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'You've either got [it] or you haven't' – conflicted supervision of preservice teachers

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The school-based experiences of preservice teachers are much reported in research with school placement often presented as a 'high stakes' endeavour. However, there is limited research on the impact of their presence on supervising teachers. This paper highlights supervision as bringing a change to teaching that impacts on teachers' identities. Tensions can emerge when teachers are required to act concurrently as teacher and supervisor. The paper argues that it is critical that the interpersonal demands of supervision become an important focus of the partnership between universities and schools if practicums are to be beneficial to all stakeholders.

Keywords: initial teacher education; professional community; supervision; teacher identity

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Introduction

Positive professional experience in initial teacher education programs is critical to the development of future teachers' knowledge and skills. Studies dealing with the relationship between experienced supervising teachers and their preservice charges have identified the significance of specific aspects of the professional practice setting and the life experiences of the teachers themselves. Anderson, Reder, and Simon (1996) and Brown, Collins, and Duguid (1989) have provided evidence of how teachers' knowledge about teaching and their practice builds on a lifetime of experiences in schools and classrooms.

Recent studies (McMeniman, Cumming, Wilson, Stevenson, & Sim, 2000; Sim, 2004) confirm that personal experiences gathered while situated within the culture of teaching can strongly influence the reasoned decision-making and critical reflection of teachers. For some teachers there is a further strong sense that personal characteristics and backgrounds influence their teaching styles and approaches to students. These intra- and inter-personal factors also impact upon the interactions of experienced teachers with preservice teachers. Ralph (2003) highlights one aspect of the supervision experience: the interpersonal conflict that can occur between the supervising teacher and preservice teacher. In this paper, the question is asked: 'What is the impact on teachers' identities of supervision that might help explain how interpersonal conflict can occur?' It is argued that through a better understanding of the impact, the work of university-based teacher educators with school-based supervising teachers could be improved.

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Despite widespread recognition that supervisors hold a key role in the preparation of new entrants to the profession (Wright & Bottery, 1997; Zeek, Foote, & Walker, 2001), there is limited research on the consequences of the supervisory experience for the experienced teachers. Day and Gu (2007) argue that teaching is often emotional work: 'to be effective, teachers need to be able to manage successfully the challenges embedded in the emotional contexts of teaching' (p. 429). When for some teachers their work changes because of the added responsibility of supervision and guidance of preservice teachers, new challenges create another emotional dimension to the context.

This paper examines demonstrably salient extracts taken from two transcribed joint interviews conducted by the researcher with two supervisors in one school site. Firstly, the framework and methodology of the full study is explained, followed by an explanation of the contextual dimensions of the supervisory case. Using specific extracts, the researcher then inquires into these 'telling' stories. The expectations of the supervising teachers are identified through their accounts. The problematic nature of these expectations as the professional experience progressed is explored.

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Theoretical framework

Hargreaves (2001) maintains that teaching and educational leadership are profoundly emotional forms of work. His research treats the emotional lives of educators not only as matters of personal disposition or commitment or psychological qualities that emerge among individuals, but also as phenomena that are shaped by how the work of teaching is organised, structured and led. Within this work context, teachers also strive to construct their professional identity. Fairclough's (2003) model of identity formation argues that 'what people commit themselves to in texts is an important part of how they identify themselves, the texturing of identity' (p. 164). Further Grimmett, Dagenais, D'Amico, Jacquet, and Ilieva (2008) explain that 'professional discourse' involves living in the tension of reconstructing professional identity under changing conditions. Therefore in this study, a narrative inquiry approach was used to examine teachers' stories of supervision to identify the nature of the impact on professional identity when they accept this different professional role.

Connelly and Clandinin (2006) describe narrative inquiry as the study of experience as story and as a way of thinking about experience. In narrative inquiry, a three-dimensional view of experience is incorporated in the data collection processes and analysis. These three dimensions are identified by Connelly and Clandinin as the commonplaces of sociality, temporality and place. In order to undertake a narrative inquiry there needs to be a 'simultaneous exploration of all three commonplaces' (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 479). In this paper, the stories of the two teachers are examined to identify how the changing conditions that occur through their time as supervisors with two particular preservice teachers affect them. Temporality investigates past, present and future. These two teachers' accounts move back and forth, telling stories of past and present experiences as teachers and supervisors; as well as predictive stories of supervision in the future.

