“You choose to care”: Teachers, emotions and professional identity

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Abstract

This paper discusses the findings of a qualitative interpretive study on secondary school teachers’ professional identities and emotional experiences. Teachers’ work is emotionally engaging and personally demanding, yet the caring nature of the teaching role is largely neglected in educational policy and teacher standards. This paper examines the reasons behind the marginalisation of discourses of emotionality and discusses the lived experiences of three teachers. The caring behaviour that teachers exhibit in their work is seen to have professional, performative and philosophical dimensions as individual teachers subjectively negotiate the demands that are placed upon them in different situated contexts.

Keywords: Emotions in teaching; Professional identity; Teacher beliefs; Teacher role

1. Introduction

This paper reports on the findings of a qualitative interactionist study that explored how three secondary school humanities teachers actively and reflectively engaged in caring behaviour throughout their work with students. By making the choice to care for their students, the teachers in this study were able to construct and maintain a sense of professional identity which cohered with their philosophical or humanistic beliefs about the teaching role.

In this study, caring is primarily defined as those emotions, actions and reflections that result from a teacher’s desire to motivate, help or inspire their students. Whilst caring can be connected to teachers’ pedagogical or classroom management strategies, it also exists and is demonstrated within the broader social context of teacher–student interactions in and out of the classroom situation. The results of the study reveal that teachers’ experiences of caring are influenced both by their need to sustain positive professional relationships with their students and by their individual beliefs about their role as a teacher.

Although emotions are at the epicentre of teachers’ work (Hargreaves, 1994, 1998; Zembylas, 2003), the intangible emotional and empathic qualities which make a “good teacher” from the viewpoint of the students cannot be measured and are thus “considered worthless” (Constanti & Gibbs, 2004, p. 247) by policymakers. The current Framework of Professional Teaching Standards (NSW Institute of Teachers, 2005) that are used to assess the performance of teachers in New South
Wales, Australia, are notable for their failure to acknowledge the emotional and empathic skills which are required for effective teaching. Within the current policy climate, caring can be viewed as a choice that is made by individual teachers to pursue a particular philosophy and set of professional goals.

In this paper, a distinction will be made between an individual's identity and their professional role. Whilst the concept of role refers to the socially and culturally determined nature and commonly held expectations of an individual’s professional self, the idea of identity refers to the means by which individuals reflexively and emotionally negotiate their own subjectivity. Emotions inform and define identity in the process of becoming (Zembylas, 2003, p. 223).

The purpose of this paper is to explore how individual teachers use and manage emotions to care for and about students in their professional work. The subjective and temporal nature of the teaching role in socially situated institutional contexts is examined, as are the effects that different professional environments have on teachers’ caring relationships with students. Teachers’ emotions and professional philosophies are viewed as the means by which they individually navigate, interpret and occasionally resist the official ethos of the schools in which they work.

2. Identity, emotions and caring

Teaching and learning are socially situated practices that are deeply embedded in emotional experiences (Hargreaves, 1998). Discussing professional identity, or the individual’s ability to negotiate and improvise aspects of a professional role, requires an understanding of how emotions guide our professional practices and decisions. In fact, reason and emotion are interdependent because our reasoning depends on emotional choices (Zembylas, 2003, p. 223). Researching the complex and dichotomous nature of teachers’ emotions requires an understanding of how individuals deal with and respond to professional situations in different school contexts.

Identity can be defined as the type of person an individual is recognised as being in a given context (Gee, 2000, p. 99). Within this study, the concept of identity has reflective and active dimensions, encompassing both an individual’s professional philosophy and their public actions. Individual reflection and social communication with others is seen to be pivotal to the development of teachers’ professional identities, and professional identities are viewed as the means by which individual teachers negotiate and reflect on the socially situated aspects of their role. An individual’s behaviour will emerge from their interactions with others (Mead, 1934, pp. 140–142), and emotions are socially constructed and saturated (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934).

