Going All the Way: A life history account focusing on a teacher's engagement with studies of Asia

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What would prompt a primary school teacher in late career and from the Australian cultural mainstream to become interested in the societies and cultures of Asia and then to expand that interest into a personal and professional life focus? Through a life history approach, this paper recounts a teacher's journey from childhood, to becoming and working as a teacher, to initial inclusion in her late career of Asia-related aspects in her teaching and learning program, to extensive professional development in studies of Asia, culminating in a formal postgraduate study pathway. The teacher's story illustrates the complexity, the changing nature and uniqueness of individual teacher identity, thereby reinforcing Goodson's (1992a) view of a teacher as "an active agent making his or her own history". The story also demonstrates the value of the life history approach in showing how personal and professional influences interact to determine how teachers think, what they value, and what they choose to do at any given time – including why they actively engage with particular professional learning programs.

Life history, teacher identity, studies of Asia

INTRODUCTION

Beth Fox (not her real name) is a 57-year-old primary school teacher with over 30 years teaching experience. She currently teaches in a small primary school in an outer suburb of Adelaide. In terms of cultural background, she could be described as being from the Australian cultural mainstream and the student population of her school is largely monocultural. Yet, at this late stage of her career, when she might have been content to rest on her existing levels of knowledge and professional expertise and cultural comfort zone, Beth embarked on an extensive professional development pathway to increase her knowledge and teaching skills in relation to Asian societies and cultures – a pathway that consumed a great deal of her personal and professional time.

This study employs a life history approach as a means of elucidating the reasons underpinning Beth's decision to make such a significant commitment at this stage of her career. Beth's narrative is chronologically structured, commencing with her life prior to becoming a teacher, and then progressing through her early, middle and late teaching career, culminating in her completion of a Master of Education (Studies of Asia) in 2003. Across the various life and career phases, three main threads are pursued – a nature of teaching thread, a professional development thread, and a cross-cultural thread.

As Beth's story unfolds, the "confusions, contradictions, ambiguities, and transitions that are part of individuals' lived experiences" (James, 2002) become apparent. Beth's story illustrates how the combined impact of these lived experiences shapes individual teacher identity, with each teacher's identity being unique, complex and continually evolving. The story also provides an example to

support Goodson's (1992a) view that each teacher is "an active agent making his or her own history".

Through the study, the value of the life history approach becomes evident. The way teachers think, what they value, and how they act can all be shown to have multifaceted and interlinked origins. Beth's life history thus reveals that her decision to make a major, Asia-related professional development commitment in late career was no random whim, but in fact arose from a complex interplay of personal and professional influences extending far back into her life and career.

THE VALUE OF A LIFE HISTORY APPROACH

Butt, Raymond, McCue and Yamagashi (1992) argue that the most effective way of understanding teacher knowledge, values and behaviours is by enabling the teacher's voice to be heard and the best way of achieving that is through biographical inquiry. They see teaching as being a praxis with both personal and professional dimensions shaped by current contexts and past experiences.

> The form of education that stays with us and informs our subsequent choices and actions is that which results from experiences which have a telling impact on our person. (Butt et al. 1992, p. 58)

Beattie (1995) sees narrative inquiry as "validating the interconnectedness of the past, the present, the future, the personal and the professional in an educator's life". Although Dhunpath (2000) rightly cautions that narrative researchers need to ensure that they do not step beyond being biographers into the realms of "journalists or burglars", she makes the strong claim that "the life history approach is probably the only authentic means of understanding how motives and practices reflect the intimate intersection of institutional and individual experience in the postmodern world". In terms of professional development, allowing teachers to voice their stories offers opportunities for new perspectives to emerge that highlight the importance of placing the teacher at the centre of the process, as opposed to "an instrumental view of teachers, one in which they can be manipulated for particular ends" (Casey, 1992).

THE CENTRALITY OF IDENTITY

Enabling the individual voice of the teacher to be heard, especially in relation to an issue like motivation, inevitably involves consideration of the person's perceived self identity. According to Goodson (1992b), an individual's sense of self is constructed by the individual on the basis of "life experiences and background". These experiences and background comprise both a personal dimension and a professional dimension. The two dimensions are not mutually exclusive. Rather, as Zembylas (2003) points out, "teachers invest their selves in their work and so they closely merge their sense of personal and professional identity" (p. 217). The powerful nature of the impact of the personal dimension on the professional dimension, for example, is highlighted by Raymond, Butt and Townsend (1992) when they emphasise the significant influence of "pre-training experiences", not just in determining how teachers think and act in the early stages of their careers but also as "lifelong references for teacher identity". Nias (1989) found that teachers themselves recognise the critical importance of identity. In his study of teacher commitment, one of the four key areas of response from teachers related to "developing and maintaining a personal identity".

