

**The 'Three Hats' of Student Teacher Identity:  
Learning opportunities in employment-based  
ITE in Wales**

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**Abstract**

The success of student teachers studying on employment-based Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes partly depends on a synthesis of the influence of theoretical university inputs and professional standards with the specific, local requirements of the schools where they are employed. Improving the quality of student teacher learning, therefore, requires investigation of the kinds of learning taking place and how, if at all, this learning is influenced by individual school contexts. I carried out a small-scale study over six months in 2015 looking at what and how student teachers were learning on an employment-based programme of ITE and the extent to which this learning was influenced by variations in schools' socio-cultural and historical context. Given the focus on socio-cultural and historical factors, Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) (Engeström, 1999) was used as an analytical lens through which to interpret and understand the data collected. The study, based on pragmatic qualitative and social constructionist approaches, involved a group of student teachers and school staff supporting them (n=4). Surveys and individual interviews were undertaken, coded and analysed using a thematic analysis, and conclusions were drawn, based on abductive reasoning. The study suggested that two main types of learning seemed to be taking place, the first related to learning how to be an effective teacher and the second related to the development of various professional identities, and the involvement of other professionals in student teacher activity. Tensions arising from the socio-cultural and historical context of the school led to a negotiation of space to learn and an elevation of student teachers' professional legitimacy and confidence. Finally, the study concludes with a small number of recommendations that could be applied to programmes of employment-based ITE and more traditional forms of ITE more generally, to improve the quality and efficacy of student teacher learning.

**Keywords**

abduction; activity theory; case study; employment-based learning; initial teacher education; mentoring; professional learning; qualitative research; relational agency; teacher identity.

**Introduction**

It is axiomatic in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) that variations in student teachers' experience in school can affect how they learn. In 2015, as the programme manager for a small programme of employment-based ITE in Wales, I undertook a six-month investigation into two student teachers' learning whilst they were employed in secondary schools, as the basis for a Level 7 dissertation, and with a view to using the insights that arose as a basis for on-going programme improvement. The ITE programme comprised three types of learning and teaching input; inputs by university tutors and programme staff, student teacher reflection and self-study, and in-school support by a mentor. Student teachers were generally new graduates on the programme, aged in their early 20s, with little or no experience of the world of work or professional development. Their work on this programme therefore generally constituted their first employed post. Programme quality assurance required collaboration over extensive geographical areas of up to 150 miles from the university campus and the employment-based nature of the programme meant that schools and mentors had greater potential than HEI staff to exert an influence over the learning of student teachers.

**Citation**

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The study was planned to fulfil two aims, namely the identification of the extent to which student teachers were learning whilst 'on the job', and identifying which factors affected this. Whilst focused on the employment-based sector, this study had the potential to bring new insight to the learning of student teachers on fee-paying, more traditional ITE programmes, whilst on placement. The study focused on two main research questions:

1. What and how are student teachers learning on an employment-based programme of ITE?
2. To what extent is the learning that takes place influenced by variations in schools' socio-cultural and historical context?

The objectives of the study were:

1. Build up a picture of the workplace.
2. Understand what student teachers do and how they are supported.
3. Understand the rationale behind, and the objectives for, that activity and support, as well as the tools used.

