Enabling/disabling English teachers' identities as innovative professionals

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ABSTRACT: In the extensive literature on teacher professional development, very little attention has been paid to the role of post-graduate study groups, or to the role of on-going professional conversations, in constituting and sustaining teachers' identities as innovative professionals. The purpose of this article is to suggest that on-going professional conversation is valuable for sustaining innovative identities and practices. The authors present and discuss findings from an analysis, informed by post-structural theory, of lexical artefacts[1] identified in interviews with eight English teachers who had been members of the same study group for the duration of their postgraduate studies. These interviews were conducted two years after their graduation with MA degrees in English Education. A key finding is that at the time of the post-graduation interviews, the figured worlds and identities-in-practice (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998) of the teachers differed significantly according to whether or not they had remained in professional conversation with members of the affinity group (Gee, 2000-2001) first constituted by the study group. A second finding showed that on-going, informal professional conversations appeared enabling for the sustaining and further developing of identities as innovative teachers of English. Therefore, we suggest that schools and universities investigate ways of facilitating and supporting such informal conversations as an alternative or as an addition to more formal programmes of professional learning.

KEYWORDS: Figured worlds; identities-in-practice; identity; post-graduate teacher-student study groups; sustained professional conversation.

INTRODUCTION

> I mean in the group we've pooled a lot of information, a lot of experiences, on theory and our classroom practice. And I feel with that when I come to this school, I come with all those people, in my head. All those ideas, all those conversations. … so I feel like, if I speak it's actually four or five of us speaking as one. Um, you know that combined authority. (*Brad:[2] a high school English teacher who remained in professional conversation with another member of a study group in the years after they had graduated*.)

> And, um, what I found is that when I look back now, when we were, when we were working in our study group, probably because of the interest and obviously because of the course but I think it largely because of the group of people we were working with, I was very innovative, as a teacher. (…) And now I feel very much out on a limb. (...) And I find, I've found that working with my colleagues very, I've found that very frustrating. Because I find them, limiting, I find them, um, staid. (*Wendy (a*

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[1] Lexical artefacts are the significant words used by interviewees to indicate attitudes or themes running through the interview.

[2] These are not the group members' real names, each of them chose the pseudonym used in this article.

high school English teacher who worked in isolation from the same study group after graduation.)

It is not always easy for teachers to advocate or implement "new" teaching approaches to which they have been introduced during formal or informal professional development programmes. While they may have developed confidence in their ability to work with new approaches, their colleagues may feel destabilised by what they perceive as new practices, and may prefer to continue with the trusted and familiar. In the face of collegial resistance, teachers who wish to initiate and implement changes in established classroom practices are likely to require support from like-minded professionals.

In the first quotation it is evident that Brad still feels confident to argue for such changes; in the second it is equally evident that Wendy feels isolated and frustrated, unable to continue teaching innovatively. Possible reasons for Brad's enabled professional identity and Wendy's disabled professional identity are explored in this article.

While there is an extensive literature on various approaches to teacher professional development (Bertram, 2011), very little attention has been paid to the role that study groups, formed by teachers who return to university to do post-graduate studies, may play in constituting their identities as confident, innovative professionals. There also appears to be very little research into the value of continued, regular professional conversations, post graduation, for sustaining and continuing the development of these identities.

In this article we present and discuss some of the findings from a four-year case study of a teacher-student[3] study and professional support group, formed by eight English teachers while they were post-graduate students. The findings discussed here indicate that continued professional conversations, after group members had graduated and the group had disbanded, may have been an important element in sustaining the confident teacher identities which developed while the group studied together (Kempe, 2014). The value of on-going professional conversations for continued development of identities of confidence is explored in this article.

The data consist of audiotaped interviews, conducted with all eight group members two and a half years after they had graduated from the Masters programme. In these interviews each teacher was asked to reflect on their current teaching practice, and to reflect on whether the experience of working together in the study group continued to influence their practice.

