

## *Resistant and Nonresistant Teachers' Identities*

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### **Abstract**

In many educational materials, it is recognized that the broader social conditions in which teachers live and work, and personal and professional factors in life, experience, beliefs and practices. The teacher is inseparable from each other, and there are often tensions between these things that impact a greater or lesser degree of sense of self or the teacher's identity. If identity is a key factor affecting teachers' intentions, effectiveness, motivation, commitment, satisfaction and job performance, then investigate the positive and negative influences of the contexts in which these occur and the consequences for practice, is essential. Although notions of personal identity are much used in educational research and theory, critical engagement with individual teachers' cognitive and emotion has been relatively rare. An interest in raising and maintaining teaching standards, especially in the context of centralized reforms, is likely to destabilize long-term beliefs and practices. This paper addresses the issue of teacher identities in Vietnam context by studying together the nature of the relationships between social structures and individual institutions; between the notions of a social construction, and therefore, depending and always being redone, 'self', and a 'self' with dispositions, attitudes and behavioral responses which are durable and relatively stable; and between cognitive and emotional identities. Based on current literatures of research papers and findings which studying variations in teacher work and life and the impact of them to students. It finds that identity is neither intrinsically nor fragmented, as previous literature suggests. Instead, the teacher identity may be more, or less, stable and more or less fragmented at different times and in different ways according to a number of lives, career and situation factors.

Keywords: Resistant, Nonresistant, Identity

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## Introduction

### Early notions of personal identity

An understanding of teachers' selves, their cognitive and emotional identities, is central to the analysis of variations in teachers' work, lives and effectiveness in which structure (external influences) and agency (one's ability to pursue the goals that one values) are perceived to be in dynamic tension (Archer, 1996, 2000). The concepts of self and identity are often used interchangeably in the literature on teacher education. Both are complex constructs, not least because they draw on major research and theoretical areas of philosophy, psychology, sociology and psychotherapy. Earlier writers (e.g. Cooley, 1902) tended to position the self as a singular, unified, stable essence that was little affected by context or biography. These initial views on the construction of self-focused on the ability of an individual to create a defining system of concepts. These concepts, which remained constant over time, were developed through the subjectively interpreted feedback from others, and were distinct and identifiable to an individual. Progressing from this fundamental principle, the connection between self-awareness and the perceived opinions of others began to develop as a major influence on the construction of self. This theoretical advance, which Cooley (1902) called the 'looking glass self, enhanced his initial opinions, as it situated the formation of self as part of a reflexive, learning process by which values, attitudes, behaviour, roles and identities are accumulated over time. Drawing on the individual's concern for how others relate to him/her, Mead (1934) believed that the self, though stable, was a continuous concept closely linked to social interactions and created through language and social experiences.

These perspectives, though fundamental to our theoretical understanding of self, do not take into account the fact that people's lives are multifaceted. Goffman (1959) went some way towards addressing this issue when he presented the idea that each person had a number of 'selves', each one focusing on the execution of one role at any given time and situation (Goffman, 1959). He believed that the ability to adapt the self was essential in order to effectively communicate the social processes necessary within each situation. However, even in the light of this development, these theoretical perspectives do not allow for a continuous, lifelong development of self which may undergo many changes over time. More than a decade later, referring specifically to 'professional identity', Ball (1972) usefully separates *situated* from *substantive* identity. He views the situated identity of a person as a malleable presentation of self that differs according to specific definitions of situations (e.g. within schools) and the more stable, core presentation of self that is fundamental to how a person thinks about himself or herself.

Parallel to these perspectives, but in the psychoanalytic tradition, Erikson (1959) suggested three 'stages' in adult life which he characterised as crises: (i) distantiation (a readiness to defend one's identity against all threats); (ii) generativity versus stagnation (motivated and goal oriented or coasting, on the road to disenchantment); and (iii) integrity versus despair and disgust (a readiness to defend the dignity of one's own lifestyle against all physical and economic threats) (Erikson, 1959, p. 98). Erikson's theory provides insights into the inner, sometimes conflicting forces which affect identity during particular life phases. Importantly, it suggests that identity is 'never gained nor maintained once and for all' (Sikes *et al.*, 1985, p. 155).

