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# Teachers' creative, critical, and agentic professional learning in liminal spaces

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper reports on a research project exploring the aspirations, assumptions and experiences of students on a Master's in Education course. Professional Learning (PL) for teachers in England has increasingly prescribed content and delivery, is highly regulated and embedded within politically sanctioned evidence-based research, structured in linear, accelerated modes. This PL largely ignores the contested ideological spaces education inhabits, reducing opportunities for teachers to engage in situated, relational, exploratory work towards how, why or for whom educational values and practices are enacted. The data suggests that liminal PL spaces are characterised by fluidity and uncertainty, often productive of personal and professional change. Using one Master's in Education course as an assemblage of liminal PL, where curriculum design and critical pedagogic approaches foreground socio-material and affective conditions, we argue that liminality can generate creative, critical, and agentic responses to knotty issues of education. We argue that liminal PL spaces need rigorous defending as shifts to regulated PL (e.g. the Early Career Framework in England) grow apace. Drawing on focus groups ($n = 4 + 50$), we pay attention to what teachers say mattered in their personal/professional learning. Our findings foreground non-linear, multiple ways of becoming teacher, and we further reflect upon affordances of liminal PL spaces.

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## Introduction

This paper reports on research carried out on an established Master's in Education programme. The research aimed to explore, and better understand, student aspirations, assumptions and experiences of the design, pedagogical orientation and socio-material nature of students' interactions at Master's level. The research contributes to debates around Master's in Education through characterising such programmes as liminal spaces of professional learning (PL). The research asked Master's students to discuss with each other, through student-led focus groups, why they decided to take up a Master's course, what they hoped to get out of it and to reflect on their experiences whilst on the course. One of our aims as a teaching team for the Master's course is to encourage and support research informed study and practice. To this end and using some internal funding, we paid our Master's students (past and present) to work as researchers on the project. A core critical purpose of the research was the centrality of these student researchers actively engaging in research with their peers, as a means of eliciting data that would speak beyond traditional course evaluations.

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Their involvement emphasised the importance of research and criticality to teacher education whilst also providing insights into the multiplicity and complexity of students' experiences at Masters' level when went far beyond the idea of PL as a linear, pre-defined and primary career enhancing.

## Professional learning (PL) in England

Teachers' PL is a highly politicised space, and in England, it is increasingly imbued with significant centralised financial and ideological investment in notions of teaching 'effectivity' and 'efficiency'. These are discourses characterised by logics of instrumentalisation and atomisation (Clarke 2012, Fox 2021, Makopoulou *et al.* 2021), which continue to be mobilised through long-standing, national and international, marketised and 'datafied' policies and bodies, embodying performative discourses centred on standards, competition, and accountability. These include The Teachers Standards, PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment), TEF (Teaching Excellence Framework), and OFSTED (Office for Standards in Education, the government regulator). Whilst considerable work is done in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) within education departments across the country to explicitly challenge prescriptive notions of teaching, these are increasingly under threat from regulation by government policy reform that aims to standardise and centralise PL at all stages of teachers' career. In 2019, a series of reforms in England (for a summary of these, see DfE 2022) linked to the Teacher Recruitment and Retention Strategy (DfE 2019b), has resulted in a wide scale PL that is highly controlled and regulated. As an example of this, in 2021, the Early Career Framework (ECF) (DfE 2019a) was implemented. This is a mandatory 'entitlement' to two-year PL following completion of pre-service training, which itself has been subject to increased curricula control and a controversial 'market review' (Carr 2021, Gibbons 2021) by a government appointed body to 'enable the provision of consistently high-quality training . . . in a more efficient and effective market' (DfE 2022, p. 4). Whilst the development of the ECF might be considered a necessary and long overdue response to a dearth of PL for neophyte teachers, the content of the framework itself is highly prescribed and demands fidelity inflexible modes of delivery and selective research. This kind of governmental prescription disregards the situated and relational nature of education and the needs of PL to respond to the situated and complex issues teachers face.

