New teachers, mentoring and the discursive formation of professional identity

Anita Devos*

Faculty of Education, Monash University, Clayton Victoria 3800, Australia

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 15 May 2009
Received in revised form 27 January 2010
Accepted 5 March 2010

Keywords:
Mentoring
New teachers
Professional development
Professional standards
Professional identity

ABSTRACT

This paper considers the implications of mentoring for the discursive formation of professional identities of newly graduated teachers. The site for this analysis is the Teacher Mentoring and Induction Program, in Victoria, Australia. The paper draws attention to the effects of mentoring as conceived in this context on the construction of new teacher identities, the close relationship between professional standards and mentoring, the relationship between mentoring and the performative culture of schools, and what it means to be ‘a good teacher’ within this culture. The aim is to reposition mentoring as a product of its contexts and times, and in so doing contribute to the development of a more theoretically informed and critical platform from which to conduct research into its effects and benefits.

© 2010 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

In 2003, the Government of the state of Victoria, Australia, introduced a new teacher induction and mentoring program aimed at supporting graduate teachers in their first year of teaching. The program was developed as a collaboration between the Department of Education and Training, the Catholic Education Office, and the Association of Independent Schools of Victoria; and is jointly delivered by the Department and the Victorian Institute of Teachers (VIT), a statutory authority established for the regulation and promotion of the teaching profession. In this article, I wish to consider the ways the mentoring program shapes the formation of new teacher identity as they make the transition from university to teaching. In doing this, I build on previous work in which I considered the productive effects of mentoring in relation to women academics (Devos, 2004a, 2005, 2007). In that work I argued that mentoring programs promote regulation and self-regulation as academics respond to the changing demands of contemporary universities.

Mentoring enjoys widespread support in the teaching profession (as in many others), is generally regarded as beneficial or at least benign, and is not generally subject to critical analysis. It is also not well-theorised (Colley, 2003) leading to a lack of clarity regarding its meanings, its effects and its complexities. In this article I aim to develop insights into what mentoring is and how it works through an appraisal of the ways it shapes possible identities for new teachers. This work is important in developing a theoretically informed platform from which to research its effects.

The approach I take draws on theories of governmentality and discourse, and treads a similar path to Kathy Nicoll and Roger Harrison’s (2003) analysis in the UK of the discursive work of standards in constructing ‘the good teacher’ in higher education. My project here departs from theirs in two ways: firstly in my discussion of new teacher mentoring as the vehicle through which these standards are normalised and operationalised; and secondly in terms of the regulatory environment that governs new teacher registration. Unlike in higher education, in the Victorian schools context, new teachers must participate in the Induction and Mentoring Program in order to continue to teach, reflecting the exercise of sovereign power in the form of a legitimating, gate-keeping function, in addition to disciplinary forms of power exercised through discourses of professionalism and standards.

My intention is not to debate the merits of the Victorian program, nor to propose a set of recommendations for improving the program or enhancing mentoring practices. Rather I am interested in the ways mentoring shapes how new teachers understand themselves and their work. I’d argue that mentoring as a vehicle for operationalising the professional standards plays an important role in shaping the profession over time and hence demands greater scrutiny than has been applied to date. My concern is that the forms and technologies that accompany new teacher mentoring risk narrowing conceptions of good teaching within a normative framework at a time when greater diversity of practices is required given the increasingly complex environments in which teachers

---

* Tel.: +61 3 9905 9143; fax: +61 3 9905 2779.
E-mail address: anita.devos@education.monash.edu.au

0742-051X/$ – see front matter © 2010 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.
doi:10.1016/j.tate.2010.03.001
work. The induction and mentoring program also needs to be considered within the context of the increasingly performative culture of schools through which schools, their teachers, administrators, students and parents, are regulated and judged.

2. Introducing the program in Victoria, Australia

Under the Victorian ‘Induction and Mentoring of Beginning Teachers’ policy, new graduates are provisionally registered for a period of 12 months during which time (if employed in a school) they are required to participate in the Provisionally Registered Teachers (PRT) Program. In this program, the new teacher is mentored by a more experienced teacher in their school. In order to seek full registration as a teacher (and stay in employment) PRTs are required to present evidence of their competence against eight Standards of Professional Practice at the conclusion of the 12 month period. The Standards are grouped under three headings—Professional Knowledge, Professional Practice and Professional Engagement. Standards listed under Professional Knowledge include:

- teachers know how students learn and know how to teach them effectively;
- teachers know the content they teach;
- teachers know their students;

Under Professional Practice are listed:

- teachers plan and assess for effective learning;
- teachers create and maintain safe and challenging learning environments;
- teachers use a range of teaching strategies and resources to engage students in effective learning;

And under Professional Engagement are:

- teachers reflect on, evaluate and improve their professional knowledge and practice, and;
- teachers are active members of their profession (VIT, 2002).

