

**THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS:
PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY DURING A PANDEMIC**

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Abstract

When compared with other professions (such as law and medicine), educators do not have a strong sense of professional identity. It could be argued that as a sector, education has been compliant to the demands of others and as a result exploring what it means to be a professional educator has not been high on the agenda for most teachers or leaders in further and higher education.

This research takes an autoethnographic approach by placing participants at the centre of the analysis. Using reflections as a form of personal inquiry, participants explored their professional identity from a specific standpoint and within a particular context. This involved cultural analysis and interpretation not only of identity but of the ways in which environmental factors contribute to it. The reflections provided an opportunity to explore the topic with an experienced eye as well as offering a space for reflexivity. By taking a ‘through the looking glass’ approach, participants embraced the notion of ‘uncertain certainty’ (Bolton, 2001).

Initial findings suggest that in the move to the virtual classroom both teachers and leaders have experienced a range of novel challenges. Whilst teachers have had to learn new skills and look at their roles in a different way, leaders have been forced to reconsider policy as well as the infrastructure required to support teaching activity. The last two years have shown a sector which is both fragile and resilient and a world where the impossible has become possible and where previous ‘truths’ are no longer definitive.

Keywords:

Identity, Professionalism, Agency, Change, Education

Background

The theory of narrative identity (McAdams, 2001) describes the way in which we internalise our ‘stories’ in creating a sense of self. These stories are based on an integration of the way we have constructed past events to provide a unified narrative of our lives. In adulthood, our stories become an operating manual for day-to-day life, they show us what to do and provide a clear strategy for how to do it. They even provide the narrative for how we present ourselves to others: ‘In this way our stories become the foundation of our personalities and influence the way we work, think about ourselves and interact with others.’ (Thompson, 2019: 26) Whilst narrative identity theory is often concerned with the stories we construct as children, it cannot be separated from adult life. As adults we form our identity through the range of roles we play and a significant part of this is professional identity, which informs the knowledge we acquire and the values we claim (Johnston, 2012).

When we talk about ‘professional identity’ we are considering the ways we might combine our attributes, experiences and values in terms of a profession (Ibarra, 1999), which is an important part of seeing ourselves *within* the profession. In most cases this is a simple process, most professions have standards, recognised qualifications and bodies who ensure that everyone within the profession understands what it means to *be* a professional in that context. For teachers this is far less clear and for teachers in post-compulsory education (PCE) the situation is confused further by regulatory changes to qualification requirements and ‘dual-professionalism’. When compared to other professions such as medicine or law, teachers do not have a strong sense of professional identity and when teaching is a second career this is further diluted by close identification with a previous role, therefore, many PCE teachers will see themselves as hairdressers or engineers before they think of themselves as teachers.

The last two years have thrown additional challenges at PCE teachers and many were not prepared for the impact of the global pandemic. Covid 19 has turned our worlds upside down both personally and professionally. In much the same way as Alice’s journey through the looking glass, the familiar was made unfamiliar, the known, unknown (Carroll, 1871). Now, more than ever, teachers must rethink their identity, not as prescribed by others but as something they claim for themselves, as a part of their own narrative.

Within this research we aim to capture the stories of a range of education professionals, working in different contexts. The research includes narratives from senior leaders, middle managers, teachers, academics and teaching support staff working in settings as diverse as Further Education Colleges and the National Health Service. Each provides an ‘insider’ view of professional identity from their own unique vantage point.

Literature - *What is professional identity?*

The issue of identity in professional contexts such as further and higher education is a complex one. On the face of it, identity is a seemingly simple thing, conceptualised ‘as the “being” that informs “doing”, where being is one’s way of viewing the world and oneself based on certain values, beliefs, and attitudes, and doing is the way of living proceeding from this (McNaughton and Billot, 2016: 644). As Churchman and King suggest: ‘Identity perspectives focus on members’ understanding of “who they are” and the ways in which this influences, and is influenced by, what they do at work’ (Churchman and King, 2009: 507). However, once identity is probed beyond the surface notions of ‘being’ and ‘doing’, the idea of identity and professional roles becomes more difficult to pin down. Arjava describes identity as something fluid and dynamic which is negotiated through reflection and awareness of the social and cultural context. (Arjava, 2018: 293).