Prescription of PL content has some history in England, particularly around the attainment of identifiable subject knowledge or discrete pedagogical skills, for example, the teaching of systematic synthetic phonics has been mandated for many years, despite having highly contested efficacy (Wyse and Bradbury 2022). However, PL focused upon the development of 'quality' professional teacher identities for 'world-class teacher development' (DfE 2022) is colonising and hegemonising PL spaces in England in particularly ideological ways. Narrow uniformity of delivery and outcomes have long been critiqued in the research literature for ways in which they '. . .repress the gaps and discontinuities out of which teaching, learning and research issue' (MacLure 2006, p. 224). They risk reducing dialogic and critical spaces for teachers to explore the conditions in which they teach, which have been central to the design of so much PL for teachers, especially HEIs. Consequently, these policy reforms have produced curriculums that are pre-determined rather than co-created and contextual, and pedagogical approaches that are transmissive; orientated towards linear, essentialist, 'input–output' logics (St Pierre 2011).

In the ECF, there is a high level of online delivery using content provided and scripted for facilitators who may not deviate from the material or bring in alternative research other than that prescribed. Research on the ECF is limited given its relatively recent inception, suggesting its claim to offer 'world class delivery' (DfE 2022, p. 8) is premature, but a pilot project review (EEF 2020) noted the inflexibility of resources and content sequencing that prevented content being accessed when it was most needed, thus failing to address individual needs. The report notes the potential of the programme to highlight the importance of PL for both early-career teachers and their mentors, plus its accessibility and scalability due to significant online

content. However, currently, the framework is primarily concerned with accelerating professional progress for early-career teachers in highly structured and linear ways. In addition to the reforms to pre-service education and the introduction of the ECF, other significant reforms to teacher PL in England include the National Professional Qualifications (NPQ). These are aimed at teachers and leaders at all levels, following a very similar format to the ECF. These are fully funded by the government and are focused on meeting new criteria around contested notions of 'quality' shaped within performative and marketised discourses outlined above. Such framing of PL for teachers in England has a global resonance. Mockler (2018), writing, for example, about PL in Australia, notes how notions of quality are, increasingly tied to the agendas of standards and accountability, counted and quantified in hours and linked increasingly to improving student performance on standardised tests and other limited measures (p. 14).

These are the powerful global 'hegemonic hypernarratives' (Stronach 2010, p. 10) of performativity and achievement that permeate teachers' professional lives, construct the 'teaching self' (Ball and Olmedo, 2013) and become manifest in national and international performance and league tables listed previously. Teachers often find it difficult to step away from these performative assumptions, beliefs and practices in order to critique or indeed even see the role they play in normative constructions of who educators are and what they do. The English government's mandated, standardised training has created a tense and high-stakes atmosphere around teachers' PL, affording fewer opportunities for teachers to be agentic in selecting PL to respond to their own needs and locations. Consequently, opportunities to critically interrogate subjective experiences of being a teacher through theory, dialogue and reflective practices that are not strategically orientated towards evidencing a particular pre-defined standard or pre-determined outcome (Lambert 2021), are noticeably absent from teacher PL such as ECF. It is also the case that PL, including pre-service education in England, is increasingly encouraged to claim ideological neutrality regarding how teachers and students interact and how curriculum and pedagogies are constructed and experienced. This political insistence on seeing teaching and learning as neutral technologies serves to undermine the ideological processes inherent in education as experienced by teachers in their everyday practices (Giroux 2019). The consequences of any teacher PL *not* acknowledging that 'common-sense' hegemonic ideas about education are influenced by political and ideological pressures, are that teachers are less equipped with the tools to recognise and discriminate between different ideological conceptualisations of what works and what matters and for whom (Biesta 2010). Indeed, they may hardly grasp that 'what works' is itself a highly contested essentialist ideological construct. For this reason, we maintain that it is important that teachers' PL that focuses on teacher identity and 'quality' challenge what appears fixed, settled and 'common sense' about education so that teachers can interrogate familiar assumptions, beliefs and practices which simply seek to reinforce and/or justify teaching and learning practices based within a 'selective tradition' (Apple 1993, p. 222). PL that foregrounds critical understanding fosters greater self-efficacy for teachers working in diverse global classrooms (Choi and Mao 2021), recognises the significance of research as part of a teacher's practice and ongoing PL (Brooks 2021) and considers 'transitional' states of teacher PL, i.e. those stages to which much PL responds, as being not stages to move through and beyond in accelerated, simplified and standardised ways, but instead, liminal spaces with much generative potential for understanding the complex ecologies of teaching.

