

---

# What Being a Teacher (Really) Means

CHRISTOPHER DAY<sup>[1]</sup> & LESLEY SAUNDERS<sup>[2]</sup>

**ABSTRACT** This article gives just a taster of a large-scale in-depth longitudinal research project, 'Variations in Teachers' Work, Lives and Effectiveness', funded by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and conducted by a joint team from the University of Nottingham and the Institute of Education, London. The authors outline the approach which the research adopted, highlight the key findings and discuss some of the implications of this ground-breaking study, which established the dynamic, emotional nature of the professional life phases and identities of teachers. They suggest that what it really means to be a teacher is not only more complex than some current wisdom suggests, but that schools need to devote far more attention to their policies and strategies for making the best of their precious human resource.

## Introduction

From 2001 to 2006, the Department for Education and Skills [3] (DfES) in England funded the 'Variations in Teachers' Work, Lives and Effectiveness' (VITAE) project. VITAE was a longitudinal mixed-methods research project which investigated variations in teachers' work, lives and effects on pupils. The main group of participants were some 300 teachers of varied backgrounds and experience, working with Key Stage 1, 2 or 3 pupils in 100 widely differing primary and secondary schools across the country. It was a comprehensive, intensive and extensive study of teachers' lived realities and of their pupils' learning outcomes which has given the educational community a richer understanding of the factors which lead teachers to remain in the profession and to sustain (or otherwise) their commitment, resilience and effectiveness over their careers and in different contexts.

Amongst other things, the VITAE research established the dynamic, emotional nature of professional life phases and identities and the ways in which variations in these and the influences upon them affect teachers' *relative* and *relational* effectiveness. Lives, curricula, school conditions and pupils all change, sometimes without warning and often simultaneously. Teachers must manage these, and the tensions that they may cause, if they are to sustain and,

where appropriate, increase their commitment, resilience and effectiveness. Teachers and those responsible for their leadership need to acknowledge and address the complexities of the cognitive and emotional contexts in which they work, and the associations between teacher commitment, well-being, resilience and effectiveness.

Two broad aspects of the study stand out as significant in the current policy environment:

- the DfES's decision to commission a longitudinal open-ended study of this kind, and indeed the huge investment made by all the stakeholders – the funders, the research team, the teachers and their schools;
- the importance of establishing that 'teacher effectiveness' is not some definitive characteristic that can be assessed (let alone measured) without taking account of, on the one hand, the large number of educational initiatives that impact on teachers and teaching, and, on the other, teachers' personal propensities and institutional circumstances – teachers' work and teachers' lives.

This article offers – as an overview of the key messages from the project – four scenarios distilled in various ways from a combination of the qualitative and quantitative data, followed by a short discussion. The detailed findings are written up in Day, Kington et al (2006); Day, Stobart et al (2006); and Day et al (2007).

### **Different Conceptualisations of 'Being a Teacher'**

#### *Scenario 1 – The Ideal (teaching as service)*

In this ideal scenario, being a teacher means wanting, more than anything, to make a difference in the learning lives of students. It means being prepared to put the intellectual, social and personal needs of each and every individual in your class – whatever they are – above your own. It means being willing to make, every day, huge amounts of emotional as well as intellectual investment in the service of those who don't all necessarily want to learn, to learn what you are teaching or to learn from you. It means that work does not begin and end when students arrive and leave school. It means exercising your creative imagination. It means adapting, with integrity, to changing social conditions, parental expectations and government policy. It means sustaining commitment and enthusiasm for the work throughout your working life. It means collaborating with others, encouraging the student voice. It means being a lifelong learner. It means engaging. It means being present to witness the wonder of a student who suddenly understands – the 'aha' moments of magic.

#### *Scenario 2 – The Cynical (teaching as compliance)*

In this scenario – the polar opposite of the foregoing – being a teacher in the twenty-first century in England means, more than anything, being able to

deliver teaching in prescribed units, or as a three-part lesson in ways which satisfy sets of externally designed competences. It means being responsible for personalised learning which is linked to detailed planning, target setting and narrowly conceived assessments. It means being judged, sometimes by strangers whose experiences of classroom teaching are distant memories. It means trying to engage students in learning in the face of constant interruption by a minority who do not wish to learn. It means gradually (and sometimes suddenly) feeling your initial enthusiasm to teach begin to die in the face of the erosion of trust in your ability to teach. It means fighting against the fatigue of the seemingly never-ending struggle to satisfy the requirements of a stultifying results-driven curriculum in schools in which, contrary to the rhetoric of the 'Workforce Remodelling Agenda' (as if humans can be shaped and reshaped at will), bureaucracy and accountability continue to demand a disproportionate amount of time and energy.

