TEACHER IDENTITY IN INITIAL TEACHER TRAINING

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This paper addresses issues of identity among trainee teachers as they progress through college training in to their first year of teaching mathematics in primary schools. We consider how such human beings construct themselves as subjects against the backdrop of the multiple social demands that they encounter during the training process. We examine how we might conceive of the trainees confronting government policy instruments, such as Ofsted inspections and the National Numeracy Strategy, and then mediating their conceptions of themselves as teachers through the demands these instruments entail. We conclude by suggesting that participation in the institutions of teaching results in the production of languages that serve to conceal difficulties encountered in reconciling these multiple demands with each other.

I: So what do you see the purpose of teaching as being?

Nathan: As being just educate children and <u>make a difference in their lives</u> really - just to make things - its just a very small part of their lives you know the year in which I teach them, really but hopefully to make a difference really – you know I can see a purpose in it

I: What sort of a difference would you want to make?

Nathan: To give them - I don't know - <u>confidence</u> in themselves to <u>enjoy</u> school, <u>enjoy</u> learning, <u>enjoy</u> books and you know just have a real . . . . just have an <u>enthusiasm for life</u> you know not be resigned to thinking things are not worth doing you know and yeah preparing them for secondary school so they don't go having a negative attitude towards school

INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on a study of how trainee teachers understand their own progression through training into their first year of teaching. The particular concern here is with offering a theoretical framework through which we might examine how such trainees conceive of their own professional and personal identities evolving in this process. We suggest that identity is produced at the intersection of the trainee's personal aspirations of what it is to be a teacher and the external demands they encounter on route to the formal accreditation of "Qualified Teacher Status". We question how such trainees seek to mediate these demands and how this mediation is formative of their evolving professional and personal identities. We commence with a brief account of the empirical study involving trainee primary schoolteachers and then pose the issue of how such trainees reconcile their personal aspirations with external demands.

THE EMPIRICAL STUDY

This paper draws on the second of two studies funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (R000223073). The first study focused on the four years of BEd training (Brown et al 1999). The particular aims of the second study were:

1) To chart the transition of final year primary B. Ed. students through their first year of teaching mathematics in the primary school.

2) To examine how the students'/teachers' conceptions of school mathematics and its teaching are derived.

3) To examine the impact government policy initiatives relating to mathematics and Initial Teacher Training (ITT), as manifest in college and school practices, have on the construction of the identities of the primary student and first year teacher.

4) To devise new understandings of the professional socialisation and education of newly qualified teachers of primary mathematics.

The study was situated in the B.Ed. (Primary) programme at the Manchester Metropolitan University. The empirical material produced built on data compiled in the previous study to provide a cumulative account of student transition. In the first year of the study a sample (n=37) of 4th year students was identified from a cohort of some 200 students. Each student was interviewed three times for about one hour during this year. The sample included seven students involved in the earlier project, five of whom were tracked for a total of four years. The study took the form of a collaborative inquiry between researcher and student/teacher generating narrative accounts within the evolving student/teacher's understanding of mathematics and pedagogy in the context of their past, present and future lives. In the second year of the study a small number of these students (n=11) were tracked into their first teaching appointment. Each of these students was interviewed on a further two occasions. These interviews monitored how aspects of their induction to the profession through initial training manifested itself in their practice as new teachers. A particular focus was on how aspects of the college training continue to influence the new teachers practice in school, with an emphasis on mathematics teaching practice.

RECONCILING PERSONAL ASPIRATIONS WITH EXTERNAL DEMAND

Nathan, introduced at the beginning of the paper, is a new primary teacher being interviewed by Tamara Bibby for related study being carried out at Kings College London. He is talking here about the sorts of motivation that underpin his early developing practice as a professional teacher. His comments point to a desire to participate in an educational enterprise aimed at making things better for the learners in his class. He hopes that they will "enjoy school" and has a result build an "enthusiasm for life". Such sentiments seem unsurprising for someone entering the profession. The motivation of buying into such a strong mission must be very appealing to those mapping out a future career. In this perspective the task of teachers is not just about raising standards according to the latest government directive, the

motivation is to improve the quality of educational experience more generally and hence the subsequent lives of the students. Teaching is about empowering young learners and as such can be seen as a very worthy profession, around which one can harness more personal aspirations such as feeling one has social worth and a clear identifiable professional purpose.

