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Turning Into Teachers Before Our Eyes: The Development of Professional Identity Through Professional Dialogue

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Abstract: This paper examines the development of professional identity in early career teachers enrolled in an "add-on year" of an undergraduate teacher education degree. Through a series of readings focused on reflection and pedagogy, participants engaged in professional dialogue as they made connections between the themes in their professional readings and their own understanding of the professional practice of a teacher. Dialogue was recorded and shared on a developed website. Participation in this dialogue afforded teachers opportunities to reflect on their professional identity in connection with literature, personal experiences and experiences of others. Further, uploading audio files to the site created a sense of accountability among the teachers to 'have something to say', thereby contributing to the community. The authors argue that this use of professional dialogue in both the physical and virtual environment is a valuable approach for promoting reflective capacities and for the development of professional identity.

Introduction

This paper examines the role of professional dialogue in the development of professional identity in early career teachers undertaking a final year of study in the Faculty of Education at The University of Wollongong, Australia. It reports on interactions that occurred between the physical and virtual environments when discussions during tutorial workshops were captured as audio files and uploaded to a repository on the 'Beginning and Establishing Successful Teachers' (BEST) website. Specifically, we examine the professional dialogue that occurred between group members as they made connections between the findings in the literature, their own teaching experiences and the classroom teaching experiences of their peers. Each week, participants prepared for and engaged in professional dialogue related to a particular theme in the literature by discussing its key themes, connections to personal experiences

and subsequent implications for their professional identity. By creating audio files, the early career teachers were accountable for being prepared and for participation in the creation of the audio text. Further, uploading them to the BEST site afforded access to the experiences and opinions of those beyond their immediate setting and provided opportunity for reflection on their own discussion.

Literature

It is well recognised that the beliefs a teacher holds about the role of a teacher and the nature of teaching and learning will influence the types of learning experiences they design and the environment they promote within their classrooms (for example, Joseph & Heading, 2010; Sparks & Shepherd, 1992; Stets & Burke, 2000; Wenger, 1998). Flores and Day (2006, p. 220) argue that these beliefs are developed when teachers engage with the 'ongoing and dynamic process which entails the making sense and (re)interpretation of one's own values and experiences', as teachers explore who they are in their teaching stories and what kind of teacher they want to be (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999; Korthagen, 2004).

The current educational climate places demands on teachers to have a greater understanding of their profession and the implications of change for their practice. Many countries, including Australia have established professional standards and milestones in the last decade for teachers, particularly early career teachers. While the development of professional standards aim for '…professional enhancements which lead to improvements in both teaching and learning, and in student outcomes' (Boston, 2002, p. 11), there is a pressing need for teachers to be supported with their professional understandings about the role and 'work' of a teacher. As Cummings (2002) noted, there are no automatic links …between developing professional teaching standards per se, and 'living these out' in everyday learning environments' (p. 3). For early career teachers, this means that they leave the university context and 'hit the ground running' as they enter the professional context.

The lifelong process of reflection for understanding oneself as a teacher and member of a professional community promotes in teachers the confidence to think flexibly, to make informed judgements and to participate in ongoing change (Rodman, 2010; Walkington, 2005). These are important skills for teachers working in a complex and shifting professional context where the role of the teacher and the very nature of learning are being challenged. Bintz and Dillard (2007, p. 223) argue that learners in classrooms can be similarly developed as active lifelong learners when teachers perceive 'themselves and their students as creators of curriculum, as reflective practitioners and as collaborative enquirers'. This perception of your students as well as yourself as valuable members of a learning community is further shaped by experiences and ongoing reflection.

For teachers early in their careers, tension increases as their professional identities are challenged within the complex settings of the culture of teaching, understanding themselves as teachers and learning how to teach (Walkington, 2005). Flores and Day (2006) describe the transition from preservice to early career teacher as 'sudden and sometimes dramatic', observing that many in transition experience 'feelings of isolation,

mismatch between idealistic expectations and classroom reality and lack of support and guidance' (p. 219). Compounding the problem is the field of curriculum, which Connelly and Clandinin (1999) observe is 'to put it bluntly – a maze' (p. 113), demonstrating the need for early career teachers to be supported in making sense of policy, documentation and professional practices and where they "fit" with them. Whilst clearly a complex and multifaceted challenge, there is no time to retire in confusion; Hammerness, Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005) identify the early development of professional identity as crucial for securing in teachers a commitment to teaching and to the culture of the profession.

