

Martin Hagan

*St. Mary's University College**

E-mail: m.hagan@smucb.ac.uk

ORCID: 0000-0002-0672-4873

Learning in the Practicum: Shaping Professional Identity in Initial Teacher Education**

Summary

This study considers the role of the practicum in supporting professional identity development in the initial stage of teacher education. Employing an interpretative paradigm and a qualitative methodological approach (Lincoln & Guba, 2000), data were collected from a purposive sample of student teachers ($n = 6$) in the first year of study, using individual semi-structured interviews and episodic documents. The findings show that emerging teacher identity was informed but also challenged by the participants' engagement with pupils, other teachers and visiting tutors. Collectively, these influences effected shifts in the participants' constructs on teaching and prompted change in their perception of themselves and others as teachers. The study provides for an improved understanding of teacher growth in the first stage of career development. By so doing, it makes a valid contribution to the discourse on initial teacher education to better inform teacher educators and policy makers in relation to teacher professional learning.

Keywords: practicum, teacher education, professional learning, professional identity

Introduction

Interest in teachers' professional identity began to develop from the late 1980s, primarily in Europe, North America, Australia and to a lesser extent, the UK (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004). Akkerman and Meijer (2011) suggest

* Address: St. Mary's University College, 191 Falls Road, Belfast, BT12 6FE, Northern Ireland

** The publication was financed by the University of Warsaw.

that this was partly due to a reaction against an emerging discourse of teacher learning as an objectified, linear process which does not take into consideration the role of the teachers themselves, their contexts and how they make sense of their professional lives. Perhaps more significantly, if the nature of professional identity is a key determinant of a teacher's sense of efficacy, motivation and effectiveness (Sachs, 2005), then consideration of the factors which play a part in its construction must be worthy of serious consideration.

Whilst the acquisition of teaching competence is undoubtedly important, Dall'Alba and Barnacle (2007) and Dall'Alba (2009) suggest that professional identity is not only an epistemological process, but also an ontological one, in which an individual actually engages in a process of self-transformation to 'become' a teacher. The value of research which adopts this more holistic perspective can help individuals understand this process of transition, the influences upon them and the challenges and opportunities they encounter.

Understanding teacher identity is not straightforward however and one of the first challenges is trying to find an adequate definition of the phenomenon (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Olsen (2008) refers to identity as a label, used to describe a sociocultural process in which a teacher negotiates their professional growth and development. Others (Smagorinsky, Cook, Moore, Jackson, & Fry, 2004) agree, suggesting that the social and professional contexts which individuals inhabit have a significant influence upon how teachers perceive themselves and others. Clandinin et al. (2006) refer to these contexts as "the landscapes past and present" (p. 4) which contribute towards the development of the professional self.

With these perspectives in mind, this study focussed on the practicum experience of a group of student teachers in the first of a four-year primary teaching programme. The study explores how the placement schools and their engagement with host teachers, pupils and tutors, influenced their perception of themselves as teachers and their emergent sense of professional identity.

Literature Review

The dialectic self

Interest in the importance of identity to teacher development goes back to the work of Mead in the 1930s (Mead, 1934/1962). He suggested that an

individual's sense of self, and therefore their sense of identity, rather than being fixed, is a relational phenomenon, dependent upon context, environment, place and time. Therefore, identity emerges within a social setting in which we learn to take on the role of others and begin to see ourselves from the others' perspective. Mead (1934/1962) suggests the concept of the 'I-Me dialectic' to help understand these phenomena. The 'Me' is the phenomenological understanding of a person within a given socio-historical context in relation to their age, gender, profession or role; an example being 'teacher'. The 'I' is the personal or individual self which responds to the concept of the 'Me' thus establishing a reflexive, interactive process or 'dialectic' which can affect change in either or both. Exemplifying this idea, Beijaard (1995) suggests that a teachers' sense of self in terms of feelings of adequacy/ inadequacy (the 'I') is often reliant upon teacher/pupil relationships and how pupils perceive them as teachers (the 'Me').

