Different Ways of Being Educator: A Sociocultural Exploration of Educator Identity and Development in Practice, in a System of Non-traditional Flexi Schools

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ABSTRACT

Engagement in conventional schooling is untenable for some young Australians due to complex social, emotional and intellectual needs and past experiences of failure and exclusion. An alternative for engaging disenfranchised young people in education is through a system of non-traditional flexible schools. This research explores educator identity and development in practice in five ‘flexi schools’ in Queensland that reengage young people with complex needs. In the exploration of educator identity and development in practice, this study seeks to explore one overarching research issue: how practice in the flexi schools’ context influences educator identity and development. Two questions have been formulated to inform the overarching research issue and relate to two specific domains of practice. The first question asks: How do ways of working in the flexi schools’ context influence educator identity and development in practice? The second research question asks: How do ways of professional learning in the flexi schools’ context influence educator identity and development in practice?

Using a sociocultural theoretical lens and design experiment methodology, educators’ ways of working and professional learning have been explored. This occurred through analysis of questionnaire data incorporating descriptive statistics, and through thematic analysis of questionnaires (N=32), interviews (N=16), and reflective practice group (RPG) data. Reflective practice data included written evaluations from participants (N= 20) and researcher journal entries (N=13) on the experience of co-facilitating RPG sessions across five sites.

The analysis reveals the influence of the flexi schools’ context on educator identity and development in practice through three overarching themes that are a synthesis of practice in two domains: ways of working and ways of professional learning. These themes include: the primacy of relationships; an emphasis on being and becoming a critically reflective
practitioner; and the art of holding complexity. Educators’ perspectives of their work with young people and colleagues in the context, and the ways they engage in professional learning, reveal three main shifts in their sense of identity and development. The first movement is from task orientation to greater people orientation, highlighting responsiveness to learners’ needs. The second movement is from doing and knowing with an emphasis on knowledge transmission, towards knowledge creation to become co-learners with young people and colleagues. The third movement is from managed outcomes to more emergent outcomes, shaped by emphasising learner’s interests. These three movements are supported by educators being relational, critically reflective, and able to hold complexity by balancing flexibility, multidisciplinary practice and relational dynamics in highly complex settings.

The implications of this study are that further preparation and professional learning is required for multidisciplinary staff, including teachers, working in these unique contexts to develop the necessary skills and dispositions for working with principles that guide relationships and promote a democratic learning community. These principles include respect, participation, safe and legal, and honesty. Using principles as tools of negotiation rather than rules, requires educators to prioritise relationships so as to understand the complex needs of young people and be able to work collaboratively with colleagues. Engaging in critical reflective practice supports adults to become co-learners with the young people they walk with, and to challenge their own assumptions, beliefs and values about the purpose of education and the nature of learners. The capacity to hold complexity involves adults listening to understand young people’s needs and interests and to recognise their agency, as they become self-directed learners. In this context professional learning occurs through situated learning, informal mentoring and being guided by more experienced colleagues, as educators engage relationally with young people and other workers to negotiate and co-construct their educator identity and development in practice.
STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

(Signed)_____________________________

Ann Morgan
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To my colleagues in the research context who have walked with me from start to finish, Dale Murray, Michelle Murray, Laura McKenzie and Peter Tracy, and the many other colleagues, who offered encouragement – immense thanks.

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his legacy. When I completed my first degree, he reminded me that it was ‘a ticket to learn’.
This has grounded me in the value of lifelong learning, within and beyond the privilege of formal education. Let the learning journey continue!
STATEMENT ACKNOWLEDGING EXTENT AND NATURE OF ASSISTANCE RECEIVED IN PURSUIT OF THE RESEARCH AND PREPARATION OF THE THESIS

This thesis was completed by the PhD Candidate with assistance from her supervisors in their supervisory role as per the Griffith University Code of Practice for Supervision of Higher Degree Research Students. Assistance was provided from the ARC Project Research Assistant and an independent researcher on three occasions during data analysis when co-analysis with peer researchers for inter-rater authenticity was required. Apart from input from supervisors, no external editorial assistance was received.
WORK PUBLISHED IN THE COURSE OF THE RESEARCH


