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ABSTRACT

This paper describes part of a Teaching Competence Project in which a national sample of head teachers (principals) in England supplied information about their experiences with incompetent instructors. The information was gained through interviews and questionnaires, which focused on the head teachers' experiences and roles in dealing with incompetent teachers. Questionnaires were sent to 3,017 primary and secondary head teachers. Responses were received from 1,966 heads. In addition to the questionnaires, 60 primary and secondary head teachers were interviewed. Findings revealed no single end result to allegations of incompetence. When head teachers were asked to describe what had eventually happened to the cases that were not current they reported a dozen different outcomes. In 80 percent of the cases, however, the teacher left the school for one reason or another. The largest single outcome was early retirement. The second largest group of those who left were teachers who resigned, most frequently to take a job in another school or to leave the profession altogether. The paper looks at ways the process for dealing with incompetent teachers may be improved, what heads might do differently, the need for training in dealing with incompetence, and the constraints in dealing with this particular problem. (RJM)

THE ROLE OF THE HEAD TEACHER (SCHOOL PRINCIPAL) IN ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM OF INCOMPETENT TEACHERS

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The role of the head teacher (school principal) in addressing the problem of incompetent teachers

Until now there has been no British research of any standing that has investigated the issues surrounding teachers said to be incompetent, and few studies of this area in other countries. Little is known, therefore about how such teachers are identified, what criteria are used, and what happens to them. One of the few comprehensive studies of how principals of schools manage poorly performing teachers is that of Bridges, first written in 1986 and updated in 1992 to include more data about managerial responses to incompetent teachers. Bridges describes how United States administrators and principals deal with the problem of teacher incompetence. In practice it is largely an account of how they fail to deal with it, and he places most of the blame for lack of action on other participant groups or external factors.

The first problem he cites is that of teachers' job security, with tenured teachers being presumed to be competent and the burden of proof resting on the School District attempting to dismiss them. This problem is compounded in the US by the need to prove incompetence in court and by the cost of legal representation, which Bridges' administrators estimated (prior to 1986) at $50,000 per case, sometimes more. Another related problem Bridges identifies is that "incompetence is a concept with no precise meaning; moreover, there are no clear-cut standards or cut-off points which enable an administrator to say with certitude that a teacher is incompetent" (1992, p.24). He notes that only the states of Alaska and Tennessee have attempted to define the term, but even these do not supply any criteria for what incompetence in the classroom actually is. This lack of clear criteria of incompetence makes it harder to prove a case in court, and Bridges also found it results in standards of what counts as incompetence varying from District to District as well as from State to State.

Bridges (1992) reported that lesson observation, allied with supervisory ratings, was the most frequently mentioned method of detecting poor performance reported by most School Districts in California. Teachers were evaluated on a 1 – 5 scale, (1 - outstanding, 2 – good, 3 – satisfactory, 4 – needs to improve, 5 – unsatisfactory) but the rigour of this evaluation is questionable. In Baltimore, Philadelphia, in 1983, 44.6% of teachers were rated 'outstanding' while 0.003% received a rating of less than satisfactory (Digilio 1984). Similar figures are found in other states, and Bridges (1992) cites examples of many teachers, diagnosed as extremely poor performers, who had received satisfactory or even glowing evaluations for many years. The habit of giving high ratings is not a recent phenomenon. Davis (1964) cites examples from 1907 when 90% of teachers in Brooklyn were given marks of over 90%, while in Chicago 96% of teachers were graded high enough to entitle them to promotion.

Bridges also cites the desire of principals to avoid conflict. He found that although supervisory ratings were the most frequently mentioned ways of detecting poor performance, in fact principals withhold negative information from the teachers, gloss over problems, and give good evaluations to encourage the teachers. The methods head teachers use to evaluate teachers have been criticised both for their lack of rigour and for the content of what is evaluated. Darling-Hammond (1986) states:

> "The most important aspects of teaching are ignored in favor of measuring the measurable, no matter how trivial." (p.535)

She criticises the 'ticklist evaluation' in which head teachers evaluate teachers by ticking off specific items of allegedly desirable behaviour such as 'starting classes on time' and 'keeping a brisk pace of instruction'. Darling-Hammond says there is nothing to show which, if either, is more important, or to consider whether there are occasions when it would be more appropriate to introduce concepts slowly. It ignores human relation skills or the ability to relate to children and, she believes, treats teaching as an unvarying didactic exercise that is unresponsive to the individual characteristics of students or the nature of learning tasks:

> "Observations of this type reveal little about the coherence of the curriculum, the depth and breadth of content covered, the range of teaching techniques used, the quality and variety of materials employed, the types and frequency of student assignments, the quality of instruments (tests, papers, projects) used for student assessment, the kinds of feedback students receive on their work, or the appropriateness of any of these things for the classroom context. These are all important elements of teaching ... that are not attended to in a traditional evaluation process." (p.534)

Haertel (1991) backs up these criticisms, claiming that proper professional assessment of teachers would not look for approved answers to multiple choice questions, but that:

> "State of the art classroom observations acknowledge that the same behavior may be appropriate in one situation and inappropriate in another, and depend on the professional judgement of an assessor who may accept different specific evidence for the same indicator, depending on the situation." (p.22)

The principals in Bridges' research appeared to do the opposite of what was advised by Potter & Smellie (1995) who stress the importance of head teachers acting quickly, because:

> "Poor performance which has been tolerated for so long ... becomes infinitely more difficult to tackle." (p.74)

They also emphasise that it is the head teacher's responsibility to make clear to all staff the expectations they should fulfil, and to monitor them to ensure that they are. They say:

> "A member of staff cannot fairly be accused of underperforming if he or she has never been made aware of the standards of performance which are expected of him or her. The setting of those standards is something which should be done in the initial contract of employment, in the job description, in day-to-day supervisions and in appraisals." (p.73)

In the USA, because teachers are recruited and employed by the District, District administrators have an option not available to their counterparts in Britain. They are able to transfer teachers to other schools, place them as permanent supply teachers (the "substitute pool"), make them tutors to individual children who are unable to attend school or find them other non-teacher positions, perhaps in school libraries, the museum, or even, as Bridges (1992) found, driving the school bus. US principals are able to recommend teachers for transfer, and this results, in some Districts, in poorly performing teachers being transferred from school to school in what has been called "the turkey trot" or "the dance of the lemons". (Bridges 1992, p.36).

The Teaching Competence Project

The Teaching Competence Project, a two year research project undertaken at the University of Exeter, England, with funding from the Gatsby Charitable Foundation, studied central concerns, such as: What constitutes 'incompetence' in the eyes of those making the judgement? When teachers are regarded as incompetent, what steps, if any, are taken to address the issue? What are the views and reactions of those identified as incompetent? What are the outcomes of action or inaction? Which seem to be successful and which unsuccessful solutions?

The Project comprised a number of linked studies which were designed to elicit the views of the different parties involved in cases of alleged incompetence:

Study 1 **To interview and conduct a questionnaire survey of a national sample of head teachers in primary and secondary schools**

Study 2 **To interview, and in some cases observe, a sample of teachers in primary and secondary schools who have been labelled 'incompetent'.**

Study 3 **To interview primary and secondary pupils of different ages to elicit their constructs about teacher competence.**

Study 4 **To interview officers from teacher unions, local education authorities (LEAs) and those who chair or are involved in school governing bodies, including parents.**

Study 5 **To analyse and report on incompetence procedures in three countries: France, Germany and the United States.**

This paper describes Study 1 of the Teaching Competence Project. It deals with those aspects of the research related to head teachers (principals) and comprises an investigation of their perceptions and experiences of the problem of incompetent teachers, and an analysis of their role. Both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection were adopted:

1. A national questionnaire survey of head teachers of primary and secondary schools
2. In-depth interviews with head teachers

This paper draws mainly on the data collected in the national questionnaire survey but, where it can illuminate and expand upon points made, the interview data is also referred to.

