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Different location or different map? Investigating charter school teachers' professional identities

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HIGHLIGHTS

- We interviewed 19 new and novice charter school teachers to investigate their professional identity.
- Charter teachers formulate professional identity in contrast to perceptions of traditional public school teachers.
- Charter teachers seek institutional fit with charter schools due to perceived support, order and like-minded peers.
- Charter teachers have difficulty balancing multiple forms of identity within charter school environment.
- Faced with identity shifts charter teachers opt out of the profession.

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how novice charter school teachers' professional identities were shaped by their histories, views of teachers and teaching, preparation, and teaching experiences. Participants tended to view teaching in traditional public schools as lacking cache and rigor. Constructing a professional identity as highly skilled, dedicated, and deserving of stature, participants sought institutions they felt were aligned with this identity—charter schools. While participants' initially perceived their charters as structured and coherent, over time they struggled to hold multiple identities (e.g., parent and teacher) and later questioned the sustainability, intensity, and efficacy of their and their colleagues' efforts.

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1. Shifting profession and professional identities

Education, like many industries, is in a period of flux with changes in which students are served, how, and by whom (Ingersoll, Merrill, & Stuckey, 2014). These fluctuations challenge the construction of the teaching profession and with it, teachers' professional identities (Hong, 2010). Moreover, these changes have been accelerated by the changing demographics of the teaching force. In the United States, for example, today's teaching force is younger than ever before (Ingersoll et al., 2014). Like many young workers (Higgins, Dobrow, & Roloff, 2010), these teachers and their international counterparts may be less inclined to adhere to traditional conceptualizations of career (Quartz et al., 2008) including the belief that teaching is a long term or even lifelong career (Johnson, 2012). Connected to this reality, and perhaps the generally low status teaching often receives in a large number of countries (Dolton & Marcenaro-Gutierrez, 2013), many new teachers, including those within the U.S., view teaching as an exploratory endeavor (Johnson, Kardos, Kauffman, Liu, & Donaldson, 2004). These shifting beliefs are underscored globally by the increasing proportion of teachers prepared by alternative certification providers featuring brief training periods and fast-track routes to full-time teaching positions (Andreas, 2012; Dinham, 2015; Feistritzer, Griffin, & Linnajarvi, 2011).

Education as an industry and the teaching profession itself may also be considered to be in flux. Brewer and Hentschke (2009) found that at least 15 countries, including a number of developing nations, had recently introduced market-based solutions or what Day and Gu (2007) call "performativity" to school improvement (e.g., increased accountability, competition and local autonomy). Beyond shifting governments' relationships to their schools, such initiatives also often recast teachers' responsibilities to include higher demands regarding instructional practice, content expertise and performance (Andreas, 2012; Hargreaves, 2003), and may have a real impact on teachers morale, efficacy and with it their professional identity formation (Bottery, 2005; Sachs, 2000).

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As professional identity can impact organizational fit, practice (see Kezar, 2001 for a review; Wenger, 1998), self-efficacy, motivation, commitment and job satisfaction (Day, Kington, Stobart, & Sammons, 2006) and the likelihood of retention in any profession (Simon & Johnson, 2015), it seems worthwhile to continue to assess how teachers conceptualizations have shifted and continue to shift over time given the dynamic environment in which they currently find themselves (e.g., Vähäsantanen, 2015).

One place to consider these changes may be United States charter schools. Aligned to the larger demographic shifts in the teaching profession, charters employ greater numbers of new, young teachers (Stuit & Smith, 2012) coming from non-traditional teaching backgrounds (Furgeson et al., 2012; Merseth, 2009). Additionally, U.S. charters serve as a strong example of many of the market-based school reforms being implemented globally (Dinham, 2015). Indeed, numerous countries are increasingly opening publicly-financed, privately operated schools (e.g. charter schools, independent schools, foundation schools, academies) that, like U.S. charters schools, aim to increase school choice and provide autonomy from government regulation to improve students' educational experiences (Brewer & Hentschke, 2009; Viadero, 2009). Therefore, like the influence charter schools have had in the international marketization of public education (Fredriksson, 2009), trends regarding charter school teachers' professional identities may also serve as a kind of harbinger of potential shifts in the global arena.

2. Background on charter school teachers

While research has not directly addressed the professional identity of charter school teachers, much scholarly work examines characteristics relevant to their identity development such as their backgrounds, training, teaching experiences, beliefs, and behaviors.

In the United States, over a third of charter school teachers are under the age of thirty and have three or fewer years of teaching experience compared to roughly a fifth of teachers in traditional public schools (TPSs) (Stuit & Smith, 2012). A third of all charter schools are associated with Charter Management Organizations (CMOs) operating networks of schools (Farrell, Wohlstetter, & Smith, 2012), and these schools are often comprised of large proportions (e.g., up to half of the teachers) of Teach for America (TFA) corps members (Chadwick & Kowal, 2011; Kretchmar, Sondel, & Ferrare, 2014; Wilson, 2009).

