

Generating an approach informed by Cultural-Historical Activity Theory to research influences affecting Early Career Teachers' professionalism and retention

Teacher Education
Advancement Network Journal
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University of Cumbria
Vol 11(3) pages 3-14

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Abstract

This article focuses attention on influences that affect Early Career Teachers' (ECTs') professionalism during their process of learning to teach. The main purpose is to generate an approach informed by Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) and evaluate the relevance of this approach to research influences affecting ECTs' professionalism and retention. This approach is significant because it could be employed in future research to address a knowledge gap in the existing evidence base and to further illuminate our understanding of influences affecting ECTs' professionalism and retention.

The paper introduces the key principles of CHAT. Then a context for researching ECTs' professionalism is constructed; tracing the enactment of government policy strategies within Initial Teacher Training (ITT) policies and examining the contested notion of professionalism. Next, existing empirical evidence on influences affecting ECTs' professionalism is evaluated and a knowledge gap is identified. Then an alternative approach informed by CHAT is outlined with reasons why it is useful in researching influences on ECTs' professionalism. Some limitations of employing CHAT in this approach are identified and adaptations are proposed. Argument is presented about how the gap in the existing evidence base could be addressed by utilising this approach in future research.

Key words

Cultural-Historical Activity Theory; Early Career Teacher; Initial Teacher Training; professionalism; methodology; teacher retention.

Introduction

This article seeks to develop insights into influences that affect the developing professionalism of Early Career Teachers (ECTs). The main purpose is to outline an alternative approach to research, informed by Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), and evaluate its usefulness in addressing a knowledge gap in the existing evidence base and illuminating understanding of influences affecting ECTs' professionalism and retention.

This section introduces the key principles of CHAT which provide a basis for the approach detailed later in this paper. CHAT, then, refers to a theoretical framework from which to consider social and cultural aspects of learning. Vygotsky (1931/1997) was pivotal in theorising the social and cultural context in which the process of learning is situated and viewed this as an integral feature. Engeström (1987) drew on this theoretical approach and employed the term 'interconnected instrumentality' (15) to describe the interrelated character of all human activity in a perpetually evolving setting. Activity here is conceived as 'a highly dynamic system, which is characterised by constantly occurring transformations' (Leont'ev, 2009:401). Roth and Lee (2007) argue that CHAT provides researchers with 'the tools for revealing the social and material resources that are salient in activity' (197). CHAT also highlights the agency of individuals and their capacity to act as driving forces for change (Leont'ev, 2009). An approach informed by CHAT will be outlined later in this paper. It will explore reasons why

Citation

Quirk-Marku, C. (2019) 'Generating an approach informed by cultural-historical activity theory to research influences affecting early career teachers' professionalism and retention', *TEAN journal*, 12(1), pp. 3-14.

this approach is particularly productive in researching influences on ECTs' professionalism together with some limitations of CHAT.

Context

This section critically examines pertinent government policy strategies: centralisation of control, accountability and marketisation of Initial Teacher Training (ITT). It critically examines how these strategies are manifested in ITT policies in England. These strategies and policies offer an important potential source of influence on ECTs' professionalism.

Neo-liberalism is an economic model based on the 'primacy of individualism, market liberalism, outward orientation and state contraction' (Onis and Senses, 2003:1). The neo-liberal principles of centralisation of control teamed with accountability have shaped the education system in England (Fitz, 2003). The government has employed accountability mechanisms to inspect and assess how their policies are being implemented and whether centrally-prescribed standards and expectations are being met. A 'culture of accountability' (Menter, 2015:3) and centralisation of control are clearly visible in circular 14/93 (DfE, 1993) which saw the establishment of the Office for Standards in Education (OfSTED) which is responsible for the inspection of schools and ITT courses. Further examples of the cultures of accountability and centralisation of control are policy documents that set out the topics that ITT courses should address and what trainee teachers should know and be able to do (circular 24/89, DES, 1989), and establish formal requirements that ITT programmes must assess trainee teachers against a nationally prescribed set of competencies (circular 9/92, DfE, 1992). These policy documents demonstrate 'the marked centralisation of control over teacher education' by government (Murray and Mutton, 2015:60) set within a 'national framework of accountability' (Furlong et al., 2008:14). They arguably diminish the agency of trainee teachers, a feature which will be explored further in the next section in relation to ECTs' professionalism and retention.