Methodology

National questionnaire survey

A questionnaire was sent out to a national sample of 3,017 primary and secondary head teachers. Responses were received from 1,966 heads, 654 of whom completed a full account of their experiences, giving details of at least one case of alleged incompetent. The sample details are set out below.

Table 1 Breakdown of case studies reported by 654 head teachers (of whom 30 described two cases, one teacher who improved and one who did not), a sample consisting of 684 teachers altogether

Total number of heads describing one or more cases		654
Number of Local Education Authorities		122
Primary school heads	61%	
Secondary school heads	39%	
Rural schools	15%	
Urban schools	61%	
Mixed	24%	
Teachers who were thought to have improved		161 (24%)
Teachers who were thought not to have improved		523 (76%)
Total number of teachers described		684

As Table 1 shows, there was roughly a 60/40 per cent split between primary and secondary respondents, with a mixture of different types of location, both urban and rural. Teachers who did not improve in the eyes of the head outnumbered those who did by about three to one.

Some 1,312 heads said they had not had to deal with a case of incompetence. Of the 654 who had had experience of such a case, 70% had dealt with either one or two instances in the last ten years. A further 15% had encountered three cases and the remaining 15% four cases or more. Altogether they had had experience of 1,519 cases, of which nearly 80% were completed (1,204 completed, 315 current). The 684 detailed histories referred to in this paper are all from this set of 1,204 ***completed cases***, none is still in process.

In terms of their experience of headship, the 654 respondents were split roughly into three thirds: 30% had five years' experience or less as a head teacher, 32% had been heads for between five and ten years, and 38% had over ten years' experience. The sample was almost exactly a fifty-fifty split of female and male heads. Two thirds had been in their first headship when the case on which they were reporting occurred.

The questionnaire contained mostly closed questions but there were also questions where respondents could express themselves freely, in their own words. Analysis and statistical calculations were carried out using SPSS 7 for Windows for the quantitative data, and a consensus 'rate until agreement' principle for the qualitative data. This involved discussion between members of the research team on what meaning was being inferred from the written freehand statements, until a particular interpretation was agreed.

In-depth interviews

Sixty primary and secondary head teachers were interviewed. These were selected from a stratified random sample in seven local education authorities in England. Interviews were carried out using a semi-structured interview. The aim of these interviews was to gather

comprehensive data relating to what happens when a teacher is alleged to be incompetent and, at the end of this paper, two case studies are provided to illuminate some of the issues arising from research into this area.

Areas of focus

Data were gathered both in the questionnaire survey and in the interviews on the following areas:

- how the heads defined 'incompetence'
- number of cases dealt with
- how performance was monitored in their school
- details of one particular teacher alleged to be incompetent - age, experience etc
- aspects of teaching regarded as unsatisfactory
- how the teacher's problem had come to their attention
- the response and behaviour of the teacher
- who else was involved in the case
- duration of cases and the procedures followed
- what the outcomes were
- a retrospective analysis of how the process could have been improved
- constraints

Heads' definitions and identification of incompetence

Written definitions

There are two ways we can elicit definitions of incompetence from head teachers' replies. The first is their ***written definition*** in response to the direct question "What, in your experience, are the major characteristics of an 'incompetent' teacher?". A summary of their views is given immediately below. The second method is to analyse the descriptions of real life cases they have encountered. This offers an ***operational definition***, since these were the actual factors they identified to be characteristic of a specific case. We describe these responses later in this paper, in the section "Cases encountered by heads".

Both the interviews and the survey of head teachers produced the same findings. Head teachers clearly expected more of teachers than the ability to perform a range of narrow, measurable tasks and most heads saw incompetence as consisting of a cluster of factors, a finding reinforced by the analysis of actual cases, as will be revealed later in this paper:

> "Inability to relate to children and stimulate interest/excitement in learning. Inability to understand process of children's learning. Inability to differentiate work. Unable to promote high expectations in behaviour and work. Lack of subject knowledge."

> "Poor classroom organisation. Poor class control. Low expectations. Inability to deliver the curriculum through lack of planning, poor subject knowledge and failure to

capture the children's interest. Inability to communicate effectively with parents about children's performance."

"Children fearful and bullied. Parents feeling the same. Lack of children's progress. Lack of planning and preparation. Consistently late for school, meetings. Inability to adapt to new situations."

Table 2 shows the six most common written definitions from a random sample of fifty per cent of all replies to the questionnaire survey. The careful sifting and sorting of several thousand freehand statements, some of which can be quire lengthy, is extremely time-consuming, so it was not possible to do a full content analysis of the qualitative responses of the total sample. All the qualitative analysis was undertaken on this same random fifty per cent sample of 327 questionnaires. Each of the Tables below states the sample size.

There are some notable differences between the ***written*** and ***operational*** definitions of incompetence, as Table 4 will show, and we reproduce the written definitions in Table 2, while preferring the operational definitions in Table 4, since these are based on actual cases, rather than on speculation or stereotypes.

Table 2 Most frequently mentioned indicators of incompetence, from a random sample of half the responses (327 questionnaires, of which 288 offered definitions)

Factor	Percentage mentioning
Classroom discipline	65%
Planning and preparation	40%
Relationships with pupils	24%
Quality of pupil learning	24%
Subject knowledge	18%
Professional commitment	18%

Identifying incompetence

Many heads stated that the cases of teachers that they perceived to be incompetent had come to their attention through their own informal monitoring of the school. This often involved hearing an unacceptable level of disruption coming from a particular teacher's classroom as they walked around the school:

"Any head teacher walking around the school is aware of problems in a classroom. There is no virtue in silence for silence's sake, but noise levels are unacceptable."

Three of the four most common sources of information about a problem with a particular teacher came from complaints: from fellow teachers, parents and pupils themselves, as Table 3 below shows. Both formal and informal monitoring by the head or senior managers, such as deputy heads, were also informative, as were unsatisfactory test scores and examination results. Inspections by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) come relatively low in the rank order, as do pre-inspections, prior to a formal visit from inspectors (in 10th and 12th positions respectively).

A little below half the heads (45%) said that they had inherited a problem when they first arrived at a school, a feature which occurs a number of times in this research. New heads seem particularly conscious, on arrival in the school, of those who seem less than competent. Equally, some teachers who had been alleged to be incompetent reported that there had been no complaints about their performance under the previous head, but had then experienced a clash of values, beliefs, practices or personality, when the new head came.

Table 3 How the head teacher first became aware of the problem (684 cases)

First source of information	Percentage of cases
Complaints/comments from other staff	67%
Informal monitoring by the head	61%
Complaints from parents - made in person	60%
Complaints/comments from pupils	49%
Problem inherited when head took up post	45%
Formal monitoring by head	42%
Informal monitoring by senior management	40%
Formal monitoring by senior management	29%
Unsatisfactory test/examination results	18%
Ofsted inspection	15%
Complaints directed through governing body	14%
Pre-Ofsted inspection	13%

Cases encountered by heads

The types of cases described were very varied. Some dragged on interminably, others were resolved more speedily; some involved certain kinds of perceived weakness, others involved different ones. The genesis of the cases did show some common or predominant distinguishing features, however, and we try to highlight these below.

