Teachers in China given highest level of public respect

By Sean Coughlan
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Teachers in China have the highest levels of public respect, according to an international study comparing their status in 21 countries.

Teachers in the UK were in 10th place in the global index which was compiled by the University of Sussex professor Peter Dolton.

The study was based on surveys of 1,000 adults in each of the countries.

This examined public attitudes to professional status, trust, pay and the desirability of teaching as a career.

The study confirmed the high status of teachers in China, where there is a strong cultural emphasis on the importance of education.

"Teachers are revered," says Prof Dolton.

A large majority of adults in China believed that students would respect their teachers - in contrast to most European countries where only a minority believed that students would show respect.

Classroom respect
In the UK, only about one in five adults believed that students showed their teachers respect in school.

And while teachers in China were compared with doctors, in the UK they were more likely to be bracketed with nurses and social workers.

In the US, people compared teachers with librarians and in Japan the feeling was that they were on a par with local government officials.

This reveals the cultural differences in how the role of teaching is perceived, says Prof Dolton, a professor of economics at Sussex University and senior research fellow at the Centre for Economic Performance at the London School of Economics.

The status of teachers in China was considerably above the next highest countries, which were Greece, Turkey and South...
Korea.

The study, published by the Varkey GEMS Foundation, also included some results that might be thought of as unexpected.

Finland, often seen as a model for recruiting high-quality, high-status teachers, was in the bottom half of the rankings, in 13th place. While Germany (16th) and Japan (17th) were ranked among the lowest countries.

No countries from sub-Saharan Africa were included in the survey.

The findings for the UK are based on a single national figure, rather than individual devolved administrations.

They show a positive picture in public attitudes, with much higher levels of trust in the education system than in the US and most other European countries in the survey.

There was a considerable level of public support for teachers - with a majority believing that they should be better paid and also underestimating the starting salary for teachers (currently about £22,000 in England outside London).

More people thought that teachers' unions should have greater influence, compared with those who thought that they had too much influence.

But a large majority were sympathetic to the principle of performance pay for teachers.

Head teachers in the UK are particularly highly respected - more so than in any other of the countries surveyed.

Former education minister, Lord Adonis, said the rankings showed the importance of the role of teaching in education reform.

"To recruit the brightest and best, teaching needs to be a high status occupation, and we need to understand better what contributes to the social standing of teachers," said Lord Adonis.

Sunny Varkey, founder of the Varkey GEMS Foundation, said: "It is my ambition that teachers are treated with as much respect as doctors. Sadly, in many countries around the world teachers no longer retain the elevated status that we used to take for granted."

Prof Dalton says the public status of teaching will influence standards of education.

"This informs who decides to become a teacher in each country, how they are respected and how they are financially rewarded. Ultimately, this affects the kind of job they do in teaching our children," he says.

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