VARIATIONS IN TEACHERS’ WORK, LIVES AND EFFECTIVENESS (VITAE)

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Introduction

This Research Brief presents the core messages, principal research questions and key findings from the ‘Variations in Teachers’ Work, Lives and Effectiveness’ (VITAE) project, a four-year (2001-2005) longitudinal study conducted in seven local authorities (LAs), funded by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES). The research was jointly conducted by the School of Education, University of Nottingham and London University Institute of Education. The key aim of the research was to investigate factors contributing to variations in teachers’ effectiveness at different stages of their careers, working in a range of schools in different contexts (Day et al, 2006a, Day et al, 2006b)

Core Messages

1. ‘Effectiveness’ is a complex idea that needs to be understood both in relation to teachers’ perceptions and how these vary over time in different institutional and personal contexts; and in comparison with other teachers in similar contexts in terms of value-added pupil attainment.

2. There are significant variations in both teachers’ perceived and relative effectiveness across year groups and sectors. Teachers’ capacities to be effective are influenced by variations in their work, lives and identities and their capacities to manage these.

3. Teachers’ effectiveness is not simply a consequence of age or experience, but is moderated by:
   • their professional life phases;
   • their sense of professional identity, something which is neither intrinsically stable nor unstable, but can be affected positively or negatively by different degrees of tension experienced between their own educational ideals and aspirations, personal life experiences, the leadership and cultures in their schools, pupils’ behaviour and relationships and the impact of external policies on their work;
   • their commitment and resilience, qualities which are dependent on their capacities to manage interactions between personal, work and professional factors which mediate their professional lives and identities positively or negatively.

4. Teachers’ effectiveness is mediated by:
   • continuing professional development, which has a consistently positive influence on teachers across all professional life phases, though needs and concerns vary in relation to these;
   • the extent to which teachers sustain their commitment (i.e. are resilient):
• the quality of leadership, both at school and department level, relationships with colleagues, and personal support; these are all key influencing factors on teachers' motivation, self-efficacy, commitment and quality retention.

5. Teachers' long term effectiveness may be at risk for teachers who:

• work in secondary schools: teachers in primary schools are more likely to sustain their commitment over a career than secondary teachers.

• work in schools in more challenging socio-economic contexts: these teachers are more likely to experience greater challenges to their health, well-being, and thus resilience, than those who work in relatively more advantaged schools.

6. There is a statistically significant association between the levels of pupils' progress and attainment at KS1, 2 and 3 (English and maths) and the extent to which teachers sustain their commitment.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The key questions addressed were:

1. Does teacher effectiveness vary from one year to another and in terms of different pupil outcomes and do teachers necessarily become more effective over time? If so, how and why?

2. What are the roles of biography and identity?

3. How do school and/or department leaders influence teachers' practice and their effectiveness? What particular kinds of influence does CPD have on teachers' effectiveness?

4. Are teachers equally effective for different pupil groups or is there differential effectiveness relating (for example) to gender or socio-economic status? If so, how and why?

5. Do the factors which influence effectiveness vary for teachers working in different school cultures and contexts, or for different kinds of outcomes? If so, how and why?

6. Do factors influencing teachers' effectiveness vary across different sectors (primary and secondary) and different age groups (Key Stage 1, 2 and 3)? If so, how and why?

The teachers and the schools

The sample for this research was drawn from seven LAs which were nationally, and geographically, representative and included both large shire counties and authorities in ethnically diverse and deprived inner cities. An initial teacher survey in these LAs assisted in the selection of samples of 100 schools and 300 case study teachers for the study. Half of the sample were primary teachers (Years 2 and 6) from 75 primary schools. The secondary teachers taught English or mathematics to Year 9 pupils in 25 schools. These teachers were representative of the national profile in terms of age, experience and gender. The schools themselves were selected to be representative in terms of level of social disadvantage (measured by percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) and attainment levels). The choice of teachers in Years 2, 6 and 9 was such that the key stage national curriculum test results could be used as pupil outcome measures. A limitation of the research design was that classroom observational data were not included.

