Changing Culture, Changing Practice:
Overseas born teachers in Victorian educational contexts

PEE02345

'... sometimes it's because you didn't live in the country, you didn't see the movies they saw here, you didn't experience the things they experience, people who are living here, sometimes I say 'please explain', because you have to spell out everything, it's useless ...' (Nina, 2002)
Introduction

Identity and self

As teachers we are aware of enormous pressures that affect us in our work. We may not be as aware of the political nuances and social ramifications of these, nor how they bear on our perception of self. For migrant teachers new to the educational system familiar ways of knowing juxtapose with new work practice, while past and present value systems come into contact.

Questions of Identity

Today I shall share the journey of two migrant teachers, Maria and Shanti, who are part of my broader study wherein I examine issues of identity and self-hood. My study explores the strategies and resources migrant teachers use to construct their sense of self in local educational contexts. It also observes how each teacher positions self in her workplace community, and how she positions other teachers as she negotiates tensions between her traditional understanding and the discoursal positions she is taking up.

In my presentation, I shall draw on two interviews with the teachers to discuss some of these issues. I will describe my analytic frame and use it to present the teacher's perceptions of self as a person and as a teacher, changes that occur in their understandings, and implications of these in their professional development.

Issues of identity and self

Person-hood is the aspect of identity which is associated with someone's social role in the community. Self-hood is the aspect of identity which is associated with some-one's private and personal traits (Ivanic, 1997:66).

To look at one's self and one's identities reminds me to look into the mirror of my own past. I see not only the self I have become but also the self that has shaped me by life's experiences. In our journeys of becoming our identities fragment, hybridise, (Sarup, 1996) constantly transform according to societal contexts, and formulate in ways that reflect the world's changing nature (Dolby, 2000).

Identity gives people 'awareness of self' (Ivanic, 1997) and through actions and interactions presents the 'kind of person' one is in a variety of situations (Gee, 2000-2001). It assumes identification with multiple social groupings, communities, sets of values, interests and beliefs that link individual action to processes of social change (Ivanic, 1997).

Social identity is the root (Ivanic, 1997) or core (Gee, 2001) of an individual's identity and is shaped by one's personal sets of values and beliefs about reality (Ivanic, 1997; Gee, 2001). Situating self

We cross borders, but do not erase them; we take our borders with us (Behar, 1993: 320)

Identity and personhood offer a lens to view self in the process of change. To examine the migrant teacher's adjustments as they re-establish their careers I have adapted Ivanic's (1997) 'Identity Framework'. I use it to describe discrete aspects of self-hood, however, I also imply the intersecting nature of these through a process of negotiation (Gee, 2001) as one articulates points of intersection and discovers common ground (Casey, 1993).
Autobiographical self embraces prior social and discoursal history of one's socially constructed past and personal encounters. Like the aspects of identity described above these factors constantly change as life's history evolves (Ivanic, 1997). In other words, they emerge in an ongoing narrative process of self-definition (Goodson, 1998).

Discoursal self embraces contexts of culture and situation as well as group affiliations. Possible tensions between the 'often multiple, sometimes contradictory' (Ivanic, 1997) characteristics of interactions and the consequences of these can affect the teachers socially and professionally.

Power relationships and values inscribed in the institutional discourses and socio-cultural contexts affect their Possibilities for selfhood. In each situation lies the propensity to develop or inhibit their professional potential, which in turn impacts on their sense of self.

Autobiographical self

[T]he present is, indeed, partly an artifact of a very specific past.' Gee, 1999:57).

In their countries of birth Maria from the Philippines and Shanti from India, hold eminent social and professional standing. Each recounts diasporic memories of an advantaged childhood, educational prowess and career opportunity, financial status and security. Despite these similarities the women are disparate in themselves, so are the contexts, times and purposes of their migrations.