### **Conceptual Framework and Literature Review**

In order to work with the first research question, it is important to understand what the literature says about types of professional learning more generally, and in particular learning as it relates to ITE. Eraut (2004:249) argued that professional learning is complex, situational and can be 'codified' (facts stored and recalled as facts) or 'tacit' (knowledge stored and recalled as practice or the application of knowledge to practice). Mimicry of others' activity leads to 'conservatism' and assumes that novices have nothing of their own to contribute to the professional context. Structured activity, in a variety of contexts, led by a mentor well-versed in how professionals develop, can help avoid mimicry and 'conservatism'. By contrast, Lave and Wenger (1999:23) have argued that novice professionals form part of a 'Community of Practice', where learning by the novice takes the form of 'legitimate peripheral participation'. For Eraut, therefore, professional legitimacy is obtained through the appropriate selection and application of tacit knowledge to a given situation. For Lave and Wenger, it comes about as a result of membership of the Community of Practice. Internationally, models of ITE vary from acquisition models (Hodkinson and Hodkinson 2003:3) such as in Japan (Lamie, 2006) where learning focuses on filling the learner with knowledge deemed previously absent, to participation models (Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2003:3) such as in Netherlands, where learning whilst doing is more prevalent (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2015). Wales sat somewhere between the two in 2015. Location affected the influence of different agents over students' learning and location was variable, therefore learning opportunities also varied, making the subjective experience of individuals meaningful and valuable.

In addressing schools' own context as noted in the second research question a small number of key points present themselves. First of all, as at 2015, ITE in Wales relied on an ability to synthesise school-based practicum, with the homogenising influence of professional standards (Great Britain, National Assembly for Wales, 2009). This learning is not without challenge. Not only is there the potential for these two factors to diverge, the research has shown that the deepest forms of professional learning are contingent on an ability to focus on the development of the professional self, one's ethos and identity (Shulman, 2005). Beijaard, Verloop and Vermunt (2000) have argued that a teacher's identity shifts over time, but in a way that is not uniform. They note also that it depends on the interaction of areas of a teacher's experience and knowledge. This, they argue, can affect how a teacher meshes theory and practice. Arguably, this echoes the way that tacit knowledge must be applied in professional learning, according to Eraut (2004). The difficulty of defining identity has been echoed similarly by Beauchamp and Thomas (2009), who also noted the impact this has on the analysis of how teachers integrate a range of influences in their practice. In considering the literature as a corpus,

Beijaard, Meijer and Verloop (2004) have similarly confirmed the complexity and lack of uniformity concerning the concept of identity, noting that the literature that exists tends to be more explicit where accounts of the formation of professional identity are concerned.

Shulman's (2005) work is based on social learning theory, where context and environmental factors impact on the learning of professionals. In seeking to understand the contextual and environmental influences over student teachers' learning, an analytical lens was found in Third Generation Cultural and Historical Activity Theory (CHAT or CHAT 3G) as expounded by Engeström (2007). This approach takes inspiration from the work of Douglas (2014) and means several things for this study. First, this requires an examination of the 'subjects' (members) of the activity system, their 'objects' (perceived intentions), 'tools' (methods) and the 'rules' governing the activity of the 'community' of subjects involved in an activity (Douglas, 2014:40). Second, objects may be 'convergent' or 'divergent' (Douglas, 2014:34-35), they may be 'explicit' or 'tacit' (Douglas, 2014:35), the researcher has to listen hard, undertaking extensive dialogue with participants in order to uncover all objects. Where tools are used indiscriminately, this can reinforce Eraut's (2004:256) 'conservatism'. Third, the use of tools, and the divergence of objects can create tension in the system, leading to 'expansive learning' (Engeström, 2007:24-25), which is somewhat like the 'participation' learning of Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2003:3), but goes further, as outlined by Engeström (2000), to describe the dynamic processes by which this may happen in terms of activities, subjects, objects and tools. All of this produces a picture of activity born of dependence and interdependence between different subjects. Differing objects drive a divergent use of a variety of tools in a way dictated by the culture and history in an activity system, and systematically creating new cultures and new history. Whilst CHAT has its critics, for instance, in its failure to acknowledge tensions created 'vertically' (Douglas, 2014:43), it is possible to mitigate against such criticism, as was the case in the present study. Tensions arising out of managerial structures could be investigated through careful planning of the data collection methods. It is also worth noting that I was aiming to use CHAT for the purposes to which it is arguably best suited (Douglas, 2014:43; Engeström, 2001: 142), analysis in isolated, well-defined professional contexts. Furthermore, there was an express acceptance that CHAT was acting as a heuristic to describe learning through its purpose and context; it became an analytical lens that helps to establish 'strength' and 'resonance' with the reader (Mellor, 2001:474-479).