Drawing on post-structuralist views of Foucault and Deleuze, Zembylas (2003) suggests that identities are not fixed but are continuously being redefined. Thus it is not so much a matter of 'who' a teacher is, but more a matter of 'when' (time context), 'where' (place context) and 'how' (psychological state) a teacher is. In understanding the 'how', Oosterhert and Vermunt (2003) stress that it is important to take cognisance of "self-esteem and emotion". Goodson (1992b) provides a timely reminder that identities are also shaped by cultural influences. This position is

made more explicit by Cope and Kalantzis (2000) when they assert that "identities are created in the multiple sites or cultures of belonging – ethnic, local, group affiliation and so on".

Teachers' perceived identities will thus underlie their views of the nature of teaching as a profession and the role of the teacher within that profession, which in turn will determine their priorities in terms of where and how they devote their energies – including the nature and type of professional development they will undertake. In *Motivating Teachers for Excellence* (Ellis, 1984), for example, the most satisfying elements of a teacher's role are generalised as "reaching and affecting students, experiencing recognition and feeling responsible". In Nias' (1989) study, teachers commonly expressed the "pursuit of competence", "career continuance" and "caring" as being fundamental elements of their role. However, the extent to which any of the elements is paramount in shaping any individual teacher's approach to teaching at any given time varies considerably. Even within each of the elements, teachers can have a quite different focus. By way of example, the report *Australia's Teachers: Australia's Future* (Committee for the Review of Teaching and Teacher Education, 2003) shows that teachers can interpret "caring" in a variety of ways, ranging from wanting to help students "grow in self-confidence", to "seeing students' understanding grow over time", to "seeing low achievers learn", to feeling that they have "positively influenced a student's chances in life".

CAREER CYCLES

The notion of constantly evolving and changing identities is closely linked to research into teacher career cycles. Day (1999), drawing on the ideas of Huberman, sees a teacher's career as comprising a number of phases, each with its own characteristics. Accordingly, the first three years of a teacher's career may be characterised as a "survival and discovery" phase, while the next three years are typically a time of "consolidation and emancipation". By the time a teacher has been teaching for 20 to 30 years, he or she may have reached a professional plateau, characterised by feelings of 'serenity' on the one hand, but a 'sense of mortality' on the other.

The final phase, from 30 to 40 years' teaching experience, is depicted as a period of increasing conservatism where change may be viewed with mounting scepticism and where there may be a "contraction of professional activity and interest". The teacher, while still prepared to "work hard at core acts of teaching", may be experiencing feelings of disenchantment, marginalisation, even bitterness, in relation to the system, or school administrators, or fellow teachers, or students, or all four combined. Where this is the case, the teacher may well exhibit "lessened emotional and intellectual commitment". Huberman (1992) himself, however, provides a reminder that career phases are neither fixed nor universal. Rather than seeing the phases as sequential "stepping stones", he offers "spirals" as a more accurate analogy.

AVOIDING LATE CAREER DISENGAGEMENT

So what factors might have the potential to overcome a tendency for teachers to "close down rather than open up" in their late careers (Oosterhert and Vermunt, 2003)? Fessler and Christensen (1992) suggest teacher development is influenced by a combination of career cycle, personal environment and organisational environment. Huberman (1992) postulates that because many teachers tend to value highly certain kinds of "instructional mastery", when they are provided with opportunities to achieve such mastery it can stave off late career disengagement and facilitate a process whereby teachers do not "end up uniquely tending their own gardens". Goodson (1992b) raises the concept of 'critical incidents' that can occur at various points in a teacher's life and career and that may "crucially affect perception and practice". Nolder (1992) finds that these critical incidents or key events can occur "at any point in an individual's life", including late career, and usher in a period of "accelerated development".

GENERAL FACTORS ATTRACTING TEACHERS TO PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

In *Professional Development for the new Millennium* (Office of Leadership, Development and Enhancement, 2003), professional development is defined as "a growth promoting learning process that empowers stakeholders to improve the educational organisation". Approaches to professional development of this sort, employing de-personalising corporate-speak and advocating the paramountcy of "the organisation" would appear to be fundamentally flawed. Guskey (2002) finds that most teachers look upon the purpose of professional development as being to provide "a pathway to increased competence and greater professional satisfaction". This is in line with the view of Day (1999) that "teachers cannot be developed; they develop" – in other words, the professional development activities they seek and choose to engage with will arise from personal choice, as and when they are ready. Raymond, Butt and Townsend (1992) reinforce this view when they describe professional development as being "the result of dynamic interaction between context and personal biography". Indeed, they go so far as to say that a teacher's biography will be a substantial factor in determining which particular professional development opportunities teachers select to undertake.

Why university courses?

Within teachers' overall attitudes to professional development, are there any factors that might attract them to accredited university courses? One possibility lies in the very fact that university courses can lead to recognised academic awards and individual teachers may value such awards, for personal reasons, professional reasons, or both. Another, more pragmatic, possibility is that teachers may perceive that gaining formal postgraduate qualifications will advantage them in their careers. In Australia, however, there are currently few incentives at a systemic level, in terms of either salary or promotion, to undertake postgraduate study. It is interesting to note that in the United States, where incentives are provided in many states, about 45 per cent of public school teachers have a Master's degree (Parsad, Lewis and Farris, 2002). By comparison, in Australia only around 8 to 10 per cent of Australian teachers have a Masters degree (generally in Education) (Dempster, 2001).

