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## Examining beginning teachers' perceptions of workplace support

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## **Examining beginning teachers' perceptions of workplace support**

### ***Structured abstract***

#### **Purpose**

The paper, taking a participatory perspective of learning, looks at the interaction between individuals and their workplace, focusing on the perceptions of workplaces and self by beginning teachers in terms of support for their learning.

#### **Methodological approach**

The study presents an analysis of 37 interviews from 17 beginning teachers across 18 workplaces. Analysis used an adapted version of Evans and colleagues expansive-restrictive framework for evaluating workplaces, focusing on relational aspects. A matrix of congruence between individuals and their workplace is presented, highlighting the significance of personal networking.

#### **Findings**

Although beginning teachers concluded their workplaces were largely expansive, they also identified concerns regarding perceptions of support availability. Formal and informal support was recognized and the significance of outside school support, such as through the University Faculty, was noted even for teachers in post. We identified good 'matches', differential engagement with the same workplace and similar agency in different workplaces.

#### **Practical implications**

The matrix of congruence is offered as a tool to researchers and teacher educators interested in understanding how support is experienced by novice professionals. Our study highlights the utility of taking a personal network perspective to conceiving workplaces as not necessarily bounded by locality or normative practices. This could offer opportunities for discourse leading to greater engagement by professionals in their own learning.

#### **Originality**

This paper responds to calls that personal-social processes in the workplace need further attention (Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2003; Billett, 2009). The consideration of network perspectives, attending to informal aspects of social engagement, offers new understandings.

**Keywords:** workplace learning, continuing professional development, networking.

**Classification:** Research paper

## **Examining beginning teachers' perceptions of workplace support**

### ***Background to the study***

There is a growing interest in the experiences of early career professionals as they make the transition from training through to employment. Our focus is on Beginning Teachers (BTs) and their perceptions of support for learning including those working for the first time, i.e. as direct graduates, and those coming to the profession with workplace experiences. Our work is premised on a socio-cultural perspective that learning takes place through social engagement. We are particularly interested in the duality between the affordances schools as workplaces offer for learning and individual engagement (Billett 2009a). We focus on BT's perceptions of how invitational such workplaces are in offering opportunities for engagement and their personal responses. We ascribe the term 'agency' to this social-personal interaction drawing both on the TLRP Learning Lives project's notion of: 'an ability to exert control over one's life' (Biesta 2008) and, in particular, taking on Billett's notions of agency as directed, effortful and proactive engagement (Billett 2001). From this interest arose three research questions:

- 1) What are the perceptions of Beginning Teachers of their schools as workplaces in terms of support?
- 2) How do these perceptions relate to individual agency in gaining and using this support?
- 3) What issues do revealing workplace perceptions raise for teacher educators?

This study was funded by the Gatsby Charitable Foundation, through its interest in supporting teacher retention. The funding supported three cohorts graduating from a PostGraduate Certificate in Education for Science in 2005-2007. Extra support included offering development days at the Faculty for peers to meet and be updated, along with the hosting of a website. The teachers in this study were part of the 2005-6 intervention cohort. The 2007-8 and 2008-9 cohorts in our sample were not part of the Gatsby-funded intervention.

### ***Beginning teachers and workplace learning***

BTs bring previous life experiences (termed 'ontologies' by Billett, 2009a) to the workplace. For some this may follow on from a previous career. For others workplace experience may be through an internship or part-time employment concurrent with an undergraduate degree programme (Lundsteen 2009). Life experiences, as well as the resources they bring, are likely to influence an individual's participation in a new workplace. We argue that previous experiences not only affect BTs transition into teaching but also bring personal social networks. We begin by exploring what support BTs might need as they enter the workplace, then go on to consider the usefulness of considering networks in understanding how BTs use support, acknowledging both formal and informal dimensions of their learning.