Program documentation requires PRTs to demonstrate their professional practice through Evidence of Professional Practice, or a portfolio. This has three elements:

1. three classroom activities they undertake with experienced colleagues, two in the PRT’s classroom and one in the more experienced teacher’s classroom;
2. an analysis of teaching and learning where they document and reflect on a sequence of learning they have undertaken with a group of students, and;
3. a commentary on Professional Activities, where they keep a list of such activities undertaken through the year and write a brief commentary on three.

At the end of the year, PRTs may apply for full registration with the VIT. The VIT registers teachers working in Victorian government, Catholic and independent schools. All practising Victorian school teachers must be registered by the Institute. The PRT applies by asking the principal to begin the recommendation process. The evidence is presented to a school based panel on which sit the principal, a teacher nominated by the PRT, and a trained mentor other than their own. Alternatively, a PRT can request an extension of time to compile their evidence. The evidence presented must demonstrate the PRT has achieved the eight standards.

Extensive training is provided for mentors in the program, involving attendance at Mentor Support days, seminars and a kit of written materials, readings and guides. PRTs are interestingly not offered any training around their roles and expectations in the program. Written sheets known as ‘Activity records’ are provided for mentors and PRTs to complete for each of the collegiate classroom activities. These activity records are recommended as a way of structuring the discussion between mentors and PRT over teaching practice. They in turn relate the tasks at hand back to the relevant Professional Standards. I will return to these activity sheets later in the paper, but turn now to look at new teacher mentoring in the United States and United Kingdom.

The model of mentoring promoted through the Victorian program can be contrasted with alternative forms of mentoring not tied to specific performance standards, but open ended and aimed at promoting critical reflection on practice conceived in context as the basis for learning. These could include group, peer and network models of mentoring in which induction into a workplace is separated from mentoring, and new teachers draw emotional and practical support from one another, and from more experienced teachers around them, in the development of their teaching philosophy and practices. Such an alternative approach offers the parties, both mentors and mentees, greater agency to create their own strategies, priorities and ways of working within the environment in which they work and teach.

3. Mentoring for new teachers: the UK and US experience

In introducing mentoring for beginning teachers Victoria is following a trend established in many other parts of the English-speaking world. The studies referred to below provide a snapshot of some recent research on new teacher mentoring in the UK and US in recent years. Williams and Prestage (2002) refer to the new induction arrangements put in place in England in 1999. These arrangements have as a key feature individual mentoring of the new teacher by a more experienced teacher for a 12-month period during their first year of teaching. They note this in effect re-instanted the probationary year abolished during the early 1990s. In Scotland, a Teacher Induction Program sets out a minimum level of experiences that probationer teachers must work through over 12 months with an ‘induction supporter’ in order to qualify for full registration (Rippon & Martin, 2003).

Many states in the United States likewise provide an induction program for new teachers (again of which mentoring forms the key and sometimes only component). The federal No Child Left Behind Act (2001), which required that each classroom have a ‘highly qualified’ teacher by 2005–2006 provided further impetus to the development of mentoring programs across states (Fletcher & Barrett, 2004). The authors note that ‘highly qualified’ for new teachers means having a state certification, a bachelor’s degree and subject matter competency (p. 321).

The induction arrangements in each setting differ in a range of ways, however they share as a key component individual mentoring of the new teacher by a more experienced teacher, in most cases in the same school. Note though that the ways in which the term is used and understood varies in different contexts particularly with regard to the balance of support and evaluation roles (Williams & Prestage, 2002). That is, understandings of mentoring vary across contexts and sites. As Williams and Prestage (2002, p. 37) point out with reference to Ball (1994), there is disjunction too between policy as text and policy as process. By this they mean there is differentiation occurring in how schools understand and act upon the same policy texts. This should not I suggest be regarded as a weakness or failure of policy but as an expected outcome of implementation of any policy text across many sites, that offers potential for the formulation of site-specific responses and strategies.
There are a number of reasons advanced for implementing mentoring programs for new teachers, the main one given being to retain teachers in the profession. A survey by the Victorian branch of the AEU (Fensling, Lowe, Nikolovska, & Roadley, 2004) of teachers who had been teaching for 5 years or less, found that four in ten respondents did not see themselves teaching in the public system in 10 years time (p. 24). The reasons given included concerns about pay, workload, tenure of employment, and stress associated with attending professional development while also teaching a full timetable. The Union concluded appropriate mentoring at school level together with reduced workloads for new teachers was urgently required.

