

FROM INFORMAL LEARNING TO IDENTITY FORMATION: A CONCEPTUAL JOURNEY IN EARLY TEACHER DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

This paper traces the development of an attempt to understand how teachers learn to teach from a vague grounded concept of informal learning through to identity formation. Drawing on ongoing research into beginning teachers in a Scottish context, it is argued that the early experience of teaching is characterised by emotionality and relationality rather than as a more cognitive or competence-related kind of professional learning. The conclusion is that progressive focusing on researching informal learning has been important in leading to a more robust theory of early professional learning in teaching, supported by a wider international literature, as a deeper process of personal change and an emergent self-as-teacher identity.

INTRODUCTION

Preliminary research with colleagues into the experience of student-teachers in school some years ago (McNally, *et al.*, 1994; 1997) identified the informal nature of that experience. While it was evident from interviews that they valued the feeling of being supported, explicit examples of what they were learning, in any formal or cognitive sense, were not elicited. It could of course be argued that their sense of developing (and subsequent qualification) as teachers *implied* that some kind of professional¹ learning was taking place. Our concept of informality was embryonic and provisional; we recognised the informal, supportive manner of many with formal positions, for example, heads of departments and other senior staff, and indeed the usefulness of formality in certain scheduled meetings and structured support. As Colley, Hodgkinson and Malcolm (2003) have since pointed out, it is important to resist polarising formal and informal learning as fundamentally distinct or in competition with one another. Nevertheless, however vague our conception of informality was from our early studies, it was still a dominant theme in the interview data that merited further exploration and deserved greater attention. This attention was given, perhaps most notably, in the publication, *The Necessity of Informal Learning* (Coffield, 2000), in which the contributors became increasingly clear from their data across studies of different learning contexts that informal learning was much more significant than they had previously recognised. They also acknowledged the prior study of informal, everyday learning in a long tradition of anthropological studies. The literature on lifelong learning has also become increasingly narrow, excluding the valuable learning that has always gone on outside formal programmes of instruction (Gorard, *et al.*, 1999). In the particular context of teacher education, it became clear to us and to others (e.g. Eraut, 1994; Williams, 2003), that informal experiences are a key yet under-theorised and under-valued element of learning by teachers. More specifically, the study by Williams and Prestage (2001) found that informal discussion was the most highly valued induction activity by newly qualified teachers.

The grounded concept of informal learning also challenged the view that a standards-based support system, however well-intentioned, could in itself actually deliver the support needed by the novice in school. Formal reference points — structured lesson observations, competence-based agendas and ‘next steps’ for development, for example — were generally absent from accounts of ‘good’ experiences and did not guarantee feelings of being supported or of developing as

a teacher. Our concept of the informal was not in diametric opposition to structure and order *per se* but represented a counter-balance against over-reliance on formal arrangements as the major or exclusive means of supporting early professional development. The inherent danger for beginning teachers was that these would provide only a partial support and miss some of their important, unvoiced needs. Again, our concerns were not isolated (Coffield, 2000):

There is a strong tendency for policy makers, researchers and practitioners to admit readily the importance of informal learning and then proceed to develop policy, theory and practice without further reference to it. (p.2)

As a tentative term meant to catch an initial conceptual base of the beginning teacher's experience, the idea of informal learning was by no means intended as a well-defined resolution of what and how beginning teachers learned. According to Smith (2003), informal refers to the lifelong process in which people learn from everyday experience whereas non-formal is seen as the organized educational activity outside formal systems. The learning experience of beginning teachers, however, includes the everyday and the organised, and also the notion of informal education as interactions with friends, family and work colleagues. In resisting polarisation of the informal and formal, Colley, Hodkinson and Malcolm (2003) recommend further study of learning as a social practice and the need to clarify context, meaning and purpose in relation to learning. Such attempts to clarify or define at least reflect an increasing recognition that crucial learning takes place in ways that would not normally be described as formal. Attempts to impose generalised definitions of informal learning² on particular contexts, however, are surely premature. They would tend to circumscribe conceptual development in contrast with the position taken in this paper, supported by Straka (2004), that it is still a problematic term suffering from a 'lack of systematically and empirically grounded valid evidence'. It is on that premise that this paper attempts to contribute to that evidence base and thus advance the search for a deeper understanding of informal learning, for beginning teachers in particular and in the wider context of early professional or occupational learning. Building on the findings of earlier research and extending the empirical evidence from recent research³, it is argued that the early experience of teaching is largely informal with strong emotional and relational dimensions associated with identity formation.