An essential aspect of neo-liberalism is the creation of a competitive market of ITT provision. In essence, this means that ITT courses compete against each other to achieve sufficient numbers of trainee teachers and consequently secure the funding attached to each trainee teacher, either from the government or from the trainee teacher. In England, the creation of the Teacher Training Agency (TTA) in 1994 was a key government decision that led to the marketisation of ITT provision. The TTA, a quango whose members were appointed by government, was given responsibility for organising the funding of teacher education in England. This meant that universities/colleges had to bid for TTA funding as 'providers' of teacher education. This established a competitive market for delivering ITT courses that prompted Ball (2003) to argue that this was an era of the marketisation of educational provision. The neo-liberalist principle of marketising ITT is not unique to England and, consequently, these developments are not unique either. In America in the 1980s schools of education increasingly moved towards 'market-based governance' (Labaree, 2011:388) with educational consumers. Just as we are seeing in England, an outcome of the marketisation of ITT in America has been that different ITT courses compete against each other to attract trainee teachers. The approach, outlined later in this article, could be employed to explore whether policies that have led to the marketisation of ITT have influenced ECTs' professionalism.

There are contesting views on the degree to which the government is taking an 'activist role...in a predominantly open and market-oriented environment' (Onis and Senses, 2003:15) but steps have certainly been taken to enable it to do so (Whitty, 2012). For example, the White Paper (DfE, 2010) aimed to increase the pace of change, topography and marketisation of ITT significantly by encouraging more school-led ITT. A significant vehicle for realising this change was School Direct (DfE, 2010), launched by the government in 2010. The scheme involves training places being allocated to schools who then cash places in with a university or other accredited ITT provider to deliver a training

package for a teacher whom the school subsequently intends to employ. Another example of government intervention in the ITT market is the Government's new apprenticeship scheme, introduced in 2017, which included teaching. Applicants can now apply for a 12-month post-graduate apprenticeship to become a teacher. The Teacher Apprentice Standards (ESFA, 2017) outline the standards that apprentices must meet in order to achieve this Level 6 qualification and QTS. The government's 'activist role' in the ITT market, through policy-making, is another possible source of influence on ECTs' professionalism and retention.

The contemporary context is one where potential sources of influence on ECTs' professionalism are visible nationally and internationally. To summarise, these include: centralisation of control and accountability; the marketisation of ITT; and an activist role of government in the ITT market. The central proposition of this article is that an approach informed by CHAT offers a means of analysing how these policy priorities impact on ECTs' professionalism and retention. The following section will explore notions of professionalism and outline in detail how potential influences explored in this section could affect ECTs' professionalism and retention.

Notions of professionalism

In order to research influences on ECTs' developing professionalism, it is crucial to analyse notions of professionalism. Professionalism is 'an essentially contested concept' (Hoyle and John, 1995:1) and 'definitions of professionalism vary across time and place' (Whitty, 2012:28). Hence it is important to unpack the cluster of different meanings, assumptions, agendas and consequences that surround the notion of professionalism.

One approach to theorising professionalism is based on the premise that there are a set of competencies that need to be learnt by the professional and then subsequently applied in practice. Arguably, this is a *reductionist discourse* (Murray and Maguire, 2007). Hoyle (1982), for example, contends that it is essentialist, construing professionalism as a process whereby an occupation or professional 'increasingly meets the criteria attributed to a profession' (161). A managerial form of this essentialist interpretation of professionalism has, in recent decades, become highly influential. *Managerial professionalism* 'accepts that decisions about what to teach, how to teach and how to assess students are made at school and national level rather than by individual teachers themselves' (Furlong, 2005:120). It is manifested in current education policy in the setting of standards that trainee teachers must meet and the prescription of core content for the ITT course (DfE, 2016). The successful professional in this conception of professionalism is the one who efficiently and effectively meets the standardised criteria and acts in accordance with the ITT provider's or the school's formal accountability process, exerting diminished agency in decision-making.

In contrast, Murray and Maguire (2007) highlight the importance of an alternative *contextualist discourse* which Locke et al. (2005) identify as a social constructionist approach. This discourse is explicit about, and responsive to, the context and historical framework in which it exists and intentionally considers the inter-relationships between macro-level policy change, and individual and collective practice. Murray and Maguire (2007) argue that a *contextualist discourse* is based on the principles that the professional has integrity, professional autonomy and is reflective, and that the training of the professional is highly sensitive to the context and designed to develop his/her diverse human capabilities.

