

# Reign of Terror



**Links between school management (leadership),  
teacher stress and teacher mental health.  
An investigation and commentary.**

John Illingworth  
March 2010



## Introduction

### **Research has shown teaching to be the most stressful occupation in the UK.**

This was confirmed by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) in 2000. Since that date, evidence suggests that stress levels amongst teachers have risen.

High stress levels should be a cause for concern for both economic and health reasons. Stress is the predominant reason cited by teachers for leaving the profession. The cost of such a loss is significant. Lost teachers must be replaced and the recruitment and training of teachers is an expensive business.

The budget of the agency charged with this task (Teacher Development Agency) was:

- **£795 million in 2007/8**
- **£736 million in 2008/9**

A total cost of over £1.5 billion in just 2 years. Last year the TDA recruited about 38,000 new entrants into teaching. However, the Agency does not appear to have a specific remit to retain teachers. Only passing reference to retaining teachers is made in very few places within the TDA strategic plan (2008-2013).

High levels of staff absence through both mental and physical illness are known to result from excessive stress. Stress-related mental illness is often a career ending event. Long term depression amongst teachers and ex-teachers is common. Some go on to commit suicide. According to the Samaritans, suicide rates amongst teachers are 40% higher than the population as a whole.

High turnover amongst teachers also causes a wealth of experience to be lost from the profession. Where turnover is very high in an individual school, the lack of stability usually impacts on pupils learning and welfare.

During the last 3 years, I have collected significant anecdotal evidence which suggests that the increase in teacher stress is partly due to a change in the styles and demands of managers (leaders) in schools. The purpose of this investigation was to collect more systematic evidence to confirm or refute this hypothesis.

I also hoped that the survey would provide some insight into the perceived reasons for changes in school management (leadership) styles.

## Survey Method

When teachers are suffering from stress they often turn to their trade union for support. There are other potential sources of support including, occupation health services, charities such as the Teacher Support Network and medical support, via their GP.

This survey has not attempted to explore all those possible sources of evidence although future research may do so. I have focussed on the support provided through the National Union of Teachers at a local level. Support of this kind provided by the NUT to members is known as 'casework'.

The NUT has a structure which mirrors the Local Authorities with responsibility for Children's Services (including Education) in England and Wales. For each Local Authority there is a matching NUT 'Division'. The Secretary of each Division will normally have the best overview of the Union's casework within any Local Authority area.

This survey was therefore targeted at Division Secretaries. They all received an email survey issued in February 2010.

The survey consisted of **6 statements** with which respondents were asked to **agree, disagree**, or take **no view**. They were also invited to make any relevant written comments and to volunteer to take part in a follow-up telephone discussion.

## Survey Results

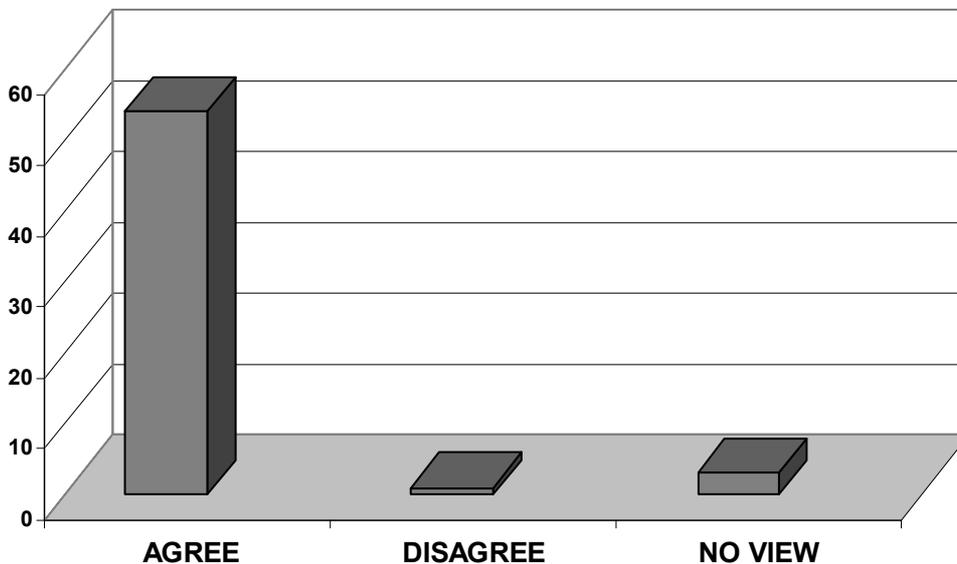
At the time of writing this report, 34% of Division Secretaries had responded.