A third possibility relates to the area of quality. In *Professional Development for the new Millennium* (Office of Leadership Development and Enhancement, 2003), reference is made to the expectation that university courses for practising educators will "reflect the principles of excellence…". Thus, teachers may perceive that university courses will be of the highest quality in terms of both pedagogy and content. In addition to quality-related issues, accredited university courses tend to be longer in duration, and Day (1999) observes that teacher participants in such courses generally value them for leading to "increased professional confidence and competence", unlike many "short-burst" training activities that do not meet the "longer-term motivational and intellectual needs of teachers". Day also suggests that partnerships between universities and teachers have strong potential for "enabling teachers to reflect on their own practice". Furthermore, as many teachers view their role as being heavily concerned with fostering in their students "a disposition towards lifelong learning", undertaking a formal tertiary course can be perceived as being an excellent way for teachers to "demonstrate their own commitment towards and enthusiasm for lifelong learning".

MAINSTREAM INTEREST IN OTHER CULTURES

Any consideration of what might motivate someone from the cultural mainstream to become interested in and study other cultures raises the question of what 'mainstream' might entail in an Australian context. Lo Bianco (1996) refers variously to "Anglo-Celtic Australians" and "Anglo-Australians", while Singh (2000) uses the term "Anglo-ethnic". Lo Bianco depicts this group as

being "homogenously white", Euro-centric in outlook, and with a heritage of "monolingual/unicultural ambition". While also referring to "whiteness" as a characteristic, Singh (2000) adds a "patriarchal" dimension. Cope and Kalantzis (2000) see "mainstream" as a construct relating to "power", "dominant groups" and "institutional structures". Both Singh (1996) and Williamson-Fien (1996) suggest that so-called mainstream Australians' views of the world have been developed within Western, modernist frameworks, characterised by 'orientalist' and 'dominant discourse' perspectives, resulting in stereotypical depictions of 'the other'.

A problem with attempting to classify too tightly mainstream Australians is that it can lead to equally unproductive stereotypes. As Singh (2000) indicates, there is considerable diversity within white culture, arising from a range of factors, including as class, religion, gender and space. Alba and Nee (2003) suggest that "mainstream culture is more malleable than monolithic" and that all cultures, whether mainstream or minority, are constantly changing through a process "less to do with one group adapting to another than with the blurring of boundaries among groups". Thus there is no particular reason why someone from a mainstream cultural background should be any less interested in a range of cultures than anyone else. This is in line with Bhabha's (1990) concept of 'cultural hybridity' and a 'third space', whereby people of all cultural backgrounds can cherish and be enriched by their cultural past, while assimilating into and being enriched by the present.

Certainly, the reasons for such interest may vary widely from any one individual to the next. Singh (2000) offers a range of possible reasons, from a postcolonial perspective. 'Conservatives', as a group or as individuals, for example, might show interest in other cultures as a way of keeping them under control and thus preserving their own cultural hegemony. 'Liberals' might be looking for 'commonalities' in order to render 'differences' invisible, while 'pluralists' might be attracted by 'differences' to the extent of exoticising or fetishising aspects of other cultures. 'Essentialists' might seek "unchanging, authentic properties" as a way of keeping cultural groups clearly defined and separate. For 'social critics', the main interest might lie in exploring "different ways of reading the world", with the aim of enhancing "inter-cultural solidarity". While these groupings are neat, it is entirely possible that individuals may be influenced by a number of these motivations, depending on time, place and circumstance.

Halse (1996a) offers another range of possible reasons, from those with "innate interest in other cultures", to those with an "altruistic value system in which understanding of cultural difference is perceived as crucial to the attainment of universal, humanitarian goals", to those seeking a "generational break with past conceptualisations of cultural identity". Utilitarian and professional reasons may also play a part, whereby a teacher may feel that cross-cultural understanding will advantage them in the job market, assist them to teach more effectively, or enable them to communicate better with particular members of their personal or professional communities (Prudhomme, 1996).

Just as reasons for seeking cross-cultural understanding will vary, so will the level at which the understanding is sought, ranging from "the 'gee whiz' phase of initial discovery" and the "wide-eyed tourist" level (Prudhomme, 1996), to a deeper understanding of particular issues or areas of interest, to an "examination of one's own involvement in particular socio-cultural processes, rather than making 'the other' the only focus of study" (Cultures and Communities Program, 2004).

WHY ASIAN SOCIETIES AND CULTURES?

As to why a study of Asian societies and cultures might be attractive to some teachers, those at the "gee whiz" level can find much to draw them in, especially those elements described by Halse (1996a) as "a melange of exotic elements different from and alien to Australia". Drawing on the

ideas of Said, Singh (1995) postulates that an orientalist perspective has led many Australians to develop " a contradictory and ambivalent desire for and derision of Asia and its peoples", whereby all Asian peoples are reduced to an imaginary 'other', at one and the same time exotic, remote, inferior, threatening and alluring.

