

# **Who am I? Why am I here? Teachers losing their professional identity and commitment during challenging times**

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## **Abstract**

With ongoing concerns in England regarding teacher recruitment and retention, one challenge for government and school leaders is to foster commitment to the profession.

Professional identities and career phases influence teacher commitment, and while previous studies have focused on developing a professional identity in early career, relatively fewer studies examine how teachers sustain their professional identity and commitment over time. Stemming from a PhD study, which explores the development of identity across a teaching career, this paper explores the experiences of three teachers working in different career phases and the relationship between times when they have lost their sense of identity and the ensuing decline in commitment.

Analysis reveals that, during challenging times, teachers in all three stages of their career teachers can lose their sense of identity and experience a decline in their commitment to the school they are working in or to the teaching profession as a whole.

## **Introduction**

The importance of individual teachers in raising standards in schools is increasingly acknowledged by researchers and policy makers (Johansson et al. 2014; Nye et al. 2004; Rivkin et al. 2005; Department for Education, 2010), and with ongoing concerns in England regarding teacher recruitment (Ross and Hutchings, 2003) and retention (National Audit Office, 2016), it would be prudent for policy makers to consider factors associated with teacher commitment.

A large scale study conducted by Day et al. (2007), explored teacher identity in relation to teacher effectiveness, and discovered that teachers' identities and career phases influence their sense of wellbeing and their commitment to the profession. Most previous research concerning professional identity (Alsup 2006; Kelchtermans and Ballet 2002; Pillen et al. 2013) and commitment (Christopherson et al. 2016,

Darling-Hammond 2003, Smethem 2007) primarily focuses on early career while relatively fewer studies have considered the span of a teaching career.

Stemming from a PhD study, which explores the development of a professional identity across a teaching career, this paper foregrounds the perspective of three primary school teachers to gain an understanding of key factors across their career which have had a negative influence on sustaining a positive professional identity and to what extent these factors impact upon teachers' commitment.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Participants were primary school teachers working in England, who were in early career phase (0 – 7 years), mid-career phase (8 – 23 years) and late career phase (24+ years).

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Informal life history interviews (Goodson, 2008) were conducted with each participant to explore their individual beliefs about teaching and education. In an unstructured conversation teachers talked freely about their own experiences of being at school, and their journey into teaching. Teachers then indicated fluctuations in their professional identity over time by mapping critical incidents on a professional timeline (Day et al., 2006) with particular attention being paid to peaks and troughs, and the circumstances which influenced professional identity and commitment in a positive or a negative way. Finally, semi structured interviews were conducted which included questions uniquely tailored to individual participants to develop and refine emerging themes and ideas. In line with the constructivist grounded theory approach data was analysed through coding, constant comparison, and theoretical conceptualizing (Charmaz, 2014).

### **Findings**

Analysis revealed that during challenging times, teachers working in different phases of their career can lose their sense of identity. Each teacher either experienced a decline in their commitment to their role as teacher, the school they were working in or to the teaching profession.

## **Anna – Early Career Phase – Age 25 – NQT – Losing confidence**

Having enjoyed working as a teaching assistant for three years, Anna took the decision to train to be a teacher. She had enjoyed all of her teaching placements during her B.Ed. and by the time she qualified she had received regular positive feedback from her tutors and felt confident in her own ability to teach. In contrast, she felt that the feedback she received during her NQT year had more of a focus on negative aspects of her teaching practice.

***Because during university they say ‘we want you to do this, this and this’ and if you do it they go ‘brilliant’ and ‘you could do this a little bit next time’. Whereas here it’s ‘Oh my goodness, you’re rubbish at everything!’***

Anna was made to feel incompetent when the leadership team observed her lessons and the previous positive self-image she held turned into doubt and frustration. Where she had enjoyed showing off her teaching practice to her university tutors, she began to dread being observed in her own classroom.

***They just weren’t encouraging at all. They were very negative. Every observation I’ve ever had I’ve enjoyed. I’ve loved to show off. But there, I dreaded it. Because I just didn’t know what random thing they would decide to say was wrong.***

During Anna’s NQT year, the previous positive self-image she held diminished and was replaced by self-doubt and frustration.

