

Education and Training Inspectorate

Report of

**A Survey of Substitute Teaching
and its Management in
Northern Ireland**

Executive Summary

Inspected: September 2003–2004

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The Education and Training Inspectorate -
Promoting Improvement

Providing Inspection Services for

Department of Education
Department for Employment and Learning
Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Following a review of substitute teaching by the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) in 2002, and by the House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts (PAC) in 2003, the Department of Education, Northern Ireland, requested the Education and Training Inspectorate (the Inspectorate) in the academic year 2003-2004 to inspect the work of substitute teachers, and the effectiveness of their management in schools. Evidence on substitute teaching in Northern Ireland was obtained throughout 2003-2004 within the normal inspection programme in statutory nurseries (nurseries) and in the primary, post-primary and special school sectors.

The number of nurseries and schools inspected as part of the survey of substitute teaching was 108, including 16 nurseries, 7 special schools, 69 primary schools and 16 post-primary schools. At the time of the inspections, 62 substitute teachers were employed in 40 of the 108 nurseries and schools, mostly in the primary and post-primary schools. In these schools, some 67% of the total number of days of temporary teaching used in 2002-2003 involved absences due mainly to illness, maternity and paternity leave, and teacher vacancies.

Some 17% of the substitute teachers had less than one year's teaching experience; 16% had between one and two years' experience; and 53% had more than two years' experience. Of the remainder, 9% had been prematurely retired for reasons of redundancy and 5% were retired. None of the substitute teachers had been retired prematurely under the Department of Education's Efficient Discharge Scheme. Most of the substitute teachers had appropriate qualifications and prior experience in respect of the sector in which they were working.

The Quality of Teaching and Learning

In most of the nurseries, primary and post-primary schools, and in the special schools inspected, the quality of planning by the substitute teachers is sound or better. The planning of just over one quarter of is characterised by many strengths. None of the planning reflected many weaknesses.

In most of the primary and post-primary schools, and in all of the nurseries and special schools inspected, the attitude and behaviour of the pupils reflect many strengths, or the strengths outweigh weaknesses; in a majority of the schools, the pupils' behaviour and attitude demonstrate many strengths.

In the main, the substitute teachers work hard to establish effective class routines. In the best practice observed, several substitute teachers demonstrated outstanding classroom management skills and excellent rapport with the children. In a few classes, some children's disruptive behaviour challenges the teachers but, in general, they manage these situations well.

In most of the primary and post-primary schools, and in all of the nurseries and special schools inspected, the quality of teaching of the substitute teachers is of a sound or better standard. In the main, they use a good range of teaching strategies and their work is often characterised by good pace, good use of praise, good questioning, high expectations, and by an effective matching of the pupils' work to their ability. The teaching of just under a quarter is characterised by many strengths. None of the teaching observed reflected many weaknesses. In the minority of the lessons, where the standard of teaching requires attention, some of the pupils are unsettled. The tasks set are not related well to their abilities and

need, and are unduly routine and mundane. Typically, in these lessons, the teaching lacks pace and challenge and too much emphasis is given to exposition.

In most of the nurseries and schools inspected, the standard of the pupils' learning is sound or better. In the main, the pupils settle quickly and focus effectively and with interest on what they are asked to do. In the minority of the lessons where weaknesses outweigh strengths, or in the very few lessons where there are many weaknesses, some pupils are not secure in what they are doing and require more individual attention, or the more able children need greater challenge as a consequence of lesson content and activities which are not matched well to need. In general, the substitute teachers deal appropriately with ensuring continuity and progression in the pupils' work. Most pupils are making satisfactory or better progress.

Temporary employment represents a major constraint for many of the substitute teachers observed during the course of this survey. They are very conscious also of the difficulties of obtaining permanent employment at a time of demographic downturn and a reduction in the number of children enrolling in schools. Several highlighted especially the negative aspects of life as a substitute teacher; for example, their growing disillusionment as a result of the search for permanent employment in the years after graduation; the pressure of competing against many other newly qualified teachers; the lack of continuity in employment; job insecurity, and term-time only employment and salary.

