

Verbal and Visual Strategies of Teachers' Work on Identity

Abstract

The paper describes qualitative research which studied six teachers from their professional beginnings to the present position of an experienced – expert – teacher. The research method used is life story, through which the teacher's career is reconstructed. The key research question is: What strategies of work on identity did a teacher use to become an expert teacher? The most important motor of change and particularly of a teacher's development was his/her decision and commitment to the development of his/her identity (Pittard, 2003). Snow and Anderson (1987) labelled this process as work on one's identity. I will discuss only verbal and visual strategies, which the teacher uses to influence the environment at school in general (verbal distancing, gossip, and strategy of uniqueness). The paper concludes with a discussion of how necessary the verbal and visual strategies directed towards the school space are for the teacher's professional identity. Had they no power, teachers could not influence decision-making processes.

Keywords: *expert teacher, identity, professional development, work on identity*

1. Expert Teachers and Identity

There are various theories describing the teacher's development and progress. They study, e.g., changes in the teacher's interpersonal styles throughout his/her career (Wubbels, Levy, 1993), the development of the teacher's professional career (Foley, 2004), the constitution of various evolutionary phases in the teacher's life (Steffy et al., 2000), development of schools as professional learning communities

(Novotný at al., 2014), the development of skills and knowledge (Minstrell, & Anderson, 2002). The presented research argues that the basic driving force of the teacher's development is his/her work on his/her professional identity by various strategies directed towards the classroom space¹ as well as the school space.

According to Berliner (1987), an expert's work performance is highly qualified and it deals with issues of educational reality with great precision; for this reason, expert methods and actions could be included in teacher training courses. This text views an expert as a qualified, experienced, and good teacher who is also a professional authority for those around him/her. Thus, the expert status of the teacher is socially defined through identification in the environment; this is why we aimed to study how the teacher can actively build his/her expert identity. According to Snow and Anderson (1987), their professional identity is imputed to others in order to see them as social objects. It is not proclamations, but identity is imputed according to information on external look, behaviour of individual, his talks and place and time of this behaviour. The research showed how common this story-telling about a particular teacher is, on the one hand (it is the core of social interactions among teachers), and on the other hand that it is always **mediated**.

The analysed teachers use strategies of work on their professional identity directed towards the school space in order to implement changes and influence their professional identity. Social interactions in the school space have a substantial influence on the teacher as well as his/her identity: at the beginning, teachers are ascribed the professional identity of a beginning teacher by those around them (management, colleagues, parents, and pupils), which entitles him/her to make mistakes and lack perfect qualifications for his/her profession. This identity is merely temporary, the carriers of this identity are aware of that and they make a decision to work on their progressive teacher identity and then an expert teacher identity employing strategies directed towards the school space.

In order to be able to describe these strategies, I decided to focus on school micropolitics, i.e., to study the use or strategic use of power in a given organization. According to Blase (1989) there are two basic purposes of using power in a school environment: effort to gain influence (pro-active orientation) and protection of one's self and the group of teachers one belongs to (reactive orientation). I am speaking about politics because at school negotiations also take place: we can find there pretence, hypocrisy, gossiping and creation of power alliances. Kelchtermans

¹ I do not deal in this text with a strategy of work on identity directed towards the classroom, but I consider it a part of the development of the teacher's professional identity (cf., Lefstein et al., 2013).

and Ballet (2002) define the teacher's micropolitical action as "such action that is directed towards establishing, protection, and reconstruction of required working conditions" (p. 108).

A micropolitical perspective of school then enables to view teachers' actions as strategies or tactics leading to securing interests of individuals and groups. This means that the teacher's power and authority in class is such as his/her pupils give them, and similarly the teacher's power at school is such as other actors at the school grant them.

All analysed teachers were aware of the way their colleagues speak about them and how they are seen by them. In short, teachers observe what professional identity they are ascribed by those around them.

2. Research Methodology

This study is based on three-year empirical research where I used a qualitative approach (biographic and narrative design, with the use of life history) to study professional and personal career of an experienced teacher, an **expert teacher**. The research question was: What strategies of work on identity did a teacher use to become an expert teacher?

