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Becoming a secondary school teacher in England, France and Spain: the societal construction of career choice

Marie-Pierre Moreau¹, Julie Jarty²

¹*University of Bedfordshire, Bedford, United Kingdom,* ²*University of Toulouse-Le Mirail, Toulouse, France*

Background

Historically, teaching has often been described as a 'vocation', in the sense of Beruf (Weber, 1919). It was assumed that one was 'born a teacher' and that becoming a teacher required the 'passionate devotion' characteristic of vocation (ibid.). Although these days such a view is more likely to attract controversy, some evidence points to the persistence of such a discourse among the public, the media and, sometimes, among teachers themselves (Moreau, 2009).

Using cross-national comparison and drawing on sociological theories, this paper questions the idea of teaching as a vocation, as a career choice mainly related to the intrinsic qualities of an individual. Rather, it is argued that becoming a teacher is the outcome of a complex process, shaped by discursive constructions of teaching, gender and class.

Research Questions

This paper explores secondary school teachers' career choice in three European countries: England, France and Spain. Drawing on post-structuralist feminist theories, it specifically considers if and how the reasons put forward by teachers to explain their choice of career relate to the dominant discursive construction of teaching in each context. It also considers how teachers' career choice is influenced by gender and how discourses of gender and social class intertwine to make teaching a desirable or undesirable career choice for particular groups of individuals.

Methods

This paper draws on a qualitative investigation. About 150 semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with secondary school teachers in England, France and Spain, with equal proportions of men and women interviewed. Interviews, conducted in the dominant language in each country, were transcribed and analysed using thematic and discourse analysis (Banister et al., 1984, Fairclough, 1995). The comparison was both between countries and, in each country, between men and women.

Frame

The analytical framework for this study draws on a post-structuralist feminist perspective. The concept of discourse (defined as a set of social practices which define, rather than describe, the objects of which they speak) is central to this approach (Foucault, 1969). Career choice is conceptualised as a complex process shaped by structural barriers (Acker, 1989), in particular by discourses of teaching, as well as of gender and social class. The paper also draws on cross-national comparative theories, especially on work by Maurice and colleagues, which focuses on the identification of societal configurations and highlights the importance of contextualisation (Maurice, 1989, Maurice et al., 1992), as well as on feminist critiques of their work (Marry, 1998, O'Reilly, 2000).

Research findings

The findings show that secondary school teachers' choice of career is linked to national constructions of teaching and that such constructions are gendered and classed. Particular clichés are deterred, chiefly the fact that teaching is a 'vocation' which has limited connection to societal contexts and is

located in the individual. The paper also shows that, although becoming a teacher is a gendered and classed project, it is not linked to men's and women's 'intrinsic nature' or to their 'inclinations'. Although women's decision to become a teacher is more likely to be primarily motivated by family-related reasons compared with men, gender differences are not so pronounced when initial motivations are compared, contrarily to commonplace assumptions discussed elsewhere (see Moreau et al., 2008).

These findings may contribute to the theorisation of teaching identities, how these are socially constructed, gendered and classed, while challenging a number of assumptions, some of which mentioned above. In practical terms, these findings may be of interest to teachers' organisations and other stakeholders, at national and European level, by providing a better understanding of individuals' motivations in becoming teachers and of teacher's dissatisfaction at work in later life.

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