The National Research Council (2005) identifies three key challenges for teachers in transition from preservice teacher to teacher:

- *preconceptions of what it is to teach:* early career teachers' identities often include assumptions and preconceptions about what students do, how teachers speak, behave and even dress based on their experiences as a student (McCormack, Gore & Thomas, 2004). Joseph and Heading (2010) argue that accepting feedback, criticism and advice from teachers in a professional manner is an important part of the process of learning to teach and of confronting these preconceptions.

- *enacting what is 'known':* Hammerness and colleagues (2005, p. 375) observe that whilst preservice teachers have opportunities to practice and reflect on teaching during their training, the danger in their early teaching years is that without support, they can infer 'wrong lessons from their early attempts at teaching' and design learning experiences that 'simply support the ability to remember facts or perform rote sets of skills' over those that support deep learning.

- *metacognitive thinking:* systematic thinking about the complexity of teaching guides reflection and decision making so teachers gain a deeper understanding of themselves and their students, better equipping them with the ability to articulate their needs, their students' needs and to take action (Hammerness et al., 2005; Rodgers, 2002).

These challenges have the potential to inform and direct the programming decisions of teacher educators. Rodman (2010, p. 20) observes that, 'it is a major responsibility of teacher education to facilitate a reflective, self-monitoring practice and to promote such a practice as a critical and active habit that improves the pre-service teachers' pedagogical ability'. Focus on the development of the professional identity can empower teachers to confront the challenges of early teaching. It can support their development as life long learners while providing the immediate support so often needed in the beginning years of professional practice.

In her study of preservice teachers, Walkington (2005) acknowledged that the university structure of lectures and workshops was a poor simulation of the unpredictable and complex nature of the school context. However, she identified four elements of teacher education that *do* support the development of professional identity within a learning environment that fosters *active* engagement by the preservice teachers.

> *time to talk:* extended opportunities for talk was observed to build trust with relationships, allowing genuine beliefs and concerns to be shared. 'Time spent in challenging discussion is as important as time spent in classrooms' (p. 61)
> *opportunities to reflect:* explicit explanations, modelling and discussion afforded opportunities to develop reflective practices as the participants considered and refined their personal philosophies of teaching and teachers

making judgements: in connecting observations to personal experience, the teachers developed confidence in their own identities as they drew conclusions about the work of others.

'research' activities: a predetermined focus allowed for the collection of certain 'data' which could then be used as a focus for reflection within the broader context of teachers and teaching (pp. 60-62).

These elements resonate with the needs of early career teachers as they work to bring together their existing identities and beliefs, their classroom teaching experiences and the experiences of others within their communities of practice.

As they transition from student to early career teacher, many identify with a range of communities as part of the unpredictable and casual nature of their early teaching experiences. Here, the practices and expectations of self and others differ, bringing the complexity of considering one's own beliefs and practices together with the unique context of a school. Whilst this may be somewhat overwhelming, Darling-Hammond, Hammerness, Grossman, Rust & Schulman (2005) identify these professional teaching communities as conducive environments for teachers to learn to teach. Teachers early in their careers can be supported to make the transition into these multiple communities through opportunities to talk, reflect, gather data and make judgements about that which they experience, observe and believe.

Early career teachers and, indeed all professionals operate within communities of practice where collective knowledge is built and shared through the practices, support and collegiality of the group. Code and Zaparyniuk (2009, p. 111) argue that communities of practice develop through a 'collective sense of need and intention', driven by what Wenger (1998) describes as understanding what the group is about, how it functions and what it produces. What can be defined as a "community" for early career teachers requires some clarification. With the often transient nature of their entry to the profession for many (ie casual teaching, part-time contracts, short "blocks"), the community to which they belong professionally is not the place they feel free to seek support and identify areas for professional growth as they are reluctant to show any "weakness" to their employers.

