

THE DISAPPEARING IDENTITY OF THE TEACHER EDUCATOR?

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ABSTRACT

The education of new teachers in the UK is in the midst of a massive upheaval. Since the DfE Market Review in 2021, teacher educators have had to evaluate their intended provision and, in line with guidelines (DfE, 2021), have had to submit their plans for reaccreditation. This process has been the cause of huge disruption amongst school-based and university-based providers. This paper will argue that the role of the university-based teacher educator, as understood in the UK, is endangered and could disappear. This will be done by examining these five ideas. Firstly, by reviewing the evolution of teacher educators and their professional identity (Davey, 2013). Secondly, by considering the contrasting perceptions of teacher education in different countries compared to the UK (Gunn, et.al, 2016, Høydalsvik, 2019). For example, the professional development of teacher educators appears to have a higher priority in some countries. I will look at how these differences reflect the radical re-evaluations of the teacher role itself and will take into account that the UK route to teacher educator roles is predominantly via the practitioner route (Murray & Male, 2005). Thirdly, I will suggest that the on-going divide between educational research and practice in the UK is a contributing factor to the disappearing role of the university-based teacher educator. Fourthly, I will briefly consider whether the perceptions of the role are being challenged by the focus on teacher *training* rather than *education* and the apparent lack of interest in an academic route for teacher education. Finally, I will argue that the teacher educators' role can be recovered through ensuring their work is values-based and by a re-evaluation of their professional leadership identity, both external and internal (Ibarra, 2016). Rather than disappearing, the teacher educator needs to straddle the divide, through their leadership example.

INTRODUCTION

For a long time I have considered the concept of professional identity, particularly in relation to educational leadership. In this article, I am proposing that, in the UK, the professional identity of teacher educators is being challenged, particularly in universities. I will consider the evolution of the teacher educator role, the current

challenges to that role and how that identity may need to evolve further still in the years ahead.

PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

Davey (2013) comments that, whilst the concept of professional identity has often been referenced, the definition of this term has not always been a priority. Crow and Møller trace the contextual basis of identity formation back to Hegel saying that ‘Hegel believed that we cannot create identities in isolation, but rather we live, work, and play in cultural and historical contexts’ (2017, p752). Blustein and Noumair look to Erikson (1968) for their understanding of a ‘notion of ego identity [that] captures a “narrow subset of experience” derived from the inner sense of accord or discord between the individual and the social environment’ (1996, p434). This encapsulates the idea that our identities are formed through an on-going relationship with our environment. This also enables a particular connection to a professional sense of identity in terms of career, namely how we are perceived within our work environment.

Ibarra (1999) takes as her understanding of identity a view put forward by Gecas (1982) that ‘identity refers to the various meanings attached to a person by self and others’ (1999, p767). I would adopt this definition, taking my understanding of identity as the co-construction of meaning attached by ourselves and by others (Ibarra, 1999). This would then mean that reflection on self would include an examination of the views of others. These definitions suggest that our sense of identity develops through our interactions with others in different environments. Ibarra (2017) suggests that our changing identity is based upon changing what we do, which then allows us to change the way we think. Given the amount of time we spend at work, it is not surprising that the job we do gives us a sense of identity. By focusing on the identity of the individual we can look at the agency of the individual person within the structures found within society, in this case in the organisation of teacher education, particularly within universities.

Day and Harrison make the connection of leader identity to an understanding of self that can be traced back ‘to the writings of William James in the late 19th century’ (2007, p365). Ibarra, Wittman, Petriglieri and Day acknowledge that there can be three aspects combined with a sense of leadership identity, ‘individual, relational, and collective identities’ (2014, p286). This enables leadership to be seen as in terms of ‘identity processes’, recognizing the transition that takes place as individuals move from one state to another, between different relationships and settings, rather than being static. Ibarra (2017) also raises an important relationship between the leadership transition and a sense of authenticity, recognising that the process of changing can often make people feel inauthentic. Høydalsvik argues

the importance of this understanding of self as a construction of dual phases 'where one reflects the attitudes of the generalised others, and the other responds to them' (2019, p95). In this instance I will be consider if there is an on-going construction of the teacher educator professional identity, can there also be a deconstruction in response to external attitudes and experiences.

This consideration of the formation or deconstruction of identity in relation to our environment is, I would argue, pertinent to the examination of the teacher educator role. I previously reflected that I may be caught potentially in a No (Wo) man's Land (Kelly, 2021) between being perceived as a Teacher by my University colleagues and as an Academic by those in schools. This is in part due to the shift of identity that teacher educators go through in taking on these roles, which reminds us of Ibarra's (2017) emphasis on the need to reflect upon our changing identity. This also engages with the idea of identity as a form of self-understanding. Davey (2013) sets out five aspects of a framework for the professional identity of teacher educators. Davey suggests that this professional identity is constructed by considering the process of 'becoming a teacher educator...doing teacher education...knowing teacher education...being a teacher educator...and belonging as a teacher educator' (2013, p7). When considering the possible disappearing identity of the teacher educator, the last two aspects are perhaps the most relevant.