There are two aspects to the results.

1. **Numeric data** - How many respondents agreed or disagreed with the statements.
2. **Conclusions** - drawn from either written comments on the survey return or oral comments made in a follow-up telephone discussion.

### Statement 1

**In the last 5 years the level of casework related to inappropriate management within schools (including bullying) has increased.**



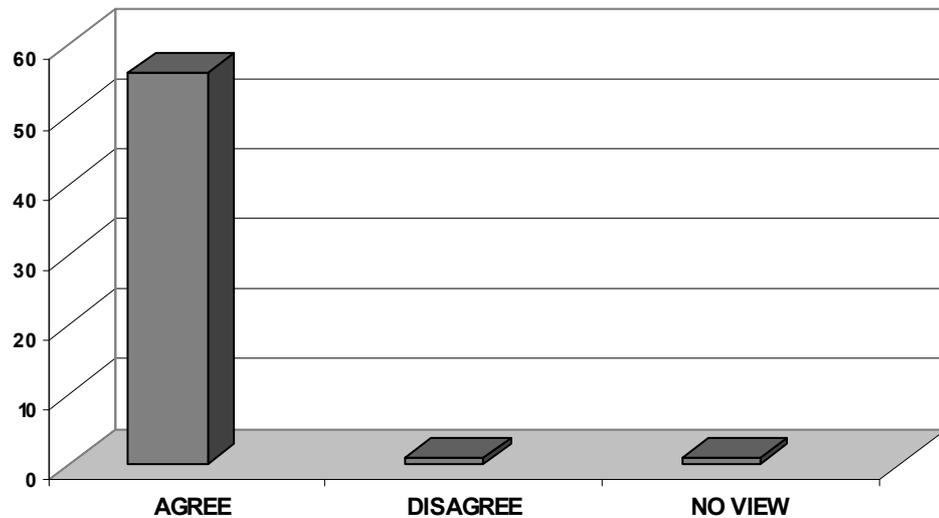
A convincing 93% of respondents agreed with this statement with only one disagreeing. Of those with No View, 2 had been Division Secretary for a short period and felt unable to comment.

There seems little doubt, that casework linked to inappropriate management is on the increase.

Many who agreed qualified answers with words like: *'definitely'*, *'loads more'*, *'hugely'*

## Statement 2

**Our division has dealt with casework, related to inappropriate management, for more than one member, in the same school.**



An even larger majority of respondents (97%) agreed with this statement.

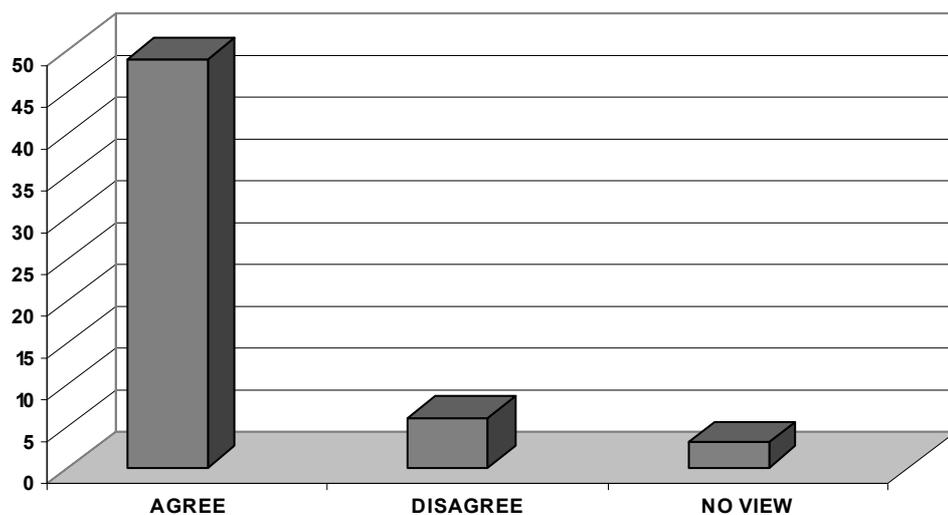
The question was designed to explore whether a particular style of management can lead to casework for more than one member.