In the analysis of these post-graduation interviews it became apparent that while *social* ties still bound the whole group together (the group continued to meet occasionally for social lunches or dinners), within the group there were pairs who were meeting and working together regularly on professional or study matters. As recently promoted curriculum leaders in their schools, Daisy and Pat were working together on a regular basis to prepare units of work for the learners they taught, Brad

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[3] We use the term 'teacher-student' for two reasons: firstly, these were experienced *teachers* who had become part-time *students*, and secondly, to highlight the fact that they drew on already existing professional teaching knowledge as a tool when studying.

and Meg were collaborating on a project involving Brad's school learners and Meg's university students, and Emma and Kate were meeting weekly on the university campus to work on their doctoral research and to explore strategies for effective adult literacy teaching. Of the eight former study group members, only Anne and Wendy no longer had a sustained professional link with anyone else in the group, and from the interviews it was evident that these were the two teachers who now felt frustrated and despondent about their teaching situations.

Noting this, Kempe (2014) began to wonder if the support provided by working on professional matters with another group member for a period after the study group had stopped meeting, was perhaps an important factor in enabling the continued development of innovative, risk-taking teaching identities. And so the final question for the bigger study on which this article draws was: beyond the life of the study group what enabled or constrained each group member's identity/ies as a confident and innovative teacher?

Given this focus on identity, we briefly review in the next section of the article key concepts from the literature on identity from a post-structuralist perspective.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The analysis of the teaching identities enacted in the interviews was informed by post-structuralist theories of subjectivity and identity, in particular those of Weedon (1987, 2004), who highlights the multiple, changeable and contested nature of subjectivity, and the importance of language in the constitution of the subject. Weedon sees language as "the common factor in the analysis of social organization, social meanings, power and individual consciousness" (Weedon, 1987, p. 22). It offers "various discursive positions … through which we can consciously live our lives" (Weedon, 1987, pp. 25-26). These discursive positions may also be a site of struggle if they are contested rather than adopted.

It should be noted that the ability to successfully enact an identity depends either on a good fit between the desired identity and the available discourses, or the ability of the actor to invest a chosen discourse with the necessary social power to make other individuals recognise a particular identity in a particular social context.

Danielewicz, in her work on the development of teacher identities, describes the complexities of identity enactment:

> individuals have agency, or the ability to signal to others how they wish to be seen. However, these projections always occur in social contexts. No matter how free individuals are to project whatever images of self they desire, they cannot control how others will perceive or interpret them. In all social encounters, there are many kinds of unpredictable and uncontrollable forces at work. Even though individuals are energetically constructing "presentations of selves", they are not existing in a vacuum. Others are active too. Institutions, situations, actors – all features of the social world are involved and affect not only what selves get presented, but also how they are interpreted, taken up, or transformed by our social partners. (Danielewicz, 2001, p. 61)

The agency of which Danielewicz writes is always mediated: "tools" of some sort – for example discourses about teaching, attitudes towards teaching, the use of particular teaching methods, and so on – are used both to signal and to recognise identity. Having the appropriate mediational means available is crucial to the success of identity enactment. In other words, if criteria key to an "innovative teacher identity" are not a feature of a particular social world, the identity of "innovative teacher" is not likely to be successfully enacted in that world.

Bartlett (2007b) adds another dimension to the constitution of identity – that of convincing *oneself* as well as others that one is a particular kind of person. In her work on situated identities and literacy practices, she discusses how identity work is done simultaneously on two levels: the interpersonal (seeming to others) and the intrapersonal (feeling in oneself), a situation "in which one works to convince others and oneself that one is the 'kind of person' who knows how to read and write" (Bartlett, 2007b, p. 55). For example, if there are factors at play in a social world which render an individual unsure of his or her actions as a head of department (HoD) in a school, that individual's ability to convince her or himself that she or he is a competent HoD is compromised, irrespective of whether she or he "seems" competent to others.

