Without the Golden Handcuffs: Identity and belonging in challenging schools

Jo McIntyre

University of Nottingham


Context

This paper is based on my doctoral research which investigates the reasons why twenty long-serving secondary school teachers have embedded their professional lives within three ‘challenging’ urban schools in the United Kingdom.

Teachers in these schools have to deal with negative policy and media portrayals. In the United Kingdom, the relationship between educational policy and media has many dimensions; the media can function as a critique of government policy, yet the media can also be used by government to put a particular spin on policy. Whilst policy makers are reliant upon the media to act as a main means of communication with the electorate (Levin 2004), the media is dependent upon policy-makers for sources of news. Thompson (2004) notes that educational stories have a high priority within British media texts and that media and policy-makers have become embroiled to the extent that there exists a ‘coercive culture of collaboration’ within the UK (2004: 303). As a result there are some ‘givens’ within the discourse of both policy and media texts.

One ‘given’ is the discourse of ‘challenging circumstances’ in which poor examination performances are equated with failing schools and teachers; within this discourse other measures of success are not valorised. The response within the media is to portray schools such as these in stereotypes of hostile, bleak places where failing students are taught by failing teachers. The current policy solution to the problem of failing schools is to condemn, close and then open Academies in their place and/or to place them in the category of ‘National Challenge’. A second discourse is that of teacher ‘performance management’, according to government policy a teacher’s performance can be measured by setting targets such as pupil examination results and can be rewarded by movement up the pay scale by meeting externally imposed standards (TDA 2007). The media response is the publication of news stories about parents having the power to ‘out’ teachers who are not performing:

Parents are to be given powers to identify weak teachers and seek their removal from schools after critics said a series of initiatives had failed to break the cycle of failing schools.

(Preston 2005)
Such depictions feed into increasing problems associated with attracting, and more specifically, retaining teachers to such schools as evidenced by the recent government ‘golden handcuff’ policy initiative, where teachers in National Challenge schools are to be given a £10,000 payment for three years service (DCSF 2009).

My own experience of teaching in a ‘challenging’ school forced me to question both media depiction and policy responses. My experience challenges the overwhelmingly negative portrayals of lives lived in such schools. Rather than seek solutions to the problem of teacher attrition in the discourse ‘givens’ of measurability and standards, I turn to the voices of long-serving teachers and find possible solutions in their accounts of their working lives. In this I question the model of teacher identity enacted in the media and policy discourse where professionalism can be reduced to a set of individual standards and functions. The main motivation for my study was to explore what had motivated a sample of twenty long-serving teachers – those who had been in the same school for twenty years or more – to stay in schools facing ‘challenging circumstances’ and serving ‘disadvantaged communities’. Analysis of my data uncovered three macro-themes emerging from their interview-conversations; these themes demonstrated the ways in which individuals and communities are linked through relational ties, locational ties and ties of shared values. This paper will explore the ways in which one of the macro-themes, relational ties, has been important in motivating the long-serving teachers to stay.

The schools

The data for the research project are derived from three schools within one Local Authority in the Midlands. I have chosen to call the schools The Bernard L Stone School; Joseph Moore School and Thomas Tunney. The three schools serve communities which are located within socially deprived areas and are typically depicted in the media in this way:

…the daily problems inevitably reflect the social deprivation of the local community. On the day or our visit, (HEADTEACHER) had excluded a boy for 25 days for assaulting a teacher, while the same morning a stolen car (admittedly not taken by pupils from the school) had been driven at high speed around the school perimeter, providing an entertaining distraction for his youngsters. Burnt-out vehicles are regularly dumped on the school premises and litter blows around the playgrounds.

(Smithers 2003)

Meanwhile each of the schools has at one time or other been judged by the Government-run, Ofsted, to have been in ‘serious weaknesses’ or ‘in special measures’ and were, at the time of the research, in the early stages of being redesignated as ‘Academies’. In spite of the negative portrayals each of the three schools in the study is characterised by stability in its staffing. A large number of the teachers have worked there for most or all of their career. I was able to create a
sample of twenty teachers (eleven men and nine women) whose years of experience within inner-city education collectively totals 614 years.

**Methodology**

The importance of locating teacher voice within these contexts was a key factor in the choice of life-history interviews used in this study. In-depth semi-structured interviews with long-serving teachers in the three schools generated privileged data. Qualitative interviews were chosen as an appropriate method for this research because they offer an opportunity to discover aspects of a policy-relevant issue or problem that could not have been predicted at the outset of a study and the flexibility to pursue these leads once identified.

(Murphy and Dingwall 2003: 101)

The “looser” structure of semi-structured interviews afforded the interviewee the opportunity to reflect on events and choices made in their recollections of their career histories, corresponding to Fontana and Frey’s concept that “interview participants are ‘actively’ constructing knowledge around questions and responses” (2000: 647). The purpose of the interview was not to generate “correct” answers or elicit a body of facts. Rather it was to enable participants to “actively construct their social worlds” (Silverman 1993: 91) and attempt to “understand themes of the lived everyday world from the subjects’ own perspectives” (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009: 27).