Because of Australia's proximity to the Asian region and the fact that the region contains many countries which might be described as "developing", some teachers may also be attracted by the idea of trying to find ways of helping to redress what they see as "the inequitable differences between two geographically close nations" (Halse, 1996b). Miller (1994) suggests that as well as "exotic Asia" and "underdeveloped Asia" there also exists "Asia, source of wisdom". Thus, a study of Asia can seem attractive to some, as it appears to offer a way of filling a void left as a result of a perceived "feeling or experience of the inadequacy of one's native … wisdom" (Miller, 1994). In *Cultures of Change*, Halse (1996b) also refers to the impact of "positive resonances" arising from prior personal interaction with people of Asian background or travel to an Asian country.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The 1990s witnessed an emphasis by successive Australian Governments on developing and implementing policies to strengthen Australia's political, economic and social engagement with the countries of the Asian region. Although the precise nature and pace of the thrust varied in accordance with global, regional and internal factors pertaining at different times, education was seen as having a pivotal role to play in enabling Australia to reconfigure its place in the Asian region (Hamston, 2000).

The Asia Education Foundation was established in 1992, followed by the National Asian Languages and Studies in Australian Schools Strategy in 1996. These national initiatives aimed to promote widespread studies of Asian languages and Asian societies and cultures in Australian schools. Teachers were seen as being a focal point in ensuring the successful introduction of the desired educational changes and accordingly substantial funding was directed towards professional development programs for teachers (Halse and Baumgart, 2000).

In South Australia a major response to the national initiatives was to place high priority on the establishment of a professional development pathway that would enable teachers to have access to a variety of high quality options. By the mid-1990s, the foundation plank of the pathway was in place – the *Including Studies of Asia in Curriculum Professional Development Program*, a 40-hour introductory level program developed initially by the Asia Education Foundation. The program proved to be popular with both primary and secondary teachers and by the end of 1999 had been taken by over 700 South Australian teachers.

As identified in the national evaluation of the program (Halse, 1996a), although it provided a very effective introduction to ways of including studies of Asia into the school curriculum and enhanced understanding of a range of aspects of Asian societies and cultures, many teachers expressed a desire for follow up advanced courses to extend their skills, knowledge and understandings. The idea of having a tertiary accreditation option available for studies of Asia professional development courses was seen as an added attraction.

In response to the need for advanced options, a number of Studies of Asia Professional Development Modules were developed nationally in 1998 and 1999 under the NALSAS Strategy. In all, ten modules were developed, two general ones and two each relating to the Arts, SOSE (HSIE), English and Asia In-Country Experience. Each module was designed to be of tertiary postgraduate standard.

Recognising the Studies of Asia Professional Development Modules as an excellent vehicle for achieving the desired professional development pathway, the Studies of Asia program of the Department of Education and Children's Services in South Australia entered into partnership with Flinders University to establish a Graduate Certificate in Education (Studies of Asia). Accreditation from the *Including Studies of Asia in Curriculum Professional Development Program* was able to be applied directly to the named Graduate Certificate. For teachers claiming the credit, a further two modules were required to complete the Graduate Certificate. The first delivery occurred in late 1999.

Following demand from teachers who had completed the Graduate Certificate in Education (Studies of Asia) for additional advanced study options, arrangements were made in 2001 to enable a Master of Education degree to be completed using further Studies of Asia modules. The first group of students to complete the entire professional development pathway from introductory level to advanced level to mastery level graduated at the end of 2001.

As the principal instigator of the Studies of Asia professional development pathway in South Australia and the person responsible for the ongoing delivery of the respective programs, I had developed a strong interest in the teachers undertaking the pathway, particularly at the individual level. Understanding what motivated the participants and how their studies of Asia professional development related to their personal and professional lives appeared to offer a productive source of information as a basis for ensuring that the respective programs continued to attract teachers and meet their needs. After initial studies of the *Including Studies of Asia in Curriculum professional Development Program* (see Trevaskis, 2004a and b), a study encompassing the entire professional development pathway now seemed timely.

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

This study adopts the approach to teacher biography described by James (2002) as seeking to provide "contextual understanding of how historical, political, cultural, societal, institutional, familial and personal circumstances have shaped [an individual's] life and role as a teacher".

Beth was selected for the study partly on the basis of her willingness to participate and partly because she approximated the typical participant in the Studies of Asia professional development pathway – a primary teacher, female and with extensive teaching experience, but little formal background in studies of Asia. On the other hand, as with many participants, there were some atypical variations that invited further investigation. It is fair to say that Beth was challenged academically and personally at times with the Graduate Certificate and Masters components of the pathway, both in terms of motivation and the demands of the respective courses, yet she persisted. She was in late career and she had also intimated that she had not received whole-hearted support from her school administration to continue to pursue her chosen professional development pathway. Additionally, at critical points in her study, Beth had undertaken extended visits to two different Asian countries. Her story, therefore, appeared likely to be multi-dimensional and of interest both to other participants and professional development program organisers.