Research regarding professional identity has been influenced over successive decades by the debate over whether there is such a thing as a coherent self that different roles and identities can be related to. Akkerman and Meijar (2011) have discussed modernist and postmodernist conceptions of the self; in the modernist version ‘[i]ndividuality prevailed, and there was an explicit distinction between the internal united self and an external “other” person’ whereas in the postmodern definition ‘identity is no longer seen as an overarching and unified framework but, instead, as being fragmented along with the multiple social worlds that people engage in’ (Akkerman and Meijar, 2011: 309). Väläsantanen et al. adopt a modernist stance on the issue of identity and the self stating that ‘identity should be viewed as negotiated through individuals’ activities in a social environment’ (Väläsantanen et al., 2020: 2), making clear connections between identity and personal agency. Akkerman and Meijar acknowledge that a postmodern stance has advantages over the modernist one because, in their view, postmodern approaches ‘particularly accommodate an accelerating globalization, leading us to participate more explicitly in multiple communities’ (Akkerman and Meijar, 2011: 310). However, Akkerman and Meijar question how far identity can be analysed if the self becomes highly fragmented.

Corporate vs. non-corporate identity: The challenge for teachers in further and higher education

The association of further and higher education institutions with notions of the corporate has increased as post-compulsory education have adopted values associated with private business in what has been identified as a neoliberal turn. As Bathmaker and Avis have noted ‘the reform and reconstruction of professionalism in public service work have been a key goal of governments in countries such as Australia, New Zealand and the UK’ (Bathmaker and Avis, 2013: 731). These reforms to public services are not exclusive to the Anglophone world:

the global trend towards neoliberal economic policies has entailed the adoption of New Public Management (NPM) principles. These were introduced into education in the

1990s, the aim being to increase efficiency and international competitiveness (Väläsantanen et al., 2020: 1).

In the context of further education in England, '[m]anagerialism ... reflected ... the concerns with efficiency, effectiveness, responsiveness and accountability ... that were considerably heightened following incorporation¹' (Robson, 2006: 71). Part of the remit for removing further education colleges from local authority control was to expose them to 'externalized forms of regulation and accountability measures such as target-setting and performance review' (Evetts, 2009: 23). The changes that occurred in universities and other higher education institutions at around this time (early-to-mid 1990s) was subtly different because collegiality has a stronger foundation in universities and '[s]elf-regulation and peer control are important to collegiality' (Robson, 2006: 68). Even with these cultural factors in play, universities were still vulnerable to the neoliberal market pressures:

the changing higher education policy context ... with its emphasis on accountability, control, productivity and efficiency, have resulted in the fragmentation of academic labour, harsh competition for funding, diminished autonomy, and increasing administrative duties (Arvaja, 2018: 291).

It can be of no surprise that these changes to the culture and ways of working in further and higher education organisations have often affected the identities of the professionals within them. Robson (2006) outlines some of the potentially negative effects created by neoliberal values . She has spoken of 'a loss of trust ... between managers and teachers and of an evolving 'narrative of previously experienced "better times" [being] a strong feature of the discourse in many FE departments' (Robson, 2006: 71). Avis counters this negativity by arguing that 'there is a paradoxical way in which managerialism carries with it a democratising impulse by raising questions of accountability' (Avis, 1996: 113). In the development towards performance indicators and measurable outcomes there is, at least, a certain transparency that staff can recognise and potentially 'buy into' or use as data to demand different priorities. Allied to this reliance on quantifiable statistics and benchmarks as a means of public accountability is the increasingly sophisticated use of branding by colleges and universities to market their wares: '[u]niversities have certainly intensified their efforts to develop a credible, shared corporate story, through artefacts such as newsletters, intranets and corporate emails' (Churchman and King, 2009: 508). This trend has become even more important as the HE sector has become genuinely international in its scope.

The institution is not necessarily the sole or even the primary entity that education professionals choose to base their identities upon. Colleagues often have disciplinary or industrial allegiances that they feel encapsulates their identity more fully than allegiances to an organisation. Robson (2006) concurs with this but also argues that there are subtle differences between professionals in

¹ The Incorporation of Colleges followed the Further and Higher Education Act (1992) which removed colleges from Local Education Authority Control

HE and FE, such as having less contractual time to make and sustain external contacts than their HE counterparts. But Hopkins (2013) argues this is not necessarily the case as FE teachers are likely to maintain contacts with colleagues from their previous roles in order to keep up to date with developments. Many teachers and researchers in FE and HE have communities of practice where they are able to engage in discussion around disciplinary practices. Such communities, where effective, are likely to reinforce and enhance a sense of professional identity for those involved beyond the boundaries of the institution. However, because: ‘the teacher of technical specialisms actively seeks to redefine links between college and industry’ (Robson, 2006: 73), the professional associations they are likely to form part of will not necessarily have an educational focus in the same way as HE.

