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The Professional Identity of English Teachers in the Secondary School

Kate Findlay
The Institute of Education
The University of Reading

Email: kjfindlay@aol.com

Introduction

This paper reports on the first phase of a research study investigating the professional identity of contemporary English teachers in the secondary school. The initial stages of the study have included an extensive literature review and interviews with seven teachers in two schools/settings.

Research Aims

The study addresses a number of inter-related research questions:
- What influences have been brought to bear on the development of teachers' professional identities, and their conception of what English is and how it should be taught?
- What are the philosophies or models of English espoused by teachers, and how might they have changed over time?
- How is the subject actualised in the classroom, and how does this relate to teachers' espoused beliefs, and to the official construction of the subject?
- To identify the residual, dominant and emergent discourses of English teaching reflected in the views and practices of contemporary English teachers.

Research methods and context

The research is an ethnographic study drawing on a range of methodologies, principally interviews and lesson observations. The focus is on seven practitioners in two secondary schools, with the aim of generating a varied but by no means representative sample. The teachers represent some range in terms of age, gender and experience. Two are male and five are female. The youngest is 24 and the oldest 59, and the sample includes novice, mid-career and late-career teachers who have experienced a variety of teaching contexts in the course of their careers. As Ellis (2007) contends, teachers' beliefs and practice are shaped not just by their current contexts but are shot through by experiences in previous contexts.

Four of the teachers, all female, are teaching in a girls' comprehensive secondary school with 1,200 students. Previously a grammar school, it has a strong academic emphasis and a tradition of high success rates in public examinations. This is referred to as School A. The two male teachers in the study, and one female teacher, are teaching in a co-educational comprehensive secondary school with 1,500 students. It has a strong academic record, but more of a mixed intake in terms of students' academic ability and socio-economic background. This is referred to as School B. Teachers' names have been changed in the report so as to ensure anonymity

The interviews are grounded in the narrative-biographical approach developed by Kelchtermans as a result of his study of the professional development of experienced primary school teachers (Kelchtermans, 1993; 1994; 1999). This is a useful analytical tool in that it brings together the 'self' and the 'professional self' with due regard to the influence of contextual factors. From the narratives teachers construct to make sense of

their experiences, they develop what Kelchtermans describes as a *'personal interpretive framework'*, which reflects how these experiences have become meaningful to them and how they influence their daily practice, a 'lens through which they perceive, give meaning to and act.' (Kelchtermans, 1999, p.183) Within this broad framework there are two 'domains':

'First there is a set of conceptions about themselves as teachers: the *professional self*. A second domain is the *subjective educational theory*, the personal system of knowledge and beliefs about teaching.' (Kelchtermans, 1999, p. 183)

The 'professional self' develops over time and has five inter-related components: self-image; self-esteem; job motivation; task perception and future perspective. (Kelchtermans, 1993, pp. 449 – 450)

Kelchtermans proposes a research procedure which he calls 'simulated autobiographical self-thematisation', a process of self-reflection which provides insights into how a teacher's personal interpretive framework has developed and how it might guide their professional actions. He places importance on the role of critical phases, critical people and critical incidents to pinpoint career turning points. A series of three initial interviews is proposed which allows for constant comparative analysis of the teacher's profile as it emerges and the identification of common themes across profiles.

This paper reports on data from initial interviews which are the first stage in this process, and they will inform subsequent interviews focussing on practice observed in English lessons, which will provide opportunities for the teachers to reflect on teaching episodes and the meanings they attribute to them. The responses relating to teachers' subject identities will be the focus of this paper.

The initial interviews were guided by a semi- structured schedule (see appendix) which acted as a prompt sheet, allowing respondents flexibility in shaping the course of the interview. It focussed on a number of themes. These included teachers' career stories to date and critical persons, phases and incidents which they perceive as important to their development. They were invited to comment on their perceptions of expertise in English teaching, what it means to be a 'good' English teacher and how their own expertise has developed. Teachers' beliefs about English and the reasons why it should be taught were discussed with reference to the various models of English used in previous studies (Goodwyn, 1992; Goodwyn and Findlay, 1999), but they were not presented as 'blueprints' and teachers were invited to discuss the importance they placed on a variety of aspects of the subject in general terms. These included: Literature; literacy and language study, including grammar and Standard English; the role of media; and the impact of ICT and new modes of communication used by pupils outside school. Teachers were asked about what they saw as future developments in and challenges for the subject.

