

Joan Woodhouse

Teaching in England post-1988: Reflections and career histories

Emerald, 2023

Licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International [CC BY-NC 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

Chapter 8: Understanding the lived experience and longevity of the career-long teacher

Introduction

The interviews undertaken in this study were original in that they focussed on career-long teachers' lived experiences and perceptions of implementing government-imposed change over a thirty-year period, in the context of English state education. The study used a novel methodology to investigate the teachers' career-long experiences, and in the first part of this chapter I consider the affordances of the approach taken. Drawing on the data generated from the nine narratives, I then present a conceptual model of an ideal type of career-long teacher, in order to capture the original insights offered by the study.

Affordances of the research design

The research design combined a semi-structured interview with a retrospective, narrative approach, so harnessing a longitudinal view. The participants were asked to reflect back over time, so the study has some features of life history interviews, applied to career-long experiences of policy change implementation. The interview was based on a check list of core areas to discuss, rather than fixed questions. The questioning was deliberately open-ended so that the participants would be able to define for themselves what the critical points of their experience had been, for example, recalling the policies that had the greatest impact on their work. Interviewers did not 'suggest' particular policies to consider, but allowed participants to set the agenda for the discussion by sharing their thoughts and recollections. This open-ended approach provides authentic narratives with meaning for the narrators, and allows the interviewer scope for probing to elicit richer, more detailed accounts.

Our analytical strategy was based on the principles of IPA, following the guidance of psychologists Smith, et al. (2009). IPA studies are still relatively unusual in educational research, being primarily based on idiographic rather than generic experiences, although there are some examples (such as Guihen, 2020; Noon, 2018; Smith, 2017; Woodhouse & Pedder, 2016). IPA is suitable for articulate participants, such as our teachers, whose descriptions and reflections were full, detailed, insightful and often analytical. On reflection, there is considerable scope, when using this approach with a small number of participants, to include in the report more detailed accounts of the individual stories. In this book, a balance was struck between relating individuals' experiences and ascertaining where there was commonality, in order to identify the most common themes to emerge from the study.

The data provided new insights into the sophisticated processes whereby the career-long teachers take ownership of change to suit the contexts within which they work, and the students they teach. Participants' perspectives offered complex and nuanced understandings of the nature of their daily work post-1988. Their accounts provided a view of teaching that contrasted with that portrayed in the teachers' standards, where teacher professionalism is defined simply in terms of a set of desired behaviours (see Evans, 2011). The competency statements in the standards take little account of values, vocation, or expertise developed over time. Yet this study has shown that the decisions the career-long teachers make are grounded in experience, their commitment to making a positive difference to children's lives, and a set of values that fuel their motivation to persevere in their chosen vocation. Their narratives provide a rounded view of a long-term career founded on an ethic of care, positive working relationships, and a grounded sense of self-belief.

Understanding the longevity of the career-long teacher: new insights

Drawing on the data from all nine narratives, I present below a conceptual model in the form of an 'ideal type' of the career long-teacher in post-1988 England (see Figure 1). Whilst the model draws on findings from all of the participants, as an ideal type, it is not intended to be an exact match for any one person.

The model suggests that a combination of vocation and wisdom empowers teachers to exert their agency in taking ownership of required change, and in developing strategies for contextualised policy implementation. In this model, vocation comprises values and motivation; wisdom comprises vision, expertise and control; and agency comprises ownership and strategy. Figure 1 provides further details, drawing on the data from this study to identify the factors that make up each element of the three constituent parts of the model.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

The first constituent in the ideal type model is 'vocation', in which I bring together the core values the teacher espouses, and their principal sources of motivation. Essentially, the teacher loves teaching. They love what they teach, and they enjoy working with young people. Children are their first priority. Any change the teacher is required to make in their classroom practices in response to policy imperatives must be made to work to the benefit of the children in their care. The teacher enjoys autonomy, and the freedom to make their own decisions in the classroom. They are committed to making a difference to children's lives and enabling them to flourish. This commitment has remained constant career-long, fuelling their motivation and giving meaning to their work. They derive the greatest satisfaction from seeing students enjoy their learning and achieve their potential, and their work is underpinned by a commitment to social justice. Appreciation from pupils motivates and sustains them, reminding them of why they entered the teaching profession in the first place.

The teacher is committed to teamwork and collegiality. They derive satisfaction from working collaboratively, and they contribute, through their work with others, to maintaining a culture of collaboration and teamwork in their schools. They identify positively with their schools, where they feel a sense of belonging. Positive working relationships are very important to them, and their relationships with children and colleagues are based on an ethic of care and empathy. The ethic of care also extends to self-care, in that they are very aware of the need to try to achieve a work-life balance. They have developed some strategies to enable this to be possible.

