
THE STATUS OF TEACHERS AND THE TEACHING PROFESSION IN ENGLAND

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Introduction

This research brief presents the main findings of the Teacher Status Project, a national four year study of public and individual teachers' perceptions of the status of teachers and teaching, carried out at the Cambridge University Faculty of Education, and funded by the Department for Education and Skills. It includes the perspectives of people who come into close contact with teachers, including governors, parents and teaching assistants, as well as a study of media coverage of teachers and education, conducted by the University of Leicester, Department of Media and Communications. The research study took place between 2002 and 2006. Base-line findings of respondents' perceptions of teacher status in 2003 were presented in Hargreaves et al. (2006)¹. The present summary includes key findings followed by the aims of the research, methods used, further findings and conclusions.

Key Findings

1) A third of the general public surveyed considered the social status of teachers to be most like that of social workers, and of headteachers to be most like that of management consultants, in 2003 and 2006. An increasing proportion (18% in 2003 to 20% in 2006) of respondents considered teachers' pay, a basic indicator of status, as an attraction to a teaching career and a substantially decreased proportion (21% in 2003 to 12% in 2006) considered pay levels to be a deterrent. *Having to control* a class was singularly prominent and seen as an unattractive feature by 32 per cent of respondents in 2003 and 34 per cent of respondents in 2006. Nevertheless, about half (49% in 2003 and 47% in 2006) of the general public surveyed considered teaching to be an attractive career.

2) The media representation of teachers has changed to a more sympathetic and positive portrayal of a profession, contradicting teachers' common misperception of a hostile press perpetuating their low status. Schools, in their turn, have become more media 'savvy' in communicating their activities to the regional press.

3) Teachers and associated groups (teaching assistants, governors and parents) consistently perceived teaching as a less rewarded, but more controlled and regulated profession than a high status profession. Likewise both groups perceived a steep decline in the status of teachers over the past four decades, starting from relatively high positions of 4.3 (teachers) and 4.4 (associated groups), on a five-point scale, in 1967. This began to level out by 1997 when the status of teachers was rated as 2.8 and 3.2 by teachers and associated groups respectively. By 2006, although low, teachers' perceptions of their status were higher than they were in 2003 (2.2 in 2003 and 2.5 in 2006). However, associated groups were less negative (2.7 in 2003 and 2.9 in 2006) about the status of teachers in recent years than were teachers.

¹ The 2003 baseline findings are contained in the Interim Report available at:

<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RR755.pdf>

See References for full details.

4) Teachers appeared to be not overly concerned with their external status, nevertheless they gained a sense of positive status when they felt trusted, appreciated and rewarded by parents and through collaborative work with other professionals. Their schools were critical in this respect. They felt positive about their status through experiencing supportive leadership, collaborative working and having time for personal development. The quality of their material working conditions was also believed to shape the regard they commanded from others.

5) Polarisation between schools classified as high achieving or poorly performing became evident in terms of differential resources and facilities, and disparities in perceived evaluations by parents and other teachers. This polarisation had a strong impact on teachers' sense of status, raising that of teachers in high achieving well resourced schools but depressing that of those in poorly performing schools.

6) Most teachers welcomed the potential of recent policy initiatives, such as workforce reform and extended schools to raise their status, although the actual effects of recent policy were mixed as schools differed in the extent to which these policies were established. This implies a need for locally sensitive implementation and dialogue.

7) Some teachers in subgroups including minority ethnic, early years, special educational needs (SEN), pupil referral units (PRU), and supply teachers, reported feeling some degree of marginalisation within the profession. This had depressing effects on their sense of status. For example, for some minority ethnic teachers, this was on the basis of perceived stifled promotion opportunities. For many supply teachers this arose through the ambivalence with which they were treated by other staff. For some SEN and PRU teachers this was associated with poor working facilities. Just one distinctive subgroup emerged as feeling much higher status and esteem than others: those involved in continuing professional development (CPD) and research.