The personal and social context ('sociality') of the supervision period is central in their stories. The changed emotional challenges that emerge become obvious to understanding the emotions that emerged. The third commonplace is 'place', described by Connelly and Clandinin (2006) as 'the specific concrete, physical and topological boundaries . . . where the inquiry and events take place' (p. 480). In this paper, the two participants' stories occur in one school. Further detail about these commonplaces is provided in the context section of this paper.

Methodology

This paper tells of one case from a qualitative research project into supervision of preservice teachers. It accepts the straightforward explanation of supervision provided by Ralph (2000):

> an educational professional, by virtue of his/her previous expertise and experiences, assists a less experienced or knowledgeable colleague in acquiring new professional knowledge/skills or to improve existing ones. (p. 312)

While accepting this simple account, the significant issue of power in the supervisory process will not be ignored here – neither will be the 'great burden' (Paris & Gespass, 2001, p. 398) placed on the supervisor. In analysing the accounts of the two teachers, the story of their supervision as a perceived 'burden' emerges.

The paper draws on data from a larger scale study investigating the supervisory practices of 23 supervising teachers and their preservice teachers in 10 school sites. Five primary schools and five secondary schools were invited to participate. The selection was made from those schools where at least two preservice teachers from the same university were placed during one major professional experience – a four-week placement. In each school between three to five experienced supervisors volunteered to participate. The added requirement was that they had a minimum of three years' experience as supervisors, and that during the time of the study each would be engaged in supervising one preservice teacher. Appropriate ethical processes were completed through the institutional ethics committee, which ensured that all participants in the research project gave informed consent.

In this study, all preservice teachers were studying in four-year teacher education programs at one university. The students were in their final year; therefore the study was based on the interpersonal experiences in their final school placement. The sample consisted of 13 preservice primary and 10 preservice secondary teachers.

The study involved two audio-taped interviews with each supervisor. The first occurred prior to the beginning of the four-week placement in order to gather information about intentions and expectations for the supervisory role. The researcher returned at the end of the practicum block to interview the supervisors again. The participating supervisors also agreed to record at least two conferences/discussions held with their preservice teachers during those four weeks. The researcher would not be present for these. These audio-tapes are not included for the purpose of this paper.

Context

Deeper understandings about learning in the workplace and in higher education require that account be taken of the context in which learners develop and utilise their knowledge and skills (Lynch, Leo, & Downing, 2006). In particular, context is central in investigations of professional experience in initial teacher preparation. As established in the theoretical framework, place or 'the specificity of location is crucial' (Clandinin, Pushor, & Murray Orr, 2007, p. 23) in a narrative inquiry.

The specific setting for this paper was a large primary school in which the administration team had always supported the university faculty in accepting preservice teachers. In this school it was recognised as an achievement if chosen to supervise preservice teachers. The administration team made it clear to staff and to the university that they

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chose only good teachers – those who they considered exemplary in professional knowledge and skills. Therefore both the teachers (Kathy and Sally, pseudonyms) whose stories are the focus of this paper had over the years established strong and affirmed recognition as good teachers. This provided them with a personal belief in their abilities as effective teachers. These factors underpin their stories of their experiences as supervisors.

Kathy and Sally were to supervise two female preservice teachers who were mature aged, each in their final practicum of their fourth year of teacher education. Upon successful completion of this final practicum, normally preservice teachers would be expected to continue into an internship with their supervisors at this same school.

Both Kathy and Sally taught the same year level in the school. While they did not share or team teach their classes, they worked together very closely. They not only planned units of work together, but also closely collaborated on lesson plans, delivering similar learning activities in their classrooms at the same time – almost in a lockstep fashion.

Sally, in her early 30s, had 12 years of experience across four schools. She had the added responsibility in the school of coordinating mathematics education. In the past she had only ever taught lower primary levels; this was the first year that she had been asked to take on a Year 6 class. The second teacher, Kathy, was in her late 20s, with nine years of experience, all gained in this one school. She too was teaching Year 6, but had taught at this level for some time. Each teacher was assigned a preservice teacher (Chris and Jill, pseudonyms). Both preservice teachers were mature aged: one in her mid-30s, the other in her mid-40s. These details are not insignificant as they contribute to the interpersonal dimension that forms part of the stories about this supervisory experience.