*Scenario 3 – The Reality (teachers as professionals)*

Neither of these two scenarios captures the complicated reality of teaching, of course. This third scenario is meant to show that being a teacher is far more complex than either of our first two scenarios suggest, at least for the 300 teachers who took part in VITAE. Almost all these teachers had entered teaching because they wanted to work with children and young people, to teach their subject, to make a difference; and most, but not all (74%), were still motivated and were sustaining their commitment – sometimes against the odds. The research found that primary school teachers were more likely to remain committed over their professional life span than secondary teachers, though the resilience of teachers from primary and secondary phases in their later years of teaching (24 years +) was more likely than those in their early and middle years to be declining. Perhaps not surprisingly, it was teachers who taught in schools, especially secondary schools serving disadvantaged communities, whose resilience was most at risk and who suffered relatively more personal health problems. What was really interesting, also, was our finding that teachers do not necessarily become more effective (in terms of student value-added attainment) with experience.

Possibly the most important piece of evidence, and one which relates directly to what being a teacher really means, is that not only did teachers relate their sense of effectiveness to their commitment (an amalgam of motivation, self efficacy, sense of professional identity), but also that their level of commitment was significantly associated with pupil progress and attainment.

*Scenario 4 – What Makes a Difference (teachers who sustain commitment)*

It seems, then, that not all teachers are the passive victims of grand policy which some suggest them to be; that most are able to maintain professional identities at the centre of which are sets of moral purposes, felt responsibilities for the

development of the well-being of the whole student. Of course, such identities are subject to negative as well as positive forces (Day, Kington et al, 2006). In the VITAE project, the research team found that professional life phase makes a difference to teachers' needs, concerns and challenges. Within each of those, the team was able to identify three 'mediating' influences – professional (policy, beliefs), situated (leadership, colleagues, students, professional development) and personal (life events and experience). It was the capacities which teachers were able to exercise to manage fluctuations between tensions within and between these three mediating influences which determined whether they sustained a positive sense of professional identity and well-being in which they saw themselves as active agents in teaching and learning; and this related in turn to their commitment and effectiveness.

### **Main Messages and Brief Discussion**

The key findings from the VITAE project and their implications are summarised below. Together, they suggest that what it really means to be a teacher is not only more complex than some current wisdom suggests, but that schools need to devote far more attention to their policies and strategies for making the best of this precious human resource.

1. Teachers do not necessarily become more effective over time. Although the majority remain effective, teachers in later years are more at risk of being less effective.
2. Teachers' sense of positive professional identity is associated with well-being and is a key contributory factor in their effectiveness.
3. Attainments by pupils of teachers who are committed and resilient are likely to exceed those of teachers who are not.
4. The commitment and resilience of teachers in schools serving more disadvantaged communities and of teachers in later professional life phases are more persistently challenged than others.
5. Sustaining and enhancing teachers' commitment and resilience is a key issue for workforce quality and retention.

Clearly, managing the emotional demands of classroom life is fundamental to effective teaching. A sense of positive professional identity is dependent upon this. The investment of emotional energy in the workplace is not an optional extra for teachers. They cannot, as those in most other professions can, 'take a break', or 'reschedule' their work. They are faced each day with thirty or perhaps many more students, some of whom, but by no means all, will be eager to learn; some of whom will have quite challenging learning needs; some of whom will not wish to learn; and not all of whom will have stable, secure lives outside school. Effective teachers will strive to engage with all of their students and this requires that they are able to bring reserves of emotional energy to their work. The more such emotional energy is depleted – through adverse effects of personal, workplace or policy experiences – the less will be their

capacities for sustaining effectiveness. This is why reformers from outside the school and those who seek to improve from within need to acknowledge the connection between attending to the well-being of the students and attending to the well-being, also, of the adults in the school.

