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Article title: From isolation to individualism: collegiality in the teacher identity narratives of experienced second-level teachers in the Irish context.

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Abstract

Harnessing teacher collegiality has been advocated as a means through which to negotiate contemporary challenges to teacher professionalism. However, the dominance of discourses of competitive individualism in global educational contexts poses a challenge to collegial relationships. This paper draws on the findings of a narrative study of teacher identity in the Irish context. It points to some ambiguities and tensions within the operation of teacher collegiality in that context and highlights the profession's cultural susceptibility to individualism. The paper argues that glossing over these vulnerabilities could hamper the development of collegial professionalism. These findings highlight the importance of bringing a culturally and contextually embedded analysis to the critique of international trends around teacher professionalism.

Keywords: teacher professionalism; teacher identity; collegiality; education policy; narrative

Introduction

Teacher professionalism, long an ambiguous concept, has become increasingly contested in the globalised knowledge economy, where the teaching profession is simultaneously positioned as policy problem and policy solution in questions of educational efficacy (Thompson & Cook 2014; Ozga 2013). This paper, drawn from a study on teacher identity in second-level education in Ireland, addresses the operation of collegiality within teacher professionalism. In doing so, it critiques some assumptions around teacher professionalism in the Irish context and highlights the need for nuance in analysing local interpretations of international discourses.

The research study was set against the backdrop of a protracted industrial dispute within Irish second-level education, during which the members of two teacher unions took strike action in protest at a proposed curricular reform and changes to pay and employment conditions. The study examined the teacher identity narratives of experienced second-level teachers and the relationship between those narratives and education policy narratives. A narrative research approach was adopted, with a theoretical framework that built on the work of the philosophers Adriana Cavarero (2000) and Judith Butler (2012).

The ambiguous operation of teacher collegiality in this context was one of the core themes in the findings that emerged from the study. This paper discusses those findings and highlights the emergence of competitive individualism within the respondents' perceptions of teacher collegiality. Teacher collegiality is a term that remains, in the words of Little (1990), 'conceptually amorphous' (p. 509). Collegiality differs from collaboration, although the terms are often used almost interchangeably. Teacher collaboration can include 'almost any kind of working together' (Hargreaves 2001, 504) and is more descriptive, whereas collegiality focuses on the relationships between teachers and has a normative aspect. However, taken together, both 'collaborative actions and collegial relations constitute

important working conditions for teachers' (Kelchtermans 2006, 221) and play an important role in the professional culture of schools. While collegiality can sometimes be characterised as inherently positive, more nuanced perspectives point to the importance of recognising that it can take different forms, depending on culture and context. Hargreaves (1994) identifies two principal forms of collegial cultures. 'Collaborative cultures' are organic, authentic, and often informal, while cultures of 'contrived collegiality' are more formal, often imposed and, as a result, can be inauthentic. Little (1990), meanwhile, describes how collegiality can operate on a spectrum from independence through collective autonomy to interdependence, where mutually beneficial collegial relationships contribute to the co-construction of professional knowledge about teaching and learning.

The discourse of competitive individualism is associated with neoliberalism, which can be seen to elevate the 'competitive, instrumentally rational individual who can compete in the marketplace' (Hursh 2005, 5), and operates through concepts such as choice, self-management, meritocracy, and the idea that the individual is solely responsible for her or his outcomes in life (Brown & Tannock 2009; Peters 1994). In the context of this study, the participants framed competitive individualism as a dominant trait of the teacher identities of their younger colleagues, positioning it as a newly emergent aspect of teacher identity in the Irish context. However, a closer analysis of the interview narratives and of the historical context of education in Ireland offers some nuance to this assumption. By unpacking some of the particularities of the operation of collegiality within teacher professionalism in the Irish context, this paper argues that the growth of competitive individualism cannot be solely attributed to neoliberal mechanisms but must be understood as historically and culturally embedded.

Sections Two and Three discuss the relevant literature, firstly in the international context and secondly in the Irish context. Section Four gives an overview of the study's

methodology. The subsequent discussion of the study's findings is arranged around the themes of isolation, collegiality, and individualism, which emerged from the analysis of the participants' teacher identity narratives. The final section makes some concluding remarks on the operation of teacher collegiality in the Irish context and on the role of teacher collegiality in negotiating challenges to teacher professionalism more broadly.

