



How to... improve a struggling trainee teacher's performance

Perhaps one of the most difficult challenges in teacher training is addressing unsatisfactory performance. **Loic Menzies** gives us a case study which demonstrates how the training team worked with a struggling trainee to ensure he made progress.



Working as a tutor on the Canterbury Christ Church (CCCU) Graduate Teacher Programme (GTP) I supported one trainee who found the transition from learning support assistant (LSA) to teacher a real struggle.

Sean (not his real name) went through two “action plans” to help improve his performance and then managed to achieve a judgement of “good” from the outstanding school in which he completed his training.

The biggest factor in Sean's success was of course his hard work and determination but in this article I will describe how university staff and the school based training team in two schools worked together to enable him to succeed.

■ ■ Introducing Sean

Sean was previously an LSA who worked with small groups of challenging pupils in his training school. During my second visit (the first was an introductory meeting) this seemed to be yielding dividends. Sean engaged some of the most challenging pupils and displayed excellent relationships with them. However, an important aspect of school visits in the CCCU GTP programme is that we spend much of the time in discussion with the school based training providers since they work with trainees day in day out and are therefore in a better position to assess their performance. Sean's mentor and the Employment Based Trainer (EBT) seemed far less happy with Sean's progress. They raised the issue of transitioning to whole class teaching. Our focus on communicating with the school based training team meant that these issues were immediately flagged up and I could feed these back to the team leader. In my report I noted that:

"I thought his delivery was very confident and his relationships excellent... My biggest concern was that most of the time he just taught and interacted with the 7 pupils at the front... Other colleagues have picked up on this tendency in his teaching"

■ ■ Supporting Sean

We also see the role of tutors as quality assuring the school based training. This meant that I made a priority of tracking how this was progressing and uncovered concerns here too. I did not feel that Sean was receiving the support he needed and therefore ensured that his mentor recognised this. His mentor was very co-

operative and we agreed five action points with regard to the training programme.

Whilst there was a lot of concern about Sean's progress it was important to remain positive and to encourage Sean's obvious dedication to becoming a teacher. In my report I stated that:

"I actually think Sean has got a lot of potential. The way he interacts and delivers shows that he is able to engage challenging pupils in an extremely positive and learning focused way. If he can develop the technical skills to teach I think he could go on to do very well."

My second visit therefore revealed three of the factors that helped turn Sean's experience around: effective communication, quality assurance of training and belief in the possibility of improvement.

The third visit escalated my concerns. Sean had not made any progress and I observed him with a larger class teaching an unsatisfactory lesson. The school was going through a difficult period and this was clearly making his job particularly difficult. A fight in the corridor made for a testing lesson start but aside from this, his teaching skills did not seem to have developed. His delivery was aggressive and planning weak to the point where even if the lesson had gone to plan, pupils would have been unlikely to progress.

■ ■ Positive intervention

I therefore decided to use our formal procedure for registering causes for concern. This identified three areas of concern, actions to be taken and success criteria. By using this process my response was seen as positive and action orientated rather than punitive. Thus it was welcomed by all involved. The formality of the process ensured accountability since lack of progress would lead to a defined response. Since CCCU plans extra capacity to support trainees in such situations, I also scheduled an extra visit and requested weekly updates from the very helpful EBT.

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Figure 1: Extract from Individual Training Plan to improve Shan's performance

Focus of Concern	Actions to be taken	Success Criteria for next visit
1. Establishing a calm, purposeful environment for learning	Observations of 3 identified teachers (NAME1, NAME2, NAME3)	Variation in tone of voice and use of quieter less aggressive delivery
	Videoing Sean teaching and watching with subject mentor/ EBT	Increased pace
		All pupils included in teaching delivery
		Range of behavioural interventions (e.g. standing next to a pupil, speaking to them individually, taking homework diary, quietly recording name on board)
		Positive behaviour management (e.g. praise in front of whole class, writing name on the board on smiley side, use of positive language)
2. Enabling all pupils to make progress	Review of one of Sean's lesson plans to form an item on the agenda of mentor meeting. Sean and MENTOR to analyse what will and won't help pupils to progress, appropriateness of objectives and work on how to improve it.	Activities in lesson plan are tailored to the objectives
	SEAN to collect and review lesson plans from 3 named teachers: NAME1, NAME2 and NAME3 and evaluate how the plans help pupils to progress	Objective moves beyond existing knowledge
		All pupils have their hands up and answer questions
3. Attending all meetings prepared	Sean recognises that meetings are the number one priority and that pupil detentions etc. do not take priority	Sean attends all meetings with all required paperwork
	Sean to inform EBT if this is not the case	Subject mentor to attend meeting each week and record comment each week
	EBT to check that meeting has taken place each week and inform Loic of ANY meeting missed.	

