

Teacher development and educational change: empowerment through structured reflection

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Reflection and change are pivotal themes in this paper, which outlines the rationale, methodology and principal findings of a research undertaking on teacher development in Ireland. The study was based on the premise that teachers' practices are guided in large measure by a 'tacit knowledge' of education, formed in response to personal and contextual factors. It was held that sustained teacher and school development relate primarily to acquiring an awareness of and engaging in ongoing reflection on this implicit theory. Participants were facilitated in structuring such reflection through images—as subjective knowledge structures which capture their latent understandings of teaching and learning processes. It was an enlightening and empowering experience for the teachers involved, who, as a consequence, could both envision and initiate necessary improvements in their educational practices. The findings have notable implications for pre-service and in-service teacher education.

Introduction

Beneath the observable 'bag of tricks' every teacher employs (Starratt, 1990, p. 87) there exists a powerful base of invariably tacit values and beliefs which influences decision-making and behaviour. Prescriptive reform measures designed to improve teachers' classroom actions and thus pupil learning may therefore achieve little other than an 'illusion of change' (Sarason, 1996, p. 110). The difficulty with such development strategies lies in their superficial focus on teacher behaviour, without recourse to the thinking underlying that behaviour. If overlooked, that central component of teacher development is likely to see familiar modes of practitioner operation eventually reasserted. In Sarason's words (1996, p. 232):

If these assumptions and conceptions remains un verbalized and unquestioned, which is to say that thinking does not change, the likelihood that any of the overt regularities one wants to change will in fact change is drastically reduced. It would all be so simple if one could legislate changes in thinking.

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The research undertaking from which the present paper emanates was prompted by this situation. It was held accordingly, that effective teacher development is premised upon practitioners' ability to reflectively access the meaningful 'tacit knowledge' (Polanyi, 1967) of professional practice contained in thought, and to address the manner in which it impacts on their work.

The reflective practice 'movement' has gained considerable currency in the context of teachers' professional development in Ireland as elsewhere in recent years. Its appeal is understandable. Reflection offers a 'psychologically safe' (Schein, 1992) means of embracing change. It appears as a relatively accessible mode of development, and as non-threatening to professional identity and integrity. Nonetheless, taking cognizance of a perceived preoccupation with the reflective slogan rather than the principle (Calderhead, 1989), and as such, of the concept's 'vagueness' (Furlong & Maynard, 1995, p. 38), it was deemed imperative in this study to engage participants, from the outset, in a process of reflection on professional self and practice that was both structured and systematic.

To that end, the metaphorical image was identified as a reflective 'device' which might be appropriately employed by the practitioner in the process of uncovering theories-in-use. This approach was suggested by Lakoff and Johnson's well-grounded dissertation on the psychological basis of metaphor (1980). As these researchers maintain, understanding in personal and professional life is constructed through an essentially metaphorical process of associating the unknown with what is known. Significantly, their views accord with those of Schon (1983) on the nature of the knowledge intrinsic to professional practice. As Schon maintains, every indeterminate situation and problem encountered by the practitioner is 'named' as fitting one or more existing domains of professional experience. The images ensuing from this 'seeing-as' process (Wittgenstein, cited in Warnock, 1976, pp. 176–182) are considered to give form to the subjective knowledge that shapes practitioner thinking and provides frameworks for professional action. The validity of this thesis is borne out in a growing body of research findings which indicates that teachers' personal choice of images and metaphors for self, students and school is related to different teaching styles and indeed to student behaviours in the classroom (Elbaz, 1983; Clandinin, 1986; Grady *et al.*, 1995). By surfacing and examining these metaphorical constructs, teachers may therefore be enabled to identify and evaluate the actual theories that lend coherence to their practices.

Such reflection can also indicate how practices may be unconsciously confined by these constructs. As Schon (1983, p. 61) explains, in the course of routinely 'naming' problems and 'framing' responses to them, the practitioner may become 'neglectful of important opportunities to think about what he is doing'. Hence, professional situations may be misread or inadvertently manipulated to 'fit' implicit theories, and to thereby maintain constancy and confidence in practice (Schon, 1983, pp. 44–45). 'Within the emotional maelstrom of contemporary classrooms' in particular, teachers may instinctively cling to established pedagogical formats with a view to reducing complexity and uncertainty (Sugrue, 1997, p. x). An awareness of this situation can be liberating, as, accepting that behaviour is altered in accordance with thinking,

teachers may discover that by reconfiguring their guiding images they are empowered to not only envision but initiate new educational practices. Reflection of this nature is consequently proposed as a promising means of providing for the ongoing, self-motivated practitioner growth and concomitant school development inherent in the post-modern context (Ryan, 2002, pp. 63–78).

