Formative assessment models and their impact on Initial Teacher Training

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As formative assessment models gain increasing prominence in government documentation, Debra Kidd explores how they might impact on Initial Teacher Training (ITT) and explores how one school, recently designated a ‘National School of Creativity’ is seeking to provide a creative and meaningful approach to assessment.

A key intention in the revision of the professional standards documentation by the Teacher Development Agency (TDA) in 2007, was to ensure that contemporary priorities for education – namely ‘personalisation’ (Q10), ‘well being’ (Q5) and ‘innovation’ (Q8) would be represented in the most basic standards for professional practice in initial teacher training – the professional entry standards. They reflected an ideological shift, now strengthened by evidence in neuroscience, (Seger et al, 2002, cited by Jones, 2007 p7) that generative or creative thinking is to be highly valued (Bentley and Seltzer 1999, Robinson 1997).

This shift in priority is evident in developments in assessment strategies, where there is a move away from summative testing towards a more formative approach which requires that a teacher can measure a child’s individual progress and adapt practice in response to these findings. In this and other respects, the concept of teacher as ‘reflective practitioner’ (Schon 1987) is enshrined within the rhetoric of the TDA. Yet the unquestioned assumption in the TDA documentation that ‘professionalism’ can be classified and categorised into a set of measurable ‘standards’, despite the abstract qualities described therein (such as ‘creative’) undermines the ability of the professional to be truly reflective in the ‘generative’ sense (Schon, 1967 cited in Pakman 2000 p5), which equip individuals with the capacity to adapt to change. This need for individuals to be able to adapt to a rapidly changing society dominates much current government thinking and while not new - the argument was made by both Rosseau and Dewey (Schon 1987) - technology has caused a significant acceleration leading to an estimate, based on an analysis of new technologies, that:

‘60% of 11 year olds will leave school to do jobs which have not yet been invented’ (Collard, 2008).

In spite of this, our systems of measuring progress, both for pupils and for professionals, remain within a positivist model which focuses on auditing technical capacities and which assumes that the qualities required for phenomenological reflection – i.e. the capacity for teachers to see the child anew in their observations – are measurable. Many researchers have noted that ‘performativity criterion’ applied to a ‘teacher as technician’ model (Laytord, 1979 p110) has created within the profession a conflict between what Stronach et al (2002, p. 1) refer to as ‘economies of performance’ (audited outcomes) and ‘ecologies of practice’ (personal and socially constructed sets of expectations and behaviours – a moral code) and while it may be possible to balance those aims by valuing both equally, it is not possible to do so by measuring them in the same way and certainly not while the publically shared indicators of success: examinations and ‘grades’, dominate.

These issues with professionalism are mirrored almost exactly in the classroom environment of the learner who attempts to meet empirical ‘standards of attainment’ (Department for Children, Schools and Family; DCSF) while being encouraged to be both a ‘confident individual’ and a ‘responsible citizen’ (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority; QCA 2006); qualities not easily measured. These competing purposes are symptomatic of what might be termed a multiple purpose disorder in education and which Egan (2008) believes are irreconcilable. Whether or not this is true, this dualism creates a confusing learning environment for children, and it is not surprising that for many, the primary objective is simply to ‘get by’ (Perrenoud, 1991 p92). Neither is it unusual that those who don’t get by become ‘imprisoned in the identity of a bad pupil and an opponent’ (Perrenoud, 1991), undermining their capacities to be either confident or responsible.

Nowhere is this uneasy partnership between the epistemological and the ontological more apparent than
in the assessment system and in the competing rhetoric between attainment and development. A standards driven agenda requires an empirical collation of data and yet the ethos underpinning new assessment models lends itself much more to a multimodal approach in which pupil’s actions, expressions, gestures and interactions are observed and noted as evidence in addition to their written responses to tasks. While there are moves towards attempting to reconcile these issues within education, there is a lack of professional confidence in implementing new assessment guidance because the signs emitted from government are inconsistent. For example in its digital support materials for assessing pupils’ progress (APP; see below), the DCSF models an emphasis on speaking and listening and drama as means to collating discourse based evidence of learning. In the criteria for assessment, however (the Assessment Fociuses; AFs), there is no mention of spoken discourse, only of written evidence (DCSF 2008).