### **Beginning teachers' professional learning**

A participatory perspective acknowledges that BTs learn through action, reification, reflection and dialogue. As a result they develop skills, acquire knowledge and expertise; referred to by Billett as knowing 'how' and knowing 'that' (Billett 2001; 2009b). Learning happens at an individual level through the constant adjustment and modification of practice, in response to actions, reactions, interactions and activities in the classroom, and in anticipation of approaching situations (Wilson & Demetriou 2007). Teachers also learn through working with others within a school by asking questions, sharing information, seeking help, experimenting with innovative actions and seeking feedback (Eraut, 2004 – 2007 better ref). Accordingly, teacher learning is shaped through a combination of reciprocity between the context of the particular school setting, and an individual teacher's interest and disposition to learn about practice; the impact of attitudes and values referred to by Billett as knowing 'for' (Beckett & Hager 2000; Billett 2001; 2009b; Hodkinson & Hodkinson 2004). Additionally, in daily classroom life, teachers choose how to act and decide what to do, that is, they exercise judgements. These judgements may be intuitive or explicit, often have important consequences and are not only driven by rational thinking but to a large degree by human experiences and emotions (Hoekstra et al. 2007). A BT's 'growing capacity to make appropriate judgements in changing, and often unique circumstances that occur in many workplaces' (Beckett & Hager 2000, p. 302) can be regarded as a result of personal response to social engagement. We argue that this engagement is not necessarily bounded by locality or normative practices. A recent Irish study, (Morgan 2009) highlighted that life beyond school is also important in helping novice professionals to cope with new workplace demands, both in terms of emotional and informational support. It is for these reasons that we have investigated the role of personal networks to help us understand how support is offered and used by BTs. Furthermore we propose, as Lundsteen has also recently suggested (2009), that such external support 'knowing 'who'', could be considered a fourth element to Billett's synthesis of knowledge.

### **Teachers' personal networks**

The use of social network theories is an emerging area of study in teacher education (Anderson 2009; Baker-Doyle 2008; Fox & Wilson 2009; Youngs *et al.* 2009). Studying personal (also termed 'ego-centred'<sup>1</sup>) networks of individuals, provides an extended way of considering the participatory practices of BTs and develops the communities of practice model proposed originally by Lave and Wenger and developed by Wenger (Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998). A personal network perspective allows for additional interactions to strong, collaborative connections to be recognized; offering a more exploratory and teacher-centred way of considering from where, from whom and how support is experienced. This approach is informed by Nardi's work (Nardi *et al.* 2000), highlighting the use of personal networks by individuals, and Granovetter, (1973), who recognised the significance of weak as well as strong ties. By asking explicitly about the nature of personal networks it is possible to explore the outcome of personal ontologies (Billett, 2009a) and to establish how these personal histories are expressed and sustained in relationships. This approach acknowledging the role of others however physically dispersed. .

### **Formal and informal learning experiences**

The two cohorts of novices involved in the study were at different stages of their professional learning.

The first cohort comprised students in a UK Higher Education Institution-School partnership. These BTs have two main formal sources of learning support during their pre-service programme. Firstly, there is support in the placement school from an allocated mentor, usually within the BT's subject specialisation. Additionally other school-based professionals are involved through their work with particular classes of pupils and through in-school Professional Studies programmes. Secondly, institutional support from the University department is experienced formally in the form of lectures, subject tutor supervision, an online learning repository and other University-based staff who visit the schools periodically.

The second cohort of BTs comprised Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) who had completed their University partner course previously. As indicated earlier, these Gatsby funded novices were connected through termly development days and website support. Several of the teachers were also part of a national Fast-track programme<sup>2</sup>, offering additional support from professional tutors in school and regionally, through conferences and training.

We acknowledge that informal school-based learning plays a significant role in professional development (Eraut 2004; Hoekstra *et al.* 2009b; Livingstone 1999; Marsick 2009). Such informal learning takes the form of: conversations in the corridors or when sharing lifts with colleagues to the workplace: observing teachers enacting their roles around a school; and co-participating in normative practices. These unplanned, spontaneous opportunities to support BTs' learning, Billett (2001) term 'unintended forms of co-participation'. Indeed a very recent US study focusing on the formal mentoring of 184 primary and middle school teachers (Youngs *et al.* 2009) found that BTs were speaking more frequently to other colleagues, and rating these interactions as more valuable to them, than those with their formal mentor. We are aware that such significant informal learning is tacit and difficult to reveal (Hoekstra *et al.* 2009a).

### **Workplaces as learning environments**

Evans and colleagues (2006) developed a framework for evaluating the nature of social interactions taking place in workplaces. They categorized workplaces as either 'expansive' or 'restrictive' for learning. This framework provides an adapted and elaborated model developed from Lave and Wenger's notions of communities of practice. Evans *et al* (2006) adapted this framework through the study of teacher learning environments and this is presented below (Table 1).