Background and context

While research on teachers' thought processes has increasingly come to attention since the 1970s, as Clark and Peterson (1986) point out in their comprehensive review of that literature, many of those studies have focused on the overt dimension of teacher attributions, planning and decision-making, without recourse to fundamental values and beliefs. In thereby inadequately addressing the underlying dynamics of the teacher's practice, they have delimited consideration of how such practice might be improved. In essence, there has been a dearth of research on the powerful, implicit thought processing that guides teachers' work. It still 'constitutes the smallest and youngest part of the literature on teacher thinking' (Clark & Peterson, 1986, p. 285).

On this basis it was decided to investigate the images and implicit concepts of teacher, pupils and school held by a sample of primary teachers in Ireland. Ultimately, it was intended to stimulate participant reflection on the nature, formation and practical implications of these constructs, and therefore on the potential of this reflective process for facilitating teacher development and educational change. It was anticipated that this research would demonstrate how teachers' metaphorical constructions can serve as a valuable means of professional self-study, capturing practitioners' personal and often latent understandings of teaching and conceptions of themselves as teachers. Consequently, it would enable teachers to not only describe their practices, as they had actually designed them, but also to identify and set about instigating desirable changes in those practices as they embraced the understanding that effective educational change is largely dependent upon changes in the personal constructs guiding those actions.

This study was conducted in Ireland at a time of significant commitment to educational reform in this country as elsewhere. In seeking to present a promising approach to sustained teacher and ultimately school development, it was a timely and necessary undertaking. Moreover, in redressing a paucity of such research with practising primary teachers, it also gave due precedence to the 'ordinary' teacher who for too long has been the 'silent subject' in the discourse on teachers' knowledge (Elbaz, 1991, p. 8) and its implications for learning.

Methodology

The study, which extended over one school year, incorporated a mix of qualitative methodologies designed primarily to encourage depth of reflection as well as to

produce a triangulation of data that would strengthen the validity of the findings. Taking cognizance of the experience of other researchers in the field (Bullough, 1991; Bullough & Stokes, 1994; Sugrue, 1997, 1998), respondents were offered a supportive initiation into the sometimes challenging process of generating images. Accordingly, the initial research instruments consisted of a postal questionnaire and drawing exercise. In responding to the questionnaire, study participants were required simply to select from given words or 'images' to complete questionnaire statements describing teacher, pupils and school (e.g. 'Being a teacher is like being a . . . ; I often think of my pupils as . . . ; My school might best be described as . . .'), and to explain briefly each of their image choices. They were also encouraged to generate their own images in response to these items.

Upon completing the questionnaire, respondents were invited to 'draw a picture of a teacher at work' on an attached A4 sheet, and to provide an account of their drawings. The decision to incorporate teacher drawings in the methodology was reinforced by several earlier studies (Rabinowitz & Travers, 1953; Weber & Mitchell, 1995). In research with student teachers, Rabinowitz and Travers (1953) designed a projective technique entitled 'Draw a Teacher'. They found that in most cases such drawings reveal individuals' 'own highly personal ideas about the persons and situations presented' (p. 19), and indeed that a student often portrays a teacher who actually looks like himself. 'However, projection is not limited to the physical image, but extends to a great host of attitudes and conceptions which the student holds' (Rabinowitz & Travers, 1953, p. 19). In encouraging expression through visual imagery, therefore, it was anticipated that the exercise would serve as both a necessary complement to the verbal orientation of the questionnaire and as a further springboard for teacher reflection. The 150 full-time teachers surveyed in this manner were randomly selected on the basis of a cluster sampling procedure incorporating 35 schools. These schools were varied according to location (urban, suburban, rural, small town); type (full-stream, junior, senior); size (number of teachers employed); gender profile of pupils and 'disadvantaged' or 'non-disadvantaged' status.

107 teachers (71%) returned completed questionnaires and 77 of these also included drawings. Respondents were predominantly female (88%). Most were aged 40 or more years and had at least 16 years' teaching experience. Although teachers of mainstream classes were in the majority, practitioners in learning support and special needs sectors were also represented.

Responses to the questionnaire were classified thematically according to respondents' image interpretations, while drawings were categorized on the basis of meanings inferred directly from them and their accompanying accounts. These initial data offered an overall impression of teacher thinking in the setting. Subsequently, ten respondents were invited to expand on their questionnaire and drawing responses and further their reflection by participating in semi-structured interviews with the researcher. These individuals were selected on the basis of both biographical profile and facility with the reflective response involved. They ranged in age from a beginning teacher in her twenties to highly experienced mid- and late-career practitioners. Drawn from a cross-section of the various schools involved, six

of these teachers including a teaching principal were working with mainstream classes in co-educational settings; one other was employed in a girls' school, another in a learning support role, and two of the teachers were working in special educational needs contexts. In discussion, interviewees' espoused and actual constructs were distinguished and the likely formative influences on, and practical implications of their theories-in-use were explored.

