Landmarks in the professional and academic development of mid-career teacher educators

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Abstract
This paper focuses on the professional and academic development of mid-career teacher educators from two universities in the UK. The objectives of the study were to analyse and compare the career experiences of teacher educators; in particular, to identify stages of development, landmark events and contextual factors affecting professional learning and academic identities. In-depth biographical interviews were carried out with 12 teacher educators, together with living graphs of their career paths. Clear landmarks were identified in both contexts, with development in teaching seen as largely positive, while research development was much more varied. Teacher educators who were further on in their careers saw research development as transformative personally as well as academically. In analysing the findings, the authors draw in particular on Swennen et al.’s (2010) identification of teacher educators’ sub-identities and Akerlind’s (2008) categorisation of an academic identity, within a socio-cultural learning framework.

Background to the topic
Teacher educators in the UK are facing increasing and varied demands, on top of already heavy teaching loads. These include heavy regulatory and inspection requirements (Furlong 2005) and the need to develop research skills alongside pedagogical expertise. The latter arises for a mixture of reasons: the continuing assessment of research in higher education; the inclusion of master’s level work on post-graduate certificates in Education; and the current move towards teaching as a master’s level profession (Gilroy and McNamara 2009). All these lead to an increasing imperative for teacher educators to re-conceptualise their roles and extend their expertise. It is therefore important to study these changes in teacher educators’ professional and academic identities.

Teacher educators: difficult transitions
A growing body of research on teacher educators emphasises the complexity of the work and multiple skills needed, but also identifies a range of issues and tensions faced by teacher educators. For example, several researchers (e.g. Harrison and McKeon, 2008; Murray, 2008) have highlighted the dual transition that teacher educators make into university life and lack of induction into new roles. In the UK and many anglophone countries, most teacher educators move into universities after teaching in schools, so they have to make the transition from school to university and a further transition from a predominantly teaching role to a wider academic role which includes research (see Wood and Borg, 2010, in relation to Australia; Dinkelman et al., 2006, in relation to USA). Teachers who were in high positions in schools move into low positions in higher education, i.e. from expert to novice, with accompanying lower status often given to teacher education (Maguire,
Teacher educators’ partnership work in schools tends to reinforce schools as their reference group.

However, the danger of a deficit model of teacher educators is stressed by many researchers (Cochran-Smith, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Korthagen et al., 2005; Zeichner, 2005), who emphasise the complexity of the role, multiple strengths and skills involved, and strong researcher abilities drawn from extensive knowledge of schools and classrooms. Swennen et al. (2010) identify four main roles or sub-identities which teacher educators adopt: schoolteacher, teacher in higher education, teacher of teachers and researcher. They argue that, in many cases, teacher educators have to transform themselves in order to take on certain identities, especially the researcher role. Swennen et al.’s model has been useful in analysing our own research findings.

**Focus of the enquiry and research questions**

This paper builds on an initial study of the professional and academic development of early-career teacher educators in two universities in the UK (Griffiths et al 2010). The research presented here draws on findings from case studies of mid-career teacher educators in the same two higher education institutions. One was a well-established, research-intensive university, whilst the other was a new university (less than five years’ old) which had formerly been a teacher training college.

The objectives of the study were to analyse and compare the career experiences of teacher educators in both contexts; in particular, to identify stages of development, landmark events and contextual factors affecting professional learning and academic identities. Research questions underpinning the study were:

1. What are the key features of, and landmarks in, the mid-career experiences of teacher educators and to what extent are they similar and different in the two contexts?
2. What are the major factors affecting the professional and academic development of teacher educators in each university?
3. What strategies for professional learning are particularly useful and do these differ in the two institutions?

**Methodology and theoretical framework**

An embedded case study approach (Cohen et al., 2007; Yin, 2002) was adopted, with purposive sampling used to identify a representative sample of 12 teacher educators, representing a range of age, gender, prior experience and current responsibilities. Six mid-career teacher educators from each university (N=12: 6m, 6f), with 5-10 years’ experience in higher education, were interviewed in order to explore personal biographies, academic career experiences and landmarks, forms of support and learning strategies, as well as any barriers or problems encountered in developing academic and professional identities. Confidentiality was assured and all names have been removed from examples and interview extracts to protect anonymity.
Living graphs were also used to map the teacher educators’ career paths in relation to affective responses and professional learning. This is an innovative methodological approach, usually associated with concept mapping and timelines in teaching (Dawson, undated) and professional development activities (EENET, 2005) or with feeling graphs in child psychotherapy (AIPC, 2011). Living graphs were used to great effect by Zimmerman (2006) in research on teachers’ careers in Israel. They are only briefly drawn on in this paper as we will explore them more fully elsewhere (Hyrniewicz et al., 2011).

