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Teacher Professionalism in Light of Biometric Controls on Teacher Mobility and Autonomy

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Abstract

In this paper, I investigate the introduction of biometric technology, specifically fingerprint scanners, for the purposes of managing faculty members' working hours at a higher education institution (HEI) located in the Middle Eastern Gulf States. Utilizing semi-structured interviews to collect qualitative data, three expatriate teachers of English discussed their experiences before and after management installed the fingerprint scanners, discussing the influence such a change has on their professional identities and the additional impacts on their teaching, their identification with the institution, and the overall culture of the HEI. The results show that the existence of the fingerprint scanners adversely affects the teachers' professionalism, but the greater issue for the participants is the dynamic between faculty and management: in this case, characterized by one-directional communication from the administration and a lack of voice for teachers in decision-making.

Keywords

culture, expatriate, higher education, managerialism, semi-structured interviews, teacher professionalism, TESOL

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Teacher Professionalism in Light of Biometric Controls on Teacher Mobility and Autonomy

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In this paper, I investigate the introduction of biometric technology, specifically fingerprint scanners, for the purposes of managing faculty members' working hours at a higher education institution (HEI) located in the Middle Eastern Gulf States. Utilizing semi-structured interviews to collect qualitative data, three expatriate teachers of English discussed their experiences before and after management installed the fingerprint scanners, discussing the influence such a change has on their professional identities and the additional impacts on their teaching, their identification with the institution, and the overall culture of the HEI. The results show that the existence of the fingerprint scanners adversely affects the teachers' professionalism, but the greater issue for the participants is the dynamic between faculty and management: in this case, characterized by one-directional communication from the administration and a lack of voice for teachers in decision-making.

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The modern working world has generally seen the concept of professionalism change from the traditional sense of an autonomous professional with membership in a voluntary professional association to a connotation in which many "find occupational control of their work and discretionary decision-making increasingly difficult to maintain and sustain" (Evetts, 2012, p. 2). This is particularly true in the academic professions, due to changes in approaches of administration brought on by a wider alteration of educational values being overwritten by "industrial/commercial values" (Broadfoot, 1988, as cited by Whitehead, 1989, p. 4). The research addresses one of those changes, the introduction of biometric technology, in the form of fingerprint scanners, for the purposes of managing the attendance of English teachers working in a higher education institution (HEI) in a Middle Eastern Gulf Cooperative Council (GCC) country. Through the experiences and narratives of teachers, I examine how such controls affect their beliefs, their identity as professional teachers, the culture of their working environment, and, most importantly, their work as teachers.

Theoretical Background and Literature Review

Professionalism

The immediate issue with professionalism is there is no unified, agreed-upon definition. Interpretations vary depending on individuals, industries, and time (Hargreaves, 2000; Evans, 2008). However, it is generally viewed as having the following components: the status those active in the profession have achieved, through their expertise and moral authority or service ethic (Adams, 2012). That status is achieved via specialist education, experience, and conduct or behavior (Leung, 2009), which enable professionals to collegially develop their own

standards for the level or expertise, education, conduct, salary, and power relative to the autonomy of the professional organization (Abbott, 1988, as cited by Evetts, 2012, p. 3; Larson, 1977). Evans (2008) focuses on this social construction of professionalism by individuals, quoting Naylor (2001, p. 322) that “professionalism consists of the attitudes and behaviors one possesses toward one’s profession” (p. 24), with a view towards this being an avenue for teachers to construct their own professionalism. However, the lack of control over professional standards has led some to label teaching a “semi-profession” in the past (Etzioni, 1969, as quoted by Day, 1999, p. 5).

Today, it is generally agreed that the concept of professionalism is undergoing dramatic changes, yet it seems that the concept has been changing since its inception, both in general and specifically to teaching. Hargreaves (2000) delineates four distinct historical phases of teacher professionalism, but his notion of “ages” of professionalism suffers most when examining the final two, “the age of the collegial professional” and “the fourth age: post-professional or postmodern professional?,” most notably because his timeline is contradictory and conflicts so greatly with the literature, as he places the latter period “at the turn of the millennium” (Hargreaves, 2000, p. 167). In fact, many researchers have pinpointed that beginning as early as the 1970s with the relationship between individuals and the state shifting from welfarism or a public-service ethos to a customer-oriented ethos driven by free-market competition (Gewirtz, 2001, as cited by Biesta, 2004, p. 236).