The four-week placement was about to begin when the researcher held the first interview. At this point Sally and Kathy had already met their preservice teachers during five lead-up day visits over five weeks. The preservice teachers were not present at the interviews with the researcher. While the researcher had planned to interview the supervisors separately, Sally and Kathy asked to be interviewed together. This again reflects how closely their professional identities were connected and how they pursued a collegial approach. After the four weeks, they were again interviewed and once again they preferred to be interviewed together.

In summary, three contextual factors are significant to their stories: the mature age of the preservice teachers; the preferred collegial practice of the supervising teachers; and the professional recognition they had been afforded by the school. The stories of their experiences follow, with two headings as organisers of their stories: Looking forward: effective teachers; and Looking back: effective supervisors. In their stories, Kathy and Sally tell of changes in personal and social interactions, across the past and present and into the future.

Looking forward: effective teachers

In the first interview held with Sally and Kathy in a school meeting room, the researcher invited them to explain their views on what makes an effective teacher. Sally began:

> I think if they haven't got the management then they can't teach. And it's fairly hard to get coming in as a student teacher because you've only got that short time and it's hard to get to know the kids and also everyone has a different behaviour management style. I know myself that I joke around with the kids, but if she tries that, like I don't do that at the start, you sort of build up your rapport with the kids so you can get to that stage and diffuse it with humour, but if she comes in and tries that straight away and tries to copy what I'm doing, she's gonna fail.

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Although Sally is conscious of the need for an individual teacher to develop her own style of effective management in a classroom over time, she seems committed to the old adage about 'not smiling until Easter'. She emphasises the importance of actual classroom experience rather than relying on textbook knowledge:

> And it's also a personal thing that you have to develop over time yourself and so that you're comfortable with how you do it and then . . . kids too, like there's kids you can yell at all you want and you get nowhere and there's other kids that you can sort of raise your voice a bit and they'll sort of sit back and they're fine, you know. So I think it's fairly difficult and it's not one you can really get out of a textbook. You've got to be in the classroom to do it.

Sally seems to draw here on personal experience. While not explicitly relating it to her recent change in teaching role, it could be that her own experience of moving from a very familiar teaching environment – that of lower primary – into the Year 6 classroom underpins her advice here. Sally continues on without interruption from her teaching partner, Kathy, to add another component to effective teaching, organisation.

> the planning would come next. Because if you're not organised and you're not planning, then your teaching's not effective and you lose behaviour management anyway. Because, if you're not organised enough to keep the kids settled you know, and know where you're going and where they're going you know . . .

Clearly organisation and its important contribution to behaviour management are being highlighted. Sally and Kathy planned every part of their teaching of the Year 6 classes together, as Kathy explains: 'At the beginning of term, Sally and I get together and we do a complete overview with all the outcomes and like our paperwork for the whole term.' Sally adds: 'we need to keep it tight because we do the same pages at the same time and the kids are doing basically the same thing even though we have the doors closed'.

These extracts evoke the nature of the working relationship between Kathy and Sally. They plan and prepare their teaching together. While 'doing the same pages at the same time' suggests limited flexibility, it also suggests they expect a great deal of support from one another. Even though Sally stated earlier that management is 'also a personal thing that you have to develop over time yourself', they prepare for their classrooms in exactly the same way. For them common planning means identical implementation. In examining the account of their present relationship as teachers, there seems to be anticipation of the possibility of the future supervision role changing this. How they will view their preservice teachers? Potential colleagues invited into their close working partnership or troublesome interlopers?

It is useful to remember that the four-week placement has not begun, but that they have already met their preservice teachers – who are in their final placement – for five one-day visits over the previous five weeks. Although not outright beginners, Chris and Jill have not yet taught at this school. In this first interview, it became obvious that, having met their preservice teachers, Sally and Kathy had already formed quite firm if not pre-emptive opinions about their likely classroom abilities.