### **Methodology, Philosophy and Ethics**

Mellor (2001) argues that establishing 'resonance' (Mellor, 2001:474-479) with the audience is important when conducting research. With a view to establishing resonance with the reader, therefore, a few words about philosophy, methodology and methods are necessary at this juncture. Philosophically, the stance behind this study was a combination of qualitative pragmatism (Biesta and Burbules, 2004: 9), or 'romanticism' (Alvesson, 2001:13-14), and social constructionism (Galbin, 2014: 83). The study aimed to uncover what was useable but acknowledged that knowledge does not just exist, it is created, woven out of the interactions between individuals, which militates in favour of a tentative interpretation of the data when arriving at conclusions. As noted in *Table 1* below, a form of reasoning that resisted theory generation or theory testing was needed. This study was about presenting the case examined in a new light and identifying points of interest that may give rise to further study.

**Table 1.** The Methodological Impact of Key Ideas in the Study.

Idea	Impact
The mission to understand learning.	Requires a qualitative approach, rooted in subjective experience.
Qualitative pragmatism.	Requires a methodology that is rooted in experiential data.
Social constructionism.	Requires a methodology that examines localised phenomena and accepts the impact of the researcher's participation in the creation of any 'truths' arising from the study.
Tentative conclusions, resisting theory generation, or theory testing.	Requires a form of reasoning that is based on suppositions rather than causal links to theory.

A case study approach was chosen, seeking to understand the case in light of the concepts already presented (Scott and Morrison, 2006:17-22). The tentative, small-scale, reflexive nature of the study made theory-testing extremely difficult to make credible, it would risk having no 'resonance' (Mellor, 2001:471-479). In addition, generating theory was too adventurous with a small cohort of participants. These two outcomes excluded recourse to induction or deduction as a mode of reasoning in this study and pointed to what Lipscomb (2012:246-247) has called 'the creative, imaginative or insightful moment in which understanding is grasped...or is thought to be grasped', thereby mitigating in favour of abductive reasoning.

Ethically, the study complied with BERA's (2011) 'Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research', having regard also to Macpherson and Tyson's (2008:74-75; 78) 'meta-ethics' and the 'Five C's'. This was about acting ethically before, during and after the research. Some key points are worthy of individual mention here. Not all those who were invited to take part gave their consent. On a small programme of ITE, this reduced the available pool of participants even further, inviting caution in how the results are interpreted. As noted by Malone (2003:797), the research was taking place in the researcher's own 'backyard', possibly giving rise to an unacceptable imbalance of power between the researcher and participants. To mitigate against this, participant information documents contained a statement expressly noting that the study does not form part of any evaluative activity relating to either student teacher assessment or mentor or school quality assurance. This was further reinforced by constant reminders throughout interactions between the researcher and the participants. Finally, the Welsh language dimension meant that all documentation, surveys and interviews had to be available in both English and Welsh. This is because the programme was committed to bilingualism, in keeping with Welsh Government policy, and because for some participants, Welsh may have been their first language. Obligatory recourse to English for the purposes of the study may have further skewed any balance of power between the researcher and the participants. This ethical consideration also militated in favour of a thematic approach to analysis, because a discourse analysis may have been undermined by the different ways in which concepts are expressed in the two languages.

### **Methods, Data and Findings**

Participants comprised two student teachers from a STEM and non-STEM background, a mentor, and a head teacher (n=4) covering a small range of schools. Data were collected via a survey, a follow-up, 30-minute semi-structured interview and from programme documentation. Questions in the survey focused on who was responsible for a range of activities such as student teacher induction, advice on planning, assessment and classroom behaviour. The survey also asked participants to identify whether activities were pre-arranged, planned or happenstance, who else was involved in the activity, which materials were used and the context in which the activity took place. This method was chosen as a reliable way of gathering initial information quickly as a basis for further, more focused discussion

in a semi-structured interview. Thus, ethically, it was felt that this was a better use of participants' rather limited time.