Where only one member reports problems related to inappropriate management, it might be perceived as a 'one off' conflict in the relationship between the teacher and manager. Where such casework for two or more teachers occurs in the same school, this suggests a more serious problem.

Division Secretaries, often report certain schools as casework 'hot spots' where they are repeatedly supporting teachers as a result of inappropriate management. Some headteachers are perceived as '*serial bullies*'.

## Statement 3

**Most of our casework comes from a few schools.**



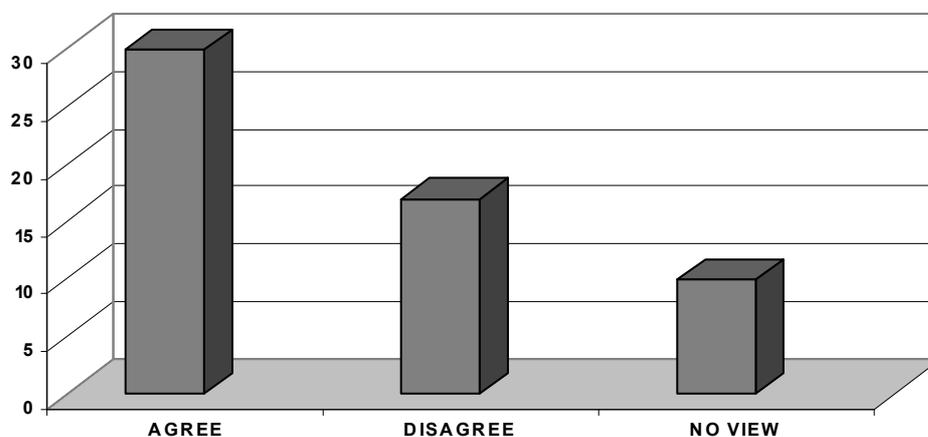
84% of respondents agreed with this statement which suggests that casework is likely to occur in a minority of schools. This would seem to confirm the hypothesis that the way some schools are managed is more likely to lead to casework.

However the respondents who disagreed with the statement did so because the casework in their area tended to be more widely spread across schools.

Additional written comments from respondents included:

- ◇ *'Now there are more schools with regular problems.'*
- ◇ *'This is beginning to widen out.'*
- ◇ *'An increasing number of schools.'*
- ◇ *'Cases tend to come in episodic clusters from particular places.'*
- ◇ *'The number of schools is also increasing.'*
- ◇ *'Some schools generate a higher percentage especially national challenge but its everywhere- Primary, Grammar, Secondary.'*
- ◇ *'The trend to bullying is fairly widespread.'*
- ◇ *'Some schools generate more work than others.'*

## Statement 4



### **Casework related to inappropriate management is more likely in Primary than Secondary schools.**

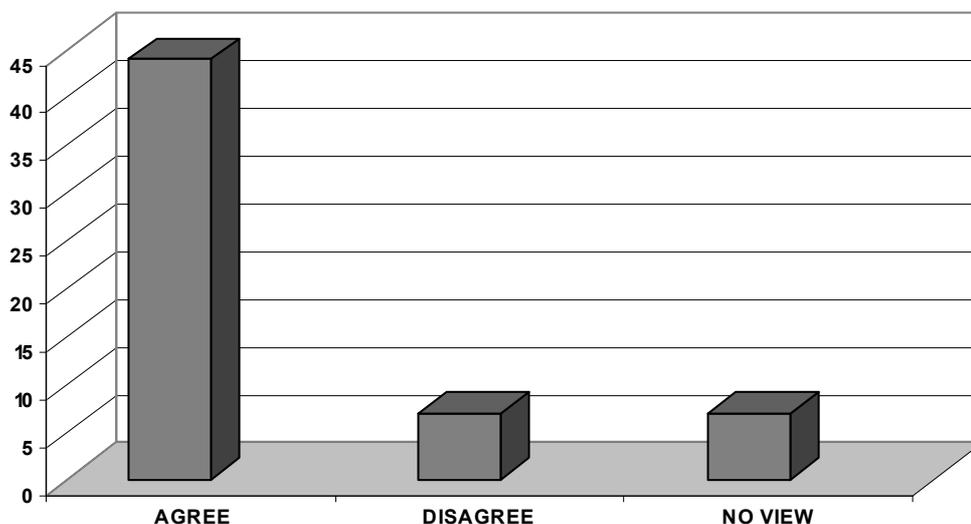
Only just over half of respondents agreed with this statement (52%) although that was almost twice the number who disagreed. So, although casework occurs in both primary and secondary there is some evidence that levels in primary schools are higher.

