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The Practice and Identity of Liminal Professionals:

exploring the social and the material context for practice teachers
in the health service, and learning mentors in schools in the UK

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Professions, para-professions, emerging professions, new professions

- Traditional dichotomy between 'trait' and neo-Weberian conceptions of professions complicated by proliferation of occupations designated 'profession'
- Some 'new' professions the result of project by occupational group – usurpatory struggle or marketing tool
- Some the result of long-term project by the State to raise significance of human service activity (Early Years Professionals/Teachers)
- BUT

Connoting labels

- ‘Emerging’ implies a trajectory and a destination (chrysalis)?
- ‘Para-’ implies fixed status in relation to a defined and stable entity, and a fixed relation in a stable network of practice?
- ‘New’ implies parthogenesis – arrival fully fledged in response to a new epistemic object? (Early Years professionals?)

Liquid modernity & liminal spaces

- Constant shifting of boundaries, people, jurisdictions characteristic of liquid modernity (Bauman) produces occupational spaces 'in between'
- Practice in these spaces are poorly defined by texts and protocols - can be both opaque and indeterminate
- The liminality of these occupations produces a weak mode of networking – practitioners deprived of resources to network with colleagues in the same role, or establish stable relationships with more permanent networks

Policy Hysteria, , impermanence indeterminacy & liminality

- Some para-professional roles product of characteristic UK short-term policy cycles – in particular in UK during NL era (Connexions personal advisers) where role tied to specific social policy episteme
- Some result from the addition of a ‘reproductive’ role to core disciplinary expertise (teacher educator)
- This paper used examples to argue for significance of liminality in terms of material and symbolic relations with others in the professional site
- Explores different ways of understanding the dynamics of liminality

Learning Mentors and Practice Teachers

Learning Mentors in English Schools

- Product of early NL concern with school standards, 'risk', and barriers to learning
- Also part of major task redistribution in English Schools
- Drew on US models that stressed links with/origins in community

Practice Teachers in the National Health Service

- Initially qualified as nurses and midwives moving to specialist practice roles in which they also facilitate supervise and assess students
- Longer-standing role (since 1960s), though designation has shifted over time (field work teacher, community practice teacher, mentor)
- Role fulfilled alongside clinical role

Conceptual lens

- Institutional Ethnography /SMT / site ontology – all setting experience of work within networks of relationality with the material (texts, social and physical space, symbolic hierarchies and status markers) and the human
- Structural frame – sociology of professions helps identify key issues (like relation with State regulation & policy) and the way in which conceptions of professions and professionalism bleed through into everyday discourse, perceptions and relations
- New Institutionalism and theories of productive systems and performativity to explore processes by which identity and practice is mediated through institutional processes

Methodolog(ies)

Overarching methodology of comparison

Karen (PTs)

- Purposive sampling including a range of stakeholder groups
- One to one interviews and a focus group
- socio-material theories drawn upon to identify concepts relevant to professional learning and offer insights into how practice teachers learn and enact their role through social interactions and active engagement with the material context.

Jo (Learning Mentors)

- Approach informed by Institutional Ethnography
- Single case study, intensive but 'selective intermittent time-mode'
- 'Observation and Talk' form of mobile conversation/interview with learning mentors
- Interviews with members of other occupational groups in school

The liminal status of practice teachers

- ▶ The PT role is situated in a position that is subordinate to a range of differing clinical roles that are prescribed in guidance, protocols and targets. These clinical roles have a clearly bounded professional status and identity
- ▶ In contrast the PT role appears relatively indeterminate, lacking disciplinary distinctive features. PT's share only a narrow range of common characteristics with their peers, and consequently experience differing levels of affinity to one another
- Practice teachers thus find it difficult to achieve a stable and unambiguous role and this has implications for their status and their sense of self

Factors that contribute towards this liminality

- PT's faced continued uncertainty regarding their role and were thus compelled to compose and recompose their work identities to reflect the changing requirements of their professional roles
- Cuts to PT posts as a consequence of financial pressures left PT's feeling undervalued
 - *'the practice teacher role as far as they're (managers) concerned comes at the bottom of the list ... I don't think they value (us) the same as they used to do'.*

Factors that contribute towards this liminality

- Location
- Working in teams but commonly geographically isolated from other PT's created difficulties in networking with other PT's, accessing supervision and hindered peer reinforcement of their professional identity
- Physical environment – lack of office space, mobile technology.
 - *'it's very difficult to reflect on a noisy bus or in a busy street'*

Factors that contribute towards this liminality

- Productive system – a highly performative culture where performance is measured on outputs
 - *‘we’re doing less clinical time and more management time trying to manage the team of (district) nurses ... looking at all the targets we’ve got to meet ... we are being commissioned now for the services we provide, so we’re looking at new services, how we can provide them, cost implications and reporting’* (practice teacher)
- Clinical & financial pressures constrain the ability of employers to provide the space needed to teach.
 - *‘I think some of the economic crisis has impacted a little bit on workloads and how people can juggle all those balls’* (manager).