Technology has the potential to support early career teachers beyond the context of the physical tutorial workshop through the development of community in the virtual environment. Oblinger (2005) and Oblinger and Hawkins (2005) note that members of the 'net generation' identify social interaction online as an important part of participating in a community. This has particular implications for educators looking to capitalise on a student's voluntary commitment to self directed and initiated learning between virtual and physical worlds.

Utilising technology to enrich physical interactions through virtual environments requires more than simply providing content for consumption by students. Course content that allows a learner to be both consumer and creator of knowledge not only deepens their own understanding, but conveys to the learner the value of their creation to the shared knowledge of the community (Collis & Moonen, 2005). Further, it contributes to a sense of connectedness to the group (Beldarrain, 2006). The virtual environment allows learners to bring their classroom experiences to their more comfortable university based professional community as challenges and issues presented for discussion and reflection in connection with professional identity.

Context of the research

At the time of the inquiry, the University offered a three year Bachelor of Teaching degree with a one year "add-on" degree for the Bachelor of Education (BEd). Students awarded a Bachelor of Teaching are qualified to teach in primary schools in New South Wales, while the BEd is accepted abroad and in most Australian States. Those completing the BEd usually engage in study at a part time load, freeing them to teach in classrooms in a casual, part time or even full time capacity. Teaching and studying simultaneously allows early career teachers to test out their beliefs and approaches to facilitating learning in classrooms and to reflect on their efforts within an academic environment focused on enriching the theoretical underpinnings of sound pedagogy. It also provides opportunity for them to operate within a community of practice with others in similar situations. Students complete two compulsory subjects during the fourth year of study, one of which, *Reflective Practice*, is the focus of this research.

Reflective Practice runs as a weekly 3 hour workshop over one semester (13 weeks) and is focused on the premise that reflective activity is an important professional attribute that makes a powerful contribution to the learning and professional development of teachers. The subject provides practical insights into educators' day-to-day decision making and the responsibilities of the profession about which early career teachers need to be aware. Opportunities to explore these issues are provided through learning experiences where participants connect subject materials (workshops, professional readings, professional dialogue) with professional experiences and examine subsequent implications. Given the professional skills required, the subject pays particular attention to the role of reflection in supporting and developing the professional teaching standards. On successful completion of this subject, students are expected to:

1. Demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of the nature of reflection in their complex role as a teacher
2. Identify, critique and articulate professional decisions, issues and challenges through personal reflections
3. Acknowledge the continued role of reflection in their future professional practice

An existing password protected website, the 'BEST' site (Beginning and Establishing Successful Teachers) was selected as an appropriate forum to support learning within Reflective Practice. BEST was established by the Faculty of Education to support education students in Early Childhood, Primary and Secondary Physical Education, Health and Personal Development (Herrington, Herrington, Kervin & Ferry, 2006). Underpinning the design of BEST are the theories of communities of learners (Wenger, 1998) and authentic learning (Herrington & Oliver, 2000).

Figure 1: BEST website

The BEST site facilitates virtual interactions between and among the learners as well as with expert others and relevant literature. Contents of the site listed on the left of the page are organised in 2 main areas, 'Major Issues' and 'Community'. Within *Major Issues* students can find:
- Links to sites compiled in response to previous surveys of early career teacher needs
- Links to literature, policy documents, teacher support sites and information about processes such as accreditation

The heading *Community* offers:
- A repository of audio files capturing professional dialogue between and among early career teacher members of the community (the focus of this paper)
- A forum with experienced educators
- Weblog (blog) postings and responses from within the community
- A repository of audio files sharing 'wisdom' from more experienced teachers gathered in the field by the students

It is through these affordances that the early career teachers engaged in virtual interaction. The audio files, the focus of this paper, provide example of how physical class interactions focused on professional dialogue were strengthened by the opportunity to capture, engage and reflect virtually in the community of practice.