CONFERENCE PAPERS AND WORK IN PROGRESS SEMINARS


# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ........................................................................................................................................... ii
STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY ........................................................................................................ iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ...................................................................................................................... v
STATEMENT ACKNOWLEDGING EXTENT AND NATURE OF ASSISTANCE RECEIVED ................................................................. vii
WORK PUBLISHED IN THE COURSE OF THE RESEARCH .................................................................................... viii
TABLE OF CONTENTS ........................................................................................................................ ix
LIST OF TABLES ....................................................................................................................................... xiv
LIST OF FIGURES ...................................................................................................................................... xvii
LIST OF APPENDICES ............................................................................................................................. xix
LIST OF ACRONYMS USED IN THIS THESIS ............................................................................................ xx

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................... 1
The Research Issue ................................................................................................................................ 1
  The research questions. ......................................................................................................................... 2
Chapter Overview .................................................................................................................................. 3
Background to the Research Investigation .............................................................................................. 3
  Alternative education and learning choices programs. ................................................................. 4
  Professional identity and development of educators ........................................................................ 5
  The research setting ............................................................................................................................ 5
  Theoretical lens ..................................................................................................................................... 6
  Research methodology ....................................................................................................................... 7
Significance of the Study ...................................................................................................................... 7
Structure of the Thesis .......................................................................................................................... 8
Chapter Summary .................................................................................................................................. 10

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW ....................................................................................................... 11
Introduction........................................................................................................................................... 11
Chapter Overview .................................................................................................................................. 11
The National Australian Context: Education and Employment .......................................................... 12
  Reform agendas .................................................................................................................................. 14
Common Features of Best Practice in Alternative Education ............................................................ 17
Identity and Self: A View through a Sociocultural Lens ...................................................................... 20
Educator Professional Identity .............................................................................................................. 23
  Teacher professional identity (TPI) ................................................................................................. 24
  TPI and the influence of context ...................................................................................................... 25
  TPI and the emotional dimension: Teacher as carer ...................................................................... 28
  TPI and the impact of educational reform agendas ....................................................................... 32
Domains of Practice in Alternative Education: Ways of Working ..................................................... 33
  Working across professional boundaries....................................................................................... 33
  Informal education .......................................................................................................................... 34
Domains of Practice in Alternative Education: Ways of Professional Learning ......................... 36
  Reflective practice ............................................................................................................................. 39
How the Research Questions Contribute Something New to this Field ......................................... 40
  Common perspectives adopted in previous research .................................................................. 40
  Unique contribution of this study to this field of educational research ....................................... 45
Chapter Summary ............................................................................................................................... 45
Overview of Chapter Three ............................................................................................................... 46
CHAPTER 3 SOCIOCULTURAL THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES INFORMING THIS RESEARCH

Chapter Overview ........................................................................................................... 47
Vygotsky’s Legacy in the Development of Sociocultural Theory ................................. 48
   Vygotsky’s perspective on human mental functioning ............................................ 49
   Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development (ZPD) ................................................... 50
   Embodiment in educational research and the ZPD ................................................. 50
Defining Educator Identity and Development in Practice .......................................... 52
   Educator identity ...................................................................................................... 52
   Educator development .............................................................................................. 54
Theoretical Traditions Shaping this Research ............................................................... 55
The Influence of Practice on Educator Identity and Development: Participation in
   Communities of Practice .......................................................................................... 56
   Beyond communities of practice: Addressing critiques of Wenger’s model .......... 58
The Influence of Mediated Action on Educator Identity and Development in Practice ... 59
   Discourse .................................................................................................................. 60
   Reinterpreting the ZPD ............................................................................................ 60
   Contemporary varieties of dialogue ......................................................................... 62
Exploring Identity and Development through Relational Dynamics ............................ 62
   Relational agency ..................................................................................................... 63
   Relational equity ..................................................................................................... 66
   Relational dynamics: An interplay of agency and equity ...................................... 68
Theoretical Foundations of the Research Design and Implementation ......................... 70
   Formulating research questions ............................................................................. 70
   Choosing a research design .................................................................................... 71
   Developing and implementing research tools ....................................................... 72
   An approach to data analysis .................................................................................. 73
Chapter Summary ......................................................................................................... 74

