

Becoming a student teacher: core features of the experience¹

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This paper reports early findings of a longitudinal research project on the experiences of beginning teachers in England. In the first phase of the study (2003–2004), data were generated via: (1) in-depth, face to face interviews with 85 student teachers throughout England; and (2) self-completion questionnaires, returned by 4,790 student teachers across a range of initial teacher preparation (ITP) routes. Through these methods the study set out to explore student teachers' accounts of their motivations for entering ITP, their preconceptions and expectations of teaching and ITP, and their early experiences as student teachers. A number of general themes were found to cut across all of these areas, and are presented here as core features of the experience of becoming a student teacher. These relate to the concept of teacher identity, the role of relationships, the notion of relevance, and the central presence of emotion.

Cette étude décrit les conclusions préliminaires d'une recherche continue sur les expériences de ceux qui sont en train de devenir professeurs d'école en Angleterre. En première phase de l'étude (2003–2004), les données ont été recueillies par: 1) des entretiens approfondis en tête-à-tête avec 85 professeurs stagiaires dans toute l'Angleterre; et 2) des questionnaires, remplis eux-mêmes par 4,790 professeurs stagiaires sur un échantillon de préparations initiales de professeur (PIP). Avec ces méthodes l'étude avait pour but d'explorer les explications des professeurs stagiaires concernant leur motivation pour entrer dans la PIP, leurs idées reçues et leurs attentes de l'enseignement et de la PIP, ainsi que leurs expériences initiales de professeur stagiaire. On a trouvé un nombre de thèmes généraux à travers tous ces domaines, et ceux-ci sont présentés ici comme caractéristiques fondamentales de l'expérience vécue de professeur stagiaire débutant. Ils sont relatifs aux concepts suivants: l'identité du professeur, le rôle des relations, la notion de pertinence et la présence capitale de l'émotion.

Este documento es un informe sobre los primeros resultados de un proyecto de investigación longitudinal sobre las experiencias de profesores principiantes en la Inglaterra. En la primera fase del estudio (2003–2004), los datos fueron obtenidos a partir de dos fuentes: minuciosas entrevistas cara a cara con 85 profesores en prácticas por toda Inglaterra y cuestionarios personales que fueron devueltos por 4,790 profesores en prácticas procedentes de distintas ramas de la ITP (preparación para profesores principiantes). A través de estos métodos, el estudio fue lanzado con el propósito

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de sondear las razones que motivaron a los profesores en prácticas a entrar en la ITP, sus preconcepciones y expectativas en cuanto a la ITP y a dar clase y sus primeras experiencias como profesores en prácticas. Estas áreas presentaron una serie de temas generales comunes que son presentados aquí como características centrales de la experiencia de convertirse en profesor en prácticas. Estas están relacionadas con el concepto de identidad del profesor, la importancia de las relaciones, la noción de relevancia, y el papel central de las emociones.

Dieses Referat berichtet über die ersten Ergebnisse eines langfristigen Forschungsprojektes, basierend auf Erfahrungen von Lehrern in England, die in den Beruf einsteigen. In der ersten Phase der Studie (2003–2004) wurden Daten gesammelt mittels: 1) ausführlicher, persönlicher Gespräche mit 85 auszubildenden Lehrern aus ganz England; und 2) selbstauszufüllender Fragebögen, die von 4,790 auszubildenden Lehrern aus verschiedenen Ausbildungsrichtungen zurückgesendet wurden. Die Studie hatte das Ziel, die Berichte der auszubildenden Lehrer zu untersuchen hinsichtlich ihrer Motivation, eine Ausbildung anzufangen, ihrer Erwartungen vom Unterrichten und von der Ausbildung, sowie ihrer ersten Erfahrungen als auszubildende Lehrer. Eine Anzahl von allgemeinen Themen wurden in allen diesen Bereichen festgestellt und sind hier als Kernmerkmale des Ausbildungsverfahrens dargestellt. Diese beziehen sich auf das Konzept der Lehridentität, auf die Rolle von Beziehungen, auf die Idee der Relevanz, sowie auf die zentrale Präsenz von Emotionen.

Introduction

In this paper we discuss findings arising from the first data generation phase of the ‘Becoming a Teacher’ project in England, a six-year (2003–2009) longitudinal study, funded by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), the General Teaching Council for England (GTCE) and the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA). The research as a whole seeks to investigate teachers’ experiences of initial teacher preparation (ITP)², teaching, professional development and support during the first four years of teaching, and to compare and contrast the experiences of teachers entering the profession via different routes, including university-administered undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, school-centred and employment based pathways.

On the grounds that learners view and interpret new information and experiences through their existing network of knowledge, experience and beliefs (Huberman, 1993; Desforges, 1995; Fosnot, 1996; Richardson, 1997), the project’s design acknowledges and anticipates that beginner teachers’ experiences will be shaped, in part, by what they ‘bring’ to those experiences, including their initial choices to enter the profession, and their prior conceptions and expectations about teaching and initial teacher preparation (Hollingsworth, 1989; Wideen *et al.*, 1998). The initial phase of the project thus focused on a range of issues centred largely around: (1) why people decide to undertake ITP; (2) why they choose to follow particular routes into teaching; (3) their preconceptions and expectations about teaching and ITP; and (4) their early experiences of ITP, including their experiences in schools. In this paper we present the outcomes of an attempt to understand whether, cutting across all of these issues and for trainees following a range of ITP routes, there were common features of the lived experience of becoming a student teacher.

Beyond indications in the paragraphs above about some of the things that we (the authors) may bring to this project, we prefer in this paper to break from convention and to proceed, at this stage, to a discussion of our research design and (subsequently) of the results of our data analyses, rather than to present here a fuller account of the literature which might situate our research. We do this to reflect more accurately the process which was undertaken in order to produce the findings reported in this article. That is, whilst it would be both naïve and (given what we have stated above) contradictory to claim that the analyses undertaken would not have been influenced by our pre-existing knowledge and perceptions (as teachers of teachers³ and/or researchers), we genuinely sought, in this endeavour, to treat our data as the starting point and to search for common themes and constructs in student teachers' accounts of different aspects of their initial choices about, and their preconceptions, expectations and early experiences of, ITP. We thus choose to make reference to the broader literature when discussing our findings, and some implications of these, in the final section of the article. Some of this literature was familiar to us prior to conducting the research reported here, whilst other literature was identified and examined subsequent to conducting our data analyses, during a search for potential resonances and contradictions between our findings and those of others.