Data analysis and research findings

The recorded interviews, each lasting between thirty minutes and an hour, have been transcribed and analysed to construct individual case studies of the participating teachers, and to identify data which reflect the discourses which individuals mobilise in their responses. Despite the variety of professional experiences and career orientations of the teachers, their stories are not merely idiosyncratic and a number of patterns emerged from the data. Common to all were a number of assertions about the subject English. These included:

- A belief that English is set apart from other subjects because it is more focussed on the personal development of the child
- English is more able to foster independent learning than other subjects because it is about opinions, discussion and interpretation and there are no right or wrong answers
- Literacy is associated with functional lower order skills and too much emphasis on literacy detracts from the subject, which is primarily concerned with Literature. The responsibility for pupils' literacy should be shared by all subject teachers
- Grammar teaching is a legitimate aspect of the subject but teachers do not enjoy teaching it and regard it as a chore
- Standard English should be taught but as one variety of language; appropriateness and register should provide the context for discussing it and pupils' own language should be valued
- Media has a legitimate place in the English curriculum but teachers regard it primarily as an aid and a 'way in' to teaching literary texts
- ICT is acknowledged as an asset to teaching English because it helps to foster independent learners and pupils' sense of ownership and engagement with literary texts
- Pupils' adeptness with using technology can be harnessed for learning, but the modes of language they engage with in texting and emailing are not a legitimate mode of enquiry for English study
- The future of the subject is perceived to be driven by assessment. Teachers regard the demise of Key Stage 3 testing as positive, and hope for more autonomy and creativity in their teaching, but regard the prescribed curriculum as overloaded.

Each of these principal findings is discussed with reference to comments made by respondents during interviews.

The 'specialness' of English

The teachers were unanimous in their assertion that English is set apart from other subject disciplines because teachers have a closer personal relationship with pupils, there is more freedom to develop individual teaching styles and it is uniquely concerned with the individual child and fostering independent learners.

'…it's a window on the soul actually … teachers have more freedom cos they get more marks for being original and if you deliver it in a pedagogic this means that way, that is not helping the child because there are several ways of looking at a text. So it's different, in Chemistry there is a right answer, it's closed questions.' (Jane)

'The opportunity is there for the teacher to have a totally different relationship with pupils because of the texts that you're studying, the genres etc. You can use different activities so that it's not the teacher that's the focus, rather than teaching from the front the teacher can lead but from the back and the pupils are in control. … I had my Year 9s standing up at the front to teach a lesson whereas I'm sitting at the side watching.' (Leena)

'The teacher-pupil relationship in English – you get to know your pupils quite well because you discuss opinions and write creatively from your own heart so English is a subject that's about English as well but they develop their confidence in presenting ideas and arguments through it. It's easier for them to become more independent than in other subjects cos there isn't so much factual content, you can let them interpret and explore things in their own way.' (Nikki)

'There is a degree of flexibility in how we teach. Like in other subjects, assessment criteria have to me met but in terms of how those are reached ultimately different teachers will have different ways of teaching texts. And it's really about getting pupils to develop what *they* think about texts, each individual will look at a text based on their own experience and background.' (Peter)

'English is so tied to maturity of response. It sets English apart, it makes it more interesting and individual and you can get some startlingly good students who are incredibly articulate and incisive, but also the kind of Maths boffin but try to get him to extend an argument, talk about euthanasia or something, it's a black and white answer, they can't understand the emotional side.' (John)

'I can see why everyone does English. … They get a lot of chance to express themselves, it's more about themselves, it's more about the personal.' (Sophie)

Literature and Literacy

All but two of the respondents teach English Language A level, and all but one has taught Media Studies as a separate subject, but they were unanimous in their assertion that Literature is at the heart of English, with literacy teaching associated with functional skills and most appropriate for less able students.

