

Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

The reconstruction of primary teachers' identities

Journal Item

How to cite:

Woods, Peter and Jeffery, Bob (2002). The reconstruction of primary teachers' identities. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 23(1) pp. 89–106.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© [not recorded]

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:
<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1080/01425690120102872>

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk

THE RECONSTRUCTION OF PRIMARY TEACHERS' IDENTITIES

PETER WOODS AND BOB JEFFREY

Published in British Journal of the Sociology of Education, [2002] volume 23
(1), 89 - 106.

Faculty of Education and Language Studies

The Open University

Milton Keynes MK7 6AA

ABSTRACT

Primary teachers have had to reconstruct their identities in response to the reconstruction of the education system. The holism, humanism and vocationalism of the old Plowden self-identity has been challenged by a new assigned social identity signalled in the assault on child-centred philosophy, the diminution of elementary trust, and changes in the teacher role. These challenges have thrown up new dilemmas for teachers, and represent 'fateful moments' in the careers of their identities. In trying to resolve the dilemmas, teachers have engaged in identity work, characterised mainly by identity talk, and a number of emotional and intellectual strategies. The result has been a partitioning of the old Plowden self-identity, with the 'real self' being largely withheld from the new personal identity and the sense of vocationalism being set to one side. The new personal identity in teaching represents a more instrumental and situational outlook, with the substantial self finding more expression elsewhere. Identity work is still in progress and seems set to continue while teachers have to find ways of relating to two or more competing discourses.

INTRODUCTION

The restructuring of education has brought about radical changes in primary teachers' work (Woods et al. 1997). In previous publications, we have considered various different modes of teacher adaptation to these changes (Woods 1995), and modifications to the teacher career (Troman and Woods 2001). In this paper, we want to examine the implications for teacher identity.

We need to make clear at the outset our view of identity. We largely follow Snow and Anderson's (1987) construction, with some modifications, distinguishing among social identities, personal identities, and self-concept. Social identities are 'attributed or imputed to others in an attempt to place or situate them as social objects.' (p. 1347) These are largely 'imputations based primarily on information gleaned on the basis of appearance, behaviour, and the location and time of the action'. In the context of our research, we find the notion of an 'assigned social identity' (Ball 1972) useful. These are imputations based on *desired* or *prescribed* appearance etc. Personal identities refer to the 'meanings attributed to the self by the actor,' and are 'self-designations and self-attributions brought into play during the course of interaction' (Ibid.). They may be consistent or inconsistent with social identities. The self-concept is the 'overarching view of oneself as a physical, social, spiritual, or moral being', and is 'a kind of working compromise between idealized images and imputed social identities' (p. 1348). We shall be concerned with teachers' personal identities, which 'provide a glimpse of the consistency or inconsistency between social identities and self-concept' (Ibid.). We make a further distinction between 'substantial' and 'situational' identities. Ball (1972) used these terms to distinguish between more enduring identities and more transient ones given meaning by their contextual location. We shall refer to the combination of personal identity and self-concept as 'self-identity'.

In the years immediately preceding the restructuring of recent years, there seemed to be a great deal of consistency of social identity and self-concept among the majority of English primary teachers. Much of the literature of this period speaks of these teachers seeing their selves and social identities as isomorphic. Nias (1989), for example, writes:

The personal and occupational self may be so closely related that, in their own terms, they 'become' teachers: The persons they perceive themselves to be go to work and the teachers they feel they are come home, often to occupy their sleeping as well as their waking hours... Many teachers, for part or all of their working lives, invest their personal sense of identity in their work (p. 224-5).

However, education has undergone a revolution since this was written. What challenges have teachers had to meet to their identities, and how have they dealt with them?

Giddens (1991) provides a useful reference point for current developments. He argues that in the current state of 'late' or 'high modernity', as he calls it, global trends impact on the self in unprecedented ways. Daily life is reconstituted. Much of everyday life used to be based on a high degree of trust between people, but now trust is less personalized, and more invested in processes and abstract systems. We also live in a culture of high consequence risks of global origin, which contain opportunity as well as danger. These developments have brought about the separation of time and space, and the 'disembedding' or 'lifting out' of 'social relations from local contexts and their re-articulation across indefinite tracts of time-space' (Ibid. p. 18). For the individual, the result is a challenge to the taken-for-grantedness of everyday life, to the erstwhile 'high level of reliability of the contexts of day-to-day social interaction', and to the 'ontological security' of the self (Ibid. p. 36). In education, these developments have been reflected in the growth of economic rationalism and technicism; an emphasis on marketability, efficiency and performativity; the growth of management systems and of audit accountability; and attacks on moral systems, such as child-centredness, which appear to

run counter to these (Woods et al, 1997). These processes demand attention, and teachers have been forced to reconsider their beliefs, values, roles, biographies, and ambitions in ways they had not anticipated. As A. Hargreaves (1994 p. 71) puts it, 'The fragile self becomes a continuous reflexive project. It has to be constantly and continuously remade and reaffirmed '.

According to Giddens (1991 pp. 189-196), the self in late modernity typically confronts four major dilemmas: 1. The degree to which the self is unified or becomes fragmented; 2. Whether one appropriates the changes to one's own concerns, or feels powerless before the scale and depth of the changes; 3. The question of authority versus uncertainty; and 4. Personalized versus commodified experience. However, though this is markedly different from the conditions pertaining to those of Nias' 1989 research, a substantial self-identity, he feels, still appears to be at the heart of the resolution of these dilemmas. Giddens is keen to emphasize the role of agency, and the possibilities for integration as well as disintegration, for opportunity as well as risk. 'The ideal self', he says, 'is a key part of self-identity, because it forms a channel of positive aspirations in terms of which the narrative of self-identity is worked out' (Ibid., p. 68).

The reconstruction of teacher identities makes a useful test case for Giddens' theory, as well as providing an opportunity to consider identity theory in general. So far, humanist theories, emphasising the consistent and unitary self (and supported by, for example, Nias' research), have largely prevailed. But these have come under attack in recent years from post-structuralists, who argue that we have multiple selves and identities that change and shift according to different discourses. According to the latter view, there is no ideal, real or substantial self or identity. Individuals' negotiations through the rapid and radically changing events of recent years lend some support to this view. But we find both theories useful in understanding the reconstruction of teacher identities.

