

# Exploring the Identity of a Pre-Service Teacher: Communal Processes During the Practicum

Margaret Walshaw  
Massey University  
<m.a.walshaw@massey.ac.nz>

This paper explores the question of teacher identity during the practicum experience. Foucault's insights are applied to explain the 'making' of one pre-service teacher. I provide an analysis of the ways in which the realities of the social and material structures in schools play out in everyday activity within schools. The view is towards developing a sensitivity of the impact of regulatory practices on a pre-service teacher's construction of herself as teacher.

## Learning to Teach

This paper explores the identity of a pre-service teacher in the context of her practice in schools. The practicum is an important component of initial teacher education precisely because it is in schools where possibilities and constraints of the teacher's identity in the classroom are first confronted—where relationships are directly implicated and where multiple meanings are made. It is where structural and organisational school processes and the taken-for-granted understandings amongst school personnel impact in important ways on those learning to teach.

Community is the cornerstone of many successful practicum stories (Alton-Lee, 2003; Anthony & Walshaw, 2007). Community is about interactions between contexts and people: a *relation* between settings and the people within those settings. Within the practicum, a sense of community develops from shared understandings of respective roles and an agreed upon meaning of pedagogical practice (Smith & Lev-Ari, 2005; Turnbull, 2005). Supervising teachers are key players in establishing the kind of community that will facilitate the development of an effective teacher (Brown & Danaher, 2008; Darling-Hammond, Chung, & Frelow, 2002). Not only do they contribute to the professional learning of the pre-service teacher, they also, according to Sinclair (2008), influence 'how', and indeed 'if', the pre-service teacher's commitment to teaching will be sustained. Successful pre-service teachers, as Sinclair observes, are those who work within a professional community of shared knowledge of and shared thinking about pedagogical practice, and who are assisted both practically and emotionally through personal and systemic support.

If, in practicum arrangements, the importance of learning to teach depends a great deal on shared knowledge and thinking, and on support, then we would want to know precisely how teacher identity is negotiated within the structures and community of professionals, charged with the task of supporting pre-service teachers' development in schools. Yet a supportive and professionally focused context stands up against the contradictory realities and competing perspectives that are not uncommon during the practicum experience (Britzman, 2003). Placed in a vulnerable and dependent position, the pre-service teacher is confronted with the key paradox of learning to teach, namely, that "there can be no learning without conflict, but the conflict that animates learning threatens to derail the precarious efforts of trying to learn" (Britzman, p. 3).

In this paper I am searching for insight about what structures the pre-service pedagogical experience. Highly influential have been Foucault's understandings of how subjects are produced and how intersubjective negotiations take shape. His work

tells us that self-conscious identifications and self-identity are not simple, given, presumed essences that naturally unfold but, rather, are produced in an ongoing process, through a range of influences, practices, experiences and relations that include social, schooling and psychodynamic factors. I draw upon this conceptual frame to understand a sense of self-as-teacher that is simultaneously present, prospective and retrospective, as well as rational and otherwise.

I report on the ‘making’ of a pre-service teacher—whom I name here as Alicia—in the context of work in secondary schools. The focus is on one question: in what ways do structures and people contribute to the making of new teachers? Addressing that question demands a close analysis of the sorts of cultural dynamics of schools and classrooms that contribute to convergences and fractures within identity formation. It also demands an acknowledgement of the tentative and shifting balance within personal relationships and the kinds of discourse interactions that operate to fix or unsettle meanings.

### Guiding Theory

Foucault (e.g., 1984, 1988) provides a framework and a language for exploring the ways in which pre-service teachers develop their identity as teachers. His conceptual tools allow us to deal with the complex interplay between social structures and the processes of self-formation that are at work in learning to teach. For him, identity is always contingent and precarious (Walshaw, 2007). Given the precariousness and contingency of the self, power becomes Foucault’s overriding interest. In *Discipline and Punish* (1977) he develops the themes of governmentality, surveillance, and regulation through which processes of identification are explored as they are lived by individuals in relation to both structural processes and lived experiences.

For the pre-service teacher, particularities that relate to the supervising teacher, the classrooms and the school at which the practicum takes place, all have their place in constituting her as ‘teacher’. The practicum school creates specific conditions and forms of control that will shape her behaviour, her attitudes and her pedagogical practice. It also constructs particular positionings for people that both create and lend coherence to the understandings that people construct of themselves. Through subtle processes, the practicum school is extremely powerful in establishing the parameters around which pedagogical practice will be defined.

