

Teacher professional knowledge formation as a negotiation of equity discourses

IN PROGRESS

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Abstract: This paper draws on a study of early career teachers' professional knowledge and identity formation. A case study of one of the teachers is analysed to illustrate the complexity of negotiating multiple discourses of equity and difference as they play out in practice, and how the construction of self is intertwined with the formation of professional knowledge.

Introduction

This paper analyses the reflections of one early career teacher to illustrate how teacher professional knowledge and identity formation can be viewed as a negotiation of equity discourses. The paper draws on a larger study of new teacher professional knowledge formation in a context of educational reform, which argues that teacher knowledge and identity are (in)formed by practice as well as practice being informed by knowledge and identity.

The analysis in this paper explores how Aroha engages with a complex network of social and educational discourses and policies as they play out in the particular context of a secondary school in New Zealand. We can see from the analysis presented something of how her professional knowledge and identity as a teacher form in conversation with these discourses. It is also a study of how Aroha responds to cultural "Othering" as a Māori woman teaching in a predominantly white school.

Teacher professional knowledge

Teacher professional knowledge has been the focus of debate for a number of years and has been analysed from a range of perspectives¹. While there are numerous attempts to classify or characterise teacher professional knowledge, much of this debate focuses on the ways in which professional and cultural discourses contribute to teachers' thinking and practice. Each approach, shaped by the context in which it was formed, differs in its explanation of which social discourses are sources of this influence and provides ways for studying important aspects of teacher knowledge and work.

Given the increased social, linguistic and cultural diversity of student populations, rapid technological change, a climate of educational and social reform, and public debate about the quality of teachers and teaching, there now is a need for a reconceptualisation of how teacher professional knowledge forms that takes account of the instability of knowledge and professional and cultural discourses. Recent poststructural and feminist research offers fruitful ways of conceptualising (beginning) teacher knowledge and work. Such approaches view knowledge as constructed by individuals in particular environments. They explicitly reject the view that the shaping of teacher professional knowledge and identity follows logical, prescribed patterns (Britzman, 2000, 2003; Davis & Sumara, 1999; Middleton, 1993; Middleton & May, 1997, 1999; Stronach,

¹ For a detailed discussion of the debates and perspectives, see Patrick (2007).

Corbin, McNamara, Stark, & Warne, 2002). Rather, the formation of teacher knowledge and identity is understood as complex, multiple and discursive. Thus, these approaches take account of a wide range of factors that impact on teachers' understandings of learning, learners and teaching, such as teachers' biography, the socio-political contexts which teachers inhabit, their teacher education experience and experience in current professional work.

It is approaches such as these that have informed the arguments presented in this paper.

An equity agenda in education

In New Zealand, as in Australia and beyond, educational reforms have brought about major changes to the way education is managed and implemented. The reforms have emphasised market ideologies that promote consumer choice and responsibility, and put in place controls to measure and monitor quality and effectiveness. At the same time these reforms, and associated policy and government guidelines, emphasise equity ideologies to alleviate social inequalities in an educational context of increasing social, linguistic and cultural diversity in student populations² (Alton-Lee, 2003; Ministry of Education, 1993, 2005, 2006; New Zealand Government, 1989). Similar imperatives or guidelines exist in Australia such as the Blueprint for Schools (State of Victoria, 2008) and essential learning standards developed by various State Governments (for example, Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2005).

Recent research literature about education's response to this increased diversity includes debates about preparation of teachers from (mainly) middle-class, white backgrounds to work with culturally, socially and linguistically diverse groups of pupils³. However, there is less about the experiences of early career teachers and non-white teachers' encounters with discourses of equity, social justice and difference. With the increasing diversity and rapid changes discussed earlier, there is a need to find ways of talking about difference in relation to how teachers engage with policy and contemporary equity discourses in their professional practice.

