



Teachers as Professional Learners

Contextualising Identity across
Policy and Practice

Ellen Larsen · Jeanne Maree Allen

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“This scholarly and well-informed book has sought to address core issues in relation to practice and identity and cautions against simplistic solutions. It acknowledges the cost to the profession of teaching when those who might provide appropriate support turn a blind eye to the many and varying needs of aspiring teachers. Ellen Larsen and Jeanne Maree Allen offer a timely antidote to the current instrumental approach and bring hope and optimism to the field.”

—Professor Susan Groundwater-Smith AM, *Sydney School of Education and Social Work, Educational Research and Professional Development Services, University of Sydney, Australia*

“This important book is a compelling exploration of the nexus of beginning teacher professional identity and professional development. Drawing from professional identity and attribution theory, professional learning contexts, practices, and policies, Dr Ellen Larsen and Associate Professor Jeanne Maree Allen’s work offers important insights on how to better promote beginning teachers’ meaningful and powerful engagement with professional learning opportunities.”

—Professor Betina Hsieh, Director of Teacher Education, *LaFetra College of Education, University of La Verne, USA*

“Teaching is a complex profession and the significance of professional learning cannot be underestimated. This book draws on the voices of beginning teachers who share their early experiences of teaching in order that we can better understand this complexity and their journeys of becoming as professional learners. This is an important book for beginning teachers, school leaders and researchers alike.”

—Dr Angelina Ambrosetti, *Central Queensland University, Australia*

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Ellen Larsen
School of Teacher Education
University of Southern Queensland
Springfield, QLD, Australia

Jeanne Maree Allen
School of Education and
Professional Studies
Griffith University
Mt Gravatt, QLD, Australia

ISBN 978-3-030-65930-1 ISBN 978-3-030-65931-8 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-65931-8>

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This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG. The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

Foreword

As a starting point teachers must want change, rather than others wanting to change them. That means that the option of professional development leading toward professional satisfaction of a kind that brings an enhancement of self must be made clear and open to teachers. (Stenhouse 1980, p. 15)

The battle for genuinely transformative teacher professional development is one that has long been waged, as Lawrence Stenhouse reminds us. While Stenhouse died well prior to contemporary discussions of teacher professional identity that emerged in the late 1990s, his work is replete with arguments around the power and agency of teachers, with respect to curriculum work (1975), professional judgement (1983), classroom research (1979) and, indeed, professional development. In relation to the latter, he understood the relationship between teacher learning and development and teacher identity through the endorsement of forms of professional development that supported “enhancement of self”, arguing that professional development was not about “improving teaching as a delivery system” (1980, p. 16).

It does us well, some 40 years later, with instrumentalist versions of education and teacher professional development even more entrenched, to remember that these battles are not new and that, historically, in most scholarship that has recognised teaching as a context-dependent,

complex enterprise, some form of understanding of teacher professional development as identity work is present. This book builds on and lends further weight to this argument. At a time when the notion of ‘classroom readiness’ dominates so much of our thinking about the early years of teaching (Mayer et al. 2017), it raises important questions about the potential mismatch between the discourse of classroom readiness and openness to professional learning for early career teachers. As the stories of teachers included in this book attest, there are many different ways in which beginning teachers’ perceptions of themselves and their practice feed into barriers to robust professional learning identities, from a need to ‘perform’ classroom readiness at the outset and an associated unwillingness to be seen to be in need of professional development, to a belief that engagement in professional development is about compliance. Indeed, we find here good evidence to suggest that current regimes of standards and performative accountability for teachers can undermine early career teachers’ connection to their identities as professional learners.

This book makes a number of important contributions to our understanding of the ‘perverse effects’ (Lingard and Sellar 2013) of performative accountability on teachers and their work. It highlights not only the critical importance of early career teachers understanding themselves as professional learners, and adopting a professional learning identity, but also the role that teacher professional development can play in supporting the development of robust teacher professional identity more broadly. At a time when teacher burnout and attrition are understood to be on the rise globally (Rajendran et al. 2020), along with what Santoro (2018) has termed ‘demoralisation’, the phenomenon whereby shifting education policy frameworks and requirements cause a disconnect between teachers’ moral commitment to their work and their everyday practice, remedies in the form of continuing professional development for teachers are highly sought after by education and schooling systems. Larsen and Allen’s work reminds us, however, that when it comes to teacher professional development, there are no ‘silver bullets’: their work resonates with Stenhouse’s contention that for professional learning to make a real difference, “teachers must want change, rather than others wanting to change them”.