All of these processes are reflected in our researches of recent years (Woods and Jeffrey 1996; Woods et al 1997). In this paper, we draw from our research during the period 1994-9 into the effects on English primary teachers (teaching children aged 5-11) of the impact of school inspections carried out by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), an organization established by the UK government in 1992 as part of its drive to raise standards of education (Jeffrey and Woods 1998). These inspections were very traumatic, and brought to a head identity issues already stirred by Government legislation. In research terms, therefore, they constitute a 'critical case' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). For the Ofsted research, we selected six primary schools, contrasting in size, location and pupil intake. We then studied the effects of the inspections on the teachers of these schools from two terms prior to the inspection (when schools were first given notice that they were to be inspected) to up to a year afterwards. We later returned to two of the schools where teachers were experiencing their second inspection four years after their first, enabling us to monitor adaptations in those schools over a period of five years. The main methods of data collection consisted of series of unstructured interviews with individual teachers, tape-recorded and transcribed, over the whole period; and observation in their schools at key points of the inspection process. Our full sample was over 90 teachers (consisting of 95 per cent of the staffs - a few were not willing to take part), 80 per cent of whom were mid- to late-career teachers whose educational values were established prior to the introduction of the National Curriculum. It is this latter population of teachers, therefore, who are chiefly represented in this paper.

It was clear that these inspections were mounting the most significant challenge to teacher identities since they had begun teaching. We consider this challenge in this paper, and how, in meeting it, teachers were negotiating new identities for themselves. We begin with a resume of typical features of the English primary teacher's self during the 1970s and 80s as evidenced by our teachers.

THE PRIMARY TEACHERS' PLOWDEN SELF-IDENTITY

The typical English primary teacher's self-identity of the 1970s and 80s was strongly endorsed by government policy of the day, and educational and academic discourse, all epitomized in the Plowden Report (CACE, 1967). While we should be cautious about the extent to which Plowden ideals were operationalised in schools (Alexander, 1992), there is plenty of evidence to attest to its general influence among primary teachers (see, for example, Pollard, 1987; Nias, 1989; Osborn et al, 2000). Consequently, those who began teaching in the 1970s had a strong sense of 'ontological security' and an almost taken-for-granted 'protective cocoon which stands guard over the self in its dealings with everyday reality' (Giddens, 1991, p. 3). Social and personal identities and self-concept were at one, and teachers had, for the most part, an integrated and consistent self-identity. It was based on two major sets of values - humanism and vocationalism - which we summarize here as illustrated by the teachers in our sample.

Humanism

This set of values centres around holism, person-centredness, and warm and caring relationships. The teacher is a whole and real person who could 'really be myself' and who could 'really feel at home' while teaching, rather than being someone who is 'really removed' (Erica). Teachers see children in holistic terms. Basic to this outlook is the child as person. They base their notion of 'good teaching' on child-centred principles, core features of which are full and harmonious development of the child, a focus on the individual learner rather than the whole class, an emphasis on activity and discovery, curriculum integration, and environmentally based learning (Sugrue 1998). They place a high priority on feelings in teaching and learning, and on making emotional connections with knowledge and with children (Woods and Jeffrey 1996). Veronica, for example, believed that fun is a powerful educational tool, and was fond of playing educational games with her children, which she found highly motivational and very productive.

Laura also felt that:

If there's something that children are really, really enthusiastically interested in, it would be so silly to ignore it because the motivation's there, the eagerness, the drive to look at something, to find out about something. It's already there.

A humanist approach has close relationships as a central feature.

It's the children as whole human beings that I worried about. I wanted to set them amongst their families and within their peer groups, I wanted to know how they felt about things and nurture them. (Naomi)

Marilyn emphasized the need for inter-personal skills, the need to communicate and for 'mutual respect'. This kind of relationship involves a high degree of trust. Erica felt that 'a warm, personal relationship wherein they can trust adults is important because children will feel that they can take risks, and not be rejected as people'. Their 'protective cocoon' is strengthened, not attacked. One of our head teachers was keen to develop a similar quality amongst the staff:

I want them to be happy, to come in with enthusiasm and joy, and to take risks with children that will put a spark in them. You can only do this if you feel safe and secure and happy, and if children feel safe and happy with you, they are going to respond as independent learners because we're trusted, we're cared for, we're respected. (Rachael)

Trust is also important among teachers (Troman and Woods, 2001).

It works informally because the relationships are such that you can go and talk to people. So you have respect for other people's professionalism. And you know if you need something, you know who to go to and you know you will get the kind of response you need to have, and you know the other person will give the time to help you. I think it's mutual trust and respect. (Grace)

Vocationalism

A second set of values revolves around the teacher's relationship with her work and job. Teachers exhibit various different degrees and types of commitment. For example, some can be quite instrumental, others more professional (Sikes, Measor, and Woods 1985).

The Plowden primary teacher, however, feels that teaching is a vocation. Our teachers had

a mission to teach and...I wanted to change the world and the only way I could do that was through changing individual children's futures. When parents say, 'My children turned out like this because of you', you think, 'Oh great!' (Angelina)

They have a strong emotional dedication to their work. Leila, for example, loves teaching:

I love being with the kids, being with a child when they actually achieve something. I could wax lyrical about it. I love being in my classroom with my kids and the door shut. Today the classroom was covered in paper and Calvin was talking to my new Somalie boy. I looked round and felt so excited.

These teachers have a strong moral and political investment in their work. Laura, for example, was

very much for the sort of world that is not patriarchal or matriarchal. I want a world where we live in some sort of mutual respect, and I want it for my sons and my daughter and for me and for all the children.

Their commitment was total:

You put so much into it, you can't switch off from it; you can't take a step back. In order to be good, you've got to be wholehearted and the children have got to see that you really care and you are committed. (Carol)

Such commitment entails a 'feeling that you can never do enough for them'.