Narrative analysis (Clandinin & Connelly 2000) was used to examine the teacher educators' own accounts, including longer term perspectives. Coding was carried out thematically and cross-referenced by the researchers. Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) three dimensions of interaction, continuity and situation are also strongly linked to the theoretical framework and therefore particularly pertinent for investigating individual and collective experiences, contexts and learning processes over time.

The overarching theoretical framework used in the study is socio-cultural learning, in recognition that the specific context in which teacher educators work and their relationships within this are of vital importance in the process of learning (Wenger 1998). Eraut’s (2007) research on contextual and learning factors in the workplace is used to identify key factors affecting teacher educators’ professional learning and any differences between the contexts. In relation to higher education, Akerlind (2008) provides a useful categorisation of understanding an academic identity which we also draw on in the analysis: fulfilling academic requirements as an academic duty or stepping stone; personal development as a route to self-understanding; establishing oneself in the field via personal achievement and wider recognition; and making a difference: enabling broader change in order to benefit a larger community.

Research findings
In our previous study (Griffiths et al., 2010), we found that the dual transition (Murray 2008) made by most teacher educators in the UK, from school to university, and within the university context, from teaching to research, gave rise to considerable tensions and difficulties for new teacher educators. The intensity of teacher education work and amount of time spent in schools as part of this left little time for research activities. New teacher educators also lacked confidence in research and, especially in the older university, often felt like second class citizens in comparison with those engaged in research as a core part of their roles. These findings matched those of previous studies (e.g. Dinkelman et al., 2006; Harrison & McKeon, 2008; Maguire, 2000).

In the second stage of the research, working with more experienced teacher educators, some similar tensions were still apparent, but also a range of clear landmarks or stepping stones, which marked transitions and transformations in the teacher educators’ identities as they moved on in their careers. We will start by considering their teaching roles and trajectories before looking at the development of researcher identities.
**Teachers of teachers**

All the teacher educators were experienced school teachers prior to entering higher education. They had made the transition into teaching in higher education and were established, confident teachers of teachers (Swennen et al., 2010). All Akerlind’s (2008) four categories of academic identity could be seen in the interviews and living graphs in relation to teaching (see Fig. 1). It must be stressed that the largely linear progression shown in Figure 1 is only indicative and particular trajectories varied between teacher educators. However, clear landmarks in teaching were identified by the teacher educators and were very similar in both contexts. The main institutional difference was that, whereas in the new university teaching and teacher education were of central importance and highly rewarded, in the old university, these activities were less rewarded than research. However, this did not impact much on the teacher educators’ perspectives, which were largely positive in both institutions.

Fig. 1 Landmarks in teaching, in relation to Akerlind’s categories (2008)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appointment as subject or phase specialist in ITE: academic duty and stepping stone</th>
<th>Success of particular cohort, student feedback: making a difference</th>
<th>Programme or course leader: personal development and achievement</th>
<th>National Teaching Fellow, Ofsted success, subject association: personal achievement and wider recognition</th>
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Appointment as subject or phase leader was the first landmark or stepping stone, with further appointment as programme or course leader later on seen as important personal development and achievement. Equally important were issues related to student feedback; particular cohorts could make a big difference positively or sometimes negatively. On the teacher educators’ living graphs, teaching was usually shown as a stable, positive dimension of their work and this was also demonstrated in the following interview extracts:

Over the first two years my confidence in being a teacher educator took off. I really enjoyed teaching the PGCE and undergraduate courses. In 2003, three years in, I had a fantastic cohort of PGCE students. I had learnt from my mistakes and how to recruit. It was a very, very positive group. All got jobs, all were very good. It was a real high in teaching.  

(Male teacher educator, old university)

I really like my teaching. I put it quite high (*draws on graph*). It’s a fairly consistent line. One high point was the [specialist] module on the MA. Every year the PGCEs do a research project, normally at M level. This year, I think the research projects are publishable – very good data.  

(Female teacher educator, new university)

Both quotes show the largely positive view of teaching which go beyond Akerlind’s (2008) fulfilling an *academic duty* or requirements and show *personal development*, as well as touching on wider applications, *making a difference* in terms of employment or research impact.
Moving on in their careers, noted landmarks such as National Teaching awards, successful Ofsted results and being acknowledged as experts by organisations such as subject associations led to *wider recognition* of excellence, which the teacher educators cited as personally fulfilling. In the old university, this external acknowledgement, together with positive feedback from partner schools, could make up for a lack of internal recognition.