Similar to international alternate routes such as *Teach for All*, TFA is a competitive program that seeks to recruit high quality candidates to teach in a "high need" school, one that has performed poorly or struggled to recruit teachers (Harding, 2012; Straubhaar & Friedrich, 2015). TFA offers a fast-track route to teaching and circumvents traditional methods of teacher preparation. However, TFA is often criticized for offering limited, superficial preparation (e.g., 2–3 months of summer training) to teachers who need the most support (Veltri, 2012).

Research on the preparation of alternate route teachers both in the U.S. and abroad (McConney, Price, & Woods-McConney, 2012) suggests that alternatively certified teachers like those in TFA are more critical of traditional teacher preparation methods [1] and are conditioned in their prestigious undergraduate institutions to be more outspoken, critical thinkers than typical teacher candidates (Carter, Amrein-Beardsley, & Hansen, 2011). Similarly, TFA corps members tend to identify themselves and their colleagues as "competitive, high performing, and committed to ending educational inequity" but view teaching as an interim position held before pursuing roles with higher prestige matched to their high achieving backgrounds (Straubhaar & Gottfried, 2014, p. 1). These studies suggest that TFA and alternate route teachers with similar backgrounds may have substantially different expectations for teacher preparation and teaching (See Bolhuis, 2002 for this phenomenon in the Netherlands).

These differences demand further investigation given the growing proportion of teachers entering the profession through alternative certification (AC). In the U.S., between 2005 and 2010, 40% of first-year teachers entered the classroom through AC routes, compared to 23% between 2000 and 2004 (Feistritzer et al., 2011). International programs such as *Teach for All*, influenced largely by the popularity of TFA in the U.S., have also seen rapid international growth and placed new teachers (who may have similar views and be affected by similar discourses on teaching) in more than 30 countries worldwide (Straubhaar & Friedrich, 2015).

Once placed in charter schools some teachers seek and appreciate specific aspects of the work environment such as like-minded colleagues, greater order and safety, and the autonomy to make decisions related to personnel, budget, and curriculum (Malloy & Wohlstetter, 2003; Miron & Applegate, 2007; Vasudeva & Grutzik, 2002) and believe in their school's ability to produce high student achievement and college attainment (Merseth, 2009; Wilson, 2009). Additionally, teachers in higher performing charters are often described as having high expectations and desiring active collaboration with people of a similar mindset (Lake, Dusseault, Bowen, Demeritt, & Hill, 2010; Merseth, 2009). Together, this evidence suggests that charter school teachers believe their ability and the efficacy of their schools to be greater than that of teachers in traditional public schools, though no research investigates how this orientation may shape their professional identity.

While charter teachers have expressed enjoyment working with like-minded colleagues and having the responsibility to build new school policies and curricula, it can, like their international counterparts working in high accountability environments, come with the tradeoff of increased teacher burnout (Day & Gu, 2007; Vasudeva & Grutzik, 2002). Increasingly, high expectations for charter teachers which include very long working hours (e.g. 60–80 h weeks) (Lake et al., 2010) and call for teachers to "do whatever it takes" to improve student performance are considered essential to the success of high-performing CMOs (Lake et al., 2010; Tough, 2009). Teachers experiencing this "no-excuses" culture often understand and embrace a "whatever it takes" (Tough, 2009) mentality, but feel uncertain of the limits of their work, which can accelerate burnout (Torres, in press). Teacher burnout is believed to be a major contributor to teacher turnover in charter schools, which is roughly twice as high as in comparable traditional public schools (see Torres, 2014 for a discussion) and follows international trends regarding teachers responses to the introduction of such similarly oriented schools (Bottery, 2005; Sachs, 2001).

While this scholarship provides meaningful insight into the background, training, experiences, career decisions, and beliefs of charter school teachers, there is a need to explore how these shape teachers' professional identity. Examining this is increasingly important considering the shifting views of the new generation of teachers (Johnson et al., 2004), the rapid growth of charter schools in the U.S. and an orientation towards market-based reforms internationally (Brewer & Hentschke,

[1] As highlighted by Boyd, Grossman, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2006, we recognize that terms like *alternative* and *traditional* are problematic. That said, we deploy them here due to their continued use in discourse about teacher education and relevancy in practice. We use Boyd et al.'s definition of traditional programs as those that, "include both graduate and undergraduate programs that are primarily controlled by colleges and universities and in which the majority of students complete the greater part of their course work and student teaching before becoming the teacher of record. Alternate route programs include those that are controlled by an entity other than a college or university … and in which students generally begin as the teacher of record after minimal course work, often during the summer" (p. 165).

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