Managers and leaders: factors influencing identity

Much has been said about the impact of managerialism on the teaching profession, in particular the ways in which a performative culture requires teachers to organise their work in response to targets. (Ball, 2003) As Ball suggests, for some, the setting aside of personal beliefs in order to achieve what others deem important creates a source of inner conflict but for others provides an opportunity and a clear pathway to success. This has encouraged an alternative form of professional identity, deemed ‘entrepreneurial identity’, aligned to a new type of teacher who closely identifies with the perceived efficiencies of a commercial approach (Sachs, 2010, Menter et. al, 1997) Alongside this, is the emergence of ‘designer teachers’ whose focus is to be seen to perform at the highest levels. These teachers thrive on being seen as ‘the best’ and actively seek opportunities to demonstrate their ability to meet benchmarks for performance. This teacher explains his response to the removal of graded lesson observations:

I was really disappointed when they took away the grading system because I love chasing a grade, absolutely love it...because we all want to chase a grade one ...of course you do, you want to be the best. (Thompson, 2018: 20)

The literature suggests that responses from managers in FE are not dissimilar to those of teachers. In their exploration of the experiences of Curriculum Managers, Thompson & Wolstencroft outline a typology of management personas which mirror those of teachers. They describe *Lone Warriors* with values focussed on responding to the ‘student voice’ and supporting colleagues, as individuals driven by strong principles, prepared to take risks. In contrast, *Career Navigators*, focussed on corporate objectives and motivated by job prospects were likely to digest systems and follow rules (Thompson & Wolstencroft, 2015).

In line with Murphy and Curtis (2013), Thompson and Wolstencroft’s findings suggest that more than 80% of middle managers in FE experienced a confused sense of professional identity due to dual roles involving management and teaching: ‘teaching commitments get in the way of my

management role and vice versa...’ (2018: 219) Like teachers, managers also experienced constraints surrounding their work, usually as a result of rigid systems or diktats from senior leadership. Despite espoused movements towards models of distributed leadership within education (Gronn, 2002) it seems that senior leaders rely on control measures similar to those employed on the production line (Mintzberg, 1988).

The impact of the commercialisation of education has been widely discussed, particularly in relation to how it influences the roles of teachers and managers (Ball, 2003, Avis, 2005, Courtney, 2015). Thompson & Wolstencroft (2018) reinforce this view, stating that there is very little difference between middle managers’ roles within education and the commercial sector as both are driven by key performance indicators focussed on meeting the organisation’s aims. However, they did highlight two distinct differences. Firstly, in the authority bestowed upon managers, and secondly, the influence of external bodies. Within education settings, managers felt that they were working in a culture of ‘mistrust’, resulting in control mechanisms they often found debilitating, alongside this, they felt they were constantly juggling the operational demands of the job with the need to implement new initiatives. Whereas, those managers working in the private sector did not experience constraints imposed by systems or external demands and felt they had autonomy and the authority to get on with their jobs.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the situation for leaders is a little more clear cut. Leaders express a strong sense of identity with their roles and are aware of the agency they have. This is especially true for those at higher levels within the organisation, such as College Principals. (Thompson, 2018) However, for many participants agency was something they felt at a personal level, as one Principal suggested:

Internally I would say that’s significant [agency]. If we are looking at genuinely the autonomy in the system then I would say it’s not very much because in a way regulatory agencies tell us exactly what they want to offer ...and in terms of the Inspectorate, they decide what ‘good’ looks like so there’s actually very little freedom...

The impact of Covid 19: Teacher identities during a pandemic

In March 2020, schools, colleges and universities closed their doors and the teacher’s world was turned upside down. Krogh Christensen et al (2022), speak of ‘the sudden change in the teaching context caused a loss of teacher identity ... teachers’ ability to adapt their teaching to students’ needs while teaching and teachers’ motivation and job satisfaction may have suffered’ (Krogh Christensen et al. 2022: online). The change in the structure and environment through online and distance learning had a profound effect on teachers and how they perceived themselves. This is

because: ‘teaching is an embodied affair, and teacher identities are sensitive to structural changes in teaching contexts’ (Krogh Christensen et al. 2022: online). The movement away from face-to-face teaching in a physical environment was challenging and potentially disorienting, especially as the transition to online learning was relatively sudden and many teachers didn’t feel confident or prepared for these changes. Kurz et al. (2021) write on how ‘[t]he pivot to online teaching forced [teachers] to change how they understood themselves’ (Kurz et al. 2021: 174). However, this pivot had both positive and negative effects on the university teachers. Some colleagues found that ‘these changes ... provoked discomfort, frustration, fear, and anger—emotions that have sometimes disrupted the faculty–student relationship’ (Kurz et al. 2021: 175). However, for others:

the shift has meant thinking much more about how to structure engaging, interactive sessions where students do most of the work ... COVID-19's gift is how it has helped college instructors see and understand issues that have long been present but latent and perhaps unobtrusive because ignoring them came at no cost (Kurz et al. 2021:177).

