

Beginning to Teach: A Time for Becoming and Belonging

Cathal de Paor

Mary Immaculate College, Faculty of Education, Limerick, Ireland

Email: cathal.depaor@mic.ul.ie

Abstract—Newly-qualified teachers are required to act as members of a collective teaching body, adhering to the standardised professionalism expected from all teachers in that body. At the same time, they must develop themselves as individual teachers [1]. Induction programmes are available in many countries to help teachers negotiate this time of transition in a teacher's professional life. The support ranges from personal to social to professional. In line with a 'situated learning' perspective, new teachers learn to 'fit in' and adjust to the prevailing school and professional culture [2]. But the newly-qualified teacher (NQT) also needs to actively construct his/her own professionalism, in line with his/her own values, beliefs, needs, etc. This is particularly important from a critical constructivist perspective [3]. This paper draws on a post-observation meeting between a newly-qualified teacher and her mentor. The results show that the NQT is engaged in a process of both belonging and becoming. She must strive to adjust and belong to her new professional community, while also following her own pathway to becoming the kind of teacher she is capable of becoming, thereby realising her potential.

Index Terms—mentoring, newly-qualified teacher, becoming, belonging

I. INTRODUCTION

Teacher education is now seen as being a lifelong process, involving a continuum of the so-called 3Is (initial, induction and in-career). Graduates may leave Initial Teacher Education (ITE) as qualified teachers but becoming a teacher is seen as a process which is lifelong: 'all teachers, even veterans with decades of experience, are continually becoming; we never arrive at a final destination of teacher [4]. In Ireland, for example, the Teaching Council policy has prioritised greater integration between the various phases of the teacher education continuum [5].

Becoming a teacher is seen as a process involving ongoing professional development. Reporting on trends in Australian teacher professional development ten years ago Grundy and Robison refer to teaching as an unfinished profession, where professional development is intrinsic to teaching: 'By its very nature, teaching is never complete, never conquered, always being developed, always changing. Far from signalling some flaw, the

centrality of development to the profession of teaching should be viewed as a badge of honour' [6]. The stages of teacher development show how teachers encounter different kinds of opportunities and challenges in their endeavour to become a teacher over the course of their careers [7], [8]. Working as a teacher is therefore a life time of becoming.

However, in the case of the newly-qualified teacher, there is also another process at work. The NQT faces particular challenges in the early stages of his/her teaching career, needing a range of personal, social and professional support. The challenge for the NQT is to maintain coherence with their existing subjective identities, but also adjust to their role in a new working environment, using their knowledge and skills about teaching.

It is therefore possible to differentiate between two separate processes as NQTs make the transition from college to the workplace. Newly-qualified teachers must strive to belong as colleagues in a new social and professional community, while also not breaking with the identity they have had as a person up to that point. It is a twin process of belonging and becoming that characterises the NQT's journey from life as a student to life as a teacher.

This paper focuses on an NQT undertaking her first year of teaching, because as well as becoming a teacher, she must also contend with belonging, i.e., belonging to a new profession, and to a new school community. Given the many challenges newly-qualified teachers encounter, they provide an interesting case with which to explore the interaction between becoming and belonging.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: BECOMING AND BELONGING

The newly-qualified teacher faces particular challenges in the transition from college to professional life. The 'praxis shock' of beginning teachers arises from personal and professional issues, but also from socialisation in the school and in the profession [9]. When NQTs are confronted with the realities of being a classroom teacher, their conception of teaching and the values that have been inculcated may be challenged. They must now belong to a community in a particular school. But they must also belong as members of a wider professional body, a body whose professionalism is

usually expressed in an agreed set of professional values, standards, and codes of professional conduct. Teachers are individuals but are expected in their professional lives to espouse certain values, and demonstrate the mastery of particular knowledge and skills in a consistent manner. However, the professionalism of teaching, as articulated in the standardised codes of practice may not always correspond to the situated and singular contexts in which teachers' work [10]. In other words, this kind of uniformity and standardisation may not always provide the optimum conditions for the emerging professionalism or professional identity of individual teachers.

As part of their early teaching experience, NQTs are expected to participate in various induction activities and to satisfy various probation requirements. However, there may be a mismatch between the developmental stage of the teacher and the professional requirements at a particular time. As Stumpf and Sonntag have noted, the schedules imposed by these induction and probation systems will not always correspond to the professional development needs and learning trajectory of individual teachers [1]. The way the induction support is organised, and the very notion of induction, suggesting a process of appropriation into a group, may not always seem the best way to cater for the emerging needs of the individual teacher.

