Lifelong learning; economic, social and cultural change experienced by educational support staff

Abstract

This paper draws on Bourdieu’s theoretical framework of habitus to explore shifts in economic, cultural and social capital for a group of teaching assistants who had gained a Foundation degree in supporting teaching and learning. Graduate teaching assistants were invited to respond to a postal survey that asked questions about the impact of doing a vocational degree on personal and professional lives. This was followed up with case study life-history interviews. Whilst there were personal benefits stemming from studying for the degree, such as a perceived increase in self-confidence, economic shifts were limited and in some cases non-existent. Several respondents indicated that they had increased responsibility without the accompanying pay, suggesting a form of potential exploitation. There appeared to be a failure of employers to recognise the degree as a higher education qualification. The research also exposed the personal challenges and hidden ‘costs’ involved in vocationally driven lifelong learning. In particular, the female teaching assistants experienced a powerful conflict between fulfilling their professional aspirations and their responsibilities towards their families and dependents. This conflict was seen as detrimental to the learning experience and sometimes deterred further study. The absence of change in economic capital suggested that the apparent enticement of people to ‘earn and learn’ to advance their careers could actually represent a false presumption. This paper calls for a more candid acknowledgement of the complex and shifting positioning of teaching assistants and the potential personal benefits and sacrifices involved in studying whilst working.

Key words: Lifelong learning, professional development, support staff.

Introduction

In the context of lifelong learning and a ‘knowledge economy’ (DfEE, 2000: 10) UK policy documents make clear statements about the kinds of adult participation in learning that are prioritised and funded. Value and focus is predominantly on vocational forms of accredited learning with key transferable skills and on courses that are deemed to contribute directly to the economy. Vocational degree level programmes like Foundation degrees are, according the UK Government, intended to enhance skills in the workplace, promote employability in an increasingly competitive global economy, and widen participation in learning (Doyle, 2003). These programmes were introduced into English Higher Education in 2001 to make higher education study more affordable, accessible and appealing to a broader range of people traditionally associated with higher education (HEFCE, 2000). They are carried out flexibly to enable students to ‘earn and learn’. They are framed as providing ‘a passport to a job’ and imply the promise of career development and professional enhancement:

‘a Foundation degree gives you the learning and workplace experience to help kick-start or further your career…so you’re prepared for the working world, or ready for promotion’ (Foundation degree website, 2007).
This paper questions the official rhetoric and almost mandatory optimism surrounding Foundation degrees and the skills culture promoted by the UK government. It presents some issues that are emerging from an ongoing three-year research project that explores the personal and professional life experiences of teaching assistants working in the primary, secondary and special school sectors who had either graduated or embarked upon a Higher Education Foundation degree in supporting teaching and learning.

One of the aims of our research was to find out if doing a Foundation degree had ‘kick-started careers’ (2007). Perhaps clouded by the policy rhetoric, we anticipated that a relatively high number would have received a promotion or financial recognition as a result of gaining a Foundation degree. We also felt that there would be social and cultural changes as a result of further study, and that teaching assistant’s perceptions of themselves and their views of their positioning within the various settings they inhabit would change.

**Teaching Assistants and habitus**

Our research focused on the experiences of teaching assistants who work in schools. The development of education support staff in schools has been at the forefront of recent UK Government educational policy reform. Workforce ‘remodelling’ (DfES, 2003a) was intended to ‘re-professionalise’ teaching and reduce teacher workload, as well as create new professional roles needed for the implementation of the UK Government’s *Every Child Matters* agenda (DfES, 2003b). This presented fresh opportunities and challenges for teaching assistants; offering wider responsibility and change that could be considered revolutionary in terms of traditional and professional hierarchies in education (Goddard et al, 2007). It would seem that recent changes to the role and status of teaching assistants are wide ranging. On of the main aims of our three year research project was to explore whether the stated aims of the Government were having an impact in school and how teaching assistants were experiencing changes in their careers and lives as a result.

Prior to recent reform, teaching assistants have traditionally been marginalized and undervalued members of the professional educational workforce (Sorsby 2004; Kerry 2005; Mansaray, 2006). They may be considered to inhabit a particular community of practice that is sometimes conceived in utilitarian terms (Dunne et al, 2008a). In order to explore in some detail whether, and in what ways, teaching assistants’ economic, social and cultural positionings in this community might change as a consequence of undertaking a Foundation degree, we employed Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of habitus. Habitus can be identified as ‘an acquired system of generative schemes objectively adjusted to the particular conditions in which it is constituted’ (Bourdieu, 1977:95). It is a physical, social and cultural space that is engaged with by individuals in particular ways.

