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The Implementation of the Performance Threshold in UK Secondary Schools

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Abstract

This paper reports the results of interviews with the head teachers of 25 English secondary schools, designed to gain information about how the Performance Threshold was operationalised in schools. The results show that most heads found their training to be unhelpful and of poor quality. The process by which the Threshold was operationalised varied between schools, in terms of how heads conducted internal training days and how they organised the process by which staff made applications. In some schools it was organised at departmental level, with departments submitting applications following a standard format. Most of the schools in our sample were able to give teachers value added information as the basis for reporting pupil progress, although a number of heads felt that this was not a valid measure of success in all subjects. Most of the staff eligible to apply for the Threshold did so, and most passed. When assessing applications, heads generally assessed the teacher rather than the form, and were keen to ensure that the assessment process did not undermine internal relations within the school. Heads were divided in their views over whether external assessors would provide effective quality control, modernisation, and a place for the 'buck to stop'. Heads were also divided about the impact of the Threshold in their school: some identified benefits, others however, believed that it had been a stressful and time-consuming process.

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1. Introduction

Teachers' pay was reformed in 2000 in England and Wales, with the introduction of a Performance Threshold. Teachers at the top of the existing salary scale were eligible to apply to cross this Threshold by making an application showing their proficiency in each of five areas. If successful, they were awarded a £2000 a year salary increase.

As a form of performance-related pay, the Performance Threshold was a controversial reform. It was designed to increase teacher effort in each of the five areas, and to help solve recruitment and retention problems. Its critics argued that there is no evidence that performance-related pay will be effective in schools, that the process for making and assessing applications was overly bureaucratic, and that the design of the Threshold was flawed (Richardson, 1999, 2000; Storey, 2000; Thompson, 2000). It was argued that as an individually-based scheme it failed to recognise the importance of team work in schools, that there were too many goals but they still did not capture that which was important in teaching, and that a number of the goals were not under the direct control of teachers.

This paper reports the results of interviews with the head teachers of English secondary schools about their experience when implementing the first round of the Performance Threshold. It contributes to a small, but growing, body of empirical work describing schools' experience of introducing the Performance Threshold and the views of those directly affected (Marsden, 2000; Purslow, 2000; Wragg et al., 2000). This work is important, since although it is a national scheme, the Threshold is operationalised in schools. To understand its effects and to improve its design it is therefore vital to have information about how this process occurred.

Section 2 of the paper describes the Performance Threshold and the rules governing its operation. Section 3 outlines the methods used in this study. Section 4 presents the results, and the paper concludes in section 5 with a summary of the results.

2. The Performance Threshold

The Performance Threshold was introduced in 2000. Teachers at the top of the previous pay scale, on Spine Point nine, were eligible to apply (School Teachers' Review Body, 2000). They applied by filling out an application form demonstrating that they had reached acceptable standards in each of five areas: knowledge and understanding of teaching; teaching management and assessment; wider professional effectiveness; professional characteristics; and pupil progress (DfEE, 2000a).

The application process began with each head teacher being invited to attend two consecutive training days, supposed to be held in March/April and then June, 2000 (DfEE, 2000b). Training days were partly designed to enable heads to give their staff information relevant to making applications. Teachers were initially supposed to complete their applications by June 2000. Completed applications were assessed by heads, who made a recommendation about whether each teacher should pass or fail. Each school was assigned an External Assessor, who was to assess the applications and who had the final say about whether a teacher passed. The implementation process was delayed when one of the teachers' unions successfully brought an injunction, forcing some minor amendments to the process, including giving teachers the right to appeal against the final decision.

Two surveys of teacher attitudes to the Threshold have been published. Marsden (2000) found that most (63%) respondents disagreed with the principle of performance related pay, and that 41% of those eligible to apply believed that £2000 was not sufficient to induce additional effort. Purslow (2000) found that most teachers applied (80%). Those who did not apply said that they did not have time (33% of non-applicants), they disagreed with the principle (18%), they were retiring (18%) or they were moving to the leadership scale (13%). Almost half thought that Threshold pay rises would probably be divisive and 12% thought that making the applications had been a "good experience" for teachers in the school.

Wragg et al. (2001) surveyed head teachers after they had completed the first tranche of Threshold applications and after assessments had been completed, about their views of and experience in implementing the Threshold. Most heads felt that their training was of a poor quality, and noted that the "ground rules" changed over time. Secondary heads spent, on average, $1^{3}/_{4}$ hours assessing each

application, and most resented the time it took. Applications were made by 88% of the teachers eligible to apply in the schools surveyed. Most were satisfied with their external assessors, rating them as 'effective' or 'highly effective': there were few disagreements between heads and assessors, leading the authors to question the cost-effectiveness of having external assessors. 60% of the heads responding to this survey were opposed to the use of performance-related pay in schools, and although 39% were in favour of the principle, this group expressed reservations about the Threshold, since they were concerned about its potential divisiveness and the problems with finding adequate performance indicators. Tomlinson (2000), by contrast, argued that although head teachers' training sessions got very bad press, the evaluations were largely positive.

3. Methods

For the purposes of this study, head teachers were interviewed about their perception of the Performance Threshold and their experience of implementing it in their schools. Head teachers were selected as subjects, since they have good information about the nature of the Threshold, they were responsible for implementing it in schools, and they have an overview of its impact in their own schools. We asked heads a limited number of questions about their perception of teachers' experience, but have interpreted the responses with care, filtered as they are through heads' own views.

The results reported here form part of a larger study designed to measure the impact of the Threshold on pupil attainment (Burgess and Croxson, 2001). Schools were approached to take part in the larger study, which required that they provide comprehensive data at two points in time. 970 schools were approached between June 2000 and March 2001, of whom 36 agreed to participate. We interviewed the first 25 who agreed to take part. Details about the method of sample selection, the method used to approach schools, and the likely reason for the low response rate are given in Burgess and Croxson (2001). As discussed in that paper, the sample appears to share the characteristics of national average in most respects, but is biased towards Foundation (formerly Grant Maintained) schools.

