

Threshold Assessment:
**The experiences of teachers who were unsuccessful in
crossing the threshold**

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ABSTRACT

This paper, the second in a pair of articles, reports empirical research undertaken into the implementation of one of the UK government's strands of performance-related pay: Threshold Assessment (TA). This procedure was introduced in English primary and secondary schools in summer 2000. Although the recruitment and retention of teachers had become a growing concern for the government by that time, it would have been politically difficult to award teachers across the profession a pay increase without attaching any strings whatsoever. The Threshold Assessment procedure requires teachers to demonstrate that they have met a number of 'standards' in order to 'cross the threshold' and to receive a pay award (when first introduced, in 2000, this was £2000). This then allows them access to an upper pay scale, although progression up this is linked to their performance via the Performance Management procedure which was also introduced into schools at that time.

The Teachers' Incentive Pay Project, currently in progress at the University of Exeter, studied the implementation of the first round of the Threshold Assessment procedure. It examined the way in which the procedure was conducted across England by collecting data from head teachers, teachers, and threshold assessors. Ninety seven per cent of teachers applying to cross the threshold in the first round in summer 2000 were successful. This paper focuses on the experiences of teachers who were *unsuccessful* in their bid to cross the Threshold, having been deemed to have 'not yet met' the required standards (referred to in this paper as NYM or 'unsuccessful' teachers). A number of issues emerge including differences between schools in the way in which the procedure was approached and undertaken; relationship problems between head teachers and teachers; the support available to NYM teachers; the appropriateness of the current procedure for 'non-standard' teachers

such as advisory/learning support staff, supply teachers and part-timers; the procedure's impact on teacher performance.

Keywords: performance-related pay; teachers; threshold assessment; review procedure

INTRODUCTION

A full review of the research literature on performance-related pay undertaken by the authors of this article was published in an earlier issue of *Research Papers in Education* (Chamberlin et al, 2002). Like the linked article in the current issue of *Research Papers in Education* (Wragg et al, 2002) this paper reports some of the key findings of the Teachers' Incentive Pay Project (TIPP), a three year project based at the School of Education, University of Exeter, funded by the Leverhulme Trust. The Project is investigating the introduction and implementation of both strands of the UK Government's performance-related pay procedures for teachers, termed 'Threshold Assessment' and 'Performance Management'. In this paper the focus is the 'Threshold Assessment' procedure which was introduced in primary and secondary schools in England in summer 2000. This procedure gave experienced teachers who had reached point 9 on the salary scale, at that time, the opportunity to apply to 'cross the threshold' and to receive a salary increase of £2000. It also offered them access to an upper pay scale, provided that they were judged to have met the required 'standards' under five main headings:

- Knowledge and Understanding
- Teaching and Assessment
- Pupil Progress
- Wider Professional Effectiveness
- Professional Characteristics

The Threshold Assessment procedure comprises three main stages:

- (a) submission of application by the teacher
- (b) judgement by head teacher as to whether the applicant has met the standards

(c) visit by an external Threshold Assessor (TA) to the school to verify that the procedure has been carried out properly and fairly by the head teacher. The Threshold Assessor has the authority to overturn a head teacher's decision.

Although applications for the first round of Threshold Assessment had to be submitted by 5 June 2000, a high court action by the National Union of Teachers had resulted in delays to the implementation of the procedure. It was not until the spring/early summer of 2001 that most teachers received notification of the outcome of their application.

Ninety seven per cent of teachers applying to cross the threshold in the first round of this procedure were successful. This paper reports the findings of a survey of 174 teachers who were *unsuccessful* in their bid to cross the threshold, having been deemed to have 'not yet met' the required standards.

METHODOLOGY

Contact was made with NYM (not yet met) teachers during June 2001 in two ways: via teacher unions and by a letter from the Project Director to the Times Educational Supplement asking for volunteers. The research team produced a flyer giving information about the Teachers' Incentive Pay Project with a form for teachers interested in participating in the research to complete and return using a freepost address. A questionnaire was then sent to the teachers. Anonymity was guaranteed to all those taking part in the research. Requests for questionnaires were received from 244 teachers and 174 were returned completed. Some teachers not returning the questionnaire rang to say that, although they had wanted to take part in the research, they found that revisiting the events to complete the questionnaire had proved too stressful for them. In addition to the 174 teachers who completed questionnaires, six advisory/learning support staff took part in the research: two were interviewed, four completed a questionnaire modified to take account of their particular circumstances. Their cases are discussed separately under the section entitled 'Non-standards' teachers. As all the teachers taking part in this research were volunteers, these were opportunity samples, not random stratified samples.

The first questionnaire sent to NYM teachers contained a mix of open and closed questions. It sought personal details about the teacher including sex; years in teaching; type of school taught;

nature of employment; year group/subject taught; years in school where the application to cross the threshold was submitted; and whether the teacher held a responsibility post. Teachers were asked whether their head had supported their application; whether they had met with the Threshold Assessor (the evaluator external to the school); what sort of evidence they had been asked to provide; who had made the final decision that their application should be unsuccessful; how they were notified of the outcome and by whom; whether they had received any feedback; the type of advice if any given to them by their union; whether they intended to seek a review of the judgement; and the effect on their classroom performance and morale. They were also given the opportunity to make further comments, if they wished.

