

Identity, person and purpose in the preparation of teachers

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Introduction

The main grounded evidence base for this paper is the set of case study ethnographies of new secondary teachers from the 'Early Professional Learning Project'. Our argument is that, from this data, the process of early professional learning (EPL) for these teachers can be conceptualised as one of identity formation. The starting point for this argument is the finding that, for all of the 28 teachers in the study, their narratives of the first few months of teaching are mainly characterised by emotional intensity and the development of relationships with pupils and colleagues.

The general picture is of an 'emotional roller-coaster' with so much compressed into such a short space of time. Entering life as a teacher is a form of initiation during which the new teacher cannot help but make an emotional investment. The narratives of the first year indicate that this emotional dimension is sustained, though with less constancy and intensity. Indeed, emotions are now recognised as important in the teaching lives of teachers in general. Hargreaves (1998) sees emotions in teaching as 'not just a sentimental adornment... (but) ...fundamental in and of themselves'. In his extensive study of informal learning in the workplace, Eraut (2004) argues that the 'emotional dimension of professional work is much more significant than normally recognised'.

Both of these writers have also drawn attention to the importance of relationships in teacher development. Eraut (2004) 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. Hargreaves (1992) stated that 'the way teachers relate to their colleagues has profound implications for their classroom teaching, how they evolve and develop as teachers and the sorts of teachers they become', and further that 'what goes on in a teacher's classroom cannot be divorced from the relations that are forged outside it'.

Our preliminary theorising from earlier small-scale research (McNally, Cope, Inglis and Stronach 1994; 1997) was that student-teacher experienced a kind of 'natural mentoring' within 'relational conditions' and that the status transition to teacherhood was essentially through an affective engagement with colleagues and classes taught. Our current more intensively researched picture tends to confirm that learning to teach is not experienced as knowledge acquisition in any ordered, rational sense. It does rather appear to be an 'inherently emotional process embedded within a relational context', a description accepted indeed as an expression of the development of identity (e.g. Bosma and Kunnen 2001, p.xiii). Of course, assuming or adapting an identity in the sense of 'becoming a teacher' has long been recognised by many educational ethnographers as a more realistic representation of the beginner's actual experience than more cognitively oriented conceptions of learning to teach (e.g. Eddy 1969). However, in a concurrent extensive, longitudinal study, Day et al (2005) find that 'identity' is emerging as the key to understanding the work and lives of teachers. Their qualitative data analysis 'is leading to the conclusion that identity is the fundamentally most important construct for understanding teacher effectiveness and improvement across all career phases and all school types'. Set beside their observation that individuals take time to acquire a 'teacher' identity, it seems reasonable to deduce from their work too that the early months and years of teaching are crucial in identity formation.

Towards a concept of identity in context

If we accept the argument that the process of early 'professional' development is essentially one of identity formation, then we surely also have to recognise that becoming a teacher has to be understood ontologically. This is not to deny that learning to teach has an epistemological basis, but to propose that, from the evidence we have, it may simply be latent at this stage. Beginning teaching would appear to be about who you are or become rather more than it is about what you know. 'Identity' is a much contested concept but perhaps the first step in conceptual clarification ought to be the actual research data – the continuing interview-based narratives over the course of the first year of teaching. New teachers do face the fundamental question of whether they can see themselves as teachers in what is reflected from colleagues and children. This can extend to include how family and friends respond. In this respect the concept of a 'relational self', used by Hoveid and Hoveid (2004), is apt in portraying the image of an individual's adaptation to and acceptance within a new relational context.

Yet becoming a teacher is not simply a derivatively social experience; the sense of a 'self' is socially situated rather than socially constructed. Each individual's evolving narrative can be read as the voice of a personal struggle through a more or less reflexive engagement with the experience itself. One of them, for example, talks of recognising the emergence of 'humanity' and 'humility' within herself. Even in a context of prevailing professional standards, there is strong evidence that new teachers seek (or just find) a sense of their 'new' professional selves that is given partly by colleagues and partly by pupils, but also experienced within as personal change. There is little reference to the relevant standard, in this case the Standard for Full Registration (SFR).

