

The cultural formation of teachers' class consciousness: teachers in the inner city

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Abstract:

Currently the job of teaching is being reconstructed through a technicist and managerial account which bleaches out the 'authentic' voice of the teacher. This paper is an attempt to recover the commitments which a particular group of teachers (urban teachers) bring to their work and explore the way their perspectives are infused with their class histories, class consciousness and their teaching experiences. The paper is divided into two main sections. The first part briefly examines the contested classed position of teachers and argues that there is a need to distinguish between economic and subjective class identities. The second part draws on a small data set of interviews conducted with seven experienced and long-stay inner-city teachers and argues that (these) teachers do what they do because of their classed identities and subjectivities. While these sorts of teachers may always have been in a minority (Grace 1978), nevertheless they are still out there teaching in the city. Through their perceptions, values and sometimes their actions, they are contesting normalizing discourses of what it is to be a teacher.

Introduction

Whilst there are various manifestations of professional experience in teacher education courses, the major responsibility for learning to teach is with the university offering the award. The move in the UK towards a model based in schools has generated a great deal of research into the relationships between the educators and the pre-service teachers (Brown, 2002). In the UK system, the supervisor of 'practice teaching' has been replaced with the mentor of in-school learning. The literature in Australia over the past few years certainly reflects the interest this has generated in the evaluation of traditional practices (Wideen et al., 1998; Ramsay, 2000; Smith, 2000; Hastings & Squires, 2002).

In the light of research and evaluation, experienced teachers in schools and other educational settings are being asked to reshape the way they work with pre-service teachers. In an ideal world, there would be many professional development opportunities for university and school staff to work together as a team in the development of beginning teachers. In reality, resources are not available. Locating a

sufficient number of teachers to be mentors is a challenge; the ability to dedicate time to their professional development is extremely difficult. This paper seeks to share some current data with those in the professional experience partnership to challenge the thinking and activity designed for professional experience.

Functional teacher role and professional identity

Changed thinking and attitudes about teacher education roles are closely related to the thinking and attitudes that the pre-service teacher develops.

Mayer (1999) argued for an explicit focus on a teacher identity as distinct from that of teachers' functional roles. 'A teaching role encapsulates the things the teacher does in performing the functions required of her/him as a teacher, whereas a teaching identity is a more personal thing and indicates how one identifies with being a teacher and how one feels as a teacher' (pp. 6–7). Teacher identity is based on the core beliefs one has about teaching and being a teacher; beliefs that are continuously formed and reformed through experience. 'It is possible to become an expert practitioner by actually doing the job, by performing the skills, but true professional teaching involved another dimension, an intellectual dimension' (p. 8). Such a view promotes the teacher as a flexible, lifelong learner, able to participate in ongoing change—confident in him/herself.

Whilst Mayer has defined function and identity as two different concepts, they are not mutually exclusive, but rather intertwined aspects of the developing professional. The functional competencies of being a teacher are developed differently, being shaped by the individual's evolving perspectives and philosophies of teaching. This view of learning to teach certainly challenges how pre-service teachers are evaluated. Demonstrating specific competencies is no longer sufficient.

Vigorous debate about professional standards is currently occurring in Australia, both nationally and at state level. At the national level it is acknowledged that 'what teachers know, do, expect and value has a significant influence on the nature, extent and rate of student learning' (ACE National Statement, 2003). This statement recognizes the functional role—'knows' and 'does'—and also aspects of teacher identity—'expects' and 'values'. The development of professional standards for beginning teachers will significantly affect the criteria by which pre-service teachers are judged.

The uniqueness of every teacher's approach to teaching, shaped by personal teacher identity, is what makes every classroom 'look' different. For this reason, each mentoring relationship with a pre-

service teacher is unique and has learning opportunities for both parties. It is not a one-way transfer of skills and knowledge from expert to novice, but an opportunity for challenging those things that create personal philosophies and modes of operation. To acknowledge the differences that make up teacher identity is to be aware of the potential for enhancement.

