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Do the professional life histories of nascent Reading Recovery Teacher Leaders provide evidence of change in professional identity as they transition into their new role?

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Background

I am one of a team of eight Reading Recovery National Trainers and Coordinators, based at the Institute of Education. Part of my role is to work with a group of Reading Recovery (RR) Teacher Leaders (TLs) in training, who undertake a yearlong professional development programme at Masters Degree level, in order to become the designated RR TL in their local authority or district (LA). They then provide the yearlong PD programme and support for all RR teachers within their LA. This research took place during 2008-9, in which there were twenty-three TLs on the Masters course. They came from a range of backgrounds: including senior teachers in their schools, LA consultants, advisory teachers, and trained RR teachers.

I was interested by the notion that for these individuals, who were undertaking a significant transition into a new and demanding role, might also be experiencing a change in their professional identity. There is a large corpus of literature in the area of teacher identity (including: Beijaard et al., 2004; Maclure, 1993; Sachs, 2001; Woods and Jeffrey, 2002; and Zembylas, 2003). However, there appears to be a dearth of literature addressing identity transformation for education professionals moving into new roles. Currently in education changing roles is becoming an increasingly important issue with teachers moving into new roles, such as: consultants, lecturers in ITE and senior management. My research focus was therefore to investigate identity transformation as a component of the RR TL professional development programme at IOE.

Research Questions

The focus of this enquiry was to pose the question: Do the professional life histories of nascent Reading Recovery Teacher Leaders provide evidence of change in professional identity as they transition into their new role?

When considering identity transformation there are three questions that I sought to explore through this study:

- 1. What is the process of identity transformation as an individual moves into a new role and when is this transformation taking place?
- 2. How can an individual be supported as they move into that new role?
- 3. What happens if or when there is conflict between new and former roles, does this lead to a crisis of identity? How is it managed in this context?

Although all of these questions were addressed in my research project, only the first question will be discussed in this presentation.

Methods

In seeking to investigate such questions I discovered a research method that appeared to be particularly effective at uncovering the lives of teachers and their professional identity. I was introduced to life history methodology in the work of Goodson and Sikes (2001), and other life historians such as Kelchtermans (1993).

As this was a pilot study, which I intended to develop for my doctoral thesis, the purpose of this particular piece of research was to trial the use of life history methods with Reading Recovery teacher leaders as a tool for exploring changes in professional identity as individuals move into new professional roles. Two TLs agreed to take part in life history interviews as part of this research.

My research aims were therefore:

- - to develop a methodology for interviewing and writing a life history for an individual TL; and
- - to ascertain the usefulness of professional life history data for the identification and analysis of professional identity transformation.

Frame

Wenger (1998) provided a theory of 'identity in practice' in which "our identity is something we constantly renegotiate during the course of our lives." (p154, *ibid*) He also considers identity to be created and shaped by the various communities of practice (COP) in which an individual participates. He uses a notion of 'learning trajectory' to describe the way in which identity shifts and changes as an individual moves into a new COP. I found this theory to be a useful theoretical frame through which the identity transformation of RR TLs in training could be explored.

Research findings

In answer to my first research question, I do consider that this professional life history methodology can be developed to provide a rich data source in which transformation in professional identity can both be clearly identified and explored. From this pilot study I was able to identify a shift in identity from that of 'class teacher' to 'senior teacher' that appeared to be common to informants. I was also able to identify some indicators that evidenced that this transformation taking place and to identify what I perceived as possible factors influencing such transformation. What I was unable to do was to identify change in identity to their new RR teacher leader role. I believe this was because they were only at the start of their PD year and had not had sufficient time in role to start to develop the sense of confidence that appears to be a requirement of identity transformation.

I consider that this research will contribute to knowledge, particularly in the field of teacher education and development, for the following reasons:

- The exploration of a new area of interest - that of education professionals moving into new roles;
- The utilisation of life history methodology to explore identity transformation;
- The possible indicators of, and factors influencing, identity transformation that were discovered in this small -scale research.