Maria

Maria migrated to Australia 13 years ago, first to New South Wales and then to Victoria. She felt obliged to follow her husband whose family petitioned him to come to Australia. Despite the political instability in the Philippines, Maria's primary intent was to keep the family intact. She is politically situated on the one hand by circumstances in the Philippines, while on the other gender issues influence her actions.

we were living well
we had to move
we had to come over in Australia
I had no choice
the Philippines were really in deep trouble
the government was in deep trouble
my husband insisted that I come with him

Maria's submission to follow her husband indicates the interplay between her roles of wife, mother, teacher and Filipino woman. It positions her according to traditional understanding of family values and indicates the status of women in her country.
Shanti

Shanti migrated to Australia merely twelve months ago. Despite reservations on her part, she concedes this was in the best interests of her daughters whose education is a priority. She realises the significance of teacher status in current immigration policy. This is noteworthy because education in Victoria is currently experiencing an increasing demand for teachers (Auditor General Victoria, 2001; Australian Education Union 2001) so there are increased possibilities for migrant teachers to gain employment.

one of the reasons why we were invited
in a way, or given permission to come here
was because Australia doesn't have enough teachers
I can't forget my Indian-ness when it's so deeply ingrained
I'm most comfortable in an Indian dress
I'm most comfortable eating Indian food
most comfortable listening to Indian music

Shanti maintains a strong sense of her Indian identity and shows resistance to the ideology of the dominant culture in Australia. She continues to call India home and attempts to live according to her traditional values; however, in many instances she faces the need to adjust to Australian societal norms. She adapts her dress ethics but considers that slacks present casual connotations that do not conform to her professional standards. While Shanti prefers to maintain her traditional practice, she is already adjusting to local customs. Although she attempts to uphold her Indian identity there are signs of tension and hybridity in her sense of self.

Shanti

English is 'more than a second language, we don't call it a first language, it's certainly a bit less than a first language but it's certainly more than a second language.'

they marvel at the grammatical accuracy, the linguistic competence, the fluency, the felicity of the language.

Throughout her narratives, it is clear that linguistic status is paramount to Shanti's perception of self. She prides herself on her English language skills although she speaks five languages fluently English is 'more than a second language'. She strongly identifies herself with her English speaking and grammatical ability; however, this creates tension in her workplace. Frequently she feels awkward in her relationships with colleagues who situate her as one who has less sophisticated English language proficiency than them. For Shanti such comments go beyond language to encompass her other capabilities also.

Generally, however, English minimises the distance between Shanti's family and the dominant group. Nevertheless, her efforts to maintain her traditional culture cause concern for her even through her daughters' school experiences. In response to this Shanti makes personal and social adjustments to protect them from isolation and ridicule. Her decision to send sandwiches instead of their traditional snack kowtows to strong peer group pressure in
the school community. In this instance, Shanti's identity is mother centred, while it additionally embraces the role of protector.

here we have to think about

how would they fit into their peer group

I make it a point to tell them to stand up for their own

but at times I know that some things,

like food for instance,

is very sensitive

so I try to steer, tip toe round the problem

and give them sandwiches

All in all Shanti shows signs of fatigue at the time of the second interview conducted four months after the first. She pictures herself merely plodding along performing multiple roles to fulfil her familial, social and professional responsibilities as she attempts to position her family and herself in Australian society. At this time, she expresses doubt in herself, and there is clear indication that her values and traditions are beginning to erode.

because of my personal circumstance at the moment

I'm not too happy

at the moment I feel like a pack horse

and I'm just plodding on

**Maria**

Maria's understanding of the role and position of women in Australian society instigate her change of status in the family. She becomes no longer submissive and obedient; rather independence gives her voice and empowers her in family decisions. However, this role reversal and empowerment consume her traditional sense of self.

in my country really men have a say in everything

the woman always has to say yes, something like that

even if it's wrong the woman has got to accept it

in my country

he drops me to my work and school

in my country
then picks me up

when I was in my country I was earning money

but the money goes into my husband's bank account

but in Australia it's different: I have my own account

but in here it's different

I have my space (laugh)

I can go wherever I like

but it's more enjoying the independence of being a woman

I began to accept the fact that if he has a say I have a say too

Maria finds contradictions in this new independence. It sets her apart and causes confusion for herself and her family members too. It creates a situation where she seeks to identify herself with freedom to choose, while ridding herself of positions formerly imposed on her. As she grapples with the present she no longer adheres to the traditional roles of woman, wife and mother. Maria's perceptions of self become 'knottily entangled' (Fine, 1994).

and then the hardships

the hard struggles of being able to do everything on your own

sometimes I get angry

I make him cook (other teachers laugh)

I don't iron any more now (other teachers laugh)

I just hang them, fold them, give them to them

**Professional self**

...sometimes it's because you didn't live in the country, you didn't see the movies they saw here, you didn't experience the things they experience, people who are living here (Nina, 2002)

Individuals subconsciously draw on an inherent 'constellation of practices' to activate personal responses that may simultaneously reaffirm or deny group membership. To engage into a particular practice or take on a new identity they face a constant state of flux in order to become a 'colonised' member of the new discourse community (Ivanic, 1997).

