Crossing borders: new teachers co-constructing professional identity in performative times

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This paper draws on a range of theoretical perspectives on the construction of new teachers' professional identity. It focuses particularly on the impact of the development in many national education systems of a performative culture of the management and regulation of teachers' work. Whilst the role of interactions with professional colleagues and school managers in the performative school has been extensively researched, less attention has been paid to new teachers' interactions with students. This paper highlights the need for further research focusing on the process of identity co-construction with students. A key theoretical concept employed is that of liminality, the space within which identities are in transition as teachers adjust to the culture of a new professional workplace, and the nature of the engagement of new teachers, or teachers who change schools, with students. The authors argue that an investigation into the processes of this co-construction of identity offers scope for new insights into the extent to which teachers might construct either a teacher identity at odds with their personal and professional values, or a more 'authentic' identity that counters performative discourses. These insights will in turn add to our understanding of the complex range of factors impacting on teacher resilience and motivation.

Keywords: teacher identity; co-construction; performativity; liminality

Introduction

The ways in which teachers construct their professional identity have been extensively studied, many recent studies focusing on the impact of the ways in which their work is managed and regulated. The global spread of performative 'technobureaucratic managerialism' (Ball et al. 1994, Apple 2000) and its attendant regulatory frameworks has been particularly influential in studies of teachers' lives and work (Troman et al. 2007, Galton and MacBeath 2008, Hall and Noyes 2009). A number of studies have explored the ways in which teacher identity is co-constructed with other professionals (Paechter 2007); others have focused on the performative policy contexts that surround them (Riley et al.

2000, Day and Kington 2008, Wilkins 2011). Less attention has been paid, however, to the impact of teachers' interactions with students on teachers' identities, although writers such as Fielding (2004) have explored the transformative potential of student–teacher dialogue. Because these relationships have not been perceived as central to the construction of teachers' professional identities, despite evidence of the importance of relationships with pupils on teacher identity and motivation (Riley 2009), these relationships can be construed as taking place in liminal social spaces. The experience of inhabiting liminal social spaces can have important effects on new teachers' constructions of their identities as they move from peripheral to core membership of the school community (Wenger 1998).

This paper draws together a number of disparate but related themes emerging from our understanding of the ways in which teacher identity is constructed, with a focus on the particular impact of new teachers' interactions with students. As teachers enter a school they have to become familiar with its contexts and processes, learning to negotiate these with their new colleagues and other groups in the school. 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. Given their relative lack of knowledge of the formal and informal culture of practice and power (Pierce 2007, Wilson and Demetriou 2007), they are particularly vulnerable to the impact of this on their work-related identities. The construction of teachers' identity, therefore, needs to be seen in relation to the construction of students' identity.

In order to make sense of how teachers construct and reconstruct their professional identities, it is important to understand the cultures and power processes of a school (Paechter 2007, Benjamin 2002). We have therefore drawn upon a wide range of literature, bringing together theoretical perspectives on macro, institutional and individual levels: the English policy context of performative managerialism in schooling; whole school cultures as well as the 'small cultures' (Holliday 1999) within; and teachers' identity at personal, social and professional levels.

The emergence of performativity in schooling in England The nature of teacher professionalism has been extensively researched, with a growing consensus around its positioning as a socially constructed and contested concept (Ozga and Lawn 1981, Helsby 1995, Roberts 2000). However, the emergence of performative policies and practices, the overt intervention of state agencies in the regulation of teachers' work and the advance of 'marketisation' have had a limited effect on teachers' motivation (Scott et al. 1999, Carrington et al. 2000, Leaton Gray 2006).

The phenomenon of performativity in schooling, justified through a rhetoric emphasising improving standards and increasing teachers' accountability, has been extensively discussed elsewhere (Ball 2000, Gerwitz and Ball 2000, Mahony and Hextall 2000, Brehony 2005, Webb and Vuillamy 2006). Performative systems are characterised by a data-driven 'audit culture', a rigorous (or some would say, punitive) inspection framework and the use of market levers to provide incentives/sanctions. Critics argue that performative systems, by demanding particular norms of practice, suppress the traditional professional process of context-specific practice emerging through professional dialogue (Seddon 1997). Coupled with threats of sanctions to encourage compliance, this can 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, p. 87).

