

THE PERSONAL AND SOCIAL MEANING OF BECOMING A QUALIFIED TEACHER: PARTICIPANTS' VOICES

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At every single moment of one's life one is what one is going to be no less
than what one has been

(Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis*).

Introduction

This article reports the personal experience of some student-teachers on a one-year secondary Post-Graduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) course at a University in England. It focuses on their development as they perceive it at a point in their course at which they knew that they had qualified for accreditation as state school teachers of Modern Languages. Their accounts suggest that they situate their development in their personal life stories and in their present and imagined future social environments, rather than in the bureaucratic discourse of official competency requirements. This insight is relevant to professional contexts beyond that of the original study.

Quotations in this article are taken from the writer's doctoral study (Roberts 2003). Participants gave informed consent to publication and the names appearing here are pseudonyms. The study responded to the dearth of research on the perspectives of student-teachers, on the premise that their voices should be heard:

in many of the educational changes and reforms currently being undertaken with accelerating speed around the world, teachers' perspectives are too often missing

(Goodson and Numan 2002)

Initial teacher training (ITT) of state school teachers in England has changed radically since 1992. It is now school-based, with student-teachers spending a minimum of 24 out of 36 weeks in at least two different schools. The participants quoted here spent 30 weeks of their 36-week course in schools (14 weeks full-time and 16 split between school and University), culminating in teaching a 50% timetable and full share of teachers' duties. Accreditation requirements demanded that they satisfy rigorous competency requirements defined centrally by government (TTA

2005), that were assessed by school and University tutors and an external examiner. Qualification involved a very public process of scrutiny, feedback and assessment (formative and summative) inside and outside the classroom. The location and length of the training suggests that their perspectives can be compared with those of teachers in the early stages of professional development in other contexts, especially those whose initial teaching experiences have been relatively short or sheltered. Furthermore, their experiences can be useful to policy makers or trainers engaged in school-based programmes in other settings.

It is worth noting that the participants themselves were engaged in cross-cultural encounters of different kinds. All had to adjust to the expectations and norms of the schools, where they were required to fit in as functioning members of staff. All were engaged in developing a new teacher self situated within the field of education in England, with its attendant occupational norms, sub-groups, rivalries and value conflicts. Additionally, six of the twelve participants were from distinctive European cultural backgrounds, and therefore had their own issues of cultural adaptation and self-identification. Finally, the course involved a major life career turn for all the participants, with changes in self-perception: three were career-changers coming from the private sector, four had been TEFL teachers, one a science teacher in Europe, three students, one a home carer. Thus theirs are stories of cross-cultural encounter at a number of occupational and national levels, as well of personal transformation.

Design

This article is based on the writer's doctoral studies (Roberts 2003) that involved a total of 22 PGCE students from the same institution, from 2000 to 2001. The study explored professional identity development, based on anti-functionalist social systems theory (Layder 1997) integrated with constructivist psychological theory (Kelly 1955; Bannister and Fransella 1980; Pope and Denicolo 2001), a theory characterising development in terms of, 'proactive cognition, morphogenic nuclear structure and self-organizing development' (Pope and Denicolo 2001: 43). Recent developments in social aspects of Personal Construct Psychology (Kalekin-Fishman and Walker 1996) indicate its compatibility with anti-functionalist social theory:

[the personal construct system] is assembled by and in our interactions with others and develops to a large extent to make sense of ourselves and those others. At the direct interpersonal level, the discriminations we make of events are tested out, with us frequently obtaining the feedback we seek from the explicit or implicit reactions of others.

(Kalekin-Fishman and Walker 1996: 13)

Participants

The participants in the 2000–1 study belonged to one Modern Languages cohort. The longitudinal group consisted of twelve participants, while cross-sectional data were obtained from the rest of the cohort ($n = 11$) at the end of the year. The longitudinal group (9 female, 3 male) included ten ‘young-matures’ aged between 25 and 35, of whom seven were career-changers. Their characteristics broadly matched those of the whole 2000–1 cohort.