*Table 1: Framework for an analysis of sites for teacher learning taken from Figure 3.1, p.53 in 'Improving Workplace Learning' (Evans et al. 2006)*

EXPANSIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT	RESTRICTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT
Close collaborative working with colleagues	Isolated, individualist working
Out-of-school educational opportunities,	No out-of-school time to stand back. Only narrow,

including opportunities to reflect and think differently	short training programmes.
Explicit focus on teacher learning as a dimension of normal working practice	No explicit focus on teacher learning except to meet crises or imposed initiatives
Supported opportunities for personal development going beyond school or government priorities	Teacher learning dominated by government and school agendas
Colleagues are mutually supportive in enhancing teacher learning	Colleagues obstruct or do not support each others' learning
Opportunities to engage with working groups inside or outside of school	Work restricted to 'home' departmental teams within school
Opportunity to extend professional identity through boundary-crossing into other departments, school activities and schools	The only opportunity to boundary cross associated with major change of job
Support for variations in ways of working and learning, for different teachers and departments	Standardised approaches to teaching and teacher learning are prescribed and imposed
Teachers use a wide range of learning approaches	Teachers use a narrow range of learning approaches

Evans and colleagues argue that both formal education as well as the informal learning taking place in the immediate workplace community is important, thus extending the apprenticeship learning advocated by Lave and Wenger. Secondly, they offered an analytical continuum, acknowledging the context-specific nature of learning in individual classrooms and schools, in a way that Lave and Wenger's work did not. Thirdly, Evans *et al.*'s work challenged ideas of a linear journey from novice to expert as being too simplistic. This framework offered us a way of evaluating workplaces, albeit in our study from the BTs' perspectives only. It was not designed however to offer a way of understanding teachers' responses to such environments.

### ***The relationship between individuals and their workplaces***

There has been a call to reinsert the 'subject' into accounts of learning (Billett 2008; Evans *et al.* 2006; Hodkinson & Hodkinson 2003) and it is to this body of work that this paper contributes. The relationship between individuals and workplaces is being explored for early career professionals across professions (Eraut *et al.* 2007) and was the theme of a keynote lecture at the recent Researching Work and Learning conference (Billett 2009a). It is also a focus of Hoekstra and colleagues in their studies of experienced teachers who have recently exposed how 'not only are teachers' perceptions of [workplace learning] conditions of major importance, teachers also actively contribute to shaping these conditions' (Hoekstra *et al.* 2009b, p293).

One attempt to conceptualise this inter-relationship drew on a longitudinal 13-year study in the US of 25 BTs' individuals' aspirations and expectations of organizations (Sawyer & Rutter 2009). A matrix between individuals' characteristics and their organization was developed, principally in terms of the organization of the curriculum compared to individuals' conceptual ability and adaptability (Table 2).

*Table 2: A model comparing characteristics of organization and individuals in terms of curricula organization and individual conceptual ability and adaptability*

<b>ORGANISATION</b>	Clear, comprehensive organizational plan with a teacher focus	Clear top-down plan with limited teacher autonomy
<b>INDIVIDUAL</b>	Conceptually-rich and efficacious (Proactive)	Conceptually-limited, but efficacious (Proactive)
<b>ORGANISATION</b>	Limited organizational plan but with flexibility for teachers	Limited organizational plan with limited teacher autonomy
<b>INDIVIDUAL</b>	Conceptually-rich but passive or limited	Conceptually-limited and passive or limited

This study mapped individuals onto the organizations in which they worked, identifying ‘nonstarters’ who appeared to be mismatched with their workplace and dropped out within the first year, those who ‘stalled’ in terms of their professional development and those who were termed ‘adapted proactive’ and who, in positive workplaces, went on to succeed.

We offer the term ‘congruence’, where Billett (2001) refers to ‘degree of relatedness’, between individual perceptions of and engagement with their workplace. We do not seek to offer a reified, solidified categorisation of any one individual-workplace analysis, rather seeing the congruence as transitory, ephemeral and part of an ongoing learning process with both individual affected by workplace and workplace affected by individuals (Hoekstra *et al.* 2009b). The workplace is considered in its widest geographical sense i.e. in terms of an unconstrained exploration of the reported personal networks of professional interaction described by the BTs. We then reflect on how this represents both support offered by a workplace and that gained through agentic activity (Billett 2008) as personal response to the workplaces.

