



7

How a Community of Practice Shapes a Modern Foreign Language Teacher's Views of Herself as a Teacher over Time and Space: A Biographical Case Study

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1 Introduction

Much recent literature on language teaching and learning has foregrounded the importance of understanding identity in promoting effective language learning (Norton and Toohey 2011). Similarly, within teacher education, the value of identity research has been acknowledged not only in the process of teacher-learning and development (Beauchamp and Thomas 2009; Norton 2017; Pennington and Richards 2016; Varghese et al. 2005) but also increasingly in the retention of teachers in the profession (Morrison 2013). In order to develop professionally, in the sense of taking responsibility for their own professional development, it is increasingly recognised that teachers need to develop agency (Toom et al. 2015) to navigate the school Modern Foreign Language (MFL) subject domain, a site of seemingly unresolvable debates on issues that concern teachers such as the role of grammar and the use of the target language (Swarbrick

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2002). Agency is defined in Pyhältö et al. (2015) as the “capability of intentional and responsible management of new learning at both individual and community levels” (2015, p. 813).

This chapter, with the author’s professional background as a language teacher educator within a higher education institution setting, seeks to gain insights into how language teacher identity develops over time and how factors such as communities of practice (Wenger 1998, 2010) and affiliations (Werbińska 2016; Pennington 2015) shape that development. The concept of a community of practice (CoP), originally developed in relation to a social theory of learning (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998), is widely contested in terms of nature, scale and applicability (Hodkinson and Hodkinson 2004). Hodkinson and Hodkinson’s own work in this area whilst focusing on CoPs in relation to school teachers’ learning in the workplace is, however, useful here in providing discussion and analyses of similar secondary school contexts to my own. The definition of CoP that most resonates with my own conceptualisation and context is that of Wenger’s work (1998), which sees a CoP as a social learning system. This view recognises identity formation as part of learning, stressing the importance of learning as becoming (Wenger 1998), a focus that is central to this chapter. I use the term “affiliation”, following Werbińska (2016, p. 137), to refer to “the individual’s willingness to become a language teacher and desire for recognition as a legitimate member of the teaching community”. I also refer to disciplinary affiliations more loosely to refer to associations or connections, for example, within Applied Linguistics.

My interest in the influence of these factors stems from my professional engagement as a teacher educator with research and practice in relation to the process of becoming a teacher and consequently in the construction of language teacher identity. As Werbińska (2016) points out, becoming a teacher is an ongoing process: the formal learning of the initial teacher training is a phase, albeit an important one, in the shaping and development of teachers and identity formation is implicated in the process.

At a time where within the UK school system there is an increasing sense of crisis about teacher retention as recognised by the Public Accounts Committee report “Training and Developing the Teaching Workforce” (2018), an exploration of the relationship between teacher identity and teacher retention from an Initial Teacher Education perspective is both

timely and pertinent. Understanding how teachers work and learn together and their perceptions of themselves at different stages of their careers is increasingly important when considering how best to equip teachers for their careers and for retaining teachers longer term.

The language teaching context of the research presented here is that of a teacher of French and German working in the secondary school sector. Within MFL teaching specifically, the national picture in England is frequently presented as a far from positive one (Lanvers and Coleman 2017; Tinsley and Dolezal 2018), a factor that may impact on teacher recruitment and retention. Of particular concern, as highlighted in Tinsley and Dolezal's survey of language trends (*ibid.*), have been the declining levels of participation in the study of MFL, particularly French and German since the removal of the compulsory study of MFL for 14 to 16-year olds, together with the introduction of more challenging examinations. However, a recent government initiative announced by the current schools standards minister (Speck 2019) creating a Centre of Excellence at York University and nine specialist language hubs in schools, is set to attempt to boost the teaching of modern languages in schools.

Having sketched the background to this chapter, I now provide an overview of the structure of the chapter. This chapter is organised in the following way: first, I present an account of the theoretical underpinnings of the conceptualisation of language teacher identity that is pertinent to this chapter. Subsequently, I introduce the study and discuss the research methodology and present the analysis and discussion of the case study data.