Data collection and analysis

Longitudinal data were elicited by means of reflective writing and semi-structured interviews (Patton 1990; Burr and Butt 1997), concerning issues of biography, professional identity and formative experiences in schools. The twelve main study participants and the remaining eleven of the cohort also completed end-of-year questionnaires focusing on events perceived to contribute to (or detract from) development in their professional identity. Segments of the transcribed interviews and written material relevant to research questions were selected and coded inductively. Emergent themes were represented in the form of detailed case studies, individual ‘thumbnail sketches’, and thematic displays (Miles and Huberman 1994; Mason 1996).

Transcriptions were analysed by ‘top-down’ selection of sections relevant to the research purpose. These sections were then content-analysed to generate within-section themes. The analyses were then reviewed, issues specific to the topic of this paper were selected, and an interpretation constructed, using both top-down and bottom-up strategies. In both studies, conditions of informed consent, anonymity, ethical approval and member-check were met. As these were small-scale interpretivist studies, generalisation was theoretical, aiming to ‘provide circumstantial evidence for

underlying processes or causal mechanisms' (Mason 1996: 140) in order to produce predictive explanations (ibid.: 137) applicable to contexts similar to that of the study.

The voices

The perceived changes described here are in self-perception, represented by changed expectations that influenced participants' current and prospective relationships and social roles. This is not at all to downgrade the importance of change in their practical teaching skills, or their knowledge of students and the curriculum. Changes in classroom management skills were mentioned by all participants, it's just that the story does not stop there.

Classroom management skills

Participants had experienced repeated cycles of teaching, self evaluation, observation, feedback, reflection and personal target setting over a period of 30 weeks. As would be expected, all participants perceived major development in their classroom competence. For example, Yvonne, a French national, commented:

The course helps us develop skills and gives us tips and strategies of how to teach and how to develop our role as a teacher the actual experience in schools was important to compare and contrast things we learned at University ...and to give us the opportunity to try things out ...I've got far more authority and I've developed my knowledge and practice of teaching methods, learning styles and the whole British school system...and yes, confidence

Mary, a British mature career-changer commented on her classroom management skills:

I've got more confidence standing up in front of a class. I'll not be taken advantage of to the same extent, I've got more ability to deal with more challenging pupils and I'm more natural with them now I think.

Anna, a German national, and then Lisa, a bilingual speaker of German, comment on more global changes in their competence:

I believe that I'm ready to go into a classroom. I do believe that it (the course) has ...made me a teacher...but of course there is always so much more to learn

I've lost five years of my life probably this year because of all the nerves that went with all the observation and preparation and everything! But in the end I think it's going to make my life much easier, in the future...because I have learned a lot, I have learned a lot from the school itself really.... now you can put me in whatever classroom and I would know what my expectations are and what to expect from the children.

However the focus of this article is on the underlying, less obviously pedagogic aspects of personal development that participants perceived to be of importance. The timing of the interview lent itself to participants' reflection on the wider personal meaning of qualifying to teach. Certain critical junctures in life and career associated with role change naturally lead us to ask how we have changed, what kind of person we have become, what kind of teacher we are now and want to be in future:

the prospective and retrospective valuation of the career by the individual [...] results in a review of self identity as it is bound up in the current career situation

(Layder 1997: 49)

This was reflected in the 'whole-life' nature of the participants' comments. It was clear that for all participants, if in diverse ways, becoming a teacher had changed their self-expectations in ways that influenced their whole lives. Examples of private, interpersonal and wider social areas of influence are given below.

Personal confidence

One consistent theme was that of enhanced self-confidence generalised to other relationships and social situations. It was seen to derive from surviving the tough 'rite of passage' that was a school-based course, and from asserting their authority in the classroom. Anna was a mature German national who had left school young, and only recently had earned a degree in order to take the course. She saw comprehensive changes in herself:

I think I'm a very different person

She was far more confident and assertive, and would now speak her mind if she was unhappy with a person's behaviour. In her husband's words, she 'doesn't take shit any

more'. She linked this to interactions in class where she had to confront pupils over their behaviour, 'because I have to react in class straight away'. Similarly David became far more personally assertive, in his view because of asserting his authority in class. Commenting on classroom discipline he said:

I suppose simple things but things like 'I've had enough of you two, you're moving over here' and then there's a refusal from the student ok and then again in private life I wouldn't have been a strong personality in that situation but now I wouldn't think twice. I'd see the refusal, as ...it's not a challenge it's simply a case of that person's going to move and I'm not gonna tolerate him not moving. It's that side, standing really hard on something

He saw that this transferred to private life:

It's crossed over, an example would be that our neighbour is noisy and plays music noisily and it's sometimes very late at night...I wouldn't have knocked on his door and complained a year ago. And I did. So I think that's something that's come out of it.