Thus, it is impossible to discuss learning to teach in Foucault’s terms without taking into account participation in the social practices of schooling. For the pre-service teacher, learning to teach is the initiation into a social tradition. Sets of rules operating at specific institutional sites govern beliefs and practices about the nature of teaching. That is to say that regulatory practices produce a certain network of material and embodied relations, controlling one’s conduct in minute detail. The practicum school performs this function, “determin[ing] the conduct of individuals and submit[ting] them to certain ends or domination, an objectivising of the subject” (Foucault, 1988, p. 18).

### The Study

The study took seed at the end of Alicia’s one year postgraduate initial secondary teacher education course. By that time Alicia had already practised and been appraised within a very large urban all-boys secondary school, as well as a small country co-educational school. Her third teaching practice took place within a large

urban secondary school for girls. She had nominated these three schools in order to experience practising in vastly different settings. The request came despite the fact that they were located in quite different regions within the country, a substantial distance from each other. The few commonalities that existed amongst the three schools included the fact that they all catered for students ranging in age 13 to 18 and all were fully state-funded.

On return to the university after their third practicum, students were given the opportunity to articulate their experiences. Following on from that opportunity, I developed the study to allow Alicia to give expression to her specific experiences. Through analysing Alicia's reflections of her teaching trajectory in schools over the year it is possible to develop an understanding of how teaching identity is produced and reproduced through social interaction, daily negotiations, and within particular contexts, which are already heavily laden with the understandings of others.

Through an examination of how regulatory practices operating within the three practicum sites intrude into the ways in the 'making' of the pre-service teacher, it is possible to unearth the political and strategic nature of learning to teach. In quoting from Alicia I try to make visible underlying structures of power. By exposing contradictory processes through my questioning, it was hoped that Alicia herself might see how similar or contradictory processes could be acted upon, in any teaching appointment she accepted in the future within schools. More broadly, it was hoped that the study would provide insights that might inform the way we organise the practicum experience.

## Unearthing the Political and Strategic Nature of Learning to Teach.

### *Normalisation Processes*

Pre-service teachers learn what is defined as 'normal' practice through their relation to the complex selves of others and, within the practicum experience, through the school's organisational procedures. As they move from one school to another they enter a different network of political and social discursive practices. The identity positions and politics which these discourses offer provide pre-service teachers with access to a differential engagement and positioning in relation to the regime of 'knowledgeable' practice operating in schools. These discursive codes based on theoretical decisions about teaching and learning are fundamental to the way teachers develop their identities and the way they enact pedagogical practice in the classroom. Alicia tells us about her first practicum school:

#### *School 1*

I would love to teach as this school! Decile 10<sup>1</sup>. It's well equipped and well funded. On arrival the school feels like a professional place of learning, where the students seem fairly happy working within the school rules. The grounds are small but feel spacious and welcoming to everyone. The school principal has business and pedagogical ideals that mesh well together and work with my own ideas about how a principal should run a school....What he was effectively doing was creating a sense of belonging in the students. He wanted students to be proud to attend the school and to show pride in themselves and the school outside of school hours.

There is a large body of literature that shows that school leaders who develop a sense of belonging amongst students (e.g., Noddings, 1995), simultaneously are establishing webs of relationships that will enhance positive teaching identities amongst staff (e.g., Alton-Lee, 2003; Cobb, McClain, Lambert, & Dean, 2003;

Spillane, 2005). The school operates as a community in shaping a sense of self-as-teacher and promoting specific pedagogical practice. It is within the school community that pre-service teachers develop the sense of belonging that is essential if they are to engage with the pedagogic routines and rituals validated within the school. The interrelationships that develop amongst teachers open up spaces for teachers to develop their own identities, providing them with opportunities to make their own pedagogical choices, within specific bounds.

Pedagogical practices that are understood by the pre-service teacher as effective, profoundly influence the sort of teacher she will become. Practices that Foucault calls 'dividing practices' are fundamental to the way she makes judgments about teaching, based on the categories and differentiations that she has established. In schools a wide range of practices are at play to create particular distinctions. Schools organise physical space and time in order to support particular kinds of pedagogical approaches, to create particular kinds of provision for specific categories of students, and to nurture particular kinds of relationships between teachers and students as well as between students themselves.