As the questionnaires were anonymous it has not been possible to triangulate the data by investigating the views of some of the other individuals, like their head teacher, involved in these cases. Of the 174 teachers who completed the first questionnaire, 74% decided to seek a review of the outcome, so they were sent a follow-up questionnaire by the research team during November 2001 to gather information on this aspect of the procedure. The percentage of teachers nationally asking for the decision to be reviewed was approximately a quarter, so our sample may be representative of those unsuccessful teachers who were particularly proactive, or whose feelings were especially strong. There is evidence that certain 'non-standard' teachers may be disadvantaged by the current structure and requirements of the Threshold Assessment procedure: advisory/learning support staff; supply teachers and part-timers.

Sample details of unsuccessful Teachers

Table 1: Sex of teachers

	%
Female	61
Male	39

Table 2: Years in teaching

	%
7-10 years	9
11-15 years	15
16-20 years	13
21 years +	63

Table 3 Phase taught in

	%
Primary	42
Secondary	56
Special school – cross phase	2

Table 4 Years in current post

	%
Less than 3 years	10
3-6 years	13
7-10 years	20
11-15 years	29
16-20 years	10
21+ years	15
Not applicable: supply teachers	3

Of the 174 teachers, 148 indicated they were employed full time, and 26 on a part-time basis. 53% held a responsibility post at the time of their threshold application and a number of respondents were heads of department. Six of the teachers in the sample were supply teachers.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Threshold Assessors' visits

One of the first tasks of the Threshold Assessor was to scrutinise a sample of applications. The size of the sample is related to the number of teachers applying in a school, with a maximum of ten. Eighty-seven per cent of the application forms of teachers completing the questionnaire had been included in the sample scrutinised by the Assessor on his/her school visit. This percentage is much higher than that for the 'successful' teachers studied by the research team in a separate survey (Haynes et al 2001). Some of the teachers believed that their inclusion in the sample had meant they were more likely to fail because their application was being scrutinised, whilst those of other colleagues were not. In fact, Assessors were required to scrutinise a sample *representative* of all applications in a school, from those which the head teacher judged to have not yet met the standards to those which they felt should cross the threshold without question. As approximately 97% of teachers nationally were successful, it would be expected that most unsuccessful teachers in a school would be included in the Assessor's sample. In addition, the project's survey of 1000 head

teachers (Wragg et al 2002) revealed that in only 71 cases out of the 19,000 teachers in the 1,000 schools studied had the head teacher and Threshold Assessor actually disagreed about the assessment.

Only a small percentage of teachers, either successful or unsuccessful in crossing the threshold, had formally met the Assessor. The evidence suggests that these meetings took place in schools where the Assessor was not convinced that the head teacher had been sufficiently rigorous in verifying the evidence cited in support of teachers' applications.

Out of 151 unsuccessful teachers who had been included in their school's sample, 131 reported that they had been asked to make available for the Assessor's visit evidence to support their application. In some cases, little detail had been given to the teacher of the evidence required. In general, however, comprehensive lists of evidence had apparently been issued by the Assessor via the head teacher. One secondary teacher's list contained many different items: "schemes of work; topic plans; lesson plans; pupils' books; evidence of use of various strategies used and behaviour management; use of differentiation; departmental assessment scheme; records for pupils at entry/general level criteria/topic specific records; progress records and progress reports to parents; monitoring and evaluation informing planning; formal test results for topics; full records of Year 9 SATs; certificate of external accreditation; notes for in-service training sessions."

The qualitative data were scrutinised to see if there were any differences between the demands made upon primary teachers and their secondary peers but none were found. The type and amount of evidence requested appeared to relate more to individual Assessors than the phase of schooling. Assessors interviewed by the research team indicated that heads sometimes asked their staff for additional documentation not requested by them.

Responses from teachers to the requests for evidence depended on how prepared the individual teacher felt, the degree of detail provided by the Assessor, how readily available the evidence was, the amount demanded, and the time given to assemble it. Some teachers had felt relaxed about the process. These were teachers who had no suspicion that they would be unsuccessful:

"I thought the Assessor would want to see 'Planning and Assessment' [one of the standards], so I was well prepared." (Primary)

“I expected to pass easily, so I thought it was just a formality. I handed in thirteen folders of evidence but was told this needed to be simplified so I handed in something more manageable.” (Primary)

Irritation was caused when demands were vaguely defined, or where large amounts of evidence were requested and if a limited amount of time was available in which to supply the required documents. In common with the ‘successful’ teachers surveyed by the research team, none of the unsuccessful teachers had had their teaching observed by the Assessor, as classroom observation was not a requirement. Only two teachers commented on this:

“How I wish [the Assessor] had [observed]!” (Primary)