Research design

The research reported in this paper is not conducted within, nor does it seek to advance, any particular theoretical framework. That said, different members of the research team have been influenced by a range of perspectives including socio-cultural theories (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Wertsch, 1991; Rogoff, 1995), cognitive skill psychology (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986; Eraut, 1994; Tomlinson, 1995, 1998), and work conducted in the field of implicit learning and 'intuitive practice' (Claxton, 1997; Atkinson & Claxton, 2000), all of which will have informed our respective contributions to instrument development, data generation and analysis.

Research instruments

Data were generated via self completion questionnaires and face to face, in-depth interviews with student teachers during the 2003–2004 academic year. The questionnaire was administered to student teachers as close as possible to the start of the only or final year of their ITP programmes. Since, in the interviews, participants would be required both to think back to their views prior to starting their ITP and to report on their early experiences of their programmes, the interviews were conducted as soon as possible after the completion of the questionnaire but (for those following one-year ITP programmes) *after* the completion of the first six weeks of their courses. It should be noted that, in the event, many interviewees (especially those who were not following one-year ITP programmes and were thus in their final

year) chose to situate their discussions of their early experiences within the broader context of their course, and some of these data are presented in this paper. The interviews lasted for an average of 50 minutes.

Sampling

The sampling strategy employed for the questionnaire survey was informed by two main considerations. Firstly, we aimed to generate a representative sample of student teachers for each of seven different ITP routes in England, namely: Bachelor of Education (BEd), Bachelor of Arts/Science with Qualified Teacher Status (BA/BSc QTS), university-administered Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE), Flexible PGCE, School-Centred Initial Teacher Training (SCITT) programmes, and Graduate and Registered Teacher Programmes (GTP and RTP respectively, collectively referred to as GRTP)⁴. Secondly, we sought to ensure that a sufficient number of student teachers were recruited from among the routes with the lowest numbers of trainees⁵ nationally, in order to enable viable statistical analysis by ITP route up to the end of the study in 2008–2009, allowing for attrition over a five-year period. ITP providers were thus initially stratified by route and a random sample of providers within each route was selected. Subsequently, a number of additional providers of some of the routes with smaller numbers of students (nationally) were purposively selected to boost the number of respondents following those routes. A total of 110 ITP providers were approached to participate in the survey, and 74 of these took part, which represents a response rate of 67%. From the 74 providers, completed questionnaires were returned by 4,790 student teachers. The breakdown of respondents by ITP route is provided in Table 1 below.

Eighty-five interviewees were recruited from those trainees who indicated, in their questionnaire responses, that they would be willing to take part in follow-up, face to

Table 1. Questionnaire respondents' by ITP route

ITP route	Achieved sample	Percentage of achieved sample ^a
University-administered Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE)	1,756	37
Bachelor of Arts (BA)/Science (BSc) with Qualified Teacher Status (QTS)	1,385	29
Bachelor of Education (BEd)	413	9
Graduate and Registered Teacher Programme (GRTP) (including SCITT-based GRTP)	707	16
School-Centred Initial Teacher Training (SCITT) consortia (excluding GRTP)	342	7
Flexible-based PGCE	187	4
TOTAL	4,790	

^aDue to rounding totals may not sum to 100.

face interviews. Here we sought to stratify the sample by key variables including ITP route, phase (i.e. whether trainees were seeking to teach in primary or secondary schools), gender, age and ethnicity. Table 2 provides a breakdown of the interview sample by ITP route and phase. Interviewees were drawn from 19 ITP providers in total. They comprise 65 females and 20 males, with 10 from minority ethnic groups.

Data analysis

The findings reported in this paper emerged from three main stages of analysis. In Stage One, all interviews were transcribed and the data were subjected to a grounded analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). At the same time, data from the questionnaire survey were entered into SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) software and ‘top-line’ results obtained and examined. Outcomes from the Stage One analyses informed the Stage Two analyses relating to the main research aims for this part of the study (as outlined in the Introduction). These involved a thematic analysis of the interview data, coded using NVivo software, and the use of a range of techniques for analysing the questionnaire data, including *chi-square*, *analysis of variance (ANOVA)*, and cluster analysis (Tacq, 1997). Once these initial data analyses were complete, we conducted, in Stage Three, what might be termed a ‘within-project qualitative meta-analysis’. By this we do not refer to the kind of (quantitative) approach to analysing the results of other studies described, for example, by Glass *et al.* (1981) and Fitz-Gibbon (1985). Rather, the process involved the first and second authors of the present paper examining, at first independently, the findings of the initial analyses described above, and the associated data-cuts, to see whether they could identify any general themes which cut across the various aspects of becoming a student teacher that were being investigated to illuminate a holistic understanding of student teachers’ lived experience. The two researchers then discussed the results of their ‘meta-analyses’, after which they each re-examined the data before meeting once more to confirm and agree on the ‘results’ of the analysis process. The outcomes of this process (notably ‘Stage Three’ of the process) are reported below.⁶

Table 2. Interviewees by phase and route

Route	No. of primary phase trainees	No. of secondary phase trainees	Total no. of trainees per route
PGCE	7	9	16
Flexible PGCE	7	7	14
BEd	7	2	9
BA/BSc QTS	6	8	14
SCITT	6	8	14
GTP	6	8	14
RTP	2	2	4
Total by phase	41	44	85

Findings

In looking for overarching themes, three themes were identified, independently, by the two researchers, as representing core aspects of the experience of becoming a student teacher. They were:

1. the concept of teacher *identity* or sense of self as teacher
2. the importance of potential and actual *relationships* with a number of ‘significant others’ (Sullivan, 1953)
3. the role of *emotion*—notably in trainees’ reasoning about seeking to become a teacher and (more strongly) in their accounts of their early experiences in schools⁷

A fourth concept, that of student teachers’ concerns about the *relevance* of ITP course provision, was initially identified by one of the two analysts and subsequently confirmed by the other as a feature which cut across much of the data and which seemed central to the experiences of student teachers across the range of ITP routes. In what follows we discuss each of these four themes, dealing, in turn, with (i) teacher identity, (ii) relationships with a range of significant others, (iii) the relevance of ITP course provision and (iv) the role of emotion in the process of becoming a student teacher.