The recent research was an intensive study of twenty eight new teachers (probationers) during their first three months of teaching. The subjects were all of the newly qualified teachers in six different secondary schools in central Scotland. The research took place in the context of a national induction scheme for Scottish teachers, introduced in 2002, which guarantees one year in one school for every teacher graduating from courses of Initial Teacher Education in Scotland (Scottish Executive, 2004). Semi-structured interviews were conducted about once every two weeks by experienced teachers in the same schools. They were seconded part-time from teaching duties for this purpose, inducted into ethnographic interviewing and were effectively 'insiders'. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed with occasional field note commentaries. These served as the data base for close scrutiny, coding and categorisation, guided by the grounded theory approach of Glaser and Strauss (1968; 1978).

This analysis yielded the conceptual basis of this paper, which is that emotionality, relationality and identity are grounded, authentic themes, supported in the wider literature, and which then discusses these themes in relation to a wider professional context. The quotes have been selected as typical illustrations from the teacher narratives. For the purposes of this paper, no distinction is made between affect, emotion and feeling; nor is any particular philosophical, psychological or sociological stance presumed for the concept of identity. Discussion only extends as far as to argue

for some notion of a developing sense of self which is both individual and relational, but which is more than a pure social construction. There is indeed a need for further theoretical work and conceptual clarification in early professional learning.

EMOTIONALITY

Interviews with the new teachers began in their first week of teaching and their accounts are replete with emotional language – ‘butterflies’, ‘nerves, panic’, ‘waking at two or three’. The first indications of this are before they have even begun, a ‘response’ to their anticipation of the first day. As student-teachers they have of course had to begin with new colleagues and classes in previous placements. Now that experience seems to be heightened; the emotional intensity of the first week is metaphorised by one of them as a ‘roller coaster’.

The probationers’ day the week before school started was when reality set in and she felt nervous, very nervous. Apparently others felt the same. On the in service day at school she felt more relaxed but on the pupils’ first day she had never been so nervous in all her life. She couldn’t stop it and the more she worried the more nervous she felt.

Ann described her first week as a “roller coaster” and “bizarre” experience. Over the summer she thought about her classes a lot. What if they are really bad? What if I can’t control them? What if I feel horrible about myself? Can I handle classes? She has been waking up at 2 or 3 in the morning thinking about the quieter pupils she hasn’t spoken to.

Taken altogether, there is in the stories of the first week a metaphorical sense of a ‘big bang’, a professional birth in which order has somehow to come from chaos. And somehow it does. This is evident in the main source of the extremity of feeling: the pupils in the classes actually taught by the new teacher. The reality of their responsibility for these young people is suddenly upon them. Whatever continuity there may be in knowledge, skills or values — and this is not apparent in the narratives — it is momentarily meaningless as they start to make sense of their new situation, defined mainly by the new people to relate to. Even the typical worry about ‘class control’ often reveals an underlying concern about the children taught and individuals or groups that might be excluded (‘the quieter pupils’ above, for example). Sooner rather than later, and for most classes, this tends to be resolved through the response of the pupils themselves, both in and outside the classroom and is again expressed in affective terms, for example ‘pleased’ and ‘liked’, or moving from ‘disheartened’ to ‘happier’:

She has been pleased at the pupils’ response to her lessons and she liked being recognised by them in the corridors.

After her first observed lesson... during which four boys had dominated the class Ann felt “pretty disheartened about the whole thing”. By the following week she wasn’t so totally disheartened because she realised there were lots of strategies to try... and if she could turn round two pupils it would be a good class and she would be happier.

Naturally, there are some qualifications to this general picture. One beginner’s over-use of colloquial language with pupils and criticism of colleagues’ curriculum materials was too extreme for the social and professional milieu of the school and so he experienced prolonged emotional difficulties before eventually accepting guidance and achieving qualification. In the same school, a probationer from the previous year (not part of the sample) had been told that she was ‘not welcome’ in the department and experienced severe emotional upset before eventually settling in successfully to another school.