CHAPTER 4 METHODOLOGY .................................................................................. 76
Chapter Overview ......................................................................................................... 76
The Research Questions that Informed this Study ....................................................... 76
Design Experiment Methodology ................................................................................ 77
A Framework for Design Experiments ........................................................................ 79
Rationale for Using Design Experiment in this Study ............................................... 82
   Improvement of educational practice .................................................................... 83
   Consonance with sociocultural theory .................................................................... 84
   The development and refinement of theory ............................................................ 85
   Appropriate ethical fit with the research context ................................................... 86
The Structure of this Design Experiment ..................................................................... 87
   Stage One: Exploration .......................................................................................... 87
   Stage Two: Enactment ............................................................................................. 89
   Stage Three: Evaluation ......................................................................................... 90
Overview of Recruitment Processes for Participants ................................................... 90
Data Collection Methods Used in the Design Experiment .......................................... 92
   Data collection methods for Stage One: Exploration .......................................... 94
   Data collection methods for Stage Two: Enactment ............................................ 98
   Data collection methods for Stage Three: Evaluation ........................................ 102
Procedures Used in Carrying Out the Design Experiment ......................................... 104
   Stage One procedures: ......................................................................................... 104
Overview of Introduction

STAFF RELATIONSHIPS AND SUPPORT

CHAPTER

Summary of Ways of Working with Young People in Flexi Schools

The Influence of Strands of Common Threads Across this Domain of Practice

Spatial Imagery: Place, Space and Body

Summary of spatial imagery in questionnaire data.

Strands of common threads and metaphor images of educator identity

Strands of common threads and staff perceptions of important aspects of work

Towards a synthesis of practice

Ways of Working: Supporting Young People

Strands of common threads

Strands of common threads in Questionnaire Data: Working with Young People

Strands of common threads and staff perceptions of educator identity

Strands of common threads and metaphor images of educator identity

Summary of Questionnaire Data: Working with Young People

Spatial Imagery: Place, Space and Body in Questionnaire Data

Summary of spatial imagery in questionnaire data.

Strands of Common Threads Across this Domain of Practice

How Ways of Working with Young People Influence Educator Identity and Development

The Influence of Relationships in Ways of Working with Young People

The strand of relationships

The strand of connections

The strand of listening to young people and the strand of time

The Influence of Changing Perspectives through Reflection in Ways of Working with Young People

The strand of strength-based practice

The strand of changing perspectives

The strand of re-engagement

The strand of agency of young people

The Influence of Holding Complexity in Ways of Working with Young People

The strand of holding complexity

The strand of structures and boundaries

Summary of Ways of Working with Young People in Flexi Schools

CHAPTER 5 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION – WAYS OF WORKING: SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE

Introduction

Overview of Ways of Working with Young People in Flexi Schools

Review of analytic methods applied to the data

Organising the data presentation using strands of common threads

Towards a synthesis of practice

Ways of Working: Supporting Young People

Strands of common threads

Strands of common threads in Questionnaire Data: Working with Young People

Strands of common threads and staff perceptions of educator identity

Strands of common threads and staff perceptions of important aspects of work

Strands of common threads and metaphor images of educator identity

Summary of Questionnaire Data: Working with Young People

Spatial Imagery: Place, Space and Body in Questionnaire Data

Summary of spatial imagery in questionnaire data.

Strands of Common Threads Across this Domain of Practice

How Ways of Working with Young People Influence Educator Identity and Development

The Influence of Relationships in Ways of Working with Young People

The strand of relationships

The strand of connections

The strand of listening to young people and the strand of time

The Influence of Changing Perspectives through Reflection in Ways of Working with Young People