In many countries, NQTs have the support of a school-based mentor to help them in this process of transition. There is much guidance available for policy-making on how such mentoring and induction programmes should be organised. For example, the guide for policy-makers published by the European Commission on the establishment of coherent induction programmes identifies four components: a mentoring system; an expert system; a peer system and a self-reflective system [11]. These interlock and are designed to collectively meet the three types of needs which NQTs have: personal, social and professional.

This support must be geared towards helping NQTs meet their immediate needs, while also empowering them to take responsibility for their own learning and professional development over the longer term. While all NQTs have potential, there is no guarantee that this potential can be realised in their professional lives.

Such realisation of potential can be explored further using Rabardel's notion of the 'sujet capable' [12] (capable subject) who has the capacity for action. The 'sujet capable' is enabled to take control of his/her professional journey, and assume responsibility for it. The role of the mentor is very important in this process and can be either enabling or disabling [13].

To develop this further, we can differentiate between two approaches or stances that might characterise the NQT's activity as a new teacher. Productive activity involves simply transformation of the objective world, while constructive activity involves transformation of the person by himself or herself. There are various theories offered to help develop the capacity of the NQT for the latter kind of constructive action, including Schön's

reflective practice [14]. Rabardel himself uses Piaget's 'knowing-in-action,' [15] which explains how people develop schemes of thought for the various activities they undertake. By transforming how we think about an activity, we can transform the activity and ourselves in the process. Piaget's work was developed further by Vergnaud [16] and has given rise to the body of theory for professional development known as 'professional didactics', ('didactique professionnelle'). This promotes the use of reflective practice with the support of a skilled other person. It requires the professional, in this case, the teacher, to detect patterns in his/her activity, to conceptualise it using organisers known as schemes, and to then act on this conceptualisation to change it [17]. In this way, the teacher becomes a 'capable subject,' transforming his/her conceptualisation of the situation in the classroom, and transforming himself/herself in the process. This is how the teacher can realise her potential, and 'become' the teacher that is possible.

But as discussed above, in the process of becoming a teacher, the teacher must also work at connecting with, and belonging to a community of colleagues. This may be at the level of the school or at the level of the teaching body more generally. It can be seen therefore that the work of the school-based mentor needs to support both of these processes. This raises the question as to how the processes of becoming and belonging interact. Can the mentor act so that both processes complement each other? How can teachers be supported in belonging as members of a group, while also developing themselves, and realising their own potential? Or can there be a conflict between these processes? Could the teachers' sense of belonging be at the expense of their on individual becoming?

III. METHODOLOGY

To explore these questions, the paper draws on the author's doctoral research [18], in which teacher induction in France and Ireland were compared. The analysis followed the example of Vinatier, mentioned earlier [13] who used both Vergnaud's theory of conceptual fields [15] and Kerbrat-Orecchioni's interactional linguistics theory [19] in her own work in teacher education.

In the equivalent of teacher induction in France, the 'conseiller pédagogique de circonscription' (CPC), is an associate of the inspector, acting in the role of a mentor, i.e., external to the school. The results being reported here are taken from just one of the post-observation meetings held between a newly-qualified teacher in France and her mentor. (The CPC will be referred to as a mentor for the purposes of the discussion here). On the day in question, the mentor observed the teacher teach a lesson to a class of young children aged 4 and 5. During the post-observation meeting, the teacher and the mentor discuss various aspects of the lesson. This meeting was recorded and later transcribed. The researcher held meetings subsequently with both the teacher and the mentor to discuss their post-observation meeting.

IV. RESULTS

The paper examines the interaction between the processes of belonging and becoming through the use of key extracts. These have been translated into English from the original French transcript and have been re-numbered 1, 2, 3, etc. Some reference is also made to a later interview, identified as A1, between the researcher and the teacher, where she discusses the post-observation meeting and her progress as an NQT more generally.

A. *The Initial Problem: Classroom Management*

The part of the post-observation meeting being singled out for analysis here, focuses on a classroom management issue and the difficulty the teacher has in managing the group work she organises for the children. During the lesson that was observed by the mentor earlier that day, the teacher divided the class into six groups, with each group expected to work at a different station or workshop for a few minutes, completing a task, before then moving on to the next (e.g., writing tasks, language games, working with geometric shapes in mathematics, etc). However, the teacher has difficulty providing the instructions to all the children at the outset and making sure that all groups understand what they have to do. Explaining the requirements of each station to the children while they are all together is not very feasible as it is too much information for the children to process and retain. There is also a difficulty for the children in knowing what they must do in the following station once they are finished the first.