Clearly these approaches to professionalism imply fundamental differences in the degree of teacher autonomy and control. Given that teachers in England require 'high levels of self-confidence and a great deal of personal commitment and energy...to sustain personal values and a personal voice in the face of Ofsted inspections, league tables and other official instruments of conformity' (Parker-Rees,

2000:30) it is reasonable to conclude that government policy strategies, explored earlier, can modify ECTs' teaching and also affect their inner voice narrating their professionalism.

It is important, then, to analyse the implication of the government policy strategies, examined above, on ECTs' retention. Retention of ECTs is a concern across many countries (Australian Education Union, 2006; DfE, 2019b, Webb et al., 2004). For example, in a survey of 1200 ECTs in Australia, the Australian Education Union (2006) found that 45% of the ECTs they surveyed indicated that they did not believe that they would still be in teaching in 10 years' time. In England, quantitative studies have explored the relationship between government policies and teacher retention. In Smithers and Robinson's (2001) study of the teacher labour market in England, the proliferation of government initiatives was listed as the third most common reason for teachers choosing to resign. Correspondingly, in Webb et al.'s (2004) comparative study between England and Finland 'teacher autonomy and the possibilities...to...exercise independent judgement' (182) were cited as 'vital ingredients' (182) for remaining in teaching. This suggests a link between educational policies that enable greater professional autonomy and higher teacher retention. It indicates a need for further qualitative research to gain a detailed understanding of the potential influence of government policies on ECTs' professionalism and retention. This article argues that an approach informed by CHAT, detailed later in this article, can be employed in future small-scale qualitative longitudinal research for this purpose.

The evidence base of influences affecting ECTs' professionalism

ITT and influences on ECTs as they learn to teach are increasingly researched areas. The findings of existing studies (Anspal, Eisenschmidt, and Löfström, 2012; Buchanan et al., 2013; Flores and Day, 2006; Goddard and Foster, 2001; Hobson et al., 2009; Lortie, 1975) will be explored here and placed in the context of notions of professionalism. This section will conclude by identifying a knowledge gap in the existing evidence base.

Anspal, Eisenschmidt and Löfström (2012) studied the development of student teachers' identity and argued that an important influence on student teachers was their former teachers. Similarly, Flores and Day (2006) maintain that former teachers are 'seen as a "frame of reference" in their [ECTs] making sense of teaching...and in their understanding of themselves as teachers' (224). An associated influence on ECTs' experiences of learning to teach is the concept of an archetype (Goddard and Foster, 2001). This could be a previous teacher, a mentor or a family member, termed a 'familial archetype' (Goddard and Foster, 2001:354). The familial archetype as role model conceptually extends Lortie's (1975) notion of the apprenticeship of observation as a pupil in the classroom. Goddard and Foster (2001) argue that at home a familial archetype has a similar influence on the younger members of the family.

Flores and Day's (2006) study identifies several other influences on the ECTs in their study; for instance, the context of ITT in Portugal, personal biographies, ITT courses and the school environment in which the ECT is working. In addition to these qualitative small-scale studies, two large-scale longitudinal studies (Buchanan et al., 2013; Hobson et al., 2009) both point to other significant influences on the ECTs' experiences of learning to teach; namely, teacher workload, pupil engagement and behaviour, and the ability to network with peers. Another significant influence that emerged from Hobson et al.'s (2009) study was relationships with their mentor and colleagues in the school.

In summary, these empirical studies provide an important context in which to position further research in the field of influences on ECTs' developing professionalism. It is also clear that they are situated within a *contextualist* approach to professionalism because the individual ECT's contextual influences are at the centre of the research findings. However, the influence of education policies, operating with an increasingly dominant form of *managerial professionalism* in England (Furlong, 2005), have, as yet, not been given due attention.

Generating an approach informed by CHAT

This section will critically examine how CHAT could be adapted and employed as an approach to research influences on ECTs' professionalism in the contemporary context. It will evaluate the usefulness of employing this approach and propose how it could be used to address the gaps in the existing evidence base just identified.