“I wish he had, as I have had excellent classroom observations in both subjects.” (Secondary)

Communications

Pre-outcome

Over two thirds of the teachers reported that their head teacher had given no indication of whether an application from them to cross the threshold would be received favourably. The data suggest that most heads who *had* addressed the issue had done so at training sessions or at staff meetings. Only six teachers (4 secondary, 2 primary) indicated that their head had *discouraged* the school staff, in general, from making applications. In some schools, the head had taken a neutral stance on the procedure and simply held a training session to raise awareness, where “nobody was encouraged/discouraged to submit an application”. In the majority of cases, however, heads had apparently encouraged *all* staff to apply:

“He indicated that everyone on the staff eligible to apply should and stated he guaranteed everyone who applied in the first round would get threshold (over 50 staff).” (Secondary)

This type of comment by heads seems surprising as they must have already known that they would not be supporting *all* applications. The following comments go even further in explaining why some of these teachers felt aggrieved when their case was turned down:

“She said she would fully support my application.” (Primary)

“The deputy head helped me to complete the proforma and checked it, leading me to believe it was acceptable.” (Secondary)

Many of these teachers did not find out until their application form was returned to them, nearly a year later, that their head had not originally supported them in their bid to cross the threshold, and there was often uncertainty about who had made the *final* decision on their application.

Notification of outcome

It is not easy to tell teachers that their competence has been questioned, and 99% of school-based unsuccessful teachers were informed of the outcome of their application by their head teacher. Table 5 shows that teachers were given the news in a variety of ways, mostly face to face, but also by letter or by telephone, sometimes formally, on other occasions informally.

Table 5: How were you first notified that your application had been unsuccessful?

Method of notification of outcome	Percentage
Individually - formal meeting with head	36
Individually - by letter	27
Individually - told informally by head	25
Individually - by telephone	9
Not told - realised when received next payslips*	2
As a group – informally	1

*These teachers came from the same school

The figures in Table 5 reveal contrasting approaches of head teachers in dealing with this issue. The qualitative data indicate more starkly how some heads tried to communicate in a professional manner, while others were less meticulous:

“I was invited to meet the Head who then outlined the situation. The meeting was formal although friendly.” (Secondary)

“In my classroom at the end of the day in a sealed envelope with no verbal communication at all.” (Primary)

“Mobile phone during lunch hour.” (Primary)

“I was informed by the Head in a corridor full of pupils. All the seven unsuccessful applicants were informed in a similar way: corridors; classrooms and school yard etc.” (Secondary)

“At our school, I and colleagues only found out whether our applications had been successful by comparing pay slips in January! There was no previous notification.” (Secondary)

Feedback

It is a requirement that application forms should be returned to teachers after the Assessor’s visit has taken place and the outcome is known. Only 15% of the successful teachers surveyed in the present project (Haynes et al 2001) said they had received their application form with their head’s comments on it, but head teachers had been more conscientious about returning unsuccessful teachers’ application forms, where the figure was 88%. A chi-square test showed this difference to be significant at well beyond the .001 level of probability.

The nature of the feedback, given by the head teacher in all but three cases, was in general little more than an expansion of the list of areas in which the teacher had ‘not yet met’ the standard. Most heads made no attempt to use the procedure as a basis for bringing about future improvements. Many of the unsuccessful teachers reported that they had received no helpful insights into how to change or develop their practice in order to meet the standards in future. Once teachers discovered that 97% of their fellows had been successful nationally, they became very disgruntled at being given no support or advice on how to improve their performance.

The 135 unsuccessful teachers who *had* received feedback were asked how they had felt about the reasons given for the rejection of their application. Only seven teachers said they felt the decision was “probably justified”. Two further teachers, one supply and one part-timer, said they had not

expected to pass because, in their particular situation, it was very difficult to prove pupil progress. The case of these special groups is discussed in more detail later in this article.

The most common words used in responses were ‘shocked’, ‘furious’, ‘demoralised’, or a combination of all three. They frequently stated that the decision was subjective and based on a personal bias against them, that the reasons were inadequate, unfounded, unfair, and untrue. The comments below give a flavour of how these teachers reacted.

“Sickened, deskilled, demotivated, loyalty to school gone, commitment gone. Had no idea that I was considered a failure – “the weakest link” was quoted – really good for my self esteem!” (Primary)

“Completely destroyed. The head never saw me teach. I was never informed of any concerns about my teaching. My teaching was never monitored. Nothing was ever offered to me to support any problems it suddenly appears I have.” (Secondary)

“Furious. Both ‘reasons’ are totally untrue. Colleagues are equally angry and know as well as I do that I was targeted because I am the union rep. They have sent statements of support to include in my review application.” (Secondary)

Many felt an overwhelming sense of injustice. This was founded initially on the limitations of the application form to allow them to describe, in full, their knowledge, skills and contributions. Secondly, many felt that judgements were made on their classroom practice when this had been only rarely or, in some cases, never observed. There was extreme dissatisfaction with what they saw as the ‘subjective’, ‘biased’, ‘malicious’ and ‘vindictive’ nature of the assessment. Many teachers who had been in previous disputes with their heads believed that their applications had not been objectively judged and that they were victims of management bullying. There were claims that union representatives were over-represented nationally amongst the unsuccessful teachers.

