Full Report of Research Activities and Results

Primary Teacher Identity, Commitment and Career in Performative Cultures

Objectives

The research had five broad objectives, to:

(1) investigate the effects of performative cultures on primary teachers' identity, commitment and career
(2) consider the impact of these effects on teacher recruitment, retention and morale
(3) compare these effects with Sweden and Finland
(4) develop theory in the area of identity, commitment and career in late modernity
(5) make recommendations for policy at government, local, school and individual levels

All these are addressed specifically in the research with the exception of (3) where the detailed life-history and ethnographic research had not been reported at the time the research reported here was completed. See Appendix 2 for a Profknow overview and summary.

Methods

Fieldwork commenced in May 2005. Following negotiations with headteachers of the schools we conducted initial interviews and recorded life-history details with 5 headteachers (3 female and 2 male) and 37 teachers (32 female and 5 male) - see Annex 1 – Table 2. These represent the gender proportions in primary schools nationally. Analysis of the interview and documentation was ongoing. Our methodological approach was ethnographic. Data collection over one school year enabled us to follow identity trajectories, expose some contradictions and developments, as well as gaining deeper analysis. Our starting conception of ‘identity’ was derived from our previous research in which we found the holism, humanism and vocationalism of the old Plowden self-identity has been challenged by a new assigned social identity. This current research was designed, in part, to develop this identity theory. We mapped changes in teachers’ experiences and changes in national, local and school policy and changing schoolwork cultures. Intermittent data collection (Jeffrey and Troman, 2004) enabled us to record events where performativity was overt as well as routine and more creative occasions. The research was based in 6 primary schools across 5 Local Education Authorities. We achieved some significant contrasts in terms of size and socio-economic status (SES). See Annex 1 – Table 1. Data analysis was conducted jointly to facilitate a comparative dimension. The preliminary analyses and resulting analytical memos and working papers were then discussed at monthly meetings involving the whole team. This process was facilitated by the overlapping of project personnel with CAPITAL (ESRC - RES-000-23-1281). Literature review was ongoing, facilitated by our involvement in the Teaching and Learning Research Project - Changing Teacher Roles, Identities and Professionalism C-TRIP Seminar Series.
Background - Performative School Cultures

The research builds on previous projects into primary teachers’ responses to educational reforms. We charted the adaptations of ‘creative teachers’ to the National Curriculum and other policy changes since the 1990s showing teachers both responding to policy prescriptions and playing a creative role in its implementation. This current research maps changes in primary teachers’ identity, commitment and perspectives and subjective experiences of occupational career in the context of performative primary school cultures. Performative policy measures, introduced to improve levels of achievement and increased international economic competitiveness, have, potentially, profound implications for the meaning and experience of primary teachers’ work.

We used Becker et al’s (1961, p.52) definition of culture: ‘classically, culture is conceived as arising in response to some problem individual members of the group see as common to all members’. The main ‘problem’ which all the schools in our research faced was how to maximise test scores, the fundamental units of assessment of the school. The organization of pupils in ability sets for the teaching of English, Maths and Science in Years 5 and 6 was common to all, as was the incorporation of revision and test/examination practice into classroom lessons. It was also common to have whole school test weeks with non-Standard Assessment Tasks (SATs) years doing ‘voluntary’ SATs. Some pupils in high SES schools were receiving ‘private’ tuition outside school in evenings and weekends and pupils in both types of schools were encouraged to buy commercially available revision guides.

Although schools were very different in terms of intake and staffing, this ‘problem’ shaped the cultural response to the introduction of creativity policies and teachers exhibited professional concerns and were frustrated by the superficiality of league tables misrepresenting the reality of the actual achievement levels of their pupils and teachers’ efforts. While this perspective was shared by all the research schools, in some cases, the strategies they adopted to raise test score performance in their pupils were different between high and low SES schools.

Parents of children at high SES schools had deep knowledge of testing procedures and the significance of test scores and league tables. Some made frequent enquiries about their child’s progress. In addition to informal ‘coaching’ of homework, they extended curricular experience by taking children on visits building upon and extending school projects. Parent Teacher Association activities often raising large amounts of money with parents spending much time on school premises interacting with teachers whilst doing this.

