

# Early Professional Learning Project



*An ESRC (TLRP) funded project with University of Stirling & Manchester Metropolitan University*

## **A loose thread of research in a seamless garment of professional development** \*

**Paper presented to TLRP Seminar Programme: Changing Teacher Roles, Identities and Professionalism (C-TRIP), King's College, London  
26 April 2006**

### **Abstract**

Regular ethnographic interviews with teachers throughout their first year of teaching reveal individual narratives of emerging self-as-teacher identities in which the emotional – relational dimension of their experience is prominent. Attempts to elicit any specific examples of more cognitive aspects of the process of learning to teach tend to return to this central theme of becoming a teacher through maturing relationships with children taught and close colleagues in a new context. Reference to the professional standard in specific or general terms in the first few months of teaching is negligible, though some connections can be inferred (e.g. with differentiated teaching) from about half way through the first year. Yet specific instruments developed within the project indicate that job satisfaction amongst these new teachers, and classroom performance as evaluated by the children they teach, are generally at a high level. The evidence suggests that the lived experience of beginning teaching is not in effect governed in by the professional standard and, furthermore, that it may be detrimental to early professional learning and support to presume that it is. However, the paper seeks to find a resolution to this apparent conflict through arguing for (a) a clearer appreciation within policy of the purpose of the standard and its limits in relation to professional learning, (b) evidence-based identification of those facets of the standard that do have some developmental significance for beginners.

\*The paper is based on findings from a TLRP Phase 3 Project, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council: Enhanced competence-based learning in early professional development. The sample at this stage of reporting is some hundred first year teachers in secondary schools across Scotland.

Jim McNally, University of Stirling  
Stirling  
FK9 4LA  
[j.g.mcnally@stir.ac.uk](mailto:j.g.mcnally@stir.ac.uk)  
01786 466265

## Introduction

The creation of a seamless garment was an aim that bothered me during and since my period of secondment to the GTC and SEED in 2000 to write the national framework for teacher induction (McNally, 2001). I had no sense of seamless continuity from my own development as a teacher over 18 years, from colleagues in teaching and teacher education and it did not resonate at all with my research on beginning teachers. The development several years ago in Scotland of a raft of professional standards - for initial teacher education, full registration, chartered teacher, headship and more to come, I imagine – seemed to carry with it a belief amongst part of the policy community at least, that professional development could be managed and controlled by a set of standards, however well-intentioned – with no acknowledgement of how teachers actually developed or a need at least to be better informed about that. I managed nonetheless to squeeze in some alternative concepts to the Standard for Full Registration (Scottish Executive, 2002), for example the notion of more holistic competences from talking to headteachers, and also to ground the framework for induction on the principles of stability of placement and continuity of contact.

Others have written of the conflict between the lived practices of teachers and the texts of standards, e.g. Biesta (2005) in a recent CTRIP seminar paper. However, like the directors of this seminar series (Cribb et al, 2005), I want to explore possible connections between critique and construction, to move towards making our research on early professional learning <sup>1</sup>(EPL) count with policy - to 'try to make a difference'. Indeed my EPL project collaborator and colleague, Brian Corbin, has already described the Scottish Standard for Full Registration (SFR) as 'discursively mixed' and not necessarily against the idea of 'self-formation' (Corbin, 2006) Like him, I draw mainly on the transcripts from our team of six practitioner-researchers as my evidence base. In reporting the main emergent themes, as I am obliged to do of course, I have to say that they are initially at odds with the regulatory standard, namely the SFR. At the risk of over-stretching a metaphor, I ask whether these threads of research are part of a different garment – a diverse coat of many colours, or are they so detached that they must unravel the policy garment and render it threadbare, or can they be woven into a common cloak with enough credibility to fit its different patrons?

Before I try to do this, I should present my main themes. These take the form of clusters of connected concepts 1) emotion, feeling and the affective 2) relational, social and informal 3) identity, self and person. I shall also develop these into questions about 4) value and purpose, that feature 5) the voice of children.

