

From the interview room to the public arena – the role of the emotional response of researchers.

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The focus of this paper evolved from a research study conducted by the author with mentors and student teachers during preservice practicum blocks. During that project the author employed a research assistant to accompany her during interviews and to transcribe the interviews. In this paper one context-specific case is used to examine the “responses” that she and her assistant presented following the interview. The paper examines extracts from one interview presenting an analysis of that extract in two parts. In the first, the ‘factual’ information that is possible to identify from the transcript is presented. In the second what is determined as the emotional response of the researchers to that extract is discussed. The author reflects on the role of the emotional response of researchers as they move from the closed space of the interview room to the larger public space of debate and discussion on issues, in this case, of the communities of practice into which preservice teachers are introduced.

Introduction

In 2003, the author was successful in gaining a university grant for a research project focussing on mentoring and the preservice practicum. A research assistant was hired to conduct some of the interviews and to transcribe the tapes. While this is not an unusual practice in academic work, on reflection, the experience of a collegial approach to data collection raises the question of the effect that this approach has on the interpretation of the data, and therefore the outcomes of the research.

Specifically, the intention of the study was to document the nature of the relationships that developed between mentors and their student teachers during a block practicum and to identify the extent to which these relationships constitute communities of professional practice. As a teacher educator the author is aware of the integral role of professional practice in influencing students' development towards becoming

teachers. Studies dealing with the relationship between experienced teachers (mentors) and preservice teachers identify the significance of the specific professional practice setting and the life experiences of the experienced teachers. These provide preservice teachers with an awareness of the professional community, and a sense of identity as a teacher. Wenger (1998) defined community as “the social configuration in which our enterprises are defined as worth pursuing and our participation is recognisable as competence”(p.5). Each community of practice has its own routines, rituals, artefacts and symbols, stories and histories. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992, 464), describe it as “ways of doing, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations – in short practices – [that] emerge from ...mutual endeavour”. As Little (2002) summarises, research has “steadily converged on claims that professional community is an important contributor to instructional improvement...” (p. 917).

The perspective of ‘community of practice’ provided the framework for the author to analyse the experiences of mentors and their preservice students in terms of the development of professional identity. As such the study focused on the ‘situatedness’ of learning to become a teacher. The research assistant, Linda, was an experienced teacher who no longer taught full time in schools. However she continued to do some teaching as a “supply” or contract teacher. She was also undertaking postgraduate studies, and was a tutor in the practicum course that the author convened. As a result of her work with me in the practicum course, Linda and I had become friends. Linda’s suitability for this project as a research assistant was linked to her currency with schools and with her postgraduate studies.

The study

The overall research design was a qualitative case study in which the main sources of data were unstructured interviews with mentors and student teachers before and after the practicum block of three weeks. The schools were approached on the basis of their involvement in the Faculty's preservice practicum programs. For each site, separate interviews were conducted with the mentors and the students, pre and post practicum. Before we began the study, Linda was fully informed by me of the study and of the procedures that had been agreed to in order to fulfil ethical requirements for both the university and the schools' employment body.

We agreed that for the first school visits to interview mentors that both of us would attend. In that way consistency of approach to the interview would be understood in the event that only one of us would conduct later interviews. Linda proved to be a valuable partner in the project interviews, as she worked with me to document the school context and the experiences of mentors and student teachers of the practicum. We shared our reactions to the experiences of the research practices as the project progressed.

In this paper, one site is used to examine how researchers' lived experiences of the interview process will affect their thoughts and responses to the data. The first interview provided data about the understandings of their role held by two participating mentors. While aware of our "outsider" status as university based researchers, we did present our selves as seeking to involve them as 'working with us' rather than us researching 'on them'. We approached them as fellow teacher educators in their role as school based mentors. As a result of the researchers'

experiences as teacher educators, we considered ourselves to be part of what Lave and Wenger (1991) describe as a “tangential and overlapping” other community of practice to that of the mentors’.