The substitute teachers' experience of induction into the life and work of the schools is particularly positive. In a minority of the schools, where their experiences reflect more weaknesses than

strengths, or many weaknesses, the substitute teachers report that they have been left largely to their own devices and have been provided with little information about the classes they are to teach, or about the school generally.

The substitute teachers have a generally positive view of the support they receive from senior and other staff. For most, this support has many strengths, or the strengths outweigh weaknesses. In just over a quarter of the schools, the lesson plans and resources available to them are of a particularly sound standard; in one-third, the plans and resources left for them reflect more weaknesses than strengths, or many weaknesses. Difficulties in this area mostly stem from problems arising from the unplanned and unexpected absences of permanent staff.

The quality of assessment information about classes and individual pupils left for the substitute teachers by the absent teachers varies considerably. In most of the nurseries and schools, it is of a sound or better standard. In just under a quarter of the schools, the information reflects more weaknesses than strengths, or many weaknesses; typically, the information relates to the general ability of the class and does not clarify sufficiently the strengths and/or weaknesses of individual pupils.

One-third of the substitute teachers interviewed reported that their access to and, experience of, external professional development was very positive and reflected many strengths; just under one-third felt that strengths outweighed weaknesses. Just over one-third felt that their access to, and experience of, external professional development reflected more weaknesses than strengths, or many weaknesses. In the best practice, the substitute teachers are facilitated extensively by the schools and are encouraged to engage

in external professional development. In the less effective practice, substitute teachers report that they have limited or no access to external training, or are unable to complete induction or early professional development training. In many schools, these problems stem from a lack of continuity in their employment, and its often short-term nature.

The situation is much more positive in relation to internal school-based development opportunities. In almost all instances, the substitute teachers interviewed reported that their access to school-based development activities is sound or better.

Most of the principals interviewed provided a generally positive picture of substitute cover and its management. In almost all instances, the strategies used to recruit substitute teachers are sound or better. In a minority of the schools, the principals reported that they experience considerable difficulties in obtaining substitute teachers, particularly in obtaining appropriate substitute cover in the case of short-term and/or, emergency appointments. A small number of the post-primary schools reported difficulties in recruiting teachers for particular subjects, especially mathematics, home economics, science and technology, and modern languages.

Induction and support arrangements are generally effective and efficient. In those few schools where arrangements are less effective, little has been done to anticipate problems arising from unplanned absences and, in these situations, substitute teachers often have to fend for themselves.

Across all of the schools, nurseries and special schools inspected, monitoring and evaluation arrangements are sound or better in almost two-thirds. In just over one-third, weaknesses outweigh

strengths. While more post-primary than primary schools have developed procedures with significant strengths, the monitoring and evaluation of substitute teachers reflect more weaknesses than strengths in two-fifths of the primary schools and in half of the post-primary schools. In these schools, monitoring and evaluation arrangements are too informal and 'ad hoc' and substitute teachers are often provided only with informal feedback on the quality of their work.

The extent to which the nurseries, special schools, and the schools comply with the Department of Education's guidance on the vetting of substitute teachers and the employment of retired teachers varies considerably. In half of all of the institutions combined, the arrangements reflect many strengths; in just over a quarter they reflect more strengths than weaknesses. Where arrangements are not secure, much is taken on trust. There is a general assumption that if the substitute teacher has been employed previously in other schools, comes from an agency, from an education and library board list, and/or has a teacher reference number, then that is sufficient security.

Many of the problems the principals experience in recruiting substitute teachers should be reduced considerably as a result of the introduction in March 2004 of the Northern Ireland Substitute Teacher Register (NISTR). This on-line service enables all schools in Northern Ireland to arrange for substitute cover by holding details of substitute teachers' availability. In addition, all substitute teachers registering are vetted and this will remove much of the uncertainty which principals have experienced in terms of vetting arrangements.

The work of substitute teachers in Northern Ireland contributes significantly to the effective running of the schools and nurseries,

and substitute teachers represent an important resource valued by principals and by others in the education service. In the main, substitute teaching and its management in Northern Ireland operate in an efficient and effective manner. There is also room for improvement, notably in aspects of planning and classroom practice, and also in the monitoring and evaluation of the work of substitute teachers by senior management. Attention also needs to be given to improving substitute teachers' access to external professional development opportunities.

Copies of the full report can be obtained from

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