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Teacher Identity and Early Career Resilience: Exploring the Links

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Abstract: A collaborative research project that explored the impact of professional, individual and relational conditions on the resilience of early career teachers revealed the importance of understanding how they engage in the formation of professional identities. Drawing on the traditions of narrative enquiry and critical ethnography, this article focuses on the story of Norah, one of sixty beginning teachers interviewed for this study, as she experienced becoming a teacher. Norah's story provides an insight into how early career teachers engage in shaping a professional identity, and leads us to suggest that resilience may be enhanced when early career teachers engage consciously and in relationship with others in this process.

Introduction

The phenomenon of teacher shortage has become a focus of attention in many Western countries, with the difficulties of attracting and retaining early career teachers adding to the extent of the problem (Moon, 2007). Early career teachers undoubtedly experience particularly high levels of individual stress and burnout, leading to unacceptably high levels of attrition and teacher shortages (Howard & Johnson, 2004). This article explores some initial insights from a collaborative research project that aims to better understand the experiences of early career teachers and to investigate new ways in which teacher attrition can be addressed. The project involved three Australian universities and a group of eight industry partners. The research uses the lens of early career teacher resilience as a means of gaining an in-depth understanding of the interplay of personal and contextual conditions in early career teachers' experiences (Johnson et al., 2009).

As a starting point the research team adopted a definition of resilience as 'the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances' (Masten, Best & Garmezy, 1990, p. 425). Focusing on resilience not only as an outcome but also as a process enabled the team to go beyond the more traditional, individualistic explanations to explore the interactions between early career teachers and the social, cultural, political and relational contexts of their new profession. On the basis of the preliminary analysis of interviews with 60 early career teachers, we identified and developed five themes or 'domains' in the form of a profile of

contextual conditions that appear to support teacher resilience (Johnson et al., 2010). Teacher identity has emerged from this preliminary analysis as a major ‘domain’ in the framework of conditions that appear to enhance early career teacher resilience. In this article we focus on the story of Norah, one of sixty beginning teachers interviewed for this study, as she experienced becoming a teacher. Norah’s story provides an insight into how early career teachers engage in identity work, and leads us to consider whether early career teacher resilience may be enhanced when teachers engage consciously in the construction of their professional identities.

Teacher Identity

Contemporary theory about identity has replaced the notion of a stable, unified identity with the notion of a self that is constantly being re-constituted (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; Zembylas, 2003). This self is ‘a practical discursive accomplishment ‘in which individuals ‘constitute and reconstitute each other’ (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000, p 70). While both personal and public identities are shaped discursively, the two are clearly distinct. Personal identity is a continuing feature of our point of view in the world and is connected to our sense of personal agency. Our public identities are those we present to the numerous different contexts in which we engage with the everyday world and behind which our personal identity ‘persists’ (Harre & van Langenhove, 1999, in Bullough, 2005, p 239). Bullough’s use of the terms ‘core’ identity and ‘situational’ identity are useful in clarifying the distinction between these two forms of identity (Bullough, 2005).

For teachers, situational identities are ‘made available by the specific cultural and institutional contexts of schooling’ (Bullough, 2005, p 240). Institutions like schools tend to prefer and support the formation of certain kinds of professional identities above others, both limiting and enabling identity formations (Bullough, 2005). Beyond schools, identity is also subject to social and historical practices, including discourses around work and teaching. In this sense identity may be likened to *habitus*, since it is at once individual and social (Bourdieu, 1977, 1999, 2004; Maton, 2008).

Early career teachers often experience a mismatch or dissonance between idealism and reality (Abbott-Chapman, 2005). This points to the struggle that teachers experience at this stage of their careers when they are in the process of moving between ‘communities of practice’ (Wenger, 1998). Bullough frames his own experiences of this as having a ‘double-identification and membership,’ and describes the experience of living through the transition as a painful struggle: ‘I was deeply and profoundly conflicted’ (Bullough, 2005, pp. 246-247).

