Supportive relationships in primary schools for teachers working in early, mid and late career phases

Abstract

Teachers' identities and career phases influence their commitment and resilience. Most previous studies have focused on developing a professional identity in early years while relatively fewer studies have focused on how teachers maintain their professional identity throughout their careers. This study reports on the initial data collection for a PhD project exploring teacher identity across the chosen career path.

Using a constructivist grounded theory design as outlined by Charmaz (2014), teachers working in their early, mid, and late career phases were interviewed three times with the purpose of developing an identity based theory to a teaching career.

Early analysis of the initial data collected from six primary school teachers (2 in the early, 2 in mid, and 2 in the late career phases) working in different school contexts, indicates that teachers benefit from relationships with school leaders, mentors and peers in different ways depending on their career and life phase.

Keywords

Introduction

The importance of individual teachers in raising standards in schools is increasingly acknowledged by researchers and policy makers (Johansson et al. 2014; Nye et al. 2004; Rivkin et al. 2005; Department for Education, 2010).

Influenced by the work of Huberman (1993) which suggested that teachers progress through five phases in their career, Day et al. (2007) conducted a large scale study exploring the work and lives of 300 teachers, and discovered that teachers' identities and the career phase in which they work influence their commitment to the profession, and that professional identities are mediated by the contexts in which they work and live.

Although much of the exploration surrounding conditions in developing a professional identity relates to the period of transition from student to teacher (Alsup 2006; Kelchtermans & Ballet 2002; Lamote & Engels, 2010; Olsen 2008; Pillen et al. 2013), there is a growing body of research which suggests that teachers in later stages of their career also experience tensions between recognising the personal needs and circumstances of individual children in their classes and meeting the objectives of the school and curriculum (Day et al. 2005).

The present study

This study reports on the initial data collection for a PhD project which aims to further our understanding of why and how primary school teachers sustain positive professional identities in different phases of their career and working in different school contexts. The specific aims of the PhD project are:

- To *identify* key positive influences on primary teachers' professional identity, commitment and resilience in different career phases and different school contexts.

- To *discover* how and why primary teachers sustain positive professional identities at different phases of their careers and in different school contexts.

- To *develop* a theoretical model which illustrates the development of a positive professional identity across a teaching career.

Method

Participants

The participants in this study (n = 6) were primary school teachers with Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) working in England. Purposeful sampling identified initial participants through personal contacts and subsequently a snowballing technique was employed. Of the participants, 2 were early career phase teachers, 2 were mid-career phase teachers, and 2 were late career phase teachers.

Data Collection and Analysis

Informal life history interviews (Goodson, 2008) were conducted with each participant. These unstructured conversations provided an opportunity to explore each participant's individual beliefs about teaching and education, their own experiences of being at school, and their personal values. Teachers were also asked to complete a professional timeline (Day et al., 2006), which involved drawing a line on a chart to indicate fluctuations in their professional identity over time. A discussion followed, with particular attention being paid to peaks and troughs, and the circumstances or contexts which influenced professional identity and commitment in a positive or a negative way. Finally, semi structured interviews were conducted which included questions uniquely tailored to individual participants to develop and refine emerging themes and ideas.

Findings

As illustrated in **Table 1**, one strong and overarching category which emerged from within the data was *Supportive relationships in different phases of career*. Codes which represent this category presented themselves across all career phases.

The section below discusses this category further, giving examples of where related codes emerged in the data during analysis and coding.

Table 1: Emergent category and related codes

Category	Focused Codes
Supportive relationships in different phases of career	Colleagues as friends
	Colleagues as information providers
	Mentoring
	Supportive senior leadership team

Supportive relationships in mid and late career phase

As teachers told their stories it became apparent that the mid and late career teachers benefitted from relationships across the school which supported them in positive ways. The nature of the support was both role focused and included emotional support. The two way arrows in **Diagram 1** indicate that teachers talked of not only being supported by leadership, teaching assistants, pupils and peers, but they also had a strong sense that they supported these people in return. Each teacher talked positively about these two way dyadic relationships.

Diagram 1: Relationships in a primary school community in mid & late career phase - Adapted from Kram's Relationship Constellation (Kram 1988, pp. 149)
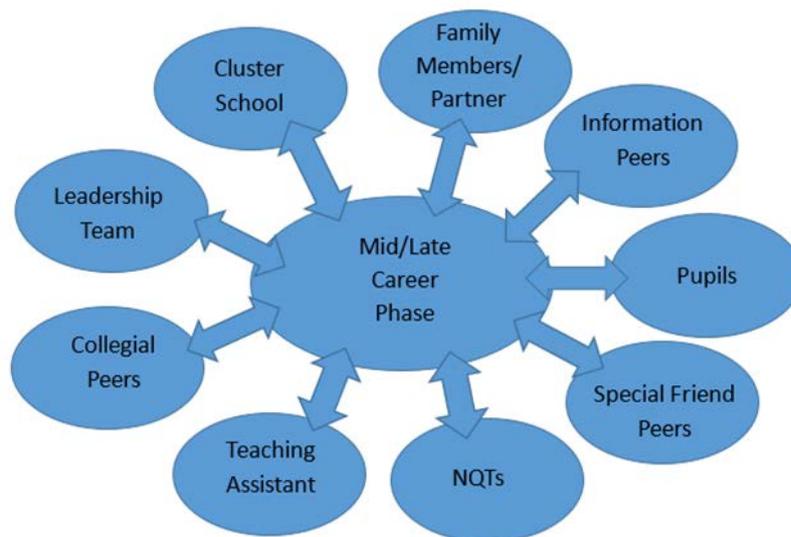
Both mid and late career teachers talked often about their peers.

