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Accessing practical knowledge: how? why?

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Abstract

Alternative forms of representation were employed to generate new insights into the knowledge teachers use to inform practice. Conversation, drawing, metaphor, and story writing encouraged a group of teachers to make multiple probes into their ways of knowing how to manage the complexities of many everyday teaching situations. 'Sandy's Story', and comments from other teachers, illustrate how these methods can enhance efforts to understand the ways that personal images enter into teaching decisions. Why teachers and researchers ought to inquire into this aspect of knowing how to teach is examined. © 1999 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Researchers and practitioners are likely to agree with the proposition that pre-service teacher education courses do not prepare graduates well for the realities of teaching. Some consider the problem lies in school cultures that become oppositional forces to the ideals presented in courses (Fleet, 1993; Kuzmic, 1994). Others locate the problem in teacher education, where much of the research informing courses disregards teachers' conceptions and is poorly anchored to teachers' day-to-day situations and problems (Tisher & Wideen, 1990). For instance, Hollingsworth (1988) concluded that

lack of recognition and support for teachers' own evolving knowledge was one reason why one-quarter of the teachers in her study left the profession at the beginning of their careers.

Whatever the reason, it is disturbing that teachers find it so difficult to apply knowledge gained through formal study to the complexities of teaching. The view taken here is that research aiming to inform teacher education must be grounded in a more holistic view on what teachers know about teaching effectively (Fang, 1996; Kelly & Berthelsen, 1995; Kuzmic, 1994). Methodologies that enhance such endeavours are evolving but there is still much to be learned.

This paper examines the forms of representation a group of teachers used as they reflected on their knowledge informing the practicalities of everyday work. The outcomes of their inquiries support Eisner's (1997) claim that alternative forms of data

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representation have enormous potential for enhancing our understanding of complex educational phenomena. The position taken on “practical” knowledge is explained below and the forms of representation that combined so well for this study are introduced. Sandy’s Story follows. This is one of a number of narrative accounts constructed with teachers where combining conversation, drawing, metaphor and story writing helped them express something of the connectedness of their personal, professional and practical ways of knowing. The paper concludes with an examination of why we should use and combine alternative forms of data representation to access, reflect on, and publish about teachers’ knowledge in action in the complex world of teaching.

2. Practical knowledge

Critics of teacher preparation courses make the accusation that too many educators assume effective teaching to be primarily a matter of applying theoretical principles to practice (MacLure, 1993; Schon, 1983). These critics point to research indicating that everyday teaching involves more complex decision making than the one-way action of applying theory to practice. Since the 1960s, research reported through case studies, ethnographies and other narrative accounts has portrayed teacher decision making as more like juggling, taking account of multiple, competing demands, assessing possibilities, to make the best decision possible within the prevailing circumstances (Jackson, 1968; Doyle & Ponder, 1977).

These portrayals have, in turn, raised questions about how teachers manage to teach within such a bewildering array of demands (Lampert, 1985). Systematic inquiry is beginning to sketch a way of knowing that facilitates rapid access to relevant information when particular types of teaching situations arise. The term ‘personal practical knowledge’ is used to refer to knowledge that is assembled in forms that make it possible to manage teaching practicalities (Clandinin, 1983, 1992; Elbaz, 1991). Woven into the ‘images’ that come into action when decisions must be made, will be theoretical principles acquired through for-

mal courses, interconnected with knowledge derived from past experiences and numerous other sources.

The current literature still has too few accounts that assist understanding of what teachers consider to be the practical knowledge informing their decisions (Beattie, 1995; Briscoe, 1996; Freppon & MacGillivray, 1996). This may be because it is difficult to communicate this way of knowing through the formal, propositional language traditionally used to report research findings.

3. Becoming conscious of images — representing practical knowledge

Becoming conscious of ‘images’ activated by practical teaching situations is said to be a catalyst for professional growth. Self-knowledge grows out of personal experience and can affect, even transform ongoing experience (Carter, 1990). Self-knowledge gained through awareness of images has the potential to expand the current, perhaps, habitual, repertoire of teaching strategies by identifying other possibilities and enlarging our imaginative capacities for dealing with problematic situations (Johnson, 1989). Beattie (1995) has claimed that accessing practical knowledge through narrative inquiry can result in critical, self-empowering understandings of the forces guiding teaching decisions. These forces often go unexamined due to their elusive nature and the absence of appropriate research tools (Briscoe, 1996; Freppon & MacGillivray, 1996; McEwan, 1990; Wilson & Hutchinson, 1991). Research tools reported by others pursuing similar research problems informed the selection of strategies for this collaborative inquiry.

