

Sharing intimate moments:

Relationships of rapport and respect

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Abstract

Is it desirable for a teacher to be unable to identify self as such? Is it appropriate to be set apart in the school community because of race? Is it good practice to deny access to community? Should we continue to do the things-we-have-always-been-doing without regard for sharing workplace knowledge with newcomers?

Such questions often besiege immigrant teachers who enter new communities in Victorian schools where they are exposed to unfamiliar codes of practice and educational philosophies. Their construction of self as professional is disqualified in their new situation and they face a quandary as to how they must (re)construct their identity and re-establish their professional standing (Kostogriz & Peeler, 2004). Speaking intimately of such occurrences requires trust and rapport as generally, one's intimate thoughts are concealed from all but a privileged few. To explore the social world of another the social researcher is bound by research ethics, must revere confidences imbued in her and under no circumstances initiate stress. The ideal relationship is bonded by mutual trust wherein privacy is respected at all costs. This paper explores the relationship between a researcher and a group of immigrant teachers. It shows how trust evolved and initiated the teachers sharing intimate stories.

Introduction

Perceptions of being a teacher and understanding what teachers do are culturally defined and differ according to a person's traditional understanding. Constructions of self as a teacher also differ. Immigrant teachers who access employment in the educational culture of schooling in Victoria, Australia, must come to terms with the philosophies and practices in this new environment. They must bridge disparity between traditional pasts and the unfamiliar present as they attempt to understand new roles and relationships with students, other teachers and broader communities. The processes involved in transferring traditional knowledge and (re)constructing self as a teacher are not straightforward, nor is it easy to gauge the impact of change. Changing culture causes social, personal and professional dilemmas for those who attempt to develop new knowledge, acquire appropriate skills and strive to identify themselves as professional in their new situations.

In this paper I draw on my doctoral study in which I explored issues facing immigrant teachers who attempted to establish themselves as professional in the educational culture of schools in Victoria, Australia. Eight immigrant women teachers participated in a series of three conversational interviews held over a twelve-month period to elicit stories and explore the teachers' experiences. The teachers' stories were of a personal nature that portrayed numerous difficulties encountered in classrooms and other communal sectors of their schools. The relationships of trust that developed between the teachers and me were fundamental to understanding the challenges they faced.

Socially significant self -stories

The participating teachers and I are a disparate group. I am a middle aged Anglo-Celtic grandmother whose career spans several decades and specialisations in teaching primary and English as another language in schools and university situations. Similarly, the teachers are diverse in background, experience and teaching areas. In this way they provide a holistic insight into problems facing not only this micro community of immigrant teachers but also others in broader educational contexts. Each teacher's case is unique, hence her personal culture-specific outlook of traditions and events become a socio-cultural record (LeCompte, 2000; Stake, 2000) that open a forum for social analysis (Goodson, 1995).

	County of origin	Date of arrival	Teaching area
Shruti	India	2001	TESOL; Business Studies
Akiko	Japan	2000	Japanese LOTE
Aya	Japan	1998	Japanese LOTE
Young Mi	Korea	1997	Korean LOTE
Sakura	Japan	1995	Japanese LOTE
Nina	Armenia	1994	Mathematics
Melati	Indonesia	1988	Indonesian LOTE
Kim	Vietnam	1981	TESOL; Mathematics Information Technology
Eleanor	Australia	Australian born	Primary; TESOL

Recording immigrant teachers' encounters of change following their arrival is an important aspect of social history. Since World War 2 Australia's cultural identity has shifted from Anglo-Celtic predominance to become multicultural. To align with the diverse cultural makeup of school communities in Victoria, the multicultural policy for schools 'promotes respect for all cultures by all cultures' and 'allows Australians freedom to maintain and celebrate their languages and cultures within a socially cohesive framework of shared values' (DOE, 1997 p. 8). It purports commitment to 'the development of an education system in which awareness and appreciation of cultural and linguistic pluralism become accepted, normal aspects of schooling, including the employment, utilisation and development of staff from diverse ethnic backgrounds' (p. 7). Ostensibly, the policy proposes a 'viable course between the unacceptable extremes of racism and prejudice, and the equally blind ethnocentrism of separate development' (p. 4). However, the teachers who

participated in this study suggest this is not so. For instance, Sakura was confused by the ideals of multicultural Australia and the stark realities she found.