An obvious site for shaping a teacher's identity is the workplace (Leeferkink, Koopman, Beijaard, & Schellings, 2019). Smagorinsky, Cook, Moore, Jackson and Fry (2004) point to the importance of the practicum as providing a forum which can either promote or detract from the sense of agency and identity which emerges. In addition, Kelchtermans and Hamilton (2004) suggest that the practicum can also make a significant contribution to the development of the values, attitudes and dispositions characteristic of practicing teachers.

Alongside context is the influence of other professionals (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Friesen and Besley (2013) suggest that when there are shared similarities with others in defined social groups social identity emerges. Whilst either social or personal identity may become more salient under different circumstances, they also suggest that, in similar fashion to Mead's (1934/1962) 'I-Me dialectic', personal and social identities also interact to the point where the characteristics of one may be adopted by the other.

For pre-service teachers, "they are creating their world while also being shaped by it" (Cooper & Olson, 1996, p. 83) and so their professional identity is fluid and this can lead to tension. Reynolds (1996) agrees and proposes that for early career teachers, the natural inclination is to 'blend in' and be recognised as a 'good teacher', reflecting whatever norms are apparent at the time. Because of this, the importance of exposure to a diversity of experience is important to allow teachers to construct, deconstruct and reconstruct their teacher identity within different contexts (Coldron & Smith, 1999).

The dialogic self

The literature considered to this point has focussed on a range of dialectical positions on identity development. Wegerif (2008) adopts a more dialogical stance emerging from the post-modernist thinking of Bakhtin (1981) and suggests that identity is more the product of differences in perspectives which may be incompatible and which do not need to be synthesised.

MacLure (1993) adopts a similar stance, suggesting that commonality of characteristics does not necessarily suggest commonality of meaning as teachers may experience their environments in completely different ways. The value of MacLure's work is that, whilst not underestimating the importance of context, it addresses the importance of the individual's unique interpretation of their context, their agential and reflexive reaction to it and the subsequent influence of that on the formation of their identity.

Amalgamating both Modern and Postmodern perspectives, Akkerman and Meijer (2011) suggest that, 'being someone who teaches', or 'teacher identity' cannot be seen as an end point, but instead should be defined "as an ongoing process of negotiating and interrelating multiple I-positions in such a way that a more or less coherent and consistent sense of self is maintained throughout various participations and self-investments in one's (working) life [sic]" (p. 315).

Their model of teacher identity suggests three continua: multiplicity and unity; discontinuity and continuity; social and individual. Within each continuum, moves the 'I' (Bahktin, 1981; 1986; as cited in Akkerman & Meijer, 2011, p. 311) which can be typified as being both unified and multiple; continuous and discontinuous; and individual and social. This dialogic conception of teacher identity in which multiple and sometimes conflicting 'I' positions are recognised, is helpful to understanding how student teachers construct their identity as they mediate the transition from 'pupil/student' to 'student teacher' to 'teacher'.

To support this identity transition, Ryan (2005), underlines the importance of 'systematic', 'epistemic' and 'methodological' reflexivity through which teachers not only reflect inwardly on their beliefs, practices and behaviours, but also outwardly, in relation to all the interpersonal, social, cultural, and other forces they encounter. Lay and McGuire (2009) agree and suggest that there is a developmental trajectory which moves from introspective 'reflection' towards critical thinking and ultimately, 'reflexive practice' which leads to a more critical stance, challenging existing ideas to affect change and improvement.

The ontological self

Beyond the importance of context and dialectical and dialogical interactions, Mutton, Burn and Heggar (2010) emphasise the transformation of the individual in terms of becoming a teacher in terms of disposition, attitude and approach to their professional learning and development. This reflects of the work of Dall'Alba and Barnacle (2007), who suggest that knowledge determined as essential for teaching professionals cannot be removed from practice within given social, historical, cultural or political contexts. Knowledge and practice therefore become ingrained within the core professional identity and 'being' of the individual as they progress through their unique professional journey.