Who spoke to the teacher first?

Once the issue had been raised, head teachers said that they themselves took the responsibility of raising the issue with the teacher concerned. Two thirds of heads (66%) said that they were the first person to tell the teacher officially that there was thought to be a problem. The next most likely person to raise the matter first with the teacher was a head of department or curriculum co-ordinator (15%), while in third place was the deputy head (9%). Others who later became involved were most unlikely to be the bearer of the first message (LEA officer = 4%; school governor = 1%).

Formal or informal?

Individuals have their own definition of 'formality', but in most cases (59%) heads stated that the matter was first discussed informally. In over a quarter of cases (28%) it was first raised in a formal context. In only 2% of cases was it first discussed during a formal appraisal (teacher evaluation) meeting. The use of the *informal* conversation is one aspect of the process

involved with cases of incompetence that needs to be addressed. Head teachers may avoid formality in an attempt to minimise confrontation or distress, but teachers in our research reported that they had not initially realised how potentially serious their position was and that, by the time they were aware of this, events had overtaken them.

What was the nature of the problem?

Table 4 shows the many factors thought to lie at the heart of the allegation of unsatisfactory performance. These provide *operational* definitions of the concept 'incompetence', because Table 4 is based on head teachers ticking a list of areas in which they thought a particular teacher's performance was unsatisfactory. In most cases several categories were ticked.

Table 4 Areas in which teacher's performance regarded as unsatisfactory (684 cases)

Factor	Percentage of cases
Expectation of pupils	65%
Pupils' progress	64%
Planning and preparation	58%
Classroom discipline	57%
Inability to respond to change	51%
Differentiating work according to pupils' abilities	50%
Monitoring and assessment of pupils	49%
Relationships with pupils	48%
Managing classroom resources	43%
Adhering to school policies	34%
Relationships with teacher colleagues	32%
Commitment to job	29%

There is a particularly strong focus on pupils' learning, and it is noticeable that the two highest categories are low expectations and poor progress.

What was the background of the teacher?

The sample contained teachers who taught all Year groups, from Reception (age 4) up to 'A' level classes (age 18). It is not possible to elicit any pattern across subjects, because primary teachers usually had to teach the whole curriculum and it would be unwise to make inferences about the smallish numbers in certain secondary subject groups, as this would involve too much speculation. For example, although there are few teachers in the sample who taught music or religious education, these are subjects with fewer staff in a secondary school than is the case in mathematics, science or English. Since many teachers teach more than one subject, any attempt to calculate relative percentages would not be well founded. Teachers might, in any case, teach more effectively in their major subject than their minor one, though there were examples of people whose subject knowledge was good, but who still had difficulties.

Nor should anything be assumed from the gender breakdown of the sample (54% female and 46% male). There were more primary than secondary teachers in the sample of 684 cases and infant schools (age 4-7), for example, are almost exclusively staffed by female teachers, so the small majority of female teachers is not of any significance. Table 5a and 5b show the

distribution of teachers across age groups and length of teaching experience at the time they were judged to be incompetent. There are separate figures for those teachers the heads believed had later improved their performance, about 24% of the sample, referred to as the 'improvers', and the 76% thought not to have taught better, labelled the 'non-improvers'.

Table 5a Age of non-improvers (76% of total sample of 684 teachers) and improvers (24% of total sample)

Age group	Non-improvers	Improvers
20-29	11%	12%
30-39	17%	21%
40-49	33%	43%
50-59	24%	16%
60+	2%	2%
Missing data	13%	6%

Table 5b Teaching experience of non-improvers (76% of total sample of 684 teachers) and improvers (24% of total sample)

Teaching experience	Non-improvers	Improvers
Under 1 year	7%	5%
1-3 years	9%	11%
3-5 years	5%	6%
5-10 years	11%	14%
10-15 years	12%	14%
15-20 years	12%	15%
20+ years	26%	26%
Missing data	18%	9%

Tables 5a and 5b need to be interpreted *with considerable caution*. As a result of the high level of recruitment to the teaching profession in the 1960s and 1970s, about two thirds of teachers nationally are now over the age of 40, so the concentration of teachers in the 40-49 and 50-59 age groups is to be expected, as is the bias towards the '20+ years' experience category. The patterns are not, therefore, quite as striking as they may seem. Although teachers labelled 'incompetent' are more likely to be in the 'middle-aged' bracket, so is the whole teaching profession currently. What can be said, even allowing for there being more missing data among the non-improvers than the improvers, is that teachers who improved were slightly more likely to be in their forties, while those who did not improve were a little more likely to be in their fifties.

How did the teacher react to the allegation of incompetence?

Being told that one is regarded as incompetent is not something that people find easy to accommodate, and head teachers reported a variety of reactions. In 44% of cases the head believed that the teacher concerned agreed with the assessment of the situation. But this overall figure conceals a crucial difference between two groups of teachers, those who later improved, and those who failed to improve what they did. Whereas teachers who

subsequently, in the judgment of the head, improved their performance, and those who did not, showed similar features on many other measures, here was an example of a critical difference between the two groups. A total of 63% of the 'improvers' were stated by heads to have agreed there was a problem, compared with 38% of the 'non-improvers'. In the eyes of head teachers, recognising that all is not well can be an important part of successfully addressing a problem, while denial is seen as an obstacle.

Intensive analysis of a random sample of half the questionnaires showed a number of noteworthy differences between the improvers and non-improvers, as Table 6 below shows.

Table 6 Percentage of 327 heads mentioning various reactions of non-improvers (76% of total sample) and improvers (24% of total sample)

Responses to allegation of incompetence	Non-Improvers	Improvers
Addressed issues raised/took on board the advice/went on courses	33%	56%
Did nothing/not a lot	25%	0%
Went on sick leave for a period, then worked to improve	16%	6%
Refused to accept there was a problem	16%	3%
Contacted union	14%	13%
'Emotional' response	4%	7%
Did not at first accept there was a problem, later worked to improve	2%	21%

The eventual improvers not only addressed the issues raised, but were much more likely to listen to advice or agree to go on courses, even if they did not initially accept that there might be a problem. It was much more common for the non-improvers to appear to do nothing or very little, to refuse to accept the head's judgment, or to go on sick leave. Table 7 shows a number of very marked differences between those who eventually improved and those who did not. Most notable is the category 'Always receptive to support and advice', which embraced 44% of improvers, but only 19% of those who did not improve. The latter group was more likely to have been unreceptive to support and advice from the beginning, or to have become so part way through the process. By contrast the improvers, even if they had resisted help initially, became much more willing to accept it as time went on.

Table 7 Reactions to advice (684 teachers)

Reactions to advice	Non-Improvers	Improvers
Always receptive to support and advice	19%	44%
Initially receptive but later became less receptive	32%	13%
Initially unreceptive but later became receptive	7%	32%
Always unreceptive to support and advice	26%	6%
Missing data	16%	5%

Heads described a series of emotional reactions from a small number of teachers to being confronted with an allegation of incompetence, including tears, sulking and the withdrawal of co-operation. In the case of improvers, however, this negative reaction was more likely to be

short-lived, especially when the gravity of the situation became clearer, or when support increased confidence, or firm action forced the issue, as heads' comments below reveal:

Reactions of eventual improvers

> "Tried to improve but lapsed again after first meeting. Support given but ignored advice. Second monitoring and meeting – more support and advice given. General improvement – not perfect but acceptable."

