Emergence of professional identity for the pre-service teacher

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This article highlights the potential influence of reflective writing upon the emergence of a professional identity during pre-service teachers' practicum placements. Links between reflective writing and identity formation were made during a project which required pre-service teachers to reflect upon their responses to, and observations of, a number of broad elements of the teaching environment both within the classroom and in the wider school context. The author reports on this small study involving teacher education students at Flinders University in South Australia and makes recommendations which could enhance the value of reflective writing as a personal and professional development tool.

Professional identity, teacher education, practicum, reflective writing, pre-service teacher

INTRODUCTION

This article encapsulates the author's journey in responding to two questions about the teaching practicum. These questions asked, What might shape a robust teacher identity? and What might be some indicators of a professional identity? Responses were provided by the project itself and through an exploration of the literature on identity formation. The project involved a small scale study at Flinders University, South Australia, on the potential role of reflective writing in the development of professional identity within the pre-service teacher, during practicum placements in schools. The literature supports the notion of broadening pre-service teachers' understanding of the nature of teacher responsibilities and professional role (Valli, 1997). A thorough understanding of the breadth and complexity of the teacher's role is a key element in identity formation. Consequently, this study required pre-service teachers to reflect upon their responses to, and observations of, various elements of the teaching environment such as daily classroom interruptions, parent liaison and staffroom activities.

Reflective writing was chosen as the method for gaining pre-service teachers' responses to their observations of school life. Reflection is seen as a vehicle for considering the management of "uncertainty and ambiguity" which is experienced in the wider culture of the school community with the potential for "changed dispositions" (Jay and Johnson, 2002, p.76). The meaning of reflection is summarized elsewhere by authors such as Jay and Johnson, (2002) and by Valli, (1997).

Choice of terms used in this paper may differ to the various terms found in current education literature when referring to teacher education students, and the teachers with whom they are placed in the practicum. The term 'pre-service teacher' rather than 'student teacher' is used in order to distinguish between tertiary student, as against school student, since in Australia the term 'student' could refer to both tertiary and school students. Further, Australian schools do not usually use the term 'pupil' to identify 'school students'. 'Mentor teacher', 'supervising teacher'

and 'cooperating teacher' are terms used synonymously to refer to the teacher of the class or subject, with whom the pre-service teacher is placed within the practicum.

PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

As professional identity development is a key component of this study, it is important to provide a backdrop for the findings and discussion, by drawing from the literature. 'Professional identity' may be described, by borrowing from the narrative literature, as the fostering of "self-descriptions" (Winslade, 2002, p.35), but which are confirmed by the social and cultural norms within their context (Winslade, Crocket, Monk and Drewery, 2000). This notion of a "socially constructed identity" (De Ruyter and Conroy, 2002, p.11) is particularly relevant for the pre-service teacher, as the context within which professional identity emerges, changes from one practicum setting to another. Identity is said to develop as a nexus of the "ideal person and professional image" (De Ruyter and Conroy, 2002 p.515; Atkinson, 2004) and professional identity as seeing self as a teacher and "by others" (Coldron and Smith, 1999, p.712) while "continually constructing a sustainable identity as a teacher" (Coldron and Smith, 1999, p.714). For the pre-service teacher, the sustainable aspect of identity is particularly vulnerable from one practicum experience to the next, as each school placement can differ widely. This demands of the pre-service teacher to exercise "fine judgments about contextual factors" (Coldron and Smith, 1999, p.716). Therefore by the end of the third and final block of practicum, totalling 18 weeks within a two year period, which was the situation for participants in this particular study, there was much opportunity for the pre-service teacher to develop a sense of 'where and how do I fit?' in the school context. Yet it is important to be mindful of Zembylas' (2003, p.113) description of identity as, "the self, never completed". This suggests that to know yourself is therefore to not know yourself, as we are always in the making. Uncertainty about self could therefore be seen as inviting the new and suggests an openness to change. This notion of fluidity of the professional self could be captured in the words of Hoveid and Hoveid (2004, p. 74) who describe teacher identity as a "strange quality in bonding with people who change,..".