Stanulis, Fallona, and Pearson (2002) too locate their discussion of mentoring in the context of a problem of teacher attrition in the US. Teachers, they argue are not provided with sufficient support or structured induction that is responsive to their needs. They need help to make the transition to teacher. The authors point to research that suggests that “the presence of a strong induction program can make a significance difference in the retention and quality” of teachers (p. 72).

Martinez (2004) argues current and projected teacher shortages are the major imperative for renewed enthusiasm for mentoring in the US and Australia. She notes some disagreement about the extent of the shortfall over all, but cites consensus about the shortfall in particular areas of teacher supply, such as science and mathematics, special needs teachers, and teachers prepared to work in remote and rural locations (p. 96). She refers to work by Preston (2001) on teacher supply and demand which identified those children most likely to be affected by shortages, particularly in schools that are ‘hard to staff’ or ‘unattractive’. These are those schools that are already disadvantaged by wider patterns of economic, social and educational inequities. Speaking of the differentiated impact of teacher supply and demand in the US, Zeichner (2001) states “students already exhibiting low academic performance, those most in need of investment and effective intervention, have a high probability of being taught by an under-prepared teacher” (p. 5).

Martinez cites 1998 figures projecting that in the US “over 2 million teachers will enter schools before 2010” (p. 96), drawing attention here to the impact on a system of the sheer quantity of teachers entering schools. Issues then of teacher quality and quantity combine to create new demands on teacher education and professional development, and, Martinez argues, “cannot be separated out from broader patterns of social and economic inequity in our efforts to build and sustain decent democratic societies” (p. 97).

In this account then mentoring has a broader role to play than just inducting or supporting new teachers. That role relates to one’s reading of the social and political contexts of teaching and learning and the roles of schools in society. Martinez’ reading implies a direct and causal relationship between mentoring and teacher competence or ‘quality’, however that may be adjudged, and between quality and disadvantage.

Martinez too discusses teacher attrition as a driving force referring again to the differentiated impact of attrition. She notes 1999 data from Queensland (another Australian state) that government schools are losing at the highest rate the teachers it has most difficulty attracting, namely teachers rated highly at entry point to the profession, and those groups of teachers referred to earlier (p. 97). Many teachers cited a lack of support as their reason for leaving, although the author did not expand what forms of support were found wanting. In the US the attrition rate for new teachers is 15% compared to 6% over all with some studies suggesting “...it is the most promising teachers who leave in the early years” (Gordon & Maxey, 2000, p. 2). Martinez questions whether mentoring can in fact ‘interrupt’ the patterns of inequity, or whether it risks reinforcing inequities, with teachers who stay focussing on survival rather than perhaps innovation.

Common to many of the accounts of mentoring for new teachers is the implicit belief that mentoring contributes to improving teaching quality, or improving teacher effectiveness. Teacher effectiveness is usually measured by looking at the performance of students, in tests or in the form of pre and post-testing to identify individual improvements against prior performance. Fletcher et al. (2004) surveyed new teachers on their experience of mentoring. They note that while retaining teachers matters, the current emphasis on accountability means mentoring needs to do more than just keep teachers on the job. New teachers often work in ‘low performing schools’ and are generally expected to be as effective as experienced teachers. They note “as experienced teachers are more likely to move out of low achieving schools for better working conditions [...] the size of the school’s achievement goal may be inversely proportional to the experience level of the faculty” (p. 322), meaning new teachers may be expected to be more effective than experienced ones. The authors compared new teachers’ comments on their mentoring experience with their students’ results, and found that the mentoring program improved the new teachers’ classroom effectiveness and their ‘collegial effectiveness’ in the school. This study is worth noting for the explicit relationship it draws between new teacher induction and student performance. This is then projected onto school performance as it is taken as read that good student performance on tests means a school is performing well. Highlighted in this series of moves are the broader accountability and performativity dimensions of mentoring with the simultaneous ignoring of contextual features that contribute to measures of teacher or school ‘effectiveness’. I refer here to the wider socio-cultural spaces in which a school operates.