Questions in the semi-structured interview included those about:

- School context.
- The role of ITE in the school.
- The balance of activities undertaken as a member of school staff generally, and as someone involved in ITE.
- What learning looked like in the participants' own opinions.
- Facilitating and restricting factors in learning.
- Sources of further help and guidance.
- The role of campus-based/academic work and everyday activity.
- The learning environment; openness to mistakes, levels of discretion, types of classes taught etc.
- Where and how student teachers think reflection takes place.
- How participants think learning is structured.
- Any tensions in the course of the day.

A semi-structured interview was deemed more efficient than an unstructured interview, but equally more flexible than a structured interview where participants' views may be skewed by my choice of questions, thus undermining the valuable subjective element of the study. Interviews and surveys were not carried out in order to triangulate participants' contributions, but in order to provide a basis for valid statements of the kinds of learning that were taking place in each context. Data were cut into utterances, which were then open-coded as first-generation codes. These were reduced to five second-generation codes, and subsequently cross-referenced with axial coding based on the main elements of CHAT ('Subject', 'Object', 'Tools', 'Community' and 'Division of Labour' and 'Rules') as third-generation codes.

There were high levels of consistency in the data. They all tended to agree, for instance, that employment-based student teachers are teachers with a mission to develop and learn on the job, rather than students or learners in the acquisition-based sense of learning (Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2003:3). Students were less cognisant than non-students as to the role of academic, university work in their daily development. This may have been a weakness in the data collection methods but may point to a more general trend about student teachers' attitudes towards academic study as part of teacher development. If accurate, this is particularly pertinent to the development of ITE, both in Wales, where ITE reforms require a focus on research-informed learning (Furlong, 2015), driven by universities, and in England, where the focus since 2010 has prioritised school-led models of initial teacher education, with implications for the role of universities and theory-based, academic input (Childs, 2013).

We now turn to the three objectives in this study. The context – relating to the second generation codes 'Those Involved in Learning', 'Causes/Enablers of Learning' and 'Obstacles to Learning' - appeared to be complex and involved a variety of people, resources, places, purposes and activities. In CHAT terms there were a variety of objects in play, which participants may have seen as facilitating learning, or as obstacles to it. Student teachers were 'joining a moving train' and had to negotiate their way through the maze of rules, tools, communities and objects. Fitting into the system and building relationships was something that impacted on high-quality teaching and was something they were conscious needed effort to develop.

'I went on a...course last week, and, with.... long-standing teachers... I saw they were on the course and thought, "Oh no, this is going to be really awkward." because...a couple of times they've ignored me in the corridor and no smile back, kind of thing. And by the end of the training course, because they'd actually talked to me and asked me what I was doing, they'd seen, over the past ten months that we were always the.....first to get to school and the last to leave, that, that image had kind of changed a lot'

(Student teacher).

*Student Teacher Interview Extract*

As for the second objective, corresponding to the second generation codes, 'Those Involved in Learning', 'Pathways to Learning', 'Enablers of Learning' and 'Obstacles to Learning' - student teachers were involved in a substantial range of activities, whereby learning could arise from preparation for the activity, undertaking the activity or seeing the outcome/receiving feedback, or reflection on the outcome or feedback. Support was copious, the communities were numerous and large, as was the potential pool of tools through which activity was mediated. Moreover, the way in which the tools were used depended on the objects of those within the activity system. Taking this point in conjunction with an understanding of the context, it can be suggested from the findings that learning opportunities were varied and numerous, but that they, along with the tools, had to be selected with care. Learning was dependent upon the ability to do this.