Interviews were conducted between September 2000 and the end of March 2001, before most of the schools in our sample had completed their assessments and made the awards to teachers. (One

interview was conducted in June 2000.) The first five schools to be interviewed were treated as pilot sites, with these interviews used to explore issues relevant to the Threshold and the nature of schools as organisations. The results of the pilot interviews were used to design a semi-structured interview protocol, with an ordered set of interview questions, all eliciting free text responses and with the interviewer free to explore issues as they arose. The interview protocol included specific questions focusing on the following areas:

The school's experience of introducing the performance threshold, including information about the proportion of eligible teachers applying, the reason some did not apply, the attitude of teachers and of heads, the process used within the school to implement the Threshold, how teachers measured pupil attainment, and the head's perception of the impact on the school of the process.

The role of head teachers as regulators

These questions covered heads' experience of training and their role as the government's agent in the Threshold process.

Incentives

These questions were designed to elicit information about the extant incentive structure within the school, and included questions about the head's perception of the factors likely to motivate teachers, and the impact of the incentive structure contained in the Performance Threshold. This material is reported in Croxson and Atkinson (2001).

Most interviews were conducted in person, although four were conducted over the telephone. All were taped and transcribed to permit content analysis. The data were analysed in QSR NVIVO, by first categorising responses into subject areas, and then identifying themes within each area. The results, as reported below, are descriptive rather than analytical, in keeping with the objective of this paper, to describe schools' experience of operationalising the Performance Threshold. Quotations have not been given identifiers, to preserve school's anonymity.

4. Results

Head Teachers' Training

All heads were invited to attend two training sessions with other heads. A minority of the heads we interviewed felt that the training had served some useful purpose, by "clarifying issues", or by enabling them to have useful discussions and to set up contacts allowing them subsequently to swap application forms with other head teachers.

Most heads, however, believed that their first training session had no redeeming features, and described it using terms such as "patronising", "appalling", "an insult" or "deplorable." Heads were most critical when they had attended a training session taken by an "outsider", in other words someone perceived to be out of touch with current education issues who was perceived by some heads to be motivated solely by the consultancy fee. One head said that her/his trainer was someone on the "periphery" of the education system, who had probably thought:

> " 'Oh good, the government are giving more money away to me. Oh that's great. I'll join this bandwagon'."

This head said that the resulting session was "a real insult to your intelligence and your professionalism". The same head voiced a sentiment held by a number of the heads we interviewed when she/he said that the second training session was better because it was taken by "an older and wiser hand" who "knew how to handle a group of Heads".

Heads were also very critical of the preparation given to trainers by the DfEE, of the way the department ran the training process and of the material it provided. Some heads noted that trainers were effectively hidebound by these problems.

> "So they'd arrive on a Sunday night for Monday's training and get a new training pack to deliver the following day."

> "The message that was coming out was, according to the people that were doing the training, changing by the minute."

One head criticised the "rigorous blueprint" for running the Threshold process in their school they were given in training sessions, arguing that it was unrealistic:

> "If I'd have come back and delivered it in the way that it was delivered to me I would have been on a hiding to nothing with staff."

A number of heads were angered by the venues in which training was held, saying that they were "insulted" by the money spent to hold training days in "plush" hotels or in executive boxes in sports grounds, when they were so short of funds in their schools.

Heads who attended more than one training session noted an improvement over time in the training materials and process. One head said that over time it had become "much more efficient and proactive and responsive, and the materials have got better", and another noted that the second session was "more business-like, which I was much more happy with". All of the heads attending two sessions said that, between the two, there had been substantive change in the message they were given about how they should assess teacher applications. The initial message was that they should assess applications strictly, referring only to the material included in the application forms. By the second session this had changed to a more permissive message, that they should pass most teachers. As stated by one head:

> "And instead of things being very, very clear cut and you know, 'cross them at your peril', it became a little more fluid and a little more sensible and people could use common sense really."

Heads also noted differences in the information given to their senior staff if they had attended different training sessions, and differences in that given to different groups within single training sessions. Heads who had trained as external assessors similarly noted differences in the message and information given to them in the two different types of training. Some heads found this confusing, others recognised that it was happening and deliberately sent senior staff to a variety of sessions to maximise the amount of information at their disposal.

The Number of Teachers Applying

Most of the teachers in the schools covered by our sample applied to pass the Threshold: based on information given to us in the interviews with heads, applications were made by 88% of eligible teachers. Table 1 summarises heads' responses to an open-ended question about why they thought some of their eligible teachers did not apply. As shown in the table, the reason they most frequently gave was that the teacher had poor teaching skills, and was probably aware that she or he would not pass the threshold if they did apply. One head mentioned that this group of teachers had poor pupil performance indicators.

> "The other one was likewise in modern languages, absolutely appalling. I invoked the competency procedures and of course she went off ill and she's still off ill … I mean she must have realised, she's an intelligent woman but a hopeless teacher."

> "And one of the things I did actually say to people when I briefed them is 'You need to think very carefully before you apply about whether you meet the criteria. Now it may be that you don't actually meet the criteria this year. You may feel that coming to this session you now know how to achieve that' … I think I had five people who didn't apply…. three definitely didn't apply because of pupil progress data being fairly adverse."

Only three heads stated that some of their staff did not apply because they disagreed with the principle of the Threshold. An additional two said that in some instances their teachers' objections related not to the principle of the Threshold *per se*, but to the additional burden placed on them by the application process. One of these heads said:

> "I think there are some people who've made a political point and you can understand that. There are some people who wanted to make a small political point to say 'I am so busy I can't'."

Lack of time was specifically noted by four other heads as a factor that staff said prevented them applying, although heads also qualified this, implying that it may not have been the real impediment.

> "I suspect that they feared that they wouldn't get through… and they may well have been right… one I think who said that he just plainly hadn't got the time… But I suspect that's an excuse."

Four heads attributed particular teachers' failure to apply to their "low self esteem" or to their "self doubt".

> "One colleague tended to think that he was never good enough at what he was doing and had self doubts. And therefore I presume had a self doubt about his ability to pass. And yet he would have passed."

The miscellaneous category in Table 1 includes two heads who said that they did not receive applications from staff who had difficulties with the application form because they were not IT literate. It also includes one head who had a teacher who left teaching, and another who had a teacher who had missed out on internal promotion, and who the head thought had therefore not applied for the Threshold because his "nose was out of joint" about everything to do with his job.