B. *Reconstructing the Problem*

The difficulty is conceived by the teacher as a classroom management issue, but rather than simply attempting to provide a solution to the teacher on this basis, the mentor focuses on the pedagogical aspect, referring to the assessment of the children's learning. Here, we can see the teacher has a certain notion of the teacher she wants to be, i.e., someone who masters the skill of classroom management, but the mentor disturbs that by problematizing the opportunities the children have for discussing their learning, even as they undertake the group work. He (the mentor) therefore tries to explore the classroom management problem and the lack of time, from the point of view of what the children are learning. He suggests that she give more time to the children to discuss what they did in group work (Extract 1), adding that this will require her to think again about her classroom organisation. He therefore avoids offering ready-made solutions that she might apply without having thought more fully and deeply about the pedagogical issue of the children's learning.

It is obvious from her reaction that the teacher is not convinced about the usefulness of the suggestion, reminding the mentor that there is little time available in class for such diversions, and that implementing this idea will require even further time, something the teacher has already very little of.

- Mentor: [...] Well, perhaps at the end of a workshop session, for example, out of the three,

you present one or two here. That helps to verify what they have done, and then it helps the other children who will have to do it after (hmm) and therefore, you will no longer need to repeat the instructions [...] Little by little, they get the hang of it, talk about it, at the same time, it helps them, it helps you to assess what they have done and then it also helps the others learn (yes, but, yes) but it requires an organisation, and it's you who must find that.

- Teacher: And then we have to manage the time well, as appropriate, to have this time for recapping on the activity, the time flies. [...]

But, it must be said that in addition to challenging the teacher's thinking in this way (that teaching is not simply about classroom management, and that children need opportunities to talk about their learning), the mentor also provides some concrete suggestions for managing the movement of the groups between the work stations (Extract 2). Again however, the teacher gives a reminder that a solution for managing this kind of group/station teaching is still outstanding ('Yes, a solution must be found'), which could be interpreted as a rebuke that the mentor is not really helping her with his contributions.

- Mentor: It could be a clock [...] that signifies that it's time to go to the next workshop, if one has finished or, because there are times when they are in a workshop and they can do it several times.
- Teacher: Exactly, that's the risk because if I say to them, when you have finished the activity in that workshop, you can go somewhere else, then there will be some who are going to mess it up, and who are going to leave straight away. Yes, a solution must be found.

This gives insight into some of the frustration felt on the part of the teacher, which she further explained some weeks later in a separate interview with the researcher. She explained that she would like to be a lot more organised in her teaching and that her greatest difficulty was the lack of time. Her priority for her first year of teaching was to take precise steps, towards a steady improvement in her teaching. For this reason, she felt initially that the meeting with the mentor was not sufficiently focused, and that it, 'went in every direction' (A1, 44). It is primarily concrete some ideas and strategies that she wants, rather than the lesson analysis. In other words, she prefers to see the mentor in the role of giver of advice: 'the analysis is good, it is good because it is necessary to analyse what has happened, but what one needs above all are solutions' (A1, 93). A more advisory-type approach would, she felt have helped her deal with the 'pedagogical liberty' ('liberté pédagogique') she has. The amount of choice was daunting and destabilising, as she was free, in line with the national curriculum, to achieve the children's learning objectives in whatever way she decided, i.e., using whatever content, approaches and methodologies she deems appropriate.

However, she was also able to recognise the wisdom of the mentor's approach, as he tried to challenge her to think in new ways about her practice. She explained with

some satisfaction that, at this stage, when using the group/station teaching, she has succeeded in giving more time to each group to recap and report back on what they did, something she had resisted when the mentor first proposed it.

- Teacher: So, what I am managing to do better are the recaps on the activities. Meaning, not to be just taken up with the production of activity, because, you put in place a task where the child works on something, but the important thing, in a big group or a small group, is the review, that the child can retell what he has done.

This had the benefit, as the mentor had explained when initially proposing it, of developing the children's language, consolidating their learning, and also helping to explain to the children from the other groups what they were required to do at the different stations. She reflected how her thinking with regard to the use of the post-observation meetings was evolving.