It is difficult to overstate the humiliation felt by these teachers, particularly as they were often the only one in their school who had been unsuccessful:

“It was a terribly humiliating experience and leaves me feeling helpless about even improving my teaching, and wary of Performance Management.” (Primary)

“It is hard going into my school where everybody passed. It makes me feel as though I am not as good as them. It is also a stigma because it was advertised as a pay rise for most teachers – I am now one of the ‘few’.” (Secondary)

‘Non-standard’ teachers

For some teachers working in what are called in this paper ‘non-standard’ situations (such as advisory teachers and learning support staff, supply teachers, home tutors and part-timers), the frustrations of the application form, providing and accessing evidence and awaiting outcomes, were exacerbated by the inappropriateness of the procedure to their particular posts.

Advisory Teachers and Learning Support Staff

Six advisory/learning support staff took part in the research. Two were interviewed by a member of the research team, the others completed a questionnaire either as a ‘successful’ or NYM teacher. The procedure worked differently to that in schools. These staff were subject to Direct Assessment where a team of external assessors visited over a number of days to carry out the assessment. Most of these visits took place in the summer term of 2001 so these were amongst the last personnel to learn the outcome of their application, over a year since they had submitted it.

Unlike primary and secondary teachers based in schools, the advisory/learning support staff had no idea, when they submitted their application, who would assess it. They had only been specifically told that it would not be their direct line manager. They, therefore, questioned strongly, the individual’s ability to judge their application without specific knowledge either of what their job entailed or of them personally. From the outset, they found the application form inappropriate to their position and it was, therefore, very difficult for them to provide evidence to support their case:

“It’s difficult to identify and supply evidence [to show] that [my] advice/input has had a direct effect upon pupil progress. Generally, progress relies upon Special Needs Co-ordinators etc. taking/following advice.”

Two teachers cited problems with gathering evidence as the reason for their lack of success, one saying: “I was not prepared to make a nuisance of myself digging up Individual Education Plans etc

from schools I have worked at over the past three years, or alternatively inventing material”. This teacher said she had not expected to be successful, but the other NYM teacher had. Like many of the unsuccessful teachers based in schools, she had confidence in her own performance. She said she felt extremely let down by her LEA and the Direct Assessment process.

The first teacher decided not to seek a review and was “seriously considering resigning”. The second teacher had applied for a review and was strongly arguing that the Direct Assessment process was severely flawed: “How can anyone make a decision – with no specialist knowledge based on a few pages of evidence?” This particular teacher was one of six staff in her support service who *all* failed to cross the Threshold.

Supply teachers

Only six of the 174 unsuccessful teachers indicated that they were supply teachers and therefore the findings must be treated with some caution, it does appear that many of the problems faced by advisory/learning support staff were also faced by supply teachers. For supply teachers, however, the problem was often even greater, as they are assessed in the same way as their colleagues who are attached to only one school. This meant they had to ask a head teacher in one of their schools to act as their line manager for Threshold Assessment purposes and even teachers who were well known in a school immediately encountered problems:

“As a supply teacher at one school for fourteen years on a regular basis, I asked the head teacher to be my line manager. She pointed out that she would not be able to say I had met with criteria regarding evidence, but was willing to take on that role.” (Primary)

Whilst a lack of pupil progress evidence was cited in all the unsuccessful supply teachers’ cases, other reasons given included insufficient evidence of professional development and of contribution to the policies and aspirations of the schools. As a consequence the supply teachers were extremely bitter about the Threshold Assessment procedure. The teacher below summed up how this group felt:

“I am an *ace* and a professional supply teacher and am regarded as such by my many colleagues in a variety of schools over a wide area. How can my qualities as a teacher be measured with statistics that do not enter into the scheme of my work? ... The only fair way

to assess a supply teacher is to follow her round for a week as she goes to a different school and age-group every day (including nursery and special needs) taking assemblies, whole school singing, two classes together to release a teacher etc. You really do have to be ready for anything and with great enthusiasm ... The most practical and fair ideal would be to ask their head teachers "Is [s/he] a talented teacher and an asset to your school?"

Supply teachers play a vital role in keeping schools in operation. They often require a greater knowledge base and more varied skills than teachers based in only one subject, or year group, in only one school. There is a need to make sure that the demands placed upon supply teachers are recognised and that they are not discriminated against financially by a system which is not wholly appropriate to them.