Teacher identity

Given that, in undertaking an initial teacher preparation programme and seeking to ‘become a teacher’, the majority of trainees need to undergo a role-shift from being a non-teacher to being a teacher⁸, it is perhaps unsurprising that much of our data suggest a preoccupation, on student teachers’ part, with the notion of teacher identity. The data suggest that student teachers tended to hold one or other (and in some cases elements of each) of two positions regarding what the process of becoming a teacher might involve, namely (1) actualising an already identified potential, or (2) undergoing a transformation of self in order to ‘change into’ a teacher.

For some research participants, becoming a teacher seemed to mean actualising an already identified potential. Thus, when asked about the reasons behind their decision to train as a teacher, over half of the interviewees (n=46) talked about possessing what they perceived to be ‘appropriate’ personal characteristics and skills. For example, one SCITT trainee said he thought he was suited to teaching because:

As a person I’m quite outgoing, I’m quite a confident person and I think my communication skills are one of my strengths as are my facilitation and group working skills, and so really, yeah, I thought from quite an early age that I’d be... a candidate who would make a successful teacher. [Male, 20–24, SCITT, secondary, drama]

Another trainee presented herself as ‘suitable teacher material’ having been brought up to speak Hindi, Arabic, Urdu and Farsi, in addition to English:

I have fantastic communication skills. Because I speak different languages I can see things from a different perspective sometimes. Certain people might think that a child

doesn't do that properly, but I sometimes see what they're doing because I can see it from here and from here and I can put that across ... so I knew I could bring certain things into the teaching profession. [Female, 20–24, SCITT, primary]

Those interviewees who saw becoming a teacher as building on existing strengths referred most frequently in this context: to the possession of a suitable personality, including having a creative side for which teaching would be an outlet; to their knowledge of the subject(s) that they would teach; and to having identified relevant 'transferable skills'. As an example, the latter is illustrated by the following interview excerpt:

For some years I'd been reorganising businesses as a consultant [and when I was thinking about how this might apply to] day-to-day teaching, managing twenty kids and working out how to cope with classrooms, I just found myself full of ideas of how I would do things and do things differently. I think that was what made me think I would enjoy doing it. It is the human interaction. [Male, 40–44, GTP, secondary, ICT]

For many student teachers, however, initial perceptions seem to have included a perceived necessity, at least initially, to undergo a transformation of self in the endeavour to become, or *change into*, a teacher. For example, one interviewee spoke about preparing to go into school in acting terms, as if dressing for the part she was playing (as opposed to *being*):

You know we'd sort of trek out at half past seven on a morning in our like shiny shoes, and we just felt like we were dressing up as teachers, and we were, you know we didn't really have a clue! [Female, 20–24, BA QTS, primary]

Another interviewee reveals how eventually she came to realise that she could be herself within the teacher that she was becoming:

You try to be the type of person you think they want you to be but as time goes on you realise that actually the score has changed. You don't have to be an automated person. You are your own person, you bring all these things to the job, obviously under the confines of the school... You have to keep control of your class... that's more like a personal confidence thing rather than how I'm supposed to behave in the school. There's no rulebook to say you have to be like this, bringing in your personality to the teaching role is part of how you teach. [Female, 30–34, GTP, primary]

Whilst student teachers of both genders, across all ITP routes and all age groups demonstrated a concern with the development of a teacher identity, there were discernable differences between the conceptions of teacher identity of those in different age groups. Many of those who entered ITP directly from school/college or from an undergraduate degree programme appeared, for example, to be concerned about the transition to a professional lifestyle and the responsibilities of being a teacher:

It always seemed like very sort of high status, you know. A lot of responsibility. You have to be very knowledgeable, know everything really! That's how I did think it was! ... [B]ecause you build, when you want to be a teacher, you build teachers up into these god-like people who are fantastic and amazing and how will you ever be that perfect [Female, 20–24, BA QTS, primary]

For older participants the expressed concerns about their developing identities as teachers seemed to relate to previous experiences, either with respect to role-shift or,

for some, to a more stable sense of self. In relation to role-shift, one participant had worried about how her pupils might perceive her change of role from teaching assistant (TA) to teacher but found her worries unfounded.

I was a bit concerned at first because having been a support assistant they always knew that I wasn't the one in charge, the teacher was and ultimately had the final word so I was a bit worried that when I started teaching that they wouldn't look at me like that, but I've not had any problems at all with that. They seem to have accepted the fact that I'm a teacher now, and I tell them what to do and they do it [Female, 30–34, RTP, secondary, ICT]

With respect to some older participants having a more stable sense of self, some appeared to be less open to the idea of making personal changes:

I went in with the view that I am a certain personality, I will teach in a certain way, and if they don't like it, then I won't be a teacher, I'll just do it for a year and leave... If my personality and way of doing things didn't fit into the system, I'd go back to IT. [Male, 40–44, GTP, secondary, ICT]

Relationships

The data suggest that past, potential or actual *relationships* with a range of people are also central to the lived experiences of beginning student teachers. These include relationships with: (1) children and young people; (2) trainees' own teachers, past and present (including school-based mentors); (3) (other) teacher colleagues in schools; and (4) family members and peers. Firstly, relationships with children or young people are reported by large numbers of student teachers as having had an important influence on their decisions to become a teacher. For example, one interviewee said:

I've done lots of voluntary work with children and when I was doing my degree I did a lot of work with children and I did really enjoy it. [Female, 20–24, PGCE, primary]

Related to this, 84% of survey respondents indicated that (prior to beginning ITP) they were 'particularly looking forward' to '*being in classrooms and interacting with children*', whilst two items concerning relationships with children and young people ('*ability to bring about learning*' and '*ability to maintain discipline*') were considered by large numbers of trainees to be amongst the things that they most needed to learn on their ITP programmes. A number of key concerns expressed by trainees also relate to relationships with children and young people, notably whether they would be able to facilitate pupils' learning or deal with their behaviour.