Teachers often possess a strong personal commitment towards their profession, and teachers’ emotions guide the formation of their identities (Nias, 1986; Zembylas, 2003). Teaching involves “human nurturance, connectedness, warmth and love” (Hargreaves, 1994, p. 175), and each teacher’s individual beliefs about their role in caring for students form a crucial part of their identity. Kelchtermans and Ballet (2002) add that political interests and personal values shape teachers’ emotions and function as a rationale for their professional actions. This coheres with MacLure’s (1993) observation that teachers frequently use their identity or political belief system to justify the way they choose to engage in their work. Teachers are passionate beings (Hargreaves, 1998, pp. 835–836), and an individual’s professional philosophy is mediated by their personal belief system.

Teaching is “charged with positive emotion” (Hargreaves, 1998, p. 835) and takes place at the intersection of personal and public life (Palmer, 1998). The teachers in Nias’s (1986) study of professional socialisation were seen to invest their sense of self in their work, and to have similar personal and public identities as a result. Emotions are the means through which teachers personally interpret the demands placed upon them, and discussing teacher identity “requires the connection of emotion with self-knowledge” (Zembylas, 2003, p. 213). Research on teachers’ work has emphasised the importance of care and commitment, suggesting that many teachers define themselves as people through the roles they play within their professional lives (Barber, 2002; Nias, 1989). It is important to note that teachers’ work also consists of what Forrester (2005, p. 274) terms “non-work” in the sense that there is no economic benefit for caring, and such activities do not technically constitute work. However, the ethical and humanistic dimensions of teachers’ work frequently act as a source of intrinsic motivation for individual teachers, and inspire them to remain committed to the profession.
Teachers as people cannot be separated from their craft (Nias, 1989, p. 203), and the act of teaching requires individuals to possess a genuine emotional understanding and empathy towards others (Hargreaves, 2001, p. 1059). The role that emotions play in teachers’ work is rarely acknowledged in public policy, and professional teacher standards (NSW Institute of Teachers, 2005) tend to downplay or ignore the emotional dimensions of the teaching role.

3. Teacher standards and policy discourses

This study was conducted in an environment of socio-political change due to the recent implementation of teacher professional standards (NSW Institute of Teachers, 2005) in New South Wales, Australia. The perceived discrepancy between the technical rationalist assumptions presented in current policy discourses and the lived experience of teachers’ work was frequently and spontaneously mentioned by the participants throughout their interviews. Currently, the teachers in this study are working in conditions where caring is not encouraged by public policies (Jeffrey, 2002), and where caring often comes at a professional cost. The ethical and emotional nature of teachers’ work is consistently ignored in public policies that seek to assess teacher quality (Constanti & Gibbs, 2004, p. 207).

Dillabough (1999, p. 378) argues that institutionalised teacher standards often act to marginalise and repress individual beliefs and experiences by viewing the private sphere as irrelevant and subjugating the aims of the individual to those of the system. The prevalence of Enlightenment concepts of rationality in the notion of teacher competencies is worrying, and Schön’s (1983) discussion of technical rationalism argues that the role of the reflective individual is sidelined in traditional notions of professional knowledge. If reflexivity is ignored, then only the active self is considered to be a worthy subject for discussion. Teachers’ emotions are intimately connected with their reflective selves, and studies that emphasise the importance of caring behaviour can present a counter-discourse to the rationalist notions that are presently being held up as a means by which to define and regulate teachers’ professional work.

The study of teachers’ caring is the study of each individual teacher’s commitment towards their work and how their interactions with others shape the identity that they take on as a professional. Jeffrey (2002, p. 535) notes that the humanist discourse in education has been challenged by a policy culture which emphasises ability and creates hierarchical and depersonalised relationships. Thus, the market-driven managerial discourses that led to the introduction of teacher standards have created a performative culture which emphasises accountability and the public demonstration of professional attributes above teachers’ ethical and emotional qualities (Forrester, 2005; Jeffrey, 2002).