Our concept of identity has also, therefore, to accommodate some notion of developing individuals. It has to include some sense of the unique persons who, in their developing biographies, are becoming teachers. The unfolding narratives as biographical episodes do not convey personal change as some sudden alteration in behaviour or self-concept. Each one is rather more like a story of self-discovery, a growing reflexive awareness that a self-as-teacher is becoming possible. For some it may be about the emergence of qualities within oneself (e.g. humility); for others it is not quite possible to articulate the change, though change itself is acknowledged. Giddens (1991) uses the term 'self-identity' to mean 'the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography' (p.53). Although it is but one of many potential stories that could be told about one's self, and is thus 'fragile', it is also 'robust' in that it can be secure enough to allow the person to cope with a transition and inherent tensions in a given context. Thus in eventually reaching a self that has within it a teacher identity, typically after several weeks of emotional turmoil and vulnerability, an individual has, for a time, a new or revised sense of 'ontological security'.

Although our earlier studies focused on relationality, we were aware of the personal and individual nature of the narratives, of the unfolding situations and sense-making by the beginners themselves that was about themselves. This was often about themselves in the classroom, the actual experience of teaching classes on your own. Student-teachers made frequent reference to being able to understand the nature of teaching only by actually doing it. You had to be on your own with classes to become accepted as 'their' teacher and thus complete the main narrative. We alluded then (McNally *et al* 1997) to a sense of a 'personal struggle' by beginners and the 'more or less existentialist predicament' in which they found themselves. Within the prominent theme of 'others' in the experience, we proposed that some concept of 'self' ought to be somehow accommodated in any attempt at a full explanation.

In relation to teacher development, Tabachnik and Zeichner (1983) have made the point that what students themselves bring as individuals to the experience and what part this plays in their own development, should not be underestimated. More recently, Reid (2001), in his keynote speech to UCET expressed the concern that the development of theory and policy should not overlook the intrinsic personal qualities and diversity of talent that new teachers bring to their work. Becoming a teacher, we argue, is thus an extension of these various individual biographies, both through drawing on the existing capacity, talent or qualities of different individuals for teaching, and also through a degree of change in the unique identities they previously had.

Though our case applies to beginning teachers in schools, individual biography has been found to be significant in workplace learning more generally (Hodkinson *et al* 2004), and in a similar way, in 'bringing prior abilities and experiences to the workplace ... (and in that) ... participation in work contributes to the construction and development of worker identity'. Indeed, Alheit and Dausien (1999) use the term 'biographicity' to mean the

capacity that people have that could not be taught by experts, their uniqueness as a resource for building new relationships. Their discovery that people's reaction patterns are biographical i.e. that each has a particular unique history, emerged from their studies of social groups over many years. Interestingly, they concede that, in a sense, their insights 'belong to the everyday business of the well-informed educator ... (and) ... are by no means new for educationalists'.

Personal purpose

A further observation to be made on the substance of the narratives is that their content – self in relation to pupils and colleagues – reveals what matters to the interviewees. Colleagues clearly play a major part but this is a common feature of many workplaces, and is no less important because of that. Indeed Hinchcliffe (2004) claims that there is an ethical nexus inscribed in relations with others in the workplace and that this is inescapable and bound up with technical skills. His argument is that the ethical dimension of relationships at work is important for human flourishing and for the quality of work that is done, provided they are not treated in formal performative terms. The research data for beginning teachers supports this position: the relational nature of their development is not only a means or context for learning (to teach) but is an integral part of what it means to become, and probably to continue to be, a teacher. The interactions and developing relationships with children in classes is, however, probably what essentially distinguishes teaching from other occupations. The near pre-occupation of new teachers in interviews with their developing relationships with these classes and the individual 'pupils' within them, suggests that this is what gives individually felt meanings to their early teaching experience. Thus it is not only a question of being 'identified' by children as 'their' teacher – and thus becoming a teacher in real, relational rather than official, standardised terms- but of this being what in fact matters most to the individual new teachers, the experience through which they feel their own initial sense of purpose.

This interpretation of this specific phenomenon evokes the broader existentialist view that what tends to stand out in our experience is what *matters* to us. Citing Heidegger and Kierkegaard, Guignon (2000), for example, states that 'discernment and differentiation are possible only for a being that *cares* about what it encounters' (p.83). The centrality in the narratives of the developing relationship with classes suggests that this is what matters to new teachers. Furthermore, the interpersonal and emotional nature of its expression suggest that the growth of new teachers into their new 'professional' role involves a degree of personal commitment by them as individuals. In the standards for beginners (SFR), it should be recognised that 'personal commitment and professional values' do constitute one of the three categories of performance (with knowledge and understanding, skills and abilities). However, the richness of the narrative data base leads us to at least a conceptual elaboration of what this might mean experientially. The personal commitment is clearly themed in the series of interviews as a developing emotional engagement by individual new teachers; it is a commitment that both influences and depends on the very self-identity of these beginners.