Low SES schools adopted forms of psychologically-based ‘nurturing programmes’ for staff and pupils alike, aimed at ameliorating the perceived worst affects of the National Numeracy Strategy (NNS) and National Literacy Strategy (NLS) and to prepare them to work in the ways demanded by these initiatives. They organised teacher-led Saturday morning and holiday revision sessions for Y6 pupils in the run-up to the SATs tests and one low SES school enlisted the support of Literacy and Numeracy ‘experts’ from the LEA to support Y6 teachers in planning for SATs tests and ‘coaching’ of children targetted as needing to improve their performance.

All the schools wanted to introduce ‘real’ learning to compensate for the ‘hot-housing of kids’ and the ‘cosmetic’ learning produced, by the NNS and NLS. They were striving to implement policies of creativity in the context of unremitting performative pressures. The approach of high SES schools, although occupying extremely high league table positions, to creativity was, in some cases, cautious – being mainly limited to residential visits and a ‘curriculum week’ each year. Some explained that their long term aim was to spread a creative approach across the curriculum. The pedagogy used in such sessions was teacher-centred in many lessons observed indicating the influence of the NNS and NLS. In contrast, one low SES school was more committed and seemed to exude creative confidence. The Headteacher envisaged eventually basing the whole
curriculum around the development of the school grounds and talked about project work and curriculum integration as the norm.

All were against performativity policies that used SATs scores for the construction of league tables and were concerned with the negative impact of testing on pupils’ psychological, educational and emotional welfare doing much in their daily practice to try and ameliorate the worst effects of the tests. One high SES school permitted pupils in Y6 to bring fluffy toys, sweets and water bottles into SATs sessions, and the levels of deprivation at one low SES school involved the teachers providing breakfast and clothing for the children.

These strategies really highlight the impact and saliency of testing regimes and standardised pedagogies. There was evidence of teachers investing in a more creative professional identity, all extra to their main tasks of meeting targets. Whether the schools and teachers developed creative approaches to increase test scores or to ameliorate the worst effects of testing they demanded increased effort and commitment from the teachers. Some of the teachers were using the creative projects as school improvement strategies required for NPQH schemes and subsequent promotion.

Results

We focus first on the commitment of teachers and then on our findings concerned with career and professional identity.

Commitment to Teaching

The literature on commitment stressed strong vocational commitment (Lortie, 1975, Nias, 1989) with teacher identities invested in ‘service’ projects of the self having core values of the substantial self being aligned with political or religious projects. The teachers in our study who had an initial vocational commitment and strong service ethic were the older teachers. They identified strongly with teachers and teaching from an early age. Most were now in senior positions. The younger teachers, many of whom had been employed in a previous occupation, tended to stress ‘interpersonal’ values and had teacher and mother identities invested in love and care often involving their own children. While some expressed the ‘service’ theme in the form of wanting ‘to make a difference’ they also stressed the importance of time compatibility for family-friendly work and child care. And the material benefits theme was of importance for many. In a society in with widespread debt issues and high costs of living (including house prices) there was a general perception that it was almost a necessity for teachers to have dual income households.

The Attractions of Teaching

Following Lortie (1975) we have characterised our sample in five attractors of teaching, The Interpersonal Theme; The Service Theme; The Continuation Theme; The Theme of Time Compatibility; and The Material Benefits Theme. These themes were found right across our sample and serve as a basis for comparison to classic studies of teacher commitment.

Teachers talked of the ‘love of teaching’, ‘love of being with children’ and ‘caring’ for children (The Interpersonal Theme). Some had experience of working abroad on a voluntary basis involving teaching and caring roles. For others opportunities to work with children became attractive when they experienced motherhood (Sikes, 1997) Sharon (City School, Y6) found:

When I had my own children and they came to this school I decided to help them out in nursery and then help them out in their classroom. From then on a teacher asked me, would I like to do some paid work as a Teaching Assistant.
Teaching was seen by some as a ‘valuable service of special moral worth’ (Lortie, 1975, p. 28) (The Service Theme). Both older experienced and younger inexperienced teachers saw some kind of service to society as an important attractor. But only the older generation expressed a strong vocational commitment (Nias, 1989) which had proved to be a life-time project. For younger teachers, teaching was an occupation where they felt they could ‘make a difference’. For some school had been a positive experience, (The Continuation Theme) thus making an occupation in teaching attractive. Chloe (County, Y3) explained,

‘I just thought it was very interesting. I had a great time and absolutely adored it. So I think it brought all the memories flooding back, I would enjoy teaching the children the kind of things I learnt when I was at school’.