Turning to student teachers' relationships with their own teachers (past and present) there is evidence, for example, that relationships with their teachers when they were pupils influenced some participants' decisions to enter initial teacher preparation. Eighty-four per cent of survey respondents indicated that '*being inspired by a good teacher*' had been an 'attracting factor' in their decision to train as a teacher, whilst some interviewees who fell into this category expressed a desire to be able to offer other children similar experiences to those they had enjoyed themselves as pupils.

It's nice to be part of people's growing up. I look back at my teachers and I still remember the ones that I loved at primary school. I remember the impact they made on my life... I'd like to be able to give that to children, that sort of enjoyment and the amount of pleasure I got out of it... I'd love to think that fifteen years down the line somebody would say that about me. [Female, 30–34, GTP, primary]

In contrast, 57% of survey respondents reported '*wanting to teach pupils better than in my own experience*' as a motivating factor in their decision to train as a teacher, and the interview data also reveal how negative models motivated some participants to 'the idea of going back and doing it better'.

Relationships with participants' current 'teachers', notably ITP programme personnel, also seem to be very important to their early lived experiences of initial teacher preparation. Most talked about amongst these are relationships with school-based mentors. Indeed 39 of the 85 interviewees spoke, without specific prompting, about how their relationships with their mentors had had a positive impact on their early experiences. Some of these talked about specific aspects of their relationships with their mentors, or specific ways in which their mentors had helped them, including boosting their confidence, providing strategies and/or support for classroom management, 'being there/available', and offering guidance for managing time and workload.

A minority of interviewees (n=13), on the other hand, recalled difficulties caused by their relationships with their mentors. Four of these reported that their mentors had been 'too busy' to help them, or indeed, had been absent; whilst three suggested that their mentors were reluctant to let them take on responsibilities in the classroom at an early stage:

In my first placement the teacher didn't want to let go of her class, she loved them too much and it was like 'no, they're mine' [Female, 25–29, BA QTS, secondary, ICT]

Thirdly, regarding relationships with other teacher colleagues in schools, survey data suggest, for example, that some student teachers saw the prospect of collegiality and teamwork as an attractive factor in their decision to train as a teacher. Here, 57% of all respondents indicated that they were (strongly or moderately) attracted by 'the collegiality/teamwork aspects of teaching', whilst 45% stated that they were 'particularly looking forward' to '*becoming a part of the school community*'. Interview data suggest that, in these respects, the reality of trainees' early school experiences was mixed. In two instances, for example, when trainees reported dysfunctional relationships with mentors, they also reported that other teachers in their placement schools had stepped in to offer support:

In my placement my class teacher [and mentor] wasn't so great, but the deputy head and a teacher that I had got quite friendly with from Year 1, she was absolutely fantastic and she went through all the planning with me and, because I really did, in my first week, I really did want to throw in the towel and think I'd had enough because I wasn't getting the support. [Female, 25–29, Flexible PGCE, primary]

On the other hand, some (n=15) interviewees indicated that they had found their placement schools unwelcoming. One trainee, who reported positive relations with members of her department, nevertheless stated that she, and her fellow trainees, were 'shunned in the staffroom':

The department I was in was very welcoming but none of the other teachers would talk to us and there were five students there, so we were always sticking together but we were in different subjects in five different departments. In general we were shunned in the staffroom and I was like ‘maybe that’s what it’s like in a secondary school, I don’t know’. If I was on my own I would find this quite an isolating experience. [Female, 25–29, BA QTS, secondary, ICT]

Finally in this theme, data also reveal that relationships with family members (parents, partners and children) and/or with friends or peers were influential in relation to a number of aspects of becoming a student teacher, including, for some, their initial decisions to enter ITP. Nineteen interviewees referred to teaching as a family profession, and eleven of these said that this had been an issue attracting them to teaching, whilst eight, including the GTP trainee quoted below, had initially resisted pursuing a teaching career:

I’ve grown up around teachers, you know, arguments about Keith Joseph over the Christmas dinner table, that really put me off in those days, but now I’ve worked for ten years and I’ve got a different perspective on it. I swore blind I’d never do it but ten years on, your life changes. [Male, 30–34, GTP, primary]

Family considerations were also reported as having affected choice of ITP provider and route. For example, the need for time to give attention to family relationships as well as financial concerns relating to the needs of their families, were given by some participants as major factors in their choice of the Flexible PGCE route. The importance of family relationships was also evident during early ITP, particularly in providing the (emotional and practical) support some student teachers felt they needed to undertake their ITP programmes. For others, ITP was felt to have had a detrimental impact on their family relationships, as illustrated below:

[I]t is hard because if I am honest I have probably given teacher training more than I have given my family... which is why there is the guilt. The guilt possibly does affect [me] at times, but if I am honest I am that determined to actually do this that I have put it ahead of my family. [Female, 35–39, BA QTS, primary]

Some student teachers also highlighted the importance of relationships with, or the presence of, fellow trainees in relation to their choice of ITP route and their early school experiences. For example, on the first issue, survey data indicate that over a third of all respondents (34%), and 43% of those opting for the university-administered PGCE route, reported that their choice of which ITP route to follow was influenced by a wish to study alongside their peers or people in the ‘same situation’ as themselves.

Relevance

The third ‘core feature’ of the experience of becoming a student teacher, which is apparent in much of the data on student teachers’ preconceptions and early experiences of ITP, relates to their concerns about the *relevance* of constituent parts of the process designed to support their learning to be teachers. Survey data suggest that, before they embarked upon their ITP, student teachers had preconceptions

about the value or relevance of various potential aspects of course provision. For example, having been asked to think back to immediately before they started their training, 75% of respondents stated that they had considered that it would be very important to *'have school teachers/mentors observe your lessons and give feedback'* and 74% thought the same about *'watching schoolteachers teach'*, whilst a relatively low 48% indicated that they had thought that it would be very important to *'study ideas about how pupils learn'* and just 22% said this about *'studying current research on teaching methods'*. In general, the further removed from classroom practice, or from their own classroom practice, the lower the perceived importance or value.