Table 1 Heads' perception of why some eligible teachers did not apply for the Performance Threshold

(Note that some heads might have teachers falling into more than one of these categories)

Reason for not applying	**Number of teachers**
Poor teacher, so doubts about whether would pass	6
Principled objections to the Threshold or the process	5
Teacher was long term absent from the school	4
Teacher lacked confidence	4
Lack of time to complete the form	4
Miscellaneous	4

Operationalising the Performance Threshold In Schools (1): Training Teachers

It is notable that all heads wished to maximise the amount of information available to staff both to help them complete the application forms and to minimise the stress associated with the process by reducing their uncertainty. To this end, in some schools heads and their deputies deliberately went on different training courses, as one head put it, so "that two of us knew what was going on from slightly different angles". A number of heads trained as assessors, some saying this was to enable them to be in a better position to give information to their own staff.

> "As a Head I think you've got a moral obligation to make yourself as well prepared as possible. So I actually did train as a Threshold assessor in the first tranche of training, and therefore felt confident that what I was doing with the staff was entirely up to date."

All heads held training days within their schools, open to all staff including those not yet eligible to apply for the Threshold. A number of schools combined training for the Performance Threshold and that for the DfEE's new Performance Management system introduced at the same time (DfEE, 1999), reflecting these heads' belief the two should be integrated. Some heads encouraged teachers not yet eligible to apply to attend, and some made their attendance mandatory. Heads following the latter course said that they did so because all staff would eventually be eligible and so would one day need the information, and some added that to make adequate applications teachers should start keeping relevant records sooner rather than later. Some heads said that they included this group so that they would not feel alienated or excluded from an important development.

> "I think we were very careful to ensure that given that say 2 years hence there may be another tranche of teachers ready to go through that we didn't want to sort of disenfranchise them at that point."

> "I wanted the staff who were not old enough to actually know what the process was – at least for this year so that they would not feel that they were being – that things weren't being hidden from them. Because I think that its very important that staff don't feel that there are things going on behind their back."

In one school non-teaching staff were also included in the training to keep "them engaged in the school rather than suggesting they were second class citizens in some way".

The format of training days varied in different schools. In most cases it began with the head outlining the Threshold process. Some schools subsequently went through details in departmental groups, or had small group workshops on specific areas, taken by senior staff. One school used a commercial training package in some part of the presentations. Another was addressed by the head's partner, who is an assessor.

Most schools involved senior staff in the process of training and of making applications, partly so that the head could be seen to maintain a degree of objectivity when subsequently assessing forms. One head said that she/he involved other staff since teachers might feel able to speak more openly with them than with the head. In some schools this involvement took the form of senior staff doing most of the training, in others they were available to give advice and to help in filling in application forms, including giving help with collecting and presenting data, as discussed below.

Operationalising the Performance Threshold In Schools (2): The Message Conveyed To Teachers By Heads

Most heads tried to convey a positive message about the Threshold to their staff during their internal training sessions and the subsequent application process. In some schools this reflected heads' belief that the Threshold was, or could be made to be, a positive development.

> "And we were very positive about the whole thing. So it was about celebration, recognition, making sure that their excellence was validated."

> "This is what was in a sense being forced upon us. That we had opportunity to respond to that positively and to try and drive the thing in the direction that we wanted it to go."

> "Well I went in with the attitude that this is going to happen and therefore we've got to make the best of it."

In others, a positive front was viewed by heads as necessary to reassure staff who had been made insecure by the way the Threshold was introduced and by the nature of the changes.

> " [staff] knew something was in the air, they knew it was going to roll out, and they were very scared."

In one school the head felt that she/he had not been able to hide her/his scepticism, and believed that this had had a positive effect on internal school relations.

> "I think it's been a unifying thing between myself and the staff in many ways …. I tried to remain as neutral as I could but obviously it must have showed at some stage that I was not overjoyed with this process. And they knew I was doing the best for them and people were saying should I apply and I was saying 'yeah because its £400 a page or whatever it is!'"

One head felt that the training had left him/her poorly equipped to present the Threshold as a positive initiative.

> "And I think a bit nervous as well about the prospect of it. A bit uncertain. Because my training had not been good and I tried obviously not to get that across, but I couldn't always answer all of the questions, so there was a degree of uncertainty amongst the staff, which I think they found difficult."

Operationalising the Performance Threshold In Schools (3): Filling in Application Forms

Some schools formally organised the application process by departments, encouraging teachers to go to their head of department for advice. A departmentally-based process also operated at an informal level in some schools, with teachers in some departments assisting each other in filling in the forms. Some departments organised this loosely while others, often maths or science departments, took deliberate decisions to use particular, standard formats for the application forms and the presentation of data.

> "Some departments were set out at the outset to operate on a much more collegiate basis so they were helping each other with the forms. Other departments - or other individual departments because some departments are just one or two anyway - didn't have the opportunity to share

expertise or discussion points- were much more individual in the way they approached the forms."

"Certain departments just kinda got together and you know like: 'come on folks lets spend a few lunch times kicking ideas around'. It depends where the kettle is where they have their meeting hole. Science department meet in one place and they spent lunch time kicking ideas around - in other departments people went away and did it on their own without really discussing it with their colleagues."

However, in some schools heads tried to ensure that all staff had access to the same resources by deliberately not organising the application process by subject or department. In these schools teachers were encouraged to go to general senior staff for help and advice.

"We tried to get them to get guidance from Senior Management Team members regardless of their subject and we were therefore taking it out of the subject area in some ways."

In these schools there was also informal co-operation between teachers.

"I think some staff worked together but I don't think that was necessarily departmental....I think it was more a friendship based thing."

"I mean we looked at how could you answer that sort of question. How could you answer? How could you respond to that? What evidence could you produce for this? And because that was talked about openly in the staff room ... we were talking about it in generic terms ... as well as in smaller groups. And I did tend to get ... have got in fact indeed ... a kind of uniformity of response."

Only one head said that she/he did not think that staff had worked together informally, since none of the application forms were very similar.