Research design

The aims of the project

The project had three main aims, namely:

1. to establish a baseline and monitor changes in perceptions of the status of teachers and their profession, among teachers, associated groups and the general public, between 2003 and 2006
2. to understand the factors that might influence perceptions of status and teachers' attitudes
3. to identify how perceptions of teacher status can be improved.

Methods

The surveys

Surveys for this study included face-to-face surveys of the public (1815 adults (60.5% response rate) in 2003 and 1252 (62.6% response rate) in 2006) who were asked about the attractiveness of a teaching career, the status of teachers compared with other occupations and what activities people associated with teaching, and their reasons for their responses. Other surveys included national questionnaire surveys of teachers (2350 (28.5% response rate) teachers in 2003 and 5340 (40.5% response rate) teachers in 2006), selected through random stratified (by school phase, school size and government office region) sampling and surveys of groups associated with teachers (namely teaching assistants, governors and parents) who were also surveyed in 2003 and 2006. Respondents to the surveys of associated groups included 898 people in 2003 and 1851 in 2006, representing 18 per cent of individuals but 42 per cent of schools contacted in both surveys. Opportunity samples of trainee teachers were surveyed in 2003 (270 trainees), 2004 (160 trainees) and 2005 (160 trainees).

Data analysis for the surveys of teachers, associated groups and trainee teachers included factor analysis and scale construction techniques for each section of the respective questionnaires.

The media study

The media study included 'rolling week' surveys of 17 national daily *quality* and *popular* papers and five *regional* newspapers in March to September 2003 and 2005. A total of 2898 articles were identified using *status* and the word stems *educ-* and *teach-*. Of these, 1717 (59.2%) were relevant to education and teachers. In addition, a retrospective analysis of news coverage between 1991 and 2002 identified 3702 articles that were relevant and worthy of further analysis. The articles were electronically available via the full-text electronic newspaper database Lexis/Nexis, and those selected as relevant were content analysed. Finally, interviews

were conducted with 21 education correspondents and media professionals, representing both national and regional press.

The case studies

The project's two main strands of school-based case studies included semi-structured face-to-face interviews. These were carried out initially with school leaders, teaching and non-teaching staff and were conducted in 2004 and 2005 in 22 primary and secondary typical/ordinary schools (between 8 and 12 individuals per school) where pupils also contributed to discussion groups. Eight of these schools were selected for follow-up visits approximately one year after the initial visits, to investigate any changes in opinion. The second strand of case studies were conducted in 12 secondary and 4 primary schools selected specifically for their classification as high achieving (e.g. beacon, training and leading edge etc) or poorly achieving (e.g. serious weaknesses and special measures) schools. These case studies examined the impact of certain school classifications on teacher perceptions of their status. The final strand of qualitative research engaged distinctive subgroups of teachers (e.g. minority ethnic teachers, teachers engaged in CPD/research, SEN teachers) in 40 focus groups, ranging in size from 3 to 10 teachers per group.

Findings

The findings are organised into groups based on a series of perspectives on the status of teachers. These include 'outside' views from the general public and the media, 'intermediate' or 'proximal' views from people who work with, or come into regular contact with teachers (teaching assistants, parents and governors), and 'inside' views of teachers themselves, and just qualified trainee teachers.

A. Public perceptions of the teaching profession

Public opinion with respect to the attractiveness of teaching showed that almost half of those surveyed in 2003 (49%) and 2006 (47%) felt that teaching was an attractive career. People most likely to feel this way were men over 55 years old, graduates, parents of school age children and people in the East Midlands.

- An increasing proportion (18% in 2003 to 20% in 2006) of respondents, considered teachers'

pay, a basic indicator of status, as an attraction to a teaching career, whilst a substantially decreased proportion (21% in 2003 to 12% in 2006) considered pay levels to be a deterrent.

- *Having to control a class* was the main deterrent for a third (32% in 2003 and 34% in 2006) of those seeing teaching as an unattractive career. Furthermore, members of the public increasingly (rising from 18% in 2003 to 26% in 2006) considered *dealing with difficult behaviour* to be a major part of teachers' responsibilities. This image of teaching is considered to depress teachers' prestige in the public eye (Hoyle, 2001).