The interviews were taped and transcribed and the interviewees were given transcripts of the interviews for verification. In order to preserve the anonymity of the respondents, the interview data was analysed vertically and horizontally (Kelchtermans and Ballet 1999). Following Kvale and Brinkman (2009), an inductive analysis of the dataset was undertaken. Emerging themes were compared and categorised, and subsequently confirmed or modified following coding of the data (using Nvivo).

As might be expected from conversations about an individual’s career some questions/prompts had deeper significance than others and these varied from participant to participant. The interview conversation for some participants became a vehicle for evoking what Goodson et al (2006) refer to as “social nostalgia” where memories of events in their professional lives were linked with home, family and the school community.

These social memories were grouped together under the macro-theme of relational ties during the process of categorising the emerging themes from the data. This macro-theme is made up of three strands. The first comprises themes that draw on ‘relationships originating in school’; the second is made up of themes which ‘extend the family’; the third encompasses themes relating to relationships which extend ‘beyond the school gates’.
Identity and community

Over time these teachers have had opportunities to reflect upon the processes of identification with a body of people to whom they feel a sense of alignment, loyalty and belonging.

_There is a family feeling in schools like this. (Grace)_

The school has provided a locus for identity formation (and re-formation).

_I suppose it has just shaped everything that I am really. (Grant)_

A key feature of this study is the role that relationships have played in this identity (re-) formation. This term ‘identity’ is a contentious one (Hall 2000) and so for reasons of brevity, I draw on Benwell and Stokoe’s definition:

Generally, we understand the term ‘identity’ in its broadest sense, in terms of who people are to each other. (Benwell and Stokoe: 2006:6)

This allows for an understanding of the pivotal role relationships play in identity construction and formation which in turn supports Sikes’ observation that “teaching is intensely personal and relationship based” (1999: 106).

The interview prompts were generic; for example I asked about memories of ‘highs’ and ‘lows’ of their working lives. It was interesting to note the prominence of personal and professional relationships within the discourse of these interview conversations. Kelchtermans explains that identity is not a static notion and that identity formation is part of an ‘ongoing process’, claiming that this identity construction or process of ‘self-understanding’ results from a range of personal and professional contexts (2006:10).

This moves the individual from a sense of the ‘I’ to ‘sedimentation of the we’ (Butler 1993:105). Through this metaphor of ‘sedimentation’, as different elements of the I ‘settle’ to consolidate bodies or groups of people that are ‘phantasmatic efforts of alignments’ (Butler 1993:105), emerges the notion of an organic process of community. The notion of community is contestable. It has been adopted by the effective schools movement who use the term ‘collegiality’ to impose professional contexts for teachers to work together (typical mechanisms include whole-school targets, enforced team teaching and coaching). These are enacted through a vision of the school as a ‘professional community’ where relationships are largely based on professional rather than personal ties (cf Fullan 2001; Hargreaves, D.H.1995). Such mechanisms have been described as a form of ‘imposed collegiality’ (Little and McLaughlin 1993) or ‘contrived collegiality’ (Hargreaves and Dawe 1990).

Tonnies developed the theory of ‘gemeinschaft’ and ‘gesellschafter’ to describe qualities of human relationships and interactions. For Tonnies the effective school

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model of a professional school community represents a shift towards gesellschaft because of the imposition of business models of performativity and accountability (Merz and Furman 1997). In contrast, depictions of schools where relationships are ‘personal, committed and familial’ (Merz and Furman 1997:4) are representations of communities which are gemeinschaft in nature. An important distinction between gesellschaft and gemeinschaft is that the former is an imposed community whilst the latter evolved organically. For Tonnies, gemeinschaft is dependent upon relational ties, locational ties and ties of shared values. The emergence of ‘relational ties’ as an important theme within the interview conversations encouraged me to consider how Tonnies’ model of community could help explain why these long-serving teachers had stayed.

**Findings**

In what follows, the findings are presented in three sections. Firstly there is a discussion of the ways in which the participants have found that relationships which originate within school can help them form an attachment to the school. This is followed by a discussion of relational ties which have been collated under the heading ‘extending the family’. Finally issues to do with relationships which extend beyond the school gates are discussed. The ways in which these relational ties contribute to notions of Tonnes’ gemeinschaft view of community are explored in the conclusion.

