Beyond 'What Works':
Understanding Teacher Identity as a Practical and Political Tool

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Drawing on previous research that focused upon the formation and mediation of teacher professional identity, this paper develops a model for conceptualising teacher professional identity. Increasingly, technical-rational understandings of teachers' work and 'role' are privileged in policy and public discourse over more nuanced and holistic approaches that seek to understand teacher professional identity - what it is to 'be' a teacher. This article seeks to offer an alternative view, presenting the idea that an understanding of the processes by which teacher professional identity is formed and mediated is central to understanding the professional learning and development needs of teachers and advancing a richer, more transformative vision for education. I argue that instrumentalist notions of teachers' work embedded in neo-liberal educational agendas such as those currently being advanced in many western countries offer an impoverished view of the teaching profession and education more broadly, and suggest that the concept of teacher professional identity holds the potential to work as a practical tool for the teaching profession and those who work to support them in the development of a more generative educational agenda.

Keywords: Teacher professional identity, Teachers' work, Teacher professional learning and development

Introduction

This paper holds that an understanding of teacher professional identity, a rich, nuanced appreciation of what it is to 'be' a teacher, is critical to understanding the heart of modern schooling. Teachers' work, encompassing the decisions they make on both a short and long term basis about approaches to such things as curriculum design, pedagogy and assessment (to name a few), is framed by and constituted through their understanding and positioning of themselves as a product of their professional identity.

Over the past decade much has been written about the perils of instrumentalist approaches to education, in scholarly journals such as this, as well as further afield in popular publications. As neo-liberal tendencies become further entrenched in western societies despite their apparent failure as a policy framework in education and other human service fields, it seems that we become further and further removed from an appreciation and understanding of complexity and uncertainty. The notion, embedded in much education policy, that 'what works' is 'what counts' (Atkinson, 2000; Blackmore, 2002; D. Hargreaves, 1996) privileges that which is simple and easy to measure over the more complex and untidy dimensions of this very human enterprise.

In this paper I present a framework for understanding teacher professional identity and argue that teacher professional identity, formed and re-formed constantly over the course of a career and mediated by a complex interplay of personal, professional and political dimensions of teachers' lives is infinitely more multifarious than assessments of teachers' work based on 'role' or function such as those inevitably embedded in professional standards. Finally, I argue that teacher professional identity can function as

a practical and political tool for the profession itself, useful in countering current orthodoxies and 'common sense' understandings of teachers' professional practice.

This theoretical perspective emerged from a three-year study which strove to draw practical links between the articulation of teacher professional identity on a micro-level and the move beyond 'what works' to the enactment of a transformational education agenda such as that suggested by Dewey in his vision of teachers "engaged, not simply in the training of individuals, but in the formation of the proper social life". (Dewey, 1897, p. 80)

Dewey points to the less technical, more reflexive dimensions of teachers' work, dimensions which do not generally bow to the laws of common sense and indeed are not easily quantified. Instrumentalist approaches to teachers and their work embedded in the discourses of 'what works' typically seek to subjugate these dimensions, which serve to highlight the complexity of the educational enterprise and the perils of providing simple 'answers' ("evidence-based", of course) to what are in fact highly complex 'questions'. Jennifer Nias reminds us of this complexity and the dangers of privileging the technical-rational over the 'human' in conceiving of teachers' work and identity:

> Teachers have hearts and bodies, as well as heads and hands, though the deep and unruly nature of their hearts is governed by their heads, by the sense of moral responsibility for students and the integrity of their subject matter which are at the core of their professional identity…Teachers are emotionally committed to many different aspects of their jobs. This is not an indulgence; it is a professional necessity. Without feeling, without the freedom to 'face themselves', to be whole persons in the classroom, they implode, explode—or walk away. (Nias, 1989, p. 305)

The framework presented here was conceived as a counterpoint to instrumentalist discourses in education. It seeks to represent the processes whereby teachers are 'formed' and come to understand themselves as teachers, the interplay between their motivations for entering the profession and their experiences as teachers and the interaction between their sense of moral purpose or desire to 'do good' and professional practice.

