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# **ASSISTANT TEACHERS' ENGAGEMENT IN A CROSS-CURRICULAR TELEVISION NEWS PROJECT: IMPACT ON PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The professional identity of assistant teachers, that is teachers in training, is, in part, defined by their relationship to those who mentor and tutor them. As teachers in training they are in a role with less power than those who are responsible for their training, support and development.

This paper focuses on the impact of assistant teachers' engagement in the BBC News School Report project on the formation of their professional identity. The research reported on is drawn from three years of evaluations of the project for Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA), the government agency responsible for teacher training in England. Respondents included assistant teachers themselves, their tutors as representatives of teacher education providers and their mentors as representatives of schools in which they were placed.

The methodological approach was interpretative and phenomenological with qualitative and quantitative data being analysed for emergent themes. The research showed that their professional identity is enhanced through their being in a leading role in respect of curriculum and working with other staff. Their self perception of role was modified to one in which they saw themselves, and were seen, as equals to qualified staff rather than subservient or dependent on them. Furthermore, engagement in such projects led them to collecting richer, more holistic evidence for meeting the "Standards for Qualified Teacher Status" as they took greater ownership for this process, situating it in their leading role in the project. Their identity became defined less by the articulation of Standards and by their relationship to others and more by their own notions of professionalism. A new more equal power relationship developed as they take on responsibility for the project.

**Keywords:** teachers, teaching, teacher training, professional identity, curriculum, project

## **INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT**

The research reported on is drawn from research into the project carried out over three years for the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA), the government agency responsible for teacher training in England. The research was undertaken, and reports written, on behalf of the IT in Teacher Education national subject association (ITTE 2009, 2010, 2011).

The paper starts by examining the concept of professional identity in relation to initial teacher training or education (ITT/ITE), considers the framework under which this takes place in England and then introduces the BBC News School Report as the locus for the activity being researched. Findings from each of the three years are discussed with an emphasis on reporting of impacts on the formation of professional identity and assistant teachers perceptions of it.

### **Professional identity of teachers**

There has been a change over time in the understanding of the notion of professionalism as applied to teaching (Bottery, 1996; Sachs, 2000). The meaning of professionalism is seen to have shifted from a virtuous and autonomous encapsulation of expertise and authority through a mystification and a professional 'elite' to the, now, more managerial (e.g. Bottery, 1996). For teachers in training this last is manifested in the predominance of statements of competence (DfE, 1992; 1993; DfEE, 1998; DfEE/TTA, 2002; TDA, 2007; DfE, 2011) that prescribe in some detail what it is to be a qualified teacher and the types of evidence that are required to demonstrate this. While these 'Standards' are presented as competences they have been variously framed in terms of 'professional' behaviours. Those in force during the research for this paper were structured in three sections – professional attributes, knowledge & understanding and skills (TDA, 2007). The latest iteration emphasizes the managerial aspects of the code by replacing these headings with 'professional conduct' (DfE, 2011).

The statements of competence and the responsibility for their assessment gives power to the mentors in schools and raises notions of performativity in the training of teachers akin to that seen in preparation of pupils for standards assessment tests (Jeffrey, 2011). It also resonates with Foucault's (1979) notion of the school as controlling institution. This is at odds with Lave and Wenger's apprentice model where new teachers gradually become part of the community in which they are practising (1991; Wenger, 1998) and notions of professionalism as a democratic concept or one which encourages active trust and participation (ibid.; Sachs, 2000).

However, the status and subject of teacher professionalism and debates about whether teaching can even be considered a profession, is contested and 'circulate around public discourse with great regularity' (Sachs, 2000 p77). Hoyle and John's (1995) extensive review of the fluctuations in thinking about the professional status of teachers since 1915, led to this definition: 'hav[ing] distinguishing characteristics on which there is a high degree of consensus, including knowledge base, autonomy and responsibility' (p16).