**Relationships which originate within school**

*I don’t think I would still be here if it wasn’t for (a) the staff or some of the staff and (b) the fact that I know families because I have been here so long and I’ve got children in year 9 now whose parents I taught; that sort of thing keeps you going along the way because you know them all very well. (Lauren)*

One consequence of staying in the same school has been the opportunity to develop strong relationships amongst different groups within the school community. Some teachers explained that these relationships had been influential in shaping their perceptions of their identity both professionally and personally. As one teacher explained:

*I thought this is because I valued everybody and everything around me that I worked with and I felt that they had made me what I was. (Ava)*

According to Britzman,

*Teacher identity is not synonymous with the teacher’s role and function; role speaks to function whereas identity voices investments; that is, function refers to what one should do, and investments refer to what one feels. (Britzman, 1993:29)*

Ava’s explanation above illustrates the ways in which her investment in relationships within school had impacted upon her perceptions of her own identity construction, ‘they had made me what I was’.
In the next section of the paper, I explore different types of relationships that originated in the workplace beginning with an analysis of the teachers’ relationships with students, both past and present. The nature of these relationships appears to have a particularly important contribution to make to the processes of teacher identity formation.

**With students**

*They probably love you more than most people and this came out last week as well, when Ofsted were saying to me, “Children love it here”. They said that, “They love it here; they think the teachers are great”. And they are wandering around going “f-ing this” and “you're a bitch” and it’s not apparent in any way. Except we do know it don’t we? You do know it when they are saying it sometimes they just want to be close to somebody ...so I think as long as you can, you always have to be the grown up.* (Grace)

Teachers invest a great deal of psychic and physical energy into building relationships with the young people in their care, sometimes into being their significant ‘grown-up’. This is in spite of the seemingly incessant top-down pressures relating to their function which is increasingly outcome rather than relationally defined (Prosser 2006). The reasons for this investment are numerous. One consequence of establishing strong relationships with children in school is a greater sense of belonging to the community within and surrounding the school. As teachers spend time in schools developing existing relationships and building emerging relationships with new students, this sense of belonging is increased.

The data from the interview conversations are full of references to the ‘buzz’ teachers feel from working with students both in and out of the classroom. A number of teachers referred to the relationships forged with students over the years, describing events or occasions involving students as ‘highs’ in terms of their memories of their time in school.

*There’s too many [highs]. It’s all to do with enhancing the lives of children who you know wouldn’t have those opportunities.* (Lauren)

Others referred to the ways in which relationships with students had been strengthened through providing or taking a part in activities which they believed enriched children’s lives. They spoke about the pleasure derived from providing new experiences, for example organising trips and camps for the students.

*I can remember the first time I went out with the school trip, in the mini bus and we were going camping for the weekend up in the Peak District and they saw a waterfall and they all rushed over to one side of the bus and the bus nearly tipped over. But they’d never seen a waterfall before.* (Stewart)
Dean explained why being involved with special events such as concerts and productions had been so enjoyable: the satisfaction was derived from taking part in a shared experience that would have long-lasting happy memories for both children and staff.

And the performances that we did I used to love doing those. And you got such a lot out of the kids and that was a big highlight when the curtains closed on the first night and they were all so pleased with themselves. They’d got through the whole thing after all the rehearsals and all the pressure and the tension and we’d got through it on the first night and they’d realised that they’d done it. And there was always a huge cheer, a cheer of release and everybody was going round kissing and hugging each other. It was just great to see them succeed. And I’m sure a lot of them will remember that for the rest of their lives. (Dean)

This shared experience of life-changing events perhaps explains why for many teachers, these relationships had longevity continuing after the students had left school and become adults. Grant talked of relationships with members of the community that had been built because of these shared memories:

I’ve got someone coming round to do some plumbing work for me this week who is an ex-pupil and was actually in my first ever tutor group here. And I can ring them up and talk to them on the phone. They’ve got so many special memories of the place and speak very kindly about the people here and the care and support that they gave them when they were here and that’s great. (Grant)

Marilyn described the experience of attending the funeral of a former student. She remembered that many former students in the congregation had been pleased to see their old teachers there:

It was funny. It was like seeing old friends. It was almost like seeing your family that have grown up and I wish I could have a whole day asking them about what they were doing. I mean we always get a few back and we do see them around but it is a feeling of warmth. (Marilyn)

Rather than purely serving an altruistic purpose, these comments suggest that the relationships with students were as important to the teachers as they were to the students. The teachers derived pleasure from knowing that they had had an important role in the children’s lives that continued after they had left the school. Some talked about the pleasure derived from former students coming back and sharing the successes they had made of their lives. These correspond to what Lortie refers to as an ‘express gratitude’ reward (1975).

Unsurprisingly, and in similar ways to the primary teachers in Nias’ study (1989), these long serving secondary teachers ‘like children’ and received a great deal of professional and personal satisfaction from their work with children as ‘teaching met a felt-need to love and be loved’ (1989: 87):
It’s because they offer you so much love actually in the end don’t they and when you do get through it’s such a pleasure being with them and that’s a fact. (Grace)

It’s really hard to explain what it is about Bernard L Stone kids. They will come up and hug you sometimes or give you a kiss on the cheek. They are very tactile and they do look at you as a person you are not just a thing. (Marilyn)

For the teachers, such relationships provided ‘opportunities for personal growth’ (Nias1989:89). There were references to different ways in which their contact with students had deepened their understanding of people from very different life circumstances to their own. As a result they believed they had become more accepting and tolerant; they felt their world-view had been enlarged and that they had become better human beings as a result.