In acknowledging the values and beliefs each person in the learning partnership brings to any situation, the potential for conflict is high. Managing and utilizing differences is required for effective learning outcomes. Later in this paper, this is addressed with suggested strategies for enhancing the learning partnership during episodes of professional experience.

Educator roles

Mentoring teachers take on a challenging task when they invite a pre-service teacher into their class/es. As day-to-day responsibilities of the teacher seem to constantly grow more demanding, the added responsibility of assisting a future teacher requires greater commitment. The identification of a sufficient number of willing experienced teachers to take on this role can be an ordeal for universities as they attempt to find suitable placements for their students.

The experienced teachers who mentor the pre-service teacher during a period of professional experience often do so with relatively very little guidance or with little understanding of what the university course entails. They understandably must then draw almost solely upon their own core beliefs and experiences as the basis for support and evaluation of pre-service teacher learning. It is not surprising, therefore, that the idea that 'school is where you really learn to teach' is commonly held by many in schools.

Changing language in teacher education is symptomatic of changes in thinking and attitudes (Fish, 1995). Consequently, with the changes in thinking about the role experienced teachers play in the school, the term 'mentoring teacher' has come to better represent the role of what was once the 'supervising teacher'. In essence, the mentoring teachers are taking on an expanded role; a closer role with the teacher educators in universities; a different role to that of educators of children (Field & Field, 1994).

In addition to functions of socialization, mentoring is more dynamic, involving interpersonal and psychosocial development, greater collegiality, professionalism and role fulfillment (Carruthers, 1993). It emphasizes evaluating beliefs and practices, questioning personal views and theorizing more about practice. These happen in

university discussion as part of reflecting on and learning from professional experience periods in schools. What is suggested here are that these characteristics of mentoring happen in school experience too, bridging and complementing the learning in both places. A consistent approach encourages the boundaries between university and school to become more ‘blurred’; the links strengthened.

It would not be appropriate to suggest that deeper and reflective activity does not go on currently in professional experience, but it is evident that more often than not, the relationship is more focused upon developing functional competence (evident through ‘supervision’) than on developing the long-term professional identity of the future teacher (through ‘mentoring’). In most situations, the written report that culminates a period of professional experience is predominantly based on beginning teaching competencies. The desire for competency factors widely recognized by employers is a strong influence.

What new pre-service teachers ‘know’ about teaching and being a teacher

Having some understanding of how new students perceive their journey towards teaching provides valuable insight for teacher educators. In semester one, 2003, a cohort of over 240 first year undergraduate primary and secondary pre-service teachers completed a record of their thoughts as they progressed through the semester. In addition they were provided with observation tasks to complete during a five-day introductory period in schools. They recorded their perceptions about their motivation for enrolling in a teacher education course, and about what they believed they would learn. They set personal goals for the school visit and revisited these afterwards. They were asked to also consider specifically what they believed effective teaching to be after their visit.

Initial statements about why they were taking this course of study fell into two general categories. Firstly there was a range of comments that told of positive experiences with teachers and teaching situations. Positive experiences in sport and community groups supplemented these. Secondly, they confidently made statements about their own ‘natural’ attributes to be teachers—how they were ‘born to be a teacher’. Anecdotes related how they are ‘good with children’ and enjoy ‘teaching the local netball team’. A number related that their mother or father (or both) was a teacher and that accordingly they would be ‘good at it too’. There was a definite sense that teachers possessed particular qualities and attributes, a teaching personality that you either have or you don’t.

In her study, Mayer (1999) identified this disposition also as pre-service teachers discussed the role of professional experience episodes in their course. 'They saw themselves as having all the appropriate personal qualities for effective teaching, but in the practicum they had to focus on pedagogical competence' (p. 6).

Their confidence about knowing what teaching is and what they need relates to their core beliefs and experiences built up through what Mayer (1999) calls their 'apprenticeships of observation' and 'atypical teaching episodes'. Having been a student for a long period of time, they have developed a concept of teaching from observing teaching in their own schooling. 'Teacher X was great. I will really be like her'. Episodes where they have assisted learning and gained satisfaction from this experience were also influential. 'I help in an after school program and I like teaching the children there'. As Mayer points out, the experiences that shape their beliefs about teaching are probably far removed from the realities of teachers' work. They are, however, providing a basis that influences how they perceive the learning to teach journey once they enter university.