Personal modes of reflection and decision-making

In some cases, change lay in generalising modes of reflection that they had acquired by means of inner speech and frequent public conversations with tutors and peers. They used these modes for other personal issues or decisions. For example, Yvonne commented:

I have developed further my skill to self-evaluate myself and take the right steps from there. I have also learnt to get rid of preconceptions or assumptions. I have finally also gained in terms of adaptability and flexibility. This is all both on a personal and professional level

Similarly, Mary commented on her changed approach to life:

I think I'm learning to be calmer. I think initially I'd go in and out of all sorts of ideas and plans; what I discovered then was that maybe if you stick to one or two things and adapt them, always keep it simple ... because I've tended to get too complicated, too involved and intricate ...so keep it simple and keep calm and try not to raise your voice, and that's had a knock on effect on my own personal life. I'm trying to anyway!

Social Interactions

Participants also saw their interpersonal behaviour as changing in particularly ‘teacherly’ ways. For example, Yvonne found that her teacher manner extended outside school:

I’m often told off for behaving like a teacher.... It’s been more of a habit recently, this year. Just in terms of the authority and the way I want things my way or the way I explain things really simply thinking that the message hasn’t been received. Things like that. Been told off for that.

Not lacking in confidence to start with, Barbara became even more socially assertive. She described an incident where she rebuked a teenager for dropping litter:

And I just picked it up and I followed him into the shop and I said, ‘I think you dropped this’, and my husband was mortified and he was just, like, ‘God you’re a proper teacher’ ...I don’t have a problem telling people... I think because you just think that all pupils grow into adults, I’ve probably just got more confidence in front of everybody...Yeah. Not that I was short of confidence beforehand.

Knowledge of others’ lives

Another influence on participants was learning more about students’ lives, with resulting changes in their perceptions. For example, Anna felt she had changed her perspectives on life in general. She had learnt about ‘horrible things going on’ in the lives of children which she had not known about before:

Pupils have such a hard time at home and pupils have seen horrible things, had horrible things happening to them and I think that also changes my perspectives too, maybe even life itself

She saw this as making her more observant and ready to look for explanations in others’ behaviour in general, and also as having a reciprocal effect on her approach to teaching, in that she became more ‘receptive’, picking up when things are not right with a child and doing something about it.

Similarly, Hans developed a new perspective on the world of work as a tough and competitive place, compared with his sheltered life as a student in Europe:

Know much more now how hard-working people are in general. Being a student it's just a privilege. And I know how competitive things are, I will have to teach to the tests, to reach all the objectives

Community membership

Another recurring theme, voiced in individually varying ways, was change in self-perception marked by the anticipation of community membership, to a school or society at large. For example Hans, the long-term student, saw a major change from his old student self to a new professional self. His sense of complete transformation lies in personal maturation, and a sense of a stake in society:

I've changed a lot as a person. It's most amazing when I go back to university and I look at the people, a year ago they were young...I don't want to patronise them but they were young, innocent girls and now they are women; it changes you a lot, the work and the stress and the experience, it changes you as a person completely, in that year you mature a lot, and from a student you turn into a teacher in nine months, it's quite extraordinary. I think I've changed a lot, I'm much more self confident, I feel like a professional now, I've got my place in society, I'm not a student anymore, 'student, lazy bugger', the further the course progressed, the more it felt like being closer to being a professional

Similarly, Patrick (a career changer from the private sector) associated qualification with winning a stake in society, and imagined developing on it:

This may sound a little pretentious but it does make you feel like a 'worthy' person and I suppose that has a knock-on effect into other parts of life. Feeling that you contribute something to society makes you a part of that society and thus more willing to contribute in other areas. I'm currently thinking of, for example, doing some voluntary work somewhere – don't know what yet ...but that kind of thing.

