

Academic identity of Access HE tutors: a focused review of the literature

Anthony Hudson,
University of East London

ABSTRACT

This focused literature review was designed to inform a small-scale pilot research project on the academic identity of Access HE (Higher Education) tutors. Drawing on literature from Anglophone and European education systems, it highlights the challenges of defining professional identity and rehearses the argument for developing a deeper understanding of teacher professional identity. It highlights the disparate theoretical frameworks used to understand and analyse the concept and the methodological approaches adopted. While there appears to be a greater consensus around methodological approaches – which are predominantly qualitative – theoretical frameworks used to underpin the concept are less well developed. Across the majority of studies, a clearly articulated and developed definition of professional identity is absent. The review identifies a number of gaps in the literature, in particular the limited attention given to the academic identity of experienced or mid-career practitioners and academic identity in further education settings in general and Access HE tutors in particular.

INTRODUCTION

This focused literature review was designed to inform a small-scale pilot research project, 'Just who is educating Rita? – The learning careers of Access HE tutors'. However, it is likely to be of interest and value to others with an interest in teacher and academic identity generally. The review is a work in progress and, in adopting a hermeneutic approach to the process (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic 2010), recognises that subsequent iterations may identify additional relevant

literature and theories which can be drawn on.

There is a well-documented, although somewhat dated, literature on the Access HE (Higher Education) Diploma, which has contributed to widening participation by providing an alternative route into HE (Preece et al. 1998; Diamond 1999). There is an extensive body of literature, for example Gorard et al. (2006) and more recently Moore et al. (2013), on learners from widening participation or non-traditional backgrounds, as well

KEYWORDS

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as a number of studies on Access HE learners (Burke 2002; Reay et al. 2002; Dillon 2011; Hinsliff-Smith et al. 2012). However, very little is known about those who teach and support these so-called 'second chance' learners (Busher et al. 2015), the majority of whom are from widening participation backgrounds.

Since the interest in professional identity is relatively recent, under-researched and to some extent under-theorised (Trede et al. 2012; Cardoso et al. 2014) the review draws on literature from Anglophone and

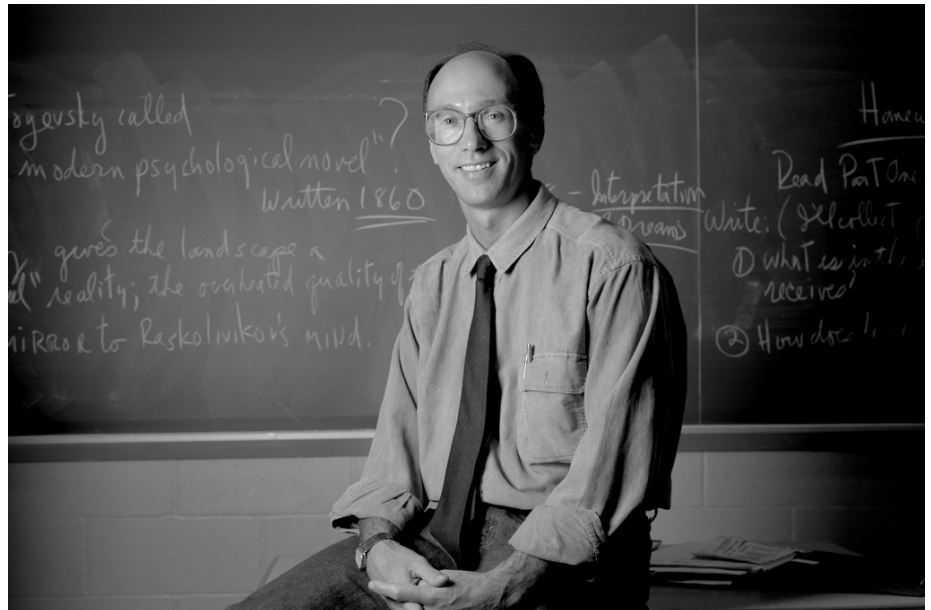
European education systems. It highlights the challenges of defining professional identity, before rehearsing the argument for developing a deeper understanding of teacher professional identity. The following sections provide a brief overview of previous literature reviews on teacher identity, the disparate theoretical frameworks used to understand and analyse the concept, and the methodological approaches adopted. The penultimate section identifies constructs of teacher identity, while the concluding section summarises salient issues and highlights gaps in the literature.