***I felt like I was a terrible teacher in that school, all the time I was there. And there’s nothing that I could pinpoint, they never said to me that I was rubbish. But they said things like ‘Your marking’s not good enough.’***

Anna felt that her professionalism was being questioned, and although she was working within the schools marking policy guidelines, she felt that her word was not trusted.

***So I’m marking ninety books each night, and they’d say ‘You’ve not marked every piece of work.’ And I said ‘I only have to mark one in depth. The others I’ve given verbal feedback on.’ And they’d say ‘Have you actually given verbal feedback?’***

Although Anna was still committed to a career in teaching, the lack of support from the leadership team meant that she was not committed to the school. As the end of her NQT year approached she made a successful application to teach in another school, and was relieved to reach the end of her first year.

***I got to my last day and I thought 'I've survived.'***

In retrospect Anna feels annoyed that she was treated unfairly, and that because she was the new teacher in school she had nobody that she could trust to speak to, and no opportunity to voice her concerns. She realised that future career opportunities could potentially be affected if she had complained.

***But I'm still angry. I'm angry because I didn't stand up for myself. It's not like me to not say anything. But there was nobody to go to. There was nothing I could do. And professionally it wouldn't have benefitted me at all to say anything.***

Anna felt that she lost her own identity while she was working at the school, but was optimistic that her new school would enable her to go forward and develop her teaching practice.

***It was a real change of character for me. I just didn't feel like me for the whole year, all the time I was working there, I wasn't me. You know? So now I'm trying to let go.***

### **Katie – MCP – Age 40 - 11 years in teaching – Struggling with work/life balance**

When Katie started her family she worked part time for the first few years. Preferring to have complete responsibility for her own class, along with the financial pressures of a young family and a mortgage, she has now returned to work full time. Katie's two young sons are both primary school age. Although she loves being a teacher, she feels that she is missing out on valuable time with them, and that the demands of planning, marking and other paperwork which has to be done outside of the classroom are invading what should be her family time.

***It is really tough. I leave the house at 7am, so I don't even get to take them to school, because it's a forty minute drive to work. And I get back home between half past five and six normally. And then I'm straight on the computer. And at least one of my weekend days I'll spend working. It's really hard going.***

Whilst Katie is working hard to ensure the children in her class benefit from interesting and engaging lessons, she is faced with feelings of guilt knowing that she is unable to give as much attention to her own children's schoolwork. The feeling that the parents of the children in her class don't value her efforts adds to her frustration.

***I already feel that I neglect a lot of their school stuff, and I do spend a lot of my time working. All day Saturday, normally. And all day Sunday, maybe...It is hard. Because I feel like I'm doing really good stuff for thirty parents who don't actually appreciate what I'm doing, and my own kids are missing out. And that's hard.***

Katie thinks that her children would benefit from seeing her as part of their own school community if she was able to drop her children off and pick them up occasionally.

***I would like to do one pick up and one drop off, because my kids are always saying 'Why do you never come to our school?'***

Katie's relationships outside of school have suffered as she feels a pressure to be seen to be coping with the multiple roles which she has to juggle. Although she realises that perfection in any family home is likely to be a façade, it is clear that she is experiencing a sense of failure.

***I don't go out. I just don't have the energy to go out any more, and I've let a lot of friendships go. Which is sad, but I can't do everything, and I do think there is the expectation on women to be able to have a perfect relationship, and a perfect family, with the perfect job, and the perfect house....and my house gets cleaned properly every six weeks. Like once a half term, because I just think (shrugs).***

There is also a clear impact on her relationship with her husband.

***We just never spend any time together. I'm just so tired. We might make plans, and get my mum to babysit, and then I'll cancel, two hours before. Because I can't be bothered to get in [from work] on a Friday night to get dressed and go out again.***

Although Katie acknowledges that she has no time for other activities outside of school, even those she feels would improve her wellbeing, she accepts the

unmanageable workload as being integral to the doing a good job for the children in her class.

***I don't even have time to exercise or anything. And I know that would probably really help with my stress levels, but I just can't be bothered. I work so hard, and I want to work hard, because I enjoy my job, and being with the [school] kids.***

Having no time for the other roles means that Katie is losing any identity which does not relate to being a teacher.