## The emotional

Emotional language pervades the interview transcripts with the new teachers e.g. 'butterflies', 'nerves, panic', 'waking at two or three', even in anticipation of their first day. The first week is 'an emotional roller coaster'. The reality of teaching is very suddenly upon them and their narratives convey no sense of any kind of smooth transition. Yet the typical, inevitable anxiety over 'class control' tends to be bound up in a developing knowledge of children as individuals and collectively as a class. This development itself is often expressed in affective terms, for example 'pleased', 'liked' and 'happier'. The first days and weeks of teaching, therefore, tend to be emotionally charged for many new teachers with so much compressed into a short period. It appears that there is little option but to enter life as a teacher through emotional labour. But this labour is also an investment in the formation of relationships that become the heart of teaching.

The developing narratives over the first year show that emotionality it is sustained though with generally less intensity. Other studies suggest that emotions are important throughout the lives of teachers. Hargreaves (1998) sees the emotions of teaching as 'not just a sentimental adornment... (but)...fundamental in and of themselves'. In his extensive study of informal

---

<sup>1</sup> The EPL Project is part of the ESRC funded Teaching and Learning Research Programme website: <http://www.ioe.stir.ac.uk/Research/Projects/epl.htm>

learning in the workplace, Eraut (2004) argues that the 'emotional dimension of professional work is much more significant than normally recognised'.

### The relational

Frequently associated with emotionality in the narratives is the theme of relationality. I had found this in smaller scale work with colleagues some years ago and we wrote about the 'relational conditions' of informal learning (McNally et al, 1997). Lohman's (2000) study actually found that an environment that hinders affective and relational engagement inhibits informal learning. It does seem fairly well established now that the social environment in which new teacher work is of central importance in their development, even though these valuable informal interactions evade ready articulation in terms of any specific learning. I have elsewhere described this informal relational support for new teachers as natural mentoring (McNally 1994). Eraut (2004) too, a major player in this field of professional learning has found that 'informal support from people on the spot' when help is needed tends to be more important than that from formally designated helpers or mentors.

The importance of friendship and human bonds has a philosophical basis as well of course (e.g. Almond 1988; White 1990) but informal relationships at work are not just for friendship's sake. Hinchcliffe (2004) argues that there is an ethical nexus inscribed in relations with others in the workplace that is bound up with performance. Relationships at work are important for human flourishing and for the quality of work that is done, provided they are not manipulated for performativity. Our research data suggests that the relational nature of beginning teachers' development is not only a means or context for learning but an integral part of what it means to become, and probably to continue to be, a teacher. Perhaps this is illustrated best by the importance of contact with fellow beginners, who have little advanced craft knowledge, as it were, to pass on.

Ann has been my lifeline. There's been days when you've just finished work and think, 'this was awful, this was terrible' and we've also had the experience where we actually have the same class, so that has been really useful in that, 'do they do this in your class?' And on the whole yes they do. It's exactly the same behaviour so you know it's not something wrong with your teaching style or that you're not interesting them. ...we came to school together, especially at the very start and we didn't know anyone else in the school we had each other to rely on, so that was good and it was just seeing that friendly face and that familiar face it just gave you bit of confidence that you didn't feel... I don't want her to move (to another school) .... we can have a good bitch if that comes into it ... or 'how do you find this person' you know and because sometimes you don't know if you've offended them

The open, intimate nature of their conversations and the content - comparisons of a class they both teach, questions about own teaching style, relating to other colleagues - is typical of new teachers in conversation and suggest that relationships such as this may be of key significance.

New teachers' anxiety tends to subside as their relationships with pupils gradually become imbued with an understanding of them as individual personalities. Relating to new pupils in a different school is also the means by which novices (and possibly more experienced practitioners) tend to make sense of a new teaching context. They notice differences between schools in terms of the children, their language and local culture. Again there is a sense in which how you relate to children is integral to being accepted as (their) teacher and this can mean adjusting their teaching to a new local context.

Rachael noticed that the pupils here are less streetwise than in Dundee and she found this refreshing. She is already adapting her lessons plans because the pupils have a wider use of language than she had been used to. She also noticed their topics of conversation were different i.e. horses not clubs

Much of the relationality is informal and lies outside formal induction schemes and structures, existing in the culture of the school and department. Smith (2003) has actually identified

certain features of learning informally that resonates with our own data, for example opportunities that arise in everyday settings, people's experiences and feelings, the centrality of conversation.