Their message, however, is one of hope. For while the book surveys the barriers to beginning teachers developing a professional learning identity, it also lays out the importance of attribution in mediating the formation of such professional identities. In doing so, it creates a powerful argument for the importance of school-based professional development in interrupting damaging attribution and supporting the kinds of attributions that keep beginning teachers connected to their own capacity and willingness to learn. The authors draw attention to the implications of this for the shaping of mentoring relationships and the types of interventions that mentors might be able to make to best support beginning teachers to attribute both the successes and the challenges they experience in ways that preserve and build their notions of themselves as continuing professional learners.

The book reaches beyond Stenhouse's pronouncement that "the option of professional development leading toward professional satisfaction of a kind that brings an enhancement of self must be made clear and open to teachers" to suggest practical ways in which this might be made a reality for early career teachers, and in this we find its key contribution. For in understanding the ways in which teacher dispositions towards professional learning are built in the early years of teaching, we might also understand the role of induction and mentoring in shaping these dispositions. At the end of the day, one thing is crystal clear: until we decouple the complex process of professional learning and development for early career teachers (including induction and mentoring) from processes of accreditation, registration and compliance, we cannot expect beginning teachers to engage openly, honestly, critically and generatively in professional learning that aims to improve their practice. Such engagement requires a vulnerability and risk-taking that sits uncomfortably, and for many impossibly, alongside the need to perform the 'good teacher' in order to gain accreditation, retain precarious employment or obtain the next contract. It also requires a deep knowledge of practice along with a robustness of engagement and generosity of spirit on the part of mentors: this kind of mentoring is not for the faint-hearted, and neither can it be achieved with one eye on compliance.

Larsen and Allen's work provides a challenge to all of us who work with pre-service and in-service teachers to act at the levels of both policy and

practice to thoughtfully and deliberately support the development of orientations to professional learning that will sustain teachers over the course of their careers. They are optimistic about the potential of such orientations yet realistic about the things that sometimes get in the way. They illustrate the complexity of teacher professional learning and teacher professional identity and the complex interplay of the personal and professional, the individual and the collective, in the shaping of beginning teacher professional identity. Finally, they raise important questions about the significant mediating role that mentoring, dissociated from line management, performance management, evaluation and accreditation, might play in the shaping of generative orientations and identities; and questions of how such mentors might themselves be formed and developed. Against the current backdrop of compliance, none of this appears, or indeed is, easy, but here Larsen and Allen have provided us with a place to start.

The University of Sydney,
Sydney, NSW, Australia

Nicole Mockler
November 2020

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Preface

It is well documented that entry into the teaching profession tests beginning teachers' ability to cope and build capacity as they encounter the realities of teaching. With this in mind, understanding how best to support beginning teachers during this early stage of their careers is of paramount importance. Professional learning has been demonstrated to be an invaluable support for beginning teachers, assisting them to effectively manage their work lives and further develop their early professional practice. For this reason, understanding how teachers develop professional learner identities at the outset of their careers is imperative. To this end, the aim of this book is to provide insight into how beginning teachers develop their identities as professional learners, particularly in their first year of teaching.

Discussions about beginning teachers' engagement with professional learning are often focused on externally driven accountabilities associated with teaching standards and regulatory authority requirements and the kinds of professional learning opportunities and environments that should be provided to teachers. These kinds of discussions, however, are limiting in several ways. First, access to quality professional learning environments has been shown to be highly inconsistent for those starting their teaching careers. Second, intentional engagement with professional learning, rather than an externally driven obligation to participate, is

significant to the success of teachers throughout their careers. Third, professional learning provision generated in response to teacher standards and associated accountability measures often fails to acknowledge the importance of self-motivation to beginning teachers' sense of professional learner identity.

Drawing on data from an Australian study, this book gives voice to beginning teachers navigating their way through their first year of teaching and discovering what it means to be a professional learner in this context. We provide rich insights into the ways in which beginning teachers respond to the range of new and challenging experiences they face during the first year of teaching and how these inform and impact the development of their learner identities at this formative time of their careers.

In an era of standardisation and accountability, this study draws attention to the need to expand current approaches to supporting first-year teachers beyond the provision of professional learning and the enforcement of compliance-driven participation by teachers. Current approaches to professional learning, of the kind proposed by external accountabilities and standardised regimes, do little to acknowledge the significance of teachers' attitudes, beliefs and motivations as professional learners. In this book, we foreground the importance of developing positive professional learner attitudes and motivations as part of teacher identity in order that the full potential of professional learning, as a mechanism for supporting beginning teachers, can be realised.