Moreover, research on teacher retention tends to focus on factors affecting teachers' decisions to leave the profession. This research provides a new perspective, focusing upon teacher retention in terms of teacher quality and effectiveness over the whole of their careers. We would argue that the findings – especially if set alongside other research, for example, about the significance of teachers' professional development (see Bolam & Weindling, 2006) – suggest some courses of action, which can be expressed as follows:

1. National organisations and schools need to target strategies for professional learning and development to support teachers in their later years of experience.
2. Policy makers, national associations and headteachers concerned with raising standards in schools need to address the associations between teachers' commitment, resilience and effectiveness.
3. Strategies for sustaining commitment in initial and continuing professional development programmes should differentiate between the needs of teachers in different phases of their professional lives.
4. Schools, especially those which serve disadvantaged communities, need to ensure their professional development provision is relevant to the commitment, resilience and health needs of teachers.
5. Efforts to support and enhance teacher quality should focus upon building, sustaining and retaining their commitment and resilience.

The DfES hosted a post-project seminar with staff from a variety of organisations to discuss the implications of the VITAE work. All participants agreed that the VITAE study was very important both for the conceptual frameworks it has created and for the strong evidence it has produced; together, these have the power to confirm what many working in or with schools feel and experience at an individual level, and also to offer new insights, data and ways of thinking: a good example of the latter is the notion of 'professional life phase' which the project has developed as a more nuanced alternative to 'career stage'.

The ideas that emerged from the seminar included:

- The quality of *school leadership* and the teacher's relationship with it significantly influences commitment and resilience. Even in schools where the leadership team is considered strong, a teacher's commitment and effectiveness may still be reduced by a difficult relationship with his/her line manager. So VITAE has some particularly important issues and messages for school governors and school leadership teams, such as:
- How to anticipate possible 'at risk' colleagues before they fall into a downward spiral. Heads and line managers should make it their business to become aware of the possible changing sense of commitment of individuals

among their workforce, and schools need a structure/process to monitor and where necessary address this.

- Whether there may be gender differences in particular (secondary school) departments, which might lead to different patterns of resilience, etc., between different subject areas.
- Whether/where there is a developed notion of 'human resource' development in/for schools. Schools are classified as small/medium enterprises, and as such perhaps need to have a designated professional function which is responsible for staff well-being, support and development.

The project's findings are also likely to be integral to strategic planning for *leadership succession*.

Additionally, it was strongly urged that the project findings can and should inform a wider definition of *professional learning and development*, to include self-reflection and self-awareness, and also acknowledge that professional development should be tailored to different life phases; teachers want 'spaces' to reflect and discuss ideas with colleagues. Schools need to think beyond the immediate needs of the school to what will benefit staff, and therefore pupils, in the longer term. The principle of an entitlement of access to mentoring throughout one's professional life was put forward. All this might be conceptualised as 'personalised learning for teachers'.

The list of stakeholder groups who could potentially benefit from this work but who could not be invited to the seminar is a long one: we hope this short article will stimulate readers to access the full findings and to think about how they could make use of the messages in their own contexts.

### Notes

- [1] The other members of the VITAE research team, whose fieldwork, ideas and analysis have contributed to all the outputs from the project, including this article, were: Gordon Stobart, Rebecca Smees and Tamjid Mujtaba, Institute of Education, London; and Pam Sammons, Alison Kington and Qing Gu, University of Nottingham.
- [2] Lesley chaired the project steering group for the final two years of the study.
- [3] The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the position of the DfES.

### References

- Bolam, R. & Weindling, D. (2006) *Synthesis of Recent Policy-related Research and Evaluation Projects Concerned with Teachers' Professional Development*.  
[http://www.gtce.org.uk/policyandresearch/research/gtcsponsored/cpd\\_synthesis](http://www.gtce.org.uk/policyandresearch/research/gtcsponsored/cpd_synthesis)
- Day, C.W., Kington, A., Stobart, G. & Sammons, P. (2006) The Personal and Professional Selves of Teachers: stable and unstable identities, *British Educational*

*Research Journal*, 32(4), pp. 601-616.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01411920600775316>

Day, C.W., Stobart, G., Sammons, P., et al (2006) *Variations in Teachers' Work, Lives and Effectiveness*. Department for Education and Skills, research report RR743.