In Australian schools a large amount of autonomy is bestowed upon the teacher and also the pre-service teacher in practicum settings, especially when making decisions about curriculum and teaching methods. While this may be welcomed by most, it also imposes a large responsibility upon, while adding to the vulnerability of, pre-service teachers. As Coldron and Smith (1999, p.718) point out there is a "personal dimension to most aspects of a teacher's daily work". It follows therefore that the more decisions pre-service teachers make, the more chance there is of these being critiqued by others. Provision of feedback, both positive and negative, is often seen as the required role of supervising teachers, and hence the pre-service teacher's sense of competence, an important element of professional identity, is once more undermined if there is an overabundance of negative feedback. Self-preservation or "care of teacher-self development" (Zembylas, 2003, p.106) is indeed an important requirement for a sustainable teacher identity. Pre-service teachers who choose to take risks in their pedagogies are particularly vulnerable if by doing so, their mentor teachers identify them as being out of tune with their own way of thinking. This could lead to self-doubt on the part of the pre-service teacher. If the chosen pedagogy is substantially different to that of the mentor teacher and this in turn leads to criticism of the pre-service teacher, the latter's growing sense of professional identity could well be shaken. Power relations between the supervising teacher and pre-service teacher can then become the focus of the relationship, often having a detrimental impact on the desired development of a robust professional and personal identity.

Several factors influence the progression of teacher identity, which by nature has "messy meanings" (Zembylas, 2003, p.109) and is "rich and complex" (Sachs, 2001 p.160). These influencing factors upon the fluid nature of the pre-service teacher's formation of a professional identity, include the degree of general self-confidence and the strength of relationships with

others. This quality of relationships is especially important with supervising teachers as the relationship is often sensed as involving power over, if the supervising teacher also has the role of assessor in addition to mentor. The emotional experiences in the practicum setting and the nature of feedback given on teaching skills, all play a part in the development of self-efficacy and hence, also of self and professional identity. Yet the pre-service teacher, as with experienced teachers, would not be deemed a competent professional if they were not able to uphold the paradoxical nature required of a teacher as proficient, skilled and knowledgeable while ever self-questioning and displaying the disposition of a life-long learner (Bloomfield, 2004; Bullough and Young, 2002; Hargreaves, 1998; Graham and Phelps, 2003).

An additional need beyond the practicum for the development of a strong sense of professional identity is to endeavour to reduce the high drop-out rate of beginning teachers (Ewing and Smith, 2003; Darling-Hammond, 2003; Darling-Hammond 2006, Martinez, 2004; Pietsch and Williamson, 2005). This is not to suggest that a robust professional identity in itself is sufficient to curtail the disenchantment experienced by some beginning teachers. However, a strong sense of personal and teacher identity that strengthens beginning teachers' understanding of the demands and nature of the teaching role upon entering the profession, may go some way to reducing the concerning early fall-out rate. If reflection, perhaps through reflective writing, could deepen the understanding of the teaching role then it could play a valuable role in reducing this international concern about retention rates of beginning teachers.

Professional identity inevitably starts to form during the practicum for the pre-service teacher, but the strength of this development is best not left to chance but by providing supportive contexts (ten Dam and Blom, 2006).

THIS STUDY

The pre-service teachers in this study each experienced three different school contexts during their practicum placements for their Bachelor of Education Degree. The first part of this two stage study was reported in an earlier paper, (Cattley, 2005), while this current commentary reports on the last part of a project in which pre-service teachers wrote reflective statements in their final practicum and at a follow-up stage five months later. The practicum, as differs from many other studies, is an important point in teacher formation upon which to focus exploration of professional identity. While other researchers focus on reflective writing for the development of the teaching skills of experienced teachers, fewer authors talk about professional identity of pre-service teachers. Atkinson (2004), Sugrue, (2004) and Twiselton (2004) are, however, some exceptions but these focused on reflective discourse on practice whereas this current study focuses on the use of reflective writing and its possible influence on the development of professional identity for pre-service teachers.