This debate about professionalism cannot be fully explored here, however. Stronach et al's. (2002) review perceptively examines how teacher 'professionalism' is currently conceptualised, noting that 'professionals' are systematically categorised in terms of different types of knowledge (Eraut, 1994), stages of development (Huberman, 1993), and typologies of role, such as 'extended' versus 'restricted' (Hoyle, 1980; Woods, 1997). Similarly Stronach et al., (2002, p4) argue that professionals are

'regularly consigned to, threatened with, or rescued from, 'proletarianisation' (Hargreaves, 1992), 'bureaucratisation' (Murphy, 1990), 'intensification' (Galton et al., 1999) and 'deprofessionalisation' (Parkin, 1995).

Hence, 'current theories of professionalism are guilty of highly reductive characterization' (Stronach et al., 2002, p18).

Writers on teacher development and professionalism have tended to focus on the following range of issues: teacher reflectivity, introspection, self-analysis and inquiry (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1992; Miller & Silvernail, 1994; Schon, 1987; Stenhouse, 1985). It is only recently that, as part of teacher professionalism, teacher development has emerged as an identifiable area of study (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1992; Hargreaves & Fullan, 1992; Darling-Hammond, 1994; Day et al., 2000). Evans (2002, p131) defines the development of teachers as 'the process whereby teachers' professionalism and/or professionalism maybe considered to be enhanced'. Whilst agreeing that teacher development is a process, it is in need of further research to gain an understanding of this process in relation to assistant teachers.

However, with respect to the development of teachers' knowledge, there is a tendency within the literature to conceptualise teachers as individuals and not as part of a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This leads to more of an individuated epistemology, as opposed to a socially constructed knowledge of professionalism as embedded in a community of shared practices. The challenge is to acknowledge the social dimension of learning, with respect to distributed cognition (Hutchins, 1995) and communal constructivism (Leask & Younie, 2001). This is recognised in professional identity being formed in the relationship between individual agency and social context (Hökkä et al., 2012). For beginning teachers this locus is also between their internal, and self-, image of 'the professional' and the externalities of manifestations of professionalism through codified standards, which trainees have to demonstrate before becoming 'qualified', and the espoused views and behaviours of mentors and tutors (ibid.).

The term 'professionalism' has been used for some time now, to denote the kind of professionalism that is regulated by inspection, regulations and audit. In contrast, the word, 'professionality', has been coined to denote a sense of : identity, enterprise and self- regulation that is the cornerstone of a salient professional identity (Trowler, 2002). There is still much to be discovered about the process of teacher's development and professionalism, since, 'the teacher development process - the understanding of precisely what we need to do if we want to develop teachers - remains unclear' (Evans, 2002, p133). Further the perceptions of professional identity in the first few years of teaching are founded on those gained in prior to qualification (Burn et al., 2010). This period of formation is crucial in building notions of professionalism.

The field of teacher professional development has been largely understood in terms of an individuated epistemology but this fails to adequately deal with the social dimension of learning. There is insufficient attention given to the way teachers learn to construct new

knowledge through participation in a 'community of practice' as a joint venture, for example, through collaborative projects such as the one under consideration here. Such participation and collaboration is crucial to teachers' understanding of the professional community in which they work (Hargreaves, 1992).

### **Initial teacher education in England**

Initial teacher education (ITE) or, to use the government terminology, the training of the teachers is undertaken in one of two modes – institutionally-based or employment-based. That is to say primarily based in a university or in schools. In both modes of training, assistant teachers must work in at least two schools (TDA, 2008), pass whatever course they have enrolled on and provide evidence that they have met the standards for qualified teacher status (QTS) (TDA, 2007). Although changing to a more mechanistic focus on teaching competence from 2012, these required assistant teachers to demonstrate, with verifiable evidence, of achievement of standards in professional values, attributes and knowledge (*ibid.*). The language here provides an external definition of professionalism, one which assistant teachers must conform to in order to qualify.

### **Project outline**

The BBC News School Report (NSRP – see <http://www.bbc.co.uk/schoolreport/>) is an annual project which aims to engage 11–14 year olds with news by helping them to set their own editorial agenda for a real audience (BBC, 2011a). In 2008 nearly 300 schools participated (ITTE, 2009). By 2011 this had risen to over 800 (BBC, 2011b). The 2010/11 academic year was the fourth in which the TDA worked with the BBC on News School Report and provided funding to ITT providers to support their engagement with it. This resulted in a complex set of stakeholders – assistant teachers, schools, providers, students in schools, BBC, TDA.