### **Methodology**

Our paper draws upon retrospective analysis of three related data sets focusing on the support of BTs. The first data set was drawn from six trainee teachers in 2007-8 and three trainees, ongoing in 2008-9. The second relates to eight teachers in their first three years of teaching between 2005-7. These BTs are summarised in Table 3.

*Table 3: The beginning teachers in this study*

<b>BEGINNING TEACHER (PSEUDONYMS)</b>	<b>GENDER</b>	<b>CAREER ENTRY</b>	<b>BT CATEGORY</b>
Annabel	F	DG	PS
Ben	M	DG	PS
Claire	F	CC	PS
Dawn	F	CC	PS
Eric	M	CC	PS
Frank	M	DG	PS

George	M	LG	PS
Harry	M	CC	PS
Iris	F	CC	PS
Jenny	F	CC	NQT
Karl	M	CC	NQT
Louise	F	DG	NQT
Maurice	M	DG	NQT
Nigel	M	LG	NQT
Owen	M	CC	RQT
Pippa	F	DG	RQT
Richard	M	DG	RQT
BTs = 17	Female : 7 Male: 10	Direct graduates (DG): 7 Late graduates (LG): 2 Career changers (CC): 8	PS: 9 QT: 8

Key for teachers' status during the study: PS: Pre-service or QT: Qualified teacher (NQT: years 1 or 2; RQT: 1<sup>st</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> year).

Evidence was largely based on an analysis of interview data from 37 semi-structured interviews with teachers either in training (23 interviews), in their first year (11 interviews) or their third year of teaching (3 interviews). Three different interview schedules were employed to generate the data. The first was used with the teachers during their first year of teaching and, in three cases, followed through to their third year of teaching. The second was used at three points throughout the six trainee's training year and the third is early data for three trainees in their first term of training. In addition network maps (Fox *et al.* 2007) representing personal networks of support were collected for six of the teachers and for three trainees. 18 schools in the South and East of England were represented in the study, three of these (schools A, E and O) experienced by more than one teacher (Table 4).

Table 4: Data collected for the BTs in this study

BT	DATA COLLECTION		SCHOOLS		
	INTERVIEWS	MAPS	PGCE: Term 1	PGCE: Terms 2 and 3	Years 1-3
Annabel	PGCE: Terms 1, 2, 3		B	A	
Ben	PGCE: Terms 1, 2, 3		H	A	
Claire	PGCE: Terms 1, 2, 3		G	C	
Dawn	PGCE: Term 1	Yes	D		
Eric	PGCE: Terms 1, 2, 3		E	F	
Frank	PGCE: Term 1	Yes	E		
George	PGCE: Terms 1, 2, 3		E	O	
Harry	PGCE: Term 1	Yes	I		
Iris	PGCE: Terms 1, 2, 3		J	L	
Jenny	Year 1: Term 3	Yes			K
Karl	Year 1: Terms 2, 3	Yes			E
Louise	Year 1: Terms 2, 3	Yes			M
Maurice	PGCE: Term 3 Year 1: Term 3				N
Nigel	PGCE: Term 3 Year 1: Term 3				O
Owen	Year 1: Terms 2,3	Yes			P

	Year 3: Term 1				
Pippa	Year 1: Term 3 Year 3: Term 2	Yes			Q
Richard	Year 1: Term 3 Year 3: Term 2	Yes			R
BTs = 17	Total interviews: 37	Total maps: 9	Total no. schools: 18 (E experienced by 4 BTs; A and O experienced by 2 BTs).		

Evans *et al's* framework for considering workplaces as on a continuum from expansive to restrictive learning environments - Table 1 (Evans *et al.* 2006), was applied to analyse transcripts of these interviews. The interviews yielded evidence strongly for six elements of the framework but, and this was principally due to the retrospective application of this framework, less consistently for three. Because of the methodologically ego-centred approach of our study in which BTs were asked only about their own experiences we collected no evidence as to what extent the school cultures were explicitly focused on teacher learning, of the agendas behind the professional development opportunities available and of the breadth of learning approaches used by teachers in the school. The analysis led us to interrogate the reported sources of support as being either internal or external to the school and to reflect on the nature of the interactions between the BTs and these sources. Those who provided a network map were able to represent their relationships with the full range of those who they felt provided them with support<sup>3</sup>.

