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On being bottom of the pecking order: beginner teachers' perceptions and experiences of support

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This article presents findings from a large-scale, longitudinal study of teachers' experiences of initial teacher preparation and early professional development in England. Data were generated via annual surveys, in-depth interviews and email communications. The study established that beginner teachers' perceptions of the support they received were a major factor shaping their experiences of becoming and being a teacher. This article examines the importance of support to beginner teachers, what they understand by support, their perceptions of their support needs, and apparent successes and failings in the support provided to beginning teachers. The findings are situated in the broader literature on beginner teacher support and a number of implications for policy and practice are discussed.

Keywords: support; initial teacher preparation; beginning teachers; induction; early career professional development

Introduction

Few writers would disagree that the provision of effective support for beginner teachers is critically important.¹ The early years of teaching are frequently characterised by intense pressure and disillusionment (Gold 1996), relating to challenges which can include 'role overload and anxiety, difficult pupils, heavy time investment, close monitoring by teacher education staff, and isolation inside the school' (Huberman 1989, 42). Research has suggested that beginner teachers who are well supported are more likely to be happy and to derive satisfaction from teaching (Barton 2004; Hoy and Spero 2005), to have a higher sense of efficacy (Knobloch and Whittington 2002), and to feel optimistic about the future (Hammond and Cartwright 2003). Moreover, a substantial body of international research has found that effective support for beginning teachers can offset stress and fatigue and discourage them from leaving teaching (e.g. Kwakman 2003; Johnson 2004). Other studies have highlighted the benefits of support derived from particular sources, most notably mentors, other teacher colleagues and peers.

Much research has found that mentoring, specifically the one-to-one support of a novice or less experienced practitioner by a more experienced one, is associated with a wide range of benefits for beginning teachers, including increased self-esteem, morale and job satisfaction, enhanced self-reflection and problem-solving capacities, and improvements in classroom management, behaviour management, and managing time and workload (Bullough 2005; Johnson, Berg, and Donaldson 2005; Lindgren

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2005). More generally, research has shown that support from teacher colleagues is highly valued by beginning teachers (Hutchings et al. 2006; Marable and Raimondi 2007) and that beginner teacher learning, motivation and retention are likely to be enhanced in schools which have a ‘professional growth’ *ethos* characterised by collegial and learning cultures (Lee and Feng 2007). Studies have also shown that facilitating mutual support through beginning teacher peer networks can enrich and extend the learning process by fostering its affective and emotional aspects (Smith and McLay 2007; McIntyre, Hobson, and Mitchell 2009).

While many writers have championed the provision of support for beginning teachers, however, few have explicitly addressed what they mean or understand by such support, and it is likely that the claims of many are based upon different conceptualisations. Amongst those who have attempted to define the term, Gold (1996) usefully identifies two broad categories of beginner teacher support:

- (1) ‘instruction-related support’, which includes ‘assisting the novice with the knowledge, skills and strategies necessary to be successful in the classroom and school’ (561);² and
- (2) psychological support or ‘therapeutic guidance’, aimed at ‘building the protégé’s sense of self and ability to handle stress’ (561).

Such forms of support may be provided by informal as well as formal sources (Capel 1998), and an examination of the broader literature enables us to identify the conditions in which they might best be provided. These include cultural environments which promote participation in professional learning (Kwakman 2003), in which beginning teachers are given ‘free’ time in which to plan lessons, undertake necessary administration and reflect on their teaching, in which their supporters are approachable and able to offer both encouragement and advice on specific issues, and in which beginner teachers are able to access teaching resources and additional training (Totterdell et al. 2002; Martin and Rippon 2003). Supportive working environments have also been found to include those which present opportunities for spontaneous meeting and ‘chat’ (Capel 1998; Williams 2003), and those characterised by ‘togetherness and trust’ (McIntyre, Hobson, and Mitchell 2009), thereby enabling beginner teachers to openly acknowledge and discuss means of addressing problems and fears (Goos and Bennison 2007). Finally, studies have suggested that support for beginner teachers should be personalised; that is, tailored to the needs of individual beginning teachers (Moor et al. 2005; Duffield 2006).

While support for beginning teachers is normally provided or facilitated, on the ground, by people such as teacher educators, mentors, other teacher colleagues and head teachers, their ability to do so effectively may be either helped or hindered by government policy (relating, for example, to the level of resources provided, the administrative demands imposed and measures designed to ease teachers’ workloads). In England, several national government policy initiatives during the 1990s and the early years of the twenty-first century have had the potential (and in some cases may have been expressly designed) to improve support provision for beginning teachers. These have included:

- (1) an increase in the amount of time that trainee teachers must spend in schools, where they are mentored by an experienced teacher (Department for Education 1992, 1993a);

- (2) the introduction of a statutory Induction period, normally lasting for one year, by the end of which newly qualified teachers (NQTs) must demonstrate their competence against national standards, and during which they are supported through the allocation of a school-based Induction tutor or mentor and a 10% reduction in their teaching timetable (Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998; Department for Education and Skills 2003);
- (3) the introduction of Planning, Preparation and Assessment time for all teachers, entitling them to a minimum of 10% protected non-contact time during the school day (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2008);
- (4) the introduction of a Career Entry Profile, designed to facilitate the identification of new teachers' development needs at the end of initial teacher preparation (ITP), needs which are to be met during their first year in teaching and beyond.³

Far less clear are the implications for the support provided to beginning teachers of other policy changes, such as the diversification of routes into the teaching profession, which has seen the introduction of employment-based, school-centred routes and 'flexible' pathways alongside more established higher education institution-administered programmes (Department for Education 1993b; Department for Education and Employment 1996; Teacher Training Agency 1998, 2001).⁴ It is also possible that some potential benefits of mentoring during ITP and Induction are unlikely to be realised where mentors and Induction tutors are responsible for assessing their beginner teacher mentees as well as for supporting them. While (to date) evidence on this matter is contradictory, a number of studies (e.g. Abell et al. 1995; Williams and Prestage 2002) have suggested that where beginner teacher support and assessment are carried out by the same person, it can be difficult to establish the kind of relationship based on mutual trust in which risk-free learning can occur (cf. Adey 1997; Yusko and Feiman-Nemser 2008).