Given the difficult nature of this transition, understanding how early career teachers shape their new professional identities while at the same time enabling their personal selves to persist and remain coherent would seem to be an important part of understanding resilience. The conflicts or dissonance experienced at such moments might have negative consequences, leading to people leaving the profession, but might also have positive consequences such as new learning or motivation for change (Galman, 2009).

Alsop (2006), in her study of the intersection between personal and professional identity in preservice teachers, also explores the idea of ‘situated identities’, and

demonstrates the complexity of the process of professional identity development. Several types of discourse intersect as part of the process of professional identity development, including the early professional identities that emerge during teacher preparation courses (Alsup, 2006). These ‘borderland discourses’ that describe ‘attempts at connecting the multiple subjectivities or understandings of self’ (Alsup, 2006, p 55) enable teachers to build bridges between the discourses of their university courses and the new discourses of their profession. We see later how Norah experienced the difficulties of negotiating between these different discourses.

Methodology

This article draws on the traditions of narrative enquiry to develop a portrait of Norah. The portrait is based on interview data collected during term two and again at the end of term four of Norah’s first year of teaching.

Narrative enquiry is a particularly appropriate approach to exploring identity formation, since personal narratives can be seen as a version of a person’s identity work (Taylor & Littleton, 2006). Narratives are continuously under construction, and reflective of the changing social contexts in which they are created. They are produced for particular and prevailing ideologies within the individual’s social environments (Taylor & Littleton, 2006, p. 23) and reflect the individual’s motivations (Baumeister & Newman, 1994). Individuals are actively engaged in this identity work as the language, meanings and identity positions of their society continue, are negotiated and change. Furthermore, as socially constructed meanings change, the identities of individuals are dynamic, responsive and negotiated (Taylor & Littleton, 2006).

Personal narratives also incorporate the histories and experiences of the individual, scripting the biographies that are told through narrative. Importantly, personal narratives ‘give voice’ to those who are often silenced (Wink, 2005). Furthermore, narratives are shaped by and reflective of previous retellings of these stories that change through subsequent identity work (Zembylas, 2003). In many ways the retelling of narratives – the restructuring of stories to incorporate the moulding of self in relation to social and/or institutional constructions – is identity work in itself, since the forming of stories to justify the reshaping at the same time further contributes to the reshaping of identities. In this sense, ‘identities are the result of the inescapable and ongoing process of discussion, explanation, negotiation, argumentation and justification that partly comprises teachers’ lives and practices’ (Clarke, 2009, p.187). Marsh (2003, p.8) further states that ‘we are continually in the process of fashioning and refashioning our identities by patching together fragments of the discourses to which we are exposed’. Narrative allows for this patching together of experience, incorporating its contradictory and ambiguous nature while building a richness and continuity of self that may otherwise be lost or overlooked (Baumeister & Newman, 1994). Consequently, narrative allows us to simultaneously analyse the individual and the narrative itself (Riessman & Speedy, 2007).

Norah’s story provides an insight into how, as an early career teacher, she engages in this kind of identity work through constructing a narrative about her experiences of teaching. Her narrative includes reflections on her personal identity, a

statement of her teaching philosophy, and accounts of interactions with significant others in her professional life (students, colleagues and parents). In the process of becoming a teacher, Norah experiences the complex interplay between personal and professional identities as she struggles to keep ‘that little bit of me’ in the classroom. Her story leads us to consider whether early career teacher resilience may be enhanced when they engage consciously in the construction of their professional identities.

Norah’s Story

Norah is an early childhood teacher in her first year of teaching. At the time of the first interview she was based in a large primary (elementary) school and employed on a one-year contract. The school is situated in a low socioeconomic status, outer metropolitan suburb, and hers is a class of 22 five- and six- year olds. The older children are in their first year of compulsory schooling while the younger ones are in the ‘pre-primary’ phase: in other words, in the year prior to the first year of compulsory schooling. She first spoke about her experiences after two terms of teaching.