Operationalising the Performance Threshold In Schools (4): Reporting Pupil Progress In Applications

To pass the Threshold, teachers had to show that they had made progress in five areas, including in pupil attainment scores. Most of the schools in the sample had collected relevant value-added data about pupil performance for a number of years, and had distributed it to teachers in some form. Some schools collected and disseminated this data in several forms. Schools variously used school-specific or national tests, 'SATs', 'CATs', value-added scores calculated using the DfEE's methods, 'ALLIS' and 'YELLIS'. Only one of the schools in our sample did not collect and disseminate some form of value-added data, although one other head felt that their information was not in a sufficiently "digestible form" to be useful, and another did not feel that all departments collected useful data.

A minority of the schools in our sample did not have relevant data available for all teachers during the Threshold process. In one case this occurred in a school which used only data about the value added between Key Stages, since about half of their pupils had previously attended schools in other LEAs and so the school did not have complete Key Stage 2 data. In two other schools the Threshold process showed that the school did not have the capacity to analyse and use the data that was available. In one school teachers had to rely on their own records. Another school kept data at faculty-level, and the head noted that the quality of the data varied between faculties, depending on whether individual heads of faculties are "good with figures." As stated by one of these heads:

> "It's a daft case really we're data rich/ information poor and I think that just highlighted that fact to me … I think its one of the things that came out of the performance management thing that we've got loads of data and but were not handling it very well."

Heads noted that teachers tended to select the best results from the variety of data available to them, and that they supported them in this.

> "Well if I give an example: for instance, my Classics Department ... would be the best in the school at adding value for GCSE classical civilisation. So they have the best value added result on there, it's phenomenal. But their A level results in 2000 were negative and we were worried about the papers and all the rest of it. So it could have been that a teacher on there would quote their GCSE results saying 'You can see I've added value here', but they were not going to quote

their A level … I mean I was always saying to people 'I don't think one piece of evidence is good enough, but you could select your evidence'. And I didn't in all honesty feel it was my job to go and research and to be able to say 'Ahah, they might have said their A level's good, but their GCSE is rubbish'."

"Well clearly, if it says it wants two or three examples you know you are going to pick the examples that actually indicate what's been asked for aren't you? So you could say it's showing you in the best light. Yeah so you could say they're selective but that's what they're asked to do, they're asked to select three. So they're not going to select things that don't show what they've done are they?"

In general, heads believed that teachers varied in their ability to use and present data on pupil progress in their Threshold applications. In most schools, if teachers needed it they were shown how to use the data to show pupil progress by the member of staff responsible for data, or by a member of the senior team.

"Some teachers are not necessarily very good at doing that … there was one teacher I remember she sent me some stuff and it said something about 'The children have got to make progress in line with national expectations as good … or on a school-based scenario'. And there were about 3 children who'd made progress and the others kind of hadn't made as much progress as they had in all their other GCSE subjects … And I said, you know 'This isn't really very good evidence for you because it only shows 3 of your pupils in that group did achieve as well as or better. Maybe you ought to choose some other classes'."

"[The teacher responsible for data] spent a lot of time giving individual tuition to teachers about how they should show progression over a couple of years in Key Stage 4, or over ... And it was anything really, we used any statistics, SATs, CATs, anything at all. So that progression was shown."

Some heads felt that the ability to use data varied systematically, by subject. A number of heads said that English teachers were at a disadvantage compared to maths teachers, because they were not used to handling numbers and were therefore less able to select favourable results, or to present information

appropriately. One school consciously tried to mitigate this by giving appropriate training to middle managers, and by directing special help to English teachers.

> "And quite clearly the mathematicians and the scientists have more ability to do that than the artists and the musicians. Because I mean they're working in numbers, it's numerical, so therefore you know it's a natural landscape for them to be in it. But in fact in order to temper that or alleviate or ameliorate that in the school we did have the Deputy Heads helping people with data."

In some schools heads felt that all teachers had difficulty selecting and presenting data since they had never before had to participate in this type of process. By contrast, other heads felt their teachers were at an advantage since within the school they had been actively disseminating and using information about pupil progress for some years.

> "But data was an issue for many teachers. It was the first time that they'd actually had to come up with hard data to look at their own individual successes... it's not lack of data but I think it is the use of data by teachers. I think senior management teams in schools are quite at ease now with data because of the accountability model of league tables and associated issues. Day to day teachers don't necessarily see a target."

> "You know even when things were not looking so good we published [value added data] and we always have done. Because I think it's important that people understand it. So I think our staff in that sense were well ahead of the game when it came to performance data, because they already knew, they'd already got it, and had had it for years."

Heads also noted the problems faced by teachers in subjects or classes without 'hard' formal data on pupil progress. In these cases, heads said they could sometimes ask teachers to present data relating to other classes, or that they accepted "soft" indicators.

> "Now what I would look at there is to say 'Can we find some other way of measuring what is success in those areas?' and I think I'd be fairly … I've tried to be fairly open and liberal about what I believe the interpretation of those areas has been. And I'm waiting on my consultant to tell me whether I've been too liberal."

> "And I was prepared to accept and I think I have really got no option otherwise, to look at almost what you might describe as anecdotal performance. For example there was one of my staff who teaches PSE [Personal and Social Education] and PE, so in neither case really do they have benchmarks … as anecdotal evidence of progress, one child who in Year 7 was not prepared to stand up and say anything, but by the time they'd got to Year 9 was prepared to stand up and give a full account of themselves, you know what they like, what they didn't like, where they lived - all this sort of thing. Very good. And this is progress."

> "It's going to be very, very difficult for people who work largely with pupils with special education needs to demonstrate as much pupil progress. But if that pupil who is being very difficult is now able to manage their behaviour in a more positive and constructive manner, if they're able to take part in social activities within the school, if they you know gain in confidence such that they perhaps are prepared to stand on the School Council … I made it quite clear I was looking for that sort of evidence."

In some schools teachers were able to show progress even in these subjects, because they had historically kept records in order to set targets of pupils or for use in the schools own performance management system.

> "And in fact one of the easiest areas in the school would be the Art Department, strangely enough, who are moving people up National Curriculum levels all the time on a half termly basis. So they're reviewed. And because the children are doing that, the teacher is keeping very extensive records on a regular basis you see. So it's just a matter of going back to your records. Not a problem."

Operationalising the Performance Threshold In Schools (5): Assessing The Applications

Heads were responsible for assessing the applications made by teachers in their school, and deciding whether to recommend that each pass or fail. Final decisions rested with external assessors, as discussed in the next section below.

