



Using a narrative approach to illuminate teacher professional learning in an era of accountability



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HIGHLIGHTS

- The life history of one mathematics teacher in England was examined.
- Context emerged as a significant influence on professional identity.
- Performative discourses appeared to restrict professional learning.
- Professional life narratives may be used to support an increase in professional autonomy.

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ABSTRACT

Despite the centrality of teacher professional learning in efforts to raise student attainment, little is known about how learning is experienced by individual teachers. This paper uses narrative approaches to explore the professional life history of a mathematics teacher who began teaching in England in the late 1990s. The significance of context is revealed, the inspection regime emerging as a powerful force, shaping professional identity and restricting opportunities for collaboration. Such professional life narratives are a rich resource for biographical work, offering a means to better understand the broader socio-political processes affecting teachers' lives, a crucial step in increasing autonomy.

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1. Introduction

Teachers' on-going professional learning is the subject of continued attention yet little is known about individual experiences of learning throughout a career. It is generally accepted that teachers can make a significant difference to student experience and attainment and there is increasing agreement in the research about the most effective means by which teachers might develop their practice (Desimone, 2009). However, there remain issues of provision, access, and participation in professional learning. There is general agreement on the importance of lifelong learning for teachers (see for example Goodall, Day, Lindsay, Muijs, & Harris, 2005). A government inquiry into teacher education and training in England and Wales some forty years ago proposed an entitlement to regular in-service education for teachers of all subjects

(James Report, 1972). These recommendations were not adopted. Such calls are now repeated in the global arena (Schleicher, 2011). In Anglophone countries, education is increasingly the focus of government intervention and monitoring, challenging teachers' identities and reducing their autonomy (Day & Smethem, 2009). How does such intervention impact teachers' professional learning?

Mathematics provides a productive space for an exploration of teachers' experiences of professional learning. Currently in England there is no clear picture of provision or participation in mathematics professional learning (Advisory Committee on Mathematics Education [ACME], 2013). Yet mathematics education and mathematics teacher development have been the focus of attention for a number of years, not least because the subject is frequently viewed as necessary for many careers. Furthermore, mathematics is heralded as significant for economic success, both at an individual level and more widely. In the UK, opportunities for mathematics teacher

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professional learning are patchy (Back, Hirst, De Geest, Joubert, & Sutherland, 2009). Taking mathematics teacher learning as a focus, this paper explores the experiences of one mathematics teacher who started teaching at the end of the twentieth century. Her story both illuminates the professional learning landscape and provides an opportunity for reflection on policy and practice. Although the paper focusses on the narrative of a mathematics teacher in England, it highlights the potential of biographical work in the professional learning of all teachers, transcending disciplinary and spatial boundaries.

In this paper, the reader will see a deliberate shift in vocabulary, from professional **development** to professional **learning**. The aim is to emphasise the active engagement of teachers in learning which is “on-going and in-depth” (Timperley, 2011, p. 5) and to maintain a focus on teacher agency, with teachers responsible for leading their own learning. Through a consideration of the significance of context in studies of professional learning, the potential of biographical study as a tool to aid teachers in (re)creating their professional learning stories is discussed. The paper begins with an overview of research on teacher professional learning, situating this within prevailing performative discourses and considering the implications of these discourses for teacher professionalism. A description of the life history approach and data collection tools follows. The three phases of data analysis and the findings are presented, concluding with a discussion of the emerging themes of performance and opportunities for professional learning.

So much is written about the features of effective professional learning that it is easy to assume that these experiences constitute the everyday experiences of teachers. Nicole’s story exposes the restricted landscape of teacher professional learning in England in an era of performativity and the difficulties in becoming an “activist professional” (Sachs, 2001). Her biography provides teachers with a glimpse into a life other than their own; a comparator with potential to provoke critical reflection. Stories such as Nicole’s “are important because it is through the construction, telling and retelling of our personal stories, to ourselves and to others, that we attempt to make sense of our lives and give them meaning” (Sikes, 2001, p. 90). Such meaning making is an important step in increasing autonomy.