## Liminality and professional learning

As a concept, liminality describes a space where transformations occur, where there are shifts in location and shifts in states of being. Liminal spaces are 'betwixt and between' (Turner 1974, p. 223), characterised by movement, fluidity, flux and uncertainty. As such, liminality is used in this research as a way of thinking about teacher PL as a space where being in transition is a generative and productive state *in itself*, rather than one to be moved through in linear, sequential

and time framed movements. Liminal spaces for PL in this conceptualisation ' . . . renders things fluid, less certain than they used to be, and starts to transform the learner' (Land et al., 2014: 1). Meyer and Land (2005) note, however, that this process of transformation can be disconcerting and uncomfortable, as is illustrated in our data below, as it may bring to the fore 'certain aspects of past learning and identities which can feel unsettling and confronting' (Land et al., 2014). More liminal PL for teachers can create a space where old and new understandings and ways of thinking about teaching can become destabilised.

Liminal PL opportunities, therefore, have the potential to open provisional, exploratory spaces with plenty of unexplored possibilities for things to be '. . .held in tension – an almost perpetual liminal state of creativity' (Land et al., in Kligyte *et al.* 2022, p. 620). Liminal spaces are being a 'risky place on the edge . . . but also with new possibilities' (Soja and Hooper 1993, p. 190). The fluidity and multiplicity of what happens in liminal space suggest, to us as educators, different ways to think about participation and co-creation and through conceptualising our own Master's in Education course as a liminal space, we consider the affordances that liminality brings to PL. Importantly for teachers working in the current English educational landscape, such spaces also offer freedom from purely output-orientated regulations and practices, whilst also recognising that the Master's itself has a tangible outcome in terms of a qualification.

## Assemblages and 'becomings': theorising professional learning

The Master's in Education course, which is the source of the data for this paper, sought consciously to create a PL space that explicitly troubled normative discourses by highlighting their 'gaps and discontinuities.' As we discussed below, the course explicitly encouraged students to be both critical and creative in terms of how they thought about, discussed and designed research projects to interrogate their professional experiences and ongoing development. We consider the course as an assemblage (Deleuze and Guattari 1987), within which the multiple, messy, and complex contradictions and tensions that characterise the experiences that teachers' PL must be responsive to. Assemblages are conceptual spaces that are dynamic, incorporating the many elements that make up any encounter or experience and are constantly in movement. They are counter concepts to hierarchy and structure and as such are useful for thinking 'otherwise' to the highly structured, instrumental nature of the government mandated PL spaces such as those outlined above. Assemblages are ontologically flat, where nothing within them is necessarily privileged but where might be found '. . . states of things, bodies, various combinations of bodies, hodgepodges; but you also find utterances, modes of expression, and whole regimes of signs' (Deleuze, 2007, in MacLure 2013, p. 661). Assemblage components intersect and interrelate in any number of fluid ways, from which different and unpredictable relationships emerge. Jackson and Mazzei (2013, p. 262) suggest the potential of thinking with assemblage to see:

> . . .the process of making and unmaking. . .the process of arranging, organizing, fitting together. So to see it at work, we have to ask not only how things are connected but also what territory is claimed in that connection.

Barad (2007) calls this interrelation, *intra-action* to characterise the 'in the midst-ness' of such action, from which different and unpredictable relationships might emerge. Assemblages destabilise the centrality of the human subject as being the only element of significance and importance. This is a helpful way to explore teacher PL as a site of complexity, where teachers' bodies – the human but also the material, the technological, socio-historical, the spatial and the temporal also matter. As such, teachers' histories, memories, prejudices, and a whole host of elements that include social structures as well as material conditions and experiences from their lives and institutions matter within the assemblage. Thinking with assemblage in liminal space foregrounds multiplicity, situated and relational practices and pays attention to the ways teachers must mediate rapidly shifting social, cultural, environmental and technological change in their professional lives

and the change and uncertainty aligned with this. Teachers are embodied and embedded in geo-political locations (Braidotti 2013), a vital consideration for educating within the instabilities, complexities and uncertainties of our hyperconnected contemporary world. It also keeps us alert to the ways that multiple identities of race, gender, culture, class, sexuality, etc., intersect to position teachers differently within their educational experiences. It encourages us to pay closer attention to the often neglected material and affective dimensions of these experiences – the 'mattering' – of experience in both material and consequential senses of the word (Barad 2007) and think 'otherwise' to governmental discourses of professionalism that 'fix' concepts of professionalism in static ways increasingly across the world (Sahlberg 2016, Hargreaves and Fullan 2020).