The shift in emphasis on assessment can be seen in the fact that paradigms for assessment such as Assessment for Learning (AfL; Black and Wiliams, 1998) and ‘Assessment Systems for the Future’ (Assessment Reform Group 2003) are finding their way into government documentation and are reflected both in Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) and in Continuing Professional Development (CPD) priorities for the TDA from 2008-2011 (TDA 2008). Assessing Pupil Progress (DCSF 2008) is a somewhat diluted response to the original work of the Assessment Reform Group but seeks to scaffold a formative assessment process centred around a cycle of observation, feedback and target setting, leading to a teacher managed summative assessment model. While it maintains a preoccupation with ‘core’ skills and levelling children, it does explore the benefits of shifting responsibility for summative assessment for children under the age of 14 to teachers. This change is evident in the recent abolition of KS3 SATS tests for 14 year olds and adds weight to the prediction of Ken Boston in 2005 ‘that external summative tests for 11-year olds and 14 year olds will eventually be replaced by moderated teacher assessment’ though he warned that ‘the transition could take 10 years’ (Boston, 2005).

For any human being, the process of being assessed is an emotive one and the relationships between the assessed and the assessor are therefore complex. Indeed pressure to ‘perform’ has an inhibiting effect on the brain’s capacity to think in a generative way (Forgays and Forgays, 1992, pp 329-335) and so testing, or even being told at the outset that the objective is to generate a product, can hinder genuine progress. This flies in the face of much current practice, in particular the tendency to offer ‘WILF’ (What I am Looking For) objectives to children. The alternative is a scaffolded and organic approach in which the teacher observes and records the contributions of the child while facilitating learning in such a way as to create the ‘trust and security’ and ‘freedom of action’ necessary to create optimal conditions for creativity to take place (Bentley and Selzter 1999) or, more simply, to ‘give the kid reason’ (Schon 1987). Such assessments sit within a componental model (Amabile 1996, Craft 2001 p6) which requires that the teacher and child become co-constructors of learning; a model which is evident in Regio Emilia schools which have developed an assessment process involving adults (both teachers and others), children, their peers and often parents, and one which Rinaldi (2006) describes as an ‘act of love’.

The complexities of this interaction, however, are largely ignored in current policy and yet I would argue, understanding the phenomena of relationships and emotions in assessment interactions are essential in creating the ‘intrinsic motives’ for learning (Bruner, 1966 p1) that governments over the past two decades have come to refer frequently to as a ‘lifelong love of learning’ (DCSF 2008).

There are clear implications here for the professional notions of teachers who themselves are caught in a dualism between the romantic - ‘to love teaching is to give of yourself in a way that can be so tenderly vulnerable’ - (Liston 2000, cited by Stronach et al, 2002 p4.) and the passive - ‘less and less planners of their own destiny and more and more deliverers of prescriptions written by others’ (Goodson 2000, cited by Stronach et al 2002 p4).

It was Dewey (1938 p27) who noted that acquiring knowledge in isolation ‘by means of automatic drill’ resulted in minds whose ‘power of judgment and capacity to act intelligently in new situations was limited.’ The problem for the teaching profession is that the very people charged with ensuring that this is not true for future generations - trainee teachers - are themselves the products of such a system. Indeed Wragg (2003) accused the current government of ‘tightening’ the straps of the ‘straightjacket’ which produced such outcomes. If so then the deliverers of the new prescriptions are also the recipients of the old prescription and according to the notion of ‘neural Darwinism’ (Sharples 2008), having been deprived of the opportunity in their own education to experience creative and generative thinking, some may be deficient in the very thinking skills required to be professionally competent within the new paradigm. Will they have the capacity to ‘act intelligently in new situations’ which demand Claxton’s 5Rs: ‘resourcefulness, remembering, resilience, reflectiveness and reciprocity?’ (Claxton, 2002). And what can I do to support them to make this shift from a passive to a ‘creative’ and even ‘romantic’ teacher?
I am moved by the notion that assessment, indeed, teaching is an ‘act of love’ (Rinaldi 2006), yet this phrase itself challenges many people’s perceptions of professionalism. It seems that it is with the awakening of sexual awareness and the heightened sensitivity that our culture has towards sexual abuse, that the concept of love begins to acquire negative associations in any context between an adult and child outside of a family group. The same fears exist in terms of professional relationships between tutors and students. Yet psychologists are unanimous in recognizing a human being’s need for unconditional love or ‘positive regard’ (Rogers 1931) in order to develop into a ‘healthy’ adult (Chapman and Campbell, 2005 p24); and ‘being healthy’, including emotionally and mentally healthy, is one of the key pillars of the Every Child Matters Agenda (DCSF 2004). Indeed, I would argue that ‘mattering’ is an emotional affair; in order for every child to matter to a teacher or other significant adult, there has to be an emotional connection – ‘mattering’ requires a degree of care and empathy and one might argue, even love.

