

Chapter 11

Back to the Future: A Journey of Becoming a Professional Practice Consultant



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Abstract This chapter follows one teacher's journey from pre-service teacher, to primary teacher, through to mentor and Professional Practice Consultant (PPC). The author journeys through an analysis of self, and analysis of her identity as an educator, showing how aspects of each of the roles experienced and explored have contributed to her current identity. Throughout the chapter, poetry is used to provide an insight into the various encounters that occur in the Professional Experience space. The poetry marks significant milestones in the 12-month process of being a PPC and assists to uncover the nuances and tensions associated with being in the PPC role.

Beginnings (January 2017)

Beginning while still ending
A dream revealed and lived
Memories of experiences locked away, drawn upon fondly
Pick your stories and run with them
Turbulent times ever-changing
Taking on the role rolling with the punches,
Becoming ...

Introduction

It is more than 10 years ago now, but I still remember my initial teacher education degree (a double degree—Bachelor of Education/Bachelor of Arts, Literary Studies) when I was studying to become a generalist primary teacher. I thoroughly enjoyed my university-based coursework, but I came to believe that professional experience, in the form of short practicum placements in schools, was one of the most valuable

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and memorable parts of my teaching degree. It was where what I had been studying at university came to mean so much. This was partly about developing teaching approaches for the classroom. It was also about applying what I was learning at university in regard to education more broadly, and beginning to foster my own teaching identity. On these placements, I was excited to feel myself *becoming a teacher*. And yet I was aware, from talking with other pre-service teachers (PSTs) enrolled in my course, that this was not always the way they experienced their teacher education. I remember a myriad of metaphors circulating amongst PSTs in the weeks leading up to our first professional experience. This placement would be for us: ‘a baptism of fire’, ‘like being thrown in the deep end’, ‘sink or swim’, ‘make or break’. Not surprisingly, this kind of talk bred fear and uncertainty among even the most confident of us PSTs.

In January 2017, after 15 years of teaching in a primary school setting I found myself one of a group of 12 teachers with recent classroom experience employed by Monash University’s Faculty of Education. We were to be the very first cohort of Monash’s ‘Professional Practice Consultants’ (or PPCs). The role, we were told, had an overall aim of optimising the professional experience program for all stakeholders: PSTs, school-based teacher mentors, school leaders, community-based mentors, and university-based teacher educators. Following extensive surveying of PSTs, school leaders and school-based mentors, Monash had created the role of PPC to improve and diversify the support for its PSTs, and also to better support Monash’s partners in its professional experience program. The published job description of the PPC referred explicitly to two complementary dimensions: ‘an internal focus on student support and an external focus on partner support.’ The internal focus involved ‘support[ing] students’ progress in professional practice and their professional readiness within teacher education courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels prior to, during and post placement.’ The external focus was to ‘sustain partnerships with placement partners, which included schools, early years settings and community-based sites.’ I interpreted this as capacity building with a dual emphasis: (i) PSTs enrolled in teacher education courses; and (ii) school (or community) leaders and teachers who were deemed to be ‘key stakeholders’ of professional experience.

One aim in writing this chapter is to deepen my understanding of the work of a Professional Practice Consultant (PPC); another is to explore the changes in my identity since beginning in the role. Yet another aim is to contribute to the research literature about the structures, supports and relationships that underpin professional experience placements. I hope to achieve these aims by presenting autobiographical stories and reflections, sometimes in the form of short poems, about my experience of working as a PPC this past year. The stories, poems and reflections draw links between my time as a pre-service teacher (PST), later experiences as a school-based teacher mentor of PSTs, and more recently, my year as a Professional Practice Consultant (PPC).

The theoretical underpinnings of this chapter draw upon literature relating to identity (Gee, 2000–2001), ‘Third Space’ (Gutiérrez, 2008; Williams, 2013) and boundary crossing in teacher education (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011). I have written the stories, poems and reflections in a way that provides a unique personal perspective

on these notions of identity, space and boundary crossing. The sense of uniqueness is enhanced by ensuring that each story I tell, and each poem I present, is situated within a particular institutional, temporal and sociocultural context. Although I present and reflect upon experiences that are distinctive to my identity and me, and therefore cannot be generalised across all other situations or educational contexts, the situated nature of the stories always provides a context for making sense of them. I hope that elements of my experience may resonate with others and raise implications for the development of such roles in teacher education partnerships and professional experience placements in schools and other settings.