Enacting an identity requires more than merely signalling how one wishes to be seen. In order to be, and to be acknowledged as being, a particular kind of person, the identity has to "fit" the context, the performance has to be accepted by the other actors and has to convince the actor if it is to be successful.

Gee's four perspectives on identity

Gee (2000-2001) suggests that identity can be viewed in four ways:

- *nature-identity:* biologically endowed characteristics, such as racial category and gender;
- *institution-identity:* the aspects of identity which accrue from an individual's position in society, such as being a teacher or a student;
- *discourse-identity:* the attributes which are the result of the way an individual is perceived and talked about by others, and so comes to perceive him or herself in that way, such as being seen/seeing oneself as a competent HoD;
- *affinity-identity:* the characteristics which are acquired through taking part in the practices of an affinity group, such as being seen/seeing oneself as an innovative teacher through being involved in a teacher group that works with innovative teaching practices.

In the data analysed for the article three of these perspectives[4] were useful for focussing on how identities at the time of graduation had been sustained or weakened in the figured worlds in which they were teaching at the time of the post-graduation interviews.

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[4] While we acknowledge the importance of racial category and gender in identity formation, in the interview data there are no references to either race or gender.

Institution-identities are authorised by authorities in institutions; being appointed an HoD or senior teacher because one holds a Masters degree, is likely to accord the holder of the position/qualification a degree of status and power. The study investigated whether the interviewees were able to take up and wield the powers invested in them via their institutional-identities.

Discourse-identities are determined through discourse or dialogue; they are the result of being talked about by others in particular ways. In order to "be" a "confident and innovative" teacher, one has to be recognised and spoken about by significant others as confident and innovative, to the point where, through dialogic interaction, one comes to see oneself in this way. Affinity-identities depend on sharing a distinctive set of experiences, which come from taking part in a distinctive set of practices (Gee, 2000-2001). Gee characterises affinity groups in educational settings as having a common set of goals and as sharing "norms, values and knowledge about what constitutes degrees of mastery in that (educational) domain" (Gee, 2008, p. 138).

During the years of working together in the study group, discourse-identities as confident and innovative teachers had been developed through the ways in which the group members spoke to and about each other. At the same time, through talking about and sharing classroom experiences, innovative ideas and methods, group members developed affinity-identities as teachers who believed in developing innovative teaching practices, and secondly, who had the confidence to be risk-takers when implementing these practices. The two identities reinforce each other; it is in the process of sharing and critiquing affinity practices that discourse identities are developed.

An important aspect of these identities (and indeed all identities) is that they have to be enacted in order to be recognised. If one is no longer able to take part in the relevant practices or is not in regular conversation with other members of the affinity group, this mirror aspect of identity formation is not happening – there is neither the enactment of the relevant practices nor the dialogic reflection of oneself as an innovative teacher with the confidence to take risks in one's teaching.

Under these circumstances it is possible that being placed in new subject positions in the professional contexts in which they are teaching might undermine the identities developed while participating in the study group. Some form of activity in which their group discourse- and affinity-identities are recognised and accepted may need to be on-going if individuals are to retain their identities of confident, innovative teachers.

Figured worlds and identity-in-practice

The concepts of figured worlds and identity-in-practice (Holland et al., 1998) are useful "frames of reference" (Dagenais, Day, & Toohey, 2006, p. 206) for analysing the teaching identities constituted in the post-graduation interviews. Holland et al. define a figured world as a "socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation where characters and actors are recognised, significance is assigned to certain actions and some outcomes are valued over others" (1998, p. 52). It is a conceptual construct that connects identity, activity and values; as individuals interact in their daily lives; they take on, struggle to take on or contest roles that define who they are (Boaler &

Greeno, 2000), the roles being ranked (and so the individual positioned) according to the value system of the social context in which the activity takes place.