2 Theoretical Framework

In this section, I explore the complex notion of teacher identity and highlight the central features of language teacher identity. I draw on sociocultural theory on communities of practice as reflected in the seminal work of Lave and Wenger (1991), Wenger (1998), and Hodgkinson and Hodgkinson (2004) to look at the relationship between communities of practice, learning and identity. I begin by exploring the notion of language teacher identity.

2.1 Understanding Language Teacher Identity

It is widely agreed that teacher identity is a complex and multifaceted construct (Beauchamp and Thomas 2009; Beijaard et al. 2004), a concept that remains challenging to define and one which may also represent a site of struggle (Norton 2000). Day et al. (2007) working within the UK school context maintain quite simply that teacher identity is the way in which teachers define themselves to themselves and others and is different from teacher role. Research into teacher identity (Beijaard et al. 2004; Pennington and Richards 2016; Varghese et al. 2005 amongst others) has consistently identified two features of identity. First, teacher identity is constructed over time, evolving throughout a teacher's career. Longitudinal studies such as early work on professional development phases (Huberman 1995) and variation in teachers' effectiveness in different professional life phases (Day et al. 2007) have offered some insight into generic patterns in teacher development. However, as Steadman points out:

In the making of the teacher, there is no endpoint of perfection at the end of a linear pathway or on completion of an apprenticeship: the practice of learning to teach is an ongoing process, marked by uneven development (2018, p. 6).

Second, teacher identity is situated (Pennington and Richards 2016) and develops through a process of interaction with others (Cooper and Olson 1996). The social and cultural environment plays a crucial role in shaping teacher identity and may further be reflected in "affinity groups", which share according to Gee (2000, p. 105): "allegiance to, access to and participation in specific practices" or in affiliations to a particular professional community (Werbińska 2016). Pollard et al.'s work (2019) within the UK school context highlights the influence of teaching colleagues both in the immediate school environment and beyond and the benefits in relation to school effectiveness of communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991) where teachers are also learners.

The views of teacher identity discussed above are particularly pertinent to the focus and context of this research. Firstly, the nature and structural organisation of classroom teaching in UK schools is such that teachers

rarely work in isolation as they are frequently part of a subject department where teachers of the same subject have opportunities to work closely with other colleagues. Consideration of the influence of CoPs is, therefore, particularly relevant. Secondly, Day and colleagues' work (2007) and later work reported in Day and Gu (2010), whilst not specifically looking at language teacher identity, is situated within the same UK school context as my study. Furthermore, it involved exploration of teachers' professional identity as part of their longitudinal studies of teachers' lives.

Whilst the above discussion has highlighted features of teacher identity, which may apply across different subject teaching contexts, it is important in this case study of an MFL teacher to consider research literature that looks more specifically at language teacher identity. Building on Richards' work (2010) which identified core areas of competence and expertise in language teaching, Pennington and Richards (2016) reconceptualised and developed these competences in relation to language teacher identity. Of interest here, are the notions of *language-related identity*, *disciplinary identity* and *membership of a CoP*. Language teachers need to have not only the linguistic knowledge but also the skills to communicate easily with those who have little knowledge of the language (Pennington and Richards 2016). According to Pennington (2015), a language teacher's identity is best built upon a foundation not only of specific linguistic and curriculum knowledge but also on broader knowledge of the content of the field (for example, in Applied Linguistics) gained through formal education. In the context of MFL teaching in the secondary school setting that is the focus of the chapter, consideration of language-related identity in relation to their linguistic knowledge is particularly important: teachers' confidence and competence in the target language have long been part of the debate over the use of target language in MFL classrooms (Macaro 2000).

It has been increasingly argued (Sharkey 2004; Pennington and Richards 2016) that teachers should not only possess practical and theoretical knowledge but should also be producers of knowledge, developing personal understandings of teaching (Borg 2006) that include beliefs, principles and theories. These understandings underpin teacher maxims (Richards 2006) or sets of working principles which reflect how teachers' identity develops over time (Pennington and Richards 2016) and how teachers' knowledge and theorising evolve.

What I have sought to emphasise here is that teachers develop their identities individually within a timeframe but always within a context, of which there are many not only the CoP, but also the wider educational community and society as a whole.