### **METHODOLOGY**

Research into the impact of ITE involvement in the BBC NSRP has been reported on for three years by ITTE (2009, 2010, 2011). In 2009 and 2010 an evaluative methodology (Robson, 2002) was adopted reporting on impact against themes identified by the TDA. In 2011 a case study approach (*ibid.*; Yin, 1994; Denscombe, 2003) was taken to gain a more rounded view of this impact on particular sample sites, taking into account the views of a wider range of stakeholders than had been possible in earlier years.

In the first two years discussions with the funding body (TDA) and within the evaluation team led to the drawing up of a set of key themes which would be used to inform the evaluation. Central to these was the impact on the type of evidence that the project provided for meeting the standards, on the relationship between providers schools and assistant teachers and on programme design.

The data collection for the 2009 and 2010 evaluations was primarily carried out through the organisation of regional 'evaluation days' whereby providers were invited to attend

meetings which took the form of focus groups. Respondents included assistant teachers themselves, their tutors as representatives of teacher education providers and their mentors as representatives of schools in which they were placed. Where it was not possible to attend in person, respondents were asked to submit a written report based around the key themes. These days were supplemented in 2010 with an online questionnaire and telephone interviews.

These focus group sessions were designed to allow groups of respondents to discuss their views on each of the key themes in more depth. This would provide for triangulation against the survey data. Groups were formed so that they were homogeneous by type – all assistant teachers, or all providers. The online survey in 2010 was made available for individuals at each event to complete had they not done so.

There were three reasons for the change to a case study in 2011:

- Repeating 2009 and 2010 approaches risked a very similar set of findings
- A case study approach allowed for greater depth of exploration and understanding of the assistant teacher experience.
- A desire for greater objectivity led to the research being undertaken in schools, rather than at a TDA-hosted event. This meant that all stakeholders for a particular case could be respondents for the research, allowing for triangulation between the views of many stakeholders from the same school.

Holding the evaluation out of school may have heightened issues to do with perceived status of the researchers and agency on the one hand and assistant teachers on the other hand (see Blumer, 1969; Hammersley, 1994, on symbolic interactionism and subsequent bias). Meeting in the schools and in the classrooms may help to ameliorate such effects.

## **FINDINGS**

Each of the three year's research was reported on by ITTE (2009, 2010, 2011) against the evaluative criteria for the first two years and in a case study style for 2011. These are presented below with those aspects that relate to professionalism and assistant teachers' perceptions of it being drawn out in the discussion and conclusions.

In 2009, the evaluation supported by independent research of Passey and Gillen (2009), found that

- Schools were supported in their involvement in the project by City Learning Centres (CLCs) and also by BBC mentors.
- The news produced by the students in schools was wide ranging.
- Students are unlikely to have been able to encounter this sort of experience through other channels.
- Educational gains were reported by teachers involved with the project.
- The project was highly inclusive and empowering for students.

- The project has enhanced the professional attributes and skills of assistant teacher teachers engaged in the project, providing many opportunities to evidence meeting the QTS Standards.
- The evidencing of Standards through the project required some changes to existing recording and monitoring systems
- The project's outcomes against QTS Standards is more clearly defined than for CPD activity for qualified teachers.
- Assistant teachers have shown high levels of confidence, and a willingness to take risks, in leading activities within the project including liaison across schools and with a wide range of teachers.
- The multi-disciplinary nature of the project provided opportunities for providers to look at innovations and change to their programme design and assessment.
- The project provided opportunities for assistant teachers to work in non-standard environments, increasing their understanding of learning beyond the classroom and in work-related contexts.
- Where assistant teachers are on employment-based routes or in a single placement for the duration of the project there has been greater opportunity for successful completion due to the fixed timelines in the project.
- The project had positive impact on students' learning in the fields of journalism, media, literacy and use of technology. Their confidence and maturity was enhanced.
- (adapted from ITTE, 2009, pp3-4)

In 2010, with a more focused study on particular standards and the impact in the classroom, the research found that:

- Taking part in the offers new models of partnership in terms of consortia and rhythms of placement.
- The project resulted in enhancement of assistant teachers' subject knowledge and technical skills, providing evidence for standard Q14.
- The project exposed assistant teachers to working in cross-curricular and extra-curricular contexts, providing evidence for standards Q17 and Q23.
- Student engagement in the project led to greater independence of learning (and concomitant personalisation) than in other forms of coursework due to their ownership of tasks. This provided evidence for standard Q31.
- The profile of assistant teachers was enhanced, as was that of the school. The former led to increased perception of employability.
- Assistant teachers were given more freedoms, encouraged to take risks and to engage with authentic tasks. This provided evidence for standards Q8, Q10 and Q30.
- The project led to richer reflections on practice than other teaching the assistant teachers had undertaken.
- The project accelerated the assistant teachers' confidence and professional development as evidenced for standard Q7 and led to a different relationships between assistant teachers and other school staff.

This paper focuses on the last three of these findings. These may be summarised as aspects of professional identity and we argue that professional identity of assistant teachers is enhanced through putting them in a leading role in respect of curriculum and working with other staff. A new power relationship is evident as they take on responsibility for the project.

In 2010, all respondent assistant teachers (n=18) agreed, or strongly agreed, with the statement that involvement in the project had had a “positive effect on [their] professional development” and on evidence collected for Standard Q7. When looking at Standard Q8, 78% reported that the project directly provided evidence of innovative practice, which may be considered an outcome of positive professional development.

Providers reported that engagement in the project led to assistant teachers developing aspects of professional identity both in respect to their own self-perceptions and to those of others. They said that the project “...encouraged trainees to develop as a reflective practitioner.”

It also allowed them to show “leadership [capabilities within] a whole school approach”, encouraging them to “lead enrichment [activity] that is valued by students” and to see other assistant teachers in a different way.

Assistant teachers themselves reported that the project allowed them to develop their sense of professionalism through “interdepartmental collaborative work and understanding” with that result, as one put it, that “it allowed me to raise my profile throughout the school and work with staff from other departments, which has helped my development.” They echoed the providers’ view of emerging reflective practitioner as they become part of a community of learners rather than isolated teachers in training.

“It allowed to me to further develop as a reflective practitioner from being able to see other trainee teachers teach”

“The project gave me confidence during my initial project to liaise with the ICT and other departments.”

Pupils also saw assistant teachers in a different way, responding to them more as they would to experienced teachers.

“I had to be very organized and be seen as an established member of staff who was completely in control.”

“I found the experience very valuable for developing relationships with pupils as they saw me in a context other than the science lab”

“[It] raised my status within the school, in the eyes of the pupils, English department and Headteacher”

In summary “the project allowed the Associate Teacher within the school to have a good reputation as we were being proactive in running something which the staff could identify as being very beneficial for the pupils...” (assistant teacher).

In 2011 a cases study approach was adopted. Each of three sites were visited and a range of stakeholders interviewed. Prior to the visit, assistant teachers had been sent a questionnaire with the same questions that were used in the semi-structured interviews to identify possible differences between perceptions during and after involvement in the project. No such differences were found however.

Three themes emerged from the case study – the impact of participation on assistant teachers’ subject knowledge, on their interactions with pupils, each other and other staff, and on their developing professional practice. Findings from each case study will now be presented in respect of professionalism as seen in the first and last of these themes. Other findings are outside the scope of this paper but are reported on in the ITTE paper to the TDA (ITTE, 2011).

### **School A**

The ITT model at school A was an employment-based graduate teacher programme. Assistant teachers were placed at the school for the majority of their training year. The project co-ordinator was a newly qualified teacher (NQT) who had been a GTP assistant teacher the year before and participated in the BBC NSRP as a assistant teacher. The NQT was an English teacher and she used her English class as the participants in the project this year. The pupils participating were one Year 9 English class who had three days off timetable for the project:

- Day 1 was a ‘workshop’ day. Three workshops were delivered by the assistant teachers, focusing on the skills required for the live day.
- Day 2 was a ‘practice’ day, where the pupils rehearsed in preparation for the ‘live’ day event.
- Day 3 was the ‘live’ day event, with news reported live on the day and uploaded onto the website.

