The development of professional identity in early career primary teachers and its relationship to designing authentic learning experiences

Jessica Mantei
University of Wollongong, jessicam@uow.edu.au

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The development of professional identity
in early career primary teachers
and its relationship to
designing authentic learning experiences

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirement
for the award of the degree

Doctor of Philosophy
From the
University of Wollongong

By

Jessica Mantei
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University of Wollongong

Faculty of Education
2010
I, Jessica Mantei declare that this thesis, submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Faculty of Education, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Jessica Mantei
2nd March 2010
This thesis is dedicated to my Dad,
**David Miller**
who taught me to love to read and that I can read anything

To my Mum,
**Margaret Miller**
my first professional mentor and colleague

And to my husband,
**Michael Mantei**
who tolerates my reading late into the night
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Abstract

The retirement of a significant proportion of late career teachers from Australian schools has meant early and mid career teachers are responsible for reshaping pedagogies to enable today’s students to engage with learning experiences relevant to their needs in authentic learning contexts. The literature reports that reflected in a teacher’s ability to design authentic learning experiences (see Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Herrington & Oliver, 2000) are the beliefs a teacher holds about what it is to be a teacher, that is, their professional identity (Ramsey, 2000; Rowe, 2003).

The professional identity of an early career teacher is reported as somewhat fragile and vulnerable to the demands and pressures of the first years of classroom practice (see Darling-Hammond, 2006a; McCormack, Gore, & Thomas, 2006). A closer focus on the development of professional identity during preservice teacher education could support early career teachers’ ‘survival’ during these early years.

This inquiry investigates the development of professional identity in early career primary teachers and its relationship to designing authentic learning experiences. Specifically, it explores the ways early career teachers’ abilities to plan and design authentic learning experiences change in response to the development of their professional identity.

The inquiry adopted a design-based approach (Reeves, 2000, 2006) as an organisational frame as it provided a useful way to organise and report the phases of the inquiry and the different focus taken for each. Within this frame, a qualitative research design employed ethnographic principles and action research to collect and analyse rich data from two groups of participants: experienced classroom teachers and early career teachers.

Data were analysed using the constant comparison method through the multiple lenses of quality teaching (see Darling-Hammond, 1997; Ramsey, 2000), authentic learning
experiences (see Brown et al., 1989; Herrington & Oliver, 2000) and professional identity (see Connelly & Clandinin, 1999; Wenger, 1998).

The results of this inquiry generated a theory for the development of a professional identity that focuses not only on oneself as a teacher in a particular school, but also on the types of learners one aims to develop. Further, the findings of this inquiry argue for a professional identity that identifies with teachers beyond the immediate setting of a single school to active engagement within the broader community of teachers. Findings of the inquiry highlighted the ways that teacher education programs can advance the skills of reflective practice, professional dialogue, making connections between theory and practice and active participation within the community of professional teachers to develop an identity that equips early career teachers for the rigours of teaching. Consequently, the theory for the development of professional identity also calls teacher educators to reflect on their own identities and the ways they are translated into learning experiences.

The findings of the inquiry support the argument that questions of identity and the principles for the development of professional identity are related to the development of a professional identity that is characterised by resilience, durability and responsibility. The development of a sense of professional responsibility was observed to empower the early career teachers in this inquiry to participate in the practices of a range of teaching communities, both as consumers and producers of knowledge.

Such findings, it is argued, are critical for teacher educators to consider as they plan learning experiences that support early career teachers as they enter the teaching profession.
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