As such, we are more likely to see the multiple configurations possible in PL as a site for 'always becoming' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). Liminal, dynamic and fluid spaces for '....an ongoing series of confrontations with self, others, ideas, ethics, dilemmas, conundrums and contradictions' (Clarke 2009, p. 214) and indeed non-human and affective elements that also constitute educational spaces, what Barad (2007) calls 'entangled agencies' and Bennett (2009) calls 'distributive agency'. Rather than the teacher agency being individualistic and positioning educators as autonomous actors, it sees agency as messy, relational and shared with other elements within the assemblage. It also positions teacher agency as being responsive to what emerges – intra actions with teachers and students, classrooms, curricula, policies, etc., as well as spatial and temporal elements, what Deleuze and Guattari (1987, p. 26) consider a logic found in the conjunction 'and, and and...' *Always becoming* describes this state of movement, although it is one that can be '... masked by powerful and persuasive illusory discourses of fixity, stability and identity' (Martin and Kamberelis 2013, p. 668) and the powerful 'regimes of truth' (Foucault 1977) that shape and produce teaching professionals in contemporary neoliberal education policy and practice.

It is vital that, as educators, we amplify the possibilities of PL that trouble hegemonic discourses and practices and encourages teachers to understand a range of theoretical, ontological and epistemological perspectives (Morris and Wisker 2011, Fox 2021), in order that they become sensitised to the very knotty issues of education. For example, our students follow a modular programme which allows for bespoke pathways tailored to their interests, from a wide range of modules. The active negotiation of assignment content and research methodology between students and module leaders allows for greater agency of teacher researchers. This not only acts as preparation for the dissertation but also seeks to position the teachers not as 'technicians' (Gray 2007) but as professionals who perceive teaching as a research-based profession (Brooks 2021). This is PL as intellectual activity rather than a sedative (Guattari 2014), a one-way activity to close-down debate, reproduce sameness and ensure fidelity to particular ways of teaching and learning.

Through a course focused on interrogating 'truth' and knowledge about their own educational experiences, students are encouraged to reflexively theorise and critique the ways these are socially constructed and mediated by hegemonic education discourses. As critical readers but also creators of research (Dixon and Ward 2015) and producers of knowledge (Neary 2010), and in the tradition of Stenhouse (1979), engagement *with* research is made productive through engagement *in* research. This focus on knowledge creation echoes studies which conclude that although it is under threat, teacher PL that is research-informed and rich in research-related processes constitutes engaged and impactful PL (Cordingley 2015, Brooks 2021). Rather than being 'spoken' by the governmental discourses outlined above, teachers can 'speak against ... mobilise and be sceptical of policy and their own discourses at the same time' (Thomson *et al.* 2013, p. 168). Such liminal spaces can germinate the seeds of personal and professional generative change but needs to be created and maintained in defiance of current education PL climates and policy moves.

To conclude this section, we return to an emphasis on the necessity for PL to explore the complexities of teaching and learning in the 'swampy lowlands where problems are messy and confusing and incapable of technical solution' and where 'lie the problems of greatest human

concern' (Schön 1983, p. 42). PL as assemblage in liminal space is a counterpoint to PL in a 'done to' modality. This repositions PL as a heterogeneous space where we might 're-imagine educators as an intellectual, rather than as a technician or as a bundle of skills and competences' (Ball 2016, p. 1056).

## Research context

We put such a PL space, a Master's in Education course at a HEI in England, under consideration. The HEI serves a diverse urban constituency and is one of the largest providers in the area of undergraduate and post-graduate education for social workers, teachers and Early Years practitioners with established partnerships across 900 primary and 200 secondary schools. As Anastasiadis and O'Brien (2019) note, Master's PL is an under-researched area in the literature, not least because it has been largely ignored until recently in terms of English university metrics and public evaluations. Our Master's course runs both full- and part-time iterations. Most of the part-time students are in-service teachers, whilst many of the full-time students have been full-time teachers who are currently taking a break or working part-time (in teaching or other areas). Some come directly from their pre-service education course such as the PGCE (Post Graduate Certificate in Education). These teachers on the course span all sectors and stages of education, from early-career teachers to senior leaders in schools and Further Education colleges and educators in Higher Education and across health, education and social work disciplines. As such, there is a wide age demographic and broad cross sectoral experience.

Many of our Master's students juggle their professional work and their study alongside caring and family responsibilities. As with many postgraduate university courses, where Master's level study is promoted internationally as a means of developing teachers' research literacy (Schleicher 2011), there is a full-time international student body. Together, this body of students means the course is a fertile space of rich cultural, social, and experiential knowledge about education and the lived experiences of educational policies and practices at local, national and global levels. This presents opportunities for students and staff to share experiences, ideas and practices, and the course foregrounds critical dialogic practices to open spaces for understanding how educators and students from such a diverse range of backgrounds are positioned and constructed in multiple and different ways across sectors, stages and countries around the world, as well as how educators and students are constructed in intersectional ways across gender, race, sexuality, class etc.