The importance of the fact that you are dealing with people never ceases to be at the back of your mind - the fact that you are instrumental in the growth of these children. However, you are always going to feel that you could have done a little more. (Cloe)

Despite these feelings of frustration, in order to carry out their unified role teachers had to have 'an inner self-esteem. Nobody likes to think that they are not doing very well' (Kirsty)

CHALLENGES TO THE PLOWDEN SELF-IDENTITY

The Plowden self-identity has been subject to challenges in recent years during the reconstruction of the educational system, primarily through: criticisms of child-centred philosophy; the loss of ‘elementary trust’; and changes in the teacher role. At the heart of this is an *assigned* social identity – one that the policy-makers wished teachers to adopt, and one under-written by sharply contrasting values to those of Plowden.

The assault on child-centred philosophy

This attack strikes at the heart of teachers’ humanism. The marketisation and managerialisation of schooling (Ball, 1994), the subject orientation of the prescribed National Curriculum, and new forms of assessment and inspection inform the new order. These developments are accompanied by government and inspectorial pressure on teachers to abandon child-centredness and adopt a more traditional approach to their classroom teaching. Cloe articulates the assault on humanism:

We're not saying that the education system didn't need a review because I'm sure it did, but it has meant that children have become slots in a machine who have to come up with the right numbers and we're the ones that have got to make them come up with the right numbers whereas before you were dealing with the whole child. You were dealing with its emotions, you were dealing with its social life, you were dealing with its grandma, you were dealing with its physical development in a much more intense and bonding relationship than you do today. You had a real effect on these people and you felt that you were actually doing something that was worthwhile and they come back and see you and you're still ‘Miss’, you're still important to them. I was referred to as ‘Miss’ by a twenty nine-year-old. Being that important to other human beings is a real privilege, but that joy has been dampened until I don't think it's a privilege any more.

Veronica affirmed that children were 'not things to be shoved in little boxes, they're human beings, they have their good days and their bad days, they have their strengths and weaknesses.' There would soon be 'no individuality left in classrooms, no way to be with kids or to encourage them or direct them or lead them the way you feel is best'. One of the 'joys' of teaching for Victor, now disappearing, was 'feeling free to run with something...that sort of vibrant, really getting excited about it, really involving all the children... (which they) never forget that for the rest of their lives'. (Victor)

The process of an Ofsted inspection reduced the complex, multiple qualities of Plowden teaching to a series of measurable criteria, ascertained in 20-30 minute assessments (Jeffrey and Woods 1998) as to how well children had 'received' specific factual knowledge.

My teaching is about the whole child, whether they're in the classroom, walking along the corridor, in assembly. It's the interactions that go on all the time that helps to bring that child 'together'. But my immediate reaction to the Ofsted inspector's questioning of the children was that it seemed like attack, attack, attack as they quizzed them on specific pieces of knowledge. (Shula)

Diminution of 'elementary trust'

Control of teachers has become, 'tighter, largely through the codification and monitoring of processes and practices previously left to teachers' professional judgement, taken on trust or hallowed by tradition' (Dale, 1989 p. 132). Power (1994) argues that accountability in public services has become a substitute for trust, and that certainly seems to be born out in our research. Robina, a recently appointed head of department, felt this change after her department had been criticized by inspectors just as she was getting to grips with its problems:

They're here all the time pushing for more and more and making you feel that you can't achieve, questioning your capability... You can't work like that because there's got to be a sense of trust if you've been given a job.

Veronica also observed that the demand for detailed and extensive records 'has left me with an even greater feeling of inadequacy than I had before...there's no trust that I am doing the job to the best of my ability'. Teachers are 'having to write down the hidden things that you take for granted'. Naomi illustrates the undermining of her sense of vocationalism, feeling that she had

to chop the top off my head off and show somebody what's in it. 'Is it OK? You don't like what you see? Then I'll go and get another one'. The assumption is that teachers are inadequate. That's why I don't like this, it stinks! It thrives on inadequacy. What does this do for teachers' self-esteem? Why do I have to have all these people checking up on me? I just want to do my job - the job I used to love, I was there till 6 o'clock every night until I had my kids. Even then I used to take work home and kids home, take kids out for netball tournaments. I loved it, because people trusted me and I felt good about things. I don't feel good about anything I do anymore.

Local inspectors used to be collegial with teachers. However, since the 1986 Education Act and as a result of the Audit Commission' report (1989), Local Education Authorities (LEAs) had been encouraged to adopt more of an Ofsted role, 'abandoning a long tradition of advice on curriculum developments and support of specialist curriculum areas'.(Evans and Penney, 1994, p. 35]

But when he (*the LEA Inspector*) came in on Wednesday, and acted differently from the way he has in the past, the atmosphere was totally different. People were tense, people were behaving differently, and they bolted things down in their class teaching. I almost got the feeling that he was slightly put out by this, that he thought that we should have been more relaxed because we knew him. But we said 'You were here as an Ofsted inspector'. (Lauren)

In most 'pre-modern' contexts, according to Giddens (1991), trust relations were localized, and focused through personal ties. Audit accountability, in the post Plowden order, places less emphasis on the local factors and more on universal strategies and practices, codified in written, standardised procedures:

There seems to be a whole ethos of telling you rather than interacting with you and supporting you. It's 'how we view it from up here' rather than, 'how about looking at what we might be doing with this?' There's no real discussions about what are you doing here, why are you doing that, where you're going to, or what problems you're having. He's here just to look through the paperwork. (Colin)

The Plowden commitment is being undermined here. Deena said the LEA inspectors had been on their side to begin with, but had 'given up the fight'. In the end, 'you give up fighting for what you think is right'. Resolve is replaced by doubt:

I just keep thinking, 'Am I going to feel good in my job afterwards? Am I going to be able to carry on? Am I going to be able to face parents when they see this report or have heard about it...and say 'Well I'm doing my best for you, I feel I'm a good enough teacher to teach your children?' And that worries me. I don't think I should feel that way because I think I am doing my best. It puts doubt in people's minds. (Helen)

Changes in the teacher role

From a notion of the 'good teacher' based on 'personal qualities' (Broadhead 1987), the emphasis is now on teacher competencies, such as subject expertise, coordination, collaboration, management and supervision (Woods et al. 1997). This is the new assigned social identity. But it is not one that our teachers welcome. It attacks their self-esteem 'saying that the teacher in all of this is not important. It's saying 'well anybody can do it' (Shula). It attacks teachers' personal philosophies, 'undervaluing exactly what teachers do. It's almost saying to us, 'you haven't been doing it right, this is what you should be doing.' ...All the time there's a mismatch between what we think is best and what they're imposing. It's like you're being pulled in different directions' (Cloe).