Literature review

Teacher professionalism as policy problem

There have been certain commonalities in the direction education policies across Europe and in global contexts have taken in recent decades. The research literature points to neoliberal influences in these global policy shifts (Lingard 2013; Connell 2013). It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a full description of the nuances of the term 'neoliberalism' and its influence in education. However, some key points from the literature in this area highlight an emphasis on education's role in the global knowledge economy, a growth in standardisation, evaluation, and accountability, an increase in privatisation and marketisation of schools and educational institutions, and the adoption of managerialist and performativity-based cultures in public sector education (Ball 2016; Hursh 2005).

Teacher effectiveness is often positioned as a policy problem within these contemporary global education reform discourses, with the result, as Thompson and Cook observe, that the teaching profession has become 'ontologically insecure' (2014, 703). These policies tend to include some combination of the following: a) an emphasis on teacher and school accountability; b) standardisation of learning outcomes; c) an increase of managerialism; d) performativity rhetoric; and e) a centring of teacher professionalism and teacher agency as an antidote to perceptions of poor teacher quality. Education policies of

this nature are usually justified by reference to globalisation, competition, and the requirements of the knowledge economy.

As Bourke *et al.* note, 'what professionalism is, how it can be defined and by whom, are still sites of struggle within the education sector' (2015, 84). There are thus certain contradictions running through the teacher professionalism discourse in its present form. For example, while there is a call for increased teacher professionalism, the focus on externally managed accountability would appear to deny the profession a self-regulatory power, which is recognised to be one of the core tenets of classical professionalism (see e.g. Hargreaves 2000). Similarly, teacher agency is identified as an aspiration but the increase in standardised testing means that teachers have little agency in how they assess their own work and that of their students. Sachs highlights the 'paradox of autonomy' whereby the teaching profession is 'being exhorted to be autonomous while at the same time it is under increasing pressure from politicians and the community to be more accountable' (2001, 150).

Biesta (2015) suggests that the current policy rhetoric around teacher professionalism in fact leads to a deprofessionalisation of teaching. Apple offers a way to understand this deprofessionalisation from an 'intensification' perspective, whereby the growing economic and management-oriented pressures on education lead to an intensification of work, with an associated implied deskilling (Hargreaves 2000; Apple & Jungck 1990). Among the characteristics of intensification are a persistent sense of work overload. In such conditions, teachers are able to focus only on the essential tasks, resulting in, for example, decreased collaboration with colleagues. It could be argued that the trends associated with intensification and deprofessionalisation 'imply a more or less pervasive questioning of teachers' professional identity' (Ballet *et al.* 2006, 217).

Collegial approaches to reclaiming teacher professionalism

A counter trend emerging to the deprofessionalisation discourse is a call for teachers to take ownership of their own professionalism. This involves collaboratively negotiating a professional identity rather than having one constructed by policy and external actors. Thomas (2011, 381) argues that 'teachers need to consider collectively how they define themselves, both in schools and in the wider community' if they are to challenge the teacher-as-problem discourse that increasingly features in many public and political arenas. Democracy is a key idea within strategies of resistance to the 'inevitability' of deprofessionalisation. Sachs (2016, 2001) suggests placing an emphasis on 'democratic professionalism', understood as emerging from the profession itself, rather than on 'managerial professionalism', which emerges from governing authorities, while Biesta calls for 'a democratic conception of professionality' (2017, 328). Fullan *et al.* (2015) argue that professional capital, a concept encompassing teachers' social, human, and decisional capital can contribute to 'developing individual and group actions that support accountability *within* the profession' (p.3, emphasis added).

These concepts based around democracy and professional capital are not in themselves synonymous with collegiality. However, it would be difficult for democratic professionalism or professional capital to emerge in contexts where there is no culture of strong collegial relations and positive collaborative actions. Thus, it can be argued that each of these strategies of resistance towards deprofessionalisation do hinge on the existence of teacher collegiality. Furthermore, the form of collegiality necessary for these strategies, building as they do on collective agency in the negotiation of professionalism, is situated towards the interdependence end of Little's (1990) model, where teachers move beyond instrumental collaboration and towards the co-construction of professional knowledge.

