



Networking and the development of professionals: Beginning teachers building social capital



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Relationships for three training teachers were analysed in terms of their support.
- Social capital concepts were used to differentiate the ways support was accessed.
- A mapping tool was used with trainee teachers to visualise their access to support.
- The support gained depended on the attitudes and actions of both trainees and others.
- Different experiences of support affect beginning teachers' commitment to teaching.

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on how beginning teachers gain support during teacher training, applying concepts of social capital to understand how personal networks can give access to affective and cognitive support. It is based on qualitative case studies of three secondary school trainees during a full-time year-long programme in England. Relationships which supported trainees' developing practice can be characterised differently to those which enhanced their sense of belonging to the profession. Whether supportive relationships developed depended not only on the actions and attitudes of the trainees but also those of others. The paper suggests wider implications for the support of beginning teachers.

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1. Introduction

Starting a new career is stressful and requires support. Beginning teachers (BTs) start teaching careers through initial teacher education (ITE) programmes designed to offer such support. If it is argued that support is gained through relationships, planning opportunities for supportive relationships to develop may be insufficient. BTs will need to be active in relationship-building. This study looks at the resources available for BT support through relationships and the ways BTs access these resources in the context of a Postgraduate ITE programme in England. We use notions of networking to describe BT relationship building and to explain how networking processes help BTs build what has been termed social capital. The capital, or benefits, BTs gain from relationships can help

explain their nature and importance to BTs' development as professionals.

This study is set within one English ITE University-school partnership programme for graduates with a subject-specialist first degree, which includes two placements organised by the University in partner schools.¹ This paper argues that, whilst not denying that support is offered through formal elements of ITE programmes, it is the social capital developed by BTs through their networking during the programme which helps them cope with the challenges presented by starting teaching. The relationships BTs build will have continued importance for their development and success in teaching.

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¹ At the time of the study this was the traditional model for initial teacher education in schools in England, but school-led and school-based models, such as Schools Direct and School Centred Initial Teacher Training (SCITT) with different school–University partnership arrangements, are increasingly prevalent.

1.1. *Becoming a teacher*

Becoming a teacher is not merely to acquire necessary knowledge and skills to teach in classrooms. It is a transformative process (Wilson, 2012). Through ITE programmes BTs are introduced to classrooms and encouraged to take an increasingly responsible role in leading learning in these classroom environments. These programmes also include sessions and academic assignments about the theory of teaching. BTs need to make sense of both theory and practice training experiences to be able not only to 'act' like a teacher but, more deliberately, to 'think' like a teacher (Wilson & Demetriou, 2007). Further, if they are to commit to the profession, arguably they need to 'feel' like a teacher (Nias, 1989) so developing an identity as a teacher. These transformations are complex, demanding, personal and therefore stressful: they require support (Ewing & Manuel, 2005; Johnson et al., 2010).

We argue that this support comes from the interpersonal interactions and relationships BTs experience through networking. This social dimension to teacher identity development is highlighted in international studies of teachers at different stages of their careers (Alsup, 2006; Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Chong & Low, 2009; Day & Gu, 2010; Nias, 1989). Others, through the relationships they build with BTs, contribute both affectively (emotionally) and cognitively (knowledge-related) to a teacher's development (Nias, 1989; Troman, 1999). If BTs are supported they can develop a 'self-efficacy' (Fox & Wilson, 2009; Johnson et al., 2010; Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002) to believe they can practice effectively as a teacher. They can also develop a necessary sense of belonging (Johnson et al., 2012; Le Cornu, 2013; Rippon & Martin, 2006) to commit to the profession. Not all relationships are positive and some add to the challenges of developing professionally as a teacher (Chong & Low, 2009). The effectiveness of relationships for support is important to understand if, as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) conclude,

'... experiences [of support] in the early years help determine whether a teacher will have a long career' (OECD, 2004, p. 5).

