

“You choose to care”: Teachers, emotions and professional identity

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Received 30 March 2006; received in revised form 11 November 2006; accepted 15 November 2006

Abstract

This paper discusses the findings of a qualitative interpretive study on secondary school teachers’ professional identities and emotional experiences. Teachers’ work is emotionally engaging and personally demanding, yet the caring nature of the teaching role is largely neglected in educational policy and teacher standards. This paper examines the reasons behind the marginalisation of discourses of emotionality and discusses the lived experiences of three teachers. The caring behaviour that teachers exhibit in their work is seen to have professional, performative and philosophical dimensions as individual teachers subjectively negotiate the demands that are placed upon them in different situated contexts.

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Keywords: Emotions in teaching; Professional identity; Teacher beliefs; Teacher role

1. Introduction

This paper reports on the findings of a qualitative interactionist study that explored how three secondary school humanities teachers actively and reflectively engaged in caring behaviour throughout their work with students. By making the choice to care for their students, the teachers in this study were able to construct and maintain a sense of professional identity which cohered with their philosophical or humanistic beliefs about the teaching role.

In this study, *caring* is primarily defined as those emotions, actions and reflections that result from a teacher’s desire to motivate, help or inspire their students. Whilst caring can be connected to

teachers’ pedagogical or classroom management strategies, it also exists and is demonstrated within the broader social context of teacher–student interactions in and out of the classroom situation. The results of the study reveal that teachers’ experiences of caring are influenced both by their need to sustain positive professional relationships with their students and by their individual beliefs about their role as a teacher.

Although emotions are at the epicentre of teachers’ work (Hargreaves, 1994, 1998; Zembylas, 2003), the intangible emotional and empathic qualities which make a “good teacher” from the viewpoint of the students cannot be measured and are thus “considered worthless” (Constanti & Gibbs, 2004, p. 247) by policymakers. The current *Framework of Professional Teaching Standards* (NSW Institute of Teachers, 2005) that are used to assess the performance of teachers in New South

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Wales, Australia, are notable for their failure to acknowledge the emotional and empathic skills which are required for effective teaching. Within the current policy climate, caring can be viewed as a choice that is made by individual teachers to pursue a particular philosophy and set of professional goals.

In this paper, a distinction will be made between an individual's identity and their professional role. Whilst the concept of *role* refers to the socially and culturally determined nature and commonly held expectations of an individual's professional self, the idea of *identity* refers to the means by which individuals reflexively and emotionally negotiate their own subjectivity. Emotions inform and define identity in the process of becoming (Zembylas, 2003, p. 223).

The purpose of this paper is to explore how individual teachers use and manage emotions to care for and about students in their professional work. The subjective and temporal nature of the teaching role in socially situated institutional contexts is examined, as are the effects that different professional environments have on teachers' caring relationships with students. Teachers' emotions and professional philosophies are viewed as the means by which they individually navigate, interpret and occasionally resist the official ethos of the schools in which they work.

2. Identity, emotions and caring

Teaching and learning are socially situated practices that are deeply embedded in emotional experiences (Hargreaves, 1998). Discussing professional identity, or the individual's ability to negotiate and improvise aspects of a professional role, requires an understanding of how emotions guide our professional practices and decisions. In fact, reason and emotion are interdependent because our reasoning depends on emotional choices (Zembylas, 2003, p. 223). Researching the complex and dichotomous nature of teachers' emotions requires an understanding of how individuals deal with and respond to professional situations in different school contexts.

Identity can be defined as the type of person an individual is recognised as being in a given context (Gee, 2000, p. 99). Within this study, the concept of identity has reflective and active dimensions, encompassing both an individual's professional philosophy and their public actions. Individual

reflection and social communication with others is seen to be pivotal to the development of teachers' professional identities, and professional identities are viewed as the means by which individual teachers negotiate and reflect on the socially situated aspects of their role. An individual's behaviour will emerge from their interactions with others (Mead, 1934, pp. 140–142), and emotions are socially constructed and saturated (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934).

Teachers often possess a strong personal commitment towards their profession, and teachers' emotions guide the formation of their identities (Nias, 1986; Zembylas, 2003). Teaching involves "human nurturance, connectedness, warmth and love" (Hargreaves, 1994, p. 175), and each teacher's individual beliefs about their role in caring for students form a crucial part of their identity. Kelchtermans and Ballet (2002) add that political interests and personal values shape teachers' emotions and function as a rationale for their professional actions. This coheres with MacLure's (1993) observation that teachers frequently use their identity or political belief system to justify the way they choose to engage in their work. Teachers are passionate beings (Hargreaves, 1998, pp. 835–836), and an individual's professional philosophy is mediated by their personal belief system.

Teaching is "charged with positive emotion" (Hargreaves, 1998, p. 835) and takes place at the intersection of personal and public life (Palmer, 1998). The teachers in Nias's (1986) study of professional socialisation were seen to invest their sense of self in their work, and to have similar personal and public identities as a result. Emotions are the means through which teachers personally interpret the demands placed upon them, and discussing teacher identity "requires the connection of emotion with self-knowledge" (Zembylas, 2003, p. 213). Research on teachers' work has emphasised the importance of care and commitment, suggesting that many teachers define themselves as people through the roles they play within their professional lives (Barber, 2002; Nias, 1989). It is important to note that teachers' work also consists of what Forrester (2005, p. 274) terms "non-work" in the sense that there is no economic benefit for caring, and such activities do not technically constitute work. However, the ethical and humanistic dimensions of teachers' work frequently act as a source of intrinsic motivation for individual teachers, and inspire them to remain committed to the profession.

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