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Peripatetic music teachers approaching mid-career: a cause for concern?

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This article discusses music service teachers' notions of pedagogical competence and occupational prospects as they approach mid-career. Respondents were drawn from a comprehensive life history study of 28 Local Education Authority employees. Of this larger cohort, 20 individuals contributed to findings discussed here. Data were collected and analysed between October 2002 and March 2004. Findings suggest a critical phase between 36 and 42 years of age. The episode entails reaching a professional apex, plateau or crisis in light of high pedagogical efficacy and career limitations. It culminates in a transformation of self-identity. Owing to respondents' unease about this period, the career structure of music service teachers is questioned.

Introduction

Research on educational life stages has concentrated on pre-service and beginning educators, and on the early portion of a teaching career (Fuller, 1969; Adams, 1982; Dollase, 1992; Schmidt & Knowles, 1995; Schmidt, 1998). Roberts (1993), for instance, has scrutinised identity construction in Canadian university music students. Biographical approaches have also been considered an empowerment venture (Munro, 1998). Indeed, the pioneers of biographical research publicised the disenfranchised and deviant (Thomas & Znaniecki, 1927; Shaw, 1930; Lewis, 1961). Biographical strategies can recognise marginalised groups 'by articulating the teacher's voice and ensuring that this voice is heard loudly within the world of teacher development' (Sparkes, 1994: 13). Along these lines, Casey (1993) raises awareness of the less dominant voices in teaching, that is, those of Catholic nuns, and secular Jewish and African–American women. Nonetheless, life history research that considers established teachers, their life trajectories and career phases, is far more scant. Only a small number of inquiries have explored schoolteachers' occupational phases expansively (Sikes, 1985; Huberman, 1993). Furthermore, music service teachers are largely overlooked and, hitherto, Morgan's (1998) project has been the only large-scale example of biographical research in this arena.

In this article, I focus on peripatetic instrumental and vocal teachers between the ages of 36 and 42 years. Findings come from a broader life history study of 28 individuals encompassing an array of ages from inductees to retirees. These music educators worked for a relatively large Local Education Authority music service in England. At the time of inquiry, the organisation had 155 employees; 107 of these were part-time workers. A five-tier qualitative model of lives emerged demonstrating changes in the teachers' perspectives across the years. In this article the focus is the third biographical phase.

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Scholars frequently refer to 'landmark events' (Kompf, 1993), 'turning points' (Wethington *et al.*, 1997; Clausen, 1998) and 'critical incidents' (Kelchtermans, 1993; Sikes *et al.*, 2001) in relation to biography. The latter are:

> . . . events which challenge the professional self of the teacher. . . . One has to reconsider choices, the personal priorities in one's work as a teacher; one has to make decisions that will influence one's further biography . . . (Kelchtermans, 1993: 202),

In a similar vein, after 36 years of age, the contributing peripatetic teachers entered a 'landmark passage' or 'critical phase' (Sikes *et al.*, 2001) wherein they reached, or at least perceived, an apex of professional energy and aspiration. The episode also concerned understanding and coping with occupational limitations, a diminished locus of control vis-à-vis career, and an eventual redefinition of self-identity. In some cases, the passage marked a time of personal strife or crisis.

Methodology

Necessary 'gatekeepers' granted their permission to embark upon the investigation. These were the Head of Music Service and Reading University Ethics Committee. Consequently, participants completed a written statement of informed consent. Informed consent does not allay the surplus of ethical affairs that surface in biographical work. Ethical matters in qualitative research must largely be regulated in process (Bresler, 1995).

The majority of life history interviews took place in music teachers' homes. There were only two exceptions; these sessions were held in private offices. Researchers sometimes favour quiet settings (Miller, 2000) or a person's home for interviews (Atkinson, 1998). Certainly, on 'home territory', the respondents seemed at ease and effortlessly articulated expansive biographies.