However in adopting this broader account of how social improvement might be achieved, the role of individual teachers often takes second place to the broader social agenda. Such individual teachers become participants in a collective programme where their personal aspirations need to be filtered through a set of socially defined demands. Such demands get to be meshed with the requirements for accreditation as a teacher and the regulations governing everyday practice as a teacher in schools. Trainees seem less enthusiastic than Nathan when it comes to having their individual practices as teachers and mathematicians gauged against the externally defined definitions of what it is to be a teacher as evident, for example, in government sponsored Ofsted inspections.

> It feels as if they're checking up on you all the time, yeah, they're not leaving it to your own professionalism ... but the university have to cover their own backs don't they, with Ofsted coming

> But I am here for the children, OK I am to meet the criteria, but I am not here to prove to the OFSTED (inspectors) that I can do maths,

Most new teachers interviewed regarded the National Numeracy Strategy as a "very useful" framework: This shift of policy however did result in nearly all schools and individual teachers in the sample abandoning their own schemes of work. Also, it was not uncommon for some teachers to find the framework a little over-prescriptive:

> the numeracy hour, it's so prescriptive as to what you have to do, when you have to do it and how long you do it for, so it shapes the whole numeracy hour of every day of every week of the school year.

> we don't always stick to (it) exactly because I feel it's a little bit too restricted.

Also, for many trainees interviewed the idyll of teaching encapsulated by Nathan was somewhat punctured by a sometimes unwelcome component of the overall job description, namely, the actual need to teach mathematics in the first place. Many had experienced significant emotional turmoil in their own experience of mathematics whilst pupils at school, where it seemed that some had received excellent training for becoming compliant individuals:

> It was just a case of doing the sums but you didn't realise why you were doing the sums,. I think the teacher's role played a big part in it as well because the atmosphere she created, it wasn't a very, it was just a case of if you can't do it, you should be able to do it now. It wasn't very helpful or you didn't feel like, she wasn't very

> approachable, you didn't feel like you could go to her and say I'm
> having trouble with this and I need some help, it was just a case of
> don't even bother going to a teacher, just very much a case of you
> have to meet the standard and if you don't then you're a failure. So I
> didn't really enjoy maths at all.

Attitudes such as those expressed here were very common and mitigated against a
clear passage to feeling comfortable about producing a conceptualisation of teaching
through which their personal aspirations could be achieved. But in analysing such data
there seemed to be a need to adopt a certain amount of caution (cf. Convery, 1999).
What is concealed in such a story? Story telling can be used as a support device to
sustain teacher learning. But surely this interviewee did not have just one teacher,
introduced here as "she". He appears to be personifying his entire experience of many
teachers in just one teacher who is required to carry the weight of this individual's
perceived suffering at school. We need to ask what sort of narrative devices do
individuals employ as they are requested to recount experiences happening maybe
some ten to twenty years earlier. For what reasons do they construct such images of
themselves and what present demands are concealed in these images?

DISCUSSION

For the trainee teachers interviewed it is impossible to appreciate fully and then
reconcile all of the alternative discourses acting through them and so they produce an
image of themselves as functioning professionals without this. The individual, for
example, may buy into official story lines and see their "own" actions in those terms.
This does not have to be seen as a problem. But it may mean that the trainees
subscribe to intellectual package deals laid on for them rather than see the
development of their own professional practice in terms of further intellectual and
emotional work to do with resolving the contradictory messages encountered. As one
teacher commented in carrying out research for a higher degree: "Why do we need to
do research to find out what good teaching is when the government is telling us what
it is?"