Methodology

Forty-eight early career teachers, nine men and 39 women participated in this study in Autumn Session, 2008. In place of a subject text, a range of readings was identified from the literature that could affirm, challenge and promote the development of professional identity in early career teachers. Final selections of readings occurred in collaboration with the early career teachers as they identified their needs, interests and strengths and we were then able to make connections between what we 'knew' about our students and the reported findings in the literature. Most of the early career teachers in

this cohort were engaged in regular classroom teaching. Therefore, readings were selected that reflected the types of issues and challenges they were facing in this context.

Professional dialogue occurred between the early career teachers and tutors in both the physical and virtual environments, supported by framing questions that allowed connections to be made between the selected literature, personal experience and the experiences of others. Questions used to frame this discussion guided the early career teachers as they grew accustomed to the nature and rigour of participating in professional dialogue. These questions were:

- What are the key points in this article for me and why?
- What puzzled or confused me?
- What are the implications for my professional identity as a teacher?

Each participant was expected to read the identified literature in the week prior to the workshop in preparation for a professional discussion with peers. The participants were reminded of their professional obligation to protect the identity of those in their professional communities: teachers, students and schools, by refraining from naming them throughout the discussion.

We listened to the dialogue files to ensure confidentiality was maintained before each was uploaded to the BEST site. Any information identifying particular teaching contexts was edited prior to posting the audio file on the BEST site. Audio files from each group were available for download by all those enrolled in the Autumn cohort of the subject for use in reflection on the readings in connection with their own experiences.

Audio files were transcribed for analysis by the researchers. The analysis was comparative and interpretive. Data were analysed by coding into categories based on the emerging themes in response to the framing questions for the inquiry:

- How do early career teachers engage in professional dialogue with peers and what connections do they make between the literature, their own experiences and the experiences of others?
- How does the use of technology to capture and share professional dialogue influence early career teachers?
- How does the opportunity to engage in professional dialogue support the development of professional identity in early career teachers?

Member checking with the participants allowed us to ensure our interpretations were valid. Further, peer debriefing between ourselves was used to check the conclusions we had each drawn from our analysis. Revealed through data analysis between and among the transcripts were four emerging themes:

- Issues relating to oneself
- Identifying with the experiences of others
- Acknowledgement of the growth of one's professional identity
- Taking action

These four themes are used as subheadings in this paper to present two cases. The first case reports the findings from analysis of the dialogue generated around a professional reading completed early in the semester. The second reports on a later reading. The readings are:

- Week 2: *Learning to teach: Narratives from early career teachers* (McCormack et al., 2004). This was the first one set for discussion in the subject.

§ Week 8: *Defining reflection: Another look at John Dewey and reflective thinking* (Rodgers, 2002) This reading was set later in the semester and the early career teachers had had some time to become familiar with the demands of this task and to develop deeper relationships with the members of their group.

Each article is strongly connected to the subject outcomes that led the researchers' planning, facilitation and expectations within the Reflective Practice subject.

Case 1 - Learning to teach: Narratives from early career teachers

McCormack et al. (2004) report on the experiences of 16 teachers all within their first years of teaching over the course of one year. The article examines current issues and challenges for the early career teachers at the time as well as providing accessible accounts of a range of other early career teacher experiences. The key themes reported within the article connect to the outcomes identified for the Reflective Practice subject as set out in Table 1.

Subject outcome	Key themes within the article
1. Demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of the nature of reflection in their complex role as a teacher	Change evident in the journal entries of teachers over time demonstrate and provide stimulus for discussion about the ways that reflection informs teaching
2. Identify, critique and articulate professional decisions, issues and challenges through personal reflections	Narratives from early career teachers throughout their year of teaching provide stimulus for discussion in connection with personal experience
3. Acknowledge the continued role of reflection in their future professional practice	The article finds that professional identity requires time, support and reflection in order to develop. It makes recommendations for facilitating professional growth.

Table 1: Connection between subject outcome and McCormack et al. (2004)

The early career teachers' professional dialogue is reported through the emerging themes of this inquiry: *relating to self, identifying with others, growth of professional identity* and *taking action*. Each will be examined in connection with excerpts from the dialogue transcripts.

