

Being a Teacher during Covid-19

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Being a Teacher during Covid-19

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Developmental Paper for the Identity Track

BAM Conference 2021

Summary

This paper is the first to be produced from a collaborative project between a Management academic and Professor of Education, which explores the impact of Covid-19 upon teacher identities. Here we present a Critical Discourse Analysis of interview data which highlights the competing pressures that faced one teacher during Covid-19. Our findings suggest that school leadership responses were key to how teachers experienced their roles during the pandemic and that teachers with care responsibilities found the adjustments particularly challenging. This project will form the foundation of a book, to be edited by the authors of this paper, which will highlight further themes around teaching and Covid-19. Our aim is to inform education policy and practice in a post-Covid era.

Background & Perspective

The Covid-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns created a unique set of circumstances for teachers in the UK. It necessitated different modes of delivery, to ensure the continued education of children at a time when their own parents' employment may have been severely affected by the government-enforced restrictions. As a result, teachers had to navigate significant changes to their personal and professional lives. The research team were interested to explore the identity work involved both in making the transition to remote working, and balancing other roles, such as carer and parent, at a time when some teachers had their own children at home and elderly relatives requiring additional support.

The project builds on extant work on teachers' lives which explored how teachers negotiate complex demands between their personal and professional identities (e.g. Burnett, 2011; Schaefer & Clandinin, 2019) and provides powerful portraits of what it meant to be a teacher during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020.

Tietze & Musson (2002, p330) suggest that remote working 'brings to the forefront important questions about the formation of human characters and identities'. We are attracted to Giddens (1991) idea of identity as 'the self as reflexively understood by the individual' (p244) and Dick & Hyde's (2006) ascertain that identity refers to 'the individual's self-understanding as constituted through the regulatory effects of power/knowledge relations' (p549). So whilst one may explore identity at the individual level (for example through a research interview), it is not disconnected from broader social discourses which it is informed by and which it might in turn inform: 'the self is not a passive entity, determined by external influences; in forging their self-identities, no matter how local their specific contexts of action, individuals contribute to and directly promote social influences that are global in their consequences and implications' (Giddens, 1991, p2). This inspired us to explore how teachers constructed their identities practically and discursively in the context of remote working necessitated by the coronavirus outbreak.

This collaborative research project between individuals from a Business School and Institute of Education built on the authors' existing methodological expertise and conceptual standpoints while establishing a new inter-disciplinary partnership. The first author has previously undertaken research into the identity work of home-based workers (Marsh & Musson, 2008; Musson & Marsh, 2008). The second author has explored teachers' professional identities (Burnett, 2009; Burnett 2011; Burnett et al., 2015)

Method

This project utilised qualitative methodologies designed to generate rich insights without being overly time-consuming for participants. Eight teachers (five female and three male) from British primary schools were invited to take part in two interviews, one in early Summer and one in mid-Autumn of 2020. They were interviewed individually for around one hour at each point in time, the interviews were conducted via Zoom. In the intervening months the participants were asked to share a range of artefacts to document and construct their teacher identities during this pivotal period of history, drawing on their preferred media e.g. blogs, diaries, artwork, photographs and videos. The second interviews explored the significance of these artefacts and the participants' reflections on the short-term impacts of Covid-19.

Aligning with our views of identity we conducted a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of the data collected. We view discourses as hard to resist messages about how life is, or should be, which reveal themselves as we verbally, physically, and materially present our lives and are evident in the roles we inhabit, actions we take (including our talk), and the practices we engage in.

Inspired by Watson (2008) we were mindful of three levels in our analysis:

1. The text itself as an example of language in use;
2. The intermediate context: the form and situation of production of the text;
3. The wider social context: in particular this level tries to locate the micro form of the text (or parts of the text) within broader macro level social discourses.

Critical Discourse Analysts 'are often concerned with political issues, seeking to explore situations that oppress or advantage certain groups in society' (Dick, 2004, p212). CDA was therefore an apposite choice to enable us to consider the implications of the challenges that Covid-19 has presented for teachers.

Findings and Discussion

Overall our research provides support for the following:

1. Media portrayals of teachers during the lockdown impacted their morale;
2. Covid-19 has led to teachers rethinking how they will balance work with other roles going forward;
3. School leadership responses to Covid-19 were key to how teachers themselves managed and experienced being a teacher during the pandemic;
4. Teachers with care responsibilities found the adjustments particularly challenging.

