"Surviving in the school… and further on…"

Emma Richardson
RIC-EDU / Monash University

Introduction

In this paper, three individual case studies are presented. These draw from the third and final interviews with three participants in a Masters Research study - held at the end of the participants' second year of teaching.

All had experienced challenging workplace contexts but had remained in the same workplaces for two years. In this study, these contexts influenced the level of their professional learning. The beginning teachers described phases of professional development such as the initial *threshold* and *growing into the profession* (Vonk, 1989), with crucial aspects of these phases being when they felt like they had gained increased acceptance from pupils and colleagues and when they realised they were "focus(ing) their attention on the improvement of skills, methods and competencies." (Assuncao Flores & Day, 2006):220

Whilst they were heavily influenced by their teaching contexts, the teachers were also actively engaging in the professional learning process by participating in the Masters project. Over the course of the two year period, a rapport was established with participants who openly shared sensitive information. Perhaps strengthening this was the fact that I too was early in my career and was seen as someone not displaced from these experiences. Furthermore, all participants were aware of my continued involvement with government policy development and implementation for early career teachers. This work with the Victorian Institute of Teaching has led me to have contact with hundreds of beginning teachers and their mentors each year since 2005. The interviews in this project were often influenced by these extra experiences and high level of contact with beginning teachers and those supporting them.

The fact that these teachers' experiences ended up becoming structured around my own journey is of some significance. The research began with expectations of a greater understanding of effective induction and the effect of government imposed standards. But the project led to more interesting dimensions which were about teacher practice, collaboration and particularly the issues surrounding the construction of teacher identity, perceptions and expectations of teaching and a career.

These teachers struggled with who they were as teachers. Perhaps this was their motivation for participating in this project. They sought to construct this knowledge in these interviews (Mishler, 1986), which gave a snapshot of their career stories on this occasion, time and place (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000): 110. Clear were the links between their "selves" and the institutions they were working in.

Three clear characters unfolded as the project progressed. There was Marcia, exhibiting confidence yet unsure of her new role. Elise was the socially alienated young teacher who struggled to grasp taking on the professional role of a teacher. Finally, Cathryn was a slightly older entrant to the profession who recognised the institutional discourses, and yet at times she still found it difficult to find her place.

Marcia – "Surviving in the school and further on..."

Marcia gained her teaching position during her final year of teacher education studies. She went into her new role in her first year with some confidence because she had a secure position, an observation supported by literature (Piggot-Irvine, Aitken, Ritchie, Ferguson, & McGrath, 2009). Her optimism was perhaps unrealistic (Pajares, 1992), with Marcia finding many aspects of teaching complex. She was an ambitious teacher who saw possibilities and opportunities, but also was critical of what she perceived as a lack of support by her school leadership.

In this, the final of our discussions, she talked about wanting more support and less asked of her. She sought more collaborative opportunities and resourcing for these (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2000). But a change in her focus was perhaps the most fascinating aspect of Marcia's development. At the end of her second year, she spent little time discussing her students and her teaching with most of her conversations directed towards how decisions were made and implemented in her school.

Marcia felt that she was not as concerned about her students' perceptions of her in her second year, nor did she question her skills in classroom management. This year, she had focussed more on curriculum.

> "I am not so worried about myself now. Am I doing this right? Am I ok? Are they going to think I am a fake? Have I proven myself to them? Will they learn anything?" (360)

This discussion continued and Marcia seemed to realise that her focus should be on how she needs to develop professionally as a teacher to support her students, that this development would result from a mix of personal and professional factors to help form a professional identity and the ability to construct professional practice and continue professional growth (Feiman-Nemser, 2001).

Marcia recognised that it was her approach that had changed. She explained that she no longer questioned herself constantly. External and personal influences were also credited with having some bearing on this change, such as recently moving out of home. She indicated that she had consciously made the decision that her "self" was not entirely determined by her job as a teacher. She also felt that she no longer had unrealistic expectations on what she could achieve, saying "You just realise that you can't be everything for everybody all the time" (366).