The human element gives way to commodified experience - 'there's nothing about what makes a 'quality' teacher - rapport with the kids, interest in their life experiences, and

enthusiasm in what they're teaching. (Aileen) This commodified discourse strikes at the roots of teacher commitment, giving 'a feeling of sickness about how it's all going'.

(Toni) It causes Freda to feel that 'As soon as that stuff outweighs the love of teaching, then that's the time when you are going to say 'What's the point? Why have stress at work all day, and then come home and be stressed as well?' Something central to the Plowden self-identity has to give way:

I now put a lot of time and effort into school to the detriment of my own personal identity. I will do things like planning but I'm going to take a bit of time back for *me*. It is a process that puts you through so much stress and strain that you are no longer talking about yourself as a 'rounded person'. We're like cardboard cut outs. (Shula)

The new role thus appears to demand a radical change of identity: 'It's almost like telling us to change our personalities. If you say to somebody, "You can't do that any more" after 24 years' teaching, it is completely and utterly demoralizing. It's so alien to the way we work.' (Carol).

Within a child-centred discourse the 'persona of perfection' (Hargreaves, 1994) was accepted as the moral basis of a humanistic and vocational professional life, even though it was understood that it was impossible to achieve. However, audit accountability seeks a perfection that *is* possible. Inspectors' grading of a teacher's work in quantitative terms and the setting of targets for pupil achievement levels exemplifies this conclusion.

Success and failure is constructed through a 'discourse of derision' (Ball 1990) and a continuous onslaught on teacher adequacy. Leticia found 'every paper you open tells you you're not good enough, that we are responsible for all society's ills'. Veronica found this 'slowly eroding away at your confidence till you're beginning to doubt nearly everything that you do. "God, if I do it that way what'll he say, and if it goes wrong how will he react?" No day's going to be perfect but you want it to be perfect. You want everything to be right'.

Continuous criticism strikes at the heart of the self-identity:

For all those years you've tried to do your very best and then to be told, 'You're not good here, you're not good there' is a blow to your pride isn't it? We are pretty engaged with the kids, so any criticism of your teaching is a criticism of **you**. It's bound to be, you can't separate them. (Aileen)

It affects the inside of you, working on people's guilt feelings, working on people's sense of inadequacy. It's hitting people in the ego but it's also pushing buttons in their unconscious, so it's getting to very deep places (Naomi).

To move towards the new assigned social identity makes you 'feel ashamed. It's like licking their boots' (Diane). Shame 'bears directly on self-identity because it is essentially anxiety about the adequacy of the narrative by means of which the individual sustains a coherent biography' (Giddens, 1991, p. 65). The other side of shame is pride. However, pride is continually vulnerable to reactions to others, 'being naked in front of the gaze of the onlooker' (Giddens, 1991, p. 65), in this case inspectors:

I felt degraded by it. We've talked as a staff about this feeling of being undressed by it, of being laid bare, being laid naked. It is very much a sort of professional rape if you like....You **are** accountable for what goes on in your classroom, I don't hide away from that, but it's done in such a way as to make you feel like a victim. (Cloe)

Teacher Dilemmas

We can see how these challenges bring on amongst our teachers the four Giddens' dilemmas noted earlier typical of experiences of the self in late modernity:

1. The previously unified self is in danger of becoming fragmented in a number of ways. There is a yearning by teachers to retain the old values, but strong pressure on them to adopt a new persona. The holism of child-centredness is being splintered in the focus on

the child as pupil, of knowledge by the focus on subjects, and of teacher identity by the focus on managerial and marketable aspects of the new teacher role.

2. There is an assault on teacher autonomy, and an introduction of far-reaching strongly prescribed changes, sustained over a period, leaving teachers with a feeling of powerlessness. Little attention is paid to their views. They are no longer trusted. They are under almost continuous surveillance.

3. A strong note of uncertainty has been introduced into teachers' minds about their work and about their selves. The constant pressure and criticism breeds uncertainty in teachers about their abilities, aims, relationships and commitment to teaching. In some instances, there is a feeling of anomie (see Jeffrey and Woods, 1998), all sense of reality and who they are being lost. Guilt, shame, and loss of confidence ensue.

4. We have seen how commodified has come to challenge personalised experience. Consumerism has replaced care. Measurable quantities have replaced immeasurable qualities in assessment. Audit accountability sidesteps the personal and local, putting emphasis on the abstract and the universal. Competencies have replaced personal qualities as criteria of the good teacher.

These dilemmas induced 'fateful moments', when

the individual is likely to recognize that she is faced with an altered set of risks and possibilities. In such circumstances, she is called on to question routinised habits of relevant kinds; even sometimes those most closely integrated with self-identity. (Giddens, 1991 pp. 131-2)

The Ofsted inspection certainly had this effect on Shula:

We can't separate self from what we actually do within the classroom. The Ofsted team cannot come in and say, 'We're looking at your teaching practice', without saying, 'We're looking at you as a person'. The self is a complex thing, with many

layers which is constantly evolving and changing and developing, but by encapsulating the assessment in one week they've tried to make the self stand still. That's not what people are about... They strip all off these layers and you feel as if you haven't got any real substance... It's building back that self that is necessary for us. I find myself thinking, 'What's my purpose, what's my role? What am I going to do?' It goes right down to where you see yourself in the scheme of things and what's important. I've never, ever, ever, had something that's really made me question something so big all at once. I feel lost... It was really getting down and saying, 'Who are you Shula, and what are you doing? And asking the question 'if you were feeling like this, what the hell are you doing to the kids? What hope are you giving to them?' I've lost *me* in it somewhere and I've got to find me, if I can. (Shula)

Aileen was also struggling in the search for self:

I still am worried; I haven't found me yet. I haven't found myself because I **do** in fact care. I don't feel that I'm working **with** the children any more, I'm working **at** the children but it's not a very pleasant experience. You feel responsible for every part of the school during an inspection, whether you had anything to do with some departments or not but at the same time I feel alienated from the whole process, divorced from it all.