However, collegiality cannot be assumed to be an unproblematic element of teacher professionalism in contexts influenced by the individualising discourses of neoliberalism,

where there is a tension between collegiality and competition (Holloway & Brass 2018). Thus, the contemporary operation of collegiality must be unpacked in order to better understand the manner in which teachers can collectively negotiate and resist the deprofessionalisation of teaching. Furthermore, in order to understand local interpretations of teacher professionalism and collegiality, supranational discourses must be read through a culturally contextualised lens. The next section provides this lens for the discussion of the study's findings by outlining some key issues around the operation of teacher collegiality in the Irish context.

Teacher collegiality in the Irish context

The autonomous professional: an ambiguous interpretation?

The literature suggests that teachers in the Irish context have traditionally experienced high levels of isolation (Coolahan 2003). There is a perception of teaching as a solitary occupation with 'inadequate opportunity to participate in shared practice' (Hall *et al*. 2012, 113). There does not appear to be a tradition of collaborative learning and teachers are more likely to get teaching ideas from textbooks than from colleagues (Halbert & MacPhail 2010; Raftery *et al.* 2007). These observations are consistent with the findings in the OECD's 2008 Teaching and Learning International Survey [TALIS], where teachers in the Irish context were more likely to engage in 'basic co-operation activities' than the higher-level 'professional collaboration' (OECD 2009; Gilleece et al. 2009).

This can be linked to a reductive understanding of the autonomous professional, whereby autonomy is understood in the sense of not having another individual overseeing one's work. According to Jeffers (2006, 191-2) teaching in the Irish context is characterised by 'strong inherited traditions of teacher autonomy/isolation and the predominantly "closed-door", privatized practice', while teachers in Mac an Ghaill *et al.*'s research 'commented on

the effect of the cellular organisation of schools, which left them to their own devices in the classroom' (2004, 191). This understanding of autonomy comes to mean working in isolation because collaboration is seen as ceding one's autonomy.

In such a context, any difficulties teachers might experience are perceived as individual difficulties and as such are to be solved independently, rather than through collegial collaboration (Kitching 2009). This unwillingness to share vulnerabilities is possibly linked to the cultural dominance of essentialist views of teaching and the 'good' teacher (Devine *et al*. 2013; Furlong 2013; Sugrue 1997). An increased openness to exploring professional vulnerabilities or ambivalences together with colleagues would represent collegial relations at the interdependence end of Little's (1990) spectrum and could contribute to the development of democratic professionalism and professional capital, as discussed above.

Initiatives introduced by the Teaching Council of Ireland in recent years aimed at enhancing teacher professionalism (Teaching Council 2016) do include themes that could be seen to move towards a more developed collegiality (e.g. schools as collaborative cultures, teachers as researchers, communities of reflective practice). However, through a combination of poor communication, unfortunate timing in terms of reform overload, and the cultural factors described above, these initiatives have been slow to take root.

Silences and missed phases in teacher professionalism?

Examining the history of educational research in Ireland, Sugrue calls the manner in which 'international debates and controversies […] have largely passed us by in this jurisdiction' an example of a 'silence in the Irish system' (2009, 22). O'Sullivan (2005) also draws attention to this idea of a silence around missed debates in the Irish context. His core argument is that Irish education jumped rapidly from a theocentric paradigm, with a

philosophy shaped by a Roman Catholic worldview and paternalistic pedagogical relationships (p. 118), to a mercantile paradigm shaped by market and economic values, with 'a strong corporatist political culture' (p. 86) and more contractual pedagogical relationships (p. 119). He argues that, because this shift happened later and more quickly than in other contexts, Irish education did not experience an intervening phase in which a democratic and progressive education paradigm emerged as it did in other jurisdictions during the mid-twentieth century. Thus, it cannot be assumed that critique of the neoliberalisation of education in other contexts can be directly transposed to the Irish context (Conway & Murphy 2013). This is because 'what such educational systems have in common […] is a background of welfare state, anti-racist, and equality interventions' (O'Sullivan 2005, 109) and in this they differ from the Irish context.