The nature of teaching cannot be expressed within “technical competencies”, but centres around human interaction and emotional understanding (Hargreaves, 1998, p. 850). Technical competencies cohere with the traditional view of professional knowledge as being standardised and scientific (Schön, 1983, p. 23), and ignore the importance of identity in professional decision-making. It is apparent that the current professional teaching standards (NSW Institute of Teachers, 2005) overlook the role that caring and personal values play in teachers’ work. Even the prescribed set of standards for “knowing students” (pp. 5–6) and “communicating with students” (p. 9) concentrate solely on a knowledge of the diverse needs of students and the communication of strategies and subject matter. This is more a reflection of the reductionist nature of teacher competencies than an indication of problems with the standards themselves. By their very nature, competencies are designed to prescribe, define and regulate aspects of a professional role in a rationalist manner. They are not intended to recognise, affirm or deal with the more complex nature of teachers’ socially situated and negotiated identities.

Teaching has traditionally been seen as a “caring” profession rather than a high-status one (Hargreaves & Goodson, 1996, p. 9), but teacher standards have tended to ignore the caring aspects of teaching. Emotions are bound up with individual experiences of the political and of power within the system (Hargreaves, 2001, p. 1057), and studies need to adopt an idiographic perspective when discussing teachers’ emotions. Research on caring needs to recognise the impact that institutional structures and discourses have on professional roles and on teachers’ ability to care for their students.

4. Methodology

This study aimed to discuss the professional decisions that are made by individual teachers in
relation to their affective interactions with students. The distinction that Ashley and Lee (2003) identify between exercising a professional duty of care (caring for) and genuinely loving and empathising with (caring about) students was pivotal to the development of the key research questions:

How do teachers care for and about their students? What effect does their caring behaviour have on their professional decisions?

To explore these questions, a series of two in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample of three participants. These interviews, which ranged from one to two hours’ duration, were structured around Seidman’s Phenomenological Interviewing Model (1998). Seidman’s (1998, pp. 10–14) model uses interactionist ideas as the basis for its structure and concentrates on enabling participants to explore and reflect on their life history. Noting that all behaviour needs to be discussed in the context of an individual’s lived experiences, Seidman (1998, p. 11) suggests that any research which is based on interview data needs to involve more than a single interview. When analysing the interview data in this study, a generative approach to theory was adopted in the sense that the initial data gathered suggested areas of focus for the second interview. This adheres to Kvale’s (1996, pp. 241–243) notion of “quality of craftsmanship”, which suggests that effective research involves a continual process of questioning and analysing the data collected.

The interview questions were constructed around the themes that Seidman (1998, p. 12) believes are necessary for a phenomenological interview. Such themes include the life history of the participants, the details of their experiences and the meaning which such experiences hold for them. In this respect, the interview protocols used were similar to those adopted by Hargreaves (1998, 2001), who followed Hochschild’s (1983) procedures in asking his participants to describe important events in their professional lives. However, unlike Hargreaves (2001, p. 1059), conducting a series of two interviews was crucial in giving the researcher an opportunity to collect and analyse data simultaneously. By linking the processes of data collection and analysis, it was possible to adjust the interview schedule and construct new questions to reflect emerging issues and patterns of data. This ensured that the interviews were able to listen and respond to the voices of the participants, and allowed the researcher and the participants to reflexively reexamine particularly significant moments in the participants’ professional lives.

Research is an ontological endeavour (Koch & Harrington, 1998, p. 887) that enables us to investigate the beliefs and values of participants. Within this study, the interviews aimed to “establish truth via people’s understandings” (Hosie, 1986, p. 200). It is important to note that such reflective understandings are both subjective and influenced by temporal factors. This study was conducted at a particular socio-historical moment, and the results were influenced by the fact that debates about teacher professionalism were taking place following the introduction of teacher standards. Mills (1959, p. 121) notes the importance of developing a “self-conscious” attitude to intellectual work, and this self-consciousness should result in an acknowledgement of the limitations of research. The data gathered within this study has facilitated a descriptive qualitative analysis of the lives of three teachers but cannot be used to reach generic conclusions about teachers’ work.