Sally is already conscious of how her professional effectiveness might be interpreted by her preservice teacher. In her story she now looks to the future – when her preservice teacher will be working daily alongside her. She seems concerned, and she actually suggests that she knows how her preservice teacher might view her close working relationship with Kathy:

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> The thing . . . is we cooperatively plan so it's very hard for our student teachers because well I know mine feels at the moment that I . . . go and ask Kathy and check with her.

Sally is concerned here that she may be perceived by her student teacher as dependent upon and not as competent as Kathy. As a supervising teacher in this particular school context, Sally is aware of the school administration's view of her as one of their most effective teachers. This means she is expected to have strong teaching expertise, and to be able to share that expertise with the preservice teachers. For her, her story as a supervising teacher should be about displaying competence in her area. She is strongly committed to confirming this aspect of her professional identity and this emerges as she speaks of supervising preservice teachers.

Sally has explained the way she and Kathy work together. Her story has identified an underlying personal concern about her preservice teacher's opinion of her competence and she has an explanation to counter this:

> she feels like I probably don't know as much as I should. . . . But we actually plan together and run the same thing . . . So we need them to stick to what we want to . . .

Kathy – who has taught Year 6 for some years – in the first interview told a story of her impressions from the preliminary five visits. These visits clearly have been important for she has established an opinion about the future performance of both preservice teachers. She introduces the concept of 'teacher presence':

> But by now, she should . . . she's not showing any initiative and to me . . . I agree with Sally with behaviour management and then planning but first and foremost what I look for in someone is teacher presence. And I think teacher presence is the most vital thing 'cause once you've got that you can pretty much do anything.

When prompted about this quality, Kathy elaborated:

> A teacher has a presence and they've either got it or they don't. You can become a learned teacher but you still don't have that teacher presence and you can pick it straight away . . . we've got the teacher presence, we can just look at them [the students] and that's enough, they know what that means, yet these girls don't at this stage . . . haven't really shown a lot of teacher presence which is fine 'cause that's something that you do learn and develop and it will be interesting to see, especially from a behaviour management side of it how they cope.

Kathy describes this attribute of teacher presence as 'you've either got it or you don't'. Yet in the same extract she states it is something 'you do learn'. Kathy also seems to be somewhat dismissive of these preservice teachers in her reference to them as 'these girls' – even though they are mature-aged women. Sally followed showing a degree of empathy towards preservice teachers and their developing teacher presence. However, she adds and supports strongly that the preservice teachers should be able to demonstrate initiative while on practicum.

> I think teacher presence takes a while to get though even in yourself . . . I know what you mean but I think that takes a lot longer to develop than just on your prac. But the initiative thing, you've either got that or you haven't like I'm here to work, and I'm here to get the job done, and what do you need done and the thing is too like ours (the student teachers) have been turning up at like quarter to nine. We said we would never be on a prac at quarter to nine.

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Across these extracts from the first interview there is evidence of the impact of the supervision on these teachers. Tension is emerging for Sally around being viewed as reliant on the more experienced Year 6 teacher – Kathy. Sally's identity is not as strong in the context of the year level she is now teaching, although she knows she is recognised as a good teacher. There is also tension because of established expectations of those who come to teach. These expectations are based on the way in which these two teachers work together – their initiative, their commitment both to the students and to each other. The next section examines their stories of their supervision over the four-week practicum.

Looking back: effective supervisors

This section draws upon the second interview conducted when the professional experience of four weeks had been completed. The preservice teachers have left. As previously explained, in normal circumstances they would return to these same supervisors to complete an internship. In an internship, the intern is expected to be capable of more independent teaching and the teachers become more collegial mentors than supervisors. They should have confidence in their charges and grant more responsibility and increasing autonomy to them in the classroom.

From this interview, it becomes increasingly apparent that Sally, although an experienced teacher of 12 years and supervisor for over three years, does feel uncertain as a first-time Year 6 class teacher. Her colleague Kathy was therefore important to her in this unfamiliar teaching situation. However, rather than identify that she could use her own situation as a reflexive tool to work with her preservice teacher, Sally felt vulnerable and the consequences for the supervisory experience were drastic. The interview begins with Kathy:

> Well you know neither of them is welcome back into our classrooms to do their internship? . . . and I'm at the point now where I never want another intern again, I am just so angry and it's a shame because I've had interns for that long and I've got so much to offer.