Part-time teachers

Of the 174 NYM teachers, 20 were part-time teachers. Unlike the advisory teachers, learning support staff and supply teachers, the majority of these teachers did not suggest that the Threshold Assessment procedure was inappropriate to the part-time nature of their employment, and their responses to questions were very similar to those of full-time unsuccessful teachers. In secondary schools, although part-time, subject teachers often taught particular groups throughout a school year, so collecting pupil progress data was not especially problematic. Where pupil progress difficulties were encountered, this was usually by Special Needs support staff and the problems were similar to centrally based Learning Support staff and more a function of their role, than the fact that they were part-time.

Two of the part-timers were primary teachers who shared a post. In both cases their job share partner had crossed the threshold while they had not, and lack of pupil progress was cited. Both teachers found this reason difficult to accept. As one of them put it:

"My morale is rock bottom. I am a part-time job share teacher and my other half job share got across the threshold and I didn't. I was told my pupils had not made progress, so I feel confused that, for the days I taught, the children made no progress, and the days my other half worked, they did!

It is certainly difficult to imagine how ‘credit’ or ‘blame’ can be reliably apportioned in this type of situation. Had the teachers been ‘failed’ in other areas, such as ‘Professional Characteristics’ or ‘Wider Professional Effectiveness’, the difference identified between them and their job share partner might have made more sense, but according to the teachers, this was not the case.

Two part-timers claimed that the current Threshold Assessment procedure militates against people in their position. One, who had been deemed unsuccessful on ‘Knowledge and Understanding’, stated: “I only teach Literacy and Numeracy, therefore I had not attended training for PE, Art, Science, etc and did not think this would affect my teaching or my threshold application”. The second teacher was also told she had not attended enough courses. She felt particularly bitter because she had only worked one day a week in the period relevant to her application.

Clearly, there is an issue here for school managers. What is reasonable to expect from their part-time staff? Should they be expected to attend the same number of training sessions as their full-time colleagues and events such as meetings held on days when they are not normally in school, and should they be expected to be involved in extra-curricular activities?

Review procedure

When the requirements for the Threshold Assessment procedure were originally laid down, no right to review was included. This was inserted later following a successful high court action by the National Union of Teachers. According to Cambridge Education Associates (CEA), the company responsible for the training and deployment of Review Assessors, their role is as follows:

- 1 to make sure that the review form has been completed correctly and that it has been received within the appropriate timescale
- 2 to look at the grounds on which the review has been submitted and to call for evidence
- 3 to consider all the evidence and make a decision
- 4 to log the procedure as it has happened
- 5 to lodge all paper work with CEA where procedures are checked

There is no formal contact between the Review Assessor and the original Threshold Assessor unless there is a need to seek confirmation of, for example, an illegible comment in the records. Review

Assessors are not allowed to ask for *new* evidence, only evidence which should have been available originally. No observation of teaching takes place.

The timescale for this process was originally intended to be 70 days. However, this was not, as many teachers believed, from the date on which the application was received by CEA, but the date when the case was allocated to a Review Assessor. There was an initial delay in allocation of cases because the review procedure had not been finalised. Other delays occurred because head teachers had not given the teacher back their original application form. In the event, 134 (77%) of the original sample of 174 unsuccessful teachers decided to seek a review. Those who had decided not to appeal cited various reasons, including the desire to avoid further anxiety and concerns about the long term impact on their career of openly confronting their head teacher:

“I have been unable to work for the past month as it has been the final humiliation. I have suffered at the hands of the head in front of a very young staff. There is only so much one can take.” (Primary)

“I am not seeking a Review because it is my opinion against the head’s and he is very unlikely to acknowledge that he could misinterpret evidence.” (Secondary)

“With so much secrecy and the almost complete disregard for the rules which the head seems to have displayed in all this, I am reluctant to take any steps which might produce short term advantage but be to my disadvantage in the longer term.” (Secondary)

In October 2001 a second questionnaire was distributed to the 134 teachers who had indicated that they would be applying for a review. It was anticipated that, by this time, teachers should have received notification of the outcome of their review. In fact, some teachers did not know the result until early 2002. In total, 111 teachers completed the second questionnaire. This sought to gather data on a number of issues including: the length of time the review procedure had taken; any help or advice they had received in the compilation of their review application; the grounds on which they had sought their review; whether their head teacher had supported it; whether they had had any contact with the Review Assessor and, if so, what form this contact had taken; the outcome of their review; and, if unsuccessful, whether they had reapplied in Round 2.

Length of review procedure

Nearly three quarters of review applications were submitted during the period May-July 2001. By the end of November 2001 89% of teachers had been notified of the outcome. However, as Table 6 reveals, some teachers had had only 2 months to wait, while others had waited for 7 months or more, a period far exceeding the 70 days originally stated by CEA as the timescale for the review procedure.

Table 6: Length of time between submitted review application and notification of outcome (n= 111)

Number of months	Percentage
2 months	9
3 months	26
4 months	25
5 months	25
6 months	10
7 months	2
8 months	2
9 months	2

nb The figures do not total 100 due to rounding

Guidance on completion of review application

As the review procedure had been ‘bolted on’ to the original Threshold Assessment procedure, teachers had received no information or training on what to do if they were unsuccessful in their bid to cross the threshold. This left many of them feeling isolated and not knowing what to do. All but one of the 174 teachers in the original sample were union members, while 162 (94%) indicated that

they had contacted their union for guidance. In the majority of cases, the advice had been to seek a review, though only 134 teachers in this sample had actually done so.

