



Shifting sands: negotiating professional roles and responsibilities during a period of culture change

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Background Literature

Within Wales, systems of initial teacher education (ITE) have been under scrutiny (Furlong, 2015). This is tied to the context of systemic change within a national education system concerned to ensure each and every learner grows 'as a capable, healthy, well-rounded individual who can thrive in the face of unknown future challenges' (Donaldson 2015 p5, also European Commission 2015). The implications for teacher educators of such a shift in education focus for learners has been the subject of significant policy reform (Welsh Government 2014, 2017). The role of teacher educator has a number of associated identities, from schoolteacher, teachers of teachers and researchers, and there is evidence that those involved in ITE may lack a coherent professional identity (e.g. European Commission 2013, Livingston 2014). The drive for reform in Wales directly addresses the roles and responsibilities of teacher educators situated in HEIs and in schools (Furlong 2015; see also Barnes and Waters 2018). Within the associated accreditation process for programmes of ITE there is an explicit expectation for 'partnership working' and 'shared responsibility' between university-based and school-based staff (EWC 2017). Accordingly some HEIs in Wales have seen changes to their staffing structures within education units, both within the HEI and within the schools associated with ITE provision. This research seeks to capture the understandings of those involved in ITE in one accredited ITE provider, about the expectations, roles and responsibilities that are inherent in this process of change. It seeks to make visible the processes of change in order to a) guide the support offered to those enacting the changes and b) contribute to the understanding of, and theorising about, systems of professional learning through a period of what might be seen as enforced professional identity change. The project has a sociological underpinning and is in its early stages; a broad overview is set out here.

Ethics

Risks to participants of this research project are low as participation is voluntary. However, researchers have a moral obligation to protect any participants from any harm (McLeod, 2007). This is addressed by enabling fully informed consent for participation. The possible participant group is provided with all the information relevant to their part in the study so they can freely decide whether they are willing to take part (Ritchie *et al*, 2013). Written consent is sought after the participants have read the participant information sheet which contains full details of what their involvement in the research will entail and specifies that the information obtained from them will be confidential and anonymised in the report, and that they can withdraw from the project and participation at any time without consequence. Research throughout this study consistently engages with BERA guidelines and consent is continually negotiated throughout the project. External facilitators are used during group discussion to avoid any risks which might arise from researchers working with colleagues. No names are attributed to responses. All data is anonymised throughout.

Methods

The research involves a number of data collection processes intended to ensure rigour, facilitate openness and, in group situations, mutually respectful dialogue between participants. The research participants are volunteers from the HEI staff group and school-based staff involved in ITE provision through the university-school ITE partnership. During the course of the two year project there are up to three data collection events. The participants are organised as discrete groups for the first data collection event; that is, HEI staff and school-based staff in separate groups. As the ITE partnership further develops, data collection will involve mixed groups of HEI and school-based volunteers. The timing of key events in the policy sphere of ITE, as well as the iterative data analysis process will steer the timing of the data collection events, though these are likely to be summer 2018, summer 2019 and summer 2020. There research tools below may be adopted in any of the waves of data collection.

Semi-structured group discussion

Participants engage in a semi-structured small group discussion relating to the project themes, facilitated by facilitators external to the education system in Wales. Semi-structured questions are used to encourage participants to answer in their own words creating greater qualification in their responses and allowing for further issues to come to light that the researchers may not have considered. The data is generated by the collation of agreed written responses from the group to the questions posed. The facilitators collate and report the data, ensuring identifying features are removed.

One-to-one semi-structured discussion

Volunteer participants are offered the opportunity to talk in a one:one situation rather than a group discussion if preferred. The focus of these one:one discussions mirrors the group discussion in the first instance though the iterative data analysis process may generate content that participants are invited to talk to the facilitators about in either a group or a one:one basis.

Questionnaires

The set of possible participants are invited to complete an online questionnaire, after the group and one:one discussions. This allows those previously participating the opportunity to reflect on their experiences further and make additional comments, and those not previously participating to offer comments should they wish to. The questionnaire relates to the themes created by the original questions and constructed through the data analysis process.

Results

This project seeks to unpick two central research questions:

- What are the perceptions and experiences of staff working in ITE about their professional roles and responsibilities during a period of culture change?
- How are changes in professional roles and responsibilities negotiated?

To date the project is in the data analysis stage of the first phase of activity. Data analysis is being undertaken through a process of qualitative coding against a framework created from a review of the literature related to processes of change. The project is firmly rooted in socio-constructivist understandings of the fluidity of lived reality, in which context shapes and in turn is shaped by the actions of individuals (Rogoff 2003).

Discussion

The results of this project will enable a deeper understanding of the ways in which the complex construct of professional identity is shaped by, and in turn shapes, processes of change. In Wales the changes in professional roles demanded of those in the education sector by the ambition of the education reform agenda require us to consider carefully the extent to which structures that are intended to support the process of change do so, and how individuals negotiate their professional pathways.

Notwithstanding the eagerness with which education reform has been met by groups of professionals, be they in school or be they in a university context, the system will be enhanced by a nuanced understanding of the process of change through the eyes of such professionals at this time. Specifically the identification of affording and constraining structures and practices during the change process will be particularly valuable as we collectively manage the sands that shift beneath us.

Conclusions

As this project is in progress we are not able to draw conclusions at this stage, however the value of the process of discussion and facilitated engagement with others during, and as part of, the change process has been notable throughout the work to date. Informally participants have reported their engagement being both stimulating and cathartic. It is noted that the process of data collection, of itself, contributes to the landscape of those enacting change.



<https://blueswandaily.com/shifting-sands-of-time>



<http://www.150.parks.ca.gov>



<https://gskpulsevolunteers.com>

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