All the assistant teachers in School A reported that they noted an improvement in their relationship with pupils as a result of being involved in the project. This had already taken effect prior to the live day due to their involvement in the workshops. They attributed this to extracurricular nature of the project, the situation requiring a more open approach to the pupils and the pupils’ positive response to the challenge of the demanding situation. They all reported an increased respect for the assistant teachers from the pupils.

Assistant teachers reported that they felt more confident in using a variety of approaches and teaching styles as a result of being involved in this project. They felt more free to take risks in their approach and have fun. The assistant teachers reported that they

became more relaxed and confident in their teaching as a result of their involvement with the project.

The drama assistant teacher reported that she felt much more confident in taking pupils out of school when she observed the improvement in their behaviour on a trip out to the local BBC radio station. She felt much more able to trust the pupils, having been very under confident about how she would manage the pupils before they went.

The school mentors reported that the assistant teachers "...gained confidence through peer observation, feedback and risk taking. Trainees see each other teaching and value what they see. This improves [assistant teachers] confidence when hearing the feedback. [As a result of team teaching in the workshops] 'them' and 'us' barriers [between assistant teachers and mentors] were broken down."

## **School B**

The ITT model at school B was assistant teachers taking a PGCE qualification placed at the school by an HEI provider. This was their main placement and they had been in another school when the project was initially launched. The assistant teachers were English specialists with concomitant foci on English, drama and media as part of their training and their teaching practice. The project co-ordinator was the media studies lead teacher in the school, who also had a background in broadcast media.

The mentor had arranged for the assistant teachers to take part in the BBC NSRP assisting the lead teacher in working with a small number of selected pupils. The project was focused on in depth work with a few year 9 pupils to produce high quality output. This was done as an extra-curricular activity.

Assistant teachers in School B reported that it was useful to work with pupils they didn't teach. This was reinforced by the mentor and lead teacher. The mentor also added that where there were pupils on the project who were also in classes taught by assistant teachers it was useful for them to see each other in a different context. In particular, the mentor observed that pupils who were difficult in class responded better to the assistant teachers as they had seen them in a different context. The case of a boy who shone in the project but was not easy to teach in the classroom was cited. "He would see the assistant teachers in a different light", the mentor said. Assistant teachers, however, reported that they had not learnt anything about working with difficult pupils as they "had them in their classes". Assistant teachers had been in other schools before the project started and had been involved in other extra-curricular activities. They confirmed that this type of activity brings the benefit of working with a wider range of pupils.

The assistant teachers in School B only had regular contact with one teacher (the lead). They also got to know a governor through the project but it did not involve any additional interactions with the school leadership. They saw that the experience would be seen positively on job applications/CVs and they would be willing to take a lead in it. They

saw its importance in providing experience of learning in a project that was extra curricular, national, fun and had a product at the end.

*“Any school leadership team should look on a teachers’ involvement in the project as a very positive thing” (pre questionnaire).*

The mentor concurred with this view, adding that through such extra-curricular experience, pupils see them in a different light. It was also seen as preparation for the assistant teachers’ involvement in other extra-curricular events – trips, open evening. This was seen as helping them to meet the standards for QTS. The mentor said that it *“Help[ed] us to view them as part of the department”* and that, as NQTs they will be able to *“take the lead in running”* the BBC NRSP.

Working on the project was seen as *“provid[ing] evidence that they have worked in wider school activities [and of] linking into wider world and other subjects”*. This was seen as crucial for the standards. It was also felt by the mentor that working on the project makes assistant teachers feel valued and valuable to the department and school and that assistant teachers often have more flexibility (if not more time) to take part in such projects than teachers.

### **School C**

The ITT model at school A was school-based GTP. Assistant teachers were placed at the school for the majority of their training year. The assistant teachers were English specialists with concomitant foci on English, drama and media as part of their training year. The project co-ordinator had previously been an assistant teacher at the school who had taken part in the BBC NRSP. This was a third year in which this ‘cascade’ model had operated with assistant teachers from previous years being appointed and then co-ordinating the project with new assistant teachers. The assistant teachers had responsibility for leading the project.

The project was run as an extra-curricular activity with assistant teachers and pupils working on it in school and in the adjacent City Learning Centre. One of the assistant teachers had previous experience of working in the broadcast media. Assistant teachers chose the class to work on the project and they had a whole day to prepare, extra curriculum time and then the live news day. Pupils involved in the project ranged from year 7 to year 9.

