

# **A Study of Student Teachers' Experiences of Belonging on Teaching Practice**

## Highlights:

Belonging is a well developed concept in a number of psycho-social studies but has rarely been the focus of research attention in the Initial Teacher Education literature

In this paper we look at belonging as an achievement from the perspective of student teachers on teaching practice

Student teacher belonging is achieved (or not) on teaching practice by individuals in relation to the interpersonal relations they build within the social systems of the institutions they are learning to teach in

Student teacher proactivity emerges as a key dimension of the achievement of belonging

# **A Study of Student Teachers' Experiences of Belonging on Teaching Practice**

## **Abstract**

While 'belonging' has a long and established place in the psycho-social literature on human functioning, it is a much less prominent construct in Initial Teacher Education. The present article seeks to address this gap by exploring student teachers' experiences of belonging during teaching practice. Seventeen participants contributed to the study, with a range of qualitative methods being used including focus group and semi-structured individual interviews, as well as online discussion forum data. Analysis revealed three interrelating dimensions, at whole-school, interpersonal and personal levels, with their interaction being central to student teachers' achievement of belonging. The implications for those involved in supporting student teachers' professional development while on school placement are subsequently considered.

Keywords: belonging; initial teacher education; pre-service teaching experience; student teaching, practicums.

## **Introduction:**

This paper attempts to address a gap in the literature on the school placement aspect of Initial Teacher Education by exploring student teachers' experiences in school through the lens of belonging. While this concept has been referred to in a number of important studies (Maynard, 2000; Malderez et al., 2007), it has rarely been the focus of specific research attention. In arguing that belonging is an important concept worthy of further sustained inquiry, the paper is organised around three main research questions: what are student teachers' experiences of belonging to a school; what are the processes that inform these; and finally what is the impact of belonging on student teachers' experiences of professional learning and development on placement?

The research is grounded in a view of teaching as a relational practice (Noddings, 2003), rather than a cognitive, technical or competence-based set of activities, and of beginning teaching as a relational endeavour informed by relationships with supporting mentors and with young learners taught (McNally, 2006). It is premised on the belief that engaging productively with the world is enhanced when working alongside others (Edwards, 2010) and that close relationships act as ‘social glue helping people to deal with uncertainties of their changing world’ (Goodwin, 2005, p615). It has built on McNally’s concept of ‘relational conditions’ (1994) and of early teaching as characterised by emotionality and relationality (McNally, 2006) where flourishing is highly dependent on meaningful relationships and human bonds.

## **Theoretical Background**

### ***Belongingness: a fundamental human motivation***

The need to belong to a group is widely understood as a fundamental need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Schlachet, 2000) and the concept is well developed in the psychological and social science literature. Baumeister and Leary (1995), in their seminal meta-analysis of over 300 citations, argue in favour of a ‘belongingness hypothesis’ (p497) which concludes that human culture exists to satisfy the innate psychological need to live together. This need is defined as ‘a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive and significant interpersonal relationships’ (ibid, p497). For Deci and Ryan (1991), relatedness is one of three basic psychological needs which, along with autonomy and competence, is fundamental to learning, growth and development.

Meerloo's psychodynamic categories of human sympathy: 'unipathy' (being one with others) and 'sympathetic togetherness' (Meerloo, 1966, p391) were developed by Anant (1966), where belongingness was conceived of as 'personal involvement (in a social system) to the extent that the person feels himself to be an indispensable and integral part of the system' (Anant, 1966, p22-23). For Antonsich (2010, p645) this informal and subjective form of belonging as a personal feeling of being at home in a place is termed 'place-belonging' and has been explored on a 'multi-scalar' level (Huot et al., 2014) across interdependent spatialities such as homes and domestic spaces on the one hand and more expansive spaces such as countries and continents on the other hand (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Lähdesmäki et al., (2016, p237) see this form of belonging as part of the ordinary, every-day aspects of life that define who we are and how life is lived.

In a series of connected studies, Bonnie Hagerty, working with other colleagues (Hagerty et al., 1992; Hagerty & Patusky, 1995; Hagerty et al., 1996) conceived a sense of belonging as one concept in a theory of relatedness (Hagerty et al., 1996) and as 'a unique relational phenomenon' (ibid, p236), important in the development and management of the individual's relationship with others. Two dimensions of belonging are delineated: 'valued involvement', the experience of feeling valued, needed, accepted; and 'fit', the person's perception of the extent to which there is consonance or harmony between the person's characteristics and those of the system or environment (p173). For Baumeister and Leary (1995), finally, two related aspects are integral to the satisfaction of the drive towards creating and maintaining a sense of belonging: 'frequent interaction' and 'persistent caring' (p497). In underlining the mutuality of these criteria, the writers assert: 'First, there is a need for affectively pleasant interactions with a few other people, and second, these interactions must take place in the context of a temporally stable and enduring framework of affective concern for each

other's welfare.' (p497) It is the reciprocal nature of the elements within the construct that define belongingness as more than simply the separate need for affiliation or intimate attachment. As Lähdesmäki et al., (2016, p237) argue, social relations are 'inherently embedded in spatial belonging'.