■ ■ Reviewing progress

My next visit was an interim visit focused on reviewing progress on the action plan (see Figure 1 for an Extract) and providing the support necessary to help Sean succeed when his progress on the action plan was formally reviewed at the end of the term. Progress on each area was reviewed and Sean was praised on the improvements in area 1. He related his progress directly to the actions we had previously agreed which suggested they were well planned and had had a positive impact. Disappointingly an additional cause for concern had to be added. I described this in my report:

“Following a review of the ITP (Individual Training Plan) a new area of concern was added as, despite feedback on how to improve the ITP by Loic made on the 3 previous visits and on a core day and several comments made by Sean’s EBT, progress was insufficient. Targets remain too general. So for instance, “Professional Development”, reflections are not reflective e.g. “this was interesting/this was enlightening.” QTS standards addressed are not included and there are many empty boxes. The weekly plan aspect seems to be filled in at the end of the week and this is not conducive to effective training”

It was also clear that Sean was still not receiving the level of support he needed to succeed. Indeed, the EBT had to take much greater responsibility than would normally be expected as the original mentor was no longer in school. Despite her good will and the numerous efforts she was making to provide worthwhile training experiences this was adding an extra pressure to her workload. The review ensured that there was a clear focus for Sean’s actions in the run up to his next review as was noted in my report:

“I was really pleased with progress on priority area 1. In the next week it’d be great to see you concentrate

on preparing for a good show on area 2 and the new area 4”

■ ■ Taking critical action

The situation was clearly becoming serious and this led to a discussion between myself, the team leader and the programme director in order to create a contingency plan should Sean not be judged to have made sufficient progress. We felt that Sean was extremely committed and had strengths in some areas but that the challenging circumstances of his training were making it very difficult for him to progress. We judged that a more structured environment would give him greater chances of success. We wanted to be certain that Sean had been given every chance to succeed, particularly as the next step was a final action plan and failure to achieve the measures in this would have ended his training. The team leader therefore drew on the strong relationships he has built up amongst the training partnership to identify where

Sean could best be supported and opened discussions with an outstanding school which has a strong track record in working with our trainees. The excellent relationship we have with partner schools was key in making this possible.

The action plan review took place with the EBT, team leader and myself. We recognised that some progress had been made but that this was insufficient. Having planned for this possibility

we were able to move straight to action and to put arrangements into place for Sean to move school.

Sean was welcomed with open arms by his new school and quickly became embedded in an outstanding department. There, all the teachers he worked with contributed to his training. He was able to observe outstanding practice on a day to day basis and received detailed feedback from different teachers on his lesson plans before teaching them and on how the lesson had gone afterwards. The consistency of approach that

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defined the school through its clear policies, routines and procedures meant he could focus on pedagogy. This helped him develop his practice extremely quickly and to progress to an increased timetable much quicker than was expected. The structure and predictability of the environment also helped him develop the self-discipline to keep on top of the training programme.

■■ Capacity to improve

Meanwhile, additional university visits continued. On one occasion I observed a detailed feedback session from one of the teachers he worked with and this assured me that he was receiving high quality support. I also observed a lesson one afternoon when he had been observed by a subject tutor in the morning. In this lesson he acted upon the advice he had been given earlier that day. This showed me that he was receiving and responding to support and so proved that he had the capacity to improve. Again, my role here was not to provide the training since I could only visit for a few hours per half term whereas the school could do so all day, every day. My central objective was therefore to maximise the school based capacity.

By the time of my final visit I was convinced that Sean had reached the standard for passing QTS with a satisfactory grade but given his rapid upward trajectory and his poor overall experience up until Easter we were keen to delay assessment until the latest possible opportunity. This would maximise his chances of succeeding at the highest possible level. His assessment was to be carried out by the team leader who showed flexibility and adaptability in making a late assessment possible. On the day of assessment the Team Leader was aware that my previous assessment had been "satisfactory". However, this was only a small part of the judgement and recognised that Sean might improve further before final assessment. The team leader's assessment was based on a 'professional conversation' in which Sean discussed his learning, reflective practice and Professional Development File. His judgement was only one factor in the overall judgement, which also took the views of the school's EBT and Sean's subject mentor into account. The judgement of "good" came from a combination of these three views. The degree of

turnaround achieved was particularly emphasised by the fact that this outstanding department said that if they had a vacancy they would like to employ Sean.

■■ Believing in Sean

Sean achieved a remarkable turnaround in his practice and this is testament to his hard work and dedication. He described teacher training as the "most difficult thing I've ever done" and faced numerous personal challenges involving illness and family bereavement over the course of the year. Yet throughout, his commitment remained undimmed and ultimately it was the combination of his commitment, the programme design and the hard work of all those involved which made his success possible.

Key Factors in Turning Sean's Experience Around

- Sean's own dedication and hard work
- Good communication between the university team as well as time spent communicating with the school based team
- A focus on quality assuring the school based training experience
- Belief in trainees' potential and the possibility of improvement
- A clear, process for dealing with concerns which is action orientated and creates accountability
- Capacity to provide extra support for struggling trainees

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