The account moved directly to Sally's preservice teacher. Kathy contributed her view – demonstrating the interdependent practice relationship that shaped their supervisory stories:

> Basically, well all of Sally's concerns about her student teacher came true, in the first lesson, within the first half hour they [the students] had a 'punch up' . . . four parents [became] involved in admin, because she [the student teacher] had absolutely no control whatsoever.

Kathy goes on to make the point that her preservice teacher, Chris, 'was doing okay at this stage, she was mine, and she was learning from us'. Interestingly she shares the credit for Chris's achievements with Sally – 'learning from us'. However Kathy went on to finally dismiss both preservice teachers: 'I've never seen two people, on a prac, so boring, I mean prac is when you just cut loose.'

The story becomes filled with contradictions. The four-week practicum clearly was a difficult time for all involved. The commitment to being effective teachers by these two experienced teachers was so strong that, as expressed earlier, they planned everything in great detail, even down to the actual page being taught. Yet somehow they expected their preservice teachers to show initiative and 'cut loose'. Similar contradictions seemed to exist in regard to the obvious lack of collaboration. Their work as a team seemed not

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to have been extended to their two preservice teachers. Sally begins: 'At least Chris had resources; Jill didn't make any resources for . . .'; and Kathy agrees: 'Yeah, Chris had, yeah she [Jill] borrowed all of Chris's resources.'

What could these preservice teachers have done that made the experience so negative for these teachers? The following description of a critical event suggests an answer to why these teachers' stories of their supervisory roles developed so negatively. Sally explains:

> I wrote a fairly scathing report but I still passed her at the end. And all she did was flicked to the back to see Satisfactory that she did pass . . . she told everybody on staff, our staff mates, that Sally had written her a glowing report but the uni lecturer had told her to rip it up and write a poorer report and that's why she got a poorer report and that's what she was telling everyone on staff. So we had everyone coming up to us and going what is going on? So we're like I beg your pardon? She just doesn't get the way school works . . . and the hardest bit was when she was still telling everyone that I was her mate and she couldn't see that I had actually instigated it and that I actually had concerns and contacted the uni lecturer.

The first statement seems to sum up the contradictions within this whole experience. To write a 'scathing' report but not to fail the preservice teacher. How can this have occurred? The response to this question highlights the importance of the interaction between the specific dimensions of place and people to teachers' professional identities. It is unfortunate that Sally does not identify her role in guiding her preservice teacher to 'get the way school works'. This conflicted account exposes the extent of added emotional challenge that supervision can bring. In this case, their colleagues – and importantly the school administration – viewed them as effective teachers. Thus Sally and Kathy would be concerned at how this particular supervision may have adversely affected their reputations. However there seems to be an added dilemma, indicating the seriousness of the impact of this supervision on them. If their preservice teachers were unsuccessful, that failure could be interpreted as reflecting on them as unsuccessful supervisors. This then would diminish their status as effective teachers. The two roles are so intertwined for them, affecting their primary professional identity of 'good teachers'. Despite the self-report that they do plan well, do not have behaviour management problems, and have a 'presence' and energy in the classroom (critical components of their teaching capacities), the experience as supervisors changed the emotional stability in which those capacities worked for them. They are understandably agitated and concerned about the supervisions they have just completed and the consequences for their relationship with their other colleagues.

In examining this story of supervision – a story of interpersonal tensions and contradictions – the importance of teachers' identities is revealed. The following discussion examines this key aspect.

Discussion

This paper presents the importance of understanding teachers and teaching in terms of the change that becoming a supervisor brings to established teachers' identities. It highlights a 'gap' in the work of universities with teachers in schools who are asked to supervise. Wenger (1998) explains identity formation in terms of the negotiation of meanings that matter within a social configuration. These two factors are discussed in relation to the accounts examined in this paper.

Researchers such as Britzman (2003), Millar Marsh (2002) and Roberts (2000) have explained how change can affect teachers' identities when they confront different situations or perspectives. In this particular case the change occurs when confronting a difficult

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supervisory experience. Kathy's and Sally's stories as teachers are ones of a close professional relationship. This relationship is significant to their identities as teachers in a specific place and time. Teacher identity, 'being recognised as a certain "kind of person" in a given context' (Gee, 2000, p. 99), has been theorised not as predetermined or given but rather as constructed within an active process of creation and re-creation.