2.2 Identity Formation Through Situated Learning: The Subject Department as Community of Practice

An aspect of a language teacher's identity that has been considered by researchers is the teacher's connection to one or more of the communities of practice. Exploring the formation of identity through situated learning has been the focus of seminal work by Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998), Wenger et al. (2002) amongst others. Wenger (1998, p. 149) emphasises the link between identity and practice, seeing the two as "mirror-images of one another" and argues that identity is shaped by communities of practice. Beauchamp and Thomas (2009, p. 180) also explain that "by participating in a community of professionals a teacher is subject to the influences of this community on identity development". Within the secondary school setting, the subject department in this case the MFL department, grouping together teachers of the same discipline, often forms this community of practitioners (Dimmock and Lee 2000; Visscher and Witziers 2004). However, within these departmental groups there may be associations between practitioners who embrace similar practices and share similar approaches (Gee 2000). Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2003) draw on Bourdieu's notions of *habitus* (1984) and *dispositions* (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), emphasising that a person's dispositions evolve over the course of a learner's "learning career" (Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000). The above theories which highlight the situated nature of learning provide a useful framework for exploring identities in practice and identity (trans)formation in practice.

2.3 Development of School MFL Teacher Identity over Time

The dynamic and continually evolving nature of teacher identity has been highlighted in earlier discussion as a central characteristic of identity. I cite Norton's definition of identity here as it emphasises identity construction across both time and space. Norton (2013, p. 4) defines identity as "the way a person understands his or her relationship with the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how that person understands possibilities for the future". Here she recognises the way in which identity may shift over time, but she also sees both teacher agency and social structures as central to identity formation. This definition is particularly resonant with the context of my study which draws on an MFL teacher's reflections on her identity over time and in different teaching contexts.

In understanding how identity develops over time, it is helpful to consider how individual and institutional identity work together and how these identify shift as teachers progress in their careers. This career progression is recognised to be unpredictable, full of uncertainty and non-linear (Gatti 2016), a view that resonates with research into professional life phases (Day 2012) and seminal research by Huberman (1993, 1995) who argued that the process of career development is filled "with plateaux, discontinuities, regressions, spurts and dead ends" (Huberman 1995, p. 196).

New teachers typically present an institutionally-sanctioned, traditional, teacher-led identity in their early career as their "default identity" according to Richards (2006, p. 16) This *safe* style is one which new teachers might readily assume as they recognise the more traditional style as providing a recognised structure for a class to be delivered and managed effectively. As teachers become more confident they may move away from this default teacher identity to a more authentic and personal identity (Richards 2006). Shifts in identity may continue to occur throughout a teacher's career, according to Pennington and Richards (2016), when teachers feel under pressure to deliver content for exams, where they have concerns about behaviour management, the introduction of new teaching methods or experience a lack of confidence in the target language (Richards 2006). This section has highlighted the unevenness of identity

development; however, it is worthy of note that opportunities for ongoing professional development together with early promotion may enhance the teacher's sense of identity and belonging as I discuss in Sect. 3.

3 The Study

This chapter originates in research conducted as part of my doctoral study (Richardson 2011) which looked at inclusive practice in teaching Modern Foreign Languages in mainstream schools with a focus on students with dyslexia. Whilst not explicitly looking at teacher identity, the initial study revealed that subject communities of practice were highly influential in shaping teachers' knowledge, beliefs and understanding of MFL teaching. This chapter develops the study by providing a biographical case study of Maria, a teacher of French and German at School X, one of the participant schools at the time the initial research was undertaken. In line with British Educational Research Association (BERA) ethical research guidelines all participant schools and names were anonymised, and any identifying features of the school were not referenced.

Taking a biographical case study approach (Barkhuizen et al. 2014), building on the author's doctoral research, in this chapter I explore the development of Maria's identity as a teacher of MFL in relation to the environmental and social influences of her school setting. Maria, an experienced Modern Languages teacher, worked from 2000 to 2008 in a secondary school. She gained her teaching qualification and moved to School X in 2000, becoming Head of the MFL department in 2001. She took a break from MFL teaching to have a family but continued to be involved in education as a sports coach from 2013 but also pursuing further studies in language education.

The general research questions (RQs) underpinning this chapter are as follows:

RQ1. How does Maria see herself as an MFL teacher?

RQ2. What contextual factors shape her sense of professional identity over time and space?