Initially, storytellers were invited to annotate a winding timeline or 'life river' with key turning points or milestones in their lives (Priestley *et al.*, 1978; Denicolo & Pope, 1990, 2001; Pope & Denicolo, 1993). This paper-and-pencil technique seemed a non-threatening way to commence an interview. The rivers served as biographical mainstays that were elaborated during subsequent tape-recorded discourses. An 'active' style of interviewing (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, 1997, 2003) was adopted whereby possible orientations and connections were adumbrated for the respondent's appraisal and contemplation. Postmodernists recast both interviewer and interviewee as 'active agents' (Fontana, 2003). Furthermore, in biographical research, the respondent's 'self is seen less as an anchor and source of narration than a product of it; self becomes discourse' (Peacock & Holland, 1993: 368). The resultant text is conceived as the 'creation of life, or a constitution of the self' (Kohli, 1981: 68). Biographical accounts are actively constructed in an attempt to manage particular social identities (Gardner, 2001).

The preliminary interviews were transcribed and returned to contributors who assessed their 'internal consistency' (Atkinson, 1998, 2001); this process is sometimes known as 'subjective corroboration' (Plummer, 2001). That is, the life histories had to have integrity in the minds of both the storyteller and researcher. Storytellers also added clarifications and dates, indicated possible breaches of their confidentiality, and underscored sensitive issues or passages they wished to remain unreported. The transcripts were subsequently coded.

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Analytic induction was employed to generate theory from the multiple life histories (Bertaux & Kohli, 1984; Faraday & Plummer, 2003). A biographical turn in sociology means we see individuals as having agency so that 'biographies make society and are not merely made by it' (Rustin, 2000: 46). Coded segments were linked and a model was gradually constructed with the aid of NUD*IST software. Analytic induction entailed repeatedly analysing new data in light of information already collected; accordingly, existing hypotheses were revised until a universal relationship could be demonstrated (see Silverman, 2001; Roberts, 2002; Lee & Fielding, 2004). Negative evidence (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Ryan & Bernard, 2000) was sought, therefore, to challenge the emerging model – thus necessitating continual adjustments – until incoming data merely acted as confirmation. It was a point of 'theoretical saturation' (Tagg, 1985) or 'rapports sociaux' (Bertaux, 1981). Readers should note that interim findings were authenticated by storytellers both during interviews and in follow-up sessions. The analytic strategy also necessitated theoretical sampling (Mason, 1996; Silverman, 2001). An opening sample embraced an even distribution of ages; this expanded considerably and the analysis revealed qualitative shifts suggesting five unevenly spread biographical phases (i.e. inductees, age 26–35, 36–42, 43–53, and 54 years and beyond). In addition to ages and genders, the final array of contributors included numerous instrumental disciplines and various levels of professional responsibility (Morgan, 1998). Single and married individuals and single parents were also interviewed. Of the overall sample of 28 teachers, five belonged to the group discussed in this paper (i.e. age 36–42 years inclusive). Additionally, 15 respondents were older; they had passed through this career episode and made retrospective comments. In total, then, 20 biographies were used when constructing the ensuing portrait.

The story of medial years

Some identity traits

In this article, the terms 'self-identity' and 'teacher-role identity' are used. These require clarification. People may have context- or situation-specific self-concepts or self-images. 'Self-identities' are overall views, or complexes, of these self-concepts (Hargreaves *et al.*, 2002). The term 'teacher-role identity' specifically concerns how individuals characterize themselves as teachers, their personal images of self-as-teacher (Knowles, 1992). This idea must not be confused with 'roles' per se; roles and identities are far from synonymous. Roles can be assigned whereas identities are in flux and represent a constant social negotiation occurring within situational constraints (Britzman, 1992).

After 36 years of age, the peripatetic music teachers differentiated their sense of expertise, separating it from younger teachers, in a number of specific ways. These qualitative changes were: longitudinal experience; increased maturity in relation to students; and a heightened comprehension of children sourced from parenthood. These were new features of the teachers' self-identity yet must not be considered an exhaustive list. Prior to this phase, respondents noted comfort with their pedagogical role in terms of managing children and group teaching. They had also developed a range of effective pedagogical approaches and materials. However, the heightened consequence of longstanding experience surfaces in 36-year-olds.

