Reconceptualising teacher identity

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Introduction

Should teachers be regarded as Professionals? Technicians? Craft workers? Intellectuals? Scholars? Researchers? Practitioners, academics and policy makers cannot seem to agree. A recent global comparison of the teaching profession across a broad range of countries presents a picture of an array of ideologies; some of which celebrate and promote the professionalism of teachers (Finland and Singapore), and others where, driven by politics, neo-liberal ideology and expediency, teaching is being de-professionalised (United States and England) (Darling-Hammond & Lieberman, 2012).

The conceptualisation of the teaching profession has been central to debate amongst policymakers, teachers and academics alike, for decades. In the UK, the debate about teacher identity in England has become particularly polarised with the discourse of 'the competent craftsperson', the dominant and hegemonic definition maintained by the British Government, at one end of the continuum and a model of the professional teacher, which I am calling 'the reflective professional', based on an amalgam of ideas from the academic community, at the other. I have decided to shine a spotlight on teaching in England, because the popular perception of teaching as a craft is distinct from other countries in the United Kingdom.

I would like to suggest that the notion of what it is to 'be' a teacher (Dall' Alba and Barnacle, 2007), starts at the point of initial teacher education (ITE). The experiences and opportunities available to student teachers in this initial phase of teacher development, play a crucial role in

shaping teacher identity. It is interesting to note that, even amongst the home nations there are stark differences in the way student teachers are educated. Since 2010, in England and Wales, there has been a move away from universities, to a more school-based practice approach to teacher education led by schools, academies and teaching school alliances. In Northern Ireland however, universities still play a major role in teacher development; whilst in Scotland student teachers undertake a more academic route leading to a Master's qualification and the award of Chartered Teachers, which sits alongside other 'chartered' professionals (Biesta, 2012).

This chapter will aim to discuss a range of viewpoints relating to the conceptualisation of teachers' identity and the implications of these for teacher preparation and the teaching profession which, of course, are closely intertwined. It begins with a brief history of how teachers have been positioned over time, before examining what might be meant by teacher identity and two dominant discourses around this – teacher as craftsperson and teacher as professional scholar. It is then suggested that a reconceptualization of the teaching profession is necessary, before summarising how this might look and be enacted.

Teachers' and student teachers' positioning – a brief history

It is widely recognised that the discourse surrounding the role of teachers, and indeed teacher preparation, is not just theoretical; it is also political. To locate and contextualise the debate I shall first offer a very brief historical overview of the 'identity' or status of teaching, which is often premised on teachers' experiences of initial teacher education.

Over the past two hundred years the pendulum has swung between the dominance of either a school-based apprenticeship model or a college or university-based approach to teacher

preparation. School-based apprenticeship models dominated in the nineteenth century, whilst college and university-based academic models were favoured for much of the twentieth century (Robinson, 2006).

From the 1960s onwards, teacher education became increasingly embedded within universities and colleges of teacher education, and teaching moved closer to becoming a graduate profession (Labaree, 1992). In England and Wales especially, teachers enjoyed unprecedented autonomy over curriculum development and decision-making. However, in 1976, James Callaghan made his now infamous 'Ruskin College' speech on education which raised questions about the monopoly of university–based teacher education and the link to unsatisfactory standards of school performance (Ball, 2013). Accordingly, the period that followed witnessed a significant shift in government policy and a reduction in teacher autonomy, which included the introduction of the National Curriculum and a set of standards for teachers.

The debate about whether student teachers should be trained in school or educated within universities continues. In more recent times, New Labour (1997- 2010) whilst introducing a new school-based model of teacher preparation, enabling graduates to gain Qualified Teacher Status (Graduate Teaching Programme) without an academic qualification to teach, paradoxically attempted to raise the status of teaching through making it a Masters level profession. However, Government funding for Masters study was withdrawn by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government in 2011. Since then, Conservative Government reform has been predicated on a model which is highly centralised and controlled, through accountability, standardisation, curriculum prescription, and inspection - despite the rhetoric around free schools and academies. Within this ideology, teaching is now

characterised as a skill that can be developed solely through professional practice. As a consequence, there has been a focus on more practical and school-based models of teacher preparation.