The transition, though, to such a managerialist approach to education has clearly taken hold much more widely in the last two decades. Driven by a change in governmental philosophy to become more efficient and accountable to citizens-cum-customers, teachers are now “the most expensive budget item” in education, becoming a prime target for technocratic leaders (Hargreaves, 2000, p. 168). This means a loss of autonomy and judgment as control is often exercised by external bodies through monitoring systems and other performative measurements traditionally tied to markets and business (Ball, 2003). Postmodern professionals experience an “intensification of their working lives, extended bureaucratic and contractual accountability, decreasing resources (. . .) and increased managerialism” which can “deprofessionalize” teachers, eroding their status and ability to actually do their job (Day, 1999, pp. 6-9); the focus on bureaucratic aspects of work and introduction of external controls on student (and teacher) assessment can result in the atrophying of the skills necessary for the day-to-day task of teaching (Apple, 1992, p. 22, as cited by Day, 1999, p. 10). As a result, the job of teaching is now much less individualized, with success defined by working effectively and efficiently to meet “standardized criteria set for the accomplishment of both students and teachers” while also working within the school’s “formal accountability processes” (Sachs, 1999, p. 3, as quoted in Leung, 2009, p. 52). Finally, this approach to education at a macro-analytical level, together with the introduction of the language of the market, has resulted in a professional environment that focuses on educational goals as products, standardized “learning outcomes” as “targets”, evidence-based quality measurements, students as consumers, and schools as units of production (Elliott, 1993, p. 54, as quoted by Day, 1999, p. 11).

Professionalism in TESOL

While over the years, the professionalism of teachers at-large has been a shifting, amorphous issue, teachers of English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) have been very much on the cusp of the professionalization debate. In decades past, this may have been because of a dearth of qualifications, as there was a widespread belief that merely being proficient in speaking or reading in a language enabled one to teach it (Crandall, 1993). That, combined with the situation of adult English as a Second Language (ESL) programs being “an afterthought in U.S. education policy,” led Crandall (1993) to call ESL literacy practitioners

“among the least empowered workforce” (p. 498). Even in other countries where ESL is more at the forefront of educational needs and programs, teachers of ESL with English as their first language enter the profession in any number of ways. A common and perhaps stereotypical manner is that of an international traveler who begins with little to no formal training in order to “finance travel adventures, practice a foreign language, or put off finding a “real job,” what TESOL Inc., identifies as “English-teaching tourism” (Lorimer & Schulte, 2011, p. 32). This lack of professionalism can be compounded by the “bewildering array of organizations throughout the world” where ESL teaching is conducted: public schools, private schools, private language institutes, vocational schools, colleges and universities, research institutions, corporations, etc. (Scollon & Scollon, 1995, p. 195).

Despite such inconsistencies of educational background, formal training, and work environments, one reason that TESOL practitioners can be considered professionalized is due to the development of a professional community. This community provides means through which practitioners can benefit from other professionals’ knowledge and communicate, membership in professional organizations (for example, International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language: IATEFL; TESOL, Inc.), conferences, courses, as well as journals and websites (Ur, 2002, p. 388). English language teachers have been sharing and developing materials since at least the 1950s, seeing the first TESOL conference established in the following decade in 1964, where the purpose was to professionalize ESL teachers through establishing “lines of communication,” sharing knowledge of teaching techniques, and giving “consideration to a professional status for those who teach English as a second language (Alatis, 2005, p. 28). TESOL Inc., was born out of these early conferences, and it is through that group and similar organization like the British Council and IATEFL that professional certifications are granted, professional standards delineated (e.g., Kuhlman & Knezevic, 2014), and professional autonomy ostensibly maintained.

Hence, it may seem that TESOL practitioners qualify as professional, yet that designation is admittedly debatable. Much of the workforce is professional in terms of education and training; however, those qualifications have received well-documented criticisms (Crookes, 2009; Thomson, 2004, as cited by Lorimer & Schulte, 2011). Furthermore, “there are still too many amateurs around, who think that it is enough to know English in order to teach it, resulting in lowering of teaching standards” (Ur, 2002, p. 391). The final limit to ESL teachers’ professionalism is the autonomy of the profession to establish standards, to make decisions, and to train new members of the profession. Teachers mostly have autonomy in their own classrooms, although recent moves towards centralization and top-down coordination are affecting this (Prichard & Moore, 2016). More importantly, the lack of control of what is taught and how it is taught or assessed potentially prevents TESOL practitioners from being fully fledged professionals: “Perhaps there are too many laypersons in positions of authority, taking or causing ill-informed decisions on the management of the learning of English in schools or on teacher training” (Ur, 2002, p. 392). Therefore, to be more recognized as professionals, ESL teachers as a community may need stricter controls on who can teach English and pedagogical standards.

Sociocultural issues of ESL teacher professionalism

In the current atmosphere of marketization, TESOL practitioners’ construction of professional identities is affected in certain ways while much of the longstanding issues persist. Despite the movement in education of performance-based management and efforts to change the status quo, one of the primary determinants of English teachers’ identity is still the native-speaker/non-native-speaker dichotomy, compounded by racial, sexual, and ethnic backgrounds (Liu & Xu, 2010, p. 590). Besides intrinsic qualities, Nguyen (2008) as well as Varghese et al.