4.1. The participants

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select participants from a range of schools and areas. This ensured that all participants were mid-career teachers who had taught in diverse school environments and could thus reflect on the situated nature of their professional interactions. The small number of participants enabled this interpretive study to sustain an in-depth focus on their professional beliefs and lived experiences.

The participants were at different stages in their careers, and had worked in a variety of school systems and in different geographical locations in Sydney. They are all currently teaching humanities subjects in secondary schools and have been in the profession for a period of more than 5 years. At the time of the interviews, all three participants had recently participated in focus group discussions with the NSW Institute of Teachers and were consequently engaged in thinking about issues of professional accountability and autonomy.

Christina and Michael currently teach secondary school English, and Laura is a History teacher. Both Laura and Michael are Head Teachers in their respective subject departments, and both have worked in the public education system for over 15 years. Christina taught in a series of public high
schools in socio-economically disadvantaged areas for 6 years before moving to her current appointment at a private school.

5. Service providers: the choice to care

Teachers are personally and emotionally involved with their work (Nias, 1989) because much of that work involves caring for and about others. Throughout this study, the three participants viewed the “kindness and caring” (Michael) they showed to others as both a professional choice and as a necessary part of their work. Laura noted that:

I choose to be involved [with my students]—and when I say involved, I mean only to a degree, and always as a professional. It is a conscious decision. You choose to care, because you see the value of what you do because you care.

Whilst this choice led them to sometimes “get exhausted and think about certain kids all night” (Christina), or be perceived in a disempowering way as “a simpering mumsy sort of person” (Laura), all the teachers in this study saw the caring work they engaged in as being an integral part of their professional identity. Michael’s need to “stop blaming and start empowering students” links his caring behaviour with his professional work, and Laura’s statement that “they’ll do the work if you connect with them” demonstrates how caring about students enables her to reach pedagogical goals. By viewing caring behaviour as a “deliberate choice” (Laura) or a “personal decision” (Christina), the teachers in this study recognised that such work was not necessarily rewarded by “the powers that be” (Laura).

Experiences have emotional as well as rational and intellectual dimensions (Schmidt, 2000, p. 827), and caring is arguably one of the predominant and visible emotions that teachers demonstrate in their work. However, policy conditions currently make caring more difficult, resulting in many teachers “sacrificing themselves” by caring for others (Hargreaves, 1998, p. 836). Examining the ways that teachers “choose to care” (Laura) for their students involves discussing how teachers negotiate institutional and professional demands.

The organisational structure of the school guides teachers’ emotional conduct and shapes their perception of appropriate expressions (Zembylas, 2003, p. 225). Christina believed that the private school she currently teaches in expected her to care for her students “to show the parents they’re getting value for money”. Whilst Christina’s original motivation for teaching and her professional philosophy centred around a desire to effect change in her students’ behaviour through building personal relationships with them, she disliked being “expected” to provide a service:

It [teaching in an Independent school] is a very service-based industry. There’s the whole idea that they [the parents] pay and you produce, and you produce well. But I really do resent being on this production line...you can’t care because your Headmaster tells you to.

The results of this study are discussed in terms of the caring behaviour that the participants demonstrated in their professional work. Whilst some elements of caring behaviour are undoubtedly a choice, caring within a professional context is also determined by the need to care for students “just to do your job” (Michael). Michael’s belief that teachers should “only care so much”, and Laura’s insistence that she “will never cross that line and feel too much” are reminders of the fact that teachers’ emotions are constrained and guided by role requirements.