Carol similarly was at an impasse:

I don't want to be seen to be good, but I don't want to be seen to be crap either, I just want to get by. I don't rate the process, but I don't want to be beaten by it. I don't quite know what to do...

How did teachers go about resolving these dilemmas? How did they emerge from their 'fateful moments'?

IDENTITY WORK: MEETING THE CHALLENGES

Teachers engaged in 'identity work', which Snow and Anderson (1987) define as 'the range of activities individuals engage in to create, present, and sustain personal identities

that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept' (p.1348). As with their sample of the homeless, so our sample of teachers, challenged by the new assigned social identity outlined above and lacking the power to pursue other varieties of identity work, engaged in a great deal of *identity talk*, involving the 'verbal construction and assertion of personal identities' (Ibid.). However, it was not just *talk*. As we shall see, teacher talk conveyed a great deal of *feeling*. This is important, as the strongly traumatic negative feelings induced by the assigning of the new social identity – those of guilt, shame, fear, shock etc – needed to be countered if the personal identity were to be salvaged. We find in teachers' expressions, therefore, among some, certainly, feelings of shock, resignation and despair, but among others a great deal of anger, feelings of injustice, fighting qualities, pride, determination and resolve, courage, spirit and hope. Like Snow and Anderson's homeless, they have been disempowered, and are trying here 'to generate identities that provide them with a measure of self-worth and dignity'.

The easiest identity work in securing a new substantial self-identity comes to those teachers whose self-concept most accords with the new social identity. They simply *embrace* the new identity, but there is still some *talking up* to be done, to ensure and almost to celebrate a close fit. Laura, for example, was rebellious as a young person but had a breakdown after the failure of a relationship and she decided she could not let it happen again. 'I suffered because I was against things so much. Now I go with the flow and I am much happier. Inspections are opportunities to perform'. She talked herself up 'about how fine I feel and how I enjoy the work'. Larry 'grabbed the inspectors as often as I could. I was keen to show them what the children could do'...It is up to you as to whether you want to jump through those hoops'. Toni felt that others should accept that 'You can't be an individual in this system at the moment', and used the currency of the inspection discourse to reinforce her self-identity, feeling 'There's something to be said for using numbers to show your worth, providing that you are influencing the interpretation'.

However, on the whole, teachers were made to work a good deal harder in negotiating some consistency between self-concept and social identity. We found two major patterns of response among them. The first was to do with *self-positioning*, teachers summoning up their own reserves to *refuse* to embrace the new social identity, and to *assert* the merits of their own favoured self-identity. This was largely emotional work, establishing a platform for the more intellectual work of *identity strategies* by which teachers would attempt to resolve the dilemmas that confronted them. There were a number of these, but they all point to the same conclusion - the dismemberment of the old substantial self-identity, and its replacement by a more fragmented one.

Self-positioning

Most of our teachers showed a strong resolve to maintain the Plowden self-identity, rejecting the new assigned social identity.

Refusal

Carol had to maintain the same level of humanism:

For all those years you've aimed to be good, you have tried to do your very best and then to be told 'No, you're not good here, you're not good there' is a blow. You have your pride. You want the children to do well and you want to show the children that you care about them. So you can't take a step back from the self. It's all or nothing, you've really got to put everything in.

This meant that, if pressed, she would leave teaching:

I don't like what we are being asked to do. You have to fit in to what is being demanded of you. What I am actually good at, I can't do any more, so I might as well try and find something that I am happier doing even it means I am paid at a lower level. I want to go with my self-esteem intact.

Corrine did leave, in between the inspections, and thought that she was going to regret it, 'but I didn't, I prefer to come in and go voluntarily now. If I had to do Ofsted now, I wouldn't cope. One of my children is doing Key Stage 3 exams (at age 14), and the other

is doing Key Stage 1 (age 7). There is no way that I could cope and go home and help them. It nearly destroyed my family last time'. While her childcare values coincided with her teaching values she could cope, but once they diverged she chose to maintain her personal values. Stephanie had been teaching for eight years and her experience of her first Ofsted inspection was traumatic. Prior to her second inspection she had already decided to have a break from teaching and this enhanced her second inspection performance and confidence in her own self:

At first they put you off. I was so nervous with them sitting there and one of them said after the first lesson 'Be a bit more lively', and I just laughed, because I am a bit of a drama queen. After that I said 'Stuff it, I will just be myself'.

She had decided to reject the new assigned substantial identity and maintain her original self-identity. Bronwyn, a far more experienced teacher, took an equally strong stand:

I will actually turn around and say something if we are criticized for not doing the best for the children. I will look them straight in the face this time and say 'I love my job, and I am doing my very best'. Ofsted are not going to make me change because that would mean being something that I am not... I am what I am from 30 years of teaching.

Self-Assertion

Faced with the dilemma of powerlessness v. appropriation, teachers summoned up all their resolve. Carol was

determined that I am actually going to get through this, no matter what it takes, because if I didn't, it would seem that the 26 years that I have been teaching have been wiped out. How could I answer the question, 'What have I done with my life?'

Sophie sustained self-esteem by thinking, 'They might be able to tell us all the theory and how it should be done, but I'd like to see them actually do it. So in some ways I feel a bit superior to them because I feel that our job is more important than theirs'. Toni

similarly reflected on the first day of the inspection, 'I'm better than any of them on my worst day'. Becky said,

Although you could make a complete hash of something you're good at when there's somebody else there, I don't feel inadequate. I believe I'm a good teacher and that my children do well. I think you've got to believe in yourself.

Sometimes, the feeling of superiority was not enough. Formal complaint was required. Elvira, for example,

was so angry and I wanted to hit out, and then as the week went on I got to the stage where I thought, 'I don't care, it doesn't matter, I know that I'm good at my job so it doesn't matter'. Then I thought 'Blow me, it does!' and I put this letter together thinking, 'I will let them know how I feel because it's important to me'.

At other times, teachers developed a 'bottom line': 'My safety barrier is that I can walk out of the job and tell the inspectors what I think'. The exit option was one solution to too much pressure, again illustrating a weakening of the vocational link:

I know what I am doing, wherever I am doing it, they should trust me. I think I am a valuable commodity. If people push me too far I will say 'OK, I am going'.