One final point I wish to make at the outset is that the newly coined title of ‘Professional Practice Consultant’ is, at the time of writing, rarely seen in existing professional experience literature. The literature I have consulted at various times in preparing for and writing this chapter often makes reference to more commonly discussed roles in teacher education partnerships and professional experience, such as: ‘teacher educator’, ‘teacher educator mentor’, ‘professional consultant’ and ‘academic supervisor’. I mention these roles because although they share some characteristics or features with the PPC role as I have experienced it, none of them completely aligns with all dimensions of the role of PPC as I have experienced it.

Methodology

In planning this chapter, I decided early on to use a form of narrative inquiry methodology (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) to represent and reflect upon the stories of my journey from a PST studying to be a teacher, through to a mentor of PSTs (still working in a school), on to a PPC working in university, schools and sometimes community settings. Narrative inquiry (and forms of scholarly storytelling, including poetry) has enabled me to explore my ‘lived experience’ of transitioning through these different roles and educational contexts. I was attracted to this form of methodology because of its capacity to highlight how we each have our own stories from which we understand ourselves and our places, ‘creating new understandings of ‘me’ at these times in my life’ (Hannigan, 2014, p. 11).

I use a variety of narrative ‘methods’ to focus and trigger the reflexive storying of my experiences, including reflections through poetry writing. Poetry as a form for scholarly storytelling and reflection was first seen in other narrative-based research methodologies such as autobiography, auto-ethnography and phenomenology. It is now used quite often in many paradigms of education research, to ‘say what might not otherwise be said’ (Cahnmann, 2003, p. 29; see also Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). On the one hand, poetry can also provide a ‘vehicle for social inquiry’ (Furman, 2007, p. 1), which is important if the research is to go beyond the mere telling of a personal story and to achieve some degree of scholarly rigour. Also, poems or poetic fragments, situated within a carefully theorised study, can allow a researcher to express an ‘emotional ‘truth’ and elicit empathic reactions from the reader who may see some aspect of themselves and/or their experience in the poetry’ (Furman,

2007, p. 1). Additionally, poetry can convey the emotion of an experience by evoking images in the reader's mind that help him/her to navigate the boundary between the 'experience of an emotion and its expression in language' (Furman, 2007, p. 2).

I initially wrote the poetic fragments in this chapter in a professional journal, which I kept during my day-to-day work as a PPC. This journal helped me to make sense of the transition I was experiencing from the identity of a teacher in a school to a PPC working in a faculty of education. The journal was always with me as I visited schools, and talked with pre-service teachers, teacher mentors and sometimes school principals. Sometimes, I was literally writing some lines of poetry while waiting in a school reception area before meeting with a PST or mentor or school leader. The more that I interacted with a wide range of professional experience stakeholders, and then reflected on these interactions in my journal, the better I felt I was understanding the significant transformation I was experiencing in my identity since taking on the role of PPC. Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) refer to practices such as I was using as 'writing as a method of inquiry', whereby the inquirer or researcher develops a richer sense of self through a combination of writing practices and engaging in social action. In my own case, there was a sense in which the poems I was writing not only mirrored my interactions and experiences; the poetry writing began to be a significant factor in building my identity and the social reality of my work as a PPC (Richardson & St Pierre, 2005, p. 961).

In my reflections on the poetic fragments and stories I present below, I have found it helpful to utilise a poststructuralist lens to make sense of the various identities and discourses at play in my interactions with various professional experience stakeholders. There are aspects of poststructuralist theory that emphasise the ways in which identity is situated in time and space, and therefore how identity needs to be understood as dynamic not rigid, and plural not singular (see Gee, 2000–2001). Poststructuralist theory also encourages a researcher to be 'critical of the nature and function of knowledge, power and discourse' (Ma, 2013, p. 447). In my chapter, poststructuralist theory has helped me to show how power, like identity, is deeply mediated by the social structure of the individuals operating in a particular context, and that (again like identity) power is not something that can be possessed by the individual themselves. For this reason, in the sections that follow, I occasionally refer to Foucaultian theory to help me explore the connections between knowledge, power, discourses, and identity in my journey of transformation from teacher in a school to PPC in a team of professional staff in a faculty of education. My exploration is structured around six poems, which I reflect upon and discuss with respect to the concepts of identity, third space and boundary crossing. I have organised these poems in chronological order to support the sense of the narrative journey I have been (and am still) undertaking. I begin by referring back to the first poem, 'Beginnings', from the opening of the chapter.

Who Am I? and What Is a PPC?