It is also important to move away from deficit ways of thinking about students (and teachers), thereby avoiding what Shields, Bishop and Malawi (2005) call 'pathologizing practices'—practices which lay blame for pupils' underachievement with the pupils and their families' cultural or economic status. One way to do this is to examine ways in which teachers make sense of policies and socio-cultural discourses and how their own identity as teachers is tied up in relation to this.

Through the analysis of reflections of one early career teacher, this paper brings together the ideas discussed above—that is (1) that the formation of teacher professional knowledge and identity is a recursive process of negotiation of beliefs, rhetoric and policy and (2) that the increasing social and cultural diversity in classrooms demands that teachers reconceptualise ways of thinking about difference and social justice, moving away from deficit theorizing (of both teachers and students) to take account of layers of complexity.

I argue that the formation of teacher professional knowledge can be understood through an analysis of how teachers negotiate dominant discourse in policy and practice. Further, issues of social justice that teachers encounter in practice can be understood

² A recent change of government to the right in New Zealand may change this emphasis. Nevertheless the debates will remain.

³ For an in-depth discussion of this literature see Patrick (2007).

through such an analysis of teacher professional knowledge formation. The instance presented here is of the juggling of the equity discourses within a context of increasing accountability standards. I analyse one teacher's engagement with the policies and practices she encounters during the first two years of her career as a way of illustrating a process of meaning-making and self-making. In addition, as the teacher speaks from a Māori perspective, insights are also gained into her experience of being culturally 'Other(ed)'.

Research methodology, design and theoretical framework

The study on which this paper draws involved interviews with nine new teachers in small groups. Teachers were invited to participate directly by formal letter or via letter passed on to them by a colleague or the school principal⁴. Their participation was voluntary and informed consent was obtained. Groups of teachers met twice during the first two years of their careers. The group interviews were designed to elicit extended narratives from individual teachers, as well as promote more interactive dialogue and reflections within the groups. Because the interviews were conducted at different points in their early careers, the study also had a longitudinal element, allowing insight into how teachers' views form or change during an intense period of professional learning.

Analysis of the teachers' narratives was informed by poststructural and feminist understandings of identity and knowledge and by a methodological orientation to writing as a method of enquiry. Thus the analysis took account of the multiple discourses in teachers' narratives about their work, educational issues and their sense of self (Britzman, 2003; Davis & Sumara, 1999; Middleton & May, 1997). It highlighted the formation of identity as being shaped both by inherited understandings of self as a teacher and insights layered with new understandings derived from new situations (Bjerrum Nielsen, 1996; McLeod & Yates, 2006). This approach brings to the fore the constructed nature of teachers' identity in relation to professional knowledge (MacLure, 1993; Stronach, et al., 2002).

The research developed the argument that early career teachers' professional knowledge and identity form as they negotiate multiple discourses encountered in a range of socio-cultural contexts and in educational policy. In New Zealand and elsewhere in the world, these discourses are dominated by an equity agenda juxtaposed with an environment of accountability controls.

Negotiating discourses of social justice, equality and difference

Aroha is a young Māori teacher working in a school with a predominance of non-Māori (or Pākehā) students and staff. Her narrative illustrates the ways in which she sees herself positioned by others in the school because of her 'Māoriness' and gender, and the ways in which her experiences, and her own positioning, in terms of multiple subjectivities, contributes to her identity work as a Māori, woman teacher. An analysis is presented here of Aroha's professional knowledge and identity formation in a culturally and socially situated context and illuminates ways in which multiple and shifting perspectives are powerful resources in the shaping of professional knowledge and identity (MacLure, 1993).

⁴ Aroha, whose reflections are the focus of this paper, was not known to me prior to this study and was not approached directly by me. For a more detailed discussion of debates and ethical considerations associated non-Māori researchers, such as myself, carrying out research involving Māori participants and how I managed the tensions and dilemmas, see Patrick (2007). Also see Smith (1999, 2005) and Bishop and Glynn (1992) for Māori perspectives on this.