Data collection

Two dimensions of effectiveness were identified: perceived effectiveness (relational) and effectiveness as defined by value added measures of pupil progress and attainment (relative). Associations between teachers' perceptions of progress and past and present effectiveness and their effectiveness in terms of value-added pupil attainment were explored. Perceived and relative effectiveness were found to be associated. The main data concerning perceived effectiveness were collected through twice yearly semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with teachers. These were supplemented at various stages of the research by document analysis and interviews with school leaders and groups of pupils. Measures of teachers' relative effectiveness as expressed through improvements in pupils' progress and attainment were collected through matching baseline test results at the beginning of the year, with pupils' national curriculum results at the end. This enabled differences in the relative 'value added' to be analysed, using multilevel statistical techniques that
included adjustment for individual background factors such as gender and FSM eligibility as well as prior attainment. Pupil attitude surveys were also conducted each year to gather pupils’ views of their schools and teachers. Using these qualitative and quantitative data, detailed, holistic profiles of teachers’ work and lives over time were then constructed to see if patterns emerged over a three year period in terms of perceived and relative effectiveness and, if so, the reasons for these (see Day et al., 2006c).

Data analysis

The first stage analysis of the data took place shortly after the interview was conducted, by the researcher who had undertaken the interview. This resulted in a preliminary understanding of the responses given and the development of analytical codes. The second stage analysis included the use of NVivo (computer-assisted data analysis software) and the construction of analytical matrices (Miles and Huberman, 1994) which provided powerful tools for the storage and synthesis of data collected and a range of key attributes which were linked to the interview data at an individual teacher level.

The areas on which the second stage qualitative/quantitative analysis focused were: professional life phase, identity, commitment and resilience. Each of these was explored in relation to teachers’ effectiveness, both perceived and relative, measured in terms of value-added pupil progress and attainment. Individual profiles (cameos) were constructed for teachers and updated after each round of data collection.

These profiles, which included information regarding, for example, teachers’ professional life phases, identities, pupils’ views, and pupils’ value-added data, were shown to teachers during the final round of interviews as a means of validating researcher interpretation of results. The qualitative and quantitative analyses were synthesised and thus contributed to the development of associations between different features of teachers’ lives, work, identities and their effects on pupils’.

KEY FINDINGS

The findings presented in this Research Brief are organised under three analytical frames: A) moderating influences; B) mediating influences; and, C) outcomes. Moderating factors are features of the wider context in which the teachers work (i.e. their personal and professional life phase and identities). They interact with combinations of influences which mediate these, i.e. pupils, policies, school leadership and colleagues, socio-economic contexts, school phase and CPD. It is the success with which teachers are able to manage the interactions between these moderating factors and mediating influences which potentially shapes the outcomes i.e. their capacities to be effective.

A. Moderating Factors

1.0 Teacher Development and Effectiveness (Key Question 1)

Teachers’ effectiveness is not simply a consequence of age or experience. The results identify teachers who are more, and less, effective in terms of their own perceptions and pupils’ progress and attainment in each phase of their professional lives. Teachers’ professional life phases are core moderating influences upon their effectiveness. Six professional life phases, relating to experience rather than age or responsibilities, were identified. Within each phase the majority of teachers perceived increasing effectiveness, though there were different challenges and concerns in each phase. Teachers in each phase were placed into groups reflecting the extent to which they were sustaining their commitment.

• 0-3 years - Commitment: Support and challenge. The focus here was a developing sense of efficacy in the classroom. This was a phase of high commitment. A crucial factor in a successful negotiation of this period was the support of school/department leaders. Poor pupil behaviour was seen as having a negative impact. Teachers in this professional life phase had either a developing sense of efficacy (60%) or a reducing sense of efficacy (40%).

• 4-7 years - Identity and efficacy in the classroom. The key characteristic was the increased confidence about being effective teachers. Seventy-eight per cent of teachers in this phase had taken on additional responsibilities, which further strengthened their emerging identities. The management of heavy workloads had a negative impact on some teachers. Teachers in this professional life
phase were grouped as a) sustaining a strong sense of identity, self-efficacy and effectiveness (49%); b) sustaining identity, efficacy and effectiveness (31%); or c) identity, efficacy and effectiveness at risk (20%).