I have explained that the PPC role was newly created by Monash University's Faculty of Education in 2017. I am now more keenly aware than I was then that the university and I were both embarking upon a journey into uncharted territory. This was exciting and perhaps held a variety of levels of risk for all of us. In the first poem titled '*Beginnings (January 2017)*', I was trying to capture some of this excitement and risk, and the sense of being in a veritable maelstrom of whirling change, in my mind at least. The opening paradox of 'beginning while still ending' describes the moment of concluding my time as a teacher in schools and beginning in the role of PPC at Monash. I evoke the sense of complexity of this paradox, by suggesting that beginning and ending merged into one experience with my move out of the primary setting and into a tertiary setting. Working in a faculty of education was a dream, but so too was being a teacher in a school when I first graduated. I was aware that in order to deal with the challenges and the unexpected difficulties ('the punches'), I would need to draw upon all of the previous knowledge I had developed as a teacher (some of it 'locked away in my memory'). I would need to select relevant stories and experiences from my days as a PST and teacher and 'run with them'. And I would have to travel *back to the future*, drawing on all of my professional knowledge and experiences from the past for use in the present (Williams, 2013).

Whenever I began to feel that the expectations of the PPC role were becoming clear, something else would change and I would once again appreciate how the role was constantly evolving. I remember one of my PPC colleagues referring to the ways different components of the PPC work moved beneath us like 'shifting sands'. That expression meant a lot to me at the time as it elicited scenes of change and development, freshness and the ability to progress and innovate. Conversely, it meant that uncertainty would arise at times, and that many days would feel like I was stepping into the unknown, crossing a boundary into a new set of expectations. Actually, the PPC role was in a continual process of becoming, just like my identity, and it would continue to morph and change depending on the requirements of the University, the Professional Experience 'Placement Partners', mentors and PSTs. This sense of change and uncertainty was picked up in 'A footprint', which I wrote in March 2017.

A footprint (March 2017)

When the heat is on, I set down a footprint
 It lingers when placed on the cool ground
 Edges blurred, steam rising
 Making its mark, doing the job of a transient being
 Slowly it disappears as the air around becomes more attuned to its environment
 Only to return when the heat is on again

This poem, like 'Becomings', juxtaposes opposites—this time it is hot and cold. I focus on the way the heat of a footprint can leave a mark on a cool tile in the summer,

and how that footprint can seem to ‘slowly disappear[...]/Only to return when the heat is on again.’ The metaphor of the footprint came to me one day in March, when I was getting ready for another day in my role as PPC. This was a time when many of the Monash PSTs were on placement. I was constantly on the move, conducting visits to placement settings, conciliating in disputes between mentors and PSTs, nurturing relationships, creating new ones. Soon I would be driving away from the school, leaving the various stakeholders to work on their relationships and deal with the challenges ahead in the space where I had briefly set foot.

The metaphor links to my alternating feelings of making my mark in the role of PPC, but then wondering (as the ‘footprint’ disappeared) if I really was helping. It also registers my awareness, again, of the PPC role being ‘under construction’, not fully explained or cemented in its nature. In the poem, this is implied by explaining that even when the mark was visible, its edges were ‘blurred’. This metaphor can also be read as representing the development of the PPC role, itself, which came into clear focus and disappeared from time to time, but ultimately revealed itself and its many dimensions. The opening phrase, ‘When the heat is on’, can be read as referring to moments where I found myself having to ‘intervene’ in a placement if it appeared a PST was struggling in some way and/or when any of the key stakeholders had expressed concern about the outcome of the placement. The notion of a ‘transient being’ is intended to show that my movement into and out of these troubled placements was gradual and my intervening was often more in the form of liaising rather than an intrusive intervention.

I have indicated that the PPC role was new and unprecedented at Monash. However, it is interesting to compare the kinds of roles I was playing within my first months as a PPC with literature from almost 30 years ago about ‘supervision’ in professional placements. In 1989, Marrou highlighted what she felt were the key requirements for a ‘university supervisor’ of a ‘student teacher’ on a ‘teaching round’ at that time. Writing from her context as a US teacher educator, Marrou emphasised that a university supervisor should be supportive of both the student teacher as well as the school-based mentor (or ‘cooperating teacher’, as she refers to the role). This support might involve interviews or counselling, assistance with resources, or orientation sessions just to name a few. Marrou went on to suggest that the relationship between the cooperating teacher, student teacher and the university supervisor should be informed by up-to-date knowledge about teacher education and that the supervisor should be able to ‘articulate the process of becoming a teacher’ (Marrou, 1989, p. 18). Additionally, the university supervisor should appreciate that many circumstances requiring intervention can involve substantial investments of ‘time, energy and professional expertise’ (p. 18).¹ The allusion in the fifth line of ‘A footprint’ to ‘doing the job of a transient being’ is meant to communicate my desire to bring my knowledge and expertise to the role, but always with the sense of moving on as ‘a transient being’. To put it another way, I was conscious of moving across the

¹Interestingly, Marrou was speaking about a university supervisor who was usually a tenured academic, whereas I had been employed as a professional staff member on a three year contract.

boundary that divides and connects universities and schools, and moving on as soon as I felt my presence was no longer required.