3.1 Methodology

This research takes a biographical case study approach (Barkhuizen et al. 2014). According to these authors, biographical case studies are studies of individuals in which data are elicited from the participants and written up as narrative accounts. Such accounts may be followed by further analysis mirroring Tsui's study (2007) of the career of an EFL teacher in China. A biographical case study was chosen for two main reasons: first, biographical case studies, as a form of narrative enquiry, allow for the exploration of personal accounts of experience and are means of giving a voice to teachers and gaining insight into their interpretations of those lived experiences. The most resonant characteristic of narrative enquiry for this study is that it allows for exploration of language teacher identity over time and in multiple settings and contexts (Barkhuizen et al. 2014). Time and space are key considerations in this research as I seek to explore the development and shaping of Maria's identity over a period of eighteen years and in different contexts.

Data were collected from the case study participant, Maria, in an in-depth semi-structured interview, with a view to exploring her professional trajectory over time and space and how her views of herself as a teacher might have changed as she moved between different teaching contexts since I first interviewed her for my doctoral research in 2002.

According to Charmaz (2003, p. 312) qualitative interviewing: "provides an open-ended, in-depth exploration of an aspect of life about which the interviewee has substantial experience, often combined with considerable insight". Interviewing as a data-collection technique is widely used in social sciences (Alshenqeti 2014) for the following purposes: firstly, to gain information relating to specified research objectives; secondly, to test hypotheses or to suggest new ones; thirdly, as validation of other methods by providing more in-depth information or throwing light on unexpected results.

3.2 Data Analysis

The approach I have taken in the process of analysis of data draws on the analytic-inductive techniques, which are used within the *naturalistic* or *interpretivist* paradigm for the analysis of interview and observation data (Goetz and LeCompte 1981). These techniques, Analytic Induction (Znaniecki 1934) and the Constant Comparative method (Glaser and Strauss 1967), begin with the data themselves and then through inductive reasoning lead to the development of theoretical categories. They both involve scanning and categorising data.

The interview data were transcribed and then coded (Charmaz 2003). In line with the Constant Comparative Approach, the interview data were examined closely, line-by-line and labelled with a term or category, in an attempt to find a term that “distils events and meanings without losing their essential properties” (Charmaz 2003, p. 320). The key themes that emerged were as follows: experiencing self-doubt, valuing family support, encountering new methods, consolidating practices, making connections, viewing language as performance, valuing humour. These themes are addressed under the relevant Professional Development Phase (Ewing and Manuel 2005) heading in the next section.

4 Analysis of Findings and Discussion

To give a sense of identity development over time, the data are presented according to an adapted version of critical phases identified in teachers developing professionalism (Ewing and Manuel 2005). Pollard et al. (2019) explain that the sense of commitment and value sets with which many teachers begin their careers are validated as professional characteristics with time but that this trajectory of professional development frequently involves conflicts between the desire to be a teacher and practical challenges. Most teachers can resolve these conflicts and develop a sense of professional identity, frequently experiencing similar stages as they develop a “more confident professionalism” (ibid., p. 10). These stages move from “Early expectations; facing early challenge”, through “Early

days of first appointment”, “consolidating pedagogical content knowledge” to “building a professional identity and voice” (Ewing and Manuel 2005). Maria’s career trajectory is neither smooth nor linear (Gatti 2016) and does not fit neatly with Ewing and Manuel’s phases (2005), but using the critical phases shown below allows for discussion of the development of Maria’s identity as she moves in, out and across different phases. Ewing and Manuel’s phases have been adapted to reflect Maria’s trajectory and Phases 2 and 3 have been merged and re-named.

4.1 Phase 1: Early Expectations: Facing Early Challenges When in Training

The first phase to emerge as critical for Maria was her first training placement where she experienced what Werbińska (2016) terms “discontinuities” or interruptions (in terms of disappointment about the lack of priority given to MFL) and her negative encounters with the reality of her particular classroom context of her first school training placement.

4.1.1 Early Self-Doubt

Maria seems to have been experiencing the self-doubt that typifies many of the emotions of teachers in the early stages of their careers when they encounter negative experiences (Fantilli and McDougall 2009). She revealed some disappointment at the lack of interest or focus on language teaching and concern about the challenges of student behaviour management: “language teaching wasn’t a priority. Stopping the children from hurting each other was”. It was at this point that she felt a certain lack of clarity about her role and some self-doubt as she says: “I was slightly wondering what was going on because I hadn’t felt that I had been massively successful”. This suggests that there was a degree of challenge to Maria’s identity as a language teacher and her affiliation (Werbińska 2016) or desire for recognition as a valid member of that community.