Educational institutions have a habitus that are structured by the economic, social and cultural systems of the society in which they exists. The ways in which individuals negotiate their existence within these systems is guided by the ways in which such systems differentiate between individuals and groups. Bourdieu’s (1977) perspective would suggest that this differentiation reproduces hierarchies of power and social inequities. Using such a theoretical framework has led us to question how teaching assistants negotiate inhabiting particular spaces. For example, how do they negotiate their positioning within school staff hierarchies and how do they ‘become’ students at an institution of higher education?
Method

In order to explore teaching assistants’ perceptions of their roles and the inequities in power relations experienced, we wanted to investigate how undertaking a Foundation degree affected them. Throughout our longitudinal research project we have used a range of research methods, including questionnaires, individual case studies and focus group discussion. This paper focuses upon the cohort of teaching assistants who graduated with a Foundation degree in teaching and learning support in 2006 and is concerned with their perceptions of the impact of acquiring a degree.

Those who agreed to take part in this research were working as teaching assistants in the primary, secondary or special schools sectors in the North West of England. A large majority of the participants were female, reflecting a national, historical gender bias for teaching assistants (Bach et al, 2006). An initial postal survey was conducted to ascertain the broad changes that the participants had experienced. In this first phase, 189 participants were invited to respond to a survey and 73 completed questionnaires were returned. Out of 163 primary school teaching assistants canvassed, 63 responded, while out of 26 secondary school teaching assistants, 10 responded. This number of responses provided the researchers with sufficient data to gain insight into key themes and issues that informed the next phase of the research process, which involved six ‘case study’, semi-structured, personal interviews with five females and one male.

The interviews followed a ‘narrative enquiry approach’ (Bourdieu, 1988; Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). For Bourdieu, forms of narrative enquiry can identify the ‘dispositions’ of habitus (1996:264-5). A narrative approach can provide a catalyst for pursuing understandings of individual’s lives from their (emic) perspective rather than from the viewpoint of an observer (Goodson and Sikes, 2001). The case study interviews were informal and relatively unstructured. Participants were invited to draw a life history line that could facilitate the provision of a personal narrative. They were asked to detail how they became teaching assistants and to identify important moments or ‘critical events’ (Webster and Mertova, 2007:73) that they felt were significant for their individual journeys. The events that they identified included changes in career, promotions, their personal lives and experiences related to their schooling and academic experiences.

In each case, the teaching assistants made decisions about how they wanted to construct and convey meanings about their experiences and lives through a process of storytelling. Having a methodology that could be negotiated by the participants was particularly important for this research as we wanted to expedite the public voice of teaching assistants and provide a platform from which their experiences could be shared. The use of life history lines and individual narrative interviews provided an opportunity for individuals to offer their views, interests and concerns that may otherwise remain unheard. The sheets of paper that contained the life history lines were analysed alongside transcriptions of the interviews by each of the three researchers who then compared their ‘readings’ of the accounts.

Forms of capital

The readings were informed by Bourdieu’s notions of economic, social and cultural capital. The forms of capital can be conceptualised as forms of wealth: they can be acquired, exchanged for each other, they relate to each other and possession of capital equates to power. In order to consider teaching assistants’ acquisition of economic capital we wanted to
study their career trajectories and trace whether they derived material advancements such as promotions, pay rises and/or changes in role. Social capital can be identified as related to an individual’s networks of social relations: the connections between individuals, and between individuals and social structures. To investigate changes in teaching assistants’ social capital we considered how their experiences might be related to social positionings such as class, gender and age. To address teaching assistants’ acquisition of cultural capital we considered how engaging with a Foundation degree affected their self-identification and the ways in which they positioned themselves as educators. We also explored how they referred to the acquisition of knowledge and the possession of goods to construct themselves as learners.

Bourdieu’s interpretation of social systems and hierarchies of power can be criticised for framing educational institutions and other social systems as acting on individuals. This interpretation can be over-mechanistic regarding the operation of power. Individuals are construed as being automatically disposed to acting unconsciously in particular ways (i.e. see Grenfell, 1998; Nash, 1990). In response to this, our research has a focus on the interrelations between individuals and the social structure and we seek to map the ‘social milieus formed from combinations of (objective) socio-economic positions with (subjective) values and lifestyle preferences’ (Gallagher et al, 2002:497).