With these dialectic, dialogic and ontological positions in mind, the purpose of this study was to explore the range of influences on the professional identity formation of a sample of student teachers during their first practicum.

Methods

Through asking open-ended questions, seeking views and perspectives, examining contexts and eventually deducing meaning (Crotty, 1998), the purpose of the study was to understand the range of influences upon the professional identity development of a sample of undergraduate student teachers in the first year of their teacher education programme. As such, a qualitative, interpretative research design, embedded within a co-constructivist paradigm (Lincoln & Guba, 2000) was employed.

Context of the study

The study took place in Northern Ireland where teaching is well regarded and where recruitment or retention problems are not as apparent as in other jurisdictions in the UK (Hagan & Eaton, 2020). The discourse on teacher education is that teaching is a complex, value-laden activity which is culturally and contextually sensitive and which is dependent upon the forging of effective relationships across a range of different dimensions (Cochran-Smith, 2004; La Paro et al., 2018). The participants were in the first of a four-year programme for prospective teachers wishing to specialise in primary education. As the

focus of the study was concerned with the influences upon identity formation, sampling from this purposive group (Newby, 2010) was important as the students were not only trying to acclimatise to the new learning environment of the university, but were also trying to navigate the transition from being a pupil to a teacher. For this group therefore, any influences on their sense of professional identity were likely to be highly significant.

The practicum involved serial-day visits to schools and a seven-week block of school experience. During the placements, the students were set a range of analysis tasks which they recorded in a structured reflective journal (Shavit, 2019). Students received three tutor visits during their block placement from two college tutors: two from a main tutor; and one from the second tutor. Additional support was provided by the host classroom teachers and in most cases, a school mentor.

Participants

The participants were drawn from a cohort ($n = 95$) of students who had entered the programme in September of the year in which the data collection took place. The complete cohort was provided with an overview of the study and invited to participate and six responded positively. Whilst this provided for a very small sample it also allowed for a more in depth and closer consideration of the influences upon each participant.

The participants were all female and each was given a pseudonym. Rose and Lily were both 19 and had strong academic profiles along with previous voluntary experience working in primary school contexts. Fleur was exceptionally strong academically and was the oldest of the participants at 21. She had previously spent time on two different, non-teaching university courses but, despite being successful in each, decided to leave in order to pursue a career in teaching. She too had extensive experience of working with children prior to entering the programme. Violet and Daisy were the youngest participants at 18. Along with strong academic backgrounds they expressed a deep desire to work as primary school teachers. Iris, whilst having a good academic profile, was not as strong as the others and did not have prior experience of working with children before entry to the programme.

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected over one calendar year from October to October and were captured from two sets of semi-structured interviews with each participant along with the material they had included in their reflective portfolios. The rationale for this approach was to determine the ways in which the students' sense of professional identity had developed as a result of their enhanced understanding of how pupils think and learn, their exposure to the work of teachers and schools and their role within their particular context.

A thematic, hermeneutical, dialectical and interpretative approach was adopted to the data analysis (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007). Such an approach is appropriate if the analysis is sensitive to the context and if the analyst fully understands its specificities, subtleties and nuances (Bryman, 2012). As the researcher was a tutor on the programme on which the participants were enrolled, this seemed appropriate. The themes identified were reflective of those in the literature review and focused on the processes of dialogical and dialectical learning gained through the adoption of reflective and reflexive orientations in relation to the participants' host teachers; pupils; and university tutors.

Ethical considerations

Ethical permission was obtained from the institution in question along with full consent from the participants themselves. At each stage of the data collection, there was close adherence to the British Educational Research Association [BERA] 'Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research' (BERA, 2018) and also to the ESRC framework for research ethics (ESRC, 2017).

Findings and analysis

The literature reviewed on identity development from both dialectical and dialogical positions, suggests that the influence of others can be particularly pervasive for student teachers (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009) and in this study, the data would confirm that position. Collectively, the participants' engagement with others in the particular socio-economic and cultural practicum contexts, challenged preconceived notions on the work of teachers and schools;

developed understanding of key aspects of professional practice; and provided support in terms of enhancing self-belief and confidence.