- **8-15 years** - Managing changes in role and identity: Growing tensions and transitions. This phase was seen as a watershed in teachers’ professional development. Eighty per cent had posts of responsibility and for many there were decisions to make about progression in their career. Of the teachers in this professional life phase 76 per cent were judged to have sustained engagement, with 24 per cent showing detachment/ loss of motivation.

- **16-23 years** - Work-life tensions: Challenges to motivation and commitment. As well as managing heavy workloads, many were facing additional demands outside school, making work-life balance a key concern. The struggle for balance was often reported as a negative impact. The risk at this stage was a feeling of career stagnation linked to a lack of support in school and negative perceptions of pupil behaviour. The three sub-groups of teachers in this professional life phase were: a) further career advancement and good results leading to increased motivation/commitment (52%); b) sustained motivation, commitment and effectiveness (34%); or c) heavy workload/competing tensions/career stagnation leading to decreased motivation, commitment and effectiveness (14%).

- **24-30 years** - Challenges to sustaining motivation. Maintaining motivation in the face of external policies and initiatives, which were viewed negatively, and declining pupil behaviour was the core struggle for teachers in this phase. While 60 per cent of primary teachers in this phase were judged to have retained a strong sense of motivation, over half the secondary teachers were rated as losing motivation. Teachers in this phase were categorised as either sustaining a strong sense of motivation and commitment (54%); or holding on but losing motivation (46%).

- **31+ years** - Sustaining/declining motivation, coping with change, looking to retire. For the majority of teachers this was a phase of high commitment. Of the small group of teachers in this phase (22), almost two thirds were judged to have high motivation and commitment. Positive teacher-pupil relationships and pupil progress were the basis of this. Government policy, health issues and pupil behaviour were often perceived as the most negative factors for this group. Teachers in this phase were seen as either maintaining commitment (64%); or ‘tired and trapped’ (36%).

### 2.0 Professional Identities: the emotional contexts of teaching (Key Question 2)

The results show that teachers’ capacities to sustain their effectiveness in different phases of their professional lives are affected positively and negatively by their sense of professional identity. Teacher identity comprises the interactions between professional, situated and personal dimensions (Day *et al*, 2005). Professional identity reflects social and policy expectations of what a good teacher is and the educational ideals of the teacher. The situated dimension is located in a specific school and context and is affected by local conditions (i.e. pupil behaviour, level of disadvantage), leadership, support and feedback. The personal dimension is based on life outside school and is linked to family and social roles. Effective teaching requires emotional and intellectual investments from teachers which draw upon personal and professional capacities and experience, knowledge and skills (Day *et al*, 2006d). Teachers’ well-being and perceived effectiveness at work were affected by life experiences and events, both positively and negatively. The majority of teachers (67%) had a positive sense of identity. They identified a close association between their sense of positive, stable identity and their self-efficacy and agency – their belief that they could “make a difference” to the learning and achievement of their pupils. However, one in three teachers did not have a positive sense of identity.

Four scenarios were identified which reflected different relationships between these dimensions of identity:

- The first was holding the three in balance. Over a third (35%, N=102) of teachers were in this group, with over half coming from primary schools and the majority coming from more advantaged schools. The dominant characteristics of this group of teachers
included being highly motivated, committed and self-efficacious.

- In the second scenario, one dimension was dominant, for example, immediate school demands dominating and impacting on the other two. This was the largest group (131 teachers), predominantly from the 4-15 years professional life phases and more likely to be female (82%). Most were highly committed and saw themselves as effective. A third of these teachers were rated as vulnerable in terms of resilience, while less than a quarter reported positive well-being. Coping strategies included accepting the imbalance, subjugating one dimension (‘life on hold’) or tolerating it for the present.

- In the third scenario, two dimensions dominated and impacted on the third. Over half of this smaller group (44) were secondary teachers. While their motivation levels generally remained high, they were more negative about their well-being and work-life balance. Half were judged to be vulnerable in terms of effectiveness and were likely to use strategies of resisting change and separating one dimension from another.