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> My pupils' progress is better now that I have lengthy experience which enables me to give them more relevant teaching. (Karen)

> . . . I am much more aware of ideas, solutions to problems and knowledgeable of teaching and learning strategies. I do think these attributes do come with experience, with lengthy hands-on experience. (Neil)

As neophytes, storytellers had often felt akin to older students; moreover, they were inexperienced and felt young thus somewhat discrete from older colleagues. At 36 years, these judgements begin to alter radically. Frequent remarks surface about a paternal or maternal dynamic with pupils.

> I do probably feel more maternal because I'm that bit older. (Holly)

> I suppose the kids probably look at me as being a bit of a father figure and I don't mind that [*laughs*]. (Thomas)

Before this career episode, some respondents had become parents themselves. Life histories recognise that various spheres of life are interlinked, that lives 'are not hermetically compartmentalised' (Sikes *et al.*, 1996: 37). Parenthood, for these peripatetic teachers, is considered helpful in underpinning relationships with students. There is an educational sagacity sourced from having school-age children. Parenthood leads to an increased understanding of children, better communication, and repose in the workplace.

> Nothing 'phases' me anymore. I don't get stressed. I think that comes from being a parent. . . . It does help your teaching being a parent. Before I had the children, I would let things get to me with the teaching. (Emma)

> I think I'm quite an understanding person when it comes to children. I understand what it's like for pupils due to having children. You know, I understand the other end: I know what it's like when they are at home and stuff. (Holly)

Certainly, teacher–pupil relationships have a remarkably different tenor to those of beginning teachers. Mature storytellers evidently drift some distance from children's worlds (cf. Sikes, 1985).

> The rapport and relationship with teenage pupils is good at the start of a career and yes, this does drift . . . (Catherine)

> The relationship with pupils changes throughout your career. Being a lot older, I feel those teenagers are more, sort of, children than when I first started teaching. At the start of your teaching career, they are not that far removed from you. (William)

A number of respondents had become managers during this life-segment. Perceptions surrounding a supervisory role feature in life contributors' teacher-role identities. There is often a negative shift and, if not, changed interactions with lower-ranking staff members. In extreme cases, interviewees recounted experiencing verbal onslaughts, harsh attacks on corporate strategies or approaches. These were taken personally at first. Eventually, they became inherent annoyances to withstand and, furthermore, part of serving as 'mouthpiece' for the service. Entering management was a confusing interpersonal undertaking. Role conflict, whereby demands are incompatible with personal values (Walsh, 1998), or role

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ambiguity (Brown & Ralph, 1998) may feature in occupational stress. Aside from this, constantly delivering exemplary teaching, even when unobserved, was thought yet another pressure.

> When you move into management, you have to be seen to be doing the job well all the time. There is added pressure there . . . . I think it's a pressure I perceive. (Oliver)

> Once you have some responsibility, you are very aware that your teaching needs to be exemplary. You're thinking 'Right, now suppose someone was watching me teach at this instant.' I think it just sharpens you up a bit. You tend to have more of a professional edge with some of the pupils. (William)

In addition, managers felt obliged to endorse, or publicly voice, the music service's modus operandi (e.g. pedagogical customs, schemes of work, philosophy). Outward support was considered necessary despite, sometimes, holding personal reservations.

> As a manager, you do *have* to make new initiatives work . . . . I have to play up the music service's traditions and support them. (Fiona)

> . . . there is always a kind of 'cabinet collective responsibility' that means you have to support things in public, even if you have some question marks about them privately. (Matthew)

> There are some things that I don't like philosophically with the National Curriculum, but you support it anyway. (Oliver)

> As a manager, particularly a middle as opposed to senior manager, the onus falls on you to be the interface between the latest hare-brained government initiative, or ambitious 'expert's' hobby horse, and the staff who will have to implement it and deal with the consequences. You have to be able to make it work yourself, sell it to the staff and monitor progress . . . (William)

Acting as a protagonist of the local authority's educational approaches clearly raised the potential for discord with fellow workers. It was necessary to become impervious to critical remarks. Middle managers like William, above, considered this particularly important; recent performance management duties had meant frequent face-to-face dealings.