Mills (1959, pp. 216–218) suggests that researchers need to use a variety of sociological lenses in order to explore a problem through different perspectives and gain a more complete picture of the social world. In this study, three distinct sociological lenses emerged which encompassed the different types of caring behaviour exhibited by the participants:

- **performative**—behaviour geared towards motivating students in order to reach pedagogical goals,
- **professional**—the management and maintenance of appropriate relationships with students in order to maintain a professional role,
- **philosophical/humanistic**—making the personal decision to care in adherence with a personal and individual philosophy or code of ethics.

Each lens is discussed in further detail below. Additionally, Christina’s emotional experiences and professional choices within different school contexts are investigated separately as an example of how teachers’ caring behaviour can be reinforced or constrained by the practices and values of the school in which they teach.
5.1. Caring as performative

Michael and Laura both commented that the main determinant of a teacher’s success was their personality and the combination of “enthusiasm and kindness” (Michael) which they were able to exude. To Laura, the human element of teachers’ work meant that teaching is “an acting job” in which teachers needed to sustain positive feelings to engage their students and “make them feel involved and excited by” the educational experience. Being able to act as a professional and still sustain a sense of self within the role has emotional implications for teachers, and Laura made frequent comments about the level of “emotional energy and sheer adrenalin” which she felt she needed to maintain whilst teaching. The need to separate her work in the classroom from her personal life has led Laura to view herself as a “performer”:

I’ll just be very engaged with them [her students], and I will work with them as much as I can. But, at the end of the day, as soon as I walk out of that classroom I become myself again. I’ve turned that switch off. I’m a performer now.

By comparison, Christina felt that the caring attitude she displayed towards her students was no mere performance. Like the subjects in Hargreaves’s (1998, p. 836) study, her reflections about her work are frequently expressed in terms of the “love” she feels towards her students:

I do care about them [the students] as individuals. I couldn’t do what I do and not care. It is not really recognised here how important that is… it’s just part of my job and I am happy for things to be that way.

Teachers need to navigate the path between being emotionally engaged with students as an individual and undertaking emotion labour to meet the demands which their professional role places upon them. Christina and Laura stated that such acting must be based on genuine caring and regard for students, whilst Michael asserted that the need to create caring but professional relationships with students can depend on a degree of “intentional charm” or “deliberate charisma”. Hochschild’s (1983, p. 7) vision of emotional labor argues that workers often have to perform or fabricate caring behaviour, but many of the emotions that teachers show throughout their work lie somewhere on a continuum between professional behaviour and “genuine feeling” (Laura). Whilst the need to encourage and motivate students can become draining and performative, it is the humanistic nature of the teaching role which encourages teachers such as Michael to persevere in their work:

There is always going to be one [student] who looks at you, and you know that what you’re saying is important to them. So you keep on at it—because of, I suppose, this very real shared importance.

Is becoming a teacher synonymous with knowing how to act in a given situation? The participants in this study saw managing relationships to be a “given” (Laura) in their daily work, and had to negotiate between their own desire to “personally go the extra mile” (Michael) and their need to maintain a professional distance from their students.

5.2. Caring as a professional

Hochschild (1983, p. 7) believes that emotional labour primarily involves an individual inducing or suppressing different feelings at work to maintain an appropriate public and professional identity. Her discussion (pp. 37–39) of surface and deep acting presumes that demonstrating emotions as a professional always involves acting, and that this acting is essentially a contrived performance of self. Michael’s belief that he needs to be “warmer and more interesting and outgoing” as a teacher than in the rest of his life contrasts with Laura’s opinion of her role as a teacher:

Even though I do think teaching is a performance, you still can’t pretend to be other than what you actually are. But you highlight aspects of yourself.