- The fourth scenario represents a state of extreme fluctuation in which each dimension is unstable. Of the 18 teachers in this small but vulnerable group, nearly three-quarters (72%) taught in socially disadvantaged schools (FSM 3 and 4). Teachers in FSM 4 were more likely to be resilient than those in other schools, but were, also, more likely to experience health problems.

B. Mediating Factors

3.0 Leadership, Colleagues and Effectiveness (Key Question 3)

Eighty-five per cent of teachers across all professional life phases, scenarios and school contexts and phases found that the quality of leadership at school and departmental level and relationships with colleagues were major factors which influenced - positively or negatively - their commitment and their motivation to remain in or leave a school. Seventy-four per cent of these (N=262) experienced positive relationships with school leaders; and 87 per cent (N=276) experienced positive relationships with colleagues. Both were perceived to be key contributing factors to their capacity to sustain commitment and their effectiveness.

4.0 The Influence of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) on Effectiveness (Key Question 3)

CPD had a consistently positive influence on teachers across all professional life phases. Four out of five teachers were generally satisfied with the formal CPD which they experienced and its quality. The same proportion, however, was dissatisfied with the time available to reflect on their teaching and to learn from colleagues.

Teachers across all professional life phases felt that heavy workload, a lack of time and financial constraints were important inhibitors in their pursuit of professional development.

The purposes of CPD were classified under five headings: Classroom knowledge; leadership/management (role effectiveness); whole school policy needs; external policy implementation; professional/personal development (long term needs). Most schools did not, however, offer a wide range of CPD. Rather, CPD experiences focused predominantly upon updating professional and role-related knowledge and skills.

Teachers’ in all professional life phases associated CPD needs with building their emotional, health and intellectual capacities in response to different Scenarios of their professional lives. Teachers in phases 0-3 and 31+ were primarily drawn to CPD that addressed classroom knowledge. At 4-7 personal development became the most frequent. Middle career teachers (8-30) reported an increasing proportion of role effectiveness activities, though personal development remained important. Teachers in more disadvantaged schools generally placed more emphasis on classroom knowledge related CPD and CPD which related to their socio-emotional professional needs than those

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1 The % of pupils in a school eligible for free school meals (FSM) provides an indication of low income and social disadvantage. It was used to divide schools into four categories from least to most disadvantaged. FSM 1 describes schools with 0-8% of pupils eligible for free school meals. This percentage rises to 9-20% for FSM 2 schools, 21-35% for FSM 3 schools, and over 35% for FSM 4 schools.
in more advantaged schools, where the demands were more evenly spread across the classifications. Collaborative learning with colleagues within and across schools was rated as a highly important form of CPD.

5.0 The Influence of Pupil Behaviour and Relationships on Effectiveness (Key Question 4)

Positive relationships with pupils were viewed as central to teachers' self-efficacy and ability to teach well. Ninety per cent of teachers reported positive relationships, irrespective of their levels of motivation and commitment. In contrast, 50 per cent of the teachers rated pupil behaviour as having a negative impact. There was evidence that pupils' attitudes to school and their teachers were less positive in Year 9 than in Years 2 and 6. The different pupils in each of the three years of the survey showed similar attitudes towards their school and their VITAE teacher. Teachers across the sample reported that the disruptive behaviour of a minority of pupils impeded their ability to be effective. Teachers in the first three years of their careers were particularly concerned about their ability to manage disruptive pupils.

6.0 The Influence of School Context and School Phase on Effectiveness (Key Questions 5 and 6)

Teachers in schools in challenging socio-economic contexts were not necessarily less effective than others. However, schools' socio-economic contexts affected teachers' capacities to sustain commitment and be effective. Teachers in FSM 3/4 schools referred more frequently than their colleagues in FSM 1/2 schools to lack of parental support, deteriorating pupil behaviour, failing energy, excessive workload, health problems and demoralization. It was the extent to which the experience of these challenges was ameliorated by the support received which determined whether teachers were able to maintain their commitment and effectiveness.