Figured worlds are multiple and can be both generic and local: a widespread understanding of "what happens in schools" or a local understanding of "what happens in this school". They can be built around particular activities; the local figured world of teaching in a particular school might, for instance, draw on an understanding of what is considered "good teaching" in this school and how the teachers are expected to implement that "good teaching" in their classrooms. The figurings of such a world would be the accepted ways of "being a teacher" – doing, behaving, speaking and so on – that had created that culture of teaching in the school. Through doing, or not doing, this cultural work, teachers place themselves "in social fields, in degrees of relation to – affiliation with, opposition to, and distance from – identifiable others" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 271) in their schools.

Holland et al. (1998) view identity as being grounded in an individual's ability to "author" her or himself through this kind of "being in particular ways". Identifying and analysing the "tools" or cultural artefacts used in the process of authoring self are essential parts of establishing the nature of an identity (Bartlett, 2007a). The cultural artefacts are a means of thinking about identity in terms of practice – which activities are central to "being" that kind of person, and how doing them "fits" with the activities of significant others in that particular social context.

An individual's identities-in-practice can be analysed in terms of four "contexts of activity" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 271): the *figured worlds* themselves, *positionality*, the *space of authoring* and *making worlds*.

Holland et al's concept of *positionality* is similar to Gee's (2000-2001) concept of institutional-identity, as it is based on the attributes of power and position that derive from an institutional source such as a school (for example, when a school appoints an individual to the position of teacher or HoD). While positions of authority should, theoretically, empower an individual, the research discussed in this article investigated whether this is necessarily the case.

The *space of authoring* is based on Bakhtin's (1981) concept of dialogism, in which an individual is always addressing and being addressed and in which a sense of self is orchestrated through the ways in which the individual responds to the world with more or less authority depending on the circumstances. "Authoring a self" is the process of telling, by behaving in certain ways, both others *and oneself* that one is who one claims to be (Holland et al., 1998).

The fourth context is that of *making worlds*, or building new worlds through "serious play" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 272), through "imagining", planning and talking and rehearsing a different way of being which may subsequently become habitual. Engaging in joint activities, sharing a common discourse with significant others in a community of practice may provide the opportunities for making such worlds.

These four contexts are useful for analysing the post-graduation interviews: what is the "fit" between the group members' individual figured worlds of teaching built up while in the study group, and the figured worlds in their current teaching positions?

How are the group members positioned, both socially and institutionally, in the figured worlds of their schools? How does their positionality affect their ability to author their desired identities?

METHODOLOGY

The data on which this article draws were collected from individual, unstructured, open-ended interviews, each lasting 1.5 to 2 hours, with each of the eight former study group members. In analysing the data, the nature of each group member's figured world was constituted through an examination, in each interview, of the lexical artefacts which opened up each group member's personal figured world of teaching, and the artefacts which indicated the teaching practices that she or he understood to be valued in her or his school.

Lexical artefacts are similar to metaphors, in that they are "not just a surface ornamentation of language, but a phenomenon of human thought processes" (Cameron, 2003, p. 2). Like metaphors, they are a word choice that "reveal[s] something of how people think and feel" (Cameron et al., 2009, p. 63) and can be used to gain an understanding of how people comprehend themselves and the world around them.

The artefacts in the interviews were identified through an iterative process of looking for themes, examining how these themes were constructed through language use, and examining how the language used connected the themes to each other or set them up in opposition to each other. This was done by identifying words or phrases that carried what Kempe (2014) came to call "added meaning". These were often metaphors, which added richness and meaning to the themes through the ability of metaphors to map the attributes of one mental space onto another. For example, the phrase "talking your way into an understanding" maps the concept of "travelling" onto the concept of "learning" so that developing understanding is seen as a journey from one state of mind to another. The "added meaning" words were not always metaphors; in some instances they were words that were used literally but through repetition and the use of synonyms either connected or highlighted the opposition between themes. The appraisal framework, developed by Martin and Rose (2003), was used as a basis for identifying the lexical choices used to construct identity and manage interpersonal positionings.