For so many of the trainees interviewed mathematics was a subject that filled them
with horror in their own schooling (Brown et al 1999). Yet such anxieties seemed
largely absent once the trainee had reached Qualified Teacher Status. Rather
professional development was seen in terms better achieving curriculum objectives as
framed within the National Numeracy Strategy, a Strategy that the new teachers
seemed very comfortable with as a framework for organising practice, even if many
did find it very prescriptive. The Strategy does seem to have provided a language that
can be learnt and spoken by most new teachers interviewed. In this sense the official
language spanning the National Numeracy Strategy and the inspectorial regulation of
this seemed to be a huge success. And that is to be applauded. This does however
point to a need to find ways of adopting a critical attitude in relation to the parameters
of this discourse in that certain difficult issues are being suppressed rather than
removed. For example, when confronted with mathematics from the school curriculum

of a more sophisticated nature the new teachers remained anxious. The National Numeracy Strategy and college training however had between them provided an effective language for administering mathematics in the classroom in which confrontation with more challenging aspects of mathematics could be avoided. If true this points to certain limits in the teachers' capacity to engage creatively with the children's own mathematical constructions. And perhaps further professional development in mathematics education for such teachers might be conceptualised in terms of renegotiating these limits.

As another example, it might be pointed out that there were some differences of professional opinion expressed during the consultations leading to the creation of the National Numeracy Strategy. We have argued elsewhere that the government's claim of the initiative being informed by research lacked some credibility (Brown and McNamara, 2001). These differences of opinion have not entirely gone away. Yet the National Numeracy Strategy legislates that we sing from the same hymn sheet in specifying the content of mathematics lessons. For new teachers, unaccustomed with previous administrations, these debates are concealed beneath the veneer of a well-defined language shaping practices: "you have to do what they tell you to do... you have to be doing this at exactly this time for this amount of minutes but ... I've been trained to do it that way, perhaps I would teach it that way anyway".

It seems essential, if the policy initiative is to promote improved practice that transcends the conceptualisations embedded within the initiative, that ways need to be found of keeping alive the debates that negotiate the boundaries of mathematical activity in the classroom and how those boundaries might reshape in response to even broader evolving social demands such as economic and intellectual necessity. It would be unfortunate if the prevailing conception of teacher development reached further towards the preference of providing a new set of rules, with the teacher understanding their own professional development in terms of following those rules more effectively.

Trainees and teacher seem to be interpellated by multiple discourses and risk end up speaking as if they were a ventriloquist's dummy. Immersed as they are in socially acceptable ways of describing their own practice, the obligation to identify with these ways can resist the desire (rather than ability) to produce an identity of their own. It seems essential that further professional development is seen in terms of these teachers seeking to recover and then developing some sense of their own voice towards participating more fully in their own professional rationalisations. As Stronach et al. (in press) suggest, "(p)rofessionalism ... cannot thrive on performance indicators. It has in the end, to rely on positive trust rather than be driven by performance ranking". Effective implementation of the National Numeracy strategy is one thing. But we do need to guard against this restricting the teachers' need and desire to reconceptualise and develop their practice in an increasingly sophisticated language. Very often in research focused on mathematics education is seen from the external perspective of mathematics experts detecting the formation of mathematics in classrooms or from the perspective of government officials concerned with administering schools and the

standards they achieve according to some "economy of performance" (Stronach, et al., in press). In a professional environment increasingly governed through ever more visible surveillance instruments, such as high profile school inspections there is a sense of needing to be what one imagines the Other wants you to be. Freud's concept of the super ego seems to be ever more reified in an environment of supposed or intended control technology. By focusing more on the perspective of the emotionally charged individual teacher at the centre of the classroom and what they have to say, development in classroom practices can perhaps be conceptualised more by those within the classrooms.

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