In discussing their early experiences of ITP, many interviewees questioned the value and relevance (to becoming effective classroom teachers) of what they termed 'theory', by which they tended to mean:

- (1) knowledge which supports classroom teaching and the assessment of pupils' work, including that relating to lesson planning, behaviour management strategies, and how to differentiate work (n=31)
- (2) knowledge about how children learn, such as the study of aspects of child psychology (n=24)
- (3) subject content knowledge (n=19)
- (4) legal issues which teachers need to be aware of, such as child protection (n=8)

Some student teachers indicated that they felt such 'theoretical' studies were of only peripheral relevance. For example, a young undergraduate male trainee saw much of what he was learning as relevant only in enabling him to obtain his degree certificate:

I originally thought that a lot more of my marks towards my degree would be based on my school experience and my teaching experience, but... the emphasis is on being able to write a good essay and knowing this person said this and this... In the opinion of people I've spoken to, the head teachers and teachers, you're never going to use it, you need to have practical experience and confidence. That is my main objection to this course at the minute. [Male, 20–24, BA QTS, primary]

Another trainee saw much of what she was learning as relevant only for use in interviews, although she did acknowledge that she might be using it 'subconsciously':

I feel that things like learning about theories of how children learn and things are useful, but I can't honestly say I've ever put them in my teaching, I think it more relies on your knowledge of your class, I don't think I've ever used what educational studies [pause] that's terrible. But maybe I do subconsciously, but I don't know. I think it will probably become more useful especially for answering [job] interview questions. [Female, 20–24, BA QTS, secondary, MFL]

Where some undergraduate trainees had initially questioned the relevance of the 'theoretical' aspects of their ITP, they also suggested that the length of their ITP programmes (three or four years) had allowed valuable opportunities to see 'theoretical' issues 'in practice':

I think one of the things that really hit home is that you learn quite a lot while you're at university but it never really, like you can say you understand it, but it never really makes

sense until you're in a school situation I don't think and I think that you can forget things, go into school and do something and your mentor says 'you could do this' and you think 'I learnt that at university but I'd just forgotten it' because it has no real relevance till you're in school I don't think. [Female, 20–24, BA QTS, secondary, MFL]

Data relating to this theme also suggest, firstly, that those student teachers who possessed relatively more experience in schools as adults (i.e. in addition to that gained as pupils), whether prior to or during their ITP, were more likely to perceive 'theory' as relevant to and connected with the practice of teaching; and secondly, that when trainees have *prior* experience in schools as adults and *bring* that experience *to* any exposure to 'theory' (as conceptualised by the student teachers in question), its relevance and utility is more readily and immediately recognized.

Emotion

The fourth and final core feature of the experience of becoming a student teacher, according to our data (or to our analyses of our data), is the central place of emotion in relation to many student teachers' expectations and/or experiences of ITP. Across a range of issues interviewees used highly emotive language, with words such as 'excited', 'love it' and 'relaxed' on the one hand, and 'worry', 'panic', 'overwhelming' and 'shock' on the other, being frequently used. We have already seen (above) that, for some student teachers, it was, in part, an emotional response to their own teachers or schooling which had motivated them to embark on ITP programmes. Interviewees also volunteered information which suggested that they had experienced a variety of both positive and negative emotions in relation to their expectations and early experiences of ITP. Some of the negative emotions are illustrated in the following quotations:

Previously, coming to the course you think 'oh my God, I can't stand in front of a class in a month'... [Female, 25–29, PGCE, secondary, English]

I'd done presentations at work but still, standing in front of that number of people is a shocker ... Nothing can prepare you for standing in front of the little so-and-sos. [Male, 30–34, SCITT, secondary, ICT]

[The placement I'm in] it's just got incredibly poor discipline and behaviour problems ... it wears you down emotionally... There are days when I just come home thinking 'bloomin heck', you know, almost in tears, going 'I can't do this'. [Male, 20–24, SCITT, secondary, drama]

Many of the positive emotions expressed by student teachers related to the fostering of pupil learning on the one hand, and to the support of teacher colleagues, including their school-based mentors, on the other:

[W]hen something clicks... and [the pupils] realise that all [the] work and effort they've put in throughout the lesson culminates in something worthwhile and relevant to them... you kind of think 'wow breakthrough', definitely. [Male, 20–24, SCITT, secondary, drama]

My mentor, the class teacher, he was brilliant, he was just mad, and everything we did was about having fun. He would ask me 'how could we do this so it's really fun, and

how can we do this?' ... It was just brilliant, I was able to put myself into more and I was probably a bit more relaxed because the class was quite relaxed. [Female, 20–24, BA QTS, secondary, MFL]

It is apparent in the data—and in the quotations presented above—that one of the factors which produces emotional responses in beginning student teachers' is their perception of the success or otherwise of their relationships with significant others such as pupils, mentors and teacher-colleagues. This serves to illustrate that the four themes that we have identified as central to the experience of becoming a student teacher are not as clearly delineated in the data as might be suggested in the preceding sections. The data reveal that there are, in fact, very clear interactions between them. For example, and to illustrate the connection between relationships and emotion further, some trainees revealed how certain relationships, particularly with mentors but sometimes also with their peers or partners, allowed them to deal with the emotional vulnerability that becoming a teacher involves. Other data suggest strong links, for example, between the themes of relationships and identity. For instance, one student teacher, who stated that she had been deterred by the perceived public perception of teachers and teaching, chose initially not to tell her friends and family that she had applied for a place on an ITP programme, whilst others talked about a desire to 'belong' to what one trainee called the 'little club' of a 'respected profession'.

Before discussing the findings presented above in the broader context of the existing literature, it is important to acknowledge some of the limitations of the research.