The idea of silences and missed developmental phases in the narrative of Irish education policy (Long 2008; Ó Buachalla 1988; Mulcahy 1981) is one that also offers a useful lens for looking at teacher professionalism in the Irish context. Hargreaves (2000) proposes a rubric of four developmental ages of teacher professionalism that is helpful in considering this question. The first three phases are the pre-professional, the autonomous professional, and the collegial professional. The autonomous professional is characterised as working mostly in isolation from colleagues, interacting around 'materials, discipline, and individual student problems rather than about curriculum goals, teaching behaviour or classroom learning' (p. 160). The collegial professional, on the other hand, works together with colleagues to create 'strong professional cultures of collaboration to develop common purpose [and] create a climate which values […] continuous improvement' (p. 166). Hargreaves identifies the 1980s as the period when autonomous professionalism began to shift into collegial professionalism. However, the literature on teacher professionalism in the Irish context suggest that the model of the autonomous professional continued to be more

dominant than that of the collegial professional until well into this century (Gleeson 2010; Jeffers 2006). Hargreaves' fourth phase of teacher professionalism is marked by a tension between two models: the post-professional and the post-modern. The post-modern is 'broader, more flexible and more democratically inclusive' (Hargreaves 2000, p. 167) than the post-professional, which actually risks diminishing teacher professionalism, for example 'by subjecting [teachers] to the detailed measurement and control of narrowly conceived competence frameworks' (*ibid*).

Anchoring the literature on Irish teacher professionalism in Hargreaves' ages of professionalism, one could ask whether it is plausible that the teaching profession in Ireland jumped from pre- and autonomous professional straight to post-professional with its markers of individualism and managerialism, without having experienced a sustained third phase of collegial professionalism. This would fit with Gleeson's argument that certain 'key themes of teacher professionalism' have 'largely passed us [Ireland] by', including 'schools as learning organisations and collaborative cultures' and 'the distinction between teacher professionalism and professionalisation' (2010, 373). While the Teaching Council initiatives mentioned above aim to develop some of these missing themes, their enactment has arguably been reminiscent of Hargreaves' post-professional model, with its emphasis on prescription and measurement, rather than the more open post-modern model.

This idea draws on the argument discussed above that Irish education policy jumped too suddenly from a theocentric to a mercantile paradigm and is intended as a heuristic device through which to consider teacher professionalism in the Irish context. The intent in raising the question is to avoid the assumption in some of the literature critiquing the current direction of education policy, which arguably positions teaching in Ireland as though it *had* experienced a sustained age of collegial professionalism. Such an assumption risks glossing over some of the vulnerabilities within the teaching profession in Ireland that may in fact

make it more susceptible to the negative effects of discourses of post-professionalism such as competitive individualism. This heuristic device emerged during the analysis of the findings of this study as a means to better understand the tensions, ambiguities, and contradictions in the teacher identity narratives, particularly in the interplay of competitive individualism and collegiality.

Research methodology: teachers' stories

The research study from which this paper is drawn aimed to explore the relationship between teacher identity and education policy in the context of Irish second-level education. The study was guided by the following core research questions: a) how does teacher identity operate in the biographic narratives of experienced second-level teachers in the Irish context and b) what is the relationship between education policy and teacher identity in that context? The concept discussed in this paper, teacher collegiality, was not the focus of the study initially but was one of the key themes which emerged from the analysis of the participants' narratives.

The research study's epistemological frameworks were rooted in the feminist theoretical tradition and adopted an understanding of knowledge as subjective, plural, and fluid. The study's theoretical framework drew on Cavarero's theory of identity, 'the narratable self' (2000). The principal elements of Cavarero's theory are that narration and storying are key to the individual's selfhood, that each individual is unique and irreplaceable, and that there is an inescapable interdependency between individuals. These three interlinked ideas and their emphasis on relationality formed the foundation from which the study's research approach and analytic framework were developed.

Butler's conceptualisation of vulnerability and interdependency (2012; 2004) also informed the theoretical framework, particularly in the attention she brings to how we are

dependent on the Other in making sense of ourselves and our lives. She emphasises that this is a mutual dependency and that it necessitates thus an acknowledgement of our responsibility towards the Other and, in turn, of our own vulnerability. These ideas were brought alongside Cavarero's perspectives on relationality and interdependency in the analysis of the study's findings.

The study's research approach was informed by the fields of life history and narrative inquiry (Goodson 2013; Clandinin & Connelly 2000) and used a qualitative method involving narrative interviewing. This narrative approach was chosen as it sat well within Cavarero's theories of narrative identity. The research interviews used a single opening question aimed at eliciting the participant's narrative of her or his teaching life. The same question was used for each interview ('can you tell me the story of your life as a teacher?') and any subsequent questions were based on the response to this initial question. This approach to interviewing is based on the Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method (Wengraf 2001) and aims to allow space for participants' agency in the telling of their narrative. This aligns with Cavarero's emphasis on the importance of paying attention to the unique 'who' rather than the generalisable 'what' in understanding people's lives (Cavarero & Bertolino 2008).

