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The impact on teacher identity of international connections

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Abstract

This paper is linked to a doctoral study focussing on the impact of international networking and knowledge exchange on the professional identity of teachers. The perspective is shaped by the author's experience of teacher union activity and involvement in international networking related to work for the British Council and the International Teacher Leadership initiative as well as on a twenty year career as a teacher. This paper involves analysis of data drawn from interviews with three teachers from Britain who have been involved in working with fellow teachers from other nations largely teachers from the Balkans. It explores the extent to which these teachers share a common professional identity with teachers from other nations and also whether this therefore constitutes a professional community. The paper includes a consideration of the implications for international networks and international teacher exchange programmes. It is also envisaged that the paper will support a discussion about ways in which the cultivation of international links may contribute to the global 'Education for All' campaign.

In this paper I first introduce my reasons for being interested in this area. I then outline a conceptual framework in terms of how identity may be constructed within a professional community especially one that crosses national boundaries. Finally I discuss the data from three interviews with British teachers who have worked on projects with colleagues from other nations. These colleagues were all primarily involved in international work via the International Teacher Leadership project (Frost, 2011) connected to the HertsCam programme in the UK.

My interest in this area of study comes from three routes: for several years, from 1996-2010, I worked for the British Council as a consultant. I worked as a teacher in secondary schools and sixth forms from 1994 until 2013. I was also President of the Cambridgeshire branch of the National Association of School Masters, Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) for twelve years. Through all of these roles I have become interested in the ways teachers both define the professional community that they belong to and define themselves as professionals, especially in relation to working with others of the same profession but who come from different nations.

Teacher identity and professional communities

There is an assumption in some research that the professional community that teachers belong to within their school is particularly significant, simply by virtue of the fact that these teachers work together as colleagues in the same workplace on a daily basis (Hargreaves, Boyle & Harris, 2014). The corollary of this is that to strengthen or improve the professional experience of teachers and even the quality of any individual's teaching, re-shaping this immediate school community is fundamental. However, whilst accepting the importance of the immediate workplace, I wanted to explore in my research whether teachers build their identity in a more exploratory way than is suggested by this model. Specifically, I am interested in whether teachers identify with and contribute to the building of communities which are not bounded by the institution that they are working within and their perceptions of the benefits of this. I am investigating whether they actively construct communities of this kind and whether this enables them to develop their sense of professional identity. Finally, I am interested in whether teachers use opportunities for international engagement with colleagues to enable them to discover and build worthwhile professional communities.

At the moment in the UK and elsewhere there is an emphasis placed on teachers to work collegially (Durrant & Holden, 2006). That is to say within a school culture where there is open and critical discussion of teaching. This can even involve collaborative lesson preparation. This comes from a wide range of sources produced by organisations such as the National College for School Leadership (NCSL, 2012) among others. Positives commonly

associated with collegiality include that it has the potential to take teaching beyond the need for dependence on outside experts whilst ensuring that it becomes more than a personal and idiosyncratic process (Creaby, 2014). In this paper I don't dispute this. However, as Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) and Frost (2009) point out there is a danger that if this community is built in a contrived way then the benefits, if any at all, may be limited. Teachers may also define their professional identity, and that of the community they belong to, in terms of being crafts people or artisans who build their understanding via experience over a prolonged period of time (Taber, 2010). However, although the view of teachers' professional knowledge as experiential is compelling, this does not mean it is necessarily the case that this can or even should be shared with others. Indeed it could be viewed as an argument that teachers as individuals are professionals but not necessarily members of an easily defined professional community. Also although it potentially explains how knowledge is built it does not explain how this knowledge is or should be shared.

It is widely acknowledged that obstacles exist which prevent the building of collegiality within the same institution on a local level (Hargreaves, Boyle & Harris, 2014). As an example a significant challenge to building collegiality are systems that promote competition for promotions and for progression upwards on pay-scales. Teachers become isolated because the system of evaluation forces them into competitive isolation against each other. It may therefore be the case that incomplete understanding, or at least non-involvement, in school, local and national political issues actually makes dialogue about classroom practice easier. Indeed it is possible that a more nuanced understanding of the individualistic teacher may show that they reject collegiality within the single institution for highly professional and ethical reasons but welcome dialogue with professionals from other nations and cultures. It may even be the case that this is a more positive form of collegiality. It is possible that the meaningful collegiality that Hargreaves described which is: spontaneous, voluntary, pervasive across time and space and unpredictable (1991) is more easily achieved outside one's own culture rather than within it and in relation to this when removed from the formal structures of the individual institution. Whether this is the case and the reasons it is, if it is, will be explored further in the next section in relation to three interviews that I conducted.