The issue of the place of emotion in education is clearly significant in navigating the interactions in assessments noted above and within the curriculum, where there is an emphasis on emotional health as reflected in the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) programme (DCSF 2006). It is evident in rhetoric from government that there is an attempt to place social and emotional learning alongside knowledge as key elements of an entitlement to education:-

‘Nothing is more important than the body of essential knowledge, skills and understanding we choose as a nation to pass onto young people… Alongside essential knowledge, skills and understanding, personal development should be a central aspect of the primary curriculum…

Personal, social and emotional capabilities are closely related to educational attainment, success in the labour market and to children’s wellbeing.’ (Balls, 2008).

In this and other statements, Ed Balls reiterates an intention that education represents a ‘pedagogy of hope’ (Freire 1992) through which ‘all can achieve their full potential regardless of background’ (Balls 2008) yet such ideals cannot be achieved without recognizing the emotional conditions necessary for learning to take place. In recognizing the socially constructed process of learning and in recommending a curriculum design which is based on ‘a clear set of culturally derived aims and values’ (Rose, 2008, p32) and on ‘social justice’ (Rose 2008 p7); i.e. one which creates ‘successful learners’, ‘confident individuals and responsible citizens’ (QCA 2007), the government is laying out an intention for securing a future population which is happy and sociable. Both ‘confidence’ and ‘responsibility’ are developed through a secure and loving set of life experiences, including educational experiences which are supported by a loving community in a purposeful environment; one in which ‘love’ is not an embarrassment, but an entitlement.

Higher Education rarely offers the opportunity for such rich interactions and relationships to take place. The lecture theatre is not a place in which individual creativity can thrive and economic factors drive a delivery model aimed at inputting information and generating thinking without the processes which help co-learning and therefore formative assessment to flourish. This problem is exacerbated by student expectations which are already rooted in a didactic model. Indeed when I try to explore alternative, creative pedagogies, students often comment that what I teach is not what they experience in the ‘real’ world. That the classrooms they inhabit on teaching practice are not ‘loving’ places – they are ‘learning’ places. My students, and it would seem, many teachers, don’t see the two as connected. In fact one said to me ‘We don’t do emotions in literacy. That’s SEAL time.’

In spite of all the changes being made to policy, or the semantic shifts in Ofsted language towards recognising ‘creativity’ ‘well being’ and ‘emotional literacy’, even going so far as to launch an ‘attack on boring teachers’ (Guardian, January 5th 2008), this emphasis is not being seen by students on the ground. Why? Perhaps this comment from a headteacher casts light on the situation:

‘If 50% of my kids are jailed for knife crime, no-one comes breathing down my neck, but if that 50% don’t get 5 GCSEs, I’m in trouble. What am I going to focus on? Their grades or their consciences?’

Rose points out in the interim review that while ‘few heads and teachers rejected the principles of good assessment…their concerns centred on the way in which the outcomes of tests are reported and the time that many felt must be spent preparing children for the conditions of testing, thus narrowing the curriculum.’ (2008 p19).

Hargreaves (2008 p5) demonstrates how real this concern is in outlining the moral contradictions inherent in the National Challenge policy which seeks to set a ‘floor target’ for GCSE grades with a threat of closure for those deemed to be failing.

While there are moves being made to provide a wider curriculum with deeper and more meaningful social and emotional experiences embedded within it, as long as schools are publicly measured by narrow sets of test results, there will be little fundamental change. And the focus for the purpose of
education will always lie in the test. As one teacher put it, ‘I'll teach to the test as long as I'm measured by the test results’.

