

Politics, policy and professional identity

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ABSTRACT: Standards-based reform of education is a dominant political discourse in many nations. In this paper we argue that the type of standards-based reform that is enacted has important implications for teacher agency and teacher professional development. Teacher professional development and identity is explored through theories of the teacher's role in the context of standards based reform of curriculum. The examples drawn upon in the paper feature a range of teacher roles and provide the basis for exploration of the interaction between professional learning and professional decision-making. In the paper we advocate the pivotal role of teacher autonomy and point to how successful approaches to professional learning may offer opportunities to offset the negative impact of policy decisions that can disempower teachers and teacher educators. We argue for conceptual rather than linear models of professional learning characterised by the teacher's role as one of "alchemist", enabling student learning experiences through creative and flexible decision-making.

KEYWORDS: Accountability, teacher autonomy, decision-making, policy-driven curricula, praxis, professional identity, professional knowledge.

Legislating for high educational standards for all is a laudable governmental focus. A focus on systemic strategies that enhance pupils' learning is implicated in responsibility for the education of future generations of pupils. But such education policy that is aimed at improving educational standards can turn teachers from "autonomous professionals into ... technicians" (Gray, 2006, p. 30). Educational policy, including notions of standards expressed in those policies, contributes to definitions of the teaching profession itself, and public and personal expectations of teachers' professionalism. The reduction of teaching to lists of standards that can be easily identified and measured reflects none of the subtlety and nuance that a professional knowledge of teaching requires. The top-down approach to teacher standards that is common in many nations appears to have more to do with control and conformity than raising the quality of teaching and learning (Sachs, 2001). The way teachers teach, their identities as teachers and their expectations of children are not merely the result of skills and techniques which are dictated, and then learned and employed; they are founded on their development as people and as professionals.

In this paper, we begin by defining professional identity and professional knowledge and explore how these interact with politics and policy to create the decision-making context for teachers.

PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY AND PROFESSIONAL KNOWLEDGE

Tensions exist between political, societal and personal expectations about what teachers are expected to know, care about and be able to do, leading to contested ideas about teachers' professional roles. Teacher identity is shaped through a number of interacting contexts: government policies; accountability processes; national and local priorities which may not always be congruent, and a teacher's own experience which forms their case knowledge. Teachers' orientation to professional development and knowledge is a significant aspect of how professional identity is constructed (Opfer, Pedder & Lavicza, 2011). In addition, the teacher one "aspires" to become also impacts on the development of identity (Day, Kington, Stobart & Sammons, 2006). Professional identity can be activated and sustained through the development of "agency" (Beijaard, Meijer & Verloop, 2004) which is the freedom to make decisions about one's life and life choices. A perception that teachers are not able to make pedagogic decisions in the classroom that differ from current policy is a threat to agency.

The particular conception of professional learning can either enable or impede teacher agency. Teacher learning can be self-initiated or demanded by others, be planned or incidental, be in an individual or a social context. The ways in which it is developed may result in an increase or decrease in teacher agency and decision-making. The extent to which professional learning develops and maintains agency, depends on a range of factors. Teachers learn to interpret and reflect on what occurs in pupil learning from a standpoint of continuous development of professional knowledge. Tan (2012) suggests that *teacher identity values* need to include "having high standards and [a] strong drive to learn...and to be responsive to students' needs" (p. 7).

A reductionist interpretation of professional knowledge resonates with the historical notion of the scholar who is presumed to know more than his or her students and must impart that knowledge. Professional knowledge at this level is limited to "replicatory" and/or "applicatory" domains (Eraut, 1994). Replicatory knowledge is capable of being used in similar contexts and similar conditions. It relates to specific knowledge of a particular topic, taught to a particular age phase. Aspects of teacher practice can be repeated and replicated accurately, though no reflection on outcomes and the role of practice is implied. Applicative knowledge (Eraut, 1994) allows the teacher to apply knowledge in new contexts with some adaptation for different pupil and ability groups. This might also include the differentiation of content for a different age phase or amongst pupil groups. Replicative and applicative knowledge are the most prevalent forms of knowledge construction teachers experience in professional learning programmes within policy-driven curricula. In such contexts teachers are conceived as "corporate agents, grasping and executing the organisation's mission" (Newman & Clarke, 2009, p. 82) rather than agentic professionals (Billett, 2008).