## Methodology

Our Master's programme had been running for five years, and as the senior team (Head of Department, Course Leader and Deputy Course Leader), we felt it was the right time to engage in some critical reflection around students' experiences, past and present. However, there was a desire to avoid the usual 'evaluative' model where tutors ask students for feedback, as these are devices often pulled into the hegemonic PL frameworks outlined above. Rather, we wanted to understand what 'mattered' to the students from their diverse backgrounds within assemblages of PL. Our decision to facilitate student-led research was underpinned by the belief that they were the best people to work with their fellow students to explore their own experiences and those of their peers in ways that were not pre-determined by us. We therefore chose to run student-led focus groups so that the collective interactions encouraged by a focus group setting would potentially generate richer insights into participants' perceptions and experiences as they 'influence and are influenced' by each other (Krueger and Casey 2000).

Moreover, the decision to involve student researchers as part of a participatory design in the project reflected a strong learner-oriented focus regarding research education pedagogies (Boud and Lee 2005, Wagner *et al.* 2011). The researchers, therefore, were 4 students on the course plus 2 post-graduate PhD students who were also alumni of the master's course. These more experienced researchers acted as research mentors to the master's students in a model where

participants were researching between themselves rather than being researched upon (Barnacle and Mewburn 2010, Hopwood 2010) and they were paid through an internal funding stream. We wanted to encourage students' critical reflexivity about research education processes as part of their ongoing development as researchers which was an integral part of the whole programme, as described above. Accordingly, the research design for this project created opportunities for 'horizontal' research interactions between alumni students who had since started a doctoral degree as mentors, student researchers and the student participants (Boud and Lee 2005).

## Ethics

The horizontal research design described above echoed an ethical commitment to minimising imbalances of power between researchers and participants. Students were able to participate in the co-construction of the research, research their own experiences and those of their peers and seek support at any stage of the research process from more experienced researchers. The research team were aware of the potential for participants to be affected by discussing frustrations and concerns about their past experiences and current careers and support was signposted and available within university support systems. Anonymity of participants was ensured using pseudonyms. Full ethical approval was obtained via the authors' institutional ethics board.

## Data collection

The authors formed a steering group for the project that was used to introduce the project, give support around conducting focus group and to share, discuss and reflect upon the methodological processes and data collection carried out by the doctoral and Master's student researchers. The student researchers were encouraged to choose their own research focus, which in turn determined which groups of potential student participants they were going to work with. The PGR mentors and student researchers managed the whole data collection process, reporting back to the tutor steering group (who were available for support at all stages).

Data was collected virtually using MS Teams due to COVID-19 restrictions and the span of the data collection ($n = 4 + 50$ students going back 5 years on the course). This enabled the participation of students who had since relocated, including those living internationally. Participants included international students, part-time students (who largely comprised those teachers working full time alongside their studies) and full-time students.

## Data analysis

Data collected by the student researchers was analysed using a 'glowing data' approach that MacLure (2010, p. 238) propose is when data, 'starts to glimmer, gathering our attention.' We were interested in data that excited, troubled or unsettled our thinking, that paid attention to some of the material, affective knowledge outlined above, and that disrupted 'taken for granted' values and practices. We also paid attention to any institutional tensions (including those within our own institution) that constitute PL experiences. This was an approach that resonated with both our theoretical framing and our own sense of what mattered within liminal spaces and differentiated forms of identity in Master's education.

## Discussion of data

What follows is an examination and exploration of data drawn from the student responses to the focus group discussions. We discuss here 'hotspots' within the data that explore some of the tensions and opportunities noted above. Rather than surface representations of meaning, these are affective, dynamic and sometimes contradictory impressions that give us pause. The affective

nature of teachers' experiences resonated throughout the data and the sense of teachers' always becoming otherwise to how they were constructed within their professional practices. We use this to suggest the generative potential of PL when imagined and practised as a liminal space where the affective, the personal and the intellectual matter.