These observations appear to show how developments in the way professional practice is performed can have both a malign and benign impact on how teachers view themselves. The movement to online learning also had repercussions for the notion of communities of practice:

At the level of VET [Vocational Education and Training] schools, teachers often received help from colleagues and generally were glad to offer it. Groups were created for sharing ideas and support, both technical and emotional’ (Kovacs et al. 2021: 7561).

The challenges in this instance seem to have instilled an *esprit de corps* amongst colleagues where their identities as part of a collective have enabled them to ‘pull together’ in a time of urgent need. However, this was by no means the only reaction. Some of the more negative perspectives on teacher identity during lockdown speak of isolation and disengagement from colleagues and organisations. In a powerful statement, one of the teachers interviewed by Krogh Christensen et al. speaks of the online experience as ‘like ... talking to a black space. And that can be very artificial’ (Krogh Christensen 2022: online).

Research Design

This research takes an autoethnographic approach by asking participants to reflect on professional identity from a specific standpoint. Participants were drawn from a range of settings within education and had varying degrees of experience. The sample group consisted of senior leaders, middle managers, teachers and teacher educators and provided a breadth of perspectives. Narrative inquiry was chosen as a method in order to gain the insider view and a deeper understanding of individual experiences. Participants were asked to write a reflective account of professional identity within their individual roles and settings. This allowed them to

analyse their experiences without having to justify them with tangible evidence and recognises the view that professional identity is as much as ‘state of mind’ as a definition of a professional role (Crossley & Vivekananda-Schmidt, 2009).

The use of ‘stories’ as a form of research may be subject to some criticism: ‘Once upon a time, psychologists viewed life stories as little different from fairy tales ... of little scientific value for understanding human behaviour.’ (McAdams, 2001) Whilst it is true that narrative inquiry does not allow us to make generalisations about the research: ‘In sum, stories are too soft and human lives too big, as well as too singular’ (McAdams 2001:100), it is also true that understanding experience is a complex process that cannot be explored solely in a scientific way.

Emerging Findings

The research to date highlights the complexities associated with defining and owning professional identity. The following reflections underline how individuals have begun this process.

Leadership-Agency Dichotomy

In this narrative, the author, a senior leader within an FE College, considers the changes to working practice enforced by the Coronavirus pandemic. By highlighting a number of conflicts, this narrative raises questions about how much agency leaders actually have and how, in turn, that impacts on professional identity. Reference is made to the practical challenges faced, suggesting that the pandemic had exposed some ‘hidden edges’ inside the systems. Prior to the pandemic, leaders and teachers had relied on day to day operations running smoothly but as a result of Covid, were thrown into a more reactive culture. An example of the difficulties associated with teaching online, such as students not engaging and being able to ‘hide’ by not using cameras or chat functions, is used to illustrate an unexpected event. This would normally be something addressed by individual teachers but, the unusual circumstances required the creation of new policies and in turn, increased bureaucracy. This raised questions about the purpose of the leadership role and exposed aspects of what was referred to as the ‘leadership-agency’ dichotomy :

... a leader might treat teacher agency with caution, another point of view is that a leader really *needs* their teachers to exercise a degree of agency: at best, the efforts of the leadership can then be directed towards allowing or creating a space for their teachers to excel.

Questioning how much control he really has within his leadership role, the author uses a Badiouian lens to analyse the leadership role and suggests that leaders may not be the ones who

instigate *real* change. This raises questions about the function of leadership: ‘for me leadership is at best about not turning away but trying to hold the conflict; exploring and working with and within multi-levelled contractions.’ Citing Badiou (2005), he goes on to say that the ‘truth’ is really out there but is hidden inside an event, so leaders should brace themselves for the event and look to others to help find the answers.

Walking the tightrope

This narrative explores the experiences of teacher educators supporting trainees through a pre-service programme of teacher education. The authors reflect on how this experience challenges their own professional identity.