She was able to recognise that her understanding of how the school worked has "gone up a level" (184) since her first year. She contended that "knowing the limitations of your school and the context ..." (180) were an important facet of her teaching and professional development.

The interview was peppered with rhetoric and discourse that Marcia borrowed from her colleagues, such as "Everyone is dictated by timetabling" (150) and "..they have realised their mistakes" (152). Whilst these statements were linked to Marcia's frustrations with how decisions are made in her school, they are also important indications of how the school institution was having an effect on her language and of her changes in approach.

Marcia's school leadership and their management decisions were a focus of our discussion. She often expressed negative feelings about her leaders and how she felt she was fitting in with the school organisation. These references were made both in the school context as well as the effect on her personally, as she was grappling with feelings of disappointment because of a lack of encouragement or affirmation.

> *"We are having a really interesting time in our school at the moment 'cause everyone is leaving. We are losing our two AP's which will obviously shake things up a fair bit. They are both retiring and I think they probably switched off about 6 months ago, so it will be a good thing when they go." (20)*

There were a number of causes for Marcia's disillusionment with her school leadership. She directly experienced that "today's new teachers are encountering unprecedented demands" (Johnson, 2006):13. Marcia was required to provide assistance to a number of student teachers in her first two years of teaching, roles which she did not feel equipped for. Another demand was her role as coordinator of the Year 12 English course. She was resentful of this responsibility, pointing out that she had been required to "train up another teacher." (50). This finding supports work by (Achinstein & Athanases, 2006; A. McCormack, 2007), who contend that early career teachers often are required to undertake roles and responsibilities of an experienced teacher.

Whilst Marcia voiced resentment about the increased expectations of her, she also revealed that she has found some benefits in engaging in professional discussions with her student teacher.

> *"I certainly think that when you have got a student teacher with you, you are made and forced to reflect on your own teaching…she is another view too… "(34)*

But on other occasions, Marcia felt overwhelmed by what was required of her and particularly so in the situation where her coordination of Year 12 English became "yet another drain on me… (64)" with little reciprocal benefits.

One of the causes of her negative feelings about her school leadership was due to her feelings of not having a voice. Whilst "at the end of last year I actually voiced my concerns to the principal on two occasions" (52), there was little done to change the situation and Marcia was left feeling unheard and irrelevant. Adding to this were her experiences as part of a team of teachers sent to visit other schools to observe best practice. Their reports on the findings of these visits also appear to Marcia to have been ignored, with no implementation of their suggestions. This failure of the principal to meet the expectations of early career teachers is not uncommon (Johnson, 2006; Manuel, 2003).

Although at the end of her second year, Marcia was still grappling with many issues. Ambitious, she wanted successes to be recognised. Marcia was an example of Wunner's (1993) "great expectations" when she described how she was "always questioning myself and my ability" (154), something which she attributed to "so much change happening" (154) and "pressure upon myself" (156). She saw the opportunities presented to her as "a chance to do something rip-roaring" (156) and this translated into putting in many extra hours and effort.

But Marcia was frustrated by the lack of resources and the dilapidated environment, seeing these as limiting her ability to achieve her aims, not unlike other findings in induction experiences (Bubb, Earley, & Totterdell, 2005; Ann McCormack & Thomas, 2003).

"...broken chairs and ratty classroom...roof leaks and mould grow(ing)..." (102-104).

A source of encouragement for Marcia and a confidence boost was her Year 12 results at the end of her first year. This clearly was found to be supporting the assertion that "efficacy belief is a judgement of his or her capabilities to bring out desired outcomes of student engagement and learning... (related to) students outcomes" (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001):783.

As a teacher motivated by providing the best opportunities for student achievement, Marcia's concern over the state of her school was related to the link between improved student academic achievement and improved building condition (Fisher, 2001).

"when you have a classroom of 25 kids and you have no scissors and no glue, you can't really do much." (164)

Another area which Marcia was still finding difficult was negotiating collaborative relationships with other teachers. She repeatedly used the language of her wish for collegial support and in reference to this she discussed her school's program of coaching and team teaching. Marcia described how she defined these relationships in terms of what she could benefit from it – stating that the program "was lovely when I wanted (it)" (126).