There is one other interpretation of the footprint metaphor I want to mention, and this relates to my identity as a primary school teacher, which I felt was fast disappearing in the PPC work. Writing 25 years later than Marrou, Williams (2013) looks at the idea of existing in the ‘Third Space’ as a ‘teacher educator’ (p. 119), liaising with stakeholders in professional experience settings. She portrays the work of a teacher educator during professional placements in ways that seem very familiar to me in my PPC role (although I was part of a professional staff team and she was speaking about tenured academics). Williams discusses how during ‘field experience’ a teacher educator may feel as though she is crossing ‘professional and personal boundaries’ (p. 121) eliciting dual loyalties—that is, empathising with the positions of both the pre-service teacher and the school-based mentor when conflicts arise. In Williams’ experience as a teacher educator, she uses this feeling of dual loyalties to help build trust and mutual respect between PST and mentor. This resonated with my experience as PPC. ‘Where the edges blur’ can be read as the space where I was crossing boundaries, and also the space where a boundary separated and connected a whole range of situations and people I was encountering: e.g. PSTs and mentors; school education and pre-service education; and school-based identities and university-based identities. Williams (2013) invokes the concept of the ‘Third Space’ (Gutiérrez, 2008; Martin, Snow, & Torrez, 2011) to explain these kinds of spaces. In the next section, I explore the relevance of this concept to my developing identity in the PPC role.

Shifting Identity and the ‘Third Space’

When I first became a member of Monash’s team of PPCs, I was conscious that I had taken a position as a university-based ‘professional staff member’. It was so exciting and new for someone who had previously been actively building her skill and identity as a school-based professional. In a very real sense, the poetry I was writing in my journal was creating a third space for me to process and make sense of this excitement and newness. As Gutiérrez (2008) suggests, the ‘Third Space’ can consist of ‘formal and informal...official and unofficial spaces...creating the potential for authentic interaction’ (p. 152). She also explains how the figurative meaning of functioning within a ‘Third Space’ can relate to the ways in which you contribute to a situation or context or community. When I looked back over the poems I had written in that ‘Third Space’, it became clear that they were often relating to identity, and many explored the power negotiation that complicated the relationships between PST, school-based mentor and university-based PPC. I want now to reflect on what I was learning through reflecting upon and analysing the ways in which power and perceptions of knowledge were operating in my experience of relationships between PST, mentor and PPC.

Whilst working as a PPC, I felt as though I was working within a plethora of physical and figurative third spaces. These spaces included reception areas in partner schools, on the road as I travelled between partner schools or community settings, and in professionals' staffrooms, where I would participate in meetings with a variety of stakeholders. I have to admit that when I was a PST on a professional placement in a school 20 years ago, I did not recall seeing a university supervisor throughout all of my placements (and yet I am aware that supervisors from different universities often did visit schools). Again, it is interesting to relate my experience as a PPC in 2017 to Marrou's writing in 1989 about the 'university supervisor' rarely being central to the many discussions surrounding the professional experience context. Marrou argued that the university 'supervisor' can be seen as one of the critical factors in a professional experience placement. I saw my role as a professional practice consultant from a faculty of education as similarly critical.

The next poem, titled 'Identity', was written initially in a reception area of one of the schools I visited last year in my role as PPC. Through writing and reflecting on this poem, I became aware of the ways in which my choice of words was highlighting the fluidity of my emerging identity in the PPC role. I had been, in a sense, settling into and consolidating my identity as 'a teacher in a school' for over a decade, and now suddenly in my new role as a PPC, I found myself constantly on the move. Reflecting in the 'Third Space' of my writing, the analogy of a river, twisting and turning occurred to me. Like a river, strongly flowing, I was invariably carving new paths in the river bed, hitting obstacles and finding ways to move around them. My sense of my identity, like the PPC role I was filling, was dynamic and fluid. Williams (2013) might say I was an 'evolving participant' in this ever evolving sense of my identity, because of the way I was actively exploring the various dimensions that the role promised. And yet it is worth noting that my identity through this time was also being shaped to some extent by the interactions I had with PSTs, teacher mentors and my colleagues in the PPC team. In practice, the PPC role was a hybrid of interactions with many stakeholders. At different times, I might be mentoring, coaching, learning from others (in schools, community settings and in the Faculty of Education), and potentially having an influence on a myriad of professional experience areas.