For the purpose of this paper, it is proposed that the particular combination of the study’s theoretical framework (community of practice), teacher mentor ‘team’, and researcher ‘team’, created a research environment that contributed some strong emotional responses on the part of both researchers and participants. For us the question of how our own presuppositions about mentoring and professionalism would influence the interpretations of the transcribed interviews became important. The gathering of data as a team facilitated the sharing of an emotional response to the interview experience. As a result the influence of this as the analysis of the transcriptions progressed needed to be considered. The way we respond to our fellow human beings in our inquiry projects depends heavily on the way we conceptualise them in our theoretical formulations (Larson, 1997).

The context

The limited time in which this funded project was to be completed did not include opportunities to build close links with the participating teachers in schools. However schools and teachers involved were chosen from those in which our Faculty’s student teachers were regularly supervised, thus there was a professional relationship there. To facilitate the involvement of the teachers and student teachers, we assured them that the project would not demand too much more of their time already spent in their teacher education capacity, and that the gathering of data would be closely aligned with that work.

To examine the role of the emotional response of researchers as they collaborate in collecting data, an interview with two mentor teachers just prior to a three-week practicum is used. These two mentors worked as a team in planning their Year 6 classes. Linda and I interviewed them as a 'team'- this was their preference, and not our original intention. This context is important in terms of our post interview reactions. Sally, in her early thirties, had twelve years experience across four schools. She had the added responsibility in the school of 'key maths teacher'. This was the first year that Sally had been asked to take on a Year 6 class –in the past she had been teaching classes in lower primary. This was important to the type of relationship that had developed between her and her colleague. The colleague, Kathy, was in her late twenties, with nine years experience. She had only taught in this one school. She was teaching the other Year 6 class. Upper primary had always been her area. By the time of the interview they had already met their preservice teachers. The students had visited them for one day a week for five weeks prior to the practicum. Both preservice teachers had not begun their degree as school leavers – one was in her mid thirties, the other in her mid forties. This is a feature of the context that emerged our post interview reactions.

Originally we had asked that we interview as a group all the mentors that were involved in our study at the school (four in all). On arriving at the school we were told by the Deputy Principal that to accommodate teaching commitments, that each mentor had been set a separate time to see us except for two who would prefer to be interviewed together. As researchers seeking to examine teachers' work, this is one of many realities of organization.

Thus the context is a specific one and relevant to the purpose of this paper - a collaborative team of two researchers interviewing a collaborative team of two teachers. In the immediate moment of 'doing the research' this reality was not something we as researchers connected as significant to our data collection. However it became essential to explicitly examine as we began to transcribe and analyse the transcripts. In those stages of the study, the dynamics of the interview became obvious. There were moments where one of the mentors would be speaking directly to Linda, while the other would be directing her comments to me. As a result some of the tape was not possible to transcribe as two conversations were overlapping and only one would dominate clearly. However what we realised in our analysis of these transcriptions was what we had done in the hours immediately following the interview. In our own debriefing we had discussed this dynamic of our individual conversations during the interview. At that point away from the interview room, we as researchers went beyond the transcribed data and added to the interpretation of the interview experience.

Such immediacy of sharing reactions to the experience of an interview is an event not possible for the lone researcher. Even though we had interviewed four teachers that morning, Kathy and Sally dominated our talk. Both of us kept personal notes following each interview – and these notes give evidence of the ways in which this first meeting drew emotional responses from both of us and that we concurred in this immediate analysis of the interview.

Experiencing the interview

From the interview transcription it was obvious that Sally and Kathy operated so closely that often one would complete the other's sentence or follow the cue of the

other in the information that was disclosed. The interview was planned as semi structured. What followed was a fairly intense session containing valuable insights into beliefs, attitudes held and actions taken by these two mentors, as the practicum was about to begin.

While there is not enough space to include all of the transcription of the first interview – it was approximately one hour in length - what follows are four extracts. In the analysis that follows each extract, I provide two ‘readings’. The first demonstrates the transcript as read only for ‘factual’ information about mentoring or about the work of teachers. In the second analysis I discuss how the researchers’ emotions immediately following the interview led them to interpret the experience in another way . These responses were a result of filtering what we had heard through our own personal ‘other’ experiences as teachers and teacher educators. I opened it with a question about what Sally and Kathy viewed as the most important qualities in an effective teacher.