In the first stage of the study, Beth provided written responses to a series of questions relating to her life prior to becoming a teacher, as well as her current personal and professional situation. The purpose of the questionnaire was to provide some background information that would enable the subsequent interview to focus principally on the period from becoming a teacher to completing the Studies of Asia professional development pathway. At the same time the intention was that the background profile would provide some interesting threads that could be probed more fully in the interview context, as for example family and social contexts, attitudes to schooling, and intercultural influences.

Following examination of the data provided by the written responses and based on the approach to life history arising from the work of Butt et al. (1992) and also James (2002), the questions which would form the basis of a face-to-face interview were determined. The questions were communicated to Beth prior to the interview so that she would be aware of what to expect and be able to advise if she was uncomfortable with any of the proposed lines of enquiry. A suitable date was determined and the interview was conducted in my office at the university, surroundings which were quite familiar to Beth given her years of postgraduate study there. The interview, which was recorded, was of two hours' duration and following the interview the conversation was transcribed. After some initial questions following up on matters arising from the questionnaire, such as familial attitudes and aspirations and specific early experiences that had aroused Beth's interest in cultures other than her own, the interview questions related to three main threads: a 'nature of teaching' thread; a 'professional development' thread; and a 'cross-cultural' thread. In each case, both personal and professional responses were sought. The questions also progressed chronologically across a number of stages, from pre-service education and career commencement, to early and mid career, to later career, and finally future aspirations. Beth was invited to view and to comment on the transcript of the interview, following which the data were analysed and then, in the light of the data and relevant professional literature, conclusions were drawn.

BETH'S STORY

Life before teaching

Beth spent the first four years of her life in rural South Australia before moving to a then outer suburb of Adelaide, where her parents had purchased a home in a "working class … post-war subdivision", with "no paved roads and no footpaths". She lived there for the rest of her childhood and teenage years, only moving out to take up a country teaching appointment. Beth's family comprised her mother and father, herself, three younger brothers and, for a few years, a foster sister of aboriginal descent.

The three principal influences during Beth's formative years appear to have been her family, the Church, and the school system. Beth's mother and father had both "missed out on opportunities due to the Depression". Her mother had been forced to leave school at 11 years of age. Her father, although matriculating, had been unable to proceed to university at that stage because his family needed him to earn an income. While Beth was growing up, her father did study a number of subjects at university, but "never gained a degree". Consequently, her parents were determined that their children should have "the best opportunities that they could provide", by which, Beth explained, they meant "university", as they were not "business people".

All family members were closely involved with the Church, for both religious and social purposes and the family's outlook and actions were thus strongly influenced by Christian values. The two main values identified by Beth were "commitment" and "sacrifice", with her mother in particular "always seeking out those in need", including "the poor, the lonely [and] the burdened" and trying to assist them. The fostering of an aboriginal child was one manifestation of this outlook, as was support for missionary activities.

Most of Beth's schooling occurred in state schools; she attended a local primary school until part way through Year 5, before switching to another nearby primary school. She commenced her secondary schooling at the local high school, remaining there for two years and then switching to a private business college for two years before returning to the local high school for a further year.

The impact of these influences on Beth took various forms. She clearly recognised the struggles her parents had endured and appreciated that it was their overwhelming desire for their children to "get ahead". She also admired her father's persistence in undertaking some university study, while

empathising with the fact that circumstances prevented him from completing any particular award. On the other hand, as the eldest child and only female, she took the brunt of her mother's frustrated hopes, which sometimes boiled over into verbal abuse and physical mistreatment – partly excused by Beth who depicted herself as a "troublesome child".

Similarly, while admiring her parents' service ethic on the one hand, which meant that they "gave things away, shared their money", she was acutely aware of and resented being poor. Even when the family went on holiday, Beth felt that other people "looked down their noses" because of their "battered car" and "clapped out little caravan". A further result of the fact that her mother was "always out helping other people" was that Beth finished up becoming the virtual mother of her youngest brother. On the other hand, she recalled with pride that she grew up in a family "where it didn't matter what your colour was, or what your race was". And despite her mortification at the family's mode of transport, she also developed a love of travel, admiring the way her father was able to turn visits to places into learning experiences.

Ironically enough, perhaps, for one who became a teacher, Beth "hated school and … hated teachers". Her negative impressions seemed to arise from three main sources: lack of academic progress; teacher attitudes and actions towards her; and a sense of class consciousness. One of Beth's earliest memories from her primary school days involved her Year 2 teacher begrudgingly giving her a brooch for "best person in the class for the day", while at the same time remarking, "I don't know how **you** won it, because you can never keep quiet". She also formed the impression that her primary school was an "undesirable school", compounded by her Year 5 male teacher, an apparently embittered war veteran, who "kept telling us how we were nobodies and nothings". Then, when she changed primary schools, she was further alienated when she found herself with a teacher who "smacked me every time I went to her". At high school, Beth felt that she and three other girls were moved out of an all girls' Latin class into a boys' class because they were the "dumbest" of the girls. Also she felt let down when she badly lacerated her foot at school and "teachers wouldn't come and help me".