This book provides insight into the lives of beginning teachers, the ways in which they respond to their lived experiences and how these responses influence the kinds of attitudes and motivations they develop as professional learners. In doing so, this book aims to provide those responsible for supporting beginning teachers, such as policy makers, school leaders, mentors and teacher educators, with insights that can further inform and add value to their ways of working.

Content

This book comprises seven chapters. The first two chapters provide the background and set the scene. Chapter 3 describes and explains the methodology and theoretical framework of the research that informs the chapters that follow. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 elucidate ways in which teachers' sense of professional learner identity can be developed and empowered, and Chap. 7 discusses implications for policy, practice and research.

Chapter 1: Contextualising Teacher Professional Learning in Practice and Policy

In this chapter we foreground the nature and scope of teacher professional learning in Australia and similar countries worldwide. Specifically, we explore the types of contexts in which teachers work and the influence of context on the beginning teachers' work as professional learners. Beginning teachers experience a wide range of school contexts that vary in the extent to which support is available to assist them to manage and derive satisfaction from their early work (Aarts et al. 2020). They encounter communities, schools and ways of working that, despite their experiences in classrooms during their university programs, can seem unfamiliar and at times overwhelming (Morrison 2013). Beginning teachers' lived experiences in the contexts within which they find themselves can be in contrast to their anticipated experiences.

Supporting beginning teachers to develop both their confidence and their ongoing professional capacity is therefore a priority for educators and policy makers internationally. It has been demonstrated that support for beginning teachers can assist with issues of early career teacher attrition (Thomas et al. 2019). With support, beginning teachers are empowered to develop their skills and understanding so they can prosper, despite the demands, challenges and complexities of the profession (Schuck et al. 2018). This chapter includes examples of policy initiatives and legislative requirements designed to facilitate the provision of professional learning. We also discuss the ways in which education policy, particularly during the past several decades, has played an increasingly powerful role in the conceptualisation and implementation of teacher professional learning.

Chapter 2: Teachers as Professional Learners

Over the past decade there has been increased interest and research into teacher identity. The concept of teacher identity has developed out of the understanding that our lives are multifaceted, and teacher identity, though linked to our personal identity, is situated within the work life of the teacher and focuses on the execution of the teaching role (Day 2012; Day and Kington 2008). The development of a teacher professional identity “is an important part of securing teachers’ commitment to their work and adherence to values and norms of practice” (Hammerness et al. 2005, p. 383) as they develop their own understanding of what being a teacher entails. In doing so, “teachers define themselves to themselves and to others” (Lasky 2005, p. 901) and gain recognition through their professional performance. The development of an identity as a professional learner as part of teacher identity, therefore, is significant to the work of the beginning teacher.

This chapter outlines current understandings about the importance of professional learning and the shift in research and educator conceptualisations as to what constitutes effective professional learning for teachers. While there is much written about teacher professional learning, the focus tends to rest on the kinds and efficacy of professional learning activities that are available, as well as the types of professional learning in which teachers do—and should—engage. Rarely discussed, however, is that teachers need to have particular mindsets, attitudes and motivations that lead them to engage in professional learning—and that is where this book comes in. In addressing this gap in the research, we ask and respond to provocations such as: What types of teacher attitudes and motivations need to be in place for teachers to engage in professional learning through volition, rather than compliance? and What behaviours influence the development of beginning teachers’ proactive professional learning mindsets, motivating them to consider professional learning as worthwhile and relevant to them as learners?

This chapter discusses how first-year teachers play an active part in the development of their professional learner identities. Support for the first-year teacher as a professional learner must extend beyond the mere

provision of professional learning. An awareness of the types of support measures that foster strong professional learner identities is critical not only for beginning teachers themselves but also for those who work with them, such as teacher educators, mentors and leaders. In this book, we are particularly interested in how beginning teachers make meaning of their teaching experiences and the ways in which their meaning making may serve to strengthen the development and maintenance of positive professional learner identities.

Chapter 3: Researching Beginning Teacher Professional Learning Identity

This chapter describes and justifies the theory and methods used in the research from which the following three chapters were drawn. The purpose of the chapter is to provide a detailed account of how the research was undertaken and establish reader trust in the validity and authenticity of the work. We first discuss the socio-psychological theory of attribution (Weiner 1985, 1986) that framed the research, enabling deep insights into the development of beginning teacher professional learner identities. Attribution theory explains how individuals perceive their experiences, determine the causality for the outcomes of these experiences and subsequently act. Through the research of the first-named author, we gained profound understanding of first-year teachers' attributions of causality following a range of teaching experiences and how these attributions impacted on the development of their professional learner identities.