Learning from pupils

Before entering ITE, the participants all displayed an altruistic desire to work with children. They were excited by the prospect of going into schools, but also slightly overwhelmed by what lay ahead. Their areas of concern related to: socio-economic issues; behaviour management; Special Educational Needs (SEN); and meeting pupils' learning needs. These concerns would be largely reflective of those found in other studies of student teachers completing a practicum experience (Kyriacou & Stephens, 1999).

Given the particular participant profile, part of their anxiety arose from the fact that they were placed in schools in areas of high socio-economic deprivation. For some, this presented a cultural 'shock' in terms of trying to understand the issues faced by some pupils and families in these contexts. Following her first serial-day visit, Iris commented,

In my primary school everyone was from a happy home. It's not like that in the school I've been in. Even something as simple as their lunch... some of them came in with a bar of chocolate and a can of coke. That's just something I'm going to have to get my head around because it's really alien to me.

Fleur was similarly taken aback by her experience in the inner-city school. She reflected,

Some of them have really troubled backgrounds, even a parent was punched in the school recently. These are things that I, never in my wildest dreams would have thought about because I went to a small country primary school and everything there was really nice. It really has opened my eyes.

Here we see the social and cultural gap between the students and the pupils they were teaching. Whilst there is a significant body of literature on the concerns experienced by student teachers as they enter the practicum (Capel, 1997), there is less which highlights the socio-economic and cultural divide and the extent to which this may challenge many of the preconceptions student teachers may have (Baldwin, Buchanan & Rudisill, 2007).

A second area of concern related to behaviour management. Like the others, Lily's personal experience of school had been exceptionally positive.

She reflects nostalgically and somewhat naïvely and contrasts this with her experience in the inner-city school during her serial-day visit. She states,

Maybe it's just in inner-city schools, but there seems to be a lot of behavioural disorders. It wouldn't have been like this when I was at school... when the teacher said to do something no one would have questioned it.

Lily was clearly challenged by what she had observed as it contrasted sharply with her existing personal constructs.

Rose too was concerned about the behavioural issues she encountered but she adopted a more considered and reflective approach. In her first interview, she showed understanding of the classroom and the relationships therein as a system; one in which she had arrived and was conscious not to disrupt. She indicates shock at what she observed, but goes on to say that it was due to her own lack of confidence rather than her being intimidated. She also illustrates her admiration for the teacher in terms of the complexity of their work in trying to assist the pupil and shows understanding of the behaviour in a positive way in terms of something to be managed rather than punished.

There was one boy who was on the spectrum and I remember finding that a bit shocking... how I would deal with that? I don't like the word 'intimidating'... I lack confidence in that area and I wanted to make sure that the teacher dealt with it because I didn't want to get it wrong. Also, for a teacher having to work out that behavioural plan and get it perfect so that the child manages their difficulty is really incredible.

Issues around SEN and differentiation according to ability were particularly prominent and provided a third category of challenge for the participants.

Iris, who was placed in a composite class of 7- and 8-year-olds, reflected in her journal,

I noticed the difference between the ability levels within the class. There was one SEN student who needed a classroom assistant with him for most of the time and there was an EAL [English as an Additional Language] student who had extremely good English. I also noticed the difference in ability levels between the different ages.

It seemed that as successes of the school system themselves, there seemed to be a dissonance in terms of trying to understand their pupils' particular life circumstances. Similarly, in terms of learning capacity, the participants were faced with children who did not have the same ability,

motivation and engagement with school as they had when they were pupils. As they became more familiar with the school settings however, they also seemed to become more understanding of the experiences of others and more resilient in themselves. In a very personal reflection in her journal towards the end of the year for example, Violet wrote,

I have come to realise that many of my pupils will come to school with baggage which can make their start much more difficult. From my own struggles I have developed a sense of empathy for the pupils who do not cope well ... the show must go on.