Nevertheless, Maria continued her training. As Ewing and Manuel (2005) point out, the factors that determine why and how some trainees are able to move forward from negative early experiences are not well

understood. In the case of Maria, she reported having clear ideas about being a language teacher before she started her training: “My mum was an MFL teacher. I had a sense of what and who I wanted to emulate”. Her ability to draw on a positive role model (Knowles 1992) in her mother and her mother’s disciplinary affiliations (Pennington 2015) appears to be a factor in her desire to continue to pursue her career.

Maria’s autonomy at this stage can be seen in her apparent belief in her own self-efficacy or ability to influence student behaviours or achievement (Guo et al. 2010), her motivation to teach and her “agentive-reflective powers or autonomy” (Werbińska 2016, p. 135). Werbińska (ibid.) uses the term to refer to “a teacher’s capacity to act while being guided by a sense of self-dependence and responsibility for educational reflection formed by ongoing reflection” (2016, p. 137). Maria’s matter of fact statement about the behavioural challenges: “language teaching wasn’t a priority. Stopping the children from hurting each other was” suggests that she is not over-awed by the challenges. This is also a point she makes later in the interview: “I wasn’t fazed by the behaviour stuff”. She can manage despite the challenges to her belief sets. She shows autonomy in her ability to reflect on these tensions and maintains a degree of resilience (Ewing and Manuel 2005).

4.2 Phase 2: Early Days of First Appointment: Encountering New Methods and Approaches/Consolidating Practices

Maria’s professional development can be seen to be fairly rapid: she was appointed Head of Department in her second year of teaching. At the beginning of her second critical phase, Maria came across new methods that presented a departure from what she had encountered during her training (Morrison 2013) and hence maybe engendered a reassessment of her thinking in the face of the unfamiliar as Werbińska (2016) suggests.

Maria’s development could be seen to enter a phase where she was exposed to new ideas and responded critically to new influences which appear to have helped her to crystallise her views of herself as a teacher

(Hodkinson and Hodkinson 2004): what she valued and practices she distanced herself from. She can be seen to be engaging with a community of practice as a site of learning (Hodkinson and Hodkinson 2004) in relation to a new Target Language-based method and more broadly about being a language teacher. This approach can be described as a model of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) which unlike the more standard form of CLT used in schools, features almost exclusive use of the target language by both teacher and students. Lessons typically include strong elements of competition as well as games and songs.

In the following section, conceptualisations of communities of practice in relation to Maria's teaching context are discussed. I follow this with an examination of the influence of the shared practices within the department as regards the use of the new teaching approach.

4.2.1 Influence of Subject Department: Communities of Practice

During her early years at School X, Maria's views of herself as a teacher seemed to be shaped by a colleague from her subject department and his embracing of a new teaching method. Maria found this method inspirational: "I was genuinely very inspired by his way of teaching [...]. I think he was the biggest influence on my teaching style". Although Maria reported feeling inspired by her mentor colleague, she saw her identity as a teacher as being separate from the method. She revealed some reservations about the method: "there were elements of that I felt comfortable with and elements I didn't so I picked only those". The more playful elements of the approach, allowing students to interact in a more "teasing" way, or engaging in "verbal duelling" (Cook 2000) did not always appear to sit comfortably with Maria. Whilst appreciating some of the light-heartedness of the method, she rejected the exchanging of insults.

However, Maria appears to have seen in the playful nature (Rampton 1999) of this method a point of connection to her sense of identity (Borg 2006), stating "I tended to use humour quite a lot and that method allowed me to be who I knew I needed to be", suggesting that she saw the use of humour as a valued quality in a languages teacher (Prodromou 1991).

4.3 Phase 3: Finding a Place: Making Connections and Encountering Conflict

Ewing and Manuel (2005) maintain that it is during this phase that teachers begin to understand how important it is to make connections and to *find a place*. Furthermore, they assert that it is during this period teachers frequently realise the challenge of managing conflict with other teachers and navigating a politically complex setting.