(2005) view identity creation for teachers as beginning during their training, when novice teachers construct their new professional identities as much as they acquire the knowledge to teach (as cited by Abednia, 2012, p. 707). In this view, teacher identity is a “dynamic construct” which has “significant effects on teachers’ development and performance” (Barrett, 2008; Varghese et al., 2005, as cited by Abednia, 2012, p. 707). Although identity develops and changes throughout one’s career, young teachers form identities in ways similar to older colleagues, according to Archer’s (2008) research: “that is, they identified the core values of intellectual endeavor, criticality and professionalism; (. . .) all the younger academics talked about strongly valuing collegiality and collaboration” (p. 270). As a dynamic construct, teacher identity ebbs and flows with interactions with colleagues, workplace challenges, and classroom experiences: it “expresses personal practical knowledge gained in experience, learned contextually, and expressed on landscapes of practice” (Xu & Connelly, 2009, p. 223, as quoted by Liu & Xu, 2010, p. 590). It is for these reasons that teachers, particularly younger teachers, reconstruct their identities to include notions of managerialism; participants in Archer’s (2008) study resented many of the new practices, notably the workload, the audit and business model, and the “macho” competitive ethos, yet much of their narratives utilized the language of business, such as “products,” “choice,” “evidence-based,” “accountability,” and “quality,” when describing their practices (p. 272).

TESOL practitioners construct their professional identities themselves in conjunction with other academics, and through their interactions, build collegiality and a dynamic working environment in the process. In the current climate, “individuals have created spaces for the exercise of principled personal autonomy and agency” (Clegg, 2007, as quoted by Archer, 2008, p. 268) in order to enact their own conceptions of their professional identity, an identity socially constructed through their interactions with colleagues that is “constrained by normative beliefs and practices, as well as material conditions” (Cohen, 2008, p. 83). In those interactions, teachers’ cultural practices organize their social relationships into a “shared world” (Cassirer, 1961, p. 113, as quoted by Hymes, 1981, p. 9, as quoted by Cohen, 2008, p. 83) that is shaped by individuals’ “professionalism,” Evans’ (2008, p. 27) basic unit of professional culture. What sets ESL teachers apart from other colleagues is their belonging to multiple shared professional worlds: Because of the international distribution of TESOL and its practitioners, those teachers may feel at “cross-purposes” with their professional identity and role in the institution, so that they may find more in common with an ESL teacher in another country than with teachers of other subjects in their current working environment (Scollon & Scollon, 1995, pp. 197-198). Both professional communities can be seen as a small culture: “a dynamic, ongoing group process which operates in changing circumstances to enable group members to make sense of and operate meaningfully within those circumstances” (Holliday, 1999, p. 248).

Through this lens of small cultures, we can examine both the development of the working environment and the effects that managerialism has on that environment. School cultures are constructed through the social interactions of the members within the context of the organization creating a web of meaning that includes “tacit and explicit knowledge, values and attitudes, propositions and theories, knowledge-in-practice and embodied knowledge” which make those cultures visible through the narratives of the participating teachers (Jurasaitė-Harbison & Rex, 2010, p. 268). Past conceptions of institutional culture as collaborative (Wood, 2007) run counter to the current moves to impose an “audit culture” (Power, 1994; Strathern, 2000, as cited by Beck & Young, 2005, p. 184). This externally dictates to teacher’s performance criteria and other standards, with part of the new neoliberal culture being that it is “inevitable” and cannot be challenged (Davies & Peterson, 2005b, as cited by Archer, 2008, p. 268), an aspect that is troubling for ESL teachers who identify so strongly with similar small cultures outside of their immediate surroundings. Scollon & Scollon

(1995) state that they are “likely to be somewhat resistant to internal pressures to conform to the corporate culture of his or her own employing institution” (p. 198). What may be inevitable, then, is how the audit culture can generate “anomie and alienation” amongst many educators who believe that “cherished identities and commitments have been undermined” and experience this cultural change as “an assault on their professionalism” (Freidson, 2001, as cited by Beck & Young, 2005, p. 184).

Researcher’s Positionality

In pursuing this topic, it is incumbent that I reflect on my own positionality, most importantly regarding my relationship with the participants, their context, and the issues being researched. As a researcher, my experiences working and teaching as an EFL teacher abroad (especially in the GCC) can provide some guidance in investigating the experiences of the participants. That identity and those experiences may grant me “insider” status in many respects with the participants (Banks, 1998). Also significant are issues of race and power relationships, with the participants, but perhaps more directly, with the HEI. This is particularly important when considering issues regarding academic leadership, the administration, and faculty’s place in the institution which have the potential to evoke strong emotional responses in myself, not merely the participants. Mindfulness of this aspect of my relationship with the participants’ experiences is likely one of the most noteworthy in my approach to the research.