<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RR743.pdf>. Summary version downloadable at: <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RB743.pdf>

Day, C.W., Sammons, P., Stobart, G., Kington A. & Gu, Q. (2007) *Teachers Matter: connecting work, lives and effectiveness*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

---

**CHRISTOPHER DAY** is Professor of Education and Co-Director of the Teacher and Leadership Research Centre (T.L.R.C.) in the University of Nottingham. Prior to this he worked as a teacher, lecturer and local education authority adviser. His particular concerns centre upon the continuing development of leadership, school cultures, learning networks and change. He has just completed a four-year DfES-funded research project on variations in teachers' work, lives and effectiveness. A book based upon this, to be published in 2007, is entitled *Teachers Matter* (Open University Press). *Correspondence:* Professor Christopher Day, School of Education, University of Nottingham, Jubilee Campus, Wollaton Road, Nottingham NG8 1BB, United Kingdom ([christopher.day@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:christopher.day@nottingham.ac.uk)).

**LESLEY SAUNDERS** joined the General Teaching Council (England) as a policy adviser for research at its inception in September 2000. Prior to that she was for many years a principal research officer at the National Foundation for Educational Research. She has written extensively for policy, academic and practitioner audiences and spoken at many national and international conferences. Lesley has taught in the primary, secondary and adult sectors and is a visiting professor at the University of London's Institute of Education. She is also a published poet and has written books and articles about women's creativity. *Correspondence:* Dr Lesley Saunders, General Teaching Council for England, Whittington House, 19-30 Alfred Place, London WC1E 7EA, United Kingdom ([lesley.saunders@gtce.org.uk](mailto:lesley.saunders@gtce.org.uk)), and University of London Institute of Education.





# The Annabelle Dixon Fund

We mark with sadness a year since the passing of a dear friend and colleague Annabelle Dixon. Annabelle was an inspired and inspiring teacher and educationalist – a researcher and writer: contributor, campaigner and co-editor of *FORUM* - the journal for promoting 3-19 comprehensive education. She joined Lucy Cavendish College, Cambridge, as the Times Educational Research Fellow in Educational Policy during a distinguished career in early years education. This spanned the domains of research, publication and the policy environment as well as the classroom she enjoyed so much. In the Lucy Cavendish newsletter of 2005, a piece on Annabelle concluded with the words ‘her work continues’ and this is demonstrably the case. In this time two books jointly authored by Annabelle have been chosen as the *Times Educational Supplement* Book of the Week. *Learning without Limits* was reviewed by Tim Brighouse, who declared that everyone in education should read it and consequently provided a copy for every school in the London Challenge.

Annabelle’s classroom was, in the words of a friend, ‘a place of genuine intellectual search.’ As a psychologist and teacher she was committed to offering inspiring but grounded experiences to children as the essential basis for such a search. The second book, *First Hand Experience: what matters to children* is dedicated to Annabelle, who died while the book was in press. Tim Smit stated ‘this book could save lives’ and hosted a two day conference around the publication at the Eden project he created in Cornwall. A bursary scheme for teachers to attend was set up by the authors in Annabelle’s memory.

A fund has now been set up at the College in Annabelle’s name, with initial donations from three former fellows of Lucy Cavendish. Collectively we sought some way to continue the spirit of generosity, collegiality and intellectual curiosity that she encompassed. We propose to use this gift to establish an endowment fund to enable the College to make modest grants to students. In consultation with friends, family and colleagues it was decided to make an annual award to a student who has made the most of her time at Lucy Cavendish during that year.

**If you would like to make a donation to the fund please contact  
Head of Development at Lucy Cavendish,  
Meryl Davis ([mgd24@cam.ac.uk](mailto:mgd24@cam.ac.uk)) or  
Jane McGregor ([jane.mcgregor@educationresearch.co.uk](mailto:jane.mcgregor@educationresearch.co.uk))**



A ground-breaking project helping large secondary schools across the UK develop human scale principles and practices.

To find out more about the Human Scale Schools project and how to apply for a grant go to [www.hse.org.uk](http://www.hse.org.uk) or contact [simon.richey@gulbenkian.org.uk](mailto:simon.richey@gulbenkian.org.uk)

**Human Scale Education**  
because people matter