The landscape in which beginner teachers find themselves in England today, then, has changed. This article examines evidence on their perceptions and experiences of support during their ITP and first four years in post as qualified teachers. It draws on analyses of data generated for the large-scale 'Becoming a Teacher' (BaT) project to examine beginner teachers' perceptions and experiences of support during their ITP and first four years in post as qualified teachers.⁵ The next section provides an overview of the research design of the BaT study and of the methods of data generation and analyses which produced the findings reported in the subsequent section. The final section offers some concluding points and potential implications relating to the findings presented, as well as acknowledging some of the limitations of the research.

Methods

Theoretical framework

The BaT research followed a theoretically and methodologically eclectic approach. That is, the study was not conducted within, and nor did it seek to advance, any single theoretical or methodological framework, but it drew upon a number of these. Perhaps most fundamentally, the study was informed by the hermeneutic-phenomenological tradition insofar as its primary concern was to investigate and seek to understand

human experience (that of beginning teachers) from the perspective of the individual actor (Schutz 1967; Bogdan and Taylor 1975; Giddens 1977; Bleicher 1980). It is not contended here that focusing on beginner teachers' perspectives, to the exclusion of those of significant others (notably teacher educators), can tell us all that we need to know about becoming a teacher. Indeed research has shown that beginning teachers frequently demonstrate attitudes and behaviours which can provide obstacles to their development as teachers, such as a concern to present themselves as 'competent' in the classroom and to mask any perceived limitations or problems that they are experiencing (Edwards 1998; Feiman-Nemser et al. 1999). It is contended, though, that for a number of reasons beginner teachers' perspectives need to be explored, understood and taken seriously.

Firstly, it is highly beneficial for teacher educators (as it is for teachers of any kind) to possess an appreciation of how their learners – here beginner teachers – view, interpret and understand their experience. In the words of von Glaserfeld (1996, 7):

[S]tudents perceive their environment in ways that may be very different from those intended by the educators ... This emphasizes the teacher's need to construct a hypothetical model of the particular conceptual worlds of the students they are facing. One can hope to induce changes in their ways of thinking only if one has some inkling as to the domains of experience, the concepts, and the conceptual relations the students possess at the moment.

Secondly, given the vast amount of taxpayers' money which is used to finance ITP, Induction and the early professional development of teachers,⁶ and given evidence to suggest that beginner teachers who feel unsupported are more likely to drop out of ITP or to leave the profession subsequent to completing it, it would seem appropriate to explore beginner teachers' perceptions of the support they are given.

Thirdly, in an increasingly centralised and bureaucratic context in which beginner teachers' everyday lives are largely shaped and constrained by the decisions of others, including policy-makers, teacher educators, head teachers, Induction tutors, line managers and senior colleagues, it could be argued that there is a moral imperative to 'take the side of the underdog' (Becker 1967; Gouldner 1968), starting with an attempt to understand the experience of becoming a teacher from the perspective of beginning teachers themselves.

While the focus of the BaT research was thus very much on exploring beginner teachers' experiences and perspectives, it should be acknowledged that different members of the research team have been influenced by a range of perspectives on learning in general and professional learning in particular, including socio-cultural theories (Wertsch 1991; Rogoff 1995), individual and social constructivism (Fosnot 1996; Richardson 1997), the study of expertise (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1986; Tomlinson 1998), and work conducted in the field of implicit learning and 'intuitive practice' (Claxton 1997; Atkinson and Claxton 2000), all of which are likely to have implicitly informed their respective contributions to instrument development, data generation and analysis. As a commissioned study, the development of the research design and of particular research instruments were part-shaped, too, by the perspectives, expectations and needs of those individuals representing the sponsors and serving on the project steering group, while the development of research instruments and the analysis of data were also informed by the review of literature on

beginner teachers' experiences which accompanied the empirical strand of the BaT research (Ashby et al. 2008).

Methods of data generation

The BaT study employed an 'equal status mixed methods design' (Tashakkori and Teddlie 1998, 43–5) in which the principal forms of data generation were:

- (1) an initial large-scale national self-complete questionnaire survey, followed by a yearly telephone survey;
- (2) annual in-depth, face-to-face interviews with a selected cohort of survey respondents; and
- (3) regular part-structured email exchanges ('ejournals') with those participants who took part in the face-to-face interviews.⁷

Data were generated between 2003 and 2008, and in six main phases or 'waves'. The first two waves took place at the beginning and end of participants' only (or final) year of ITP, and the subsequent waves (3–6) spanned beginner teachers' first to fourth years in post. As each phase of data generation occurred at different stages of the beginner teachers' careers, each wave had a slightly different focus (e.g. 'Wave 2' research instruments sought to discover participants' experiences of ITP, 'Wave 3' instruments their experiences of Induction, etc.), while there were also a number of common questions across all or most waves of data generation. For example – and of particular relevance to this paper – from Wave 2 onwards survey respondents were asked to rate the support that they had received on a five-point scale ranging from 'very good' to 'very poor'.⁸

Sampling

The sampling strategy employed for the initial questionnaire survey was informed by two main concerns. Firstly, the research team sought to generate a representative sample of student teachers (in England) for (or within) each of the ITP routes being studied, namely university-administered Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE), Flexible PGCE, Bachelor of Education (BEd), Bachelor of Arts/Science with Qualified Teacher Status (BA/BSc QTS), School-Centred Initial Teacher Training (SCITT), and Graduate and Registered Teacher Programmes (GTP and RTP, collectively GRTP).⁹ Secondly, it was hoped to ensure that a sufficient number of trainees were recruited from among those routes with the fewest training places to enable viable statistical analysis by route up to the end of the project in 2009 (allowing for attrition over a five-year period).