Below we present two brief examples of data, taken from Wendy's and Brad's interviews, to illustrate the identification and preliminary analysis of artefacts and related themes. In these data examples and in the discussion of the findings, the artefacts are presented in **bold** to distinguish them from the rest of the text.

Wendy: a terrible teacher

Conversation	Theme
Well, .hh I, the one thing, and and er actually, funnily enough you being here today has, has made it very clear to me. At the moment I **feel, terrible**, I feel like **a terrible teacher**.	(Present) Teacher identity: **a terrible teacher** – a teacher of very bad quality Feels **terrible** – her emotional state
And, um, what I found is that when I look back	(Past) Reason for being innovative teacher:

now, when **we were** t, when **we were working** in our study group, probably because of the interest and obviously because of the course but I think it largely because of the group of people **we were working with**,	working with others – **we were working with** – the combined effects of the group and the course
I was very **innovative**, as a teacher.	(Past) Teacher identity : **innovative** teacher – one who brings in new ideas

Brad:

Conversation	Theme
I think what I've got from, my studies, within the study group and also outside of that with the masters and honours courses, it's just **given me knowledge**, a lot of **deep background knowledge**, a lot of **shared ideas**.	Teacher identity: **knowledgeable** teacher, is connected to studying and **sharing** with others, combined effects of group and courses
I mean in the group we've **pooled** a lot of **information**, a lot of **experiences** on theory and our classroom practice.	Connection to group: co-operative action, **shared**, **pooled** – sharing with a group for effective action
And I feel with that when I come to this school, **I come with all those people, in my head. All those ideas**, **all those conversations**.	Teacher identity: **knowledgeable** because knowledge base extends into community, is **shared knowledge**

Rather than relying on an intuitive understanding of the artefacts when interpreting them, Kempe (2014) followed the recommendations of the Pragglejaz Group (2007) for determining the actual meaning of language used in real discourse, and worked with dictionary definitions of the lexical items[5].

Once identified, the themes, all of which illustrated aspects of teacher identity and or professional practice, were analysed to establish how the interviewees "saw" the figured world of teaching in the study group and those in the schools in which they were currently teaching. The degree of "fit" between the two figured worlds was examined in an attempt to understand whether or not former study group members were still in a position to engage in "serious play" and thus to continue making new worlds of teaching.

FINDINGS

Analysis of all eight interviews indicated that the two teachers (Wendy and Anne), who were no longer participants in sustained professional conversations with former study group members, spoke about themselves as teachers and about their teaching in much less agentive ways than did the other six. To illustrate these differences, firstly, findings from the analysis of the interview with Brad are compared and contrasted with those from the interview with Wendy, as both teachers had moved to new

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[5] The choice of the *Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners* (Rundell & Fox, 2007), 2007) was guided by the Pragglejaz Group, as this dictionary: "is based on a fairly recent, well-balanced corpus of 220 million words, which makes it suitable for identifying metaphor in contemporary texts. Its language data stem from a broad range of text types and from both written and spoken discourse" (Krennmayr, 2008, p. 101). Occasionally, when the definition of the lexical item in the *Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners* did not seem to completely explain the apparent contextual meanings of the word, *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles* (Onions, 1972) was used to provide additional information.

schools and into more senior positions. Secondly, findings from the interviews with Daisy and Pat are compared and contrasted with those from the interview with Anne, as all three teachers had been promoted within the schools in which they were already teaching when the study group was formed[6].

Brad and Wendy

Both Brad and Wendy had moved to new schools after graduating, Brad as the head of the English department and Wendy as a senior teacher. However, their experiences in their new schools were markedly different.

