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The professional identity and practice of secondary school English teachers in the UK

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Background

This paper reports on a research study investigating the professional identity of English teachers in the secondary school in the UK, and the effects of their subject philosophies and their conceptions of learning on their teaching. The various and often competing definitions of the subject have a long history, and a number of forces have been brought to bear on the development of English teachers' identities, beliefs and practices. The research is being undertaken at a time when English has been subject to a decade of government initiatives to raise the profile of literacy teaching in English, starting with the Key Stage 3 Strategy and Framework for Teaching English in 2001 and followed by the Secondary National Strategy in 2003. The external pressure to meet quantifiable targets with the Key Stage 3 National Curriculum tests and the imperatives of the Literacy Strategy have been seen by many in the profession as diminishing their autonomy, and undermining their teaching. A focus on functional literacy skills has been criticised for the detrimental effect it has on the development of students' creativity and enjoyment of Literature. The teaching of grammar is a further topic that has been highly contested, whether it is enabling for students, or a policing of language that stifles creativity. The decade has also seen the development of new technologies, particularly interactive multimedia and the internet, which have the potential to change teaching practices and what counts as knowledge in English. With the relaxation in prescription and the end of Key Stage 3 National Curriculum tests, English teachers have reclaimed some of the professional agenda and the study is timely in focussing on what is still a relatively un-researched field.

Research Questions

The study addresses a number of inter-related research questions:

- What influences have been brought to bear on the development of teachers' professional identities, and their conceptions of what English is and how it should be taught?
- To identify the philosophies or models of English espoused by teachers, and how these might have changed over time
- How is the subject actualised in the classroom, and how does this relate to teachers' beliefs and identities, and to the way the subject is officially constructed?

Methods

The research is an ethnographic study drawing on a range of methodologies, principally interview data and lesson observation. The focus is on six leading practitioners, representing a range in terms of age, gender and experience. Interviews are grounded in the narrative-biographical approach developed by Kelchtermans, which invites a process of self-reflection to gain insights into the development of teachers' personal interpretive frameworks and how it guides their professional actions. The data from initial interviews has informed discussion in subsequent interviews which focus on practice observed in English lessons, providing opportunities for them to reflect on teaching episodes and the meanings they attribute to them. Audio tapes of teacher interviews have been transcribed and analysed in line with the research focus.

Lesson observations adopt a multimodal approach, pioneered by Gunther Kress and his colleagues in the 'Production of School English Project' undertaken 2000 - 2003, and reported in 'English in urban classrooms; a multimodal perspective on teaching and learning', published in 2005. The methodology is based on the understanding that teachers mediate curriculum knowledge through a variety of linguistic and non-linguistic modes. In deconstructing the meaning of classroom events, attention is

given to classroom layout, the movement of the teacher and students, visual displays, gaze/facial expression and gesture, together with the linguistic modes of speech and writing. English pedagogy is seen to be orchestrated through this range of modes and signs, which reflect the teacher's sense of English, perception of students and of department and government policies. Analyses of lessons describe the separate meaning of each mode and how the modes of meaning making fit together to create a composite picture and account. Audio tapes of lessons are supplemented by recordings from two digital cameras, one focussing on the teacher and the other on students.

Frame

The combination of a narrative-biographical approach to investigate teacher identity, and multimodal semiotics as a way of observing practice, provide the theoretical framework for the study. Professional identity is not confined to teachers' views of their subject, but this aspect is informed by the studies of the various models or versions of the subject supported by the profession. These have relied on survey and interview data, and the value of this study lies in its analysis of the connection between teacher identity and subject theories and their classroom practice. The impact of technological changes is also a feature which previous studies did not confront, and this will be highlighted as an important aspect of English that affects teachers' beliefs and identities and their practice.

Research findings

The findings of the study are a contribution to the research evidence on the professional identity and development of contemporary English teachers and the versions of the subject they practice and promote. It provides detailed examples of how the subject is mediated and represented by teachers in the classroom, and how teachers are responding to a relaxation in official prescriptions. It has been undertaken at a time when the impact of technological changes on the classroom, together with the expansion of communicational resources available to students, have implications for both the subject and the professional status and identity of its teachers. The findings provide insights into the ways in which English teachers address new textual forms and digital cultures, and the relationship between traditional literacies and curriculum and newly developing digital literacies and curriculum. As such, it is a significant contribution to knowledge which can inform teacher education, continuous professional development, and future developments in English curriculum and pedagogy.