Limitations

We see three main reasons to be cautious with respect to the findings presented in this paper. The first relates to the fact that student teachers were asked to provide historical accounts of the views and positions that they held prior to undertaking their initial teacher preparation and (in some cases—for those not following one-year programmes) historical accounts of their early experiences of ITP. This was to some extent inevitable given the difficulties (most notably relating to Data Protection legislation in England) of gaining access to people who have not yet begun their ITP programmes. As a consequence, however, our research participants may in some cases have failed to recall accurately their prior viewpoints and positions, and in addition the perceptions that they held at the point of data generation may have been partly shaped by their intermediate experiences.

Secondly, in spite of the large size of the sample (the survey sample in particular), some reservations must remain about the representativeness of the data. As detailed in the research design section earlier, the survey sample was not completely random and is unlikely therefore to be representative of student teachers nationally. Furthermore, whilst for the questionnaire survey we sought to sample all student teachers following the ITP route sampled in the chosen providers, not all student teachers will have been present on the days on which the questionnaire was

administered, which may be a source of further bias. We cannot either state with any certainty how typical (of the broader survey sample or of student teachers nationally) the experiences and accounts of our interviewees are, given, for example, that the interview sample was partly self-selecting.

Finally, as discussed in the introduction to this paper, all stages of the research process from design through data generation and analysis will inevitably have been influenced to some extent by the prior experiences and perspectives of the present authors and other members of the research team.

In spite of these limitations, the findings reported provide powerful indications as to the (or some of the) core features of the experience of student teachers as they come to and embark upon programmes of initial teacher preparation. Below we point to some connections between our own findings and those of other researchers, and briefly consider some implications for the teachers of student teachers.

Reference to the broader literature and discussion of findings

A review of the literature on initial and early professional learning shows that each of what we have termed ‘core features’ of the experience of becoming a student teacher—identity, relationships, relevance and emotion—have been identified (though some more explicitly than others) in reports of earlier research. Such studies, however, have often been small scale (often conducted in single institutions and/or associated with particular ITP pathways); few have focused on the experience of *becoming* a student teacher (e.g. on trainees’ expectations about, and early experiences of, ITP), and (as far as we are aware) none have identified each and every one of the four aspects that our data indicate are core aspects of the experience of becoming a student teacher in England, regardless of the initial teacher preparation route followed. Our findings may thus be regarded as important both in confirming the existence of the four ‘core features’ of becoming a student teacher to which we refer, and in providing a synthesising framework for earlier work in the field. They also extend earlier work by providing detail and description of variation in some of the characteristic features of the experience of becoming a student teacher.

Identity

Teacher identity is not a new theme in the teaching literature (e.g. Reves & Medgyes, 1994); Danielewicz, 2001; Johnson, 2003; Day *et al.*, 2005). Nor is the notion of the *development* of a teacher identity a new theme in the literature on early professional learning (e.g. Lipka & Brinthaupt, 1999). Kagan (1992), in a review of 40 research studies on professional growth among pre-service and beginning teachers, includes as the first of three main conclusions the proposition that beginning teachers appear to be intensely concerned with the image of self as teacher. Much of the literature on beginning teacher concerns seems to suggest that a focus on self is a stage to be passed through on the way to a central concern with pupil learning, whilst Conway and Clark

(2003) suggest that the initial focus on self is a necessary and valuable stage in the construction, over time, of a 'professional self'. The findings in this paper support and extend the work of others by showing that the development of a teacher identity is a core aspect of the experience of *becoming* a student teacher, and by illustrating some of the ways in which student teachers' perceptions and early experiences of teacher identity development are differentiated.

With respect to strategies to support student teachers in the development of their teacher identities, a variety of approaches have been suggested in the literature. One strategy proposed relates to a function of mentoring. Some who write within a sociocultural approach to teacher learning (e.g. Edwards, 1998) suggest that supporting student teachers' development of a comfortable and congruent sense of self as teacher is the main function of a mentor. Johnson (1999), who writes within an investigation-articulation approach to teacher learning, argues for the development of 'robust reasoning' as a goal for teacher learning. The development of 'robust reasoning' can be understood as an increasing capacity to address a number of questions (including ones relating to the rationale for, and effects of, teaching practices) in informed and complex ways. Included among the focus questions which teachers seeking to develop and maintain 'robust reasoning' are recommended to revisit periodically are two relating to teacher identity development: 'who am I as a teacher?' and 'who is my professional community?' Some authors (Marble, 1997; Rust, 1999) discuss the use of narrative as a supportive tool, with Marble finding that beginning teachers moved significantly towards establishing their own identities as teachers through creating their own stories.

The findings presented in this paper thus suggest a need for all ITP programmes and those who teach on them to continue to search for effective ways to support all trainees in discovering the teacher within, or in transforming themselves from non-teacher into teacher. In addition, there is some evidence in the findings presented to suggest that care might be taken during the selection process to ensure that applicants for ITP programmes are open to personal change of the kind that becoming a teacher might require.

Relationships

It is perhaps understandable, given the nature of the two activities student teachers are primarily engaged in—(their) learning and teaching—that a considerable amount of data in our study reveal the central role of *relationships* in the experiences of our research participants. Our findings provide support for the work of others (Lortie, 1975; McNally *et al.*, 1997; Oberski *et al.*, 1999) in confirming the importance to the process of becoming a student teacher of relationships with (i) pupils, (ii) trainees' own teachers, past and present, and (iii) teacher colleagues in placement schools. Our findings also augment this work by highlighting the additional importance of other social relationships, notably with family members and peers.