There were different cultures in primary and secondary schools which also impacted upon teachers' capacities to sustain commitment. School phase appeared to have a significant influence on teachers' commitment and resilience, particularly in their mid-career professional life phases. The effect of this was that primary school teachers (85%) were more likely to report positive experiences than their secondary peers (63%) during the 8-15 professional life phase.

C. Outcomes

7.0 Variations in Teachers' Effectiveness (Key Question 1)

Patterns of similarity and difference were found within and among teachers in different professional life phases and professional identities and between teachers' effectiveness and the personal, workplace and broader professional development influences which mediated these.

8.0 Teachers' Initial Motivation and Sustained Commitment (Key Question 1)

What motivates teachers and sustains their level of commitment impacts on their effectiveness. Of the 1143 respondents to the initial questionnaire survey, 51 per cent gave 'working with children' as their motivation for becoming a teacher. A further 17 per cent gave 'wanting to make a difference'. Thirty-two per cent of secondary teachers gave interest in a particular subject as their reason, a motivation hardly found in primary teachers (1%, N=1).

When motivation was followed up in interviews, 71 per cent reported that the original motivation still held. Whether or not there had been a shift in motivation, 89 per cent of the project teachers intended to remain in teaching.

9.0 Commitment, Resilience and Effectiveness (Key Question 1)

Statistically significant associations were found between pupils' levels of attainment and teachers' commitment and resilience. These were moderated by professional life phase and identities; and mediated, positively or negatively, by interactions between i) personal values, life experiences and events (personal dimension); ii) professional beliefs and aspirations, and external policies (professional dimension); iii) the socio-economic context of the school, composition of the pupil population, school leadership, and colleagues (situated dimension). Whilst such interactions affected the commitment,
resilience and effectiveness of teachers, they varied between primary and secondary teachers within and across each professional life phase and varied also, for a significant number of teachers in secondary schools, according to the level of socio-economic advantage and disadvantage of the school. Teachers’ capacities to sustain commitment (i.e. resilience) and thus effectiveness were related to the ways they managed these and the support they received in doing so.

10.0 Pupil Progress and Attainment (Key Question 4)

Differences in the characteristics of pupils do not fully account for the differences in levels of pupil attainment or progress between classes and teaching groups. Statistically significant associations between teachers’ commitment, resilience and pupils' progress and levels of pupils' performance in value added attainments in national tests at age 7 (Key Stage 1), 11 (Key Stage 2) and 14 (English and Maths, Key Stage 3) were established. We believe that this is the first time that research has found associations between these. Pupils of teachers in each professional life phase who were sustaining or continuing to build their commitment and resilience (74%) were more likely to attain results at or above the level expected, regardless of school context. Pupils of the minority of teachers who were not sustaining their commitment and resilience (26%) were more likely to attain results below the level expected, regardless of school context. The qualitative data revealed no systematic links between relative effectiveness and age, professional life phase or gender.

How well teachers were managing their work-life balance, however, did appear to relate to their effectiveness. Relatively less effective teachers were also more likely to report personal factors, pupil behaviours or policy initiatives which were impacting negatively on their work.

CONCLUSIONS

VITAE is the most comprehensive, large-scale and extensive study of teachers’ work and lives and the first to explore associations between these and effectiveness. Because of this, and because it was over real time, using mixed-method approaches over a three year period, it was able to take a multi perspective view of stability and variation among teachers, their experiences, the moderating and mediating influences on these in different phases of their professional and personal lives and identities, and their perceived and relative effectiveness. It was, therefore, able to generate both a more detailed and a more holistic view of teachers’ work and lives than has been possible in previous studies.

The research has 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. If teachers are to manage the tensions they face within and across both, and sustain and, where appropriate, increase their commitment, resilience and effectiveness, they and those responsible for their leadership must draw upon and be encouraged to build understandings of the cognitive and emotional contexts in which they work in order to increase their capacities to manage these. This in turn is likely to foster their perceived and relative effectiveness.

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 effectiveness. It suggests that what is required is a better understanding of the moderating and mediating factors which enable teachers, not simply to remain in teaching, but more importantly, to sustain their commitment, resilience and, therefore, quality and effectiveness over the whole of their careers.

REFERENCES


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Additional Information

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