The second constituent in the model is 'wisdom'. Wisdom is defined as 'accumulated knowledge', and, 'the ability to think and act utilising knowledge, experience, understanding, common sense and insight' (Collins English Dictionary and Thesaurus, 2002). In the model, I differentiate three elements that constitute wisdom: vision, expertise and control.

Within the 'vision' element is the ability to envisage the scope for positive change. This is arguably one of the most important factors in the model. Without this ability, it would seem unlikely that the teacher would maintain the commitment and motivation to sustain them long-term. Added to this is the teacher's clarity about the primary purpose of their role, which they see in terms of offering opportunities to children. Finally, they believe firmly in their own capacity to exert a positive impact and to make positive change happen in their teaching role.

The second element of wisdom is 'expertise'. The career-long teacher has a strong sense of self-belief, and confidence in their own knowledge and skill, grounded in their sustained experience of teaching. They have a clear view of themselves as able to improve students' lives.

The third element is control, that is, a belief that they can take control of change in their own classrooms and schools. They are able to prioritise the areas they will aim to change, and how. Decisions about what to prioritise are informed by their values, and how they do it is informed by their experience. A fundamental belief in their own freedom and capacity to act underpins their willingness and determination to take control and ownership of change, and the pace of change.

Vocation and wisdom combine to foster teacher agency, the third constituent part of the model. As Figure 1 shows, agency includes taking ownership of, and developing strategy for, policy implementation. The teacher is also agentic in drawing on a range of sources of support to sustain them in taking ownership of change in their schools and classrooms. Their working lives are strengthened and supported by reciprocal, supportive, familial relationships in schools. Collaborations with colleagues motivate and energise them, and strengthen their sense of belonging in the school, to which they feel a positive, emotional attachment. Their school 'family', empowering senior leaders and positive, supportive home lives are all important sources of support, on which they draw proactively.

The teacher's belief in their own agency and scope to manage change leads them to take the time to reflect on policy before implementation. The teacher acts autonomously in the choices and judgments they make in their daily work. They unpick, analyse and adjust policy as they translate it into practice, so that it is fit for purpose. They engage in a process of interpretation and mediation of policy, before tailoring the changes to suit the children they teach and the context in which they are teaching, at a pace that is manageable. They are neither resistant to nor compliant with government imperatives, but make pragmatic judgments about the extent to which they can tailor change to suit their students, classrooms and schools. They evaluate the degree of freedom that they have to make their own decisions about pedagogy and curriculum content, and they take ownership of change. They take policy, and make it work, for their students and their school.

It is noteworthy that the model works at optimal level when all components are fully functioning and working together. Were any part to be missing or dysfunctional, the operation breaks down. For example, in a school in which the collaborative culture or commitment to teamwork are weak, or the senior leadership unsupportive, even the most committed career-long teacher may eventually disengage. Similarly, should the teacher lose faith in their own capacity to exert positive change, demoralization and disengagement would be likely to ensue. It may be that, in this sense, the model accounts not only for why teachers remain career-long, but also why they quit. This might provide the basis for further research, as the findings of the current study point to remarkably committed teachers who stay the course despite the challenge of constant change.

Concluding comments

This book reports on experienced teachers' perceptions of and reflections on an extraordinary period of educational history in England, 1988-2018. This was an era characterised by a succession of reforms that changed the culture of schooling and the work of teachers. The book provides authentic and original insights into the impact of reform on teachers' daily work, drawing on the career experiences of nine teachers near the end of their careers, who had lived through and implemented the changes. More significantly, it offers new understandings of why these teachers stayed the course, given the shifting policy context.

Over time many of the participants in this study had gained in confidence. Linked to their confidence was their ability to focus on the positive and exert their professional agency. This confidence had allowed them to be increasingly selective in what they adopted in their practice, rather than following change, both national and organisational, uncritically and in fine detail. They were able to look beyond the constraints and see the scope for positive change, a key factor that helped to

sustain and retain the rich seam of teaching expertise afforded by this generation of career-long teachers.

The findings of this study might usefully inform policy makers and school leaders concerned to retain teachers in the profession. The insights gained might also be of interest to novice teachers, or those considering the profession, as they reflect on their motivation and potential strategies for dealing with far-reaching policy shifts that are likely to impact their work during the course of their careers. For the teachers in this study, their core values, wisdom, sense of vocation and firm belief in the scope and the imperative to make a positive difference to children's lives emerged as highly important in securing their long-term commitment to the teaching profession.