Identity (June 2017)

Identity changing, ebbing, flowing

A hint of the mentor flavour, then vanilla as an aftertaste.

The knowledge once shared and acquired – becomes shared with another?

A knowing wave goodbye as the door closes

only to open again in a different place

The 'Identity' poem hones in on the part of the PPC experience that involved interacting with school-based mentors. In the 5 years before I was employed as a PPC, I was fortunate to have opportunities in a school to mentor PSTs from various universities. This allowed me to develop some knowledge about what is involved in the complex and nuanced work of mentoring during a professional experience placement 'from

the inside out', in effect. I found that hosting a PST in my classroom was a valuable experience for myself and for my student learners. It was an opportunity to work with the PSTs' new ideas, fresh energy and excitement in a shared teaching space. The introduction of a new teacher voice in my classroom often involved an injection of innovative knowledge; and it invariably offered an opportunity for me to see the learners in 'my' classroom in a new light. As a school-based teacher, when I was mentoring PSTs, I remember trying to recall the feeling of what it was like to be a PST. I presented my classroom as an open, inclusive space; my approach was, wherever possible, to distribute or share professional responsibility in the classroom. I positioned myself, figuratively, as a professional guide operating collaboratively, alongside the PST.

Nevertheless, during these mentoring experiences, I was always aware that the adolescent learners in my classroom, whom I had grown to know over several months (some of them for longer), were my ultimate responsibility. Yes, I was professional in my mentoring of the visiting PST, but it was my students' learning that was my primary focus. Despite remembering some of my experiences and attitudes as a PST, I found it difficult to really 'tap into' what it was like to be a 'PST' in that moment in time, when I had another PST in my own classroom. Rather than developing an enriched identity that encompassed mentoring a PST and teaching a classroom of children together, I recall myself consciously *switching* between the identities of 'classroom teacher' and 'mentor'.

As a PPC I often visited schools and took on 'a hint of' the mentoring work of PSTs who were experiencing difficulties in their placement, *sharing* my knowledge and then moving on. At first, it rarely crossed my mind that I might again step into the shoes of the PST and consider the ways in which identity could play a part in their success or otherwise. Of course, I understood the nerves, the sense of learning as a continuum, and the fact that a PST in the classroom was often at a fledgling stage in their aspiration to become a teacher. However, the importance of a mentor seeking and understanding the identity of her PST was a blind spot on my trajectory. Soon enough, I came to realise the importance of thinking deeply about the different ways in which identities were operating and evolving in the school-based mentor and PST relationship. I saw many successful professional relationships between PSTs and mentors, which would prompt me to reflect and consider how I had been as a mentor. With every new observation of mentors in action, I appreciated more and more how mentoring was multi-faceted, dynamic and unpredictable work. Quality mentoring was different in different contexts—just as when I was a beginning teacher, I had come to appreciate that the learners in my classrooms were diverse, and each presented their strengths as learners in different ways.

Sometimes in the mentoring work I would do as PPC, I would *share* certain information or knowledge, and sometimes I would discuss my own experiences and beliefs as a teacher, and link this to the teaching and learning I had just observed. Often, I was a 'set of ears', listening to the dreams and aspirations of PSTs about to launch into a career in teaching. I began to appreciate, in more conscious ways than when I was a school-based mentor, the importance of forming a partnership with each PST I came to observe.

In writing *'Identity'*, I came to realise how important 'knowing oneself as an educator' can be for effective mentoring. As a PPC, I needed to move between spaces and participate in interactions between mentors and PSTs. In this work, I appreciated the 'hybrid character of the "Third Space"' (Gutiérrez, 2008, p. 149), as I worked to establish and navigate between these different settings. This involved substantial time liaising between the university and the school, helping each to cross boundaries, in order to promote mentoring relationships that were mutually beneficial (Martin et al., 2011, p. 300). I got the chance to spend time in many different schools and community education spaces. Opening the door to these spaces was an eye opening experience for me; I learned first hand about the diversity of educational spaces in and around Melbourne, which I had only ever read about or heard about before. It was as if each door to a new educational space was a door to new knowledge. One door would open to reveal another, and another. And just as I relished the opportunities to explore the previously unknown in terms of educational settings, these opportunities enabled me to learn more about myself as an educator.