### ***Findings and discussion***

#### **Overall perceptions of schools as workplaces and other support used**

The BTs in this study found schools as largely expansive learning environments in terms of support planned into their induction or training or as opportunities with which the teachers could engage informally. This represents the strong invitational nature of these schools as learning environments (Billett 2001). This should not be entirely surprising given that the schools, at least in the pre-service year, were selected by the University as suitable environments into which to place training teachers.

One strong element in the teachers' accounts (26 of the 37 interviews) was the use of Faculty links to supplement the support offered in schools. This was true beyond the training year itself with QTs still making contact with lecturers, tutors and the Faculty website. This support was therefore transferable from placement to placement and into permanent posts, independent of the workplace, with teachers able to apply this support to their needs in different schools. Several of the teachers raised queries about how such Faculty support could continue to be available further into their teaching. They also queried where they would have obtained such external support and stimulation had the Gatsby-funded opportunities not been available.

#### **Concerns of workplace environments**

However, analysis revealed that only three BTs indicated an entirely 'expansive' perspective. We therefore looked to what teachers reported as restrictive. A

dominant theme was a mismatch between available and expected levels of support. Support had been hoped for from (listed in the order most cited): class teachers, other colleagues in the school, heads of department, mentors and school leaders. Many (9 of the 17 BTs) cited the largely departmental focus of their participation, although some individuals overcame this by proactively involving themselves in beyond-department activities. These activities were principally extra-curricular, through helping at sports or Duke of Edinburgh scheme<sup>4</sup> clubs. A couple joined cross-school working groups.

### **Analysis of formal versus informal support**

In accordance with other workplace learning literature, informal support was highly cited and balanced against formal opportunities. Analysis indicated where support was located, with an indication of how many teachers cited each form of support, mapped against criteria from Evans *et al*'s framework of expansive learning.

Whilst mentors, class teachers with whom teachers shared groups and technicians featured strongly as within-department support, BTs also valued those with cross-school roles such as professional tutors. They also sought out and used a range of peers and more experienced teachers as supplementary opportunities to collaborate. Faculty support, both formal and informal, was evidenced as were other external sources such as family, friends and those known socially with an interest or experience in education. Some of the teachers took up formal roles and responsibilities that allowed them to work across the school or, as noted above, helped informally with clubs. BTs reported that becoming engaged in such activities reaped unexpected rewards through getting to know other staff better.

### **Congruence between workplace and individuals**

We offer the following matrix (Table 5) as an alternative to that presented by Sawyer and Rutter (2009), see Table 2, as a representation of how individuals might be conceived to be agentic against their perceptions of their workplace as supportive. This allows for particular individual-workplace interactions to be identified, whilst committing neither individual nor workplace permanently to such a categorisation. Table 5 presents the findings from the above analysis for the 17 BTs in this study and we follow with three vignettes illustrating aspects of this analysis. Along the vertical axis is an interpretation of Evans *et al*'s framework (Evans *et al.* 2006) as represented by the data in our study, headed 'BT's perceptions of school support'. Along the horizontal axis is a set of descriptors of the 'BT's approach to support'. By focusing on behaviour rather than individual dispositions (Hodkinson & Hodkinson 2004) the analysis foregrounds proactivity, direction and the effort of such engagement (Billett, 2001; 2009b). The conscious use of personal networks, which we highlight are effective when both within and beyond the immediate workplace, refers to Nardi's assertions that self-awareness and proactivity in using personal networks are desirable for modern day workplace learning (Nardi *et al.* 2000).

*Table 5: A matrix for mapping the relationship between teacher agency and perception of support available in a workplace*

BT's approach to support \ BT's perceptions of school support	Highly proactive networker	Active networker	Limited networker	Passive
High levels of school-based support	Jenny: Sch L	Annabel: Sch B Ben: Sch H	Claire: Sch C	
High levels of department-based support	Owen: Sch P Karl: Sch E	Louise: Sch M Maurice: Sch N Dawn: Sch D Eric: Sch E Annabel: Sch A	Nigel: Sch O Pippa: Sch Q Frank: Sch E George: Sch O	Harry: Sch I
Limited support - from individuals	Richard: Sch R	Ben: Sch A Iris: Sch J	Claire: Sch G Eric: Sch H Iris: Sch L	
Low level of support				

In the cases of teachers experiencing the same school workplace (those in school E), they engaged differently. Where two trainees experienced the same workplaces at the same time (Annabel and Ben in school A) different perceptions were noted. Jenny could be described as 'adaptive proactive' (Sawyer & Rutter 2009) whilst trainees Claire, Eric, Iris and Harry exhibit weaker 'matches'. Notably, teachers inhabited the top and left dimensions of this matrix with trainees to the bottom and right, perhaps suggesting that networking skills can be developed over time in work.