TEACHER IDENTITY: DEFINITION AND IMPORTANCE

'Common usage of the term [identity], however, belies the considerable variability in both its conceptual meaning and its theoretical role' (Stryker & Burke 2000: 284)

Defining teacher identity is no simple endeavour and there are a number of approaches in the literature which draw on a range of disciplines and research traditions. The constructs of identity have been explored from a range of perspectives including psychology, social psychology, sociology and philosophy and consequently, as Gee (2000) notes, have taken on many meanings. Despite or perhaps because of, this wide-ranging interest, the concept as Beijaard et al. (2004) demonstrate is still not clearly defined. It can be used as an analytical lens (Gee 2000) but also as an organising principle for teachers to make sense of themselves and their relationships with others (Maclure 1993).

Access HE tutors, for example, will have a professional identity based on relationships with students, peers and management; depending on their discipline or vocational area they may have a professional identity related to a professional or trade body as well as a subject association; in addition, they will have a personal identity based on



Portrait of an English Teacher by Ben Russell on Flickr

structural characteristics, domestic and social relations. The common themes in the literature are that identity is not fixed but dynamic; that it is subject to a range of internal factors, such as emotion (Hargreaves 1998, Zembylas 2005); and external factors such as job and life experience in specific contexts (Flores & Day 2006). Individuals have multiple identities (Gee 2000; Peel 2005), and a single 'core identity' has multiple forms which manifest in different contexts (Gee 2000). As Beijaard et al. (2004) note:

'What these various meanings have in common is the idea that identity is not a fixed attribute of a person, but a relational phenomenon' (108).

While recognising that individuals have social, personal and professional identities, few studies make clear the connection between these multiple identities, 'let alone how to reconcile and integrate them' (Trede et al. 2012: 376). Recounting her own search for professional identity Peel reflected:

'Moreover, it was the interplay between the professional and personal... that was critical to the development of my sense of self in both its public and private facets.' (Peel 2005: 496)

Identity can be seen as a useful 'analytic lens' because it allows for a

'more dynamic approach' than fixed categories of ethnicity, gender and socio-economic status (Gee 2000: 99; Sfard & Prusak 2005). However, while there are 'promising beginnings', the absence of fully articulated and satisfactory definitions is a limitation (Sfard & Prusak 2005: 16). Recognising the advantages and limitations of the concept as an analytical tool, professional identity may also be important for teachers' practice, efficacy, self-development and resilience in what both Menter (2010) and Beijaard et al. (2004) describe as a changing policy landscape. An understanding of identity guides teachers on 'how to be', 'how to act' and 'how to understand' (Sachs 2005:15).

For individuals the formation and development of professional identity is important for both job performance and satisfaction (Maclure 1993; Day et al. 2005; Zembylas 2005; Jeffrey 2008). Teaching is emotional labour (Hargreaves 1998; O'Connor, 2008) and working in a pressurised environment, which is subject to constant change, can cause high levels of stress. A well-developed professional identity enables teachers to cope with this change, whereas a less well-developed professional identity not only impacts on practice but also on an individual's resilience. The consequence of this may be evidenced through reduced levels of

motivation and commitment, which may impact on staff retention and recruitment (Jephcote & Salisbury 2009).

LITERATURE REVIEWS AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

In addition to brief reviews of the literature which preface many academic papers and monographs on professional identity, there have been a number of literature reviews, published as reports (Mentor 2010; Baxter 2011) and papers within peer review journals (Beijaard et al. 2004; Beauchamp & Thomas 2009; Cardoso et al. 2014). Mentor's (2010) review focuses on teacher identity in primary and secondary settings in the UK, as well as exploring the link between creative aspects of teaching and identity. In contrast Baxter's (2011) review focuses on professional identity within the public sector, drawing on comparisons between teaching, nursing and social work.