Relating to self

Analysis of the dialogue revealed that the students related personally to the narratives shared within the article. Hearing the stories provided comfort and reassurance that they were not alone in feeling 'ill prepared' and 'overwhelmed' for classroom teaching. As one group member described *'I like reading people's personal testimonies ... beginning teachers just get thrown into some very difficult classes with extreme behaviours,*

committees and programs that the older staff don't want to be part of … I don't feel prepared to actually take on all of these new things when I'm starting out as a beginning teacher, because I'm still sort of finding my feet – like it's an unfolding journey'.

In another group, strength was drawn from the revelation that they were not alone in experiencing tension, *'But I had had a really bad day yesterday teaching and then I thought – how am I going to be at teaching? I honestly thought I'd had enough – I didn't know how I was going to make it through the year. And then I read this and I felt heaps better of how…it's not just me…So that was a good thing, yes'.* It would appear that the confirmation that their experiences are 'normal' inspires them to return to the classroom and to continue trying to improve their practice.

Identifying with others

The honesty of the narratives shared within the article connected with the early career teachers. Frank and open accounts of other teachers' experiences and emotions were acknowledged by each group as a strength of the article. One group member commented, *'I think it was really good too how they were able to be honest like in their journal and they were able to reflect… It was just good for a beginning teacher like me to read that … you think maybe you're the only one who thinks those things, like concerns and lack of knowledge of things and understanding, but to see it on paper and see that other people have [been] through it … It's like opening it up'.* Understanding the 'place' of another teacher appears to bring a sense of solidarity for this early career teacher, perhaps an understanding or empathy for others.

Other accounts in the article were valued as good advice and acted as a springboard for gathering the opinions of others within the dialogue group, for example, TEACHER 1: *'The article also talks about how it helps to stay in contact with other beginning teachers – a bit like our scholarship students – next year we'll be placed all over the state. It's like us staying in contact and see(ing) how each other's going. But it talks about how that's a good practice to get into, because we're all sort of going through a similar phase in our career. Have you spoken to any first year teachers? Or do you find it helpful coming back to uni?'*
TEACHER 2: *'I found that teaching helps me at uni – it helps me with all this stuff. In the article, I can relate to some of the things that they're saying – you know how they had the early career teacher stories – stress and whatever and staying in touch'.* Just as relating the literature to their own experiences built confidence and resilience, identifying with the experiences of others, too, appears to build a perception of community support. Knowing that teaching became 'easier' over the period of these other teachers' first years of teaching was something the early career teachers in this study appeared to relate to and find promising for their own practice. This observation is further explored through the next theme, growth of professional identity.

Growth of professional identity

Growth and development of professional identity was evident to the students as they discussed the themes within the reading. The opportunity to examine the teachers' stories

over the course of the year demonstrated the changes, challenges and learning of each teacher, emphasising to the students a sense of professional journey. This was summarised in one group, *'It all seemed heaps scary when they were talking about the start, when the teachers first came out. None of them just said I'm comfortable, everything's good, they were all, "This is horrible, this child's making my life difficult, I don't have enough planned, I don't have this". But there was blogs from the end of the year and it was sort of comforting for me. Like they were saying, it feels like I've learned a lot, all my lessons are going for the right amount of time, I'm planning things that are channelled in and the kids are starting to learn'*

This understanding of professional identity as a journey was reiterated in another group in the form of a reminder, *'That's just something I think you need to keep in your mind all the time when you're teaching. When you start teaching fulltime, it's important not to forget that I'm still learning as you're going and you need to keep remembering that's what being professional is – knowing that you've still got to learn even though you've finished uni'.* Reflection on and opportunities to discuss issues through the literature appears to affirm the initial steps some group members have taken in their transition to early career teacher. Further, these early career teachers appear more resolute in their commitment to their own professional growth and ongoing learning.