But the general picture is that the first days and weeks of teaching are emotionally charged for many new teachers. So much is compressed into such a short space of time. It is a kind of emotional labour, not in any exploitative sense, but simply because this appears to be how you enter life as a teacher, through a form of initiation during which you have to make an emotional investment. Yet, the affective nature of teaching does not end with these first contacts. The narratives show that it is sustained, albeit with less constancy and intensity. Indeed, emotions are now recognised as important in the teaching lives of teachers in general. 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 learning in the workplace, Eraut (2004) argues that the 'emotional dimension of professional work is much more significant than normally recognised'. This is acutely so for new teachers, even in the context of a national scheme of structured support.

RELATIONALITY

Almost as pervasive as emotionality in the data, and indeed frequently associated with it, is the theme of relationality. Earlier research had found that a feature of the informal experience of beginners was that of 'relational conditions', governed largely by departmental colleagues and existing between extremes of 'total abandonment' and 'rigidly controlled, stifling support' (McNally, *et al.*, 1997). Lohman (2000) actually found, as a kind of corollary, that an environment that hinders such affective and relational engagement inhibits informal learning. Speaking to a range of different teachers beyond the department is important - 'everyone's got something different to say' and you can 'learn so much' - though such important informal experiences are once again not readily articulated in terms of any specific learning. However, it is clear that the social environment within which the new teacher works with departmental colleagues, is of central importance:

One big help had been that the department were friendly and helpful.

...great atmosphere in the school department and classroom - one teacher has taken me under her wing and is very supportive. At the end of the day I was relaxed and very positive about the future.

I had been nervous and not sleeping well. The PT had given me his home phone number so I called him on Monday night. He put me completely at ease. I felt he was friendly and supportive. I still didn't sleep well but felt more relaxed about my first day.

The indication is that the informality of volunteered support — giving out your home telephone number, taking someone under your wing — is important for the beginner. There is no implication that anything in particular is learned; yet that feeling of having support at hand is of enormous importance. The importance of such informal relational support was described in previous work (McNally, 1994) as natural mentoring and is further supported by Eraut (2004) who 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. This unplanned support can take the form of simple reassurance and can be from within or beyond the subject department:

She had been out for lunch with another probationer and some of this probationer's department. It had been reassuring when they had said that they hadn't heard her voice carrying into the corridor. She had worried about how she could meet people on the staff when she worked in a two-person department.

I was taking over from a teacher... (and) ...we were just getting to know each other ... and she was able to give me insider information on the pupils... so... that in itself was really good in that it built up a friendship as well, it built up

a bit of a relationship... she became someone I could really go to for a bit of help if I didn't want to go to the mentor or the PT. It just gave me another person which is really good and it's through things like that you actually feel part of the department so that you actually feel yourself becoming more of a teacher ... it just goes to cementing and making you part of the department ... it's something that's organic and it grows and it's just a natural process of getting to know each other.

The wider, fundamental importance of informal relationality in the form of friendship and human bonds has a philosophical basis as well (e.g Almond, 1988; White, 1990). However informal relationships at work are not just for friendship's sake. 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 but is an integral part of what it means to become, and probably to continue to be, a teacher. Contact with other beginners is a common manifestation of this process of becoming and being a teacher:

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. It's just that that is their behaviour so I always kid them on and say they've got the weakest bladders in Scotland because it always seems they are needing to go to the bathroom but Ann has the same problem so I guess they really do.

...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... and because Ann also has her own classroom, whereas I don't, it's a good sanctuary for me sometimes just to go up there and because it's a totally different department and there's a different feel up there... I don't want her to move (to another school).

...we can have a good bitch if that comes into it yes, and also even sometimes 'how do you find this person in the school' 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. Although they are not formal, we should not discount the possibility of formal induction arrangements that could facilitate them.

New teachers' anxiety about pupil behaviour and class control also tends to subside as their relationships with pupils gradually become imbued with an understanding of them as individual personalities:

I find it easy to relate to them now, it's just because I'm beginning to know their personalities... I'm beginning to know a lot of pupils much better, what kind of music they're into you know... the quiet ones in the class I'm trying to get round and have a wee blether to them.

They also become aware that how they relate to their pupils can carry beyond the classroom to others as a kind of informal assessment of their teaching – and vice versa. It is acknowledged that ‘kids talk’ and that ‘teachers get a feel of what teachers are like from the kids’. 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 their ‘induction year’ school and placement schools as students 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; it can mean adjusting teaching accordingly:

I was worried about understanding the pupils’ accents and vice versa as I am from Glasgow.

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.

BUT WHAT ARE THEY LEARNING?