Research Context

This study focuses on expatriate ESL teachers at a small HEI in a GCC country. While there is a campus director, major decisions such as the implementation of biometric attendance systems are taken in the central administrative offices which are headed by a governing council and a chancellor. Total student enrollment is under 4000, with male and female students being taught on separate yet adjacent campuses. The language of instruction is English, and the research participants are either involved with the foundation-level teaching for newly enrolled students or English for academic/specific purposes for upper-class students. As the focus for the study, the teachers are required to use their index finger to scan in and scan out whenever they arrive at or leave the campus and to have accrued a total of forty hours on campus during the working week (Sunday to Thursday). Arrival times are not scrutinized as long as teachers are on campus to teach their classes, but after scanning in, they are generally expected to remain on campus until their last class, although there exists a formal approval system for scanning out and returning during the day under special circumstances. In the region, the policy of monitoring and requiring 40 hours on campus is not ubiquitous, but it has been enacted in multiple HEIs. Since such practices are becoming more widespread, the effects on “academic work and day-to-day practices, and on academic identities” are an area in need of further research (Davies & Peterson, 2005a, p. 33, as quoted by Archer, 2008, p. 266).

Methodology

Research Questions

The study predominantly consisted of individual interviews, with the central problem being the effect of the introduction of the biometric controls on the functioning and the small cultures of the institution. The more specific research questions that addressed that problem were as follows:

1. How has the introduction of fingerprint scanners (or other controls) affected the teachers' identity as professionals?
2. What is the impact this has on the work they do as teachers?
3. In this context, do they believe there are practical alternatives to such controls?

Research Methodology

For these research questions, rather than positivist, an interpretive approach is more appropriate, thus also necessitating the collection of qualitative data, as, according to Day (1999), "macro-oriented analyses (. . .) cannot tell the whole story, for, by their nature, they do not investigate individual realities of teachers at local levels" (p. 11). Via interpretivism, the research delves deeply into teachers' attitudes and how they construct and interpret their own identities and realities; however, the results are only applicable in this limited context yet are open for others to interpret and apply to their own contexts since they are not generalizable (Grix, 2019). It is also appropriately interpretivist because I, as the researcher and an associate of the participants, am in the middle of the research and therefore am influenced by and an influence on the results of the study (Richards, 2003). Since the study is focused on how I as the researcher interpret the meaning and reality created by each individual, data collection aims for "rich material for the research report" that will provide a useful basis for deeper understanding (Dörnyei, 2007, pp. 39-40). In line with interpretivism, the focus on one aspect of professional identity construction could also be viewed as a critical aspect, as I effectively problematize the use of fingerprint scanner to control attendance in a manner that "is unwilling to accept the taken-for-granted components of our reality" (Dean, 1994, p. 4, as quoted by Pennycook, 1999, p. 343) and seeks to posit solutions to difficulties facing teachers with little or no voice in their present situation.

Research Participants and Ethical Considerations

The three participants are all TESOL professionals, expatriates, native and non-native speakers, holders of master's degrees, and each with more than ten years' experience in a variety of institutions around the world. Their experience in their current context ranges from recently hired to several years, and they were chosen for participation through convenience sampling, with efforts made to select participants with clear differences – gender, department, campus, etc. The research was undertaken with strict adherence to ethical guidelines. Despite their positions as my colleagues, they were each asked to read and sign a consent form. I informed them that their participation was voluntary and that they could ask to withdraw at any point during the study. For the interview process and the data, they helped to produce, they were guaranteed confidentiality and all reasonable levels of comfort so as to ensure that they experienced no harm during the interview and transcription process (Richards, 2003). The handling of the data was of utmost concern for several, since it involved commentary on their current employer, and every precaution was taken to protect the raw data of their recordings and the transcriptions of their interviews (see Pring, 2014).

Research Methods

The data collection process involved a series of semi-structured interviews with the participants. Interviews were selected as the sole instrument because they "capture rich and complex details" and provide "thick descriptions" of participants' views and insider meanings (Dörnyei, 2007, pp. 37-38). The interview questions were formulated based on Evett's (2012) assertion that "in sociological research on professional groups the fixation is the occupation,

the work, practitioners, work cultures and identities” (p. 2). My approach to the interview questions was three basic paradigms: professionalism connected to past experience, experiences at the current institution before the fingerprint scanners, and since the introduction of the fingerprint scanners. However, I loosely structured the interviews in what Patton (1980) refers to as the “interview guide approach” to keep the encounters “conversational and situational,” with the goal of participants being at ease (p. 206, as quoted in Cohen et al., 2011, p. 413).

Before contacting participants, the interview format was piloted with a teacher similar to the participants (Turner, 2010). The piloting was productive as I was able identify a few key issues missing from the interview questions, and to practice the delivery of the established questions and follow-ups. Together with the consent forms and the research information sheet, I emailed the interview questions to the participants prior to their interviews so that they could familiarize themselves and begin reflecting on the topics. The final interviews were 30 to 40 minutes and were personally transcribed for analysis. I also gave participants the opportunity to read and amend the transcription for member validation (Richards, 2003).