The 111 teachers who completed the second questionnaire were asked if they had received any help in completing their review application form and, if so, from whom. As Table 7, indicates, the main sources of information at this time were the teacher unions, either at local or national level.

Table 7: Sources of help used by teachers completing review application forms (n = 111)

Sources of help	Percentage
Local teacher union representative	51
National teacher union helpdesk	30
Head teacher	6
Senior manager/line manager	6
Colleague in same school	19
Colleague in another school	8
Other (usually partner)	14
No help received	17

nb These figures do not total 100% as some teachers ticked more than one box

Seventy six per cent of respondents said they had found the review application form “quite” or “very” difficult to complete. Some had been unsure what was required; many had found the process extremely time consuming. For others it had not been the form itself which was problematic, rather it was the emotional aspects which were most difficult:

“If I had not had union help and advice on the way in which the review could be worded and on the aspects of my application I could focus on, I would have found it extremely difficult to fill in. There was no real indication of what was required or how to set it out.”

“Very stressful to keep reliving the ‘failure’.”

“Time consuming, finding yet more evidence, photocopying previous evidence shown to the Threshold Assessor. Emotionally very difficult as I had to counteract the Head’s negative attitude, half truths and downright lies.”

Teachers were asked if there was anything which would have been helpful to them in completing their review application which was not then available. Some teachers had had to complete their review form without reference to their original threshold application form:

“I had not received my original form back from the CEA and therefore had not read the full details of the sections completed by the head teacher, only a summary of these points.”

“My (former) head teacher’s report was not available when I submitted my review application because he had delayed sending it to me for as long as he could.”

Others would have liked an informed advisor:

“Someone to turn to – I felt distinctly isolated. Being “confidential”, I was not able to consult anyone else. The union rep was there but couldn’t offer precise advice or wording for the application.”

“A mentor who understood all the ways through the wordy documentation.”

Grounds for Review

Teachers were required to indicate on the form their reasons for seeking a review. Three grounds were offered, as set out below:

“I would have met the threshold standards if the head or assessor who made the assessment:

1. Had taken proper account of relevant evidence

☐

2. Had not taken account of irrelevant or inaccurate evidence

☐

3. Had not been biased or had not discriminated against me”

☐

As Table 8 below shows, the data indicate that a large minority of teachers cited *all* three grounds.

Table 8: Teachers’ grounds for seeking a review (n = 111)

Grounds for seeking a review	Percentage
Ground 1 only	18
Ground 2 only	1
Ground 3 only	3
Grounds 1 and 2	13
Grounds 1 and 3	17
Grounds 2 and 3	6
All grounds	43

nb Where percentages do not total 100, this is due to rounding

Further analysis of the data reveals that ground 1 was cited by 90% of respondents, ground 2 by 62% and ground 3 by 67%.

Given that, in most situations, the head teacher had been the instigator of the ‘not yet met’ verdict on these teachers’ original applications, it is perhaps not surprising that in only 15% of the cases had the head apparently supported the teacher’s appeal. Furthermore, in the majority of these cases, this was a different head teacher to the one judging the first application: either a new head at the original school, or the head teacher of the school to which the teacher had since moved.

Communication with Review Assessors

Six per cent of unsuccessful teachers had had some form of communication with their Threshold Assessor at the time of their original application. This figure rose to 23% during the review procedure. Twelve teachers spoke with the Review Assessor (RA) on the telephone. Fourteen teachers formally met the RA; notice of the meeting ranged from less than 24 hours to three weeks. The length of the meetings ranged from 15 minutes to two hours and were always attended only by the RA and the teacher. The RA met the head separately. Some of the accounts below give a flavour of what happened at these sessions:

“He started off by apologising for having to read out the ‘nasty things’ my head had said about me. He went through most of the points in the appeal and asked me to expand on some.”

“The Review Assessor asked a lot of questions but listened to my replies intently and made copious notes. She asked to look at any evidence I had brought with me to support my application.”

“He questioned me on the issues, mentioning other information (negative) received orally from the head – some of which was new to me. I explained why reason 3 was also relevant, but to tick that box would have been very prejudicial to my application. He didn’t seem particularly familiar with my portfolio (posted with application) and file of requested additional data. He kept saying he was just collecting data. He seemed to be asking questions only to a format.”

Teachers who had met the RA were divided as to how they felt about the meeting afterwards. Some said they had felt “comfortable” and thought the RA had been “very professional and not at all threatening”. Others felt more negative about the experience:

“The Review Assessor completely missed the point that my statistics showed that my target pupils had progressed academically and in self esteem.”

“It had been impossible to prepare adequately for and there was a lot that I wanted to have said but hadn’t like to say or hadn’t thought about on the spot. I felt that the assessor had been

very pleasant and I had done the best I could in the circumstances but there was a lot in my review form that had not been discussed.”

