

## **Mentoring: Bridging the identity crisis for beginning teachers**

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### **Abstract:**

New teachers who enter Australian educational systems must acquire suitable knowledge that enables them to function effectively as a teacher here. Whether they are beginning teachers or overseas born professionals new to the system, mere transfer of knowledge does not suffice; neither does it satisfy their professional perception of self. While beginning teachers lack knowledge about teaching and learning, teachers born and trained overseas lack culturally specific educational knowledge. These shortfalls can initiate unforeseen dilemmas for their professional development and shifts in their definition of self. Acquiring new knowledge requires teachers to understand the social knowledge of learning and teaching in local contexts and to apply this appropriately. Mentoring relationships are a means of bridging the gap between the newcomers' former ways of knowing and current practice, thus mobilising their capacity to operate effectively as a teacher in their new contexts and develop a positive professional identity. In this paper our conversation draws on experiences of two studies, one involving interviews with overseas born teachers, the other a mentoring initiative that facilitated beginning teachers' transition to university life.

### **Introduction: risks and dilemmas**

The pathway to teaching in Australian schools can lead to dilemmas for new teachers, whether they are new to the profession and beginning their careers or overseas born and trained teacher professionals. As newcomers to university life, pre-service teachers need to take risks in order to make new friendships and begin to understand tertiary institutional practices. Similarly, overseas born teachers entering Australia put at risk their hopes and aspirations of continuing their teaching careers. Often they are faced with dilemmas as their professional identity is challenged. When addressing these dilemmas it is important to recognise that new teachers, including those who are overseas born, bring unique histories that reflect their own understandings. Contact with others in the profession can help these teachers orient themselves to the theoretical and practical concepts of teaching and inform them of specific contextual orientations. Effective transitions are an evolutionary process that form a bridge to connect newcomers into the profession and help them to appropriate the skills and knowledge they require (Ball 2000). The contribution that the mentoring process can make to effective transitions is now being recognised.

Although there are many definitions and variations of mentoring they all involve 'on-going supportive relationships'. Frequently the relationship is between a more experienced, reliable adult and a younger person. The mentoring process may involve both informal and formal arrangements. Evans (2000) argues against formal arrangements asserting that informal mentoring can be more effective. Here we identify mentoring as a positive component of overseas born teachers' experiences of teaching in schools.

In this paper we argue similarity in experiences for new teachers whether Australian or overseas born. We draw on two studies to support this; one was a new initiative in a university in Melbourne where pre-service teachers took part in a formal mentoring program. As time went by and relationships between mentees and mentor developed, formality was replaced by informality and bonds became strengthened. The second study looks at the process of developing a professional identity among a group of overseas born teachers. The stark contrast between teachers who realised a positive self-image and those who did not seems related to their relationships and the extent of help they received. The oral narratives of two overseas born teachers from language backgrounds other than English (LBOTE) support our belief in the value of mentoring relationships. The neutral settings selected in this study and informal, open-ended discussion in the university study empowered our participants who willingly shared their experiences. Listening to our participant's voices we are thus made aware of the personal support new teachers need to develop their careers and at the same time a positive sense of self.

Shanti who is new to the country but not new to the profession sums up the value of mentoring relationships. After extensive experience teaching in international contexts Shanti's professional identity was thwarted when she was thrust into a local educational workplace where her employment was subject to contract, she felt isolated by lack of support. Unable to cope after a stressful year, she turned her back on this situation to take on the role of employer. From this position she acknowledges the need for a supportive bonded relationship between mentor and mentee.

I was an employee, now I'm an employer,  
that has put a lot of responsibility on me,  
these conversations have helped me to understand  
about how a teacher feels in a new country or a new industry  
you're either new to teaching  
or you're new to the country  
you're new to the culture  
or you're new to the land  
but somewhere I knew that we would get there (Shanti: Int 3)

### Teacher supply: a critical equation

The value of overseas born and trained teachers in Victorian schools has not been fully realised. Despite the urgent call for teachers in Victorian education (Peace 2001; Victoria 2001) and the call to employ native speakers of Asian 1 to teach Languages Other Than English (LOTE) (DEST 2001) few bicultural, bilingual teachers are employed (Santoro, Reid et al. 2001). The looming teacher shortage in Victoria's public, private and Catholic schools is currently a major concern (Dunn 2003) that overseas born teachers could help to alleviate. Progressively within the next 10 years government schools expect to lose approximately 45% of teachers as they reach retirement age (Williams 2002). Table 1 below shows the ageing population of teachers and Tomazin (2003) warns of the impending crisis.