Of the literature reviews published in peer review journals, Beijaard et al. (2004) identified 22 studies for the period 1988–2000, justifying this date range as the 'period that teachers' professional identity emerged as a research area' (Beijaard et al. 2004: 108). They divide the studies into three categories: those which focus on professional identity formation (Goodson & Cole 1994); studies which focus on the components of teacher professional identity (Beijaard et al. 2000); and studies which represented identity through teachers' narratives (Connelly et al. 1999).

Beauchamp and Thomas's (2009) review provides an overview of the debates on teacher professional identity and in doing so notes the paucity of clearly articulated and developed definitions. A number of factors – agency, emotion, narrative and discourse, the role of reflection and the influence of contextual factors – are considered mainly in relation to identity formation of pre-service and newly qualified teachers. Cardoso et al. (2014) provide a systematic review of the literature on professional identity for the

period 2002–11 which aimed 'to map the typology of conceptual studies about professional identity' (Cardoso et al. 2014: 83). The findings from their review of 22 papers highlighted the focus on teaching and nursing and concentration on learning and professional development. They also noted that within a number of studies there is '*a strong positioning of authors in the perspective of symbolic interactionism and in post-modernity*' (Cardoso et al. 2014: 83).

From this focused review of the literature, the field would appear to be underdeveloped theoretically with limited consensus between scholars who draw on a wide range of frameworks to underpin empirical study (Trede et al. 2012). The theoretical frameworks and some of the empirical studies which they underpinned included Giddens's structuration theory (Peel 2005); Lave and Wenger's theories of situated learning and communities of practice, which a number of studies have drawn on (Busher et al. 2015); and Foucault's work on power. A number of studies also drew on learning theories including Schön's reflective practice; Mezirow's critical reflection; and Vygotsky's social constructionism (Trede et al. 2012: 375).

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES

In comparison to the disparate range of theoretical frameworks, there appears to be a greater degree of consensus regarding methodological approaches, which is qualitative in the majority of studies. A small number, for example Wilson's (2010) study of further education (FE) teachers, adopted a mixed methods approach; for their study of 80 secondary school teachers in the Netherlands Beijaard et al. (2000) administered a questionnaire, and more recently Rus et al. (2013) collected data from 80 teachers in Romania using a 21-Statements Test and a Q-sort distribution.

Of the qualitative studies, while most are small-scale, with some drawing on a case study of one (Zembylas 2005) or three

teachers (Bukor 2015), those drawing on a larger group of respondents – 27 FE teachers and 45 FE students (Jephcote & Salisbury 2009) – were usually part of a larger funded project. Many of the larger-scale studies also adopted a multi-method qualitative approach, not least because they were sufficiently resourced to be able to do so. Jephcote & Salisbury (2009) conducted semi-structured interviews at the beginning and end of the project, administered learning journals, undertook 'ethnographic observation of learning interactions in a variety of settings' as well as a small sample of autobiographical accounts (Jephcote & Salisbury 2009: 967).

Most of the studies have been cross-sectional, a snapshot, taken at a single point in time, although some (Flores & Day 2006; Jephcote & Salisbury 2009) have been longitudinal. Zembylas (2005) in a study of teacher identity and emotion noted the advantages of 'long-term ethnographic investigations' (Zembylas 2005: 935). This is further supported by Rus et al. (2013) who argue that given the dynamic nature of identity, longitudinal or multi-wave studies would be useful to understand not only what influences identity but also the process itself.

A variety of methods have been adopted, singly or more often in combination, ranging from observation to diaries and learning journals to qualitative interviews. Some researchers have adopted a life history approach (Sikes et al. 1985; Goodson 1992, 2003; Nico 2016) which it is argued provides a richness and depth of insight that other methods cannot reveal.

CONSTRUCTING TEACHER PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

THE PLACE OF IDENTITY

A number of studies have noted the importance of place and how working in different contexts and settings shapes identity. The difference between teachers working in different education phases (pre-

school, primary, and secondary school) was identified by Rus et al. (2013) in a comparative study. However, the majority of studies have not been comparative and focus on a specific phase.

While a number of scholars have considered teacher identity in the context of primary schools (Pollard 1985; Nias 1989; Menter 1997; Acker 1999; Osborn et al. 2000; Woods & Jeffrey 2002; Webb et al. 2004) and secondary schools (Ball 1981, 1987), and academic identity in HE (Henkel 2005; Winter 2009; Clarke et al. 2013), there has been less attention to the professional identity of teachers working in FE in general (Jephcote & Salisbury 2009) and Access HE teachers in particular (Busher et al. 2015).