The use of narrative and biographical design is justifiable because the analysed teachers are experts with long-time professional careers, which cannot be separated from their personalities.² In my view, narrative research is suitable for capturing the complexity of the teacher's work and his/her behaviour in the classroom (Lyons, Laboskey 2002), which is often complicated and unpredictable. To identify an expert, the following characteristics were chosen as the starting point: sufficient qualifications, minimum 10 years of practice, the head teacher's and colleagues' recommendations, long-term excellence of pupils (for more about an expert teacher, cf., Švaříček, 2007). I studied 6 teachers, 3 of whom were teachers at Czech primary schools and 3 at the lower secondary school.

Biographical interviews with expert teachers, observations of the teacher's in-class performance and school, a biographical questionnaire, and interviews with other actors at the school (head teacher and colleagues) were chosen as the main

² Narrative research on the teaching profession brings an insight into the profession itself (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998) as well as the teacher's work in the classroom (cf., Schratz et al, 2013).

data collection method.³ The aim of switching between methods was to let the teachers look back, reflect upon their career, and motivate them to thematize their experiences.⁴

3. Verbal and Visual Strategies of Teachers' Work on Identity

Experts teachers are ascribed an expert's social identity on the grounds of attributes (external manifestations) of the previous teacher's identity: working several hours overtime every day, but at school, not at home, dedication to the teaching profession, discussing new methods with colleagues, participation in activities beyond duties following from the teacher's role (interest groups, projects, theatre, computer room, study room), participation in seminars and courses in further education, professional literature on one's desk and permanent expressing of a desire for better teaching methods. The existence of **audience** leads to the teacher's different behaviour: the teacher assumes an expert's identity in front of the audience, although he/she does not believe to have reached the expert level in his/her development. Pupils and their parents are inseparable audiences of the teacher's performance and they participate in creating the teacher's social identity.

From their perspective, incompleteness or imperfection is then an inseparable part of the teaching profession: their identity is not created once and for all. The teacher must work on his/her identity all the time: there is still the ideal teacher, who produces tension for teachers leading to change. Teachers are actively disappointed with numerous issues at their school because now the ideal teacher's identity is a catalyst of information.

The teacher's felt professional identity determines whether he/she holds or does not hold power in the school space. Teacher Kateřina graphically documents this relationship in the following example, when she tried to pass what she learned at a training course to her colleagues after three years of practice in her teaching career. Seen from their perspective, she was merely "stealing their time" and she was giving them advice "of an inexperienced teacher that has no clue".

³ An in-depth biographical interview was the basic data collection method. Although I conducted interviews with six expert teachers, the interviews were not standardized or structured. I conducted a series of interviews (6 to 8) with each expert, all up to one and a half hour long. There were 68 resulting interviews. When they were transcribed, together with other methods they gave about 3 million characters.

⁴ Cf., research on expert teachers using a stimulated recall interview (Tüma et al., 2014).

“When I had those 40 hours or so of teacher pedagogical-psychological skills, there were a lot of moments that were interesting for myself, so I presented that to the head teacher and he figured that it would be great if the others learned something from it, too... I don't know if somebody else had to, how good I was at presenting it or not, but I didn't mean to harm anyone and some were taking it personally, that I was attacking them... The impression was like that they never experienced that somebody would say something like that and if they were my age [4 years of practice], they would never dare to say anything like that, and then we haven't even said “hello” to each other for almost six months.”⁵

Teacher Kateřina clashed with a different group of teachers, to which she did not belong, and which she labelled as “passive teachers”. Events like these unite teachers' groups, because it is not only the clash that takes place; passive teachers are reassured that they have chosen the right path, and so are the active ones.

In the following lines, I will focus on various expert teacher strategies that the analysed teachers tried to use to influence the school space.

3.1. Verbal distancing

During the series of biographical interviews I was captured by the frequent mutual observing among teachers. They kept speaking about other groups and teachers even when asked about their own ideas and opinions. In particular, the teachers' comparisons were expressed in their distinguishing between groups of teachers according to the ideological differentiation into engaged and passive teachers (the “old” and “modern” schools). Experts would classify some of their colleagues among the “ossified teachers”, “teachers that would sit through it”, “ripe teachers”, “established teachers”, and “old-school teachers”⁶.