Teachers' age	Numbers
Under 25	1811
25-29	3431
30-34	2984
35-39	3874
40-44	7314
45-49	10,166
50-54	7756
55-60	2368
60-64	521

Source: Australian Education Union

Table 1 **AGEING POPULATION**, June 2001

Despite increasing demands for new teachers (DETYA 1999; Peace 2001) universities offer only limited places to trainees. The imbalance between supply and demand is further stressed by the global desire to learn English, approaching retirement age (Auditor General 2002), burnout of current teachers (Seddon 1990) and the fall out of new teachers during their early years in schools. At the present time recruitment campaigns target teachers who currently work in other professions and those who are not practicing (Peace 2001) as well as overseas born teachers (Auditor General 2002). Despite the overseas born teachers' prior teaching experience, most have to complete an additional teacher-training course at a Victorian university.

Unfortunately, teacher training courses do not equip them with the socio-cultural knowledge they require (Inglis & Philps 1995; Santoro 1999). Therefore overseas born teachers find it stressful when they try to comply with unfamiliar philosophies and practice (Seah & Bishop 2001). Because university courses have a culture-specific orientation instead of being universal, different perspectives concerning teachers' role, teaching methods, and teacher status are common issues that confront the newcomers.

### **The culture of schooling**

As the context of this paper is the school community, we briefly examine the culture of schooling in Victoria. Ethnic diversity in our school communities is a result of 'international mobility and migration' (DETYA 1999). Despite this broad cultural base the British system of knowledge continues to influence the educational environment (Bishop 1990) and teachers of Anglo-Saxon origin predominate (Rizvi 1990). In this context established conventions set the norm (Kamler, Reid et al. 1999) and interact with the micro cultures of individual schools. Overseas born teachers, as the minority group among teaching communities, are expected to acculturate to the local work culture (Bishop 1990). It is assumed they have appropriate social knowledge of education (Rizvi 1990). However this knowledge is innate to those familiar with the culture and often unspoken within school communities (Eckermann 1994). The newcomers' professional and social adjustments are impeded because this knowledge is unknown and work practices are unfamiliar to them (Santoro, Reid et al. 2001). Jang Mi, an overseas born teacher from Korea explains:

[The] teaching environment is quite different to one I which I have used to I have to learn the Australian education system, I have studied at university in Australia but it's really quite different to what I have learnt so that's why it's quite a hassle to me (Jang Mi: Int 1)

### **Beginning and overseas born teachers**

The process of becoming a teacher involves changes in beliefs, attitudes and behaviours (Elliot & Calderhead 1994). Newcomers to the teaching profession should understand the philosophies and virtues of the educational culture and acquire new competencies and skills (Smith & Alred, 1994). Furthermore, they should develop strategies to cope with dilemmas that confront them throughout their learning process (Maynard & Furlong, 1994). As beginning teachers develop a teacher identity they redefine of the role of teacher and interpret self in new ways (Goodson & Cole 1993). Initial discomfort, confusion and low self-perception slowly transform as levels of comfort increase (Goodson & Cole 1993). Jang Mi describes the transformations she experienced over time in the following way. However, she is vulnerable to changing circumstances and re-interprets self as her level of comfort dissipates and relationships alter.

First one semester I have quite difficult, the problem is the support of the teacher I've got one colleague who was teaching Korean language, first semester she tried to help me then second semester I changed from part time to full time then she little but give me different attitude to first semester. (Jang Mi: Int 1)

Overseas born teachers confront similar issues to those confronting beginning teachers. Like other migrant professionals overseas born teachers undergo a process of adjustment (Hawthorne 1994) while holding firm to their cultural roots and traditional values (Behar 1993; Alavez 1996; Singh 1997; Purpel 1999). To bridge the gap between different understandings and avoid confusion, overseas born teachers must be aware of local perspectives and become socialized into the culture of schools and classrooms (Inglis & Philps 1995). The demand to adjust is a one-way procedure (Kamler, Reid et al. 1999) that may give rise to uneasiness and an incapacity to cope in their new educational culture (Kamler, Reid et al. 1999; Santoro 1999). Scepticism by employers of overseas born teachers' overseas qualifications (Inglis & Philps 1995; Kamler, Reid et al. 1999; Santoro 1999) and colleagues' preference to work with 'people like us' (Kamler, Reid et al. 1999) or 'not to get too close' (Neal 1995) exacerbate the difficulties they confront.

Different perspectives in the teacher's role, status and teaching methodology cause tensions for overseas born teachers (Kamler, Reid et al. 1999). The comments below indicate the frustrations they experience when their position as a teacher in local contexts is juxtaposed to their traditional understanding. From her Confucian heritage perspective, Jang Mi describes the teacher's role and the relationship between teachers and students in Korea.