Other comments included:

- ◇ *'Especially if early years centres are included. There's more industrial muscle/ union organisation in secondaries.'*
- ◇ *'Has increased in both, though more in primary.'*
- ◇ *'Secondaries are catching up.'*
- ◇ *'Currently aware of bullying issues evenly in both sectors – very difficult to differentiate in this way.'*
- ◇ *'Members in primary are and feel more vulnerable and isolated.'*
- ◇ *'Generally, but I think this is because of the smaller nature of primary schools and also that there are fewer secondaries.'*
- ◇ *'No, This may be because most of really difficult head teachers in my area are secondary.'*

## Statement 5

**Casework related to inappropriate management is more likely in schools with newly appointed Headteachers (in post for less than 5 years).**



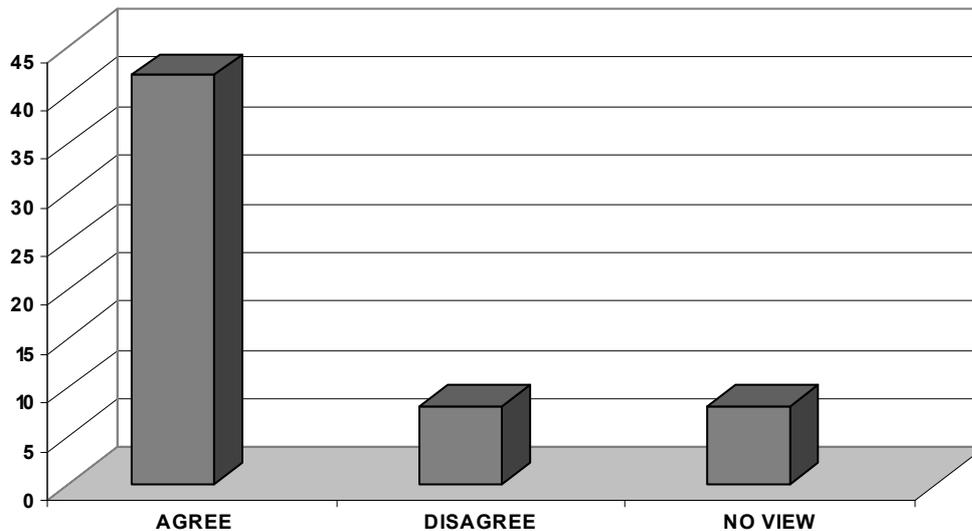
76% of respondents agreed with this statement with only 12% disagreeing. So management related casework would appear to be more likely amongst heads who are relatively new to the job.

Comments from Respondents included:

- ◇ *'Resoundingly agree.'*
- ◇ *'Clearly new heads are trying to make their mark in a heavy handed manner. There have been 6 new heads in my area in the last 3-4 years, and with only one exception, I have had casework. I calculate one head has got rid of 6 or 7 teachers who did not fit his vision - 4 pregnant women and the rest with small or adopted children.'*
- ◇ *' I disagree - more likely in schools in OFSTED /LA Categories, particularly where the LA has placed a lead HT or Associate HT as a temporary measure.'*
- ◇ *'But not solely – some long established heads are appalling.'*
- ◇ *'This is certainly the case in most of the secondaries who have recently appointed. However, we have one or two primary heads who are also exhibiting the same behaviour.'*
- ◇ *'There is a strong correlation between heavy-handed management and those who have been to the National College for School Leadership and Children's Services (NCLS & CS).'*
- ◇ *'A key feature underlining a lot of these problems is the appointment of a new headteacher in their first headship with their heads stuffed full of the rubbish being peddled by the NCSL training. i.e. "If in doubt reach for a procedure" They seem to follow this advice as the first port of call and it is usually the capability or disciplinary procedures.'*

## Statement 6

**Casework related to inappropriate management is more likely in schools in an OFSTED 'category' or in receipt some form of Local Authority 'support'.**



72% of respondents agreed with this statement and 14% disagreed. However, there seems little doubt that the pressure that follows a critical OFSTED report creates high levels of stress upon school managers and this has a consequential impact on teachers.