4.3.1 Making Connections: The Challenges of Getting Colleagues on Board

Although Maria's early experiences as a teacher of MFL suggest an affiliation with the community of practitioners of the new method in her school, notably her mentor, she subsequently met with some resistance when, a year later, as Head of Department, she attempted to encourage her colleagues to engage with the method by visiting another school and to consider taking on board some ideas from them: "there was no way in which they could conceive of borrowing ideas".

4.3.2 Affinities and Fragmentation

Maria's affinities with other colleagues appeared to shift as influential staff and new staff came in. When taking over as Head of Department in her second year as a qualified teacher, she became increasingly aware of fragmentation or divisions in the department. As stated by the participant, despite her colleagues' resistance, when her mentor left the school, Maria and another colleague continued to use elements of the new approach. Affiliation with this colleague as a member of the community of practitioners was through a shared endorsement of elements of that approach and a similar teaching style whereby they created a professional connection and potential for collaboration, elements which are recognised as highly significant in the development of the identity of early career teachers (Morrison 2013). In addition to the colleague who also embraced the new approach, there were some colleagues who shared broadly similar

teaching styles to her and with whom she developed closer links: “There were pockets of only two who taught German then there was one who I could share ideas with. We would have a regular slot even it was just a quick chat”.

The teachers in this instance were connected by teaching styles and shared assumptions (Wenger 1998) about what worked in language lessons. In terms of working together and sharing of materials, the affinities were most clearly related to shared practices such as the use of games in the language classroom.

According to Maria, the department of six teachers was somewhat divided with significant differences in approach between teachers who were “old school where the classes were silent” and the noisier classes where teachers were “more fun”. Maria aligned herself with the latter set of teachers. She also reported disagreeing with colleagues about issues such as grammar, stating in relation to one of her colleagues, “one thing we used to argue about was grammar”. Whilst discussion is not always harmonious, Wenger et al. (2002) argue that a sparky disagreement can be part of the positive energy of a community of practice and can stimulate reflection and problem-solving.

4.3.3 Beliefs and Values

During the period of consolidation of her practice at her school, Maria appeared to have reinforced some of her educational beliefs (Pajares 1992; Borg 2006) and her values. Maria reported viewing language as performance and valuing the use of humour in language teaching to help create an environment where making mistakes is seen as a natural part of language learning. She embraced the new approach as a way of providing some light-heartedness in the lessons and to help students to develop a good-humoured and positive approach to making mistakes in language.

She reported allowing her students to be “put on the spot” to some extent to help them develop wider life skills of dealing with making mistakes with good humour, although like Morreall (1983), she was concerned by the idea that laughing with someone at their mistake might mean laughing collectively at someone.

4.4 Phase 5: Building a Professional Identity and Voice: Teacher as Agentive Educator

There are two key threads that run through Maria's biographical account: the constancy of a wider teacher identity and a strong sense of agency (Edwards 2015). Maria's view of herself as a teacher appears to have broadened as she progressed through her career, leading her to identify herself most strongly as an educator rather than as an MFL teacher. Seeing herself as an educator means working across different contexts and applying her generic teaching skills with a view to educating children holistically. Increasingly she is able to identify and reflect on her values and belief sets as will be illustrated in this section.

Although Maria had a break to have children, she still viewed herself as a teacher, as illustrated below. Since she left her school in 2008, she has undertaken a coaching role and maintains that: "it's bigger than just this classroom identity ... I don't feel that I have left teaching". However, she felt that absence from formal teaching had embedded the permanence of her identity as a teacher, albeit an identity that is shifting and broadening over time and space (Norton 2013). Similarly, whilst working in a different context or space as a coach later on, it became clear to Maria that as a teacher she had a set of skills and knowledge that remained with her and could be transferred from one context to another: "it's teaching, you realize that those skills don't ever leave".

4.4.1 Beliefs and Values

As illustrated below, Maria viewed herself primarily as an educator. As such, her attitudes to herself were underpinned by strong beliefs about educational responsibility for the development of the whole child. What she enjoyed as an educator was communication and connection with learners and the: "responsibility of being an educator of a child" and 'making eye contact responding thoughtfully to a child". Her comments suggest a recognition of the moral underpinnings of education (Sockett 2008) together with a valuing of the relational aspects of teaching (Gatti 2016). Through her continuing role as a coach she can continue to be an educator

and to connect with young people: “I’m somebody who values connection with people, finding out why people are finding certain things difficult”.