Learning from teachers

Host teachers played a significant part in bridging the divide between the participants' personal experiences and those of their pupils by helping to broaden the concept of the role of the teacher. Mrs M. for example had a profound influence upon Iris' understanding of the teacher's role in an area of very high socio-economic challenge.

...every Tuesday afternoon Mrs M. visited the homes of students and future students. She explained that she visits homes to provide help with homework and to help parents filling in application forms for their children to attend school. These parents don't have the skills to do so themselves.

This extract highlights the value that exposure to an unfamiliar context provided for Iris in terms of helping her see the multifaceted and highly complex role of the teacher.

The teachers also helped the participants gain practical insight and knowledge in terms of actually 'being' in the classroom and understanding the nature of teaching. Like Iris, Rose began to see how 'teaching' was not a simply a didactic activity, but rather an interplay between individuals, with each dependent upon the other. She wrote in her journal,

...they do not simply teach whatever lesson or skill needs to be taught, they immerse themselves in the classroom and act as a facilitator of learning, who changes and adapts their plans to fit the needs of the children. They are a guide to learning, who themselves are guided by the pupils' abilities and skills.

A second key learning area related to planning and preparation for teaching, not only as a necessary activity, but also as a means through which

a teacher can exercise their values in terms of ensuring all pupils are treated equally and fairly. In her journal Daisy wrote,

Mrs P. had a range of schemes to suit groups and individual pupils. This was something I hadn't previously considered. I didn't realise that sometimes one scheme cannot work for all. As a teacher I realise it is my duty to embrace each pupil's best effort and cater for their individual needs.

Here we see Kelchtermans and Hamilton's (2004) more holistic perspective on the importance of the practicum in terms of inculcating certain value perspectives clearly in operation.

Through planning and the other activities, the participants were able to develop their understanding of reflection and its importance to continuous improvement. Rose for example, began to see planning as a fluid activity which involved the engagement of others as well as the personal reflection of the teacher. She stated, "The teacher is constantly modifying lessons because of the ever-changing nature of the classroom. She finds it particularly useful to speak to other teachers who have taught similar lessons and discuss their reflections together."

Not all of the experiences gained from working with teachers was positive however, and it was because of the more challenging episodes that the participants began to develop a more dialogical stance, prompting deeper reflection and more critical evaluations of practice. One example was provided by Daisy who was made feel uncomfortable as a result of the teacher's approach to discipline. She stated, "I didn't like how she tended to give off to the child in front of the whole class as this seemed quite intimidating. This made me feel quite uncomfortable."

Daisy determines her own approach as a result of her ability to empathise with the pupil. In this sense, she is beginning to formulate her own script for managing discipline in her classroom when she is teaching.

Iris seemed to have the least positive experience of all. After her initial placement with Mrs M. where she witnessed the teacher trying to cater for, and accommodate the needs of all pupils, Iris embarked upon her block practicum with Mrs B. Here, Iris witnessed a different practice which was clearly upsetting and very frustrating for her. She wrote in her journal,

I was surprised to see that Mrs B. didn't have a range of levels in the class; it was clear that the pupils are not all working to the same level. She didn't differentiate the pupils'

work to suit their ability. This makes me feel very frustrated as these pupils cannot move forward despite their best efforts.

Iris displays a very values-driven perspective here. She sees the difficulties for some pupils in the class and she is frustrated by the teacher who seems to be oblivious. In the following extract, she provides a most insightful analysis of an observation of a lesson taken by Mrs B. Iris' sense of outrage is evident as is her determination NOT to become a teacher like Mrs B.

The divide between the class became very clear when Mrs B. invited the pupils to the carpeted area. The pupils at the back were off task and completely disengaged. At one point, four of the pupils were lying on the floor, staring at the roof or crawling around. If anyone NEEDS to be engaged, it is these pupils as they were not contributing and not gaining anything from the lesson.

Observing other teachers seemed to have a powerful ontological influence in terms of the participants' sense of their own identity in terms of the kind of teachers they wanted to become. Daisy was particularly self-aware and was able to reflect on her observations from a critical stance.

