

VOICE OF THE ICONO CLASS ROOM

Historically, local authorities were largely in control of supply teaching. Schools were issued with a list of registered candidates in their area on whom they could call to cover sickness or maternity leave, and who would be paid by the LA. This was a superb system; schools were able to quickly make a decision on the staff they required and build up a rapport with regular supply teachers – and on the other side of the coin, the supply teachers themselves were able to deal directly with their employer, safe in the knowledge that they would be paid the correct wage. All was well with the world... until the advent of agencies.

These agencies have been the bane of the supply teacher. They have sprung up and multiplied like a crop of uninvited fungi and wreaked havoc with the lives of the people they are supposed to represent. Instead of being treated as professionals, supply teachers are now commodities. Agencies have stolen their individuality, their sense of pride in the profession... not to mention a large proportion of their salary.

Local authority support for the supply teacher has dwindled to near extinction. I rang my local government education department recently to find out if they still employed somebody to deal with supply teaching. Apparently so. However, I am at a loss as to what this person's job actually entails. Certainly not helping supply teachers into work, or protecting their rights, or else anything remotely useful. I can only imagine this Mock Turtle spends her time sobbing as she shreds the yellowing files that held the hopes and dreams of supply teachers from a bygone age – and counting down to retirement and a hefty pension fund.

Forget becoming misty-eyed about the vital role of an educator in shaping young minds and how teaching is a vocation blahdy-blah... Take altruism out of the picture, because frankly, most people who teach *need the money*. Like any other worker, they rely on their salary to pay the bills, and to feed their families. In a professional environment one would expect remuneration to be commensurate

with experience. Supply teachers paid directly by an education authority received an amount of money relating to their ranking on the teacher's pay spine, dependent on their teaching experience. Not so with agencies. They can pay what they think they can get away with. According to the national pay scale I ought to be earning circa £170 per day but via an agency I am lucky to receive £100; with many offering a paltry £75-£80.

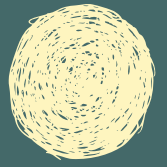
A supply teacher has no sick or holiday pay. A number of agencies make the pretence of honouring holiday payment but this is simply a cunning ploy to sidestep legislation by skimming a little off one's daily wage and then repaying it at a later date. One agency even had the bright idea of hiring a separate agency to pay its staff, thus I was expected to shell out a further £20 per week for the privilege of receiving my own meagre wage!

A long-term supply teacher will usually assume the added responsibilities of setting and marking homework, writing reports, attending parents' evenings and staff meetings – not to mention invigilating exams and supervising detentions; meeting the obligations of an absent full-time member of staff – but at a fraction of the salary.

Supply teaching is a difficult job and if not richly, should at least, be fairly rewarded. The unions are swift to champion injustices against full-time staff – isn't it time they recognised the plight of the supply teacher, too? Many schools would crumble without the crucial intervention of temporary teaching support, but few seem to appreciate this fact. Small wonder that many talented educators are so disenchanted and disenchanted that they have voted with their feet and quit the profession altogether.

My message to all supply teachers reading this is: get together, complain to your union, speak to your local authority and be instrumental in change. You've heard about 'supply and demand'? Well, then! Supply teachers are intelligent, well-educated professional individuals... and should demand to be treated as such.

Times are changing for the supply teacher – and not, according to this issue's passionate contributor, in a good way...



WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Are you a supply teacher? Do you share our Voice's frustration with the apparent monopoly of agencies when it comes to your profession? Or do you have a more positive experience to share? Get in touch at editor@teachsecondary.com, and join the debate!