In the following discussion of our findings, we combine a theoretical framework that draws on Bourdieu’s work with a feminist perspective to focus on how a particular social field of power determines how individuals interact with each other and with society. We also consider how individuals ‘inhabit’ spaces and position themselves through their active negotiation of dominant meanings or truths.

**Economic Capital**

We had anticipated that teaching assistants’ acquisition of a relevant Foundation degree would be financially recognised and would further their careers. However, our survey showed that career development opportunities were limited and in some cases non-existent. Only one third of the graduates who responded to the initial survey had obtained promotion with its concomitant pay increase. One third stated they experienced no change and another third of the graduates indicated that they had increased responsibility without the accompanying pay: ‘I was given the responsibility to teach whole classes’. This suggests a potential form of exploitation.

Qualifications and financial rewards seemed to be less important than job satisfaction for some: ‘I will ultimately have a satisfying job’ and ‘I can get the same or more job satisfaction by working with small groups’. Abery (2008) had similar findings; she found that ‘job satisfaction’ was ‘very important’ for 65% of the 3,156 support staff she surveyed, while 44% said ‘career progression’ was ‘very important’. For some of the teaching assistants in our study, economic capital was not of central concern, but ought it to be?

The potential exploitation of teaching assistants may be related to the prevalent (mis) perception that Foundation degrees are not ‘real degrees’ (Dunne et al 2008a; 2008b). As one individual commented: ‘I didn’t particularly think the Foundation degree was a qualification in itself anyway’. This view appears to be endorsed by schools and employers: ‘The first year they (School Managers) wouldn’t finance anything towards it because they said it was personal development, not professional’.
‘Real degrees’ are regarded as ‘the benchmark of success, at the end of the day’. Despite the UK government’s aims to erode the divisions between traditional and vocational education through the introduction of courses like Foundation degrees (DfES, 2004), a dichotomy and tension appears to remain between these traditions. We would suggest that until Foundation degrees are more widely recognised and consequently valued as higher education degrees in their own right, those who undertake them may find themselves under-sold. Schools and local authorities will continue to utilise and exploit (through lack of financial reward) the increased ‘skills’ and ‘qualifications’ of their workforce.

The notion of Foundation degrees not being ‘real’ degrees may also reflect the teaching assistants positioning within hierarchical social and cultural practices of schooling (Dunne et al 2008a; 2008b). The degree is not seen as a ‘real’ degree in a similar way that a teaching assistant is not perceived as a ‘real educator’. The power-knowledge base resides with ‘teachers’ who hold ‘real’ degrees.

Social capital

The cohort of teaching assistants involved in this research was representative of those who work as teaching assistants across the UK. Out of the people in our cohort who graduated with a Foundation degree in 2006, only four were male. The majority of teaching assistants are female (Abery, 2008; Dunne et al 2008a; 2008b) and most of our cohort were mature students (over the age of 25). Such gender and age demographics might explain why family relationships featured so frequently in both the surveys and in the personal narratives:

‘I could never have gone this far without it (my family’s support)…without their support and realising that I still do exist….even though I’m in the attic working away and they don’t see me for nights on end. Especially when you’re a mature student, you’re still running a house and doing everything else a mum does and you work as well so it’s a very big commitment’.

‘I suppose my family have been supportive in lots of ways, which makes a huge difference and that’s allowed me to do it’.

While both these comments appear to emphasise family support, the language used infers that this support was not unconditional. The teaching assistants’ education was ‘allowed’ once the needs of their families had been met and was relegated to marginal spaces. Study was not necessarily seen as part of their lives: ‘Nobody in my family has ever been to University and I’d no idea…and you think, what’s expected of me?’. Lifelong learning and study was framed as a peripheral activity, almost a luxury, indulgence or even a subversive activity, rather than a right or entitlement (as advocated in government literature).

What seemed of particular importance to those who provided personal narratives was the pressure they experienced to manage or ‘juggle’ the disparate demands on their time and energy related to family life, work and study (Armstrong, 2005; Abery, 2008). Participants stated:

‘with the children’s activities the kids do ballet and swimming, it’s just fitting everything in but also trying to be involved at the same time’.