These events and general lack of progress prompted her parents to enrol her in a private business college, but she failed her Leaving examination. With her parents unwilling to pay fees for a repeat year at the private school, she returned to her local high school where she "played hookey a lot". If her formal education did not provide many positive outcomes, her informal education included some rather more enjoyable elements, particularly her love of reading about people and places.

When asked about cultural influences during her childhood and teenage years, Beth recalled that her mother's best friends were "a Sri Lankan lady and a Russian lady". She also clearly remembered the arrival of a Dutch girl at her school when she was in Year 3, and wanting to be a Dutch girl herself because she was fascinated by "anyone that had a national costume". Perhaps the biggest cultural influences came from reading about missionaries and, through her family and Church, actually meeting some people engaged in missionary work. In learning about these people and their work, Beth felt that she was able to be "transported … to places outside myself". She particularly tended to associate these memories with Asian countries, referring to Gladys Aylward, who walked with 100 orphans across China to escape the invading Japanese. She also remembers being fascinated when a missionary who had worked in Japan showed her some "exquisite" artefacts, leading her to conclude that "these people had beautiful things and it was exotic and it was colourful".

At one time, Beth aspired to be a missionary herself, but as she grew older that changed to wanting to be a doctor, not so much for the service element of that profession but "more because somebody looked up to you". When her grades made it apparent that medicine was not an option, her parents suggested various possibilities, such as working in an office, but when Beth showed

no interest in that direction they did not push her. Eventually, Beth firmed on two choices, teaching and nursing. Interestingly, apart from the fact that they were careers open to girls at that time, Beth's paramount reason for favouring them was that "both of them got me away from home". Teaching had an added attraction, in that so-called Leaving Scholarships were available to provide some income while the prospective student teacher was still at school.

Becoming a teacher – the first ten years

After two years at Teachers' College, Beth "wasn't chosen to do a third year" and exited with a Certificate of Teaching to take up her first appointment – to a school within driving distance, much to her disappointment. When asked what, as a beginning teacher, she thought the role of a teacher was, she observed that in those days "you just went out teaching, didn't you". She recalled feeling that it was an "expectation from above" that teachers would "get good results" from their students in weekly and end-of-term tests. She also had a strong desire to "make them [the children] feel comfortable about it".

Overall, she found her first year of teaching "horrific", particularly after an unpleasant discipline episode involving a "reluctant" student that left her feeling, on the one hand, that she had "failed him" and, on the other, that she had been inadequately supported by the Principal "who sat in his office and whenever you came in he would spray the air for germs". On the positive side, she did get satisfaction from being involved in a training program for the 'New Maths' and then passing on that knowledge to other teachers, parents and students, with the result that she "had a lot of children who loved me". She also enjoyed helping a hearing-impaired student. Nevertheless, she regarded herself as "a pretty terrible teacher".

In those early days, Beth had no concept of a career path in teaching, her primary life ambition being that she "wanted to be married, someone who would just accept me for what I was". Shortly thereafter, Beth did marry and then took accouchement leave to have her first child. She returned to work for a year when the child was one year old and then resigned to have second child, thinking that once the children were back at school if she wanted she could just "pick up and go back".

There, Beth's teaching career might have ended, but when it came time for her elder child to attend school, she decided that sending him to a private school was a better option. To be able to afford that, she needed to return to work. By that time permanent teaching positions were hard to come by and so began what was to turn into a 20 year saga of contract appointments. By the time she had completed her first ten years of teaching, she still did not feel confident as a teacher, attributing this to the fact that as a person she "had not had very high self-esteem". However, she was starting to feel that her teaching approaches were "kind of right". To Beth, the most positive aspect of the job remained the interaction with children, particularly "kids who were in trouble", because she "identified with them".

The middle years

During Beth's mid-career, her main challenge was to obtain a permanent position and this became an "all-consuming goal". Thinking that upgrading her qualifications might help, she enrolled in a Diploma of Teaching course at a College of Advanced Education. Despite misgivings about having to do subjects she "didn't want to know about, curriculum development and all that sort of … rubbish", she received high grades for most of her subjects, leaving her with the feeling that "for the first time in my life, I was fairly successful".

Although she and her husband were willing to accept country appointments, suitable placements did not eventuate and so the "merry-go-round" continued, with the challenge of a new school almost every year. Because contract teachers often tended to be placed in "difficult schools" and

many such schools were in parts of the metropolitan area some distance from her home, Beth also often found herself facing long drives to and from work. The frustrations of being unable to achieve permanency led her to start "getting really negative", which she explained manifested itself through "whinging". In order to channel these emotions more positively, she became involved in establishing an "employable teachers branch" of the teachers' union in her area.

One of the things that Beth found most difficult during this period was the attitude of other teachers towards those who had been contract teachers for a long time, as "people kept saying if you were any good you'd be permanent". Conversely, she did feel that her experiences did have the effect of making her a better teacher in some respects, through having to develop strategies to "immediately fit in" and "fight for your rights". Some of her contracts had also involved her in promotion positions, such as being a learning area coordinator, and this had helped to boost her confidence. By the time Beth had been teaching for about 30 years, she had finally reached a point where she believed that her teaching could be said to be "good". "I knew that I didn't care what I taught, so long as I could get to the kids then I could teach them anything."

