The Lamp of Sacrifice: Professional Identity and Work Culture in a College of Further Education

Submitted by Martin John Price to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Education in Education, October 2010.

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Abstract

Britain has a culture of long working hours, resulting in significant levels of work-related stress. Teachers are arguably the professional group most likely to experience pathological stress and burnout as a result of working long hours. Research in schools suggests that teachers' work orientations are strongly influenced by factors of personal identity, social background, career stage and personal resilience to stress. In Further Education (FE) research hitherto has emphasised the impact of Government policy and managerial style on teacher behaviour, and notions of teacher professionalism. There has been less research into the impact of FE teacher identities and attitudes towards work upon their working lives. This thesis investigates the relatively under-researched area of work culture within a single FE College, in an attempt to discover the reasons underlying teacher's reactions to the pressures of overwork. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were carried out with 13 teachers and managers to investigate teacher responses to the work culture of the College. Based upon existing theoretical models of stress and burnout, three groups of potential determinants are explored: personal identity, the social context of the College, and the impact of external political, economic and social factors.

The research confirms the existence amongst College teachers of a culture of working long hours, and identifies examples of stress and burnout. Interview responses support previous research findings concerning the central importance of teacher identity. Interview data underline the importance of personal factors in determining teachers' responses to workload and their resilience to stress. A model is developed which summarises potential teacher responses to workload stress, and proposes ways in which these may be linked to factors of teacher identity and work cultures. The findings also highlight the pivotal role of managers and work teams in supporting teachers, particularly those most emotionally susceptible to stress.
# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contents</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List of Tables</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Abbreviations</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Chapter 1. Rationale for the Research Topic

1.1 Personal Context  
1.2 A Culture of Overwork  
1.3 The Changing Culture of Further Education  

## Chapter 2. Literature Review –Teacher Identity and Work Culture

2.1 Defining the Research Field  
2.2 Teacher Identity: backgrounds and motivations  
   2.2a Self-image and Personal Identity  
   2.2b Educational Background and Career Cycle  
   2.2c Motivation, Emotion and Work Satisfaction  
2.3 Social Contexts of Teachers’ Work  
   2.3a The Social Construction of Self  
   2.3b College Cultures, Teams and Ecological Models  
   2.3c Professionalism and Vocation  
2.4 The Changing Locus of Control  
   2.4a Managerialism, Performativity, and Culture  
   2.4b The Architecture of Surveillance  
   2.4c Autonomy and Time  
   2.4d Bureaucracy and Institutionalised Stress  
2.5 Models of Teacher Work Ethic, Stress and Burnout  
2.6 Summary  

## Chapter 3. Research Perspective, Methodology and Methods

3.1 Perspective and Research Question  
3.2 Methodology – Choosing A Research Paradigm  
3.3 Research Methods  
   3.3a Choice of Data Collection Method  
   3.3b Data Collection - Interview Method  
   3.3c Ethical considerations  
   3.3d Methods of Data Analysis  

Chapter 4. Data Analysis

4.1 Data Analysis – setting the scene 92
4.2 Systematic analysis of themes 93
   4.2a Reasons for entering a career in teaching 93
   4.2b Length of career – career phase – career goals 95
   4.2c Nature of current workload 95
   4.2d Strategies for handling work-life balance 99
   4.2e Attitude towards teaching as a job / vocation 102
   4.2f Subject or pedagogic orientation 104
   4.2g Emotional attitude to current teaching role 106
   4.2h Relations with immediate team 109
   4.2i Relations with immediate managers 111
   4.2j Relations with senior managers 113
   4.2k Attitudes to College – buying in to the vision 114
   4.2l Degree of stress/burnout – and any identified factors 118

Chapter 5. Discussion of emerging themes 122

5.1 Workload and stress 122
5.2 Personal identity and work 126
5.3 Teamwork and collegiality 130
5.4 Management culture and leadership 133
5.5 Professional identity 138
5.6 Discussion of emerging theory 140
5.7 Evaluation of Research Methods 146

Chapter 6. Conclusions and Recommendations 150

6.1 Conclusions 150
6.2 Recommendations 159
6.3 Directions for Further Research 160
## Appendices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appendix</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 1 Interview Schedule</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 2 Your Rights as an Interviewee</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 3 University of Exeter Consent Form</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 4 Sample Transcript Analysis</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 5 Sample Page of Open Coding Analysis</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## References

| References                                         | 172  |
List of Tables

Table 1. Reasons for Working Long Hours 16
Table 2. Conflicting Paradigms in FE 47
Table 3. Details of Interviewees 92
Table 4. Quantitative data on Interviewees 96
List of Figures

Fig. 1. Summary Model of teacher burnout derived from literature review 60
Fig. 2. The model of negative strain relations and consequences in teaching activity. 61
Fig. 3. Proposed Model of Teacher Burnout. 62
Fig. 4. A Proposed Model of Teacher Responses to a Culture of Overwork (Types of Agency) 144