Negative perceptions of career

The aforementioned biographical themes largely portray a buoyant self. There is a rise in professed efficacy reinforced by maturational characteristics but, alas, this has a downside. Teachers become uneasy about impending routine prior to, and beyond this career episode. Ennui is pandemic.

> I had been teaching since I was 23, and I was 35. There was a certain amount of sameness coming into what I was doing . . . (Catherine)

> I wanted to do something different at that point [i.e. the respondent's thirties]. It *is* a bit of a problem teaching instruments, I think. Teaching in schools, whizzing around a dozen different schools a week, does become a relentless process. I had begun to feel,

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> I must confess, that 'Oh, here we go. I'm in another rut.' It was a relentless treadmill and there weren't a lot of changes to be seen. (Douglas)

> I think monotony can be a problem and especially at the moment with the exam syllabus for my instrument. We've had the same pieces for some time and they are getting very boring to teach. (Emma)

> The instrumental teaching job can get monotonous; it gets boring . . . . It's just too much of the same all the time. (John)

Music service teaching is demanding, especially in its pastoral aspects; teaching small instrumental groups and after-school ensembles impels closeness to pupils and parents. Contrariwise, its necessary itinerant, weekly schedule is repetitive and, as with any teaching, the turnover of pupils is cyclical. Walsh (1998) asserts that jobs deficient in variety can impair mental health since people have no new challenges to engender a sense of achievement. Here, therefore, is the rub: awareness of high proficiency, ennui, and, as described below, the notion of negligible career prospects trigger an occupational apex or plateau. It should be emphasised that causality, the 'connective tissue' of the analysis, was verified by respondents.

Storytellers clearly felt that, in terms of promotion or acquiring additional responsibilities, there are limited prospects. Lack of status and opportunities for advancement have been recognised by teachers as causes of stress (Travers & Cooper, 1996). Perhaps, money also becomes increasingly significant. Midlife is sometimes considered 'the putative high road of economic attainment in the life course' (O'Rand, 1990: 140).

> Teachers within the service have to content themselves with their position . . . . I feel as though there is a glass ceiling which will stop me progressing within the music service. (Holly)

> If I wanted to advance, it would take forever . . . . These jobs don't come around very often. (John)

> I don't really see a career progression in the music service. (Karen)

> Well, it's true; it's a fact. There's very little in the way of a career ladder in the music service. There are no posts for my instrumental discipline as Advanced Skills Teachers. There are two woodwind posts but why isn't there an Advanced Skills Teacher for my instrumental discipline? (Sebastian)

Besides, these respondents believed that any prospects meant crossing an unappealing divide into management. Management was considered undesirable because it meant moving away from contact with students towards increased bureaucracy. This quandary is not restricted to peripatetic instrumental teachers. For classroom teachers interviewed by Cox (2002: 114), promotion dictated letting go of music. Similarly, mid-career Australian humanities teachers interviewed by Ingvarson and Greenway (1984: 58) noted a primary interest in teaching so upward mobility seemed anti-climactic and professionally unrewarding. Steffy (1989) has argued that, in order for career ladders to promote pedagogical excellence, they must embrace factors other than seniority and administration.

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> I don't have desk job ambitions . . . . If you want to be into this career stuff, into this job, for me it's making music with the kids and *not* sitting around filling in forms like the senior managers. (John)

> There are few opportunities for promotion even though I'm experienced, and I'm not so ambitious now . . . . I would like some sort of promotion, but not a lot of paper pushing thank you. (Neil)

> Becoming a manager has less to do with children. I wouldn't want to be stuck behind a desk all the time. (Sebastian)

The peripatetic teachers' disinterest in paperwork adds credence to Steffy's viewpoint and reveals a specific proclivity. Since these educators yearn to maintain involvement with students throughout their careers, a desirable career structure must spotlight pedagogy.