Between 2014 (when the study was first designed) and 2019, the majority of papers published on teacher identity in Ireland focused on student and newly qualified teachers (n=14) with only one paper on veteran teachers, although that paper also related to initial teacher education. It is important to address this gap in the research literature because of the nuanced understanding that can be gained from exploring the narrative of an experienced teacher's career against the backdrop of educational and cultural change. Thus, a purposive sampling approach was used to recruit participants who were qualified second-level teachers with at least 20 years' experience of teaching. Recruitment notices were placed in teacher union and subject association newsletters and on teacher forums on social media. The

researcher is an experienced second-level teacher and works in teacher education, thus word-of-mouth recruitment was also used through the researcher's extended professional networks. However, no participant was recruited who was a direct colleague of the researcher. The research was approved by the relevant university ethics committee and informed consent was given by all participants. The final number of participants was eight second-level teachers. The small sample size was in keeping with the paradigmatic position of qualitative narrative research. The sample is not assumed to be representative nor are the findings assumed to be generalisable. The average interview duration was two hours, with the shortest just under an hour and the longest almost three hours. The interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were anonymised with pseudonyms used throughout.

The framework for analysis involved two phases. Firstly, a narrative analysis was undertaken involving iterative close reading. The analysis aimed to draw out a sense of the unique 'who' in each teacher's narrative, in line with Cavarero's focus on individual uniqueness. The second phase was a three-step thematic analysis undertaken with the aid of qualitative data analysis software (MaxQDA). Firstly, line-by-line descriptive coding was used to identify topics, followed by which the coded data was assigned to categories. The third step involved developing overarching themes from the discrete categories. The study's theoretical framework informed this step of the analysis, in that concepts such as interdependency, relationality, and vulnerability offered a lens through which to interpret the findings and develop emergent themes. The results of each of the two phases of analysis were brought alongside each other and supplemented by the researcher's fieldnotes and coding memos to provide for nuance and depth in the interpretation of the study's findings.

Findings and discussion

This section presents some of the collegiality-related themes that emerged from the analysis. The themes are arranged chronologically, starting with the isolation and limited forms of collegiality that were prevalent in experiences related by the participants from the early parts of their careers (i.e. 1970s – 1990s) and then discussing the participants' perception of the emergence of a more competitive form of individualism in recent decades. Table One below presents a brief profile of the study's participant teachers. The themes discussed do not represent the participants' full narratives nor the totality of the study's findings, but rather those related specifically to this paper's focus on collegiality.

[Table 1 here]

Isolation and territorialism

The findings that emerged from the interviews undertaken for this study fit within the interpretation of teacher autonomy in the Irish context discussed above. The research participants, particularly those with over 30 years' experience, recounted experiences that appear to represent a prevalent assumption that a marker of competent teaching was being able to cope with the challenges of the profession on one's own.

Evelyn spent a number of years teaching in two countries abroad before coming back to Ireland. She describes her first impressions when she returned:

> I was slightly shocked that there wasn't much interaction between teachers who were teaching the same subject. They were very closed about it, whereas in [country] we would have had a department, a language department and there was an awful lot of sharing. […] I was offering to do things for people and they were looking at me thinking, like, who is this person? Why is she asking me?

The narratives emerging from the interviews with Roy and with Fiona, each of whom have over 30 years' experience in the Irish context, echo some of the observations Evelyn makes. Roy describes a difficult start to his teaching career:

> I was sure for the first year I was going to be fired do you know. Because I just felt nothing was working.

A sense of isolation emerges as he describes his relationship with a principal who:

> tried to suggest to me that, well you're the only person having trouble…yeah that was the kind of insinuation that was in it …and would you consider leaving and all that.

Over the course of time, Roy has come to realise that he was not alone in having difficulties but, as he says, it took him a long time to come to this awareness:

> it was only with passing years I gradually found out that there was a whole …that there was other people that the same […] but I mean it took *years* before I found that out.

Similarly, Fiona describes the early part of her career in somewhat negative terms: 'I started my career in 1990 and until 2006, stagnation and professional isolation characterised…that time'. Clarifying what she means by isolation, she explains that:

> I had *no* experience of collaborative work with colleagues and had little idea of what any of the teachers in my subject departments were doing. I simply clocked in every school day and taught my classes.