Many of the teachers who had had personal contact with the Review Assessor perceived that their head teacher had been given more occasions for discussion with the RA than they had and they felt this was unfair.

It was not clear from the responses on the questionnaires why some teachers had had this personal contact with their RA whilst three quarters of the 111 teachers had not. This question was put in interview to a CEA officer who said that the RA would decide, when looking at the individual case, whether contact was necessary or not. It was stressed that if a RA made a ‘site visit’ to a school, the RA *must* interview both the head and the teacher. Usually contact would be made if the RA required further evidence, although CEA emphasised in interview that no *new* evidence could be asked for:

“What they cannot ask for is new evidence. What they can ask for is further evidence. They can only ask for evidence that should have been available to the original assessor.”

Teachers in this situation were most likely to be those who had not been in the original Threshold Assessor’s sample and so had not had to submit evidence for scrutiny at that time. CEA were also keen to stress that the review process was intended to be an open one:

“Any evidence requested from the head or evidence requested from the teacher is copied to the head teacher and they know it’s copied and vice-versa. So the evidence requested is very, very transparent. The whole process is.”

Outcomes

Teachers were notified of the outcome of their review by letter from Cambridge Education Associates. Of the 111 teachers completing Questionnaire 2, 39 (36%) had been successful at review. Further analysis was undertaken to discover whether there was any correlation between the grounds cited and the outcome of the review but there was none. However, teachers whose head teachers (whether new ones or the head who had judged the original application) had supported their

review application were more likely to be successful. A chi-square test showed this difference to be significant at the 0.02 level.

A mixture of emotions was expressed by teachers who had been successful:

“[I feel] justified that I knew I was right all along. But now I feel the need for action to be taken against the unprofessional conduct of the head teacher – who can carry on and do the same thing to someone else!”

“Relieved. I now have parity with my colleagues, but I’m cross that I was put through it!”

“Satisfied. But very angry at all the extra work I have had to do just before our school’s Ofsted inspection. Very angry at my head (who has fortunately left).”

Those teachers who had been unsuccessful were cynical about the review procedure:

“The original assessor overturned 5 of the 8 judgements made against me by the head. For the Review Assessor to overturn the other three would be to say that their own person [the original Threshold Assessor] and the head were wrong. This would be “politically” disadvantageous.”

“I think it is very difficult for the Review Assessor to overturn the original assessor and the head teacher. I was very disappointed that neither the original assessor or the Review Assessor met me or ever saw me teach.”

For these teachers, the desolation, demoralisation and disillusionment which they had felt when learning of their original failure to cross the threshold returned in full measure.

Of the 70 teachers who were still unsuccessful (two teachers did not report the outcome), even after the review, half said they were intending to reapply in Round 2 of the Threshold Assessment process. Twenty five of the 35 teachers who were *not* reapplying gave their reasons. Nine teachers had already left teaching, either through resignation or early retirement. Six said they were unable to face possible further humiliation, four said it seemed “pointless” given that they were still

working with the same head teacher. Three cited continuing problems with providing pupil progress evidence, while three others said they had not received notification that they had been unsuccessful at review until after the deadline date for Round 2 applications. According to CEA, there would have been nothing to preclude these three teachers from submitting an application before the outcome of their review was known.

Most of the 35 teachers reapplying in Round 2 were optimistic about the outcome of their second application. Over half the teachers had by then moved school, or had a new head teacher who had said they would support them; the remainder had been assured by their head (the original one) that their application would be supported, though one teacher commented rather wryly:

“Apparently I have improved dramatically this year so the head feels that he can support me. In fact, he even offered help this time and went over my application before I finally submitted it – no alterations were necessary.”

Impact of Threshold Assessment on Classroom Practice

When the government introduced Threshold Assessment, it was couched in terms of rewarding teachers for effective performance. At the time it would have been politically difficult to award teachers across the profession a pay increase without attaching any strings whatsoever, although one of the issues at the forefront of the government’s policy was the retention and recruitment of teachers. So teachers were told that they had to demonstrate that they had met the various standards required, in order to receive the £2000 pay award and to access the upper pay scale.

To tie pay to performance raises an expectation that some changes in practice should occur. However, when we asked unsuccessful teachers, after they first learned their application had been unsuccessful, whether they had made or were making any modifications to their classroom practice as a result of the Threshold Assessment procedure, there was little evidence of change. Removing from the dataset the teachers who were no longer in school due to retirement or a change of career, or were on long term sick leave, as can be seen from Table 9 just over half of the unsuccessful teachers reported little or no impact on their classroom practice. The first questionnaire data suggested two reasons for this: firstly, most unsuccessful teachers strongly disputed the reasons

cited for their lack of success; secondly, as discussed previously, very few had received any diagnostic assessment of their practice or support to help them identify what and how to improve.