Approach to Analysis

I analyzed the data through a number of steps. Initially, the organization of the interview questions pre-sorted much of the data into a few basic codes (Cohen et al., 2011). The first codes established when analyzing the data were *attribute* coding, providing “basic descriptive information” (Saldaña, 2009, p. 55); this was a very limited and quick step, as little descriptive information was recorded for ethical reasons, further ensuring participant confidentiality. Working within the larger organizational units, I initially coded data descriptively, looking at the basic information, and with pattern codes, to organize the data “into smaller and more meaningful units” (Punch, 2009, p. 176). Once the data was organized into large themes, I used domain and taxonomic coding to see “the cultural knowledge people use to organize their behaviors and interpret their experiences” (Spradley, 1980, pp. 30-31, as cited by Saldaña, 2009, p. 133). The *semantic relationships* that I focused on included *cause-effect*, *rationale*, and *attribution*, with the objective of constructing an “index of major categories or themes in the data” (Spradley, 1979, p. 111, as cited in Saldaña, 2009, pp. 134-135). During this process, constant comparison was used to ensure that the coding was consistent (Richards, 2003, p. 287), and many of the relationships became clear only during a second or third analysis. Thus, I used inductive coding, as the codes were not previously dictated, but rather took shape from the data as the themes emerged throughout the data analysis process (Greener, 2011, p. 95)

Research Limitations

The primary limitation in research such as this is the relationship between the researcher and the interviewees. In this case, we are colleagues, so there could certainly have been the possibility of participants responding based on their expectations of what I wanted to hear or to avoid being overly critical (Richards, 2003). There are also limitations with the data itself: transcriptions are an imperfect and selective transformation, as readers must also understand is the nature of interpretivist research (Kvale, 1996, p. 167, as cited by Cohen et al., 2011, p. 281). Furthermore, one data source, interviews, particularly when studying the culture of an institution limits the conclusions that can be drawn, as it only reflects the interpretations of the three participants and the researcher and could be expanded with additional data collection methods (Denscombe, 2014).

Results and Discussion

Throughout the data collection process, the participants associated their teaching and professional identities with various aspects of managerialism and interactions with leadership. Though the focus of the research was on the biometric control of attendance and its effects on the teachers and their practice, several key issues emerged in the data.

Introduction of the Fingerprint Scanners

The fingerprint scanners were introduced to the HEI in the academic year before the interviews took place. Of the three participants, two were employed during that time. They discussed faculty attendance as a concern for multiple years prior to the introduction of the scanners. Kelly spoke of a “childish” culture of “tattletales” where some faculty members reported on others for leaving early or taking long lunches: “a big game of cat and mouse” that “created a lot of anxiety” if one needed to be off campus for any reason. On the other hand, Devin noticed, even in their first few days at the college, that many of the faculty were not fulfilling their duties by being on campus long enough. Devin’s impression was that contracts required teachers to be on campus for 40 hours per week, so that was their professional duty, which many were not fulfilling:

I didn’t like it because, if in my contract it says 40 hours a week, (...) I should do 40 hours. And then some people were never here, and you do start feeling a bit hard done by that, you know? Why am I the idiot, the workhorse? (...) As I said, it was a widespread problem when I got here, and they *had to* do something about it. (Devin)

This calls into question the professionalism of Devin’s colleagues, as not embracing the service ethic, and reinforcing Devin’s beliefs (Adams, 2012). While not universal, a requirement for faculty to be on campus a set number of hours is widespread in the region. It seems that there were inconsistencies, and that the situation was engendering ill feelings within the faculty so that the administration needed to address it.

How it was introduced had effects on all three participants and the working environment. Devin said that the rumors began in earnest before any official announcements and that the uncertainty caused consternation. Here they delineate the rumors and early stages:

They’ve delivered these machines. Then the next thing was, “Oh, they’re mounting them on the walls.” OK, but no one made an official announcement. We could see things happening, but people didn’t know how it was going to work, how it was going to be introduced to us, nothing! (...) Then there was an announcement basically... We had to go to our HR representatives and register our fingerprint. (...) After that, there was a lot of confusion because there was no, as far as I can remember, there was no formal policy, and then people were panicking. (Devin)

Hence, even in the earliest stages and before use, the biometric technology was causing consternation amongst the faculty, largely due to the lack of open communication and clarity from management.

On one campus, there was a more formal announcement, but it was not clear and open, according to Kelly. The teachers received an email:

It sounded like World War II Nazi Germany. It sounded like, “Implements of control will be instituted.” No explanation as to why or for what purpose. And a lot of people got really angry; several were talking about quitting. (...) Nobody stood up in a meeting and said, “Ladies and gentlemen,” you know, before it happened? “This is what we’re going to do. This is the reason why. We hope you understand.” (...) But it’s been zero explanation, to this day. (Kelly)

Kelly’s take on the introduction demonstrates the frustration that staff were feeling, both at the installation and the manner in which it happened, illustrating that most employees would appreciate being more fully informed. In this situation, we can see that the introduction of a means of control through audit culture causes a disruption in the teachers’ environment, but it is compounded by the lack of explanation, which some of the teachers interpreted as a show of disrespect. We might infer that this approach was simpler and produced less immediate hassle for management, but the resentment it seemed to generate and the damage to workplace morale may prove more costly over time.