ITP providers nationally were thus stratified by route and a random sample of providers within each route was selected, with a small number of additional providers being purposively selected to boost the numbers of trainees from the smaller ITP routes. As a result of this strategy, in 2003 110 ITP providers were approached with the request that they allow their trainees to participate, should they wish to do so, in the initial (Wave 1) survey. Of these 110 providers, 74 agreed to do so, a response rate of 67%.

The Wave 1 questionnaire was completed by 4790 student teachers, all of whom were expecting to complete a one-, two-, three- or four-year ITP programme in

Table 1. Survey participants and inter-wave response rates.

Wave	Number of participants taking part	% of those who took part in previous wave
1	4790	–
2	3162	62
3	2446	77
4	1973	81
5	1638	83
6	1443	88

Summer 2004. By the end of the project (Summer 2008), 1443 teachers remained and took part in the (Wave 6) telephone survey. A breakdown of participation in the six waves of the survey can be found in Table 1.

Eighty-five student teachers who took part in the survey strand of the project were also recruited at the start of the study to participate in the annual face-to-face interviews. They represented 19 ITP providers, covering different phase (primary and secondary education) and ITP route combinations. Forty-eight of the 85 Wave 1 interviewees remained in the study until the completion of its fieldwork stage with the final (Wave 6) interviews.

Table 2 gives a breakdown of the number of achieved interviews at each phase of the project, together with the response rate, based on those eligible for interview at each wave (notably those participants who remained in teaching or those who had left the profession but had not yet taken part in a final interview).

From Wave 3 of the study (the beginning of participants' first year in post), those participating in the face-to-face interviews were also invited to complete e-journals on a half-termly basis. Here members of the research team sent an email to each participant prompting them to recount what they considered to be key aspects of their experiences during the previous half-term. In total, 62 participants provided e-journal data at least once during the lifetime of the project.

Table 2. Response rates and number of achieved face-to-face interviews, Waves 1–6.

Wave	No. of participants eligible for interview	No. of achieved interviews	Per cent response rate†	Participants known to have left the profession	No. of (additional) participants lost to the study*
1	85	85	100	–	–
2	85	79	93	1	5 [#]
3	84	73	87	6	5
4	72	64	89	1	8
5	58	56	97	6	2
6	51	48	94	4	4
Total				18	24

† Based on those eligible for interview.

* These participants could not be contacted so it is not possible to know whether they (or some of them) left the profession or whether they remained in teaching but were just lost to the BaT research.

[#] These five participants were not interviewed at Wave 2 but returned to the study the following year (Wave 3).

Data analysis

The findings reported in this paper emerged from three main stages of data analysis which were replicated at the end of each phase of data generation. In Stage One, all face-to-face interviews were transcribed and, along with the ejournal data (from Wave 3), were subjected to an inductive analysis in which different members of the research team, at first individually and then as a team, read and discussed a sample of the transcripts in order to identify themes which they considered central to beginner teachers' experiences. At the same time, and in a separate process, 'top-line' or aggregated data from the survey were examined.

Stage Two analyses were informed by: (a) the emergent findings from Stage One analyses for that wave (hence the second stage analyses of survey data were informed by the preliminary analyses of interview and ejournal data, and vice versa); (b) (from Wave 2 onwards) findings identified from previous waves of the research; and (c) issues arising from our corresponding review of the literature (Ashby et al. 2008). The Stage Two process involved: on the one hand, a thematic analysis of interview and ejournal data, coded using NVivo software; and on the other, the use of a range of techniques for analysing the survey data, including logistic regression analysis to identify which of a range of potential 'explanatory variables' (such as ITP route, age, gender) best predicted respondents' answers to questions about different aspects of their experience, and General Linear Model repeated measures analysis to examine change in beginner teachers' reported perceptions or experiences over time (Plewis 1997; Field 2000; Kinnear and Gray 2004).

Stage Three of the analysis process involved what we have termed a 'within-project interpretive meta-analysis' or 'integrative analysis' (Hobson et al. 2008). This involved two members of the research team (myself and my co-director of the BaT research) examining, at first independently and subsequently together, findings derived from the first two stages of the analysis process, and the associated data-cuts, to attempt to identify any general themes which might provide a more holistic understanding of the lived experiences of beginner teachers. At the end of the project, this integrative analysis process was undertaken using findings derived from Stage 1–2 analyses for all waves (1–6). Here it was established that the notion of support for beginning teachers was one of the most prominent themes (if not *the* most prominent theme) to emerge from the analysis process as a major factor shaping participants' experiences of becoming and being a teacher. In the next section some of the key findings relating to support for beginning teachers (which draw upon all stages of the analysis process) are identified.

Findings

The findings presented below relate to beginner teachers' perceptions of support and their own support needs; the importance of support to beginning teachers; positive aspects of the support experienced by beginning teachers; and actual or perceived limitations and failings in the support provided to beginning teachers.