3.1. *Conversations and story telling: oral forms of representation*

Yonemura’s (1982) distinction between data accumulated through ‘conversations’ rather than ‘interviews’, shaped the researcher’s contacts with individuals and the group. Conversations were encouraged to stimulate reflection about sensitive experiences, to build trust and a sense of mutual

support, so that it would be possible to risk expressing partly formed ideas, to ask naïve questions, bring emotion to the fore, and to challenge one another's ideas (Francis, 1995; Goodson & Fliesser, 1995; Hollingsworth, 1992).

During conversations the group developed accounts of their teaching experiences in child care. These accounts were revisited in personal reflection and writing, allowing the accounts to move beyond the anecdotal stories told in staffrooms. They were a deliberative social construction generated through sharing and reflecting on the complexities and intricacies of each others' worlds and roles in child care. Teachers talked about their own situations, listened to what others had to say, retold, built upon and unpicked situations to embrace a collective orientation to experiences.

3.2. Drawing and metaphor: pictorial forms of representation

Drawing can focus attention on experience and on teasing out connections in knowledge held tacitly (Johnson, 1989). Effron and Joseph (1994), and Weber and Mitchell (1996) claim drawings provide an excellent forum for reflection, bringing to light nuances and ambivalences in teaching identities that might otherwise remain hidden, and illuminating how teachers make sense of their work by grasping and revealing the not always definable emotional dimensions of knowing. Drawing combined with metaphor assisted teachers to conceptualise their images of teaching (Bullough, Knowles & Crow, 1991; Francis, 1995). This stimulated awareness and enlarged capacity to imagine ways to deal with teaching dilemmas

Drawing provided a starting point to articulating unexamined tensions around the teachers' identity and work, by providing a recognisable form to their images of teaching and self-as-teacher. The teachers drew pictures of self-as-teacher and used these representations to re-examine dilemma situations in their work. The drawings helped them examine, reflectively, connections between feelings, aspirations, past experiences, relationships and events and how these shaped teacher identities. Metaphor helped teachers articulate and explore

their teaching images further, adding to the dimensions touched on in the drawings.

3.3. Journals and story writing: written forms of representation

Clandinin's (1986) report on moving away from asking practitioners to verify field notes and transcripts to engaging with them through letter writing, shaped the style of written communication encouraged during the study. Also influential were reports on how story telling, writing life histories and journal writing can become tools for examining practical knowledge. These were used for inquiry into teaching dilemmas, those situations where competing personal, professional and practical demands made it particularly difficult to determine the most appropriate action (Halliwell, 1995; Olson, 1995; Carter, 1990).

Many researchers are recognising the influences teachers' past experiences and life histories have on teacher decision making (Taylor, 1996; Bullough et al., 1991; Clandinin, 1992; Maitland-Gholson & Ettinger, 1994; Pinnegar, 1995). Such research is suggesting that past experiences might, more powerfully than anything they learn from teaching courses, form the basis of teacher images. Within the group, writing education-related life histories proved to be an important step in uncovering images at work in dilemma situations. Reflecting on past experiences and their connections to current actions worked hand in hand with the notion of accessing practical knowledge through examining images. Listening to others assisted individuals to tap into their existing images of teaching and examine how these had been influenced by past experiences. Writing about this in journals added another layer of understanding about experiential knowledge.

The teachers used a journal to record reflections about group conversations, drawings, metaphors and past experiences. Writing an education-related life history encouraged them to think about past experiences and their connections to current teaching actions. To encourage progressive focusing on images influencing teaching, letters which revisited the oral, pictorial and written information produced during the sessions were sent to the teachers.