There was little improvement to the manner of explaining it to teachers since the initial introduction. Chris began working at the college the following year and also spoke about a lack of explication regarding the fingerprint scanners during orientation:

They didn’t say, “Oh, it starts this week.” They did say, “You have to check in and check out.” They spent a great deal of time explaining the technical aspects of it, but never really (...) But it just started with, “Come and give me your fingerprint,” and then, “make sure you press F1 for this and F2 for that.” (Chris)

Again, given the opportunity to clarify the policy and provide a justification that may allay TESOL teachers’ fears about external control (see Scollon & Scollon, 1995), management appears to have missed it, causing additional stress and uncertainty. As Chris underlined, they didn’t really need a lot of information on *how* the fingerprint system worked, more on why such a system was in place and why it was a requirement for faculty. As a professional, Chris also spoke about wanting to be monitored in other ways and the disappointment of a simple measurement of time spent on campus, and not on performance, especially in teaching, remarking that other types of monitoring like class observations “improve my game.”

Relationship with Management

Participants all spoke about the manner of monitoring that they had experienced throughout their careers and gave examples of situations demonstrating the qualities of management that were desirable and those that were not. They talked about positive experiences where the management was effectively “hands-off,” with the focus on teaching and learning. Chris put it succinctly, saying, “I felt that they had hired me as a teacher in the past, and I was valued as a teacher, and I was monitored as a teacher, evaluated as a teacher” (see Evans, 2008). Both Devin and Kelly used the word “trust” to talk about positive experiences and how important as a professional it was to feel trusted. Interestingly, the negative experiences that two participants discussed revolved around institutions which also used biometric technology for tracking attendance. Chris and Devin both talked about the effect that the style of management had on how the fingerprint scanners were received. Chris called it an “industrial model,” in which more importance was put on quantity of total outputs, rather than quality of materials or teaching; therefore, “I didn’t feel committed to the institution, although I was initially excited to work for them.” Devin was uncharacteristically waking up at 4:00 am to start work at 7:00, a reaction to the system-wide inflexibility with clocking-in

and the financial penalties that were assessed over being late by just a minute or two, calling the system “off putting” and “demoralizing,” that they felt like a “caged animal,” and saying, “I tried to be professional, but because of all the other factors, it only took about a year before it broke me.”

The participants revealed positive feelings about the heads of their departments, generally connected to availability and openness. Devin and Kelly lauded their immediate supervisors for smoothing over much of the potential problems or overreach that could have occurred. While none of the participants appreciated needing official approval to leave campus during the day after signing in, Devin felt lucky to have managers that sign off of on such requests without any complications:

Well, perhaps we are fortunate. (...) All we have to do is send an email requesting permission (...). They (the managers) always approve it, sign it off—no issues. So, I think they have played a major role because they have been so good, so accommodating, so understanding, and that’s why I feel I’m not taking, er, I will not take advantage, and I will not try to let you down by doing something silly. (Devin)

Here, Devin illustrates the appreciation that employees show when they feel they are being treated fairly, and how they are more able to embrace their professionalism when matters that they deem as outside of their professional focus are kept to a minimum or simplified. It can even be seen that this teacher wants to repay the managers’ good will by performing to an even higher standard.

While participants had mostly positive opinions of their immediate management and their leadership style, the upper management was not seen in the same light. Chris did not appreciate the fact that the current leadership in the college has “a more business mindset” (see Ball, 2003) and longed for an atmosphere that was more open to dissent or at least discussion when there was a disagreement on assessments, for example. Devin and Kelly both believed upper management to be the root cause of the issues connected to communication within the system. Kelly, as the longest serving participant, had the strongest opinions, going so far as to call the leadership “evil,” leading by “fear and intimidation.” Kelly further relayed their recollection of the head’s visit with students:

So, he came in and spoke to the students and said, “You’re not the problem; you’re not lazy; you’re misunderstood. The problem is your teachers are not fully qualified, and they’re lazy and unprofessional.” He actually said that to the students, and so, now when I put that into my mind, now I understand why he put cameras everywhere, why he put in the fingerprint systems, why he made surprise visits. (Kelly)

The aggrieved attitude of the teacher and the persistence of this story speaks to the nature of communication between faculty and upper management, which would also seem to reinforce Hargreaves’ (2000) observation of teachers as the target of technocratic leaders. Kelly’s litany of complaints also belies a management style that removes teachers’ autonomy and individual judgment. With a focus on basic monitoring, the fingerprint scanners and CCTV cameras, Kelly’s final grievance revolved around the administration redefining a teaching hour as pertains to the total contact hours with students during a week, saying that their department’s weekly teaching hours increased from 20 to 24 with no increase in pay. This change happened more-or-less simultaneously with the introduction of the fingerprint scanners; the manner in which the changes were introduced (without explanation or justification) was especially galling

for Kelly, who revealed a willingness to work overtime, but said that this method of change was “obnoxious” and that leadership “literally violated a contract, and there was nothing we could do about it.” Thus, the combination of the increasing teachers’ workloads together with increased monitoring, for Kelly, meant less trust and served to “deprofessionalize” teachers, in Kelly’s opinion (see Day, 1999), with adverse effects inside and outside of the classroom.