In both institutions, some teacher educators felt that their reference group for teaching was still schools and this validated their teaching, although others were scathing about this: ‘They haven’t made the transition in their head. Their identity is still grounded in being a school teacher,’ (female teacher educator, new university). Like other researchers (Murray, 2008; Swennen et al., 2010), we found that the school teacher identity still persisted among some of the experienced teacher educators, in some cases surprisingly long after their transition into higher education.

**Researchers**
Clear landmarks in research development were again identified by the teacher educators and were very similar in both contexts. As with teaching, all categories of Akerlind’s (2008) model were represented (see Fig. 2). However, unlike teaching, a much more varied picture emerged from the interviews and living graphs, with more negative or interrupted aspects. The teacher educators were starting from a less confident base, therefore the transition to researcher was more of a steep learning curve.

**Fig. 2 Landmarks in research, in relation to Akerlind’s categories (2008)**

![Diagram showing positive and negative landmarks in research]

Early *stepping stones* were gaining a doctorate, presenting a first conference paper or gaining one’s first publication. Each of these represented significant milestones in themselves. However, these were often represented as negative duties, terrifying ordeals or significant hurdles; for instance, one of the new university teacher educators described getting his doctorate with impassioned detail as his ‘dark night of the soul’. In several cases, the teaching trajectory affected or interfered with the research trajectory, as illustrated in the following interview quote:
The research was very positive. I saw myself moving forward, being recognised as a lecturer rather than an ITE [initial teacher education] tutor...Where I work there is incredible pressure to be research active, so not to be involved is seen as negative – an outsider...Then I stopped doing research...other roles dominated my time.

(Male teacher educator, old university)

In this teacher educator’s trajectory, research was becoming more prominent and he was beginning to develop a research identity, although his transition to researcher was interrupted when he took on leadership positions in teacher education. There was extrinsic as well as intrinsic motivation, although the strong pressure from the institutional culture to develop a research identity was described as rather a negative compulsion with severe sanctions for non-compliance. This was in contrast to a teacher educator at the new university, who saw research as generally well supported, as she described: ‘An organisation that puts research high up as priorities and is much more committed to developing its workforce is crucial. This has had a big effect on me.’

One of the most striking, positive aspects of research cited by the teacher educators was collaborative research and support, which gave rise to personal development and achievement, and an increased confidence in research, as the following example illustrates:

J. has been absolutely brilliant, supportive. He mentored me and was my PhD supervisor...I’ve been making the transition from initial researcher to a more established one since completing my PhD. In the last 18 months I’ve had three journal articles, book chapters and two books [accepted].

(Male teacher educator, new university)

In this case, the transition to more experienced researcher is clearly highlighted, with strong support from a mentor and supervisor. Particular landmarks are identified: gaining his doctorate and building up publications. This teacher educator was highly motivated and ambitious in terms of career, promotion and external recognition; these characteristics were more evident in the male interviewees overall.

As research experience grew and publications increased, some teacher educators noted positive feedback from senior academics and promotion as positive aspects, though the lack of this in some cases gave rise to feelings of being devalued in both contexts. Later landmarks included international conferences, where teacher educators also felt that they were able to make a difference as well as gain wider recognition for their research.

Contextual factors: enablers and barriers
We now discuss our findings in relation to contextual and learning factors. We have already seen some contextual differences between the two institutions which had an impact on teacher educators’ academic development and sense of self-worth. Eraut (2007) identified expectations, relationships, and work-life balance or overload, as key contextual factors. Of these, relationships were often foregrounded as particularly important, as in the next example:
I'm lucky to have worked with many inspiring people, colleagues … Jane was great – she had a strategic vision, wanted to move things forward. Karen too – she encouraged me to go for the national teaching fellowship and then promotion … Those kind of Heads of ITE have all been very good to me – they were supportive and as I said encouraged. Higher up though… (Male teacher educator, old university)

Positive support and encouragement from senior managers were marked here, enabling this teacher educator to go for promotion and a national teaching fellowship, although support elsewhere in the department and higher in the institution was lacking: an example of the micro-community of teacher education differing from the wider culture (Murray, 2008). In contrast, lack of support and overload are illustrated in the following quote from the new university:

I was director of a big [research] project, and as well as that...I taught virtually most days, every day. And at the same time in the evenings and weekends I directed this very, very large programme all by myself, with no administrative help at all. So that was my balance then – I taught most of the time and then I did the project. (Female teacher educator, new university)

Unlike an earlier example from the new university, this teacher educator felt isolated and overwhelmed as she endeavoured to combine research and teaching. She was new to research at the time and it had put her off trying to take on the leadership of a large, funded project again. The teaching loads in the new university were certainly enormous; dedicated research time disappeared and research was often ‘dumped’, as another teacher educator put it, ‘It’s very difficult to ring fence the time.’ In other cases, however, teacher educators at the new university described being able to buy themselves out of teaching if they obtained external research funding, so there was quite varied experience.

