Surviving or thriving? Do teachers have lower perceived control and well-being than other professions?

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Abstract

Teaching is not what it used to be. The complexity and intensity of the pressures on teachers and the pace of education reform are unprecedented. The aim of this research was to explore perceived control and well-being in teachers and other professionals.

A mixed methods design was selected. Phase 1 consisted of an online quantitative survey (298 participants, 222 females, 76 males). Perceived control was measured using the Brief Levenson LOC and Generalised Self-Efficacy Scales, well-being was measured using the Life Orientation Test-Revised, Satisfaction with Life, Subjective Happiness and Ego Resilience Scales. Phase 2 consisted of semi-structured interviews (n = 6); thematic analysis was carried out. It was hypothesised that teachers have lower perceived control and well-being than other professionals, and that older teachers have higher internal control than younger teachers. Independent t-tests using teachers (n = 150) and non-teachers (n = 148) revealed that teachers' mean scores were significantly different to those of non-teachers.

Teachers' perceived control and well-being were significantly lower than those of non-teachers (p > 0.001). The hypothesis that teachers have significantly lower perceived control and well-being than other professionals was supported. Four themes related to control were located in the qualitative analysis: autonomy, authenticity, connection to others and resilience. The study found that there were similarities between professions in terms of need for control over one's work. Teachers value connections more highly; non-teachers value objectivity and independence more highly. It is suggested that non-teachers are better prepared to deal with change than teachers.

The results are discussed in the context of ongoing reform in the education system, focusing on what actions can be taken to enhance teachers' well-being.

Introduction

> ... the scale, complexity and intensity of pressures on [teachers] in the postmodern world are unprecedented. (Galton & MacBeath, 2008: 5)

The English education system has undergone significant change in the past twenty or so years. It is frequently argued that initiatives such as the introduction of the National Curriculum, Standard Assessment Tests (SATs), Ofsted and a plethora of National Strategies (ranging from Early Years Foundation Stage creativity and critical thinking to Secondary Level Improving the Teaching of Shakespeare) have improved educational standards; on the other hand, there are numerous studies which contradict this. As far back as 2001, the then Department for Education and Skills commissioned a review of teachers' workload. Alongside the intense working week, the following key issues were identified:

> Teachers in many schools perceive a lack of control and ownership over their work, undertaking tasks – particularly documentation – which they do not believe are necessary to support learning ... Some head-teachers and senior teachers also report perceived lack of ownership ... Although in general teachers, head-teachers and senior teachers welcomed the spirit of many government initiatives, they felt that the pace and manner of change was working against achieving high standards, that they were insufficiently supported to meet these changes, and not accorded the professional trust that they merited. (PwC, 2001: 1)

Insofar as teachers believe that these issues are beyond their control, various psychology theories, for example self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and perceived control (Thompson,

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2005), suggest that their well-being will be adversely impacted. On the positive side, over 80 per cent of teachers (Sturman et al., 2005) described the single biggest reward in teaching as the satisfaction of helping children both academically and personally. Clearly the ability to foster and maintain positive relationships is an important part of teaching well, the other side of the coin being that poor relationships in school may adversely affect teachers' well-being.

The aim of the current study was to explore teachers' well-being in comparison with other professional groups, for example, in health, social work, finance and human resources. The research was conducted in 2009, a year after England and Wales had seen its biggest national strike by teachers in 21 years, disrupting nearly a third of schools and closing one in ten completely. In one study of teacher attitudes carried out by the National Foundation for Educational Research, 90.3 per cent of teachers rated the status of the teaching profession at 3 out of 5 or lower (where 1 is low and 5 is high) (Sturman et al., 2005). What's more, 57 per cent of teachers take an average of nearly two weeks' sick leave a year (from a total of 38 working weeks), amounting to over 2.9 million lost days per annum (DCSF, 2008). For many teachers in England and Wales it seems that teaching is a dissatisfied and dissatisfying profession.

At their best, teachers act as role models, inspiring children to a lifelong love of learning, encouraging them to identify and develop their strengths (whether academic or vocational), building their confidence and self-assurance, and enabling them to reach their full potential. At their worst, not only can teachers turn children off learning for life, they can damage self-worth, foster distrust in grown-ups and authority figures, and launch children on a downward path. Whether we like it or not, teachers, and school staff generally, have an extraordinary influence on future generations.

Empirical evidence is now emerging that teachers' well-being is linked to school performance. A recent research study of 24,100 teachers in 428 schools suggests that average levels of teacher well-being within schools are correlated with pupil performance (Briner & Dewberry, 2007).

Primary hypotheses and methodology

This study set out to test two hypotheses: firstly, that teachers have lower perceived control in the workplace than other professional groups; secondly, that teachers have lower well-being than other professional groups.

A mixed methods design was selected. Phase 1 consisted of an online quantitative survey (Table 1).

Perceived control was measured using the Brief Levenson Locus of Control and Generalised Self-Efficacy scales. Well-being was measured using the Life Orientation Test-Revised, Satisfaction with Life, Subjective Happiness and Ego Resilience Scales. Phase 2 consisted of semi-structured interviews (n = 6) after which a thematic analysis was carried out.