This process of identity construction can be aligned with Wenger (1998) and his use of the term 'negotiability'. He speaks about 'the value of meanings' and 'ownership of meanings' (Wenger, 1998, p. 200). By this Wenger explains that different individuals have varying degrees of control over the meanings that are produced in a situation. This is evident in the accounts of Sally and Kathy. Wenger's 'negotiability' refers to the extent to which individuals can use, modify and claim as their own the meanings that matter to them. If such negotiability is absent, an individual's experience 'becomes irrelevant because it cannot be asserted and recognised as a form of competence' (Wenger, 1998, p. 203).

In considering these two teachers' stories about their work supervising preservice teachers as a changed condition in which personal meanings of the experience had not been examined, the contradictions can possibly be explained. At one level these teachers speak of their work as teachers, telling a positive story. This is evident in their accounts of their work together – personal professional stories of satisfaction and achievement. They tell of the mutually beneficial aspects of their professional activities, such as their students' learning activities, the relationships established with colleagues in the school and the stimulating nature of their daily work. This story is about experiences which are within their control, and which hold great relevance to them. The frame of reference for these stories of competence and satisfaction is local as it focuses on actions and relationships at the level of the school.

Their accounts as supervising teachers present experiences that are worrying to them – and a frustrating and negative story also emerges. At the same time as they speak of their competence, these teachers tell of their concerns. The effectiveness of their practice as a teaching team as well as their professional recognition by peers is threatened by the changed circumstances that supervision has brought. This concern translates into a story of frustration about the lack of commitment and initiative of their preservice teachers.

These stories emerge in a context that is integral to these two teachers' sense of professional identity – good classroom practice. In this context, the stories express conflicting emotions about teaching and these teachers' identity struggles in a changed context of supervising preservice teachers.

Generally, supervision of preservice teachers brings difficult conditions and disruption to teachers' professional identities. They have no control over the timing of the supervision or the personalities or characteristics of those they will supervise. They have had no input into the previous practicums of these students. The preservice teachers have come from university coursework and have experienced different school supervisors. The possibility for Wenger's 'negotiation' of a meaning for them of the changed experiences brought by supervision is missing. Thus Sally's and Kathy's stories of their partnership and the effectiveness of their work in the context of challenges that supervising preservice teachers brought, presents an important space for careful and caring work by university teacher educators with their partner schools.

Conclusion

This paper presents one case from a larger research study into teachers' experiences as supervisors of preservice teachers. Through a narrative inquiry approach the significance

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of the impact of supervision on teacher identity construction emerged. In this particular story of supervision, the teachers placed great importance on being appointed as supervisors of preservice teachers. It was a responsibility, the discharge of which established beyond any doubt that they were successful, capable teachers. The last thing that they could have anticipated was ending up feeling unsuccessful and less capable – and even worse, perhaps viewed in that negative way by their professional colleagues. For them, the outcome should have been a reinforcement by significant others of their strengths as experienced professionals. As evidenced in the early interview extracts, while the supervisors could see the demands and risks for their preservice teachers, they seemed unaware that they too might be vulnerable.

For teacher educators this reflects the importance of understanding teachers as supervisors in terms of teacher identity. Supervision as a role for teachers changes the conditions that influence their identities. As experienced teachers, supervisors confront and adapt to their preservice teachers and to the particular university's expectations. This paper argues for the support of supervisors by university teacher educators through on-site visits specifically to discuss their practice in these changed conditions. Such discussions would provide an important space for teachers to produce conversations that enable 'joint storylines' to be told and thus meaning to be made of their experiences as supervisors (Davies & Harre, 1999). As Clandinin et al. (2007, p. 33) argue, 'moving from telling stories of our teaching practices to narratively inquiring . . . asks us to make the known and the familiar strange and open to new possibility'.

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Notes on contributor

Cheryl Sim's academic interests are in the area of teachers' professional learning including development and influences on teachers' knowledge and the role of experienced teachers in professional practice settings.

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