The Resulting Working Environment

The participants were less definitive regarding the effects of the fingerprint scanners on the overall culture of the institution. According to Devin and Kelly, in the early period after the biometric technology was implemented, the mood in the faculty offices was negative, with many teachers resigning or at least announcing their intentions to resign. Kelly’s immediate feelings:

My first reaction was anger, and then I started looking for another job. I didn’t want to be here anymore. (...) I didn’t have a job lined up, so I calmed down, and thought, “Yeah, Ok, I’ve got a family, I can’t just walk out angry and slam the door.” But one of my reactions was that a lot of people were leaving and a lot of them were my friends and that influenced me to say, “You know what? I’m done.” (Kelly)

Here we can see a potential snowballing within the faculty. Kelly also talked about retiring faculty that might have worked one or two more years but felt compelled to leave due to the changes, and that the campus “had one of our highest exits, in terms of the number of people resigning.” An exodus of employees is much more possible when considering TESOL practitioners because of a higher-than-average itinerant nature, with movement across continents from one teaching position to the next a fairly normal occurrence. However, Kelly and Devin reported similarly that the mood on campus was improving as the presence of the fingerprint scanners became more normal.

Whereas Kelly seemed resigned to that normalization, Devin was more opinionated that it was a change for the better:

It was relentless. It was all people talked about, and I was a bit fed up with it, to be honest. (...) Every time, it was this disgust when they came in, “Look what I have to do, like I’m a laborer in a factory, ugh! Look at it! This is demeaning!” (...) When they left in December, we kind of knew what was happening with the system and rules, and it got much more relaxed. (Devin)

The different perspectives are clear. Devin had worked in an institution with much stricter management of the fingerprint scanners and had already been staying on campus for 40 hours, so the change was much less upsetting. The issue for Devin was actually the overreaction of colleagues: once the vocal complainers were gone, it freed up the rest of the faculty to focus on their work and the positive aspects of the job, despite any arguments with management. This reinforces Day’s (1999) assertion that in such situations of managerialism, teachers do not remain “victims” of “reforms” but instead simply re-interpret their new situation within their professional viewpoints (p. 11). The experiences of the other participant, Chris, who was not at the institution during the initial introduction of the fingerprint scanners, support this to an extent, as Chris felt welcomed since joining the faculty, calling it a “good collegial environment, in spite of this.” Chris did wonder if that was partly due to the adverse working conditions, since during “a difficult time, people band together,” particularly as the subject of

time worked and monitoring seemed to color the faculty interactions, still a major topic of discussion and worry for employees. Chris remarked, “I think it really has affected the environment openly *and* under the surface.”

Identity and Work as a Professional Teacher

The preoccupation with biometric monitoring of attendance (and other aspects of audit culture) can take teachers’ focus away from their practice and adversely affect their professional identity. All three participants revealed that their professional identity, their sense of themselves as professional teachers, is not constant, but can wax and wane depending on their context, most importantly related to what they are teaching and their relationship with management. As a professional, Chris’s best experiences consisted of situations with open channels of communication between faculty and management, as well as opportunities for real professional development. In contrast, the current context has moved Chris’s attention from teaching to counting hours:

It was always, “What do I have to do for my students for these objectives?” And that sounds really idealistic, but I’m just being honest with you that that’s what I’ve focused on for all these years. And now it’s calculating. (...) It’s more about how I’m measured, timewise, by the clock. And that’s a really key element for professionalism and how it changes the atmosphere here. (Chris)

Hence, we can see that when a teacher’s focus is shifted, professionalism is influenced. Chris also said, “It’s changed the whole dialogue about teaching, which is unfortunate.” This illustrates the displeasure that a teacher might feel when their professionalism comes under fire. Teachers like Chris typically enter into the profession to help students and resent when management’s actions distract them from what many would consider a calling.