Each interviewee then completed a concise reflective journal of his or her work over a five-day period. In doing so they were encouraged to employ image and/or metaphor to describe self, pupils and school. A follow-up interview with each individual facilitated the enhancement of reflective skills, as, in collaboration with the researcher, interviewees assessed the pictures of actual practice revealed in their constructs, and where necessary, set about 'reframing' (Schon, 1983) some of these with new images. The further insights arrived at in the course of these interview and journal reflections provided for in-depth analysis and consequent development of practice on the part of these teachers.

Findings: a multiplicity of images

Collectively and individually participants in the study held multiple concepts of their work which they expressed in a complexity of images of teacher, pupils and school. Their responses comprehensively embraced cognitive, administrative and, above all, affective aspects of the teaching-learning process. These numerous constructs which shaped their implicit knowledge of teaching were, in accordance with the findings of other researchers in the field (Provenzo *et al.*, 1989; Marchant, 1992; Efron & Joseph, 1994; Fischer & Kiefer, 1994; Allinder *et al.*, 1995; Weber & Mitchell, 1995; Inbar, 1996; Sugrue, 1997) both complementary and contradictory. For all involved, the practice of teaching was viewed in terms of juggling a diversity of roles. Yet, as this seemingly ambiguous data unfolded, general and specific thought patterns integral to the personally meaningful professional practices of these teachers could be identified and clarified. Contained in the complexity, therefore, was a potential coherence of thought for each individual with consequent possibilities for teacher and school development.

A caregiving perspective

A caregiving theme (Noddings, 1992) prevailed in the findings overall, lending support to other such research data (Marchant, 1992; Fischer & Kiefer, 1994; Allinder *et al.*, 1995; Inbar, 1996), and the view that emotional aspects of teaching and learning are of particular interest to primary-level practitioners of education (Marchant, 1992; Fischer & Kiefer, 1994). One of the most popular of the interrelated caregiving constructs was that of teacher as 'parent'. Regardless of gender or of potential constraints such as class size, many questionnaire respondents ascribed to the principle of 'loco parentis', and conceived of pupils as 'part of the

family'. As one respondent explained: 'I look after them and care for them as if they were my own'. Moreover, parenting experience did not appear to be a precondition of this response, as was evident in the interview comments of one beginning teacher who, without such experience, referred to the 'love' she felt for her pupils as 'just overwhelming', like that of a 'mother'.

A caregiving perspective was also conveyed in horticultural imagery, whereby in line with research literature in this area (Clarcken, 1997; Tuohy, 1999), the teacher 'gardener' was seen to 'care for' and 'nurture' the varied pupil 'plants' in the 'garden'. It was equally apparent in study participants' identification with such images of teacher as 'counsellor', 'friend', 'guardian' and 'healer', and in their related descriptions of pupils as 'innocent', 'vulnerable' and 'wounded'. Contrary to the conclusions of other researchers (Efron & Joseph, 1994; Inbar, 1996), however, this response was not suggestive of a preference for an unequal distribution of knowledge and power between teacher and pupils in terms of teacher dominance and passive, dependent pupil learning. Rather, as equally borne out in their drawings and accompanying commentaries, and in line with the principles of the curriculum for Irish primary schools (Department of Education and Science, 1999), participants were largely committed to fostering what was perceived as a wealth of varied pupil potential through collaborative, activity-based learning. Hence, there was an interesting emphasis on facilitating natural 'plant' growth and development, rather than as Browne *et al.* (1995) have cautioned, on direct tutelage by the practitioner. As one questionnaire respondent stated, pupils 'have their own life force. I have to help them grow in their own time'. From a similar perspective school was described by one interviewee as,

a forum for achieving self-reliance. If you're a carer there's something very important that you must watch out for and that is not to allow the child to have a learned helplessness. You have to make them executors in their own life. You cannot live their lives for them. You must show them how to make good decisions and then [let them] go ahead and do it.

The considerable number of study participants who employed self-images of 'entertainer' and 'actor' and availed of Pineau's (1994, p. 4) 'theatrical techniques' in classroom interaction also seemed to do so with the best interests of their pupils in mind. While acknowledging the 'performance' inherent in their practices, and their intent thereby to engage pupils, their constructs were not indicative of contrivance or a desire to gain 'control' with a view to 'transmitting' information. Rather, pupils' participation in, and enjoyment of the 'drama' were of prime consideration: As one teacher wrote: 'I enjoy "entertaining" the children so as to ... lighten the load of work. It helps to keep their interest and make learning fun'.