It is a fair question; one that tends to be asked by the public at large and their elected representatives. From the argument so far, the response could be that new teachers’ learning (to teach) is an inherently emotional process embedded within a relational context. Further, this is an accepted concept of the development of self and identity (Bosma and Kunnen, 2001; *xiii*). Assuming or adopting (or adapting to) a new 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 a more rational, cognitive notion of learning to teach (e.g. Eddy, 1969). What is being learned still stands, however, as a valid research question alongside the validated notion of a developing teaching self and the concept of learning as becoming. Clearly, new teachers may well have learned enough during ITE to survive as teachers in the classroom for several weeks. It is likely that they also work hard at reading up and writing plans and so on during this strongly emotional-relational early phase. Yet, attempts to probe beneath the screen of informality do not readily yield data on ‘learning’. One interviewee mentioned routines before immediately reverting to the robust theme of informal relationality - saying ‘hi’ in the corridor, in this case:

I think just starting to get more into a routine. They know they come in and take their jackets and bags off and they know that when I say right settle down, working, they know. You’re also starting to build up a relationship with the kids. They stop and say hi to you in the corridor and they know you and recognise you and they speak to you outside the class. It just helps.

The difficulty of ascribing whatever is learned to any particular source is also apparent. It can be absorbed from others, through informal conversation more than formal observation, from ideas at university, but their sense of developing as a teacher is often attributed simply to their personal experience of teaching classes, a kind of ‘personal learning’ (Eraut, 2004):

I think it was from my own experiences. People had said things like that but it didn’t really register and it wasn’t until I was putting it into practice I found what works for one class doesn’t work for another it’s the same with teaching things and behaviour strategies. It’s all about adapting and always being adaptable yourself. Kids have all got different learning styles and I learnt that at university and I don’t think I’ve grasped how important that is until now.

The question was pursued through more specific probing as in, for example, ‘Can you give any examples of anything you learnt from someone in your department?’ This uncovered examples of a holistic kind of learning - making kids want to do well for you, what works for one does not for another, easier to lighten up than tighten up, learning from mistakes – which, although triggered by observation of another teacher teaching, was somehow connected to other sources too such as advice from the principal teacher and learning ‘on the job’. Some respond by reframing the question of learning in terms of personal qualities (my diplomacy is becoming really good) or teaching approaches, occasionally turning negative experiences into positive intent. Again, the impression given is of personal adaptation and self-discovery; the sense of a developing identity as a teacher is reinforced, almost stubbornly so:

I observed a lesson given by one of the younger teachers but very experienced and the way she was with the kids but she had discipline... she makes the kids want to do well for her... I think I had the attitude of you can go in and not be friends but on an equal wave length with them and my PT said to me it’s easier to lighten up than to tighten up and that’s probably the biggest thing I learnt... tightening up has been quite a steep learning curve for me and a lot it’s been making pure mistakes and making massive mistakes and learning from that... I thought all kids are the same but they’re not... all totally different... what will work for one child will certainly not work for another and I’ve learnt that through making mistakes. Trying to push a kid into doing something and they’re just not going to do it... what I’ve learnt over the past six weeks has been generally on the job, making mistakes and trying to... change things for next time.

I witnessed an experienced teacher dictating absolutely everything to the pupils, which they later regurgitated. The pupils had a poor learning experience and although he got good results the pupils did not enjoy the experience. This strategy was used partly to keep pupils quiet and under control and partly because he was lazy. This is one role model I have no intention of emulating.

Since we know that relationships with children are a crucial element of informal learning, another obvious question to ask is ‘What have you learnt from the kids?’ – (other than that they are all different). The typical responses — they learn ‘lots of new phrases’, that ‘kids want to be listened to’, that they ‘really want you to set boundaries in the classroom’, for example — suggest that learning is about the voice of children, what they say and how they say it, but sometimes also the background experiences of individual pupil voices. ‘Taking a step back’, ‘taking time to understand’ lead to ‘sympathy’ as much as empathy. Beginning teaching means that many of these new teachers are ‘learning’ about the wider world that some children actually inhabit, lives in which one ‘broke down in tears’ and in which some are ‘carers in their homes’. Learning this directly from the children in your classroom again exemplifies the argument that learning is strongly relational in nature. How you relate to them as ‘pupils’ seems to determine how you will be viewed by them as a teacher and, crucially, whether they allow you to ‘become’ a teacher:

...one of my third year boys who is constantly in trouble and talking to him and taking the time to understand how he felt and his emotions and he actually broke down in tears and after that he’s always been most helpful and I think it was because he knew he could trust me. So we formed that relationship... I’m just starting to really know them... to build up the relationship, to know who are the younger or older brothers and sisters, all sorts... I found out that one has a mum that works at this school so that’s really good. It’s all about building up my view of the pupils.