Australia is amazing place ...
multiculture policy was introduced ...
fortunately that multicultural things at schools
community, everywhere, I saw that was really good things ...
but when I stay longer sometimes it's totally divided (Sakura).

Sakura shared the utopian dream set out in the multicultural policy. Such a community 'would value diverse experiences of all teachers and see them as a resource rather than a liability'; such a community would be 'an ecological co-existence of differences' where Sakura and others like her could 'navigate and negotiate their workplace spatiality effectively and positively' (Kostogriz & Peeler, 2004, p.15). Unfortunately, as Sakura realised, the utopian community was not a reality. Like others, she found pressures to adjust to the local educational culture were common in communities where innate practices remained unshared and restricted her access to knowledge. Coercion to conform to 'taken-for-granted practices' by longer-serving staff disempowered the immigrant newcomers and appeared to disqualify their professional stance (Kostogriz & Peeler, 2004).

Hearing other's voices

The conversational interviews conducted in coffee shop venues yielded rich narratives that resembled Denzin's (1997) account of self-stories being descriptive, sensitive and emotive. The stories suggested a sense of loss, of families and lifestyles left behind, and tension between past understandings and present realities.

The narratives became a rich tapestry formed of fragments that depicted selected episodes of their school experiences and revealed the significance of relationships with others. Similarly their relationships with me were important, as my ability to elicit in-depth description and richness of data hinged on establishing and maintaining rapport. The stories the teachers shared were like a series of windows on everyday life and the social realities within particular social, historic and political eras (Denzin, 1997) of their individual migrations and educational history. For instance, Kim's story spread over a period of twenty years while Shruti's was just over twelve months. Although the teachers' histories differed, their stories were located in the present. As stories were told, speaker and listener shared intimate physical and social spaces where, 'together, we create[d] a historical situation, a social structure, [and] a moment of experience (Denzin, 1997:39). According to Clifford (1986), the nature of our relationship determines what is told or withheld. In other words, the relationship I developed had the capacity for teachers to include or exclude selected episodes. I was responsible to listen to the spoken words as well as the silences as

Inner and outer dialogues merge, interact, and inform one another. Punctuated by silences, dramatic pauses, and gestures, these two dialogical orders are the said and the unsaid, the heard and the unheard of everyday life (Denzin, 1997, pp. 38, 39).

The teachers' stories were an ongoing process of self-definition (Goodson, 1998) that embodied 'partial and selective consciousness of subjective story building and self building' (Stake, 2000:442). Classrooms stories located behind closed doors could conceal difficulties and failures, while stories shared in communal spaces had the capacity to mingle reality with fictionalised truth (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996). While the personal disclosures could reveal problems that awakened others to individual perspectives (Janesick, 2000) they could also uncover conditions that others may prefer to silence (LeCompte, 2000). From my perspective, as I crafted the oral performances of our conversations into the form of written text, the stories created a new world of understanding (Denzin, 1997). As I later replayed the tape-recorded conversations to transcribe or analyse the texts, I sometimes laughed with the teachers and at other times cried. In the shared process of telling stories I had become '[t]he reader [who] comes to know some things told, as if [I] had experienced it' (Stake, 2000 p. 442). However, stories retold in such 'dynamic interaction' (Borland, 1995) could take a different perspective or be skewed by my interpretation, so I attempted to maintain the speaker's intent (Denzin, 1997).

Talking to teachers: teachers telling stories

Ethics of interaction

The unpredictability of interactions between strangers (Denzin, 1997) was initially a major concern. There were times when I queried my interview technique and realised this could impinge on my ability to elicit the privileged information I sought (Densombe, 1998). The potential to disturb teachers by unveiling sensitive issues, such as marginality, tenure, workplace culture and racism during face-to-face interviews was another concern (Casimir, Mattox, Hays, & Vasquez, 2000). Consequently, I was continually aware of my accountability; the need to offer respect (Errante, 2000), to be tactful and modest, avoid embarrassment or cause loss of face (Berg, 1995). The teachers were vulnerable and it was my responsibility to protect them (Errante, 2000) by sustaining a sensitive relationship, developing and maintain rapport (Johnson, 1992) and presenting a neutral image (Densombe, 1998). I should seek clarity, correction and amplification (Berg, 1995), establish equity in our relationship, minimise communication barriers and allay any form of discomfort (Seiber, 1993).