They also derived intellectual satisfaction from working with their students. For example, Grace described devising strategies for her students as both “challenging and rewarding” whilst Frank talked about investing “psychic energy” on “materials and the teaching strategies” and deriving “professional pride and intellectual pleasure” as a result. Other teachers found satisfaction in ‘seeing children make progress’ (Nias1989: 88): Kathryn from Bernard L Stone succinctly explained that the most rewarding aspects of her career had been, “seeing kids develop emotionally and academically”.

The relationships described above all seem indicative of the emotional connections made with the young people in their schools. These experiences challenge Hargreaves’ observation that secondary school teachers (and in particular mid-late teachers) have few emotional connections with their students (1999). Zembylas argues that emotion is not just located within the individual; rather it is constructed in social relationships and systems of values which come from families, cultures and school situation (2003:216).

Within the teachers’ interview conversations, there are references to providing a ‘system of values’ or moral guidance for their students. For example, providing role models for their students both in terms of academic endeavour and appropriate behaviour:

And we are an example to them that they won’t see anywhere else probably for the rest of their lives and they know that which also I find a bit sad for them. (Grace)

Some felt that the students were struggling to understand what was expected of them in school because of a lack of moral code in the home, usually because of a (perceived) lack of appropriate parenting skills.

In organizational professional communities, roles are clearly defined whereas in traditional social communities, relationships overlap and roles are diffuse (Merz and Furman 1997:16). These teachers have seen a shift in their relationships with students.
as their daily work has become more clearly defined and encompasses a more professionalised role. Consequently there are fewer contexts for conversations to occur between teachers and students where they can discuss issues associated with moral values outside planned lessons on personal, social development or citizenship. Judy echoes a common anxiety for the teachers in this study; namely that increased surveillance coupled with pressures to meet performance outcomes has led to a lack of opportunity for students to seek help and guidance in the ways they would have previously.

We started to lose a lot of the children who relied on teachers for moral guidance; they’d sit and chatter to you and they’d say “My dad was knocking my…” and you know they’d sit and chat but now you don’t have time to chat ... and that is something that’s changed much to the detriment of a lot of children whose parents don’t have the social skills or parenting skills to talk to them about you know just issues. You can’t sit and chatter about what happened on the news this week because you’ve got to get this done and some snoop might be coming in and checking where you are on the lesson plan so I think that has been bad news for the inner-city schools. (Judy)

The teachers talk about how relationships they have forged with their students have changed, especially because roles traditionally associated with parents/elders that they would have taken on in the past are under threat as their professional roles become increasingly governed by ‘function’ at the expense of the ‘identity’ in turn threatening investments and bonds with students and consequently the wider community (Britzman 1993).

Previously, students understood (albeit probably not consciously) that their teachers were ‘in loco parentis’, bringing with it a sense of security and trust that their teachers would understand them and their needs. Laurence explains how he views the part that teachers play in providing stability and a place of safety for the children:

(For) a lot of the kids that we have got, their biggest sense of security is what they get at school and I don’t know if I can rationalise the fact with myself or whatever but sometimes the kids kick off with us because they need to and it’s the only place that they can do it and feel safe. You know it’s their one chance of getting the attention from somebody who is not going to smack them or hit them or you know fall out greatly with them and lets face it everybody as they are growing up needs to kick off some time or other. There are very few people who don’t and in inner-city places it is more (so) than others and I think that what we have done is give the opportunity in a fairly safe and secure environment to test the limits to do this that or the other but to do that in a situation where they are safe. (Laurence)

Inculcating an appropriate ‘system of values’ (Zembylas 2003: 216) has been an important element of the work that these teachers have felt they have had to do,
largely because of a sense of instability amongst the communities surrounding the schools.

The communities that the schools serve are in a state of flux. They are partly populated by transient groups who for economic or social reasons are very mobile. Yet amongst this instability is a core of families who have lived in the areas for a long time and have known the individual school for generations. The personal relationships that more stable, traditional communities in past times could forge have been replaced as communities become more transient and as the world becomes more urbanised. Schools become the place where personal relationships based on notions of shared goals and belonging with like-minded people can emerge. They offer stability, set boundaries and are fixed points of reference. This is under threat as schools become places where teachers feel under pressure to be seen to be meeting externally imposed standards and competencies which are not relationally based.

**With colleagues**

Another recurring theme was the importance of the close relationships they had developed with their colleagues.

These relationships were functionally diverse. Most described friendships with colleagues that had evolved in the school over time. Although these relationships began in the workplace teachers often referred to ways in which they extended beyond school.