For Jane, the reason for placing Literature at the heart of her teaching was to give students a 'voice':

'English is important cos it's giving people a voice. If you think about 'To Kill a Mockingbird', and them reflecting on their own behaviour and through that they

become more articulate because they talk through the issues, and through Harper Lee's take on life they take on board some of her ideas, some of her language.'

This linked with a belief that through Literature, students would be equipped with necessary life skills:

'When you listen to people talking on the radio, their use of metaphor and repetition and the way they organise their ideas, an English teacher along the way has had a hand in that.'

She used an organic metaphor to describe the enriching qualities of Literature:

'Reading Shakespeare improves their writing, because I think if you're exposed to the richness of language, like a plant thrives in soil that's rich, pupils thrive in a rich linguistic environment. Shakespeare is the soil.'

Leena regarded literary study as a way of teaching analytical skills which they would need in life:

'The skills you develop, analytical skills are relevant as the girls move to A levels or degrees or more vocational, they need those skills … so when they leave school they are going to be rounded individuals who can cope with the demands in society.'

Nikki, who is Head of Media Studies within the department, explained her preference for Literature in terms of the personal qualities it develops in students:

'I think the Literature side of it is important. It opens people's minds and helps them to grow and to develop and to be more thoughtful and sensitive and mature and be able to empathise with people more. That's why I like the Literature more.'

Rachel, Head of Department in School A, resented what she perceived as a 'push towards the functional':

'I'd hope that being a high achieving school and what our pupils are capable of we can be much more refined and sophisticated. It has a place but for life skills and enjoyment and promotion of the subject I think the literary aspect of it is what really challenges and pushes pupils.'

She regarded her role as to teach an appreciation of Literature:

'Leading them into appreciation, it is such a pity when people get into adult life and not to have a working knowledge of a playwright who is considered throughout the world to be one of the greatest. Americans fall over themselves trying to get to Stratford-on-Avon, if our own pupils haven't had access to that work, it would be a tragedy.'

She regarded Literature as providing life skills, but also as an anti-dote to the problems in society:

'Life skills, the creation of the wholeness of a person, I think English is so important to our society and moving forward, cos if we just go down the functional route, we've got to think about the problems of the economy and so on and I think there has to be another side to life apart from creating people who can fit little pigeon holes for jobs, which isn't happening anymore anyway.
The aesthetic, creativity is so important, it gives people confidence, it builds their skills, even in the workplace as well, that confidence to be able to debate and to deal with challenging issues, people can take that into life in all sorts of ways, just the reflection and the evaluation of looking at the human condition is really important. And poetry can give you that, children can identify and empathise with poetry in ways that are very surprising, even with children you might consider to be of lower ability, there is something there that can often touch them.'

Although less emphatic, John also stressed the affective dimension of literary study:

'We do bog standard lessons, knowing what a sentence is, writing a letter, but we're trying to give a certain creativity and it's an enriching thing, literacy I see as more functional … it doesn't give you the emotional kick that you get when you're reading a piece of Literature.'

Sophie referred many times to the importance of a 'passion' for reading and Literature:

'I want them to become really passionate about texts, whether it's a novel, a play or a film … I hope they get a lot from it and want to read on and go to the theatre.'

Peter regarded Literature as a means of understanding society and developing qualities which will be needed in life:

'Literature is important because it shapes the society we live in and has done for as long as there's been Literature, writers have written in the contexts with which they're familiar and I think the body of Literature we have is very indicative of the society we created over time. They need to be aware but in a practical sense. Some will have a real passion for Literature and want to pursue that further through university or further study, but for the vast majority of pupils it's about equipping them with skills they can then take and apply in whatever area in life it is they go in to.
Emotionally engaging with texts and understanding different viewpoints is absolutely crucial because whatever environment they go on to work in, the ability to consider other people's points of view is quite important I think.'