Towards a conceptualisation and categorisation of beginner teachers' support needs

While participants in the BaT research were never directly asked what they meant and understood by 'support', most participants made frequent reference to the term in their

interviews and emails (mostly while discussing positive or less than positive aspects of their experience) and such data provide insights into both what they understood by support and their perceptions of their support needs. The data suggest that beginning teachers associate support primarily with *people*, particularly with school-based mentors, Induction tutors, peers (fellow beginner teachers) and other teacher colleagues in their schools. They suggest, too, that for beginning teachers themselves, their most important support needs include having people (mentors and others) who:

- (1) are ‘there for them’ – accessible, willing and able to listen and to provide help when it is needed;
- (2) treat them as a ‘whole person’ and have regard for their emotional and practical as well as professional needs;
- (3) make them feel welcome and ‘safe’ within their schools, providing them with important information about (for example) school policies and access to resources;
- (4) provide ideas relating to their teaching, and help them deal with specific problems, such as those relating to pupil behaviour, and time and workload management;
- (5) facilitate access to additional training or opportunities for continuing professional development (CPD), including guidance on their career development;
- (6) provide opportunities for them to join peer networks and to work as part of a team;
- (7) empower them and give them confidence through recognition, encouragement and trust; and
- (8) are ‘on their side’.¹⁰

Support categories 1–3 and 6–8 above could be seen to be principally concerned with what Gold (1996) referred to as ‘psychological’ support, and categories 4–5 with ‘instructional’ support, though the distinctions are blurred and far from clear-cut. For example, beginning teachers may gain both ‘instructional’ and ‘psychological’ benefits from being a member of a peer network or from working as part of a team. It is nevertheless clear that while many (and perhaps most¹¹) participants tended to include in their personal understanding or perception of support both elements of Gold’s (1996) operationalisation, they tended to place greater emphasis on the ‘psychological’ or ‘psycho-social’ (Kram 1985) aspects. Indeed there are indications that at least some participants thought of support *solely* in these terms, with ‘support’ for (for example) the development of their *content knowledge*, *general pedagogical knowledge* and *pedagogical content knowledge* (Shulman 1987; Malderez and Wedell 2007) somehow seen as distinct – as training or CPD, for instance, but not as support per se.

The importance of support for/to beginning teachers

Analyses of survey, interview and ejournal data all suggest that the extent to which beginning teachers feel supported (whatever they take this to mean) has a major bearing on how they experience – and whether they wish to continue with – their initial teacher preparation and teaching in general. Six findings from the analyses of survey data are presented below.

- (1) When those Wave 2 survey respondents who had left their ITP programmes prior to completion were asked (in an open-ended question) to give their reasons

for this, the second largest specific response category (after ‘workload’), given by 15% of these respondents, was ‘I did not feel I was getting appropriate support’. Furthermore, when asked ‘What factors, if any, would have helped you to complete your training course?’ the two most popular responses were ‘more support from [ITP] provider’ (19%) and ‘more support from school mentor(s)’ (19%).

- (2) The higher their rating of the support they received, the sooner beginner teachers tended to successfully complete their Induction. For example, those who rated the support they received during their first year of teaching as ‘very good’ were more likely (97%) to have passed their Induction before the end of their second year of teaching than those who rated their support less highly (93%) (chi-square: $p < 0.001$). In addition, the second most common reason given by survey participants who had not completed their Induction by the end of the first school year (after ‘had not been in the job long enough’) was ‘had not received sufficient support from school’ (13%).
- (3) Beginning teachers who gave higher ratings of the support they received were statistically more likely to perceive themselves to be effective teachers. For example, 56% of those who regarded the support they received during their second year of teaching as ‘very good’ rated themselves as ‘very effective’ teachers, compared with 41% of those who gave lower ratings of the support they received (chi-square: $p < 0.001$).
- (4) The higher their rating of the support they received, the more likely beginning teachers were to give higher ratings to their enjoyment of teaching. For example, survey respondents who stated that they felt very well supported during their second year of teaching were approximately 50% more likely than those who did not feel as well supported to ‘strongly agree’ that they were enjoying teaching.
- (5) After ‘nothing’, ‘lack of support’ was the response most frequently given by second, third and fourth year teachers to an open-ended question asking what, if anything, had hindered their development as teachers: 17% of second year, 22% of third year and 25% of fourth year teachers gave this response.
- (6) Those second, third and fourth year teachers who rated the support they received as ‘very good’ were statistically more likely than those who did not do so to remain in teaching (chi-square: $p < 0.001$). Thirteen per cent of those second year teachers who did not rate the support they received as ‘very good’ had left teaching within four years of completing ITP, compared with a relatively low 5% of those who did rate such support as ‘very good’.

Sources of support for beginning teachers: success stories

Throughout the period between ITP and the end of their fourth year in post, the majority of beginner teacher survey respondents gave positive ratings of the support they received. Table 3 shows, for example, that each year from survey Waves 2–6, between two-thirds and four-fifths of respondents rated the support they were given as ‘very good’ or ‘good’.

Interview and ejournal participants who spoke or wrote in positive terms about the support received referred to its derivation from a number of sources. These included higher education institution (HEI) tutors, school-based mentors, Induction tutors and heads of department (sometimes one and the same and sometimes different people),

Table 3. Beginner teachers' overall ratings of support between ITP and their fourth year in post.

	Per cent (%)†				
	Wave 2	Wave 3	Wave 4	Wave 5	Wave 6
Very good	37	46	36	27	29
Good	42	31	37	41	38
Neither good nor poor	11	9	13	15	16
Poor	5	7	7	8	8
Very poor	2	2	2	3	3
Can't generalise	3	1	4	6	6
Don't know	(0)*	(0)	(0)	(0)	(0)
Not applicable	(0)	4	1	(0)	1
Number of cases	3162	2357	1943	1618	1413

Note: Includes all who (from Wave 3) had worked as a teacher at some point during the school year in which the survey took place.

† Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding.