'Traditional' thought

These complementary child-centred views were off-set by an underlying continuum of constructs which, from an apparently contradictory perspective, was rooted in

relatively 'traditional' thought. This small but persistent 'voice' referred to the teacher's role in deterministic terms as one of managing classroom interaction and directing learning by 'imparting knowledge' and 'training' receptive pupils. It was evident in the selection of certain questionnaire images such as of teacher as 'dispenser of knowledge', 'storyteller' and 'navigator', and pupils as 'apprentices'.

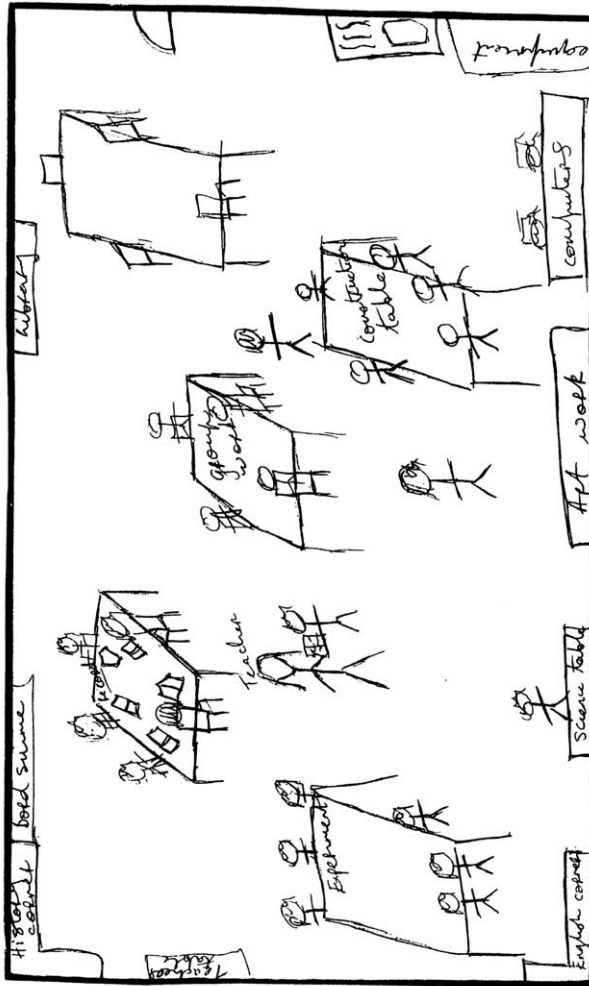
However, any suggestion of negativity in such responses was invariably mitigated with reference to extenuating circumstances. Thus, one teacher whose self-image was of 'sergeant major' described how a 'too broad curriculum and time constraints cause me to be constantly hurrying the children to finish their work, eat lunch, tidy up, get undressed, dressed for P.E.'. Another as 'prison warden' was reluctantly 'forcing a large class to conform'. Moreover, many such respondents were employed in 'disadvantaged' contexts and chose to rationalize their chosen constructs with reference to the considerable teaching and learning challenges associated with these environments, while also expressing much concern for their pupils' consequent difficulties. While children were sometimes described as 'empty vessels', therefore, they were also seen as 'prisoners of their home circumstances' which, as one respondent stated, left them 'generally unmotivated and unaccustomed to taking an active part in any learning process'.

Drawings

In accordance with their questionnaire responses, a diversity of images of professional practice found visual expression in respondents' drawings. In seeming reference to their own work, these respondents conceptualized teachers variously, as facilitators employing 'progressive', affectively inclined, group-based methodologies with active, independent learners (Figure 1); as relatively 'traditional' transmitters of a prescribed curriculum (Figure 2); as practitioners incorporating elements of both approaches to various degrees (Figure 3); or guided by a particularly personal concept of appropriate educational practice (Figure 4); and invariably, as both frustrated and energized by a highly complex, multifaceted, uniquely personal, contextually dependent and above all, child-centred undertaking (Figure 5).