The place of grammar teaching and status of Standard English

The teachers believed that Standard English should be taught in English, but stressed the importance of doing so in the context of language in use:

'It's a kind of moveable feast, Standard English; it's all about what's appropriate. It's not wrong; never say wrong cos if you say it's wrong you're attacking people's culture and their voice, their own voice. I'd say it's not appropriate for a university interview. And my job is to give them the tools.' (Jane)

'We should teach an awareness of what Standard English is, when it's appropriate, it's part of a whole exploration of language use and the difference between spoken and written language, so there isn't a sense in that any one is right, it's just that people speak in different ways and it's interesting to explore that.' (Nikki)

'At home they might speak a different language in a completely different way, but for speaking and listening assessment if it's not accessible at home you have to teach it.' (Leena)

'They have to have the breadth of registers and language is power in life and that is very much a part of English teaching as well, that you're equipping them with the power to use language in different ways and different situations. Really important. … It's much more than Standard English, that's simplifying it to put it in that way.' (Rachel)

'In my previous school, a lot of pupils wrote as they spoke, dialect into writing which don't make sense when written down. And text message speak and ways of spelling things, so for me Standard English is still important because there's lots of contexts in which they absolutely need it.' (Peter)

'You teach Standard English where appropriate and necessary, which is most tasks. As long as they get the right register, in a formal situation or essay or letter it's got to be standardised but not in class discussion or writing dialogue or characterisation.' (John)

Teachers agreed that grammar teaching should be a part of English:

'Grammar should be taught. I wasn't taught it and as time has gone it's decreased even more and I think we do need to go back to it and it's a basic expectation from parents.' (Leena)

'English teachers should teach grammar. It sharpens their own writing. Never exercises but to point out patterns, effectiveness, what works, what doesn't work. … You have to have the grammar as a tool for discussion.' (Jane)

'I personally don't like grammar teaching but you have to pick out mistakes when people are writing, we have a responsibility to teach pupils to write accurately and correctly as people have to in real life.' (Nikki)

There was some uneasiness about their expertise in this area:

'Grammar is a difficult area. As I was going through the education system grammar was put down as presumed knowledge … now things are beginning to change and there's more of an emphasis on it and for me I have to refresh those things for myself because I was not taught.' (Peter)

'I was never taught it but found it quite useful, I had to teach A level Language for five years – I wouldn't have known a gerund if it had bit me in the backside. A smattering is quite helpful and some children can see how it improves writing.' (John)

There was little enthusiasm expressed in teachers' responses, which tended to regard grammar teaching as a duty, and the missionary zeal expressed by a number of respondents when talking about Literature was notably absent.

Media study and the impact and use of ICT

The teachers varied in the extent to which they valued the role of ICT in their teaching. Most felt that it had made a significant impact on English teaching. They valued its role in motivating students and encouraging independent learning:

'At the moment I'm doing trailers with Year 9 and because we're using technology they seem to have so much more enthusiasm for it. They've got their tripods and their cameras, even using their mobile phones to make their trailers and edit it afterwards.' (Leena)

'It's had a huge impact. It's made it more accessible, more entertaining as a subject.' (Jane)

'It's powerful for them to see their ideas going up on screen and being saved and being referred to in the future.' (Nikki)

Peter, the youngest teacher in the sample, was least enthusiastic and regarded ICT as a tool to 'enhance the presentation, when studying Shakespeare we've got easy access to films and various versions we can show pupils. …
But I would never go too overboard with technology because ultimately English is still rooted in the texts you're studying, and while technology can be used to enhance that in certain areas, taken too far it can become a multi-media distraction.'

John also felt that it had a limited impact:

'It's changed the way you serve up ideas so it looks more interesting. I've only used it (*the Interactive White Board*) as a screen. It's had no fundamental impact, just made things easier to do.'

The ability to use ICT was linked with three of the teachers' notions of expertise:

'Now the expectations of being a good English teacher compared to ten years ago are completely different. To be innovative, to come up with new ways of teaching girls, using media to make education more interesting and exciting.' (Leena)

'I think now more than ever to be a facilitator, a good manager of people, sensitive, obviously to be very well read themselves and clear in their instructions and to be able to use IT, that means a lot now, it's quite important.' (Jane)

'I've become more adventurous with things, bringing in media and using the Whiteboard and bringing in clips and those sorts of things.' (Sophie)

The ability of pupils to manipulate new technologies and their out of school experiences with them was regarded by some respondents as a reason to include them as a legitimate part of the curriculum:

'They use this technology all the time and they're more able to use it than teachers.' (Leena)

'It's part of their lives so it has to be a part of English.' (Rachel)

Nikki felt that ICT was a valuable tool in her teaching:

'I love my Interactive White Board. I don't use it in a wizzy way but I use it a lot. I get pupils to move things around or make notes on it. It's really good for annotating and saving things onto it then coming back to it.'