When asked what they expect to learn at university, the majority of respondents clearly focused on subject knowledge, how to teach that subject knowledge, how to gain the respect of children and how to 'control' children. While there were responses that included expecting to learn about how children learn and how to establish relationships with children, they were few in comparison. Having established for themselves that they have the necessary attitudes and dispositions, these pre-service teachers expect university will assist them with the subject knowledge, pedagogical aspects and, most particularly, behaviour management strategies—the latter more prevalent in the secondary group.

What the pre-service teachers learned from brief exposure during professional experience

Following a short period of observation in school settings, the written comments expressed by the pre-service teachers disclosed a myriad of judgments about what they experienced. Asked about what they had learned about schools during their brief visit, the pre-service teachers exposed a wide range of revelations about how schools operate, for example 'I hadn't thought before about the need for policies', 'Some schools have two teachers for one class', 'I didn't think teachers cared about uniforms and stuff' were indicative comments. However, the comment recorded most frequently was the realization about how much work teachers do and how much

management, preparation, etc, goes on outside the classroom. Also, many were surprised to see the amount of work teachers do together.

Reacting to a specific task asking them to reflect upon what they believed characterized an effective teacher, the responses of the pre-service teachers showed some thought about the personal attributes of the teacher and the teacher role, based on the classes they had visited. Attributes such as patience, sense of humour, tolerance, flexibility and being respected were commonly provided. Comments relating to organization, discipline and subject knowledge were also frequent.

Naivety is not necessarily a bad thing in the learning journey. Having made these statements, the pre-service teachers provided themselves with the opportunity for their perceptions to be challenged and interrogated. Identifying the thinking that is going on in the pre-service teachers' minds is powerful for the teacher education partnership. It is their personal philosophies of teaching which shape their emerging teaching identities. University staff, school-based mentors and supervisors can all assist pre-service teachers examine their personal theories and philosophies to enhance the journey of growth towards being a professional teacher. 'As teacher educators, we need to appreciate the tacitness and validity of personal theories...(and) provide opportunities for discourse and reflection' (Mayer, 1999, p.9).

Towards mentoring teacher identity

Effective mentoring involves a complex relationship that draws upon personal and contextual factors and a range of tasks and tools. Whole books are written on the topic. The focus here is to use the insights gained from pre-service teacher perceptions to suggest how the mentoring relationship can be best used to assist in the formation of a teacher identity as a basis for responsible professionalism. These strategies encourage moving beyond supervision of performance and socialization, to the more dynamic growth of the professional as Caruthers (1993) suggests.

Reflection on one's own perceptions, beliefs, experiences and practices is core activity for all teachers—pre-service and in-service, in schools and universities. Outwardly challenging ideas that one holds dear is not always particularly comfortable, but as a practice serves to affirm as well as to confront existing positions. Also, 'reflecting on practice may not lead to immediate visible improvement, but rather to longer-term quality in practice and professionalism' (Fish, 1995, p. 85).

As teacher educators, the concepts of both teacher role and teacher identity are integral to developing the life long learner (Mayer,

1999). Reflection on action assists in the development of the functional role of a teacher, and also provides strategies to nurture the ongoing development of a teacher identity that has been shaped, and will continue to be shaped over a long period of time. The ‘intellectual dimension of expert practice is, for most teachers, reflection’ (Mayer, 1999, p. 8).

Maximizing learning in a ‘safe’ context for reflection and growth

The relatively brief time spent in schools during a teacher preparation course provides opportunities for learning that can occur nowhere else. Lectures, tutorials and workshops at university cannot simulate the spontaneity of the classroom or the nuances of the workplace. For the pre-service teachers, time on professional experience is a ‘sharp learning curve’ about teaching and about themselves as teachers.