This is not the first time that a sense of peril or challenge to the identity of the teacher educator has been considered. Murray and Male's (2005) study suggests that, during the first three years as a teacher educator, a number of challenges are encountered and therefore this introductory time is needed for the new professional identity to be formed. Davey himself argues that teacher educators feel that they are 'betwixt and between' (2013, p159) when considering their professional identities, having no particular sense of home identity in universities and often having to straddle contrasting departments. This links to Davey's understanding of the importance of 'becoming a teacher educator' and recognising that they are in a professional sense, back at the beginning again (2013, p60).

OTHER COUNTRIES

In America, Olsen and Buchanan refer back to Goodlad's study (1990) where teacher educators felt that they had a 'low status' with their work being considered as 'low prestige and non-scholarly' (2017, p10). This sense of status will be a factor I will suggest that is contributing to the disappearing identity in the UK today. Olsen and Buchanan (2017) themselves argue that the teacher educator role itself is not seen as distinct career path and part of their conclusions consider that the professional identity of teacher educators needs further research focus and reflection. When writing about 'native and non-native EFL Teacher Educators', Mannes

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argues that their professional identity is ‘confused’ (2020, p385). The demands of the role requiring teacher educators to have a dual focus of teaching and researching.

Gunn, Hill, Berg and Haigh (2016) examine the way in which the work of teacher educators has changed in New Zealand. The authors outline that rather than a dual focus, there have been three ‘trajectories’ for teacher educators, firstly as an expert practitioner, contributing their career experience, but not necessarily having an expectation to research, a ‘traditional academic’ who may not be a qualified teacher or one who has both the teaching qualification and has also been involved in research (Gunn et.al, 2016, p306). New Zealand’s Ministry of Education were looking at ways to increase the ‘status and effectiveness of the teaching profession’ (Gunn et.al, 2016, p307) with the result of teacher education having an increased postgraduate focus. This shift to university-based teacher education, in line with approaches found in other countries such as Norway and Finland, has an impact on the professional identity of teacher educators. Again, this seems to emphasise a possible sense of professional identity shift that can happen within teacher education, with a sense that the teacher educator faces the biggest challenges when moving from practitioner to academic.

By contrast, Høydalsvik (2019) asks the question as to whether the professional identity of teacher educators is hidden. Høydalsvik (2019) takes professional identity to be aligned with a sense of personal identity, arguing less for a sense of shifting identity, rather a reconciliation of their personal sense of self with their new professional identity. The study that Høydalsvik carried out in Norway, where the expectation is that most teacher educators will be qualified to doctoral level, finds that whilst some teacher educators had reflected on their sense of professional identity, this was ‘not necessarily visible to others’ (2019, p103). Høydalsvik presents that teacher educators are ‘carriers of double identities’ (2019, p103). With the challenge of there being more than one professional identity to acknowledge, the visibility of the teacher educator is then often related to the perceptions of others and not about the need to reconcile one’s own sense of self to the new professional identity. The link made with qualifications may reflect the need for the individual to invest themselves in this new role recognising that it requires its own professional development.

PRACTICE AND RESEARCH: THE GREAT DIVIDE

These ideas correlate with informal discussions held when preparing ‘When is a teacher not a teacher?: a battle cry from educational no (wo)man’s land’ (Kelly, 2021). Having experienced my own shift in professional identity, from experienced practitioner to teacher educator, I had no sense of joining a new profession and

became increasingly aware of conflicting perceptions from others. After decades of work as a teacher, I had not expected to lose a sense of self-understanding as an educator of others, but the new context of my work, in a university, meant that this was challenged, particularly by others. In informal conversations with other teacher educators, I explored whether I was alone in feeling that there were different experiences of this teacher educator professional identity. One idea that emerged was that an integral part of being an educator was to model practice and therefore it was inevitable that we would not be perceived as an academic by the post-graduate teachers, in same sense as those that delivered their degree content. This would add to Mannes (2020) dual roles of teacher educator as either teacher or researcher, and would go further still than Gunn, Hill, Berg and Haigh's (2016) three trajectories as these roles would depend on whether teacher educators were teaching undergraduates or postgraduates.