Others developed strong interests in particular subjects while school pupils which they were not able to continue with professionally.

The theme of Time Compatability was most noticeable in the relationship with the home. One male teacher mentioned the attractions of time flexibility because of the issue of balancing work with family life. Most female teachers, particularly those with children, did find this potential compatibility of working hours to be an attractor supporting the traditional (and persisting) sexual division of labour in the home (Oakley, 2002, Crompton, 2006). Ellie (West Side, Y4) saw teaching as ‘a good career if you want a family, it’s quite flexible in that respect’. Remuneration was a prime attractor (The Material Benefits Theme), and, therefore, source of commitment. Hannah (County, Y2) had a salary increase when entering teaching, ‘journalism’s worse than teaching, certainly, when you start.’ However, career changers sometimes took a large cut in salary to become teachers. Samantha (Albert Road, Y3) a former Army Captain, was ‘earning a lot of money in the Army, 3 or 4 times what I’m earning now’. The £6,000 tax free training grant had been an incentive for some of the single teachers but did not seem adequate for single mothers. Becker (1961) has referred to these types of considerations as ‘side-bets’ in the occupational career. Increasingly in primary teaching they appear to be becoming parallel or main bets.

Contemporary school factors
Changes in curriculum policy advocating integrated ‘topics’ were perceived by some of the teachers as ‘back to the old days’. The ‘modernisation’of teaching introduced planning and preparation (PPA) time and work/life balance policies being widely implemented in the research schools alongside the performativity measures, but within these and outside them there were the ‘highs’ and ‘lows’ of school life providing ‘satisfiers’ and dissatisfiers (Nias 1989) in their work. The psychic rewards of teaching (Lortie, 1975) provided the main basis of commitment and professional work satisfaction. For example the satisfaction and reward seeing a child suddenly grasping a concept they had found difficult – or seeing the rapid cognitive, social or emotional development of children. Emotional highs of teaching were clearly positive reinforcers of teacher commitment. While a wide range range of positive and negative factors relating to personal life influenced commitment, including age, other commitments, family, relationships, interests, health etc. We focus here on three fundamental aspects of professional life in performative school cultures, instrumentalism; relationships and teaching itself:

Instrumentalism
Achieving good SATs results was seen as rewarding and morale building, especially in low SES schools. Test scores provided evidence that teachers were ‘making a difference’. Teaching and administering tests made Y6 teachers ‘feel special’ and raised their status in the eyes of colleagues. Changes in Y2 SATs introduced an emphasis on teacher control and use of professional judgement. There was evidence of a less pressured atmosphere in the schools. One deputy head, said she had enough experience ‘not to feel guilty about cutting corners’. Another teacher said
‘what I don’t get done, doesn’t get done’. PPA time was appreciated by many teachers as was praise from parents for pupils’ progress providing evidence of their professional efficacy.

However, teachers reported parental complaints were quite frequent. In low SES schools complaints were normally about the teachers’ negative behaviour towards children. In high SES schools complaints were about progress, curriculum or teaching methods. Middle-class parents knew how the system worked and exerted influence. The policy push for constant improvement resulted in some teachers having a cynical attitude – if things are ‘coming full circle’ then if we do nothing – what we are doing now will be coming back in fashion soon’.

Teachers asserted that the tests were primarily about accountability not learning, that there was no legitimate educational rationale for the tests and that test scores were not useful in recording or planning learning. They were sometimes anxious about the negative emotional impact on pupils who they knew could not ‘perform’ and some suggested colleagues had falsified scores to look as though improvement had taken place. Teachers resented spending hours feeding test scores in to laptop programmes for LEA analysis, believing this was detracting from genuine attempts to raise standards. The introduction of Individual Learning Plans, first as part of the inclusion agenda, then later as Personalised Learning, resulted in an escalation of workload.