Sometimes it's (homework) not coming and you have to step back and ask why...if you have a class that's first period and sometimes they're late and you have to ask yourself the reason why...I found that on several occasions it's because these pupils are actually carers...in their homes. Parents have a disability or they have younger siblings and they have to take them to school before they can come to school themselves and I think you have to be aware of that.

After some three or four months, the emotional intensity of teaching tends to subside and a relational network tends to be well developed. Continuing interviews at this time reveal little in the way of specific learning or specific events that could be identified as producing learning. Although all twenty-eight probationers qualified successfully as teachers, it should not be inferred that everyone's experience was trouble-free - indeed two of the sample were not well supported on the whole - but there was little mention of difficulties in the narratives. What further probing tended to elicit were holistic expressions such as 'feeling more confident', 'not making as many mistakes' and 'needing less reassurance', echoing Valsiner and van de Veer's (2000) socio-cultural theory that reliance decreases with time and experience from social relatedness to more independence as individuals.

...AND WHAT ABOUT THE STANDARD?

Like the great majority of probationers (over 95%), the teachers in the sample all achieved the relevant standard, the Standard for Full Registration (SFR). However, it was not mentioned in interviews until it was actually raised by the interviewers after some four months, when the official interim report is due. Even then, it tended to be used as a checklist for the report, seen as a bureaucratic requirement with little bearing on their actual experience. With no explicit, unsolicited reference to the standard or parts of it, the transcripts were closely scrutinised for implicit connections or for learning that might be viewed as more cognitive in nature. Apart from the holistic feelings of confidence mentioned earlier, perhaps two areas of development can be inferred. These are essentially to do with developing a sense of difference (between classes, lessons and individual children) and 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...

There is clearly a disparity between the actual experience (of learning?) that is taking place and the ordered expression of the standard. The language of informal learning has nuanced rather than precise meanings but it is also surely more authentic in representing the process. A standards-centred or competence-based discourse may have a place in the rhetoric of product then, rather than that of process. To that extent,

the discourse and grounded concepts of this paper may be seen as complementary to the meta-language of policy but, should there be a presumed rationality imposed on the process of becoming a teacher, then the two discourses would be at odds. The danger of rhetorical robbery, in relation to terms such as 'competence', has been advanced by Halliday (2004), who also argues for rich descriptions of becoming competent and the contexts in which it happens, which is in part the intention of this paper. However, we have little theoretical sense yet of how the specific competence statements of the SFR are or could be meaningfully used by practitioners. Given focused persistence and patience, within an ethnography that is aware of and can interpret the formal discourse of professional learning espoused in official standards, it may 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 professional informality.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

It is hard to resist the conclusion that informal learning is an inevitable part of the early professional development of teachers. This is not to exclude the contribution of more formal structures and systems, or even to be unduly critical of these, provided they are not presented as dogma or panacea. The point is that, though it eludes precise cause-and-effect formulation, it is nevertheless too important to be ignored by policy makers, or indeed excluded by researchers, as in, for example, the recent systematic review by Totterdell, *et al.* (2004) on the impact of induction programmes. In any case, it is also important to resist premature definition until further studies in different contexts are completed and compared for their particular conceptions of informal learning. For example, Brown (2004) relates the informal learning of telecommunications workers to development of a flexible work identity. In that context, this flexible identity proved to be critical for continuity of employment and job retention. Although these considerations are of arguably less urgency for teachers, the study still highlights the importance and connectedness of informal learning and identity formation in the workplace.

Even within the same broad professional context there are differences to be explored. While the empirical base of this paper could support Eraut's (2004) notion of personal learning, it would also question his somewhat reductive typology as in, for example, categories of reactive and deliberative learning. Situated learning in a community of practice, as Lave and Wenger (1991) have theorised, only captures part of the experience since it does not engage with, as Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2004) point out and as our interview data suggest, individual biographies and dispositions in particular workplace contexts. What does resonate with the data, however, are certain features identified by Smith (2003) in his review of informal education: the range of opportunities for learning that arise in everyday settings; the importance of relationships, people's experiences and feelings; and the centrality of conversation. His review also recognises that informality has a purpose – 'a concern to build the sorts of communities and relationships in which people can be happy and fulfilled' – that is consistent with the emotional-relational nature of new teachers' learning proposed in this paper.

