Research paper

An exploratory study of teachers' workplace relationships

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Contextualisation

Teachers may, in one contest be colleagues and in another, managers or the managed. The paper that follows begins an examination of the often complex inter-personal issues that inform these different relationships. It also reflects on the role of the researcher when exploring these issues from a largely qualitative perspective.

Abstract: *This paper is written with two aims in mind: Firstly, it argues that the research topic of teachers' workplace relationships is an important one. Secondly, it describes and conveys a sense of the complexity of the subject, in both its positive and negative aspects and of the necessarily complex research journey that the author has had to undertake in order to investigate the issues raised. It reports the results of the first two stages of the research and identifies key interpersonal issues pertinent to developing an understanding of teachers' workplace relationships.*

Introduction

In my own experience as a teacher, and as an educational psychologist, who works with many teachers, I have found that the quality of teachers' workplace relationships is key (Antrobus and Cullen, 1997). It seems to represent the make or break factor for most teachers in relation to their levels of job satisfaction and professional efficacy.

Over the last 20 years my curiosity has grown and so too, has the proliferation of legislative policy and guidance literature from diverse fields which makes overt and incidental reference to the importance of professionals' workplace relationships. The DfEE's emphasis (DfEE, 1997; DfEE, 1998) upon raising achievement and social inclusion consistently promotes the ideal of professional collegiality and collaboration. However, at the same time, the general media and educational literature is locked in the discourse of over-stressed and over-worked professionals trying to meet children and young people's educational and core developmental needs in work environments which are characterised by inadequate acknowledgement of *adults'* core needs (Abdelnoor, 1999; Smithers, 1999).

Researching teachers' workplace relationships offered a way of expressing my commitment to humanist principles (Rogers, 1983) and feminist ideology (Chodorow, 1978; Gilligan, 1982) in which the emotional and relational aspects and elements of education are acknowledged and valued. I also hoped that it might contribute to a better balance between process and outcomes within educational policy and practice.

The research reported below was informed by substantive theory, highly relevant to, but not specifically about, teachers' workplace relationships, which included work from psychological, sociological and philosophical frameworks, eg, social psychology (Hargreaves, 1972); organisational theory (Handy, 1986); systems theory (Simons, 1997; Watzlawick, Weakland and Fisch, 1974; Von Bertanlaffy, 1968); humanistic psychology (Rogers, 1983); psychoanalytical theory (Henry, Osborne and Salzberger-Wittenberg, 1983); personal construct psychology (Ravenette, 1997; Kelly, 1991); sociology of education (Cohen, 1981); and philosophy of education (Downie, 1974). The themes or topics which became apparent through the literature review were:

- Teacher identity - personal and professional esteem and attributions of worth and value (Nias, 1988).

- Teacher socialisation (Zeichner, 1983).

- Teacher collegiality, collaborative practice - effective teaching (Acker, 1995).

- Schools as systems - groups - effective schools - leadership effects - policy and curriculum studies (Croll, 1996).

- Teaching and learning processes - emotional and relational aspects (Wexler, 1993).

The literature review also revealed the relative absence of current, British-based empirical research in the area. Nearly three decades ago Hargreaves (1972) stated:

> The teacher's conception of himself, his values and attitudes to many aspects of education, may...be influenced by his relationships with his colleagues and superiors and thus influence the teacher's behaviour in the classroom and his relationships with his pupils. Life in the staffroom and its impact upon the teacher constitutes one of the most significant gaps in our knowledge of social processes within the school. (Hargreaves, 1972, p 402)

Investigations that incorporated a psychological perspective and highlighted teachers' expectations, attributions and perceptions of their workplace relationships, were not located in the literature review.

Research focus and aims

The study's aims were, firstly, to examine and describe teachers' own perceptions, attributions and expectations of their workplace relationships in a variety of mainstream and special primary and secondary school settings, secondly, to discover whether or not any particular patterns or themes existed and thirdly, whether any particular factors / elements could be located which either supported or mitigated against teachers' workplace relationships.

My initial, tentative, hypotheses were as follows:

- That a link exists between teachers' recognition, value and active facilitation of the part of 'relationship' between themselves and colleagues and their identity as teachers, job satisfaction and self perceptions relating to teaching effectively (Nias, 1988).

- That individual teachers' self-perceived abilities to empathise, accept and to be personally congruent affect their relationships with each other and with pupils and other members of the school community (Rogers, 1983).