* '(0)' stands for greater than 0 but less than 0.5.

peers and other teacher colleagues, head teachers, school support staff, and friends and family. Amongst these, mentors and Induction tutors were given most prominence, followed by peers and teacher colleagues.

The following findings from the analyses of survey data substantiate the suggestion that mentors and Induction tutors are the single most important providers of support for beginning teachers, be that 'psychological' support only or a combination of both 'psychological' and 'instructional' support.

- (1) Using regression analysis to determine which of 13 different potential 'explanatory variables' (including age, gender, ethnicity, the ITP route followed, whether respondents were teaching in primary or secondary schools, working part time or full time, etc.) might influence first year teachers' ratings of the support they had received, it was found that respondents' rating of their relationship with their mentor or Induction tutor had the strongest overall effect: the more positively they rated this relationship, the more highly they rated the support received over the course of the year.¹²
- (2) Those second, third and fourth year teachers who reported that they had a (post-Induction) mentor were more likely to give higher ratings of the overall support they received. For example, 50% of second year and 44% of fourth year teachers who reported that they had a mentor rated the support they had received as 'very good', compared with 35% and 27% respectively of those reporting that they did not have a mentor.

Regarding peers and colleagues, some participants reported a number of benefits arising from opportunities to form, develop and be a part of an effective peer support network, as the following quotation suggests:

I think one of the most useful things about [external courses] has been the opportunity to get together with other NQTs to see how they feel about how they are doing and what they are having difficulties with etc. It is sort of reassuring for all of us I think that we are all in the same boat.

Analyses of the face-to-face interview and ejournal data show that beginning teachers were particularly appreciative of seven different kinds of support and supporters. First, they valued support which was readily available and easily accessible, and supporters who were pro-active:

This department is just incredible. You never feel that you're being a nuisance. They come to you and see what you need, past papers, example materials, the members of staff in this department are very helpful.

Secondly, warm mention was made of supporters who helped deal with specific problems, particularly those relating to problematic pupil behaviour and workload management:

When I had a problem with one of the Year 10 boys at the beginning of term I found that there was a very strong network of people to support you when you do need it.

The main support has been from [my mentor], one of the other Year 6 teachers. She's been brilliant, just keeping an eye on me, in terms of how many hours I'm doing and she'll come and tell me off and she'll come and check that I'm not doing too much marking.

Thirdly, participants appreciated those who treated them as 'whole people', addressed their emotional as well as 'practical' needs, and were understanding of their domestic situations:

[My] Induction tutor – a very helpful, supportive teacher ... I feel very able to go to her with any problems or queries and she will sort them out for me. She is very interested in my personal as well as professional development, seeing me as a whole person rather than just a NQT to be 'got through' their Induction year.

Fourthly, they valued supporters who worked with them as part of a team:

The support is just brilliant so we do all our planning together, all our assessment together so it's really, really supportive, really good.

I find the teamwork and the support that you get and the fact that you are never on your own very motivating.

Fifthly, they also valued supporters who were willing to listen to them and act as a sounding board:

I have got a mentor who is a colleague in the language department. She's great ... if I want to have a moan about something or anything else, I'll go and speak to her, she's lovely.

I've got the support of my head of department and I can go to him and ... sometimes we just sit and talk ... that really has helped me to have someone I can go and talk to and somebody I can bounce ideas off.

Beginner teachers were also appreciative of supporters who empowered them and gave them confidence through (for example) 'recognition', 'trust' and enabling them to be and feel autonomous:

The beginning of this year has been interesting. I have moved to Year 4 (from 5) and am now paired with a new teacher to our school. Being the one with the experience of our school and being treated as someone to defer to is a bit of a shock but good.

Finally, they were grateful to senior colleagues who facilitated access to additional training or opportunities for CPD:

I have been going to two courses for every term... In that way I think the school has been very, very supportive ... Our mentor has been very, very supportive and made sure that all the people [went] who wanted to.

Failings and limitations in 'support' for beginning teachers

Whilst, as we have seen, the majority of participants were generally positive about the support they were given, a re-examination of survey respondents' responses (see Table 3 above) nevertheless reveals that, each year, between seven and eleven per cent of respondents rated the support they received as 'poor' or 'very poor'. Furthermore, interview and ejournal data show that, across the period between their ITP and the end of their fourth year in post, many beginning teachers experienced support that they considered inadequate. From the accounts of these participants there appear to be a range of failings, most of which relate to the absence, for some beginning teachers, of one or more of the kinds of support enjoyed by those participants quoted above.

First, many beginning teachers bemoaned the lack of opportunity to meet with their mentors or Induction tutors as often as they would have liked, which was sometimes attributed to timetabling issues:

The teacher used to come in at about half past eight and leave at half past three, so I didn't really get much support from her at all.

[I]t turned out that the person who was mentoring me was always teaching when I was free and I was always teaching when they were free.

Secondly, many participants reported a lack of support from mentors whom they considered disorganised and/or not fully committed to the role:

The head of department is my ... mentor but actually he sits down about two days before the review has to be done and then panics because he can't find his bits of paper

A third criticism commonly voiced in interviews and ejournals was that some teacher colleagues were unwelcoming and/or unfriendly:

In general we were shunned in the staffroom and I was like 'maybe that's what it's like in a secondary school, I don't know'. If I was on my own [with no other beginner teachers in the school] I would find this quite an isolating experience.

Fourthly, some beginner teachers, especially trainees and NQTs, reported that they had received an unhelpful (or no) introduction or induction into their school:

The biggest low was starting school on the first day. No one greeted me or even spoke on the first morning. I was trying to find the loo. When I asked a member of staff they told me that I should have been in the staff briefing in the hall and walked off. It took me about five minutes to find the hall at which time I was nearly 15 minutes late for the first staff meeting and had to walk in late, not knowing anyone. Talk about not feeling welcome.