A more accurate interpretation of professional knowledge, and one that allows for teacher agency, includes associative and interpretive (Eraut, 1994) types of knowledge. Interpretive knowledge is part of a different kind of professional identity, since it implies knowledge generated at the point of practice, and is something that links with reflection-in-action (Schön, 1991). Similarly, knowledge that is associative draws not only on knowledge of pedagogy and subject but also intuitive elements of

reflection. Eraut's (1994) definition helpfully suggests a dynamic nature to professional knowledge, incorporating not only technical and procedural knowledge and prior experience, but also the seminal role of reflection prior to, during and after practice as part of professional knowledge (Schön, 1991). It is knowledge *in* action, knowledge *on* action and knowledge *for* action that leads to professional agency.

POLITICS, POLICY AND PRESSURE ON PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY AND AGENCY

The latter part of the 20th century saw political interest in education focus particularly on the achievement of universal literacy and numeracy (Fullan, Rolheiser, Mascall & Edge, 2001; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2010). A capacity to use technology to generate large amounts of pupil data paved the way for the kinds of assessment of narrow aspects of curricula which could easily be turned into data. National statutory testing in England was introduced in 1988 alongside the National Curriculum (NC). With advancements in technology, data rapidly became more widely available and entered the public domain. The national tests provided a means of measuring teacher performance through pupil performance. An expanded inspection system heightened the role of accountability using both pupil outcomes and teacher performance to evaluate and compare schools through league tables. Curriculum development and teacher professional development began to be shaped in response to aspects of learning which could be measured. The NC and its associated testing system in England was followed in 1993 by the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies. The strategies were based on large-scale *cascade* models of linear professional development, linked to teaching practices with the goal of raising pupils' attainment in literacy and numeracy. Professional development was therefore inextricably linked to what could be tested.

An emphasis on the kinds of learning that could easily be tested on a national scale led to a reductionist model of learning. For example, literacy skills of 11-year-olds were tested through a written reading comprehension test, a spelling test and a grading of writing over two pieces of work under examination conditions. Reading was tested through *written* answers to comprehension questions. Writing topics which standardise the writing assessment also limited the potential of pupils to respond with motivation and imagination or draw on their own experiences. Some forms of text, poetry for example, were less likely to feature in writing tests because they are harder to quantify and therefore assess. Other skills such as creative thinking, collaboration or leadership were ignored as they are also too problematic to test. Much was lost from the curriculum addressed by the tests; for example "speaking and listening" did not feature at all. The assessment data provided convenient measures of teacher quality, and teachers of 11-year-olds in England have become increasingly valued for their capacity to teach children to pass the tests, something that is also necessary to relieve pressure on schools from inspection.

In spite of election promises to reduce national assessment, the current Conservative-Liberal Democrat government in England has intensified the focus on grammar and spelling and has removed the testing of written comprehension, which will in future be covered by teacher assessment only. The purpose of the grammar test remains unclear since research has indicated for some time that learning grammar alone is not a route to improved writing (Elley, Barham, Lamb & Wiley, 1976; Wyse, 2001).

However, the tests will provide a further set of standards data which can be used to measure teacher accountability and school performance. A likely effect is a further narrowing of professional development and further reduction of teacher agency.

In contrast with professionalism imbued by teacher agency, teacher professionalism in England has continued over time to move from a service ethic to a performance ethic (Barnett, 2008). In England there has been a drive to shape teacher professionalism through government reform leading to a “demanded” professionalism, focusing predominantly on teachers’ behaviours rather than their dispositions and thinking about pedagogy (Evans, 2011). A statutory system of “performance management” was introduced in 2007, along with published “professional standards” (Training and Development Agency for Schools, (TDA) 2007). The updated standards are a simplified version with a single set of standards which applies to all teachers. These standards conceptualise teachers’ pedagogy as relating to subject or curriculum knowledge (Department for Education [DFE], 2012a).

A government *White Paper, The Importance of Teaching* (DFE, 2010), indicated the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government’s intentions for teacher professionalism. This resulted in a narrowing of the professional standards, and the goal of using these to identify and deal with unsatisfactory performance. The thrust of the proposals in the White Paper represents a particular philosophy of mandated professionalism, which implies control of the professional rather than one of teacher agency (Evans, 2011). Further politicisation of teacher training is evident in the suggestion from government that the standards will not be mandatory for any schools which choose to move to academy¹ status. This has potential to further weaken the collective professional status of teachers.

The use of top-down control and increased surveillance that are part of the performance and accountability mechanisms evident in the standards for teachers are also evident in other developments in England. There is competition for their role from a growing workforce of teaching assistants and non-teachers, and increased marketisation with a commercial approach to education along with reductions in funding. A failing respect or recognition for the professional knowledge of teachers is also reflected in media reports which take up the standards agenda and perpetuate the government view that teachers are directly responsible for standards, thus undermining even further, teachers’ professional agency.