We use three vignettes to highlight aspects of this matrix. Firstly the 'win-win' situation of Jenny in school L. Secondly, we show how four individuals agreed on the departmentally-focused support in one school but engaged slightly differently as individuals. Finally we show how Claire moved from school to school, perceived differently as workplaces, whilst maintaining a very selective approach to using support.

### **Vignettes illustrating aspects of individual-workplace congruence**

#### **Jenny's perspectives: a 'win-win' employee-workplace situation**

Jenny came to teacher training a few years after graduating from her undergraduate degree. She accepted a post in a rural comprehensive (11- 16 age range) school in which she had not trained. By the end of the first year she felt part of the department, able to welcome new trainees. The departmental team developed some peer-coaching alliances, which Jenny welcomed. This sense of belonging is shown throughout her interviews by the use of the pronoun 'we'.

It's a really good department, which helps, we all get on really well and help each other out. We started as well to have some new initiatives this year in our staff meetings to support each other.

We've got student teachers in this year and we try and make them part of the department as well. The relationships in this school are very good. It is such a friendly place to work – and not just in your department – you befriend people from all over the place.

I don't have a mentor this year but will be a mentor next year and am looking forward to it. This year I've done a lot of work with trainees, so I do feel like I've done some mentoring.

As a mentor in her second year she showed on her network map how she valued meeting other mentors through Faculty-based training. This was in addition to other Faculty links maintained with tutors and peers in other schools through the Gatsby development days. Jenny said she felt part of the whole school, explaining that the culture of not staying in departments physically all day helped support strong working relationships bonded by a social dimension. Further cross-school links were forged by her engagement in activities such as the Duke of Edinburgh scheme.

It's not one of those staffrooms where you sit in your Faculty areas. Everyone sits together. I make a point of going over for lunch every day and I'll sit with who-ever – not just someone from Science.

I think [most of my support as been gained] through the friends I've made at work and not necessarily someone in the department. Maybe going for a drink after work and asking about different things.

The deputy head who is my professional tutor – I got to know her quite well when I was training. And the head because he does Duke of Edinburgh with us. So there's no one [in the senior leadership] I couldn't go to or anyone I couldn't go to and speak about an issue.

When asked about how she perceived the support offered to her she explained that she was keen to set herself new challenges, proactively searching these out and making them happen. She added that if this school could not offer her such opportunities, such as becoming an Advanced Skills Teacher (AST)<sup>5</sup>, then she would move school.

I think because I'm quite proactive and quite independent I go out and look for things...but things like career progression have become quite tricky because I want to become an AST and am trying to find information about that. I have had meetings with the Deputy Head and said 'I really want to do this' but I do feel that if I didn't go out there and push things, they wouldn't happen...And I think a lot of the staff will sit in that comfort zone because they are not of the character, whereas I become bored and need something new to do –others wait to be approached.

Currently Jenny is enrolled on a Masters programme at the Faculty of Education. She is at the same school working as an AST and mentor, now with a role that takes her into neighbouring schools as directed by the Local Authority.

### **Multiple perspectives of the same workplace -a rural comprehensive (11-16 age range) school.**

Three of the four BTs at School E were interviewed during their first term of training (two together in 2007 and one in 2008), with Karl interviewed twice during his first year of teaching (2006/7). They came with different workplace experience: Frank was a direct graduate, George a postdoctoral graduate and both trainee Eric and teacher Karl were career changers, having spent a number of years working in industry.

All four unanimously agreed that they felt strongly departmentally-based in school E, supported not only by the 'experienced' head of department who also acted as mentor for the trainees, but also from other class teachers.

I think I get most of my support for teaching from the two class teachers I teach lessons for and the head of Department, my mentor... I use him to talk generally about teaching and [Faculty] assignments and I go to him for advice and I would go to him if I have a problem (Frank).

The lab technicians were mentioned by all teachers as particularly helpful, Karl going further to say that the most supportive aspect of the school was the lab technician's base.