V. DISCUSSION

The results provide a useful basis for examining the role of belonging and becoming in the teacher's first year of practice, and how the mentor strives to develop both processes. He is keen that the teacher would make her own choices, 'work it out for herself,' and develop her own practice, 'becoming' her own teacher. He sets out therefore to enlarge the teacher's capacity for action by mobilising professional knowledge that was not within her initial construction of the problem, i.e., by reframing the problem and focusing on it as a pedagogical issue, rather than simply as a classroom management issue. By so doing, the mentor tries to help her further along the road of 'becoming' a teacher.

At the same time, he offers some concrete solutions that may help her overcome some immediate problems. This is the kind of practical knowledge that experienced teachers would be expected to have in abundance, and to share with novice teachers. The teacher's preference for such solutions can be understood in the context of her need to belong, i.e., manage her classroom the way other colleagues do. Developing this sense of belonging would enable her to regain control in her new professional environment and to overcome the instability associated with being a newly-qualified teacher.

This disorientation in the teacher's own identity can also be related to the teaching profession more generally, given certain challenges it has faced in recent years. Malet [20] writes that in today's world where the institution of teaching, like so many other institutions is fragmenting (for example, maintaining appropriate pay and conditions and safeguarding standards of teacher preparation), it is all the more important that teachers can create and construct for themselves their own professional identity. Given this double instability, i.e., at the level of the individual teacher (subjective), and at the level of the profession (institutional), Malet advocates 'modalités réflexives complexes', which could be translated as complex reflection. An example of such reflection is the use of teacher autobiography in order to

find a stable and coherent identity in a context of permanent change. The work of Stronach *et al.* [21] also favours taking account of the contextual nuances of professional identities, emphasising the situated, local and indeterminable nature of professional practice and the importance of confidence, diversity and creativity. Such a subjectification of professional identity favours singularity and ipseity, where the mentor and teacher focus on how the teacher can become and belong as a professional.

The results show the important role of the mentor in both these processes. As we've seen, in problematizing the teacher's initial analysis of the lesson, and in promoting a more sophisticated and critical reflection, the mentor succeeds in mobilising pedagogical knowledge to a greater extent in the conversation that envisaged by the teacher. Although the teacher saw the problem as being one of classroom management, the mentor succeeds in relating it to language development and to the assessment of their learning. After some initial resistance, the teacher changes her conception of the problem, incorporating pedagogical knowledge into how she analyses her practice, thereby increasing her 'pouvoir d'action'.

The role of the mentor is crucial in enabling the teacher to arrive at this new more advanced understanding of her practice, emphasising her becoming a more competent teacher and in realising greater potential. But this also helps the teacher's belonging. It is a more demanding kind of belonging, i.e., a belonging among the group of teachers who can think critically about their practice in sophisticated ways.

VI. CONCLUSION

Although the mentor featured in this example was not school-based (but rather an externally-based associate of the Inspector), the analysis shows how school-based mentors could use lesson observation to promote greater criticality in the reflection NQTs undertake on their practice. The mentor is a peer and represents the professional community to which the NQT wishes to belong. The mentor can strengthen that belonging by providing personal (e.g., encouragement) and social knowledge (e.g., school organisation and culture), but can also play a crucial role in mobilising professional knowledge related to pedagogy, learning and assessment.

While a situated learning perspective helps new teachers 'fit in' and adjust to the prevailing school culture as presented by Lave and Wenger [2], the newly-qualified teacher (NQT) also needs to actively construct his/her own professional identity. This is particularly important from a critical constructivist perspective so that new teachers are encouraged to confidently ask questions, of themselves, and of the prevailing culture and received wisdom they encounter [3]. The analysis above shows how mobilising professional knowledge is an important part of that process of professional construction for the individual teacher.

This can in turn play a role in the development of the teaching profession more generally [22]. School culture may become stagnant, leading to practices which may

need to be challenged. It is therefore not just the new teacher that is involved in a process of ‘becoming.’ The profession of teaching (whether in individual schools or at the level of the professional body) also needs to ‘become’ and the newly-qualified teacher has a role to play in supporting that. It underlines how the often-used metaphor of climbing a stairs to represent teacher induction [23], may not quite capture the interactive and dynamic nature of becoming and belonging for teachers.

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Dr Cathal de Paor is Senior Lecturer and Director of Continuing Professional Development in the Faculty of Education, Mary Immaculate College (MIC), Ireland. Prior to this, he worked for the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and before that, as a primary school teacher. His main research interest is teacher education, professional development and programme evaluation. He holds a PhD in Education from the University of Nantes, focused on the induction of newly-qualified teachers in France and Ireland.