Given the complexities of the nature of, and responsibilities involved in teachers' work (Connelly and Clandinin 1999; Valli,1997), the focus for reflection in this present study was upon non-instructional aspects of teaching. The importance of a wider focus for teacher development such as the development of "self as teacher" is supported by writers such as Tickle (1999, p.137) and Bjarnadottir, (2005). This is not to say however that competence in teaching practice is not important. It is of course inextricably involved in professional identity development but it is the notion of teaching as a "relational profession" (Connelly and Clandinin, 1999, p.85) that behooves us to focus on a broad range of school situations in which the pre-service teachers find themselves. Their emotional responses to these, warrant attention rather than the more common single focus on lesson delivery.

The process for this part of the study involved the eight participants writing reflective logs on at least four occasions over their eight week practicum block. The participants were placed in eight different school settings. A further question through email was posed to participants five months

after the final practicum. All participants volunteered for this project, were female and in Bachelor of Education courses ranging across all year levels of schooling from junior primary to secondary. These pre-service teachers left school themselves from between 5 and 20 years previously, thereby representing a range of ages and life experience.

METHOD

The method chosen for this study could be described as a combination of a biographical and case study method (Burton and Bartlett, 2005) whereby participants wrote their responses to situations through using a reflective log (Appendix 1). Their written statements were considered alongside a framework for reflective writing (Campbell-Evans and Maloney, 1998). This framework was chosen since its four levels of analysis were about the quality of reflective statements. This differs from the focus of other frameworks (Valli, 1997; Spalding and Wilson, 2002; Jay and Johnson, 2002) which related more to content of statements about teaching skills.

This study, that is the second stage of the project, followed some explicit teaching about reflective writing. Each participant had received the results of the analysis, according to the Campbell-Evans and Maloney (1998) framework, of their stage one (Cattley,2005) statements. Participants were required to analyse 12 of their combined reflective statements and rate them according to the four levels of the framework. Their analysis was then discussed in terms of the quality of each statement. This was a deliberate decision to coach the pre-service teachers in achieving the richer levels of reflection, given my supposition that it is these levels of reflection which are most likely to enhance the development of professional and personal identity. This rating task therefore became a teaching tool with the group of pre-service teachers in analysis of their own reflective statements written previously in their involvement in the first stage. Individual feedback was given using this schedule and participants could identify with ease, the differences in quality of reflective thinking, since they were analysing their own written statements. In other words the pre-service teachers were able to apply the framework used in this study, (Campbell-Evans and Maloney, 1998) to their own reflective statements written from stage one, before engaging in the second part of the study.

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

I suggest that it is when the quality of the pre-service teacher's reflections cluster around Campbell- Evans and Maloney's (1998) third and fourth levels, which they describe as involving analysis, evaluation, reconceptualising and stating a philosophy and vision of teaching, that a development of self-identity best occurs, in terms of the personal and professional. While these specific qualities of written reflections can be taught explicitly, the same quality could perhaps be achieved through a second method, that is by the careful selection of prompt questions (Appendix 1). After the completion of the reflective log writing stage, the pre-service teachers gave verbal feedback, stating that the prompts were extremely helpful to them when writing their reflections. Such questions are used in narrative therapy and the prompts on the reflection log sheets were borrowed from this arena (Winslade, J. (2002); Winlsade, Crocket, Monk and Drewery, 2000). Brookfield (1995, p.73) who indicates that a reflective log gives the teacher "insights into your own emotional and cognitive rhythms", suggests similar prompt questions.

Furthermore, since the role of teacher is broad and complex it is necessary to encourage pre-service teachers to reflect upon their multifaceted role, as was the case in this study. As a result, the pre-service teachers in this study raised issues such as time-management, team work, student engagement on learning tasks, managing differences between parent and teachers' values and balancing the workload of the teacher role with relaxation activities. None of these specific aspects of a teacher's role was suggested on the Reflection Log Sheets but rather, these were additional issues raised in the written reflective comments made by these pre-service teachers.

This suggests that by reaching the deeper levels of reflective expression the pre-service teachers focus more on, what Moore (2004, p.150) describes in his explanation on reflectivity, "the broader picture of social contexts of classroom interactions" rather than what can be deemed a more technicist interpretation of reflective practice when the focus is exclusively on teaching skills or lesson delivery. For example, one pre-service teacher reflected upon the interactive nature of time and effort and the impact of these on student-teacher relationships:

> '…the more I get involved the more I realise just how much teachers really do. It is certainly not a profession you can leave at work! I found myself doing a lot of marking and class preparation in the evenings and on weekends. However, the more effort I put in the more I get out of the job and the more I love it! I find teaching so rewarding. The best part of the job is the relationships with the students. I have found that by doing lots of preparation and having really well organized and varied lessons that students respond to you. Students know if you are putting in the effort and they tend to reciprocate the effort you put in, thus helping that bond and relationship.'