The role of teacher is quite different ... because in Korea teacher is more higher level, I mean in Australia teacher and students kind of like a friendship, but in Korea they're hierarchy of teachers and students ... students always follow and respect their teachers but in Australia there's not this kind of relationship so I feel like I don't know what I have to do, like what I have to cope with this kind of situation. (Jang Mi: Int 1)

Akiko looks specifically at her subject area and expresses concern that she as a teacher lacks the knowledge she needs to fulfil her responsibilities. In Japan, the teacher is the source of knowledge but here she finds she is the one who does not know.

Of course we learned about CSF, but all we had maybe only two sessions on CSF, a teacher came and gave lots of paper, and then tell us you have to read this (laugh) and so I actually didn't learn really anything from the university course about CSF yeah, nothing from the university course. At school, I think all the teachers know lots about CSF ... all the KLA except LOTE. (Akiko: Int 1)

Ballard and Clanchy (1991) claim that the education system of each society has a unique flavour. As traditions of the past flow through to the present, they continually influence current professional practice. In the same way that Australia's histories influence its education system, perspectives rooted in the past of both Akiko and Jang Mi impact on their professional and social understanding.

### **Developing a Professional Identity**

For those who choose to live in another country migration generates a "process of becoming rather than being: not who we are or where we came from, so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves" (Hall 1997). In other words, this evolving yet reflective process involves those born overseas to look into the past to redefine the present and locate self in the future. In fact, each person's identity evolves and changes as they move through life and are subjected to countless experiences in a multiplicity of contexts. However, the migratory circumstance itself creates fractures for those who re-locate to a new environment, experience changed circumstances and new value systems (Hall 1997). Coming-to-terms with such changes is affected by the experience itself, as well as the route that links the polarities of the past with the future trajectories.

The notion of 'fluidity' (Hall 1991; Farrell 2000) is applicable to shifts back and forth along a continuum of contestation and change as overseas born teachers re-negotiate their personal and professional positions according to their cultural values (Seah & Bishop 2001). Similarly a person's identities continually mutate as one's historically shaped, raced and classed 'self' interacts with 'other' (Hall 1991). Gee (2000--2001) claims that shifts in self-definition concur with tides of social and political change. Culturally different viewpoints affect one's relationships and group affinities and influence one's interpretations of self and other. Degrees of acceptance and contestation are negotiated as one presents self as a particular type of person, while others interpret the presentation according to their own cultural understanding. Below Jang Mi and Akiko talk about how they perceive themselves as teachers in their Victorian schools.

#### **Jang Mi:**

Sometimes the students, their attitude and their outcomes were quite good so I felt like it is worthwhile to teach I'm enjoying my job as a teacher. But some bad day I'm not very good teacher I don't have any talent I don't have any gift to teach. (Jang Mi: Int 1)

#### **Akiko:**

Now [end Term 2] I am starting to see myself as a teacher (laugh) I really have an idea of my ideal image of my teaching and I really want to make a friendly relationship with them (students) that's always what I wanted to do but at the same time I really have to build a professional working relationship with them.

I wasn't really good at making them really become quiet and make them listen to me, pay attention to me that was really not good when I just started, I really learned lots of strategies from the other teachers. (Akiko: Int 1)

The school can be viewed as a learning organisation. Within organisations, minority group members have limited opportunities to assert their own beliefs because of dominant group norms and the expectation to conform (Madsen & Mabokela 2000). Members of the dominant group position the minority group members according to the culture of the organisation, its norms, rules and regulations. As a result, minority group members must acquire socialisation skills and abide by the codes of power. They are open to scrutiny, subject to higher visibility and placed under pressure to perform (Kamler, Reid et al. 1999). These pressures become visible when overseas born teachers recall how they were treated in their schools.

### **Jang Mi**

Yes still they watching me of course, like they employ me so they watching they evaluate like how valuable they employ me so of course they watching me, even like colleagues, they watching me. 'What's she doing', 'is she working very well'? Just evaluate me.

Some good kind teachers they tried to take care of me they told me they can attend our class to discipline students ... I feel like very embarrassing like (Jang Mi: Int 2)

### **Akiko**

They thought I would have a problem (laugh) because I am a Japanese.