Due to this strategy of negative and positive self-definition against their own group and other groups, teachers strengthen their professional identity. I call this strategy verbal distancing and I regard it as a part of building one's professional and, particularly, group identity.

The analysed teachers self-defined themselves against passive teachers most often. It is a duel between innovators and tradition-keepers. We could talk about the social competition strategy, because group members try to impose the concept

⁵ Research participants' quotes have the following form: a smaller font-size, a narrower block alignment, and inclusion of the speaker's name (e.g., Teacher Aneta); the initial R refers to the author and interviewer at the same time.

⁶ The analysed teachers similarly differentiated between schools: “a classic” and “a place where they make efforts to try something new”.

of their own group on the other group. In her research on a Portuguese elementary school, Lopes (2002) describes similar clashes between innovators and traditionalists. The traditionalists feel guilty because they could be innovators if they wanted to, while the innovators feel self-conscious because they promote methods whose usefulness for pupils has not yet been proved, Lopes concludes.

R: “You mentioned that being a teacher is different from having another profession. How does it influence you?”

Teacher Vendula: “Female teachers are, like, systematists, they are just there, in the classroom, they’re like machines. See, they’ve got twenty-five items there and now they’re working very precisely, but they only see those people as items and they only consider them as means for some kind of evaluation, some tables, charts and so on, well, that’s...”

The studied teachers use some techniques of verbal distancing in front of their pupils in the classroom as well.

Through the work at his/her professional identity using the verbal distancing strategy, the teacher shows his/her identity to the others, which is important for the socially ascribed professional identity.

3.2. Gossip

I discovered the use of gossip as a strategy to influence the social space of a school while analysing teacher Petr, when I was also interested in the opinions of other people in the school about his work (I asked similar questions the other participants in my research, too). I found out that teachers evaluated their colleagues and their teaching methods without having seen them teaching. For this reason, their evaluation may be called gossip. The following example illustrates the use of gossip.

R: “And did you have the feeling that [teacher Petr] has an utterly different attitude to children than yourself?”

Teacher Aneta (2 years of practice): “In his attitude, I didn’t much... I’m not criticising it now. There are two different attitudes and it depends on the person. He is exactly this authoritative type that comes to the classroom, screams and it must be quiet there and that’s it. I rather speak about it with the children...”

[...another interview...]

R: “And how many times did he come to your lesson?”

T: “Well... (*a longer pause*)... When I remember it now, in fact he didn’t come even once to me... And I have never gone to see him...”

Teacher Aneta describes teacher Petr's teaching style. He was her tutor, although she has never gone to see his lessons. The research showed how stories about a certain teacher are common on the one hand (it is the core of the social interactions among teachers), but on the other hand that it is mediated. Teacher Aneta presents this information as if it was based on her knowledge of the true state of affairs. For this reason, her evaluation may be called gossip. Further research showed that gossip makes an indispensable part of the school and also, that gossip is very difficult to grasp for the researcher.

A detailed analysis of the school's life and operation showed that gossip does not emerge accidentally, but that it expresses the effort to manage and control the school space. In their recognized text on the function of gossip in an organization, Noon and Delbridge state: "Gossip is the process of informally communicating value-laden information about members of social setting." (Noon, Delbridge, 1993, p. 25).

I consider this definition most suitable, because: first, it shows the processuality of gossip; second, it states a certain intentionality of the communicated piece of information; and third, it gives evidence that gossip is not a random and isolated phenomenon, but a part of a broader social process where individuals' and groups' interests clash.

Gossip is influenced by the following aspect of the school: teaching takes place behind a closed door and for this reason teachers are not eye-witnesses of a lot of events. They cannot see their colleagues and cannot be seen by them; they cannot see the head teacher and his/her day's work in the office and for this reason they make up a lot of legends, rumours, and gossip.