Comments from respondents included:

- ◇ *'The threat of OFSTED is used to bully teachers.'*
- ◇ *'Much harder to deal with if head of a 'successful' school is a bully.'*
- ◇ *'Mostly agree (or those that are trying to stay Outstanding)'*
- ◇ *'There is also a lot of pressure on staff if a school is 'outstanding''*
- ◇ *Schools going into special measures (we have 3 in 2 Junior & 1 Primary) take up a lot of casework time. Executive HTs looking after more than one school do not always help.'*

## General Written Comments from Respondents

Many respondents added more general comments to the survey return.

I have not included all comments received but have attempted to ensure all the main issues raised are represented.

- ◇ *'A lot of the bullying stems from LA Advisers. I have known them be particularly ruthless when giving feedback to NQTs following observations. My view is that NQTs are not prepared for the current climate in schools and are shocked by the reality and some of the treatment they receive at the hands of some HTs & Advisers. They are bullied into working excessive hours.'*
- ◇ *'The inappropriate management approach is now more supported by HR in the LA and in fact there have been a rise in cases where heads have been given wrong advice leading to members in great distress. Apologies don't happen rather justification instead. SIPs and HR seem to be unsupportive much more than they used to be.'*
- ◇ *'The new OFSTED framework and the appointment of 30 new primary heads last September has had a dramatic effect - from having no schools in a 'category' since September we now have 7 and many more who are convinced they will also be. The pressure on our teachers and our*

*headteacher members is immense and even the most reasonable heads are finding it difficult to resist the pressure from the LA'*

- ◇ *'Mental health issues tend to be linked to a loss of confidence in ability to teach. This is a vicious circle with the capability procedure. Many teachers try to compensate by working harder and make themselves more ill.'*
- ◇ *'There has been an increase in management bullying and loads of stress placed on teachers at all levels leading to a commensurate increase in casework from members feeling the pinch. At the lower end they are asking for confidential advice but carrying on with a huge burden of planning preparation, long hours, late nights etc., up to those at the other end who have gone of sick and are broken individuals in the worst cases.'*
- ◇ *'There seems to be an increasing desire to 'get' those over 50 – certainly over 55 – whose practice is suddenly deemed to be not good enough. No dignified exit. The LA seems more and more ineffective.'*
- ◇ *'At times the Local Authority, through their "standards agenda", seems to turn a blind eye to bullying if the Head Teachers are leading a school in an OFSTED category. A few human casualties secondary to the Local Authority League tables! Much of the bullying centres on inappropriate lesson observations/scrutiny and hints at capability that places members in very stressful situations. Observations that are not within either class room observation protocol or Performance Management. New Heads often invite the Local Authority in to do a mini OFSTED where lots of 'satisfactory' lesson judgements are given, or worse, to staff who are far better than this. It often seems a predetermined outcome which is then used as a stick to beat the whole staff with, in an attempt to raise standards. This seems cynicism on my part but these are patterns I've seen all too often in the past two years. Some Heads are under such stress themselves that they are unable to self-evaluate their management style and the detrimental effect this is having on individuals. New younger heads, particularly in primary schools, also seem to target older, established and perhaps less malleable staff for poor treatment.'*
- ◇ *'I have great concerns about the current situation and much of this I believe emanates from the approach adopted by our LA Advisors and permeates through our 'below floor target' schools. There are also a number of heads in more 'successful' schools where key motivation appears to be seen to be as "outstanding".'*
- ◇ *'My casework tends to be generated by teacher workload, and then by management trying to keep the school rolling, but they usually make the teacher feel inadequate and so destroy goodwill - when there was often common ground in wanting the pupils to receive a good education.'*
- ◇ *'We usually find that it is lack of knowledge of policies designed to keep things on "good" terms that starts initial bad feeling. Many HTs are unaware of the policies agreed between the unions and the LA which, if they knew it existed, have a wealth of support to make a bad situation run as smoothly as possible.'*
- ◇ *'Headteachers are being appointed with less and less experience of a number of schools - the pattern of a colleague who has worked in at most two schools as teacher then deputy becoming a head in their early thirties is increasingly common. Such colleagues frequently have little empathy, few management skills, and are easily swayed by whatever is the educational whim of the day, resulting in initiative overload.'*
- ◇ *'There is tendency for LA HR to act as if the head is client who has to be supported at costs. This means that complaints about bullying are NEVER taken seriously by the Authority, or the Governors because they seek LA advice. I was in a meeting this morning where the head of HR defended (incredibly) the practice of putting up on the staffroom wall a chart showing the*

*sick days taken by individual teachers, the practice of almost perpetual observation and "drop in". HR regard special measures or even "satisfactory" as justifiable reason to bully.'*