Building the argument from a notion of informal learning has also led to a concept of identity formation (Bosma and Kunnen, 2001). In the current, extensive longitudinal study of teachers (Day, *et al.*, 2005), it is suggested that identity may be the fundamental construct for understanding teacher effectiveness and improvement. Their observation that individuals take time to acquire a 'teacher' identity also indicates that the early months and years of teaching may be fairly crucial in identity formation. Given the personal stories in the data (that space permits only a glimpse of here), it is a construct that should accommodate a sense of self and personhood. Becoming a teacher is not simply a derivatively social experience. Much of the

emotionality in the narrative accounts, particularly in relating to children, suggest the embedding of a personal commitment (see the SFR!) within individuals whose identity may be associated, as Greenwood (1994) would argue, with their engagement in a moral career.

Within the empirical base of this paper, however, there is clear evidence of unique, individual stories, each with an emerging self-identity (Giddens, 1991), more specifically a self-as-teacher identity that has personal agency (e.g. Hollis, 1985). Drawing on Schibbye (2002), Hoveid and Hoveid (2004) develop the concept of the relational self of the teacher, that conveys something of a sense 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 anecdote a new teacher becomes aware of her 'teacher mode' in 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!

A fuller discussion of the contested conceptions of identity in this learning context, and acknowledgement of the temporal, contingent and multi-faceted nature of the self, is for another paper (see McNally 2005). Thus it may be apt to let poetry offer a more succinct expression of intended meaning⁴:

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)

There are few examples in the data of development that could be described as strictly cognitive, for example subject knowledge, lesson planning, practical teaching insights. Yet the teachers are meeting the professional standard and becoming competent in that sense. We might infer, therefore, that learning is taking place and that knowledge, skills and values are somehow being acquired. We could also ask whether another interview technique or research method might better elicit examples of the implicit learning and tacit knowledge that tends to be ascribed to the process (e.g. Eraut, 2000). It may be that this latent cognitive dimension of learning to teach emerges in a later phase of development as the trauma of acceptance and belonging subsides, perhaps through an extended longitudinal study. However, it is the emotional and relational dimensions of learning that come to the fore in this early phase. The argument in this paper is of course presented in the specific context of new teachers and is still to be tested in other professional learning contexts. Yet in his more general theory of learning, Illeris (2002) argues that the cognitive, the emotional and the social are the three dimensions of learning. He points out, moreover:

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)

It scarcely needs detailed research to convince anyone who has taught that the first year of teaching is demanding, if not crisis-like for some, and is more or less transformative. Formal standards and support systems cannot be expected to capture

the complex, personal nature of the experience. Yet it may be that through this emotional-relational experience, they discover their own ‘personal commitment’, their sense of creating and not just choosing values, that somehow gives a sense of purpose to individual beginners in teaching (and a sense of purpose is something Stanley Nisbet himself would have considered crucial⁵). It is clear that the experience is one of becoming rather than of incremental learning; it is about who you are as much as what you know, perhaps better understood as an ontological rather than epistemological process. As a concept, informal learning can begin to capture a realistic sense of this. Researching that vague but important reality offers a view of beginning teaching as a deeper, emotional and relational process of personal change characterised by the emergence of a self-as-teacher identity.

NOTES

- 1 Professional is used here simply to convey a sense of the learning being generally related to the job of teaching or role of teacher, not as a sign of any special status in relation to other kinds of occupational or workplace learning.
- 2 It is not the purpose of the paper to explore in any depth the definitional issue surrounding ‘informal’ other than to make the case that it tends to be outside formal standards and support systems that the important experiences and processes occur and where, therefore, attention needs to be focused.
- 3 The research data is from the project ‘Enhanced competence-based learning in the early professional development of teachers’, funded by the ESRC in Phase 3 of their Teaching and Learning Research Programme.
- 4 Substitute ‘school’ for ‘farm’ – or think of the school as a farm.
- 5 Stanley’s series of lectures on aims and purposes in education in the 1960s and 70s were renowned – one of the few ITE experiences other than teaching experience itself that had an enduring impact on me.

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