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Teacher agency and professional learning: Narrative explorations

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There is considerable research on teachers' professional learning in mathematics, much of it written by those involved in leading 'development' activities and projects. In this paper, secondary mathematics teachers' accounts of learning provide a stimulus for an exploration of teacher agency and professional learning. Differing experiences and perspectives inform an evolving theoretical framing of mathematics teacher agency, an examination of how agency is achieved and restricted in professional learning.

Introduction

Much of the literature on teachers' professional learning in mathematics (and in other areas) is written by those involved in teacher professional 'development', with studies focussing on evaluations of specific professional development initiatives. Such studies contribute to knowledge of how these initiatives impact on teachers' beliefs and practices. However, such initiatives and programmes are frequently developed from a position that views teachers' skills, knowledge and practice as deficient in some way, with interventions taking the form of remediation. Where teachers' voices are heard, they are frequently restricted to their experience of a particular programme. What happens if we take a different starting point in a consideration of mathematics teacher learning, focussing on individuals' experiences and our own critical reflections?

In this paper I discuss an on-going exploration of teacher agency in relation to professional learning. I start from a fragmentary recollection of my own experience as a teacher, an account initially centred around learning through a one-day event. Other fragments are drawn from a life history study of mathematics teachers' experiences. These fragments provide snapshots of professional learning experiences from the early 1990s, when collective approaches to teacher learning and to curriculum development were beginning to be challenged by increasing state control, to a time of increasing national reform in the late 1990s, through to the early 2000s, when these reforms increasingly emphasised performativity.

Teacher agency

There is growing interest in teacher agency in relation to school reform (Pyhältö, Pietarinen, & Soini, 2014; Lasky, 2005) and teacher professional development (Insulander et al., 2019;

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Martinie et al., 2016). In England, continued challenges in recruiting and retaining secondary teachers in particular subjects, including mathematics, has prompted renewed focus on teachers' experience, particularly on their 'job satisfaction' (Worth & Van den Brande, 2020). In their study of retention and satisfaction in England, Worth & Van den Brande focus on autonomy, defined as a capacity to make informed decisions. The concepts of autonomy and agency are variously understood in the literature and often conflated. In this paper, I work towards a clarification of teacher agency through critical engagement with professional learning stories. I take as a starting point, Eteläpelto et al.'s (2013) definition of professional agency as 'exercised when professional subjects and/or communities influence, make choices and take stances on their work and professional identities' (p. 61). Their argument for a 'subject-centred socio-cultural and life-long learning perspective' (p. 60) facilitates a study of teachers' learning as they navigate their careers, changing roles and moving workplaces, engaging in identity work that encompasses professional and personal lives. An alternative framework advanced by Emirbayer and Mische (1998) enables the in-depth study of agency in action. They define human agency as 'a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment)' (Emirbayer & Mische 1998, p. 963).

Working with these temporal dimensions of agency, Priestley et al. (2015) develop a framework to aid enquiry into teacher agency. This encompasses teachers' life histories and their professional experiences (iterational element), social, cultural and structural aspects (practical-evaluative element) and long- and short-term aspirations (projective element) (Priestley et al., 2015, p. 30).

These conceptualisations of agency focus on the individual within a socio-cultural context. Relationships figure in these conceptualisations as workplace conditions. An alternative, perhaps complimentary theorisation of agency, relational agency, involves a focus on the recognition of others as a resource, acknowledging that 'work needs to be done to elicit, recognise and negotiate the use of that resource' (Edwards, 2005, p. 172). In shifting the focus from the individual, Edwards directs our attention to moral purposes of working together, highlighting possibilities of individual and collective benefits. Thus, relational agency is seen as an enhanced version of individual agency. Edwards draws attention to implications for professional learning, noting that the capacity for relational agency can be developed and that it may support teachers to recognise the value of working with others and negotiating meanings, rather than these actions being seen as evidence of a lack of skill or competence.

Building on the discussions above, I develop an analytic framework that enables exploration of the ways that policy might restrict or enable the achievement of teacher agency. Using vignettes drawn from life history studies, I consider policy effects across Emirbayer and Mische's temporal dimensions of agency (1998), focussing particularly on relational aspects.

Methodology

In this paper I revisit narratives co-constructed as part of my doctoral studies (Adams, 2013). These stories have remained significant to me, informing historical policy studies. Although they represent moments in time my understanding of them shifts as my knowledge, perspective and awareness shifts. Such revisiting of narrative research provides opportunities to 'explore the new and unfolding meanings' (Andrews, 2007, p. 5).

Vignettes or 'compact sketches' (Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul, 1997, p. 70) are found in various forms in qualitative research; here they enable the introduction of characters, together with a glimpse of their experience. In addition to these vignettes, I begin with a reflexive account of my own experience as a secondary mathematics teacher, before working with documentary evidence to gain an alternative perspective on this experience. The account centres on recollections of one day in 1990, this day represents an impression of my experiences across several similar days across the first fifteen years of teaching. Much of my learning in that period was related to SMILE mathematics, a curriculum development project initiated by teachers in the 1970s (see Gibbons, 1975).

Vignettes drawn from the narrative study focus on two periods. The first, in the late 1990s, when changes initiated in the previous decade had gathered pace, the National Curriculum was undergoing its third revision and the focus on standards and accountability measures was growing. The second vignette is from the early 2000s, a time of global education reform, when the National Strategy was introduced in England.

Discussion

A focus on teachers' experiences of professional learning, albeit in the (short) form of vignettes drawn from a life history study, reveals how agency is achieved and constrained. The fragments provide starting points for an analysis of the complex factors influencing teachers' capacity for agency, broadening discussions of effective professional learning beyond specific opportunities provided to examine policy influences on individual and community. My reflections on learning through the SMILE project together with teachers accounts of learning in times of high accountability raise questions about scope for (and value of) collective learning activities, questions of learning what and why.

Accounts of complexity and variation are often missing from studies of mathematics teacher professional learning, yet such accounts can be productive, inviting us to reflect on our own experience. This initial work with selected vignettes will facilitate the development of an analytic framework to be utilized in further historic mathematics professional learning policy analyses.

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