Although I need the money, I also need my sanity; that is more important to me.

(Clare)

Shula was upset by the inspection, but eventually concluded 'it might well have been a good thing, in the sense that it made me start to kick back and say, "No way, no way, I'm not sitting back and taking this"'.

Identity Strategies

The strategies teachers deployed all involved some separation of the self from the new assigned social identity. They necessitated the development of new personal identities, sufficient to meet the ostensible requirements (though not the spirit) of the new social identity, while reserving and cultivating what to them were more important aspects of the self for their private life outside the teacher role. In this sense, their erstwhile

substantial self-identities have been dismembered, the 'substantial' element of aspects they hold most near and dear now being displaced to life outside teaching, while their personal identities within teaching have become more 'situational', constructed to meet different situations and purposes with which they might be presented, but in which they feel they cannot invest their full selves. Naomi expresses the problem:

I can't come to terms with all this. I really cannot believe it. I do love the kids but I can't go on with all this. Angela will come in and say she's been working all weekend or all night. I know she spends hours and hours planning her lessons, but I think she is wasting her life and I'm not prepared to give my whole life. I'm 48 years old and I need to have some of my life for myself. I feel extremely vulnerable with all this going on, I might even crack up and have the week off. I don't owe my life to this institution.

Self-displacement

Teachers, like others, will engage in identity work to dissipate the harmful effects of any incongruity. Even when Cloe found out that one of the new inexperienced teachers had been graded 'excellent', whereas her own grading had been 'satisfactory' this did not affect her because

as I told you, it wasn't me. It was somebody else they looked at. They can think what they like, as far as I am concerned, I just don't want to know. They can please themselves what they do; I don't care. I will do what I have got to do. I will smile when I have to smile, I will be somebody else, when I have to be somebody else but they aren't going to get to *me*.

In schools that had had a second Ofsted inspection, teachers had acquired a certain streetwise knowledge which was empowering, and enabled them to counteract 'expropriation processes' (like Ofsted inspections, which) 'reach not only spheres of day-to-day life but the heart of the self' (Giddens, 1991, p. 192). Cloe regained control of her self-identity by detaching

myself from my work and it made me feel good. It gave some power back to me, to who I was. If I hadn't they would have skinned me alive like they did last time when I had all my guts hanging out. My whole career, my whole life was laid on the line for that 'bloody inspection'.

Cloe is still committed to her work, but it is a commitment that reflects a new personal identity, that of mainly raising achievement levels. She retains her humanism but has lost her sense of vocation that was constituted by a unified self-identity.

Francis adopted temporary ambivalence, 'I'm not resisting it, I'm just not accepting it at the moment, because there is enough pressure elsewhere'. Others treated it like a life trauma. Leticia 'decided I've just got to get through it, like most unpleasant things in life, just pretend it's not happening, though I'm not sure I know how to do that.' Clare 'felt good doing playground duty today when five girls and boys came up to give me a hug and a kiss, I thought, "Yes! this is what it's all about". I love these kids and that's got to triumph and I'm not going to think about the bad vibes'.

Being praised by inspectors caused even more problems, for this was announcing an identity that the teacher might not want, especially in the eyes of her colleagues. When Amy received a commendation from Ofsted she was concerned that it might threaten her relationship with a colleague. 'I phoned her and said "I feel dreadful" but she said that she knew that I had a greater loyalty to my friendship with her. I would have been really upset if it had made a difference'. Similarly with the rest of her colleagues:

When I sit in a staff room and put forward an idea I don't want people to just value my commendation because that's not me, that's about Ofsted and their skewed values system. I do not want to be judged by the number that has been stuck on me.

Game playing

Goffman (1959) has written of how one 'presents oneself' in order to control the conduct of others, especially their responsive treatment of one. In 'playing the game', teachers

acted out the new assigned social identity in inspection situations. Amy's analysis indicated how successful it was, 'It's no accident that both Larry and I are adult trainers and both got commended. We know how to put on a performance.' Keith remarked 'I don't think I will be able to go my own way as when I was on teaching practice with Ofsted coming up, I think it is going to be a bit more of an act to act up to what is needed'.

Game-playing is a defence. It is not for real, but something that is being enacted outside the really important frame of one's life where the innermost self resides. Most teachers were caught unawares with the first Ofsted inspections. The Plowden self-identity in its integrity was all that was on show, and they were extremely vulnerable. Hence the highly traumatic reactions (Jeffrey and Woods, 1998). But they were more prepared second time round. When the National Inspectors arrived four years after their first inspection, Cloe was determined 'that they wouldn't get to *me* this time. I distanced my "self" from the operation. I played the game and I'm pleased and satisfied about the way I did it'.

Cloe's strategy was

that they weren't going to know who I was as a person. I was hiding behind the face of the year 6 teacher. I smiled when I had to smile, but they weren't going to get to me like the last time. I came out of this inspection, thinking 'got you', not because of the result, but because they hadn't affected me. I am exhausted, like we all are, but they didn't affect who I was this time.

While Cloe expresses some satisfaction here, as individuals, and as would-be vocationally dedicated teachers, the orientation is troubling, for this is not their real selves. Toni wondered how far she was in control: 'Am I identifying things that are really there or are they being identified for me and I'm playing the game? I'm not the person I was when I was younger; it's been stamped out of me'. Diane's reaction to her own game playing was self critical, 'I told myself that I wasn't going to play the game, but I am and I know they know I am. I don't respect myself for it'.

Victor was aware that he had to construct a new personal identity by negotiating between the new assigned identity and his self. 'We shouldn't have to go through this. It is a process that says we don't trust you. But I will stay and fight for the profession. It means I must play the game and it's a very trying game but I can't complain, I chose to do this'. Cloe, prior to her first Ofsted inspection, questioned the effect that the strategy being forced on her by the new assigned social identity was having on her personal identity:

I'm just really worried about my own personality and my own emotions and I know that even if I'm nearly dead next week, I'll be putting on a show. I'll be belting around here like no teacher's ever belted around, smiling and being wonderful but I wonder what the cost will have been in terms of whether I would feel that what I have to offer in the future is sufficient. Am I going to feel that 'I'm not good enough' and that I'm going to have to find something else to do?