During this period, Beth perceived an increasing tendency for the Department to try to set the professional development agenda. She noted that she failed to see the relevance of most of it, considering it "faddish and trendy". By way of example, she cited a time when teachers were encouraged to just let children write, without teaching them any formal writing skills. If, on occasion, she found something from this imposed professional development that interested her and appeared to have a direct application to her classroom, she would adopt those particular elements only.

Late career

In the early 1990s, noting that Japanese was becoming a popular language in schools and because she "loved things Japanese", Beth completed an adult education Japanese language course. It was this decision that was to lead to her fulfilling the elusive dream of gaining a permanent position. After responding to a newspaper advertisement for "junior primary teachers with an interest in Japanese", Beth was able to convince a staffing officer to appoint her to a school as a junior primary teacher of Japanese language. Initially it was a one-year contract, but permanency was confirmed the next year, followed in turn by a transfer to a school closer to her home, where she currently holds a position as a primary school Japanese teacher.

After the long wait, Beth found permanency threatening at first, compounded by the fact that as a language teacher she took other teacher's classes during their non-instruction time. Although a couple of the other teachers have shown some interest in the Japanese program, she has tended to feel "isolated", because "nobody understands Japanese, and they're not interested, they don't want to know". That notwithstanding, as a sign of her increasing confidence in her own ability, Beth applied for and successfully obtained an Advanced Skills Teacher classification, in spite of her Principal saying that he didn't think it was a good idea.

Beth continues to view the Department with suspicion, considering that "they really have lost touch with the classroom teachers" and have become "faddish and self-serving". Despite that attitude, or perhaps because of it, the latter stage of Beth's career has been the period when she has been most involved in professional development. She partly attributed this to the fact that in the past she had "put the family first", but now that her children had left home she was more able to focus on her own needs. She also noted that she has never minded hard work, as long as she is interested in the task and it suits her learning style; otherwise "it becomes a chore". When asked to clarify what she meant by "interested", she explained that the subject matter had to strike a personal chord and have the potential to be applied to her classroom context.

Given that the major component of Beth's professional development in recent times has involved postgraduate study, she was asked about her attitude to the value or otherwise of formal academic qualifications. She commented that this was an area where she had undergone some change of heart. When the basic qualification for teaching had become a Bachelor of Education, which she didn't have, her feeling at the time was that the "piece of paper" did not "make people a better teacher". She also referred to her father's wide knowledge of scientific principles and his common sense, despite his lack of a formal qualification, as opposed to some people of the scientific establishment who had qualifications but "didn't have the understanding that goes with it". Now, however, Beth's view is that it is important for teachers to do some additional academic training, but only if it is "in areas that they feel it's going to be relevant to them, rather than prescriptive areas".

Although she had previously heard of the Including Studies of Asia in Curriculum professional development course, it was a phone call from a colleague that led to Beth commencing her Studies of Asia professional development journey. As a Japanese language teacher, she felt "that would enhance it", while at the same time she was looking for something that would take her beyond what she perceived as the fairly narrow focus of some of her fellow Japanese hub group teachers, "because they weren't really interested in anything but the language, and I was interested in the culture and in the culture of the neighbouring countries around them". The fact that the costs of participating in the Including Studies of Asia in Curriculum course were covered by the Department was another motivating factor.

It was the availability of some initial fee sponsorship that also led Beth to continue on to the Graduate Certificate in Education (Studies of Asia) and subsequently the Master of Education (Studies of Asia). Equally important was the coursework nature of the two awards, which enabled her to proceed "in little bites" that were manageable and not overwhelming. Having to pay for some of her final Master of Education units added a further spur, in that even when she felt she was "struggling", she persevered so that she didn't "waste that money". There was also an element of 'I'll show you' in her dogged determination to complete. At one stage, when her Principal, who was "paranoid that it was going to detract from my [teaching] program", suggested that she give up her studies, she responded that "that was the last thing I was doing". Likewise, when some of her peers indicated they "thought I was mad", because, she considers, "they felt threatened", it only steeled her resolve.

Above all, however, it was the enjoyment angle that sustained Beth. She loved "learning about societies" and having the freedom to choose what countries or issues she would research.

CONCLUSIONS

Beth's story reinforces the observation of James (2002) that a life history is an individual's interpretation of events and experiences viewed from their current perspective. Beth's account also demonstrates Beattie's (1995) view of the value of narrative inquiry in interconnecting a person's past and present and their personal and professional selves.

A number of themes run through Beth's story, many of them consistent with Raymond, Butt and Townsend's (1992) finding of the enduring impact of "pre-training experiences" in framing a teacher's identity. The influence of Beth's parents was significant in framing her view of the world and of herself, with ongoing effect on her life choices and directions. Much of her childhood was characterised by feelings of alienation and inadequacy that carried over into her teaching career, particularly in the early stages, helping to explain her strong interest in so-called 'difficult' and 'troubled' students, because "the children accept you as you are, not for what you are, or who you are, or anything else, or what you look like".