Marcia's feelings of not being equal in these relationships she also articulated, explaining that "when teachers talk, experience is the factor that holds most weight." (Wunner, 1993):237. Her experience found that whilst joint classroom work is perhaps the most effective form of collaboration, it is also the most difficult (Chadbourne, 2004)'. Perhaps aspects of "principled resistance" (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006) were present,where the perceived deficiencies in the program caused Marcia and the other teachers to not engage with it fully.

Bissell (2004) and Siegel (1999) find a relationship between the working environment and collaboration, with it having "immediate and far reaching consequences for teachers ability to effectively and efficiently accomplish daily activities, the formation of social and professional relationships, and the sharing of information and knowledge." (Siegel, 1999:4).

Elise – the "more responsible, knowledgeable old cousin"

Elise was the youngest participant in the research project. Her first year of teaching had been extremely challenging, for not only did she have difficulty gaining employment but once a position was secured she was placed on a number of short term contracts. This required her to continually reapply for a job and subsequently was shuffled around the school, having to relocate her office space. This impacted on her ability to develop relationships with other staff members and with the student population. The concept of "place" as a significant dimension of teacher identity speaks to Elise's situation (Kerkham, 2007). Elise has since invested much in her current school location, moving house and living by herself in the school's outer suburb of Melbourne.

Elise's uncertainty about employment continued into the second year. At the time of interview, Elise's position was to be readvertised although she had not formally been notified of this by her employer. Her situation supports the findings that in order for effective induction to occur, reassurance for new graduates on limited contractual employment arrangements is required (Piggot-Irvine et al., 2009):187.

The discussions at the end of the second year reveal a teacher who has struggled to move from being a student to being a teacher, with complications surrounding her relationships with her students which have serious consequences. These have been the defining experiences of her second year. Elise has found it difficult to integrate into both the school as an institution and taking on her professional role, unable to find a professional place in the culture of the school (Hebert & Worthy, 2001).

> A: *Term Three, yeah mine was sort of complicated. But I'm not sure what had happened, I had some sort of falling out with some other people and they sort of made it a point to ostracize me. Fortunately they have stopped being so childish lately.*
>
> I: *But you don't know what caused it?*
>
> A: *There has been some innuendo about me and a year 12 boy. (2-8)*

As her explanation unfolded, Elise described how a student she had taught in her first year had sought her advice over personal problems. Her explanation was "because I am closer to their age and he wanted my advice not a 50 year olds' advice. So I was helping out with that…" (18). Whilst Elise stated that she wasn't guilty of having an inappropriate relationship with a student, she admitted that "… I could see where they were coming from; I can see that there were possibly some genuine concerns which I can validate… yeah…" (48)

Elise's personal situation had also deteriorated, with depression and family issues complicating her ability to cope. Later in the conversation she stated that it was this year that she had been diagnosed with panic disorder with a difficult day at work triggering an attack.

Elise often mentioned her age. She was critical of how she felt her appearance influenced others' perceptions of her, but yet she also seemed to rely on it as something which defined her.

> *"It's hard… I look younger than half of the Year 12s. Physically I look immature and so there are sort of assumptions can be made…" (38).*

When talking further about relationships with students, Elise explained that her approach in the classroom included "…discussion and jokes and I'll try to make pretty much everything that we do fun, whether it be through the way I present it, or tasks I give them or just my relations with the kids… I'm very relaxed with the kiddies" (128). She then immediately made a connection between her relaxed approach and "…where some of this other business came from." (128)

The presentation of this relaxed classroom persona was then counteracted with statements of her plans to be heavier handed in her third year. Elise's simplistic summary of her relationships with students and classroom management was not comparable to the more sophisticated analysis presented by the other two participants in the study. In this way, Elise is somewhat like a "bricoleur", engaged in "an interpretative salvage operation" Levi-Strauss, C. in (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000):153

A key factor for Elise which limited her being able to shift beyond coping and survival was linked to the culture of support she encountered (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). Elise refers to a couple of staff who she has been able to seek support from and describes the support as consisting of sending encouraging text messages to her during work hours and providing a should for her to cry on "sitting in my lounge room, trying to work my things out in my pyjamas and tear stained whilst drinking beer." (264). This experience demonstrates "emotional support is one of the strongest needs of beginning teachers" (Tickle, (1991) in (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2000) but also indicated that there was little professional support she was accessing. The only Elise cited was a fellow teacher in her office workspace, a relationship which based on shared experiences such as some difficult student behaviours in their classes and on a personal level, both having diagnosis for panic disorder.