After a consideration of external perceptions, these discussions moved to self-reflections on the role; does the teacher educator see themselves as a teacher first, then an academic or both? One discussion centred on the idea of not leaving the teacher identity behind. However, this could be problematic if the teacher educator does not embrace the evolution of their own professional identity, or in Høydalsvik's (2019) terms, if they did not reconcile their own understanding with their new role. Blustein and Noumair talk about a sociological perspective of self as 'anchored in a social context in which individuals derive a sense of self from their own subjective experiences' (1996, p433). Perhaps it is this anchoring that causes a sense of homelessness for the university-based teacher educator in that their work is primarily concerned with practice, but their delivery of this process is displaced from schools and is in a different setting for much of the time. This all seems to suggest that it is important for the teacher educator to remember Crow and Møller's point when considering potential identity shift, that 'identities are fluid and dynamic' (2017, p723).

If the sense of identity is to emerge from a layering of perceptions, of self and others, then this adds to the complexity of establishing the professional identity of the teacher educator. If there is a sense that the commonality of being an educator is enough and that context does not impact then this does raise questions relating to the relationship between research and practice. I have encountered, as Hennessey and Lynch describe, those that are critical of the overlapping roles of practitioner and researcher, proposing that they have found 'the inherent role of the teacher to be at odds with that of the researcher' (2019, p596). This divide between educational research and professional practice seems to be greater than ever in the UK. Hennessey and Lynch go further to suggest that there is an 'epistemological divide' (2019, p599) between the exploration of theory and its application to practice. Evidence of this divide can be found on Social Media with voices from both sides,

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for example from the teaching side, ‘Deskilled teachers. Mere bloggers. Micropopulists. These are what teachers get called these days – by education researchers’ (Boxer, 2021). From the teacher educator side of the divide, ‘Isn’t it great that, unlike many other countries, we have teacher educators that are themselves qualified and skilled in the profession and that still spend time in both school, college and uni classrooms as well as managing school partnerships, people, courses and research?’ (Bentley, 2021). Hennessey and Lynch talk about the ‘marshy divide’ (2018, p595) between trainee teachers and their views on educational research. This may add to the view that there is something wrong if the perception of practice is that it takes place in schools, but the education of teachers takes place in universities.

Certainly there is evidence that the professional identity is confused amongst teacher educators themselves. Some felt that they were academics when they had acquired their doctorate. However, in these discussions there was a clear sense that some academics felt that teacher educators were different, not far from Goodlad’s (1990) observations from over thirty years ago. Whether perceived as teachers or academics, it seems that there is a sense that teacher educators are required to adopt an more chameleon-esque approach to present themselves in an appropriate way depending on the context. Hennessey and Lynch argue that this relationship needs addressing further, suggesting that those promoting the need for educational research ‘as a means to improve practice are frequently charged with holding a naive understanding’ and that part of that naivety is to ‘assume a linear relationship between theory and practice’ (2018, p595).

WHAT’S IN A NAME? EDUCATOR OR TRAINER?

These are troubling times for teacher education (Weale, 2021, Knight, 2021). The response to the decision to require all teacher training providers to apply for accreditation has already caused some universities to reconsider whether they can continue to accommodate these changes (Hazel, 2021). Since 2019 teacher preparation has had to follow the ITT (Initial Teacher Training) Core Content Framework provided by the DfE. There is a clear focus on this as being evidence-based and research is being used to support this as teacher *training* rather than teacher *education*. This has caused some academics to suggest that the process preparing teachers is ‘too prescriptive’ and lacking academic rigour (Booth, 2022). Lofthouse suggests this is evident even in the nomenclature of this work saying that ‘the language of training rather than education is potentially reductive’ (2018, p3).

How we talk about teacher education can be lost in the different perspectives involved in the debate today. There is a danger to have ‘overly simplistic definitions of teaching as “craft”’ (Czerniawski et.al, 2019, p185). This highlights the

expectations of the education process taking place. Are teacher educators educating teachers about the research and strategies of teaching, or are their trainers showing them how to do it. This links to a fixed perspective of research to be delivered rather than as a process to engage with that is fluid and evolving. Czerniawski, Kidd and Murray's research (2019) suggests that how those involved in the preparation of new teachers identified themselves was also a reflection of context. They suggest that those that are university-based identify themselves as educators, whereas those based in schools saw themselves as teachers and their work as training (Czerniawski et.al, 2019). This contributes to the divide of the perception of teacher trainers as 'removed from the "ivory tower"' (Czerniawski et.al, 2019, p175). Czerniawski, Kidd and Murray's research found that there was an association of university-based teacher educators as those with 'knowledge *of* teaching' rather than the school-based trainers having 'knowledge *about* teaching' (2019, p175). This distinction reinforces the point that there is a confusion over the identity of all teacher educators, but particularly that of the university-based teacher educator. The perception of some, including colleagues faced with the same task of preparing teachers, is that university-based teacher educators are removed and academic, lacking direct experience, despite often decades of their own teaching experience in schools.