Extract 1: first impressions

SALLY: I think, behaviour management is the main one.

RES 1: What year level will your student teacher be working with you in?

SALLY: Year 6.

...

SALLY: I think if they haven’t got the management then they can’t teach. And it’s fairly hard to get coming in as a student teacher because you’ve only got that short time and it’s hard to get to know the kids and also everyone has a different behaviour management style. I know myself that I joke around with the kids, but if she tries that, like I don’t do that at the start, you sort of build up your rapport with the kids so you can get to that stage and diffuse it with humour, but if she comes in and tries that straight away and tries to copy what I’m doing, she’s gonna fail. You know. And it’s also a personal thing that you have to develop over time yourself and so that you’re comfortable with how you do it and then all the risk(?) kids too, like there’s kids you can yell at all you want and you get nowhere and there’s other kids that you can sort of raise your voice a bit and they’ll sort of sit back and they’re fine, you know. So I think it’s fairly difficult and it’s not

one you can really get out of a textbook. You've got to be in the classroom to do it. ...

RES: So would you say when you have your student teacher, that's something that you make a priority to work with them on.

SALLY: I'd say so. And then probably the planning would come next. Because if you're not organized and you're not planning, then your teaching's not effective and you lose behaviour management anyway. Because, if you're not organized enough to keep the kids settled you know, and know where you're going and where they're going you know...

RES: And is the planning pretty tight. You know, how, when you say planning, I've seen a range of it across the range of teachers.

SALLY: The thing with us too is we cooperatively plan so it's very hard for our student teachers because well I know mine feels at the moment that I have to ask, I go and ask Kathy and check with her to see and she feels like I probably don't know as much as I should. Whereas that's not the case we need to keep it tight because we do the same pages at the same time and the kids are doing basically the same thing even though we have the doors closed. But we actually plan together and run the same thing.

In the transcription of this first part of the interview most of the talk was clear - easy to transcribe and dominated by the mentor, Sally. In analysing the discourse here for the purpose of the project two things are clearly important in their relationship with their student teachers. Sally makes it clear that classroom control and tight planning are the top priority and that both are interrelated. These are not unusual expectations from mentors. Most of the literature examines the dominance of more technical aspects in the work of mentors with their student teachers.

Linda and I, in our shared reflections immediately after the interview, saw another element. We sensed that Sally perhaps felt insecure that her student teacher may have thought, "that I have to ask, I go and ask Kathy". As the interview progressed there were other aspects that emerged about the way in which this team were responding to their student teachers before they had observed them teach.

Extract 2: clear expectations

KATHY: At the beginning of term, Sal and I get together and we do a complete overview with all the outcomes and like our paperwork for the whole term, ...

SALLY: We have the term ready to go.

KATHY: Yea and then we have our day planning that we do which is pretty much planned before the term is up.

RES: And that's done jointly as well.

KATHY: Yea, so when we sit down and you know, I get to term two and say I want to do page twelve in the maths page and Sally says I've done that, well

SALLY: It doesn't work.

KATHY: And that's why we have ...(*indistinct*)

SALLY: So we need them to stick to what we want to

KATHY: Yea

SALLY: so that when we take back over, we're not out of whack and then we can't plan together and...(*indistinct*)

KATHY: Especially when there are only three days a week too (*I think this is what is being said as she was speaking at the same time as Sally*) we need to make sure that they're doing the same we've actually put it to them to cooperatively plan together as well. Not so much for the next prac

In this extract the researchers are told the way in which these two teachers work together. The talk becomes a little difficult to transcribe because at this point one mentor continued her point to Linda while the other was speaking to me. However it was clear that their planning was very detailed – to the extent that the same page of a textbook is completed at the same time in each separate class. They do not teach each other's classes though. They emphasised that cooperative planning would influence what their student teachers would be directed to teach. Their expectations are that the student teachers will also plan together to this same level of detail. The transcription indicated the world in which these two teachers might be described as one of mutual support and respect for one another.