### ***Belongingness and social and psychological functioning***

Belongingness has implications for human development. Baumeister and Leary's (1995) review discovered links between the need to belong and differences in cognitive processes, emotional patterns, behaviour, and in health and well-being (p522). Links between belonging and cognition have been widely described, for example, with Baumeister and Leary (1995) providing evidence that interpersonal relationships are central to the way people think, shaping the nature of cognitive activity in quite significant ways. Social exclusion may even be linked to an impairment in cognitive functioning. Baumeister et al., (2002), conclude that 'intelligent thought and social inclusion seem to have a positive, direct relationship' (p827).

There are emotional implications, too, of the hypothesis that belonging is a fundamental human need. The extent to which people feel accepted in social groups can lead to some of the strongest emotional responses, with positive emotions such as happiness, elation, contentment and calm being related to inclusion, and anxiety, depression, grief and jealousy being linked to exclusion and rejection (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p508).

Furthermore, people who experience relatedness and a sense of belonging behave differently from those who do not. In a series of studies, this conclusion was borne out in the discovery that social exclusion produced significant increases in aggressive behaviour, alongside decreases in pro-social behaviour (Twenge et al.,

2001). This is consistent with Anant's (1966) emphasis on the importance of belongingness needs in the area of mental health, leading Osterman (2000) to conclude that belongingness is 'an extremely important concept' with 'far-reaching impact on human motivation and behaviour' (p359).

With such a well-developed literature around belongingness, it is surprising therefore that there is such an absence of research that seeks to explore the concept as it relates to the experience of working with others in a school and to the impact that this might have on the early professional development of student teachers. It is to this that the paper now turns.

### ***Belonging as a social construct***

Antonsich (2010) has argued that belonging has only recently begun to be written about in the social disciplines, having been treated as a self-explanatory term in the realms of intuition and common sense. Indeed, there is very little extant research in Initial Teacher Education using belonging as a theoretical lens (Johnston 2016b). However, the social experience of teaching in a school is a vital aspect of student teachers' early professional learning (Trent, 2014; Johnston, 2016a) and key to the development of a sense of belonging as a social accomplishment. Indeed, for many, school placement is the most important element of the Initial Teacher Education programme (Hascher et al., 2004). While university-based components afford important opportunities for learning, on their own they are insufficient. Learning in-situ (Barab et al., 2001) thus provides the kind of authentic challenges (Putnam & Borko, 2000; Harlow & Cobb, 2014) that enable novices to develop the skills, understandings and dispositions needed to function effectively as they move into the first few years of teaching as fully registered professionals.

Importantly, too, being placed in a school also offers students the chance of becoming members of a community of practising teachers (ten Dam & Blom, 2006), a process of acculturation (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 1999). Belonging is therefore at the heart of this process that locates student teacher development in the dynamic unfolding of group activity. As student teachers cross the threshold of their new placement school for the first time as novice guests (Johnston, 2016a), they soon begin to participate in the social practices of groups of more experienced teachers who come together, often around a common set of purposes related to the learning and development of pupils, in the process building common, but not always agreed upon, understandings of their work (Wenger, 1998). Such participative processes make a significant contribution to the development of the student's 'teaching self' (Tang, 2004, p191) or to what Yuan (2016) calls 'identity formation' (p188).

McNally et al., (1994) thus argue that while a sense of belonging is felt as a 'primary need' (p227) for student teachers, it is expressed in their relationships with two significant reference groups who validate or challenge their identities as putative teachers: teaching colleagues with whom they are in regular contact, and pupils in the classes they teach. Teachers are a particularly important reference group (Nias, 1989) as they can validate the student's presence in the school and legitimise their professional activities, providing important evaluator information as students reflect on their sense of developing competence and on the underlying dispositions that contribute to their growing sense of self as teacher (Tang, 2003).

Hayes (1998), moreover, suggests that the importance of belonging to the social milieu cannot be overstated as a contributing factor to a successful school placement. While fitting in and making genuine contributions to the life of the school were among the students' principal aspirations at the start of school experience, those who learned

how to develop a sense of belonging said it was one of the most satisfying aspects of being in a school. In Maynard's (2000) study, the students' concerns with being made welcome in the school were underpinned by a felt need to be accepted, as learners, as teachers, as members of the profession and as persons. Positive collegial relationships between student teachers and their host colleagues are therefore essential to the early experiences of fitting in to a school and to subsequent on-going and meaningful professional progress (Hobson et al., 2005; de Lima 2001).