### (i) Teachers' identities: personal and professional

Common to all this early research is a recognition of the importance of an understanding of self to beliefs, attitudes and actions, and thus the kinds and effects of such actions. In teacher education also, much research literature demonstrates that knowledge of the self is a crucial element in the way teachers construe and construct the nature of their work (Kelchtermans & Vandenberghe, 1994) and that events and experiences in the personal lives of teachers are intimately linked to the performance of their professional roles (Ball & Goodson, 1985; Goodson & Hargreaves, 1996; Acker, 1999). Several researchers (Nias, 1989, 1996; Hargreaves, 1994; Sumsion, 2002) have noted that teacher identities are not only constructed from technical and emotional aspects of teaching (i.e. classroom management, subject knowledge and pupil test results) and their personal lives, but also 'as the result of an interaction between the personal experiences of teachers and the social, cultural, and institutional environment in which they function on a daily basis (Sleegers & Kelchtermans, 1999, p. 579).

The ways in which teachers form their professional identities are influenced by both how they feel about themselves and how they feel about their students. This professional identity helps them to position or situate themselves in relation to their students and to make appropriate and effective adjustments in their practice and their beliefs about, and engagement with, students. James-Wilson, 2001, p. 29)

Geert Kelchtermans (1993, pp. 449-450) suggests that the professional self, like the personal self, evolves over time and that it consists of five interrelated parts:

- *Self-image*: how teachers describe themselves through their career stories;
- *Self-esteem*, the evolution of self as a teacher, how good or otherwise as defined by self or others;
- *Job-motivation*, what makes teachers choose, remain committed to or leave the job;
- *Task perception*, how teachers define their jobs;
- *Future perspective*, teachers' expectations for the future development of their jobs.
- In his (1996) study of the career stories of 10 experienced Belgian primary school teachers, Kelchtermans found two recurring themes.
- *Stability in the job*, having achieved ambition, led to job satisfaction;

*Vulnerability*, to the judgements of colleagues, the head teacher and those outside the school gates, e.g. parents, inspectors, media, which might be based exclusively on measurable student achievements. As vulnerability increased, so they tended towards passivity and conservatism in teaching.

Thus, a positive sense of identity with subject, relationships and roles is important to maintaining self-esteem or self-efficacy, commitment to and a passion for teaching (Day, 2004).

In *Primary teachers talking: a study of teaching as work*, Jennifer Nias (1989) located the primary school teacher's self in the social context of education in England in the 1980s, which she described as encouraging 'individualism, isolation, a belief in one's own autonomy and the investment of personal resources' (p. 13).

Their involvement in activities within the school also provided them with 'personal and emotional satisfactions within their working lives rather than outside them' (p. 18). However, this integration of identities, and the concomitant levels of commitment to work which it signals, produced a 'paradox'; that is, teachers' investments in their work, their levels of commitment-understood as 'a readiness to allocate scarce personal resources' (Lortie, 1975, p. 189, cited in Nias, 1989, p. 18) led to increasing demands upon them for ever-greater investment. This in turn resulted in a reduction of satisfaction when these demands could not be met. A second key contribution of Nias's research, therefore, concerned differences in commitment between teachers' performance and motivation. As in Lortie's (1975) research, commitment demonstrated involvement and activity in work beyond the immediate demands of the post. It was through reference to levels of commitment, also, that the teachers distinguished between those who were seen to 'care about the children' and 'take the job seriously' and those who did not, between those who were 'real teachers' and those whose interests were elsewhere, between those who are 'professionals' and those who are not (Nias, 1989 pp. 30/32).

A third area to which Nias's research draws attention are the tensions and contradictions in the primary teacher's role, which are principally produced through the opposition between the impulse and requirement to 'care and nurture' and the impulse and requirement to 'control' (p. 193).

For Nias, all of these, together with the institutional organisation of the school, are implicated in the production and acting out of teachers' 'work identities'.