> "(1) Considered and made a list of the areas she felt she needed help and support.
> (2) Requested visiting other schools to see good practice.
> (3) Involved the union."

> "Nothing at first. He then tried desperately hard when things were almost out of his control."

> "***Strop***! Became quite rude and indifferent – worked 'to rule'. Went early, came in late etc. It reached a stage when I had to have a formal meeting and minute everything said in front of my Deputy Head and County Adviser. This 'shocked' the person and we turned a corner."

Reactions of eventual non-improvers

> "Appeared to forget about it until the formal written process started. Said 'I didn't think you meant it'."

> "Remained unable to identify difficulties and, although attempts were made to address the issues, there was no real awareness of the situation. Complete inability to accept ownership and responsibility."

> "Became very angry with pupils and staff. Turned down offers of support from head of department and head. Problems continued and parental/pupil complaints increased."

> "She was a very intractable person and there was a strong personality clash with her first head of department ... (who left) during the informal stages. The acting head of department was a close, long-serving colleague and progress was slow for 18 months when a new head of department was appointed. After a settling in period, formal proceedings began. By then the teacher accepted her shortcomings and genuinely tried to overcome them – not to much avail!"

What help or support was made available?

Heads were asked specifically what main strategies had been used to help the teachers improve their performance. Table 8 shows the main strategies employed. While senior managers were more likely to be involved with those who subsequently did not improve, those who did improve were more likely to be offered regular meetings, the chance to see fellow practitioners thought to be good at their job, to be sent on in-service courses, or to be observed during their own lessons.

Table 8 Main strategies used to support teachers (327 heads)

Strategy	Non-Improvers	Improvers
In-house support and advice	31%	35%
Target setting	28%	31%
Observation of teacher's lessons	21%	27%
Sent on in-service training course	19%	27%
Given opportunity to observe good practice	21%	26%
Offered regular meetings	10%	22%
Involvement of senior staff with support/advice	28%	22%
Support from Local Education Authority advisers	23%	21%

Many heads described at length what they and their colleagues had tried to do to support the teacher, and careful thought appeared to have been involved. In several cases the more senior members of staff, as well as outsiders, had been involved. For some heads signalling to the teacher that the senior people were actively seeking to help was regarded as an important psychological element of the response. In several cases these strategies were associated with a degree of success:

> "Discussion with head and deputy head. (Teacher) knowing that the head and deputy head *wanted* the teacher to succeed. Observation by deputy head. Deputy head and head working with the teacher. Regular feedback meetings. Following *small* targets of success." (Improved)

> "In class support. Removal of some pupils. Advice from colleagues, LEA advisor. Monitoring and feedback of her lessons. Watching lessons in school and other schools. Relevant courses – i.e. class management." (Improved)

In about a quarter of cases the teacher was given time out of the classroom to go on courses, witness good practice in the school or elsewhere, visit the doctor, or was offered some alleviation of duties, given a smaller or easier class. Sometimes these strategies paid off, but this was not always the case, as the contrasting outcomes of the two cases below reveal:

> "Identification of key problem as perceived by head. List of concerns. Action list of strategies to help remedy the situation. Programme of informal/formal observations. Monitoring by Head of Department ... Visit by LEA adviser to comment on performance and offer advice. Visits to see good practice in school and other schools. INSET and course attendance." (Improved)

> "Support from team leader and deputy head who helped with daily/weekly planning. Class observations with follow up meetings and written feedback by head. Smaller class than rest of the team. No challenging pupils included in the class. The best teaching area. Regular time off school to visit medics. Relief from taking any curriculum responsibility for two years." (Did not improve)

Lesson observation was also tried, often by a specially selected 'mentor'. There was usually a specific focus on particular strategies, some of which seemed elementary. However, since

three quarters of the teachers in the sample were thought not to have improved, many of these attempts were said to have failed:

> "Lesson observations by senior staff to pin-point main areas of concern. Formal feedback and strategies to improve, e.g. following departmental schemes of working, marking policy, preparing more work than is necessary, differentiating work, how to start the lesson and end it, how to arrange the classroom. Teacher observed colleagues' teaching." (Did not improve)

> "Head monitored progress of some pupils. Suggested various strategies for improved performance. Suggested less Draconian approach, smile at parents – be more welcoming. Monitored teaching, classroom control. Regular meetings for personal support – suggestions of meetings with a mentor, an adviser, a doctor... Several mentors were used (each one gave up after approximately six months). This teacher was a drain on everyone's personal reserves." (Did not improve)

While most heads appear to have made considerable efforts to offer support, a small number simply became exasperated or rejected the very idea of assistance:

> "Persuaded him to retire." (Did not improve)

> "No strategies. The incompetence related to failure to adhere to school policies/procedures over marking of GCSE homework, deadlines. I inherited the situation but I had on record other administrative and professional failings." (Did not improve)

Who else became involved?

Within the school the major responsibility for what happened was taken on by heads themselves. They were assisted in two thirds of cases, however, by their senior colleagues, such as the deputy head, and in about one third of cases by other members of the teaching staff. As Table 9 shows, the most common external involvement was from LEA advisers/advisory teachers (58%), union officials (48%) and officers from the LEA personnel department (48%).

Table 9 Who else was involved, other than the head (684 cases)

Others involved	Percentage
Deputy head/senior management	67%
LEA advisers/advisory teachers	58%
Teacher union	48%
LEA personnel department	48%
Chair of governing body	40%
Other members of staff	37%

The chair of school governors was reported to be involved in 40% of cases, which seems a low figure, given the responsibilities of the post. We cannot explain, from this study, why the chair was not included more frequently. That would need a different enquiry, as heads were

only asked to describe in the questionnaire who was involved, not why a particular group or person was or was not involved.

The duration of the cases and the procedures followed

How long did the process last?

There has been a great deal of concern about the length of time taken when a teacher is alleged to be incompetent. A balance must be struck between, on the one hand, the common law notion of 'natural justice', which decrees that anyone accused of something must be given due notice and a fair hearing, and, on the other hand, the rights of those who, if the allegation turns out to be true, may be suffering the consequences of poor practice.

The UK's Labour government, when it began in 1997 to initiate discussion about and legislation on incompetent teachers, proposed a two term process, plus a 'fast track' option, which could lead to dismissal in as little as four weeks. In the national questionnaire head teachers' views were solicited, and we also asked about the length of time they had spent on the cases they had described in detail.

It is difficult to put an exact time on a process which may have had a diffuse beginning, rather than a single spectacular event, and which may be protracted at the end. However, with these reservations in mind, Table 10 is a summary of what head teachers themselves estimated to be the duration. It shows that fewer than 20% of cases were thought to have been concluded within a year. The two largest categories occupied between one and three years (46%), with '1-2 years' being the largest single group (27%). About a fifth of cases (21%) lasted three to seven years or longer.

Table 10 Time elapsing from identification of problem to conclusion of case (684 cases)

Total length of process	Percentage
0-1 term	4%
1-2 terms	9%
2-3 terms	6%
1-2 years	27%
2-3 years	19%
3-7 years	16%
7+ years	5%
Missing data	14%

Most head teachers (55%) felt that the process was too long, with only 1% of respondents believing it was too short a period. About a quarter (27%) said that the length of time was about right. Heads were invited to give a freehand account of their views on government proposals for quicker procedures and we did a content analysis of a random sample of fifty per cent (327) of the 654 questionnaires returned.