In discussing the interview experience Linda and I found ourselves commenting on this phenomenon of such close planning. There seemed to us to be “no room for individualism”. We also expressed our belief that to team so closely required a mutual desire on the part of teachers. We considered that for Sally with her first experience of

a Year 6 class she was reliant on Kathy's support. As a result it seemed to us that regardless of personalities or individual difference, their student teachers would need to operate very closely. We both agreed that some problems lay ahead for the student teachers. In Linda's personal notes kept during the project she wrote of Sally and Kathy:

A power struggle with strong intentions of keeping student teachers in their places - not like being challenged – again the tapes will be interesting and just hope they are not designed to show these two as the all-knowing ones while stifling student teachers.

Extract 3: teacher beliefs

SALLY: We've both got mature age students too who think they know a bit more than they probably do. And they, I think they think it's going to be quite easy because the classes are so settled but once we let them at them. They're gone.

RES: Yes, once you're not out the front.

SALLY: I find that quite difficult when they're trying to tell you how much they know and how good they are and you're - I'm thinking you've got no idea. Even with the planning at the moment, I'm finding with mine, she wants us to spoon feed her a bit and she's feeling frustrated that we're not telling her a lot but she should be doing it.

RES: At this stage...

KATHY: We've given her our lesson plans. Like how many teachers give their students actual lesson plans to do?

SALLY: And yea she wants direction of where to go and get stuff and

KATHY: But by now, she should have the... she's not showing any initiative and to me see - I agree with Sally with behaviour management and then planning but first and foremost what I look for in someone is teacher presence. And I think teacher presence is the most vital thing 'cause once you've got that you can pretty much do anything.

RES: So can you explain what you mean?

KATHY: Well it comes into your planning and it comes into your behaviour management. A teacher has a presence and they've either got it or they don't. You can become a learned teacher but you still don't have that teacher presence and you can pick it straight away and when you come into. SALLY and I have got very demonstrative classrooms. Our kids, we love our kids heaps and they've got a lot of character and they're really, really nice children but there are a lot of borderline kids that could be absolutely rank if you let them go. But because we've got the teacher presence, we can just look at them and that's enough, they know what that means, yet these girls don't at this stage haven't really shown a lot of teacher presence which is fine 'cause that's something that you do learn and develop and it will be interesting to see, especially from a behaviour management side of it how they cope.

SALLY: I think teacher presence takes a while to get though even in yourself

KATHY: Yea it does

SALLY: like you've got to be teaching to get it, but I think the initiative, like you know Kathy's will sit on the seat and unless you tell her to get up, and do something, she won't do it, you know what I mean?

KATHY: And there's a deliberate thing 'cause ...

SALLY: I know it's an easy thing to do, like I can see that kid's off task a bit I'll just go stand behind them or just not sit in the seat.

KATHY: And that's part of teacher presence as well. You know

SALLY: I don't think you can get that behaviour management just being a teacher because they don't see that person as that and I know what you mean but I think that takes a lot longer to develop than just on your prac. But the initiative thing, you've either got that or you haven't like I'm here to work, and I'm here to get the job done, and what do you need done and the thing is too like ours have been turning up at like quarter to nine. We said we would never be on a prac at quarter to nine.

From this extract the mentors discuss the notion of “teacher presence” – Kathy’s words. This is not explained in detail but the description of what a teacher might do to demonstrate they have teacher presence emphasises that Sally believes it to be very important and yet something that does take more than just practicum experience to build. Kathy however suggests that some “they’ve either got it or they don’t”. A point is raised from Sally when she refers to initiative as possibly more important than ‘presence’ – to have a student teacher that takes control of the situation and is willing to work hard. She conceded that a student teacher can demonstrate this during a practicum whereas it might take a longer period of time to develop ‘presence’. In this extract the fact that these students are both of mature age is raised and Kathy and Sally feel that this factor makes them a bit too sure of themselves. This results in a view that they will learn the hard way that these children are going to be hard to control. Finally Kathy clearly states they care about their children and “like” them.