Aroha's narrative statements illustrate something of what it is like for Māori teachers to be caught between the contradictions of school/educational policies and goals related to the Treaty of Waitangi⁵ and the provision of effective education for Māori pupils. She also expresses something of what it is like as a Māori teacher in a predominantly Pākehā school. Her narrative speaks of the "Othering" attitudes of colleagues, their lack of understanding of Treaty of Waitangi principles and obligations in relation to the education of Māori pupils, their resistance to addressing equity policies in practice, and a power imbalance based on the ethnicity between the teaching and management staff.

Sense-making

In my observation as a teacher and teacher union delegate in New Zealand, Māori teachers are frequently called on by non-Māori colleagues to provide advice on, or solve their 'problems' with Māori pupils. This is rarely recognised as an additional professional responsibility, so these teachers often have increased workloads compared to their (also overworked) Pākehā colleagues. Furthermore, Māori teachers often lead time-consuming extra-curricular programmes for cultural, language and sporting groups, which frequently involve touring with pupils throughout New Zealand and abroad, and contributing to school-wide ceremonies that require Māori protocols:

That's a lot of extra time, ... you know, family visits, pōwhiri⁶, you know (Interview Two).

This experience of Māori teachers is similar to that of Indigenous Australian teachers discussed in a study by Santoro and Reid (2006), who also had increased expectations placed on them by schools to solve Indigenous pupils' 'problems'. In her first year, Aroha chose to say 'no' to taking on such additional responsibilities. While she seemed initially to resist being placed in this role, by her second year she was part of a small group of Māori teachers who were (almost by default) responsible for educating non-Māori staff in how to be effective with Māori pupils. This appears to have been a response to the expectations of school management that the Māori teachers would carry out this work in addition to their normal workload and, because of the cultural make-up of the school, there was particular pressure on just a few Māori teachers:

In terms of culturally [my school] has a high European rate. There are only about 170 Māori students there⁷, and three Samoan students. And they recognise the fact that our Māori students aren't achieving, and so they're trying to put in a system where there's that support there, but there's only three Māori teachers up there—two guys and me, you know (Interview Two).

Aroha expresses a sense of powerlessness in that she feels she has no choice, but also a sense of ambivalence at the essentialist assumption underpinning her school management's attitude toward Māori students' achievement and Māori staff.

Early career Māori teachers face a number of specific tensions and dilemmas. From my reading of Aroha's narrative, the school's management makes the assumption that everyone involved (including Aroha) wants to improve Māori achievement. To be fair, the senior management team is highly conscious of the expectation that they need to

⁵ The Treaty of Waitangi was signed in 1840 between Indigenous Māori tribes and the British Crown. While New Zealand does not have a constitution, this treaty serves as a founding document and impacts on all legislation and policy including the educational curriculum and guidelines.

⁶ A *pōwhiri* is a traditional welcome.

⁷ This is, nevertheless, significant in a school of approximately 900 pupils.

meet mandated equity standards⁸ and they are also likely to be concerned for their pupils' success and keen to ensure that Māori achievement is raised within their school. Yet they are also happy to hand over responsibility to this group of teachers to implement the school's plan, with what appears to be only limited consultation about what form that plan might take:

We've had a lot of talk, but no-one's come to us directly to see what can be done ... our principal wrote our objectives for this year, and we're supposed to do all these P[rofessional] D[evelopment] sessions with the staff and we've been given no PD time (Interview Two).

However, less thought appears to have gone into the time, resources and commitment involved in implementing the suggestions proposed to achieve the management goals. The group asked for time to develop the professional development programme and for a Māori dean position to be created:

We hadn't been officially approached [about doing the PD]. We just had it chucked at us. What would be your thoughts and views? And we're like, that's bloody fantastic, you know, cos that's a step forward in raising the achievement rate for our students—that's awesome. However, don't expect we'll be doing it for love. You make sure you give us the time that we're allowed and money.