Dividing practices that are at odds with each other are most keenly felt by pre-service teachers as they move from one school site to another. In describing her second practicum school, Alicia makes judgments about teaching at that school, based on the categories and differentiations that she has already established. The dividing practices that she surfaces, operating across the two school settings, impact on her in ways that create a different sense of self-as-teacher. To this end, the divisions operate not only between the teachers at the two schools, but also within Alicia herself.

#### *School 2*

Decile 3. Some teaching not up to scratch, but other teachers really top of their game. Arrival at this school makes you aware that the school is in a working class town. On saying that, the students are open and welcoming and the grounds are well laid out and spacious. It has a relaxed feel about it.

Like my first school, teachers got to teach whatever they wanted at any time. The only exams were at the end of the year. In some classes I felt that the feedback on formative assessment was not there, and was replaced with a summative grade without comment.

Learning to teach develops through particular knowledges and particular pedagogic modes of operating. Through the knowledges and modes of operating that it advocates and promotes, the first practicum school had established a benchmark for what will count as 'teaching'. The understanding advanced attempts to shape, monitor, and discipline the knowledges, modes of operating, and positionings that she will hold as a teacher within not simply her second school, but also within her final practicum.

#### *School 3*

Learning in this school is very prescriptive. Teach X then Y and then we'll have a common test. Rote learning is more important than learning for knowledge. The girls I was teaching at Year 10 [age 14]...had on-going testing. The pressure on them to achieve was immense. The scope for teachers to do their own thing in the classroom is very limited.

The first practicum school, in its alignment with the intent of the university course, operated as a "privileged teaching repertoire" (Ensor, 2001, p. 299). It validated problem solving and it also recognised difference. The teacher's role was to

create a supportive learning environment, by facilitating and empowering. As Alicia puts it, the “emphasis is on teaching for learning” and that emphasis is “implemented through inquiry in the classroom.” The teacher is expected to “allow students to express their knowledge in ways that best suit them. Asking the ‘why’, ‘why is it like that?’ questions.”

Without Alicia really being fully aware of it, the first practicum school attempted to control, classify and delimit the kind of teacher she might become. She read pedagogical practice through the terms made available by it. In creating knowledge and operating modes for Alicia the first teaching experience worked as a powerful cultural institution, positioning, defining, enabling and regulating her sense of self-as-teacher. In Foucauldian understanding, by validating particular pedagogical practices, the first practicum was part of the technology of normalisation.

### *The Community Involving Supervisors and Pre-service Teachers*

Supervising teachers who are responsible for the development of the pre-service teachers under their care, work hard to find out what helps and what hinders professional learning. Support, both within and outside of the classroom, is integral to the work they do with the pre-service teacher. Such support is fuelled by the values that underwrite initial and ongoing teacher development at the school. Yet support within an empowering community is not an end to itself: within the successful supervising/pre-service teacher arrangement, relationships always involve reciprocity and a pedagogical attention that is focused on moving the pre-service teacher towards independence.

The teachers at the first two schools sat with me and said this is what the students need to know. Then they let me go away and create a lesson plan or unit plans. Then either of two things happened. They wanted to see my lesson plan before the class—go through it and discuss changes—OR they just let me get on with the teaching. The lesson plans that were discussed before worked really well. The outcome of the initial discussion was that the students and the teacher trusted me for all subsequent lessons and I enjoyed learning that you could put too much into a lesson!

Like many educational practices, a set of institutional and social relations was established, in relation to pedagogy, for the pre-service teacher. Gaining better access to this set of relations at the first two schools demanded attention to those strategic practices and orientations which, taken together, signified the subject position of the teacher with those schools. But attention to detail was not enough: that attention must be monitored, and her practice, as a pre-service teacher, placed under the panoptical gaze (Foucault, 1977); assessed against the supervising teacher’s standards. Particular surveillance procedures, exercised in relation to the supervising teacher’s classroom practices, regulated and sanctioned Alicia’s work at the classroom level.