## **(ii) The teacher, the pupils and the school**

Douwe Beijaard's (1995) research with 28 secondary school teachers in the Netherlands draws upon and adds to Nias's insights on teacher identity. For Beijaard, the concept of identity refers to 'who or what someone is, the various meanings someone can attach to oneself or the meanings attributed to oneself by others' (p. 282). Drawing on the work of Sikes *et al.* (1991), he examined three main features of secondary school teachers' professional identities: the subject that teachers teach, their relationships with pupils, and their role or role conception. Beijaard argued that for secondary school teachers, professional identity is derived, in the first instance, from the subjects that they teach, which have a strong and ongoing influence on their perceptions of themselves as professionals. With Sikes *et al.* (1991), he noted that relationships with colleagues in the school who also teach the same subject have particular significance to teachers, together with the different statuses of particular subjects.

Beijaard also noted the significance of pupil agency in this process. Drawing also on the work of Riseborough (1985), who maintains that the perceptions and behaviours of pupils are 'instrumental in the generation of differential rates of teacher "achievement", vertical and horizontal promotion, "satisfaction", absenteeism, nervous breakdowns, "deviance", resignation, etc. (Riseborough, 1985, p. 262, cited in Beijaard, 1995, p.283), Beijaard proposed that pupils' attitudes and behaviour may have profound effects upon the teacher's 'self ('me') *and* his/her structural position at the meso (organisational) level as 'adult', 'parent', 'teacher'. The more personal and professional selves are integrated into teacher identity, the more this is affected by

positive or negative pupil behaviour. Beijaard's findings also point to the importance of teachers' experience being taken into account in research on personal histories and their 'substantial' selves. Like Sikes (1992), he found that 'teachers of similar age and sex share similar experiences, perceptions, attitudes, satisfactions, frustrations, and concerns, and the nature of their motivation and commitment alters in a predictable pattern as they get older' (Sikes, 1992, p. 40, cited in Beijaard, 1995, p. 284).

For Beijaard, then, as with Nias (1989), an important element of teachers' identities related to their experiences of school. Like Rutter *et al.* (1979), Galloway *et al.* (1982); Mortimore *et al.* (1988); Pollard (1985) and Woods *et al.* (1997), he found that the culture of the school, its internal dynamics and organisation, enable or constrain the achievement of 'satisfaction', 'commitment' and 'motivation' and impact upon teachers' constructions of their teacher identities and the acceptance or rejection of the identity teacher as an aspect of self. He suggested that teachers have high stability in their careers 'when they have a good relationship with pupils and when they function well in the school organization' (p. 292), and that a change to one of these aspects results in a period of instability within the teacher's career. His research showed that, overall, the teachers' actual perceptions of their professional identities were influenced in a positive manner by:

(1) the transition in schools from teacher-centred towards pupil centred education, (2) schools' directedness towards pupil counselling, (3) the co-operation between colleagues in general and between those who teach the same subject in particular, (4) the possibility of having additional jobs in but also outside the school, and (5) the opportunity to influence the development of school policy, (p. 288)

(1) Negative influences included: colleagues (for example by the feeling that one's subject is not taken seriously by colleagues or as a result of different levels of previous education), (2) effects of mergers (for example by possessing no adequate teaching style when one has to teach other categories of pupils, in particular pupils of schools with a 'lower status' and (3) the school organization and its structure (often criticised for being obscure and insufficiently open, it remains unclear whether this is really the case or a reaction of teachers to personal frustrations), (pp. 288-289)

The most important contributions by Beijaard's research to understandings of teacher identity, then, concern (i) the interplay between teachers' relationships and interactions with their pupils, (ii) their perceptions of their subject status, (iii) the influence of the school environment, and (iv) the relationship between these and stability or instability of identity. (v) The multiple 'I': agency and structure in the early years of teaching

In Canada, Cooper and Olson (1996) and Reynolds (1996) investigated the interconnections between the personal and professional elements of teachers' identities exposed by Nias and Beijaard. Their work goes beyond these, however, by its identification of 'multiple selves' of teachers, which, they suggest, are continually reconstructed through the historical, cultural, sociological and psychological influences which all shape the meaning of being a teacher.

Nias's (1989) work and suggests that, in the early phase of their career, teachers have little agency in the shaping of their identities, and, moreover, that the 'interactional processes' in which teachers' selves are constituted have little impact upon the

structures (educational or otherwise) through which their identities are lived out.