Most heads checked at least some of the evidence their teachers gave in their application forms. In most cases the checking was limited in scope, and designed to collect evidence to satisfy any queries external assessors might make about the head's judgement, rather than to directly check the veracity of applications. There were some exceptions: one head said she/he received two identical applications and so asked for evidence to validate the claims; another said that she/he checked evidence in a few cases "where I felt they were perhaps abusing the statistics"; another said that if they did not know the applicant they requested evidence that "… would persuade me that what they said was justified"; and another said that she/he needed to check evidence because she/had was relatively new to their school.
The reluctance to be seen to be checking veracity appears to reflect head's desire to respect staff or to protect internal relations within the school. One stated explicitly that she/he would not check the veracity of the forms, since to do so would be an insult to the professionalism of staff. This head checked applications only if she/he was unsure about the sources of the data, or if she/he felt that staff had under-sold themselves. Another head, who checked none of the evidence presented by staff, said that she/he did not need to check because they knew the teachers well, and that to ask for "material to validate what they'd written would suggest a lack of trust".

The method used to check applications varied. In most cases heads who did check evidence wrote to or approached the staff concerned and asked them for specific additional information. Two heads observed lessons, and some asked other members of the senior staff to verify evidence provided by applicants.

Most heads, when assessing applications and deciding whether to recommend that teachers passed or failed, used the evidence presented by staff as a guide, but explicitly recognised that they ultimately relied on their own professional judgement. A number said that they had passed applicants who submitted weak application forms, since they knew them to be good teachers. They said that they had taken into account information omitted by teachers who undersold themselves. One head said that she/he had to take other information into account, since the Threshold criteria had been poorly asked and designed, and had therefore elicited poor answers.

> "I think that you've also got to put in the intangible, that I know the member of staff. Now that is unquantifiable."

> "You're not actually assessing the form are you? You're assessing the performance. The form is simply a vehicle for them to record and to provide the evidence for their performance."

Only one head teacher said that she/he ignored her/his personal knowledge of teachers and based the assessment solely on the information presented in the application form. This head passed three teachers who she felt were poor since: "you do it on the forms and mediocre teachers wrote excellent forms".

Five heads said that they consulted senior staff about whether or not to pass individual teachers. In one case the head felt she/he was too new in the school to be confident of knowing teachers well. In other cases the school's internal organisation gave senior staff a substantive role as line managers, giving them better knowledge of teachers than the head.

Ten heads recommended that all of the teachers who applied should pass. Some of these heads believed all of their teachers were good enough to pass; others were complying with their perception of the DfEE's wishes, even though they believed some of these teachers to be poor. One head wished to protect herself/himself against potential litigation by passing everyone and relying on the external assessor to make the final judgement. Two wished to safeguard the school's internal relations by passing every applicant.

In no school did a head recommending that more than three teachers fail. In most cases they recommended failing teachers because of the teacher's poor teaching skills or lack of effort, reflected in poor pupil progress documentation, in OFSTED reports, or as observed by the head. In a minority of cases the recommendation reflected poor performance in other areas, usually in the teacher's attitude to or participation in the school as a whole. One head failed someone who consistently had "difficult relationships with other colleagues", another failed someone who she/he described as "just does not bother you know to be that committed to the whole school, the management of the whole school", and another is failing a teacher who has a "bad attitude towards youngsters" and makes little contribution to the "wider ethos of the school".

Heads said that they had a variety of problems when assessing Threshold applications. As noted above, a number said that they had had to deal with the problem of teachers under- or over-selling themselves.

One head responded to this by returning the applications to teachers to be rewritten. Others responded by writing "supporting comments" on the applications.

> "And if necessary I would say, you know, 'There isn't as much evidence to support this particular aspect as I would like, but I do know this, this and this because I do know the teacher'."

Some heads were, however, reluctant to write anything on the application forms, since they would eventually go to teachers and as one head put it could, therefore, "come back to haunt."

A number of heads said that they had difficulties assessing applicants who were not equally strong on all of the Threshold criteria, particularly good classroom teachers who were weaker with respect to professional development or with respect to their contribution to the school as a whole.

Most heads complained about the amount of time it took them to assess applications, with many describing the burden as "unfair". Most said that they spent about an hour assessing each form. On top of this a number spent additional time collecting and checking evidence, or on lesson observations. One head said that she/he spent four hours assessing each form.

When asked whether they thought that teacher applications could have been assessed by someone other than themselves, as head teachers, some thought that there could and should be a greater role for school deputies. Heads in large schools or in schools with a decentralised management structure thought that deputies might be in a position to have better information than the head about what really happens within particular departments, or about individual teachers. However, a number of heads also noted the problems likely to arise if deputies had to assess their own staff, since saying "no" to particular teachers might disrupt day-to-day working relationships. Three heads said that they did not think that deputies should be directly involved, but rather that it was part of the head's "professional duty" since they have the "big picture" and their slight detachment can impart "an element of robustness and objectivity".

No heads thought that teachers could be assessed solely by an external assessor, since external assessors could not know the context or the teachers and since, as discussed below, they might not have credibility with teachers.

> "You can't have an external person coming in because it's just like OFSTED. I mean I had the most restful week in my whole life because everybody's lessons were planned fully, there was no problem and it went like clockwork. Now we can all do Royal Variety Performances, but not day in day out … how do external individuals or bodies or groups monitor the performance of the individual over the year. And what evidence base could an individual teacher provide?"

External Assessors

The majority of heads were critical of the principle of using external assessors. Most were critical because they did not believe teachers could be evaluated by someone who did not know them. These heads believed that the use of external assessors was supposed to give the process the appearance of objectivity, but that in practice assessors would have to rely on a head's professional judgement – in which case they were simply duplicating the heads efforts.

> "The Assessor will come in and may not be ... yes they've gone through the training ... of what? Three or four hours ... but are they fully aware of all the nuances that are potentially in that form and in that application?"

> "They're not even meeting with the teachers. And I think there is a question to be asked here about professional judgement, who's actually making it and who knows the staff in order to make it."

> "And so there's duplication. The Head does all this work, then a fellow comes in from CEA or whatever it is, Cambridge Education Associates and does all the work again. And gets paid for it. So it's adding injury to insult really, I find."