- ◇ *'There is a noticeable increase in demands being placed upon teachers, particularly by new headteachers - who often seem to be selected because they have a top down management style . I would not use the term bully to describe these people. It is the workload they impose on teachers that causes casework - where it does. Often teachers and others endure excessive work demands especially primary school planning and suffer in silence until one individual speaks up. Many members actually consider it part of the job to work excessive hours - though they do complain about it. I think many young teachers left the profession after a few years because of excessive workload. Primary Headteachers are definitely feeling that the amount of work that is expected - and the expectation is from OFSTED - of them and their schools is wildly excessive. Any school it seems could fall apart at any time.'*
- ◇ *'The pressure on head teachers to show and maintain measurable improvement is immense (even those already achieving statistically improbably high scores). This leads directly to pressure on teachers through a number of mechanisms. Performance tables are paramount and impinge directly on capability casework particularly at middle management level. Mock OFSTED inspections are currently popular. These appear to generate more stress for teachers than a real OFSTED. I have had at least one NQT suffer a breakdown as a result of a mock inspection following a real one. All secondary schools in my Authority are Academy, Trust or VA. Academies and Trusts produce the most casework. The LA is systematically privatising educational services by rolling out a "commissioning model" throughout the council. I rarely get casework from primary schools and have very few reps in them. This worries me. Primary teachers rarely come to meetings or respond to group e-mails. They do not want to be identified as NUT members. When cases come through, the issues are usually very advanced. Staff turnover is high (people vote with their feet).'*
- ◇ *Policies and procedures, although invaluable when the situation gets to that stage are no substitute for 'people skills'. Many perceived problems could be dealt with quite simply and cause much less damage if HTs were not under such pressure from OFSTED, SIPs etc. Unfortunately, the NAHT advice is often less than helpful when HTs seek advice (i.e. contact your LA/HR officers and use the procedures). Our local HR officers are generally lacking in experience themselves and there is a huge turnover of staff or constant changes so they know very little of the schools they deal with and don't build up any relationship. There is an increase in 'capability' casework and 'satisfactory is not good enough anymore'. Almost every case I have dealt with has ended up with the teacher being off ill - sometimes only for a short period but often for long term. How on earth does this end up helping any school?*

## **Conclusions**

My conclusions are based on all the collected data and comments together with notes taken from the follow-up telephone interviews with respondents. I have not yet completed all these telephone interviews. My desire to publish before the 2010 NUT Annual Conference, means that this report is therefore an interim one. Any further conclusions, drawn from further responses or future interviews, will be included in a final report. This will be available on-line at:

**[www.teachermentalhealth.org.uk](http://www.teachermentalhealth.org.uk)**

Although this survey covered both England and Wales, there were very few responses from Wales (3) and they would therefore be statistically dubious. The following conclusions apply to the situation in England although some may be

relevant to teachers in Wales.. The accountability systems in Wales are different, there are no SATs or School League Tables and the Inspection body is ESTYN rather than OFSTED. However, the respondents from Wales confirm some of the same pressures experienced by teachers in England. I freely admit to having less knowledge of the Education system in Wales and my conclusions, if I were to draw any from the very small sample of returns, would certainly be less secure.

## **1. The Role of the Local Authority**

In most cases, Local Authorities remain the employers of teachers although the proportion of teachers employed in this way is falling because of the growth of Academies, Trust Schools and Faith Schools.

Any employer has a legal 'duty of care' towards employees and should take steps to ensure workplace 'hazards' are identified, removed or minimised. Stress hazards are almost certainly the greatest cause of teacher illness, which leads to significant levels of absence from work and to teachers leaving the profession in large numbers.

It is clear that whilst some Local Authorities take this responsibility seriously, most do not.

The two kinds of LA staff who have the most potential for impact are Human Resource Staff and School Improvement Staff. The later category of staff can have many different titles in different authorities. (Advisers, School Improvement Officers, Standards and Effectiveness Teams, etc.).

### **Human Resources**

The responses in the survey suggests that Human Resource teams are not always effective in implementing the employers 'duty of care'. Government insistence that most of the Education Budget is delegated to schools, means that HR is usually a 'bought back' service or has been outsourced to a private company. Because heads advise governors on which services to 'buy back', the pressure on HR to support heads over and above other employees is immense.

Heads who choose to manage in an inappropriate way are very unlikely to be challenged by HR staff. The responses from Division Secretaries demonstrates that HR support for classroom teachers is deteriorating.