I'm starting to form my own views on the kind of teacher I want to be. I don't necessarily agree with everything that I have seen some of the teachers do so far. It's not that that the teacher is wrong, it's just that I'm starting to formulate my own opinions.

From this we can see the importance of the practicum in providing a space which can allow for an ontological shift in how student teachers perceive themselves. They begin to develop their sense of professional identity through the dialectical and dialogical exchanges and processes, with other professionals and the pupils they teach. The challenges this presents reflect Cooper and Olson's (1996) perspective on the balance between their identity as students and as quasi-teachers, subject to range of influences: some from themselves and their desire to be successful; and some from others and the contexts within which they find themselves.

Learning from tutors

Visiting tutors also helped the participants manage their developing conceptual understanding and changes in their sense of identity. To do this, a coaching and mentoring approach was adopted, which gave consideration

to the relational, developmental and contextual dimensions of the practicum (Ambrosetti, Allen Knight, & Dekkers, 2014).

From a relational perspective, Wang (2001), highlights the importance of how supportive and directional feedback can boost confidence and develop professional agency. The concept of professional dialogue, engagement and support was initially difficult for the participants to grasp as they were still coming from the perspective of being a 'pupil/student teacher' being assessed by a 'university tutor' rather than embracing the idea of the professional mentor/mentee relationship. At the outset, the participants were obviously nervous about being observed and in the case of Fleur, her anxiety actually had the potential to detract from her practice. In her second interview she reflected,

I was really nervous about the tutor visits because I felt that everything had to be perfect and I made a mistake of trying to micro manage the pupils. I was trying to think of all the different possibilities of things that could happen and it made me freak out. And then it came to it and it wasn't that bad. I think I just made such a big thing of it in my head. My tutors were really lovely and they really put me at ease.

Lily, whilst still anxious, was more broadly typical of the others.

The tutor visits were daunting at first, and a relief to get over. They were very, very beneficial though in terms of giving me an idea of where I am and where I could be. They also boosted my confidence greatly in my first year experience.

The importance of the relational dimension was also echoed by Rose, who reflected on her lesson observation and feedback, showing how the tutor had built her confidence.

Overall this tutor visit give me belief in myself. It was the first time I had been assessed on teaching and it proved that if I work very hard I have the ability to become the best teacher I can be.

Whilst the support and affirmation received from tutors was welcomed, it was also important for them to provide direction to enable the students to meet their professional goals and expectations. This developmental dimension, presented some challenges to the participants' sense of professional identity. Lily for example, was so focused on her actual teaching that she did not place sufficient emphasis on planning. She was subsequently taken aback by the feedback she received.

He explained that whilst he thought the lesson, my relationship with the children, classroom presence and teaching standard, were very good, he said my file was very light. He had checked my progress to date as 'Requires attention'. Although I could get upset over this, it will not do me any favours. Instead, I am going to work extremely hard to have my file up to a high quality standard as soon as possible.

Given Lily's previous academic record, it was a shock for her to be told that an aspect of her work was below standard. Illustrating Kelchtermans and Hamilton's (2004) view that professional dialogue can develop resilience however, she was determined to improve and she later reflected,

Looking back on this visit I can confidently say that, although at the time I thought it was a very negative experience, I found the tutor really helped my development as a student teacher as he gave me a clear target where I wanted to be.

Brandt (2008) proposes that feedback needs to be authentic to enable students to improve their practice and the response of Lily was reflective of this as she did seem to appreciate that the feedback was given for the right purposes.

The learning gained from pupils, teachers and tutors as outlined above collectively highlights the importance of the contextual dimension of their practicum, and the need for students teachers to develop their awareness and understanding of the range of issues which may be beyond their immediate experience. Through their interactions, the students gradually realised that whilst there was much joy in teaching, schools can also be very difficult and challenging places. As they became more familiar with the school contexts, they developed greater understanding of the experiences of others. In her journal towards the end of the year, Iris wrote, "I have come to realise that many of my pupils will come to school with baggage which can make their start much more difficult. Teachers cannot afford to crumble in the face of adversity."