‘I couldn’t do it during the day because of childcare’ … ‘I could come home and study when my children had gone to bed’. 
Study was framed as a highly personal and secondary activity and it was inferred that immersion in the ‘luxury’ of education was a selfish act that risked neglecting familial responsibilities: ‘At the age of 35 both my children were in school and I decided I would do something for myself’.

The inference that doing a Foundation degree was not a selfless act was negotiated by these women with repeated references to the importance of their parental role. All of the women who provided personal narratives stated that their families always came first:

‘I could see that it (a Foundation degree) would fit round my family life – if it hadn’t have done that it just wouldn’t have featured, I just wouldn’t have considered it’.

‘...the kids were in bed and all settled. They always come first anyway, the funny thing throughout that, is that family always comes first and it does, so if the problem’s in family, the learning will come second...yes, the learning comes second but it did fit in at some point, it always came along but it came at 2 o’clock in the morning when it fitted in’.

The women were also continually engaged in (re)constructing themselves as ‘good mothers’:

‘If one of them said, Mum I need you then I’d be there and it wouldn’t matter whatever else needed doing it would be dropped’.

‘I carried on in education to give the children a good role model’.

‘I think I did it at the right time for where my children were up to, obviously they were my biggest factor’.

This focus on their mothering roles appeared to be used as a strategy to assuage feelings of guilt because they felt they were ‘indulging’ in learning for their own benefit. This is a particularly gendered response that can be framed in relation to women’s mothering identity and caring emotional role that has been represented as an essential part of being a woman in British culture (Lawler, 2000:125).

The women appeared to be struggling to develop learner identities that were formed through a negotiation of their experiences and lives that are classed, gendered and aged in specific ways. For them, being a successful learner is about ‘fitting’ their education into the absent spaces that are outside of work and family life. They were prioritising their mothering roles in order to negotiate how they conceived of themselves as learners when such an identity was dissonant with their social and cultural habitus.

In terms of social capital, the teaching assistants placed a great emphasis on the mutual dependency and support they received from each other, as students, whilst doing a Foundation degree:

‘It was brilliant, we all supported each other so much, and it was nice to see which directions other colleagues were going because we were all going in different directions’.

‘You worked together as a team, you study together...and you talk to each to each other and discuss and analyse different areas. Actually we got really close. If you did have worries you
could carry on... and they’d (the group) say you’re not giving up - so you’d get support off them’.

The supportive group dynamics for the students who were similarly situated appeared, like the support of their families, to be vital in keeping the group together and ‘determined to succeed’.

**Cultural capital**

The possibility that ‘becoming’ a learner is at odds with the experiences and lives of the individuals involved in this study is repeatedly evidenced in their personal accounts. They recounted that their own experiences of schooling were negative, and felt they were not encouraged or expected to have certain aspirations:

‘we all have it don’t we, every time I ask I feel stupid ... that’s connected to the way I was at school, being afraid to ask. I did not have a successful career at school’.

‘I think sometimes you’re scarred for life from what happened in school do you know what I mean’?

‘When you don’t do well at school even though you’re only 16, it’s no age is it really, it does affect you, your life’.

The teaching assistant’s experiences of their own schooling appeared to have had an impact on their self-perceptions as ‘learners’ in the traditional sense and on their attitude to ‘education’. Self-doubt about their positioning as learners resurfaced for the women when they returned to education as mature students:

‘The Foundation Degree was quite daunting at first because I didn’t have a fantastic education... I sort of came out of school not really bothered., I could have done a lot better’.

I thought, ‘I’m not clever enough to do it (a Foundation degree)’.

‘It had taken me so long to get to here, I mean I was a mature student, I was 40 when I graduated and you know, you’ve been a mum, you’ve run a house, you’ve been all that and never think you’re actually capable, well... maybe if you are capable, your brain cogs have gone a little bit rusty and you feel you’re not going to get there’.

It is possible that the teaching assistants’ low expectations of themselves as learners is reinforced by their social and cultural positioning in schools.

Their negative self-perceptions of academic ability appeared to change through their experiences of a Foundation degree. The consequences of their experiences of schooling appeared, for some, to strengthen their alignment working with pupils in school who experience similar forms of disaffection: ‘So, if we look at it from my (negative) experience of school ... (it) also directed what I’m doing now in a way’ (working with disaffected pupils).