In the first two practicum schools the supervisors’ monitoring of Alicia’s lesson preparations operated through an understanding that she had the capacity to make sensible choices. Understandings, like these, allowed Alicia to come to formulate ‘good’ teaching for herself. The key point about the surveillance is that Alicia actively involved herself in self-forming subjectification. For Foucault, subjectification is a process through which individuals becomes accountable to specific practices that claim their hold—the way they discipline themselves without any formal compulsion to do so.

In the ideal supervising/pre-service teacher relationship, “what makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn’t weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms

knowledge” (Foucault, 1984, p. 61). The first two schools were shaping a love of teaching and Alicia experienced what it was like to work within a professional community of shared knowledge and shared thinking about pedagogical practice. In granting her “legitimacy and agency” (Davies, Edwards, Gannon, & Laws, 2007, p. 33) within the classroom, the supervisors had not imposed practice but had allowed her to make the discourses of the classroom her own. Her passion for teaching flourished as she was assisted practically and emotionally through personal and systemic support. Such alliances, however, were not always apparent:

There were two teachers I failed to have a good relationship with during my teaching pracs. Both were at my third school. Annie handed me her unit folder and said: ‘we will do X today and Y tomorrow’. So I took her book away and looked at X and Y and then failed to teach it well. Why? Because I disengaged from the teaching because it wasn’t my work that I was teaching. I failed to have a good teaching experience with Fleur too. She said to me: ‘The unit plan is on the ‘S’ Drive. Feel free to use as many resources as you like.’

Initially the lessons went well. The students seemed to respond to me and my method of inquiry learning. Fleur was a bit edgy about it. During classes she became very critical of my teaching. Essentially she wanted me to teach the way she taught and, try as I might, I just wasn’t Fleur. I didn’t have the rapport with the class she did. I had to bed into teaching before I could adopt any of her methods. But Fleur didn’t want me to cherry-pick her teaching methods. She wanted me to teach exactly like her.

In the supervisor/pre-service teacher relation, the pre-service teacher is one of the primary effects of disciplinary institutional power, the most pervasive disciplinary practice being, to borrow Foucault’s term, ‘the gaze’. The ‘gaze’ is delicate and seemingly intangible, yet its networks can determine the very texture of teaching and its possibilities. To Fleur, the supervising teacher, teaching constituted a closely scripted strategy of how teacher’s work was to be enacted in her classroom. Well aware that the practices demanded also embodied personal and emotional investments on Fleur’s part, Alicia nevertheless, attempted to carve out a teaching voice in a setting already created from Fleur’s ideas and intentions.

Given that Alicia did not share the understanding of pedagogical practice held by Fleur, no sense of supportive community was experienced by her. Rather, what Alicia experienced was her supervisors’ gaze, regulating minute details of classroom environment, task, as well as space and time. As in the study of partnerships reported by Davies et al. (2007), perceived problems were seen to arise from the ‘problematic individual’, “rather than from systems, forms of interaction or systematic taken-for-granted sets of discursive practice” (p. 32). Undermined by the tensions that ensued from the multiple and conflicting discourses at work, Alicia felt the full effect of the supervisors’ gaze in her most private thoughts and desires.

Fleur’s classroom produced its own truths about pedagogy. Those truths become intelligible through their reliance on certain strategies which are accepted, sanctioned, and made to function as true. They legitimised and sanctioned a discursive space for some, and not other, practices and social arrangements. *Power, knowledge and truth* became coordinates which constituted good teaching in her classroom.

## Conclusion

Like the pre-service teachers in Britzman’s (2003) study the transfer from the university course into schools brought sharply into focus differential institutional practices. Although she could lay claim to “many years of experience being a student in a classroom” (Kemmis & Smith, 2008, p. 30), Alicia’s practicum experiences were fraught with ambiguous and at times painful negotiations to produce a sense of self-

as-teacher. The pre-service teacher who invests in the practices of the supervising teacher signals an engagement with the technologies and practices through which teaching is managed in a particular classroom. It is an engagement that depends as much on embodied relations of power between people in the practicum as it does on choice of content and material resources.

Unanalysed elements exist in many authoritative arguments about the “gap between the ‘actual’ and ‘designated’ identities” (Sfard & Prusak, 2005, p. 18). In the wider education literature Zeichner and Tabachnik (1981) tried to explain the lack of perfect fit between practices advocated by course work and actual teaching practice as a problem of the school setting. Others have set some score by the idea of pre-service teachers’ varied engagements with course work (e.g., Lacey, 1977). These explanations derive from and sustain conceptions of instrumental rationality: that people and circumstances can be matched up. Within this conventional paradigm there is no place to consider the pre-service teacher in any terms other than in a model of normality/pathology.