Firstly, CHAT is premised on the idea that both people and objects are possible sources of influence to be considered in researching influences on ECTs' professionalism. This enables researchers to conceive 'objects' such as: the school's behaviour policy, the department's handbook/guidelines, the lesson planning proforma, the layout of the classroom, marking expectations and school displays as potential sources of influence, alongside people who possibly influence the ECT. Engeström (1987) argues that all human activity is set in a detailed context that is interrelated and that the context keeps on evolving. In order to research and understand these various influences on an ECT's professionalism, researchers could use different research methods to collect data, namely: semi-structured interviews with the ECT, classroom observations of the ECT, and field notes of the research site/s including document analysis. These qualitative, interpretative practices could then be layered to create a montage of representations of the teaching experience (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000) and the influences on an ECT's professionalism. Dissonances in the data could be a source of interest to researchers to explore the reasons for these differences. Furthermore, small-scale longitudinal research with ECTs would be apposite to understand how ECTs respond to changing influences and whether ECTs make individual choices that add up to 'particular cumulative trajectories' (Corden and Millar, 2007:529). MacLure (2003) argues that 'the self is...decentred' (181); meaning that individuals are subject to different, sometimes conflicting, influences and that individuals and their lives are therefore multiple and fragmented and cannot be seen as one linear cumulative trajectory. Longitudinal research could explore whether ECTs' choices and actions can be accumulated and conceived as a cumulative trajectory over the longitudinal study or whether the self is illuminated as decentred and fragmented.

Another feature of CHAT which is useful in studying influences on ECTs' professionalism is the premise that learning is a process of mediation. 'The individual...is not simply thrown into the human world; it is introduced to this world by the people around it, and they guide it into that world' (Leont'ev, 2009:117). Vygotsky (1978) contends that learning is an 'assisted performance'. This supports empirical evidence which identifies archetypes (Goddard and Foster, 2001) as a crucial influence on ECTs' developing professionalism. In order to explore this process of mediation, researchers could conduct a classroom observation of the ECT followed by a semi-structured interview with the ECT. For instance, in a classroom observation the researcher might identify specific differentiation strategies. The researcher could subsequently conduct a semi-structured interview with the ECT to ask about how their understanding of differentiation and the differentiation strategies might have been shaped through interaction with an archetype/s. Furthermore Leont'ev (2009) argued that there are two circles of influence. The first smaller circle of key people are pivotal figures who influence the individual. In the context of researching an ECT these could be family members or their mentor. The second circle is composed of people whose relationship to the ECT is 'mediated' (Leont'ev, 2009:356) by members of the first circle of influence. Researchers could conduct life history methods to illuminate insight about these key figures, as part of a semi-structured interview/s with the ECT. Life history methods could offer an 'inside view' (Tierney, 2010:129) of an ECT and his/her view of the significant people influencing them. The life history methods could research the influence of archetypes (Goddard and Foster, 2001) and investigate further how these key individuals might shape how ECTs respond to other potential influences.

A third aspect of CHAT that is of methodological value is its focus on the agency of individuals. Using this approach Ellis and McNicholl (2015) showed how the human agency of the teacher educators

'complicate(d) the enactment of policies' (15). CHAT could also illuminate the potential influence of individuals in interpreting and translating national policies at a local level (Braun et al., 2010). For instance, how varying responses to the Teachers' Standards (DfE, 2016) leads to this policy being enacted in different ways and to different degrees. In applying the previously mentioned research methods, researchers could conduct a classroom observation of the ECT, alongside document analysis of the Teachers' Standards (DfE, 2016) and a semi-structured interview with the ECT. Researchers could then layer the different data sets to illuminate insights into how the ECT has influenced the enactment of the policy and potentially shaped his/her professionalism. This could also offer researchers further understanding of the link between ECTs' degree of autonomy and teacher retention (Webb et al., 2004; Parker-Rees, 2000).

A further principle of CHAT that could be methodologically useful is Bakhtin's (1981) theory of the 'professional stratification of language' (289). Bakhtin (1981) reasoned that language is 'ideologically saturated' (271) and that the 'professional stratification of language... [is] directly intentional' (289). Professions develop a specific vocabulary and ascribe specific intentions and meaning that are embedded in the culture of the profession (Bakhtin, 1981). In applying this theoretical approach to researching influences on an ECT's professionalism, researchers should carefully consider how they use professional language in semi-structured interviews. Bakhtin (1981) argues that in employing professional language, researchers use appropriate words that are 'shot through with intentions' (293) and therefore they need to analyse these existing intentions and meaning and their potential influence on the research. In addition, researchers should be attentive to how professional language is utilised in participants' responses. As ECTs, many participants in research studies might begin as 'outsiders' (Bakhtin, 1981:289) to the language of teaching and it could isolate and exclude them. Researchers could use follow-up questions within a semi-structured interview to check the use of terminology by the ECT to ensure that responses are accurately interpreted.