Teacher Professional Identity: A Career-Long Project

The question of what constitutes professional identity, and indeed identity generally, is fraught. Conceptualisations of identity typically emphasise either the similarities or commonalities between members of a group or sector of the community – this emphasis is encapsulated in the 'identity politics' approach – or the fundamentally shifting, moving, multiple nature of identity such that it can never be defined or clarified.

For the purposes of this discussion, the concept 'teacher professional identity' is used to refer to the way that teachers, both individually and collectively, view and understand themselves as teachers. Teacher professional identity is thus understood to be formed within, but then also out of, the narratives and stories that form the 'fabric' of teachers' lives, what Connelly and Clandinnin (1999) have termed 'stories to live by'. Professional identity has a 'performative edge': the process of 'storying' and 'restorying' has the effect of both claiming and *producing* professional identity.

The contention that professional identity is a career-long project connects with this notion of identity as both a reification and a by-product of teachers' narratives. The construction of identity, the process of creating and re-creating identifications across the

length and breadth of our lives and careers is non-linear and downright messy work. Judith Butler conveys a sense of this in her explication of identity formation:

> Identifications belong to the imaginary; they are phantasmatic efforts of alignment, loyalty, ambiguous and cross-corporeal cohabitations, they unsettle the I; they are the sedimentation of the 'we' in the constitution of any I… Identifications are never fully and finally made; they are incessantly reconstituted and, as such, are subject to the volatile logic of iterability. They are that which is constantly marshalled, consolidated, retrenched, contested and, on occasion, compelled to give way. (Butler, 1993, p. 105)

Butler makes use in this explanation of Derrida's notion of 'différence' (Derrida, 1982), the idea that the process of identification is in part at least the definition and re-definition of the 'other' in relation to the self, the opening of spaces both categorically and temporally through which the self is constituted and understood. This constitution and re-constitution of the self with reference to the 'other' and, as Butler suggests, the 'we', takes place on an ongoing basis and is representative of the shifting and complex nature of identity formation. This understanding of identity formation as dynamic rather than static, emergent rather than fixed, multi-dimensional rather than linear, and fluid rather than compartmentalised is common to a breadth of conceptualisations across sociological (Bernstein, 1996; Pecheux, 1982; Wenger, 1998), psychological (Erikson, 1963, 1968; Gergen, 1991), philosophical (Derrida, 1981; Hall, 1996; Laclau, 1990) and critical (hooks, 1989; Huggins, 1987; Rich, 1983) fields. Indeed, the similarities between perspectives on identity developed by scholars working out of enormously diverse fields might be used as a justification for something of a theoretical eclecticism: a range of often complementary theoretical positions emerge from a reading of these supposedly disparate theoretical perspectives.

Much has been written about formation of identity for pre-service teachers and the breaking or otherwise of Lortie's (1975) "apprenticeship of observation" (e.g. Mayer, 1999; Walkington, 2005), but the forming and re-forming of professional identity across the course of teachers' careers is far less theorised and understood. While a 'nod' is often given to the literature from outside of the field of education which indicates that identity is fragmented and ever-changing, little attention has been brought to bear on the ongoing processes of identity formation and mediation.

The view of professional identity as a career-long project in an educational context links with the work of Huberman (1989, 1993), who, in his large-scale study of Swiss teachers, pointed to the seven stages of the life cycle of the teacher, namely survival and discovery, stabilisation, experimentation/activism, taking stock: self doubts, serenity, conservatism and disengagement. While Huberman suggests a timeframe corresponding with the various themes and phases in his model, his contention is that these 'stages' are "tentative, often fragmentary" (1989, p. 36) in the manner in which they unfold in teachers' lives, rather than a process wherein each teacher progresses through each of the seven stages in a linear or lockstep manner.

My own conceptualisation of the formation of teacher professional identity, as embedded within the model presented below, suggests a still less linear experience than Huberman's, where considerable 'drift' takes place backward and forward between each of the 'stages' and a capacity exists for teachers to 'loop' or 'jump' from stage to stage. Furthermore, Huberman's model is rendered somewhat inflexible by the addition of indicative corresponding years, which despite his claims to the contrary, does suggest something of a linear progression. His model, however, suggests that the process of

becoming and being a teacher is one which is subject to career-long formation. As a career takes its course, this process takes on a differing timbre and form to that which has gone before.