What also emerged from the interviews was that Maria valued her general teaching skills, such as behavior management and clear communication very highly. For Maria it was very important to see herself as more than a modern language teacher to help her deal with challenging times in the work place: “conceptualizing yourself as an educator rather than simply and straightforwardly as a modern language teacher really helps you to see those times through”.

Maria’s comments suggest that as she has become more experienced, she has become less influenced by the immediate environment and contextual factors (Lave and Wenger 1991) and has become more independent in her identity as a teacher. Whilst she is not currently teaching MFL in a school, she has been able to reflect on not only her own teaching but also on her educational values. She exhibits a confidence and a sense of clarity about her teacher identity. At the same time, she exhibits the desire to challenge and question, suggesting that she would welcome the opportunity to engage with critically reflective discourse communities of experienced teachers or professional development programmes involving university tutors and school teachers (Thomas et al. 1998) or, indeed as she has done, to undertake further study.

5 Conclusion

This chapter has examined the concept of language teacher identity, looking at perceptions of identity; to what extent contextual and social factors such as communities of practice and affinities have shaped the development of the case-study participant, Maria; and how these influences have changed over time. I now return to my research questions:

In relation to RQ1, it is clear that Maria identifies most strongly as an educator rather than as an MFL subject teacher. This is an identity which, although shifting in nature, endures over time. Embedded in this view of herself as a teacher are sets of general beliefs and values sets about education as well as more specific ones that relate to language learning. Maria sees her teacher identity as extending beyond the classroom into

different contexts where she can bring her valued teaching skills in relation to communication with young people and behaviour management to bear. Nevertheless, as an MFL teacher, she is clear about what she valued: seeing language as performance, using humour in language teaching and learning and creating a safe classroom space for making mistakes.

Turning now to RQ2, the contextual factors that shaped Maria's sense of identity over time and space, it is clear that identifying with and sharing approaches and practices at her school, helped her to develop confidence and an increasing clarity about who she was as a teacher in the early stages of her career. Whilst benefitting from some degree of sharing of practice and affiliations during the early and middle stages of her career, Maria appears to have had the confidence to be independent in her thinking and her practices which has sustained her in her career. The apparent lack of reliance on a large community practice after her mentor left is significant as it raises questions about the extent to which communities of practice are enduring in their influence or are sustained by other members (Hodkinson and Hodkinson 2003).

Although she appears to have briefly faltered slightly, Maria showed resilience (Ewing and Manuel 2005), and seems to have benefitted from emotional distancing through her higher-level studies, which perhaps has enhanced her sense of identity as a teacher to enable her to develop her disciplinary affiliations (Pennington 2015) and educational beliefs (Borg 2006).

Whilst individual case studies are bound to the particular case, they nonetheless provide nuanced accounts of teacher development. I would argue that this study offers interesting and potentially important insights with implications for teacher education. First, it adds to the body of literature that highlights the important relationship between teacher, subject affiliation, identity and agency, suggesting that a strong identity as an educator, a strong sense of agency and ongoing engagement with formal education and research may be key factors in sustaining a satisfying and ever-developing teaching career. Nevertheless, a greater focus on teacher identity in teacher education programmes would certainly be beneficial.

Further studies are needed with a wider range of participants into the factors that influence the development of teacher identity over time and

space to ascertain whether it is familial influences or personal characteristics and beliefs or indeed a complex mix of all of these (Beauchamp and Thomas 2009) that are most significant. Also worthy of further investigation is the role played by the development of disciplinary knowledge as teachers develop as researchers through undertaking collaborative research projects, or indeed through language education studies, in consolidating and clarifying teachers' views of themselves as teachers (Pennington and Richards 2016).

It is striking that Maria identified most strongly as an educator rather than as an MFL teacher and that she has an enduring desire to develop her teacher role to become a producer of knowledge (Johnson 2006) and a theoriser in her own right, a role that would resonate with Zeichner et al.'s work (2015) advocating a more democratic epistemology in teacher education through a re-framing of whose knowledge counts and how school teacher and teacher educators interact across institutional and ideological boundaries.

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