Background to the project

There is a widespread consensus that schools need to change their practices to keep pace with rapid social change, and government educational policies worldwide have sought to achieve this in recent years through often prescriptive curriculum reform. However, many writers suggest that such policy has been largely unsuccessful at effecting change to the way that schools work. More recent policy has moved away from this prescriptive approach; Scotland’s Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) is a good example of a major national initiative with the explicit aim of transforming the culture of schooling. Intrinsic to such policy is a renewed vision of teachers as developers of curriculum at a school level, or as agents of change.

The notion of the teacher as an agent of change draws implicitly on the concept of agency. This has been well-theorised in the social sciences, however there has been little explicit research or theory development in relation to teacher agency. Our research project seeks to address this gap.

Our primary aim in this project is to develop an understanding of key factors that impact upon teacher agency in contexts of educational change. If it is an objective of policy that teachers are to become agents of change, then it is also important to understand: 1] what we mean by agency; 2] how it might be enhanced; and 3] what factors limit it? Our research addresses these issues, and thus has important implications for both policy and practice.
Research design

The research is involving a researcher spending extended periods in each of the participating schools. Research methods include observations of teaching and other activities, interviews and more informal dialogue with teachers, written logs and audio recordings – this latter method involves teachers describing their decision making processes shortly after they have had to deal with professional dilemmas, and these reflections are subsequently explored in interviews. The project is also identifying and mapping the networks of relationships and significant events that impact on agency in each setting.

The project is following the work of six experienced teachers in three schools (two secondary and one primary). The research is being conducted over three distinct phases, covering a full year.

What is agency?

This is a complex issue, and we cannot do justice to it in this short précis. Readers requiring more detail about the theoretical underpinnings of our work should refer to the publications available on the project website at: http://www.ioe.stir.ac.uk/events/tacc.php.

Our starting point is that agency is not, as is widely claimed, something that resides in individuals to be exercised according to rational choice. Instead, it is something to be achieved by people in particular situations, drawing upon their own capacities and working within their environment (utilising available resources). Seen in such a light, agency is thus dependent upon the *iterational* past (for example skills, knowledge and values that people bring to bear on everyday problems). These feed into forming *projective* aspirations for the future – and clearly if people’s experience is limited, then this will impact upon the types of aspirations that they form. Finally, prior experience and aspirations will shape the responses that people formulate in the face of *practical/evaluative* constraints and opportunities in their present daily lives, and the ways in which they are able to draw upon resources available to them.

This theory of agency draws primarily on two sources. The first is the work of American sociologists Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische, whose work shows how past experiences, future aspirations and the present environment combine to shape agency. The second is the social theory of Margaret Archer, whose work allows us to undertake an analytical separation of culture, structure (ie social forms), the natural or material world, and the individual. These theories allow us to theorise how agency is shaped over time, and which factors are instrumental in its shaping. The appended diagram on the final page of this newsletter shows how this might be achieved.
Project findings

This newsletter reports on the first phase of the research. The following themes have emerged from this.

Constructing Professional Identity

At the individual level the personal and professional identity of the teacher is important. The secondary school teachers strongly equated their teacher identity with their subject. The environment created by their faculty colleagues strengthened their identity as teachers of a specific subject. In the primary school teachers tended to remain teaching one year group for a number of years so for the primary teachers the year group they taught established their identity.

Teachers’ understanding of their role

Just as important as professional identity is understanding of role. Teachers individually expressed a strong feeling of responsibility toward their students. They all talked about ‘doing the best’ for their students and ‘helping them to achieve their potential’ and ‘teaching them what they needed to know.’ Creating a positive learning environment was expressed in a number of ways. Understanding their students as people is an important part of creating the learning environment. Teachers were keen to talk about individual students’ potential, learning styles, social backgrounds and personalities. However the secondary teachers also focused on teaching for the exams, particularly exam preparation. The tension between pressure to create an active learning environment and pressure to ‘get through the work’ is one with which teachers seem readily able to cope.

An important focus is the classroom. For many teachers this is where they ‘work’. The teachers regarded their work as taking place in the classroom (teaching). New methodologies, such as cooperative learning and the use of new technologies have become commonplace and accepted. However for many of these teachers the work done outside the classroom is regarded as something extra, often a burden and often something that is de-prioritised through lack of time or resources. For instance, while the teachers recognise the need for collaboration outside the classroom with their colleagues, this has often been deprioritised by management in comparison to classroom related activity.

Teacher agency and performativity

The shift from a prescriptive curriculum dominated by assessment and quality improvement strategies to a more open-ended developmental role for teachers is causing considerable anxiety. It is clear that the broad principles of CfE are broadly welcomed by many teachers. However, there is anxiety about unclear expectations on assessment, and worries that the new system will rely more on teacher professional judgement than formerly.