What follows here is an alternate model for understanding the formation and re-formation of teacher professional identity across the length and breadth of teachers' careers, focused on the overlapping and interacting dimensions of their work rather than on a linear progression from phase to phase as teachers move from neophyte to elder.

A Model for Conceptualising Teacher Professional Identity

Teachers' work and professional practice is constituted across and out of the three key domains of their personal experience, professional context, and the external political environment within and through which significant aspects of their work is constituted. **Similar to the three dimensions of professional identity, personal identity and situated identity developed by Day and colleagues (Day, Sammons, Stobart, Kington & Gu 2007; Day and Kington 2008),** these three domains work in a reflexive, constantly shifting dynamic, and the impact of each changes in significance and strength, dependent upon circumstantial and contextual catalysts. While these three domains share some considerable overlap, each has its own defining characteristics.

The domain of teachers' personal experience relates primarily to those aspects of their personal lives, framed by class, race and gender, that exist outside of the professional realm. Teachers' own experiences of school (as students themselves) is a particularly salient part of this domain. As Lortie argued over three decades ago, perceptions of schooling and education derived from teachers' own experience as students hold particular implications for the way they see themselves and their work as teachers:

> …the conservative force represented by teachers who entered with highly positive sentiments of identification is not offset to any appreciable degree by people favouring discontinuity and change toward other conceptions of teaching. Since positive identification appears to have the upper hand, so, apparently, does continuity. (Lortie, 1975, p. 46)

Also included in this domain are teachers' own 'extra-curricular activities', interests, hobbies, roles held and activities engaged in outside of the profession, in community groups and the like, and their particular family context – for some the experience of parenthood and child raising, for example.

The domain of teachers' professional context relates to those aspects of their experience which are framed within an education context. Here we find career histories, professional learning and development experience, those features of the particular school and system contexts they have worked within that have made a particular impact upon their 'professional selves'. Also within this domain are located experiences and facets external to particular school and system contexts but internal to the professional world of teachers, such as involvement in professional associations, unions and networks on small and large scales. Teacher education, both initial and ongoing, is a significant element within the domain of professional context, as are, for an increasingly large group of early-career and other teachers, processes of accreditation, registration and recognition of professional competence and achievement.

The domain of the external political environment comprises the discourses, attitudes and understandings surrounding education that exist external to the profession,

experienced by teachers largely through the media, but also through the development of government policy which relates to their work and the ways in which political ideology impacts upon their work as a result of government policy.

Figure 1 below represents the overlapping and entwined nature of these three domains in the constitution of teachers' lives and work. The three dimensions work in a dynamic, shifting manner, such that the impact of each upon an individual's sense of professional self and decision making processes changes in intensity and significance dependent upon the circumstance and context.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

At the confluence of these three dimensions lies each individual's 'unique embodiment' (Clandinin, et al., 2006, p. 9) of what it is to 'be' a teacher. 'Identity work' that takes place in the overlap of the three dimensions takes the form of personal development, professional learning and teacher activism, each of which results in enhanced engagement and understanding of the self, the field of practice or the political sphere. Professional learning lies at the intersection of professional context and personal experience, requiring both professional and personal relevance to be effective in improving or changing practice. At the intersection of professional context and external political environment lies 'teacher activism', which may be enacted within or outside of the classroom or school, and which sees teachers engage (sometimes pro-, sometimes re-) actively with the politics of education. At the intersection of personal experience and external political environment lies personal development.

Each of these forms of development and their result works in a reflexive way with the others and with the dimensions themselves to keep the 'unique embodiment' in a state of flux. The mediation of teachers' professional identities occurs at the hands of catalysts which emerge from these three domains over the course of a career, either as the result of intentional engagement with professional learning, personal development or activist activities or by virtue of events, occurrences or experiences which take place located within an individual domain. These identity 'anchors' (Mockler, 2008), which emerge over the course of teachers' careers out of this interplay serve to secure teachers' professional identities, provide a 'touchstone' for professional development and formation and a frame of reference for professional practice within a particular temporal and spatial context.