4. Constructing ‘the good teacher’ through mentoring: discussion

In the mentoring literature, the matter of teacher identity is mentioned on occasion (see for example Stanulis et al., 2002) but is never explicitly discussed or theorised. In this article I draw on the concept of governmentality as a means to understand identity and how it is constructed in contemporary workplaces. Governmentality may be defined as:

...all endeavours to shape, guide, direct the conduct of others, (...). And it also embraces the ways in which one might be urged and educated to bridge one's own conduct, to control one's own instincts, to govern oneself Rose (1999 (1989)).

A central feature of governmentality is the way in which one takes up the project of managing one's own conduct within the prevailing conditions, of constructing oneself as a self-regulating, self-managing subject (Devos, 2004b). This process is not inevitable but one effect of the power exercised through discourses operating in the site in question.

The concept of governmentality affords insights into the work that professional development—and in this case, mentoring—performs in organisations. In mentoring, the mentee, her work practices and her identity becomes subject to transformation, or reconstitution. Mentoring may produce changes in one's work and practice but also necessarily produces new ways of understanding and positioning oneself in discourse, in this case, the discursive environment created through the mentoring program and the professional standards governing the registration of Victorian school teachers. Chappell, Rhodes, Solomon, Tennant, and Yates (2003) argue
... words and ideas ... are not neutral representations of a pre-existing reality, but act as powerful practices that ‘do work’ by constructing particular realities (…) Put simply, our conception of who we are, our identity, is constituted by the power of all of the discursive practices in which we speak and which in turn ‘speak’ us (p. 41).

Through the discourses of professional standards new teachers are being constructed as particular sorts of teachers. Discourses are technologies of power that act as ‘… an inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by internalising to the point that he is his own supervisor, each individual thus exercising surveillance over, and against, himself [sic]’ (Miller & Rose, 1993, p. 223). Discourses are powerful because they construct regimes of truth with their attendant disciplinary practices (see for example Nicoll & Harrison, 2003; Usher & Solomon, 1999). They “hide their presence in their construction” (Chappell et al., 2003, p. 42) thus disguising their role in determining what may or may not be said and by whom, and what it is or is not possible to be or to become. The individual acts (to differing extents) upon herself and through mentoring to construct her behaviour and identity within the terms allowed in the discourses in any given context (see Devos, 2004a).

Mentoring offered through the Victorian program is highly structured, with specific tasks, activity records and work sheets to be completed by the mentor and mentee over the course of the year, reflecting a procedural focus for the relationship (Rippon & Martin, 2003). Several pages of instructions are provided to the parties on how to talk about and complete these forms. While it is not mandatory to fill the forms out, the data produced through mentor/mentee meetings and the records completed at these meetings are required as evidence of competence in the final portfolio to be produced by the PRT.

The documentation associated with the program reflects a textualisation of work and of identity, wherein identity is produced through the documentation of one’s behaviours and values, the writing up of oneself. This preoccupation with textual production is perhaps not surprising given the long-standing culture in the teaching profession of documentation. It also reflects the profound influence of competency-based models of education since the early to mid 1990s, wherein teaching (like any occupation) can be disassembled into its component bits—a list of competences, tasks, elements, performance levels and attitudes—and in which questions of power and context are generally absent.

While many informal interactions may occur between mentors and mentees which fall outside these tasks (see Corrigan & Loughran, 2007), the relationship is driven by the documentation and demands of full registration which in turn are framed through the discourses of the professional standards, particularly through prevailing conceptions of ‘the reflective practitioner’. The standards include many elements common to professional development in universities and schools—namely a requirement to document practice, give evidence of performance, reflect on needs, and a commitment to develop and improve one’s teaching (Nicoll & Harrison, 2003). Yet as Nicoll and Harrison (2003) argue the focus is “on teaching as a ‘technical’ activity defined as competence and reflective practice in a particular domain” (p. 24). I acknowledge the importance of teachers acquiring certain technical skills but understand ‘technical’ here to mean a narrowly defined set of skills applied mechanistically irrespective of context. Nicoll & Harrison argue certain sorts of teachers, improvements, and technologies of self-development are promoted through a standards framework, necessarily limiting the expression and growth of others. That is, certain forms of improvements and pedagogical practices are promoted while others are implicitly ruled out.