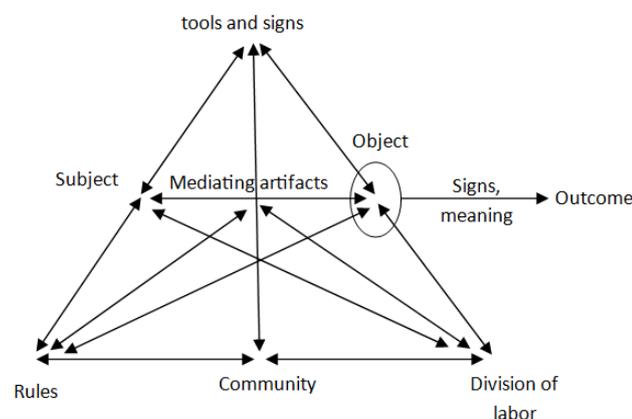


Figure 1. The structure of a human activity system (Engeström, 1987).

Finally, Engeström (1987) presents a conceptualisation of CHAT titled 'The structure of a human activity system' (figure 1) which is a framework for thinking that a researcher could use to analytical effect. It is relevant as it offers researchers possible angles from which to explore influences on ECTs' professionalism. It could also help address the knowledge gap in the existing evidence base by analysing the influence of specific education policies. For instance, Ofsted is introducing a new Education Inspection Framework (DfE, 2019a) on which to inspect and judge schools in England. Researchers could use Engeström's (1987) framework (figure 1) to investigate the influence of this policy (DfE, 2019a) from various perspectives and using different sources of data. The segment of Engeström's model (1987) labelled 'rules' suggests that the influence could be looked at through document analysis of the policy (DfE, 2019a). Furthermore, the 'division of labour' segment could

direct research into which staff and mechanisms of accountability are monitoring the enactment of the new Education Inspection Framework (DfE, 2019a) and investigate what measures are being put in place to implement the policy. The 'community' segment offers another source of data collection to be how the pupils and teachers in the school respond to the policy, alongside how policy makers present the policy (DfE, 2019a) and its aims. In addition, the segment 'mediating artefact' could point to analysis of pupils' books and the ECT's lesson plan to explore how the policy is enacted in these mediating artefacts. Perhaps there are traces of how the ECT has enacted aspects of this policy in his/her lesson plan and in the pupils' work. Engeström's model (1987) offers researchers this framework to consider an influence from multiple perspectives and through different sources of data collection. If the data collection process generates different perspectives with 'various tension(s), contradictions and conflicts' (Avis, 2009:158), researchers could use the data sets to illuminate understanding of how this policy is potentially influencing ECTs' professionalism and retention and consider reasons for dissonances.

However, there are two important potential limitations of this framework (figure 1) that need to be addressed before employing it to analyse influences on ECTs' professionalism and retention. Firstly, Engeström's (1987) framework (figure 1) places boundaries around the activity system (i.e. the school in this context) and neglects influences beyond these parameters. Here Massey (2005) raises a problem: 'Where would you draw the line around the lived reality of your daily life?' (184-185). In reality, influences on ECTs' professionalism could have their source outside of the activity system in national policies, as we have seen. It is crucial that potential sources of influence beyond the activity system are investigated. For instance, an ECT training to teach in a school could be gaining inspiration from ideas outside the activity system. The ECT could be using online resources to support him/her in making teaching resources or might discuss classroom management strategies with a parent who is an experienced teacher and then try these strategies with his/her groups. Peim (2009) argues that Engeströmian activity theory 'abstract(s) the activity system from the wider social context' (173). This could obscure the agency of ECTs because they could respond to forces outside the activity system that are not visible in this theoretical approach. It could also lead to 'analysis that leaves these wider relations in place and fails to interrogate the manner in which they shape the terrain on which an activity system...is set' (Avis, 2009: 156). Engeström's approach to CHAT appears to marginalise the contextual setting of the activity system beyond the locality, which would overlook strategies manifested in national policies and their potential influence on ECTs' professionalism. Conceiving space as relational (Massey, 2005) enables researchers to investigate influences beyond the activity system, including national policies, whilst benefiting from the usefulness of Engeström's (1987) framework in researching ECTs' professionalism and retention.