Despite the dominance of a discourse that sees school improvement as intrinsically linked to collegiality, and even a related perspective that lack of success, either institutionally or individually, is linked to problems of isolation (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2014). It has also been argued that the way that teaching is structured lends itself to an individualistic approach and perhaps attracts individualistic personalities (Lingard, 2009) making the building of close-knit professional communities an illusory and inevitably unsuccessful goal. However, teachers working for many years face regular challenges and it is also possible that fostering a sense of shared professional identity may help build the type of personal and professional resilience needed to succeed over a prolonged period of time (Hodkinson, 2009).

It is certainly my experience that those teachers who embrace collegiality most strongly are often most resilient to those kinds of crises that lead to union involvement and that even when developing a strong individual identity teachers may simultaneously find it helpful to share stories about the process of teaching, which then might help to fuse an individualistic experience into a collective process (Biesta, 2009). Beyond this it is widely acknowledged that all people, not only teachers, have both a personal identity and a social identity (Reicher, 2004). It can be presumed therefore that teachers want to establish themselves as individuals within their own space of the classroom, to have a self-perception of efficacy (Bandura, 1997) and also want to build positive collegial relationships. It is also possible that a perception of belonging to a professional community may enhance practice on an individual level even if practice isn't directly copied.

There are a wide range of theories on the nature of networking and knowledge sharing. Granovetter (1983) a seminal figure in the early period of research into social network theories believed that there are two primary forms of social link: these consist of 'strong ties' where information and ideas flow and circulate freely but very little that is transferred is new, and weak ties where a considerable amount of information is new but it flows less freely. He also identified that there is comfort in strong ties but more exhilaration in weak ties. He also defines the term 'professional networking' quite broadly as being relevant to all professional relationships regardless of whether these are formally constructed or created, which is also appropriate for this paper. Although the nature of networking has changed radically in the last two decades because of technological change, these basic principles are supported in more recent articles (Castells, 2009). They are also present in the concept of communities of practice (Wenger, 1999), which are frequently portrayed as potentially crossing distances in a way that earlier networking theories do not account for (Eckert, 2006).

The international dimension

There is potential relevance for this regarding the role international networking has for teachers. It is possible to suppose that the school a teacher works within consists of a large number of strong ties. It is a comfortable place where the teacher may have the confidence to work at the peak of their ability but it may not be a place that presents them with new ideas. On the contrary, the experience of networking internationally may present a teacher with short-term, weak ties that are still professionally based and that provide them with new information or ways of thinking that older stronger ties do not. This is not to play down the roles of these older ties but it is possible that a healthy professional life needs the existence of both. The first however, for teachers, may be relatively easily attained as they are built into the structure of their school life while the second needs to be worked at with the support of

others. It is also possible that as long as the 'strong ties' are located near to the teacher that there may be benefit if these weaker more challenging ties are located at a geographical distance.

Changes in communication technology that have taken place over the last twenty years may have also increased the significance of ties that cross geographical distance. Perhaps we now seek and build relationships with those people both professionally and personally who we feel most attuned to being or working with regardless of geographical distance. It is similarly possible that teachers may shut one door where the local circumstances of their particular school mean that they perceive this as a positive strategy to developing their own professionalism whilst simultaneously opening doors to colleagues from other institutions that are removed by distance and culture.

In conclusion to this section, it may be that international networking is a way to square the circle of building a professional community among people who usually work within a structure that promotes isolation and competition. The fact that such relationships are built away and aside from the conventional structure of the institution teachers work in may be the strength of building relationships with colleagues internationally (Swaffield, 2006). It may be that whilst enforced collegiality may potentially damage an individual's sense of self-efficacy, that working together collegially within a loose structure away from the normal structures of a school may enhance teachers' collective-efficacy (Skaalvik, Skaalvik and Sidsel, 2007). Such relationships may enable the teacher who has chosen for valid ethical and professional reasons to tread a more individualistic path, within an institution, to build collegiality within another aspect of their professional life. It is perhaps also not important that teachers sharing stories about professional understanding agree but rather that they have articulated these stories and their own beliefs to another (Elliott, 2009). Sharing experiences via story can potentially achieve a variety of goals aside from the direct adopting of practice from others, including building self-efficacy and reinforcing the sense of belonging to a professional community (Frost, 2007). It may be that more than in a localised context the sharing of stories and the reflection that takes place when working with another nation or culture is of a more personally challenging and rewarding kind.