System improvement and consequent improvement in pupil outcomes is an admirable goal which we do not dispute. However, we argue that the means of achieving positive outcomes lies in developing pedagogy in different ways. In analysing the approaches typically chosen by leaders in countries such as Australia and the USA, Fullan (2011) considers drivers that do and do not meet the goal of “the moral imperative of raising the bar (for all students) and closing the gap (for lower performing groups) relative to higher order skills and competencies required to be successful world citizens” (2011, p. 3). Fullan concludes that the key to successful reform is to make the energy of educators and students the driving force. He suggests that this is an energy which comes from “doing something well that is important to you” and “which makes a contribution to others as well as society as a whole” (2011, p. 3). We see in this an orientation to praxis (Brookfield, 1986; Kemmis & Smith,

¹ Academies are publicly funded, independent schools where the governing body has greater autonomy.

2008). Capacity building, group work, pedagogy, and coherence of all aspects of the “system” are effective drivers “because they work directly on changing the culture of schools systems (values, norms, skill, practices, relationships)” (Fullan, 2011, p. 5). In Fullan’s view, less appropriate drivers are accountability on the basis of test results; relying on individual teacher quality rather than collaboration; expecting technology alone to drive up standards, and using fragmented rather than systemic approaches. Such drivers should not be used to *lead* change since they merely change structures and procedures of the system, “and that is why they fail” (2011, p. 5). However, the latter are attractive to governments since they may bring about short-term, observable shifts which indicate that policy is being enacted, thus protecting the reputations of ministers “by having new programmes to announce which can demonstrate that they are driving forward the process of reform” and not “running out of steam” (Moss, 2009, p. 166). To establish the success of policy, national testing of pupils and measurement of teacher quality are by-products as policy-makers seek “evidence” that policy is succeeding or that further change is needed.

As the policy context invests less in teacher agency, and privileges accountability, there is a consequent risk not only to professionalism but to resulting pupil outcomes. The current round of public sector reform in England “assumes that policy can and should act as a mechanism for transferring appropriate knowledge from one place to another” (Moss, 2009, p. 157), an assumption that transferring the right knowledge to the right place in a linear way will impact practice and subsequent outcomes, giving rise to a particular view of professional development as linear/rational.

LINEAR AND CONCEPTUAL MODELS OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Constant change and a requirement for fast policy response can impact on the aims and design of professional development, resulting in linear approaches (Coburn & Stein, 2010; Moss, 2009). Linear approaches may or may not be informed by research and frequently go through a development stage before being rolled out to a wider context. The goal of linear approaches is to rapidly change teachers’ behaviours to align them with current policy; practical tools such as schemes of work and lesson plans are sometimes foregrounded to rapidly alter classroom practice as a means of shifting practitioners’ thinking (Coburn & Stein, 2010).

In England, the policy on the teaching of early reading represents a linear approach to teacher professional learning. By privileging one component – synthetic phonics, taught systematically (SSP²) – materials for teachers have been confined to sequences of described and prescribed content. As the prescribed teaching materials merely give a sequence and a practice to be followed, the underlying theories and research on reading teaching are not accessible for teachers to draw into their pedagogical decision-making. Therefore the complexity of reading theory is largely hidden from teachers. The linear professional learning in SSP has emphasised replicative and applicative types of knowledge and is closer to a “training” model, with outcome measures based on the number of teachers adopting the approach (Coburn & Stein, 2010). The adoption of SSP has been evaluated by monitoring the numbers of schools which have responded to an offer of matched funding to purchase government

² Synthetic phonics teaches the phonemes (sounds) associated with the graphemes (letters). The sounds are taught in isolation then blended together (that is, synthesised) all through the word.

approved phonics resources. This approach demonstrates an assumption that materials can change practice and that the teacher's role is to replicate and apply knowledge. Replicative and applicative types of knowledge, which teachers can learn in linear professional development approaches, are not sufficient to equip them for decision-making. Opfer et al. (2011) found that teacher change was not a sequential process and that "assuming that belief change leads to practice change or that practice change leads to belief change may not be helpful in understanding the complex processes at work" (p. 143). Professional learning was found to be a complex interaction between changes in belief, changes in practice and changes in students, which depended significantly on teachers' orientation to learning.

Pupil outcomes are an accountability tool in the SSP policy. For example, perceived poor performance in national statutory assessment tests in reading for seven-year-old pupils can trigger school inspections. An even more controversial measure has been the Year One Phonics Screening Check (DFE, 2012b), an assessment of six-year-old pupils' ability to decode real words and non-words. Data from the tests are collated nationally and used as a performance measure for schools and teachers. Further materials have been subsequently published to aid both teachers and parents to support children as they practice to read a list of words and non-words and to provide catch-up intervention for those who must re-take the test after failing it the first time. These accountability measures are having a direct impact on the curriculum and the experiences of teachers and their pupils.