## Fixed identities, frustration, disillusionment and becoming otherwise

Several participants embodied the neoliberal hypernarratives outlined above, viewing the Master's instrumentally, as a lever with which to advance their careers. It was an opportunity for advancement in educational marketplaces for Craig, an experienced school leader and educational professional, who had worked internationally in a variety of settings:

> *[. . .]to have more currency . . . I . . .thought I had the knowledge and the know how – but you need to look good too. I was trying to get to the next stage and I couldn't because I hadn't got a master's degree. It was frustrating the hell out of me*

'It has really *accelerated me to where I want to be*' (Lucy)
*'It's been a springboard to getting a job in HE so really I couldn't fault it.' (Georgie)*

Whilst these students were clearly consumers of PL (and specifically Master's) for career enhancement and progression, they were simultaneously frustrated by the effects of the hypernarrative upon their own professional experiences and circumstances: institutional obsessions with standards, rankings and auditable achievements, predicated on an often dubious 'what works' agenda (Biesta 2010). Craig was increasingly uncomfortable with the hegemonic discourses that defined him in his teaching role, and which he was so proficient in using, and needed a space to do some of the complex work of 'unpicking' as to how he had 'arrived' at such a frustrating place, despite having been so successful within the system. For him, the course was an opportunity to:

> *[. . .] to look at things differently – . . . not for career or pay but fresh perspective*

The idea of PL as becoming more than a linear career progression as the master's progressed emerged strongly from the data. With more time and a different learning space, students were able to critically interrogate educational practices and resist the 'gaze from above' (Bourke *et al.* 2015, p. 7), at least in terms of their own professional integrity, by helping them to realise that they were becoming different kinds of educators with a greater awareness of their professional roles from a different perspective.

> *. . . it's done so much for me. I'm so much more aware of everything involved in my job and the world around my job (Cassie)*

There were multiple affective responses, including participants who were very bruised by the system and desired spaces for reflection and self-care. Harriet took a break after her school was placed into special measures by Ofsted and expressly joined the masters because she was '*exhausted and disillusioned*'.

Others had been so immersed in the job resulting in little time to think about what they were doing until they stopped, a significant reflection on the lack of time and space within educational institutions for engaged thinking. Despite the PGCE being a level 7 course, the overcrowded and performative nature of it as an educational training model necessitated by highly prescriptive and regulated curricula and is indicative of current professional learning. Maisy talks about how she felt aspects of the PGCE were '*stagnant*' and how the Master's enabled her to be *'more critical'*.

Precious agrees, noting:

> *It's not until you start reading the theories . . . you're like hang on a minute that's why! . . . . that's how I became more analytical than before!*

The opportunities for PL spaces where perspectives were multiple and contestable, rather than singular and linear, were considered of vital importance. The reference to 'digging' beneath the surface was resonant with the Barad (2014) concept of 're-turning' as a means to interrogate and reflect. Not to 'return to' in a traditional sense of linear reflections common to both teacher training and normative PL spaces, but to turn over again and again, as with digging, a process Barad (2014) likens to an earthworm moving through organic matter ' . . . aerating the soil, allowing oxygen in, opening it up and breathing new life into it' (Barad 2014, p. 168). As Ngozi suggested: '*It's a way to look at things differently and get a different perspective on education. . .. I was so ready to dig beneath the surface*', to understand the 'driving forces or the policies' that were causing frustration. As result of joining the Master's, students began to see their jobs and themselves differently, with less prescribed and fixed professional identities. Within these becomings, they felt a growing confidence in their ability to think 'otherwise' about education, suggesting the Master's, as a liminal space, can provide a means of making sense of experience that can only be attained through a distancing from the everyday practice of teaching. In its liminality, the space acts in ways that are safe, open, and active, both physically and theoretically, where theory can be engaged as a tool to challenge and scrape away the surface inscriptions of 'profession' to uncover the ideological constructs and behaviours within:

> *The programme has opened up my mind to think deeply about certain things to not take things on surface value. To question things a bit more (Ngozi)*

June talked about how theoretical and political perspectives offered a means to understand how her experiences had been shaped over time. She talked about how the National Curriculum, introduced in 1988, mandated prescribed approaches to teaching and led to a passivity exacerbated by lack of time and accountability:

> *The Master's gave a meaning to everything that has happened to me in the last 30 years . . . at the time we knew nothing about what was going on. We just had a job to do (June)*

These new perspectives on education practice and processes led to the beginnings of more multiple and entangled identities where the professional and the personal were less distinct from each other. Parveen described the Master's as having '*helped to support me with challenging circumstances (as well as) helped me a lot professionally*'. Whilst the erosion of normative, fixed or standardised professional identity might seem destabilising, participants spoke of how generative that was to build greater confidence and agency as being part of a broader, more collective profession where they had a role in the production of knowledge. Safiya talked about having felt no longer '*relevant*', having lost a sense of who she was within demands for standardised and compliant practices and how the Master's gave her confidence:

> *it's made me believe I could do something. I was still relevant.*

This sense of no longer being able to 'act' or 'make a difference' or be agentic within normative educational spaces spoke both to how fixed they felt their professional identities had become but also helped a greater understanding of both the burnout and the attrition from the profession. There was reference to the restorative acts that could take place within the space of Master's and motivating ways to move beyond the fixing of teachers into singular roles. Halima spoke, paradoxically, of how she now felt she '*could make a difference*' for '*teachers leaving the profession*' as an educational consultant.

The significant impact of the affective dimensions of teaching and learning were evident throughout the data, and the opportunity for educators to understand these through dialogue and sharing stories and experiences and theorising these were considered a valuable way of decentring the individual as being responsible for their own feelings of frustration or failure to

see how these were constructed and produced within institutions and systems shaped within educations' neoliberal hypernarratives.

Our data suggest that such governmentality takes its toll on educators in multiple affective ways. However, instead of reproducing things *'the ways that have always been done' (*Maisy), our PL on the Master's consciously wanted to dwell in the liminal, and whilst there were many references to the intellectual challenge of this, Maisy is typical of many of the responses:

> *I was daunted at first (by the Master's) but really glad that I did it*

PL as a liminal space is populated, not by pre-determined, co-opted and 'approved' theoretical models and ideas but by dialogic moments that cannot be known, except at the point of their emergence.

> [. . .] *the team of tutors we had were trying to . . . [use] this critical system of education, we were trying to build knowledge . Sometimes it feels quite 'empty' it feels like there is nothing and yes sometimes there is nothing because we need to build the knowledge'* (Fabian)

Building knowledge in this way is risky and it relies on participation, co-creation and experimentation. Especially, as Biesta (2013, p. 2) points out, education has increasingly been constructed as a "risk-free" space, where only the effective production of pre-defined 'learning outcomes' in a small number of subjects or regarding a limited set of professional identities can be produced.

Students' time on the Master's appeared to encourage the development of less-risk averse, more theoretically informed, agentic professional identities for students. Indeed, it was the creation of time and space to do thinking that was so important to Chris '*taking time out to think'*.

Indeed, students were often very explicit about the ways in which they had begun to feel very differently about the work they had been previously involved in, to the point that it no longer seemed possible to continue in a mode of the same. Harriet was very conscious of the highly prescriptive nature of educational practice in school, and whilst she contested these ideas, she was told '*that's the way it is that's what we have to do'*. However, the course gave her the opportunity to theorise her practice and to move '*from an environment where it wasn't ok to question things'* to one where it was '*encouraged'*. Like Halima, this also led to her not re-joining the teaching workforce in state education.

This dissatisfaction was most significant for school-based teachers (rather than early years or further education), a challenging response in some respects for us as a course team, albeit one which speaks to the pessimism towards enacting change within school-based education.

> *The Master's has. . . made me oh so critical of it (teaching) . . . in a good way (Maisy)*

There were ways in which the Master's was considered challenging and unsettling. The uncertainties of open critical debate and engagement with lecturers who themselves embraced uncertainty stood in contrast to their expectations of more linear engagement indicative of PL with pre-determined learning outcomes. Participants spoke of it taking time to adapt to open spaces of learning. One participant spoke of feeling resentful of them at first as they seemed lacking in structure and what he felt were issues of performance of the lecturers. This elicited the following response within the focus group:

> *I felt the Master's wasn't fully structured but . . . there was that agency . . . Freedom to act or bring your views. . . that's . . . the extra agency I love so much* (Fabian)

All participants valued highly the dialogic nature and the opportunities to learn with educators from very diverse experiences and backgrounds, as it allowed them to '*deconstruct ideas and critique them' (Debbie).*

The diversity of the student body fostered interdisciplinary and interprofessional professional thinking where 'so *many disciplines. . .cross over' (*Sienna). The varied biographies of the students were recognised as an important facet of the course. The bringing together of educational

professionals from a range of disciplines and different ethnicities, nationalities and at a variety of career stages helped to create the conditions within which PL can foster dialogue across traditional hierarchies of the educational workplace, as Cassie, who had healthcare background states:

> *What's been good for me is just hearing different perspectives as well . . . . . I've learned loads about schooling . . . they've no rights, teachers. It's really shocked me.*

Robert, a healthcare professional in the military, was intrigued by the crossover between professions also:

> *It's not just my world that's had these problems. It's across education from early years all the way through.*

This sharing, discussing and critiquing of experiences clearly helped the students consider how policy and political agendas that impact their own practice are part of wider, global reforms and social, political and material conditions to which all their professions were subject.