The strand of strength-based practice

The strand of changing perspectives

The strand of re-engagement

The strand of agency of young people

The Influence of Holding Complexity in Ways of Working with Young People

The strand of holding complexity

The strand of structures and boundaries

Summary of Ways of Working with Young People in Flexi Schools

CHAPTER 6 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION - WAYS OF WORKING: STAFF RELATIONSHIPS AND SUPPORT

Introduction

Overview of Ways of Working: Staff Relationships and Support

Review of analytic methods applied to the data

Organising the data presentation using strands of common threads
Towards a synthesis of practice .............................................................. 178
Ways of Working: Staff Relationships and Support ................................. 181
Strands of common threads .................................................................. 181
Strands of Common Threads in Questionnaire Data – Ways of Working: Staff
Relationships and Support .................................................................. 182
The strand of collaboration in questionnaire data ................................... 183
The strand of relationships in questionnaire data .................................... 187
The strand of working with the four principles in questionnaire data ....... 189
The strand of organisational structures that support in questionnaire data .... 190
The strand of challenges to support in questionnaire data ..................... 191
Summary of Questionnaire Data – Ways of working: Staff Relationships and Support... 192
Strands of Common Threads Across this Domain of Practice .................. 194
How Ways of Working Influence Educator Identity and Development ........ 194
The Influence of Relationships in Ways of Working: Staff Relationships and Support .... 195
The strand of relationships .................................................................. 195
The strand of working with the four principles with staff ....................... 197
The Influence of Changing Perspectives through Reflection in Ways of Working:
Staff Relationships and Support ......................................................... 200
The strand of multidisciplinary practice ................................................. 200
The strand of collaboration ................................................................. 206
The strand of seeing the bigger picture ................................................ 208
The Influence of Holding Complexity in Ways of Working with Staff ........ 210
The strand of organisational structures that support ............................. 210
The strand of challenges to support .................................................... 212
Summary of Ways of Working in Flexi Schools ..................................... 214

CHAPTER 7 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
WAYS OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING ................................................. 216
Introduction ......................................................................................... 216
Overview of Ways of Professional Learning in the Flexi Schools ............ 216
Organising the data presentation using strands of common threads ........ 219
Exploring Ways of Professional Learning in Flexi Schools ................. 220
Strands of common threads ............................................................... 220
Strands of Common Threads in RPG data: Ways of Professional Learning ...... 221
Brief summary of the purpose and origins of RPGs ............................. 221
Underpinning philosophy informing RPGs ......................................... 222
Feedback from written evaluations of RPG sessions ........................... 223
The strand of learning in and through relationships in RPG data ........... 224
The strand of self-awareness and inner work in RPG data ..................... 227
The strand of critical reflective practice in RPG data ........................... 231
Summary of RPG Data: Ways of Professional Learning ....................... 233
Strands of Common Threads Across Two Domains of Practice ............. 233
How Ways of Professional Learning Influence Educator Identity and Development in
Practice ............................................................................................... 234
The Influence of Relationships in Ways of Professional Learning .......... 237
The strand of situated learning ............................................................ 237
The strand of learning in and through relationships ............................ 240
The Influence of Changing Perspectives through Reflection in Ways of Professional
Learning ............................................................................................. 244
The strand of self-awareness and inner work ....................................... 246
xii
LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.1 Themed groups of features of best practice in alternative education summarised from the literature review ................................................................. 19
Table 2.2 Main focal points of teacher professional identity and relevant literature .......... 26
Table 2.3 Three research perspectives and key researchers identified in the literature review of alternative education and flexible learning choices ...................... 42
Table 2.4 Identified gaps in research in learning choices programs and report recommendations (te Riele, 2012) with links to this research thesis ...................... 45
Table 4.1 Three stages of the design experiment, data collection instruments, purpose of data collected, data analysis and links to research questions ................. 88
Table 4.2 Overview of the questionnaire including: purpose, relevant questions, kinds of data collected and how the data addressed the research questions .......... 95
Table 4.3 Overview of the semi-structured interviews including: purpose, relevant questions, kinds of data collected and how data addressed the research questions ................................................................. 99
Table 4.4 Overview of the researcher journal entries including: purpose, relevant questions, kinds of data collected and how data addressed the research questions ................................................................. 101
Table 4.5 Overview of the written evaluations of RPGs including: purpose, relevant questions, kinds of data collected and how data addressed the research questions ................................................................. 103
Table 4.6 Arriving at strands of common threads across four codes in ways of working: supporting young people ................................................................. 118
Table 4.7 Dispositions of “being” and “becoming” in quotes from stage one semi-structured interviews ................................................................. 123
Table 5.1 Strands of common threads across four codes in ways of working: supporting young people ................................................................. 131
Table 5.2 Translation of categories into strands of common threads and prioritised number of instances in each category ................................................................. 133
Table 5.3 Categorisation of most important aspects of work from questionnaire item 8... 135
Table 5.4 Instances of metaphors that were identifiable in strands of common threads ... 136
Table 5.5 Spatial imagery: themes of place, space and body in metaphors ............. 139
Table 5.6 Ways of working: supporting young people – The influence of relationships on educator identity and development in practice ................................................................. 143
Table 5.7  Ways of working: supporting young people – The influence of changing perspectives through reflection on educator identity and development in practice ................................................................. 150

Table 5.8  Ways of working: supporting young people – The influence of holding complexity on educator identity and development in practice ...................... 171

Table 6.1  Strands of common threads across three codes in ways of working: staff relationships and support ....................................................................................................... 181