Through examples of policy in England, we have demonstrated how a linear model of professional development casts teachers as conduits for policy decisions rather than developing their professional identity and allowing them to act as professionals in the fullest sense. The flexibility with which teachers are able to interpret curriculum is diminished by narrowing the scope of professional development programmes and linking them to accountability measures (Richards, 2012). This results in an imbalance, since the policy, which by its nature is a general one, is not intended to be re-interpreted at the level of the classroom. Policy which demands a particular approach to teaching reading focuses on behavioural aspects of the role: what teachers will do and be seen to be doing when monitored. It fails to take into account two other key aspects: firstly, teachers' orientations (for example, beliefs, perceptions, views held, self-perception, values, motivation, job satisfaction and morale) and secondly, the intellectual component of professionalism (knowledge bases, the amount and degree of reasoning applied to practice, analytic skills and what they understand) (Evans, 2011).

EARLY LITERACY AND CONCEPTUAL PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

In the conceptual model, professional development successfully creates an interactive space where teachers can draw on theory and practice and develop reflective dispositions driven by what they observe in their pupils. This interaction takes into account the learning that occurs as practitioners enact practices, and is focused on shifting teachers' cognitions and increasing their knowledge, enabling them to make responsive, practical decisions day by day (Coburn & Stein, 2010). Developing interpretive and associative knowledge (Eraut, 1994) is critical and the goal is a generative learning process which extends beyond the time frame of the development sessions. A conceptual approach foregrounds the professional capacity of teachers.

Professional learning as part of becoming skilled in Reading Recovery follows a conceptual design. Reading Recovery is an early literacy intervention which enables children who have made little or no progress in reading and writing to catch up with their peers (Burroughs-Lange & Ince, in press; DFE, 2011; Douëttil, 2011). Teachers, through initial and then on-going professional learning, are empowered to draw on moment-by-moment observations of the learning interactions with pupils. From these observations, teachers construct hypotheses about the child's learning, using assessment knowledge to determine the next steps for that particular child. Reading Recovery provides a clear example of a professional learning design which develops and maintains agency as one its core purposes.

A key factor in the success of Reading Recovery pupil outcomes is its approach to professional learning for teachers (DFE, 2011). It represents an investment in the planned development and maintenance of teacher agency by recognising that high quality decision-making is dependent on teachers' knowledge and their ability to critically reflect on the application of that knowledge. This tenet links to the previously discussed applicative and associative areas of professional knowledge. A key practical feature is the use of a one-way screen behind which a member of the teacher/learning group teaches a child. Together the group describes, theorises and then critically reflects in a real-time dialogue to provide supportive and constructive feedback for their colleague and to draw out new insights for the group that will help their decision-making processes with struggling literacy learners. The leader of the learning (a teacher leader or national leader) coaches the group to become "more flexible and tentative, to observe constantly and alter their assumptions in line with what they record as children work. They need to challenge their own thinking continually" (Clay, 2009, p. 237). One-to-one coaching also takes place in each teacher's own school context. Reading Recovery professional learning has several design elements that seem to work together to promote professional identity and agency: building and applying theory; close observation of practice; discussion grounded in teachers' work with learners, and sustained and ongoing learning.

Building and applying theory

A distinctive feature of Reading Recovery professional learning is that theoretical understandings are considered core to pedagogical decision-making underpinning the intervention practices. This theoretical base is articulated for teachers in a series of core texts. These are not handbooks or schemes of work, but are used as a reflective tool during professional learning sessions and as a reflection on teaching in teachers' own contexts. This is unusual amongst guidance and publications for professional development activity, particularly for the teaching of literacy skills amongst low attaining groups. Such materials are often confined to sequences of described and prescribed content (Wasik & Slavin, 1993). This building and applying theory is fundamental to professional identities being forged by such professional learning practices.

Close observation of practice

Teachers' understanding of theories of literacy acquisition is fostered through repeated collection and analysis of observational data on individual learning and teaching, and through opportunities for "real-time" reflective critique around literacy teaching and learning (Clay, 2009). Close observation of children undertaking oral and literacy tasks builds a body of knowledge for teachers that can be applied creatively and flexibly. Critique informed by theoretical rationales for observed behaviour of teacher and child allows teachers to provide finely tuned instruction (Lyons & Pinnell, 2001).