In the interview, Brad's use of language indicated that he saw himself as having a degree of power and control. Two metaphors appeared repeatedly as he talked about his teaching, indicating that he was in a subject position in which he had the agency to act and to take risks: **mapping out** what is to happen in his department and **exploring** new areas of work for his pupils.

His mapped out world of teaching was figured by artefacts such as **content reference points**, **directing pupils towards skills**, choosing **directions to go in** and **mapping out an overall framework**: the direction in which he wanted his department to develop had been charted in advance. His confidence in the plans is indicated by a repeated use of expressions of strong modality such as "We will do …", "They will have …", "I will put …" and "I'm going to ...".

His exploratory world of teaching was figured by artefacts such as **wanting to explore more**, **wanting to do more research work**, have pupils **act as researchers** and **go into the world** to **find an issue of personal importance**. He planned for teachers and pupils to move beyond classroom-bound reading and writing.

We suggest that an explanation for Brad's ability to author himself as an innovative teacher and authoritative HoD, can be found in Gee's (2000-2001) perspectives on identity. Firstly, in the gendered, patriarchal social context of South African schools, his nature-identity as a man would have given him an authority that a woman might lack. Secondly, his confidence in his institutional identity as HoD would have been reinforced by his discourse- and affinity-identities. As head of the English department in his school, he was authorised to institute new frameworks and put new projects into operation, but we suggest that the power to actually *do* this is derived at least partly from his continued professional conversations with Meg. Although Meg was lecturing in a university, she and Brad were developing a joint project in which Meg's university students and Brad's pupils would do joint research on an edutainment campaign that focussed on teenage/young adult relationships. In talking about, sharing, developing an innovative affinity practice with a like-minded other, Meg and Brad spoke to and treated each other as innovative teachers with the confidence to risk trying new approaches. Such opportunities to hear oneself being reflected in another's discourse as having "this" identity is an important element in being able to convince oneself that one *is* "this" kind of person. These occasions activated both of Bartlett's

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[6] The analysis of the data from the interviews with Emma and Kate indicated that they both spoke about themselves as teachers in positive ways, but their interviews are not included in the sample for this article as both of them were teaching only part-time, having registered as doctoral research students.

(2007b) levels of identity formation, the interpersonal (seeming to others) and the intrapersonal (feeling in oneself).

Brad's ability to enact a confident institutional-identity as HoD was further strengthened by the institutional approval bestowed by his school on this joint project with a university, which in the competitive social context of South African private schooling would have been seen as adding value to the reputations of both the school and Brad's English department.

By contrast, Wendy was struggling to author herself as an innovative teacher. While she had an institutional-identity as a senior teacher holding a Masters degree, the social relations of power in her department accorded her a subordinate position as a newcomer into an established relationship between two teachers who had taught together for a number of years. Her institutional-identity should have accorded her the agency to advocate some of the innovative teaching practices to which she had been introduced while studying. However, the resistance of her colleagues combined with her subordinate social positioning in the group appeared to have hindered her ability to do so.

As is evident in the extract from Wendy's post-graduation interview in the methodology section above, the artefacts are indicative of **isolation** and **frustration**, the result of the mismatch between her figured world of good teaching, developed while a member of the study group, and that of her colleagues.

In her personal figured world Wendy does not "teach". When she talked about working with her pupils on an innovative literature project she said the assignment **asked them to think a lot**, **required them to do readings**, **we did** the assignment, and **we went through this project by reading stuff**. This is a figured world in which the teacher is positioned as both working alongside her pupils (together they read, think and construct knowledge), and as a co-learner (elsewhere she said, "Every time I do (Macbeth) I see **something new** … As my **understanding deepens**, so my **teaching will improve.**") The co-construction of knowledge results in learning for the teacher too.

By contrast, she characterises her colleagues' figured worlds as "teaching": they aimed to "**teach** the **basics**", to "**teach** the **fundamentals**" and "you **get** your objective and you **get** your aim and you, that's how you do it. You **teach** the conflict, and, you **do** the scaffolding". It is a world in which teachers are positioned as possessing knowledge that they then transmit to learners; knowledge is not "co-constructed with" but "got from" teachers.