The assessment and regulation of the performance of schools and teachers in England have been led by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) since 1992. Ofsted have been viewed by many as a deliberate assault on professional autonomy (Maw 1998), and the recent shift of inspection to focus on schools' self evaluation reinforces the external regulatory system with a self-surveillance regime (Ball 2003), and is arguably more damaging to professional cultures because it obscures the real sources of power in this process (Spivak in Morton 2003). In the self-surveillance inspection regime, teacher and student practice is under constant scrutiny as school managers act as 'the ever-present inspector within' (Troman 1997, p. 363). Market levers are crucial to the neo-liberal model of governance. In

English schools, admissions policies view parents as consumers, encouraged to use 'performative profiling' (Ofsted reports and attainment league tables) to inform their choice (Ball et al. 1994, Gewirtz et al. 1995). By making the funding regime much more responsive to admissions at individual school level, schools have been commodified to an extent that virtually guarantees professional judgement is undermined by a culture of 'coercive compliance' (Wilkins and Wood 2009).

Teacher identity in performative times

This extension of the self-surveillance apparatus into school middle management means that teachers' professional identity has to be understood in the context not only of the varied cultures within the school (students, parents, teachers), but also of schools' managerial practices and cultures. Teachers' identity is therefore bound up in a complex relationship with their own performance as well as the performance of their students. Day and Gu argue that this means that their 'resilience, commitment and wellbeing must be examined and understood in terms of particular school and classroom contexts and cultures' (2008, p. 9). The impact of managerialism on teacher professionalism has been fiercely contested. Whilst some have argued that 'distributive leadership' creates the potential for school transformation through 'collegial professionalism' (Gronn 2000, Coles and Southworth 2005), more often this has been seen as an erosion of teacher autonomy. This in turn has been viewed as leading to a technicist, 'incorporated professionalism' (Barton et al. 1994, Troman 1996, Day et al. 2006) in which teachers become compliant in the delivery of state-imposed initiatives. The notion of the incorporated professional is countered by those who argue that the managerial discourse can be resisted through a 'democratic discourse' in which teachers develop an 'activist identity' (Sachs 2003, pp. 134–135). This activist identity has the potential for the development of a resistant or 'transformative' profession that 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 in managerialist institutions (Talbert and McLaughlin 1994, Clement and Vandenberghe 2000).

Changing expectations about the work of schools and shifts in the composition of the student population are key environmental factors that challenge teachers' sense of identity, effectiveness and well-being (Day and Kington 2008). The change of social situation transforms human experience (Bauman 2004) and is a probable cause of the transitional experiences of new and pre-service teachers. 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. For example, a number of writers have challenged the gendered assumptions of existing models of 'teacher professionalism' and 'professional identity' (Dillabough 1999, Osgood 2006, Smith 2007). Dillabough (1999, p. 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' (1999, p. 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 and 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, p. 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 (Busher and Barker 2003, Craft and Jeffrey 2008). Performative discourses can be construed as denying personal agency through their emphasis on instrumentality. Yet teachers are not merely passive conduits of policy; they mediate, interpret, resist and subvert policy imperatives, bringing their own values to bear on

the implementation of performative objectives. Identity has reflective and active dimensions, encompassing both professional philosophy and public actions (O'Connor 2008, p. 118). Negotiations with policy objectives, work related demands from co-workers (including students) and demands from their personal lives are part of people's developing 'projects of the self' (Giddens 1991).

Enacting personal agency helps resist and renegotiate policy agendas (Osgood 2006), although teachers need resilience in maintaining a strong sense of vocation and motivation (Sammons et al. 2007, p. 694) to do this. This is particularly important for women teachers who, by making a conscious career choice to care, can exercise their personal agency and resist dominant institutional discourses (Smith 2007, 2011). However, this resistance can be undermined by marginalising women's stereotypical caring roles and constructing women 'symbolically as that which stands in opposition to rationality' (Dillabough 1999, p. 377). The co-construction of identities and cultures in schools by teachers and students Social learner theory proposes that inter-group behaviour is always preceded by some social categorisation activity (Tajfel and Turner 1986). This is not only for the well-established reasons of 'cognitive simplification' but also because such categorisation involves the allocation of the self to one of the available groups, with corresponding implications for the search for social coherence and self enhancement (Tajfel and Turner 1986). Social Identity Theory posits that attitudes and behaviours of members of one group towards another are governed by the strength and relevance of the members' social identity (Haslam et al. 2000). A key element in the process of the co-construction of identity is the negotiation between participants of meanings and practices; this involves constant role-taking, role exchange and negotiation of shared symbols and shared meanings. The interaction between students and teachers concerns individuals performing institutional roles, and the negotiation that goes on is between individuals and their institutional role as well as between individuals and between institutional roles (Goffman 1991).