School contexts that fail to offer a supportive 'human infrastructure' (Campbell-Gibson, 1997, p8) of belonging can jeopardise the success of student teacher placements, resulting in unproductive learning experiences (Tang, 2003), emotional upheaval (Hayes, 1998; Maynard, 2000), loss of confidence and self-esteem (Hayes, 2001), ineffective teaching performance (Hayes, 1998) and a negative impact on the construction of the teaching self (Tang, 2004). Longer-term development may also be impeded, with such early experiences of non-belonging (Harris & Gandolofa, 2014) impacting on teachers' decisions as to whether to remain in the profession or not (Jones, 2005; Gold, 1996). Hayes (1998) describes students' lack of belonging, being unable to make the necessary adjustments to the school's socio-cultural climate, in terms of being 'gripped by feelings of helplessness and a fear of failure, trapped within a social system that they felt had the power to crush them' (p74). McNally et al., (1994) refer to the absence of a secure personal rapport with staff colleagues as the cause of their strongest sense of non-belonging. Again, what seems to support the smooth initiation into the community of practising teachers is the support and encouragement of teaching colleagues. Moreover, a strong relationship between a more experienced mentor and the newcomer is considered particularly important to effective learning on placement (Rippon & Martin, 2003; Ferrier-Kerr, 2009).



It is clear, too, in perspectives on belonging that avoid focusing only on the personal dimensions or only on the social and political aspects of inclusion or exclusion, that the development of belonging is a two-way, dialectic process (Johnston, 2016b). This stance views the actions and beliefs of both the individual and the institution being mutually constitutive in the achievement of belonging. In this sense, belonging is an accomplishment that plays a central role in connecting the individual to the social; society cannot exist without individuals and individuals do not exist separate from society (May, 2011). New members change as they affiliate with an institution, and the organisation changes as new members ‘usher in fresh ideas and unique ways of acting’ (ibid., p448). Hayes (2001) puts it succinctly when he says that student teachers influence the circumstances of their support, intimating that they should therefore be helped to develop skills of negotiation, questioning and responding in their dealings with staff colleagues. What is being underlined here the individual’s professional agency (Turnbull, 2005) in the process of belonging, a process that Schempp et al., (1993) liken to navigating tricky waters (p468) and Hayes (1998) to ‘walking on eggshells’ (p67). For while veteran colleagues may introduce the newcomers to a school’s established traditions and practices, these can be accepted, rejected, modified or accommodated (ibid, 1998).

The review of literature which informed the present research design encouraged enquiry around a qualitative exploration of the experience of belonging for student teachers, with data to be grounded in students’ accounts of important contextual features – involving the interplay between whole-school, inter-relational and individual dimensions of becoming a member of a school community.

## **Methodology**

### ***Research Context***

In Scotland currently, graduates training to become secondary teachers (of pupils aged 11-18) undertake a 36 week course, The Professional Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE), 18 weeks of which is school-based, with 18 weeks being located in the university. At the University in which the writers work, the school components comprise placements in two different schools each lasting 9 weeks. School experience is interspersed with university experience, with placement one starting with an Orientation week in September and continuing with five weeks in November/December. After time back in the university and a break for Christmas, students finish their first placement with three weeks back in the same school in January. The second placement in a different school starts in February and comprises a five week block, continuing with a further four weeks in May/June.

The participant sample, who responded to a whole cohort email call for participation, comprised 17 student volunteers from three different secondary subject departments (English, Home Economics and Science). They were heterogeneous in mix; 11 were female and 6 male; they ranged in age between 23 and 45; 7 were married and 10 were single; there were significant differences in previous working and life experiences. As a purposive sample (Borg & Gall, 1989), they were united in their capacity as willing and able participants (Di Cicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006) who could provide 'information-rich' (Patton, 1990, p169) descriptions and relevant explanations (Popay et al., 1998) of their experiences of belonging on school placement.

### ***Data collection***

After an initial welcome meeting to explain the project aims and to start building a social base, data collection began at the end of the first four weeks of their first placement when 17 student volunteers were invited to four focus group meetings. The purpose of these was to continue the social bonding (Briggs,1984) that was considered important in helping the participants to feel personally involved in the project and also to get students to reflect critically on their first experiences of teaching. They were asked to explore and clarify (Crabtree & Miller, 1999) aspects of their placement that both supported and detracted from feelings of belonging to the department and schools in which they were placed. The meetings lasted approximately one hour and were recorded with the permission of participants. These were then quickly transcribed in order to begin the recursive process (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984) of identifying initial themes that could be subsequently pursued through a range of associated data collection methods.

From analysis of the group interviews, and integration of this with our understanding of the literature on belongingness, three main lines of enquiry were established - the whole-school dimensions of belonging; interpersonal relationships with important others; personal strategies and feelings. Identification of these led to the construction of an on-line discussion forum that students could participate in while engaging in the remainder of their placements. This method aimed at capturing data close to students' experiences of placement, facilitating within-method triangulation (Denzin, 1978) with other post-hoc data. The discussion forum housed separate 'chat rooms' which focused on each of the three themes. Students made productive use of the opportunities of discussing their experiences online and there were 140 different postings throughout the remainder of their time in schools.

