

Chapter 17

Comparative Perspectives on the Changing Roles of Teachers

Patricia Broadfoot

Commentators often remark that schools have changed remarkably little since the 19th century. Unlike say hospitals, in which the paraphernalia of the modern operating theatre means that it would be virtually impossible for a 19th century surgeon to function effectively in it, a teacher in the same situation would immediately recognise the setting, the task and the skills required. They would readily understand the challenge of inculcating a defined body of curriculum content to a classroom group of more or less enthusiastic learners within the parameters of a set timetable and expected outcomes.

But is being a teacher really as standardised as this description implies? Clearly there are more or less significant objective variations in the conditions under which teachers work. In developing countries, there may be no classroom, no equipment and more than fifty pupils in a class. Teachers may be untrained and even unpaid at times. In highly developed countries, teachers will increasingly have access to new technologies – interactive whiteboards, blogs and e-learning platforms that enhance the traditional reliance on ‘chalk and talk’, books and written work. Some teachers work in highly dirigiste national systems which allow little scope for personal interpretation and professional judgment; others work in the context of intensive testing regimes that drive a results-based culture that also constrains their appetite for innovation and variety of approach.

As this volume makes clear, the enduring legacy of Eric Hoyle’s approach to the study of teachers and their work has been to establish the importance of delving beneath the surface of such glib stereotypes; to recognise that as individual professionals, as a staff group within a school and as an occupational group within a particular society, the way teachers take and make their professional practice is subtle, complex and continually changing in response to circumstances and external requirements. Beneath the apparently minor variations from one century to another or from one country to another in the way in which teachers exercise their professional work, lies an enormously significant mix of factors that influence teachers’ perceptions of the task in hand, the nature of their engagement in it and consequently, the nature of their impact on the learners in their care. It follows too, that aspirations to improve or change the work of teachers, to make them more motivated and effective or to direct their efforts in new directions, depend for their success on an understanding of the nature of such forces.

Hoyle's ground-breaking theoretical work, such as his seminal distinction between 'restricted' and 'extended' professionalism, has inspired an enormous corpus of detailed empirical work designed to identify the influences on teachers' work. His work has informed efforts to evaluate the different professional 'drivers' to which teachers in different settings are subject and hence, to aid in the more general identification of the 'teaching genome'. Such empirical studies have, in turn, provided the foundation for the more recent scholarly focus on the nature of teaching as a profession and what this means for teacher development and leadership in the contemporary educational context. As this book makes clear, Hoyle's work continues to inform a range of international studies designed to illuminate the ways in which the work of teachers around the world today is being shaped by new forces such as intensification and privatisation and what these developments mean for teaching as a profession.

Comparative studies of teachers have proved to be one of the most powerful tools for illuminating the way in which teachers construct their professional identity and the implications of such perspectives for policy implementation and classroom practice. This was the rationale, for example, for a series of comparative studies based at the University of Bristol during the 1980s and 1990s. The first study in the series was a systemically focussed comparison of educational accountability in France and England – two countries regarded at that time at least – as classic examples of centralised and decentralised approaches to the management of educational systems. The enquiry was designed to elicit whether, in practice, these stereotypes of centralisation and decentralisation really were associated with a stronger or weaker experience of central control in practice on the part of teachers. Was it the case in France, for example, that teachers priorities and practices were primarily a response to the directions issuing from the National Ministry of Education as Napoleon had assumed would be the case when he created a strongly centralised education system?

The results of the study suggested a much more complex picture. (Broadfoot, 1985) It found that central directions are inevitably 'watered-down' by the mediation of successive layers of bureaucracy en route to teachers in the classroom as well as the personal interpretation of the intention of these instructions by the many individuals involved in the chain of communication. Thus, in many ways, teachers in France were found to be freer, if they chose to be, than their English counterparts, given that the latter were subject to several additional forms of accountability. The very centralisation of the French system was found to be a protection for teachers against being held to account by parents, head teachers and the local community which was the feeling and experience of the English teachers. Yet, English teachers, by contrast, had a passionate belief in their right to professional autonomy whilst French teachers chose to embrace central control as an ideology as the basis for equality of opportunity and national cohesion. In short, French teachers could have exercised considerable professional discretion but generally chose not to since they believed in the desirability of national consistency. English teachers strove to exercise professional autonomy since this was a defining element of their professional discourse but found themselves heavily constrained by a network of both formal

and informal accountability that severely constrained their capacity to exercise such professional autonomy.

