New teachers co-constructing professional identity

Chris Wilkins, Carmen Mohamed, Joan Smith, University of Leicester
European Conference on Educational Research, Berlin, Germany 13-17 September 2011

Introduction

The global spread of ‘techno-bureaucratic managerialism’ (Apple 2000; Ball et al. 1994) and its attendant performative frameworks, has been particularly influential in studies of teachers’ lives and work (Galton & MacBeath 2008; Troman et al., 2007; Day & Kington 2008; Wilkins 2010). Whilst some have explored teachers’ co-construction of identity is with other professionals (Paechter 2007); the impact of teachers’ interactions with students on teachers’ identities has received less attention, although writers such as Fielding (2004) have explored the transformative potential of student-teacher dialogue

New teachers may initially play a peripheral role (Wenger 1998) in a school’s community, and so need to find ways of ‘positioning’ themselves in professional relationships with students, other teachers, support staff and parents; this is particularly important given their relative lack of knowledge of the formal and informal culture of practice and power (Pierce 2007; Wilson & Demetriou 2007).

This paper builds upon the theoretical perspectives outlined in a previous ECER paper (Wilkins et al, 2011) and reports on a pilot study investigating how new teachers’ interactions with students impact on their developing professional identity.
Performativity and teacher identity

The notion of teacher professionalism as being a socially constructed and contested concept is well-established (Ozga & Lawn 1981; Helsby 1995; Roberts 2000), particularly in the context of the emergence of performative policies and practices. The phenomenon of performativity in schooling, characterised by a data-driven ‘audit culture’, a rigorous inspection framework and the use of market levers to provide incentives/sanctions, has been extensively studied (Ball 2000; Gerwitz & Ball 2000; Mahony & Hextall, 2000; Brehony 2005; Webb & Vuillamy 2006).

Critics argue that performative systems result in “inauthentic practice and relationships…[where]…teachers are no longer encouraged to have a rationale for practice…what is important is what works” (Ball 2003, 87). In this technicist model of ‘incorporated professionalism’ (Barton et al. 1994; Troman 1996; Day et al. 2006), a culture of ‘coercive compliance’ (Wilkins & Wood 2009) enforces the delivery of state-imposed initiatives.

Teachers’ professional identity has to be understood in the context of schools’ managerial practices and cultures, with their own performance as well as the performance of their students. Some writers argue that managerialism is vulnerable to challenge from professional ‘democratic discourse’ (Sachs 2003, 134-135), in which resistant or ‘transformative’ professionalism balances public accountability with professional autonomy (Furlong et al. 2000; Whitty 2002; Sachs 2003; Avis 2005). Collegiality and collaboration have been widely viewed as crucial to the maintenance
of core professional values and practices (Talbert & McLaughlin 1994; Clement & Vandenberghe 2000).

One of the consequences of the performative view of teachers is to homogenise the discourse of professionalism, overlooking the influence that various social factors (e.g. gender, ethnicity, religion, socio-economic status) have on the way in which teachers and students perform their work-related identities. Dillabough (1999, 386) argues that ‘historically determined gender dualisms serve as identity-framing devices’ in the field of teaching through emphasising the notion of the teacher as ‘a rational and instrumental actor’ (Dillabough 1999, 373).

Performative discourses deny emotionality and the caring aspects of teaching (O’Connor 2008), despite evidence of the importance of relationships with pupils on teacher identity, motivation and resilience (Riley 2009; Morgan et al. 2010), and of the place of an ‘ethic of care’ in the teaching profession (Vogt 2002; Malm 2004; Smith 2008; Ballet & Kelchtermans 2009). As such, performative systems can foster inauthentic teacher relationships by reconstituting the teacher as ‘devoid of meaningful connections to those whom he/she is expected to educate’ (Dillabough 1999, 379). This is contrary to the notion that teachers, especially in Primary schools, are often as much a part of the local civic community as are the students and their parents (Craft et al. 2008; Busher & Barker 2003).

Although performative discourses are generally construed as denying personal agency, teachers are not merely passive conduits of policy; they mediate, interpret, resist and subvert performative objectives. Identity has reflective and active
dimensions, encompassing both professional philosophy and public actions (O’Connor 2008, 118), and negotiations with policy, demands from co-workers and from their personal lives are part of the developing ‘projects of the self’ (Giddens 1991).

Teachers and students co-constructing identities

A key element in the co-construction of identity is the negotiation between participants of meanings and practices, each bringing an understanding about these roles based on previous experience (Pierce 2007). These negotiations contribute to the construction of ‘communities of practice’ (Wenger 1998), and help members build and manage knowledge, create shared language, and sustain aspects of a school’s culture that are vital to maintaining norms and instructional practices. These norms help distinguish between core and peripheral members of the community.

Teacher communities “operate at multiple levels within a school, complementing and reinforcing teachers’ work” and contributing “uniquely to teachers’ knowledge base, professionalism, and ability to act on what they learn” (McLaughlin & Talbert 2006, 5). Students also develop communities of practice “as learning is mediated through their social identity, this identity is in turn integrated into their cognitive models” (Wortham 2006, 21).

Learning is also influenced by social, historical and cultural factors, so academic and cognitive activities presuppose and create social identities (Wood 2000). The persistent under-achievement of some groups of minority ethnic pupils (Gillborn &
Mirza 2000) is linked to teachers’ frequently inadequate understanding of the constraints pupils face (Ladson-Billings 2004) as well as the cultural differences that play out in classrooms where majority ethnic teachers interact with minority ethnic pupils.

However, these identity formations are not fixed, and often contradictory, with student culture frequently viewing peers who engage with performative expectations less positively than teachers. Identity formation for both teachers and students, therefore, creates localised ‘communities of practice’ (Wenger 1998). For newcomers to progress through the liminal space between the periphery of the community and the core, they draw on widely circulating ‘stereotypes’, the presupposed ways of speaking and acting associated with certain types of people.

Beginning teaching involves the suspension, even temporary loss, of professional identity (Pierce 2007), a phase of cultural initiation, “which has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state. Liminal entities…are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial.” (Turner 1969, 94–95, in Pierce 2007). During this transition, beginning teachers are caught between the intense engagements with students and the muted compliance tacitly expected of newcomers by colleagues. In this period of identity adjustment, resilience is key; difficulties in transition are a major factor in the high drop-out rate of early career teachers (Day & Gu 2008).

The perceived gap between notions of teaching developed during teacher education institutions and the ‘real world’ of teaching may be a particular challenge (Pinto &
Monteiro 2002). McCormack & Gore (2008) suggest that transition from pre-service training to teaching requires finding “...a professional place within the culture of the school”; this requires complex behavioural and conceptual professional learning in order to interpret and interact within the context in which they find themselves (Kelchtermans & Ballet 2002).

Developing a socially recognised identity as a ‘proper’ teacher constitutes a highly valued working condition for any beginning teacher. Collaboration and collegiality are significant features of successful integration into schools (Dymoke & Harrison, 2006; Patrick et al. 2010), but conversely where this is not successful, feelings of exclusion, isolation and negativity can result (McCormack & Gore 2008, 6). They can be subjected to practices imbued with techniques of power that can adversely affect their actions, beliefs and sense of themselves; criticism and confusion caused by school micro-politics can increase feelings of vulnerability and lower self esteem (Kelchtermans & Ballet 2002, cited in McCormack & Gore 2008).
References


Ladson-Billings, G. 1995. But that’s just good teaching! The case for culturally relevant pedagogy *Theory Into Practice* 34, no 3: 159-165.