Ball (2013) argues that it is the interrelationship between performativity and the state that is not just changing the way teachers work and how they are employed, but is also changing who they are, how they act, and importantly, how society defines what is a good teacher. What I want to debate here is how this ideology might affect teachers' identity and more importantly their ways of being (Dall'Alba and Barnacle, 2007).

Teachers' Identity

While literature on teaching emphasises the importance of identity, understanding what is meant by teacher identity is a complex issue. Sachs (2005) presents a useful starting point which shows the centrality of the concept of identity for teaching but also indicates the dynamic nature of it:

> *Teacher professional identity then stands at the core of the teaching profession. It provides a framework for teachers to construct their own ideas of 'how to be', 'how to act' and 'how to understand' their work and their place in society. Importantly, teacher identity is not something that is fixed nor is it imposed; rather it is negotiated through experience and the sense that is made of that experience.*
>
> (Sachs, 2005, p.15)

This definition encompasses both the personal and professional aspects of identity (Beauchamp and Thomas, 2009) and involves an understanding of the self in relation to others (Mead, 1934). In this definition, teachers' identity is shaped in interaction with others in a professional context. The discourses in which policy-makers, academics, and teachers

themselves engage, contribute to the shaping of their identities. Currently, there are two dominant yet binary discourses of the 'good teacher':

- The competent craftsperson (Moore, 2004), currently favoured by the British government in England. This conception of teaching emphasises situated professional knowledge (Moore, 2004; Winch, Oancea and Orchard, 2015);

- The teacher as professional scholar - this conception of teaching, based on an amalgam of ideas from a number of educational theorists (Moore, 2004; Biesta, 2012; Winch, Oancea and Orchard, 2015), combines situated understanding and tacit/ intuitive knowledge, technical knowledge and critical reflection based on an understanding of educational research.

These discourses will be discussed in turn before a consideration of their impact in terms of how they contribute to the way teachers construct their identities.

Teacher as competent craftsperson

This, the current and most dominant ideology in England, is monopolising the discourse about teaching (Biesta, 2012). As articulated by the Secretary of State for Education in 2010, predicated largely on government critique of what was perceived as overly theoretical approaches to teaching based in universities, there has been a significant shift in government policy regarding the status of teaching:

> *'Teaching is a craft and it is best learnt as an apprentice observing a master craftsman or woman. Watching others, and being rigorously observed yourself as you develop, is the best route to acquiring mastery in the classroom.'*

(Gove, 2010)

The aim was that 50% of student teachers were trained through school-based routes (Gove, 2010), and in 2016/17, 57% of post-graduate teachers *were* trained in this way.

The main concept emerging from this discourse is the notion of competence: 'the ability to perform the tasks and roles required to the expected standards' (Eraut, 2003, p. 117), which suggests that the notion of competence is practical and builds on knowledge, skills and action (Biesta, 2012). Such discourses tend to emphasise the technical aspects of teaching, based on the acquisition of a set of skills and competencies with which to meet the Teachers' Standards (2014). Underpinning this ideology of teaching as a craft is a belief that teachers need to have sufficient subject knowledge and pedagogical knowledge to teach their students effectively; which as Biesta (2012) adroitly argues is hardly contentious in itself.

In this model, teachers and student teachers predominantly learn from experienced practitioners, and through attention to their own development as resourceful, discerning and insightful professionals (Biesta, 2012). From this perspective, teaching can be delivered as a series of strategies to be learnt, applied and mastered; and advocates argue that school settings are well equipped and best placed to support this practical and technical knowledge. For example, Lemov (2015) in his book 'Teach like a Champion 2.0', offers '62 Techniques that put students on the path to college'. This popular book, endorsed by a highly regarded route into teaching, offers a set of teaching techniques to improve teachers' classroom practice. The techniques are practical and, according to Lemov, easy to implement.

Models like this, which Biesta (2012) argues are driven by fear, oversimplify the nature of teaching so that it is reduced to a set of outcomes and competencies, that can be measured

and compared. This, I would argue, reduces teachers to mere technicians who carry out instrumental tasks. In this model, pedagogy is reduced to the implementation of strategies, subordinating teachers' knowledge to a set of skills to be mastered (Aronowitz and Giroux, 2003).

