Working at the Chalk-face: Articulating the ‘Teacherly-Self’ and Educational Change

In this chapter, we focus on a group of male and female teachers, working at both primary and secondary, and ranging through generations but with a principal focus on teachers following 1945. The new Labour government, following their successful election victory, made education universal, transforming teachers’ working lives. Following the change to comprehensive schooling following the 1960s and early 1970s, the majority of established teachers experienced significant structural changes imposed on their profession, particularly from the 1980s with the implementation of the national curriculum, and associated introduction of testing, inspections and league tables stamped by the Thatcher policies and continued more recently by the New Labour government in power in Britain from 1997. In our initial study of 40 teachers we recognised that teacher identity – much like identity *per se*, as we have already discussed – is never ‘pure’, one that does not take on an acceptance of other markers of identity formation articulated through language and experience that underlines concepts of ‘age’, ‘class’, ‘ethnicity’, ‘gender’, ‘sexuality’, and most pertinent for our discussions, ‘the place of work’. In this chapter we examine the following dominant themes in relation to teacher identity: notions of commitment in new post-war conditions in education and the formation and expression of resistance and recognition in the field of education, both important constituents of the work identity of teachers.

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Earlier sociological investigations of teacher identity employed similar methodologies. One of the most substantial pieces of research around this subject is MacLure’s work on teacher identity, published in 1993,
which was based on a project conducted with serving teachers that ran from 1987 to 1990. Central to that project, in terms of methodology, was a set of semi-structured interviews – 69 in all – with teachers in both the primary and secondary sector. These interviews took place in outer London, East Anglia and the north of England, and sampled teachers from both rural and inner-city schools. MacLure’s project assessed the impact of policy changes on the working lives of teachers, and she cited media stories highlighting the detrimental effects of change in work experience in such terms as ‘teacher burn-out’, ‘innovation overload’ and ‘de-professionalisation’ (1993: 313). Her study addressed these developments through a series of interviews with teachers – what we call in this book ‘work-life histories’.

In her research, MacLure argued that identity should be regarded as ‘a continuing site of struggle … [and] should not be seen as a stable entity – something that people have – but as something that they use, to justify, explain and make sense of themselves in relation to other people, and to the contexts in which they operate. In other words, identity is a form of argument’ (1993: 317). Therefore claiming identity, she contends, is ‘also inescapably moral: identity claims are inevitably bound up with justifications of conduct and belief’ (1993: 318). Rejecting ‘the idea of an essential or “substantial” self …’ MacLure prefers ‘the notion of identity as a set of discursive practices’ (1993: 318). Thus, there is a denial of a ‘core’ identity, what we might call here a ‘teacherly-self’, that can be ‘common to … all or most of the project teachers’, and instead her research ‘looked at how identity was claimed, talked about and otherwise used by the teachers for particular discursive purposes … exploring the categories which people chose in order to explain themselves, and how these categories were used in the construction of identities’ (1993: 317). So while MacLure points to the significance of context, these contexts ‘were not predictive in any simple way of individual teachers’ attitudes, expectations or practice’ (1993: 318). To some extent, this process undermines the view of a stable teacher identity, one in which the private self and public persona are indistinguishable (see Woods and Jeffrey, 2002), a view accentuated by perceptions of the teacher as committed public servant with a clearly defined career trajectory and place within the wider community, shaping what we might call a relatively homogenous ‘structure of feeling’ (Williams, 1977) marked by affinities and affiliations with each other and with a wider public based on a relationship of trust. MacLure suggested here a far more explicitly poststructuralist view of identity than the one implied by our work in this book, seeing instead identity as shifting, fluid and dis-