Issues of teacher agency and its relationship to social and educational structures for teachers in their early years were explored further by Celia Reynolds, (1996). She suggested that teachers' selves are both constructed in their identities and constructive of them (Davies, 1993). In an application of this 'subjectification' model to longitudinal data collected from beginning teachers in Ontario, Canada, Reynolds and her colleague identified three problems: (i) although beginning teachers had accepted that 'at this early stage in their work as teachers, their primary goal was to "blend in" to their surrounding landscape in order to survive "induction" and to be "enculturated" as a "good teacher" according to prescribed definitions and scripts' (p.75), interviews with the teachers three years after their teacher education showed that this view had changed. They had found a diversity in the 'landscapes' of schools which confounded earlier definitions and challenged them to assert their own sense of agency; (ii) through exposure to a variety of schools, the teachers experienced conflict and confusion. 'Many of them began to question previously held beliefs about themselves and about their students. A few expressed concerns about the dominance of a discourse which they now saw as robbing individuals of the "potential to become something other than what has been predicted"' (p. 75); and (iii) as they progressed, teachers found that pupils and parents did not fit the images that they had previously held whilst training. These three 'scripts' of 'constraint' highlight the shifting sands of personal experience and school cultures on which identities are constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed in the early years of teaching.

### **(iii) Fragmented selves**

The concept of an 'active' agential teacher self, as suggested by Reynolds through her metaphor of the 'landscaper', was also proposed by MacLure (1993) through her empirical research with 69 teachers at the beginning of a period of radical systemic reform in England. Critical of earlier notions of an essential or substantial 'self', MacLure advocated a post-structuralist understanding of identity which is formed and informed through the 'discursive practices' and interactions in which individuals engage. Here identity is not a stable entity that people possess, but rather, is constructed within social relations and used by individuals as an interactional resource. This view is not dissimilar to those expressed by Beijaard, Olson and Cooper and Reynolds. However, it locates teacher identity in a particular view of broad, social movements.

### **Variations in identity**

For a given individual, or for a collective actor, there may be a plurality of identities. Identities are sources of meaning for the actors themselves, and by themselves, constructed through the process of individuation. The construction of identities uses building materials from history, from geography, from biology, from productive and reproductive institutions, from collective memory and from personal fantasies, from power apparatuses and religious revelations. (Castells, 1997, pp. 6-7)

The effects of the interaction of biography, experience and context in the construction and reconstruction of identity seem, however, to be disputed. For some researchers (e.g. Nias, Beijaard), teachers have a relatively stable identity, rooted in core sets of

values, beliefs and practices. For others (Cooper & Olson, Reynolds, MacLure), teachers' identities are essentially unstable, their temporary stability likely to be affected at any time by either their own 'biographical projects', change in their working environments or a combination of the two. Additionally, although all are present in each of the research projects, more or less cognisance is taken of:

- macro structures: broad social/cultural features usually referred to in discussions of social diversity and/or government policy as it is implicated in the order of an education service;
- meso structures: the social/cultural/organisational formations of schools and teacher education;
- micro structures: talked of in terms of colleagues, pupils and parents;
- personal biographies: values, beliefs, ideologies.

A further consideration in the discussion of teacher identity is that of emotional factors. In a review of empirical research, Sutton (2000) found that love (as a social relationship) and care, surprise and joy, anger, sadness and fear, excitement and pleasure in students' progress and achievements are among the most commonly cited emotions. Because of their emotional investments, teachers inevitably experience a range of negative emotions when control of long held principles and practices is challenged, or when trust and respect from parents, the public and their students is eroded. Kelchtermans (1996) has also reported on teachers' feelings of *vulnerability*, engendered when professional identity and moral integrity are questioned either by policy changes, parents, inspectors, or colleagues in the light of unrealistic expectations or their failure to help students achieve higher standards. In England, Jeffrey and Woods (1996) found *professional uncertainty*, confusion, inadequacy, anxiety, mortification and doubt among teachers when they investigated primary school teachers' responses to an external (Office for Standards in Education) inspection, associating these with 'dehumanisation' and 'deprofessionalism'. Other negative emotions are: frustration; anger exacerbated by tiredness, stress and students' misbehaviour; anxiety because of the complexity of the job; guilt, sadness, blame and shame at not being able to achieve ideals or targets imposed by others. Emotions play a key role in the construction of identity (Zembylas, 2003). They are the necessary link between the social structures in which teachers work and the ways they act:

emotion is a necessary link between social structure and social actor. The connection is never mechanical because emotions are normally not compelling but inclining. But without the emotions category, accounts of situated actions would be fragmentary and incomplete. Emotion is provoked by circumstance and is experienced as transformation of dispositions to act. It is through the subject's active exchange with others that emotional experiences is both stimulated in the actor and orienting of their conduct. Emotion is directly implicated in the actor's transformation of their circumstances, as well as the circumstances' transformation of the actors' disposition to act. (Barbalet, 2002, p. 4)

The literature cited so far suggests that identities are a shifting amalgam of personal biography, culture, social influence and institutional values which may change according to role and circumstance. They depend upon:

the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives, [which] takes place in the context of multiple choice ... Reflexively organised life planning ... becomes a central feature of the structuring of self-identity. (Giddens, 1991, p. 5)

Thus, the ways and extent to which reforms are received, adopted, adapted and sustained or not sustained will not only be influenced by their emotional selves but will exercise influence upon them.

## **Conclusion**

The architecture of teachers' professional identities is not always stable, but at certain times or during certain life, career and organisational phases may be discontinuous, fragmented, and subject to turbulence and change in the continuing struggle to construct and sustain a stable identity. Indeed, today's professional has been described as, 'mobilizing a complex of occasional identities in response to shifting contexts' (Stronach *et al.*, 2002, p. 117). Such mobilisations occur in the space between the 'structure' (of the relations between power and status) and 'agency' (in the influence which we and others can have); and it is the interaction between these which influences how teachers see themselves, i.e. their personal and professional identities. Stronach *et al.*'s (2002) research with nurses and teachers, like others before it (Nias, 1989; Bowe & Ball, 1992; Kelchtermans, 1993; Hoyle & John, 1995; Hanlon, 1998; Furlong *et al.* 2000; Friedson, 2001), claims that 'professionalism' is bound up in the discursive dynamics of professionals attempting to address or redress the dilemmas of the job within particular cultures (p. 109). Their reading of professional identities and their own data from teachers in six primary schools in England, though limited, and 'walking the tightrope of an uncertain being' (p. 121), resonates with much other empirical research on teachers' plurality of roles (Sachs, 2003) within work contexts which are characterised by fragmentation and discontinuities (Huberman, 1995) and a number of tensions and dilemmas (Day *et al.*, 2000) within what is generally agreed to be increasingly intensive external audit policy cultures (Power, 1994) which are present in many developed nations.

Teachers in all countries need support for their commitment, energy and skill over their careers if they are to grapple with the immense emotional, intellectual and social demands and as they work towards building the internal and external relationships demanded by ongoing government reforms and social movements. The picture of teachers in English schools involved in the VITAE project gives cause for concern and hope concern because it is clear that there *are* variations in perceived effectiveness which relate to life events, age, experience, phase of schools and their socio-economic status; concern because of the high levels of professional stress which, for many, are having negative effects upon their personal lives; concern also as to whether such levels can be sustained without loss of some of the best teachers or loss of their energy, commitment and sense of purpose. Yet there is hope, too, because of the high levels of commitment and agency, often against the odds, which many teachers' accounts reveal.

The VITAE research does suggest that some teachers themselves do seek and find, in different ways, their own sense of stability within what appears *from the outside* to be fragmented identities, and that the capacity to sustain such stability is directly associated with a combination of positive factors to be found within personal life situations and school working contexts (Day *et al.*, 2005). Furthermore, it suggests that neither stability nor instability will necessarily affect their effectiveness.

Sustaining a positive sense of effectiveness to subject, pupils, relationships and roles

is important to maintaining motivation, self-esteem or self-efficacy, job satisfaction, and commitment to teaching; and although this research shows consistently that identity is affected, positively and negatively, by classroom experiences, organisational culture and situation-specific events which may threaten existing norms and practices (Nias, 1989; Kelchtermans, 1993; Flores, 2002), successive reform implementation strategies have failed to address the key role played by these, and thus, paradoxically, fail to meet the standards' raising recruitment and retention agendas which they espouse.

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