### **School Improvement Staff**

The pressure on Local Authorities to improve school 'standards' has mounted significantly in recent years. Their responsibility to intervene if a school is thought to be 'underperforming' means that many schools now face 'judgement' not only from OFSTED but from local authority school improvement personnel.

These staff often put headteachers under very significant pressure to adopt highly structured programmes often described as 'intensive support' but rarely viewed as such by teachers who have to implement them. For teachers 'intensive monitoring and pressure' would be a better description. Genuine 'support', historically provided by LA advisers, is now hard to find.

Today's 'support' programmes are often mechanistic and involve very regular data and 'evidence' collection. This, in turn, consumes vast amounts of teacher time and effort, often without any evidence that they work. Teachers who seek to exercise professional judgement in opposing the initiatives can expect to be subject to inappropriate management techniques, bullying or other procedures.

The philosophy adopted by LA personnel is often one of 'We know better than you.' The views of teachers, who have a detailed knowledge of the pupils and the community, are given little if any value. Consequentially, teachers have expanding **demands** and shrinking **control** over their work. Unreasonable demands and lack of control are identified by the **HSE** as key causes of stress.

## 2. **OFSTED**

OFSTED's latest framework gives even greater weight to raw assessment data has had significant impact on schools serving the most disadvantaged areas. Even schools that can demonstrate excellent 'value added' cannot escape criticism.

Headteachers know that being placed in an OFSTED category can end their career. For that reason many heads develop a fear of OFSTED which, although understandable, can be exaggerated. In an attempt to avoid OFSTED criticism heads try to maintain an 'ever ready for inspection' status motivated by the 'no-notice' inspection system.

Heads know that they will be judged on how well they monitor and evaluate their own school. In preparation for this, monitoring, data collection and observation often become ongoing. Consequentially, teachers in some schools feel under constant and quite unjustified scrutiny.

As with low SATs results, a poor inspection report will immediately trigger LA 'support' which often leads to the same excessive demands being made upon teachers. These may be backed up by threats or abuse of capability and disciplinary procedures. The consequential incidence of casework is high, as shown by the survey results.

Research conducted by Teresa Roca (Loughborough University) in 2007 confirms the impact being placed in an OFSTED category can have on teacher stress and their mental health.

Paradoxically, high levels of casework can also occur in some schools classed as 'Outstanding' by OFSTED. Having attained that judgement, some heads seem determined to place staff under even greater pressure to maintain that status.

So, be the judgements bad or good, OFSTED certainly impacts upon the way teachers are managed and the demands placed upon them. Surveys show that for more than 4 out of 5 teachers, OFSTED is perceived as a major source of stress.

## 3. **Primary Schools, Secondary Schools and SATs**

Survey responses suggested that casework related to inappropriate management was probably more likely in primary schools than in secondary, although the evidence was not conclusive.

If primary casework levels are higher, why might this be the case? One Division Secretary suggested that the relationship between a primary teacher and their head was much more central to their work. If a secondary teacher was experiencing difficulties with a particular manager, there were other senior staff with whom the teacher could develop a more positive relationship. In a primary school, especially a small one, the management relationship between teacher and the head is predominant.

If SATs have a significant role in promoting problematic styles of management, we shouldn't be surprised that problems are more common in primary schools. Only Year 6 pupils are still subject to compulsory SATs, although exam and assessment regimes in secondary schools clearly have a role.

Year 6 SAT's data is also used as a baseline for pupil progress in secondary schools. Many secondary teachers feel, with some justification, that Year 6 SAT results are often 'inflated' by primary schools, because they are judged against the results. This, in turn, makes progress in secondary schools more difficult to demonstrate.

The role of SATs and other testing data is very significant. No school below or near the 'national floor targets' can hope to escape attention.

One Division Secretary told me of 6 primary schools within his area all of which had received a 'good' judgement for 'Achievement and Standards' in their recent OFSTED inspection but, because SATs results were 'below national floor targets' were identified as needing 'intensive support'.

Staff working in these schools then went on to experience unmanageable workload pressures leading to high levels of stress.

Schools serving disadvantaged areas will always struggle to compete where crude data from tests overrides everything else as a measure of success.

#### **4. Newly Appointed Headteachers and the National College**

The survey data is fairly conclusive in confirming that the incidence casework related to inappropriate management is higher in schools with new heads. However, it is very important to recognise that there are exceptions. Several respondents commented on having to deal with bullying heads who were very experienced and new heads can demonstrate perfectly appropriate management.