At the end of the course, in June, intensive, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each individual, lasting between 50 and 75 minutes. These picked upon issues identified in the discussion forum, inviting deeper exploration of emerging ‘belongingness’ themes at the institutional, relational and personal levels. They were recorded, transcribed and shared with participants for further comment.

### ***Data Analysis***

Transcribed data from each of the three sources were converted to rtf files and uploaded into Atlas Ti, with subsequent analysis being conducted using this software tool.

Preceding this was a process of becoming immersed in the data (Burnard, 1991) to ensure familiarity (Polit & Beck, 2004) with the experiences of the different participants and to begin the process of getting at the meaning of the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). To facilitate confidence in the reliability of the coding process, it was decided to identify five interviews which could be worked on separately by each researcher, using hard copy of transcribed interviews, before reconvening in a series of meetings to co-construct shared understandings (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004) of emerging interview themes and to agree on the codes that both researchers would begin to ascribe to the full data set. The first five interviews were then coded jointly using Atlas ti, before the remainder of the data were divided up for individual analysis. In moving from analysis to interpretation, as all the data were gradually coded, a series of meetings was held between the two researchers to visually map out key recurring themes (Maxwell, 2006) and to negotiate our understandings of the possible meanings of the data (Morse & Field, 1995).

Coding initially stayed close to the participants’ words, descriptively (Miles & Huberman, 1994), before more theoretical or abstract categories (Maxwell, 2006) were

constructed to represent the etic interpretations of participants' core messages (Thomas, 2007). These higher-order categories (Burnard, 1991) captured commonalities and variations across individual cases (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996) and were then organised under the main organisational headings established at the design stage of the project but reformulated in the light of analysis and discussion: *whole-school structures and procedures; inter-personal relations; personal strategies* (see table 1). Each researcher took responsibility for writing a detailed summary of the key themes within each heading, substantiating inclusion with reference to verbatim quotations. The thematic summaries (Ritchie et al., 2003) provided a focus for researcher discussion of the links between categories and, in order to build trustworthiness (Guba, 1981), supported negotiation of our common, co-constructed understandings of the key themes. The culmination of this process led to the writing up of the results section of the article.

Original Codes	Final Analytical Themes	Illustrative quotations
<b>Whole-School Structures and Procedures</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Department layout</li> <li>• Social spaces and teaching spaces</li> <li>• The importance of social spaces</li> </ul>	School Architecture	‘the department was laid out in one corridor and that gave me easy access to all the teachers I was working with. After a while it felt like belonging to a big family.’
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The staffroom as social space</li> <li>• Teachers’ interactions in staffroom</li> <li>• School culture</li> <li>• Department ethos</li> </ul>	Patterns of Social Activity	‘I really kinda belonged in the staffroom ... everybody welcomed me and it was fun, you know, because you’d go for a little bit of a laugh with them and relaxation with different groups of people who made you feel welcome.’
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The administrative welcome</li> <li>• The importance of the Senior Management Team</li> <li>• Familiarisation with school building</li> <li>• The human touch</li> </ul>	Formal Induction	‘I felt really welcomed because the depute came down to the front door to meet me, he had a time-table for me to follow and then I had a meeting with him for an hour and he explained everything to do with the school and then he took me round the

		school... I felt part of the school really quickly.'
<b>Interpersonal Relations</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participation in department meetings</li> <li>• Taking part in wider school activities</li> <li>• Being included in social activities</li> </ul>	Staff Relations: being involved	'They'd ask you, do you want to come with us for lunch? They included you in their planning so you feel like you're one of them. You're not alienated or isolated.'
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Positive feedback on teaching</li> <li>• Collegial support</li> <li>• Positive social relationships</li> <li>• Forging personal bonds</li> </ul>	Staff Relations: being valued	'They asked me to put my resources up on the drive and they said 'M's left her stuff and it's really good', so it's again that idea that what you do is just as valuable as teachers who have been teaching for 20 years.'
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Positive feedback from pupils</li> <li>• Getting to know classes</li> <li>• Breakthroughs with individual pupils</li> <li>• Out of class contact</li> </ul>	Relations with pupils: acceptance and validation	'I think that belongingness is as much about kids accepting you as it is about the staff accepting you ... it makes your life in the classroom so much easier ... it brings you right back to being part and parcel of the school'.
<b>Personal Strategies</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contributing to department resources</li> <li>• Being an asset to whole school</li> <li>• Making a difference to colleagues</li> </ul>	Being proactive	'I learned you can't hang back, you've got to get stuck in, you have to put yourself forward.'