- That teaching staff groups which value and promote collaborative staff practices and positive relationships between staff facilitate job satisfaction and ameliorate stress in teachers (Feiman-Nemser *et al.,* 1986).

- That teachers' perceptions of staff groups dynamics are related to their perceptions of pupil outcomes (Little, 1982).

- That teachers' thoughts and views in relation to their workplace relationships mainly operate at an unconscious level and are not a focus for schools' management, policy and practice.

- That making teachers' perceptions, expectations, hopes and fears about their workplace relationships an area for overt consideration could offer opportunities for positive change in relation to teacher recruitment, teacher retention and levels of job satisfaction and effectiveness.

Theorisation and conceptualisation informing the research

It has been important to hold on to a commitment to staying open to a variety of different and complex epistemological and ontological thinking and theoretical frameworks. Just as important has been the quest for a non-prescriptive and original research methodology that privileges creativity:

> "We need to be aware of the limits and possibilities both of quantification and of interpretation, combining the strengths of diverse paradigms to maximise constructive interchange and collaborative creativity." (Lunt, 1999, p 494)

I have drawn upon a wide-ranging field of theoretical models including social constructionism (Burr, 1995); symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934); phenomenology (Berg, 1989); hermeneutics (Gallagher, 1992); humanistic psychology; systems theory; feminist theory; psychodynamic (Lacan, 1977); and personal construct theory (Kelly, 1991).

My view of the research is that it is a complex, sophisticated and elaborative process of questioning which is recursive, dynamic and multi-leveled. I also privilege the postmodern recognition of multiple, shifting and elaborate notions of 'truth', which are frequently contradictory and paradoxical and located within individuals' narratives (Gergen, 1994; Harre, 1998).

I have tried to locate and view my researcher voice within and as a combination of the "transformative intellectual of critical theory" (Giroux, 1992) and "the passionate participant" (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998) of constructionism. I place gender as central to my research agenda (Neumark, 1999) and in connection with this privilege power, emotion and relationship.

Within the social constructionist framework which I adopt I seek to gain understanding and reconstruction of the constructions both I, as researcher, and the researched hold. Being an essentially inductive study, over time I attempt to produce trustworthy and authentic, more sophisticated and cohesive constructions and place myself as an inquirer who is active, participative and facilitative of and within the process.

My engagement in the research has been shaped and formed from 3 core elements:

Firstly, researcher awareness/consciousness; this rested upon placing myself firmly within the research and challenging the positivist model of detached and 'objective' researcher. It was also necessary to owning my own vested interest in and personal connection with the research topics of relationship and the emotional realm and imperative to overtly promote a 'gender agenda'. Within interview interactions I sought to learn from and use the partiality of researcher *and* researched and their interaction.

Secondly, communication; I viewed language as *the* key to a better understanding of social reality/ies (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and I also sought to privilege the language of emotion

(Hothchild, 1990). Highlighting and utilising the relationality of language was an important theme as was constantly exploring and making overt, whose meaning and whose meaning-making, was involved.

Thirdly, increasing understanding over time; by recognising the partiality, fragmentation and incomplete-ness of the research I had to frame questions and answers as part of a potentially infinite process (Moustakis, 1990). In doing so I was consciously and overtly seeking depth, richness and greater understanding rather than 'proof'. When considering the merits of inductive versus deductive methodology it was essential to acknowledge and incorporate theory at every level and stage.

Methods

The meta-theoretical ideas arising from social constructionism and symbolic interactionism theory offer a perspective which sees individuals' lives as being multi-faceted and social, shaped by the personal construction of meaning and identity formation. The research methodology I have employed, namely interview, uses discourse as a vehicle for the articulation and understanding of multiple-realities.

My initial expectations were that I would be conducting an entirely qualitative study utilising up-to-date, in-depth ethnographic research from my position as a professional employed within the education system involved in many established working relationships with potential participants. I expected to incorporate a range of data gathering approaches which constituted direct and 'real world' research. But the freedom of engaging in an inductive study meant an implicit need to try out different methods and means to think about and conduct research at different stages and raised important questions about qualitative or quantitative research. Readings (eg, Denzin and Lincoln, 1998) suggested that the subjective/objective dichotomy inherent to the debate was an unhelpful one and that the interaction between knowing and what is known was the really important entity.