We had submitted a proposal for a Māori dean, but we're getting all the usual runabout, you know, who's going to do it; you know, what's going to be the role, blah, blah, blah. We're just like, look there's a need there. Give us the "yes" and we'll sort out the details, you know ... we haven't heard back from them (Interview Two).

Schools and teachers face a dilemma, discussed by Scott (1994) because in order to achieve equitable outcomes in terms of the academic achievement of traditionally 'disadvantaged' pupils (in this case the school's Māori pupils as identified by the Ministry of Education and school policies), it must target that particular group. This potentially leads to the pupils, and Māori staff involved, being 'Othered' because of this classification and the presumed 'deficiencies' of students who are thus categorised. Delegating responsibility of this matter to the Māori staff assumes their affinity with the Māori pupils. Yet, while these teachers may well be committed to similar goals as suggested in the above quote (and may, indeed, have the skills and knowledge to achieve them), they face further professional and personal challenges. Māori teachers are singled out from their colleagues and given additional work that involves potential confrontation with their peers:

So, culturally, I think our school's got a lot of work to do. And the staff members as well. Cos, last year when we had bicultural sessions and we were practising Māori pronunciation, you get all the groans from the staff, you know, er, how useful is this going to be in maths, or this doesn't apply in science. So, you're banging your head against a wall with them. No wonder it's going to be hard for us to reach the kids.

One thing the bicultural committee came up with—one idea, was ... cos we have Year 9⁹ nohos¹⁰, where the Year 9 students stay overnight at the

⁸ These standards occur in several policy documents and guidelines for schools, and a school's performance is evaluated against such standards. A more detailed analysis of these can be found in Patrick (2007).

⁹ Year 9 in New Zealand is equivalent to Year 8 in Victoria and is the first of five years of secondary schooling.

marae. So we thought we should have a staff noho. At the beginning of the year, we go on to the marae and we do stuff, then we can meet some of our literacy and learning objectives, blah, blah, blah, and then the next day we could go for a staff trip somewhere—boost morale and that. So, we got this idea, we put it together and we went back to our departments to submit to them what support there would be. Science said, look, not relevant at all, not helpful. Maths, yeah, it's okay. So, if we're not getting the support from staff...

The majority of the staff said, nah, not interested, not if we have to do Māori things. Okay, when [the principal] asks us whether we have met our objectives, we'll go, no, and here's why (Interview Two).

This situation highlights one of the pressing practical problems in implementing equity policies, which is that in order to address inequities for particular groups, the group must be targeted, thus potentially 'Othering' that group. The narrative also captures the difficult position in which Aroha finds herself—caught between policy and practice, as she negotiates the challenges in education in New Zealand. As such, it offers a further dimension to how teachers balance policy imperatives with day-to-day practices (Stronach et al., 2002).

There is also a sense in Aroha's narrative that she and her colleagues feel undervalued as Māori because they are given no formal power or authority within the school, yet are expected to contribute with no guarantee of improved outcomes. How can they ethically and morally refuse to take on the agenda of the management team and the Government to improve outcomes for Māori students? Yet how can they have any effect, if they have no real power—such as time, status and funding? And how can they work with colleagues who are resistant to the initiatives—colleagues whom they are, in a sense, expected to educate?

The experience described above is significant from a macro, sociological perspective as well as at a more biographical level. Aroha's narrative here came out of interviews conducted during her second year of teaching. In Interview One, she spoke little of being Māori or of particular Treaty of Waitangi or equity issues related to Māori pupils. However, in this narrative (one year later), her identity as Māori is much more to the fore. This suggests that her (somewhat imposed) engagement with the school's goals for Māori has made a significant contribution to her identity work; it also shows how this involves a layering of new inscriptions over existing ones (Bjerrum Nielsen, 1996). I now turn to Aroha's work in relation to identity categories—ethnicity, gender and teaching discipline.