*People would go away on holiday together; people would socialise together or you would play in a cricket team or a football team. We had staff cricket and football; we had staff mixed hockey; we had staff playing football on a Friday night. There were a lot of social events going on and people got to know each other and support each other.* (Dean)

Little and McLaughlin describe the various ways in which teachers gravitate towards collegial groups that arise out of a range of relationships amongst different groups of people such as pastoral teams or curriculum groupings (1993). Hargreaves’ study of the emotional geographies of teachers’ relationships in school found that whilst informal relationships with colleagues “help build emotional and intellectual understanding… such friendships seem to be the exception rather than the norm” (Hargreaves 2001: 523). He found that, when they did exist, such relationships were not necessarily a good thing because they created “mutually affirming friendships for a few and a more distanced conflict-avoiding culture of friendliness or politeness for the rest” (2001:524). However for Hargreaves these relationships were viewed negatively when they were perceived to be obstacles impeding the route to school improvement.

Do informal friendships with colleagues have a place in a professional work-place setting? Nias et al value school workplaces where “colleagues behaved and reacted to
each other as persons rather than practitioners” (1989: 79). They emphasise that what seems to an outsider like inconsequential talk is actually ‘chat [which] is a high-level activity’ because such talk has important long-term implications for individuals experiencing a sense of attachment and affinity with a place. This ‘sense of attachment and affinity’ resonates with the data in my study which contain many references to the importance of friendships with other adults in school.

Nias et al also demonstrate how having a sense of shared values and vision, humour, and the importance of finding a common enemy contribute to this sense of attachment (1989). Dean explained that Bernard L Stone was often directed by the Local Authority to take in excluded students from other schools. Initially these children exhibited challenging behaviour and attitude, however, over time they began to fit in and accept the Bernard L Stone ethos. Dean took obvious pride in this as he depicted Bernard L Stone staff as one sharing the same vision and values. There are many references to the importance of humour in sustaining relationships amongst colleagues within the three schools. Judy referred to the importance of having opportunities to let off steam with colleagues as she described memories of “crying with laughter” with her friends during the school day at Thomas Tunney. Finally, for teachers working in urban schools in disadvantaged areas, there are many common enemies, the most prominent within the data being Ofsted. When faced with such an enemy, teachers talk about drawing on each other for support. James at Joseph Moore described how the friendship and support from other teachers in the school helped him to survive a difficult few months of prolonged scrutiny after an Ofsted inspector’s rating of his teaching competence.

Socialising out of school with work colleagues allows teachers to mix with a range of people regardless of their status within the workplace. This appeared to strengthen these relationships with the result that they found themselves working with a closely knit group of friends and belonging to a supportive network of colleagues with a wide range of experiences. Lauren explained how this helped her feel secure and supported in her work.

*That friendship, that working together, knowing that you’ve got support doesn’t matter what department they are in or what status they are in the school you know there’s people there who you can go to for absolutely anything.* (Lauren)

Laurence’s comments echoed many of the others in the sample. He talked in his interview of feeling valued and of a deep emotional connection with the people and the workplace:

*There is always a strong staff bond here ...I think that it might be worth looking at how people feel that the school treat them as an individual as a person and do they feel valued and whether this us against the rest of the world attitude that a lot of typical inner-city schools have is a thing that helps them to succeed. And the fact that they sometimes feel that they are part of a family and partners know other*
partners and they meet socially. And so if you go through a bad spell, people will kind of ease off a bit and take that time there and I think that if there is that... it is amazing how I repaid that over the years three or fourfold you know. If people kind of look after you when you are down then when you come back you feel as if you owe them something and I think that has always been one of the things about the school here. (Laurence)

However, Marilyn commented that such sociability wasn’t necessarily a feature of other schools she had been in. She developed this by stating that such social ‘togetherness’ might not be perceived as professional in ‘other schools’.

Recent policy initiatives and references which appear to prioritise professional relationships within schools have involved a form of metonymic substitution whereby individual teachers are in reality impersonalised. The ‘collegial school’ implies an environment where relationships are paramount but in actuality has come to be a metaphor for a strand of school improvement where collegiality is imposed and constructed top-down from the school management. Individual social actors within such a structure become less important as the ‘collegial school’ obfuscates their roles and contributions (Benwell and Stokoe 2006: 114). The version of a school community which links professional collegial relationships with corporate goals of improvement is a very different version of community which has emerged from this analysis where relationships which have evolved over time foster affinity and belonging to the schools.

One of the dangers of imposed collegiality is that individual enthusiasm and creativity can be stifled. Frank repeatedly referred to how the label of Special Measures had stifled creativity as teachers were pressured to prepare lessons using the same lesson formats and teach prescribed lesson content. He described how he survived this by reacting to those outsiders who were paid ‘in bucket loads’ to tell him what and how to teach.