Secondly, an activity system can be a 'dense mediational setting' (Engeström, 1987:16) composed of many, interconnecting influences. In employing the model (figure 1) researchers could collect vast amounts of data. Therefore, researchers need to be selective and adapt the framework (figure 1) to suit their research purposes. Ellis and McNicholl's (2015) study focused on 'the *rules* for participation in cultural practices; the membership of the *community* held together and engaged by those practices and the *division of labour* among the members of that particular community' (11). Correspondingly, Otrell-Cass et al. (2016) concentrated on the role of 'mediating artefacts' in affecting pupils' experiences of standardised testing. In a similar vein, an inductive and selective approach to data collection is advocated here which is led by the research aims. For instance, to address the knowledge gap in the existing evidence base researchers would focus attention on how policies could be influencing an ECT's professionalism by examining segments of Engeström's (1987) framework (figure 1), as detailed earlier.

Within CHAT there are diverging views on the role of the researcher. Engeström (1987) argues that the researcher should act as a 'developmental interventionist' with a 'bold experimental attitude' (16) who causes disturbances in the context s/he is researching. In contrast, Otrell-Cass et al. (2016) used CHAT as a theoretical lens to gain insight and argued that CHAT enabled them to 'adopt a reflexive position' (37) as researchers. For the approach outlined here, it is appropriate to adopt a similar role to the one employed by Otrell-Cass et al. (2016) because research validity would be reduced if the researcher is a significant influence on the ECT and the activity system. The researcher should pay attention to his/her potential influence on the ECT, try to minimise his/her impact and attend to other influences on the ECT's professionalism.

Five main ways in which an approach informed by CHAT is useful in researching influences affecting ECTs' professionalism and retention have been proposed here alongside adaptations addressing two limitations of CHAT. The following discussion will detail how this approach could be utilised to inform future research in this field and address the knowledge gap in the existing evidence base.

Informing future research, policy and practice

Firstly, the existing evidence base does not explore how education policies influence ECTs' professionalism, despite evidence that the proliferation of education policy can lead to low teacher retention (Smithers and Robinson, 2001). Existing research underlines this knowledge gap. Stevens et al. (2006) interviewed a cohort of trainee teachers and concluded that the trainee teachers 'transform' (97) during the PGCE course in various ways including 'a certain closing down of that sense of creativity about what is possible to teach...in favour of acknowledging the constraints' (100). The chief constraints that these trainee teachers list are the 'dogmatisation of the National Curriculum' (Stevens et al., 2006:102) and the National Strategy for Key Stage 3 (DfEE, 2001). Employing the CHAT approach, outlined above, to this research context would enable a much deeper understanding of how these education policies affect ECTs' professionalism, which in turn would inform policy makers. The CHAT approach would involve detailed document analysis of the aforementioned policies. Then this data would be layered alongside classroom observations of ECTs, interviews of ECTs and field notes to understand how priorities within the policies are affecting the ECTs' professionalism. Some of these effects would be visible to the ECTs, and voiced in semi-structured interviews, whilst others would be illuminated through classroom observations of the ECTs. Small-scale qualitative longitudinal research using the approach outlined would definitely help explore the influence of policies on ECTs' professionalism and retention.

Secondly, there is a competitive market of ITT provision in England. ITT providers are judged on their retention of trainee teachers throughout the ITT course and their success in achieving Qualified Teacher Status (QTS). The CHAT approach outlined above could be employed by individual ITT providers to understand the detailed influences affecting the trainee teachers on their course and their retention. For instance, an ongoing small-scale research project using the CHAT approach with a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) that is leading a School Direct ITT course has found two significant influences affecting trainee teachers' professionalism and retention. Firstly, one of the schools in which trainee teachers were placed had not been able to fill all its teaching vacancies and therefore trainee teachers were the sole class teacher for some classes. These practices enact a combination of 'rules' (Engeström, 1987) from individual schools, the MAT and national policies. Government policy introduced in 2012 allowed academies to employ unqualified teachers, without QTS (Harrison, 2012), and this school has enacted this policy by using trainee teachers as the sole class teacher for some classes. Classroom observations and interviews with these trainee teachers revealed that they felt unsupported in planning and teaching these classes and were concerned about their substantial responsibility as the sole class teacher. Secondly, semi-structured interviews and classroom observations of a small group of trainee teachers on this ITT course found that the trainee teachers

