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## **Is mentoring up to the standard?**

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### **Background**

International and Australian research into issues surrounding the professionalisation, socialisation and retention of beginning teachers points to the complex challenges beginning teachers face when navigating the professional landscape. This paper examines a select aspect of teacher professional knowledge. The focus is the construction of the unique novice-expert relationship commonly referred to as 'induction and mentoring'. The research aims to contribute to an existing knowledge base about the needs of beginning teachers and their early career experiences. It examines issues of pedagogical knowledge, power and agency, professional identity and the combined impact of these elements on teacher retention.

### **Research Questions**

This paper details a phenomenological study of the beginning teacher-mentor teacher relationship. Fieldwork was undertaken in the final school term of 2009 and data were collected using qualitative methods from multiple data sources. Individual and focus group interviews were employed. Rich data was also yielded from email and discussion forum entries submitted across the duration of the entire 2009 school year via an electronic university subject site. The participants (n=28) were provisionally registered teachers (27 secondary teachers and 1 early childhood teacher). Concurrently, the participants were enrolled students in the final year of their Master of Teaching degree at the University of Melbourne (subjects 460 551 Professional Portfolio and 460 553 Investigating Practice). These subjects were designed to support beginning teachers in their graduate year. The design of the subjects was informed by previous research conducted two years prior with beginning teachers from an undergraduate degree at the same university, referred to in paper 1 of the symposium.

### **Methods**

Given the impending teacher shortage and subsequent impact upon quality teaching and quality schools it is imperative that we further research the career entry processes and experiences of beginning teachers (McKinsey Report, 2007; Richardson & Watt, 2006; MCEETYA 1999; Murnane et al. 1991, Henke et al., 2000). Before 1990 few comprehensive studies were found that examined the impact of mentoring on beginning teachers (Little, 1990, Feiman-Nemser 1997). More studies have been sought that directly correlate the effects of mentoring upon teachers, teaching and teacher retention as well as the systemic structures and resources that support mentors and the mentoring process. This study examines how professional knowledge is constructed and transferred to the classroom within the context of statutory induction and mentoring programs and the subsequent impact upon the professionalisation, socialisation, transformative identity and retention of beginning teachers. Further to this the data produced provides evidence of the value and effectiveness of a university-based induction and mentoring subject to support beginning teachers in their graduate year.

Victorian teachers educate one quarter of Australia's children. By conducting the research in the state of Victoria, Australia, the study sought to determine whether induction and mentoring processes, framed by the Victorian Institute of Teaching Standards for Graduating Teachers, are an effective catalyst for professionalising beginning teachers. The study provides a local Victorian interpretation of what beginning teachers view as supportive practices in the areas of:

- Induction, which is limited to the school-based activities that assist a participant in understanding the expectations and mechanics of the role from the time of appointment to the end of the first month of tenure.
- Mentoring, which assumes a number of guises and studies that tend to bracket a range of practices

together. This is loosely defined as the relationships made between the participant and colleagues.

The transition from university student to autonomous teaching professional requires a critical morphing of identity. Theoretical and pedagogical assumptions are made about how beginning teachers acquire personal, professional knowledge and engage with the profession. Beginning teachers are still grappling with philosophical beliefs and issues of professional identity at the same time as statutory authorities require them to demonstrate effective practice and provide evidence of professional knowledge in order to achieve full registration. Beginning teachers frequently encounter hurdles such as poor conditions, isolation, lack of materials and resources and challenging students. These social and material practices suggest poor orientation and socialization processes. Understanding how beginning teachers have developed over their first year in the profession; the roles, realities and dynamics of the beginning teacher-mentor relationship may inform the redevelopment of existing approaches that support effective and induction and mentoring practices.

## **Frame**

Transcribed data were searched for phenomenological categories and codes used to identify emergent themes, patterns and broad areas in the discourse. Categories and subcategories were distinguished and major themes highlighted. Data were then re-examined to determine intentions, functions and consequences. Rival interpretations were eliminated by seeking alternative explanations and determining degrees of variability. Meticulous interpretation of textual material was supported by linguistic evidence with sensitivity to the nuances of language (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007).

Building on the notion that practices are discursively shaped and enacted (Foucault, 1975) the intrinsic properties of discourse that can be linguistically analysed present interpretive opportunities to examine the way social practices are discursively moulded. The conceptual lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995) provided an effective tool to gain insight into the ways that socio-political inequalities or hegemonies are reproduced by discourse. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides a three-dimensional framework where intersections of text analysis, discourse practice and discursive events are analysed as instances of socio-cultural practice. For this study it was impossible to separate agencies of power from institutional conversations and more particularly those necessitated for statutory registration purposes. CDA systemically positions text or talk within the socio-political structures of power, dominant hierarchies and bureaucracy and this was an element for examination within this study.

## **Research findings**

The findings of the study indicate support for the university based initiative, but also point to the fragility of the contexts that these beginning teachers inhabit, contexts where mentoring is understood as both rich in opportunity for the development of teacher identity but also heavy in local politics and weak initial socialisation which contributes to the best beginning teachers leaving the profession.