You have to do your own thing ... you know you may be in an institution but ... I am finding ways of, yes, the humanity of it; being able to break out of the rigid compartments that the government with budgets and management structures and all of that... I am now overtly saying to people let’s do things differently, let’s enjoy things and there aren’t enough people saying this in teaching but I think there are more. I think people have had enough and you know we are quite bright and we are quite well educated and ... I want to be very proud of teaching. (Frank)

Frank in this is exhibiting what Huberman refers to as the characteristics of an ‘independent artisan’; Huberman challenges the notion that collegiality is a totally positive experience, he cautions that

the lure of a common mission ... of professional work planned, observed, and carried out in concert – can be a hazardous one... (1993: 13)
In contrast to structures that impose collegiality, Huberman argues that teachers working as ‘independent artisans’ inevitably seek out and collaborate with ‘peer artisans’ as a matter of course (rather than force) when they need clarification and support with making the appropriate steps forward with their craft. There are many examples within the data of individual teachers forging relationships with colleagues that could be viewed as measures which would fit within the ‘effective schools’ discourse. For example, Ava describes in detail the ways in which her and a colleague team-teach and are often used by the school to spotlight good practice when external visitors tour the school. Frank talks about the various ways in which he and his colleagues plan a range of activities and teaching approaches with the specific aim of raising student achievement. However these are relationships that have evolved naturally over time rather than the product of top-down imposed structures.

These relationships which have developed over time have helped the teachers form an attachment to the school which, as Laurence explains, is immensely rewarding.

*It is just that sense of belonging over time that is one of the highest points.*

(Laurence)

This ‘sense of belonging’ is strengthened by the fact that they entered the school as young inexperienced teachers and their professional and personal identity has evolved over the years within the workplace. Grant evoked a picture of colleagues sharing experiences which helped them to be nurtured and develop within the workplace; a process which he believed had very positive outcomes.

*The thing that has really made a difference to us and the achievement of the children here has been the development of the staff here, which is as strong as I’ve known it in 30 years. And they are people that have grown up within the school so that they work in a way which we know is successful and it’s just about building those relationships with the youngsters.*

(Grant)

So relationships with colleagues are formed and sustained in a variety of ways. The teachers described relationships with colleagues as ‘real’ friendships that sustain beyond the school gates and are built upon a mixture of personal and professional shared connections. These relationships help the individuals feel valued and a deep emotional connection both with other individuals and with the school community itself (they feel ‘part of Thomas Tunney’, for example). At times these connections have fostered a familial atmosphere for the teachers and students within the schools. It is this sense of family that I go on to explore in the next section.
Extending the family

Growing up

Some of the participants described being nurtured by workplace colleagues in terms of their growth as a teacher; Ava also described how these colleagues took on more traditional parenting roles when for example her head of department helped her to choose her first car. Similarly, Judy seemed to view her first headteacher as a father figure to whom she could turn for advice. A number of the teachers perceived that their relationships with colleagues had been strengthened because of the particularity of their school circumstances. Their years of teaching in an urban context entailed specific shared experiences and challenges that meant the teachers within the school believed they had formed closer bonds as a result. Grace described this as being part of a group of colleagues who had come together in the face of a common adversity:

There is an enormous family feeling and we are all very fond of each other ...because you do need each other for support because there is nothing like when somebody has been really ghastly to you is there? Knowing that everyone else is in the same boat and I think that that’s unique to city schools.

Others echoed Grace’s sentiments about the familial atmosphere within the workplace that appeared to be a consequence of these close relationships with colleagues who had bonded through these shared difficult experiences.

Some teachers also described the importance of knowing the families of the students they had taught over the years. This understanding of family networks and their students’ backgrounds helped them feel an increased attachment to the school. For Lauren, her in-depth knowledge of the family networks amongst the pupils and the close relationship with colleagues had helped motivate her to stay at Joseph L Moore.

Home- family/school-family

A number of the participants described how the school became an extension of their home or family life, especially during the early stages of their professional lives. Liz is typical of many of the participants in her explanation of how her work-place had provided the locus of her social life. For Liz, marriage to Rick was a way into the social networks associated with his workplace. She later also became a teacher in the same school. Liz went on to describe how the interweaving of home and school life went a stage further when she told me that her daughter had also for a time worked at Bernard L Stone. Two other teachers in the sample described how their home and work lives became intertwined through their daughters. Kathryn, like Liz, encouraged her daughter to work for a short amount of time in the same school. However unlike Kathryn, her daughter found the school to be a difficult place to work and left.

After experiencing dissatisfaction with her son’s experience at another school, Isabel explained that she decided to send her daughter to Bernard L Stone. At the time of the interview, this decision was having repercussions in Isabel’s career choices. She
reported experiencing anxieties about remaining in the school after the Academy opened but could not move until her daughter had finished at the school. Liz, Kathryn and Isabel illustrate how entrenched within the school culture their personal lives were in that they felt they could entrust members of their family to the workplace and its community.