Assistant teachers in School C reported that the project gave them an opportunity to think about matching media resources to pupil needs in a way that was not dictated to by the formal curriculum. The mentor reported that there were different interactions with the pupils on the project than in normal classes. These were to do with working with small groups (which one assistant teacher had previous experience of as she had previously been employed as a learning support assistant in the school).

Links were made with the City Learning Centre and local media organisations. This was seen as both a benefit for the authentic learning in the project – the links were with real journalists and a video company – and also for the school itself as a stakeholder in the local community.

A assistant teacher reported that the project gave the opportunity to “*raise my profile*” with these partners and, by extension, with colleagues in the department who saw her taking a lead and using her own initiative to make links outside of school. She had been given an opportunity for making these links and the responsibility for doing it. These opportunities were not ones that would have occurred without the project. Being involved in the project “*puts [assistant teachers] on the map*” and was something that was noticed by the headteacher who reported their work to the whole school.

The mentor concurred that the project provided opportunities for assistant teachers to “*take control*” rather than being handed tasks to do. It also allowed the assistant teacher who had professional media experience to translate this to the school context. In talking about the project and the way in which assistant teachers were perceived by the school leadership, the mentor said that “*the headteacher was more aware of who they were and their progress [than of other graduate trainees] because of it*”. Assistant teachers worked with “*people they wouldn’t normally have [had] contact with*” including ASTs and the leader of applied learning. A mathematics teacher used the material produced in a tutor period as it was so impressive.

The school has an activities fortnight at the end of the school year. Assistant teachers would be able to bring the experiences of the project to helping plan and lead activities in the department and across the curriculum.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

In this section of the paper we focus on one key emergent theme – that of the impact of participation in the project on assistant teachers’ perceptions of their emergent professionalism and formation of professional identity.

The contextualisation of the project in the training year varies from case to case. In school B, for example, it was introduced as part of the teaching programme of the HEI and was a common feature for all assistant teachers. In school C, it had become a tradition in the school, with previous years’ assistant teachers leading and ‘cascading’ their experience to assistant teachers. In school A the project was undertaken by assistant teachers from different disciplines, whereas in the other schools they were exclusively English specialists. This diversity of approach was also seen in the evaluations of previous years (ITTE, 2009, 1010).

Participation in the project develops assistant teachers’ confidence and moves them from being a assistant teacher, with connotations of being a sub-ordinate, to being an autonomous teacher. Where assistant teachers were given the opportunity to lead the project they, and/or mentors, reported that they developed:

- increased confidence to try out different teaching techniques;
- greater sense of collegiality;
- more receptiveness to feedback; and
- a higher profile with peers and school leadership.

Even in cases where they did not take the lead, they reported that they were more highly valued by colleagues and gained greater respect from pupils (see 5.1.1). In all cases they saw the project as contributing directly to enhanced CVs and employability prospects. It was felt that school leaders would look favourably on such participation.

The project also enhanced assistant teachers' identities as teachers beyond the school. Whether it was working with the BBC or with local organisations and personalities, assistant teachers were seen in the same way as other teachers in the school. This is perhaps more noticeable where they were given the lead and, as with other evaluations (see especially ITTE, 2009) where they were on GTP programmes and so were in the same school for a significant period of time.

Throughout the three years of research into the involvement ITE providers in the BBC NSRP the value of the project to both the formal curriculum of assessment for QTS and the development of professional identity has emerged as a significant finding. This has been achieved for a very small input of supporting funds from the TDA. Such support is no longer available perhaps reflecting a more focused budget on core ITE activity. It is the authors' contention that given the benefits found in the research such a move is regrettable.

If teachers in training are given roles of responsibility in such projects then their self-perception of role is modified to one in which they see themselves, and are seen, as equals to qualified staff rather than subservient or dependent on them. Furthermore, engagement in such projects leads to them collecting richer, more holistic evidence for meeting the Standards as they take greater ownership for this process, situating it in their leading role in the project. Their identity becomes defined less by the articulation of Standards and by their relationship to others and more by their own notions of professionalism.

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