> "I mean what a nerve, expecting the head of a school to do all the work which then a bloke who's paid, the External Assessor, is paid to come in to do. And so there's duplication."

Some heads appeared to feel threatened at the prospect of having their professional judgement assessed by an outsider. Others were concerned that evaluation by an external person could disrupt internal relations.

> "It's the corner shop mentality of many people in education… In some ways, unlike other large organisations, schools are little islands who see themselves as a corner shop, right? So there's not the sort of national mentality at the moment. And I think that causes many problems… So if somebody comes into your corner shop and starts telling you you're not doing it very well, you know teachers get resentful of that. Well just like some teachers get resentful of people coming into a classroom."
>
> "I think the problem with the External Assessor role is it undermines the authority of a Head Teacher…"

A number of heads expressed concern at the incentive structure governing external assessors. Some noted that assessors have no incentive to fail teachers, others that the system will attract individuals motivated by money.

> "You're paid for the job but you have to fill in a whole series of extra forms if you fail somebody. Well there isn't much incentive to."

> "Well I think that they're just tired most of the ones I've seen! This is a way of eeking a living out before full retirement kicks in and that sort of thing… it was a matter of rubbing hands and saying this is what I can earn a few quid for. It just worries me."

> "Money for the boys I'm afraid on this one."

Those who were positive about assessors sometimes expressed their positive views warily. These heads viewed external assessors as "an irritating necessity" for quality control, for moderation, or as a place for the 'buck to stop'. When discussing the need for quality control, one head described an incident when the head teacher of another school had been found to be acting fraudulently with respect to pupil numbers, as if to illustrate the need for some external control to ensure that heads act fairly. Other heads also noted the need for some form of quality assurance.

> "But maybe I might be too subjective and therefore you do need some objective view from an external source."

> "I mean obviously I have all sorts of baggage because they're my teachers you know. There are some that I know … there are some that I feel instantly 'Ah they really deserve it'. But they might actually really deserve it because they're willing to help with the School Plan, the football team, all that kind of thing. Not because maybe they're a thoroughly excellent teacher in the classroom."

Another role ascribed to the assessor was that of moderator, ensuring national consistency. Some heads believed that this would be important to teachers.

> "Well I mean it's simply to moderate my judgements against judgements in other schools. So it's just to check that what I've decided is reasonable in the light of everything else that you're seeing from other schools."

> "A teacher who passes in this school could easily think 'Oh well that means I'm comparable with a teacher who passes the Threshold in another school'."

Some heads felt that assessors would play an important role in protecting internal relationships within the school, both by providing a check that will reassure teachers that the head is "fair and just" and by allowing someone other than the head to be seen to be failing teachers. As noted by one head teacher:

> "In a way I wanted to put people through and I'll allow somebody else to reject [them]."

Like those who were negative about external assessors, many of these heads believed that teachers could not be properly evaluated solely by someone looking at application forms during a formal process. They felt that assessors would still have to rely on information provided by heads. One head described the process assessors would have to use:

> "Well by using experience, gut feel, probing questioning ; the way the Head Teacher responds to it, that will give you a clue as to whether they're telling the truth or not."

A number of those who were negative did not think that the buck would effectively stop with the assessors, since heads have to feed results back to teachers, and teachers have heads' comments on their application forms. One felt that teachers would not even be aware of the assessor, that they would

think decisions had been made by the head. Nor did these heads think that assessors would be effective moderators or agents of quality control.

> "One of the claims is it's actually about moderation. It's not about moderation, because you don't compare that school with another school. The Threshold Assessment Assessor is simply a mechanism whereby the DfEE can check whether or not performance management in a school has been implemented."

> "Talking in general terms, I can't see an External Assessor turning a Head's picture down unless there is something very obviously wrong. Because you know what you have got is somebody coming in from outside who doesn't know the school, doesn't know the situation, making a judgement which is inevitably going to be very time limited on something that the Head has perhaps spent quite a long time on."

In all cases, heads emphasised that in order to play a positive role, external assessors had to have credibility with heads and with teachers. Only one of the schools we interviewed had been assessed at the time of the interview. In this school the assessor gained credibility with the head by being "very thorough, very sound": she/he read all of the applications and then agreed with the head's assessment of the applicants which were borderline. The other heads emphasised that the assessor could have credibility only if they were a head teacher, since this would ensure that they had realistic expectations of what teachers can achieve and will put in their applications, that they understood the school environment, and since heads felt that they could only accept the judgements given by another head.

> "this is somebody judging a Head, therefore I expect somebody who is judging a Head Teacher to be a fairly decent calibre person … So I'd expect it to be somebody who's held some sort of senior role in a school…. if I thought they were absolutely awful I wouldn't ... and they'd failed somebody who I thought ought to go through, then I would be obviously going to query the quality of them and not the quality of me."

> "teaching is a very complicated mixture of confidence and abilities and knowledge and skill and personal relationships and all the other bits and pieces. And that is not something that you can just get straight out of a book … And that's something I don't think you could expect the local bank manager to understand… I mean I don't think that the job is sufficiently clearly cut that it

could be just somebody who knows exactly what the book says but has never done it or seen it themselves."

"I think that those who were out of school and hadn't been through it with their teachers because they've already left teaching may not necessarily have their finger on the pulse… If another Head says I've been over-generous and too lenient on some of those I could certainly accept it and I hope that the staff will as well. If it's somebody who's not been through the mill with their staff then I'm going to be thinking 'Mm mm mm rr …'"

The Impact of the Threshold In Schools

One head teacher was completely positive about the Performance Threshold.

"I thought … the Threshold was quite an interesting process. I quite enjoyed doing it and felt I got something out of it and felt quite positive about it."

Most heads, by contrast, identified benefits and problems arising in the school from the implementation of and effects of the Performance Threshold.

In some schools heads found the Threshold process helped them to overcome teacher resistance to the introduction of classroom observation and performance management. Two heads noted that it had also brought to their attention the need to improve the schools' data management and dissemination systems. Other schools, however, found that the Threshold process and the way it was introduced contradicted their internal systems (Croxson and Atkinson, 2001).

A number of heads believed that it had been beneficial to force teachers to reflect on their successes. A number noted that teachers were not used to "blowing their own trumpets", and that although having to do so caused them some stress it may have boosted their confidence in the long run.