Discussion

The findings of this study are largely reflective of the literature on teacher development which suggests that teacher identity emerges by adopting

reflective and reflexive orientations to engagement with others within given contexts.

Central to this process was the challenging socio-economic contexts in which the students found themselves. The interactions with pupils for example, presented a range of challenges to the participants' preconceived notions which led to a shift in their understanding and identity. Behavioural concerns and the ability to cater for the increasingly diverse needs, are issues which are always at the forefront of student teachers' thinking as they prepare for a practicum experience (Capel, 1997). In this study, these concerns were enhanced by the fact that the children they encountered had completely different life experiences to themselves. Through exposure to the different social contexts and working alongside experienced teachers however, the participants were able to develop their conceptual understanding of difference and diversity and the extent to which this influences the role of the teacher.

Regardless of the social and experiential challenges in evidence, what was particularly interesting was the values perspective exhibited by the participants and the fact that they saw themselves as being there to help and support all pupils to the best of their ability. Placing student teachers in practicum placements beyond their immediate familiarity clearly presents a range of challenges but is nonetheless of the utmost importance. Edwards and Protheroe (2003) point to the fact that learning in classrooms is highly context-specific and Beijaard (1995) suggests that the culture of a given school context will have a significant bearing upon the identity formation of the teacher within. As such, for those in the process of developing teacher competence and identity, there is a need for a variety of experience in a range of different types of schools and classrooms. The participants in this study displayed a strong degree of commitment to their chosen career, which it could be argued ensured that, whilst disconcerted by some aspects of their experience, they remained resilient and not diverted from their path. For others less committed however, exposure to difficult pupil contexts too early in their ITE could lead to disengagement and eventual exit. The study raises questions about the organisation of practicum experiences within teacher education programmes and the necessary support mechanisms required to ensure that students gain the optimum placement experience.

The processes of supervision, guidance and mentoring are regarded in the literature as key activities to support the development of reflective capacity, understanding and practice (Boreen et al., 2002). Teachers were the focus for observation and analysis and from a dialogical perspective, the data show that

the participants were not only able to recognise both good and questionable practice, but were also able to go beyond the reductionism of curriculum delivery and recognise the importance of values and the adoption of a holistic approach to the care and support of their pupils as crucial elements of the teacher's role.

In terms of developing reflexive orientations, some of the participants did reflect upon some aspects of their experience from a very critical stance and this was encouraging in terms of evidencing what may be regarded as the early stages of dialogical thinking and the emergence of the 'activist' teacher (Giddens, 1994). Daisy and Iris in particular were able to recognise what they regarded as bad practice. This evaluative ability is in line with the findings of other studies (Roberts & Graham, 2008) and illustrates the extent to which other teachers play a significant role in helping to shape the identity of those beginning to teach.

In similar fashion, college tutors are central to supporting students develop their teacher identity (Tang & Chow, 2007). Whilst tutor visits appeared daunting at the outset, it seemed that in the case of these participants, their tutors played three roles: one of affirmation; one as the critical friend; and one as assessor. Interestingly, when discussing their tutors, the participants did not refer to assessment, but rather focused on the affirmative and critical friend dimensions of the relationship, both of which were regarded as highly significant. This supports the work of Urzua and Vasquez (2008), who posit the importance of the dialogue between supervisors and mentees as being future-orientated and focused on action-planning.

In summary, this study supports the assertion that ontological change in terms of professional identity is highly influenced by the dialectical and dialogical interactions which take place in the ecosystem of the practicum. It is illustrative of the work of Priestley, Biesta and Robinson (2013), who suggest that agency is always informed by personal and professional history; is forward-looking in terms of objectives and values; and is rooted in the concrete contexts of the present which are underpinned by discursive, material and relational resources which can either enhance or constrain the development of agency. The data reflect the 'iterative' dimension in that the participants came to the programme with a set of preconceived ideas about teaching which were largely informed by their previous, personal experience. This, along with their engagement with others and exposure to the different dimensions of school life coupled with their personal motivation and willingness for critical

engagement, began to influence their degree of agency and influence their sense of teacher identity.