Table 1: Coding process – from initial codes to analytical themes

## Limitations

As a small purposive sample, analytical generalisability is not possible. There are, in addition, several accredited routes into teaching not featured here (see for example MacDonald & Rae, 2018) and the sample excluded groups that would merit further exploration (e.g., primary student teachers, distance learning students etc).

Furthermore, there would be value in future work which considers inclusion of other countries to create a larger-scale study and, by employing other methodologies, to investigate belonging cross-culturally. Finally, while belonging is conceived of as a

positive construct by most research participants in the research, there were a very small number who alluded briefly to the downside of having to constantly implement practices that they felt uncomfortable with just simply to fit in. Exploring the ‘dark side’ of belonging would thus be a worthwhile project for future consideration.

## **Results**

### ***Whole school structures and procedures***

#### *School architecture*

The students who participated in the study were training as secondary school teachers and were based in subject departments. They reported that the physical layout of classrooms in relation to their subject specialism influenced the nature of their ‘place-belonging’ through interactions with teacher colleagues. This in turn informed the extent to which they felt part of the department team. In tightly coupled situations where a department was narrowly spread out with subject-based teachers’ classrooms in relatively close proximity, there was more opportunity for regular contact and thus a rapport to be built between student and teacher through professional discussion. In departments where classrooms were dispersed more widely throughout the school, such conversations were much more difficult to undertake. Students’ expressions of feeling ‘*at home*’ or ‘*not feeling at home*’ were thus closely related to experiences of the school as a physical entity. Student G summed this up clearly: ‘*the department was laid out in one corridor and that gave me easy access to all the teachers I was working with. After a while it felt like belonging to a big family.*’

The availability of social spaces also influenced processes of inclusion, as did the spatial relationship between teaching accommodation and social areas. Some departments had their own base, a multi-functional area which combined opportunities

for both work and social interactions, making regular contact between colleagues possible. This was absent in other departments with teachers thus having to use a central staffroom for social purposes. There were also several reports of students in larger schools feeling unable to make use of the social affordances of the staffroom due to its distance from departmental teaching accommodation. In another case, the school had lost its staffroom due to a fire, leaving the student feeling vulnerable, isolated and ‘*without a home to go to*’ (Student B, Interview). In such situations, the process of settling in to the department and school was made more problematic, causing students to feel greater emotional distance between themselves and those they would be working alongside. ‘*I didn’t belong in the staffroom, so I just didn’t go back*’ (Student I, Interview).

#### *Patterns of Social Activity*

However, patterns of social activity in relation to the physical spaces impacted significantly on the students’ feelings of being part of the school. Even if there was a staff base or whole school social area, this affordance was not always taken up by teaching colleagues. Being new to the school and often feeling uncertain and anxious, students expressed a strong need for social interaction in order to build a sense of security and of confidence in having an acknowledged place in the school.

Opportunities for socialising were thus very important aspects of students’ experiences of working in a school. Regular contact with other teachers cemented their feelings of being part of the social fabric. This was easier when established patterns of social interactivity generated informal opportunities for students to mix in with a range of teachers, fostering the possibility of extended professional and personal relationships:

*‘In my last school the staffroom was deserted all the time. Each department*



*stuck to their own. In my present school most staff go to the staffroom for interval and lunch. It's great... I feel the whole school staff and environment has really made a difference to my feelings of belongingness'* (Student F, Interview).

When such opportunities for informal discussion were not available, students struggled to build a sense of positive attachment to the school. In the absence of a departmental common room where teachers spent break times in their own classrooms, there were reports from students about '*invading their territory*' and '*crossing a boundary*', experiences that detracted from the possibility of building a rapport with colleagues. '*I went into the staffroom and teachers were coming in and they were like pointing and their facial expressions saying, like what are you doing here. And I didn't know how to react to it, so I went back only a few times as it felt so awkward*' (Student N, Interview).

### *Formal Induction*

All schools have sets of procedures that are employed to facilitate the smooth running of the institution. Such routines often came to impact on the extent to which student teachers in the study were able to feel integral to the school's aspirations, and to signal the extent to which students were valued not only as prospective colleagues but also as people. Formal induction procedures setting out the school's expectations were very much welcomed by the student teachers in the study, making a distinct difference to their initial sense of security. This '*administrative welcome*', as it became known on the discussion forum, helped students feel established and settled in the school. Their crucial need for familiarity was enhanced through clarification of important aspects of the school's functioning and of the role of the student in fulfilling their key responsibilities.

When students perceived that organisational procedures were motivated by an understanding of the human dimensions of being a novice on placement, students responded particularly well. There was evidence of ‘personal touches’ that clearly signposted the importance to the school of the placement experience and of students as valued human assets:

*On Monday morning when reading the staff notices, there was an announcement made to the staff that I was a new student within the school and to help me feel welcome. I thought this was a very nice idea as I found many staff would then speak to me in passing (Student H, Interview).*

Indeed, how the student’s presence in the school was communicated to others came to be a significant marker of the student teachers’ perceptions of their worth. Being given ID badges signalling ‘teacher’ rather than ‘student teacher’ was a powerful signal of value. Students found very comforting and motivating such evidence of what was commonly referred to in interviews as ‘*the human touch*’.