For others, workplace relationships with colleagues and students seemed to supply a kind of proxy family unit. Marilyn explained why her home life and school life were so indistinguishable at times; she said that because she had no children of her own the school was ‘fulfilling some kind of need’.

Some participants talked about the ways in which events in their personal lives had consequences on their experiences within their work place; for example, if they were encountering problems at home this might have an impact upon their working lives. These difficult periods were sometimes made easier because they felt that they were coming to work with colleagues who were also supportive friends. For example, Laurence described candidly his wife coming to school to tell him that she had cancer; Laurence recalled in detail how the people in the workplace supported him though this and how this deepened his connection with the workplace as a result.

Workplaces such as these where teachers perceive their colleagues to be part of an extended family are not unusual. Achinstein’s description of Washington school is about a close knit community of like-minded individuals who have familial like ties with their colleagues (2002). Achinstein attributes the slow turn-over of staff to this sense of community. She warns that such collegiality comes with associated problems especially for newcomers or staff who might find themselves outside the shared values of such a community. Achinstein argues that a necessary component of collegiality is conflict and that professional communities which are based on strong emotional ties may not be equipped to manage conflict in a constructive manner as those involved react personally rather than professionally to the conflict. My study did not set out to focus on notions of familial ties, rather this was a theme which emerged from analysis of the data. A more sustained analysis of the communities in these three schools (which would necessitate a very different research project) might find similar concerns to those that Achinstein uncovered in Washington. What can be ascertained from my study is that during the course of the interview conversations there were many references to the emotional ties to students and colleagues within the workplace which at times sounded familial in nature.

**Relationships which move beyond the school gates**

**Becoming somebody in the community**

The teachers also spoke about their relationships within the local community. Just as their relationships within the school helped them to forge an identity within the workplace, their relationships within the external community appeared to help them to
feel that they belonged there; that they had over the years become someone in that community.

A number of the teachers lived in the local community and saw this as a positive experience. There were many occasions when the teachers talked about how they had experienced a sense of positive well-being which had come about from belonging to an extended community and in many ways working in the school had provided a gateway into that community.

Some of the things I really genuinely treasure in terms of memories are the number of adults now who actually still take time out to come and speak to you. I had one yesterday, I was stood at the gate and he turned his car around and came over for a word and they still do that and that’s really pleasing to see. (Grant)

This idea of becoming somebody within the community is echoed in Sandiford and Seymour’s study of face to face service occupations; they note that one of the perceived rewards of such work was the ‘sense of status and recognition’ that the local community afforded the workers (2007:220). The teachers in this study appear also to derive pleasure from their status in the community beyond the school gates.

Bridge-building

Whilst individual teachers spoke confidently about their own identity within the local community, developing the corporate identity of the school within the community was a more difficult relationship for them to manage. Some of the Bernard L Stone teachers felt that the community felt no ownership of the school. This was partly due to the physical location of the school buildings; Bernard L Stone was located at the top of a steep hill some distance from the housing estates where the residents of the community lived.

Some teachers discussed taking part in activities which were expressly aimed at improving school-community relations. For example, Dean talked about how part of his job description in the past had involved being a ‘community teacher’ and the aim of this was to try and establish that ‘the school would have a presence in the community’.

This active commitment to raising the profile of the school within the community had mutual benefits for both the members of the local community and the school, Dean uses metaphor, “I think I was having to build bridges...” to describe his role in this relationship. His active role in this process is similar to Carmichaels’ ‘broker’ (2006). Wenger describes the broker as working on the boundaries or peripheries of two communities acting as an interpreter for the actors in each community (2000).

A reciprocal relationship

Many teachers understood that this commitment to strengthening such relationships was more than an exercise in public relations. They believed that the school they were
part of had an important and unique role to play in the community. They had seen how changes over time had affected the children and adults within these communities. Grace believed that unreal expectations had brought about increased pressures on students and that when the students couldn’t live up to these expectations the community lost faith in the school.

*But the aspirations that have been forced onto some of these children and I mean forced have not given them hope. They have done the opposite to be honest. So when the education has changed and probably benefited most people[it] has done more damage in schools like this.* (Grace)

Isabel described how she thought increasingly negative societal pressures were changing what the children were experiencing in the community and as a result teachers had to work harder on maintaining relationships with them. Laurence felt that the school had had some success in helping young people manage to overcome some of these problems:

*And if I look back at the biggest success of the school then it’s that we have been in a very difficult community and we have actually taken some very damaged young people and sent them out the other end being able to cope.* (Laurence)

As a consequence of this, some teachers perceived that the school’s role was to provide a refuge for the children, and their parents:

*I suppose you can think of it as the last bastion of hope for the area. …despite what goes on in the community, this place is a place of calm and a refuge for both the parents and the kids.* (Stewart)

It had sometimes been a reciprocal relationship. For example, when Joseph Moore had gone through a period of difficult inspections and was subject to prolonged media scrutiny, Laurence took comfort from the families within the community who remained loyal to the school.