Bells did not bind the diverse spaces I found myself working in; nor did teaching timetables. My days became 'meeting rich' and varied in the knowledge I was learning and sharing with others. In my role as a PPC, I would be frequently crossing boundaries, professionally and personally, each time I stepped inside a different 'Third Space' with a different PST or mentor. I was working and learning across multiple settings (Gutiérrez, 2008, p. 150), each one of them different – none of them could I classify as 'my own'. Across these multiple settings, I began to realise that my sense of identity would change depending on where I was physically, and the people with whom I was interacting.

The Gatekeepers of Knowledge

Writing the poem *'Who do you believe?'* in the second half of 2017 was an interesting experience for me. I had been thinking about the knowledge that I was bringing with me as a classroom teacher and comparing this to the knowledge of seasoned university lecturers, of other professional staff at the university, or of school-based mentors who had 30-plus years' experience. How would I as a new PPC be able to share or disseminate knowledge so that these education colleagues would trust or believe me? As I mused about these concerns, I began to ask myself big questions about knowledge and power in professional experience relationships – questions like: What types of knowledge are valued? Can that knowledge be distributed or shared in an open and inclusive manner by anyone in the professional experience space? It is these types of questions that I am grappling with in the next poem, *'Who do you believe?'*

Who do you believe? (August 2017)

Believing belief trust truth deepens

Who, whom, whoever

The holder of knowledge the knower of knowing

I imagine a bustling farmyard. The gate to the yard is rusty, noisy,

Creaking back and forth in a stilted, laboured fashion.

A little oil on the gate, and it swings freely, perhaps wildly, in the winds of change

In ‘*Who do you believe?*’, I wanted to explore the notion of knowledge in professional experience, and its relationship to belief and trust, and once again I use contrasts to do this. Olsen (2016) provocatively suggests that some people perceive a dichotomy between school-based mentor knowledge and knowledge that a PST acquires from the university. He describes how PSTs are sometimes ‘confused and unclear about the roles and expectations of supervisors and their relationships with them’ during professional experience placements (Olsen, 2016, p. 51). PSTs may feel caught between opposing perspectives of university-based supervisors (or consultants!) and their school-based mentors. They may be left feeling perplexed by a range of contradictory expectations. An additional level of confusion can arise when a mentor questions or even flatly dismisses the knowledge or information a PST has learned at university (or from research), and this can lead to a number of uncomfortable outcomes. In my role as PPC, I was sometimes required to engage with a PST and his/her mentor in order to resolve some problematic situations like this. I could never set myself up as the holder of all knowledge in this situation, but I felt I could draw on a range of knowledge or experience within educational settings and across sectors that could potentially help. But would I be believed? Would I be seen as ‘a holder of knowledge a knower of knowing’?

On my visits to different school settings, I was occasionally privy to conversations between mentors and PSTs where they enthusiastically agreed that professional experience placements were valuable for the PST to gain practical experience of the classroom. Recalling their own memories of university, some mentors would characterise university-based teacher education as ‘giving’ PSTs a range of theory but ‘ignoring’ practice. These mentors tended to believe that the information ‘located in books and articles from professors and researchers’ (Olsen, 2016, p. 21) was not being translated into practical knowledge or that universities did not teach PSTs how to participate in the ‘hands on’ aspect of a professional experience placement. Needless to say, governments across the world have commissioned inquiries into the quality of initial teacher education, suspecting that teacher education in universities is deficient in some way. For instance, the recent Australian inquiry by the Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group, *Action now: Classroom ready teachers* (2014) reported that both school principals and recent graduates were concerned about the way teaching graduates emerged from their degrees with a weak understanding of the link between theory and practice. This inquiry also suggested that PSTs typi-

cally begin their professional experience placements with limited understanding of important aspects of teaching (TEMAG, 2014).

Rather than siding with universities or schools, Olsen (2016) argues that the knowledge acquired by PSTs during professional experience placements comes from both the university and from mentor teachers (p. 20), and that the different forms of knowledge should be seen to complement each other. And yet PSTs often ask themselves: who should I believe, my university lecturer or my school-based mentor? I saw this on school visits where I had important information to communicate, either to a mentor or a PST—sometimes even to a principal. I was conscious that effective communication with the various stakeholders in the professional experience setting was paramount, and yet I sometimes sensed that coming from outside the school I had to work harder to earn the trust of PSTs and school-based mentors than when I was a teacher inside the school. The teachers I had come to work with as a PPC were once my colleagues. Strangely, those collegial relationships seemed different when I was no longer a teacher. Communicating with PSTs and mentors became a ‘sensitive balancing act’ (Martin et al., 2011, p. 304) as I would attempt to remind them of university requirements while ensuring that I also explicitly honoured the knowledge of the mentors in the school space.