Teachers resented the time it took preparing pupil reports and even PPA time was criticised as it took them away from their class resulting in some aspects of work not being covered, and some not finished.

Instrumentalism has become much more of a feature of a primary teacher’s professional life with its advantages and disadvantages exemplified as primary teachers view themselves as competent implementers of instrumental policies (Jeffrey and Woods, 1998) while at the same time being debilitated by it.

Relationships

Relationships were found to be important although transitory with the high turnover we found in contrast with schools of the 1980s (Nias 1989). Teachers liked working in schools where there ‘wasn’t a (bad) atmosphere’. They liked being in a ‘friendly’ school, with a ‘family atmosphere’ with ‘supportive staff’ and good ‘teamwork’ similar to that established in the Nias et al research (1989) and did not like working in schools with a ‘bad’ or ‘massive’ atmosphere. Teachers spoke of importance of good pupil behaviour, and children ‘who are achieving well’ and ‘want to achieve well’. They spoke of theirs being a ‘nice school – where you can teach’ and where ‘the children are a pleasure to teach’ and they ‘enjoyed teaching’. They found a ‘my class’ perspective of relationships with the children maintained commitment. Some found this a reinforcer of commitment, particularly in low SES schools where ‘they had always taught’ because they ‘loved this type of child’. However, they doubted they would always have ‘enough energy’ to keep on doing it. One said she could not return to a low SES school for emotional reasons, following the birth of her own children, because, despite loving working there she thought there could ‘not be enough love to go round’. For some, moving to a nicer school was an ambition due to ‘all the time having to deal with behavioural issues’ which proved to be a counter to commitment.

Re-professionalism and workforce remodelling proved to be an agent of securing commitment as in one inner-city school which formerly had retention problems, young female teachers were encouraged (and supported) to seek promotion by their headteacher. Teaching Assistants (TAs) were encouraged and supported to take up training as teachers within the school. One deputy headteacher ‘lost’ her class upon promotion, was no longer required to spend so much time with preparation and marking, but continued to seek involvement in out of school activities and projects.

Teachers liked working in schools where the headteacher was ‘supportive’ and ‘has no favourites’. They liked those with a ‘caring attitude’ and who were ‘personable’. Good heads were those that ‘backed up’ their staff, usually in the face of parental complaint. Most of the teachers did not criticise their current headteacher but referred to previous schools. In all the schools the
teachers felt the need to always have at hand ‘evidence’ to ‘cover your back’ in the event of an ‘investigation about you’, usually arising from a parental complaint. Performativity was also a tool of the management to maintain performance status and one Y6 teacher had been ‘moved’ to Y5, being effectively demoted from a de facto deputy headteacher post and resented both that it had been done and the manner in which it was done.

A minority of the teachers did derive benefits from testing but the majority found these a time-consuming diversion from engagements which were more fruitful in supporting teacher identity and commitment. Here, relationships were critical factors in supporting a positive professional identity.

Teaching
Creative projects provided important ‘breaks from the National Curriculum’ and opportunities for ‘exciting’ rather than ‘boring’ lessons. Here teachers saw ‘real learning’ take place. Projects, out of school events and residential trips took time and effort to organise and tended to be before or after SATs week or at the end of terms. The teachers were often already exhausted and the creative events added to stress, but many spoke of the importance to them of ‘having’ or ‘liking a challenge’; that it is important ‘to have something you can get your teeth into’. Despite the officially expressed need for constant improvement, the teachers at some of the high SES schools felt it was impossible for them to improve their test scores, ‘there is no score higher than 5’ and for the low SES schools getting their pupils to improve against national average scores was seen as an ‘impossible’ venture. One deputy headteacher spoke of an official ingratitude expressed by the LEA in not thanking them for reaching the high targets they had been set, and at the same time not recognising ‘all the other good things which were going on in the school’.

The psychic rewards of teaching appear to have changed from Nias’ day and in some ways are more akin to Lortie’s teachers. There is still a caring component of vocationalism, but the striving for management posts is now more prominent, with both men and women. Women are still using teaching as a convenient co-relation to parenthood.