Not only were participants' objectives and tools numerous, there were links between them. For instance, when observing a lesson, student teachers could participate passively, as observers, actively, as joint-teachers, or take a stance somewhere in between. There is a tentative similarity here between this context and acquisition and participation learning (Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2003:3). However, in each stance, there is an outcome in terms of discretion and risk, both being directly proportionate to each other. Where discretion for student teachers is high, they have a chance to learn something new, and to feed back into the activity system. However, they may also make a mistake that impacts directly on learner outcomes. This tension, arising out of different objects, has the potential to produce 'expansive learning' (Engeström, 2007:24-25), but comes at a potential price, given the performativity agenda in schools (Downes, 1996:84-85). Whilst it would be easy to judge schools who do not permit student teachers unfettered access to exam classes, such decisions were clearly made by schools, having regard to the need to balance risk and reward. Student teachers also showed that they feel the tension in terms of balancing competing identities and identifying how to make decisions. Learning in context, therefore, is about balancing identities to make the right decisions to learn from:

'I think, the ethos at the school, certainly with my mentor... is I have made some mistakes, and, and, they've sort of been OK with it, but, you know if it were to repeat, or if it was something that was really serious...well, yeah you can't just palm it off as being a mistake...'

(Student teacher).

*Student Teacher Interview Extract*

As to the final objective, student teachers were supported by mentors, wider staff in school, other student teachers and stakeholders, which were identified via the second-generation codes, 'Those Involved in Learning', 'Pathways to Learning', 'Enablers of Learning', and 'Obstacles to Learning'. In each activity, student teachers' ability to perform, and the way that they learned, were determined by the objects of those supporting them, which in turn affected the way tools were used, how rules were observed and how the community at large was perceived by the student teacher. All of this combined to influence student teachers' perception of the ease with which they could improve in any given activity and as teachers in general, thereby influencing their perception of the context in which they are operating, the teaching profession in general and themselves in particular. As such, therefore, and related to the final second-generation code 'Types of Learning', this study identified

two possible types of learning. General learning related to the day-to-day acts of being a teacher and improving as a teacher. There also existed, however, special forms of learning, which influenced a student teacher's identity and ethos. It is these special forms of learning that will form the focus of further discussion.

### **Discussion – Special forms of learning; using identities and 'relational agency'**

As suggested above, 'expansive learning' (Engeström, 2007:24-25) is perhaps not merely a good in itself, because it comes with a risk. The balance of risk and reward was keenly felt by all participants in this study but tends to go unmentioned in the literature, albeit that it is implied and inherent in the 'continuity displacement' mentioned by Lave and Wenger (1999:31) and lends high stakes to the questions of teacher identity and student teacher decision-making. One of the ways that participants tried to strike a balance between risk and reward was the way in which identities were used as an indicator of the best course of action by student teachers. One student teacher felt they wore three 'hats' – those of teacher, trainee and student. The more discretion afforded the participant, the closer to the 'student' end of the spectrum the student teacher was, and the greater the potential for 'expansive learning' (Engeström, 2007:24-25). On occasions, the student teachers were merely expected to do as instructed in order to 'get the job done', meaning that they wore the 'hat' of teacher, but had less space to question or reflect, giving rise to less (or indeed no) 'expansive learning' (Engeström, 2007:24-25). This description further adds to the sense that student teachers have to alternate their identity according to context, place and time, to negotiate space to be both teachers and learners and is resonant with Beijaard, Verloop and Vermunt's (2000) comments about the effect of identity on how a teacher meshes theory and practice in their day-to-day activity. There was also evidence that student teachers managed 'continuity displacement' (Lave and Wenger, 1999:31) by involving more experienced members of staff, not as a safety net in the event of errors, but in order to lend professional status to the student teachers' novice attempts at professional activity in a manner that is akin to Anne Edwards' (2005:179) references to 'relational agency'.