This creates a huge professional dilemma for teacher educators. While we may be seeing a move in the wider educational system towards finding a pragmatic synthesis between valuing that which is measurable and that which is not, student teachers are preoccupied in measuring progress – it is what they are used to. They want to measure their own and other’s achievements against clearly identifiable sets of criteria, and indeed they will be expected to be able to do this well in the future. Notions inherent in APP and in AIL such as the capacity to recognize skills which have been transferred from one context to another and to record this through the use of observational data are alien to many students, who see assessments as processes in which children write in isolation and then are marked by an adult in isolation. Hence, there is a misconception among trainee teachers as to what constitutes reliable evidence or data. They have not been trained to value or to be able to analyse actions, gestures or even speech. They require some training on discourse analysis and wider experience of methods of collating observational data. They need to be able to deconstruct that which they take for granted; the ability to ‘read’ the non verbal; in effect they are being asked to acquire the skills of the multimodal ethnographer (Dicks et al, 2006); yet nowhere in their training is this made explicit.

There are, however, schools who are developing radical new approaches to assessment and for whom such questions are being addressed. It is vital that our trainees are exposed to some of these models of practice, but they are rare. In addition, opportunities to explore creative pedagogies and subjects such as Drama which have a long tradition of assessing through observation, would be beneficial. Yet where these opportunities are created, there are issues with attendance. This was clear in the poor attendance of trainees in the Hearts Project (Opie 2005) where less than 50% of students attended a funded two day enrichment event aimed at promoting Arts pedagogies in Initial Teacher Training. When followed up, typical responses ranged from ‘I thought it was voluntary’ and ‘it wasn’t assessed was it?’. So deeply embedded is the experience of their own education that the only tasks worth anything are those which are graded and few value the kinds of socially constructed and skills based projects which sit outside of the core curriculum.

Yet according to David Hargreaves, it is these types of experience which create the deepest learning and which, he argues, create feelings of happiness and fulfillment in human beings. In his report for the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (2008 p43), he goes further to say that these projects meet some core human needs:-

‘Our deepest needs concern how we relate to others…Offer claims that we need the 3As – ‘attention, affirmation and approbation’. Adolescents feel such needs acutely: for them there can be no well being if they remain unmet. It is from their peers that they are most demanded. Many need help to deal with their deep fears of being rejected, humiliated and excluded by peers and to overcome their conviction that friendship lies in rigid and shallow conformity to peer pressure, fashions and status hierarchies or in the dreams of the cult of celebrity.’

He argues that working collaboratively on long term projects with clear assessment input from peers and teachers, helps to fill this important adolescent need. This view of learning as the pursuit of what Aristotle termed ‘the good life’ demands an acceptance of the role that platonic friendships, outside of ITT provision, there are schools who are attempting to address the issue of assessment in a meaningful and collaborative model. Kingstone School in Barnsley is attempting to ‘transform the child’s experience in school and create a curriculum and assessment process that genuinely nurtures human development and enables young people to come to terms with who they are and how they relate to others’ (Matthew Milburn, Headteacher).

Bruner argues that ‘human development’ or growth, requires skills which derives from ‘knowledge that makes action
flexible, foresightful and open to new learning” (1973 reproduced 2006 p167) and the school has committed itself to developing a curriculum model which aims to equip children with these skills. I believe their experiences might better inform my own practice in Higher Education and beyond.

I have documented the process of setting up the model in previous articles (Kidd, 2007), but briefly, the curriculum is intended to bridge the gap between primary and secondary school and to develop skills of autonomy, collaboration, creativity, empathy and thinking which are embodied in the 5 Cs of the Cultural Studies Learning Contract:-

• I commit
• I collaborate
• I consider and am considerate
• I communicate
• I create

The school is currently piloting an assessment model which seeks to evaluate the outcomes of the curriculum aims set out above. This has not been an easy task; when a school seeks to find a new way of assessing its pupils, they discover that there isn’t much guidance on assessing ‘human development’, or ‘coming to terms with self and others’. Even some of the skills which frequently crop up in QCA documentation such as creativity, compassion and entrepreneurialism are difficult to assess, yet there is nevertheless a preoccupation with measuring skills such as ‘creativity’. Indeed, there are several models for assessing ‘creativity’. One such model, the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), (Ellis and Barr, CLPE 2008) seeks to measure and assess creative processes in arts projects and there are several others including the Creativity Wheel (Creative Partnerships, 2007) and the 5x5 project (Fawcett and Hay, 2004). To an extent, these seem to have been successful in allowing teachers to observe, document and recognise creativity, but as Mathew Milburn says:

‘Why are we spending so much time and money trying to measure or assess creativity (and in the very act, reducing it to a series of tick boxes), when what we really should be doing is looking at finding a creative way to assess pupils.’ (2008)

In developing their assessment process, the staff have examined the Personal Learning and Thinking Skills (PLTS) framework (QCA 2006), SEAL documentation (DCSF 2007) and produced a tick boxed proforma which allows the assessor to tick whether or not the child is ‘never, sometimes, often or always’ using competencies such as ‘being objective’ or ‘managing feelings/emotions’. It seems to contradict the headteacher’s condemnation of the tick box culture quoted above, and if it stood alone, it would simply be another tick box proforma. But it does not stand alone. It is situated within a complex relational assessment process in which the child, his peers, parents, teachers and representatives from the local community come together to explore what has been learned, how it has been learned, what has been gained, valued, explored, investigated, loved, hated and retained. And the evidence is obtained through multimodal data; group work, discussions, presentations, questions, actions, gestures, behaviours, thinking skills and yes, written evidence.

The child is assessed by two peers – one of whom is their ‘critical friend’ and the other who is a ‘constructive friend’ and also self assesses in the form of a presentation. The findings are fed back to a panel of a teacher, parent and external visitor and targets for future learning are subsequently set.

It is a hugely complex and time consuming process and very difficult to manage in terms of timetabling, yet it mirrors many developments in assessment at Higher Education level – the increasing importance on self reflection or reflexivity; on keeping a learning journal; on allowing ideas to develop; on recognising one’s own place in the world and the impact this has on objectivity and perspective; the importance of sharing ideas, or working collaboratively; the value in presentations, in discussions, in action learning sets, in community. All of these I recognise from the Doctorate in Education. I had not expected to see them embedded so firmly into a Year 7 curriculum.

Initial findings showed that every child in the pilot managed to complete the task regardless of their ability and all found it a valuable experience, if difficult. Parents were initially sceptical and shocked at the amount of work being demanded of the child – some complained that it was harder than GCSE – but in feedback afterwards they felt that it had been a rewarding experience for the children and many commented that it had initiated lots of conversation and debate at home about the questions being explored; demonstrating the value of socially constructed learning for both parent and child. There were many surprised comments such as:

- Solved a problem
- Worked as part of a team
- Managed their own learning
- Demonstrated creative and reflective thinking
- Shown motivation and perseverance

The initial pilot is now being developed across the year group, largely in response to one of the key observations from the pilot: the impact of the process on the child and the relationship between him, his peers and his parents. The assessments centred around evidence gathered throughout an extended project, in which the child:
‘I had no idea she was capable of this.’

and from the pupils:

‘when it were set I thought I’ll never do this – it’s too hard, but then I did it and I were really proud of myself.’

The peer assessment process was perhaps one of the most profoundly significant elements of the process and the pupils’ feedback showed sensitivity and insight which seemed to have impacted greatly on those being assessed. Students commented on each others’ abilities to focus and work as a team, but were able to add comments such as: ‘I think you don’t work well in a team because you’re not confident and so you mess about because you don’t think your work’s any good. But you do have good ideas – you need to be more confident that we’ll listen to them.’

It is easy to be dismissive of such evidence, but if we are to re-evaluate our conceptions of well being and to place them within a framework in which happiness and hope can be achieved by overcoming a hurdle, then children’s voices are crucial; their active participation in shaping their learning is vital, for passivity leads to hopelessness and as Freire stated ‘hopelessness paralyses us, immobilises us. We succumb to fatalism and then it becomes impossible to muster the strength we need …to change the world’ (1992 p2). The world Freire sought to change was in many ways different to that which our adolescents would recognise, but the need to instil in young people a resilience and idealism which will carry them through hard times is crucial. The balance of skill to challenge inherent in Kingstone’s task is essential to human progress and development.