Nor do values appear to be associated with any formally espoused rhetoric about what matters. These too are bound up in the emotional-relational journey of discovery of self and others. In other words, what we are arguing is that individual new teachers are engaged in internalising their own sense of purpose in a worthwhile cause through their own early experiences as extensions of their own personal histories. The emotionality in the narratives, in relating to children particularly, suggests the embedding of a personal commitment within individual identities, that Greenwood (1994) might argue is actually associated with engagement in a 'moral career'. This is not to say that ITE and induction programmes are not relevant (see below), but that they have to be seen as only part of a range of potential influences that are only likely to achieve impact if they connect to a central core of development that is the personal sense of purpose in teaching within each individual biography. Though this paper has new teachers starting out in teaching as its context and focus, Cope (2005 – working paper) extends the argument to cover other cases as well with regard to the disconnection between policy rhetoric and personal motivation.

As part of the EPL project (2005), certain indicators of new teachers' development have been designed. One of these is a 'children's descriptions' indicator. Its design involved seeking responses from children in classrooms through our teacher-researchers. Of the 1130 individual statements from some 100 x 13/14 year old pupils, at least 2/300 refer to behaviour or qualities that are about the person, and a further 1/200 that could be construed in this way rather than as pure teaching skills (e.g. *humorous, relaxed, understanding, friendly, considerate, kind, forgives, not mooney, pays attention to you, happy excited, fair mean, shouts, bad moods, scary, angry, laughing at you, has favourites, embarrasses you*). A similar finding emerged in the Hay McBer study,

prior to their categorisation of performance levels of teachers: good teachers, for example, '*stand up for you ... tell the truth ... have faith in you ... are generous*. It seems that pupils see the person that resides within the teacher, or that **is** the teacher. In voicing such personal qualities of their teachers, children themselves show some need to trust or believe in their teacher as a person. In an age of apparently increasing fragmentation of familial security it may be that children become more dependent on teachers as trusted adult persons, as well as for their traditional epistemological and pedagogical responsibilities.

Many children may increasingly need a sense of ontological security themselves from their teachers. The security is reciprocal of course, for teachers (new teachers in particular) are also dependent on their pupils not only for offering a sense of professional purpose, but also for their very acceptance as a teacher - as we have argued above. This reciprocal ontological security is indicative of the teacher-pupil interdependence developing toward something approaching a 'pure relationship' (Giddens 1991) which depends on mutual trust, in which the trust of the other has to be won, in which the individuals have to be trusting and trustworthy within the confines of the relationship, and in which self-identity is negotiated through linked processes of self-exploration and shared histories (p.96, 97).

Some implications for the preparation of teachers

Perhaps it is important, first of all, to clarify what is **not** being argued. Clearly, teaching is dependent on a wide range of knowledge and skills too and is not simply about identity formation. In a sense the new teachers are of course gaining knowledge about their classes and the individual pupils within these classes. They are also coming to terms in most cases with new locations, physical layouts, resources, procedures and accommodation – and we acknowledge these structural, physical and cognitive dimensions*. However, the narrative base of our data (established through two to three-weekly interviews by insiders) did not uncover during the first four months or so (a half-term approximately) any strong occurrence of references by new teachers to subject knowledge, teaching methods or any of the standard conceptual apparatus of either professional standards or ITE courses (which could range from similar to fairly divergent). Our own view is that there is a latent cognitive dimension of learning to teach and that the new teachers probably have enough knowledge and skills from their ITE courses (including teaching as students in schools) to 'survive' this first phase of starting to teach. This view is based on the fact that they do (with few exceptions) come through this traumatic transition and also the evidence from interviews at and following some four months that cognitive references begin to surface more explicitly. Mention is made around this time of, for example, adapting lessons and resources for different classes.