She emphasises that, 'I wouldn't consider myself to have been alone in having that experience', a point that is supported by the literature on teacher collegiality in Ireland, as discussed above.

Evelyn's unease at her return, after nearly a decade abroad, to an Irish system marked by this lack of collegial relationships is apparent in her observation about the territorialism she perceived in the staffroom:

God forbid that you sat in somebody's chair, you know, that this is like, that's so-and-so's chair. You know? That's awful. I mean, I think that's…that speaks *volumes*.

This type of spatial symbolism also featured in Mary's narrative, where she recounts how, during the early years of her career, there was an inner room connected to the main staffroom, in which many of the male members of staff would gather at lunchtimes. She remembers that, when the door to this room was opened, 'gales of laughter and the stink of cigarette smoke' would emerge. As a newer, female colleague, she was implicitly excluded from this space.

The concepts of relationality and vulnerability, as understood in the study's theoretical framework, offer a useful lens through which to interpret these experiences. Arguably, for example, it may have been more possible for Roy to develop and sustain a positive sense of professional identity if a culture of relationality had existed that allowed for the expression of vulnerability, offering the opportunity for him to learn from and be supported by others in his difficult times teaching (Kitching 2009). This culture of hiding difficulties can be linked to the construction of boundaries around a model of the 'acceptable' teacher that does not permit the expression of vulnerability. This type of negative internal regulation impedes a more relational culture, where teachers could acknowledge and express vulnerability in an interdependent collegial atmosphere, an argument that draws together the conceptualisation of interdependency informing the study's theoretical framework and Little's (1990) theory of interdependent collegiality.

A limited form of collegiality?

There were exceptions within the interview narratives to the absence of collegiality described in the quotes above. Mary expresses her gratitude for the support of her colleagues in the early years of her career, saying that, while '[t]here's plenty of negative anyway' from that period of her career, 'the positives would be the…the support from the staff….especially

the older men…they were *so* kind'. She uses terms such as 'lovely' and 'kind' at various points during her interview to describe these older colleagues and positions them as having played a positive role in the construction of her professional identity in her early career.

These statements may initially seem to contradict the literature which points to a lack of teacher collegiality in the Irish context. However, when analysed more closely, it seems that the support Mary describes receiving is all based around instrumental outcomes, in this case classroom management and discipline, thus fitting the arguments in the literature that collegiality as understood in the Irish context is not expressed in terms of pedagogical collaboration and therefore is not necessarily reflective of the developed collegial professionalism of Hargreaves' third phase (2000).

Interestingly, it was only when they moved outside mainstream education that some of these teachers described experiencing the type of collegiality situated towards the interdependence end of Little's (1990) model, which is necessary for Hargreaves' collegial professionalism. When Fiona starts working as a tutor on summer courses with a private organisation, she experiences collaboration based around teaching and learning for, as she states, the first time in her career:

> It was the first time in my professional life that I enjoyed the chance to collaborate with another professional, namely the course director. […] And I planned all my sessions shaped by advice from him, and then he observed the sessions and gave feedback. And he was really positive and…enthusiastic and interested in what I was doing.

The lack of collegiality perceived by Evelyn in the mainstream schools in which she worked is one of the factors that resulted in her choosing to continue her career in an alternative education setting. Here, her positive experience of a different pedagogical approach has strengthened her conviction that:

> if there was a lot more give and take within the Irish system that, you know, you had an English department or you had a German department or whatever where everybody was working *together* […] I think you'd probably get a lot more out of the students.

The type of collegiality Evelyn advocates here fits within Hargreaves' collegial professionalism in its focus on student learning and is a form of collegiality that she argues was lacking in the mainstream schools in which she worked.

A more competitive individualism?

The analysis of the interviews suggested that there was a subtle temporal shift in the manner in which the theme of individualism operated within the narratives as the time period under discussion moved through the turn of the century and into recent decades. Where previously individualism had been most strongly associated with isolation, in latter years there is a distinct association of individualism with competition, particularly the type of strategic and individualised self-advancement associated with neoliberalism.

However, Janet, Carmel, and Sinéad positioned this competitive individualism as being a particularly dominant aspect of the professional identities of younger and newly qualified teachers, rather than of their own generation. Reflecting on the dynamics shaping the early career of their younger colleagues, they tended to express a type of (possibly misplaced) nostalgia as they compared them to their own early careers. Recounting various interactions they had with their younger colleagues, these teachers suggested that the younger generation's narratives of emerging professional identity are being constructed in a context that is marked by competitiveness and individualism in a way that they themselves did not experience.