Learning the role

- Student PT's felt inadequately prepared for the realities of practice
- They relied on:
 - Testing out their teaching skills through doing the job / trial and error
 - Historically developed insights
 - PT's actively sought out internal and external networking opportunities though these were constrained by time limitations, geography, clinical priorities and the low number of PT's in the workforce

Managing the role – Integrating V segmentation

- There are benefits and costs associated with maintaining role boundaries or enabling integration
- Integration
 - *‘she tries to arrange things (clinical activities) that would be of benefit to me. We fit in my practice days with her (caseload) or my learning needs really, so we kill two birds with one stone’* (student)
 - A degree of integration was also evident in some supervision sessions.
- Segmentation
 - Practice teacher set aside *‘a lot of protected time to go through what we had done’*.
 - PT’s sought out external networking opportunities that enabled them to enact their PT identity *‘you come out (of practice) and you come into university and you’re with people who are doing the same as you and you’re with lecturers and people with a lot of knowledge’*

Learning Mentors – Liminality in social and physical space

- Division of labour in English schools produces range of roles alongside teachers which are defined by function rather than credentials or disciplinary knowledge (HTLAs, Behaviour Support Managers, Pupil Referral Managers)
- Routes through into these roles can originate in links with community or 'client' status
- Rather than work in teams or inter-professionally, in this school LMs worked semi-autonomously, though protocol of referral gave no control over when they started or finished work with an individual pupil