As a girl, Norah said, she had not wanted to be a teacher. She ‘dropped out’ in her final year of school, deciding she ‘wasn’t cut out for university’, and went instead to a vocational education college to gain a qualification to work with people with disabilities. She did this for a while and then worked in a special school as an assistant to the teacher. There, others began to comment that she was a lot more confident when working with the children than the teacher was. ‘Everyone used to joke and say I might as well be the teacher, including the teacher, because I’d sort of take control.’ So Norah thought, ‘Why not actually be the teacher?’ This reframing of her identity led her to university.

University was a wonderful experience for Norah. She learnt a lot about herself in the four years of her degree, particularly that she could do well in an academic setting. As a child she had thought that she was the ‘dumb one’ in her family, the odd one out because her brother, sister and both parents were all ‘really into reading’ books while she was content to read comics. However, getting top marks for her work at university showed her that if she really put her mind to it she could achieve academically. Her success at university gave her a huge confidence boost.

At the end of her final year Norah applied to teach in a number of remote schools in the north of Australia, but when the principal of the school where she did her final pre-service teaching placement phoned to offer her a one-year teaching contract, she accepted.

In the first interview Norah spoke about her teaching philosophy. She believes strongly in the value of play-based education for young children. She feels passionate about this. She thinks a lot of people undervalue play and don't understand that children actually are learning when they are playing. She also likes having hands-on activities, and to display the individual things that the children have made. In this she is unlike the teachers in surrounding classrooms, where artwork ‘such as 20 identical rabbits’ is displayed ‘just to make the classroom look attractive’. She also likes using the natural world as the basis for her teaching and is trying to explore that as much as possible by taking her class outside and planning learning based on the things to be found in the areas of bush around the school. At the time of the interview she was worried about plans to cut

down some of the trees in the playground, because they are ‘too annoying’. Her goal is to be the most effective teacher she can be.

The school where she works is broken down into small teaching teams of teachers and teacher assistants who work in adjacent classrooms teaching children in the same age group. The teachers who work alongside Norah do not share many of her views about teaching and learning, such as the value of play in the curriculum. This has made her feel rather alone in the school, as she has no one to talk to about how to develop as the kind of teacher she would like to become. She would like to have an ally on the staff who thinks the way she does. However, despite her professional isolation, Norah’s approach seems to be working with the children and their parents. She hasn’t had any ‘major dramas’ here, and her relationships with her students and their parents are going well.

Norah’s most memorable teaching experience in her first term was when she decided she would do what *she* wanted to do, not what everyone else expected. She and her class played with ice. The original focus was reading, and the children were learning the letter ‘i’. But the lesson turned into a science experiment when Norah let the class direct the learning themselves. Students talked excitedly about why the ice was melting and then timed how long it took to melt. Norah was able to sit and observe and interact with the students, and record what the children were saying so she could use it to inform her planning. This example shows the satisfaction Norah gained when she was able to teach in the way she believed was best for students’ learning. The lesson showed so well how simple play could support ‘all that learning’.

When we picked up Norah’s story again at the end of term four she had just discovered that her contract was to be renewed for another year. Although she felt a sense of satisfaction about this she was not sure whether she would accept another contract. Since the earlier interview things had ‘gone downhill fairly quickly’ as she continued to struggle with the different opinions about teaching that she has found amongst her colleagues. She had ‘sort of given up on a lot of things’ that she would have liked to do, and it has been ‘just too difficult’ to work in the ways she would have liked to. The sense of isolation she described in the first interview has remained, despite her attempts to offer to share resources and ideas with her colleagues. She began to discover that her colleagues were making decisions that affected her when she was not there, and she has found it difficult to ‘break in’. In the second interview she described how she has started to think about finding another job outside teaching. She came across an advertisement for a job as machine operator at a mine site, and thought, ‘pushing buttons sounds good right now’. ‘Will I do this [teach] forever?’ she asked herself.