I didn't even know how the equipment worked. I didn't know where anything was ...

Other complaints related to a reported lack of support, from individuals or from school procedures, in dealing with problems of pupil behaviour or indiscipline:

If you've got a difficult pupil, the first port of call is your head of department ... Sometimes you'd go in and she'd say, 'don't talk to me, I don't want to know', before you'd even mentioned anything. Well then you'd kind of think, 'well heck, what do I do now?' ... If you try and go one step further, somebody higher as it were, they just turn round and say, 'it's a department issue, sort it out within your department'.

I had an incident with a child who told me to 'F' off and I just did not know how to handle it. I went for help and I didn't get any help and two days later this child is back in my class again and nothing's happened to them ...

Some beginning teachers saw their tutors, mentors or line managers as overly critical of their teaching or other aspects of their work as teachers, and some found this demoralising:

[I]t was a really oppressive atmosphere in the school. [From] my actual mentor ... I got nothing but criticism and pressure from her from Day One. She was criticising everything I did ... I mean we had been doing a lot on the course on the power of positive feedback ... and I got none whatsoever.

Some beginning teachers complained that they were denied access to additional training or CPD opportunities, including guidance relating to the advancement of their teaching careers:

What's hindered me this year is that we haven't been able to go on any courses ... I don't really know why. It was clamped down in the beginning of the year and I haven't been on anything. I do feel at this point there's still so much that I need to take on board, so much that I need to learn.

It would be nice to have [had] more support for career progression.

While some participants felt that their support needs declined after their first year in post, others bemoaned the falling away of some of the support previously available to them.

I think when you come into teaching, yes, it's great, you have your NQT [Induction] year, you get a lot of support ... but then after that it feels like ... you're just kind of ... left, you know.

[Y]ou are now a qualified teacher, the support that you would have got ordinarily pretty much drops away, like a booster rocket on a shuttle, that's the way it feels!

These findings are supported by analyses of survey data. Table 3 above shows that beginner teacher respondents' ratings of the support they received declined steadily throughout the period between their ITP and Induction to the end of their fourth year in post. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the most marked decrease in ratings occurred between the end of respondents' first year in post (when as many as 46% rated the support they received as 'very good') and the end of their second year (when the corresponding figure was 36%), a period which for most marked the end of their formal Induction into the profession.¹³

While the level and effectiveness of support provided for individual beginning teachers inevitably tend to vary according to the individual school, department and mentor involved, analyses of survey data reveal that beginner teachers' ratings of the support they received were also systematically differentiated by the ITP route they followed, their age and their ethnicity.

- (1) In relation to ITP route, the Wave 2 survey showed that amongst both primary and secondary trainees, those who followed Flexible PGCE programmes were least likely to rate the support they received as 'very good'. Only 16% of primary and 30% of secondary phase respondents following Flexible PGCE programmes rated the support they were given as 'very good', compared, for example, to 46% of primary SCITT trainees and 53% of secondary BA/BSc QTS respondents.¹⁴ As might be expected, however, such route differences were 'washed out' (Zeichner and Tabachnick 1981) by teachers' subsequent experiences of teaching post-ITP.
- (2) Regarding age differences, older beginning teachers consistently rated the support they received less highly than their younger colleagues. For example, at the end of participants' first year of teaching, 53% of the youngest age group (22–26) rated the support they received as 'very good', compared with 39% of those aged 42–46.¹⁵
- (3) Similarly, Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) teachers, as a group, consistently (and increasingly) gave lower ratings of the support they received than their (white) majority ethnic group colleagues. Regression analysis, conducted to determine which of a range of variables might influence first year teachers' ratings of the support they had received, found that respondents from the majority (white) ethnic group were statistically more likely than those from BME groupings to rate the support they received as 'good' or 'very good'.¹⁶ Furthermore, repeated measures analysis conducted at the end of Wave 6 found that over the course of their first four years in teaching, BME teachers' average ratings of support declined more markedly than those of their white peers.¹⁷

A more general issue, and perhaps one related to a number of those presented above, is that many beginning teachers feel voiceless or 'powerless' in schools that appear to them to be hierarchically organised:

You're at the bottom of the pecking order and I suppose I wasn't prepared for there to be as many political games as there can be in a school.

[S]ome of the older members of staff, kind of do talk down to you ... several times people said ... 'Oh well, you are not a real teacher' and things like that ... [T]he first half term was really bad and I thought about quitting so many times.

Such treatment appears to be particularly hard to swallow for career changers who have held senior positions in their previous working lives, and those who have taken on positions of responsibility in teaching but feel they are not free to make their own decisions relating to these:

I'm used to going into businesses and telling people what they're doing wrong and how they should restructure their business. I went to a meeting on how the school was going

to make provision for able students. I raised my hand and a teacher commented on why was I giving an opinion when I'm not even a teacher.

[L]ast week ... once again I was shot down in flames during a department meeting ... At the meetings are two [senior members of staff], so often I am over-ruled by one or other of them. I feel this undermines me and I am not allowed to make any decision ... I really do not understand how they expect you to run a department when they are always interfering ... It just feels like a very sort of powerless feeling.

Such evidence corroborates the view, suggested in the previous section, that beginning teachers (or some beginning teachers at least) are very much the 'underdogs' in their schools.

Conclusions and implications

The findings presented in this article should be treated with some degree of caution since, like all research, the *Becoming a Teacher* study inevitably has a number of limitations. For example, it should be recognised that the research was based predominantly on beginner teachers' *accounts* of their experiences (Dingwall 1997), and that some participants may not have been completely open or honest in their survey, interview and/or email responses. It should perhaps be noted that in general, the concept of social desirability suggests that research participants have a tendency, in their interactions with researchers, to seek to present themselves in a favourable light (Fisher 1993).