### ***Inter-personal Relations***

The process of building relationships with important others in the school community proved to be one of the student teachers’ most important and challenging professional undertakings. The data revealed that there were two key reference groups that supported a sense of belonging to the school: staff colleagues and pupils.

#### *Relationships with staff colleagues: being involved*

Allied to a sense of being welcome in the department and school more widely, student teachers in the study appreciated placements where they were actively involved in the daily life of the school. This helped to endorse their status as ‘*real teachers*’ and not simply as guests. Being incorporated into teachers’ informal, social activities was highly

valued as a means of feeling integrated within the school community, offering opportunities for bonding. The data reveal numerous stories of student teachers being invited to Friday lunches, coffee mornings, curry night outs, departmental celebrations, the theatre, as well as being actively encouraged to take part in red nose day charity events, lotto syndicates, children in need sponsored activities, salsa dancing, five-a-side football, body combat days and ‘teachers got talent’ shows. Such events enabled them to become more widely known across the school, enhancing their profile with regard to pupils and staff, helping to build their sense of having something worthwhile to offer the community. These occasions also enabled the student teachers to present a human side to others, fostering a more personal dimension that extended their role beyond that of student. A good example of this was when a student took part in a staff award ceremony, an ironic version of the Oscars called ‘the Charlies’, enhancing her reputation of amongst her colleagues: *‘other teachers that I’ve not spoken to much came out and said you’re part of the school now, you’ve been involved in this... and you’re going to be remembered.’* (Student A, Interview).

Involvement in the professional practices which characterised departmental activity was also important. Being invited to department meetings for example, provided a boost to the student’s sense of team membership. Moreover having access to, and being encouraged to contribute to, school resources gave students a sense of having equal authority and status on a par with their fully registered colleagues, helping them to feel a valued and valuable part of the system. Being involved in decision-making around their own professional development was also highly motivating, giving students a sense of their worth as putative colleagues. For example, student teachers noted their appreciation of being given a say in what they taught, how they taught it, when they would take a class over, what outcomes they might work towards with pupils and how

these outcomes might be assessed. Occasions where decision-making powers were handed over to them were particularly welcomed: *'she was kind of like, just try stuff, don't be afraid and I loved having that free reign where I could try things out, it was a real confidence-booster'* (Student H, Interview).

#### *Relationship with staff colleagues: being valued*

Student teachers in the study accepted that they were extra work for departments and schools, but equally that they had something important to offer: a different perspective, with new ideas and approaches that might help to refresh a department's practices. It was reassuring if these ideas were taken seriously and incorporated into the day-to-day activities of colleagues they were working with on placement. It was considered a great achievement when teachers valued and made use of resources that students had constructed themselves. Student P expressed this clearly in an interview when she said: *'They asked me to put my resources up on the drive and they said 'M's left her stuff and it's really good', so it's again that idea that what you do is just as valuable as teachers who have been teaching for 20 years.'*

Being given responsibility was a key indicator of host teachers' acceptance and valuing of them as professional equals. Taking classes independently was an important sign of teachers' trust in the students' capabilities as classroom practitioners. In addition, students felt that they were contributing to the wider life of the school by being assigned a range of departmental activities involving marking exams, helping to present pupils for exams, contributing to parent's evenings and engaging in team-teaching with colleagues from other departments. Involvement in such practices helped students to build confidence in their abilities to manage a wide range of teacher activity, validating their sense of competence in the eyes of their professional colleagues.

Student H summed this up well: *'The more you get involved in the life of the school the more you feel like you're making a difference'* (Interview).

However students felt most valued when interpersonal interactions were based on what was perceived as being a real interest in and concern for themselves as individual human beings. This became apparent in data which emphasised important gestures of collegial kindness and consideration: being phoned at home after a difficult day; small messages of support and encouragement; hugs when things went wrong, and in celebration of small successes; a kind word or reassuring smile. In such ways, colleagues built emotional ties that went deep, fostering a resilience which helped to bind the student teachers into tight-knit communities where there was a strong sense of common humanity and kinship: *'when they treated you as an individual rather than just a student, it made you feel normal and more of a real person ... part of the school'* (Student C, Interview).