I started with an initial interview study designed to orientate and locate my research generally and to 'test the water' in relation to gauging how willing and responsive teachers would be to participation in the study. This used methods developed from personal construct psychology and feminist research methodology approaches which were framed as an heuristic enquiry, in that I had come to research, through personal experience arising from, and precipitated by, my own self awareness and self knowledge.

The interview methodology facilitated the elicitation of individuals' in-depth personal accounts and reflections in relation to everyday, familiar, lived experience and made possible the adoption of a humanistically principled stance and one which was phenomenological in essence.

The interviews, which consisted of single session individual, face-to-face verbal interchange, were audio-taped. Semi-structured interview schedules were used. Interviewees were invited, both verbally and in written form, to supplement and/or, amend, interview transcripts. The transcripts were mailed in complete form to interviewees soon after the interviews.

This initial sample (Study 1) was a 'convenience' sample in that all respondents were relatively easy to 'access', ie, 15 teachers in management positions with whom I had an established working relationship and who, as part of their role within a variety of schools, secondary, primary and special, were required to have frequent contact with other teachers.

A second interview study (Study 2) followed, this time with a different sample group of classroom-based teachers from the same schools as for Study 1. It was a 'snowball' sample

arising from the first study participants' suggestions and through volunteers who had heard about the research. I conducted 21 interviews in total. It was particularly difficult to enlist secondary classroom-based teachers and so, in order to do so I undertook a separate but related study, commissioned by the school, entitled 'An Appreciative Inquiry into Teacher Collegiality at X School' (Bushe, 1995).

The final stage (Study 3) of the research is envisaged as being a much larger scale questionnaire study. The questionnaire will be constructed from the findings of the second study and will probably use direct quotations from teacher participants.

I intend to use a large sample representative of a cross-section of classroom-based teachers taking into consideration age, gender, years of teaching, school phase/type within an LEA.

Analysis of data from Study 1 was carried out in tandem with my own process of development as a researcher and it involved learning about and developing my understanding of and familiarity with discourse analysis methods. In grasping the idea that this approach encompasses a broad and adaptive framework I have worked through a number of different stages.

Firstly, was the refinement of data into a collection of textual extracts which related very specifically to the research topic and the identification of many diverse, complex and surprising types of discourse. This involved, engaging with the whole text, ie, researcher and participant's dialogue and interaction, as well as the process of the interview as a whole, with the intention of developing a more free-flowing and spontaneous analysis and interpretation of the text. This was then repeated with a re-analysis of and saturation in the texts, starting with one transcript which seemed to express elements and themes common to all of the interviews in a particularly overt way, and one which made me particularly curious.

Secondly, I became increasingly aware of and clear about the connections between different areas of the transcript, and also the gaps and contradictions; and spent much time in formulating and trying out different systems of coding against the whole set of data, linking with themes identified in the literature review. A number of major themes began to emerge: *Complexity, Reality, Control, Judgment, Task, and Feelings*. These related to teachers views on education in general, management of schools and to the research inquiry itself. Again, more refinement and also the use of free-association techniques, upon my own spontaneously produced images, yielded three, particularly, key themes:

1. The dichotomy of teachers as people and as professionals

2. The official lines/scripts regarding teacher workplace relationships

3. The absence of dialogue about negative emotions and/or conflict and difficulties in workplace relationships.

Finally, I produced a single, central and pivotal statement which seemed to adequately sum up the core idea emerging from the research inquiry at this point:

> Adoption, by the teacher manager, of a constantly reiterated official line that conflict, negative emotion and tensions between teachers, although present, are relatively rare, inherently unproblematic and of minor import.

I then went on to conduct Study 2, using the same interview schedule as for Study 1, in which I interviewed 21 classroom-based teachers. The data was again, transcribed verbatim and sent directly to participants for verification, comment and supplementation. Following this I used discourse analysis methods, firstly coding and then locating themes.

Results

In all but one of the interviews, teachers did not challenge the idea that collaboration and collegiality was a good thing although active support was relatively faintly voiced. Most teachers did not talk about their workplace relationships in connection with choosing to teach, their self views as teachers or enjoyment of teaching but did refer to it when speaking of teacher managers' responsibilities

Teachers *did* have clear and fairly consistent ideas about what constituted ideal and non-ideal teacher colleagues. Classroom-based teachers particularly valued practical support and problem solving, whereas teacher managers emphasised attitudinal aspects including values and commitment to teaching.