Secondly, there are a number of reasons to be wary of generalising BaT findings to the wider population. For example, as indicated in the previous section the survey sample (though large) was not completely random, with ITP routes which recruited small numbers of student teachers being purposefully over-sampled to facilitate viable statistical analysis by ITP route in the final wave of the study.¹⁸ Nor, given that participants were partly self-selecting, can we state with any degree of certainty how typical of the broader survey sample or of student teachers nationally may be the recounted experiences of in-depth interviewees. And though minimal compared with most studies of this nature, participant attrition over the lifetime of the project means that we cannot be sure how typical of all beginner teachers in England (or indeed of all those who participated at Wave 1) were those who remained in the study.¹⁹

In spite of these and other limitations, it is nonetheless considered that the *Becoming a Teacher* research provides an important insight into the lived experiences of a large number of people who sought to become (and became) teachers via a range of different pathways into the profession in England. To the extent that these findings are both trustworthy and typical of the experiences of at least some beginner teachers, they have the potential to help teacher educators and policy-makers improve the experiences of future cohorts of student teachers, and newly and recently qualified teachers, with consequent potential benefits for schools, the educational system and society at large. The study adds weight to some findings of previous research, reported above, on the importance of supporting beginning teachers and effective strategies of beginner teacher support (see also Stansbury and Zimmerman 2000). In addition, the findings presented here have the potential to provide teacher educators and policy-makers with a fuller understanding than existed hitherto of beginner teachers' support needs, while they also highlight some serious limitations in the support provision experienced by beginning teachers in England around the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Amongst the large number of possible implications, the findings presented in this article strengthen calls for those who provide or facilitate provision for support for beginning teachers to:

- (1) help beginner teachers develop effective strategies for managing their workloads and pupil behaviour, and have in place transparent and effective school procedures to support beginner teachers in dealing with problematic pupil behaviour (Barmby 2006);
- (2) pay greater attention to the effective selection, training and support of mentors, and seek to ensure the provision of adequate time for mentors and beginner teachers to work together through, for example, attention to time allocations and timetabling (Bullough 2005; Valencic Zuljan and Vogrinc 2007);
- (3) seek to ensure that beginner teachers are not solely dependent upon the support of individual mentors, and that they are effectively integrated into and participate in wider school and professional communities, which ideally would be characterised by collegial and supportive learning cultures (Totterdell et al. 2002);
- (4) seek to ensure that beginner teachers also have access to peer support networks (Oberski et al. 1999);
- (5) respond with sensitivity to the needs of more mature entrants to the profession and of those from BME groups (Basit et al. 2006);
- (6) ensure that provision is in place beyond the first year of teaching for appropriate forms of individually tailored support and CPD for beginner teachers (Moor et al. 2005); and
- (7) provide beginning teachers with appropriate levels of autonomy (Kwakman 2003) and trust (Smethem and Adey 2005), and ensure that they have a voice.

Last but by no means least, while the provision of effective psychological or emotional support is not a sufficient means of facilitating the professional learning and development of beginning teachers (Feiman-Nemser et al. 1999), the findings reported in this article, together with some of those reported elsewhere (Eraut 2004; McNally 2006) attest to the position that this is an absolutely necessary condition. I would add that, in an international educational context increasingly characterised by high-stakes assessment and performativity (Ball 2003), my own view, at least indirectly supported by some of the findings presented in this study, is that attempts to create the conditions in which beginner teachers are likely to both survive and thrive might best be served by *reducing* and not further increasing the assessment of their developing capabilities, especially that undertaken via in-class observation of their teaching by more senior colleagues or external assessors. The main consequence of such observation, for many beginning teachers, is to increase their stress levels and to ensure that what is being taught, learned and observed is atypical of what normally occurs in those teachers' classrooms. (And even if what is observed is trustworthy, as teacher educators we know that a focus on teacher 'performance' only tells a small part of the story.)

Finally, while research evidence on the matter remains ultimately inconclusive (Hobson, Ashby, et al. 2009), some of the findings presented above endorse the belief that the most important single provider of support for beginning teachers, the school-based mentor, would be better able to meet their needs (both 'psychological' and 'instructional') if s/he were not also charged with the unenviable task of formally assessing their capability. The ambivalent relationship that results is potentially destructive

of trust, especially where the outcomes of such assessment may impact on whether or not those assessed are granted licence to continue in the teaching profession.