Game-playing can leave teachers ambivalent (Casey, 1995) about their self-identity. In the face of authority and loss of trust, uncertainty occurs and creates yet another dilemma for teachers.

Realignment

Realignment involves recognition that the self-identity is no longer a harmonious, integrated whole, and that it is composed of separate parts that cannot be blended together, and that indeed in some significant areas are in tension with each other. This necessitates teachers reviewing the balance of their selves and social roles, and re-prioritising. In all instances, the self-concept is paramount. Social roles have to be meaningful in the light of the self-concept. A common strategy here was to separate out the personal identities of home and school. Teacher values of humanism and vocationalism (in the sense of heartfelt commitment) were sustained in the former, but came under adjustment in the latter. This was particularly true of vocationalism. There was thus less of what one might term the 'quality' self in the personal identity reconstructed for school.

Some insisted on maintaining a practical balance, not forsaking domestic and family affairs for the demands of an inspection, as many teachers have been wont to do (Jeffrey and Woods, 1998). The mother of Rachael, Mixstead's head teacher, for example, had a 90th birthday some 200 miles away on the Saturday prior to an Ofsted inspection beginning the following Monday, and she decided it had to go ahead. 'Ofsted is not the big thing in my life until Sunday night. I am going to spend a little time sorting out my assembly for Monday but most of my focus is on my mother's birthday'.

This was a way of keeping things evenly balanced. On the other hand, Frederica, with 30 years teaching experience, began distancing her personal self from her social identity between Ofsted inspections. Prior to her first inspection she had been resistant to the idea of change, or game-playing, or any other strategic device: 'I'm not going to change my way of working. If they can do better let them try'. However, after a prolonged absence due to ill health between inspections she reassessed her vocational commitment.

Originally she saw herself as 'putting in a lot of energy, because I'm that sort of person anyway, I'll put 150% into anything I do'. However,

Since I have been ill I have prioritized so much and I have realized what is valuable in life. So, with this inspection I thought 'What is the point of using energy on something that really can't be changed?'

Clare's commitment has very clearly changed from vocationalism to instrumentalism:

I remember my first school in Brixton. I didn't have children of my own and those children were my life. I loved them, and the parents loved me. It was wonderful, it was so rewarding. They were the best years of my life as far as my professionalism is concerned. It was based on my interaction with the children and my own intellectual thought being imparted to the children. But I don't feel I have a career anymore, not at all. This is just a job, a means to an end to earn some money until I am retired. I have no commitment whatsoever, it has gone out the window. I am more important than my job, as are my family, my husband and my son. There is no feeling that this is my vocation, my way of life, that I was meant to do this.

In terms of career, Clare's unified self-identity has disintegrated. Her personal self now resides in her family situation, while her commitment to teaching has become purely instrumental. 'It's a job and I do it and I'm also *me*. But there's no place for *me* now'.

Teachers are practising a form of 'strategic compliance' (Lacey, 1977), wherein the individual accepts the prevailing system though entertains private reservations. The acceptance and the compliance, though, are made to differing degrees with differing feelings. Cloe, for example, 'decided to comply, to go along with it because otherwise you tear yourself in half if you're always working against what you believe in. I've shuffled my beliefs away in a back drawer somewhere'. In all, then, it is a very reluctant, grudging kind of compliance, with even more seething beneath the surface at times.

Bronwen

will cope with it, I will take it on board, I will do all the things I'm meant to do and I'll scrape and bow and I will back the head teacher and the school to the hilt. I won't let anybody down. But secretly inside myself I'm very, very angry that we're being made to go through this.

In these cases, the new school personal identity is experienced as being in sharp conflict with the self-concept. The full-blown instrumentalism of the identity is at complete odds with the humanistic vocationalism of the self. The more the self is dedicated to the latter values, the more difficult is the resolution of this problem.

CONCLUSION

For primary school teachers, local trust relations have been reconstituted in terms of audit accountability, position in national and local league tables as decided by SATs and Ofsted inspection reports, and by grading by inspectors. The introduction of literacy and numeracy programmes has further reduced teacher qualities to a short and narrow list of competences (Cox, 1998). The 'expert systems' behind these policies now define teachers' social identities by 'performativity' (Ball 1998; Broadfoot 1998). This is how

they are known within the official educational world. But it is not how they are known to themselves. This has brought on severe identity crises for teachers. For the mid-career teachers of our researches, a unified self-identity had been unchallenged for many years. It was deep in the heart, but not in the forefront of their minds. The challenge has caused them much heart-searching, and has forced them to reconsider and reconstruct.

For most, their new self-identities show some key changes from those that pertained during the Plowden era. In general terms, our data suggest a retention of the humanistic values, most evident in teachers' resolution to remain dedicated to caring, to the child, and to holism, even though they are at some odds with the current rationalist discourse in education. There is a weakening, however, of the vocationalism. Certainly the physical conditions described earlier by Nias of teaching occupying their 'sleeping as well as their working hours' may still apply to many, but then it was a matter of choice, of 'giving their all to work'; whereas now, it is a matter of weight of prescription, of 'work demanding all'. One involves integration of the self, the other disintegration. There is no easy resolution of Giddens' late modernity dilemmas.

In general, teachers have been forced to become more strategic and political in defending their self-identities against the countervailing inroads of the new teacher social identity. Their priorities have been to hold on to their values and their self-esteem, while adjusting their commitment and other aspects of the holistic approach. Current trends, therefore, appear to be working against the conception of primary education that Nias (1989 p. 208), for one, had in the 1980s:

Primary teaching has a bottomless appetite for the investment of scarce personal resources, such as time, interest and energy. The more of these resources that individuals choose to commit to their work, the better for pupils, parents and fellow staff, and the more rewards the individual teacher is likely to reap, in terms of appreciation, recognition, self-esteem, and, perhaps, self-extension. Therefore, it could reasonably be argued that children, teachers, and parents will all benefit, if

teachers are motivated to give more to their work than simply the physical presence and minimal level of competence required....