Many of these worries emanate from perceptions of professional risk, and a lack of confidence amongst teachers faced with implementing change,
often while lacking the cognitive and physical resources to do so. What has been termed performativity is a powerful influence on teacher decision-making and actions, and erodes teacher agency. In Scotland, this is mainly framed around the use of attainment data for the purposes of teacher accountability and via inspections and audits. CfE demands that teachers become agents – and an irony lies in the suggestion that agency is something that can be demanded – while performative systems simultaneously narrow and undermine this agency. Our research suggests that simply to say that teachers should become more agentic, and simply presenting them with a situation in which they need to be more agentic, but without providing resources that would allow them to make such a shift, is not a very effective way to promote teacher agency.

The importance of communities and networks

There is an expectation that teachers no longer work in isolation. Some of the teachers referred to the ‘open door’ policy that demonstrates a shift to increased openness. Our research suggests that agency is enhanced by such practices. This was particularly well developed in one of the secondary schools, where there is a significant amount of informal sharing of practices amongst the teachers, as well as well-developed and formal horizontal professional relationships across the school. While the classroom constitutes a bounded space for learning and teaching, these activities often extend into the common areas, including the faculty meeting room. Such practices are significant in shaping agency, enabling teachers to draw upon a wide[r] repertoire of responses when dealing with problematic situations and professional dilemmas. In the case of our two participating teachers from this school, relationships extend beyond the boundaries of the schools, for example involvement in national working groups. The span of these ties provides an additional dimension to these teachers’ agency, enabling them to draw, for instance on expert knowledge that would not necessarily be available within the school.

Where boundaries tended to be framed by the classroom walls, teachers seemed to work for the most part in isolation. This led to more rigidity in the division of subjects and time, and inhibited the development of an informal sharing environment.

Further work is needed in later phases of the project to map the nature, strength, symmetry and extent of these relationships, and to gauge their effect in shaping teacher agency.

School Culture - confidence and trust

A related and recurring theme in the data coming out of this project is the importance of the school culture. How is the culture of the school created? What is it? According to one senior manager school culture is shaped through the practices and discourses of the management team. He maintained that culture is created over a long period of time and takes many years to change. The implementation of CfE through teacher collaboration and partnerships externally and internally, setting up working groups and sharing the knowledge within the schools has, in his view, been a beneficial way of including teachers in dialogues about changing their practices. There is no doubt that the teachers in this
project are aware of the importance of a school culture that encourages relationships and builds trust and confidence. But school culture does not exist in a vacuum. It is affected by external factors such as policy, accountability strategies, measurement of school performance, teachers working conditions and reports about teacher practices, as well as comments made by the press. The latter, what the teachers referred to as the ‘teacher bashing’ culture, strongly affected all six teachers, who were frustrated and at times angry about the criticism of their work. Despite the criticism of schools and the focus by schools on their own performance, measured through student attainment data, the teachers all stressed the importance of peer collaboration and equally the support provided by the management teams.

Concluding thoughts

Our early findings suggest that enhancing teacher agency is about the conjunction of many factors. It is partly about addressing issues within the working environment that cause tensions and dilemmas for teachers – in other words reducing complexity, through ensuring that policies are congruent with each other, and meaning that teachers are not caught between a rock and a hard place as they enact policy. However, it is also about raising the capacity of people to work constructively within their environment. It is about establishing structured spaces for professional dialogue where there is access to specialist advice and expert knowledge. It is about connecting theory and practice, through structured projects that require teachers to apply theory in practical situations, and systematically evaluate the results.

Next steps

The following are focus areas for the final phase of research

- Exploring the relationships between teachers and material artefacts and physical spaces
- Exploring the nature and extent of formal and informal relationships
- Exploring teacher identity – their sense of self – and the ways in which they negotiate complexity through inner dialogue and professional interactivity.

Publications

It is our intention to publish emerging findings in a series of working papers on the project website at:

http://www.ioe.stir.ac.uk/events/tacc.php

The first of these is:


This paper sets out our theoretical position on agency. Future papers will focus on different aspects of teacher agency as they emerge from the empirical research.
Other publications to date are:

Priestley, M, Robinson, S. & Biesta, G. (in press). *Teacher Agency, Performativity and Curriculum Change: Reinventing the Teacher in the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence?* Forthcoming in an edited book on performativity and education – at the time when this newsletter was published, we had not yet confirmed the title/editorship of this collection, which will be available in mid-2012. Further details will be available shortly on the project website.


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