were often not required to plan their lessons, which is relevant to 'division of labour' (Engeström, 1987). This is because the policy of the MAT was to 'align' their curriculum and lesson planning and teachers were required to deliver the lessons that had been created by the MAT. Some of the trainee teachers described how their workload was reduced by this curriculum alignment, whilst others were concerned that they were not gaining skills and experience in lesson planning. The researcher worked inductively to collect this data. The proposed CHAT approach was productive here in conceiving 'objects' as potential sources of influence, exploring influences beyond the boundaries of the activity system, layering multiple influences, highlighting the agency of individual teachers in responding to an influence, and in using Engeström's model (1987) to consider how 'division of labour' and 'rules' have affected the ECTs' professionalism and retention. The ITT provider will then use these findings as a basis for adaptation of their ITT course to support the needs of their trainee teachers, the aim being to improve trainee teachers' achievement of QTS and retention.

Finally, teacher retention of ECTs is a significant and growing issue. 'Over 20% of new teachers leave the profession within their first 2 years of teaching, and 33% leave within their first 5 years' (DfE, 2019b:10). The thorough-going CHAT approach proposed would help the design of small-scale qualitative longitudinal studies aimed at understanding why some ECTs leave the profession and other ECTs remain. It is also a valuable approach as it conceives space as relational (Massey, 2005) and therefore wide-ranging influences can be identified, from a trainee teacher who leaves the profession due to the workload, pressure and culture of high surveillance and accountability to a trainee teacher who leaves for personal circumstances, examined using life history methods. The correlation between ECTs being able to exercise higher levels of autonomy and higher retention rates (Webb et al., 2004; Parker-Rees, 2000) could then be explored more thoroughly. Again, such additional empirical evidence would inform policy makers in deciding how to alter policy so that it further supports ECTs to remain in the teaching profession.

Conclusions

Teachers in England are working within a prevailing form of managerial professionalism which is essentialist and characterised by increasing criteria and policies that teachers are expected to meet which constrain teacher autonomy, centralisation of control and mechanisms of accountability. Previous studies investigating influences on ECTs have neglected to explore the effect of education policies on ECTs' professionalism, which has left a knowledge gap in the existing evidence base. This is particularly important given the national and international concern surrounding the retention of ECTs and evidence that teachers are choosing to leave the profession because of the proliferation of education policies (Smithers and Robinson, 2001) and restricted teacher autonomy (Webb et al., 2004). In response, this paper details an alternative approach to address this knowledge gap and illuminate the influences affecting ECTs' professionalism and retention. This approach is informed by CHAT and will be particularly productive in such research because it conceives learning as a process of mediation; identifies and layers multiple influences on ECTs' professionalism within an evolving context; and analyses intentions within professional language. The approach also highlights the agency of ECTs in potentially shaping the enactment of educational policies. Furthermore, Engeström's (1987) model (figure 1) provides a framework for thinking that a researcher could use to analytical effect in investigating influences affecting ECTs' professionalism. Some limitations of CHAT have also been identified but adaptations have been outlined which overcome them. As has been argued, Engeströmian activity theory is limited in focusing purely on the localised context within the research site, an aspect that omits the potential influence of national policies on ECTs. Therefore, a significant suggestion has been made that we work with a conception of space that is relational in Massey's (2005) sense. Boundaries drawn around any activity system can then be bracketed out in investigating potential influences on ECTs' professionalism. Research using Engeström's (1987) framework (figure 1) also potentially generates huge amounts of data. A more selective and inductive

approach to data collection is advantageous from that point of view. Finally, the approach canvassed here advises that researchers in contrast to Engeström's (1987) approach assume a reflexive, discrete role during the research process. With attention given to these matters, an approach based on CHAT (but reconfigured meaningfully for the contemporary policy-heavy setting) would add clarity of focus, depth of attention, and thickness of description to any small-scale qualitative and longitudinal research investigating ECTs' professionalism and retention.

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