Furthermore, the discourse of the teacher as craftsperson is now so dominant (Biesta, 2015), it is now the identity of the teacher that is expected and recognised socially, politically and professionally. Indeed, it is so much part of the professional norm, many teachers and school leaders think it is the only way to develop good practice. In this way, the discourse of teacher as competent craftsperson has been cultivated and embedded.

Winch, Oancea and Orchard, (2015) argue that this popular conception of teaching, which relies purely on practical wisdom passed on from more experienced others, could limit theories of practice to a community consciousness in which theories of teaching and learning are localised and implemented without question. Brookfield (2017) supports this idea and contends there runs a risk of ideological homogeneity in schools, whereby there is a reinforcement of particular pedagogical approaches and a corresponding dismissal of alternative perspectives. In this way the discourse surrounding the competent craftsperson is obscuring the language of purpose, content and relation in education. This model of the teacher seems to rest on the assumption that practice is seen as more relevant than educational theory and, during initial teacher education, the more time a student teacher spends in school 'inevitably and unproblematically leads to better and 'more relevant' learning' (Brown, Rowley and Smith, 2015, p.22).

The current education system in England is being eroded by forms of accountability and increasing managerialism alongside the intensification of workload that restricts the amount of time teachers have for critical reflection and intellectual development. The competent craftsperson discourse, with its emphasis on education based on educational qualifications, standards and accountability presents a threat to the status of teaching as a profession; reducing teachers to the status of high-level technicians. This has created a situation in which measurement and accountability has become an end in itself rather than a means to achieve a good education system in the fullest sense of the term (Biesta, 2015). This discourse of competence over technique focusses attention on what teachers *do* rather than what they *know* and limits teachers' ability to think (Biesta, 2015). Instead of posing questions about the principles underpinning different classroom methods, research techniques and theories of education, teachers are often preoccupied with mastering the best way to teach a given body of knowledge. All this Giroux (n.d) argues is proletarianising the profession; reducing teachers to specialist technicians merely managing and implementing the curriculum.

As previously mentioned, in other countries in the United Kingdom, particularly Northern Ireland and Scotland, there is a strong emphasis on critical reflection and active engagement in research for teachers, across each phase of their professional development. In England however, the value of educational theory and research in initial teacher education has diminished over time as the shift away from university-led programmes continues. This model of teacher education in England is in opposition to other highly regarded international education systems, such as Singapore and Finland, where teachers rely heavily on rigorous research-based knowledge to inform their practice (BERA/RSA, 2014).

This idea of practitioner as researcher has not, however, gone unnoticed in English government circles, and in a recent and welcome development, Sir Andrew Carter, in his review of initial teacher training (sic), recommended that trainees, [and teachers] 'should understand how to interpret educational theory and research in a critical way, so they are able to deal with contested issues' (DfE 2015, p.8) and 'ITT should teach trainees why engaging with research is important and build an expectation and enthusiasm for teaching as an evidence-based profession' (DfE, 2015, p.8). This is the first occasion in recent government policy that acknowledges that teaching is, and should be, a scholarly, evidence-based activity in which research and research activity can enhance teachers' ability to make a difference to students' outcomes. Whilst this may seem a positive step towards enabling teachers to be critically reflective practitioners, Winch, Oancea and Orchard (2015) and Biesta (2012) point out that Carter's (DfE, 2015) definition of an evidence-based profession implies that research evidence can tell teachers what they should do, and how they should do it based on the assumption that particular forms of research, for example the research found on the Education Endowment Foundation website (the research website favoured by the Government), 'can provide clear and unambiguous knowledge about 'what works' (Biesta, 2015, p. 80). The issue for Biesta (2015) and Winch, Oancea and Orchard (2015) is that 'what works' always has to be set in relation to a particular purpose, or set of purposes determined by policy makers, and teachers should be able to make their own professional judgments about the validity and reliability of the evidence; to do this they must be 'educationally wise' (Biesta, 2012, p.8). This leads on to an alternative model of teacher identity.

The teacher as professional scholar

In their model of teacher as professional, Orchard and Winch (2015) argue that while substantial teaching experience is required for the 'creation of good teachers' (2015, p. 14), it is the teacher who is able to engage with the findings of educational research who is more able to judge the appropriate and effective action in school and classroom contexts.