The importance to teachers of pupil-teacher relationships and interactions is supported by much of the general educational literature (Claxton, 1990). The

central importance of teacher-pupil relationships, to teachers in general and student teachers in particular, is also a key feature of literature published by those who subscribe to neo-Vygotskian perspectives on learning (Mercer, 1995) and by those who write about, for example, group dynamics (Dornyei & Malderez, 1999) or 'behaviour management' in schools (Porter, 2000). Findings reported in this paper may have implications for ITP programmes, as they suggest the need for ITP curricula to have an explicit focus on related issues, such as teacher talk and classroom discourse, or how to form and maintain cohesive and productive learning groups, for example. There are further implications for those who teach on such programmes. A long line of work from, for example, Lortie (1975) to Tomlinson (1999) and Atkinson and Claxton (2000), has highlighted the impact of experiences not only of teaching but also of being taught on practitioners' future actions, which suggests a need for the teachers of trainees (including lecturers, tutors and mentors) to go beyond simply *talking about* these issues (e.g. in sessions on 'rapport', 'classroom dynamics' or 'behaviour management'). As with many aspects of the ITP curriculum, it is important that teacher educators also *live out* the suggested ways of thinking in the relationships they foster and maintain with their ITP students. This might take the form of, for example, consciously employing strategies designed to create, maintain and eventually disband a fully functioning and cohesive student teacher learning group. In this example, such teacher educator behaviour would not only help to facilitate student teachers' experiential (if unconscious or implicit) learning with regard to classroom relationships, but also with regard to teacher collaboration for professional practice and learning.

The mentoring relationship has been the focus of considerable attention in the literature on ITP, and most writers see this relationship as a complex and demanding one (Edwards & Collison, 1996; Malderez & Bodoczky, 1999), which often requires the mentor, to be effective, to undertake considerable additional preparation. In the light of the high number of spontaneous references to this relationship by trainees in our data, as well as the expectations placed upon the relationship (Hobson, 2002; Hobson *et al.*, 2006), such a focus seems entirely appropriate. In addition, the information in our data on the types of support provided (or withheld) through the mentoring relationship suggests considerable variation in mentors' understanding of their role and the need for planned consistent development opportunities.

In relation to student teachers' accounts of the importance or centrality of relationships with teacher colleagues in schools, other literature has suggested that the professional relationships in which a student teacher is engaged are also crucial to their development (McNally *et al.*, 1997). McNally *et al.* (1994), in a study investigating the interactions between student teachers and school staff and their relationship to successful processes of becoming teachers, found that supportive relationships in secondary schools centred around subject departments, and that trainees who were judged to be relatively competent reported feeling part of a team. In a similar vein, Oberski *et al.* (1999) found that establishing good relationships with pupils *and* colleagues had fed into later 'achievements', including enjoying teaching, which also has implications for teacher retention (Spear *et al.*, 1999).

Together with the importance of a supportive whole school ethos for both pupil and teacher learning that is widely reported in the literature (Hargreaves, 1994; Prosser, 1999; Hoban, 2002), our data also suggest that *all* teachers (and other staff) in schools receiving student teachers—not only those formally occupying the mentoring role—need opportunities to prepare themselves for their part in a supportive school ethos. Given these findings, teacher educators in ITP programmes might consider, for example, following Oberski *et al.*'s (1999) suggestion of providing opportunities for trainees to make a profile of their new school, focusing on relationships within it to understand its culture and identify potential future sources of support. They, like many others (Medgyes & Malderez, 1996), also recommend a greater emphasis, in general, on the importance and development of interpersonal skills during ITP.

Finally on the theme of relationships, our findings have illustrated something of the impact of non-professional relationships in the experience of becoming a student teacher, which as far as we are aware, is little alluded to in literature relating to the experience of becoming or being a student teacher, apart from that dealing with the reasoning behind decisions to withdraw (Coles, 2001).

Relevance

The findings of this study support those of a range of others which have found that, over the years, and despite various changes to the structure and content of ITP programmes, student teachers tend to place a higher value on the practical and school-based components of their courses, can be sceptical of the relevance and value of more theoretical aspects of course provision, and are sometimes unable to understand the interrelations between different elements of course provision (Taylor, 1969; Lomax, 1973; Blake *et al.*, 1995; Asher & Malet, 1999; Foster, 1999; Hobson, 2003; Younger *et al.*, 2004). The fact that, as we reported above, some student teachers do not recognise the relevance or see the influence of 'theory', or hear teachers talking in what they might recognise as 'theoretical' terms, does not necessarily mean that they (student teachers and teachers respectively) are not, in fact, making use of such understandings in their talk and decision-making. The difficulty and challenge (perhaps for mentors in particular) is in making this thinking and reasoning as a teacher explicit for trainees (see Woods, 1996; Claxton, 1997; Atkinson & Claxton, 2000).

There are two reasons why this may be a challenge. The first is that mentors are first and foremost teachers (of pupils/students, not of student teachers) and as such may not have needed to put this kind of thinking into words for many years, as the main practice of teaching does not require talking *about* teaching. The second is that the choice of language used to express this thinking needs to be meaningful to and to relate to the listener. This need (from the trainees' perspective) for 'shared language' is one reason why 'partnerships' are needed in ITP. The considerable interaction between partners required to create a solid partnership results in the development of shared explanations as well as language. In turn this serves not only to unite what, in

schools, universities and local authorities, are distinct organisations and communities of practice (Wilkin, 1996; Bullough *et al.*, 1999), but also, and crucially, to support trainees' learning.

The data in our study also support some of the literature (some of which is reported above) on stages of teacher development, which suggests that the focus and breadth of student teachers' concerns change over time (Fuller & Brown, 1975; Kagan, 1992; Capel, 2001; Conway & Clark, 2003). For any teacher new to a class or context, an initial concern is with acceptance by the community in the role, and a focus is therefore on themselves (their identity and performance as a teacher). In order to prepare an appropriate climate for learning, a concern with pupil behaviour and the establishment of group norms is added. Finally, attention can turn to pupil learning. It might thus be argued that beginner teachers will only see the relevance of much of those elements of ITP programmes which deal with pupil learning when they reach this stage or this additional focus of concern. If we accept that current curricula content are necessary and relevant in ITP, then these data suggest the need to re-think, in some programmes or institutions, or for some individuals at least, the sequencing of such content in relation to trainees' school experiences, the pacing of its introduction, and/or the pedagogies used to enable trainees to see the connections between their studies and their life and work as a teacher.

Emotion

Those findings, in the present study, which show that becoming a student teacher is a highly *emotional* experience for many participants supports work on the importance of emotion in the learning, lives and work of teachers (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Arnold, 1999; Hayes, 2003; Day, 2004). Hayes (2003), for example, found in a recent small scale study, that trainee primary teachers experienced highly emotional states before and during their final school placement, with emotions of an enabling or disabling nature depending in part on the experience of previous placements.