### Identity formation and the individual

In his more general theory of learning, Illeris (2002) argues that the emotional, the social and the cognitive (little or latent in new teachers' stories) are the three dimensions of learning. He points out, more specifically, that very demanding, crisis-like situations can lead to:

'deep and comprehensive transformative learning processes that include simultaneous change in all the three learning dimensions and have to do with the very identity of the learner' (p.229)

It is not only because of the emotional and relational themes identified in data classification, but from the individual narratives themselves, that there is a clear case for equating learning to teach with forming an identity as a teacher. In the current, extensive longitudinal study of teachers by Chris Day et al (2005), reported here last year, it was becoming clearer (unless the data interpretation has moved on) that identity may be the fundamental construct for understanding teacher effectiveness and improvement. From their observation that individuals take time to acquire a 'teacher' identity, we might infer that that the early months and years of teaching may be fairly crucial in identity formation.

However, our data require us to be a little more explicit about the much used term of 'identity formation' to represent the process of becoming a teacher. Given the personal stories in the data, it is a construct that has to accommodate a sense of self and personhood. Becoming a teacher is not simply a derivatively social experience. You have to 'give of yourself but not be yourself', as one new teacher put it. Much of the emotionality in the narrative accounts, particularly in relating to children, suggest the embedding of a personal commitment (included in the SFR) within individuals whose identity may be associated, as Greenwood (1994) would argue, with their engagement in a moral career. The raw data for this paper is a set of individual stories, each with an emerging self-as-teacher identity, closer perhaps to Giddens' (1991) notion of self-identity. Hoveid and Hoveid (2004) develop the concept of the 'relational self' of the teacher to convey something of agency and purpose in a self that is intrinsically dependent on pupils and colleagues (and significant others) for its emergence and expression. In this brief quote, a new teacher has become aware of her new 'self-as-teacher' in disturbing otherwise close relationships outside school:

Personally I find it difficult to get out of teacher mode. I've gone home and I've got into trouble from my mum because I used the tone and words I would use to pupils like 'Stop speaking to me like that' and she just looked at me and said you're not a teacher now you know, and I said 'what?' because I didn't realise I was doing it, and my boyfriend's always on at me, saying stop treating me like one of your pupils ... That's one thing I'm definitely struggling with, speaking to people out of the classroom like pupils!

The concept of identity formation here is less complex perhaps than in many other analyses (e.g. Sikes, Measor and Woods, 1985; Stronach et al 2002). The explanation of this difference may lie in the focus on that brief, beginning period when the development task, so to speak, is well defined – to become accepted as a teacher by your pupils and colleagues. 'Identity' is a much contested concept, as is 'self' itself, but for the beginning teacher, there is much insight I think in this succinct verse:

Self under self, a pile of selves I stand  
Threaded in time and with metaphysic hand  
Lift the farm like a lid and see  
Farm within farm, and in the centre, me  
(from *Summer Farm* by Norman MacCaig, 1990)

Individual biography has been found to be significant in workplace learning more generally (Hodkinson et al 2004). I have been struck by the primacy of the individual's story in some of

the other CTRIP presentations, for example Burn on the male early years teacher; Daly and Maguire on becoming a black manager; van Zanten, indirectly, on young teachers' new humanitarian ethic in French schools. It is difficult to resist – perhaps wrong to deny – the integrity of each person's story in our attempts to theorise. People do bring their individual abilities and unique experiences to the new workplace and working there contributes to their developing worker identity'. Alheit and Dausien (1999) actually write of 'biographicity' to mean the capacity that people have that could not be taught by experts, their uniqueness as a resource for building new relationships. It is surely important, therefore, that we recognise limits to individual development that courses of professional 'development' can actually bring about. It is often people's individual experiences, qualities and capacities that enable them to perform (or, indeed, prevent them from performing) – in the classroom or elsewhere.

## Purpose and values

These conceptual clusters – emotionality, relationality and self-identity - are presented as major themes in the data but it is evident that they are closely interwoven and indeed integral to the learning process that is defined by the experience of becoming a teacher. They are a conceptual triad (rather than the SFR triangle of knowledge, skills and values) within which the beginner experiences meaning and purpose. The 'ethical nexus inscribed in relations with others', as Hinchcliffe (2004) put it, is important in itself as a performance end as much as means. Smith (2003) further argues that there is purpose in informal learning through the concern to build the sorts of communities in which people can be happy and fulfilled.