**Learning factors: enablers and barriers**

Eraut (2007) identified major learning factors as a mix of individual and workplace elements, including personal agency and commitment, but also feedback and support. In the next example, the personal agency and ambition of this teacher educator is clear:

Being on the EDD is really important. It is hard though – the late Fridays and Saturday mornings it can be hard to get motivated … but once you are there you get so much. I think it is really important to step back from your teaching, and be ready to learn from others … It is unsettling to be challenged but in a constructive way. (Male teacher educator, old university)

The challenge of doing a professional doctorate is hard but highly valued in terms of personal development. Similar characteristics are evident in a different way in the next case:

In the last three years I have made conscious decisions about what I chose to pursue, so I chose not to take a programme management role that I was offered…and therefore I have become much more tactical... I accepted that…in choosing to pursue research I’d necessarily limited my progression in my career and excluded myself from a possibility for promotion. (Male teacher educator, new university)
An interesting point is that, in the new university, it was perceived that research success would hinder promotion – the opposite of the old university, where research was seen as the prerequisite for advancement. This teacher educator’s views may have been affected by the review of promotional criteria that was being undertaken at the time.

As seen earlier, overall, the male teacher educators in our sample were more obviously ambitious than the women, as can be seen in this contrasting quote from a female teacher educator at the new university: ‘I’ve developed a more pragmatic approach to my career. I have three kids, the youngest is six ... I’ve no expectation of getting PL [principal lectureship] or Reader.’ Family commitments were a key factor in women’s choices and this could limit their decisions (Maguire, 2000).

However different the planned or expected outcome, all these teacher educators were being strategic and exercising agency in their choices, building on their learning from experience and knowledge of the institutional culture. As another teacher educator told us:

’I know the levers and drivers now, so – and I’m more confident... I feel more experienced now. I’ve learnt lessons, hard lessons...I’ve learnt more - it’s just learning isn’t it?’

(Female teacher educator, new university)

**Concluding discussion**

Akerlind’s (2008) model of an academic identity has been valuable in helping to identify aspects such as personal development and achievement in relation to the teacher educators’ experiences in this study, with clear landmarks and milestones in teaching and research trajectories in both institutions. Positive aspects of individual and collective practices were identified, as well as barriers to development arising from teacher educators’ professional and academic roles.

Teaching in higher and teacher education was largely seen as positive, although perceived as being valued more in the new than the old university; teacher educators drew positively on their previous identities as school teachers, were confident in their teaching abilities and found it inherently rewarding. They were less confident in research and some experienced considerable difficulties in balancing research with teaching, owing to lack of support and/or time. However, there was a great commitment to research within the sample, both to inform teaching, as personal transformation and to make a difference, and teacher educators often undertook research at great personal cost. Those teacher educators who were further on in their careers saw research development as a bonus in terms of developing new perspectives, which was transformative personally as well as academically.

Swennen et al.’s (2010) discussion of teacher educators’ sub-identities has also been useful in reviewing the teacher educators’ perspectives in this study. The research has demonstrated gradual and complex transitions among mid-career teacher educators as teachers of teachers or researchers, or a mix of these identities, as in Swennen et al. (2010). These multiple identities and the links between them are depicted in Figure 3. As well as those making links between these multiple identities, we also found some teacher educators who were moving from one identity to another and leaving the previous ones behind, i.e.
moving from teacher to teacher educator to researcher, especially those who were aiming at traditional, academic careers. Others were somewhere between, in terms of which identity was dominant, or were trying to find a balance between them. Compared to the new teacher educators in our previous study (Griffiths et al., 2010), research featured more strongly and was more embedded in the identities of all the mid-career teacher educators in this sample.

Figure 3 Teacher educators' multiple identities

Because of the different university contexts, cultures, organisational frameworks and practices, there were differing individual needs and experiences, institutional demands, strategies and forms of professional development (Eraut 2007), both between and within each institution. Nevertheless, some common features of successful development and learning also emerged, with important implications for teacher education policy and practice. The value of collaborative research, learning alongside experienced researchers, balanced workload, dedicated research time and institutional support was strongly emphasised by the teacher educators, with both positive and negative examples; we would reinforce the importance of these factors, whatever the institutional context. The need for continuing in-service professional development for teacher educators must also be stressed, as well as the importance of a range of collaborative strategies within an active learning community. Further research into teacher educators’ work and identities will reinforce its importance as a field within the larger sphere of education in higher education.

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