Despite the self-doubt and reservations regarding them selves as learners, all the women surveyed and interviewed graduated from the Foundation degree and over 50% continued with academic study and a further 25% said they would consider further study in the future.
So what prompted this change in how they perceived themselves as learners and how they embodied their new habitus?

In the personal narratives, issues about not being ‘academic’ or a traditional learner were traversed through attention to personal changes. In particular there were repeated references to increased self-esteem and confidence:

‘(The Foundation degree) has given me a lot more confidence as well doing like presentations in classroom, that’s given me a lot more confidence. I can stand up now and talk to people no problem a lot easier than what I could before, it’s given me a lot of confidence that’.

‘I wouldn’t be where I was now if it wasn’t for the Foundation degree because that gave me the confidence to feel I could do it, and I could do better than I thought’.

As the teaching assistants’ gained confidence - ‘I mustn’t be as thick as I thought I was’ - their academic achievements were coupled with changes in their aspirations. A ladder metaphor was used to recount aspirations that were linear and progressive in nature; ‘...it’s where you are on the ladder that lets you say you are doing well’, and the language used again potentially reflected an awareness of their positioning within inequitable staff hierarchies and the need to ‘get on’, ‘do well’ and, ultimately ‘prove’ themselves (to themselves and to other educators):

‘I need to go an awful lot further’.

‘I’m the only person who’s got a level 4 and HLTA (Higher Level Teaching Assistant status) and the Foundation degree means I sort of started head and shoulders above everybody else’.

Comments suggest that the women constructed themselves as ‘successful’ learners and integrated the demands of their socially gendered and aged lives, to the extent that they had developed further academic aspirations as they experienced shifting forms of cultural capital.

Reflections
The interplay between economic, social and cultural capitals assigns each individual to their place in society (their habitus) (Bourdieu, 1984). In the case of the teaching assistants in our study, there was a complex negotiation involved in embodying a new habitus and there was evidence of shifts in their forms of capital and positioning in a particular community of practice.

In terms of social and cultural capital, the teaching assistants developed strategies for pragmatically managing their lives in new ways to encompass family responsibilities. Such strategies often involved them studying in peripheral and marginalised spaces. They experienced a powerful conflict between fulfilling their personal and professional aspirations and their responsibilities towards their families and dependents. But during the process of studying for a degree the ‘luxury’ of education and the guilt that this entailed, became reframed as a usual rather than exceptional practice. This reframing was aided by the strong relationships that developed between the teaching assistants as fellow learners.

The teaching assistants were conceiving of themselves as learners and starting to undertake complex negotiations of different demands on their time and energy whereby they drew on a variety of resources (social and cultural) to develop an identity that ‘fits’ or adapts to their
new habitus. They were able to traverse the disjunctures between the identities and spaces they inhabited at home, at work and within higher education. They were able to integrate their learner identities into existing spheres. They learnt to traverse the dissonance between two cultures and integrate being wives and mothers with ‘becoming’ learners and graduates employed in a specific community of practice. The teaching assistants were perhaps learning what ‘belonging’ entails: they developed knowledge about their roles in schools and about themselves, they gathered goods and resources that they needed and embodied identities that ‘passed’ (Skeggs, 2002:82).

The narratives showed the personal challenges and hidden ‘costs’ involved in vocationally driven lifelong learning. They showed how people orient themselves in their everyday lives, within a structure of a neo-liberal knowledge-based economy (that prioritises skills and training), and how they struggle, shift priorities and sacrifice to ‘become qualified’.

There was an absence of change in economic capital for those who took part in our study and few experienced material advancement. This suggested that the apparent enticement of people to ‘earn and learn’ to advance their careers could actually represent a false presumption and facilitate potential forms of exploitation of the workforce. Although the teaching assistants did not experience shifts in economic capital on an individual basis, their collective increased ‘skills’, training and qualifications may ultimately benefit the economic interests of the state.

In our research to date we have found that teaching assistants talk in utilitarian terms about the usefulness of knowledge (and information) they acquire on a Foundation degree and their own ‘usefulness’ in the classroom (Dunne et al 2008a and 2008b). This raises questions for us; both about the kinds of knowledge that courses like Foundation degrees offer and of the positioning of teaching assistants within structural hierarchies of schooling. This is an issue that we will pursue further as we reach the final stages of our ongoing longitudinal research.

Bibliography


