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Identity tensions: one early career teacher's stories of navigating the school context

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As teachers enter the profession, tensions between their values and beliefs and the expectations of their schools and colleagues are common. This study gains insight into such struggles with these individual and contextual factors, or identity work, by reporting on initial analysis of one early career mathematics teacher's stories of navigating a tension between herself and a colleague. Using a narrative inquiry approach, stories were elicited through personal written reflections and an exploratory interview. Analysis of these stories demonstrates how interactions with colleagues are emotive experiences which are likely to cause identity shifts and tensions. To help make sense of this, and choose how to navigate the situation, the teacher drew on past experiences as both a teacher and learner of mathematics and was ultimately able to view this experience as an opportunity for professional learning.

Keywords: teacher identity; early career teachers; tensions; agency.

Introduction

In England, secondary mathematics teachers in their first five years of teaching, defined as early career teachers, are amongst some of the most likely to leave the profession. While the issue of early career teacher attrition has largely been conceptualised as either a problem with the individual teacher or the context in which they work (Clandinin et al., 2015), this study recognises that it is the complex interaction between individual and contextual factors which is important when deciding whether to remain in teaching or not. Therefore, the aim of this study is to explore teachers' struggles as they enter the workplace, as they attempt to reconcile the internal forces that shape their understanding of being a mathematics teacher while navigating the social and cultural contexts of their schools. This is an ongoing and dynamic process of sense making (Beijaard et al., 2004; Neumayer-DePiper, 2013) in relation to other colleagues and to the contexts in which teachers work (Maclure, 1993). This requires consideration of the multiple communities in which teachers participate, for example their mathematics department, school, and professional communities. Teachers construct their identities in relation to these communities of practice, and membership allows them to negotiate the meanings of their experiences (Wenger, 1998). For the early career teachers in my study, identities are constructed by gaining access to these communities and understanding the unwritten and implicit rules of the workplace. As they do so, tensions, for example between teachers' personal beliefs and their professional expectations, are particularly common for early career teachers and are of great importance for the construction of a teacher identity (Alsup, 2005; Pillen et al., 2013). Where teachers are unable to resolve these tensions, they are likely to experience negative emotions and choose to leave the profession (Alsup, 2005; Pillen et al., 2013). However, these tensions also

have the potential to be productive when teachers are faced with alternative approaches and views that aid their professional learning (Smagorinsky et al., 2004).

Methodology

This paper draws on research from a larger study focusing on the identity negotiations of secondary mathematics teachers in their first two years of teaching by examining their experiences, beliefs, and personal goals as they establish themselves in school contexts. As part of a narrative inquiry, I used data collection methods which were designed to help elicit extended narratives of teachers' experiences, with the view that such narratives represent who teachers are and becoming (Schaefer & Clandinin, 2019) and their teacher identity (Beijaard et al., 2004). Given the focus and theoretical framework, the research questions that frame the study are:

1. How do secondary mathematics teachers construct and negotiate their identities within the social and cultural contexts of their school and the wider policy context?
2. How do teachers' beliefs about mathematics, and their past experiences of the subject, influence their identity negotiations?
3. How do early career teachers make sense of, and navigate, any tensions they experience in constructing a teacher identity within the contexts in which they work?

Data collection

In this paper I focus on one early career teacher, Bree, and her narratives of experiencing and negotiating tensions in her school context. Bree works in a large secondary school in the north of England which has a low proportion of children eligible for free school meals and was rated outstanding by Ofsted. Data collection took place in the summer of 2021, towards the end of her second year of teaching mathematics and during a period of significant disruption in normal schooling due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Bree has worked in her current school since qualifying, having completed a mathematics degree and a school-centred initial teacher training (SCITT) programme. To capture the complexities of the personal and contextual factors which Bree experiences, data collection comprised of written personal reflections and an online interview. Written reflections were completed prior to the interview and guided by prompts to encourage extended narratives. This was also achieved by sharing extracts of the written reflections with participants in their interview which provided rich starting points for discussion. The use of extracts and discussion starters was balanced with a desire to remain flexible so that participants were given the space and opportunity to share what is meaningful to them without me directing the conversation too much. Interviews therefore had conversational features which are common in narrative inquiry interviews (Clandinin & Caine, 2013). One of these written reflections was inspired by previous research (van der Wal et al., 2019) which used written reflections to explore tensions faced by early career teachers. To encourage participants to be as likely to share productive experiences as negative ones, the question included the statement "this does not have to be a negative experience and may have helped you to develop as a teacher".