#### *Relationship with pupils: acceptance and validation*

Pupils also provided important points of reference for student teachers as they reflected on their developing competence. Running through the data was the notion that being validated as a teacher among the pupil cohort was a crucial achievement: *'when the kids accept you as a teacher, I think that helps your overall acceptance'* (Student C, Focus Group Interview). There was also widespread agreement that *'the kids are the reason that keep you going every day'* (Student A, Interview) and that *'most people come into teaching because they want to work with young people'* (Student G, Focus Group Interview), with one student asserting that *'if you can engage with your pupils, that will get you through any difficulties you might have with staff'* (Student F, Interview). There were numerous examples of incidents with pupils which promoted highly positive

emotional responses that bolstered the students' sense of themselves as potential teachers. On one occasion a pupil's reaction to towards the student *'just lifted me out of that depression and I was walking on air for the rest of the day. And I thought, this is for me, this is the right job for me'* (Student B, Interview). Another student summed it up well: *'it's amazing how emotionally involved you become and how quickly that bond forms with those kids'* (Student H, Focus Group Interview). Those students who were able to build a strong sense of belonging to their host school all emphasised the importance of developing close personal and professional relations with their pupils.

### ***Personal strategies***

#### *Being proactive*

Student teachers are not simply passive recipients of the culture of the schools in which they work. They are active agents contributing, often in conscious ways, to the shaping of the learning opportunities that presented themselves on placement. For those in the study, being a student teacher on placement involved highly strategic activity. From *'sussing out the lie of the land in the staffroom'* (Student A, Interview), to *'knowing who to ask and when'* (Student E, Interview); from *'getting to know the department staff as people'* (Student I, Interview) to *'branching out and making myself known throughout the school'* (Student G, Focus Group Interview); from *'getting involved in as much socialising as possible'* (Student D, Interview), to *'helping teachers by providing as many resources as I could'* (Student H, Interview), the students came to realise that developing a sense of belonging to the departments and to the schools in which they had been placed meant demonstrating a consistently proactive approach: *'you have to be proactive in taking initiatives in different corners of the school'* (Student C, Interview).

Students who built the strongest feelings of belonging to the school quickly sensed the vital human elements in being a teacher and worked hard to contribute their own humanity: taking a personal interest in other teachers through conversation; taking the burden off colleagues by offering to teach classes, mark work and produce resources; sharing their particular talents and skills in making the department a livelier place and the school more generally a more enjoyable and productive place to be in.

This often intense and certainly active involvement enabled student teachers to build a strong sense of security; references were regularly made to feeling ‘*settled*’ (Student K, Interview) ‘*comfortable*’ (Student N, Interview), ‘*at home*’ (Student H, Interview), ‘*relaxed*’ (Student P, Focus Group Interview), ‘*safe*’ (Student A, interview) in contexts where they knew their presence was welcome, their role valued and their contributions worthwhile. Building security in a supportive environment which they had an active role in contributing to also encouraged students to ask the kind of questions they needed to ask to address whatever professional issues were most pressing at the time. It gave them the confidence to try out new ideas in the classroom, to take risks free from the spectre of reprisal and not to be afraid of making mistakes. It encouraged them to take greater control over their own learning, promoting a clearer sense that success in becoming a teacher was possible with active intent. Experiencing a keen sense of belonging to the department team, they reported feeling more enabled in adopting a personal teaching style, even if this contrasted the approaches and manner of colleague models. In such achievements, confidence was developed and self-esteem boosted:

*‘feeling that you belong in the department makes you feel settled, it makes you feel confident, it makes you feel important, it makes you feel happier, more comfortable, more able to be yourself’ (Student A, Discussion forum posting).*

## Discussion

Despite belongingness being an established construct in the social and psychological literature around human functioning, where it has been ascribed the significance of a ‘fundamental human motivation’ (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p497), it has been much less prominent feature of student teacher development during teaching practice. The research on which this article is based, however, suggests that being able to build a sense of belonging is a highly significant aspect of student teachers’ identity development on placement. It is closely linked to students’ sense of themselves as real teachers in the making and to their overriding understanding of the importance of human bonds in teaching. It thus deserves much closer empirical scrutiny.

The important interplay between contextual factors and individual factors is highlighted in this research, with the development of a sense of belonging to department and school assuming strong emotional and relational resonances (McNally 2006; Hobson et al., 2005). When a range of positive environmental affordances (Billett, 2001) was available to students, they were more able to build a sense of security and confidence that enabled them to concentrate on becoming the kind of humane and caring teachers they felt they aspired to be. These factors comprised:

- A welcoming social milieu (Dewhurst & McMurtry, 2006; Jones 2005) where students were accepted as people and as teachers, where colleagues took a genuine interest in their development and where they were involved in a range of social activities that marked their membership of the team;
- An inclusive professional culture (Johnston, 2010) where students were valued as having something worthwhile to offer and where they were given opportunities to take responsibility for a range of professional activities, being



involved in decisions on important professional tasks, thus signalling colleague acceptance;

- Warm, collegial personal and professional relations (Jarzabkowski, 2002) where students felt able to get to know colleagues at a personal level, ask questions to support learning, make suggestions to support departmental development, develop their own teaching style irrespective of colleague models, take control of their own learning and contribute ideas and resources for departmental benefit;
- Systems and procedures that were underpinned by a personal element that humanised organisational processes (Sergiovanni, 1994), presenting a personal face that was reassuring and confidence-building;
- The physical organisation of space, so that communication and co-ordination of effort could be facilitated.