An analysis like this allows us to move away from pathologising individual pre-service teachers when things go wrong, and explore, instead, the actual construction of their identity as teachers, in all its contingency and precariousness. Such work allows us to appreciate how the practicum functions as part of the technology of surveillance and discipline—how it imposes conditions in schools which induce teachers into a particular pedagogical pattern. Given that pre-service teachers’ teaching identities, like all teaching identities, are always in relation to the meanings of others, initial teacher education leaders need to pay close attention to the way in which people and systems shape those learning to teach during the practicum. This recommendation is important if we are to advance our understanding of how teacher education might become an asset rather than a (presumed) liability for sustained growth in the twenty-first century.

### Notes

1. A school’s decile rating indicates the extent to which the school draws its students from low socio-economic communities. Decile 1 schools are the 10% of schools with the highest proportion of students from low socio-economic communities, whereas decile 10 schools are the 10% of schools with the lowest proportion of these students.

### References

- Alton-Lee, A. (2003). *Quality teaching for diverse students in schooling: Best evidence synthesis*. Wellington: Ministry of Education.
- Anthony, G., & Walshaw, M. (2007). *Effective pedagogy in mathematics/pāngarau: Best evidence synthesis iteration [BES]*. Wellington: Learning Media.
- Britzman, D. (2003). *Practice makes practice: A critical study of learning to teach* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Albany: New York Press.
- Brown, A., & Danaher, P. (2008). Towards collaborative professional learning in the first year early childhood teacher education practicum: Issues in negotiating the multiple interests of stakeholder feedback. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 36(2), 147-161.
- Cobb, P., McClain, K., Lambert, T., & Dean, C. (2003). Situating teachers’ instructional practices in the institutional setting of the school and district. *Educational Researcher*, 32(6), 13-24.
- Darling-Hammond, L., Chung, R., & Frelow, F. (2002). Variation in teacher preparation: How well do different pathways prepare teacher to teach? *Journal of Teacher Education*, 53(4), 286-302.

- Davies, B., Edwards, J., Gannon, S., & Laws, C. (2007). Neo-liberal subjectivities and the limits of social change in university-community partnerships. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 35(1), 27-40.
- Ensor, P. (2001). Taking the 'form' rather than the 'substance': Initial mathematics teacher education and beginning teaching. In M. Van den Heuvel-Panhuizen (Ed.), *Proceedings of the 25<sup>th</sup> Conference of the International Group for the Psychology of Mathematics Education* (Vol. 2) (pp. 393-400). The Netherlands: Freudenthal Institute, Utrecht University.
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Foucault, M. (1984). *The care of the self* (Trans R. Hurley, 1986). Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Foucault, M. (1988). *The ethic of care for the self as a practice of freedom*. Cambridge: The Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press.
- Kemmis, S., & Smith, T. J. (2008). Personal praxis: Learning through experience. In S. Kemmis & T. J. Smith (Eds.), *Enabling praxis: Challenges for education* (pp. 15-35). Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Lacey, C. (1977). *The socialisation of teachers*. London: Methuen.
- Noddings, N. (1995). *Philosophy of education*. Oxford: Westview Press.
- Sfard, A., & Prusak, A. (2005). Telling identities: In search of an analytic tool for investigating learning as a culturally shaped activity. *Educational Researcher*, 34(4), 14-
- Sinclair, C. (2008). Initial and changing student teacher motivation and commitment to teaching. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 36(2), 79-104.
- Smith, K., & Lev-Ari. L. (2005). The place of the practicum in pre-service teacher education: The voice of the students. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 33(3), 289-302.
- Spillane, J. (2005). Primary school leadership practice: How the subject matters. *School Leadership and Management*, 25(4), 383-397.
- Turnbull, M. (2005). Student teacher professional agency in the practicum. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 33(2), 195-208.
- Walshaw, M. (2007). *Working with Foucault in education*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Zeichner, K. M., & Tabachnik, B.R. (1981). Are the effects of university teacher education 'washed out' by school experience? *Journal of Teacher Education*, 32 (3). 7-11.