A discussion of three interviews

In this section of this paper below I discuss the data from three interviews and explore the themes identified above. Firstly, I discuss the significance of long distance ties and whether these are significantly different from professional relationships that are locally built; secondly whether when working across national boundaries this relates directly to changes in teaching

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practice and finally I look at the extent to which teachers actively construct professional communities separate to those found within the school that they work in.

The three teachers interviewed are referred to in this paper as Ruth, Grace and Louise (not their real names). All are secondary school teachers in the UK, whose main form of engagement with colleagues from other nations has been through the International Teacher Leadership Project. All were interviewed in a semi-structured way regarding the professional communities that they perceived themselves as belonging to and the role that these communities had in their professional life, including their experiences working with colleagues from other nations.

Working with colleagues from other nations

To all the teachers who were interviewed the existence of a community is primarily defined by the shared values and beliefs of the members of such a community. All defined themselves as belonging to communities that crossed national boundaries and that were related to their experiences in international projects. To Ruth a definition of community as one that is geographically located and shares similar roles and functions was effectively a meaningless one 'if the individual community around me is not synchronised to my professional beliefs I don't feel that I belong to a community of teachers and I don't feel like I belong to the community that I am currently in, in my school'. Ruth also identified herself very closely with a community of teachers who she had left in terms of physical proximity more than six months before this interview was conducted yet who in her own terms were more significant to her than her immediate colleagues.

For Ruth, belonging to the international community of teachers that she belonged to as part of the International Teacher Leadership (ITL) project is increasingly an aspiration rather than a reality and she expressed concerns that although she still perceives this community as being a professional community that she belongs to, she had significant doubts as to whether others felt the same way. This had therefore presented challenging reflective questions in her mind. 'I hope that I still belong to such a community but I now feel removed from it. One has to continue to be active to say one still belongs to a community. In my mind I still feel that I belong to this community but I don't any longer feel like I am active in it, raising the question in my mind, do I still belong?'

She had not yet developed a clear answer to these, although she felt that it was her 'responsibility to find [her] way back into such a community of teachers.' The other two interviewees weren't so strong in their viewpoint on this and defined something more closely

related to Granovetter's (1983) description of communities that have both strong and weak ties and that perform different functions.

Despite the significance of these communities to each of these interviewees, the presence of a perceived international community of teachers encompassing a large proportion of teachers did not emerge from these interviews. In fact all stated that part of the value of this community was that it was small, tight knit and shared similar values. Indeed in the strongest language used by any of the interviewees Louise felt that it enabled her to build 'an alternative community' to those she worked with on a day to day basis, who did not share her values. Although this may well be one of the strengths of international networking for some teachers, it does mean that the scope of such a community is potentially limited.
Further than this, Grace felt that the factor that joined together the professionals that she worked with was not the shared experience of being teachers but was the values they held regardless of their profession. Indeed, as she mentioned, many of the professionals that she was working with and that she perceived as central to her professional community were not teachers. What she did identify however was 'a community of people who are passionately involved about there being a better way to release the potential of all teachers to lead change.'

Learning strategies

None of the teachers who were interviewed felt that transferring strategies was fundamental to their experience of working with colleagues from other nations. However, all spoke about both reflection and research as alternative reasons for taking an interest in others' practice. Interestingly a challenging definition of research was also created that revealed a perceived identity both of being a researcher and of belonging to a community of teacher researchers. 'Teachers do research: facebook, chatting to colleagues, etc. However it isn't named research because it is so innate. We are constantly researching, refining. We do an incredible amount of research by tapping into each other's ideas, a pool of expertise.'