Equally, when students themselves were able to influence the contexts they were in (Hayes, 2001), being active participants in their learning, such involvement was more likely to lead to feelings of belonging. In such a way their own actions were part of the environmental affordances (Billett, 2001; Billett, 2004). Significant individual factors impacting on a sense of belonging were:

- Determination, skill and sensitivity in building close working relations with colleagues (Graham & Roberts, 2007), with relationship building being high on their priority list.
- Strong emphases on building and maintaining positive relations with pupils in a full understanding of pupils as a key reference group in signalling identity as a 'real' teacher

- Proactivity in throwing themselves into the placement fully, including being a sympathetic and helpful colleague, being creative in resource construction, being willing to create positive early impressions through hard work, being sensitive in managing micro-political tensions (Pillen et al., 2015) and contributing to wider-school activities in order to achieve broader recognition and validation.

Belonging is thus a complex and multi-faceted web of processes that are embedded in the social and professional milieux of the departments and schools in which student teachers are placed. While many studies emphasise the importance to learning and development of the relationship between mentor and student teacher, this research also highlights the significant role of the subject department and of broader whole-school processes in shaping what is possible for students (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2004(a); Hodkinson et al., 2004(b)). In departments with strong relational dispositions, both working and social spaces are used purposefully to build and sustain the interpersonal bonds that facilitate positive professional practices. Moreover, where collegial relations are warm and welcoming, student teachers can quickly feel like one of the family, overcoming some of their initial vulnerabilities as newcomer (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002) or guest (Johnston, 2016a). These social bonds enable them to settle in more securely, concentrating in a more focused way on the activities they have to learn in order to become validated as potential members of the profession. In some particularly generous departments, indeed, such validation was an unconditional aspect of the moral contract they entered into with their students (McNally, 2006); students were accepted as a valid member of the team right from the start and were expected to grow into successful colleagues under their supportive tutelage. In departments and schools where teachers took a genuine interest in one another as individuals, and developed relations of trust and respect, relational bonds

between the student teacher and the placement were further intensified. In such conditions, students felt more able to ask questions, seek feedback, contribute ideas and take risks, in doing so becoming more confident in their own developing abilities and building greater commitment to the purposes of the school. The achievement of belonging (Bell, 1999; May, 2011) is thus intimately connected to the social relations in evidence within a school.

But it is also clear that the building of a sense of belonging to department and school involves students in agentic action, a process of developing professional agency (Turnbull, 2005). The decisions they make as regards the nature of their participation on placement become important elements of the affordances available to them. For example, by being proactive in looking for opportunities to support colleagues in a range of ways (taking classes, marking work, preparing lesson plans and materials), they found host teachers more inclined to get involved in supporting their development (observing lessons, giving feedback, sharing resources). In widening their presence beyond the department by choosing to engage in extra-curricular activities, there was evidence that the possibilities for unexpected learning were enhanced, further reinforcing feelings of belonging to the school and enhancing motivation to succeed. Thus by investing emotionally (Day et al., 2005; Day et al., 2006) in their placement, students often found their efforts returned in full. Developing a sense of belonging has a deeply emotional character that locates it deep in the core of the teacher's sense of self (Zembylas, 2004), intimately connected to values of caring and concern for others (Nias, 1996). However, the individual sense of belonging emerges in relational interdependence with the social context in which the individual participates (Billett, 2008, Billett, 2009), working in interplay to shape the particular experiences of belonging that individuals themselves contribute to.

There are a number of implications for all those involved in supporting student teachers' development on placement. For departments and schools, there are issues around the kind of relationships that can be built between teachers, student teachers and pupils to enable a more family-like ethos to be created, similar to Ussher's (2010) notion of a 'learning village' (p103) where human contact is based on notions of trust, involvement and mutual value. This will involve consideration of the physical organisation of social spaces in relation to working contexts and the encouragement of senior managements to make constructive collegial relationships an important professional development aim. University faculties could also help by encouraging students to see the task of becoming a teacher as involving the development not only of appropriate classroom skills and strategies, but also of effective ways of working with others (staff colleagues and pupils alike) in order to develop – and contribute to - a sense of belonging to a socially skilled, inclusive school (Graham & Roberts, 2007). Being proactive in identifying and seeking out opportunities for learning, in the process contributing positively and purposefully to the context that one participates in, is therefore a key challenge for future teachers and for those who work with them to facilitate the challenge.

Those charged with the responsibility for nurturing the professional development opportunities of the next generation of teachers might do well to consider ways of promoting the benefits of a positive sense of belonging. It is hoped that this article is a positive contribution to such attempts.

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