Derived from their own empirical research, Oancea and Furlong (2007) conclude that there should be a complementary relationship between theory and practice. In a more recent paper, Winch, Oancea and Orchard (2015) offer a conception of the teacher – the teacher as professional – which encompasses a complementary and mutually enriching relationship between three different aspects of professional knowledge and practice: situated understanding, technical knowledge and critical reflection. They argue that professional practice makes the following demands of teachers: a practical understanding and knowledge of teaching and learning; a good conceptual understanding of education; and importantly the ability to understand, interpret and form critical judgements based on empirical research and its relevance to their particular situation. All of these depend on the disciplinary study of education and research which plays a complementary role in relation to each of these dimensions. They argue that it is the appreciation of both theory and practice that has the most impact on being a reflective and reflexive practitioner.

Brookfield (2017) also argues that teachers should draw on a body of theory, that has been mastered by teachers through years of study and reflection, so that they are able to question received wisdom about identified classroom practices. Brookfield (2017) asserts that engagement with theory helps teachers investigate their instincts and tacit knowledge that shapes practice and helps critical reflection. He argues that it can help teachers to break the circle of familiarity and can help prevent 'group think' or ideological homogeneity within the

setting. Furthermore, he suggests that if teachers hope to encourage critical thought in their students, they must engage in it themselves. Cordingley et al. (2005) highlight how engagement in collaborative enquiry is crucial to create the conditions for enquiry-oriented teaching, which is associated with the greatest gains for pupils' learning and educational outcomes.

Biesta (2012) like Dall' Alba and Barnacle (2007) argues that educational wisdom starts with the formation and the transformation of the person, and it is only from there that knowledge, skills and dispositions develop. This means raising questions about the content, purpose and relationships in educational discourse (Biesta, 2015). He argues that the real work is to make teachers more thoughtful and wiser. However, unlike Winch, Oancea and Orchard (2015) who argue that teachers should be engaged in educational research, Biesta (2007) argues that teaching and research are different, and the rhetoric of the practitioner researcher is undermining the identity of the teacher and the student and may also be creating 'professional uncertainty'.

Winch, Oancea and Orchard (2015) however, argue that it is only through engagement with research that teachers are able to make decisions as to whether, and how, research-based considerations are relevant to how and what they teach. Boyd, Hymer and Lockney (2015) argue that engagement with, or in, research has the potential to inform and improve teachers' technical knowledge. They suggest that it is the interplay between practical wisdom (situated and technical knowledge) and public knowledge (theory, research, professional guidance and policy) that enables teachers to understand and evaluate the relevance of research findings to their own situation. In this way theory, policy, and research do not replace practical judgment in the classroom, but support or substantiate it.

The current focus on situated and technical knowledge often leaves teachers with the difficult task of integrating this knowledge into their practice without question. But teachers are human beings and knowing is situated within a personal, social, historical and cultural setting. I would contest that all teachers need to take an active responsibility for raising serious questions about what they teach, how they teach and the purpose of education. To do this, teachers need to challenge their assumptions about the world and their place within in it, as educators.

Reconceptualising 'the teacher'

Across the UK there has been increasing divergence in policy discourse surrounding teaching. However, in England the drive for school-based initial teacher education, with its focus on the acquisition of skills and competencies, seems to be inconsistent with the conception of teachers as reflective professionals. In particular, a focus on the acquisition of knowledge and competencies, treats learning as unproblematic and renders irrelevant the necessity to educate student teachers to be able to make wise educational judgements (Biesta, 2012).

In contrast therefore, to this notion of the competent craftsperson, drawing on Orchard and Winch's (2015) concept of the professional teacher I argue that teachers should be 'reflective professionals', which captures the notion of the professional and the scholar or intellectual (Giroux, no date). This model emphasises not only the necessary discrete practical skills, techniques and areas of knowledge, but also skills needed to reflect constructively upon experience and theory as a way of improving the quality and effectiveness of a teacher's practice (Moore, 2004). In contrast to the competent craftsperson, the reflective professional

is configured as someone who thinks and acts creatively, flexibly and thoughtfully based on their informed assessments of what is happening in their classroom (Moore, 2004). This educational wisdom (Biesta, 2015), enables teachers to articulate their position and provide justification for their decisions, based not only on doing, but also on reading and critical reflection which he argues, goes beyond technical judgement (Biesta, 2012). I would also like to debate that teachers *should* engage in research, but not in the way that Stenhouse (1983) espoused i.e. as a public endeavour, but by utilizing small-scale research as a means for teachers to examine their practice and challenge their assumptions.