A closer analysis brought up some contradictions in this assumption. While characteristics of competition were explicitly attributed by the participants to newer entrants

to teaching, their own identity narratives also contained subtle elements of competitiveness, for example in negatively comparing younger teachers' methodologies or subject knowledge to their own, or expressing satisfaction that students voiced a preference for their classes over those of their younger colleagues. Nevertheless, while these examples could be seen as moments of competitiveness, there did not appear to be a culture of *strategic* competitiveness running throughout their career narratives, whereas they did perceive such a culture shaping their younger colleagues' careers and teacher identities. Naturally, these perceptions are subjective. However, the concerns voiced by the participants at the implications of this perceived culture merits some attention.

In discussing the shift she perceives in professional identity, Janet highlights the emergence of what she terms the 'career principal' who is 'driven by money'. She suggests that there is now a tendency on the part of certain entrants to teaching to have an explicit ambition towards achieving a management position and questions the validity of this as a reason to enter teaching:

> like, why did you enter the teaching profession, did you actually start, going into [university] or wherever day one and said aha I'm going to be principal of a school?

Janet's perception of the career principal as a contemporary teaching identity aligns itself with neoliberal discourses, representing self-management and strategic thinking.

Carmel makes similar observations about the strategic approach of her younger colleagues to their careers, characterising them as 'political'. When asked for clarification on what she means by political she explains:

> They just know *exactly* what they need to do. […] they'll rush in now and get their Master's done; it doesn't matter what they do their Master's in, but they have their Master's. And they're doing a Master's in Education and they've no more interest in

> what it is. […] No interest. And they won't do it in their subject area. They'll do it in a management area. Constant. It's all about management now.

This passage encapsulates the way in which the self-managing individual must engage in credentialism, adapting their interests to the demands of a competitive employment environment, possibly at the expense of education that is of an intrinsic value to them.

Sinéad describes comparable processes at work in her perception of her younger colleagues' approach to their careers:

> That teacher who says, I got 4 As this year. It fascinates me. […] There is, I suppose there's a worrying trend in….among younger teachers….to see that as how they're going to get their CID [contract of indefinite duration] […] And they're charging up the, they want to *charge* to the finish line, they want to *be* at the level you're at.

She views this preoccupation with self-advancement with unease, arguing:

> now hold on a minute, you know, it takes a little bit more than just the determination to do it, it takes kind of some pause and some time out, some low time…to actually pull yourself back up and say, no, hang on a second.

In her awareness here of the complexity of professional identity, Sinéad highlights how vulnerability and 'low time' as she puts it, are unavoidable elements of a teacher's narrative and that to suppress those affective experiences is not ultimately beneficial or sustainable in terms of a teacher's identity, as discussed above.

Precarity as a challenge to collegiality

As Sinéad points out, this competitive element of the professional identity of newly qualified teachers is a function of contemporary precarious employment environments. Janet also draws attention to the role of structural conditions in teacher identity narratives:

> I think one of the greatest, greatest, I suppose, damage that's being done to the education system has been the lack of permanency for teachers, yes…the total insecurity.

These structural factors, such as the increase in casualisation and part-time contracts (Ward 2014), contribute to the pressure felt by newly qualified teachers to invest in and maintain a strategic approach to their professional development so as to enable them to be successful in an increasingly competitive employment environment.

In a context in which there is a limited number of posts and progression opportunities and where the environment requires a certain type of self-managing and competitive individual, it is arguably difficult to sustain positive collegial relationships. Echoing Janet's observation about 'career principals', Carmel observes that, 'there's definitely now…in a school there's the A and the B team'. The emphasis on competition and self-differentiation, as perceived by Carmel, again echoes the arguments in the international literature around the effects of neoliberal discourses on the construction of professional identities. Speaking about her perception of the affective change this pressure to be competitive has brought about, Janet says: 'it worries me when you see people in their twenties who should be full of enthusiasm' but are instead caught up in a sense of 'looking over your shoulder.'