References to negative and conflictual aspects of teachers' workplace relationships were relatively fewer than the positive or ideal, particularly by teacher managers. Where they were described it was usually in the past, in hypothetical situations or in problematic individual colleagues. Classroom-based teachers' 'nightmare' colleagues were mainly teacher managers and vice versa.

Most teachers talked about the requirement to integrate their professional and personal selves. They did not see personal friendship and professional collegiality as correlating in any significant way

When asked about what supported and what hindered collegiality and collaboration, three distinct themes emerged: support, communication and control. In terms of support and communication, interviewees talked mainly, of individuals' personal characteristics. For control, however, most comments were about school systems and structures. Classroom-based teachers and teacher managers had different attributions for the things which hindered collegiality and collaboration. For teacher managers the emphasis was upon individual teachers' characteristics, style, practice and attitudes:

> (Interviewee): Yes, I suppose the ideal colleague relationship (sighs)...it's so difficult. It's somebody who doesn't go: 'ohhhh' every time you sort of approach them in the staffroom and they might have very legitimate criticisms; they might raise really valid, professional points against or obstacles which you then sit down and work through and that's really healthy because then you think 'oh, yes, I don't think of everything' you know, that is so true and I think there's an immediate, a feeling that 'yes, okay, how can we make this work' rather than 'oh no, can't do that. We haven't got this and we haven't got that and I don't like it anyway and I'm not prepared to do that. Somebody who's prepared to meet me at least half way or to go along with, entirely can be equally boring if they're to say yes, yes, to everything but I suppose it's a bit like myself. I like people to meet me half-way and actually do it, actually see it through and I suppose those are the people I value working with the most. But I've got to have professional respect for people so that's what an ideal colleague is about. (Primary School Deputy Head interviewed for Study 1)

> (Interviewee): I've also got this thing about masks and it's the part that worries me because, often as headteacher the mask is the only part I see and at the end of the term you see this and I said to someone recently: "Oh, so that's the real person and all that time I'd never seen it." Because as a teacher you can wear a mask and underneath there's a real human being...and sometimes, it is, you wonder what are they really trying to say? The mask, often for totally wrong reasons...

> (Interviewer): What do you think the reasons are?
>
> (Interviewee): I don't know. They can sometimes feel you're going to be over critical...(Secondary Headteacher interviewed for Study 1)

Classroom-based teachers mostly talked about management of the school, in terms of the structures and systems, but also, in terms of teacher managers' individual characteristics:

> (Interviewee): Definitely, the management structure, the hierarchy, is not how I feel it should be...particularly here, it's all done through phase managers...it's all disseminated down...you don't get...whatever people say...they can call these phase management like little headteachers, if you like, but it's not because that just goes to create a divide, to segregate year groups within the school and then the teachers don't have that contact or an input or, you know, just a sense of being connected...I mean they're talking about schools in terms of a corporacy ..."
>
> (Interviewer): A business model ?
>
> (Interviewee): If you just take a step back, you can see things, it's quite interesting as an observer...you can see different things...it's quite funny, you know, you can see people resenting decisions being made for them and being given to them and it quite often seems as though the middle management is sort of stuck between the bull and the gate, between management telling them one thing and the workers, them telling them and going back to them. It can create that sort of thing and when I said that teachers can feel not that included...and it does feel like that sometimes. You see these senior management who are having their little chats and you feel, very often that you shouldn't be there...(Primary Classroom-based Teacher interviewed for Study 2)

Where there *was* a consensus, however, was in relation to the supportive aspects and this nearly always had implications for the quality of communication, relationship, personal and professional development and learning, and those nebulous things like attitudes, values and ethos:

> (Interviewee): We provided a support network for each other and we supported each other…we did…We went out on a limb in that project…we tried really adventurous things that we wouldn't have done if we'd been on our own because we knew the other one was there for back-up…we were so honest with each other and felt comfortable with each other. (Primary Classroom-based Teacher interviewed for Study 2)

Conclusion

The work to date has produced questions about the differences between classroom teachers' perceptions and views and those of teachers with management responsibilities. Also, questions about the finding that teachers perceive their workplace relationships as ideal, positive and largely non-problematic. I also intend to examine whether or not themes or patterns emerge in relation to types of school setting, characteristics of individual teachers such as age, gender, length of teacher experience. Further questions, about teachers' perceptions and experiences of power and control, the fusion or co-existence of their personal and professional selves, forms and quality of communication and support at individual, group and institutional level, have emerged. The next and final part of my study will be a large-scale, borough-wide questionnaire in which I hope to answer some of these questions.

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