Self-making

Aroha appears to be negotiating between being 'a teacher' and being 'a Māori teacher' and the similar and different responsibilities that each of these identities brings. As Stronach et al. (2002) and Scott (1994) argue, identity is not singular and is cut across by difference and contested affiliations. Therefore we need to examine the ways in which ethnicities, gender, profession and teaching discipline, for example, intersect and the dilemmas this generates in the formation of professional identity.

¹⁰ A *noho marae* is a residential workshop that takes place on a marae (a cultural meeting place) and is often hosted by local Māori. There is usually a focus on the particular interests of the group(s) present. Local history is shared and discussions/debates take place about such things as identity, language, culture, current issues related to the Treaty of Waitangi or the particular interest of the guests. It is intended to be an open and honest time of learning about oneself and others.

While identity categories are embodied in an individual and may or may not conflict, multiple identity categories may compete politically for primacy (Ladson-Billings, 2004). In this instance, the policy dilemma faced by Aroha and her Māori colleagues creates, in turn, a dilemma for her about her sense of who and how she 'is' as a teacher. This identity dilemma is troubling because she has been marked as 'Māori' and therefore different from the Pākehā 'norm'. This does give her some authority and she gains respect within the group that she is working, as well as from some colleagues outside this group. However, at the same time, she expresses the need to be respected and included as a member of the wider group of teachers—and not only as a Māori teacher known primarily by her 'difference' and being 'Other'.

It's a bit hard, because my role up there is split in two, because they bring in a Māori perspective, really. And I'm the only Māori female up there, so they've been talking about my role there. As a Māori teacher, I'm meant to be a role model for the Māori girls at [the school], but nothing definite has come to me. It's everything I hear around me, you know. ... but then I have very little to do with a lot of the Māori girls, cos I don't get very many coming into my [subject] areas. So I push that aside and I just concentrate on teaching the kids that are in my classroom (Interview Two).

In this extract, Aroha specifically identifies a number of subject categories related to ethnicity, gender and 'the professional'—Māori, Māori woman, teacher and so forth. For Aroha, by having bestowed upon her the role of 'Māori woman role model for Māori girls', a further dimension of difference was added, forcing her to consider taking on the role of 'woman as carer' as part of her identity work.

Aroha also points out that, although she works in an academically oriented humanities curriculum area where she has little contact with Māori students—in her school, fewer Māori students take such academic subjects—senior management still assume that she is the right person to improve outcomes for the school's Māori students, simply because she is, essentially, Māori. She is also identified, being the one Māori woman on the staff, as the role model for Māori girls. This situation highlights the multiple identity categories in play as Aroha tries to negotiate becoming and being a teacher.

Aroha is profoundly ambivalent about being 'Othered', about being positioned as a role model, about management practices and motivations, and about the policies and their impact on teaching and learning in the school. These matters are all fundamentally connected to identity processes—to formulating a sense of self as well as a sense of professional identity. At the same time, she is prepared to work with colleagues to enable them to recognise Māori knowledge as part of the mix of valid and valued knowledges in the school. She understands the moral and ethical reasons for this debate over the last 20 or so years—and she wants to support and collaborate with peers whom she respects.

Interviewer: So do teachers come to you all the time with, "I've got the Māori kid in my class, what do I do?"

Aroha: Not so much, basically because I've put out there that I don't think I'm qualified or experienced enough to deal with what those problems are. I know our HOD of Māori gets lumped with a lot of it. And when he comes to me and asks for help, I give it because I like him. I've got a lot of time for him and he's loaded with a lot of work (Interview One).

The excerpt above, and the one that follows, are from the first year of teaching when Aroha felt able to set her limits and boundaries clearly. She also acknowledged the advantages of her providing a Māori perspective in her teaching:

Well, for [my senior class], cos we're doing the [New Zealand] topic, me being Māori has helped a lot, in terms of giving a Māori view, but because my grandfather is English, so I'm still maintaining the European view as well (Interview One).