School is thus characterized by absence of supervision over teachers, which some authors (Hoy, Miskel 2001) call "structural looseness": a lack of coordination between various activities, different goals of various groups, a complex decision-making process, and absence of control. According to Ball (1987), this is a school's characteristic: there are no mechanisms of direct control over teachers' work, or they are merely formal. I identify this aspect as one of the institutional aspects of school that allows for gossip and increases its presence.

3.3. Strategy of uniqueness

The strategy of uniqueness is used by teachers that have specific skills or knowledge, in other words, the analysed experts. The analysed teachers used this strategy after three years of practice, because before they had not possessed skills that would have been unique in the given context. The exclusiveness of the teacher's skills is primarily caused by the context and for this reason, some

experts lost the opportunity to apply this strategy after they switched schools. It is a visual strategy that complements the above-mentioned verbal strategies. Teachers have developed a habit to present information in two different channels, by words and gestures, which increases the probability to be understood by their pupils (Šalamounová, 2013).

Expert teachers intentionally show their **engagement** and involvement to their audience, which co-creates their ascribed expert professional identity. Teachers use a lot of various ways to do so: working overtime at school, participation in staffroom discussions on innovations, using new special teaching aids and new methods. Work beyond standard requirements and repeated comments about this work were a very frequent way, too. Teachers stated that it was common for them to stay overtime at school, till 7 pm. However, this does not happen often in the Czech education, so it did not need to be emphasized much that a teacher stayed at school till late night hours. A similar story told “by the way”, was sufficient.

The aim of declaring one’s diligence and willingness to stay at school beyond requirements is again to gain certain advantages, such as material support and socially ascribed identity of a hard-working or engaged teacher. The analysed teachers showed their determination in this way, so that they could assert their interests. In his questionnaire for approximately 700 teachers, Blase (1989) identified a similar strategy and called it a **visibility** strategy. According to Blase, the aim of this intentional behaviour is to show a given teacher’s attractiveness for other actors in the school, particularly the head teacher.

Some experts use material means and aids to demonstrate the uniqueness of their position. To materialize his expertise, teacher Petr uses a strategy that I call **the magician’s box**. It is an actual box full of various aids (stamps, markers, pencils, post-its, cards and the like). It does not include any unusual objects.

“This is my diary. This is a string, because I always hang something somewhere, like motivational stamps, smileys, a stamp. It is a kind of rarity, but it animates, motivates them, and there I go. We give smileys... Kids are like crazy about it, I’ve also got a super-stamp, kids like want to have it on their forehead...”

Similarly to a magician’s or a shaman’s props (such as a black hat, a wooden wand or a glass ball), teacher Petr’s object are of symbolic character.

4. Conclusion

Teachers get to know themselves through their interactions with their pupils and colleagues and reflecting upon these interactions. Their self-knowledge is thus mediated; it is not direct as in the case of contemplation or other methods. The studied teachers look into an imaginary mirror where they do not see themselves, but merely their image mediated by other people and their "another self". As follows from the above-stated, the teacher's identity is a result of a long-term effort. It is a creation of a rational behaviour and a result of self-reflection, rather than a set of given or innate qualities.⁷ Snow & Anderson (1987) call the process of identity management and creation **identity work**.⁸

The studied teachers gradually begin to develop new strategies of work on their identity, but they stick to two directions of their intentional behaviour: first, they increase teaching efficiency (a strategy directed towards the classroom) and second, they improve the conditions at school (a strategy directed towards the school). Teachers, thus, establish friendly relationships, form other teachers with similar ideological profiles, protect their group, and primarily put forward their fundamental, ideological, and personal interests. The studied teachers have developed various strategies of gaining power at school (verbal distancing and open conflicts) and they become targets of strategies applied by various other teachers (gossip). The research shows that in the heterogeneous institution, teachers use verbal and visual strategies of identity work so that they can establish friendly relationships, form teachers with a similar ideological profile, protect their opinion group, and put forward their own or their group's interests.

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⁷ Cf. Snow, & Anderson (1987); Pollett, & Jasper (2001).

⁸ Pittard (2003).

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