The initial meeting between mentor and pre-service teacher is of vital importance in establishing a collaborative learning relationship and cannot be rushed or squeezed in between commitments. The groundwork produced through sharing experiences and expectations alleviates the potential for misunderstanding later. Establishing a trusting communication channel allows each to more easily expose their core beliefs about teaching in a non-threatening way. The initial meeting is a situation for leadership by the mentor as s/he assists in the socialization to the setting. It must also be a time for opening opportunities for discussion, encouraging questions and opinions.

For the learner, the journey is essentially a journey inward. The only vehicle on which the journey can be made is trust. (Sgroi, 1998, p. 26) An initial comprehensive meeting enables the development of trust to happen through an open commitment to deep discussion and valuing of each other’s ideas and opinions. Based on trust, opportunities for modeling, experimentation and collaborative expansion of ideas are possible.

Consider the antitheses. Without a focused discussion where clear understandings are established, the pre-service teacher follows the mentor around quickly forming beliefs about how s/he is expected to behave/perform. The socialization aspects are picked up in formal and informal ways and assumptions are often based on the pre-service teacher’s individual perceptions. Assumptions, as can be seen in the information gleaned from the data collected from first year pre-service teachers, can be quite naïve and often information about procedures, etc, can actually be incorrect.

Pre-service teachers require explicit input and guidance to be both well informed and encouraged to challenge currently held ideas. Time

to consider the deeper implications builds a more solid foundation for when unexpected situations arise. Time spent in challenging discussion is as important as time spent in classrooms.

Opportunities to reflect

One expectation of professional experience placements is for the pre-service teachers to regularly reflect on what they think teaching is about—refining their personal philosophies of teaching and teachers. They are encouraged to compare and contrast what they know from past experience with that in which they are currently immersed. How are things the same? How are they different? Why? How do I feel about that? How have I changed my opinions of ...?

It is to be expected that the core values and beliefs that pre-service teachers bring to professional experience may be at times quite different to those of the mentoring teacher. Field and Field (1994) provide anecdotes where the pre-service teachers have felt uncomfortable with the practice and/or disposition of the mentor, but have kept these thoughts to themselves for fear of unfavourably affecting how they will be judged. If there has been no opportunity to open up the possibility of discussion, then compliance may be seen as the ‘safer’ option. The pre-service teacher either becomes disenchanted with the experience or ‘learns’ that their ideas are wrong or not to be valued.

The author’s recent personal experience has included situations where pre-service teachers report having been confident in openly discussing differences in approach only to receive almost hostile responses from their mentors. From an experienced teacher perspective, a senior member of a school staff reported about a strained relationship between pre-service teacher and mentor.

Kate (mentor) had a lot of good advice for James, but I think James had some fairly

fixed ideas about the teaching profession before he came and some of those went against

Kate’s ideas of what an effective teacher should be. (Personal communication)

This scenario clearly demonstrates the coming together of differing perspectives in an environment of entrenched ideas. Such conflict is likely to occur where the purely functional approach to supervising the pre-service teacher based only upon socialization into the current context is employed. In such a situation, it is understandable that a mentoring teacher feels uncomfortable, or even intimidated when challenges occur. ‘Kate’ expected ‘James’ to take on

her approaches. Both parties were ill prepared in terms of negotiating a shared understanding and clarifying expectations. Both university and mentoring teachers can assist pre-service teachers to become reflective by providing support and opportunities to think out aloud (Lazarus, 2000). For example, planning time for discussion; making the implicit explicit to avoid potentially incorrect assumptions; and modeling reflective practice by challenging one's own thoughts openly can give 'permission' for the pre-service teachers to do likewise. This way, aspects of both individuals' philosophies and developing teacher identity are celebrated.

Making judgements

The data from the study highlighted judgements made by pre-service teachers about 'good and bad' practice after their initial five days observation in a school. They worked as a group during this period and were not assigned to a particular teacher as mentor. Their focus was more an overview of school and teachers. With little opportunity to engage in discussion with teachers, their judgments, directly linked to their experiences so far, had little chance to be challenged on this occasion. In most cases, their post observation comments served only to affirm their earlier perceptions. The intervention of the teacher educator/mentor to assist reflection will become critical in following experiences in the field.