However, participants bring to these negotiations an understanding about these roles from previous direct or indirect experience (Pierce 2007). These negotiations contribute to the construction of 'communities of practice' (Lave and Wenger 1991, Wenger 1998). These 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. This construction of norms helps distinguish 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 and Talbert 2006, p.5). These sites (e.g. subject areas or year groups; Pierce 2007) offer sites where existing staff and newcomers can integrate into a school's professional culture. These internal communities of practice routinely meet and reflect on their work and interests in both formal and informal ways.

Students also develop communities of practice (based on, for instance, gender, year group, or subject areas). Their identities allow them to be accepted as members of their communities (Benjamin 2002), drawing on a 'symbolic market' that attributes different values to different identities (Bourdieu 1974). For pupils in classrooms, 'as learning is mediated through their social identity, this identity is in turn integrated into their cognitive models' (Wortham 2006, p. 21) – an example of which might be the ways in which the traditional 'transmitter/acquirer' model of teacher–pupil relationships may be undermined by new technologies and shifting pedagogies. Learning is also influenced by social, historical and cultural factors, so academic and cognitive activities presuppose and create social identities (Wood 2000). Wider socio-historical identities affect students' social and cognitive identities leading to the embedding of stereotypes into developing identities (Wortham 2006). The persistent under-achievement of some groups of minority ethnic pupils (Gillborn and Mirza 2000) is linked to teachers' frequently inadequate understanding of the constraints pupils face (Ladson-Billings 1995). Critical Race Theorists argue that government policies are designed to perpetuate the

dominance of a white middle-class social identity through racist practices (Ladson-Billings 1995, Gillborn 2008, Mirza 2009). Many studies highlight the racism that some teachers exhibit (Bhatti 2004, Bhopal et al. 2009) as well as the cultural differences that play out in classrooms where majority ethnic teachers interact with minority ethnic pupils.

Bucholtz and Hall (2005) argue that in order to understand how individuals construct their identity, we need to consider the social world as well as 'the self'. The context for classroom interaction is in part determined outside the classroom and the school. The asymmetrical power relationships of the school are laid down by powerful social and policy discourses, and are reflected in 'the customary spatial and architectural arrangements' (Vanderstraeten 2001, p. 273) inside the classroom.

The visible nature of this 'reproductive pedagogy' (Bernstein 1975) means that in the performative school, students are made aware of the expectations both on themselves as learners and on teachers (Busher 2009). Engaged students are likely to be perceived more positively by teachers than those who are disaffected (Busher 2009). However, these identity formations are not fixed, and are 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 models of academic practice. The negotiation of identities within these asymmetrical institutions leads to the construction of cultures that distinguish between 'core' and 'peripheral' practice; referred to by Wenger (1998) as 'communities of practice'. For newcomers to construct a secure sense of belonging, they need to progress through the periphery to the core, and negotiating this 'liminal space' requires them to draw on widely circulating 'stereotypes', the presupposed ways of speaking and acting associated with certain types of people.

The flows of power in schools affect the construction of identities and cultures in schools (Busher 2006). School leaders may demonstrate reluctance with regards to democratic participation by restricting students' and teachers' capacity to shape institutional practices, whilst expecting them to adhere to policies (Deakin et al. 2004). Democratic participation of

students can be fostered through institutional structures such as school councils, although there is a need to focus on real issues to avoid tokenism (Fielding 2004). A genuinely transformative approach to the distribution of power in education organisations will legitimatise student participation, helping students to develop their identities and individual voices, recognising that students are the 'expert witnesses' in the process of change management, understanding and respecting students' worlds (Rudduck and Flutter 2004, p. 101). Apart from the important benefit of preparing students to be 'citizens in a democratic world', Rudduck and Flutter argue that adherence to this 'advocacy' principle leads to an authenticity in the commitment to democratic schooling rather than a coercive compliance with superficial policies of student engagement (2004, pp. 100–101).