***But I just don't know where Miss stops and where Katie begins. It all bleeds in too much really.***

As Katie finds it increasingly difficult to find the time to be a parent, a friend, and a partner, she considers a career change, but she feels that she has limited options. Her commitment is reduced but it seems likely that, for now at least, she will remain in the profession.

***I keep saying I won't stick it out, and that I'm going to leave and find something else, but I think I'm trapped in a way now.***

### **Alan – Late Career Phase – Age 51 – 28 years in teaching – Challenges of headship**

Throughout Alan's teaching career his confidence had continued to grow, and he had progressed through various leadership roles, from classroom teacher to phase leader, into deputy headship. Alan had positive relationships with his own head teacher and it her support that had encouraged him to embark on the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH).

Alan was excited to embark on his first headship, which was in an area transitioning from three tier to two tier education, and meant that he would oversee the shift from a First School to a Primary School system. For the first two years he was leading the existing first school, along with the appointment of a staff team for the new primary school, while overseeing the construction of a school building.

***I got the headship. I started, and obviously I had to be involved in everyone reapplying for their jobs again...Then the roller coaster ride here over the next***

***few years, was the build up to preparation for the action on site, and working with architects and all of that, so we had lots of consultation with the staff about what they wanted on a wish list and things.***

A change of government meant that Alan's careful planning and his vision for a new school were unexpectedly quashed.

***And then everything got held up, because the local authority froze all of the new builds, because the Building Schools for the Future program was frozen by the [new] government. So they just stopped all movement.***

Following an intensely stressful period of negotiation during which the future of the school was unknown, the school was granted a reprieve, and the build was allowed to continue.

With the responsibility of an existing and a new school Alan found it increasingly difficult to relax, and as project manager for the new build he felt a responsibility to ensure that things were progressing throughout the summer months.

***Even on holidays my mind would always be somewhere else, and particularly when we were building up towards the new school build etc... I was taking phone calls on the campsite. I had to be contactable, because if I wasn't everything would've stopped until I was back after two weeks. And that wasn't something that I was prepared to let happen for the staff.***

During this period, one high point for Alan was his first Ofsted inspection as a head teacher, in which he felt his hard work was rewarded.

***Everybody was ready for it, the data was good, and we came out as a Good and Outstanding school. So it was a high to build on, alongside the constant up and downs of building a new school.***

Once the new school was up and running Alan had to take leave from school, as he recovered from undergoing hip surgery. During this period the chair of governors stepped down from his role, resulting in a new chair and a different leadership body. Alan immediately felt the relationship between him and the governing body change. Where he had previously felt supported he began to feel that all of his decisions were being questioned and undermined and he was constantly having to justify each decision with written reports and presenting relevant data.

***And things went wrong then. In one form or another, and I had...I had a breakdown really...And I had been under constant pressure from these new governors, and I felt that all I was doing was writing reports for them. I wasn't leading the school forward, I was generating reports. And I was being questioned on leadership etcetera.***

This turn in events marked a critical point in Alan's head ship. Where previously he had a clear vision for the school, the staff, and the pupils, he began to questioning his own ability to lead a school.

***And I got onto the carpark one Monday morning, and I just thought 'What am I doing? I don't even know why I'm here anymore. I'm not doing headship, I'm doing something else, but I don't know what that is.'***

The relentless pressures of head ship had left Alan exhausted. His resilience was ebbing and his confidence receded. He began to question his role. His sense of identity, along with his commitment to the profession, was lost. Alan made the decision to leave the school.

***On reflection I was probably approaching burnout, because it had been such an intense period. But there hadn't been a slow regression, it was just BAM! And it just hit me. ...And then my whole identity had gone. Anyway, the trust had gone. And I decided that I could no longer work there.***

***I'd lost my faith in the teaching profession. I'd lost my own identity.***

## **Discussion**

As an early career phase teacher, Anna was losing self-confidence due to constant negative feedback for the leadership team. The positive comments she had received during her university placements continued to motivate her to develop and become more effective in her practice. Anna decided to transfer to a different school, in the hope that she will receive the support and encouragement she needs, as she still feels committed to becoming a good teacher even though she is not committed to the school (situated commitment).