Apexes, plateaus and crises

Some time between 36 and 42 years, the respondents pinpointed a high point of enthusiasm, energy and/or professional ambition. This seems consistent with research on secondary teachers by Sikes (1985) although the timing is slightly different (i.e. 30–40 years). For those undergoing this phase, there were remarks about losing interest. Older respondents commented on a past zenith. Some women were increasing their contracts at this juncture and returning to the workplace after privileging motherhood. Nonetheless, there was a renunciation of aspirations when questioned. Emma's story (below) offers a view of 'the teacher she is not', in short, an 'argumentative identity' which defines her in opposition (MacLure, 2001).

> I'll take my career and see how it goes. I'll see what comes to me. I do know people who had children, went back to work, and followed up their career path. I'm not sure that I'm looking to do that. I just tend to take things as they come. (Emma)

> . . . I'm still dynamic about the job, but maybe not as much as when I was in my early forties. I felt that was a peak there . . . (William)

Many respondents also felt ensnared in their occupation at this point. They were at an age where it appeared improbable to embark upon a new career. Additionally, they had arrived at the aforesaid professional ceiling. Moreover, those individuals who, by now, have achieved advancements (and even substantial promotions) voiced these anxieties. For some, the career episode was patently a traumatic state of affairs. Anguish was reflected in tone of voice, demeanour and occasionally even tearfulness; these cannot be conveyed in print. Walsh (1998) submits 'status incongruity', frustration at being at a career ceiling, as a cause of stress and teachers' job dissatisfaction.

> I can see the years of doing the same job stretching out before me and wonder if that is all I will ever do. (Holly)

> I do remember, for a time, perhaps having a midlife crisis and thinking 'I don't want to do this, but there's nothing else I can do.' I know that some staff members feel like that. (John)

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> I can see myself in the same situation in another 25 years. It's not a pleasant thought though. I would not want to turn into a grumpy, cynical old git! (Neil)

> After, sort of, two weeks of term, and it's been a bad two weeks, I thought 'I'm approaching 40 and I could be doing this job for another 25 years. I don't know if I'm going to be able to do it for another 25 years and still be capable of inspiring and enthusing children'. I felt I was getting more old and cynical . . . I've been thinking about this for a year or so and I *really* don't know. I've come to the point now where . . . I don't know what else I could do if I left the music service. . . . I know I have to stop in music because there's nothing else I could do really. (Sebastian)

Through remarks such as ' . . . there's nothing else I can do', John and Sebastian show that they are dubious of alternative professional identities by this life-stage. Storytellers commonly sensed that age, inappropriate training and professional experience had conspired to prohibit new careers. Additionally, we should recognise that established teachers will have accrued substantial family-life and financial commitments.

Discussion

On one side of this qualitative representation, peripatetic music teachers' self-concepts depict healthy self-regard. On the other, torments surface about restricted occupational prospects and tedium. Meanwhile, managers experience the additional pressures of overtly endorsing policy and demonstrating exemplary practice. Apexes of ambition or energy result, plus the belief that one is 'trapped' in one's present job; in some cases, there are personal crises. These are not gender-related phenomena and, furthermore, promoted individuals also considered further progression unlikely. For those on the bottom rungs of their occupational ladder, there are particular dangers. Misalignment of task perception (when low) and self-image (if high) can result in poor self-esteem:

> . . . self-esteem can be understood as the subjective balance between a teacher's self-image and his or her task perception. Task perception refers to the teacher's 'personal professional programme': the goals and norms to be achieved and respected throughout one's work . . . . However, if the discrepancy between teachers' self-image and their task perception becomes too wide, it will negatively affect their job satisfaction and motivation and, as a consequence, it can cause undue stress (Kelchtermans, 1999: 186).

Consequences for learning will be unfavourable if educators become dissatisfied and uncommitted. Music services might be wary of such deterioration. After all, contented individuals will be motivated teachers. In this case, confidentiality, trust and catharsis, which are integral to a biographical inquiry, have led storytellers to articulate private concerns. Contributors revealed thoughts that, otherwise, would remain hidden from their employers. For example, candidness about tedium would seem unbefitting any committed educator. The life histories have, therefore, provided an enlightening window and, for local authorities, findings beg lengthy reflection about peripatetic specialists' careers.