Career
Analysis of career changer narratives indicates career plans are provisional, influenced by personal and family stage, structural factors and unexpected life events (Acker, 1992). For most women, the ‘critical career event’ was childbirth. Other turning points involved redundancy and changes in partner’s careers. There are more turning points when people reviewed their former career and realized they didn’t enjoy it enough or ‘wanted more’ taking major financial cuts to achieve this. Narratives of our female respondents show ‘career women’ as mothers had to abandon that career in favour of teaching which fitted better with childcare responsibilities. Also there are those career changers from less secure employment who turned to teaching after displacement.

With the exception of the London schools, pay was seen as satisfactory for dual-earner households. Promotion and increased salary seemed significant to a small majority. Teachers, generally, did not express strong interest in promotion and the additional payment that would bring. One said, ‘the pay is not enough to offset the head’s role’. However, those interested in developing a career were engaged in fast track promotion to management and National Professional Qualification for Headteacher schemes.

An unexpected finding was the number of teachers (18) who had entered teaching after following another occupation. Most of the career changers came into teaching via new routes. Of these, fifteen were women and three men. We analysed the choices of these career changers in terms of ‘turning points’ in the participants’ lives to assess the extent to which these choices were ‘self-initiated’, ‘forced’ or ‘structural’ (Strauss, 1962; Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997) and found all three represented in our sample. The high number of career changers in our sample (42%) indicates...
that it is now, perhaps, more common to change careers than it used to be (Edwards and Wajcman, 2005).

The data, summarised in Annex 1 - Table 3, led us to develop the following categories of ‘turners’: the Parent Turners, Self-initiated Turners and Displaced Turners, corresponding to the forced, self initiated and structural indicated above. In each category there appears to be a general level of satisfaction with the change, albeit for different reasons.

The Parent Turners

Teaching traditionally attracted female workers with its reputation as a ‘woman’s job’ (Steedman, 1986), fitting in with family life unlike private sector occupations from where career changers came. More suited to parental responsibilities there were also gains in moving to a culture in which care and humane relations were considerations. Teaching in performative cultures was not without its tensions between managing a professional role and the family. But, in contrast, in other occupations juggling the two roles was harder. Hannah a former journalist found the period following childbirth ‘very hard because of the hours in journalism’ which involved ‘6 o’clock shifts in the morning’ and having to work on weekends. She explained that ‘it was a nightmare to arrange childcare’. And that working part-time would have meant that ‘you would have lost so much respect’. So ‘you’ve got to be able to do the hours basically’ There were also problems for those who had taken pay cuts reflecting the Women and Work Commission Report (2006) which states that despite policy changes the ‘opportunity gap for women remains’ and women ‘are crowded into a narrow range of lower paying occupations, mainly those available part time’ (p. 19).

Self-initiated Turners

Career changers who left well paid ‘career’ jobs, turned to teaching because they did not enjoy their previous professions, got bored or ‘wanted to learn again’. Theresa worked in Finance, for ten years and ‘got to quite a high level’. When she was ‘put up for a big promotion’ to become a senior requiring ‘taking on more responsibility’. During this process she re-evaluated her career and ‘felt I’m not interested … enough in business and finance’. One main ‘problem was it was such long hours’ and because of ‘tight time scales’ she had to ‘work more than full-time, there is no way to do it part-time’. Theresa stated: ‘I was more ambitious when I was younger’ but at 30 she realised ‘there are too many sacrifices’ and ‘I should do something which I enjoy.’ In a flexible market place teaching is benefiting from a group who bring experience from other professions. These incomers, perhaps, indicate a new form of vocationalism in teaching.

Displaced Turners

Some career changers experienced a structural turning when facing redundancy. Jan as a flight attendant ‘got made redundant after September 11th (9-11-2001) together with five hundred colleagues. Jan’s narrative illustrates how much personal decisions can be influenced by structural global events. Looking back at her former career she said ‘I’d had enough of travelling’ pointing out that being a flight attendant can be restrictive by age, because ‘airlines are phasing older employees out’. Jan is an example of turners who enjoyed being a teacher: ‘I really found my niche’. She ‘decided to give teaching a try’ in order to work more creatively. This influx of turners are bringing new commitments, values and expertise to primary schools.