Table 9: What impact has the Threshold Assessment procedure had on your classroom practice? (June 2001) (n = 146)

Impact on classroom practice	Percentage
None	42
Initially negative, now none	6
Very little (unspecified)	6
A detrimental effect - emotional	40
Keep more records	5
A positive effect	1

In November 2001 we asked unsuccessful teachers again whether the Threshold Assessment procedure had had any impact on their classroom practice. One hundred and four of the 111 teachers completing the second questionnaire provided some sort of response to this question. The data provided by teachers who had left teaching were excluded. Table 10 shows the findings from the remaining 87 teachers. Only two teachers said there had been a positive impact. These were both teachers who had been successful at review, but even here no deliberate alterations to practice were reported, merely an increase in confidence due to finally crossing the threshold.

Table 10: What impact has the Threshold Assessment procedure had on your classroom practice? (November 2001) (n = 87)

Impact on classroom practice	Percentage
None	45

Initially negative, now none	5
Keep more records	7
Very little (unspecified)	2
A detrimental effect – emotional	33
Withdrawal of cooperation/extra-curricular activities	8
A positive effect	1

nb The figures do not total 100 due to rounding

Comparison of the data between June 2001 and November 2001 shows that, if anything, the impact of the Threshold Assessment procedure for these teachers has been to reduce their commitment to the profession, with some teachers indicating that they were deliberately opting out of any responsibilities outside their job description:

“I am wholly disaffected and very angry. I now do sufficient to get by. I shall just keep the system ticking over until I reach the age when I can retire without an actuarial reduction of my pension.”

“I am now far less willing to spend all the extra time and effort I previously did at the expense of my own family who saw so little of me. I try to leave school earlier and spend much less weekend time on planning sheets. I do my best for my class but do not offer to take on extras or work in my own time.”

“I still work flat out for the pupils but now no longer run football and cricket clubs after school. I will not help with school fetes. The pupils have lost out.”

CONCLUSION

This paper has reported the key findings of a survey of teachers who were unsuccessful in their application to cross the threshold and then appealed against the outcome. It is apparent that, despite the role played by Threshold Assessors as moderators of the procedure, teachers in different schools had had very different experiences of the Threshold Assessment procedure. There was a lack of

consistency nationally and even locally in the way in which head teachers administered it, as the two comments below demonstrate:

“I know that the threshold procedure is an unfair system. We received no help or even hints to aid form filling ... I know of schools where the head actually drafted answers for the form or helped staff review forms before submitting them.”

“My head teacher said that if she had known that so many people would cross in the first round, she would not have been so critical. She has told me that if I reapply, she will support me this time.”

A number of issues have emerged to do with the relationship between head teachers and their staff. Many of the unsuccessful teachers questioned the basis on which their head teacher made judgements about their performance and/or felt that they were victims of bias and management bullying. Many teachers studied in this research, even ‘those deemed to be successful’, have felt uneasy about the amount of power residing with the head, perceiving the Threshold Assessor’s role as merely to confirm the head’s decision. It is difficult to judge the veracity of statements made on questionnaires when there is no opportunity to triangulate the data, but some comments made by teachers suggest that a small number of heads may be abusing their position of power:

“I was put into a quandary when the acting head said that if I made an appeal, those who had been awarded the threshold in my school might lose it because I would be appealing against the ‘process’, not pursuing my individual claim.”

Several teachers when first considering whether or not to apply to cross the threshold had also been told that if they did and were unsuccessful, they might adversely affect the outcomes for their colleagues. There is no evidence, however, that there was anything in the training for head teachers which would have encouraged them to think that this is how the system would work.

A key finding of this study of unsuccessful teachers has been the lack of communication between many heads and their staff at all stages of the threshold procedure. Heads are precluded from helping teachers with their application forms, yet some did help, or found other ways to provide support. Even if head teachers feel that they should avoid all personal involvement at the

application stage of the threshold procedure, it must be asked why heads had not acted earlier to address issues of poor performance with a teacher whose case they were not intending to support. The situation was exacerbated when head teachers failed to give the teacher detailed feedback on reasons for their lack of success. The evidence suggests that it was rare for head teachers to suggest how performance might be improved and to offer to provide support either in-house or externally. It may be that these head teachers hoped that their 'unsuccessful' member of staff would become disillusioned and leave. Such a strategy might well have been effective, as 50 (29%) of the 174 unsuccessful teachers completing the first questionnaire had left or said they were intending to leave. Two thirds of these 50 had moved, were intending to move to another school, or were undertaking supply teaching, and one third had decided to leave the teaching profession altogether, some taking early retirement.

There is certainly no evidence from this research that the introduction of the Threshold Assessment procedure had a positive impact on classroom practice. The main outcome of Round 1 seems to have been to send a message to all teachers that, in order to progress in their career, they have to furnish evidence in the form of lesson plans, pupil progress data, courses attended, approving letters from parents, and evidence of their organisation of school trips. This might appear to suggest there is a link between record keeping and rising standards of teaching and learning, yet some teachers expressed a fear that an excess of record keeping would lead them to neglect their performance in the classroom.

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