Identity Formation in Norah’s Story

Norah’s story reveals how she engages with becoming a teacher, and her story speaks of processes of identity formation. Identity formation involves a ‘reflexive awareness’ of a self, constituted in relation to others (Giddens, 1991, p. 52). Individual identity is only meaningful in relation to ‘the social world of other people’ (Jenkins, 1996, p. 20), and hence an important aspect of understanding identity is understanding where one ‘fits’ in relation to other people. For early career teachers like Norah, their colleagues, their students, the students’ families and the local community all help to

provide the relational boundaries within which they form new professional identities. It is also important to understand that Norah's identity formation began long before our research interest in her and will continue on long after our research interest has shifted (Riessman & Speedy, 2007).

Throughout her childhood, Norah's early identity formation framed her as 'dumb' in relation to her siblings and parents. This identity was later reinforced by her schooling experiences and led to her dropping out of school. However, once she began to work in classrooms her emerging identity as a teacher was confirmed by everyone around her and led to her pursuit of a teaching degree. Not only is she now a fully qualified teacher, but someone with a very clear view about the kind of teacher she wants to be and someone whose sense of professional identity is becoming coherent. But this may be fragile while she does not feel she has teaching colleagues who think the same as her.

A coherent sense of identity is characterised by an individual's ability to integrate experiences in the outside world into an 'ongoing 'story' about the self' (Giddens, 1991, p. 52). This process of integrating new experiences into a 'story of self' would seem to be a key aspect of the experiences of early career teachers as they explore new identities alongside the exploration of new professional roles. Norah is intent on sustaining her professional self despite her new experiences of an absence of affirmation by others and a limited sense of belonging.

The conviction with which Norah speaks of her goals and successes in teaching indicates that as an undergraduate she found a professional space within a set of guiding principles about pedagogy (based on play and student self-direction) that resonates with her. Her identity thus encompasses her beliefs about how children learn and about the role of the teacher in supporting learning, and is underpinned by her values such as what is worth knowing and the importance of recognising each child's individual achievement. Like all new teachers Norah is now operating in a particular professional space in which social interactions are vital in shaping her teacher identity (McLeod, 2001; Forde, McMahan, McPhee & Patrick, 2006) and not all of Norah's beliefs will be supported within this space. In Norah's case, her social interactions work against her developing the particular identity she seeks and hence she is left with feelings of isolation and dissonance, to the extent that after one year in teaching she is considering leaving. Her description of the wonderful day when she stepped back to allow the children to explore ice, when she decided she would just do what *she* wanted to do and not what everyone else was expecting her to do, shows that this experience took place in spite of, not because of, the existence of a professional space for this kind of work to happen. The fact that by the end of the year she has 'given up on a lot of things' is evidence of how hard it has been to continue to learn and grow in a situation of professional conflict.

Dissonance and Habitus: Their Potential for Learning and Growth

Cognitive dissonance occurs when 'two things occur together... [but] they do not belong together' (Festinger, 1958, p. 63). Cognitive dissonance can be thought of as the 'product of conflict between one or more opposing thoughts' (Galman, 2009, p. 471). For example, such dissonance may be the product of the difference between how individuals see themselves and how others perceive them (Raffo & Hall, 2006); the result of

differences between the individuals' beliefs, values and expectations of teaching and the realities of the profession (Galman, 2009; Raffo & Hall, 2006); or teaching contexts that contrast with those previously experienced (Raffo & Hall, 2006).

In experiencing conflict between her own preferred ways of teaching and those of other teachers in the school, Norah could be said to be experiencing all of these types of cognitive dissonance (Galman, 2009). Cognitive dissonance is relevant to Norah's experiences as her current narrative reveals tensions between what she believes are important understandings about teaching, derived from and shaped by the formation of her habitus (Bourdieu, 1998, 2004), and the different realities of how teaching is structured by others around her. The experience of dissonance is not necessarily benign and leads in some instances to feelings of stress and depression (Anderson et al., 2010) that in turn are likely to compromise a person's resilience. Yet dissonance also brings with it the potential for growth, learning and transformation (Mezirow, 2000). For Norah and other early career teachers like her it will be important to ensure that their experiences of dissonance lead to positive outcomes, including the enhanced resilience that comes with the construction of professional identities that are 'in tune' with their personal identities.