When comparing the status of teachers with that of 12 other professionals, the public felt, consistently, that primary and secondary teachers were most similar in social status to social workers. Despite a decrease in the proportion of respondents feeling this way (40% in 2003 and 35% in 2006), the comparison of teachers and social workers remained the strongest, largely because they work with children or young people. Primary and secondary headteachers were likened most often in social status to management consultants, because of the level of responsibility associated with the job, and headteachers' authority to make decisions at work.

B. Media perspectives on teaching

In recent years, *education* has grown in prestige and editorial importance to become one of the top three or four areas of news coverage. Coverage focussing specifically on teachers had become relatively more prominent since the early 1990s. Contrary to teachers' almost unanimous perceptions, there was much explicitly supportive or positive reporting of teachers and the image of the teaching profession had moved from the negative 'teacher-bashing' of the early 1990s, to portraying teachers as dedicated and committed professionals struggling against a broad range of serious problems and pressures.

The principal themes to emerge during the survey were *government targets/ new schemes for schools*, and *teachers' employment/pay issues*, whilst stories of teachers involved in, or, frequently as victims of, *civil or criminal cases* were particularly frequent in the popular press. An indication of the credibility and status accorded teachers in news coverage was the findings that teachers, headteachers and

teacher trade unions, along with government and higher education sources were among the most prominent 'voices' directly quoted in the press. This lends the teaching profession a remarkably high visibility as a key voice in the public debate.

The interviews with education correspondents and editors indicated that the prominent position of government, headteachers and teacher trade unions in news coverage was a result of an increasingly active and professional media publicity strategy on the part of these sources. Teachers/headteachers were described as becoming much more 'media-savvy'.

C. The perspectives of adults other than teachers on teachers' status

Teaching assistants, governors and parents (the associated groups) defined a high status profession, on the basis of 19 statements about occupations, in terms of two factors: *reward and respect* and *control and regulation*, as did teachers themselves. Their definitions were absolutely stable across the two surveys (2003 and 2006) regarding a high status profession as enjoying *reward and respect*, but being uncertain as to whether it is characterized by (external) *control and regulation*. In contrast, these groups felt that the teaching profession was highly characterised by *control and regulation*, but were marginally positive that *reward and respect* were true of the teaching profession. In 2006, they were slightly more positive that *reward and respect* was true of teaching.

The steep decline in teachers' status, perceived by these groups, from 4.4 in 1967 to 3.2 in 1997 (on a five-point scale), had become less severe and had stabilized. Teaching assistants rated teacher status more highly than did governors in the years 1967 to 1989, but these positions reversed after 1997 when governors gave teachers higher ratings. In the 2006 survey, the parents' ratings (3.2 for 2003 and 3.1 for 2006) of teachers' status for 2003 and 2006 were higher than either governors' (3.0 for both years) or teaching assistants (2.9 and 2.8 respectively).

In their responses to surveys in 2003, 2004 and 2005 trainee teachers construed a high status profession to be characterised by *trust and respect*, and *reward*, also, but to a lesser extent, *control and regulation*. Whilst trainees felt that

teachers were trusted almost to the same extent as people from high status professions, they considered the teaching profession was far less rewarded and much more controlled than a high status profession.

D. Teachers' perceptions of their status

Surveys of teachers' ratings of status in 2003 and 2006 show perceptions of a steep and rapid decline in the status of teachers since 1967 when it was rated 4.3 on a five-point scale in both years. This has been arrested in recent years. The 2006 sample revealed the same pattern of perceived decline, over the four decades since 1967, but these teachers' perceptions of teacher status in 2006, although low (2.6), were higher than teachers' ratings (2.2) in 2003.