The figurings of innovative teaching being good teaching in Wendy's personal world are not recognised by her colleagues. She commented that, "they're **not prepared to try** things … they never really seem to **step out of what they are comfortable with**, they **never want to experiment.**" Her colleague "was **not happy with the process**" she had to go through while working with her pupils on Wendy's literature project; she felt it was "**beyond them**, it's **too hard**, and, she **never really bought into** the whole thing." Weedon says "non-recognition and non-identification leaves the individual in an abject state" (Weedon, 2004, p. 7) in which she or he lacks agency. This non-recognition stripped Wendy of the authority she should have derived from

her institutional-identity, denied her the identity of "innovative teacher", leaving her isolated, **out on a limb,** and **frustrated**, a **terrible teacher**.

Unlike Brad, Wendy was not in professional conversation with any of the study group members. Brad's sustained conversations with Meg supported his continuing development of an identity as a confident, innovative teacher. We suggest that being unable to share and develop ideas with other like-minded teachers disabled Wendy's confident, innovative teaching identity. Being a confident and innovative teacher is enabled by being recognised and spoken about by significant others as confident and innovative, to the point where, through dialogic interaction, one comes to see oneself in this way. If one is no longer able to take part in the relevant practices or is not in regular conversations with other members of the affinity group, this mirror aspect of identity formation is absent. There is neither the enactment of the relevant practices nor the dialogic reflection of oneself as an innovative teacher with the confidence to take risks in one's teaching.

Daisy and Pat, and Anne

Daisy, Pat and Anne had remained in the same schools after graduating, moving into posts which, amongst other responsibilities, required them to assist their colleagues to implement a new curriculum. Pat and Anne had become heads of department and Daisy, while still doing some teaching, had a new post as curriculum advisor. Daisy and Pat met regularly to plan and to share teaching activities, whereas Anne was working without the support of another former study group member.

In Daisy's interview there are artefacts indicating that she is still able to be innovative in her teaching and that she is confident of her ability to advise her colleagues on implementing the new curriculum. As a teacher she had the **confidence to introduce a new approach** to teaching African Literature (an approach that, ironically, she had "borrowed" from Wendy), she had got **new ideas** from Pat and another colleague, she was **fine-tuning her procedures**, and as a result she was **learning all the time**. As a curriculum advisor she was **grateful that all the studying,** and **the group talking, gave me insight, and some confidence** to explain the procedure to colleagues; she **understands what they have to do**.

But at the same time there are artefacts illustrating the contradictory nature of subjectivity: while Daisy was confident of her understanding of the new curriculum, she was not confident of her ability **to share it** without appearing to be **bossy**, **prescriptive,** or **superior**. However, she demonstrated agency by finding an alternative solution: "So one of the things that I've found easier, is **to call in somebody else**. In **giving little workshops**, and things. So **it doesn't always seem as if I'm telling them what to do**."

Daisy did not mention in her interview discussing or getting any advice on these issues from Pat, but evidence of mutual advice-giving sessions came from Pat's interview, such as discussions about ways of giving Pat's colleagues critical feedback on the setting of examination papers. It is possible that Daisy's agency to work around her social positioning and confidently enact her institutional-identity as curriculum advisor was a result of conversations about approaches to implementing the new curriculum as she and Pat worked together.

Pat's interview included stories of sharing ideas and materials, and **preparing examinations** and **discussing assessment**, which would have provided her and Daisy with opportunities to reinforce their affinity-identities as innovative teachers and at the same time build discourse-identities as competent curriculum implementers. That Pat was being positioned by colleagues outside her school as an innovative teacher, and therefore had developed that discourse-identity beyond the study group, is indicated by two anecdotes about being invited to present papers at teaching conferences, and how she felt **affirmed** when experienced teachers asked her for copies of her paper and for information on how to use her teaching methods.