Teacher Professional Identity and 'Moral Purpose'

Teachers' work is often conceived of, both within the research literature and by practitioners as framed by a driving 'moral purpose', and this notion has a complex and significant link to the formation and mediation of teacher professional identity. The articulation of one's identity is a first step toward theorising professional practice through the explicit linking of 'what I do' with 'why I am here', and in this we find a rationale for exploring teacher professional identity in the first place. The concept of identity itself is often considered to be a rarified and esoteric one with little, if any, practical application. However, the rigorous theorisation of teachers' work, particularly at the hands of teachers themselves, is critical to the development of the teaching profession, and furthermore, in

this context, teacher professional identity can be utilised as a lever for teacher learning and development.

This contention suggests that teachers will be best served by amassed theoretical knowledge related to teacher professional identity not by engaging in "unknowing 'complicity'" (Wacquant, 1989) as subjects, but rather by engaging in the consideration and construction of their own professional identities explicitly and purposefully. It thus proposes a more active agency on the part of teachers than Bourdieu assumes in his discussion of the interaction between agents and theoretical models, and advocates an operationalisation of this theoretical base in the service of practitioners who are agents within the model, through a reflexive approach to identity construction.

The centrality of 'moral purpose', otherwise expressed as 'stewardship' (Sergiovanni, 1994, p. 102ff) and also embedded in European notions of educational praxis (Ax & Ponte, 2007; Ronnerman, Furu, & Salo, 2008) to the teaching profession is a popular concept amongst those who focus their work on the life-world of teachers. Day, for example, suggests that "moral purposes are at the heart of every teacher's work" (Day, 2004, p. 24), while Fullan, who has built a body of work in this area over more than a decade, invokes us to "scratch a good teacher and you will find a moral purpose" (1993, p. 12). Fullan's more recent work focusing upon teachers' moral purpose (2002, 2006) has morphed into a discussion of what he refers to as "moral/spiritual leadership" defined as educational leadership on the part of teachers and administrators that has at its heart a desire to "make a difference in the lives of students" (Fullan, 2002, p. 14). Two assumptions are generally common to discussions of teachers' moral purpose: that moral purpose is a positive driving force for the profession, and that as a teacher, holding a sense of moral purpose, a desire to 'do good' or 'make a difference' will necessarily be automatically acted upon within the field of teachers' professional practice. Nias, however, has rather provocatively posed the question "Would schools improve if teachers cared less?" (1989), suggesting that teachers' commitment to moral purpose and 'care' can sometimes get in the way of what she sees as schooling's primary task, that of "equipping students for life in the 21st century" (1989, p. 22).

In the same way as Freire (2006, p. 2) declared "my hope is necessary, but it is not enough", moral purpose, no matter how strongly held or deeply felt, is not enough to ensure that this or any other primary task is accomplished by teachers or schools, regardless of the claims made by politicians and bureaucrats in support of 'fast tracking' programs such as *Teach for Australia, Teach for America* and *Teach First* in the UK. Furthermore, the expression of moral purpose can become a 'blocker' to rigorous and robust debate and discussion, insofar as it can represent the 'moral high ground' against which there can be little or no rebuttal. In their work on school reform, practitioners Wiggins and McTighe argue that a level of disconnection exists between teachers' moral purpose and the way in which their work is enacted. They write:

> Over the years, we have observed countless examples of teachers who, though industrious and well meaning, act in ways that suggest that they misunderstand their jobs. It may seem odd or even outrageous to say that many teachers misconceive their obligations. But we believe this is the case. Nor do we think this is surprising or an aspersion on the character or insight of teachers. We believe that teachers, in good faith, act on an inaccurate understanding of the role of "teacher" because they imitate what they experienced, and their supervisors rarely make clear that the job is to cause understanding, not merely to march through the curriculum and hope that some content will stick. (Wiggins & McTighe, 2007, p. 128)