Approximately 55% of this sample had offered their views and positive statements about faster dismissals outnumbered negative reactions by about three to one. Some heads felt it was too early to judge, or admitted that they were not familiar with the proposals. The following

statements are illustrative of the points *in favour* that many heads made, though some expressed concern about whether these would work, especially if teachers went absent through ill health, and several made a plea for continued support and a fair system of judgment:

> "There must be a faster method of removing teachers whose actions actually damage pupils' attitudes and therefore progress. Many teachers, when faced with situations recognise this and are grateful for support. What is not acknowledged is that the present system becomes too prolonged, adversarial, demotivating for staff body as a whole."

> "Procedures should be swift - but a reasonable time to allow for a period of support to give an opportunity for the person to improve should be given."

> "Very much in favour of the 'faster track' but I suspect that once cases are started the staff member will go off 'sick' - how do we then proceed? I am not aware that government proposals will deal with such a situation."

> "I agree something should be done quicker (with guidelines in place) but the reason for incompetence, i.e. unwillingness as against medical, must be ascertained."

Fewer heads were opposed to the proposals, but many of those who were expressed the same reservations about 'fast track' dismissals that had been uttered by union officials and LEA officers, especially about where they would stand with a four week dismissal before an industrial tribunal. About six months, or two terms, was commonly mentioned as being more feasible. These comments below were typical of those that were *negative* about the government's intentions:

> "Don't like the phrase 'fast track' - such methods should only be used in extreme cases of incompetency, i.e. where there is a real threat to 'life and limb'. A structured scheme of guidance support and counselling - involving LEA inspectors/advisers - working with agreed target dates over perhaps a six month period is the fairest way of dealing with incompetency."

> "Draconian! If any person in their work situation has difficulties, they have a right to support and help. I am not sure that the 'support' element is there in the modern climate."

> "Unhelpful. Teachers' rights not equally described or protected. *Independent* assessment needed once both sides have made case."

Were certain predetermined procedures followed?

The vast majority of head teachers (80%) said they followed a set of procedures that had been agreed by their LEA or by the governors within their school. One matter of concern, given the sensitivity of the situation, was that about one head teacher in six (17%) followed no predetermined procedures, but rather improvised actions as the case progressed, or said that

existing procedures were regarded as inappropriate. Table 11 shows the breakdown of 'Yes' and 'No' answers to the question about following predetermined procedures.

Table 11 Responses to the question: "Were you following a predetermined procedure when dealing with this problem?" (684 cases)

Was predetermined procedure followed?	Percentage
YES – LEA procedure	60%
YES – School's own procedure	20%
YES – Other procedure (unspecified)	3%
NO – Procedure improvised as case progressed	15%
NO – Procedure available considered inappropriate	2%

Other groups interviewed were less optimistic about the use of procedures by head teachers. In the interviews with teacher association officers and LEA personnel and advisory staff, there was evidence that, even where LEA capability procedures existed, head teachers were not always aware of or did not follow them. Forty two per cent of teachers taking part in ***Study 2*** of the research indicated that no predetermined procedure had been followed by the head following the allegation of incompetence and a number of teachers believed that, even where procedures were available, heads did not always use them properly. Indeed, 15% of them said they did not even know whether any predetermined procedures were being followed. Effective communication between the head and the teacher concerning the procedure being followed is vital if teachers are to understand the seriousness of the allegation and to understand their own rights.

Why did some teachers improve, while others did not?

About three-quarters of the teachers described by heads were said not to have improved, while a quarter did reach an acceptable level of competence. A cluster of items in the questionnaire invited a freehand response to direct questions about why some teachers appeared to fail, what strategies worked particularly well, and whether certain constraints may have been in operation.

Why did some teachers not improve?

Table 12 Most common reasons for teachers not being able to improve (327 heads)

Reason why some teachers did not improve	Percentage
Denial - would not accept there was a problem/did not act on advice	19%
Personality factors - should never have been a teacher	16%
Unable to change/adapt to national curriculum etc.	13%
Health problems/stress	10%
Not committed/lazy	9%
Personal problems, demoralisation, lack of confidence, burnout	8%
Context - in the wrong age range/position/school	4%

Table 12 shows the content analysis of the freehand responses of a random sample of half the head teachers (327 cases) describing their beliefs about why some teachers did not appear to be able to improve what they did. Detailed comments illustrate these points more clearly. If Table 4, laying out the areas in which teacher's performance was regarded as unsatisfactory, showed the symptoms of perceived incompetence, then the illustrative quotations below indicate the causes, as seen by the same head teachers:

Denial

> "Would not accept that there was a problem. Competency had never been questioned formally before, even though she had been taken out of classes and given support duties. Was given a good reference, which was untrue. Teacher always blamed the children."

> "Was not prepared to listen or to accept that *he* was in any way to blame. A total disaster – the only complete *failure* I've met in 30 years."

Personality

> "The teacher's personality and skills were such that, I feel, he was well below the standard required in teaching. I cannot imagine how he passed his PGCE. I understand that he was the only person available on appointment (mid-year), but he was a poor appointment."

> "Should never have entered teaching as he did not like pupils and found it difficult to communicate with anyone. It would appear that he had been failing for *many* years before I joined the school and inherited the problem."

Unable to change

> "I believe she found all the changes of the national curriculum too demanding and not necessary."

> "In Primary Education things have moved on at an unacceptable pace and he was just unable to cope with the demands and pressures."

Health problems/stress

> "Psychological problems meant he never sustained the effort needed to improve. He ran away from pressure - taking time off, lying about being ill."

> "She lost control of the class and was never able to regain it. She had a good track record before this, but I believe the stress of the job and the change of schools proved too much."

> "She was an Alcoholic!"

Not committed/lazy

> "He had lost interest in the job. He wanted to do things his way which was inappropriate, and he failed to meet the needs of all his students."

> "Incapable of understanding the advice/support he was given. Interest was in a business of his out of school. In the wrong profession and incapable of relating to groups of children."

Personal problems

> "Teacher had personal problems outside of the classroom - these she couldn't shrug off."

> "Became disillusioned, unable to cope with pressures. Not 'well liked' by colleagues or students."

Context - wrong age range/position/school

> "Promoted beyond her abilities in a 'difficult' school. Came from FE and found 11-16 beyond her."

> "He was originally Secondary trained, but transferred to Primary as an easy option."

> "Unused to demands of teaching a large mixed class – had been used to small private school groups."

When *teachers* who had been alleged to be incompetent were asked in ***Study 2*** why they had failed to improve, however, their explanations were very different to those offered by heads. Many claimed that that the initial allegation had been incorrect, that staff were conspiring to remove them, that nothing they did would satisfy the head, that they were the victims of bullying and intimidation – yet another example of the multiple perceptions of reality emerging during this research.

What approaches appeared to work well?

It would be easy to take a substantially negative view of the findings of this survey of head teachers, especially given that only a quarter of the teachers described were judged to have improved their teaching and reached an acceptable standard. However, we were particularly concerned to identify any particular approaches thought to have been successful, so head teachers had a freehand opportunity to describe these. As might be expected an analysis of our random sample of half the responses (327 heads) showed more offering examples of successful strategies from the improver than the non-improver group. Yet although 82% of heads describing an improver gave examples of approaches they thought had worked particularly well, so did 59% of heads describing teachers not thought to have improved.