Identity

To cite this output:
The empirical data derived from this current research show teacher identity to be increasing in complexity for they are taking on a national commitment to raising achievement which they may not have seen as part of their role in the past when beliefs in static abilities were more prominent. They are more managerial as every teacher is incorporated into sharing responsibility for the institution’s development and they are more accountable now to parents and the community. At the same time they are aware of their opportunities to slip between careers and to transfer their skills to different areas of work and import their life’s experience for the benefit of a school. There is much evidence of the ‘seriousness’ with which teachers ‘treat both their professional and domestic commitments’. It is clear too in the testimony of some teachers, Dorothy, for example, saw that ‘her sense of herself as a mother is coloured by her identity as a teacher, just as her work in the classroom is shaped by her experiences as a mother’. Primary teachers are developing complex identities in order to deal with the new and uncertain roles within rapid social, cultural and economic changes and the changing experience and meaning of work in post-industrial society. As they cope with all these possibilities, situations and opportunities they have to learn to adapt their substantial selves to incorporate each new situational identity they encounter and take over.

There was much evidence of ‘love’ and commitment to ‘care’ arguably the most fundamental commitment in life both domestic and work-based (Hochschild, 1993, Noddings, 1984). The teachers of our previous researches had, in many cases, owing to their strong professional and vocational commitment, failed to ‘juggle’ the personal and professional and with this failure came an identity crisis, and vulnerability of the ‘self’ (Kelchtermans, 1996). Teachers now seem much more adept and realistic in both recognising and managing their range of parallel commitments and identities. An increasing emphasis here on strategies to protect the personal and invest in the personal, while also investing in the public, need not necessarily be read as ‘instrumentality’ or as a form of ‘individualization’ or ‘project of the self’. They do seem, however, to be kinds of parallel and ‘care-full’ commitments in cultures of care (Nias, 1999). The new personal identity in teaching represents a more situational outlook, with the substantial self finding expression elsewhere. Identity work is still in progress and seems set to continue while teachers have to find ways of relating to rapidly changing policies and work contexts.

On the evidence presented here, primary teaching may no longer be considered as a job for life. Schools, like other organizations in post-industrial society, are no longer bureaucratic institutions offering bureaucratic careers in which individuals invest their ‘selves’ for a working lifetime. Work also may no longer be the major area of human activity around which personal and occupational identities are formed. In this respect then, the primary schools of our research can be said to have undergone a major change in the identities, commitments and careers of those working in them.

Policy Implications

Policy could be developed in two main areas:

- It is clear that for the majority of teachers in the study the national assessment scheme had little legitimacy. Current policy moves to separate assessment from accountability and marketisation concerns could be supported. The educative features of assessment for learning could be exploited in order to increase the psychic rewards of primary teaching

- Teaching is an increasingly popular occupation owing to its flexible, compatible family-friendly organisation and ethos. Developing this aspect could contribute positively to recruitment and retention. There is also evidence that supporting teachers work and teacher well-being policies are having a positive impact on
teachers juggling professional and personal life. These policies could be supported and developed.

Activities
We have given papers at 9 international refereed conferences and 4 invited seminars (see highlighted/bold in Bibliography).

Outputs
In addition to the outputs listed in the Questionnaire and Bibliography, we have successfully negotiated a contract for a book reporting the research with Tufnell press.

Impacts
Our research is generating considerable interest both within and beyond the academic community. In addition to newspaper coverage (Times Educational Supplement) and invited papers and talks, interest in our findings has been expressed by the participants in our research and their Local Education Authorities.

Future Research Priorities
It is clear from this research that teachers derive both satisfaction and a positive professional identity from working with their pupils in more ‘creative’ projects. However, they are also required to conform to officially prescribed pedagogic models and reach performance targets. This, for a number of teachers, was causing dilemmas, tensions and constraints which impacted negatively on teaching and teacher identity. Ongoing research in our overlapping Creativity in Teaching and Learning (CAPITAL – ESRC - RES-000-23-1281) project will provide more evidence on how these tensions are being managed by the teachers and the implications of this for teaching and learning in a continuing and rapid policy change on curriculum, assessment, pedagogy and the conditions of teachers’ work.

Ethics
Permission to conduct the research was granted by the Research Ethics Committees of Roehampton and The Open Universities. The Revised Ethical Guidelines (2004) of the British Educational Research Association (BERA) formed a general guide for the research.
Bibliography