Nevertheless, by referring to her English heritage, she also points out that identity cannot be simply defined by one aspect of a person's cultural or ethnic background. This illustrates how a teacher's professional self can mobilise discrepant identities (Stronach et al., 2002).

In her second year of teaching, Aroha was much more outspoken about the way she had been positioned by school management and also more critical of the resistance and ignorance of some of her colleagues. Thus, in Interview Two, Aroha more readily volunteered her views about being Māori and about addressing political issues in her teaching with her students. In the following extract, however, she identifies her engagement with societal issues as being part of her role as a humanities teacher (rather than her identity as Māori):

As a [humanities] teacher, like, all those things [societal issues] do impact on ... especially like with [one of my classes], I've got quite a few kids who like to debate. So they'll come in and go, miss, can we discuss today about the hiko¹¹. What are they marching for? What do they really want? Okay, we'll talk about that. Okay what do you know? What do you think they're marching about? I mean I didn't know, myself, that much. So, in that respect, I don't mind taking the time out (Interview Two).

She appears to brush off this engagement with Māori issues as something she does as a matter of course (and something she does not normally engage with). However, a closer reading of this extract suggests that she is taking a more political stand by choosing to explore important cultural and political issues in contemporary New Zealand. While the issues she faces—such as school management's assumption that, as Māori, she can best address the school's equity targets—bring to the fore a number of identity questions for her, at the same time her identity work enables her articulate the issues themselves. That is, she is making sense of herself as Māori and as a teacher as she explains and makes sense of the context in which she lives and works. So, her identity and the issues are being constructed in a kind of dialogue with each other.

Concluding thoughts

This study of early career teachers' knowledge and identity formation highlights a number of points about teacher thinking and teachers' work. This paper presents an example from the narrative of one teacher. The discussion has shown how Aroha negotiates a particular context with a powerful equity agenda and the effect of accountability standards on her professional practice—that is, pressures on Indigenous Māori teachers, the equity and difference dilemma, power and powerlessness playing out in schools, and the positioning of teachers in relation to gender, ethnicity and other dimensions of difference.

This analysis illustrates how teacher professional knowledge and identity formation can be used to understand how important issues in education play out in practice. It also highlights how issues, policies and practices contribute to professional knowledge and

¹¹ A *hiko* is a politically motivated "long march" to parliament, in this case related to the introduction of a parliamentary act that seriously impacts on Māori customary rights and access to the seabed and foreshore.

identity formation, and how such an approach to this analysis takes account of the instability of knowledge.

An important outcome of this study was uncovering the complexity of new teachers' thinking about their work. I have attempted to position new teachers such as Aroha, not as naïve or deficient, but as professionals who theorise multiple, competing discourses of social justice as they construct their teaching identities in the classroom. Thus, learning to teach is a not linear or regimented process, but dynamic especially when encountering ideas about (in)justice and equity.

Teachers continually negotiate competing political and conceptual debates about social justice, equity and difference, and this negotiation is central to the formation of professional knowledge and its enactment in their daily lives. Further, professional identity forms in an ongoing, uneven and fluid manner and is socially and discursively situated/embedded. Thus how teachers engage with the culture and values of their work environment is integral to professional knowledge and identity formation. At the same time, their sense of identity shapes how they engage with school policy and practices.

These findings suggest the need for teacher educators, policymakers and schools to take account of complexity of teacher learning and to reposition early career teachers as having something valuable to contribute to the profession. They also indicate the importance of teachers examining their own identity positioning in relation to their work with pupils from diverse backgrounds.

As highlighted in this paper, in order to achieve equity goals schools and teacher educators need to find approaches that reduce resistance and increase commitment and teacher engagement with what such goals mean for them and their pupils in practice. Teachers need critical understandings of contemporary and traditional debates about diversity and equity (including policy) and to be able to deconstruct and reframe knowledge, intelligence and difference.

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