Due to the word count limitations of this developmental paper and because we are only in the initial stages of analysis, it is not possible to demonstrate and expand on all of these points here, instead we present one excerpt that touches on some of these themes – the final two in particular. The passage below is from the second interview with a female Year One Teacher, of two years' experience, who has a 4-year-old daughter. She moved out of her family home and in with her elderly parents during the lockdown of Spring 2020, not seeing her husband and child for six weeks.

Interviewer: It certainly seemed like Covid compounded the challenges that you were facing, being a Newly Qualified Teacher and having a child and trying to find any kind of work life balance.

Teacher: And my parents, because that obviously was the other big impact. Now, what's been quite interesting, when I spoke to the Head [teacher] and I'd said that the reason I needed to care for my mum is she had a motor neurone virus, oh, maybe 20 years ago but it left her severely immunocompromised. My dad's over 70, diabetic and asthmatic so they needed a lot of support. They couldn't manage their house on their own, they're in a three-storey house and obviously when they had a cleaner coming in, when they had me and my brother that helped a lot, they were fine, but as soon as we hit lockdown they couldn't do that and my mum had had

her knee replaced the week before. They were stuck... one of the things I'd kept saying to the Head was, "you know, my mum needs the help and my dad can't help her, he's not in a position to, he can't bend down to cut her toenails and because of this motor neurone virus she has nerve damage so if she nicks a foot she could lose it, you know, it's as simple as that". My Head didn't seem to be taking any of it on board. Anyway, she didn't start back in September. She was down to have a knee op herself, so she had her knee replaced in I think the second week of September ... I saw her last week when she came in for an hour and she said to me then, she said "I just keep thinking of your poor mum". I was like "thank you, but of course this is October now, you needed to think of her in [spring]". I couldn't say anything because she's my boss. But it was like 'now you understand but I was telling you this, nothing changed, I was telling you this'...

Interviewer: How did you get through it? It sounded so draining and challenging for you when we last spoke

Teacher: It still bothers me now. It still upsets me hugely and I still feel very resentful and this is why I think I definitely need to go... I can't let that resentment go... Now I think if I'd been more difficult and said ... "I have dependents, my parents need me", I wonder whether they'd have just sucked it up but of course being an adult and having a mortgage and having a child I couldn't take the risk.

This example represents the competing pressures that faced one teacher during Covid-19. Through it we can see the practical and emotional challenges of providing care whilst continuing to be a teacher, adjusting to a new mode of work in the context of a global pandemic, whilst separate from home and immediate family. We witness her attempt to manage the conflicting demands of society's expectations for women to care (physically and emotionally) and the economic reality of housing costs that often necessitate dual-earner family configurations. The identity work we wish to highlight is how she represented her struggles to her Headteacher.

Her story at times seems contradictory ie. *"I kept saying"*; *"I was telling you this"* versus *"If I'd been more difficult and said... I have dependents"*; *"I couldn't say anything because she's my boss"* - which we read as conscious self-censoring to avoid being too explicit about care-giver requirements when appealing for support in the workplace. It is evident that this remains a taboo. Awareness of the discourse that this would make a woman *'difficult'* is evident in her phrasing.

Her resentment is channelled toward *'the Head'* who she represents as only showing compassion when faced with her own need for care. It has resulted in a decision to leave the school and possibly the teaching profession: *'I definitely need to go... I can't let that resentment go'*.

Women leading women is a common scenario in primary teaching, which is a female dominant profession at all levels, and we wonder if the emotional distress evident here is compounded by an expectation that another woman would implicitly understand such challenges through shared experience and be more amenable to aiding a colleague under such circumstances. Regardless, the outcome is the loss of a teacher.

Conclusion & Future Plans

This research project is a broad initial exploration of what it meant to be a teacher during Covid-19. Our intention is that it will form the foundation of a book, to be edited by the authors of this paper, that will highlight further themes around teaching and Covid-19 such as: the impact of Covid-19 upon attraction to the teaching profession; the legacy of Covid-19; flexible and remote working in the teaching profession; how Covid-19 has impacted on the career plans of teachers; the impact of Covid-19 upon parental involvement in schooling. Our aim is to inform education policy and practice in a post-Covid era.

Whilst we were only able to provide a small preview of the data and our analysis here, we welcome the opportunity to discuss the project further at BAM 2021.

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