Table 1. Survey participant data

Profession	No. of participants
Teaching	150
Other professions (e.g. doctor, social worker, pharmacist, HR and finance managers)	148
Total	298
Gender	
Female	222
Male	76
Total	298

Results

Independent t-tests using teachers (n = 150) and non-teachers (n = 148) revealed that teachers' mean scores were significantly different to non-teachers'. Teachers' perceived control and well-being were significantly lower than non-teachers' (p > 0.001). Additionally, t-tests revealed that teachers aged 36+ (n = 72) had significantly lower internal control than teachers aged under 36 (n = 78) (p = 0.028). The hypothesis that teachers have significantly lower perceived control and well-being than other professionals was supported. Four themes related to control were located in the qualitative analysis: autonomy, authenticity, connection to others and resilience.

The theme of autonomy focused on wanting choice over how to do your job, personal influence and freedom to exercise professional judgement, and to interpret and 'craft' your job (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). The findings suggest that teachers feel they have less freedom, choice and control over what they do every day compared to non-teachers, and that the biggest influences on this are the National Curriculum and Ofsted requirements.

The theme of authenticity focused on congruence and compromise, that is how far professionals are able to operate within their values, how they prioritise clients' well-being (Ozar, 1993) and their need for rigour and professional excellence. The theme of connections focused on social support from colleagues, bosses and other related professionals, trust and the overall quality of relationships in the organisation, as well as teachers' attachment to their pupils. Non-teachers in particular talked about the importance of retaining their professional independence and objectivity. Teachers on the other hand emphasised the importance of good relationships with pupils, colleagues, managers, other professionals and parents. Connections, and being able to put pupils first, were what really mattered to them. The fourth theme of resilience focused on the ability to adapt to change, including self-efficacy, personal attributes such as assertiveness and confidence, and techniques used every day to cope with change. Teachers mentioned various ways they could mitigate the impact of constant change on their feelings of control and well-being. Solutions included working part-time, prioritising, using time-management techniques, saying no and crafting their jobs to focus more on relationships than on tasks. At a micro-level, at least some schools are achieving greater

participation and commitment by involving staff in the discussion about how to implement change. Despite this, it appears that the sheer volume of new initiatives may be preventing new practice from becoming embedded before the next change is introduced. Other non-teaching professionals also commented on the rate of change being difficult to manage, especially in public sector professions such as health. Like teachers, they too wanted less change and more say in its implementation.

Conclusion

This mixed methods study showed that teachers have significantly lower perceived control and well-being than do other, non-teaching professionals. The qualitative analysis revealed how the profession and practice of school teaching has changed and is continuing to change, and how this change is perceived and managed by teachers in the classroom. There is no doubt that for the professionals interviewed, their autonomy, that is the opportunity to decide for themselves how to do their job, was crucial to their sense of control. In addition, the congruence of their professional values and obligations clearly distinguished them. That said, teaching values appeared to be different to other professional values. Connections with others were fundamental to teachers. Not only did human connections provide a source of well-being, for some interviewees focusing on building solid and supportive relationships with others also helped them rise above issues caused by lack of control, whether perceived or real. Finally, their ability to adapt to and manage change (whether generated from within the profession or prompted by external sources) clearly influenced their level of well-being and differentiated those who were thriving from those merely surviving.

The qualitative data tell a complex story, however. While some teachers acknowledge the improvements in teaching practice that reform has brought, all struggled to cope with the sheer volume of additional non-teaching tasks (paperwork, data collection and analysis, etc.). At least some of the basic psychological needs of teachers are not currently being met, in particular their need for autonomy, relatedness and competence (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

This research was a relatively small snapshot of teachers and other professionals but it highlights real issues in the ways educational reform is carried out. Disengaged and demotivated teachers are costly for the country, not just in terms of sick leave, but because they are poor role models. Finding ways to support them in developing greater resilience, well-being and perceived control may help to address the issues highlighted, have a positive impact on schools' performance and, as one teacher suggested, transform them from surviving to thriving.

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Biography

Bridget Grenville-Cleave (MSc MAPP) is director of Workmad Ltd, which specialises in applying positive psychology through training, consulting and coaching. She is currently engaged in developing a well-being curriculum for Haberdashers' Aske's School as well as the UEL Masters in Applied Positive Psychology foundation course. Bridget is author of *Positive Psychology – A Practical Guide* (Icon Books, 2012). She writes a monthly column, combining practical application with the very latest research, for *Positive Psychology News Daily*.

Dr Ilona Boniwell is the programme leader for the first Masters Degree in Applied Positive Psychology (MAPP), the first postgraduate degree in positive psychology in Europe. Ilona is the author of *Postitve Psychology in a Nutshell* (2006, PWBC) as well as four other books. She founded the European Network of Positive Psychology, organised the first European Congress of Positive Psychology (June 2002, Winchester) and was the first vice-chair of the International Positive Psychology Association (IPPA).