Connelly and Clandinin (1999, p.95) claim that the "different facets and different identities can show up to be reshaped and take on new life in different landscape settings." This could be applied to the various facets of the teaching role in which these pre-service teachers found themselves involved. For example, whereas they may have felt confident about their curriculum choices, several mentioned how they felt intimidated when liaising with some parents. As one pre-service teacher commented, *"I was surprised by my feelings of inadequacy when questioned by parents."*

I am suggesting therefore that by encouraging pre-service teachers to reflect upon the breadth of their roles, they are more likely to shape a robust professional identity.

Involvement in writing a reflective log, could in itself have contributed to the development of the participants' identity as a teacher, if they saw themselves in the role of researchers, which as (Burton and Bartlett, 2005, p183.) propose, is a normal part of professional identity. Knowing that they were a part of a research project with requests to comment on their own experiences, could well have supported the pre-service teachers in viewing themselves as researchers and hence, if Burton and Bartlett's (2005) views were valid, also strengthened their sense of teacher identity.

It can be seen that many elements are involved in developing professional identity. Hoveid and Hoveid (2004, p.53) advocated that the process of teacher identity formation should be made a "conscious pursuit" and I propose that by explicitly guiding pre-service teachers in reflective writing, which is "directed towards one's own self among others" (Hoveid and Hoveid (2004, p. 53), they strengthen confidence and competency in the relational nature of a teacher's role. A common feature of the pre-service teachers' reflections in this study is their response to the paradoxical nature of a teacher's work and in particular within the relational aspects. For example one pre-service teacher commented:

> 'However, as my relationships with the parents grew I soon became caught up talking to them in the mornings and listening to them. Finding a balance between building a good rapport and knowing when to carefully send parents on their way is difficult'.

Another comment was in relation to a student with a medical condition:

> "Although he is aware of his condition I am responsible for his health while he is with me. I find it difficult to get the balance between fussing and responsibility, that is, getting duty-of-care right."

The importance for teachers in their understanding of self is acknowledged widely in the literature. As Hamachek, (1999, p.209) poignantly expressed, "Consciously we teach what we

know; unconsciously we teach who we are". A strong sense of self is vital if pre-service teachers are to develop positively their professional identity during the practicum. This is particularly important when these teaching novices are questioned by their students. The following reflective statements from one middle schooling pre-service teacher in the study, highlighted this notion of interplay between self-understanding, self-efficacy and relationships with students:

> *'The students were not really engaging or responding to my questions. I wonder if they sensed my own internal fears about not being able to teach this subject adequately. I guess as time goes on and I begin to feel more comfortable both as a teacher and in my relationships with students, that this issue would cease to cause so much concern. I found the Year 7s to be more accepting of information, as opposed to Year 9s who love to question everything. This questioning can be quite intimidating. I especially found it intimidating during lessons where I wasn't quite as prepared as I would have liked to be.*

> *I guess I have gained a certain level of comfort with admitting that I do not always know the answers to everything – but students are welcome to help me research to uncover information which will enable us to gain better understandings'.*

Similarly the same inner strength and sense of competence is needed when managing questions from parents. A primary school pre-service teacher in the study made the following comments addressing her concerns:

> *'Decision making needs to be suitable or 'good' enough to suit all persons concerned. This may include the students, parents, colleagues, principal, and the surrounding community members. I have realized that when I make a decision I need to know in myself that it is the right thing to do, because there is every chance that I will need to justify my reasons to any of the above people.*
> *The parents are obviously only looking out for their children and possibly concerned about something they would like to find out more about. On the other hand the teacher could feel somewhat put out by these questions and come to the conclusion that the parent feels they are not doing their job as a professional.*
> *I feel I need to gain a high self-awareness and self worth before even attempting to teach in a school where parent liaison may not be a pleasurable task.'*

Tickle (1999) suggested that the interface between the personal and professional was paramount in the development of teacher identity. It can be argued that reflection on self-as-teacher during practicum period is an opportune time for this activity and more easily achievable than for beginning or experienced teachers. This may happen because pre-service teachers may be more willing to self-question, as they do not expect of themselves to have all the answers, whether in relation with students or parents.