I do not wish to suggest that the claiming of one's professional identity can act as a panacea for the challenges and difficulties thrown up for teachers by the demands of the 21st century teaching and learning context. Rarely, however, particularly in the context of the intensification of their work well documented over the past two decades (Apple, 1986; Ballet, Kelchtermans, & Loughran, 2006; A. Hargreaves, 1994; Valli & Buese, 2007), do teachers have 'permission' in the context of their day-to-day work to theorise their practice and consider their own place within their practice, either beginning with their own experience in and outside of school or beginning with educational theory. Furthermore, while the concept of 'reflective practice' has been firmly incorporated into discourses around teacher professional learning, and in some cases appropriated by governments and school systems as an instrument of 'improvement' (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2009), rarely are teachers offered even a very basic set of conceptual tools to use as a scaffold for effective reflective practice, much less to enter the realm of authentic reflexivity.

The articulation of one's professional identity requires teachers to construct themselves, in their own minds, as teachers - the 'internal conversation' (Archer, 2007), but then also within the context of their communities. The process of assisting teachers to reflect upon and articulate their professional identity is one of helping them to draw links between their own moral purpose and their professional practice. This is in fact about drawing a link between theory and practice, where moral purpose can be conceived of as an aspect of teachers' personal theory about education: generally one's moral purpose is expressed in terms of a 'big idea' or understanding of what education is or can be; and the practical expression of this through teachers' day to day work. This process itself is not linear, but rather an ongoing articulation and re-articulation of their own professional stories.

The concept of teacher professional identity thus offers a framework for teachers to think through the links between theory and practice, and to implement those, to hold on to the broad vision represented in their moral purpose. Research indicates that while not necessarily held by 100% of neophyte teachers, this broad vision most often guides the decision to enter the teaching profession, encapsulated in a desire to 'make a difference' (see, for example, Carrington, Tymms, & Merrell, 2008; Day, Sammons, Stobart, **Kington & Gu** 2007; Johnston, McKeown, & McEwen, 1999). Many teachers either lose sight of this vision (eclipsed by the pragmatic imperative) or let go of the vision (either by virtue of the kinds of socialisation they go through in the early years of teaching or as a by-product of the managerialist agendas at work within school education). The process of articulating one's professional identity is in essence about teachers developing their own personal philosophy of education that grows out of who they are, what they believe and where they have been over the course of their careers, and finally, opening that up to each other on whatever scale is appropriate.

The 'project', then, of developing one's professional identity is one of articulating and maintaining congruence between personal and professional values, moral purpose, and then 'pushing through' the border between moral purpose and 'on the ground' action, to create congruence between these and the key work of the teacher both inside and outside the classroom.

Professional Identity as a Political Tool

So far, this discussion of professional identity has focussed on the ways in which teachers' articulation of professional identity might work as a tool for professional development and learning. I am also concerned, however, with the broader social and political dimensions of professional identity, and the work that professional identity might do on a macro level in relation to positioning teachers in opposition to the regimes of instrumentality and 'what works' discussed in the introduction. Neo-liberal discourses continue to proliferate in Australia despite the demise of the Howard Liberal Government in 2007: while the current Labor Government is arguably more socially progressive than its predecessor, a focus on national testing, measurement of teacher and student 'standards' and determination to produce and publish school league tables in the popular press might provide evidence of this continuing instrumentalist agenda, within education at least. In the US, a similar pattern can be observed in the shift from Bush to Obama administrations in the past 3 years. While the Cameron government in the UK is still in its infancy, it seems unlikely that a sharp change in educational policy direction from that established by the Blair/Brown governments will herald a shift away from instrumentalist discourses.

In relation to teachers' work, neo-liberal doctrines tend to work with the notion of 'role' rather than 'identity': where identity is demonstrably complex and interwoven between various dimensions of teachers' work, 'role' more comfortably fits the technical-rational conceptualisation of teaching that lies at the heart of neo-liberal education agendas. Aspects of teachers' role (ie what teachers 'do') are easier to quantify, measure and mandate than professional identity (ie who teachers 'are'). In fact if the articulation of a professional identity is partly about the explicit linking of 'what I do' with 'why I am here', it is easy to understand why those who exhibit neo-liberal tendencies prefer to work with role rather than identity when it comes to teachers, as reflexive, politically aware teachers with a strong sense of their role *and* their purpose are likely to prove more unwieldy than those fixated upon technical aspects of their role and 'teaching to the test'.