Performing in liminal spaces: teachers co-constructing identity

Teachers who are new to a school may be novice teachers fresh from initial teacher education, or experienced teachers moving between schools for whatever reason. Some novice teachers are just beginning their first career; others may be mid-life career changers (Pierce 2007). The development of teacher identity is a process of socialisation, involving school experiences as well as social and cognitive factors (Lortie 1975). Its construction is an active not a passive process, involving the agency of the teacher, as well as the actions of others in the school (Glazier 2009). It is a negotiative process in both the classroom and the school (Pane 2009). The influence of others on teachers' sense of identity is crucial, as: 'interpersonal worlds are organised around distinct sets of role relationships: teachers with students, teachers with other teachers, teachers with parents and with their line managers' (Bryk and Schneider 2002, p. 20).

Liminality helps explain how the rite of passage known as beginning teaching involves the suspension, even temporary loss, of professional identity (Pierce 2007). This same rite of passage applies to new but experienced entrants to a school. In this form, inhabiting a liminal space is a dramatic cultural phase where the new member gradually develops a more

sophisticated understanding of a new institution in an effort to gain accepted membership of it. It is a phase of cultural initiation, 'which has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial' (Turner 1969, pp. 94–95 in Pierce 2007). During this transition, new members of an institution are caught between the intense engagements with students in classrooms, the muted compliance tacitly expected of newcomers by other adults in the new school, and a lack of knowledge about how the system in the new school works. Given the complexity of these role relationships, new teachers inevitably experience a period of identity adjustment, and their ability to manage this transition may determine their wider resilience; difficulties in transition may be a factor contributing to the high drop-out rate of early career teachers (Day and Gu 2008). The perceived gap between notions of t teaching developed in teacher education institutions and the 'real world' of teaching may be a particular challenge.

McCormack and Gore (2008) suggest that transition from training to teaching requires finding '. . . a professional place within the culture of the school'. New teachers must undertake complex behavioural and conceptual professional learning in order to interpret and interact within the context in which they find themselves (Kelchtermans and Ballet 2002). This transition from training or previous school requires active participation in, '. . . the practices of social communities and the construction of identities in relation to these communities' (Wenger 1998, p. 4). Teachers are shifting their identity and behaviour constantly, as they are '. . . caught up in a variety of differing encounters, each of which may call for different forms of appropriate behaviour' (Giddens 1991, p. 190). Giddens sees identity as not just fluid, but fragile, being: 'created and continually reordered against the backdrop of shifting experiences of day to day life and the fragmenting tendencies of modern institutions' (Giddens and Pierson 1998, p. 186).

New teachers' agency and the co-construction of work-related identities Successful established teachers have a professional identity for which they are recognised by their

students, peers and community and respected for their knowledge, pedagogy competency and contribution to their school and education (McCormack and Gore 2008). A number of studies have highlighted the importance of collaboration and collegiality in supporting new teachers' integration into schools (Dymoke and Harrison 2006, Patrick et al. 2010) and enhancing their professional learning (Lieberman 2009, Shawer 2010). However, although new teachers' relationships with colleagues can enable them to understand the dominant school and community culture and values, many report feelings of exclusion, isolation and negativity (McCormack and Gore 2008, p.6).

Early career teachers are often subjected to a range of practices and relationships 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 considerably (Kelchtermans and Ballet 2002 cited in McCormack and Gore 2008). As identity is dependent on a person's feelings about a job and how this allows them to be part of a profession (Korthagen 2004), developing a socially recognised identity as a 'proper' teacher constitutes a highly valued working condition for any beginning teacher. Individuals thrive in environments that support their specific preferences (Bretz and Judge 1994). There is an emotional response to the capacity to conform to the school norms in the desire for a sense of belonging. Wilson and Demetriou (2007) discuss the various strategies that teachers new to a school develop to enhance their learning about the school in order to become accepted members of the school community.