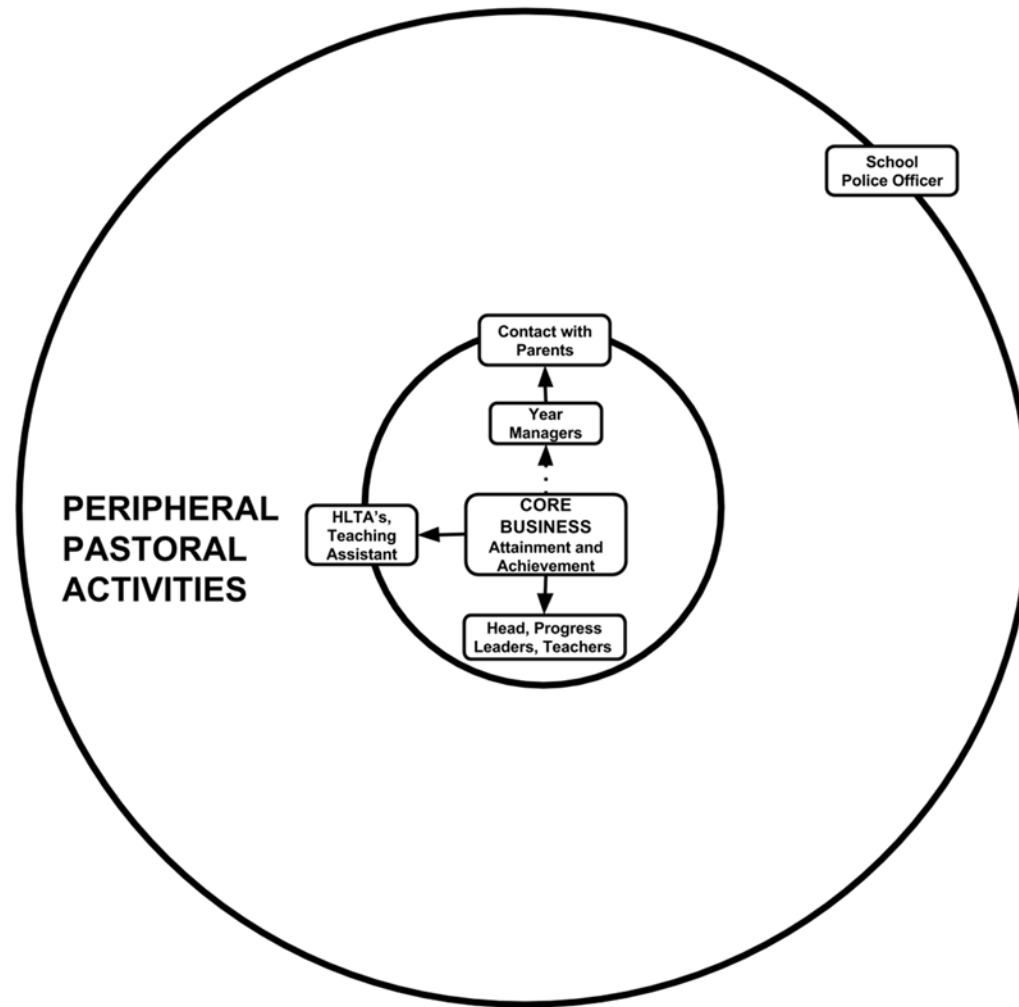
Core values and indeterminacy

- LMs appeared very secure in 1-1 practice, relationship-building, boundary setting, reflective work with pupils
- Values embedded in practice explicitly distinguished from that of teachers, first name terms, informal dress codes and language, fuzzy interpretation of school rule structures, while focused on fulfilling aim of getting pupils back into classroom and mediating conflict
- Indeterminate status in eyes of school managers, teachers and other professionals 'no-one's quite sure what they do' – and location of key institution (Breakfast Club) unknown to reception staff

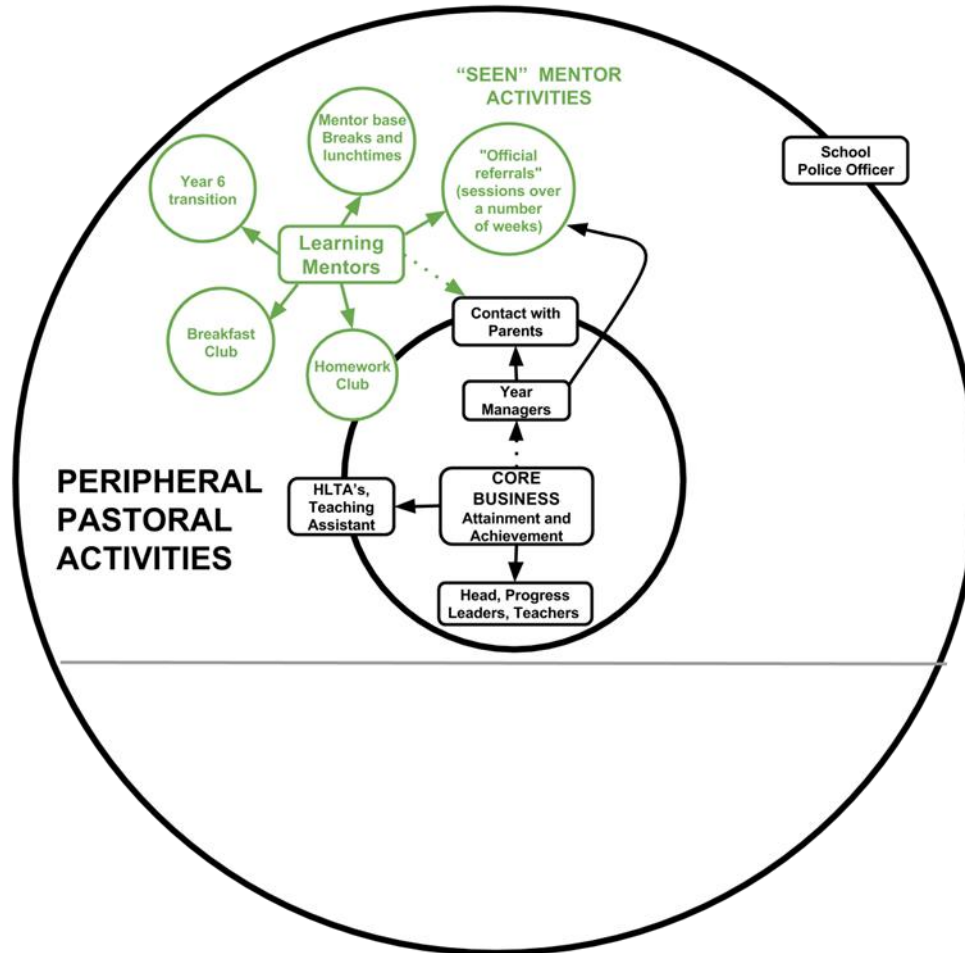
The material base of professional hierarchy

- Even where perceived as significant, work of LMs seen as subordinated to the 'real' work of teachers, and this could be expressed in monetary terms
- Reinforced by public displays of School's objectives in terms of pupil achievements
- LMs excluded from inter-professional case reviews of pupils they were working with
- Nature of expertise and identity subject to eclipse/redefinition as a result of transformation of epistemic object (shift from pupils having 'barriers to learning' to 'social behavioural emotional difficulties' and needing 'behaviour managers').