Although now somewhat dated, given the very significant changes in both education systems that have since taken place, this study provides powerful testimony to the importance of deconstructing stereotypical interpretations of teacher professionalism and, in particular, the need to understand the reality, rather than the rhetoric of national stereotypes in this light. These important insights into the significant differences between English and French teachers' perspectives and into the gap between rhetoric, and reality in particular, led to the initiation of a much more substantial comparative study of English and French primary teachers' conceptions of their professional responsibility. The 'Bristaix' study, as it came to be called, based as it was jointly on the Bristol and Aix en Provence areas, sought to document through systematic enquiry how primary teachers in these two countries saw their professional priorities and how they thought about key aspects of their work. (Broadfoot et al., 1993).

In seeking to understand the mass of detailed differences identified, Hoyle's concept of 'restricted' and 'extended' professionalism emerged as being of critical importance. Hoyle defines 'restricted' professionalism as indicating thought and practice that is:

intuitive, classroom focussed and based on experience rather than theory. The good restricted professional is sensitive to the development of individual pupils, an inventive teacher and a skilful class manager. He is unencumbered with theory, is not given to comparing his work with that of others, tends not to perceive his classroom activities in a broader context and values his classroom autonomy.

(Hoyle, 1980: 43)

Extended professionalism, by contrast, involves

being concerned with locating one's classroom teaching in a broader educational context, comparing one's work with that of other teachers, evaluating one's work systematically and collaborating with other teachers'. It also involves being interested in theory and current educational developments, reading journals and educational books and 'seeing teaching as a rational activity amenable to improvement on the basis of research and development.

(Hoyle, 1980: 43)

The Bristaix study found other deep differences in the professionalism of teachers in the two countries including 'problematic' versus 'axiomatic' conceptions of teaching and an emphasis on the process rather than the products of learning in England and France respectively. English teachers also tended to hold more 'particularistic' (i.e. individualised) educational goals compared to the more 'universalistic' (i.e. common) goals of French teachers. Not surprisingly, the study concluded that

any attempt to at change which fails to take into account the real influences on teachers' professional motivation and practice will be unsuccessful in all respects but one. It may well succeed in eroding the professional commitment inherent in working towards self-imposed goals which is the explicit core of the motivation of both cohorts of teachers in the study reported here. Only then, when it is too late, will the real key to effective educational change be apparent.

(Broadfoot et al., 1988: 286)

This empirical documentation of the very real differences in the way in which primary teachers in these two countries felt about their work provides some important contemporary lessons of a more general kind in relation to the themes of this book – the professionalization, development and leadership of teachers and the particular issues surrounding teaching as a profession. The Bristaix study demonstrated clearly that teachers' professional perspectives were very different in England and France. It suggested that teachers' professional perspectives were likely to be substantially influenced by the national setting in which they were working and hence, vary significantly from one country to another. It was also possible to hypothesize that variations in teachers' professional perspectives were also likely to be the product of several other social influences in addition to the cultural and institutional traditions of a particular national setting. Significant in this respect is likely to be the teacher's own personal life-history and the 'micro-narrative' of their career experiences.

However, even when the 'Bristaix' study was conducted in the 1980s, there were clear signs that social and political change was beginning to break down national professional stereotypes. Pupils were becoming more diverse in their needs and behaviour; Governments in both countries were becoming more anxious to impose their own educational policy priorities on the education system. During the last two decades, these pressures have strengthened considerably with the introduction of considerably greater central control in England with the first ever National Curriculum and Assessment system and the opposite decentralist policy trend in France of trying to empower individual head teachers and schools to enable them better to address the individual circumstances of very different communities. It thus became clear from other comparative studies at this time that the ebb and flow of policy narratives also provide a significant influence on teachers' professional priorities. (Osborn and Broadfoot 1993; Broadfoot et al., 1996) But how best to develop teachers' skills and attitudes in this respect so that they are equipped to respond to the particular and unpredictable challenges of educating children for a rapidly changing world, has become one of the most challenging educational questions of our time. As national educational traditions and assumptions have begun to fragment in response to novel and diverse pressures on the education system, it has become correspondingly more important for Governments in particular to find effective ways of articulating educational priorities in a clear and publicly acceptable manner. Even more important, arguably, is policy-makers' capacity to impose these priorities by in turn ensuring that they are incorporated into the professional discourse and priorities of teachers.