Effective teaching demands engagement with a broad range of knowledge bases, which I would like to argue are much more powerful when they are research informed. Of course teachers need to be competent, and their work needs to draw on evidence of 'what works' but most importantly teachers need to be able to make wise educational judgements (Biesta, 2012), to develop the capacity to be critical of policy, practice and research. Critically reflective teachers cease to rely only on methods and activities that have worked well in the past. Instead there is a recurrent checking of assumptions, a continual viewing of practice through different lenses and a persistent rethinking of what works and why. This can only be accomplished effectively if teachers are given opportunities to reflect on 'how to act', 'how to understand' and importantly 'how to be' (Sachs, 2005). Thus, it is important for teacher educators and school leaders to create space and opportunities for teachers to encounter the familiar in unfamiliar ways so that they can see teaching from an alternative perspective.

Summary

If teachers want to reject the notion of teacher as craftsperson, and instead reclaim teaching as a profession, we, as a profession, need to work beyond a set of shared standards

(competencies) of practice. In contrast to this narrow conception of teaching, the reflective professional needs to develop educational wisdom (Biesta, 2015) whereby they can exercise their own judgement in the classroom and make decisions as to whether and how research-based considerations are relevant to how and what they teach (Winch, Oancea and Orchard, 2015). Whilst I am not suggesting that teaching can be learnt from theory alone, research processes and findings could contribute to the richness of reflection required in practical deliberation.

The conception of teaching as a reflective profession celebrates the fact that both systematic knowledge and educational research can have a valuable role to play in informing teachers 'how to act' 'how to understand' and importantly 'how to be'; but this is not enough. Instead, I suggest an embracing of what Biesta calls a 'virtue-based conception of teaching' (2012, p.18) in which there is a focus on the formation or transformation of the person as a professional.

Questions for Reflection

What do you see as your professional identity? Think about your autobiography and how this has shaped who you are as a practitioner.

To what degree should teaching be an intellectual/academic endeavour? Should teacher preparation and on-going professional development have an academic or theoretical underpinning?

If we, as a profession, advocate teaching as a craft, are we in danger of reducing its professional reputation?

How do we, as teachers, maintain and sustain teaching as a 'profession'? What could/should we be doing? What does this mean for teacher preparation and on-going CPD?

What do you think it means to be educationally wise (Biesta, 2012)?

What do you think it means to 'be' a teacher (Dall'Alba and Barnacle, 2007)?

Further Reading and Resources

Ball, S. (2017) *The education debate (Policy and politics in the twenty-first century)*, Bristol: Policy Press.

In this book, Ball captures key debates and themes in this fast-changing education field. He guides us through recent government initiatives and policies and looks at the politics of these policy interventions and how they have changed the face of education. This text does not simply describe education policy; Ball also considers the influence of neuroscience, the increased interest of business in education and the impact of austerity.

Biesta, G. (2017) *The rediscovery of teaching*, New York: Routledge.

The Rediscovery of Teaching demonstrates the important role of teachers and teaching in the project of education as emancipation towards grown-up ways of being in the world.

Brookfield, S.D. (2017) *Becoming a critically reflective teacher*, San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons.

This text provides a practical guide to the essential practice of critical reflection. Brookfield describes what critical reflection is and why it is important, providing expert insight and practical tools to facilitate a journey of constructive self-critique. He shows how teachers can uncover and assess their assumptions about practice by viewing them through the four lenses; students' eyes, colleagues' perceptions, relevant theory and research, and your own personal experience.

Day, C. (2017) *Teachers' worlds and work: Understanding complexity, building quality*, Oxon, UK: Routledge.

Teachers' Worlds and Work provides a new, research-informed consideration of key elements which independently and together influence teachers' work and lives: policy and workplace conditions, teacher professionalism, identity, emotions, commitment and resilience, types of professional learning and development, and the importance of the contribution to these made by high-quality leadership. In bringing these elements together, the book provides new, detailed and holistic understandings of their influence and suggests ways of building and sustaining teachers' abilities and willingness to teach to their best over their careers.

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