Migrant teachers undergo a process of adjustment to dominant group ideologies while they simultaneously hold firm to their cultural roots and traditional values (Behar, 1993; Alaverez, 1996; Singh, 1997; Purpel, 1999). As they negotiate the present and the past, their cultural heritage with current context, their attempts to clarify their personal and group identities compels them 'To walk in two worlds. To walk in none.' (Glancy, (2000:88).
Australian teacher education programs offer only a brief and sketchy introduction to cultural issues rather than efficiently preparing teachers for classroom situations (Hickling-Hudson, 1997). Consequently, migrant teachers are ill prepared for teaching in Australian contexts (Viete, 1999; Santoro, 1999; Kamler et al, 1999). This can be contextualised in the macro environment of the education system or the micro politics of the individual school.

**Maria**

Maria identifies herself as a teacher of Maths and Chemistry at university level. In Australia her qualifications and experience deem her unqualified to teach, however, she finds casual employment in Catholic schools. She describes a surreal situation; culturally and professionally, she is unaware of what to do and how to do it. She experiences tension between her enjoyment and the frustration of being an outsider. Maria's first appointment as a kindergarten teacher is daunting. While she is positioned as a teacher, she is simultaneously distanced by lack of knowledge that makes her feel helpless and ill equipped to perform the role of teacher. In this situation, she positions herself as a mother or nanny.

I'm used to teaching college students

and then I was given the kindergarten

I felt like a mother then, a nanny

I felt it was sort of um a movie thing for me

Building bridges between the past and present arouses tension for migrant teachers who seek positive representation within the dominant group (Kamler et al, 1999). Only recently, Maria completed the final practicum of her Diploma of Education: Secondary, which offers her the opportunity to position herself as a teacher of Maths and Chemistry in the secondary system. Observation has been crucial, enabling her to understand how other teachers teach and how the students respond. Although she finds it difficult to adjust, she recognises it is her responsibility to adjust her teaching style to suit the culture of learning in the secondary schools.

I felt so flabbergasted or something like that (laugh)

looking at the students speaking up,

very independent in the way of speaking

I find it difficult to adjust at the start

there's always a lot of balancing

they would expect probably for me to teach them

the way other teachers are teaching

other Australian teachers

Maria makes clear the status of academic subjects in the curriculum and shows her awareness of the students' attitudes towards them. While her teacher identity is strongly linked to these subject areas, it is also important for a teacher to understand her students
and recognise their specific needs. Realising this she is well positioned to handle the adolescent students in a state secondary college whose attitudes to Maths and Chemistry tend to be negative.

it's quite difficult, especially with Maths and Chemistry

one thing very important in academic subjects
to make the students to get quite a bit of comfort -
they don't like the subject,
especially with Chemistry,
especially with Maths,
especially the girls

Shanti

To create a temporal articulation into the discourse as she attempts to bridge the divide (Hall, 1997) Shanti also applies art of observation. She clearly indicates her ability to understand different practices within discrete cultures and locations and recognises her own sensitivities.

I'm a keen observer

watch what other people do

how they do things

and I also am not shy of asking

each new job in each new country meant a totally different ethos

just to make sure that I am doing the things that are expected in that education setting

and then I try to see how I can give my own inputs to that

Shanti first learned about classroom culture in Australian secondary schools indirectly through her daughter. The position of the teacher and the relationship with students is counter to her cultural ethics and her educational principles. Consequently, she looks away from the secondary sector for her employment to work in an adult environment where she is compassionate to the needs of the international students she teaches.

[She] was appalled by the way students talked to their teachers

in the Asian culture the teacher is given a very elevated status

in my own country, India, they say teacher is like God

there is a saying mother, father, teacher
I was used to that sort of, you know
reverence coming to me from students

**Teacher self: Contractual, casual connotations**

Shanti remembers her first offer of employment in Australia and the financial security it offered. On the one hand, she is pleased to identify herself with her profession, while on the other she realises the status it offers is inequitable to her understanding of teacher. She recognises the instability of short-term employment and the stigma that marginalises her professionally; her teacher status is trivialised to an almost unacceptable degree.