Socialisation into a school's culture is an interpretative and interactive process between the teachers and the new context of the school as an organisation (Jurasaite-Harbison 2009). As already discussed in the context of women teachers, this interplay between the capacity to conform and the desire/need to belong must be considered in the light of specific social contexts. For example, for women teachers, values relating to the ethic of care and positive relationships with pupils and colleagues lead many to resist strongly careers in school leadership, seeing the latter as espousing values underpinned by performativity and

marketisation (Smith 2007, 2011). They therefore opt instead for classroom-based careers that allow them to 'construct and maintain a sense of professional identity which cohered with their philosophical or humanistic beliefs about the teaching role' (O'Connor 2008, p. 117). This positive use of agency in career choice, however, as noted earlier, can be alternatively seen as marginalising women teachers (Dillabough 1999), and similar concern has been raised about the marginalisation of Black and minority ethnic teachers (Pole 2001, Bush et al. 2006).

Researching co-construction of teacher identity?

This paper has attempted to provide a comprehensive review of literature relating to the socio-cultural and policy contexts of the construction of teacher identity. In doing so, it reveals a need for further research in one particular area; the ways in which teachers' identity is co-constructed with their students. Running through our review is the notion that the construction of teachers' identity is a complex process of ongoing and evolving micro-interactions in which individuals negotiate their way to an understanding of the specific practices and values that enable them to 'belong' in a particular school. This process is mediated through external and internal social contexts, and is further complicated by the 'asymmetrically contingent' nature (Hargreaves 1972) of the interaction between students and teachers and the role of social power in the formation of their roles. As such, power is not simply applied but is negotiated.

Alongside these social contexts are the policy contexts that impact on the outcomes of these 'negotiations of power'. Whilst individual schools manage the work of teachers (according to the specific professional culture operating), the externally imposed performative agenda discussed here is the most significant policy driver affecting the construction of teacher identity. Performative regimes are characterised by conflict between professional values based on critical reflection and practice determined by externally imposed, data-driven

priorities, resulting in, as Ball (2003) argues, an 'inauthenticity' of practice; a teacher identity fabricated through conflict is likely to be an unstable one.

Whilst further research is clearly needed, designing a study that can unpick these complex processes presents considerable challenges. The complex social dynamics outlined here suggest that a social interactionist perspective (Mead 1934) would be most effective, adopting the socio-linguistic view of identity. This suggests that an ethnographic case-study approach is likely to be most productive as it will construct an in-depth knowledge of the conditions within which participants interact as well as gaining the trust of the participants towards the researchers. The case study (or, more likely, studies), will need to examine how teachers and students experience the ongoing and evolving micro-interactions and negotiations of work-related roles, their perceptions of the school's rules and rituals, and of the expectations others have of them. Underpinning this approach is the notion of power being negotiated rather than simply imposed or applied. One strategy for focusing such an investigation would be to focus on new teachers' reflections on 'critical incidents' as they negotiate the liminal spaces encountered on entering an unfamiliar 'community of practice', the site-specific values, expectations and practices of the school in which they work. Critical incident analysis, an analytical approach focusing on key episodes and/or experiences in professional contexts (Butterfield et al. 2005), has been most widely used in supporting the professional learning of clinical healthcare professionals. More recently the approach has been used to the same purpose in the work of teachers and student-teachers, but has also increasingly been deployed as a useful tool for researching the work of teachers (Lasky 2005) and teacher educators (Harrison et al. 2005). Given the complexity outlined in this discussion of the dynamics of student–teacher interactions and professional identity in performative school systems, critical incident analysis might be an effective means of exploring the liminal space of co-construction.

In conclusion, it is evident that the work of teachers in England continues to be at the centre of seemingly perpetual reform, as the rhetoric of 'accountability' and 'attainment' intensifies

in political and public discourse. The construction of teacher identity, therefore, will continue to be contingent on the enactment (at both local and national levels) of the performativity agenda. Whilst we have referred in our discussion to the substantial body of literature chronicling the impact of performativity on teacher identity, it is clear that identity construction and development continues to be a complex process, and that even as the scope of performative policies and practices widens and deepens, this should not necessarily lead to the emergence of a truly 'performative professional'. Adding the further complexity of the role of student–teacher interactions in the co-construction of identities provides us with even more challenging questions.

The coalition government in England, elected in May 2010, has signalled an accelerated and intensified period of school reform, including radical rethinking of both pre-service and in-service training and professional development. Whilst there has been a great deal of research carried out into the nature of teachers' work and identity in recent years, the highly politicised context of the management of teachers' work, and the rapidly changing landscape of 'professional learning', emphasise the continuing need for further study of the interactions that take place in this environment, and the forms of teacher identity that develop as a result.

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