Recognition of and responsibility for ones emotions is certainly part of professional identity formation. There was strong evidence of emotional expression in the reflective statements of the pre-service teachers in this study. Zembylas (2003, p.105) reminded us that acknowledgement of emotions was essential in identity formation while teachers were required to adopt the "emotional rules" acceptable for the professional teacher in a specific school culture. Reflective writing could therefore be argued to provide a medium for the expression of otherwise unacceptable emotional portrayal in the school context, while providing a forum for the investigation of both the "personal and social" (Zembylas, 2003, p.112) aspects of emotions and the link to self-formation.

Hargreaves (1998, p.838), agreed that teachers had a "heavy emotional investment" in their relationships with both students and the parents within the school community. This emotional aspect of the role of teacher and hence the development of teacher identity was always present

(Bullough and Young, 2002, Flores and Day, 2006). This is not surprising since much of teachers' work is on show to an audience of one type or another, and usually a large number at any one time, be it students, parents or colleagues. This differs from other service professionals, such as in health, who more often are interacting with one client at a time or other types of professionals who produce a product such as an engineering report, which is not usually under surveillance during the act of writing. Teaching differs largely as the delivery of the service is instantly observable by an audience, perhaps more akin to a surgeon, along with its successes and mistakes. Furthermore this "gaze" on teachers is constant (Kosnick and Beck, 2003, p.20) especially for the pre-service teacher on practicum. It is difficult therefore, for them to escape the sense of pressure and vulnerability to emotional responses that emerges, when thought to be under surveillance or being judged for high career stakes.

In this study there is a range of both positive and negative emotions expressed such as "empowered, frustrated, confident and relaxed". Other comments included feelings of concern, vulnerability, privilege and amazement. One pre-service teacher spoke of her fear for not getting control when she found herself shouting at her students. She explained how she gradually learnt other strategies leading to what Britzman (1986, p.450) described as "social control", thus contributing to her sense of competence.

> *'I know now that I can gain attention effectively without feeling stressed about it. I guess the stress factor is caused by fear that one may never be able to effectively gain attention of students. I am very, very pleased I have overcome this fear.'*

Some striking aspects of this study emerge from attempts to analyse the data in terms of the quality of the pre-service teachers' reflective statements. While frameworks such as Campbell-Evans and Maloney's (1998) are useful in this regard, a further scale or framework may have been useful in determining indicators of professional identity. Such a framework can capture the richness of content and diversity of the topics included in the written reflective statements. In other words, a system for acknowledging the breadth and wealth of content in the themes that emerge in the comments, beyond those listed on the Reflective Log sheet. For example an indicator of professional identity formation can be the recognition of the role of responsibility for teachers.

Several of the pre-service teachers in this study wrote about their "heavy responsibility" for the decisions they made in the course of their professional duties. Further themes, as previously alluded to, included their sense of professional competence when interacting with various members of the school community, the paradoxical nature of teachers' work and perspective taking of others, particularly of parents. For example, one pre-service teacher was clearly able to put herself in the parents' shoes through her reflection:

> *'At first I felt uncomfortable with parents watching my teaching, however, as I became more confident with my own abilities I realized they were wanting to know how I relate to their children.'*

The theme of heavy responsibility which emerged could sound a caution by being alert to what Moore (2004, p.104) described as the pitfall of reflective activity becoming an "unhelpful over-personalisation" or indeed personal "blame". To avoid this Moore (2004) suggested that there was a sharing of reflections with others. This was achieved to a small degree in two ways in this study. Firstly the researcher read and collated the comments and secondly through a short de-briefing meeting with the participants at the conclusion of the practicum. A recommendation would be, however, that this sharing aspect should be expanded upon if teacher-educators wished to ensure change, which was in this case, progression in professional identity within the pre-service teacher. One way might be to encourage the pre-service teachers to share and examine personal biographies of their own schooling experiences, (Moore, 2004,) underlying beliefs and

assumptions (Darling-Hammond, 2006) before engaging in their practicum placements, thus enhancing possibilities for "change in direction" (Moore, 2004, p.148) as a result of reflective writing.