While none of the children are leaving with a ‘level ’, every child and every parent knows what they have done well, what they learned, what they know, and what they need to do in order to improve. Most importantly, they have overcome a hurdle, completed a task that seemed daunting at first. They have faced their peers and their own critical selves and have done so in front of the people that matter the most to them; their parents.

Hargreaves argues for a return to a ‘moral’ education which promotes ‘well being’ as ‘a way of life rather than a state of mind’ (2008 p31) and offers many examples from philosophy and psychology as to how this is important to the well being of society. He argues that happiness in education is found in friendships, in purpose and in endeavour in which:

- Frustration and hard work are inescapable elements
- These are more bearable because they are shared with others
- Signature strengths are shared and valued by others.

(2008 p32)

These signature strengths are set out in the work of Martin Seligman (2002 pp140 -159) who lists the core qualities which best equip people for ‘authentic happiness’ as:

- Wisdom (curiosity and interest in the world, love of learning, open-mindedness, critical thinking, judgement, ingenuity, originality and practical, social, personal and emotional intelligences)
- Courage (bravery, perseverance, diligence, integrity, honesty)
- Humanity and Love (kindness, generosity)
- Justice (citizenship, teamwork, loyalty, fairness, equity and leadership)
- Temperance (self control, caution, discretion, humility and modesty)
- Transcendence (appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, optimism, sense of purpose, forgiveness, humour, playfulness, passion, enthusiasm).

I would argue that Kingstone’s curriculum and assessment model genuinely attempts to value these strengths in children. The place of Philosophy in the curriculum and in the extended project in which pupils address questions such as ‘Is the world a fair place?’ or ‘What makes people happy?’ foster wisdom. In tackling a task which seems so daunting, they show courage. Their support of each other as critical and constructive friends demonstrates love. Their work seeks to define justice and the balance of power in the assessment process allows for a sense of justice to prevail through the assessment itself as well as being a key component of the questions set. Whether the process engenders transcendence depends
on the individual child, but 92% of Year 7s rate Cultural Studies as their favourite subject and many speak of its playfulness, emphasis on practical work and a commitment to thinking. As one child said:

'It makes your head hurt, but in a good way.'

In addition, the importance placed on making choices and recognising consequences – the CFA of De Bono’s CoRT programme (De Bono 1992 p112) was felt by pupils and staff to help children to make measured and temperate decisions.

As an external observer of this process, the most compelling evidence of the success of the pilot was almost accidentally caught on film. As the teacher walks to the camera to switch it off, in every case, there was an interaction between child and parent, in which the parent leaned forward and patted, hugged, kissed or tussled the hair of the child, mouthing silently comments such as ‘well done’. The children’s pink cheeks and silent smiles full of pride, betrayed the modest shrugs they gave, and showed them basking in the knowledge that they were loved, valued and admired. I would argue that this is an example of assessment as an act of love and one which the child will remember long after they leave school.

It was A.S. Neill who said ‘All crimes, all hatreds, all wars can be reduced to unhappiness.’ It seems that the need to place authentic happiness, brought about by care and collective endeavour, is more urgent than ever in a society preoccupied with fears of knife crime, terrorism and recession. As we enter a period in which material possessions will be less readily available or affordable and financial hardship more prevalent, it will be important to reassure and equip children with the resilience to adapt and the wisdom to see value in other aspects of being. Indeed I would argue that this is a professional duty within the realm of an ‘ecology of practice’ (Stronach et al 2002). Furthermore if we as professionals are serious in our intent to deliver the outcomes of ‘Every Child Matters’, then we require an understanding and capacity to deliver ‘real reciprocity’ in order to allow young people to fully reach their potential or ‘become’ (Rogers, cited by Kirschenbaum and Henderson, 1990 pp 50-63).

Our assessment processes offer an opportunity for embedding and evaluating these values into a curriculum in a meaningful way. The rhetoric is in place. We need the practice. As Gardner argues, it is not enough to equip pupils with intelligence, even multiple intelligences; the pressing question is ‘how can we help to ensure the use of these intelligences for positive ends rather than destructive ones?’ (1993 pxxviii). This is the professional challenge for me, and I believe for my trainees in the future. I intend to explore how best to use these findings to equip my own students with not only the skills to observe these traits in children, but also an awareness of the importance of well being, of happiness and of love in their own professional lives and in the relationships they construct with the children in their care.

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