Our debriefing session following the interview identified that we had been given some insight into Kathy by her emphasis on “teacher presence” as core to being an effective teacher. For her it seemed to be about the way in which a teacher presented in class –

a certain style or dominance that a teacher had. Our reflections on this were that Kathy had made her “presence” strongly felt by us. She, we decided, was the dominant partner in the teaching team, and that we felt it would be difficult for any one to “disagree with her”. Another response we discussed was that we were concerned that these two mentors had decided that the student teachers would have difficulty with classroom management. Again we shared our views that Sally possibly felt insecure with having a student teacher during her first efforts with a year 6 class, even though she had 12 years teaching experience. We concurred that perhaps she actually hoped her student teacher would not be successful in managing the class because she herself struggled with them at times. Here it becomes clear the way in which we could influence the interpretation of the data. But it also started to become a concern about how might we report on our research, as we recognised that there were ethical issues to be considered in the publishing of our findings.

Extract 4: Conflicts and tensions

As the interview progressed further information was shared with us that told us of these teachers’ views about university preparation.

KATHY: ‘Cause even a friend of ours who is also a year 6 teacher, she said that the university basically had told her when she was there - she’s only been out three years now - and they told her at uni basically, ‘the teachers are old they are used to the old methods, we’re teaching you all the new stuff so you’re better than the teachers’. And she said - she actually came here for her internship - and she came with that air of arrogance thinking that she was so much better. And it wasn’t until she’s actually come out and realized that they shouldn’t be saying that and we feel that that’s what these girls have come in and Sally’s student has already said that she finds it irrelevant, what we’ve asked her to teach, and um

SALLY: wanted to change the whole thing and not do what we asked her to do ...she went to the Deputy Principal to go ‘no I don’t want to teach that’

KATHY: which is really awful ‘cause automatically I’m on her panel and I’m thinking S3...

SALLY: And now she's trying to suck up to Kathy because she knows that Kathy is

RES: Can I just take a step back? With the people that you've had, have they all given you that impression about the universities telling them that the school teachers are out of date or is it just are you assuming that they've

KATHY: mature age yea, the mature age ones seem to have

RES: interpreted the message as saying that?

KATHY: Yes - you'll be better. You are better 'cause you are better trained and you are newer trained yes, ... [the deputy Principal] put her right in her place and said well Kathy and Sally are two of our best outcome based planning teachers who I introduced it to the upper school, Alison introduced it to the lower school and she just went "Oh". 'Cause she thought that, because she even said "well the document was written nine years ago so it must be outdated" and

SALLY: I think too that they're more forward than we were.

KATHY: Oh yes.

SALLY: I've only had three student teachers, but this one will come up and say stuff to me that I wouldn't have said in a pink fit to some of my teachers. Like you just sit back and do your job, you work hard and hope you get a good mark. You know, you don't actually approach people and go " ...

KATHY: Like I said to mine I could tell you to do a twelve week unit on fleas. It's the outcomes that I'm looking for and it's the way you choose to teach it and your style. It's not the content I'm looking at and mine understands that, I think my girl, her planning will be exceptional I just worry about her teacher presence because she's a bit quiet and not really out there and the kids are used to me and they don't understand...

SALLY: You need to sell it. You can't just sit back and think they're just going to do it.

KATHY: That's right, that's right, yes.

SALLY: Wish it was like that.

KATHY: And it's funny 'cause we, at this stage, Sally and I have kinda said that we have held back from telling them certain things at the moment because a) they should have had the initiative to find out themselves and b) we want them to fall now

SALLY: Yea, because they think they know so much

As researchers in this study we were looking for the meanings that these mentors give to their work with inexperienced teachers. This extract provided us with a wealth of information. Certainly our position in universities as seen by these teachers was made very clear. There was a sense of "them" and "us". They had heard through colleagues and student teachers about views held by academics about the currency of knowledge held by schools and teachers. This affected the ways in which Sally and Kathy would

respond to the student teachers. There seemed to be a belief that learning to become a teacher involved finding out that they didn't have all the answers – that the university did not prepare them well for the realities.

Linda and I were affected by the perception that these mentors had of the university. It was clear that while our community of practice did overlap with the school's community – because of the teacher education component – it was not seen as a collaborative overlap in these teachers' explanation. Yet the Faculty viewed this school highly because it was so supportive taking a good number of both student teachers and interns. It was in fact for this reason that we had approached the school to be involved in the project.