The teachers also used journals to write about specific situations of concern in their teaching. Lampert (1985), Berlak and Berlak (1981) and Halliwell (1995) characterise teachers' work in terms of managing dilemmas: in relation to knowledge, students, the teacher's role, the relations to the local community, and the relations to society at large. Examining dilemma situations and discussing these was a way of staying close to teaching practice and to how teachers were using their knowledge to make sense of competing goals and actions (Carter, 1990; Olson, 1995). By examining specific dilemma situations, implicit knowledge was brought to the awareness of the teachers, together with the awareness of how that knowledge had been acquired.

Journal reflections were explored further during group discussions. This meant that as the program progressed there was a layering effect where the teachers built on and made connections with each other's stories. As they shared, the teachers recognised similar experiences and the taken-for-granted hidden norms of working in child care. Realising a commonality of experience existed among the group was encouraging. As a result, teachers felt less isolated and better able to understand their individual workplaces within the wider context of centre-based care. The teachers also identified useful ways to think about dilemmas they faced in their work.

3.4. Teachers collaborating in a search for knowledge

Fourteen Australian early childhood teachers working in privately owned child care centres accepted an invitation to collaborate in an inquiry into knowledge they used to inform everyday teaching actions. Ali, one of the authors of this paper, acted as a facilitator, encouraging Sandy, Brooke, Joy, Trish, Julie, Linda, Kim, Kylie, Corinne, Lyn, Debbie, Annette, Kara, and Andrea (pseudonyms), to use conversation, drawing, metaphor and story-telling to reflect on what they knew.

The teachers engaged in cycles of reflective inquiry over a period of twelve weeks. On six occasions they met for 2 hours for reflective conver-

sations about what they had learned about their personal knowledge in the intervening period. These teachers were enthusiastic about the idea of working together to gain a more holistic understanding of how their knowledge entered into teaching actions and to have the products of their deliberations used to help others wanting to extend their understanding.

3.5. Narrative: bringing the forms of representation together

The researcher collected all the information shared by the teachers and used it to construct draft narrative accounts that were then read to the group and reviewed by the teacher featured. Teachers added information, changed forms of expression to communicate ideas more clearly, reflected further and uncovered more about their images and how their sense of self as teacher was caught up in these images.

The following narrative account was one of the products of this process. Sandy has confirmed that this story accurately and authentically captures her representations of practical knowledge in use.

4. Sandy's story: a shared construction

Sandy worked as director/preschool teacher in a forty-place privately owned child care centre. At the time of the study, the centre had operated in a suburb on the outskirts of a large Australian city for 11 years. The centre owner worked in an office adjacent to the preschool room and although Sandy was the director, the owner took on most of the administrative responsibilities associated with running the centre and helped out in the room whenever extra hands were needed. During the 12 weeks of this collaborative inquiry, Sandy's conversations and reflective representations centred upon a child named Nicholas.

Researcher's note: The first person I met when I visited Sandy at her centre was an enthusiastic Fijian boy — Nicholas. Sandy had told the children a visitor called Alison was coming. I had barely

stuck my head around the door when Nicholas came running, arms open wide, calling “ALISON”. After being greeted, hugged and squeezed like a long lost friend, Nicholas grabbed my hand, flopped onto my lap, wanted me to read a book, wanted to show me everything. He showered me with a demonstration of affection and attention the whole time I was there. His behaviour and personality were infectious and certainly aroused my interest. I wasn’t at all surprised when Sandy indicated that he provided her with many teaching challenges. In an early journal entry, Sandy wrote: “Nicholas is a little boy with huge bad behaviour.”

4.1. *A dilemma: children like Nicholas*

Describing the dilemmas of a “particularly awful week” Sandy wrote: “He (Nicholas) had been running, screaming, basically ignoring me all week, running out the front door and banging the gate and screaming — not wanting to get out, just creating a scene. So I eventually lost my temper with Nicholas and as I was talking loudly (yelling) at him his mum walked in. She looked absolutely crushed and disappointed. My immediate reaction was, Oh great! Now she’s going to think I scream at him all day. So I went to her to explain what had been happening in Nicholas’s day. She began to cry ... Would I have felt so bad if his mum had not walked in at that particular moment and cried? Yes, probably because the behaviour and lack of improvement is really starting to get to me!”