> "I think that many of them found it quite stressful to be positive about themselves… I think teachers often put themselves down. And I think they found it quite stressful to sort of say 'I did this' and 'I did that'."

> "I think probably that looking at yourself against particular standards can be a very positive exercise because I think you can realise 'Oh yes I can do that, yes I do that'. And I think for many staff I think there has been a positive benefit for them… And I think it's been quite good to start to realise that they do do so much of this sort of thing that characterises a good and effective teacher."

> "That they've become confident to say 'Not only are we a good department, we can prove we're a good department. And we can prove that individually we're doing the business with these students'. And even more interesting I think perhaps now, this second time round and talking to their head of department, they're quite confident about saying 'We've not done very well with this class, but we can give ourselves reasons as to why we haven't'."

A small number of heads believed that the Threshold was an effective means of communicating that which was valued by the government in teaching, and that this would encourage teachers to focus on neglected areas, such as professional development or pupil performance in non-exam subjects.

> "[the criteria are] bound to help to focus the mind and get people singing from the same hymn sheet."

> "I think it's helped to focus people's minds on what is really important in the job. Because I mean whatever else you say about the Threshold Assessment it is looking at the right things. Particularly the standards that look at the classrooms and so on. So there's a high focus on the right things within the jobs. I think they're good standards in that sense."

Most heads resented the amount of time it took to complete the process and felt that this was also resented by teachers.

> "So most people were upset at the amount of work which they had to do and the amount over and above what they were doing, and the amount of evidence which they had to sort of pull out. And of course they're not used to doing it."

> "I think they thought it was vastly time consuming filling in their forms. And for many of them … at a very awkward time, with the GCSEs just started up. Half term was taken up by a lot of teachers I think just filling in forms which they felt they could have done other things with."

A number of heads had identified low morale in the teaching profession as a problem. Some felt that the financial reward associated with the Threshold was too small to offset the negative consequences accompanying the introduction of the Threshold or other factors undermining teacher morale. A number of heads specifically said that the way the Threshold was introduced was demoralising: as discussed above they felt that it was introduced in a rush making staff feel overburdened, and in some cases, they felt it left staff worried and confused. One head said that although her/his staff were used to being judged against their peers, they were made insecure by the Threshold process because it apparently "questioned their professional credibility", particularly for older staff used to a different culture. Moreover, a number of heads were concerned that if some staff were failed it would have a bad affect on morale by being divisive, both between staff and between heads and their staff.

> "No, I don't see it improving morale, no, not the Performance Threshold. In fact far from it. I actually see it probably undermining morale … There is a real deep-seated problem in education, the politicisation of education is creating some quite intense resentment in schools … And rightly or wrongly Threshold Assessment is simply associated as part of that. It's tarred with the same brush. You know one teacher said to me 'It's ironic isn't it? I have to jump through all this hoop, I have to fill in all this form, we have to go through all this process. And what for? To buy my family a MacDonald's meal once a week'."

> "It was quite obvious that although on the surface everything was going very well there was acute anxiety amongst the staff and tremendous uncertainty about their own professional competence… So some of my best teachers who you know were wonderful role models and working above and beyond the call of duty felt very, very threatened by the whole thing to the

point of, I mean, spending weeks and weeks and weeks preparing their forms and getting very anxious about the whole process."

"Especially for older teachers, they're 50, and they've been doing their job very successfully for a lot of years and then someone suddenly says 'Somebody's going to validate your practice'… And they feel that their professional credibility is being questioned."

By contrast, four heads felt that the additional income, when it was received, would boost morale amongst teachers, because it might make teachers feel "a little bit more rewarded for the work that they're doing." Two of these noted that this would be the case only if teachers perceived it to be fair, in other words, only if it is neither "one, too hard to get or two, if there's a view that anybody can get it, therefore it doesn't matter…" Moreover, some heads believed their staff had not found it a stressful process: one said that her/his staff was completely "comfortable" with the Performance Management and Threshold "environment", another that there was "no controversy", and others said that although not enthusiastic, their staff were resigned to having to go through the process to get a pay increase. Some thought that, in comparison with older staff, younger staff did not find the process stressful.

"And certainly I mean the view even at that time being expressed by my staff was 'Yes, I accept the arguments the unions are putting, but actually I've got a mortgage to pay'. So that was all way, way back, kind of last spring…certainly I didn't feel there was any great controversy about it."

"I mean all those things were going around at the time but there was a kind of shrug of the shoulders at it and a sort of these are the rules of the game we might as well play it."

"And of course what was very interesting, that younger staff who'd gone through their own teacher training in a different way from the older staff kept wondering what all the fuss was about…'We're used to this' you know. 'This is what we've had to do'. 'We're quite used ... we expect people now to watch what we do', 'We expect people to monitor what we're doing, that's part and parcel of what our training has told us."

A number of heads felt that teachers who were not eligible were resentful at not being able to apply for the Threshold, especially if they felt that they were as good as and working as hard as those teachers who were eligible.

> "Yeah, there's a resentment among those lower down on the spine… Many of the teachers lower down on the spine feel that their performance is good. I mean here they've seen their value added scores. In fact some people lower down the school would have higher value added scores than people who are going through the threshold and they're saying this is not a fair way … if you've got a performance management system why is it that people who have got nine points are allowed to go through, but by virtue of the fact that I haven't been in the profession as long, but I'm doing as good a job, maybe a better job, and I can't go through. So I think it's fair to say there was resentment and there still is resentment to that."

> "One particular teacher … I've got one head of department, head of music department, as such, and he's very, very, very good. And he was quite upset that, you know, he was doing a good job in the school, he was really working hard, he's got clubs every evening and every lunch time etc., and because of his age, as such, regardless of what sort of job he's doing and what responsibility he was doing, he wasn't able to apply for the Threshold."

None of these heads felt that this would be internally divisive since the resentment was directed at "the system which didn't let them apply" rather than at other teachers within the school. Few felt that it would demotivate these teachers. Moreover a number had taken steps to mitigate the injustice they believed was being done to these younger teachers. In one a teacher who was not eligible was given an additional £2000 per year from the school budget, as if she had crossed the threshold. A number of heads in other schools gave younger teachers additional discretionary or management points.

