ACTIVITIES AND ACHIEVEMENTS QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Non-Technical Summary

A 1000 word (maximum) summary of the main research results, in non-technical language, should be provided below. The summary might be used by ESRC to publicise the research. It should cover the aims and objectives of the project, main research results and significant academic achievements, dissemination activities and potential or actual impacts on policy and practice.

This current research extends our previous research by mapping changes in primary teachers’ identity, commitment and perspectives and subjective experiences of occupational career in the context of performative primary school cultures. Cultures of performativity in English primary schools refer to systems and relationships of: target-setting; Ofsted inspections; school league tables constructed from pupil test scores; performance management; performance related pay; threshold assessment; and advanced skills teachers. Systems which demand that teachers ‘perform’ and in which individuals are made accountable. These policy measures, introduced to improve levels of achievement and increased international economic competitiveness, have, potentially, profound implications for the meaning and experience of primary teachers’ work; their identities; their commitment to teaching; and how they view their careers.

It has been argued that the performative school cultures contribute negatively to teacher well-being, morale and commitment. The research aimed to provide in-depth knowledge of school organisation, school climate, and teacher culture; and teachers’ subjective experiences of these in their work of teaching.

The research had five broad objectives, to:

(1) investigate the effects of performative culture on primary teachers' identity, commitment and career.
(2) consider the impact of these effects on teacher recruitment, retention and morale.
(3) compare these effects with, Sweden and Finland.
(4) develop theory in the area of identity, commitment and career in late modernity.
(5) make recommendations for policy at government, local area, school and individual levels aimed at promoting successful and positive adaptation to the changes that are occurring in teaching at the moment; and that will improve morale and assist the retention of teachers.

We have conducted interviews and recorded life-history details with 5 headteachers (3 female and 2 male) and 37 teachers (32 female and 5 male). The teachers interviewed represented a range of ages and career stages. In addition we have visited the 6 contrasting research schools in 5 Local Authorities to carry out observations throughout a school year.

These measures, introduced for social justice reasons and increased international economic competitiveness as vital to the knowledge economy, had profound implications for the meaning and experience of primary teachers’ work; their identities, their commitment to teaching; and how they viewed their careers.

Themes in the data reveal changed commitments and professional identities. The literature on commitment in the past stressed strong vocational commitment, and...
The teachers who had an initial vocational commitment and strong service ethic were the older teachers in our sample. They identified strongly with teachers and teaching from an early age. The younger teachers, many of whom had followed a previous career in another occupation tended to stress ‘interpersonal’ values and had teacher and mother identities invested in love and care. While some expressed vocationalism in the form of wanting ‘to make a difference’ they also stressed the importance of time compatibility for family-friendly work and child care. Other instrumental concerns were also clear in a society in which it is difficult to generate income to, for example, buy a house owing to high cost of living, and it seemed almost a necessity for some of the teachers to have dual income relationships. In primary teaching these are now important commitments.

In the ‘highs’ and ‘lows’ of school life a number of factors supported some of the teachers’ initial commitments, thus, providing ‘satisfiers’ in their work. However, there were also factors which impacted negatively on teacher commitment. For our teachers the psychic rewards of teaching provided the main basis of commitment and professional work satisfaction. Typical examples involved the teachers deriving satisfaction, pleasure and reward from seeing a child suddenly grasping something they had found difficult before – or seeing the sometimes rapid cognitive, social and emotional development (especially the case in the early years) of the children.

These teacher strategies in performative school cultures highlighted the impact and saliency of testing regimes. The negative influence of initiatives to standardise teaching approaches was pervasive. There was evidence, however, of teachers investing in a more creative professional identity in their involvement in nurturing programmes and creative projects. These were all extra, however, to their main tasks of meeting targets in the performative cultures. Whether the schools and teachers developed creative approaches to increase test scores or to ameliorate the worst effects of testing they demanded increased effort and commitment from the teachers. In terms of teacher careers, some of the teachers were using the creative projects as school improvement strategies required for headteacher training schemes and subsequent promotion. Some of the younger teachers who had entered teaching from other occupations and professions had chosen teaching as a potential occupation for engaging in ‘more meaningful’ or ‘more creative’ work. Our sample had a number of new entrants to teaching who appear to be able to make more career choices in their twenties and thirties based on opportunity and a desire to change careers as a result of evaluations of their situations and circumstances. We found the ‘mission’ to teach was still there as was the humanist solidarity with young children, expressed as ‘love’ and ‘caring’. The material suitability of primary teaching for parents of young children was still a factor but so were choices based on improved workplace welfare and responsibility in school teaching in comparison with other occupations. The performativity policy pressures and their dominant practices influenced the feelings these teachers had for their work and affected their professional identities, both positively and negatively. The teachers of our previous researches had, in many cases, owing to their strong professional and vocational commitment, failed to ‘juggle’ the personal and professional and with this failure came an identity crisis, and vulnerability of the ‘self’. Teachers in the contemporary context seem much more adept and realistic in both recognising and managing their range of parallel commitments and identities. They have become more strategic and political in defending their self-identities. Some evidence suggests their priorities have been to hold on to their humanistic values and their self-esteem, while adjusting their commitment.

See below for significant Outputs and Dissemination opportunities.