The most important source of support is not a person but a place. During break time you go to the technicians' room, you have a cup of coffee and it's the informal conversations that you have that are really worth their weight in gold (Karl).

These BTs speak of a busy and well-organised school. On the one hand, it offers them a good departmental base for developing their teaching through clear and well-worked schemes of work and systems. On the other, there is very little space and time to socialise and develop more informal working relationships with others.

One of the things is that in this trade is that your exposure to adults is very small. When you do interface with them, being in the right place at the right time is what is important (Karl).

Even by the end of the year, Karl was aware support was mainly limited to the department.

I'm a cog in the wheel of science. I wouldn't say I'm a cog in the wheel of the school, as if you take the science away, there's not a lot else (Karl).

Karl did go on to take up opportunities to work across the school, joining two working groups and interacting with both the school's special education needs 'centre' and the pastoral team. Trainees at school E however had been offered a communal base to their socialisation at break and lunchtimes in the central staff room and this, along with the regular professional studies sessions, allowed them to seek and find support across-disciplines.

Muffins and sandwiches on Wednesdays and Thursdays are pretty good...That cheers everyone up and brings people together (Frank).

Faculty support was seen as valuable by all, including the NQT, who reported that planned reflective opportunities, such as the Gatsby development days, were vital for new teachers - rather than having to rely on chance to reflect with others. Such opportunities Karl implied were not possible in school formally, although he did refer to sharing lifts and time with the staff football team as opportunities for more informal mutual reflection. Karl also had Fast-track support from a professional tutor supplied by the Local Authority together with connections maintained with former colleagues in industry. Of the trainees, Eric placed greater emphasis on external links than Frank and George, proactively taking up opportunities offered by the Faculty such as with a Biology teachers' forum.

### **Claire, a trainee exhibiting the same way of using support in two, differently perceived workplaces**

**School G:** Claire entered the PGCE course as a graduate having worked for 7 years in business. Her first placement was a large inner-city comprehensive (11-18 age range) school, which provided a programme for trainees including designated staff and weekly seminars. Individual members of staff in the department were helpful and willing to share resources, though Claire found they did not work well as a team:

I think it was probably just during the day everybody just had so much stuff to do and, you know, always a kid to deal with or something, but they didn't often get to sit down together.

Apart from scheduled contact, Claire did not draw much on her mentor's support, seeing this as a less accessible relationship:

[Mentors] take on so much... so you do feel a little bit like you don't want to bother them.

Instead, she found others that she could talk to 'more personally.' These included another trainee, an NQT and a teaching assistant. Again, awareness of work demands was a restraint:

I just didn't want to take much of their time.

Outside school, Claire's husband was noted to be supportive, although not always able to empathise with her experience. Additionally, she maintained contact with friends from the PGCE course via text or phone, but regretted not seeing them more often.

**School C:** Claire's second placement was in a small rural upper (13-18 age range) school where, by contrast, she found the atmosphere less 'hectic and highly strung'. The new trainees were introduced in a staff meeting, indicative of the school's emphasis on 'keeping everyone informed about what's going on.' There was good team co-operation in the highly collegial department:

Ninety percent of the staff will come in to the staffroom at break time and we all literally sit round the table, and there's always cakes, and somebody always makes the coffee – so there's always time for each other and to have a little whinge or chat about not necessarily school-related stuff at all.

Here Claire got on well with her mentor, who she found both efficient and supportive:

I think I've been quite lucky ... She's super organised, very efficient, willing to answer your questions and she always knew what needed doing when, so it just helps you organise yourself a little bit as well.

She also found staff willing to listen, answer queries and share resources. Having another trainee in the department to 'sound off to' on occasions was also appreciated. However, her reluctance to approach individuals because of 'how busy everyone is' continued. Underlying this sensitivity was a second, more fundamental concern:

I don't want to look like I'm always seeking approval all the time... you do need somebody to give you a bit of a boost your ego – but you don't want to whinge or sound needy.

At the same time, Claire reflected on her tendency to under-value her own performance and counter the feedback she received:

Sometimes I think I've got no idea how well I'm doing – I mean my report might be... good but maybe I'm a bit sceptical and I think, 'Well, they just do that to make it sound good; how am I really doing?'

Combined with this self-doubt was a strong sense of determination to overcome difficulties without recourse to external support:

You've just got to get on with it, you haven't got time to dwell on it, because if you did you'd just get really down...So you just need to keep yourself going really...