Much of the teacher education literature underscores the vital mentor role of providing emotional support. For example, Murray-Harvey *et al.* (2000) report that the seeking of support from supervising teachers is the principal coping strategy for student teachers who are experiencing stress. Calderhead and Shorrock (1997), in a discussion on the enculturation (or socialisation) of student teachers, argue that quality of mentoring (through a range of approaches including the provision of emotional support), is one of the contextual factors which will affect this process. Stephenson (1995) similarly found that the quality of trainees' school-based experience depended principally on their emotional condition, which was itself related to the quality of the mentoring process.

Our data, and the findings of other studies, lead us to suggest, with Hayes (2003) and McNally *et al.* (1994, 1997), that initial professional preparation needs to take more account of trainees' emotional states and welfare, and that ITP providers should seek to ensure that they provide effective support which helps trainees navigate the inevitably emotionally-charged process of becoming a teacher, starting

with that of becoming a student teacher. Programme personnel need to take trainees' emotional states into account when assessing trainee needs and planning as well as when working with them, and they therefore need to be able to recognise such states and to have devised strategies for appropriate responsive action. Swennen *et al.* (2004) suggest that drawings, and discussions around them, might be one way of discovering emotional states, and that the interpersonal skill of active listening may be one strategy for responding.

Conclusions

Findings presented in the paper support and confirm those of other studies. In addition these findings add to existing work by, for example, pointing to variation and differentiation among student teachers in developing a teacher identity, and by highlighting the role of relationships with family and peers (as well as with significant others in schools) in the experience of becoming a student teacher. Finally, through the identification of all four core themes in the experiences of participants, the paper provides a synthesising framework for many earlier studies.

In later stages of the 'Becoming a Teacher' project, we hope to examine the extent to which the early career experiences of research participants are characterised by the same, similar or different themes. We also intend to explore the extent to which specific features of the four themes (for example, participants' perceptions of the relevance of aspects of ITP provision) may have impacted on their subsequent experiences and/or early career development.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the European Conference on Educational Research, University College Dublin, 7–10 September 2005.
2. We use the term *initial teacher preparation (ITP)* to refer to what is variously described as 'pre-service' teacher training, initial teacher training (ITT) and initial teacher education (ITE). The official term used in England at this time is initial teacher training (ITT), but there are objections to the use of this term, on the grounds, for example, that 'training' is sometimes associated with a view of teaching as 'performing a set of mechanical tasks' (Stephens *et al.*, 2004), to the exclusion of 'understanding and intelligent awareness' (Tomlinson, 1995, p. 11; Cameron & Baker, 2004, p. 13). Some writers thus prefer the term 'initial teacher education' (ITE), though some 'teacher educators' associate the term 'education' more with the learning of declarative knowledge than with procedural knowledge. Although operationalization of the terms 'training' and 'education' respectively need not have the kind of connotations referred to above, our choice of the term initial teacher preparation reflects an attempt to remain neutral as well as accurate. The term 'pre-service' training (or education) is inaccurate in a context where some student teachers are already 'serving' on employment-based routes into the teaching profession.
3. For the same reasons motivating our choice of the term ITP, we prefer the more neutral (if clumsy) term 'teacher of teachers' to those of 'teacher educator' or 'teacher trainer'. However, for reasons of style, we use the terms 'teacher educator' and 'teacher of teachers' interchangeably.

4. For those unfamiliar with one or more of these ITP pathways, a summary account of each is provided in the Appendix.
5. We use the terms 'trainee' and student teacher interchangeably, in spite of the reservations about the term 'training' (in 'ITT') referred to above.
6. Some of the findings of the 'Stage Two' analyses are reported in Hobson *et al.* (2006).
7. Two of these three themes were also identified by our colleague and critical friend, Christopher Day, in reviewing a draft report of our 'Stage Two' findings.
8. We should acknowledge that a small proportion of our research participants had previously worked as (unqualified) teachers prior to undertaking their ITP programmes, though this is not to say that they did not experience any shift in roles and/or identity during their ITP.

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Appendix: an outline of the main ITP routes in England

Post-graduate HEI-administered programmes (PGCE; Flexible PGCE)

These routes include both a substantive HEI input and a period of training in schools. Those successfully completing the courses achieve an academic qualification (a Post-graduate Certificate in Education [PGCE]), in addition to Qualified Teacher Status (QTS). Programmes typically last for one academic year (full time),

or five or more academic terms (flexible), and applicants must hold a relevant first degree (or equivalent).

Undergraduate HEI-administered programmes (BA/BSc QTS; BEd)

BEd and BA/BSc QTS courses allow trainees to achieve both a Bachelors' degree—either in education or in a specific curriculum subject, and qualified teacher status. There are variations in the length of time required to complete BA/BSc QTS and BEd programmes. Traditionally these programmes last for three and four years respectively, though the length of programmes is becoming more variable, with institutions offering two-, three- and four-year programmes. Shorter two-year programmes appear to have been designed for entrants with professional qualifications equivalent to degree level study.

School-centred Initial Teacher Training programmes (SCITT)

In SCITT programmes single schools or consortia of schools are responsible for the programme of initial teacher preparation. Depending on the specific programme provided, trainees may achieve solely QTS, or may have the opportunity to also gain an academic qualification, namely a PGCE. Programmes typically last for one academic year.

Employment-based programmes: Graduate Teacher Programme (GTP) and Registered Teacher Programme (RTP)

In the GTP trainees take-up a salaried teaching post and (if successful) achieve QTS whilst in-post. Generally, employment-based routes offer QTS only, and typically last for one academic year. As with other postgraduate programmes, applicants to GTP programmes must hold a first degree in a relevant subject. By contrast, the RTP is open to those who do not yet hold a degree but have qualifications equivalent to the first two years of Bachelor's degree study. Typically, the RTP is a two-year programme during which trainees will be employed in a teaching post, whilst also completing a further year of degree-level study on a part-time basis.

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