I was so happy when I got this job - an emergency teacher's job
we had to start earning
because until then we were living off our savings
I do have this sense of disquiet
that I am a casual worker
it is not what I've done all my life
it's not also a part of the system that I come from
I don't like this system
we joke about it because there's nothing we can do about it
we liken ourselves, to casual, unskilled farm labourers in India
we have this joke and when I chat with my brother in Oman
he asks me 'Did you find work today?' (laugh)
'Did you buy bread today?' (laugh)
'Was there food on the table today?'
that kind of thing, it's a joke, but, go a little deeper into the joke and that's a reality
you can laugh about it with him
but you probably can't laugh about it with your colleagues like that can you?
I find here that I am afraid to fall sick
because it means a loss of $200
it's a weeks shopping, you know, after the tax
Like Shanti Maria takes on professional poverty as a teacher in local contexts where she is unqualified, her skills deemed inadequate, and her Filipino experience unrecognized. She too must content herself with casual teaching hours. The situation is different when Maria is offered a year long contract to teach English in the TAFE sector. Not only does this offer her security but above all, at last, she can feel like a full-time teacher. However, political shifts in the composition of TAFE colleges meant amalgamations and more employment uncertainty. For Maria it was the loss of her contract.

I just wanted to feel how it is to be a full-time teacher

and experience what the other teachers are experiencing

casual teachers are employed only for the hours

which the other teachers will not be able to work

I'm given all the leftovers

I had regular hours

and I even had a contract

so I take it that I finally am a teacher

but it just turned out to be a bit sour

I began to hate casual work then (sigh)

Conclusion

As we can see from the experiences of Maria and Shanti Australian academic culture is vastly different to their previous experiences. In order to function appropriately in local contexts they must develop suitable sociocultural knowledge, adopt a new persona, adapt to academic discourse and understand the local perspective. They must straddle two cultural traditions in their attempts to become socialized into the culture of schools and classrooms (Inglis and Philps, 1995).

My presentation today has portrayed a frequently hostile educational environment, yet it supports previous studies that describe tensions faced by migrant teachers to the local conventions of education, teaching practice and the culture of schooling (Inglis and Philps, 1995: Viete, 1992, 1999; Santoro, 1999; Kamler et al, 2000).

During my interviews with Maria, Shanti and other migrant teachers I have entered the communal spaces they occupy within their schools, the privacy of their classrooms and also the intimacy of their emotions. These teachers have shared with me the tensions that impact on their lives as they reconstruct their perceptions of self as a teacher in both professional and social contexts. Despite the ongoing difficulties they face, Maria, Shanti and the other teachers in my study reveal tenacity and ambition to work as teachers here.

Thank you for your attendance today. I hope I can answer your questions and I welcome some ideas that you may be able to offer. Thank you.
Possibilities for self-hood

Maria

and then I read newspapers
and they were in need for teachers in the secondary school
because of my wanting to become a full time teacher
to work as a full time teacher
I enrolled at Monash University
I felt as if - oh why am I doing this?
I mean I should not be studying any more
I'm already beyond the years of studying this course it's called an undergraduate
because I don't have an education training
I have to wait to be able to teach
I thought that this is a waste of time at the start
but I need to improve myself or I won't be able to find a better job
I won't be able to teach in the secondary school which I want to so much
It's just like I keep thinking about the good side of it, or whether you're happy about it, even if your in your country it's the same thing, even in the Philippines you can find struggles around, that sort of thing, it's just a different culture

Shanti

At this point of time, I don't know myself. Sometimes I think I wouldn't like to be just a teacher all the time but at the same time I think I need some more time to consolidate, you know, my career here, so then I will have the necessary background, the necessary expertise, the necessary financial backing to venture out into something else. I might even go on to study full time.

I want to be a University teacher but I know it's not very easy. I'll have to first upgrade my qualifications.

We are here and we've got some good opportunities.

I take courage from the fact that people have settled down and eventually everyone does well, that's the key phrase that's hanging like a carrot in front of my nose at the moment.

I still have a few questions about living here in Australian which bother me from time to time, but I guess I'll have to make those adjustments - questions about my children, questions
about what sort of life they will lead. Perhaps I must learn to let go, because letting go is not part of my culture.

References