Table 6.2  Insights into collaboration with examples from questionnaire Item 12.......... 183

Table 6.3  Six most frequently accessed sources of support......................................... 187

Table 6.4  Statements about working with the four principles with staff, with Likert-type scale responses from questionnaire item 14................................................................. 190

Table 6.5  Ways of working: staff relationships and support – The influence of relationships on educator identity and development in practice ..................... 196

Table 6.6  Ways of working: Staff relationships and support – The influence of changing perspectives through reflection on educator identity and development in practice ........................................................................................................ 201

Table 6.7  Ways of working: Staff relationships and support - The influence of holding complexity on educator identity and development in practice ................... 211

Table 7.1  Strands of common threads across four codes in ways of professional learning................................................................................................................................. 220

Table 7.2  Prioritised induction themes and their definitions from member checking process in consultation group......................................................................................................................... 222

Table 7.3  Summary of results from reflective practice group written evaluations........ 223

Table 7.4  The strand of learning in and through relationships synthesised from common threads ......................................................................................................................... 225

Table 7.5  The strand of self-awareness and inner work synthesised from common threads ................................................................................................................................. 228

Table 7.6  The strand of critical reflective practice synthesised from common threads ...... 232

Table 7.7  The influence of relationships in ways of professional learning on educator identity and development in practice ............................................................................... 238

Table 7.8  The influence of changing perspectives through reflection in ways of professional learning, on educator identity and development in practice.......... 245
Table 7.9  The influence of holding complexity in ways of professional learning on educator identity and development in practice ..........................................................253

Table 7.10  Themed dispositions grouped according to three overarching themes across the strands of common threads........................................................................261

Table 7.11  Levels of capacity evident in disposition statements identified in the data analysis........................................................................................................................262

Table 8.1  Wenger’s four components of a social theory of learning reconfigured into a social theory of identity and development in practice and connected to the research sub-questions ............................................................294
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 3.1 Components of a social theory of identity and development, based on a reconfiguration of Wenger’s components of a social theory of learning ........57

Figure 3.2 The processes of relational agency: Learning through working with others (Edwards, 2005) .................................................................66

Figure 3.3 The capacities of relational equity: the ways people should treat each other as they work together (Boaler, 2008) .................................................................67

Figure 3.4 Relational dynamics: a relational model of identity and development in multidisciplinary communities of practice .................................................................69

Figure 4.1 Diagram of Design Experiment model as it applies to this study ...............80

Figure 4.2 Three stages of data collection with iterative cycles of reflection ............93

Figure 4.3 Data analysis tools and how they were applied in each stage of the design experiment ................................................................................................................................111

Figure 4.4 An adapted model of thematic network analysis with variations in terminology ..........................................................................................................................115

Figure 4.5 Diagram of thematic network data analysis of ways of working applied to semi-structured interviews ........................................................................................................116

Figure 4.6 Three overarching themes identified in strands of common threads across two domains of practice .................................................................................................119

Figure 5.1 Diagram of thematic network data analysis of ways of working applied to interview data ................................................................................................................................129

Figure 5.2 Three overarching themes identified in strands of common threads across ways of working ................................................................................................................130

Figure 6.1 Diagram of thematic network data analysis of ways of working applied to interview data ................................................................................................................................179

Figure 6.2 Three overarching themes identified in strands of common threads across ways of working ................................................................................................................180

Figure 6.3 Two distinct ideas about collaboration from questionnaire data ...............185

Figure 6.4 Most important sources of professional support ......................................189

Figure 7.1 Diagram of thematic network data analysis of ways of professional learning in interviews ................................................................................................................218
Figure 7.2  Three overarching themes identified in strands of common threads across
two domains of practice.................................................................235

Figure 7.3  Strands of common threads interconnected in web of practice .............236

Figure 8.1  Wenger’s model of a social theory of learning reconfigured to become a
model of a social theory of identity and development in practice ..................271

Figure 8.2  How the flexi schools embody a social theory of identity and development
in practice, as educational sites, relational spaces and educating communities
of practice .......................................................................................274

Figure 8.3  Relational dynamics: a relational model of identity and development in
multidisciplinary communities of practice ...........................................278

Figure 8.4  Revised theoretical construct of relational dynamics – a model for a social
theory of identity and development in multidisciplinary communities of
practice .............................................................................................283

Figure 8.5  The influence of relationships on educator identity and development in
practice............................................................................................293