Do teachers need to create an artificial persona in order to avoid becoming “too involved” with their role? Successful teaching requires teachers to create an atmosphere that promotes empathic understanding (Hargreaves, 2001, p. 1060), and Michael felt that his work often involved “creating a sense of belonging with kids you don’t really know”. Is being able to facilitate such an atmosphere a valuable skill, or an intrinsically personal attribute? Palmer (1998, p. 13) argues that possessing the “capacity for connectedness” is inherent in effective teaching, and teaching cannot be reduced to techniques precisely because of its emotional
dimension. Even so, it is evident that choosing to care about students as a professional involves “knowing how to care the right way and amount” (Laura). Whilst the “right way” to care is individually negotiated and regulated by professional boundaries and institutional constraints, Laura and Christina noted that limiting the “amount” of caring they did was important in order to avoid their work “taking over” (Christina) or “eating up” (Laura) their personal lives.

For Laura, the “conscious decision” to care about her students facilitates her teaching and adds meaning to her work. Like Christina, the nurturing atmosphere which Laura aims to create in her classroom is strengthened by her sense of professionalism and her need to maintain a certain “healthy distance” from her students. Laura stated that becoming emotionally engaged with the classes that she is currently teaching has mitigated the effects of her “very tense” relations with colleagues and allowed her to “find some integrity in what I do”. The fact that her “integrity” as a professional stems from her caring relationships with her students is worthy of note. Christina sees caring as:

Something that I’m in there doing…and you see that caring is important because it’s not something every teacher does. You know, that smile, that comment to a kid, and when you become [like] a big sister or an aunty to them…it’s not like I have to feel needed, but it’s those things that make me know that what I do matters.

Caring is important to teachers precisely because of the fact that it is not represented in standards and cannot be quantified by any objective means. Whilst roles can be and are officially assigned to teachers by virtue of societal expectations and the implementation of professional standards, the “intense emotional experiences” (Mead, 1934, p. 274) through which professional identities emerge are guided by an individual’s reflective philosophy and axiological motivations.

5.3. Caring as philosophical/humanistic

Teachers invest their selves in their work, and this may mean that their personal and professional identities are very similar (Nias, 1986). Two of the three teachers in this study explicitly espoused a humanistic philosophy of teaching. In their interviews, Michael discussed his desire to liberate his students through improving their literacy skills, and Christina mentioned the importance of teaching students to “develop empathy by example”. Teachers “invest in the values that they believe their teaching represents” (Zembylas, 2003, p. 213), and both Michael and Christina saw humanist values as being at the apex of their professional philosophy. MacLure (1993, p. 316) sees identity as a “form of argument”, or a reason for justifying and making sense of behaviour and decisions. By viewing themselves as “humanists”, and by using such a label as a justification for their professional actions, Michael and Christina position their caring work as being grounded in a particular and individual way of thinking.

Hochschild (1983, p. 19) notes that the emotions which we display privately can be controlled by corporations, but the participants frame their engagement as a conscious decision that was not always valued by their colleagues. Michael stated that “concrete results rather than nurturing” tended to be emphasised by schools, and some of Christina’s problems with her current school stem from the fact that her colleagues “don’t recognise that simple caring is better than all the rah-rah encouragement”. Her distrust of “rah-rah encouragement” undoubtedly has a gendered dimension, and her personal conception of caring behaviour (which she defined as individual attention and counselling-style interactions with students) often discounts the value of encouraging positive group dynamics as a substitute for nurturing individual teacher–student relationships. This is at odds with Michael’s notion that creating “a sense of shared energy with a class” is more important than devoting time to individual students. Both teachers see themselves as espousing an explicitly humanistic stance towards teaching, but their different orientations towards humanism serve as a reminder that each individual’s subjective understanding of a concept or paradigm differs. Whilst individual teachers will always reflectively adjust the roles they play in order to navigate institutional demands, such demands are negotiated according to the individual’s professional beliefs and definition of a situation.