Discourses are of course not hegemonic but produce counter discourses as subjects seek alternative ways of understanding and constructing their subjectivities other than those made available to them. The close association, however, between mentoring, the textual and subjectivity demands of the portfolio, and full registration as a teacher places caveats on what it is possible to become particularly for new teachers looking for a permanent job.

Nicoll and Harrison (2003) point to the impossibility of any one set of standards pertaining equally at all times across all disciplines and contexts of higher education. The same concern should be expressed in regard to school teaching, given the range of disciplines taught across schools, the differences between primary and secondary school teaching, the vastly different sites of practice, and the differing conditions under which teachers and schools operate. Martinez’ work (2004) echoes this sentiment in her discussion of the need for highly differentiated approaches to teacher mentoring across schools that differ significantly on a range of indicators—to give a local example, from an independent Anglican girls school in a leafy upper-middle class suburb, compared to an inner city state co-educational school mainly serving a new refugee community. Standardisation necessarily standardises and in the process what it means to be a ‘professional’ teacher may be constituted in specific ways irrespective of context and relations of power within each context.

Within the Victorian standards, a certain sort of autonomous worker-learner, ‘a reflective practitioner’, is valorised, drawing on understandings from humanist psychology about the nature of identity. These ‘individualised and psychologised’ understandings have been criticised for being ahistorical, asocial, and “failing to acknowledge the role of culture, power and environment in shaping subjectivity” (Nicoll & Harrison, 2003). Other identities made available through pedagogical traditions such as critical or feminist pedagogies are ruled out of contention within the prevailing discourse. Emphasis is placed on the ‘how’ of learning rather than questions of ‘why’ and ‘what’ which might arise through the adoption of such pedagogical approaches (p. 31).

5. Conclusion

I would like to make five comments in closing.

Mentoring needs to be located within its institutional and political contexts as a technology for the production of worker identities. PRTs in Victoria must produce evidence of themselves within the discourses of the professional standards in order to practice as teachers. While the standards are couched in broad terms, the ways in which mentoring has been framed promotes specific and standardised identities and conceptions of what constitutes good teaching.

In the article, I have drawn attention to the ways mentoring for new teachers in Victoria is linked to school accountability and performativity agendas, embedded in new forms of managerialism that characterise public education and public services generally. The Teacher Induction and Mentoring Program and the standards it enshrines acts as a gatekeeper, policing who enters the teaching profession and who does not. It potentially weeds out those who may be regarded as ‘unsuitable’ for teaching, a poor fit for the profession or the school in question, and supports school performance goals. Mentoring therefore performs a range of jobs over and above merely ‘supporting new teachers’ or ‘reducing teacher attrition’.

Given the political work mentoring performs, we must interrogate what sorts of teachers are being produced through the Victorian experience of mentoring, and whether these teachers are best equipped to meet the challenges of teaching in schools today. This is not to suggest they as individuals are under equipped but to question whether the promotion of standardised conceptions of what...
constitutes good teaching from an individualised psychological framework are most helpful in dealing with the challenging job of teaching. At a time when the knowledge bases any new teacher is expected to command are increasingly diverse and more complex (Martinez, 2004), arguably the range of identities available to new teachers is being narrowed, as mentoring and the professional standards it enshrines places a template around what it is to teach.

Standardisation of the mentoring process assumes that one size fits all, when it is clear graduating teachers display different abilities and capacity for innovation. A mentoring process must acknowledge this or else face departure of the best and brightest due to frustration at lack of support for innovation and diversity of approach, and further stagnation of a system and profession recognised for conservatism.

A further concern relates to the silence in new teacher mentoring around schools as workplaces. The professional standards make brief reference to ‘teachers as active members of their profession’ but this abstraction does not capture what it means to work in a complex and highly porous environment, with all its complexities, politics, tensions, and pleasures. I refer here to the work of Kostogritz and Peeler (2007) on the experience of overseas trained teachers in Australian schools, in which they highlight the ways ‘professional communities’ promote normative conceptions of teaching and of community membership that marginalise and sometimes disallow expressions of culturally diverse teaching practices and identities.

In conclusion, mentoring for new teachers should be subject to much greater scrutiny than has been given to date, as a vehicle for producing particular sorts of teachers for the times and the place. This means we need to do research that might enrich our understandings of mentoring, rather than stick to a current narrow focus on aspects of mentoring program design and improvement, or the ‘improvement imperative’. If we approach mentoring in the ways I suggest it influences the kinds of research questions we might ask and the empirical work we might do.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Jenny Miller, David Simpson and two anonymous reviewers for their very helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article.

References