Subsequent studies in the Bristol comparative programme, illustrated the scale of this challenge very clearly. In the context of significant policy shifts in both England and France, the 'Quality in Experiences of Schooling Trans-nationally' (QUEST) project, conducted between 1995 and 1997, sought to explore the significance of the differences in *teachers'* perspectives that the Bristaix study had identified for *pupils'* classroom experiences and learning outcomes. Not surprisingly, a comparison of English and French primary school children's achievements revealed that the priorities and traditions of each country were reflected in the profile of strengths and weaknesses identified. French children demonstrated strengths in having mastered taught knowledge and

techniques; English children in problem-solving and creativity. (Broadfoot et al., 2000). But which is likely to be more important for the future? How far should national governments be seeking to change the traditional strengths of their education system by seeking to influence teachers to adopt new priorities in response to a rapidly changing world? How can the strength of teachers' professionalism be harnessed to address the implications of such changes when their natural inclination will be to continue to pursue the educational goals and the pedagogic means of achieving these goals that have become enshrined in the national psyche and national tradition?

The complexity of this question is further illustrated by a subsequent study of young secondary pupils in the same two countries but with the addition of Denmark. (Osborn et al., 2003) The ENCOMPASS study confirmed the enduring importance of national traditions and culture in shaping teachers' priorities, their ways of engaging with pupils and their pedagogical approach. The study identified a continuum stretching from 'low distance between teacher and pupil and an emphasis on relationships – the expressive – at one end to high distance between teacher and pupil and an emphasis on cognitive content – the instrumental – at the other. Danish teachers, grounded in the 'Communitarian' tradition, were located at one extreme given their overriding emphasis on relationships and building the social community of the classroom. The 'Cartesian' tradition French teachers were located at the opposite extreme with their contrasting emphasis on cognitive development and intellectual activity in which the pupil as 'person' had little relevance. English teachers, heirs to a 'child-centred' tradition, with their concern for both the social development and happiness of the individual and their intellectual progress, were located between the two extremes. As such, the study confirmed its initial hypothesis derived from the earlier comparative studies discussed above, namely that:

The policy priorities, institutional arrangements and classroom processes of a national education system are informed by and in turn help to reproduce the deep 'socio-cognitive' and cultural patterning of a particular nation state.

(Osborn et al., 2003: 215)

It also confirmed that, just as teachers are shaped by the national educational culture and institutional traditions, so too are pupils. This makes it difficult for any generalised 'silver bullet' to be conceived that would help teachers wherever they work, address today's educational challenges despite the fact that these challenges are becoming increasingly similar across different national settings. Despite the fact too, of the increasing evidence to suggest that there are constants – meta-narratives about learning- that are valid beyond the confines of particular cultures. The challenge for teachers, then, in the early 21st century, is to redefine their professional priorities and their pedagogic approach in ways that are in harmony with their deeply rooted, cultural traditions but which are sufficiently innovative to allow them to incorporate a refreshed professional vision that embraces the new challenges and the new educational possibilities of the 21st century.

The ENCOMPASS study concluded that culture must be seen as central to any understanding of education and how it is best delivered in today's world. Comparative studies can show just how important is the culture that defines the features of the

national, local, institutional and classroom environment and informs the educational priorities that characterize them. Comparative studies also reveal the importance of the common cultural challenges that globalisation is presenting to schools and teachers – change, diversity and the lack of a clear narrative of tradition or of ‘what works’.