However, it does appear to be the emotional and relational dimensions of learning that come to the fore in this early phase. In his more general theory of learning, Illeris (2002) argues that the cognitive, the emotional and the social (which we prefer to call relational) are the three dimensions of learning. He points out, moreover, that:

Very special and demanding situations, often with a crisis-like character, 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)

Our evidence is that beginning teaching is indeed demanding for just about all beginners and special for each beginner. While it may not approach a crisis for everyone, it is more or less transformative for everyone and that is why the transition has to be recognised as an identity shift rather than as a rational progression in the more abstracted concepts or principles of the standard or indeed conventional ITE courses.

What would acceptance of our argument mean for the preparation of teachers? Ideas such as this argument, which we claim is well grounded, cannot just be rendered superfluous because they are not easy to prescribe through theory or sensible policy. Nonetheless, formal statements should surely acknowledge that teaching cannot just be assimilated as a craft or set of technical skills (e.g. clarity of voice, use of power point), or even as parts of professional knowledge (e.g. a Maths curriculum or approaches to difference); these can be learned. The various standards and collections of competence requirements lay out laudable, vaguely articulated aspirations that may help illuminate but cannot of themselves hold the key to successful teaching or acceptance as a teacher.

In a recent seminar* (EVABCOM, 7 Oct 2005) the gap between occupational standards and actual workplace learning was identified as a genuine issue. The standards were presented as an initial attempt to frame learning outcomes and that they needed to be moved on to a stage where the importance of emotional engagement and of personal qualities could be acknowledged. It emerged in discussion that a dialogue between researchers and policy makers /standard writers was needed to take the expression of standards on to this next stage. The conceptual gap between standards and workplace learning is thus not unique to teaching (in which the school itself is the workplace), or the professions more generally. What is perhaps not widely known is that the writing of the SFR was the product of a research-policy collaboration (McNally, 2001) in which the final document at least acknowledged the possibility that practitioners might use more holistic professional judgements, rather than or as well as more specific competence statements. This was but an initial step of course and it remains to be seen whether, as an occupational standard, the SFR will have in due course the linguistic or political capacity to absorb concepts such as emotion, identity and ontology.

What the same seminar did not resolve was the extent to which personal qualities and an individual's capacity to do a particular job well, including the ability to teach children well, could be captured in any quantifiable way - or whether certain qualities remained 'unmeasurable'. While we are able in this paper to avoid debating this seemingly perennial polarisation of positions, we are nevertheless compelled by our findings and argument to acknowledge that the preparation of teachers (in ITE and induction) should involve the nurturing of them as individuals, helping them as empathetically as possible to release their individual qualities, and building their confidence and capacity to do the same for others. It is again important to recognise that this has to be balanced with the need to develop a more or less agreed sets of knowledge and skills. In this respect, research should be able to offer indications of the kind of input that matches stages of EPL in as much as these can be identified. Currently, for example, we have examples of formal LA induction input on and on 'getting to know your class' and on 'behaviour management' that have been well received by new teachers during the first few months. These inputs clearly match the concerns that most new teachers have at this time although their success appears to owe more to the quality of the individual presenters than to the topic itself. The main point remains, however, that over-emphasis of knowledge and skills, through, for example, cramming just about all the experienced teacher would need to know into an ITE / induction curriculum, runs the risk of squeezing the space for more sensitive input.

In writing about teacher education in Sweden, for example, Carlgren (1996) actually argues that there is a contradiction between the tacit knowledge that teachers draw on in practice 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 to be grounded in, or integrated with, tacit experience-based knowledge, particularly in the social dimension of learning (p26). Within a structure that offers reasonable coverage of 'expected' topics, it is, therefore, important to resist the presumption that standards can adequately define an ITE curriculum. The agenda might be extended to include, for example, the need to resist demands for ready made solutions (e.g. how to teach) and algorithms (e.g. for behaviour management), and to explain why they should be resisted (e.g. McNally 2005); we resist them; to ensure space for supporting and engaging with beginners as individuals; to facilitate conversations that allow beginners to talk through their own experiences and reflections with their peers; to observe early lessons with a view to gaining a narrative-based understanding rather than imposing a checklist-driven account; to plant some seeds of further understanding of advanced teaching for the period after survival and acceptance.

Finally, the paper demands something of ourselves as teacher educators. If becoming a teacher is a highly personal experience in which individuals internalise their own sense of purpose, then we need to show something more than a research portfolio and a respectable RAE submission for those of us in HE; something more than demonstrable observable classroom competence if we teach in schools.

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