A further issue that Linda and I discussed was the disapproval that was evident as a result of one student teacher asserting her views on the suitability of a particular topic she was asked to teach. Without having met the student teacher for her interview, Linda and I agreed that it was possible that her personality was affecting the relationship that Sally expected to have with her student teacher. Sally made it clear that her expectation of a student teacher was that “you just sit back and do your job, you work hard and hope you get a good mark”. Yet this to us contradicted her earlier claim that it was important for a student teacher to demonstrate “initiative”. The question for us became what is really meant when a mentor says that showing initiative is important?

Discussion

In this paper, the research team's discussions following the interview experience, could be described as a “sub-text” of the transcribed interview. This sub-text

contained references to issues of status, recognition, suspicion and frustration – not only about the teacher mentors but about us also. In this paper I suggest that even though we are constantly reminded in the literature of recognising the positioning of the researcher in qualitative research, in the immediate time frame of collecting the data, it can become ‘hidden’ because it is ‘understood’ by others in the field of qualitative inquiry. The danger then becomes a lack of explicit acknowledgement as we revisit the data to interpret and represent the lived experience of our participants.

What were our emotional responses? We wanted ‘status’ and recognition: we considered our selves to be part of mentor teachers’ communities of practice, (that “tangential and overlapping” other community that Lave and Wenger (1991) raise). We were ex- teachers and had a lot to do with schools because of our roles in supervising the practicum. In this interview ‘lecturers’ were criticised because they led student teachers to believe that those teaching in schools currently were ‘out of date’.

After the interview we responded generally in a defensive way. We supported each other’s assessment of the teachers – their style and their pattern of support. We gave ourselves the ‘authority’ to pass judgement on them. We defended the student teachers, in their absence - and in the absence of their mentors – becoming protective of them, as we discussed with each other our concerns about their future success with these mentors. Finally, while we acknowledged that these two mentors took their roles seriously, we were frustrated by the contradictions we perceived in their talk about expectations of their preservice teachers: in particular, showing initiative but doing so in the bounds of conformity.

Context is very important to acknowledge in research. Sites of research must be acknowledged in terms of the impact of context on the research practice. The particular combination of our study's theoretical framework (community of practice), these particular interviewees as a 'teaching team', and the interview having two researchers present, created a research environment that 'encouraged' an emotional responses of the researchers.

In our responses to the experience of the interview we conceptualised our participants. Sally we decided was insecure in her role as a year 6 teacher; and this was exacerbated by the fact that she had a mature aged student. The style of supervision we conceptualised as being very directive and technical (Ballyntine et al., 1995). We decided that Kathy was the dominant team member. The school was a highly structured environment and so were the classes of these two mentors. These two teachers had conceptualised all lecturers at the university as misleading student teachers to believe that most experienced teachers were 'out of date'. As a result of all of this, we shared concerns about how well the student teachers could perform in this environment. As Larson (1997) reminds us, the way we conceptualise the human beings in our theoretical formulations will strongly influence our interpretations of our research.

As educational researchers, we choose qualitative methodologies because they respond to the complexities of school life and acknowledge that emotions are at the core of quality educational research. Researchers can approach transcripts simply as

representing a text waiting to be analysed. However to the interviewees those transcripts are much more than text. They are lived experiences.

In this paper I have begun to re-examine the interview from the lived experience of the researcher also. I have considered the added complexity when more than one researcher is involved in that lived experience of data collection through interview. There is also an obligation to acknowledge this dynamic when interpreting the interview transcript. Goleman (1995) when discussing the characteristics of participants in educational change refers to “emotional intelligence”: “ the capacity not only to be aware of and able to express our emotions but to manage and moderate them effectively too” (cited in Hargreaves, 1997, p.14). Much of what we do as educational researchers is in the hope of influencing change in education. For that reason it is also important for researchers as they analyse data, to articulate their responses. However we need to consider how does this approach affect our decisions about sharing the research in the public domain?

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