Teachers participating in the case study research also felt that teachers, whom they perceived as once venerated as similar in stature to doctors, had seen a reduction in their status to that of service sector professionals, particularly in recent years. They explained this change as due to a wider demystification of the profession through the engagement of a more informed and critical public, a greater transparency demanded through national testing, and associations of teaching as more to do with behaviour management. In the surveys, teachers also gave higher status ratings to surgeons, doctors and barristers than their own profession, which again could be explained through the continuing 'mystique' and distance of these professions, in contrast to teachers' close proximity to their clients. This situation was particularly an issue for early years (EY) teachers who had closer contact with parents both within and outside the classroom.

In the 2003 and 2006 surveys, teachers defined a high status profession as highly characterised by *reward and respect* and as subject to some external *control and regulation* (although with less certainty). However, they saw their own profession as highly characterised by external *control and regulation*, while there was uncertainty as to whether it was characterised by *reward and respect*. Women, primary teachers, younger teachers and recently qualified teachers were more positive about *reward and respect* as an aspect of the teaching profession.

A consistent view of teachers expressed in our 2003 and 2006 surveys was that the most positive impact on their status would be through greater public awareness of the intellectual demands and responsibilities of their jobs, together with more opportunities for teachers to exercise their professional judgement. Workload reduction, time for collaboration with colleagues and an expanded community role were also deemed likely to have a very positive impact on status.

E. The centrality of personal relations, personal commitment and the school environment

Teachers in the case-studies reported feeling less concern with status than the personal esteem gained through vocational aspects of the job and expressed in appreciation from those people within and closely associated with the immediate school environment.

Teachers working within the specially classified schools (specialist, beacon, leading edge or academy schools) felt a higher and more positive sense of status than was found more typically in the case study schools without special statuses. The positive achievements and evaluations of the schools appeared to spill over to engender a sense of high status of teachers working within the schools. Teachers considered the school classifications were associated with access to resources, higher staffing levels, more time for reflection and better facilities, which in turn facilitated creative teaching and learning and prompted external respect. However, teachers experienced some negative reactions from teachers working at other schools and were keen to foster modesty to discourage divisiveness between schools.

Teachers working within schools classified as poorly performing (cause for concern, serious weaknesses or special measures) demonstrated a lower sense of status than in other schools. The poor evaluations of the schools, negative reputations, low enrolment and poorly resourced working conditions impacted upon the regard in which teachers felt they were seen. Many teachers felt embarrassment at their school's name and felt they were seen as lesser teachers because of the poor school results. In particular, classification as *Special Measures* was associated with demoralisation within the schools, causing high staff turnover and low morale and friction amongst the remaining staff. Teachers felt

particularly disempowered by not being given the opportunities to explain their teaching in context.

F. National policy initiatives

Many teachers participating in the case studies valued the potential for relief from mundane administrative responsibilities, opportunities to focus on teaching and learning and benefits for work-life balance offered through the workforce reform agenda (*Raising Standards and Tackling Workload: A National Agreement*, DfES 2003). However, most felt that the programme and its requirement for schools to provide planning, preparation and assessment (PPA) time for their teachers relied upon a financially unsustainable strategy which might not enhance their status in the long run. In underperforming schools, the reality of PPA was frustrating for some teachers, who felt that they simply received extra duties and responsibilities, such frustrations were not expressed by teachers in highly performing schools. Conversely, teachers in a school where workforce reforms were well established appreciated the benefits.

Teachers felt that extending school services to provide greater collaborative working arrangements between professionals had the capacity to provide teachers with a more specialised role. They maintained, however, that collaboration between professionals with potentially competing priorities requires locally derived solutions rather than nationally prescribed strategies. Collaborative working arrangements with parents helped teachers to feel trusted and respected, although where parent communities were less engaged and even sometimes hostile, this was a cause of concern.

Teachers and support staff appreciated government initiatives aiming to re-shape provisions for children, although they struggled with what they perceived as a torrent of national policies. Those teachers who held misgivings about the initiatives felt that government imposition of targets and teaching strategies demonstrated distrust for teacher professionalism and their abilities to achieve desired results. They felt it undermined their autonomy and skill in providing solutions for pupils according to their learning needs.