At present, teachers in different countries start from very different places in seeking to accommodate the very real pressures associated with globalisation. It is becoming clear internationally that the cultural variants of the familiar model of schools and teaching that ‘worked’ in the past, is unlikely to ‘work’ in the future. As Giddens (1993: 268) has argued, the traditional sources of ‘ontological security’ – trust, predictability and face to face associations which are essential to the ‘biographic project’ are being eroded. Society is changing in the way that it operates and the skills, knowledge, attitudes and values that it will require of its young people. Yet, paradoxically, government policies derived from anxieties about international competition, have prompted schools across the world to resort to traditional approaches to curriculum, pedagogy and above all, assessment, concentrating on producing human, rather than the desperately needed social, capital. If there is any constant amid the myriad culturally specific factors that influence teachers’ priorities and practices, it is that schools are proving very slow to change; that, as suggested at the beginning of this chapter, there is as yet no serious challenge to the familiar 19th century edifice despite the symptoms of educational crisis now manifest in many countries of the world. (Broadfoot, 2007)

The programme of international educational comparisons described here which were conducted over more than three decades, shows how important it is to understand teachers’ work as framed by its cultural setting. As such, the studies emphasise the importance of Hoyle’s sustained contribution to our understanding of teachers, their work and how they may best be helped to develop over many years. In recent years, the need to understand the interface between teachers and the external pressures they experience as a result of policy changes has become widely recognised. Less widely recognised as yet, is the need to understand teachers’ work as a series of interlocking and more or less fluid cultural narratives – individual, institutional, community, national and international. Particularly important is the need to recognise the role of individual agency in cultural production, the need to recognise that teachers are constantly involved in re-shaping their professional perspectives as they engage creatively with the new opportunities and new educational challenges now confronting them.

The ebb and flow of teachers various perceived accountabilities – moral in terms of their duty to their students; professional in terms of their perceived obligation to support colleagues and the head teacher; and contractual in terms of their relationship with the employing authority continues to provide the frame of professional obligations that shape teachers’ work. But perhaps most important of all as a professional driver is the impact of personal accountability that mediates and helps to reconcile the sometimes contradictory imperatives that come from these various sources.

Classrooms and schools today may appear superficially familiar to those that first emerged on a mass scale in the 19th century, but in fact they are profoundly different. Indeed, I have suggested that despite appearances, they were already sig-

nificantly different from each other, even in the 19th century, reflecting as they have always done, the institutional traditions, policy priorities, religious traditions and other cultural features of the different societies that established schools at that time. Equally, despite what may appear to be similarities, the huge number of schools set up around the world during the colonial era are also the product of a unique blend of specific cultural factors. Thanks to the work of scholars such as Hoyle, we now understand much better the dimensions of such differences and the importance of understanding teachers as creators, as well as reflectors of a particular educational culture. We now understand the importance of seeking to understand the ‘constants’ and the ‘contexts’ in such responses from a comparative perspective.

Last but not least, we also now understand better the very particular challenges teachers have had to face in asserting their right to be regarded as an autonomous professional group; the struggles they have had in articulating and defending the degree of professional autonomy that is needed if they are to be able to respond adequately to the changing circumstances of those they are required to teach. The recent emphasis on professional development, leadership and the creation of a learning community offers an exciting prospect of greater professional fulfilment for teachers. As the chapter by the late Ray Bolam in this volume documents – the impact of institutional leadership and the scope for enhancing teachers’ professionalism that is inherent in the creation of a ‘learning community’ focussed on professional development offers an exciting prospect for teachers to have much greater scope to create, rather than simply reflect, the cultural currents that will inform their work.

If the long overdue challenge to the 19th century norm of schools and schooling is indeed to materialise, it is likely to come through harnessing the creativity and courage of teachers to think the unthinkable and try the untried. The more we understand ‘what makes teachers tick’, the more means to unlock such energy for change will be identified. These are challenging times for teachers; but they are also exciting times as the real possibility of a refreshed journey of professional discovery begins to open up. Eric Hoyle’s work has played a crucial part in launching this journey and in establishing its importance. His work continues to shape the route to be taken and to point to the desired destination. If there are few teachers today whose professional life has not in some way been touched by Hoyle’s work, there will be even fewer in years to come whose working life is untouched by his legacy.

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