Listening to stories

Conversational interviews were the primary source of data, although personal records and emails added other dimensions. I recognised that one-to-one relationships would encourage rapport and empathy (Berg, 1995; Stake, 2000) and that in-depth nature of semi-structured interviews facilitated access to privileged information (Densombe, 1998). During the interviews I kept my voice to a minimum (Errante, 2000) to optimise the teachers' reflections. The first interview was influenced by Casey's (1993) sweeping open-ended question, 'Tell me the story of your life' (p. 17). Such 'watershed questions' unlock a stream of memory and release 'a moment of flow' (Errante, 2000 p. 19).

The interviews were 'a mixture of participant observation and almost casual chatting with notes taken' (Plumber, 1983, cited in Creswell, 1988 p. 95). Denzin (1997) suggests that in such relationships the researcher should enter the others' world to decipher its meaning. The coffee chat venue helped develop relationships of trust, and privileged me with insider status to intimate experiences. Such interviews do not have a neat closure (Casey, 1993) and on each occasion I concluded by inviting questions from the teachers. In this way, my relationship with the teachers was also open-ended as they were free to contact me to have a chat, seek clarification or withdraw data.

Stories shared

Several factors influenced my decision to include a focus group in the study. While 'the individual interview dislocates the person from her social context' (Wilkinson, 1998 p. 111), a group situation can 'inform us about the co-construction of realities between people [and] the dynamic negotiation of meaning in context' (p. 112). Kosny (2003) argues that in one-to-one interviews participants lack the 'benefit of hearing the story of the other participants' (p. 139). Furthermore, members of focus groups support each other and their 'shared agreement about one issue may encourage a participant to speak about that issue and share things that she would not normally share' (p. 143). Expressions of agreement from others may signify broader issues than the personal plane, thus indicate difficulties that lie within 'the system' (Wilkinson, 1998; Kosny, 2003). Notes from my diary record the atmosphere during the focus group.

The focus group ran for two hours. The interaction between the teachers was amicable and there seemed a warm ambience throughout the room. Apart from taking notes my role was minimal as I observed the vibrant discussion.

A positive outcome was the rapport and warmth shared among the teachers. They realised their experiences were not isolated, nor were they alone in facing problems of gaining acceptance into their communities. They found comfort knowing that other immigrant teachers similarly experienced tensions between belonging and not belonging. As suggested by Kosny (2003), they benefited from hearing other teachers' stories and realised others shared similar problems. This helped them find a space of belonging, albeit to the small group present, and to reconstruct self in a positive light in the teaching profession. The focus group provided the teachers a forum for sharing difficult encounters and doubts as well as their achievements.

Story fragments: A tapestry of tales

Shruti, Aya and Young Mi were three of the participating teachers. The following story fragments reveal some of the tensions they encountered as they attempted to (re)construct their teacher identity. The emotive and insightful fragments also raise the following questions:

- Is it desirable for a teacher to be unable to identify self as such?
- Is it appropriate to be set apart in the school community because of race?
- Is it good practice to deny access to community?
- Should we continue to do-the-things-we-have-always-been-doing without regard for sharing workplace knowledge with newcomers?

Shruti's story

Shruti was well qualified with her Masters Degree, university rank¹ and extensive teaching experience in India and overseas. She taught according to 'my own experience as a student, from my appreciation of my teachers'. She was diligent, had a hard work ethic and 'an eye for detail'. Her satisfaction lay in establishing a good reputation and a responsible attitude to her students' learning.

Shruti's mastery of English equipped her to teach in various contexts and subject areas but she needed an approved qualification to teach in Victoria. She lamented having been 'invited, or, given permission' to come to Australia to satisfy the teacher shortage because she found that permanent work here was unavailable. Distinctions of employment status disturbed her, such as permanent staff's access to 'their own computers and larger work spaces'. Casuals thus 'view them with a certain aura'. Shruti believed Australia's multicultural environment was a mere façade; its policies of inclusion were unreal. She felt 'pushed aside' by 'a glass ceiling'; although 'you're good enough to work ... you're praised and you're wonderful ... but something keeps you from getting those positions that you covet'.