Discussion grounded in teachers' work with learners

Teachers often reflect on the ways that working with individual children has taught them something about learning more generally. They are referring to the opportunities for critical reflection on practice. Their daily teaching of children provides opportunities for newly acquired theories of teaching and learning to be tested and reformulated (DeFord, 1997; Pinnell, 1997), thereby allowing teachers the opportunity for an agentive role. The model of professional learning espoused in Reading Recovery has been described as "inquiry-based", with teaching and learning interwoven through a "reflective/analytic experience" (Pinnell, 1997, p. 9). Teachers bring their experiences of working with learners to sessions and engage in collaborative dialogue about challenges they have encountered in their teaching. Each teacher sees the situation through a different lens, triggering a reflective loop "around theory, practice and observation, with critical reflection operating at its hub" (Taylor, Ferris & Franklin, In press).

Sustained and ongoing learning

Teacher learning is never seen to be complete in the Reading Recovery professional development context. Knowledge generated at the intersection between technical procedures and the point of practice provides a demonstration of praxis during which teachers adapt and restructure learning opportunities in ways that might best meet the needs of the pupils. Within this process, existing professional knowledge is used to develop both reformulated knowledge and new practice as it is occurring. Therefore it would seem to involve reflection-in-action (Schön, 1991). Designing professional learning opportunities such as these described here draws not only on knowledge of pedagogy and subject but also intuitive elements of reflection. This view of professional knowledge suggests a dynamism, incorporating not only technical and procedural knowledge and prior experience, but also the seminal role of critical reflection as fundamental to the development of professional knowledge – reflection prior to, during and after practice (Schön, 1991).

The model of professional learning we use and advocate (in our work with teachers) represents the transformation of learning opportunities from passive reception of policy information to one of repeated and upward spiralling of information to support and "power" the learning process (Carless, 2007). Additionally, the model confronts the importance of attitudinal change, vital to developing and maintaining a professional identity of teacher as powerful decision-maker; knowing not only how to act, but also why, able to rationalise and evidence their decision-making using a theoretical framework for action. To neglect the full extent of what is needed for

change is to risk widespread misunderstanding of failure of any given top-down policy (Fullan et al., 2001).

CONCLUSION

Teacher professional identity and decision-making is in conflict in many international settings, caught between a rational linear model of professional learning with growing accountability, and a lack of agency to affect how political policy reforms are played out at the point of learning. Competition rather than collaboration creates a negative climate with unrealistic claims that all teachers should be outstanding. The public perception of teachers' competency developed through the media creates a further lever for teacher competency to be used as a political tool. If decision-making lies at the policy level rather than the classroom level, teachers may feel less, not more responsible for outcomes. They have neither autonomy nor responsibility. Teachers should "conceive of themselves as 'agents of change', rather than 'victims of change'" (Whitty, 2008, p. 45). Teachers need to be able to develop as "imaginative professional(s)" who can make "creative and articulate responses rather than respond with feelings of hopelessness" (Power, 2008, p. 157).

Currently there is worldwide interest in the Finnish education system as both politicians and educators look for successful models (Niemi, 2012). Despite contextual differences, what should not be ignored is the investment in teacher development in Finland: teachers have a seven-year course of study, having to attain a Master's degree to be accredited, and are respected decision-makers with autonomy to adapt a loose national curriculum to suit the local needs of their pupils. They have time and dedicated spaces in the school environment to collaborate with colleagues and also have access to continuing education classes throughout their careers. Fullan (2011) notes that better performing countries have been successful because they have developed the whole teaching profession, citing findings from a significant study which found that pupil attainment was improved in relation to how much teachers interacted around children's learning. He proposes that accountability comes as a result of getting more instructional improvement but that accountability does not drive the improvement. Instead "collaborative practices mobilise and customise knowledge in the system" (2011, p. 10). In addition, he notes that "all of the successful systems have come to trust and respect teachers" (2011, p. 16).

Internationally, the work of teachers and the range of skills and knowledge required are similar, although the particular needs of children are highly individual. We argue that the pathway to teachers re-claiming trust and respect and a capacity for developing and using professional knowledge is possible through coherent approaches to continuing professional learning. Models of professional learning, which aim to build teachers' interpretive and associative knowledge and privilege a conceptual rather than a linear approach, can equip teachers with a well-informed praxis. This in turn enables greater agency and creativity on the part of the teacher and more effective learning outcomes for all pupils. Rather than acting as a performative robot enacting policy, the teacher becomes an "alchemist", planning and leading learning experiences creatively, flexibly and responsibly and able to do so through informed autonomy.

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