Individual insights

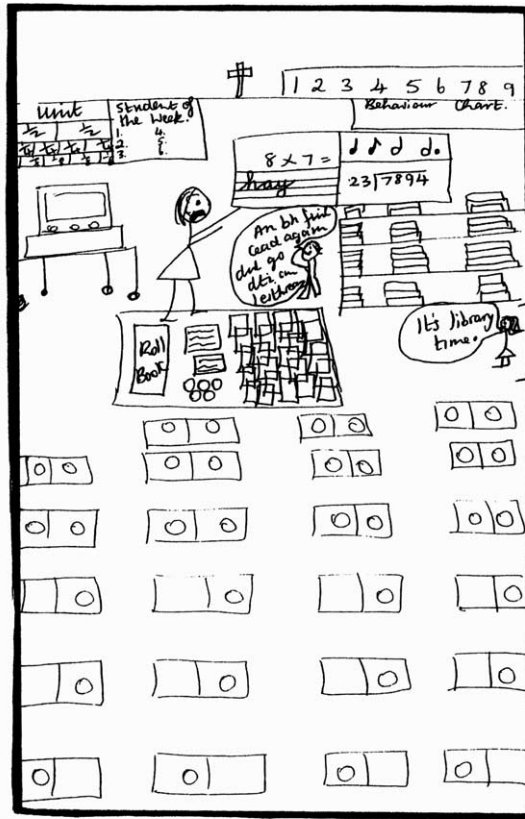
The mix of 'progressive' and 'traditional' theories implicit in the images that characterized overall questionnaire and drawing findings featured also in responses at the individual level. Furthermore, under such scrutiny 'traditional' constructs were found to have some significance for all involved. However, the amplification of this theme in discussion as in drawings, seemed to awaken respondents to 'a recognition of their own struggles, stances and ambivalences' (Weber & Mitchell, 1996, p. 307), prompting particularly valuable insights on perspectives which helped to belie any suggestion of conservatism. In line with the wider response, this lesser theme was associated in part with context and constraints. However, in describing the manner



"A science lesson - children rotating from table to table - teacher as facilitator, children as instruments in own learning" (F, 20s, 6th class, Urban).

Figure 1. Group/'Progressive' Teaching

in which potentially conflicting perspectives had relevance for their work, each interviewee also alluded to the intrinsic heterogeneity of educational practice (Weber & Mitchell, 1995). They 'cared' certainly, and concomitantly sought to educate. As one interviewee, a teaching principal, who aspired as 'gardener' to 'nurturing' his pupils explained, given the pressurized nature of his work, it was, in horticultural terms, more akin to farming than gardening: 'I'm gardening by tractor. I'd prefer to garden more individually but I'm under pressure to produce literate, numerate pupils who will also hopefully be fulfilled' (Figure 6).



"I'm teaching 3rd class maths, having prepared 4th class previously. Now they must work silently as my voice does not carry above noise. Piles of copies await correction . . . The desks are full - twenty-seven pupils . . . My desk is covered by books for two classes, money collected for various reasons (nothing to do with teaching), notes from parents as to why uniform is not worn / homework not done. Roll book is never called due to lack of time, filled in by me when it's break time. Constant interruptions, endless requests to go to the 'leithreas' " (F, 40s, 3rd / 4th classes, Suburban, Disadvantaged).

Figure 2. Whole Class/'Traditional' Teaching

A two-fold perspective was equally evident in the reflections of a teacher who saw the success of her work in a 'disadvantaged' context as dependent upon her ability to balance an empathetic, counselling role with more authoritarian functions. As she explained:

Every child in my class has something dysfunctional about their situation. . . . I have a child in my class whose father is in prison. There's six of them—six children and the mammy living in a room not much bigger than this one. I mean realistically, how can I expect that child to do homework? How can I expect him to read at home? . . . And yet you have to let them see that you're the boss . . . and really lay the law down.



“Music class and the teacher demonstrates some movement (rhythm to the children). The important feature is that they are all happy and involved at the same time. There is obvious interaction and enjoyment in the classroom. . . . He epitomises the ‘new curriculum’ of involvement and movement rather than ‘static teaching’ (M, 20s, 3rd class, Suburban).

Figure 3. Mixed ‘Traditional’/‘Progressive’ Teaching

For another individual, a teacher of infants, the self-image of ‘frenetic butterfly’ described her dual sense of commitment ideally to facilitating individually paced, exploratory-based learning, while also ensuring that all aspects of the prescribed curriculum were comprehensively addressed. Such a response pattern was just as evident for the three interviewees employed in special needs contexts who held remarkably similar images of self in ‘caring’, ‘healing’ roles, as each in her own way also remained loyal to the conventional culture of teaching. One of these teachers, pulled between contradictory professional self-images as ‘mother’ and ‘teacher’, found she compromised as ‘benevolent despot’. Another concluded:



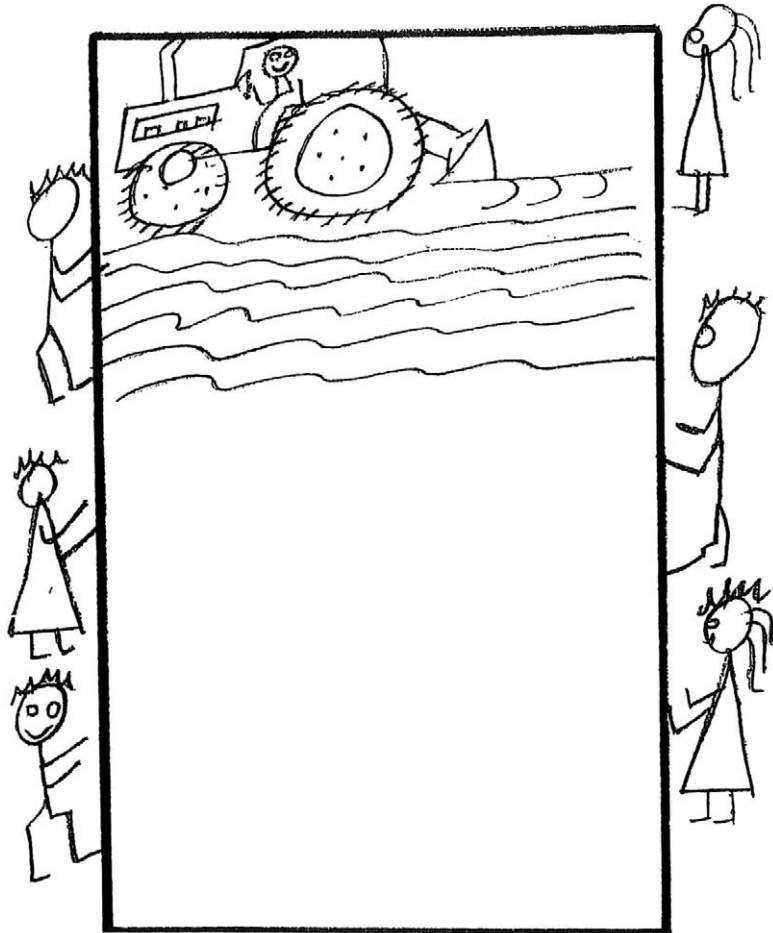
"This picture suggests that the teacher is an entertainer and may often need to be a thrilling magician to keep the children entertained in what is now an instantly gratifying world of computers and high tech. The blackboard and writing signifies that s/he is also an educator" (F, 20s, 6th class, Urban, Disadvantaged).

Figure 4. Teacher as 'Entertainer'

I know that I'm getting on with the kids ... I've built a relationship with them, and I'm very pleased with that ... but I really feel I should have a more specific goal for the children. ... I want to be an educator. I don't want that the kids would just have a happy time. I like to see that they actually learn.

Influencing factors: stereotype

The extent, if any, to which stereotypical thought, personal factors and school context and culture influenced image formation was examined. While certain



"I'm gardening 'by tractor'. I'd prefer to garden more individually but I'm under pressure to produce literate, numerate pupils who will also (hopefully) be fulfilled. Mechanical teaching may meet some of the demands, but I'd love to provide really well-tailored individual attention. . . . I love using 'tractor' to achieve effective results but maybe it removes me from the essentials of the process!" (M, 40s, 4th / 5th / 6th classes, Teaching Principal, Rural).

Figure 6. Teaching: 'Gardening by Tractor'

Personal influences

Personal factors were found to significantly influence the images formed. Furthermore, the process of linking their metaphors and images to their biographical roots and personal histories (Bullough, 1991, 1994a) seemed greatly to enlighten the professional perspectives of these individuals. The interviews offered the ideal forum for such

reflection. They also served to underline the inadequacy of professional development strategies which fail to appreciate the impact on professional practice, of the varying life circumstances of the teacher as a person (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1992).

Several interviewees considered that aspects of their upbringing and early schooling may have indirectly determined their particular interpretations of the role of educator. The ‘apprenticeship of observation’ period (Lortie, 1975) of participants’ own schooling, though not found to have brought about an internalization and reproduction of teaching models, did appear to have been inversely influential. As such, preferred images of teacher and pupil appeared to have formed in resistance to teaching and learning strategies experienced. Remembering the ‘fear’ that had characterized their learning, the lack of opportunity for creativity, and how children ‘with problems’ had often been overlooked, many of these teachers had resolved that their pupils’ schooling experience would be ‘different’. Indeed, the caring, supportive, activity-based roles implied in their images bore little resemblance to the often autocratic teaching regimes they recalled.