Aya's story

Aya's first appointment in Australia was 'just an assistant, not a teacher'. Unlike previous assistants, rather than stay in the office during lesson breaks, she ventured into the staffroom. Although she 'didn't chat' with other teachers this was an achievement and she felt 'comfortable sitting there and smiling'. Although Aya was qualified to teach in Japan she needed to qualify to teach in Australia. Her decision to attend university stressed relationships with Japanese LOTE colleagues; one was English speaking but she 'only studied Japanese at university or somewhere, for a year'. The other was 'Japanese Japanese ... [but she] hasn't done Dip Ed'.

Aya found the transition from assistant to teacher difficult to manage. 'I wanted to be friendly ... I didn't know how I can keep a good relationship but discipline as well'. Initially, she felt confident in her first teaching appointment but 'being by myself in class I really couldn't teach at all'.

I just couldn't do any enjoyable things ...
I couldn't get their attention ...
I felt like there's this glass or wall in front of me
and I almost cried in the class
I cried a lot after the class (laugh) ...
I felt like I was rejected.

Young Mi's story

Young Mi recalled teaching in Korea as a safe job where 'everybody respect teacher'. Despite long hours and high university entry scores people strive to become teachers. Young Mi enjoyed teaching secondary students in Korea, 'I have no problem' but teaching in a Victorian country school was 'quite difficult, it's more tough, tougher'. She soon began to doubt her teaching ability and despite having attained local qualifications and completing a positive practicum, she felt her 'first time to teach as a teacher was like facing a wall'. Young Mi explained the school is in 'an Anglican² dominant area' so teaching here exposed her to 'that kind of culture ... Australian students' attitude' and 'classroom environment'. She believed that Korean LOTE was the 'lowest interesting subject' and students 'don't listen to me, [they] don't follow my instructions ... they just folding paper then throw away to their colleagues'.

¹ The rank Shruti speaks of is similar to a qualification to teach at university. The recognition a rank offers is highly sought after.

² Young Mi used the word Anglican to refer to the Anglo-Celtic community

Young Mi was unfamiliar with the informal language used in the school and upset with colleagues' impatience and inclination to quit when they do not understand when she spoke to them. She found that teachers in her school community formed 'two groups, quite distinguishable ... downstairs, usually old teacher ... upstairs, usually young teachers chat together' but both caused her discomfort. Some teachers were very kind, some very strict; 'they treated me as a child'. Others ignored her; 'I just say hello ... but they didn't even be polite, respond to my hello (laugh)'. Young Mi believed the teachers were 'watching me, then they assess me, instead of helping me'. One teacher 'always complained about my class' and took it upon herself to attend Young Mi's class. She sat at the back and 'did her [own] work' while Young Mi attempted to teach her lesson.

Stories told to me

My intent was to hear the teachers' voices. Using their own words to tell their stories I attempted to share the realities of their lived experiences in schools. In their stories the teachers talked of being othered, in relation to people and also to places. Classrooms as a site of seclusion (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996) could be havens or sites of conflict. Aya and Young Mi suggested they were akin to battlegrounds when students tackled teachers' authority and integrity. Student power manifested command that disempowered them and caused them to lose control, lose their language, their ability to teach and their self-esteem. Young Mi used the glass wall to describe the feeling of detachment from their students when she was unable to teach or engage with the class.

During the second interview the teachers talked about the research experience and expressed its personal worth. Taking part helped them recall where they had come from and think about where they were going.

Shruti felt

so pampered
just giving me the opportunity without shutting me up ...
it was also therapeutic (Shruti)

Aya commented

we don't really spend time to stop
and think about it
we just have to keep going ...
and then we have to finish
and then we have to start another year
it's very good to think back about what I did (Aya).

Although the teachers and I developed comfortable relationships, there were times when they expressed uncertainty about the worth of their contributions. Nina, a teacher from Armenia who teaches advanced Mathematics to international students, was apprehensive in her reflection on the value of her narratives.

I found I'm not very helpful
this is not what Eleanor needs ...
it made me feel just a little bit guilty too (nervous laugh)
this is not what she needs
I'm not prepared well
I'm not sure why this is happening
but hopefully you will gain something out of all this (Nina).

In my journal I stressed how our relationship had developed since we first met.

Nina had more to say than she needed. Some parts became more conversational rather than following a strict interview format. I really think this relaxes people and we share thoughts. It becomes a two-way process ... usually Nina rushes off but today we seemed to go on talking in a relaxed manner.