'Expansive learning' (Engeström, 2007:24-25), therefore, takes not only effort, but also judgment and collaboration. Student teachers seemed to refer to, and defer to others, being sensitive to the history of the context they were joining, understanding the prevailing rationales and objects in the activity system in which they were working, to choose the appropriate course of action and to learn from it. Schools facilitated this by understanding student teachers' needs, and being open to mistakes within reason, exposing student teachers to excellent practice and sources of expertise, and cloaking their activities with professional legitimacy via collaboration in the form of 'relational agency' Edwards' (2005:179).

In both of these instances of special learning, there seemed to be no clear line between being a novice, and being a confident expert, and decisions always bore risk. Student teachers and mentors had to work with, and accept, imperfection and its potential consequences. It appeared from the data that this acceptance raised student teacher confidence that they could make decisions that went wrong; in other words, their objects are a valid part of the activity system, perhaps, because learning is seen as a valid part of their work in schools.

### **Conclusion**

In returning to the research questions, therefore, it is possible to draw the following conclusions from this study:

#### *1. What and how are student teachers learning on an employment-based programme of ITE?*

The data suggested that learning was taking place in more general and special terms, the latter being negotiating space to learn by adopting different identities and the use of 'relational agency' (Edwards, 2005:179) to enhance one's confidence and status where need be. As such, this is highly resonant

with concepts of participation learning (Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2003:3) and, being situational, and therefore variable, requires schools and mentors to understand this form of professional learning, acting as learners themselves, in order to facilitate it (Eraut, 2004:249).

2. *To what extent is the learning that takes place influenced by variations in schools' socio-cultural and historical context?*

Socio-cultural and historical context impact on what and how student teachers learn, arising from tension resulting from the interaction of different subjects working towards different objects in the same activity system, leading thus to 'expansive learning' (Engeström, 2007:24-25). Specifically, the tension arises from the desire by subjects in the activity system to balance risk and reward. Both general and specific forms of learning are based on friction in professional relationships where power is not evenly balanced to incite negotiation, challenge and support. This has implications for the impact of quality assurance activity, both on employment-based programmes of ITE and, more broadly, in any instance of professional learning where novice activity is overseen by an in-practice mentor or guide. Essentially, the data suggests, inter alia, that:

1. Developing as a professional is not just the result of inputs, but also of metacognition; student teachers need to be taught explicitly about the impact of activity systems on their learning and adjust their attitudes to learning accordingly.
2. This metacognition equally applies to the mentor. An ability to 'smooth the way' during the student teacher's learning journey depends on an understanding both that learning is situational, and that there are methods in which student teachers can be encouraged to think about this, in order to support professional learning. This needs to be considered as a key part of mentor training and development.
3. Leaders in the workplace need to commit not only to the idea of professional development, but also to the challenges it poses, including challenges to existing culture and norms, in order to get the most out of the experience, for all parties involved. ITE partnerships should be careful in the choice of school partners to ensure not only that partner schools are high-quality in terms of learner outcomes, but that school leaders understand the challenges and have adequate resolve to work with them, to the benefit of student teachers and, ultimately, the learners in their schools. As such, partner schools need to commit to ITE as one of the core factors advancing school improvement, deserving long-term investment.

The study had to omit several points, such as the possible inclusion of university tutors, or a wider examination of theories of professional learning. Later, more detailed, studies would allow for further testing of the ideas that the abductive analysis drew out, and the inclusion of a larger cohort of participants. A longitudinal study might follow student teachers into their careers, to understand how their own experience filters into their own support of student teachers in future. Whatever the shortcomings of this study were, however, there is arguably still value for all those involved in teacher education in general and employment-based teacher education in particular in understanding how forms of learning are based on tension in relationships where there is a power imbalance. Furthermore, understanding the ways in which this, in turn, incites negotiation, challenge and support, can help with the tricky task of taking a sensitive approach to 'normalising' how agents deal with tension in the activity system to impact positively on the pace and quality of professional learning.

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