For education, this is clearly a serious matter. There is no direct route to changes in teaching and learning, restructuring education or raising educational standards. Such desired outcomes, however politically willed, have to be processed through teachers, who have feelings, values, beliefs, thoughts, cherished ideals, in short, identities. Before they can apply themselves to best effect they have to work out how to organize a personal identity or identities congruent with the social identity and self-concept – to know who they are. As Snow and Anderson (1987, p. 1365) among others argue, in opposition to Maslow (1962), such concerns are just as important as physiological and safety needs. As a teacher told Riseborough (1981, p. 15), ‘You know, if you take this (status) away, not all the money in the world will make him feel content with his job, and this is what teaching is all about. You’ve got to feel right’. In most cases, as we have seen, the identity work aimed toward such equanimity has involved the deployment of strategies to resist the new assigned social identity, to extol aspects of the old, to construct new personal identities congruent with the self-concept, and to disguise situational identities. Education is the loser here on two counts. First, identity work consumes enormous emotional and intellectual energy that might otherwise be dedicated to teaching. Secondly, the teacher’s personal identity in the new order is partial, fragmented, and inferior to that of the old in that teachers retain a sense of the ideal self, but it is no longer in teaching. The personal identity of work has become a situational one, designed to meet the instrumental purposes of audit accountability. Teachers’ real selves are held in reserve, to be realised in other situations outside school or in some different future within.

It is in this sense that the evidence presented here challenges the poststructural scepticism about an essential self (Maclure 1993; Davies and Harre 1994) and their

championing of a multifaceted self, one that is not constant and constraining, but which recreates itself anew in different social situations. Yet, in some ways, there is evidence here to support this view. The dilemmas are only partially resolved. Teachers have to live with them – there is no neat transition. Identities are thus in flux, there is no settled state. There are signs of multiple and situational identities that were not there before in the integrated self-identity. However, as Snow and Anderson (1987, p. 1364) point out, personal identities are not static, but alter with time. In the case of their sample, ‘distancing’ was more a feature of the early stages, evolving later into ‘embracement’. Will teachers, similarly, grow more into the new assigned social identity? Some will, no doubt, especially younger teachers who are fashioning personal identities in teaching for the first time. For our mid-career teachers, it is more a matter of regaining control. Identity work goes on. There is no endpoint, no completion of task. The new self-identities are much more volatile than the old.

REFERENCES

- Alexander, R. (1992) *Policy and Practice in Primary Education*. London: Routledge
- Audit Commission (1989) *Assuring Quality in Education: The role of local authority inspectors and advisors*. London: HMSO.
- Ball, D. (1972) Self and identity in the context of deviance: The case of criminal abortion. In R. A. Scott and J. D. Douglas (eds). *Theoretical Perspectives on Deviance*, New York: Basic Books.
- Ball, S. J. (1990) *Politics And Policy Making In Education :Explorations In Policy Sociology*. London: Routledge.
- Ball, S.J. (1994) *Education reform: a critical and post-structural approach*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Ball, S.J. (1998) Performativity and fragmentation in 'Postmodern Schooling'. In J. Carter (ed.) *Postmodernity and Fragmentation of Welfare*, London: Routledge.
- Broadfoot, P. (1998) Quality standards and control in higher education: what price life-long learning? *International Studies in Sociology of Education* 8,2, pp. 155-181.
- Broadhead, P. (1987) A blue print for the good teacher. The HMI/DES model of good primary practice. *British Journal of Educational Studies* 35, 1, pp. 57-72
- Casey, K. (1995) *Work, Self and Identity*. London: Routledge.
- Central Advisory Council for Education in England (CACE) (1967) *Children and their Primary Schools (The Plowden Report)*. London: HMSO:
- Cox, B. (1998) (Ed.) *Literacy is not Enough: Essays on the importance of reading* Manchester: Manchester University Press
- Dale, R. (1989) *The State and Education Policy*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Davies, B., and R Harré. (1994) Positioning, conversation and the production of selves. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 20, 1, pp. 43-63

Evans, J., and Penney, D. (1994) Whatever happened to good advice? Service and inspection after the Education Reform Act. *British Educational Research Journal*, 20, 5, pp. 519-583

Giddens, A. (1991) *Modernity and Self-Identity*. Cambridge: Polity.

Goffman, E. (1959) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. London: Penguin.

Hammersley, M. and Atkinson, P. (1995) *Ethnography: Principles in practice*. London ; New York: Routledge.

Hargreaves, A. (1994) *Changing Teachers, Changing Times: teacher's work and culture in the postmodern age*. London: Cassell.

Lacey, C. (1977) *The Socialization of Teachers*. London: Methuen.

Maclure, M. (1993) Arguing for your self: identity as an organizing principle in teachers' jobs and lives. *British Educational Research Journal* 19, 4, pp. 311-322

Maslow, A.H. (1962) *Toward a Psychology of Being*. New York: Pantheon.

Nias, J. (1989) *Primary Teachers Talking*. London: Routledge

Osborn, M. McNess, E. and Broadfoot, P. (2000) *What Teachers Do: Changing Policy and Practice in Primary Education*. London: Continuum.

Pollard, A. (ed.) (1987) *Children and their Primary Schools*. Lewes: Falmer Press.

Power, M. (1994) *The Audit Explosion* London: Demos

Riseborough, G.F. (1981) Teacher careers and comprehensive education: an empirical study. *Sociology* 15, 3, pp. 352-81

Sikes, P., Measor, L. and Woods, P. (1985) *Teacher Careers: Crises and continuities*. Lewes: Falmer Press.

Snow, D., and Anderson, L. (1987) Identity Work among the homeless: the verbal construction and avowal of personal identities *American Journal of Sociology* 92, 6, pp.1336-1371

Sugrue, C. (1998) *Complexities of Teaching: Child-centred perspectives*. London: Falmer.

Troman, G., and Woods, P. (2001) *Primary Teachers' Stress*. London: Routledge-Falmer.

Woods, P. (1995) *Creative Teachers in Primary Schools*. Buckingham,: Open University Press.

Woods, P. , and Jeffrey, B., (1996) *Teachable Moments: The art of teaching in primary schools*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Woods, P. , Jeffrey, B., Troman, G. and Boyle, M. (1997) *Restructuring Schools, Reconstructing Teachers*. Buckingham: Open University Press.