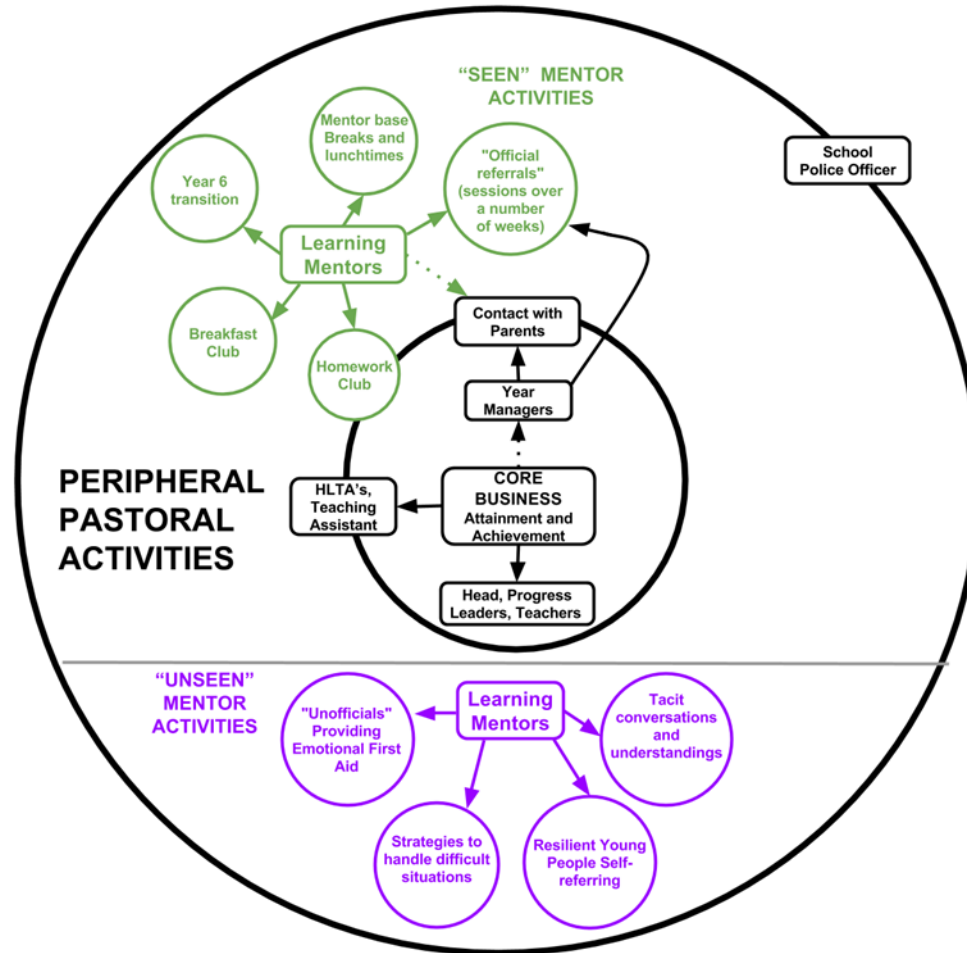
Core and Periphery in School activity



Visible LM activities



Invisible LM activities



Performative structures?

- New Public Management built around converting 'human service work' into measurable outputs.
- These outputs then become the object of the service as a productive system.
- In both health care and education, elements of the system and occupations most obviously close to the production of measurable outputs achieve greater recognition and resources
- Occupations recognised as important to reproducing the system, but only indirectly linked to outputs vulnerable to eclipse, lack formal means of self-organisation and representation – a 'seat at the table'

Conclusion

- Rapidly shifting occupational landscape seems likely to mean more professional roles rather than less will occupy these liminal spaces
- How can support for professional learning, development and networking be achieved under the conditions of liminality?
- How can the effects of performative structures, texts and protocols focused on a one-dimensional model of professional outcomes be mitigated?