In accordance with research by Stofflett (1996), teachers’ own learning styles also played a part in image development. As one interviewee realized, her ideal constructs of pupils as ‘apprentices’, ‘hard-working slaves’ and ‘well-behaved pets with lots of brains’, had most likely formed as a consequence of her own successful approach to learning. Frustrated, however, at having ‘failed’ her less able pupils, she wondered whether the ‘traditional’ methodology she clearly favoured, having served her well as a student, was appropriate after all to the varied needs of the children in her class.

Life phase (Levinson *et al.*, 1978; Sikes *et al.* 1985) was found consistently to impact on image formation. Its influence was evident in the idealism of a beginning teacher who had difficulty reconciling her construct of pupils as ‘expressions of God’s light and truth’ with the disciplinary conventions of schooling. It was also relevant for many teachers with experience of parenthood, who linked the skills acquired in child-rearing to those required in teaching; acknowledging their children’s central contribution to the construction of the important practical ‘knowledge’ that determined the success of their work. Moreover, the theory that ‘critical incidents’ (Measor, 1985) in the life and career of a teacher can profoundly affect image development and hence professional practice (Bullough, 1991, 1992) was very much substantiated in the present study. The experience of a career break was a common factor in the developments described. One such teacher observed how she had been transformed during three years teaching in Japan, from a stern, duty-bound practitioner into a gentle, compassionate ‘guide’ for her pupils:

I got ... a great sense of different cultures—respect for each other’s cultures. I was fascinated by it. I was very challenged by it, ... because I couldn’t be this strict teacher anymore. I had to give these children a chance. They were used to having their time and space. I had to adapt to that.

As she explained, although it was more than ten years since her return to Ireland, by working with special needs students as ‘friend’, ‘counsellor’ and ‘healer’, she had succeeded in maintaining this self-actualizing methodology.

School context and culture

School context, and in particular the shared system of meaning or 'culture' implicit in the organization of the school (Tuohy, 1999), were factors which also significantly affected the professional image formation and actions of study participants. One beginning teacher realized in the course of the study that her self-image as 'facilitator of spiritual and emotional growth and learning' was at odds with the prevailing culture of 'reading, writing and arithmetic' in her school, and that the difficulties she was consequently experiencing left her vulnerable to discouragement and dysfunction. However, a strong sense of self-belief, together with the insight afforded by her reflection, precluded any 'shattering' of images (Cole & Knowles, 1993) and enabled her to develop a timely response to her dilemma. Determined to resist the press for conformity experienced by many beginning teachers during this period of uncertainty, and yet concerned to fulfil her curricular obligations, she resolved to employ a more balanced methodology. By 'giving more time to the 3Rs' without losing sight of her ideals, she would 'strategically comply' (Lacey, 1977), biding her time for a further year in order to more accurately determine her suitability for the profession.

Several other interviewees referred to a culture of 'teamwork' in their schools. One such teacher defined her learning support role largely in relation to her construct of school as a 'hospital' in which she and her colleagues addressed their 'patients' as a healing 'team'. As she discovered, however, ideal self-images as 'healer' and 'gardener' were operational only in her non-mainstream role. While occasionally employed in mainstream classes she felt obliged to relinquish the teacher-pupil interaction these constructs implied, in favour of a self-image as 'disciplinarian' with a crowd control mandate. As she concluded, teachers' aspirations for their work may be rendered obsolete in the face of situational factors beyond their control.

Another teacher recalled how preconceptions of her professional role were dispelled early in her career in response to the socially disadvantaged environment in which she was employed. Therefore, as 'psychologist', 'social worker', 'counsellor' and 'mother', and less willingly as 'prison warden', zookeeper', and 'referee', she was more often 'fighting for attention' in the classroom than presenting prepared lessons to motivated pupils as anticipated. Another interviewee pointed to the pleasant environmental context of his school as significant to his 'free-spirited' methodology and professional fulfilment. He drew a striking contrast between that school's location on a four-acre site on the edge of a village 'with a stream passing through', and his previous school which was designated disadvantaged and 'had a security fence around it'. He recalled how his departure from that 'soul-destroying' environment with its pervasive culture of negativity, had helped to restore his interest in teaching: 'It was a turning point really. . . . It changed the way I look at kids. . . . In a quiet country school I'm much more interested in teaching again'.

Discussion

Each of the interviewees commented very positively on their study experience, concluding that it had provided a rare opportunity for, and in particular a most valuable means of reflecting in depth on their practices. They spoke of 'seldom' having such 'time' or 'a chance' to 'step back' and 'actually think' about their roles. There was consensus that the process of taking distance from their work by reflecting on it through metaphor and image helped to reduce the complexity and indeed confusion of thought associated with their daily activities. In enabling them to separate out espoused from actual concepts of practice, it was described as both a clarifying and enlightening experience.