Taking action

An understanding of the research findings in this literature empowered the students to consider the possibilities for themselves as teachers. Taking action supported by knowledge from research was considered a powerful professional skill. For example, *'...this research backs up that they **do** work; induction programs and mentoring programs **should** be included. I suppose if your school wasn't implementing one and you thought it was a serious enough issue you could probably go to your principal or whoever your head teacher, and say, look I think we should use this because obviously there is evidence to say that it does work'.* (emphasis in original)

Making judgements was also considered appropriate as the early career teachers discussed the ways they are valued as members of staff. For example, one group discussed the introduction of new approaches and teaching ideas,

TEACHER 3: *'I think too that if – like as a beginning teacher – you can really allow the opinions of experienced teachers to affect you, good or bad. And it's interesting that the majority of beginning teachers will comment on the bad, not the good, because they're the things that stand out. But it's like – I want to try and adopt the attitude in my teaching – even though I'm a beginning teacher – that yes, I'll be open to their opinions, but I don't want to be boxed in by them.'*

TEACHER 4: *'So of course, I want the mentoring and I want the ideas and I'm really open for all of that stuff – that will scaffold my own learning. But if I want to try something new, I want to be able to do it, regardless of whether I'm frowned upon. But of course, do we go ahead and do that if the principal goes – 'You do that and you're out'. So it's a fine line.'*

TEACHER 3: *'Yes, and I guess that's what the teachers are saying though – like they tried these new ideas and they were frowned upon by other teachers. But I guess that comes down to – well, how are you going to handle that?...'*

TEACHER 4: *'Well, that's their opinion, they can do what they like with their class – this is how I'm going to go about it and not let that person affect me'.* Knowledge and understandings supported by findings in the literature are observed to support the taking of action.

Case 2 - Defining reflection: Another look at John Dewey and reflective thinking

This reading explored reflection and its role in developing professional identity. Rodgers drew on Dewey's extensive philosophical body of writing about reflection and made links to classroom teaching. The reading was selected to challenge the early career teachers' understanding of the complexity of reflection and its role in making informed judgements about teaching and learning. The students read the article in preparation for professional dialogue in Week 8, the dialogue from each group was captured and shared on the BEST site. The key themes reported within the article connect to the outcomes identified for the Reflective Practice subject as set out in Table 2.

Subject outcome	Key themes within the article
1. Demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of the nature of reflection in their complex role as a teacher	Rodgers identifies reflection as important in supporting the development of flexible strategies that can be applied to the many complex decisions faced by teachers.
2. Identify, critique and articulate professional decisions, issues and challenges through personal reflections	The article proposes a range of strategies for reflection that provide stimulus for discussion in connection with personal experience.
3. Acknowledge the continued role of reflection in their future professional practice	Various types of reflection are discussed that support different levels of thinking about teaching and learning. Rodgers draws links between Dewey's elements of reflection and their application to the classroom throughout a teacher's career.

Table 2: Connection between subject outcomes and Rodgers (2002)

As with Case 1, the early career teachers' professional dialogue is reported through the emerging themes of this inquiry: *relating to self, identifying with others, growth of professional identity* and *taking action*. Each will be examined in connection with excerpts from the dialogue transcripts.

Relating to self

Analysis of the dialogue revealed that the early career teachers made connections between the article and their own experiences. Reading about the connections made by Rodgers to the somewhat abstract and theoretical work of Dewey appeared to affirm existing approaches and practices, *'...the article says something about teachers need to*

be able to critically examine their practice and seek advice of others. So I found this on my prac I actually did this a fair bit, when they gave you the feedback sheets on how your lesson went I actually went back and I wrote how I thought I went as well and then compared the notes…It was good to actually talk to someone about it though as well…'

For others the reading and ensuing discussion encouraged deeper, more systematic reflection, *'I think when I was reading that article I thought that I probably haven't done as much of that sort of formal reflection, probably I have done a bit of the more informal, just thinking about how it went, but I probably need to do more of that sort of formal reflection, sit down…'.* The practical use of recorded reflections on teaching units was also realised, *'A lot of it I wouldn't have done…and I wrote that so then for the next teacher that picks it up or if I do it again they know.'* Through discussion and reflection, the 'wrong lessons' readers were warned about in the literature (Hammerness et al., 2005) have been avoided.