For Norah, her continued experiences of failure and lack of enjoyment of school as a student contributed to her decision to leave early. As a teacher at the start of her career, it will be important to ensure that similar negative experiences do not once again contribute to a decision to leave the field. Norah continues to believe in herself as a teacher and in the philosophies that she has about teaching and learning, but also acknowledges the challenges to both that are present in the realities of her professional setting. The narratives that she constructs reveal this dissonance, but also show the subtle ways in which she is trying to establish congruence by consciously going against the grain and appealing to the positive feedback from students and parents to support her professional decisions. While at the time of the interview dissonance was acting as a motivator for Norah, the possibility remains that ultimately this dissonance will become an inhibitor that will lead her once again to make the decision to leave.

Raffo & Hall (2006) describe the type of positioning that Norah is engaged in as reflective of 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1977, 1999, 2004). Bourdieu (1998, 2004) uses the concept to describe the way in which individuals behave and how they structure and live their daily lives. Habitus appears to be common sense and natural; it is of individuals' own making, but in many ways is made unselfconsciously. Habitus is intimately connected with the experiences that are the result of individuals' engagements with the external world.

Habitus is important in interpreting Norah's narratives – of self-as-other-than-teacher and eventually of self-as-teacher – as these reflect the systems, beliefs and structures that exist within her and her lived and experienced world (Bourdieu, 1998, 2004). Norah's history, prior values, dispositions, behaviours and orientations influenced her initially to believe that she could go to university. Later, she constructed new narratives that enabled her to envisage a different future as a teacher. These decisions reflect Norah's ability to capitalise on her cultural and material resources (Bourdieu, 1998), while attempting to reduce or eliminate cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1958). Here, habitus provides the lens for viewing the structures and guiding framework for choice, while dissonance emerges as a force for action.

How are Identity Formation and Resilience Connected?

We note the perception that ‘reduction of dissonance is rewarding, in the same sense that eating when hungry is rewarding’ (Festinger, 1958, p. 63). While it would be a misapprehension, in our view, to limit the explanation of Norah’s identity formation to a superficial view of the rewards of reducing dissonance, it is in the processes of coming to terms with dissonance that Norah reveals herself working to develop her professional identity. By attempting to overcome this dissonance, Norah is fashioning a sense of self that reflects the social and institutional expectations of the profession while also enabling her personal self to remain coherent. The extent to which she is successful may have a bearing on her capacity to be resilient.

Norah positioned herself early in life as someone who, because of her perceived academic limitations, lacked the potential to become a teacher. Later, as the result of new experiences and her different readings of how she was positioned in relation to the social, professional and learning spaces she inhabited, she opted into the teaching profession. Understandings of the rewards available to her (Bourdieu, 1977) throughout her undergraduate preparation contributed to the rewriting of stories that suited her needs. But this does not mean that her original position was one of a lack of resilience. While her experiences and sense of self are now telling her a new story of self-as-teacher, this does not then mean that teachers (pre-service, early career or experienced) tell themselves stories to keep themselves in the profession simply because it suits them to reaffirm those stories. The function of these stories may be to maintain a person’s role and status as a teacher, to overcome dissonance (to learn, grow or be ‘resilient’) or to position themselves to make the most of their cultural capital within the field (Bourdieu, 1998), in this case the field of teachers’ work.

We argue that resilience is about more than assuring positive outcomes for individual teachers in terms of the development of pedagogical effectiveness, the acquisition of a professional knowledge and skills base, and the achievement of professional acceptance and belonging. If Norah cannot reconcile her struggles to acknowledge where she falls outside of the boundaries of the field, from her colleagues’ perspectives, her capacity to remain engaged in her profession is compromised. We suggest that if she is to be resilient and remain engaged in her profession it will be important for her to use her own beliefs about teaching and learning to author a new script that allows her to capitalise on her investments in becoming a teacher.