G. The perspectives of distinctive sub-groups of teachers

Although a few minority ethnic teachers were able to identify examples of equal opportunities in relation to promotion in schools, the majority of these teachers expressed impatience with what they believed to be school leaders' inequitable approaches to promotion. These teachers felt that not only would they gain esteem through promotions but that it was important for their colleagues, pupils and the wider community to appreciate that minority ethnic teachers were capable of holding influential positions.

There is huge variation in forms of provision for special educational needs across different local authorities, and many SEN teachers felt that they did not have adequate resources to do the job because it was seen as low status work in some schools.

PRU teachers felt marginalised within the profession by LAs and the government, evidenced, they suggested by the application of inappropriate pay structures and policy initiatives, and feelings of little involvement in decision-making. However, they felt they generally were seen highly by those working in other agencies, other teachers who they come to contact with, and the general public, who respected the challenging work they did.

Supply teachers felt a reasonable status because schools benefited from their contribution, although it was threatened by ambivalence within which they were viewed by regular teachers. They felt they were sometimes seen as lesser teachers, forbidden to use their professionalism and were socially marginalized in some schools by regular teachers. As a result, they accepted more responsibility for their status and evaluations by others, through the attitudes they displayed.

Where the climate and organisation of schools were such as to take advantage through effective sharing of practice, teachers engaged in CPD reported particularly high status. They gained esteem through a sense of personal empowerment and learning, as well as in believing that being engaged in CPD or research benefited their pupils, although there was recognition that schools varied in their readiness to take full advantage of individual teachers' CPD or research.

In the case-studies, pupils viewed headteachers' status more highly than that of teachers, and secondary teachers were rated more highly than primary, as they prepared pupils for exams. Young and older pupils alike rated the medical and emergency services most highly (from a list of 16 professions) but younger pupils recognised that teachers had played a major role in the lives of all professionals.

Conclusions

Status was not a word that teachers used comfortably or frequently. For them their sense of vocation, deep commitment and being able to help their pupils sustained them even in situations where their sense of status was under threat. That said, being trusted as professionals, being challenged and given responsibility, through democratic and distributed school leadership and collegial support enhanced their sense of status. In particular, the investment of time and funds to extend their professionalism through continuing professional development, and developing collaborative partnerships with parents and community were powerful factors in enhancing their perceptions of their status. Being encouraged to use their creativity and be flexible in their teaching also engendered a positive sense of status, as did high quality facilities and resources, which they felt enhanced their status in the eyes of parents, visitors and public onlookers. In this respect their schools emerged as the critical factor in enhancing the esteem they perceived from colleagues and their school communities. Where these positive factors prevailed, they nourished teachers' sense of status. Where they were lacking, typically where schools were classified as poorly performing, teachers' sense of status was low.

In general, the teaching profession sees itself as lacking in reward and respect but highly characterised by external control and regulation compared with a high status profession. This self-perception was reinforced by the views of people who work with teachers and come into regular contact with them, including teaching assistants, parents, and governors. As long as this persists in the minds of these people and teachers themselves, the separation between the teaching profession and a high status profession will remain wide. A slight but perceptible improvement in perceptions of reward and respect for the teaching profession may take 20 years at the present rate to meet the

standards of a high status profession. Recent policy initiatives were seen as having the potential to accelerate this process, but progress in implementation varied widely, and at this stage it is too early to assess the effects on teachers' status.

From an outside perspective, teaching is considered an attractive career by just under half the general public. Pay is now much less likely to be seen as an unattractive feature of teaching. These findings augur positively for the status of the profession. The positive and sympathetic portrayal of teachers in the press, and increasing prominence of the teacher voice therein, seriously belies teachers' perceptions of their press treatment. This finding also suggests a context favourable to the improved status and prestige of teachers, compared with the situation in the early 1990s. On the other hand, the image of teaching as controlling a class of pupils had become a singular detractor from the attractiveness of teaching, an aspect likely to depress teachers' professional status. Perhaps one of the most important contributions to improving the status of teachers and their profession, is for teachers themselves to communicate their activities and professional expertise to the public, and to revise their own perceptions of the respect and trust in which they are held.

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