Her clashes with her mother and with a number of her teachers left her with a distrust of authority figures and a determination to defend herself from those she perceived as misusing their authority, including various Principals at schools where she worked and officials of the Department. Her sense of poverty and deprivation as a child led to strong desire to escape from and rise above that world in terms of both security and esteem. She saw the keys to achieving that freedom as coming from some combination of factors such as a loving family context of her own, a well-esteemed and well-remunerated job, or gaining acceptance in a culture totally different from her own. Although understated by Beth, it was apparent that notions of Christian service were also strongly embedded in Beth's pre-training days and remained a lifelong influence.

After Beth commenced teaching, the first ten years pretty much equated to Day's (1999) "survival and discovery" phase, with some "consolidation" in so far as she gained satisfaction from working with particular types of students. However, there was very little in the way of "emancipation" because of the fractured nature of her career to that point as well as her low self-esteem. Likewise, even after 30 years there was very little in terms of "serenity" because of a prolonged lack of permanence, although Beth was increasingly confident in herself as a teacher.

Beth entered the final phase of her teaching career feeling that she still had a number of things to prove – that she was worthy of a permanent position, that she could teach as well as, if not better than, anyone else; that as a classroom teacher she was every bit as good as those in promotion positions; that independence of thought and action were the attributes that had enabled her to survive and thrive and these attributes must be maintained and defended at all costs; that she was intellectually able and capable of reaching the highest academic levels; that her chosen areas of interest (Japanese and Studies of Asia), and hence herself, were worthy of a respected place in her school community; and that she had achieved what her father had been prevented from achieving. Thus, while there might have been continuing scepticism about the education system, this has not been a phase characterised by a "contraction of professional activity and interest" – quite the opposite in fact. Huberman's (1992) view that there are certain kinds of instructional mastery that teachers value and that can help to stave off a "closing down" syndrome in late career was evident in Beth's case, as she valued mastery from both a professional and a personal perspective, indicative also of Nolder's (1992) "accelerated development" concept.

Although when she was asked about "critical incidents" affecting her career, Beth tended to talk more about interactions with particular teachers and students, there were a number of occurrences that significantly affected her career and life directions. The first was being forced by circumstance to become a contract teacher and the long lasting consequences of that. Another was finally gaining a permanent position in late career. Beth identified active support from particular Principals to undertake certain career steps as important, as, conversely, was lack of support from other Principals. Her decision to study and then teach Japanese language was very influential, as was her decision to undertake an initial professional development course in Studies of Asia.

Beth's attitudes to professional development, in keeping with other aspects of her life and career, showed something of a rebellious streak. She neither respected nor responded positively to Department imposed professional development and when she did undertake professional development it was not to benefit the organisation, nor indeed her school. Rather, she did it for herself as a person and as a teacher, seeing that as likely to have the most benefit for her students.

The Asia-related nature of the professional development that Beth devoted so much time to struck a chord at the right time, revealing a dynamic interaction between her context and her personal biography. Her interest in societies and cultures of Asia had deep personal origins extending right back to her childhood, as well as more recent resonances with her focus on Japanese language and culture. It also linked with her notions of Christian service – her trip to the Philippines, for example, coming about because of a decision to visit a student her family was sponsoring.

The pursuit of formal postgraduate qualifications through the Studies of Asia professional development pathway in many ways represented unfinished business for Beth, enabling her to address a perceived lack from her past. Obtaining the awards provided her with a sense of achievement not only at the personal level, but also professionally, as she had carved out a niche for herself and was now better qualified than most of her peers. From a cultural standpoint, Beth now felt a closer sense of identification with those cultures she had admired for so long in comparison to the perceived deficiencies she perceived in her own culture.

Beth's story shows that in one sense she was a product of the 'mainstream', in terms of the social attitudes and values context in which she grew up, while in other ways she was quite different from the 'mainstream' stereotype, in terms of her family's poverty, her negative views about her own culture and her deep interest in other cultures. As she matured she demonstrated, as Halse (1996b) found, that people's interest in other cultures can arise from "genuine compassion and empathy", and can lead to the development of an "altruistic value system" with understanding "cultural difference" as a central element.

Although it was not the purpose of this study to investigate in any depth shifts that might have occurred over time in Beth's attitudes towards the various societies and cultures of Asia, it was apparent that Beth had made a considerable transition from the "gee whiz" sentiments of her childhood – although some elements of that still remain – to a deeper understanding based on more extensive knowledge as well as interaction with and mutual respect for people in and from the Asian region. Her story thus reinforces Hamston's (2000) view that "our values and our ways of seeing the world … are never complete, finished; each individual's 'becomingness' is open and dialogue keeps this process alive".

It is fitting that Beth should have the last word as to how her life journey had led her to an extensive involvement in a Studies of Asia professional development pathway, through her poignant reflection,

> "It was Asia, wasn't it. It was Asia."

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