Identifying with others

Clearly evident within the dialogue was collegial respect. Group members who were teaching regularly were held in esteem and often questioned at length during group time about their practices and philosophies. Confirmation from a more experienced peer appeared to affirm the decision making of others within the group. For example, one person who was questioning the use of reflection and reflective practices beyond the university context revealed a change of heart, *'I liked knowing that you guys had done it* (kept a reflective journal) *and you're taking it on, it's good to get it from a teaching perspective, whereas, I'd probably just go out there and go "Why do it?"…but having you guys who've done a journal and have the kids go through, I think that shows that "Yes, it can be done" and then you can implement it further on.'*

The early career teachers demonstrated a desire to be part of their teaching communities by acknowledging the role of others in their development as teachers. One group member shared, *'I particularly liked the community element, saying that it's not just thinking about it you have to express reflection so other people can understand your ideas and it broadens the experiences'*, another agreed, *'The more you talk to teachers about experiences or even just what you're doing in a classroom I think you bounce ideas off each other and it's a good way to learn'.* The role of both formal and informal reflection individually and within the community is clearly valued within this dialogue as a way of identifying with the experiences of others and of locating oneself within the profession of teachers.

Growth of professional identity

Revealed in the transcripts was a growing understanding of the many perspectives teachers bring to the school context. One group, for example, discussed how the reflections of a casual teacher might differ from that of a permanent classroom teacher or of a more experienced teacher compared with a less experienced teacher because of the different priorities they may have. It appears the opportunity for dialogue in connection with literature, personal experience and the experiences of others affords the development

of a range of perspectives in teaching, allowing early career teachers to 'try on' different teaching personas as they explore the types of teachers they want to be.

Reflection of their own learning journeys was evident between and among the early career teachers, *'This year, everything makes so much more sense now, even when we're doing assignments because we've had that little bit of experience in schools and in classes. Things are just "gelling" much easier and you're able to put your own experiences into theories, which just cements the ideas. So this* (professional reading) *was really good because we do have the experience to say "Yeah, reflection's really good" but it probably would've been a good thing to know a bit sooner'.* And others recognised that they had come a certain distance in their journeys and had further to travel, *'...after some of the days I had at a school that is from a more difficult area I was kind of like "Okay well obviously I'm not equipped to deal with that now, I need to work out some strategies to employ in the classroom."'.* Through dialogue and reflection the early career teachers are able to identify areas of growth and need within their identities.

Taking action

As the early career teachers identified the role of reflection and dialogue in informing, challenging and shaping their understandings, they also recognised the potential for change; change in their own practice, the practice of their peers and of their students. The perception was clear that reflection leads to change and that there is an obligation for teachers to be vigilant in monitoring their teaching. One group responded to Rodgers' description of reflection as an 'academic demonstration of a mind'.
TEACHER 5 *'...without whole heartedness there is this indifference, so obviously if we're not going to be passionate about learning more and reflecting on your teaching then you don't care enough about your profession.'*
TEACHER 6 *'There's a lot of teachers out there who are like that.'*
TEACHER 7 *'Yeah.'*
TEACHER 5 *'And a shift in an understanding of an experience may call for an entire shift in outlook...the underlying thing being flexible as teachers, being flexible to change your understanding like reading things to shape your understanding further. And I think not being so set in your ways that's a process of reflection.'*
The increasing certainly of the value of reflection and the need for ongoing growth and change in schools seems to empower these teachers to promote the notion of change, even 'revolution' in schools.

In recognising their potential to develop reflective practices in their students, the early career teachers discussed teaching their students to *'reflect',* their ability to *'pass that through onto the students as well'* and to *'encourage your students to reflect and to talk about their work as well'.* These teachers are empowered as active members of their communities, capable of enacting change in themselves, their colleagues and their students.