Drawing from a sample of first-year teachers located in independent schools across the Australian state of Queensland, analysis of an online survey and follow-up interviews generated a range of findings into teachers' experiences in their first year and, importantly, how these teachers attributed causality for what they perceived to be the outcomes of their experiences; that is, what they experienced, what outcomes resulted and who/what was seen to influence these outcomes. The first-year teachers who engaged in this research provided extensive data about their lived experiences, their emotions and thoughts at a time in their careers which is typically fraught with self-questioning and doubt. Prioritising

participants' anonymity and confidentiality was of the highest priority and, therefore, analysis and reporting methods focused on aggregation of these data and the reporting of these data using composite narratives. Via these composite narratives, the following three chapters provide insights into the ways in which participants made sense of their work as professional learners.

Chapter 4: Understanding Professional Learning as Purposeful

The working contexts of teachers have long been recognised as complex social environments. In 1968, for example, Jackson foregrounded the demands and stressors inherent in working in schools in his seminal work, *Life in Classrooms*, and later wrote about the classroom as a social place in which events are “curiously interdependent and frustratingly intertwined” (Jackson 1990, p. iv). Since then, many studies have shown schools to be complex and demanding workplaces, particularly for first-year teachers (Aarts et al. 2020; Björk et al. 2019; du Plessis and Sunde 2017; Thamar and Kunter 2020).

In this chapter, we draw on the previously mentioned study to discuss how first-year teachers who ostensibly maintain the most positive attitudes to engaging as professional learners are those who seem to take account of the complex interplay of influences on their work. They make meaning of their experiences in ways that recognise schools as highly interactive places where their experiences are inherently interconnected with those of the many others who occupy that working context. They see the unpredictability of the school environment and understand it to be the kind of workplace where change is ongoing. This kind of balanced sense making in response to their teaching can serve to protect their sense of self-efficacy while at the same time ensuring that they accept a manageable level of responsibility for improving their practice, thus remaining open to purposeful engagement with professional learning. This chapter highlights the importance of first-year teachers taking on a proportionate and balanced approach to determining the source/s of responsibility for the outcomes of their teaching with respect to the development and maintenance of their identities as learners.

Chapter 5: Experiencing Professional Learning as Work Intensive

Chapter 5 explains how beginning teachers can think about their experiences in ways that sometimes fail to consider the complexity of the teaching context, placing a sense of pressure on first-year teachers and potentially undermining their resilience. In this chapter, we illustrate how, for some participants, engagement in professional learning becomes another layer to a seemingly already unmanageable workload. First-year teachers may feel compelled to re- or de-prioritise professional learning, despite their initial intentions as professional learners, as they deal with more pressing matters on a day-to-day basis. This finding is supported by Australian researchers Crosswell and Beutel (2017, p. 426) who suggest that, despite some first-year teachers' seemingly "rapid-adaptation" to their teaching demands early on, there is the potential for them to become overwhelmed by the increasing demands of the job as the year progresses.

Furthermore, this chapter illustrates how the beginning teachers' perception of professional learning as work intensive is exacerbated when they consistently feel that they should take personal responsibility for the difficulties they encounter in their teaching. Some first-year teachers believe that they are more often than not at fault for the challenges they face in their teaching. This can lead to them losing heart and feeling overwhelmed by the burden they see ahead of them to "fix" their teaching. Researchers such as Atkinson (2012) show how confessional-like attributions are unproductive to improving practice as they act to demotivate the teacher.

Compounding the issue, they are likely to develop "risk-averse dispositions" (Sachs 2016, p. 416), often distancing themselves from potential avenues of collegial support as a means of concealing what they believe to be problems with their practice. In this chapter, we raise concerns about the impact of evaluation and performativity on these teachers' thinking and actions as learners. This withdrawal from seeking support may occur at the very time when, as first-year teachers, they could most benefit from the support of their colleagues to consider alternate, more balanced ways of looking at their experiences.