Our school has induction program the new graduate teachers have the opportunity to observe other lessons of experienced teachers. The classroom teachers should be on short time release they should be in their office not in the classroom so they know what I was doing. I don't want them to be there all the time ... I just want to be on my own without the influence of the classroom teacher there. (Akiko: Int 1)

The process of personal and professional development for beginning teachers radiates outwards to look at others rather than focus on self (Goodson & Cole 1993; Elliot & Calderhead 1994). Like a series of concentric circles teacher identity evolves as new teachers develop coping strategies appropriate to their role, acquire understandings of self as a teacher, and a sense of their overseas born professional identity in their workplace community (Goodson & Cole 1993). In the interviews with teachers, those who had been supported by a mentoring program revealed how this had helped them develop a sense of belonging and to identify self as a teacher. The mentoring experience acted as a bridge between their cultural identity and their professional identity as a teacher in their new environment. We discuss the mentoring process as a bridge in the following section.

### **Mentoring as a bridge**

Guidance and negotiation by more knowledgeable members of a community alerts newcomers to the knowledge they require to negotiate meaning (Ball 2000). The following transcript reveals how Akiko's identity as a teacher was shaped and supported by her mentor.

Each teacher has a mentor and my mentor is really a wonderful person so when I have a problem I always go to him and he always gives me good advice and good support. (Akiko: Int 1)

This school as a learning organisation initially set up a formal mentoring process by providing each teacher with a mentor as well as a formal induction program. However, the induction program failed after one semester. Akiko describes a highly structured program in which mentees and mentors met weekly. The frequency placed heavy demands on all involved so the induction program ceased to continue.

It didn't work! We had a weekly meeting in the morning with those experienced teachers and they gave me sort of introduction to things like school systems and how the school works, and if we have a question we can always ask in that meeting and also part of the programs we have, actually we have to arrange visits to other classrooms to observe lessons by experienced teachers so I went to some classes to see.

I think we stopped that meeting because we are just too busy to have that meeting (laugh), all the teachers are just too busy. (Akiko: Int 1)

While Akiko feels that the induction program was unsuccessful, she admits that there are benefits of the mentoring partnership. Both were a school initiative to help new teachers understand the school ethos and practice. However, the mentor-mentee relationship has extended beyond the bounds of the formal program. Below Akiko describes her mentor.

He's Australian, and he's a classroom teacher, he's teaching at Grade 1,2, but he was a Japanese teacher last year actually he lived in Japan as well he can speak a bit of Japanese and he taught Japanese for five years in secondary and also primary school. (Akiko: Int 1)

For teachers transitioning into the profession effective instruction involves a developmental process that "awakens and rouses to life those functions that are in the process of maturing" (Ball 2000). The relationship between Akiko and her mentor is bonded by their Japanese language skills. Akiko's fluency situates her positively. However, she submits to his knowledge of the education system. This knowledge she needs and he is willing to share (see transcript below). Although Akiko believes the formal induction program failed, the relationship with her mentor continues to evolve according to her need. The informality of this unstructured association allows the mentor and mentee flexibility to accept and negotiate their time and relationship with the other. Akiko illustrates how she gains from the relationship.

He is the mentor and it's very good because he knows how to teach LOTE and he knows how Australian education system as well. (Akiko: Int 1)

Our conversation continues by considering an example of a mentoring program, with beginning teachers, that was initially put in place by a tertiary learning organisation. The university mentors involved in this program were given the freedom to implement it as an informal, collaborative process. 'Building relationships' was the focus of the mentoring process for the group described here. Through participation in the mentoring program first year pre-service teachers in this group identified themselves as part of the university community. The mentoring process facilitated each student's search for a sense of identity as a beginning teacher. Students felt comfortable not having a formal structure for the sessions as the following transcripts indicate.

Even though the program does not have any formal structure that we followed, I think that it has been useful in having it that way, as it allows the people involved to introduce personal fears and questions. (J 13/5.02)

I think what made our group work so well was that we wanted to meet and it wasn't some big structured thing. (C 3/5.02)

These two comments are consistent with Evan's (2000) argument we identified above in the introduction that claims that informal relationships are preferable to formal ones. Parker Palmer captures the potential of mentoring in mentees' lives when he contends:

Mentors and mentees are partners in the dance of spiralling generations, in which the old empower the young with their experience ... reweaving the fabric of the human community as they touch and turn. (Palmer 1998)

For new teachers to be so empowered we strongly call for school principals employing these teachers to establish mentoring opportunities within the school. Whether they are new to the profession or new to the educational environment, this mentoring process aims to minimise the gaps in the teachers' professional knowledge.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we have argued the case for beginning and overseas born teachers to be provided with opportunities to interact with mentors on a regular basis. The mentoring relationships that would develop are a means of bridging the gap between the newcomers' former ways of knowing and current practice, thus mobilising their capacity to operate effectively as teachers in their new contexts and develop positive professional identities.

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