When reflecting on their experiences, student teachers’ often consider how they overcome specific hurdles in order to reach their goals. These accounts are littered with emotional highs and lows further heightened by the pandemic where the norms of daily activity were turned upside down and where potential support systems became distanced. The focus is often on the support they received during their training and on how they learnt from observing others such as tutors and mentors. Very few consider the knowledge gained during their training and aside from copying what their own teachers *do* in the classroom, there is very little recognition of how the teacher education programme has influenced their teaching. This raises questions about the purpose of teacher education and the role of teacher educators.

A pre-service route to teacher education includes intensive training and experience gained through a practicum. In the UK there is a growing trend towards ‘apprenticeships’ which are taught and managed ‘in-house’ reinforcing current practice within organisations. The traditional university-based training is seen as an antidote to this model of regeneration. Its aim being to create an environment in which new teachers can develop their knowledge and skills in a way which allows them to be the teacher they *want* to be. Aligned to this philosophy, teacher educators traditionally take the stance of facilitator, offering their knowledge and experience for critical analysis and encouraging trainees to synthesise this in relation to their own practice.

A further influence on the Teacher Educator’s role is policy directive and demands from external bodies which have an influence on how teacher education is informed. Through the Core Content Framework (DfE, 2019) the Department for Education has provided set literature which must be incorporated into TE programmes, thereby dictating the knowledge that teacher educators’ are ‘allowed’ to share. However, most teacher educators rely on years of experience and the tacit knowledge they have gained from this to inform their approach to their roles. This allows them to frame new learning in practical ways, and to give credence to the approaches they recommend. Removing the choice of what knowledge to share, removes significant agency

from teacher educators; making the role little more than a vehicle for transporting the DfE's agenda:

On the one hand we have to implement the DfE's guidelines and on the other hand, we have a lot of experience to share. I am never sure of how much of 'myself' I should put into the role; balancing the varied demands is constricting...It's a bit like walking a tightrope and I very often wobble, but I have realised that in order to provide the space for my students to grow, I need to relinquish some of my control and I have to manage some of the control that others have. Sometimes, I do as expected and sometimes I don't.

Interdisciplinarity during a pandemic

This narrative from a senior lecturer in a 'widening participation' university in the UK, explored the issue of interdisciplinarity and how this affects professional identity generally and during the pandemic. Using the work of Collini (2012) on the pressures to achieve research outputs in British universities and how this can have a profound effect on the value of work that crosses disciplinary boundaries. In relation to the COVID-19 lockdowns, he goes on to say:

The pandemic had a mixed impact on me ... On the one hand, I felt a sense of increased isolation from colleagues - the lack of face-to-face engagement had a curious effect of questioning who I was professionally, where did I position myself? On the other hand, there was this massive increase in online communication and research discussion that often straddled disciplines due to their fluid and impromptu nature. These seminars I found to be a bit of a lifesaver at times.

This participant talks of interdisciplinarity as 'an inevitable' part of being a researcher in education due to the fact that education takes its cues from a variety of disciplines in the social sciences and humanities. This crossing of boundaries can be potentially liberating, 'I'm not confined or 'boxed in' to a particular way of working or having to conform to a given way of thinking'. However, in an academic culture that appears to increasingly value the focus on measurable outcomes and their impact, this way of working can have its disadvantages: 'I'm sometimes vulnerable to peer reviews where the commentators say the paper doesn't contain enough of this or that subject area ... There's a feeling that I'm just skimming the surface because I'm not concentrating on a given discipline'. The working environment during the pandemic appears to have magnified these issues for the participant, making professional identity a complex and potentially confusing quest.

Summary

The research suggests that identity is both within and external to the individual and is impacted significantly by environmental factors. This was evidenced in individual reflections detailing specific challenges encountered during lockdowns. However, the reflections show that some participants found the change in working practices enabled them to critique previous practice and presented opportunities to enhance their ways of working in the future. A particular benefit highlighted was how the effective use of ICT had a positive impact on teaching and learning as well as creating efficiencies in other areas such as education management.

The metaphor of the looking glass has identified both contracting and expanding lenses. The sense of isolation experienced by some had a contracting effect in terms of motivation and physical proximity to others. Whilst the pandemic may have encouraged some to narrow their focus in order to maintain a level of control, for others it had the opposite effect when they realised the potential of relinquishing some of their authority. Some narrowed their focus to what they knew best, or felt most comfortable with, whereas others took the opportunity to critique current practice and experiment with new ideas. In summary what we have seems to be a bi-focal looking glass - professional perceptions narrow or increase depending on which aspects of the pandemic we choose to look at and through which lens.

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