2. Theoretical framework: teacher professional learning

This study is framed by theories of teacher professional learning and by the concept of identity. The policy background is a significant influence on teacher autonomy over their professional lives, shaping perspectives on the contested concept of teacher professionalism. In this section, the relationship between these concepts is outlined.

Internationally, there has been much criticism of traditional forms of professional learning for teachers, frequently described as based on a training or deficit model and characterized by one-off courses by external providers (Hoban & Erickson, 2004). Such courses aim to rectify a perceived deficit in knowledge or skills (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002). A comprehensive review of teacher professional learning commissioned in New Zealand notes these courses often employ a language of “delivery” (Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2007). Frequently linked to policy changes, such courses require little active engagement by participants, are costly, and have been found to have limited impact in reviews of research in the United States (Borko, 2004) and New Zealand (Timperley, 2011). There is a rich history of alternatives to these “traditional” models in England, for example those arising from the work of Lawrence Stenhouse and John Elliott on classroom-focussed curriculum development and action research (McLaughlin, 2013). In mathematics, there is evidence from the 1980s of a wide variety of

support for professional development. This professional development included school-based support, work with teachers from other schools, involvement in professional associations, support from advisory staff, links with higher education institutions, courses, and the use of research (DES, 1982). Mathematics teachers today access a range of courses, participate in a variety of professional learning activities within school, and network beyond their schools (Back et al., 2009). However, participation is “variable and geographically inequitable” according to the Advisory Committee for Mathematics Education (ACME, 2014, p. 1), an independent body advising on policy. In mathematics, as in other subjects in England, there is no strategy for career-long professional learning, no plan to support teachers to direct their own learning through their careers.

The availability of professional learning opportunities is but one part of the multi-layered environment within which teachers work and learn. Taking a situated perspective aids a close examination of teacher learning, one which considers the broader socio-cultural context within which learning and practice take place, the individual teacher’s knowledge and beliefs, the learning opportunity, and the complex interactions between them. Such a perspective is conceptualised in Clarke and Hollingsworth’s (2002) interconnected model of professional growth, a model which encompasses a wide variety of learning opportunities, highlighting the role of an individual’s knowledge and beliefs within the broader socio-cultural context. This model reveals the multiple possibilities for teacher learning, accounting for variation in teacher growth. In their recent comprehensive review of research into mathematics teacher professional learning, Goldsmith, Doerr, and Lewis (2014) utilized the Clarke and Hollingsworth model, confirming the incremental, iterative nature of teacher professional growth and highlighting variation between individuals and across contexts. Complex systems theory acknowledges that events and actors interact in different ways with multiple possible outcomes, thus highlighting the dynamic nature of the professional learning environment, considering the influences on the individual, the school, and the learning activity and the way these nested systems interact (Opfer & Pedder, 2011). This theory adds depth and complexity to the Clarke and Hollingsworth model, better representing the lived experience of professional learning. Detailed consideration of the extent of the impact of the external environment on teacher learning is limited in these models, yet research demonstrates the situated nature of teacher professional learning (Borko, 2004; Timperley, 2008).

2.1. Professional identity

The dynamic process of identity development is a significant aspect of professional learning and a growing focus of research on teachers (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Black, Mendick, Rodd, Solomon, & Brown, 2009). Despite this aspect, there are considerable challenges in attempting to define the term, with Beijaard et al. (2004) noting that in their review of studies focussing on teacher professional identity almost half (10 out of 22) gave no explicit definition, with the remainder highlighting different aspects in their definitions. They propose the following as essential features of teacher professional identity: it is an ongoing process; it is individual yet influenced by context; it is composed of sub-identities; and it is agentic (Beijaard et al., 2004).

A discussion of the features of teacher professional identity is developed further in a dialogic approach, one which conceptualises teacher identity as a complex, ongoing social process, involving multiple voices or positions, and featuring discontinuities as individuals engage in internal dialogues with these different selves (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011). In this approach, an early

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