Figure 8.6  The influence of changing perspectives through reflection on educator identity
and development in practice............................................................305

Figure 8.7  The influence of holding complexity on educator identity and development in
practice............................................................................................307
LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix A  Options for staff participation in the research project .................................. 313
Appendix B  Questionnaire information sheet ................................................................. 314
Appendix C  General staff questionnaire ............................................................................ 317
Appendix D  Staff consent form for interviews ................................................................. 324
Appendix E  General information for interviews ............................................................... 325
Appendix F  Interview schedule for stage one interviews .................................................. 326
Appendix G  Model of the coding scheme for interview data analysis ............................... 327
Appendix H  Interview codes with definitions ................................................................. 328
Appendix I  A snapshot of questionnaire participant details ............................................. 337
Appendix J  A snapshot of educators who were interviewed ............................................. 345
Appendix K  Common threads in four codes for Ways of working: Supporting young People .................................................................................................................................. 349
Appendix L  Arriving at strands of common threads in Ways of working: Supporting young people.................................................................................................................................. 350
Appendix M  Data extracts for eight common threads in the code: Understanding the needs of young people ...................................................................................................................... 351
Appendix N  Data extracts for four common threads in the code: Recognising the agency of young people .......................................................................................................................... 356
Appendix O  Data extracts for seven common threads in the code: Learning choices support ................................................................................................................................. 361
Appendix P  Data extracts for eight common threads in the code: Positive relationships support ................................................................................................................................. 366
Appendix Q  Details of the process of independent categorisation analysis of staff descriptive words of self as educator ........................................................................................................ 371
Appendix R  Questionnaire Item 7: Definitions for independent categorisation of data..... 372
Appendix S  Questionnaire Item 7: Descriptive words of self as educator sorted into categories ................................................................................................................................. 373
Appendix T  Questionnaire Item 8: Definitions for independent categorisation of data..... 378
Appendix U  Questionnaire Item 8: Categories of most important aspects of work with examples from data .................................................................379
Appendix V  Questionnaire Item 8: List of most important aspects of work linked with strands of common threads in Ways of working: Supporting young people .384
Appendix W  Detailed summary of the instances of metaphors identifiable in strands of common threads .........................................................386
Appendix X  Common threads in three codes for Ways of working: Staff relationships and support .................................................................389
Appendix Y  Data extracts for six common threads in the code: Multidisciplinary practice and collaboration ........................................................390
Appendix Z  Data extracts for five common threads in the code: Productive relationships among staff.................................................................399
Appendix AA  Data extracts for six common threads in the code: Staff support ..................403
Appendix AB  Arriving at strands of common threads across three codes in Ways of working: Staff relationships and support .......................409
Appendix AC  Items 12 and 13: Results of questionnaire data analysis related to Collaboration .................................................................................410
Appendix AD  Item 14: Ways of working with others. Results of questionnaire data analysis related to strands of common threads ......................412
Appendix AE  Common threads in four codes for Ways of professional learning .............413
Appendix AF  Data extracts for six common threads in the code: Situated learning ........414
Appendix AG  Data extracts for seven common threads in the code: Transformation of professional identity .........................................................424
Appendix AH  Data extracts for five common threads in the code: Critical reflective Practice ......................................................................................435
Appendix AI  Data extracts for eight common threads in the code: Staff induction and professional development .............................................442
Appendix AJ  Arriving at strands of common threads across four codes in Ways of professional learning .........................................................453
Appendix AK  Description of kinds of activities conducted in RPGs............................454
Appendix AL  Dispositions of being and becoming in quotes from Stage One interviews with educators ...............................................................459
Appendix AM  Dispositions identified in interviews, arranged in themes, and categorised according to three overarching themes ....................478
Appendix AN  Narrative explanation of dispositions with interview data extracts incorporated, and grouped according to three overarching themes ...483

xx
# LIST OF ACRONYMS USED IN THIS THESIS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABS</td>
<td>Australian Bureau of Statistics</td>
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<tr>
<td>AITSL</td>
<td>Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AQF</td>
<td>Australian Qualifications Framework</td>
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<tr>
<td>AQFC</td>
<td>Australian Qualifications Framework Council</td>
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<td>Australian Research Council</td>
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<td>Australian Services Union</td>
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<td>Foundation for Young Australians</td>
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<td>United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization</td>
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<td>ZPD</td>
<td>Zone of proximal development</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>