The teachers considered the focus group a positive experience. Shruti recalled

it was fantastic
I mean everybody was so receptive and understanding
and I actually got a lot from those ...
I used it as a sounding board and other people
to take stock and look at myself
and why I am being so bitter ...
it did help me to take a bird's eye view of my own situation (Shruti).

Nina believed

it gives you a sense of satisfaction
that what you do and what you're going through
difficulties and probably enjoyment
it's the same things felt by other teachers too
so you're in a way quite normal
those experiences that you have is quite normal
it's not you, it's the circumstances you are in
so if someone who is able to overcome them
it will be a comfort too (Nina).

Matters of caution

I delighted in the compliments the teachers offered; however, the comments also revealed some shadows of doubt. Nina expressed concern that her comments may not be helpful.

what I'm going to talk about
I feel like I'm having an interview with a doctor (Nina).

Furthermore, Nina considered that taking part in this research, telling her story and expressing her ideas was culturally unfamiliar to talk to a stranger.

exposing your personal experiences ...
to talk to a complete stranger
a total stranger about me, myself
my teaching self' (Nina).

Akiko, another participating teacher, raised concern as to whether the research, and my role in it, attained appropriate responses.

I feel as if we've developed a relationship
and we communicate
but we may be miscommunicating (Akiko).

In response to these issues I re-thought my position and responsibilities. While I placed emphasis on relationships between the teachers and myself, I should also ascertain the teachers' understanding. Although I gave a clear explanation at the onset, a longitudinal study such as this, required clear explanations at each stage to ensure the participants understood the research processes as well its progress.

Another issue that caused occasional concern was my interview technique. I felt it was sometimes difficult to ask probing questions. Following my first interview with Shruti I reflected,
some awkward spots ... when I was uncertain how to lead on to a new question but it was generally good.

I had been unnerved when Shruti took control of the conversation to ensure I had the facts straight and made certain we (she and I) had covered all aspects addressed on the interview guide. The guide helped me maintain focus and gave the teachers an indication of the type of questions I would ask. On another occasion I wrote,

It took all my energy to keep the interview going. At times I felt uncomfortable and later questioned my technique.

Although I had practiced the interview in my mind during the 1-hour drive to the other side of Melbourne I was surprised by my awkwardness. There were occasions during the transcribing process when I questioned my interview skills; despite the teachers' meaningful responses, my questions seemed shallow. Yet, looking back now that my thesis is bound and placed upon my shelf, I feel that the insecurities may be related to the sensitivities involved in the interactions.

The focus group was difficult to manage to ensure that all teachers had the opportunity to respond. The teachers suggested they found it empowering but I felt quite out of control. The interview guide on this occasion was not useful as one teacher's response initiated another to reply. On reflection, I found the focus group provided a rich source of data and as Kosny (2003) claims, proved to offer social support to the teachers. Since coming to terms with the richness of data sourced from a focus group I recommend others consider their benefits when several participants are involved. I also suggest they are aware of focus group dynamics and understand their role is not to intervene but ensure that all participants have the chance to contribute.

Concluding thoughts

The role of relationships was a fundamental aspect of exploring teachers' lives and their journeys of (re)construction of self. Gee's (2000/2001) notion of affinities was significant during the interviews, as success hinged in developing positive relationships. The nature of the privileged information (Densombe, 1998), the sensitive issues raised (Casimir *et al.*, 2000) and the possibility of embarrassment (Berg, 1995) were always a concern; however, as Johnson (1992) claimed, my awareness of their sensitivity and vulnerability helped me develop and sustain a sensitive relationship with the teachers. Consequently, data revealed somewhat shocking stories of incidents involving immigrant teachers in today's schools. The utopian ideals of equity in a socially compatible community (Kostogriz & Peeler, 2004) are often an idealised dream and hence a major concern in Victoria's multicultural schools and classrooms.

Awareness of these issues is raised and I argue that the relationship that developed between the teachers and me facilitated them telling such intimate stories and talking honestly about the problems they faced. I draw on the words of Shruti who recalled our first meeting when she approached me to participate in the research. While she spoke of the rapport she and I developed, I like to think this is typical of my relationship with the other teachers too.

I was just taken to you from the minute I saw you
I never thought you were a stranger (Shruti).

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