The episode ranging from 36 to 42 years appears to be simply a 'bump' in the occupational road for some, and a significant 'junction' for others. 'At many points along the life course . . . our sense of integrity (of what we claim to be) or our sense of direction

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(where we are headed) may be subject to challenge' (Clausen, 1998: 192). Data from the inquiry suggested that, after 42 years of age, these same people redefine themselves by shunning occupational cynicism which, they worry, may impact upon pupils' learning. They also present themselves as the dependable backbone of the service and emphasise the importance of an established reputation within their local communities. These, rather than upward mobility, bolster a new teacher-role identity. Usefulness is an ideal which might 'guide us out of the confusion of crowding problems' (Jung, [1933] 1985: 118). It is a lodestar 'in the adventure of extending and solidifying our psychic existences' (ibid.). Catherine has noticed a transition point in staff:

> I have discussions with other staff of around the age of 40. They are feeling that it's difficult to see themselves continuing in their current role for another 20 years. This would seem something of a watershed . . . It is encouraging to note that teachers seem to come through this to regain job satisfaction . . . . It would be true to say that, if career progression hasn't taken place by the late thirties or early forties, it is unlikely to happen later. (Catherine)

Even so, the episode carries the potential to be extremely testing for some. Whilst root causes of stress in teachers might best be eliminated, most stress management work has focused on symptoms (Brown & Ralph, 1998). For this reason, stress management strategies often 'promote the view that the responsibility for change lies with the workers' (Walsh, 1998: 27). Rather than merely addressing symptoms, the development of a progressively 'staged' career structure, one that is apparent for workers, or some viable prospects, will clearly hinder the emergence of manifest problems. In his seminal work on schoolteachers, Lortie argued that career 'staging', or upward mobility through promotion and additional responsibility, serves to 'institutionalize the delay in gratification . . . Staging gives reality and force to the idea of the future; it generates effort, ambition, and identification with the occupation' (Lortie, 1975: 85). Positive personal growth may also prevent cases of occupational burnout (Kelchtermans & Strittmatter, 1999). It is heartening that peripatetic teachers want such growth to hinge on pedagogy.

Career-path qualms are not exclusive to peripatetic teachers; school music teachers may experience similar worries. However, the causes are rather different. An investigation in Northern Ireland showed that schoolteachers also feel limited in terms of promotion. Within the school, they were disadvantaged by their subject area. The upshot: 'If you teach a low-prestige subject your suitability for promotion will suffer' (Drummond, 2001: 11). The kudos of music is less important for peripatetic teachers. Instead, so few upward steps are available within their organisations. The middle and upper echelons of music service management structures are typically small; opportunities are limited below these strata. Peripatetic teachers have similar backgrounds to their classroom counterparts and, of course, are responsible for their choice of career. Can they, consequently, be considered victims of the local authority system? The snag is, when embarking upon a career, inductees may fail to anticipate the eventual importance of professional growth. A fertile career structure must be extended for these educators. Of course, developing genuinely incremental hierarchies of status, and diversifying available duties, will necessitate both ingenuity on the part of local authority managers and substantial funding in years to come. Advanced Skills Teachers are an admirable start. Careers undoubtedly offer financial rewards and variable degrees

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of security. However, perhaps upward vocational movement is '. . . the essence of career' (Lortie, 1975: 84). A richer definition of career might be a path along which individuals progress wherein status is incremental, personal interests transform, and a robust locus of control is maintained. Addressing this definition is a real challenge for employers.

Life history research is able to place 'an emphasis on teachers' thinking from *their* perspective – from the perspective of an *insider* looking around, and not that of an *outsider* looking in' (Muchmore, 2000: 1). In this instance, life histories have generated a 'snapshot' of self-identities and revealed a predicament for peripatetic music teachers' in medial years. There are also likely solutions. With storytellers' lives, it seems, a gauntlet of challenge is thrown down for the organization under investigation. Perhaps other LEA music services might also learn from these peripatetic teachers' lives.

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