The distinctive role of the teacher educator raises problems of any sense of a shared identity in the UK. The distinction between university and schools-based preparation potentially causes a divide amongst teacher educators/trainers themselves. Davey talks of the importance of 'belonging as a teacher educator' (2013, p7), but this seems to be challenging for the university-based teacher educator in a number of ways. Firstly, there is a lack of professional identity in the university, with the questioning of where their home is. Secondly, there are problems with current debates between educational research and educational practice. Thirdly, there are potentially problems within the shared practice of preparing teachers and yet with no common community. With the questioning of the academic rigour of proposed changes in the UK by some, the role of the university-based teacher educator is at best changing and at worst disappearing. If the legislation (DfE, 2021) of the accreditation process has the same underpinning approach, then the professional identity of the teacher educator would be endangered and could disappear.

TEACHER EDUCATOR AS LEADER

There are a number of routes to becoming a teacher educator. Murray and Male (2005) find that the majority of teacher educators in the UK come to the role after a period of time working successfully as teachers in schools. In their study,

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Czerniawski, Gray, MacPhail, Bain, Conway and Guberman (2018) find in their research that the average length of time spent serving in schools was 10–14 years. Whilst Murray and Male (2005) did not go into detail on what was meant by an successful experience, there is a sense that many of the staff come to role via leadership responsibilities in schools that are likely to be involved in teacher induction. There is also an interesting distinction between what are described as ‘first-order practitioners’ and ‘second-order practitioners’ (Murray and Male, 2005, p2) referring to teachers in the first instance and teacher educators in the second. This, along with a sense of going back to the beginning, can lead teacher educators to lose sight of their leadership experience.

Faced with the task of preparing the next generation of teachers, it is possible to see the work of the teacher educator as an educational leader creating future educational leaders. Fullan’s (2019) focus on the importance of being passionate about making things better can also link here to the work of a teacher educator. By re-discovering the moral imperative (Fullan, 2019) of teacher education, these values can be placed at the centre of this work and this role. These values could be a way to reclaim a sense of identity, particularly for the UK teacher educators.

Biesta states that ‘education needs to be values-based rather than evidence-based because it is only on the basis of normative judgements about what good education is that the practice of education because possible’ (2020, p62). If this is the case for education, then it should be the case for teacher education. Maaranen, Kynäslähti, Byman, Jyrhämä and Sintonen, in Finland, establish that it is vital for teacher educators to be able to ‘express their own values’ (2018, p214). This brings together two important aspects of practice, placing values at the centre and ensuring critical reflection is embedding in the process. As a leader, the teacher educator can, through an examination of their own values, recognise their role in helping new teachers to discover their values.

This development of the teacher educator’s work would benefit from a commitment to their own professional development and reflection. Perhaps this is easier in Finland where professional development is already part of the role. There is a requirement for teacher educators in universities to have a doctorate, but not necessarily a teaching qualification. In Czerniawski, Gray, MacPhail, Bain, Conway and Guberman’s research (2018) in their sample of 272 university-based teacher educators in England, Scotland and Ireland, found that 36% of the sample in England had doctorates (n=157), 42% of teacher educators in Scotland (n=61) had doctorates and 83% of the Irish teacher educators had doctorates (n=54). Establishing a clear professional development pathway for teacher educators would be one way of strengthening their professional leadership identity in the UK. It is important to note here the work of the Universities’ Council for the Education of

Teachers (2022) that works to support university-based teacher educators in the UK. However, the provision in the UK does not match other international providers. By comparison, teacher educators in Norway are offered ‘one or two courses nearly every year to follow continuing education programmes for teacher educators’ (Høydalsvik, 2019, p105).

CONCLUSION

I have suggested that we are at a point where the professional identity of the university-based teacher educator in the UK is under threat. This is as a result of a changing view of teacher training in the UK and the splits that exist between university and school provision as well as the greater battle between research and practice. How can teacher educators straddle these divisions? I would suggest that there are a number of steps that could be taken for individuals to develop their own understanding of their professional identity. Firstly, that critical reflection, internal and external, on the nature of our role is vital and that we look to reconcile the different experiences that have brought the teacher educator to that point. There should also be a chance to ensure that their own professional development continues. In the absence of a sense of belonging, ensuring that the work in education is values-based (Biesta, 2020), brought together with a re-establishment of the sense of leadership identity from previous roles, would help teacher educators to straddle the divisions. In these turbulent times, much can be learnt from the work and experience of teacher education in other countries to reassure that this role is not extinct yet.

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