The participants also showed how much they aspired to do the best they could for their pupils. When the reality of achieving these aspirations was challenged, for example in the case of Iris' observations of Mrs B., or Lily's feedback from her tutor, the participants adopted more determined positions to ensure positive outcomes in the future. This reflects the second dimension of Priestly et al.'s (2013) model: the 'projective dimension' which is concerned with the individual's level of aspiration and its influence upon professional identity.

Finally, how an individual responds to given situations relates to the 'practical-evaluative dimension' and is concerned with the "day to day working environment within which teachers work" (Priestly et al., 2013, p. 6). The degree to which the 'personal' individual is able to negotiate the extreme complexity of 'the professional' life of schools and classrooms is a key determinant of teacher agency. For these participants, high levels of complexity were apparent, but through considered engagement and reflection, they managed to navigate the challenges to positive effect.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to better understand the dialectic and dialogic processes inherent in the practicum and the extent to which they influenced an ontological change in professional identity in the participants. It was hoped that this would in turn better inform teacher educators to support students and contribute to the wider discourse on teacher professional learning. This is particularly relevant to the UK context where very contrasting perspectives have emerged in relation to the roles and relationships between schools and universities in supporting teachers to develop their identity, understanding and competence.

The findings affirm the importance of the practicum as highlighted in other studies and make a contribution to the understanding of teacher development in the early stages of professional learning. The study points to two specific issues which require further consideration: the need for experience in a range of diverse practicum settings to challenge existing beliefs and bridge the divide between teachers and those they teach (Cochran-Smith, 1991); and

the importance of understanding and interpreting the dialectical and dialogical interactions through close observation of the practice of others and structured, critical, future-orientated challenge provided by mentors (Brandt, 2008). As such, teacher education programmes need to maximise opportunities for co-learning, collaboration and cooperation between the key players in order to draw upon the range of strengths apparent and contributions that could be made to encourage more critical and dialogic approaches to professional learning and development.

Whilst there is merit in the study, there are also limitations. Of greatest significance was the nature of the sample. It was unfortunate that no male participants were involved as this may have provided for interesting comparisons. The relative homogeneity of the final sample however, was reflective of the wider cohort of student teachers engaged on the programme and did allow for close consideration of the impact that the different professional learning activities may have had upon their individual development (Cresswell & Plano-Clark, 2011).

The research design and methods employed were appropriate in that they provided a series of narratives, written and verbal, which presented a picture of each participant as they progressed through their first year of study. By the same token, the data were collected only at certain points and related to particular aspects of each participants' experience and were therefore inevitably limited in providing a complete picture of the teacher development narrative and the key influences upon it.

The study does not make a claim to generalisability, but does to resonance with others involved in the process of teacher education (Bassey, 1981). The participants were very committed students and perhaps this was also a motivating factor for their participation in the first instance, and not unrelated to the generally positive findings of the study. As such, there is room for further consideration of professional learning for students who experience significant challenges such as failure in the practicum or lack of engagement, not apparent here.

A third potential limitation relates to the nature of the data. The documents from which data were generated were part of the normal course requirements for each student. What the students wrote in their journals was subject to assessment and so the overall trustworthiness of the contents may have been skewed to some extent as they may have felt that there were certain things which were acceptable or otherwise to express.

Finally, the study only focused on first year students. It must be recognised that this was only the start of their journey which would be likely to take many more significant turns as they continued to move through the programme.

For those wanting to teach, developing a sense of professional identity is of central importance as it is the foundation which enables the individual to untangle the complex social world they inhabit. Developing a teacher identity can never be a solitary enterprise. However, it is dependent upon the range of experiences, contexts and others involved in the process. This research has attempted to explore these influences to ensure that teacher education programmes focus on the primacy of relationships at all levels and provide appropriate support for students, tutors and host teachers to ensure optimal engagement and the most positive outcomes for student teachers and the pupils they teach.

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