Whilst Elise claims to have experienced some supportive professional relationships, she did not evidence them. She stated "…what I learnt most of, it's been from my self experiences rather than what anyone has told me." (240) This suggested that Elise was far from the seeking of collaborative opportunities to learn from other teachers which is attributed to this generation (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2000):51.

Elise believed that the greatest influence on her as a professional were due to the changes she'd made in her personal life.

> A: *"I am feeling more adult this year and I think that has impacted on the relationships, so I guess back on the old cousin analogy – I am more the knowledgeable, responsible older cousin." (214)*
> I: *So what do you think has changed, what has made you feel more adult? Is it more a confidence in the job?*
> A: *More of a self identity*
> I: *So more of a personal thing?*
> A: *Yeah, I think living on my own has sort of taught me about myself which has flowed on into my teaching. And also presenting at the conference. (214-218)*

But our discussion has a number of instances that highlight issues around Elise's professional judgement. One is her description of how she ignored her colleagues advice and came dressed up as Hitler to the final day of Yr 12. She argued that "All the kids that I've taught, they know that I'm strange and that it was intended esoterically. Not anything else" (234). Later, she returns to the topic of the Year 12 graduation and says "I was more excited than half the kids this morning I think." (336)

Elise also talked about an occasion she recognised as a lapse in judgement, when she was corresponding with a student using her personal email address. Whilst the situation was related to the students' school work, the emails became personal. Elise then realised how the situation had the potential to become a problem, so she advised the Student Welfare Coordinator of it.

Much later in our discussion, Elise shared her philosophy on whether voicing her opinions in her classes was appropriate "keeping in mind that I am the teacher and I don't want to be brainwashing" (344). Whilst she appeared to be cognisant of the potential influence she had over students, when asked whether she was ever questioned by her students about her opinions, she responded "Not really. Which is interesting I think. I don't know. Apparently I am knowledgeable." She appeared to draw a boost to her ego from the failure of her students to challenge any of her opinions, rather than to recognise that she may be influencing them.

At the end of this eventful interview, Elise concluded with a summary of where she felt she was at.

> *I'm still idealistic. Not as naive I don't think. I've dried up behind the ears by now.
> (400)*

Cathryn – "getting smarter (and) still learning..."

Cathryn was a 'career change' teacher, one of the increasing numbers entering the profession with a previous working background (Johnson, 2006). She chose to teach because she felt a 'calling' – often falling in roles of staff training in previous workplaces.

Like the other participants in this research project, her first year of teaching was challenging. But what defined Cathryn was her ability to separate her emotion when in the professional situation. She did not complain about extra curricula demands and workload and had less focus on school politics or the decision making processes within her school. Perhaps this was due to Cathryn's experience from other workplaces, equipped with skills to handle the complexities of the role.

Cathryn was also the only participant that explicitly discussed engaging in professional learning and participating in learning opportunities that supported the findings of research into learning communities and communities of practice (Achinstein, 2002; Chadbourne, 2004; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Riordan & Gaffney, 2001)

Cathryn talked enthusiastically about her roles of Competitions Coordinator and coaching the school debating team. In particular, she discussed the pleasure she got from vesting time and energy into the girls debating. This energy and enthusiasm was clearly evident to other staff as Cathryn laughing told of how she and another early career colleague were recently asked about the debating budget and how much they would need – being such visible forces in the school it was mistakenly assumed that they were coordinators.