Trust was the key word used by Devin and Kelly when speaking about their positive experiences, and both admitted that the current regime of clocking in and clocking out had affected their own professionalism, but also that other factors had greater repercussions. According to Devin, the fingerprint scanners color how they identify with the institution:

I think, without me realizing it, it does affect me. I’m less willing to do more. (...) Even though I’m at ease with it, you do want to make sure you do your 40 hours, and I clock in for 40 hours. I still take work home, but not that much. (Devin)

It is interesting to see that even though Devin initially defended the need for the biometric technology and called it “not a big deal”, they still feel like it has a negative impact on professionalism, at some level. There is the corollary of less commitment, taking less work home. However, for Devin, the central planning of class activities and assessments influences professionalism more dramatically:

Some of the decisions they make, they just go against my philosophy of teaching or how I approach different things, but you know, the bottom line is I’m getting paid well for the work they want me to do. (...) I’m not particularly happy with it, and I know it’s probably not very good for me professionally. (...) This sort of system doesn’t encourage me to be more creative. (Devin)

As can be seen, teachers typically fixate on teaching, and it is primarily where identity as a professional teacher is derived. Devin sounds remorseful, almost disappointed in compromising, just taking the money and sacrificing professional ethics or at least autonomy.

Kelly, on the other hand, did not admit to being “compliant” but instead detailed resistance mechanisms to assert autonomy. While there were some small acts of in-class rebellion in response to changes in ESL courses, Kelly seemed to have the strongest reaction to the fingerprint scanners and how that time is spent on campus:

It just says be on campus, so we’ll go to the gym for an hour. We’ll watch a movie at our desk for an hour. Catch up on the news. Send personal emails. (...) What you get is a less productive staff because now I feel like you’re trying to control me, and I resent it, and I feel disrespected. (...) I know down to the minute when I can leave on Thursday, and I never did that before. I never, ever did that before. (Kelly)

Based on Kelly’s narrative, it bears asking what the purpose the fingerprint scanners are actually serving. There would certainly be times that faculty need to be available to students, and all teachers have additional duties related to class preparations, marking assessments, administration, etc., but the effect on an experienced and formally educated TESOL practitioner seems counterintuitive, creating a less professional, less productive member of faculty who no longer identifies with the institution. This is in line with research into other aspects of audit culture; that it is perceived as an “assault” on professionalism and generates “anomie and alienation” as identities are “undermined” (Freidson, 2001, as cited by Beck & Young, 2005, p. 184).

Conclusions and Recommendations

Overall, all three participants interpret the use of fingerprint scanners differently. However, regardless of the strength of their opinions on the biometric technology, none of them believe that it enhances professionalism. Additionally, they all believe that faculty’s relationship with management is dictated largely by the channels of communication and how open those lines are. The lack of communication is underscored by the fact that neither Chris nor Kelly understood the policies related to taking personal time out during the day and how that might affect accumulated hours on the day. There was also evidence of the sort of information that fills the void when proper communication from management is lacking: Chris and Devin both relayed the rumor of “who it’s really for,” that the fingerprint scanners were introduced to control “local teachers” who did not fulfill their responsibilities, but that management had to implement changes across the board so as not to make the locals lose face or promote a confrontation over their absenteeism. Therefore, a cultural divide between local and foreign teachers is seemingly exacerbated unnecessarily; communication and greater awareness of what is happening at ground level could facilitate more collaboration and understanding between those two groups.

On the question of whether to keep or remove the fingerprint scanners, participants were divided. Based on prior experiences, Devin advised keeping them in place, identifying an improvement in teacher attendance since the biometric technology was implemented (though some rule breaking persists), and a flexibility not seen in the prior employer. Kelly saw a possible path to either action; however, if the fingerprint scanners were to remain, clearer justifications would have to be expressed. On the other hand, Kelly believed their removal would move this institution more in line with most universities around the world which allow freedom of movement for faculty members because “maybe to do my work, I need to go to a

library, I need to go out to a museum, maybe I need to go meet with someone.” Chris was the most forceful in the belief that the fingerprint scanners must be removed because it would send a message to faculty that “we trust you, we’d like you to commit your thoughts, efforts, emotions to students and your teaching.” If that were to happen, in Chris’s opinion, there would be no need to replace it with anything but “trust and very high expectations for me professionally.”

When examining the narratives of the participants, the question of the fingerprint scanners seems fairly clear. There are arguments to keep them, but they seem to have more negative effects on teachers’ identities and institutional culture than positive results preventing teachers’ truancy. Incidentally, the academic year following the data collection showed an improvement in that culture when the required hours on campus per week were reduced, a move which was well-communicated to faculty. In fact, communication and collaboration between management and faculty look to be the more important issue in this context. It became apparent throughout the data collection process that participants were upset by management introducing the fingerprint scanners and several other managerial policies, and that those changes had an adverse impact on their professional identities and the professional culture of the institution. What seemed to cause the most consternation was the manner in which those changes were implemented, with little to no explanation from management and with teachers feeling like they had no voice in such policies. Teachers create their own professional identities based largely on their role in their context (see Cohen, 2008), so in order to have a faculty of fully engaged, professional teachers, it seems that upper management should rather be more open in their own communication and provide more avenues for faculty to communicate in kind.

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