The consensus across all three interviewees was that even when strategies are not directly imported back to the UK they have a relevance in provoking ideas. In fact Grace spoke about finding significance in the 'discomfort' that such a journey can entail by pushing herself 'out of her comfort zone'. Through this she found that she built confidence within her professional context. However, none of the interviewees linked the process of reflection specifically to the sharing of strategies.

One issue described by all the interviewees was that in working with people from other nations they found themselves working with education systems that are not perceived to be as successful as the system in the UK. Another practical problem that they were confronted with

was the fact that they weren't working with teachers directly, reflecting different structures in terms of school and education management. However, Ruth didn't see this as particularly problematic as she also saw her own identity as quite fluid. In the roles in which she has travelled, she has tended to see herself as a leader and a manager of a programme rather than specifically a teacher 'I have also learnt managerial and leadership strategies'. To Ruth therefore she has a variety of professional identities which have different significance at different times and while travelling to work with other teachers she has predominantly seen herself as the manager of a programme that presents a deeper vision for education rather than a teacher.

In relation to this the fact that she did not see herself as having learnt concrete strategies did not to her negate the value of the international programmes that she had been engaged with as she felt that there were other equally valid reasons for involvement and potential definitions of success. 'I gain a sense of vision or a degree of reflection more than I do concrete strategies, partly this is just because I am already an innovative teacher, partly because I was mostly meeting people from NGOs.' As this quote suggests this plurality of purposes and results was related to a plurality of identities, including specifically that of both teacher and manager or leader of educational change. Interestingly, she also did not feel that education in the Balkans and in the UK were as substantially different as the superficial differences of funding and class sizes may suggest.

> I think I have learnt a lot from the west, I haven't learnt from the East not because they aren't doing interesting things but because they aren't displaying this to a public audience. In the East I see a lot of modern 'western' methods but I hear in other schools about rote-learning. However I have also seen teachers asking children to copy from a book in this country [UK] too.

Reasons for involvement

All the teachers, as was suggested at the beginning of the previous section, actively sought to become involved in international projects. In their interviews they all also saw this as something which defined them as belonging to a smaller community of outward looking and innovative teachers who are working in the UK. For all of them this meant engaging with a broader community worldwide, whilst also defining themselves as part of a narrower group of British teachers with a specific set of shared values.

Grace's reasons for working on international projects, is illustrative of this. Her experience was closely linked to a desire to promulgate the values of teacher leadership widely, something she had first experienced locally as part of the HertsCam network that the ITL project was based upon. As she says, she was 'passionate about teacher leadership and had

seen the amazing effect it had had in schools that she had worked in in the UK'. She also saw the community of professionals that existed between these teachers from the Balkans and Britain as a potentially vibrant professional community.

This community lived up to expectations. She described her experience of being part of it as a 'meeting of minds' who all had 'a shared professional concern regarding teacher leadership.' and that the moral purpose of teacher leadership 'bound people together'. She also described it as a very close-knit community, describing how she would meet the same people repeatedly, people who shared her passion for teacher leadership. However, as I have alluded to above this did raise doubts in her mind regarding how far this project could potentially reach in terms of the teaching community of a nation as a whole. These issues she felt could be as potentially significant in the UK as they were in the Balkan nations that made up the international aspect of this project.

Conclusion

Many teachers seek and build professional communities that exist beyond the boundaries of their own workplace. One way in which they do this is by choosing to become engaged in international projects. From the interviews it seems that, for these teachers at least, the process is a deeply rewarding one. It builds a sense of identity beyond that of being a teacher including defining oneself in the roles of leader in the broader field of education. However, as this community becomes broader the way this community of teachers define this community that they belong to becomes narrower. Teachers who perceive themselves as belonging to this community of outward looking and innovative teachers define themselves as having distinct values in comparison to those that they work with but who do not engage with others outside their own workplace. This raises a significant challenge to the acknowledgement of a global community of teachers.

For these teachers however, the multitude of communities they belong to enables them to build fluid professional identities and to build self-efficacy. There was little desire among these teachers for learning concrete teaching strategies. However, there was considerable interest in talking to other teachers from other nations about teaching. This may well reflect the tension between the individualistic identity of the teacher in their own classroom and the community of teachers that they belong to. Indeed it may be a nuanced and sophisticated way to resolve this tension. In a globalised society it is wise to enable teachers to build these communities but without the simplistic expectation that strategies can be either imported or exported directly.

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