The major categories involved support of one kind or another, but the rank order was different for the improver and non-improver groups. Table 13 shows what were regarded as the five

most successful factors for each of the two groups. The prominent position of 'In-house support', as a strategy that was thought to work well with those who improved, confirms what union officers interviewed said about the importance of other people, particularly the head, wanting someone to succeed, rather than fail.

Table 13 Most successful approaches for improvers and non-improvers (327 heads)

Strategy (Improvers)		Strategy (Non-improvers)	
1. In-house support	43%	LEA support	29%
2. Positive, sensitive approach	20%	In-house support	15%
3. Openness/honesty	9%	Union/head relationship	12%
4. Monitoring process	9%	LEA/school procedures	12%
5. Observing good practice	7%	Keeping detailed records	10%

Since the actual wording of the question, however, was "Is there anything that you felt worked particularly well?", it has to be pointed out that, in the case of the non-improvers, 'worked well' was not always interpreted as 'helping the teacher'. Some 10% of heads said that 'getting rid of the teacher' had worked well.

Analysis of the freehand statements also shows that strategies that work in one context may not be effective in another. For example, offering a high level of support, observing someone's lessons, encouraging them to watch others, giving detailed and honest feedback, all these may lead to success with a teacher who actively seeks to improve, but fail if the teacher is acutely stressed, resistant, or simply appears not to have the inner resources to change existing practices.

The outcomes of the cases

There was no single end result to allegations of incompetence. When head teachers were asked to describe what had eventually happened to the cases that were not current they reported a dozen different outcomes. In addition to the 684 detailed cases described in this paper, heads recorded what had happened in a further 520 cases in which they had been involved, giving a total sample of 1,204 teachers for this particular analysis.

Table 14 shows the outcomes in rank order of frequency under different categories. In some 80% of completed cases the teacher had left the school for one reason or another. The largest single outcome was early retirement, a popular option which is now less readily available in the UK since the conditions for it were changed after March 1997. In any case, it is not usually an option for younger teachers, largely being available for those aged over 50. Ill health retirement was the second most common end result. Heads had frequently referred to physical or psychological stresses, and in many of these cases the teacher's doctor had been involved. These two major reasons accounted for about 37% of the outcomes between them.

The second largest group, accounting for about a third of all cases, was teachers who resigned, most frequently to take a job in another school (14%), or leave the profession altogether (13%), but some teachers (6%) resigned to seek a different post even before finding alternative employment. Table 14 shows that these two major results, retirement or

resignation for one reason or another, were the outcome in 70% of cases. The remaining 10% of those who left their post consisted of very small groups like redundancy and dismissal (3% each), or redeployment by the LEA (1%), a diminished option since schools assumed more responsibility for their own staffing following the UK's 1988 Education Act.

Table 14 Summary of outcomes of 1,204 cases (not just the 684 detailed case studies, but rather all completed cases mentioned in the replies) reported by 654 head teachers

Outcome	Percentage
Took early retirement	20%
Retired on the grounds of ill health	17%
Reached acceptable level of competence	16%
Resigned, moved to another post	14%
Resigned and left teaching profession	13%
Resigned and looked for another post	6%
Made redundant	3%
Dismissed	3%
Still in post, case never resolved	2%
Given different duties in same school	2%
Redeployed by LEA	1%
Other	3%

While 80% actually left their post, about 20% of teachers remained in it, the vast majority (16% of total sample) because they were regarded as having improved their performance to an acceptable level. In some 2% of cases heads practised a mixture of support and damage limitation by assigning them to different duties, while a similar percentage of teachers (2%) were still in post and the head appeared to have reached some accommodation of their limitations or even given up.

A separate analysis of those teachers who were thought eventually to have improved their performance reveals a mixed evaluation by heads. The greatest success was obtained by a small group (4%) subsequently classified as being 'very good', and a bigger group (9%) said to have become 'good'. The two largest clusters, however, were those described as 'acceptable' (39%), or 'acceptable but with some problems remaining' (42%).

How can the process be improved?

The 654 head teachers who took part in the questionnaire survey had had direct experience of being centrally involved in a case of alleged incompetence. They were able, therefore, to capitalise on the many benefits of hindsight. All respondents were invited to reflect on the whole process, to reflect on how they and others might have acted differently to be more effective, what constraints existed, what help they might have needed and whether training would have been beneficial. One common factor to all these questions was that they felt they needed more support. This factor came out in our interviews with head teachers, who recounted graphically the harrowing nature of the experience, both for them and the teacher concerned. A feeling of isolation came through strongly in those interviews, and it featured again in the questionnaire survey.

What might heads have done differently?

The overwhelming response to this question was that action should have been taken earlier. Once ignored the problems simply escalated. There was no difference in this sentiment between heads describing teachers who had improved and those recording cases where the teacher had left the profession. Table 15 shows the rank order of most common responses, from our analysis of the freehand comments of a random sample of half the questionnaires, in response to the question "With hindsight, is there anything that you would have done differently?" Just under half said they would have changed what they did.

Table 15 Rank order of action heads would have taken, with the benefit of hindsight (percentages are of those who said they would have acted differently, not of whole sample) (327 heads)

What would be different	Percentage
Taken action earlier	47%
Been more forceful/more direct	12%
Taken more formal approach	9%
Not appointed the teacher in the first place	9%
Involved the LEA sooner	8%

With the benefit of hindsight many heads concluded that they had prolonged the informal stage for too long. They had often hoped the situation would improve, only to find that a more focused and structured approach was necessary, and this applied in the case of both those who improved and those who did not.

What might others have done differently?

About 40% of the freehand comments of a random sample of half the questionnaires expressed opinions about what others might have done differently. Mostly these comments reflected a wish for greater support from different constituencies, as Table 16 shows.

Table 16 Rank order of action heads believe others should have taken (percentages are of those who responded to this item, not of whole sample) (327 heads)

What others should have done differently	Percentage
Better support from LEA	31%
Previous head should have tackled situation	12%
Teacher should have been more receptive	10%
Line manager could have been more effective	8%
Honest references should have been given	8%

The key people from whom support is most sought are LEA advisers and fellow head teachers, as well as senior colleagues in the school. It must be remembered, however, that 60% of heads did not make any suggestions about the actions of others, so the views below are those of a minority of respondents, albeit a very significant one:

LEA - provide better support to head

> "I would have welcomed an LEA officer/adviser who would have given advice on how to help the teacher and how to conduct the incompetence procedures. Unfortunately the advisory service knew nothing (or very little) about the procedures and Personnel Department knew nothing about the teaching side. I was, therefore, always needing two types of advice from different departments."

> "All the LEAs for which I have worked have been unwilling to grasp this nettle. Incompetent teachers have been moved like pawns around the Authority when things began to get hot for them in a school. Now this responsibility has devolved to heads, LEAs are keen to see us fulfil it in a way they never did."

Previous heads - should have tackled situation

> "The problem had existed in other schools where no action was taken as the teacher's needs were put before those of the children. The situation should have been dealt with when it first arose."

> "An early acknowledgement of the problems – *much* earlier. It was clear from final reports that this teacher had been teaching in the same area for almost 30 years and had frequently been through similar procedures."