This 'political edge' to teacher professional identity is critical in terms of the implications it holds for the realisation of the broader transformative aims of education. Teachers with a strong sense of their professional identity and the connection between their purpose and their practice are more likely to be pro-active in the enactment of their 'moral purpose' both within and beyond the school (Sachs, 2003). This points to an associated challenge for teacher educators (both initial and continuing) to foster teachers with a strong sense of themselves and the importance of their work not only on a local level in relation to the individual students they teach, but also on a societal level, ideally pushing the profession, both individually and collectively, 'beyond what works', interrupting along the way discourses which threaten to undermine the critical and democratic dimensions of education.

In practical terms, this is about the creation of a teaching profession with a sophisticated and clearly articulated understanding of their purpose, their identity and the implications of these for their practice, both within and beyond the classroom. Furthermore, this underlines the significance of the socio-cultural/political domain in the construction and maintenance of teacher professional identity, for, as highlighted in the model above, it is the interaction between this and teachers' professional context which gives rise to identities within which such 'activism' might flourish.

Conclusion

This work holds significant implications for both initial teacher education and in-service teacher professional learning and development. In the first place, it points to a need to understand initial teacher education as *formation*. Far from the narrow conceptualisations of 'teacher training' embodied in fast-tracked programs and which often proliferate in the application of technical-rational standards to teacher education programs and pre-service teachers themselves, such an approach would incorporate opportunities for pre-service teachers to develop an understanding of their changing identity as they prepare to become teachers. Importantly, such an approach to initial teacher education might also support students to understand the interplay of the three domains in their own formation, particularly with reference to the connection between their own personal experience of schooling from point of view of student and their subsequent understanding of pedagogical and other educative processes as a classroom practitioner, mediated (one would hope) by their growing understanding of a range of theoretical perspectives on education.

The implications in terms of in-service teacher professional development and learning point to a need to understand professional learning not as a one-size-fits-all phenomenon exemplified in "spray-on" (Mockler, 2005) or "drive by" (Senge et al, 2000) professional development. Contextualised, differentiated professional learning that supports teachers in developing their authentic understanding of their practice, classrooms and students, both individually and collaboratively, is more likely to be inquiry-based, open-ended, and connected to teachers' prior learning than the prevailing 'one shot' approach (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2009). Furthermore, inquiry-based professional learning provides opportunities for teachers to systematically reflect on their practice, and to develop strategies for reflection and learning located within an understanding of who they are and why they what they do.

Finally, this work suggests that further research, examining, for example, the differences that can be identified in orientation toward the domains between early childhood, primary and secondary teachers as well as teachers at different points in their careers, or working within vastly differing school contexts, might help to shed further light on the formation and mediation of teacher professional identity. Such work might focus on one of the domains identified, seeking to establish its relative importance to the framing of professional identity, or inquire across all three domains to further develop an understanding of the lived reality of 'being' a teacher.

This article has presented a framework for conceptualising and understanding the development and mediation of teacher professional identity. Central to the framework is an understanding of professional identity as ongoing, dynamic and shifting; influenced by personal, professional and political dimensions of teachers' lives and work which interplay in an overlapping and active way. Further, I have argued that teacher professional identity might be harnessed as a practical and political tool: the reflexive and generative act of conceptualising professional identity on the part of teachers holds potential for pushing the profession beyond the dogma of 'what works', through constituting teaching as multi-dimensional and embracing the human, personal and emotional dimensions of good teaching in the face of technical-rational approaches that would deny these in favour of those that can be more efficiently measured.

These arguments hold implications not only for teacher professional learning and development, but also for the way we constitute identity issues in the course of initial teacher education: explicitly building a capacity for beginning teachers to 'join the dots' between, on the one hand, their broad beliefs about education and their desire to teach and on the other, their classroom practices and interactions, might possibly build for a more robust, self-confident teaching profession, equipped for the task of moving us beyond "what works".

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Biographical Note

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