However, if there is a tendency amongst newer heads to adopt inappropriate management styles, it is important to consider why. We should examine what differences might exist between new and experienced heads.

Several survey respondents drew attention to the training (NPQH) provided by the National College (for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services).

NPQH does not appear to prepare new heads for their role in meeting the 'duty of care' for employees, neither does it ensure that all new heads have an understanding of the HSE Management Standards for Stress Reduction. There is also some evidence to suggest that the style of management promoted by the College may be less collaborative and more authoritarian.

For example, several reports from participants on NPQH have referred to a specific strategy encouraging new heads to classify teachers as 'radiators' or 'drains'; rewarding and encouraging the 'radiators' who support them, whilst seeking to 'drive out' the 'drains' who are critical or questioning. As a result, it is unsurprising that many teachers report that newer heads are intolerant of any professional debate in their schools? Whilst this may not be a formal part of the NPQH programme, it is clear that some staff at the college are promoting this approach

It is also likely that some new heads are less confident to resist pressures placed upon them from outside the school. LA pressure to adopt specific measures that place teachers under ever greater pressure may be harder for them to reject.

Experienced heads may be more confident to resist such pressure and may also have greater experience of how to manage teachers and external pressures more effectively.

One respondent suggested that perceived underperformance may receive less sympathetic treatment from newer heads. (Instead of attempting to improve practice, immediate attempts are made to dismiss or 'drive out' the teacher concerned.)

## 5. Observation

There has been a huge growth in the use of classroom observation in recent years. Some teachers report an average frequency of observation which exceeds one per week and many take place without any notice or information about what aspect of teaching is being observed.

Teachers who do not follow a pre-determined lesson structure can be deemed unsatisfactory even when pupil learning outcomes are excellent. (e.g. unsatisfactory because there was no plenary).

Some respondents to the survey highlighted the common practice of observations being carried out by two or more observers. Observers talking to each other during the lesson, and sometimes 'competing' to find more negative criticisms. The impact on the teacher during joint 'feedback' can be wholly de-motivating. For many teachers, repeated observation can be a significant stress hazard.

## The Role of Government and the DCSF

When looking at the underlying causes of inappropriate management and teacher stress, it is impossible to ignore the role of Government.

SATs, School League Tables, OFSTED, Local Authority Monitoring, Performance Management and the soon to be implemented 'Licence to Teach' together represent the harshest accountability system experienced by teachers anywhere in the world. These accountability measures are just part of the wide range of Education policies put in place since the late eighties by successive governments.

The progressive delegation of funding and decision making to a school level has given enormous power to headteachers. This delegation of power, whilst not always welcome, has increased over the years. There will always be those in positions of power who will abuse it. Prior to this delegation, the power held by a headteacher was mainly limited to the management of teaching and learning. Now heads are responsible for almost everything related to a school (finance, premises, health and safety, personnel, etc.) but ironically, what is taught and how it is taught is increasingly micromanaged by the Government through LAs and the plethora of national initiatives.

The hand of the DCSF and ministers is felt everywhere. Whilst the DCSF recognises the incidence of teacher mental conditions, the blame is placed at the door of teachers themselves. The Government it is in denial of its own role of in creating excessive teacher stress.

Speaking at a recent Teacher Support Network reception, Vernon Coaker (Schools Minister) stated that bullying of staff was totally unacceptable. Unfortunately the DCSF has proved unwilling to take the necessary steps to end the '**Reign of Terror**' that exists in many of our schools.

Government must give priority to radically reducing teacher stress if they wish to maintain a well-motivated, healthy teaching force.

### **About the Author**

*John Illingworth is a former primary headteacher who retired in 2006 following a period of work-related mental illness. A teacher for 33 years, he was head of three schools between 1982 and his retirement.*

*John has been active in the National Union of Teachers throughout his career and was the National President in 2001/2002. He served on the NUT's Teacher Mental Health Working Party between 2007/2009.*

*Having experienced stress-related illness himself, and discovering its high incidence amongst teachers, John has devoted much of his time to investigating and promoting teacher wellbeing. He regularly speaks to groups of teachers about his work and has appeared in several radio and TV programmes that have explored Teacher Mental Health.*

*He is also the author of "Crazy About Work" - An investigation into work-related factors influencing teacher mental health. (2007)*

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