Williams (2013) references this ‘balancing act’ when as a teacher educator, on the outside as it were, she has to negotiate relationships with PSTs and mentors within schools. As a PST, I recall my mentors discussing this concern. However, as a PPC visiting placement partners, I rarely had open discussions comparing the university teacher education experience with the in-school teacher education experience. From very early in my time as a PPC, I was convinced that relationships founded upon trust between mentor, PST and PPC were a crucial part of what Cole and Knowles (1995) call ‘the field-experience triad’ (p. 45). But I was concerned that an argument about the relative merits of ‘university experience versus school based professional experience’ could potentially undermine that trust, and thus undermine one of the key objectives of my work as a PPC, to build stronger relationships between partner schools and the university. In the metaphor of my poem, it could make the ‘rusty, noisy gate’ that should enable a free flow of knowledge between university and school even more ‘stilted and laboured’.

If trust was lost, the ‘stilted and laboured’ flow of knowledge could potentially break down altogether. As a PPC, I had a responsibility to sensitively apply ‘a little oil on the gate’ in the form of nurturing the relationship. If I was successful in applying this oil, then communication could flow more easily—the gate would swing ‘freely’. When the gate was swinging freely, this meant knowledge and communication were flowing more readily, and each of us in the professional experience ‘triad’ was more likely to respect the knowledge shared with us by others. That was not a guarantee for harmony, however, as suggested by the poem’s reference to the ‘perhaps wildly’ swinging gate. However, it did allow for a more positive third space of communication and knowledge sharing.

Negotiating Power in Professional Experience Placements

Writing 20 years ago, Fulwiler (1996) had described the work of university-based academic supervisors during PSTs' professional experience placements as 'challenging, intense' but also 'rewarding' (p. 22). My experiences as a PPC certainly reflected this at the time I wrote the poem, *'The power of the classroom (September 2017)'*. By then, I had made many visits to observe and speak with PSTs on placement. My visits often involved communicating and sharing knowledge with both mentors and PSTs. Many of these visits seemed equally rewarding for PST, mentor and me. Sometimes, however, conversations over the simplest of issues could feel like a push and pull wrestling match, with me moving around, looking for a position from which I could respectfully listen to explanations and propositions but also offer advice that I thought was important. The conversations varied greatly: from orienting the students at university level, to liaising between university and placement partners, to mediating in a conflict between PST and mentor (Fulwiler 1996; Cole & Knowles 1995).

The power of the classroom (September 2017)

A seesaw bearing weight on either side
 Depending on the day, it could be a wrestling match: you pull, I push
 I have to move around It's tough to create a shared balance
 But when that balance is achieved, it's a powerful straight plank
 Walk the plank, take the risk, dive in

'The power of the classroom' metaphorically explores the triadic relationships I was often part of when, as a PPC, I visited PSTs in schools. The poem centres on what I see as a crucial dimension of PST identity formation in professional experiences. For the PST as for me, it involved the pull and push of negotiating power and a sense of professional voice in an unfamiliar professional space. Martin et al. (2011) describe this as a 'jostling' for power in the relationship between PST, school-based mentor and university-based supervisor. They identify two elements in this jostling, 'cultivation' and 'navigation', and they argue that the exact nature of these elements can vary depending on the individuals involved. Nevertheless, as they say, the positive relationships that can result from this cultivation and navigation are crucial in developing triadic relationships from which all three people can learn.

Casting my mind back to my own professional experience placements as a PST, they often did feel like a *seesaw* of emotions. I would be trying to find ways of working with a new supervisor, and I would experience this as a 'you pull, I push' wrestle, hoping to acquire some sense of autonomy as a teacher, while of course realising I still had a lot to learn. Poststructuralist theory describes how power is an issue in all social situations, such as within relationships and human-to-human interactions (Taylor, 2014). It suggests that knowledge and power cannot be possessed like some commodity; rather they are exercised through the choices and interactions enacted between people. I had experienced this myself as a PST and mentor, and I was now

privity to new relationships experiencing the same moving around to achieve a shared balance. I could only do this if I kept in close contact with school classrooms, and maintained rich communication with mentors and PSTs before, during, and after the placement. When I was able to do this effectively, I felt we could ‘recognize and celebrate teacher strengths...explore dilemmas...and collaboratively construct the next steps’ (Fulwiler, 1996, p. 22) in the placement, in way that optimised the professional experience for all stakeholders.