Barbara, a highly dynamic person and another career changer, anticipated membership of her local community, since she lived in the area in which she had trained and then been offered a job:

I feel more responsible as a community member. I feel I need to act as a role model both in school and out of school ... and I am more integrated in local community

Mary, who was recovering from disruption in her private life, like Barbara and Patrick valued becoming a member of a community which in her case was the school itself:

I like the idea of a community where everybody's pulling together, all working for the same aim, you're not by yourself, you're not out on a limb, it's the whole community feel I think.... Having a function and a role and a purpose

In their different ways according to their prior role experiences, participants described changes in their self-confidence and assertiveness, in approaching personal life in different ways, in changing self-expectations that anticipated changed relations with others, and expressed a sense of belonging to society, seeing the world of work differently, and a wider perspective on life. Rather than any discussion of attaining competencies, they interpret their new role in terms of its social and relational dimensions.

Discussion

ELT teacher training has long been concerned with cross-cultural encounters, and has explored appropriate methodologies for the classroom and teacher training (e.g., Holliday 1994; Kramsch and Sullivan 1996). More recently, this issue has been explored in terms of how teachers construe their own developmental needs (Leather 2001), how to design western-based courses to meet the needs of non-western non-native speaker teachers of English (Carrier 2003), and how to develop awareness of socio-cultural relativity in TESOL trainees (Dogancay-Aktuna 2005). This article does not directly contribute ideas for training. Rather, drawing on a study in the context of Modern Languages teacher education, it suggests a social perspective on personal-professional development. From this perspective, significant change lies in changed personal self-expectations, developed through and reflected by changed social expectations of self and of others.

From this perspective, professional change takes place as individuals explore and clarify their personal expectations of self in the role of teacher. These expectations are tested out and developed by means of the interactions each individual has with significant others in the school:

the construct system that we evolve during our lifetime is assembled by and in our interactions with others and develops to a large extent to make sense of those others and ourselves. At the direct interpersonal level, the discriminations we make of events are tested out, with us frequently obtaining the feedback we seek from the explicit or implicit reactions of others.

(Kalekin-Fishman and Walker 1996: 13)

At the personal level, the perspective suggests that understanding the individual's context of change might counteract a natural tendency to stereotype or oversimplify the nature of group cultures and encounters between members of these groups. Each participant quoted in this article brought an individual life history to an interpretation of their own professional development. Each of them used contrasting and similar features between their previous role experiences (for example as a parent, a university student, a business EFL teacher, a musician, career changers from IT and the travel industry) to define themselves in their new teacher role. These features are idiosyncratic and unique to the person, while also culturally embedded by processes of primary and secondary socialisation. In any training encounter, we need to attempt sociality, put ourselves in the trainee's shoes, to understand the meaning of training in their life story: what an individual's life roles were, and the ways in which s/he sees the role-in-training as either similar to or distinctive from roles and relationships in her/his life before. In a cross-cultural encounter it is especially important to understand the culturally-embedded roles and situations the person sees as relevant to the new role-in-training, and what expectations s/he brings from these situations to the new unknown role.

At the social level it seems that changing relationships in a professional context (with students, colleagues or managers) and in private contexts (with one's family, neighbours, friends) were actually the medium through which the participants' self-perception changed. It follows that our effort to understand should focus on the relationships trainees anticipate having with key others (students, colleagues, parents, bureaucracy) and how institutional and community cultures mediate these relationships. In the particular case of an encounter between state-system non-native speaker teachers and a native speaker trainer who has developed in a private sector EFL culture, it is the responsibility of the trainer to understand the trainee's working

relationships. The network of relationships would include those with students, colleagues, school management, and power figures outside the school. Who the significant figures are, the nature of their mutual expectations, and how these might be subject to renegotiation as a result of training would need to be explored collaboratively with trainees.

As Salmon (1995: 92) points out, new ways of working, embedded as they are in new ways of relating to others, ‘must be delicately negotiated’ and require a support group or research group that offers teachers ‘a kind of protected space for different ways of thinking [with] freedom from their usual professional responsibility; a context in which they can think about potential change at a distance, without as yet having to own it’ (ibid).

For trainees to carry through changes in self-expectation developed by training requires relationships that affirm and maintain that change, whether this is in the form of informal support, one-to-one coaching, support through a research group, or through affiliation with like-minded teachers within the school or across schools. In this way the teacher can develop a long-lasting, socially negotiated and culturally mediated teaching identity.

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