The stories that Norah constructs affirm the emergence of a secondary habitus (Bourdieu, 1977) – that of a teacher – and justify her place within the profession through the social responses of parents and students within her social environment. In this sense, Norah’s story falls into what Alsup (2006) describes as ‘borderland discourse’, which involves becoming conscious of how one’s thoughts and actions can ‘incorporate the personal as well as the professional’ (Alsup, 2006, p. 125). Engaging in such discourse involves honouring one’s personal beliefs and experiences while at the same time acting in ways that are recognisably professional. Norah’s experiences, in which she is not only trying to incorporate the personal as well as the professional but also having to choose between different ways of being professional, suggest that this process is not clear cut. Importantly, successful engagement in such work results in the development of a ‘personal pedagogy’ that incorporates both personal beliefs and ideologies and

educational theory as a philosophical basis for decision making in the classroom (Alsup, 2006, p. 127).

Identity formation is the product of interaction with others, since ‘identity is at once a complex matter of the social and the individual’ (Clarke, 2009, p. 189). Such interactions, which may include the conversations teachers have about teaching, the emails they send to friends where they reconstitute events of the day, the seeking of support from critical friends about their practice and the myriad of other interchanges between teachers, we suggest when taken together constitute practices that result in identity formation. Through these exchanges teachers are modelling and shaping the self – the language, meanings and structuring of self go hand-in-hand with the formation of professional identities. We suggest that this means that the shaping of a professional identity takes place during teachers’ social exchanges and as a result of interactions within other members of the school community such as students and parents. Evidence of this work is embedded in Norah’s story. For example, Norah’s recognition that she *is* creating positive opportunities for students is likely to contribute to a different construction of herself as a teacher than if she were to incorporate her colleagues’ counter perspectives to judge the quality of her teaching. The shaping of her professional identity involves reconciling the dissonance she has experienced when at the centre of these different social exchanges.

Whether Norah continues to make a success of this process as she makes her way through the difficult early years of teaching remains to be seen. It has been suggested that commonly occurring perceptions of teacher identities (such as a teaching ‘personality’, a disposition to care and the ability to teach a curriculum) may no longer ‘fit the school contexts in which teachers operate’ (Sugrue, 1997, p. 222). In Norah’s story, there is a suggestion that normalised discourses about teaching in that particular school threaten to overshadow more individualistic expressions of identity such as those found in her story. In such a case, there is a risk that an impoverished view of the teacher’s role will form the dominant narrative of what it is to be a teacher, with diminishing possibilities for behaving differently. However, ‘[e]ven in the face of strong “enculturation” individuals have choice about the positions they adopt in relation to the workplace, what they learn and how they identify with it’ (Shreeve, 2009, p. 152). To ensure that Norah’s experience of dissonance leads to growth and a desire to remain in the profession, it may be essential that she be supported in engaging in social exchanges with colleagues that enable her to consciously exercise this choice.

Conclusion

Identity formation is a discursive process, taking place as a result of interactions with others and developing as part of a narrative of the self (Giddens, 1991; Danielewicz, 2001; Sfard & Prusak, 2005; Alsup, 2006). Such identity formation may be seen as a constitution of oneself within a range of possibilities and meanings (Zembylas, 2003, p. 107). For teachers at the beginning of their career, interactions with colleagues (teaching and non-teaching), students and students’ families are all crucial to this construction of self. Successful engagement in the construction of the new self seems to be assisted in professional contexts where new and different ways of thinking can be accommodated,

both by teachers at the start of their careers and by more experienced colleagues. While Norah's interactions with others have at times led to experiencing dissonance that made her question her decision to become a teacher, her desire to 'have that little bit of me in there' remains a resource that helps her to engage productively with the challenges she faces. This realisation of her identity results in a sense of agency, 'of empowerment to move ideas forward, to reach goals, or even to transform the context' (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009, p. 183), and in turn contributes to her becoming resilient through strengthening her ability to cope with negative experiences such as her sense of being isolated in the school. The experience of 'being disconnected from our own truth, from the passions that took us into teaching' has been described as 'painful' (Palmer, 1998, p. 21). Norah's story is indicative of the power of this assertion, and hints at the central importance for Norah of hanging on to fragments of her 'own truth' about the kind of teacher she wants to be as she grapples with what it means to be a teacher.

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