Anne, however, was no longer in professional conversation with another member of the group and was having difficulty in authoring herself as a competent HoD in charge of implementing the new curriculum and as an innovative teacher. While still studying, Anne had spoken of **understanding the new curriculum**. When interviewed two years later, however, she indicated that the on-going changes to the structure and implementation of this curriculum were undermining her ability to confidently assist her colleagues.

In her interview there are artefacts indicating a lack of organisation on the part of the education department: **materials that they've not edited**, **a revised version with different demands**, having to **iron out (…) problems which the department should have ironed out**, and **the layout for portfolios arriving late**. The consequences of this are **wasted time**, when teaching plans have to be altered and **a panic** and **a runaround** as Anne helps her colleagues with hasty changes to their schedules.

The effect of this on Anne's sense of self as HoD is epitomised by a comment: "I'm **supposed to know** what's going on **as head of department.**" Bartlett's (2007b) two levels of identity work are a useful lens for examining this statement. On an interpersonal level, she was able to "seem" a competent HoD to her colleagues; they turned to her for advice and she was able to tell them what to do. But her use of **supposed** signals her intrapersonal "felt" inability to adequately support her colleagues. Weedon says that, "What an event means to an individual depends on the ways of interpreting the world, on the discourses available to her at any particular moment" (Weedon, 1987, p. 79). The discourses of good teaching leadership that Anne had developed in conjunction with the study group were connected to **working together** with colleagues, **thinking** about one's teaching, and **planning ahead of time**. Interpreting her rushed, unplanned actions and decisions by means of these discourses left her feeling **undermined** and with **a fractured sense of reality**.

Furthermore there was mismatch between the discourses in her figured world of good teaching and those in her school. Her school's world of teaching was based on efficiency: there are artefacts of **collecting papers**, **creating policies**, **putting policies in the right places**, **filing**, **collecting marks**. These were the dominant discourses in this particular social context; her discourses of **thoughtful teaching**, **talking methodology** and **talking ideas** were marginalised, disempowering her as both a teacher and HoD.

We suggest that because Anne was no longer sharing thoughtful, innovative ideas and practices with a like-minded other, either inside or outside her school, she did not have the necessary interaction to sustain her affinity-identity as a thinking, innovative teacher. Working on her own, Anne was not sharing the discourses necessary to constitute and maintain a discourse-identity and an affinity-identity as a competent HoD in the way that Daisy and Pat were doing, via their discussions around solutions to their administrative problems. Had she still been involved in sustained, professional conversation with another former study group member, her situation might well have been different.

CONCLUSION

While all eight participants in the study group valued the knowledge gained from their post-graduate degree studies and research projects, they also acknowledged the great value of learning together in the study group. This co-operative learning was important for both their student and professional identities. We suggest that the analysis of the group members' post-graduation interviews demonstrates a sharp contrast between the agentive identities enacted by those who continued to have professional conversations with another group member, and the disempowered, disaffected identities of those who did not.

This finding may be of interest to advocates of teacher professional development through participation in professional learning communities (PLCs), given that sustained collegial professional dialogue has been identified as centrally important to the efficacy of PLCs (Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2008).

We suggest the following:

1. In both initial teacher education preparation and in post-graduate professional development programmes, teacher educators should encourage the formation of study groups, and encourage students to continue meeting for professional conversations after they have completed their studies.

2. In order to foster awareness of the value of such discussions, either universities or professional subject associations, or both, could host events that include time and space for professional conversations for interested teachers.

3. To enable professional conversations among teachers from different schools, school districts should set aside time for teacher development programmes within school districts, not just for meetings with a bureaucratic focus as is usually the case in South Africa at present.

4. To facilitate on-going meta-talk about teaching within schools, head teachers should plan for professional development sessions to be held within school hours.

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