Where to from Here?

Becoming an educator: an ongoing journey (October 2017)

An academic?

A professional staff member?

A researcher?

A teacher?

A mentor?

A learner?

An educator?

A PPC!

By October 2017, I was beginning to look back over the year that was rapidly drawing to a close, reflecting on who I had been and who I was becoming as a PPC. In writing this poem, I came to realise that all these different roles were part of my work as a PPC, but that they were only part of the story of my identity. In the first weeks of the year, my colleagues and my managers would often ask me how I felt the PPC experience was going. After one particular chat with a PPC colleague, I became acutely aware of the journeys of becoming that all of us PPCs had been living. This colleague and I discussed little things, like the dilemmas we experienced when having to tick one ‘occupation’ box from a drop down menu! ‘Do we have to choose just one?!,’ we asked each other. I remember another colleague explaining to me that she felt her role was as a manager, working in an educational context, and at the core of her work, she would always see herself as ‘an educator’.

When I had been a teacher in a primary classroom, I had often spoken to my students about the identity of a teacher. I am not the only ‘teacher’ of this class, I would tell them. Their parents were teachers, their friends, the Principal, the other staff in the classrooms they’d passed through in their learning journey... they were all their teachers, in different ways. The other students in the class were also their teachers! As the end of my first year as a PPC approached, I came to believe that the role of PPC comprised elements of all those other roles. And yet these roles only defined *what I did*; they didn’t define *who I was*. My identity was *associated* with all these roles, but it was always more than just them. I was *becoming* a different form

of educator from what I had been before, and this becoming continued with every new day of the job and every new visit to a school.

In October 2017, I had just begun to work with a new cohort of Monash PSTs, to liaise with new professional partners and to visit new professional experience settings. This offered new opportunities for teaching, learning, mentoring and researching. Whitchurch (2013) explores the poststructuralist idea of identity and the 'Third Space' in higher education, specifically discussing the identity of professional and academic staff within the sector. He suggests that new roles and identities appear to be emerging in recent years that have not existed previously (p. 20). These include higher education sector professionals who have a 'professional or academic background' (Whitchurch, 2013, p. 26) and who are overseeing projects such as learning support and building community partnerships. My experience as a PPC was bearing out Whitchurch's (2013) predictions of a new form of 'unbounded' professional, who could apply an exploratory approach to their work and draw upon external experiences and contacts to complete 'broadly based projects' (p. 8). These were the kinds of projects (and problem solving) that I was undertaking as a PPC. Experience and knowledge of teaching and learning were not just professional assets to do a defined job as a PPC; they gave me the capacity to do all manner of educational work within and across professional and academic domains (Whitchurch, 2013).

Conclusion

At the conclusion of 2017, I can say that my professional journey has taken me through a range of pathways that have enabled me to move into and grow through the role of PPC. Over the course of the year I sensed that my work and my identity were evolving and developing with every new experience. In this chapter, I have shown different elements of my journey from PST, to teacher, to mentor (in schools), and then to PPC, and considered how the year of being a PPC has itself been a journey. I have explored some complexities of the PPC role, including some challenges of negotiating triadic relationships with PSTs and school-based mentors on my visits to school settings and centres. Recounting my experiences through poetry was an important process for developing a deeper understanding of how the different experiences and roles were shaping my emerging identity as a PPC.

This understanding has continued to develop through the process of writing the narrative of this chapter. The processes of writing in my journal and in this chapter have enabled me to hold a mirror up to my journey through the myriad of 'Third Spaces' and see more clearly my identity within each space. In this professional journey, I have learned and developed across many spaces and settings (Gutiérrez, 2008) and my identity has stretched, changed and evolved as the settings and spaces grew in number. This is what I understand as the ongoing process of becoming an educator.

My identity today? I am a professional staff member, a 'consultant' for professional practice in teaching and learning, a teacher, a learner, an educator and a

researcher. I also see myself as ‘unbounded’ (Whitchurch, 2013) in my professional identity, striving to apply the knowledge, skills and experiences I have developed throughout my professional journey to this point. Where this role will take is still unknown. However, it is certain that the experiences will continue to shape who I am forging forward, back to the future.

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