As mentioned earlier the final data gathered were composed of participants' responses to an email sent by the researcher five months after their Reflective Log involvement. They were asked the question 'What do you consider to have been the effectiveness of this reflective writing task for developing your professional identity?'. Six participants responded and of these four used the two deeper levels of reflective statements exclusively (Campbell-Evans and Maloney, 1998).

Their responses to this further question showed evidence that their teacher identity clustered around five elements which are summarized below.

A common element mentioned was relationships with others, particularly other staff and parents. As one participant answered:

> *'I think it also helps to develop more professional relationships with other staff members as you seek their ideas and opinions when you have had time to reflect and can then make more relevant and meaningful inquiries and engage in more meaningful discussion.'*

Another strong element was their awareness of wider social and political world beyond the classroom. For example one pre-service teacher responded,

> My c*ooperating teacher appreciated that I could converse not just about the 'veneer' of the job but about the social and political issues that influence the education system."*

Awareness of the need to support their colleagues with their work was a further element which emerged in their answers,

> *Rewarding knowing that my journal was going to be used for an academic purpose – helping someone else in their work."*

The pre-service teachers were mindful of how their reflective writing had helped them in observing self and others, taking responsibility and further, being able to analyse reasons for their own successes.

> *'Reflections have helped me to look at how certain situations actually made me feel and how experiences can allow new teachers to build on understandings. It is very easy to handle certain interactions and forget to look at how we decide on these actions or strategies in our practice.'*

Finally, the pre-service teachers acknowledged the benefit from analyzing and understanding their emotional responses to situations.

> *'I think written evaluation forces you to acknowledge your new found understandings about education and relationships and this is extremely useful in establishing your professional identity.'*

CONCLUDING COMMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This article draws links between the nature of pre-service teachers' statements in their reflective writing and their understanding of the teacher's role. Given the complexity of the development of professional identity in teachers, it is considered to be important in this study to focus on non-teaching elements of teachers' work in order to expand the pre-service teachers' notions of the range of teacher responsibilities (Valli, 1997) and the nature of school culture, if they are to

develop a strong identity as a teacher professional. I demonstrate that reflective writing is a valuable tool for professional identity formation in this group of volunteer pre-service teachers. As for recommendations for the wider application of this tool, there needs to be supportive structures in place in addition to setting a reflective writing task. First, the skills for reflective writing need to be taught explicitly. Second, the provision of a scaffold of suitable prompt questions, such as those on the Reflection Log proforma (Appendix 1), is more likely to result in reflections which support identity formation, since the questions invite analytical and evaluative reflection. Further, providing a strategy which encourages the sharing of reflections and personal experiences is likely to enhance the potential influence of reflective writing on professional identity development. Finally, it is recommended that a framework, which identifies indicators for evidence of professional identity development, is a valuable contribution to the analysis of reflective writing and as an important learning tool in the teacher education curriculum.

APPENDIX 1

Research Project:
Student-Teachers Reflections on Observations in Practicum Setting

Week _____ *(of practicum)*

You may wish to reflect upon any aspect of the life of a teacher. This could include:

decision making, questions asked of teachers, teachers as a school community member, staff room activity, parent liaison, daily interruptions to programs or any aspect of teaching.

Reflective Log Proforma

*Here are the **reflection prompts** to guide you.*

Reflection on Observations	General Reflections	Summary Reflection
What impact have these observations had upon you?	What makes you feel 'like a teacher" during this prac?	What are your views, philosophy or vision about what is involved in being a teacher? What has influenced you to come to these viewpoints?
Have you been surprised by the outcome of any of your observations? How were things different to what you had expected?	Does anything threaten your sense of self as a teacher?	
What sorts of self-talk have you found yourself having during or as a result of your observations?		
What emotions have you experienced during your observations?		
Have these changed over time?		
What has influenced these changes?		

Note: These questions were adapted from the work of (Winslade, J. (2002); Winlsade, Crocket, Monk and Drewery, 2000). Brookfield (1995)

Brief description of situation/context (optional)

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