Clearly interested in future opportunities for promotion, Cathryn had been excited at the end of her first year with indications from school leadership about steering her towards the 'Emerging Leaders' programs, but when we met at the end of her second year, these promises had not come to fruition. She expressed disappointment of this, but it was not a pressing concern for her as not only did she recognise there was plenty of time for promotion, but she was more open to exploring all opportunities rather than just focussing on one trajectory.

The opinions of her colleagues were also not issues which dominated much of her reflection. When questioned about whether she felt as though she was viewed by other staff still as a 'graduate', she replied "I don't know, it's weird. Sometimes I'm not. I am getting a student teacher in three weeks and I didn't expect that being only second year out…. Then other times I think, especially with reviews and stuff like that, you're back on with the 'brand new' type of thing." (36)

But Cathryn described another situation in which she was being made to feel very much like a 'graduate'. She and another early career staff member were being required present all their curriculum to their coordinator for review, with no other year levels in the faculty operating in this manner. Her frustration at not being given the licence to make her own professional decisions was clear. Even so, Cathryn was managing this situation with a calm and measured approach.

"I will just go with the flow. It's the best way to go with these things." (78)

A major aspect of what Cathryn described as her teaching "identity" was the perceptions about her held by students and the parent community. Continuing in the same workplace in her second year had been crucial to this. Cathryn believed that her reputation was as a hard marker with high expectations of students' work quality.

> *"...what is a real difference too (between first and second year) is because I have been here a whole year the kids know me as well and they know what to expect, and if they haven't had me, but their friends have and they know, that 'oh you can't do this or you can't do that' or 'yeah, you know, she will be okay with this' or the other thing." (80)*

Also interesting was the change Cathryn described in her own personal feelings about herself as a teacher. She talked about how "I think of myself more as a teacher when I am out and about. When I was on my holiday, I'll tell you, I went to bookshops and I found grammar books, and I thought 'Oh man, look at these grammar books!'" (198) This indicated a deeper level of self-belief and confidence.

Perhaps related to this sense of identity and confidence was the fact that Cathryn was the only participant in the study who seemed to be experiencing the collegial aspects of teaching. Whether due to being slightly older or her more mature approach, her relationships were described as more equal. Cathryn was also the only teacher who experienced a positive mentoring relationship in her first year of teaching and the only participant who advocated some benefits in the process required of all graduate teachers by the Victorian Institute of Teaching (Richardson, 2007).

Cathryn talked easily about working with other teachers to solve problems. When discussing some challenging students, she said "*We* come up with strategies" (88). She was comfortable to access professional support when she wanted to. "...if I did need, if I felt at a time that I really wanted to have a professional discussion I could easily go and see my Mentor or anyone in our staffroom and that would be quite easy." (208)

The mentoring relationship from her graduate year was continuing. She explicitly described this professional relationships as "even" (140) and not hierarchical.

> *"We just share stuff all the time. So it's pretty even, so it's nice." (142)*

Cathryn was "a learner" (198), with maturity influencing "the difference in learning from when I was 15 to now when I'm 30" (198).

Conclusion

These case studies illustrate three extremely different second year teachers, defined by their personalities, approaches and contexts. Marcia, Elise and Cathryn grapple with their ongoing development of a teacher identity, teacher knowledge and practice. They continue to be challenged by the demands of their jobs and the workloads, but the politics of the workplace and dealings with other staff are highlighted as the most predominant themes in these discussions.

Marcia's frustration with the school leadership is regularly vocalised and she perceives many of the decisions as having an impact on her continued development as a teacher. Whilst she grasps at every opportunity offered to her, she feels underappreciated and constantly cites a lack of support. For Elise, she floundered in a situation with no security of employment and with limited feelings of attachment to the staff body. Her difficulties in recognising professional limitations and making robust judgements are well illustrated. And Cathryn has clearly benefited from her other workplace experiences, appearing to coast through new experiences, slowly implementing more effective administration of teaching duties and hungrily digesting new learning and teaching approaches.

This project highlights the importance of continued support for graduate teacher beyond the first year of teaching. It shows how many continue to misunderstand the complex needs of beginning teachers, with the effect of leadership and their decisions most profound. Peer support is crucial, and assistance in developing effective collaborative and collegial relationships is required.

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