6. Christina: a case study

[I was going to] do all these wonderful things from 9 to 4, you know—just save all these lives and somehow make it home in time to live my own life.
Christina has undergone a self-styled “baptism of fire” as a teacher, and the story of her professional experiences raises interesting questions about the emotional dimension of teachers’ work. Initially inspired by a desire for social justice and the belief that she could “save all these lives” by caring about students, Christina now places an emphasis on maintaining a “healthy distance” between teachers and students. Developing the ability to perform a role in the classroom and “then walk out and become me again”, she retained her desire to “do the caring-sharing thing” but came to a more realistic understanding of her own power to effect change. After moving to a private school where “everything’s calm”, Christina now views emotions as both the reason for her engagement with her work and as part of the reason why “I mightn’t be teaching forever”.

Whilst roles can be assigned to individuals, identity is determined by individual subjectivity. Christina’s reflective resistance against the “business world” ethos of the school she currently works at is perhaps crystallised by her discomfort with her Headmaster’s insistence that his teachers should take on the role of “service providers”:

We have got a Headmaster that states very openly that ‘We are service providers’. That our school fees are $16,000 a year, and, rightfully so, the parents deserve something for their money…but I say to myself, ‘Yeah, but I’m a teacher. That doesn’t change wherever I am.’…so I have to do what I can live with.

Christina positions herself professionally as being at the nexus of a chain of interactions. The framework which she is required to adopt for these interactions, and the way her actions are mediated by the “service provider” ethos her school promotes will determine the nature of her caring behaviour as a professional. Christina’s insistence that her role “doesn’t change” is somewhat mitigated by her recognition that feeling like a service provider at her current school “impacts” on her work in and out of the classroom. Zembylas (2003, pp. 224–225) believes that the connection between teacher identity and emotion is the result of agency, and is determined by the individual’s ability to reflect on their professional actions. Christina’s emotions towards the ethos of her school have enabled her to develop and sustain an identity that reflectively resists the “service provider” label despite having to publicly perform such a role. Teachers’ emotions can become the means for resisting the demands of the institution (Zembylas, 2003, p. 213), and Christina’s feelings of “dislike and disillusionment” towards the official values of her school act as a justification for her reflective resistance against these values.

The socially constructed nature of emotions and the need for teachers to deal with or manage the emotions of others can lead Christina to “feel down when they’re down”. Coping with the emotions of other teachers and students has proved to be challenging for Christina, and often requires her to adopt a “terribly cheerful” persona in order to facilitate a positive classroom environment:

Most of all with teaching, it’s that it’s so emotional… You cop so much from everyone else’s emotions, and then you have to create all these positive emotions in students. You have to motivate yourself to motivate them.

Whilst Christina felt that the emotional domain of teaching and the rewards she achieved through establishing meaningful relationships with students were one of her core reasons for staying in the profession, she also acknowledged that having to engage in emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) was “the most exhausting part” of teaching. Additionally, she felt that it occasionally distracted her from pedagogical concerns into focussing on areas of human relations which she felt unprepared for or unwilling to engage in:

I came in there, and I thought, “what on earth am I doing?” Because it’s not actually teaching—it’s not what we were told teaching was at uni. And I came in there thinking it was about having a good lesson, and then I realised that these kids didn’t need a teacher because their emotional needs…sort of took over their learning needs… You wanted to make things better for them, but you also had to teach them.

Christina’s “need to find out where they were at” and her willingness to listen to and interact with her students outside of the classroom situation enabled her to understand their “difficult lives”:

It took them awhile to talk to me—and even then, you had to figure out what they didn’t say…it was only through chatting after class that I ever got to put a finger on why they behaved the way they did. I’m not a counsellor, but I would take in what they were saying as a teacher.
Christina was forced to take on a role that she was unprepared for, and her desire to engage with and “save” her students conflicted with her reflective resistance against the idea of the teacher-as-counsellor. Her belief that emotional engagement was “not actually teaching” seems paradoxical when juxtaposed with her original motivation for entering the profession. Whilst drawing a line between teaching and caring, Christina later stated that her positive interactions with students meant that they “will do things for you because they’re grateful to you”. Christina recognised that her belief in the importance of caring led her to spend more time developing relationships with students and “less time angling to get a promotion” that might take her out of the classroom. Despite this, she felt that the emotional connections she has with her students (whilst undervalued by the school administration) are what motivated her to continue teaching:

“I’m here for the kids. And for no one else… I always say [to my students], “I could walk out of here tomorrow if it wasn’t for you guys. If I’m here for you, you’ve got to do something for me.”