Teacher - been more receptive to support and advice

> "(Teacher should have) been more open about problems affecting performance and receptive to help. Not put up barriers to genuine and sympathetic handling."

> "(Teacher should have) made *some* attempt to try out the strategies suggested by the head teacher to improve organisation/discipline."

Honest references should be given

> "The teacher who resigned has since taken up a teaching post in another LEA. No references were requested. I feel there should be a legal requirement to take up references prior to employment. I am sure there are now other groups of children who are being damaged by this teacher."

What were the constraints?

The most common constraint mentioned by the 62% of heads who made freehand comments in this section was the legal issues and their fear of running foul of the law. This was followed by the time-consuming nature of events, given their complexity, as Table 17 reveals. The comments below the Table amplify and highlight different aspects of these points.

Table 17 Rank order of constraints faced by heads (percentages are of those who responded to this item, not of whole sample) (327 heads)

Constraints	Percentage
Legalities and employment law	21%
Amount of time consumed	12%
Length of procedures and long timescale	10%
Teacher unions	10%
Absences of teacher	9%

Legalities of procedures/employment law

> "Constraints based on the legal aspects, i.e. the case could have led to formal proceedings of incompetence and we had to ensure that this was not prejudiced. Also care to ensure that constructive dismissal could not be claimed."

Amount of time consumed and length of procedures

> "Time factor: the proceedings were almost inevitably drawn out and I wrote over thirty memos, letters to LEA, unions et al. It was incredibly time consuming. All in all the man was observed/inspected six times!"

> "The stages of the formal procedures which ensure fairness but do require time to pass to allow target setting and monitoring to take place."

Teacher unions

> "Wary of union response. Personnel department very careful."

> "Knowing that if I got one of the stages wrong, the teaching union involved would have stepped in."

Absences of teacher

> "The teacher was frequently absent during the informal stage which prolonged the procedure."

> "It is very difficult to proceed when the teacher has the backing of the medical profession and receives sick notes for two weeks at a time over a prolonged period of time. The medical profession only hears one side of the story therefore working conditions/practices are grossly misrepresented. It is impossible to proceed with capability procedures when the teacher has medical and union backing to request a gradual re-integration to teaching through part time work."

A further point, which does not appear in Table 17 because we analysed it separately for different groups was to do with *relationships*, between the head and parents, governors, the teacher alleged to be incompetent and other members of staff. Sometimes relationships were very positive. For example, heads found it difficult when they liked the teacher concerned as a

person, but had to take action on professional grounds. On other occasions, however, relationships might be negative, and this too could act as a very destructive force.

What would have helped?

Many heads wanted a better understanding of the procedures involved, reflecting their anxiety about falling foul of the law. This might take the form of personal assistance from an outsider, or even something as simple as a flow diagram, or a guide to the stages of the process. It was symptomatic of the essential loneliness of their experience that heads often sought external assistance. Some wanted an independent external assessment of the teacher's performance, from the LEA or Ofsted, while others would have welcomed a support group, or even a personal mentor, preferably someone who had experienced an incompetence procedure at first hand:

> "Systematic external monitoring to demonstrate impartiality."
>
> "A head teacher support group – of head teachers going through similar process."
>
> "I would have liked a 'mentor' head who had done the process before to go through it with me – some weeks I would have needed daily contact."

The need for training

One of the questions in the questionnaire asked head teachers "Have you received training in dealing with cases of incompetence?", while the following question asked "If no, would you have liked training?". Of the 82% of the sample of 654 head teachers who responded to the first question, one third (33%) said that they had had some training. The two thirds who had not had any training were strongly in favour of it being available, 89% saying that they would have liked training, and this applied to experienced as well as to new heads. Indeed, some felt it was important for deputies to receive training as well:

> "There must be training on how to go through each step and gather evidence, offer support, etc. The most stressful element for a head is you feel so isolated as you don't know what to do."
>
> "As a recently appointed head the issue of teacher competence is a new area for me. Training would seem to be central – yet because it is the responsibility of a head, it is the one issue that at present a deputy has no involvement in. As such it would seem to me – (1) Deputy heads need to be trained – especially given the number who will be acting heads in the present climate. (2) It should be part of the training for a head's qualification. (3) Existing heads need 'remedial' training. Fairness, clear steps and a reasonable timetable would seem to be essential in dealing with competence."

General observations

Head teachers were asked if there were any general or further points they wished to make. Some commented on the increased demands that the profession now faced, so that notions of 'competence' had moved to a higher level of demand. Even if the quality of teaching had improved, it might not have improved sufficiently to match the increase in demands:

> "There is no doubt that teaching quality in schools and colleges is much higher now than it was 10-15 years ago. All my head teacher and principal colleagues endorse this and agree that tolerance of incapability is low. With more students taking exams and assessments at all levels, there are also fewer places to hide in schools and colleges. The 'consumers/customers' are also more demanding and rightly so as recognition widens that educational success is a key factor in future career success etc."

Most wanted to put the issue of incompetence in perspective, arguing that it was a very small minority of teachers, and that they felt that, in general, their colleagues were industrious and competent, though some feared for the future, especially if the quest for higher competence merely produced safe orthodoxy:

> "The levels (in terms of percentages) of incompetent teachers are small. I would rather look in terms of competent and able teachers who have coped with many changes – under-resourced in these changes – who have responded well and not taken negative tactics out on children. This is the larger number in percentage terms."

> "I fear the cloning of the profession. Most of my best teachers (when I was a pupil) were distinctly eccentric and some were charismatic. They could now be seen as incompetent."

A number were concerned about the negative image of teachers sometimes portrayed in the mass media and the escalating pressures that this produced. They feared that these pressures could turn competent practitioners into incompetent ones:

> "There are few teachers now who do not *feel* incompetent. We all struggle to fulfil ever unreasonable job descriptions and cope with: continually being labelled 'failing' by Ofsted, overwork, and the press. Many quality members of the profession have taken early retirement to escape this spiralling pressure/stress. I would like to see a 'Competence Project' address the issue of what schools, in the modern era, need, by way of resourcing, to fulfil the demands made upon them. More labelling of teachers as incompetent will only serve to demoralise further a profession more demoralised than I can ever remember and contribute to the self-fulfilling prophecy of the 'blame-fail' ideology/culture we live in."

> "I feel great sadness ... both people I lost were sensitive and highly intelligent but both felt unable to handle the demands and stress – and that in a school with a fantastic group of teachers who support each other in every way. Both felt there should be more to life than school work and that health and quality of life had been affected to an unacceptable degree."

Some heads were critical of initial training and induction, feeling that certain teachers should not have been allowed into the profession, or should have been identified as being at risk in their first post. Others were concerned that teacher shortages, especially in certain subjects, could lead to the employment of those who just manage to pass their course and would normally have difficulty obtaining a post:

> "Recruitment difficulties mean incompetent teachers may be appointed, especially in shortage subjects such as Maths and languages."

> "Current salary/status does not attract good recruits. I see too many less than sparkling newly qualified teachers. *Must* weed out initial teacher trainees before they gain qualified teacher status. Too much 'buck passing' allows weak students through the net. Managers must be allowed to get rid of incompetent teachers quickly. They do harm to pupils. I applaud the Government's determination to do so."