As an established and successful late career phase teacher, leading an existing first school, while having sole responsibility for the build of a new primary school, proved to be all consuming and the strain meant that Alan's resilience was low. When an

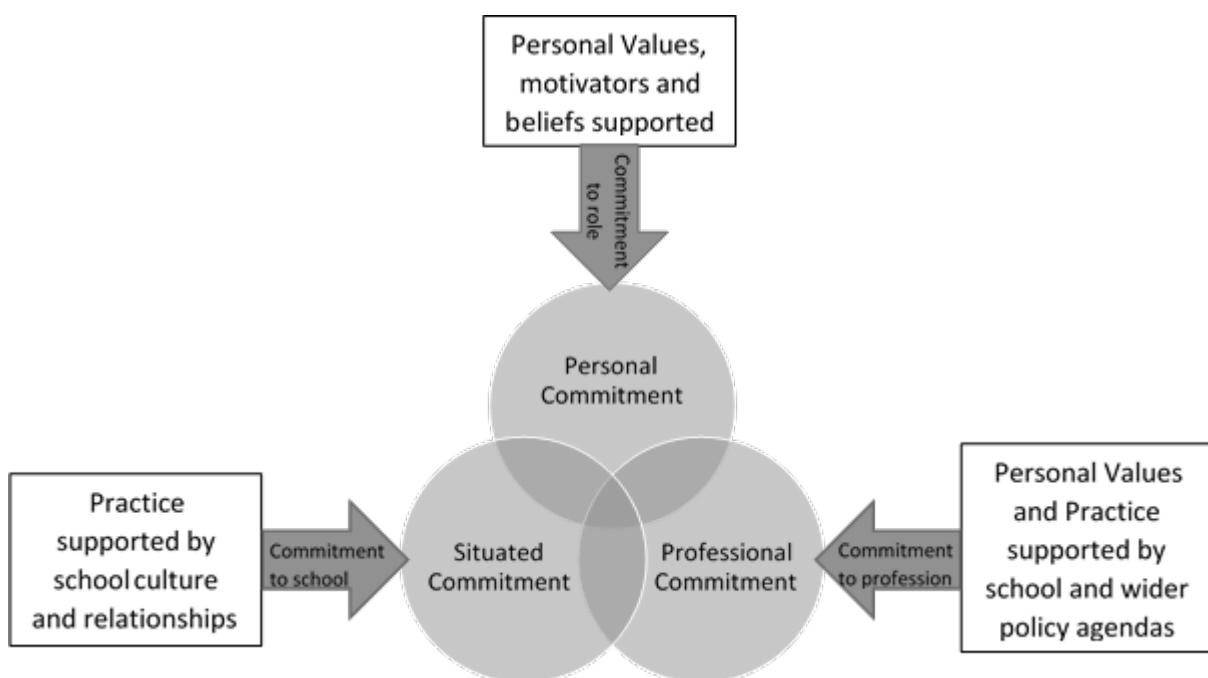


overzealous governor began to undermine and question his leadership decisions he felt too exhausted to defend his actions against the constant criticism. He began to feel self-doubt, and to question the role he would play in his vision for the school. As a result he lost his professional identity, and along with it his commitment to the profession (professional commitment).

Katie still enjoys her work and wants to be the best she can be for the children she teaches. Working in her mid-career phase she considers the time she spends at home working to be essential if she wants to remain as an effective practitioner. Having no time to nurture the important relationships which Katie values outside of school means that being a teacher and having a family may not be sustainable long term. Although she is likely to remain in the profession in the foreseeable future she is losing her identity as an individual and her commitment to teaching is eroding (personal commitment).

The experience of these three teachers suggests that while it is important to consider the professional identity development of beginning teachers, it is equally important to recognise that, during times of challenge, established teachers working in mid and later career phases can also experience difficulties in sustaining a positive professional identity, which has a negative influence on their personal, situated or professional commitment (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Personal, Situated and Professional Commitment



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**Biography (50 words).**

My research interest stems from personal experience of working in many different schools, combined with a curiosity about human development and behaviour across a life span. It explores the development of a teachers' professional identity across a whole career, and its influence on commitment to teaching, within different school contexts.