Collegial Peers

We have over sixty staff, so there's no way that they're all my friend. Yes they are in terms of they're all my colleagues, and there isn't anybody in that school who I wouldn't say 'good morning' or 'hi' to. And I do value the fact that I have that way of, I hope, being friendly to everybody…But there's obviously people that I've known longer, like the deputy and a few members of staff…And we know when we've got…I mean, we had a huge incident last week, it was huge…And as, you just know that when you're dealing with that it's like there's somebody right behind you. And you turn round, and there is. And there always is. And you can't afford to take that too much for granted.

 – Mid Career Phase Teacher

Information Peers

And over time you realise…Well, if it's science then I go to [name], or if it's maths then I talk to somebody else. And if they don't know what to do about RE, then hopefully they would come to me. Which they do sometimes. 'Do you know where?..' 'No…but give me a moment and I will find out for you.' That's really important. And also the fact that we share about the children, amongst ourselves. So I'll often go back to their previous teacher and go 'Right, we did this…' And that gives you the support mechanism.

 – Mid Career Phase Teacher

Special Friend Peers

Because I could ring them any time of day, and that's when they're friends and not just colleagues if you know what I mean. And they know the family, from those that have been there's a good handful that know [son and daughter] they know [husband], and that makes it friendship then doesn't it, rather than just a colleague.

– Mid Career Phase Teacher

Family Members/Partner

He's wonderful! He doesn't think so, but he is. And you know, he's very…he could see that I needed to do these things, and he never says 'Oh you've not got to bring your marking with you again?' You know.

We went out last night, my son was playing in a band, at a supermarket. So we didn't need to be there, but we couldn't go off and leave him. So I said 'I'll do a bit of shopping, and then I'll sit in the coffee shop and do some work.' And I took a bit of marking with me, and that was fine. Then we had a cup of coffee, and it was fine.

 - Late Career Phase Teacher

Leadership Team

I think it was because she believed in me. And if I had some ideas, she would run with them, and she'd give me the responsibility, without over burdening me. Or she'd come and say 'I had a case study review with so and so today, what do you think about this?' So she wasn't like 'I know everything'.

– Late Career Phase Teacher

It is of interest to note that these extracts all relate to high points on the teachers' professional timelines.

Supportive relationships in early career phase

In comparison, the data from my early career phase (ECP) teachers told a different story. **Diagram 2** illustrates that early career phase teachers received support from fewer people, and support received was more role focused than emotional.

Diagram 2: Relationships in a primary school community in early career phase- Adapted from Kram's Relationship Constellation (Kram 1988, pp. 149)

Leadership Team

One teacher felt that although she was supported by the leadership team, her own ideas and potential input were not valued. This negative experience with them resulted in a dip on her professional timeline.

I went to them with…You go with ideas and they just shoot you down. It's their way or no way.

– Early Career Phase Teacher

Teaching Assistant

The ECP teachers didn't talk much about relationships with family, but they had formed supportive relationships with their teaching assistant.

And my teaching assistant luckily, comes into work early and stays late often, she doesn't get paid for it, but if she didn't do that I don't know what we'd do, because I would have no opportunity to talk to her about stuff, and she sees things in a different way to me, obviously…

- Early Career Phase Teacher

Special Friend Peers

One special friend spends time to help this teacher understand the schools aims and ethos.

We have a key stage meeting on a Wednesday, it that tends to be like therapy. Myself and the Year One teacher are new, so we tend to just talk about all the ways that this school does things and we both try to get our heads around it.

- Early Career Phase Teacher

Information Peers

After a terrible maths observation her mentor introduced her to the maths coordinator, who helped her to plan the next lesson. This resulted in a dip in her professional timeline turning into a peak following a really successful lesson.

..But from that real low point with the maths observation, I then got a really good relationship with the maths coordinator who came to help me, and we did some planning together.

Discussion

The category and codes which emerged from the transcripts seem to suggest that supportive relationships which develop across the school community have a positive influence on professional identity in all phases of a teaching career.

It is of interest to note that the extracts from the data which are concerned with supportive relationships each relate to peaks on the teachers' professional timelines. Each time there was a trough, due to feelings of isolation in early career, pressures of work/life balance in mid-career, or a change of school, it was always supportive relationships that returned the line to a peak.

The positive influence seems to be increased further if teachers feel that they also are given the opportunity to offer support and ideas, enabling a reciprocal process and the feeling of being valued.

The notion of mutually supportive relationships in identity formation will be explored further during the remainder of this PhD project, and will be central to building an identity based theory of a teaching career.

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