Findings

The opportunity for the students to physically meet regularly as teaching colleagues with similar experiences, needs and interests was identified as a supportive structure throughout the subject. Professional dialogue groups provided the forum for these teachers in transition to engage with the elements identified by Walkington (2005): time to talk, opportunities to reflect and to make judgements about their work within predetermined foci from the literature, thereby bringing together the multiple communities to which they belong.

Weekly preparation for the dialogue meetings engaged the early career teachers as active participants in developing deeper understandings about the nature of teaching (Wenger, 1998). Walkington (2005) argued that it is this active participation that allows early career teachers to make strong connections between the context of their teaching and their role within this community. These connections were evident within each reported case as the teachers related their own experiences to the literature and to the experiences of others as they identified opportunities for practice within multiple professional communities. Further, the recording of the professional dialogue and knowledge that they were to be housed in the virtual learning space, brought a sense of accountability to the experience as each early career teacher prepared and reflected upon the themes and messages prior to their group conversation. This improved the quality of the professional dialogue.

Recording these conversations for upload to the virtual learning space further strengthened the experience. Availability of the professional dialogue files for convenient access and retrieval provided each early career teacher with opportunity to experience the conversation again and reflect upon key points in connection with their growing professional identity (Korthagen, 2004). Further, the students were provided with access to other groups' conversations, which enabled them to connect with more understandings and broaden the perspectives to which they were exposed. The ability to do this is not typical in most conversations. These early career teachers were able to revisit key moments, seek clarification of points discussed, raise additional questions in subsequent sessions and really get to know the stories of those within their community of practice.

While many of the early career teachers accessed the conversations of their own group in the first instance, having each group's conversation available meant that they could expand their dialogue network as they followed the discussions of other groups within the cohort. This afforded opportunities for the early career teachers to reflect on their 'fit' within this community (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999; Joseph & Heading, 2010) as they accessed a range of perspectives, experiences and group interaction patterns and expanded the membership within the communities of practice.

The BEST site afforded anytime access to audio dialogue files from all of the groups, allowing teachers to engage in reflection as needed. The use of these files within the virtual community enriched interactions within the physical setting of the tutorial workshop as teachers sought each other out to ask questions, continue discussions or begin new ones in response to the dialogue they had heard. The combination of the virtual and physical communities deepened the professional relationships between and

among early career teachers as they identified like minds and professional network possibilities.

Recording the dialogue allowed us, their teachers, to listen to the many and varied conversations our students had around key subject materials. This enabled us to really know our student cohort as we became familiar with their professional situations and personal challenges, information we were subsequently able to use to guide our teaching. We felt empowered ourselves to meet some of the challenges of teacher education reported in Darling-Hammond and colleagues' research (Darling-Hammond, 2006a, 2006b; Darling-Hammond et al., 2005).

Concluding remarks

This inquiry demonstrates that opportunities for engagement in regular professional dialogue allows transitioning teachers to address the key challenges for this early stage of their careers: preconceptions about teaching, putting the 'known' into practice and thinking metacognitively about the complexity of teaching (National Research Council, 2005). The opportunities to regularly read, talk and listen supported the process of reflection as each early career teacher examined their understandings and what these meant for them as a teacher.

As teacher educators, we are obliged to support the development of teachers who can adapt to the demands of the ever changing education environment. It is not enough to share anecdotes, good ideas and procedural protocols (Hammerness et al., 2005) if we expect graduate teachers to develop the necessary skills to make complex decisions to suit the needs of the range of learners and learning environments they will encounter. We need to encourage early career teachers to draw upon professional knowledge and understandings as they consider their own experiences, and those of others in connection with their emerging professional identity.

Darling-Hammond et al. (2005) argue that educating teachers is a challenging and complex role requiring that we "model practices; construct powerful learning experiences; thoughtfully support progress, understanding and practice; carefully assess students' progress and understandings; and help link theory and practice." (p. 437). Engagement in ongoing professional dialogue supported by the dual environments afforded by virtual and physical interactions has enormous potential to empower and sustain transitioning teachers as they move between their multiple professional communities, consider their 'place' within the profession and work toward becoming the types of teachers they aspire to be.

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