Chapter 6: Professional Learning as an Act of Compliance

This chapter highlights the way in which some first-year teachers neglect to take account of the changeability of the school environment, and education more broadly, believing that their current teaching successes will be unlikely to change into the future. These teachers tend to deflect responsibility to others for the challenges they experience. Attributing causality in this way can be self-serving in that individuals protect themselves from blame and responsibility for failure. In other words, making sense of their experiences in this way may well help to free them from any personal burden of blame and serve to safeguard their sense of self-efficacy as teachers. Huisman et al. (2010) have raised concern about the impact on teachers' motivation that can result from this type of attributional behaviour. Hsieh (2015) notes that beginning teachers who are prone to placing the onus of responsibility for problems in practice on others can remain wedded to their ways of working and are likely to be disinterested in opportunities for professional learning. Moreover, it is clear from the work of attributional researchers (Eberley et al. 2013; Huning and Thompson 2011) that individuals who experience ongoing perceptions of limited agency (or control), as do teachers who attribute in these types of ways, can develop a sense of injustice, which can have detrimental effects on their well-being and motivation to stay in the profession.

This chapter underscores the significant influence that such attributions of causality can have on the extent to which first-year teachers are motivated to build their identities as professional learners. Without a sense of responsibility or necessity to act (in this case, respond through learning), these teachers can resort to participating in professional learning purely as a matter of compliance, placing them at risk of failing to develop the kind of attitude towards professional learning that will serve to motivate and support them through their careers. A number of researchers argue that the current focus on externally driven requirements for teachers to participate in professional learning is insufficient to develop beginning teachers who are self-motivated and committed as professionals (Buchanan 2015; Lillejord and Børte 2018; Mockler 2020).

Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury (2016) agree, stating that a focus on external accountabilities reduces professional learning to a series of performance tasks. This chapter raises concern for first-year teachers attributing in ways that lead them to participate in professional learning as an act of compliance.

Chapter 7: Focusing on the Future

The concluding chapter includes a number of implications for teachers and teaching, in relation to teacher professional learning and professional learner identity development. While there is a current focus on the provision of expansive professional learning environments to support the capacity building of first-year teachers (Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL] 2012), this book has highlighted the need to also understand the way in which first-year teachers interpret and respond to their experiences in order that they can, and will, take advantage of these support mechanisms where available. By responding to the multifarious experiences during the first year of teaching in ways that are productive to professional learner identity development, first-year teachers can benefit from professional learning available and, where necessary, manage to build their professional learner identities in contexts that may not be as optimal. The provision of associated professional learning for staff working with first-year teachers is also an important implication of this research.

The research reported on in this book goes some way to extending thinking about professional learning support, moving from a perspective of prioritising the provision and mandating of professional learning to a perspective of understanding how first-year teachers actively engage in developing their volition as professional learners.

Final Words

This book has been written with the intention that a wide-ranging audience, including beginning teachers, policy makers, teachers, school leaders, teacher educators and researchers, can see application of the ideas presented within it to their own work. For the researcher, this book outlines methods of research that address the complexities of researching beginning teachers. The study from which this book has drawn provides a gateway to further research in this area, as well as a theoretical lens through which this topic could be further investigated.

At a policy level, this book may serve to prompt educational policy makers to reevaluate current approaches to professional learning and to consider how future policies may potentially be informed by the insights provided. It is hoped that teacher educators will see the application of this identity work in initial teacher education programs as a means of value adding to their work in preparing the next generations of teachers as professional learners. At the school level, the book speaks to leaders, mentors and teaching colleagues that have both the opportunity and influence, through their consideration of the work in this book, to further nurture and support beginning teachers to develop and enact their professional learner identities from the start of their careers. Finally, it is hoped that beginning teachers themselves will use this book to raise their own awareness of the ways in which they can invest in themselves as professional learners in order that they have fulfilling teaching careers.

Springfield, QLD, Australia
Mt Gravatt, QLD, Australia

Ellen Larsen
Jeanne Maree Allen

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Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge a number of people without whom we would not have been able to complete this book. First, we thank those beginning teachers who took the time to be part of the study central to this book. They shared their rich insights and stories of being a new teacher with honesty and, at times, incredible humour and it was a joy to undertake this research with them. This book provides the space in which their voices can be heard and where understandings about their lives as professional learners can be shared.

We acknowledge Associate Professor Nicole Mockler of the University of Sydney for her ongoing support of the research study on which this book is based and for sharing her expertise and insights in the foreword to this book. She is an inspiring researcher and advocate for the work of educators, and her generous contribution to this book is highly valued. We also thank our esteemed colleagues, Professor Susan Groundwater-Smith (University of Sydney), Associate Professor Betina Hsieh (California State University) and Dr Angelina Ambrosetti (Central Queensland University) who took the time to read our book and provide their professional commentary for our readers.