Carmel, Janet, and Sinéad are not the only participants to voice their disquiet about a perceived increase in competitive individualism amongst newer entrants to the profession, with Mary, John, and Evelyn all raising similar concerns. However, despite some references to the broader societal and cultural status of the teaching profession, the concerns and criticisms are for the most part directed at what the participants perceive to be individual characteristics of newer entrants to teaching. This individualisation of characteristics that could be better understood if they were contextualised is a reflection perhaps of the individualised way in which professionalism has operated historically in the Irish context.

Without a tradition of collaborative approaches to practice or a relational interpretation of collegiality, it is arguably more difficult to collectively identify and define structural challenges to teacher professionalism, resulting in criticisms directed at individuals rather than structures.

Conclusion

From isolation to individualism: a fertile discursive ground

The impression emerging from these interviews is that, in the course of the participants' careers, collegiality tended to be patchy and focused on 'coping', with isolation being overall a more dominant experience. There is a temporal shift in the manner in which individualism operated in the interview narratives, whereby the isolation of the earlier chronological phases segued into competitiveness in the later phases. The participants perceived an increasing dominance of a narrative of teacher identity that emphasises self-management and competition, echoing the findings across the international literature (Holloway & Brass 2018; Reeves 2018).

Nevertheless, it would be incorrect to attribute the emergence of competitive individualism in this context solely to the influence of international neoliberal trends or current policy. Certainly, the increase in precarity and casualisation in the teaching profession, as evidenced in the Ward Report, is likely to give rise to competitiveness. However, researchers such as Lynch identify individualism as having long been one of the dominant ideologies in Irish education (Lynch 2012; 1987). This creates fertile discursive conditions for the responsibilised individual of the neoliberal era. Furthermore, given that isolation and individualism are such closely intersecting concepts, it is arguable that, in the Irish context, the teaching profession, accustomed to isolation and a lack of collegiality, is particularly susceptible to current discourses of competitive individualism. The risk that this

narrative will become more firmly rooted is perhaps enhanced by the traditional dominance in the context of Irish education of consensualism (Lynch 1987), through which the conditions of possibility for alternative narratives are stifled.

When the energy of the individual is channelled towards the project of strategic self-advancement, there are negative implications for the development of democratic professionalism (Sachs 2016) rooted in collegial relationships. As argued by Fullan *et al.* (2015), the collective development of professional capital is necessary if the teaching profession is to successfully negotiate the challenges of deprofessionalisation. However, while that professional capital can perhaps be developed from an established core of collegial professionalism, it becomes more difficult if collegiality has historically had a more ambivalent status.

It may be the case that initiatives aimed at fostering collegiality, such as formal mentoring programmes and structured collaboration, are a necessary first step to developing professional capital in these contexts. While such initiatives may be reminiscent of contrived collegiality, they could provide the space for genuine collegial relations to emerge (Datnow 2011). In order for the teaching profession to withstand the more damaging effects of the macro-narrative of deprofessionalisation, a counter narrative rooted in a strong tradition of collegial professionalism is required (Hargreaves 2000). In the absence of established norms of developed collegiality, it would be short-sighted to assume the organic emergence of a collective professionalism that is strong enough to negotiate the challenges of deprofessionalisation. Critique of international educational discourses must remain alert to culturally embedded nuances in their enactment rather than glossing over potential vulnerabilities in the teaching profession. There is a need, thus, to acknowledge the complexity of the operation of teacher collegiality and not to assume it exists unproblematically in all contexts.

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Table 1: Research participant profiles

Name (Pseudonym)	Gender	Age range (years)	Experience (years)	Context of teaching experience
Roy	M	60-69	35-39	Whole career in a single-sex voluntary school (city A), mainstream class teacher
Mary	F	40-49	25-29	Whole career in a single-sex voluntary school (city A), mainstream class teacher, then moved into support
John	M	60-69	35-39	Two single-sex voluntary schools (city B), both designated disadvantaged schools, mainstream class teacher, then moved management
Evelyn	F	50-59	20-24	Number of mainstream schools (abroad and in Irish context), then an alternative education centre (city C)
Fiona	F	50-59	30-34	Majority of career in co-ed community school (city B), designated disadvantaged school, mainstream class teacher, then s support
Janet	F	60-69	30-34	Whole career in a single-sex voluntary school (town D), mainstream class teacher
Carmel	F	40-49	25-29	Started career in a single-sex voluntary school (city B), then co-ed community school (town E), mainstream class teacher
Sinéad	F	40-49	20-24	Started career in a single-sex voluntary school (town F), then co-ed community school (town G), mainstream class teache into management