Many heads described in detail the traumatic impact of events on themselves and their family, just as heads interviewed had done. Usually, however, they said they would go through it all again in the interests of their pupils and the school. It was especially difficult when the teacher concerned was in a senior position. Several heads found themselves going through incompetence procedures with their deputy or with a head of department or senior teacher, and this caused particular stress:

> "It took an enormous amount of time, was very stressful for me (it only hit me the following term when a minor illness became unexpectedly worse and I became clinically depressed). Because the member of staff was the deputy head, there was no management support for me within the school and it was very divisive for the staff who agreed she was useless but felt sorry for her. She talked publicly about what I was doing and I could say nothing. The LEA and Diocese were very helpful and encouraging. The governors were all rather scared, they very much wanted her dismissed but didn't really want to be associated with the process. It was awful but worth it and I would do it again."

> "The whole issue is very stressful for all concerned. Measures which are designed to monitor performance fairly and help teachers to improve can also cause them to lose confidence."

One issue that concerned heads was not so much the teacher who was clearly failing, but rather the person who was just on the borderline, doing enough to avoid formal proceedings. In the case of older teachers, some heads would have welcomed a humane process of withdrawal, or possibly even transfer into a different role:

> "Part of the problem is that people who were once quite good at their job become 'tired'. There should be somewhere or some way that they can be transferred to a different role within the profession if they wish, before formal proceedings have to take place. Early retirement at fifty with enhancement should be an option for those who request it. Twenty-five plus years in the job is punishment enough without further hassle etc. In-service sabbaticals for length of service should also be a possibility to infuse some new life into the 'old dog'."

Finally one head described with approval the situation in another country which appeared to take some of the pressure away from the head and the school:

> "I like the sound of the system used in Australia. The head has a competency and skills appraisal check for every teacher. This is applied every year. When a teacher 'fails' this check, the issue is taken away from the head. An independent panel then takes over. They assess the teacher, set targets and achievement times. If not achieved further targets and shorter time limit set. If not achieved, teacher's contract terminated. I like the independent nature of the assessment body as this removes personality clashes and prejudice claims between head and teacher."

CASE STUDIES

Two major points which emerge from this research are (a) the considerable stress involved for heads, who, even if supported, still feel a sense of failure and isolation, however much anyone might try to reassure them they acted properly; and (b) the different perceptions of events by heads and teachers, each of whom may feel the blame lies with the other. The stress involved in dealing with problems of incompetence is illustrated in case A below, and the different perceptions of events in case B.

Case A

The head teacher was newly appointed to the school. Within a short time she believed that the school had major problems, with four teachers deemed by her to be unsatisfactory. There was not enough knowledge of the national curriculum, she felt, no planning, no differentiation, lax discipline, no curriculum balance, and poor test results (in one class 25 out of 30 pupils were below their chronological reading age).

The head talked to the staff informally at meetings, gave observation and support, took classes for people. In the meantime she also took photos of the school, did tests and set targets in reading, spelling and maths, so that there was evidence (when Ofsted came) that the children had improved since she came to the school.

The head described her concerns to the governors, and then to the LEA, who subsequently designated it as a 'failing school'. She also involved the unions, reporting them to be "very good and very professional".

The teachers involved were all very unhappy and one became abusive. One went off on long term sick leave, the other three had a support and monitoring package. They were monitored and set targets. Three got jobs elsewhere and one stayed on sick leave. One teacher's husband threatened her with physical violence. The head's own health suffered badly:

> "I just wanted to get out. I felt I don't need this. I was very cross with the LEA - this school shouldn't have been allowed. The LEA now monitor more rigorously. I feel very cynical that a lot of poor teachers are moved on. I would have gone into Ofsted and the school would have failed and it would have been my fault.

You get paranoid as well - you feel vulnerable, frightened you're going to do the wrong thing. You've got the staff, the governors, the children. You just think 'I don't need this'. At one point I felt like it was a conspiracy. Part of it is the stress, but you're totally on your own. I was always frightened I was going to go off on long term sick ... I feel damaged by it. I felt I had to give, give, give. The procedures laid down are too wishy-washy. Failing teachers should have support and advice but the balance needs to be equal."

Case B

In case B we were able to interview the head, the teacher concerned, and later another head who gave the same teacher a job in her school. This case illustrates the complexity of alleged incompetence and shows how different people can see events quite differently.

The view of the head of the school

A newly qualified teacher joined the school in September. The head felt there were problems as soon as she started:

> "Within half an hour it was mayhem. It went from bad to worse ... Then we got (a County adviser) in and he said she was probably the worst he had ever seen. It cost me hundreds of pounds in support. She made copious notes, but took no notice of them. County were appalled. The governors wanted to get rid of her. I taught with her, gave her three weeks off. She thought she was going to have a breakdown.
>
> Another head teacher who had been badly let down took her on, on a part time basis, with a class of 10 children ... it was a godsend for us. She had an inability to get order - total chaos, the children ran riot. They didn't do any work, there was no discipline. The children were hurt from fighting in the classroom. They were a super class, bright, alert, raring to go. Within three weeks they had regressed academically. Parents came in to complain."

The head explained what she did once she had become aware of the problem:

> "I talked to her, initially asked her if she was aware that there were problems - I drew up targets for her, went and worked alongside her, gave her small groups to work with. I sent her into other classes, sent her to other schools so she could see good teaching, sent her on two class management courses. I talked to her every lunchtime and morning. Constant praise and reassurance. The chairman of governors did a visit. There was County support and monitoring."

The view of the teacher

We interviewed the teacher herself, after she had left the school, when she had been working at another school. Looking back, she saw events quite differently:

"I feel I had a very bad experience there and luckily, because of the LEA, I had support there ... I felt there was another agenda I didn't know about. Since coming here (to another school) I've had no problems. Part of the problem was the newly qualified teacher induction programme ... the school didn't follow it. They adopted their own, not County's. I felt it was all right in the beginning, but I felt like a newly qualified teacher ... I feel the problem was the way I was treated and the things I was asked to do. I had a class of 34 children. The class had a reputation of being quite difficult to handle. I think my method was quite different from what they had used before. I was getting conflicting advice from County and school.

After a while they were saying I was rubbish - that is a quote - their words. There were lunchtime and after school meetings where I was subjected to a barrage of criticism with the head teacher and the deputy head and I was always on my own, until there was an official meeting and then I had my union rep there. The upshot was that I left in quite a state. I had no confidence when I left.

I think they looked upon what they were doing as support, but I saw it as criticism. They said we might have to go down the route of incompetence and they threatened it a few times. It's quite scary when you're a newly qualified teacher, but then I thought, after talking to my union rep, that it might be a positive move because I thought it might show weaknesses on the other side. But they kept pulling back from it, saying it's not fair to do that to a new teacher. I felt that it was used more as a threat."

Her relationships with the pupils and parents were also viewed differently:

"The parents and children bought me presents when I left. (I had) a very good relationship with them, I thought. I didn't have any complaints that I knew of. The head teacher said there were complaints and I asked what they were but she wouldn't tell me ... so how could I do anything about it?"

The views of the second head teacher

The second school's head saw the teacher differently from the first school's head:

"The head teacher told me that she was having difficulties. I said I was prepared to take her on ... I felt the system had let her down and felt there was a personality clash. All the things she had been criticised for were excellent. Her discipline and planning were excellent ... The parents have been very complimentary, pleased with the reports. I see it as our gain and (their) loss."

Full findings of the Teaching Competence Project will be reported in October 1999 in:

FAILING TEACHERS? **by E C Wragg, G S Haynes, C M Wragg and R P Chamberlin, Routledge, London.**

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