> "I think they felt aggrieved… Well I've not got many staff in that situation, but I've got one member of staff who for the last two years has had a point for excellence because of her examination results. I mean she is an outstanding teacher and she's just coming up to Point nine… Now I've either got to go down a different route and look at some other way of awarding her, or giving her another management point. In fact what I decided to do was give her another management point, temporarily, so she's eligible to go through the Threshold… its not fair."

A small number of heads were not concerned about this as an issue, believing that the eligibility criteria could not be perceived to be unfair since they were clear and standardised, and since all teachers would eventually be eligible to apply to cross the Threshold.

> "That's why I wasn't concerned about people not being eligible for the Threshold if they were still on Point five or Point six. It was very clear that you could only go for it if you got to Point nine. That was it."

> "I had only one sort of long discussion about somebody who was too young, who was too young by one increment point, i.e. one who was on Point eight or Point nine. They were not unhappy … I think it was just irritating. I don't think they took it as being a big issue because I think they realised it would carry on next year whatever else."

Results relating to the impact of the Threshold on teacher effort in the area of pupil attainment and on team working in schools are discussed fully elsewhere (Croxson and Atkinson, 2001). None of the heads we interviewed were certain that the Performance Threshold would improve pupil performance as measured by pupil attainment. However, two did say that it would lead to a greater focus on test scores. Moreover, a number had observed or expected changes in the behaviour of their teachers, such as better record keeping. A number of heads expressed concern that the Threshold was based on individual teacher performance when they believed that pupil attainment was the result of a team effort. None had observed problems with team working, but they did identify the risk to team work posed by the Threshold Incentives.

However, even though they did not necessarily see it as morale-enhancing or as likely to promote good teaching, all heads supported the principle of giving staff a payrise. A number said that they supported the Threshold because they believed it was the only way their staff would get a payrise in the short term.

> " It was painfully obvious that this was something which was going to be the mechanism by which they were going to receive a pay increase. And therefore I would support the staff to the hilt."

> "David Blunkett was desperate to get money for the teachers, the Treasury wasn't going to give it to him unless he did something for it, and this is what they came up with... 'you know after all the teachers weren't doing a very good job, they haven't done a very good job for years and

years and years. How can we possibly give them any money? Right, we'll make them do this for it'."

"They couldn't just come out and give them 2000 quid so they decided to come up with this cock and bull way which they could reward some people."

"I don't think the Performance Threshold is anything other, if I'm being crudely honest, to sum it as being an interesting political way of giving teachers 2000 quid on the basis they're probably Labour voters."

5. Summary

Our results show that most heads found their training to be unhelpful and of poor quality. Some blamed the identity of trainers, others the preparation given to them by the DfEE. This is consistent with results reported in Wragg et al. (2001).

The format of teachers' training days varied between schools. Most heads tried to present the Threshold to teachers as a positive initiative, to allay their uncertainty or, in some cases, because the head believed that they could turn the Threshold into a positive force within the school. In some schools and some departments applications were completed by teachers working together, either informally or as the result of a deliberate decision to present standardised application forms. However, heads in a small number of schools discouraged this and encouraged staff to seek advice from general senior staff rather than from their own head of department, to make the process fair and equally accessible to teachers from all departments.

Most of the schools in our sample had centrally collected value-added data available for teachers' use in filling in their application forms. This may reflect a bias in the schools in our sample, since participation in our broader study required that schools have good data capability (Burgess and Croxson, 2001). Teachers selected the data which showed them in the most favourable light, although heads noted that teachers varied in their capacity to use and select data, with English teachers generally at a disadvantage. The heads of some schools felt that all of their teachers were poorly equipped to use

and present pupil progress data, since they had not been affected directly by changes which had forced schools to be more accountable. However, some heads in schools with long-standing performance management systems felt that most of their teachers were comfortable with the concept of reporting and using performance data. Heads also noted difficulties in some subjects in reporting pupil progress: in subjects without 'hard' test scores, or those with team teaching. It was, however, notable that not all heads reported this difficulty.

When assessing applications and recommending whether particular staff should pass or fail, it was apparent that heads were concerned to protect internal relations within the school, and to treat staff as professionals. This led some to limit the amount of evidence they checked, but in no case did a head report engaging in comprehensive checking of the evidence staff put on their application forms. Heads generally assessed the teacher rather than the form, relying explicitly on their professional judgement to reach a decision about whether to pass an individual. All but one head relied on their personal knowledge of teachers to some extent to decide whether they should pass or fail. Heads recommended that most of the eligible teachers who applied should pass; the small number who they recommended to fail were generally viewed by heads to be poor teachers. Heads did not believe that external assessors could evaluate teachers without considerable input from head teachers, a view that is consistent with their reliance on their own professional judgement when assessing teachers.

Heads were divided in their views about external assessors. Some viewed them as an important means of quality control, of national moderation, and as a buffer which might help protect internal relations within the school. However, others viewed them as unnecessarily duplicating heads' role, since they felt that as outsiders, assessors would not have access to information about real day-to-day activities within the school. Both groups of heads believed that assessors would be dependent on heads for accurate information about each applicant. Wragg et al. (2001) found that heads had a positive view of external assessors. The negative views expressed by a large number of the heads in our sample may reflect the fact that they were interviewed before they had met their assessors, and so were still uncertain about their credentials and actual role.

Most heads were able to identify benefits and problems in their schools, resulting from the introduction of the Threshold. A number felt that it had been beneficial for teachers to be forced to reflect on their

own successes. A minority felt that the Threshold standards were an effective means of communicating national priorities to teachers, and would encourage teachers to focus in the right areas. Most heads resented the time taken by the process and the stress it caused, and believed that this view was shared by teachers, although notably some said that their teachers had not found it at all stressful. Heads were divided over whether they thought that the Threshold would have a positive or negative effect on morale, with some thinking that the extra money and sense of being rewarded would improve morale, and others thinking that it might be divisive, and that the stressful process had undermined the potential positive effect of a rise in income. Heads were also divided over whether they believed that the morale of teachers not eligible to apply for the Threshold would be affected, with some giving high achieving teachers who were not eligible financial compensation. All heads supported giving staff a pay rise, and most made comments indicating that they believed that some form of performance-related pay was the only politically viable way of achieving this.

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