In summary, Jenny represented a highly proactive networker in a school with high levels of support. She had developed broad networks, facilitated by being in a collegial school able to offer her support and developmental opportunities, but extending beyond her workplace. In contrast Claire experienced two placement schools perceived by her to be differently supportive. She responded to both, however, similarly and in a much more limited way than Jenny. Her active engagement with support remained selective, mediated, at least to some extent, by her self-perceptions. We have also shown how, for school E, four BTs, while perceiving the school's support similarly as highly departmentally-based, responded differently.

### ***In conclusion***

Our study connects with those renewing a focus on individuals in understandings of workplace learning. We examined, from individual perspectives, experiences of support for learning in making the transition into workplaces; viewing them as unique perceptions of social engagement. Whilst looking for congruence between individuals and the workplaces they found themselves in, we reveal the significance of personal agency (Billett, 2009). We note a spectrum of engagement. Some individuals appear proactive in finding and using support from school and external sources. Some, whilst not being actively encouraged, make the best of support available. Still other BTs appear more passive or less willing to seek and use available sources of support. As with work by both Day and Hoekstra we note that agency is exercised even when teachers are working within perceived constraints in their workplace (Day *et al.* 2006; Hoekstra *et al.* 2009b). This highlights a more active individual-workplace interaction than mere congruence or relatedness.

Although there were dimensions of the expansive – restrictive framework (Evans *et al.* 2006) not systematically addressed within our study, we found their work provided a helpful way into analyzing support for teacher learning in workplaces. Through focusing on the relational aspects of the framework, highlighting the importance of acknowledging informal learning and considering the place of personal networks, we developed the framework into a matrix. This allowed us to map teachers' perceptions of agency against their views of workplace and which we offer as a potential tool for other researchers.

In our study teachers were largely satisfied with the workplaces to which they were assigned for training and/or subsequently chose to be employed - as expansive learning environments. This recognizes the bias in our sample of schools. BTs did also identify constraints affecting their support. Despite the use of vignettes we have not

been able to attend fully to the ontological aspects of each teacher's story, and this approach could inform future studies, particularly in relation to individuals bringing prior workplace experiences. Another temporal feature of the study, although patchily evidenced, was in showing how external support can be transferable between workplaces. As highlighted elsewhere some teachers rely on family, prior friends, peers from training or from former workplaces (Fox & Wilson 2009).

In looking to the significance of this study for teacher educators, we conclude that taking notice of BTs' support needs and the extent to which they can satisfy these needs within their school environments, could lead to discourse that recognizes both formal and informal opportunities, inside and outside school. Considering personal networks and networking skills offers one route to such awareness. BTs are able to reveal their expectations for support and identify where this is lacking. Such discourse might afford BTs greater self-awareness and empowerment to engage in personal development drawing intentionally on resources within and beyond a workplace. This data shows indications that these skills can be developed.

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<sup>1</sup> Social network analysis enables patterns of relationships in networks to be shown. Within this tradition are two kinds of studies: *whole network* studies, directed at the comprehensive structure of relationships and studies of *ego-centric* (or personal) networks - Wasserman & Faust, 1994, p. 42. In the latter, networks are shown as they are perceived by the individual (i.e. they are at the centre) and are generally investigated through surveys, interviews, or by anthropologists ethnographically.

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<sup>2</sup> This was a programme run by the National College of School Leadership for aspiring leaders for which they could apply in parallel to their PGCE course or after graduation and offered support for the first four years of teaching. This programme is now no longer available to new graduates.

<sup>3</sup> The network mapping tool was adapted from earlier use in a project in which educational professionals represented school networks Fox, A., McCormick, R., Procter, R. & Carmichael, P. (2007) The design and use of a mapping tool as a baseline means of identifying an organisation's active networks, *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 30(2), 127-147. and as used since with respect to BT's networks of support Fox, A. & Wilson, E. (2009) Support our networking and help us belong!": listening to beginning secondary school science teachers, *Teachers and teaching: theory and practice*, 15(6)..

<sup>4</sup> The Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme can be run by any youth organization and offers children a way to develop a range of skills including community-based activities, expeditions and personal skill development.

<sup>5</sup> There are various options open to UK schools through recent Teaching and Development Agency accreditation. Advanced Skills Teachers are assessed externally and are then funded and directed to support teachers in other schools by the Local Authority.