

One step forward, two steps back: the mentoring experiences of three provisionally registered teachers in Victorian secondary school.

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Background

This paper outlines the experiences of three provisionally registered teachers during their first year of teaching in Victorian secondary schools. The cases present the interactions the beginning teachers had with their mentors, both formally and informally identified, and discusses the nature of the professional learning arising from these relationships.

Mentoring has become a strong focus globally as education systems seek both to stem the high levels of attrition and to facilitate the acquisition and exchange of professional knowledge. It is identified as the human resource management strategy that can provide support for newly qualified teachers as they begin their teaching lives, as well as serving to reinvigorate experienced teachers. This study is concerned with the impact of mentoring on newly qualified teachers' acquisition of personal, professional knowledge.

Research Questions

Many countries have adopted a standards based approach to address the problem. In 2004, The Victorian Institute of Teaching introduced a requirement of a standards - based approach to full registration for beginning teachers. Provisionally registered teachers select one of three approaches through which they can gather evidence of the growth of their professional knowledge in order to meet the Victorian Institute of Teaching's registration requirements for competency. School-based formal mentors are appointed to support beginning teachers as they address the criteria for registration. The three case studies presented arise from a phenomenological oriented case study, which examined the nature of the professional learning that resulted from the interactions that beginning teachers had with both their formal and informal mentors. The participants (n = 8) were 2007 graduates of a secondary teaching course at a Victorian University. The study commenced in October 2007 and was completed by December 2008.

Methods

Over the course of the study, participants were involved in in-depth face to face interviews. Diaries provided some insight into developing collegial relationships, which were explored further during discussions. Seven of the participants remained in the study for the full year and all of these returned to teaching in their second year.

Frame

Qualitative data were analysed from two main perspectives. The first perspective drew on the mentor categories identified by Wang and Odell (2004) to provide some insight into the types of mentoring relationships the participants experienced. The second perspective used the works of Bourdieu and Wenger as theoretical frameworks to understand the nature of learning as a result of the reported mentor relationships.

Wenger's theory of 'communities of practice' provided insight into the structures, both reified and participatory, which supported the beginning teachers as they became part of their school communities. Neither implicitly positive nor negative, 'communities of practice' provides an understanding of how professional knowledge is exchanged between the experienced teachers and neophytes through legitimate peripheral participation.

Bourdieu's work encourages a deeper examination of the social conditions under which teachers learn. Using the notion of the 'cultivated man', Bourdieu's elements of pedagogic work, pedagogic

action and pedagogic authority allow some insight into how beginning teachers learn what it means to be the 'cultivated man' from their more experienced colleagues. This theoretical lens allowed analysis of the reported interactions and uncovered the use of 'symbolic violence'.

Trompe l'oeil became part of the data representation as a result of the notion of symbolic violence. As an art form, it serves to challenge the meaning we attach to representations and invites the viewer to take a 'second look' at the world as we know it. As part of this study's methodology, trompe l'oeil gives an artistic representation of the notion of symbolic violence, a veiled means of coercion that relies on time and honour to elicit the behaviours valued by social groups.

Research findings

Over the course of the study, participants identified both formal and informal relationships, with variance in the quality of those relationships being evident. Historically embedded factors of time, isolated practice, professional autonomy and views of knowledge remained prevalent, were encouraged to some degree on the mentor relationships and impacted upon the professional learning of all participants. In particular, time and honour, were identified as operants to develop the 'cultivated man' within the teaching 'field of practice'.

The results suggest further attention needs to be given to the quality and consistency of the learning experienced by beginning teachers. While some beginning teachers reported strong pedagogical discussions with their formal mentors, others were relying more on trying to access private knowledge through friendship based relationships or clandestine measures. These latter behaviours tend to reinforce the cultural norms of 'learning to teach' identified by Lortie (1975), Little (1991) and Moore-Johnson et al (2004).

The Victorian Institute of Teaching has a significant investment in the mentor program as an avenue for improving the retention and quality of teachers in their early years of practice. This study highlights that the implementation of the standards, the understanding of competency and the role mentor relationships play in the development of provisionally registered teachers are all impacted upon by the cultural norms within schools. As such, it cannot be assumed that the introduction of the VIT registration process will result easily in the type of learning envisaged by the governing body. The findings of this study provide an impetus for further investigation into the school-based issues related to mentoring. In particular, long term studies that explore the complexities of beginning teachers' lives are more likely to expose the cultural norms perpetuated through symbolic violence, and which can remain hidden in less in-depth investigations. This would allow the focus on the potential benefits of mentoring to be maintained within a realistic appraisal of the impact of the embedded cultural norms of teaching communities.