Data analysis

The initial stage of analysis consisted of analysing Bree's written reflections, looking for explicit and implicit mentions of the school context and anything requiring further clarification, to choose extracts to share with her in the interview. The second stage of analysis consisted of repeated readings of both Bree's written reflections and interview transcript with the aim of using approaches to narrative analysis which were responsive to the data. For Bree's stories to be understood in relation to each other, and subsequently gain an insight into her identity construction, this required a combination of thematic and structural analysis. While thematic analysis focuses solely on the content of the narratives, structural analysis shifts attention from the content to the form of the narratives, such as how the content is told and organised by the participant (Riessman, 2008). While this distinction is not always clear-cut, attending to the telling of the story recognises that teachers' language is central in identity construction, as identity both arises out of language and gets represented by it (Olsen, 2016).

Bree's stories have been chosen to illustrate how including structural analysis allowed for a better understanding of how early career teachers draw on a number of personal experiences, both as a teacher and learner of mathematics, to help navigate tensions they experience in the school context. Bree's stories also demonstrate how tensions have the potential to facilitate professional learning if early career teachers feel able to reflect upon and resolve these tensions.

Experiencing tensions with colleagues

Bree describes her colleagues in the mathematics department as supportive, "in a sort of very genuine way". Nearly all her colleagues have worked together for multiple decades, are friends, and find opportunities to socialise. Aside from these long-standing members of the department, Bree is one of three teachers who have joined in the last five years. She is aware of this divide in experience between them and their other colleagues but feels she belongs and has been welcomed into the department. It is this belonging that she values, and she feels 'lucky' to work in her department, comparing it to friends of hers who have already left teaching due to working in unsupportive departments where they felt unappreciated. She describes herself as somebody who generally agrees with her colleagues but notes that she differs to the rest of her department with regards to the 'best' way to teach geometry. While her colleagues believe that getting students to draw and discover geometrical relationships (for example angle facts) is the best way for students to master these concepts, she believes that direct instruction and practice has its place, and that helping students to understand the *why* behind the mathematics can come *after* they are confident with the skill. She also believes that technology is a powerful tool in achieving this understanding, with the added benefit that the initial process of drawing can be done more quickly. This allows students to concentrate on more than just the procedures involved, avoiding her students' attention being taken up with "wait, how do I use a ruler again, how do I measure an angle?". While she rarely disagrees with her colleagues, this difference in opinion was highlighted in a story which Bree looks back on nervously, feeling uncomfortable about being dishonest with a colleague. The colleague, her head of department, suggested a resource where students would draw a variety of right-angled triangles, with the intention of helping them discover the trigonometric ratios. While Bree did not believe that this was the best way to teach her

year 11 class, she did not feel confident in telling her more experienced colleague that she wouldn't be using the resource. "I didn't really wanna say no ((laughs)) to her face". When asked about it later by her colleague, Bree instead credited the decision not to use the resource to the significant number of students self-isolating and the fact that they may struggle to engage with the activity at home.

Bree attributes this decision not to discuss her choice with her head of department to the 'type' of person she is, describing herself at numerous points in her narrative as a nervous type of person. She notes not sharing is a regular pattern for her; at school she needed two to three years with a teacher before feeling able to offer any ideas at all, and in her first year of teaching she didn't say a word in meetings, even if she had ideas to share. In part she believes this is because she requires a level of familiarity with the person before feeling comfortable sharing, "and be really really sure about how they'll react before I want to say anything". Even if she does not believe the reaction will necessarily be negative, she prefers time to reflect on her ideas and must have thought through something in depth before sharing her opinion. When her head of department offered the resource, Bree felt she had no "neat, worded-out justification" for why she didn't want to use it, and had she been able to reflect on her choice, practice the words, and have a resource she could offer as an alternative, she would have been more confident in asserting herself. She notes that she did not want to start that discussion at a point when she "didn't feel like much of an expert".