She regarded exploring students' use of technology as part of her Media Studies teaching, but not English.

At the same time as acknowledging the legitimacy of studying new forms of communication, Jane imposed a value judgement, maintaining the superiority of Literature:

'Why do we look at letters? Why are letters more important than emails? They have their own grammar. As with MSN they have their own conventions and that is one form of communication and letters are another, a soliloquy is another, a monologue is another. They may not – email may not be as artistically satisfying. It's not Literature. But an email from Andrew Motion might actually be Literature.' (Janice)

Rachel emphasised the 'enormous amounts of problems' associated with ICT:

'How do you teach twelve, thirteen year olds to differentiate with the enormous amount of technology out there and the enormous amount of information overload they can get? You now have to do a Year 7 library lesson and teach them how to look up in an encyclopaedia cos they just go to Google and press a button. … And there is a danger of death by power point.'

She also highlighted the problem of a lack of resources in the school:

'We have Interactive White Boards in two classrooms, the rest have projectors, ideally you want all pupils to have a laptop but that can't happen. It's all about money and they've got much more sophisticated stuff at home they can use and in no way can we mirror.'

The future of English

Respondents were unanimous in welcoming the end of Key Stage 3 tests and were generally optimistic, feeling that they would regain autonomy for Key Stage 3 Year groups, and the chance to be creative in their teaching:

'I hated them, I'm definitely glad they're gone … we can be more creative in our teaching now and get children to interact with texts in a deeper, more thoughtful way.' (Nikki)

'We're going back to the autonomous Head of Department who will have more say, I don't think there'll be a call for so much paperwork, and the bureaucracy, it won't go, it will still be a headache and a nightmare but I think there may be more flexibility.' (Rachel)

There was some enthusiasm for changes to the GCSE specifications:

'I think that we're taking in other cultures a lot more and understanding the value of talk'. (Jane)

'It will be interesting to see because of the impact of new forms of communication, because communication is one of the key aspects of English. It is changing.' (Peter)

However, several of the teachers expressed concern that the curriculum is increasingly overloaded and that there is a lack of time to cover it:

'It seems to be so crowded, hard to cover everything, it's going to be bitty the new GCSE. Spoken language units and the controlled assessments are all going to be done in school so that will take away from the teaching time we have. Assessment is going to take a greater amount of time.' (Jane)

Nikki felt that the controlled assessment at GCSE was a negative development because it detracts from the importance of drafting:

'To me that's an exam, that's not how you do coursework.'

Leena, one of the youngest respondents, expressed a frustration that changes happen very slowly:

'The poems I teach I was taught for GCSE in 1999, the texts are the same. A wider range of texts is needed to access, that's important.'

Responses suggested that teachers feel that they are driven by assessment:

'Revision of the exams is the thing that affects us most, that comes backwards and it affects the way you build your curriculum.' (Rachel)

'It all comes down to assessment.' (John)

Discussion

In *Marxism and Literature* (1977) cultural critic Raymond Williams develops a perspective on cultural activity which could usefully be applied to English teaching, the professional identity of its teachers and how they construct identity and legitimacy. Williams conceptualises social and cultural systems and practices and proposes a framework for thinking about them as 'dominant', 'residual' and 'emergent'; this situates them historically and highlights the relationship between past, present and future, and the ways in which change always contains a sort of continuity.