The FE sector has been variously described as the “everything else” sector (Panachamia 2012) and the ‘Cinderella service’ (Randle & Brady 1997). It is poorly defined and understood for a number of reasons that the descriptions above hint at. Firstly, the breadth of provision ranges from basic literacy and numeracy through to HE including postgraduate courses. Secondly, FE colleges are distinct from schools and universities in the extent of vocational provision, a significant proportion of which is delivered part-time. As a consequence many colleges have a diverse student population, from younger learners to adult returners, who are sometimes physically segregated by the provision of specialist units for 14- to 16-year-old learners (McCrone et al. 2007) or HE Centres for undergraduate and postgraduate students (Hudson 2012).

While recognising that professional teacher identity extends across contexts and that there may be value in comparative study (Rus et al. 2013), identity is constructed locally (Cohen 2010). However, while context – in this case education phase – impacts on the life and practice of teachers, the impact will be mediated by individual biography (Maclure 1993).

IDENTITY AND AGENCY

The role of agency in shaping identity is linked to the interaction between teacher and their educational contexts, and the relationship between agency and identity is well documented in the literature (Lasky 2005; Day et al. 2006). An understanding or awareness of identity can be empowering, enabling teachers not only to achieve their aims but also ‘transform the context’ in which they work (Beauchamp & Thomas 2009: 183). Given that teachers have multiple identities which are developed and shaped, agency may be important in not only shaping but also sustaining these identities (Day et al. 2006).

Newly qualified teachers and those in the early phases of their teaching career are likely to have less agency in developing their identity or impact on the educational contexts or structures in which they practise (Nias 1989). While the diminution of agency in the context of a performative culture has been considered by a number of scholars (eg Ball 2003), for teachers in general there is little consideration in the literature on the agency of mid-career or experienced teachers in particular.

IDENTITY AND EMOTION

‘Teaching cannot be reduced to technical competence or clinical standards. It involves significant emotional understanding and emotional labor as well. It is an emotional practice.’ (Hargreaves 1998: 850)

The role of emotion in teaching and teacher identity, is an emerging field which a number of scholars have investigated (Hargreaves 1998, 2001; Zembylas 2005; O’Connor 2008).

There is a clear contrast, as Hargreaves notes, between the North American literature, which is ‘celebratory’ and ‘exhortatory’, and that of England and Australia where the ‘reform process has been more politically transparent, more persistent and more intensively applied’ (Hargreaves 1998: 837). A number of

feminist writers have explored the caring orientation of teachers in relation to their students (Noddings 1992) and to parents (Henry 1996), yet the value or role of emotion in teaching is marginalised in policy. If emotion is embraced, it is only those emotions which are calming and have a sedative effect in managing change as opposed to more volatile or passionate emotions such as joy and excitement, frustration and anger. An important facet of being a teacher is recognising and managing these emotions (Day et al. 2006).

CO-CONSTRUCTION WITH PEERS AND STUDENTS

While recognising that identity ‘requires the participation of others’ (Gee 1999: 15), there is a paucity in the literature about how teachers’ professional identities have been co-constructed with peers and students. Some studies in the United States (Cohen 2010) have explored co-construction by analysing teachers’ talk from focus groups and how identity is recognised through ‘co-constructing stories’ and the use of observed evidence. However, there is little evidence of studies exploring teacher co-construction in the UK context (Wilkins et al. 2012).

A study of Access HE teachers in England (Busher et al. 2015) considered the role of students in co-constructing identity with their teachers, whose identity they suggest is renegotiated and reconstructed each academic year. They also noted that there still appeared to be little evidence of studies exploring co-construction of identity between students and teachers.