*It’s just the whole thing about being a part of a school that went through a really bad spell where it got a lot of criticism from outside the area for a long time but there were still an awful lot of people that remained and had confidence in the school and would send their children there because they had been there.* (Laurence)

Babyegeya (2001) drawing on Swap (1993) describes a continuum of relationships between school and community with the ‘protective model’ at one end (where schools feel the need to protect themselves from the surrounding community and devise strategies to restrict the impact of home-school collaboration) and the ‘partnership model’ at the other (Babyegeya 2001: 135-137). The relationship between schools and the wider community evoked by the teachers in my study does not sit easily along this continuum. This is perhaps because Swap’s models have been constructed with specific outcomes or goals in mind whereas the relationships described above by the

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teachers in the study have evolved naturally over time. The communities that the teachers feel part of beyond the school gates have been happened on by chance. They are according to Nelson ‘found’ communities and are different from ‘chosen’ communities which have been consciously created (Nelson 1995).

**Conclusions: Relational ties or belonging to a community (of kin)**

These descriptions of reciprocally supporting roles have resonance with Tonnies’ description of relationships that ‘are based on positive mutual affirmation’; such relationships ‘consist of mutual encouragement and the sharing of burdens and achievements’ (Tonnies 2001:17). Such a relationship and ‘the social bond that stems from it…’ according to Tonnies either has

real organic life, and that is the essence of community [Gemeinschaft]; or else as a purely mechanical construction, existing in the mind, and that is what we think of as Society [Gesellschaft] (Tonnies 2001: 217)

The lives the teachers live outside of the school gates as well as within seem to be more than a ‘purely mechanical construction’. They are real and have evolved over time with relationships that have deep emotional significance for the teachers in the study. Ava talked in emotive terms of the crucial function she felt that an inner-city school held within its community:

*I think we wanted to save the school more than our jobs, do you know? I do because the community there, we felt would have its heart ripped out. (Ava)*

For this group of teachers, relationships within the workplace comprise relationships with colleagues, with managers, with students (past and present), with families of students and colleagues and with individuals within the wider community. Multifaceted relationships such as these inevitably draw on many layers of teacher identity and incorporate aspects of the professional and personal self. Trier, a teacher-educator uses school films to engage trainee teachers to critically reflect about ‘the issue of the relationship between the personal and the professional lives of teachers’ (2001: 131). In reporting some of the critical reflections made by the pre-service students he writes: “a valuable bit of knowledge for a pre-service teacher to acquire: [is] the knowledge that ‘being a teacher seems to involve a special relationship with other people that you don’t find’ in most other professions’” (2001: 135).

There are two elements of relationships that appear to strengthen attachments within the school community. The first of these is *longevity*: relationships that have been established and deepened over time not only with students within the school but with their parents and even grandparents have a positive effect in terms of becoming part of a community. The second, *spatiality*, is related to *longevity* in that as former students become members of the wider community, the teachers retain their relationships with them and feel attached to the community beyond the school gates as a result. Long-serving teachers who have built up relational ties over time that have
spread into the wider community thus have *spatio-temporality*; they belong to both the space and time of that community.

For this group of teachers, relationships matter: relational ties are key to an individual’s sense of identity and to their identification with a close-knit community of people. When these relationships have evolved naturally they take on some of the characteristics of familial attachments. The boundaries between personal and professional lives become indistinct as professional activities merge with non-work-related activities.

In communities, we create our social lives with others who have intentions similar to ours. In organizations, relationships are constructed for us by others and become codified into a system of hierarchies, roles, and role expectations. (Sergiovanni 1994:217)

Teachers form relationships as they come into contact with different groups and these relational ties are not hierarchical. Strong attachments are made to students and to their families, to colleagues and their families, and to individuals and their families within the wider community. Their sense of loyalty and belonging has been strengthened by such relational ties; the school has become an extended family which incorporates ‘multiple reference groups’ (Little and McLaughlin 1993). These relational ties have been the source of or reservoirs of resilience that have helped individuals to stay rooted within the workplace as they feel an attachment to their ‘community of kin’ (Tonies 2001:27).

The stories from the teachers in my study thus produced a very different picture of lives lived in challenging schools. Far from being attracted by the ‘golden handcuff’, their motivations were principled and based on strongly held values. These findings query policy which seeks to retain good teachers in such schools through appealing to their perceived financial self interest. This is particularly important in the current context where teacher stability within challenging schools is a key issue. The research also demonstrates the value in listening to the voices of long-serving teachers whose narratives of community may be of more interest and relevance to prospective teachers than the prospect of handcuffs, golden or not.

**References**


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