One individual, a learning support teacher, admitted that she had given little thought to the images she had selected while completing the questionnaire: 'I kind of dashed through it, and in a way I wondered at the end of it, "what have I filled in here—do I really think that?"'. As she subsequently acknowledged, the inter-related constructs of teacher as 'healer', pupil as 'patient' and school as 'hospital' with which she had identified at that early stage were in fact instrumental in readily accessing the important 'knowledge' directing her work. As she and several others conceded, their involvement in the research had, at the very least, made them 'think' about their teaching. Indeed, they indicated that one of the most rewarding aspects of such reflection lay in its ability to 'slow down' thinking processes (Senge, 1990) to the extent that the pertinent factors underlying image formation could be identified. As one teacher summarized, critical thought of this nature provided for a 'distillation' of the various events impacting on professional practice.

Above all, the process of bringing to awareness the tacit understandings filtering their knowledge of teaching and learning and the factors which had given rise to these, was empowering for those involved. By articulating the 'meaningful' basis of their classroom actions (Bullough, 1994b) and pondering the implications of these meanings, matters of appropriateness and effectiveness of practice and its future form and direction could be addressed. Where improvement was desirable, further reflection through alternative images, offered, as in other research findings (Marshall, 1990; Tobin 1990a, b; Stofflett, 1996), an obvious means of envisioning new practice possibilities. Towards the close of the study most interviewees were proceeding to generate such images with little assistance.

As a predominant propensity to care saw these teachers seeking every means of meeting their pupils' varying needs and interests, the question of how best to reconcile the contradictions inherent in their practices and attain equilibrium, formed a common theme in their reflections (Weber & Mitchell, 1995; Inbar, 1996). Thus one teacher decided that her activities as 'friend', 'guide' and 'counsellor', though necessary, were not sufficient to the holistic development of her pupils, as she could not confidently account for their academic progress. By also focusing on self from the perspectives of 'lesson planner' and 'educator', however, and by seeking out appropriate in-service educational support to inform her work in special education, she felt she could restructure her methodology to take broader cognizance of her

pupils' educational entitlements. For another teacher, participation in the study highlighted concerns about balancing a commitment to 'traditional' curricular principles and practices with a desired 'lightness' of approach. As she concluded, by reconstructing self as 'theatre director' in the classroom, she might more successfully incorporate both responses, and thereby satisfy her own and her pupils' requirements.

Two interviewees were largely affirmed in their teaching as a consequence of their reflections and saw no need to consider a reform of images. For two others, the discovery of a seemingly insurmountable conflict between their ideal and actual activities led them to question their very career choice. For most teachers involved, however, the reflective process saw them identify a degree of disequilibrium in their practices. They then spontaneously undertook the generation of further images with a view to reconstructing some of their professional situations and responses, and thereby improving teaching and learning in their classrooms. Irrespective of outcome it was a reflective strategy which was developmental and empowering for all. In learning thus how to approach 'personal mastery' (Senge, 1990) in their professional situations, these teachers also held much potential if they so wished, to become significant agents of organizational change in their schools.

Conclusion

In conclusion, as the findings of this research indicate, each of the teachers involved possessed a powerful body of self-constructed 'knowledge' particular to his or her work. By structuring their professional reflection through image, they could 'give form' (Elbaz, 1983, p. 170) to this amorphous theory, contemplate its formation, and ascertain and assess its determination of their practices. This process of confronting actual perspectives and experiences, highlighted a complexity of thought underpinning the work of these teachers, which was characterized by a prevailing ethos of care, articulated in both 'progressive' and 'traditional' principles and practices. The comprehensive teasing out of these tensions through such reflection was found to be fundamental to the professional development of those who participated in the study as a whole. Seeking to attain a sense of individually meaningful equilibrium in their work, these teachers could, as a consequence of their reflection, readily determine the need for, and as appropriate, initiate a reconstruction of their images, and hence explicate any necessary improvements in their professional practices.

As Fullan (1991, p. 326) has observed in this context, irrespective of policy change and structural innovation, 'educational reform will never amount to anything until teachers become simultaneously and seamlessly inquiry oriented, skilled, reflective, and collaborative professionals'. In this study, the metaphorical image emerged as a promising means of providing for such reflective inquiry and development in education. The process of structuring reflection through image, empowered teachers, enabling them to both express and gain control over the highly powerful,

personal, practical knowledge and attendant problem-setting and role-framing processes (Schon, 1983) implicit in their professional actions. Therefore, given the international impetus now for ongoing, effective educational reform, pre-service and in-service teacher educators in Ireland and abroad might helpfully encourage and support the employment of such a reflective strategy on both an individual and collaborative basis. Their doing so might well promote sustained professional development of teachers as an essential basis for educational change.

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