The emphasis on dialogue and discussion was also highly valued:

> *The relationship with the lecturer is quite different - I never used to speak up in modules . . . but without this experience I wouldn't . . . even have an intellectual conversation with a professional in education*

Students themselves often challenged each other's preconceptions as they shared and compared their very different personal experiences and practices as educators. For example, Craig as a school leader found the more egalitarian nature of the course very interesting:

> *Not a lot of people disagree with me because I'm their boss . . . .so to have my views really put on a back burner and make myself open to what was going on without my voice shouting out was a challenge.*

The hierarchical structures typical of normative educational systems that Craig embodies and performs become flattened out within this more liminal space. This allows for potentially more marginalised voices to be heard and challenges dominant voices to pause and reflect the ways they have been prioritised and given most credibility within normative discourses.

After engaging with the Master's course it was significant that many of these students felt the need to continue on their learning and research journeys.

> *[. . .] it's really opened up my mind and I feel a lot more knowledgeable and have a thirst to continue [. . .]* (Ngozi)

Once students had begun to question, critique and explore their professional practices and engage within open, liminal and entangled spaces, then further study, beyond the Master's, seemed possible and desirable.

## Towards a conclusion

The PL assemblage of students' experience of PL on this one Master's in Education course offer us insights into what matters to them as teachers. Whilst the study has limitations in its scale, as it focused on one HEI and one course, there are implications across the sector for those working in PL in HE. For example, our data suggest that students valued less tangible things about PL than 'what works' approaches. Their time on the course was experienced as collective and relational and their accounts captured the messiness of their lived experience of teaching. They highly valued opportunities to dialogue and socialise within diverse groups, across ages, cultures and locations, experiences and discipline. It is rare to find PL spaces that offer such diversity other than in HEIs and the possibilities that rich and diverse perspectives from such diverse groups are an affordance with potential for learning from education systems and educators across the globe, as well as across age, class and experience. Rather than PL as undertaken as a singular or solitary exercise within heterogeneous groups, this is PL as reciprocal and connected to multiple perspectives and stories of educational experience.

The liminality of the space that the Master's programme offered was considered unsettling by many of our participants, but the data suggested that blurring boundaries between their multiple identities between formal and informal learning was ultimately productive in students exploring their professional selves. By dwelling within the unstable, variable and contested nature of education, participants found a new confidence through the 'in-betweeness' that the course offered. This PL experience was transforming in the sense that previously held ways of understanding their professional practices and assumptions were dislodged. For some participants, this led to a changed relationship with the 'taken for granted' knowledges of education, for others it led to a change in career. One of the interesting consequences of the course has been a significant minority of students opting for subsequent doctoral study within a student body who are often marginalised within traditional post-graduate researcher (PGR) communities, through class, race, and educational experience. This is worthy of further study, not least because there is a general positioning of 'practice-based' PL as being of greater relevance to teachers but diversifying the PGR education community further amplifies marginalised voices and contributions within the discipline.

The data suggest that normative 'what works' PL discourses are seductive but problematic and that these have an affective impact on teacher bodies who internalise such discourses and the implicit judgement couched within. Finding an alternative language through theoretical concepts to trouble these normative discourses in PL spaces gives teachers a language with which to critically interrogate and articulate why and how what matters, matters for their professional and personal becomings. These teacher becomings are dynamic, a never arrived at place. As a counter to the achievement and arrival narratives, narratives of becomings, assemblages and liminality are worthy of further exploration with teachers themselves to re-frame notions of professional identity, and further research as to the effects and affordances of such re-positioning within teacher PL.

Such narratives provide an opportunity for critical counterbalance to hegemonic hypernarratives that have so often already fixed professional identities, ignoring personal and affective dimensions. Working with critical theories and methodologies enables teachers to identify the affective dimensions and implications of accountability cultures. Conceptualising PL as a liminal space for diverse groups of students to explore assemblages of social, affective, and embodied experiences of teaching is, we argue, generative. Liminal PL spaces might be under threat, but they are worth fighting for.

## Disclosure statement

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