This realisation has led to two bodies of related international research (including Australia, Canada, Singapore and the United Kingdom (UK)) into teacher resilience (Chong & Low, 2009; Day & Gu, 2010; Johnson, 2004; Le Cornu, 2013; Mansfield, Beltman, Price, & McConney, 2012; Pearce & Morrison, 2011; Tait, 2008) and teacher wellbeing (Day & Kington, 2008; Dunlop & Macdonald, 2004; McCallum & Price, 2010). Together, this research highlights the social dimension to support recognising that BTs need to be 'able to form and sustain socially positive relationships' (Day, 2008, p. 355) and develop 'relational resilience' (Le Cornu, 2013, p. 4). Research is now needed into how BTs develop such positive relationships.

1.2. *Support for beginning teachers*

As noted, support for BTs is planned into ITE programmes (Cox, 2012; Johnson et al., 2012; Wilson, 2012). In the programme in this English study the University partner offered BTs insights from educational research and scaffolded opportunities to reflect on in-school experiences. The partner schools offered opportunities to work with more experienced teachers to gain access to their expertise as well as experience authentic classroom teaching practice. In English ITE provision the majority of BT time is spent in schools, developing an increasing teaching load during the course. We believe this increases the relevance of this study to BTs beyond their training year.

In such partnership provision BTs will need to make sense of experiences in one setting to apply to the other and, ultimately,

help them develop their professional practice as a teacher. Such school–University partnerships are prevalent internationally (Cooper & Alvarado, 2006; OECD, 2011; Villegas-Reimers, 2003) with the OECD challenging them to ensure BTs are offered fully-integrated experiences (OECD, 2011; Schleicher, 2012). Those with formal roles in supporting BTs will help BTs integrate their experiences across settings, although are themselves located principally in only one; mentors (in schools) and supervisors (in Universities). Mentor/supervisor–BT relationships have become a focus for an international body of research in Australia (Ambrosetti & Dekkers, 2010; Le Cornu & White, 2000; Nguyen, 2007), Switzerland (Harscher, Cocard, & Moser, 2004), the United States (US) (Hallam, Chou, Hite, & Hite, 2012; Tomas, Farrelly, & Haslam, 2008) and theoretical work by Mertz (2004).

As well as being provided with opportunities for support, BTs will need to be active in taking up these opportunities and/or, as this paper argues, make their own opportunities. During their ITE, BTs interact with many people other than their mentors and supervisors. To understand the contribution others make to their development as a professional we need to identify them, have ways of thinking about how effective, supportive relationships develop and what forms of support they offer? Networking offers a useful conceptualisation.

1.3. *Networking as a way of thinking about BTs' access to support*

The importance of BT networks for support has been raised by recent empirical studies in Canada (Deal, Purinton, & Waetjen, 2009), England (Fox & Wilson, 2009; Wilson, 2012) and the US (Baker-Doyle, 2011; Baker-Doyle & Yoon, 2011). With whom BTs connect and build relationships can be mapped as their personal networks to reveal the value and strength of these relationships (Carmichael, Fox, McCormick, Procter, & Honour, 2006; McCormick, Fox, Carmichael, & Procter, 2010). Such studies show that, additionally to mentoring and supervisory roles, support comes from a range of informal sources: peers; other school-based teachers; University lecturers; partners; parents and friends. BTs' strategies for learning informally are under-researched (Hoekstra, Beijaard, Brekelmans, & Karthagen, 2007). Knowing the structure of BT networks is not enough to understand the value of relationships to BTs' development as professionals. It is important to understand the processes of relationship building (networking) which result in BTs gaining tangible benefits to help them 'act', 'think' and 'feel' like a teacher.

1.4. *The research questions*

The following three research questions form the basis of this paper:

RQ1: From whom do BTs report gaining support during their ITE?

RQ2: How do BTs develop supportive relationships during ITE?

RQ3: How do BTs understand the relationships they develop in terms of optimising support?

2. *Organising concepts*

Arguing that BTs access support through relationship building, we suggest that they develop social capital through such networking. Social capital is a way of thinking of the benefits accrued from relationship building and can be characterised as two types. We drew on Adler and Kwon's (2002) notions of *bonding* and *bridging* capital, as well as Portes' (1998) explanations of the motivations associated with such capital-building as *consummatory* or *instrumental*. These organising concepts were helpful in thinking

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