New teachers face the fundamental question of whether they can see themselves as teachers, not only in the reflections from colleagues and children in their schools, but also in the mirror they hold up to themselves. What they articulate in interviews are often different personal qualities rather than any values prescribed by a professional standard, personal attributes they discover or need to find within themselves that will enable them to accommodate the demands of the job. This search for a teaching identity has a strong individual dimension. For example, one beginner talks of recognising the emergence of 'humanity' and 'humility' within herself, as she begins to understand the real difficulties that some children experience in their lives. It is as if the ability to teach comes in part from an emotional response to a developing relationship with children. Through this emotional-relational experience, they discover or make their personal commitment, their internal, implicit values and sense of purpose. The earlier seminar paper by van Zanten gave an example of the centrality and power of this lived commitment as new teachers were drawn into a pastoral relationship with schoolchildren in a context of increasing social instability in parts of France.

## The voice of children.

There are many references to children in the interviews, typically in terms of a developing knowledge of them as different individuals. This is a reciprocal process in that children also begin to see the new teacher as an individual. As this develops more or less successfully (and the interviews suggest that it generally does), then the teacher-pupil relationships build into a working classroom community. One new teacher's expression of his developing identity as a teacher was to become 'a person in a class'; you become accepted as a teacher when 'kids start to see you as a person'. Many children find 'ontological security' (Giddens) within their pupil-teacher relationships. Teachers also draw their self-as-teacher identity and their own ontological security from children - and colleagues too. Through this interdependence there is a reciprocal ontological security that transcends the meeting of a professional 'standard'.

The human components of teachers' qualities are quite clearly valued by children as 'their' indicators of professional competence: a 'good teacher', for example, 'tells the truth' and 'stands up for you' (Hay McBer, 2000). In piloting a questionnaire for children in classes taught by new teachers we found that many of the children's responses could be categorised as human qualities and personal characteristics. As we develop this questionnaire as an indicator of children's perceptions and judgements, many teachers in our collaborating schools have sought

to use it in a formative, self-evaluative capacity. As in the work on pupil voice led by Ruddock at Cambridge (e.g. Ruddock and Flutter 2004), we found that pupils very rarely personalised their comments. In some cases too, it appears that new teachers have used the pupil feedback to change their practice. The language that pupils use is also much more specific and practical in a way that teachers can make sense of, in contrast to the decontextualised abstractions of a written standard.

## Conclusion

The tension in teacher education between the formality of theory and standards and actual experience and practice is not confined to teachers in this country. In writing about teacher education in Sweden, for example, Carlgren (1996) actually sees it as a contradiction between the tacit knowledge that teachers draw on in what they do and the formal theoretical knowledge about teaching and learning that tends to dictate what they ought to do. Her view is that formal knowledge needs, therefore, to be grounded in, or integrated with, tacit experience-based knowledge, particularly in the social dimension of learning (p26). This would require an exploratory dialogue with the policy-making community which need not be a meeting of polar opposites, despite the absence of reference to the SFR in the interviews with new teachers. Acknowledgement of the emotional rather than the cognitive dimension of early professional learning might also be important; alternatively, can formal standards and support systems to capture the complex, personal nature of the experience

There are some aspects of the standard, however, which the research suggests might merit greater emphasis, for example a) a developing a sense of difference (between classes, lessons and individual children) and b) an ability to adapt as you teach. For example, allowing for the difference in register, the following extract,

I've learnt that no two lessons are the same, that no two classes are the same and not to expect them to be the same and though you're preparing the same work it never works out the same...and not to be discouraged by that but I've actually enjoyed that and...at first I was a bit concerned and I thought well maybe I wasn't teaching it correctly especially the first time I taught the lesson and there was an element of thinking that you can change this or change that but you need to know that kids are different and different things work for different kids

has some resemblance to this particular series of statements in the SFR (GTCS 2001):

registered teachers...ensure learning tasks are varied in form, differentiated and devised to build confidence...select strategies for teaching and learning appropriate to the subject, topic and interests and needs of pupils ....use and adapt materials for learning and teaching which stimulate ...