While Bree attributes her response to this tension with a colleague to how she sees herself as a person, a more coherent understanding of how she navigated this tension is possible by exploring the language she uses as she returns to and reflects on this story in both her written reflections and interview. Her emotive language (summarised in Table 1) demonstrates that Bree's decision not to use the suggested discovery-based resource for teaching trigonometry, and to not discuss this choice with her head of department, was drawn from a number of personal experiences, both as a teacher and learner of mathematics. The tension she felt, in remaining true to her own beliefs about effective mathematics teaching without challenging the seniority of her head of department, can be understood more holistically in the emotional language she uses when recalling past experiences of trying similar discovery-based activities herself as a student ("I would have *hated* it"), as a trainee teacher ("it *scared* me off a little bit"), and her perceptions of the type of person who would be confident enough to express this opinion to her more experienced colleague ("I'm just a bit of a *nervous* person").

What Bree was Discussing	**Example(s) of emotive language in italics**
Describing herself	I think I'm just a bit of a *nervous* person ((laughs)); just as a person, in order to be *confident enough* to say my opinion on something I have to have really thought it through; like being somewhat a *nervous* person myself ((laughs))
Using discovery-based teaching approaches during her placement	I'd later discussed it with the maths lead at my SCITT and he said he also found that exercise to be *a waste of time*; it's *not a way that I enjoy* teaching, discovery with drawing; I think it's partially

	influenced by my own experiences of trying to teach it during my SCITT year a little bit, it sort of *scared me off* a little bit
Further concerns about discovery-based teaching and learning	because otherwise *the danger* with this is that *the weaker ones* would just totally give up and do nothing
Not telling her head of department she did not agree with the suggested approach to teaching trigonometry	I didn't really feel *confident*; it makes me a little *nervous* thinking about it; I also felt a bit bad about being *dishonest*
Personal relationship with mathematics: experiences from her own schooling	drawing lots of stuff and doing lessons like that, *I would have hated* and so it's probably a bias in that way as well

Table 1: Bree's use of emotive language (both explicit and implicit)

Tensions as a professional learning experience

As early career teachers construct their teacher identities, identity tensions such as this, in which Bree's preferences in teaching conflicted with those of her department and colleague, are common. These tensions are emotive experiences but, in this case, Bree was able to actively deal with, and resolve, this tension in a way which allowed her to teach in the way she believed was best for her students. Navigating this tension through avoidance of a discussion with her head of department could be viewed as a lost opportunity for professional learning, but Bree believed that this experience was positive and impactful:

> I feel like I have learned something from the experience, as it gave me a chance to reflect on why I teach geometry topics the way I do, and I know I may well still use that worksheet with a higher class in the future. Also, I feel like if this sort of thing comes up again, I would be more confident about saying my actual opinion now that I've had time to think it through.

This tension afforded an opportunity for self-reflection in which she had to reconsider why she had previously discounted this type of resource in her SCITT and the ways in which she may find it appropriate in future. As Bree used this experience to negotiate her teacher identity, a positive consequence is that she believes she would be able to respond differently should this happen again and share her opinion. Her ability to turn this into a positive learning experience is perhaps supported by the fact that she can share these tensions and explore ways to navigate them with other early career teachers in the department. This group of teachers regularly discuss teaching and learning, share experiences, and provide a safe space in which to explore responses to these tensions faced as they establish themselves within their department.

Conclusions and next steps

Analysis of the data is still at an early stage and this paper offers a discussion which will be returned to as the research continues. Nevertheless, early analysis reiterates that tensions experienced by early career teachers are of considerable importance in constructing and negotiating a teacher identity (Pillen et al., 2013; Smagorinsky et al., 2004). Bree's disagreement with her colleague on the best approach for teaching trigonometry was an emotive experience in which she drew on her past experiences of learning and teaching mathematics to help her make sense of, and navigate, the tension. She used this productively as a professional learning experience, reflecting on

her opinion and consequently being more open to her colleague's approach than she would have previously. Given the positive view Bree has of her department and colleagues, she felt able to teach in ways which aligned with her beliefs about mathematics teaching despite this disagreement with her colleague and therefore able to resolve the tension. Further consideration is necessary to understand why she was able to resolve this identity tension and explore stories in which early career teachers feel unable to do this.

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