IDENTITY AND GENDER, ETHNICITY, AND AGE

A number of scholars (Menter 2010) have commented on the lack of attention to characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, social class and religious or other beliefs. While age may not be a useful analytical category, experience and the length of time in the profession might be significant. The majority of studies focus on identity formation of trainees

and early career teachers, due in part to practical issues, such as gaining access to respondents, as well as theoretical issues such as exploring identity formation, compared to more experienced or longer-serving teachers. Mid-career phases are complex and may be characterised by maintenance, growth or stagnation, which when disrupted by various 'triggers' such as organisational changes, may stimulate change (Hall 1986). This change may be to re-engage with learning and professional development. Continuing to be a learner is an important component of teacher identity (Cohen 2010) and in a study of teachers in England and Australia has also been linked to commitment, particularly for older and more experienced teachers (Day et al. 2005).

KNOWLEDGE AND IDENTITY

There has been limited attention on the consequence for teachers' relationship to knowledge. While it is difficult to do justice to Bernstein's classification of knowledge, drawing on his work, Beck & Young (2005) consider how:

'Older forms of relations to knowledge enabled professional and academic identities to be centred in relatively stable identifications with (and loyalties to) clearly defined knowledge traditions' (191).

An emphasis on trainability, which Bernstein described as an empty concept, leads to the erosion of traditional subject loyalties, for which are substituted 'temporary stabilities' driven by the needs of the market (Beck & Young 2005: 191). While FE teachers may never have enjoyed the same degree of loyalty to academic or vocational subjects as their counterparts in HE, clearly their relationship to knowledge has changed and could be usefully explored through further research.

BLENDED PROFESSIONALS

Whitchurch (2008) has noted the rise of 'blended professionals' who, in the context of HE, span both academic and professional domains. While Whitchurch

is primarily interested in professional staff identities in HE and the creation of a third space in which they could operate (using lateral relationships with colleagues internally and externally to build credibility rather than relying on role-based authority) (Whitchurch 2008: 393–4), the extent to which teachers in FE are assuming more administrative roles and duties could be usefully explored. If, as in HE, there is significant blurring of boundaries then this will have an impact on the development of teacher identity.

CONCLUSIONS

Across the majority of studies, a clearly articulated and developed definition of professional identity is absent. Different and disparate theoretical frameworks have been used to underpin empirical work and in doing so highlight what they contend are the significant components in constructing identity. There appears to be a greater consensus in terms of methodological approach, which is largely qualitative, and although a range of methods have been employed, interviews tend to dominate. The majority of studies are cross-sectional, although there are examples of longitudinal or multi-wave studies. Most of the studies focus on identity formation of pre-service and newly qualified teachers for both practical (ease of access) as well as theoretical reasons.

While recognising that a definition of identity is absent in some studies and not fully developed in others, nevertheless it is still useful as: an analytic tool (Gee 2000); for teachers' well-being and job satisfaction; as well as their practice (Maclure 1993; Day et al. 2005; Zembylas 2005; Jeffrey 2008). In terms of well-being, a strong identity enhances resilience and enables teachers to cope with a changing policy landscape and practice in a performative culture.

The review has highlighted a number of gaps in the literature which could usefully be explored through further research.

1. The importance of place in constructing identity. While a number of studies have focused on teacher professional identity in primary (Pollard 1985; Webb et al. 2004) and secondary schools (Ball 1981) and academic identity in HE (Henkel 2005; Clarke et al. 2013), in comparison academic identity in FE has received limited attention. Having noted the importance of place in the construction of identity, and given the breadth of provision in FE colleges, it seems likely that there will be multiple teaching cultures which will provide a rich research context. In a rapidly changing educational landscape, the rapid growth of alternative providers will also provide a rich site for research.

2. Teacher's career stage. The majority of studies have focused their attention on identity formation in pre-service and newly qualified teachers, rather than how mid-career and experienced teachers sustain and develop or reconstruct their professional identity.

3. The constructs of identity. While studies have identified and explored the constructs of identity, some constructs, such as the emotional aspects of teaching and co-construction of identity with peers and students have received less attention.

4. Finally, while there is a significant body of literature exploring performativity and the audit culture (Ball 2003), less attention has been paid to the impact on teachers in FE than in schools. FE colleges, due to their breadth of provision, are subject to scrutiny from multiple external agencies. This emphasis on performativity, it is argued, leads to inauthentic practice. This concern was identified in a recent study (Busher et al. 2015) which also noted Access HE tutors' concerns regarding performativity – meeting recruitment and challenging retention targets. ■

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