Nias (1989, p. 32) states that teachers often adopt an image of themselves as being a “crusader”, and derive both pleasure and professional satisfaction from their emotional involvement with students. Whilst Christina’s “big moments” came from her interactions with students, she also believes that maintaining a “healthy distance” and playing a caring yet professional in her students’ lives is the answer to dealing with the emotional nature of teachers’ work:

“You need a healthy distance, which I didn’t really understand at first. Because you have to be effective…[On] so many nights, I come home and I cry, I absolutely cry. Because I’m just dealing with all these other people’s emotions… Every man and his frigging dog is coming up to me and telling me just what it’s like for them. So many parts of me just get all wrung out.

Christina sees managing relationships to be a crucial part of her job, and her choice to care for her students enables her to motivate them to participate in the classroom. Like Laura, who said she had “become more caring and patient” after joining the profession, Christina continually made comments about how taking on the teaching role had affected her sense of personal identity. The idea that “I’ve had to get used to being in that role as part of me” was reflected in her comments about her professional journey:

“I guess it’s that you don’t just wake up and say “Oh, I’m a teacher”. Like, when Soula [her daughter] was born, I didn’t just wake up and say, “Oh, I’m a Mum now.” Although those first few moments or days or whatever are really, really surreal in being a mother or a teacher. But you become. You don’t have to go through this process of becoming…a waiter or someone who works in an office, but you become a teacher because it becomes part of you…

It is interesting that Christina has made a conscious connection between a professional role and a personal lifestyle choice such as motherhood. Christina consistently viewed her professional identity as being pervasive and as involving a process of becoming as opposed to merely being, or just playing a role within a given situation. The “surreal” moments between taking on the teaching role and allowing it to slowly become “part of you” are perhaps the most crucial moments in a teacher’s professional development. In fact, the link between the professional and the personal must surely imply that there cannot be any real professional development without personal development. Teaching and learning are emotional and social practices (Hargreaves, 1998, 2001), and examining the role of emotions in the development of professional identities leads to a richer and more complete understanding of teachers’ work.

7. Conclusion

The teachers in this study have used their identities to guide and shape their professional and emotional decisions. Caring for and caring about students was an important part of all the participants’ work and frequently acted as both a motivation to continue teaching and a “terribly exhausting” (Laura) professional demand. By viewing caring through performative, philosophical and professional lenses, this article has discussed the diverse ways that caring emotions affect teachers’ professional actions and reflections.

Discussions of emotionality in teachers’ work form a counter-discourse to the technical rationalist emphasis on teacher standards. Whilst standards seek to define and prescribe the professional role
that teachers play, teachers’ identities are complex and socially situated within lived experiences. Identity can be used as an analytic lens for discussing schools and society (Gee, 2000), and the participants in this study used their sense of identity as a justification for the caring behaviour they demonstrate in their professional work.

Teachers’ identities have philosophical and axiological dimensions. Schools that seek to define their teachers as “service providers” (Christina) whose job it is to promote the needs and values of the institution have overlooked the personal and individual nature of teachers’ work. Whilst teachers like Laura and Christina struggle with the need to negotiate emotional closeness by managing “professional boundaries” (Laura) and caring for their students within “sane limits” (Christina), teachers’ caring behaviour frequently cannot be measured or evaluated. Although the personal and intrinsic value of caring behaviour lends meaning to teachers’ work and acts as a justification to remain in the profession for some teachers, the importance of teachers’ emotions is under-recognised in educational policies. This study demonstrates the need for future research to discuss how and why teachers choose to care for their students, and to analyse the effects of this choice on their professional identity.

References