Teachers make decisions based on their judgments in all aspects of their role. As well as recognizing core beliefs and values, Atkinson (2000) argues for the acknowledgement of intuitive skills and reasoned objectivity in the development of judgments. For example, being able to write a well-structured lesson plan is desirable. However, knowing what to do with it when faced with the reality of the teaching context is more important. Spontaneous decision-making is required. Intuition to do so relies on having confidence—confidence in knowing how, but also in knowing why. Such confidence is enhanced by having a feeling of freedom to take risks based on their beliefs about their teaching role. The combination of intuitive and reflective practice assists pre-service teachers to make decisions confidently rather than reverting to some long held belief (or fall back position) when challenged with a difficult situation. (Wideen et al., 1998). If they are to develop a strong sense of their own teacher identity, pre-service teachers must be able to take risks to challenge opinions.

'Research' activities

The importance of the initial meeting and the need to keep communication channels open has been emphasized thus far and the

case for reflective practice has been presented. Other activities woven into the professional experience program can focus on learning through researching—posing questions, seeking solutions to problems (Fish, 1995). The practical exercise of tracking a student throughout the day to find out about his/her interaction, for example, provides data and substance for challenging current knowledge. Tracking another teacher looking at all interactions and tasks, can identify issues for discussion that go beyond the day-to-day classroom functions. These mini-research activities may then form the basis for analytical discussion, school-based seminars or tutorials involving the mentors, peers and other school staff, and with university staff in the field and back on campus.

Observing the pre-service teacher and being observed by him/her is commonly used in the professional experience situation. The strength of this for developing both functional roles and teacher identity is the reflection that takes place post ‘event’. Observation tasks, outlined ahead of time, provide focus for discussion. This becomes research in action when a focus question is arrived at; for example, what are the interest differences of the children and how are they addressed? Interpretation of observations will vary because of the differing perceptions of the participants, but it is preferable for the learner to lead the reflective discussion by describing, analyzing and evaluating the experience.

The process is best described as ‘debriefing’ (Fish, 1995). This is preferred to ‘feedback’ as there is a connotation of one-way communication. For many, it is ‘easier’ to be told what worked and why. The practice of supervising operates more this way where the novice is being informed and socialized by the supervisor (Field, 1994). In a mentoring approach, the learner is empowered to take the ‘risks’ of suggesting answers and explanations.

In the collection of data, students’ observation tasks were guided by questions to consider. Depth of response was encouraged. However a considerable number provided no more than surface responses. This indicated a need for more extensive preparation in this area before attending schools.

Conclusion

The collation of responses from a cohort of pre-service teachers served to provide some understanding of the perceptions and assumptions that they bring to teacher education. Given the caveat that these were only first year, first semester students, there was nevertheless confirmation that reflected conclusions about students’

core beliefs drawn by Mayer (1999). Acknowledgment of these beliefs provides a basis for learning. Respect for these beliefs builds trust.

Teacher educators, whether they are university lecturers/tutors or mentoring teachers in the workplace, must seek to continually encourage the formation of a teacher identity by facilitating pre-service teacher activity that empowers them to explicitly build upon and challenge their experiences and beliefs. The traditional practice of pre-service teacher supervision, where the focus has been on socialization into a setting and the assessment of performance, is limiting to the future teacher's growth as a professional. Without the opportunity to challenge personal philosophies and existing practices, pre-service teachers merely perpetuate the behaviour and beliefs of supervising teachers. The potential result is a teacher who knows how to 'fit in' to existing contexts, but lacks the skills and confidence to make decisions that will make a difference.

It is not the intention that professional experience exclude the ideas of socialization and performance assessment, but it is stressed that the way these happen is not one of one-way communication. The pre-service teacher needs to take an active role by reflecting on, and engaging with, both the context and their own role within it.

The importance of dedicating sufficient time, reflecting on practice, empowering decision-making and learning through research in action is strongly recommended as means to promoting a positive and personally meaningful teacher identity. Mentoring, rather than supervision, by the experienced teacher promotes a collegial relationship that fosters each individual pre-service teacher to develop his/her own identity as a professional teacher.

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