A standards-centred or competence-based discourse may have a place in the rhetoric of product rather than process. A hopeful interpretation is that the grounded concepts of this paper may be seen as complementary to the meta-language of policy. In relation to competence, for example, Halliday (2004) argues for rich descriptions of becoming competent and the contexts in which it happens. Given that we have little theoretical sense yet of how the specific competence statements of the SFR are or could be meaningfully used by practitioners, such descriptions would be a reasonable start to a research-policy conversation. It may in due course be possible to discover whether some competences are more important, more difficult, or more stage-critical – and also whether indeed their acquisition or embodiment may be dependent on an emotional-relational process of identity formation. It may well be that a cognitive dimension of learning to teach is latent early on and emerges in a later phase of development.

The evidence is that learning to teach is a 'becoming' experience rather than one of incremental learning. It is about who you are as much as what you know and should perhaps be understood first as an ontological rather than epistemological process. This surely points to the need for a

broader conceptual foundation for early professional learning and an associated standard, in which the nature of professional identity is defined beyond the impersonal and decontextualised expressions of policy.

## References

Alheit, P. and Dausien, B. (1999) *'Biographicity' as a Basic Resource of Lifelong Learning*

Almond, B (1988) Human Bonds *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 5, 1, 3-16

Biesta, G. (2005) Teachers' reflections on the normative dimensions of their work CTRIP seminar series, KCL

Burn, E. (2005) 'Working with the ankle biters': constructing the male early years teacher, CTRIP seminar series, KCL

Carlgren, I. (1996) *Professionalism and Teachers as Designers* in M. Kompf et al (eds.) *Changing Research and Practice* London, Falmer

Corbin B. (2006) Professionalism on Probation: induction and new teachers in Scotland and England, working paper, EPL website: <http://www.ioe.stir.ac.uk/Research/Projects/epl.htm>

Cribb, A., Gewirtz, S., Hextall, I. and Mahony, P. (2005) Connecting teachers' lives to teachers' professional practice: a paper for discussion at the TLRP annual conference, November 2005, Warwick

Daly, D. and Maguire, M. (2005) Becoming a black manager, CTRIP seminar series, KCL

Eraut, M. (2000) Non-formal learning, implicit knowledge and tacit knowledge in professional work. In Coffield F. (ed.) *The necessity of informal learning* ESRC Report (Bristol, The Policy Press)

Giddens A. (1991) *Modernity and Self-Identity* Cambridge Polity Press

Greenwood J. D. (1994) *Realism, Identity and Emotion* London, Sage Publications Ltd.

Halliday, J. (2004) Competence in the Workplace: Rhetorical robbery and curriculum policy *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 36, 5, 579-590

Hargreaves, A. (1998) *The Emotional Politics of Teacher Development* Keynote address to AERA San Diego U.S.A.

Hay McBer Report (2000) *A Model of Teacher Effectiveness*  
[www.dfes.gov.uk/teachingreforms/mcber](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/teachingreforms/mcber)

Hinchliffe G. (2004) Work and Human Flourishing *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 36, 5, 535-547

Hodkinson, P. and Hodkinson, H. (2004) The Significance of Individuals' Dispositions in Workplace Learning: a case study of two teachers *Journal of Education and Work* 17, 2, 167-182

Hoveid, H. and Hoveid, M. (2004) *A Teacher's Personal Language: Ways of Constructing Inclusion and Diversity in Teaching* Paper presented at the annual European Conference on Educational Research Crete

- Illeris K. (2002) *The Three Dimensions of Learning* (Leicester, Niace Publications/Roskilde University Press)
- MacCaig N. (1990) 'Summer Farm', in *Collected Poems* (Chatto & Windus, London)
- McNally, J. (2001) *The Induction of New Teachers in Scotland: A Report for the General Teaching Council for Scotland and the Scottish Executive Department* (Edinburgh, GTC Scotland)
- Ruddock, J. & Flutter, J. (2004) *How to improve your school; giving pupils a voice* London, Continuum
- Scottish Executive (2002) *The Standard for Full Registration Scotland* Edinburgh, SEED or GTCS
- Sikes, P., Measor, L. & Woods, P. (1985) *Teacher Careers: Crises and Continuities* Lewes, Falmer
- Stronach, I. Corbin, B., McNamara, O., Stark, S. & Warne, T. (2002) Towards an uncertain politics of professionalism: teacher and nurse identities in flux *Journal of Educational Policy* 17,1, 109-138
- Van Zanten, A. (2006) The new generation of teachers in France: views on professionalism in a changing policy context, CTRIP seminar series, KCL