The 'dominant' perspective is the most powerful, and can contain elements of the 'residual'. The 'residual' represents the beliefs and practices that were once dominant, which often remain dominant long after the social conditions that made them dominant have disappeared. Within the 'dominant', there are 'emergent' elements, that is, elements that are substantially alternative to the dominant. 'Emergent' practices develop usually unconsciously out of a new set of social interactions as societies change, often very different from and a challenge to the 'dominant'. All 'dominant' practices were once 'emergent', but not all 'emergent' practices will become 'dominant'. The categories are not static and unified but dynamic, and at any moment there are tensions among 'residual', 'dominant' and 'emergent' perspectives, as one perspective tends to be dominant at a given point while other perspectives are also contending for meaning, some older or more 'residual', some newer or 'emergent'. Nor do they work in isolation but are inextricably related and interactive, 'at any moment in the process (the 'residual' and the 'emergent') are significant both in themselves and in what they reveal in the character of the dominant.' (1977, p. 122)

In terms of the subject English, the dominant could be applied to the personal growth through literature discourse which research suggests has had a powerful and tenacious grip on the profession. (Bousted, 2000; Davies, 1996; Goodwyn, 1992; Goodwyn and Findlay, 1999). It has been shown to be the common-sense raison d'être for English teachers. Residual might refer to older traditions, associated with a version of English emphasising correctness in grammar, Standard English and an adherence to the canon of English Literature in a strictly appreciative and elitist mode. By emergent, Williams refers to 'new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships' (1977, p. 123), which might be applied to the challenges of new media and modes of communication,

together with theoretical approaches which challenge the dominant, common-sense, liberal humanist version of the subject.

Data from this study suggests that the dominant discourse of English teaching remains firmly rooted in the study of Literature. In the tradition of Matthew Arnold and F.R.Leavis, Literature is unquestioned as a category and literary appreciation is at the heart of English Studies. I.A.Richards assertion that poetry could be the salvation in times of cultural crisis, and Leavis's assertion that Literature is about 'Life' is implicit in many of the teachers' responses, and most explicit in Rachel's comment:

'… looking at the human condition is really important. And poetry can give you that.'

The cultural heritage version of English is still dominant, but it has absorbed the once emergent discourse of personal growth. Writers are valued for their ability to raise issues, promote discussion and awareness in students. Teachers have coupled the heritage model with reader response theory (Rosenblatt, 1978), valuing the individual views of students and regarding the literary experience as a transaction between reader and text; there can be no right or wrong answer.

'Each individual will look at a text based on their own experience and background.' (Peter)

The position can be traced back to the writings of I.A.Richards (1924) and F.R.Leavis, and Leavis's contention that individual lives can't be aggregated, generalised or averaged and can withstand social and economic determinations was echoed in Rachel's comment:

'we've got to think about the problems of the economy and so on and I think there has to be another side to life apart from creating people who can fit pigeon holes for jobs …' (Rachel)

The dominant discourse regards language study, the teaching of grammar and varieties of language in use, as an aid to literary study, but teachers reject the residual discourse with its emphasis on correctness. They accept responsibility for preparing students for the functional demands of life after school, but this is a duty rather than a passion. While accepting the value of the Literacy Strategy, they firmly resist a re-definition of English as Literacy

The emergent discourse, in a society where new technologies proliferate and students are adept at manipulating new modes of communication, is acknowledged in varying degrees by respondents. They currently appear to be absorbing the least threatening aspects of this emergent perspective, absorbing it into their firmly held belief systems, or seeing it off at the door. In most of their responses, they draw on the dominant discourse as a point of reference. Applying William's concept of residual, dominant and emergent discourses alerts us to the possibility that new discourses may emerge, but do not obliterate what came before but rather intersect with it in a dynamic struggle for visibility, legitimacy and influence. Leena's comment on the slowness of change in

English teaching permeates the meaning of the responses from the teachers in this study, and there is no generational distinction to be made. What was striking was the resilience of the growth through Literature paradigm, and Eagleton's contention that English teachers are 'card-carrying Leavisites whether they know it or not' (Eagleton, 1983) seems as apposite for new entrants to the profession as for those nearing the end of their careers.

William's conceptualisation of cultural activity can help us to understand English teaching and its teachers, and to see it as a practice and a formation comprising past, present and future dimensions in a dynamic field. The respondents in this study express their beliefs which reflect a number of discourses of the subject, but their main point of reference and reason for teaching English is firmly rooted in the study of Literature.

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