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Notes

1. The terms ‘beginning teacher’ and ‘beginner teacher’ are used interchangeably in this article to refer to those undertaking a programme of initial teacher preparation or in their first four years of teaching following the successful completion of such a programme. The term ‘initial teacher preparation’ (ITP) is used to refer to what is variously described as ‘pre-service’ teacher training, initial teacher training (ITT) and initial teacher education (ITE). My preference for the use of ITP has been explained elsewhere (e.g. Hobson et al. 2008).
2. This writer is uncomfortable with the term ‘instruction’ in this context given its literal meaning as ‘the process or act of imparting knowledge’ (which underplays the social and situated nature of learning and fails to do justice to the pedagogical techniques employed by most teachers), but recognises that such connotations are not intended by many writers and educators who use the term.
3. The Career Entry Profile was introduced in 1997, revised to take account of the new statutory Induction arrangements in 1999, and subsequently developed in 2003 as the Career Entry and Development Profile (CEDP). At the time of writing, it is undergoing further review.
4. For those unfamiliar with initial teacher preparation in England, a brief overview of the main routes to Qualified Teacher Status is provided as an Appendix.
5. The Becoming a Teacher project was a six-year (2003–2009) longitudinal study of beginner teachers’ experiences of initial teacher preparation, Induction and early professional development, funded by the Department for Children, Schools and Families, the General Teaching Council for England, and the Training and Development Agency for Schools, and carried out by a research team from the University of Nottingham, the University of Leeds and Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute.
6. In relation to ITP alone, in 2002–2003 the (then) Teacher Training Agency in England spent £187 million on funding ITP courses and an additional £127.6 million on student teacher bursaries (Teacher Training Agency 2003).
7. The eJournals were introduced in the second year of the study, for those interviewees who successfully completed their ITP and subsequently took up a teaching post.
8. The term ‘support’ in this survey question was not defined for respondents; rather they were encouraged to interpret this in their own way. Participants’ interpretations and conceptions of ‘support’ were explored at a later date through the analyses of interview and eJournal data (see Findings section in the main text).
9. As indicated above, for those unfamiliar with initial teacher preparation in England a brief overview of these ITP routes is provided as an Appendix.
10. A range of evidence substantiating the existence of these support needs is presented in the following sub-sections.
11. Given the nature of the data generated on this subject it is not possible to be more precise than this in quantitative terms.
12. Further details can be found in Hobson et al. (2007, 85–6 and 143–4).
13. In some respects, the decline in support was even more marked than these figures suggest, since (as we saw in the Findings section) those participants who rated the support they received less highly were more likely to leave teaching (and thus less likely to remain in the survey sample). Repeated measures analysis of the responses of those participants who remained in the sample between Waves 3–6 reveals that the decline in respondents’ ratings of support was statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). For further information see Hobson, Malderez, et al. (2009, 154–5).

14. Further details of these statistically significant (chi square: $p < 0.001$) results can be found in Hobson et al. (2006, 35–6).
15. Further details of these statistically significant ($p = 0.03$) findings are available in Hobson, Malderez, et al. (2009, 154–5).
16. Further details are available in Hobson et al. (2007, 85–6 and 143–4).
17. Further information can be found in Hobson, Malderez, et al. (2009, 154–5).
18. That said, comparison of the achieved Wave 1 sample with national profile data (Training and Development Agency Performance Profile data for 2003) suggests that in terms of gender and ethnicity survey participants *were* representative of trainees throughout England.
19. A more comprehensive account of the limitations of the BaT research is provided in Hobson, Malderez, et al. (2009, Appendix III).

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Appendix. An outline of the main ITP routes in England

Undergraduate HEI-administered programmes (BA/BSc QTS; BEd)

Successful completion of these programmes, which combine HEI-based input and school-based experience, leads to the award of a Bachelor's degree, either in a specific curriculum subject (BA/BSc) or in Education (BEd), as well as Qualified Teacher Status (QTS). These programmes normally last for three and four years respectively full time, although two-year programmes are offered by some institutions for entrants with professional qualifications equivalent to degree-level study.

Students following these programmes have to pay tuition fees, the level of which varies depending on the specific course and HEI they attend, though Home students may be eligible for a means-tested grant towards the cost of such fees, and Home and EU students may also be eligible for student loans to cover the cost of tuition fees and to help towards accommodation and other living costs.

Postgraduate HEI-administered programmes (PGCE and Flexible PGCE)

These programmes include periods of HEI-based provision and school-based experience. Successful completion leads to the award of a Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE), an academic qualification, as well as QTS. The full-time PGCE lasts for one academic year whilst the flexible version takes five or more academic terms. Applicants must hold a first degree or equivalent; for those wishing to teach in secondary schools this should normally be in the subject they intend to teach.

Student teachers following these programmes must also pay tuition fees, which again vary according to the specific course and ITP provider. Home and EU trainees may be eligible for a student loan to cover the cost of tuition fees, and trainees may also be entitled to a tax-free bursary from the Training and Development Agency (TDA), the size of which varies according to the phase of education and subject specialism being followed (with higher bursaries available to those training to teach shortage subjects in secondary schools).

School-Centred Initial Teacher Training programmes (SCITT)

Applicants for SCITT programmes must normally hold a Bachelor's degree relevant to the subject they wish to specialise in (or at primary level, relevant to the primary national curriculum). The programme is provided by a school or a consortium of schools. Successful completion leads to the award of QTS and, depending on the nature of the provision, a PGCE. The programme lasts for one academic year. The regulations relating to tuition fees, student loans and bursaries are the same as for HEI-administered PGCE programmes.

Employment-based programmes: Graduate Teacher Programme (GTP) and Registered Teacher Programme (RTP)

In the GTP, which typically lasts for one academic year, 'trainees' take up a salaried teaching post and (if successful) achieve QTS whilst in post. As with other postgraduate programmes, applicants to GTP programmes must hold a first degree in a relevant subject. The RTP is a similar programme open to those who do not yet hold a degree but have qualifications equivalent to the first two years of Bachelor's degree study. Typically, the RTP is a two-year programme during which trainees will be employed in a teaching post, whilst also completing a further year of degree-level study on a part-time basis.

Trainees following these routes receive a salary, which is at least the minimum point on the unqualified teacher pay scale (and may be higher, depending on their responsibilities, prior experience and the school's location), from the school in which they are employed and undertaking their training. Some providers have TDA-funded training places (which are limited in number), whereby the TDA pays the school a grant to contribute to the cost of training the student teacher. Where this is the case, trainees are not required to pay fees. In other cases, the school or other sponsor may also be willing to cover the cost of training as well as providing salaries for student teachers.

Further and up-to-date information about funding relating to different ITP routes in England is available on the TDA website at: <http://www.tda.gov.uk/Recruit/thetrainingprocess/fundinginengland.aspx>.