After this incident Nicholas’s mum handed Sandy a letter which she had written for the child psychologist. Reading this letter caused Sandy much distress. It detailed Nicholas’s life history. He had been starved as an infant and lost half his body weight. Two weeks before arriving at Sandy’s centre, Nicholas lived in a grass hut in a village in Fiji. Suddenly adopted, he found himself living in a foreign country in a new environment with a new ‘mother’, and long days at a child care centre.

This letter brought new understanding. It showed Sandy that there were many complex reasons for Nicholas’s behaviour and she was motivated to try harder and exercise more patience.

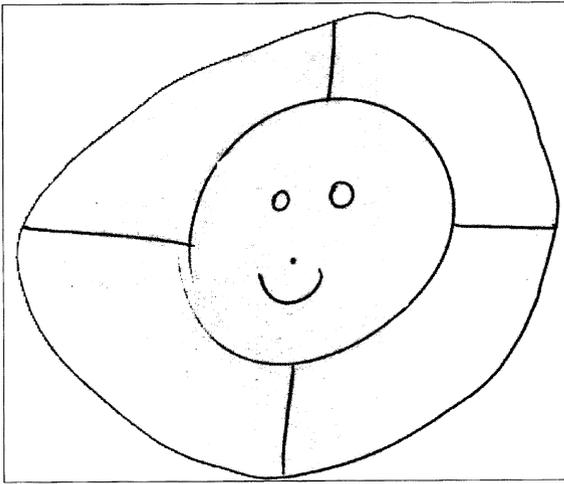
Sandy recognised that Nicholas was not just ‘a naughty boy’. She felt guilty about her reactions to Nicholas and that his mother had witnessed her yelling at him. She knew that his mother required support and was also finding Nicholas’s behaviour a challenge at home. Sandy also began to realise that she didn’t have the knowledge to deal with such a complex situation. She listed in her journal some of her specific knowledge needs: how to deal with children who suffer from Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), how malnutrition affects children and their development in the long term, how to help children adapt to new situations, people and places, and strategies for helping Nicholas and his mother adjust to their particular situation.

4.2. *Keeping the peace: Sandy’s image of teaching*

When Sandy first explored how she thought of herself as teacher she drew a smiling face and wrote these words to amplify: “to keep happy and to keep the peace. (I believe) all interactions with people (staff, parents, children, community) need to be polite/positive so that the overall day can run smoothly and all people in the work environment feel positive and happy about the day.” A seemingly simple image at first glance, further probing revealed many unexplored ambiguities in Sandy’s experience. The influence of past, present and future were caught up in her art form. Representing in various ways helped her to tease out some of these.

When examining her life history, Sandy traced her image back to her family upbringing: “My mum has devoted her life to the family peace keeping process and as a result I value calm, happy environments where people can reach full potential in a stress free environment — staff and children.” This image of teaching as ‘keeping the peace’ also related to her own experiences as a child: “I was a very sensitive child and I guess this is why it was so important for me to please people and do what was expected — keeping everyone happy — in retrospect this is what I was doing and still today I am the same — can’t let my employer down, the parents, children, family, friends.”

Sandy's first drawing of her image of self-as teacher



Sandy also realised that caught up in her image of happy, positive interactions were memories of the anguish in her home as her younger sister struggled to cope with learning difficulties: "I saw a young child struggle all through school, in class, with homework, teachers dealing with her, or NOT dealing with her. (Through) seeing this struggle, I came to understand that children with problems need to be helped and extra guidance recommended — not just forgotten about or passed on to another teacher, kindly, school etc. I, as a teacher, need to know my limitations about how much I can do for a child before calling in support services and getting help for the child."

In terms of her present situation, Sandy experienced disharmony because the reality of her work was not corresponding with this happy image of self-as-teacher nor with the ideals she held for teaching generally. She felt that Nicholas's behaviour disrupted 'the peace' and she experienced conflict because all interactions were NOT positive and happy — she wasn't happy, her interactions with Nicholas and his mother were not entirely positive, and the days weren't running smoothly. She also came to understand that teacher as 'keeper of the peace' was far more complicated than her first drawing depicted.

Positive relationships were part of her aspirations and goals for the children, families and staff in

her centre. Her drawing helped her to see that much of her energy and current actions were aimed at establishing and maintaining positive relationships with the people in her world. She did all she could to "be all things to all people" and keep everyone happy. This had personal consequences.

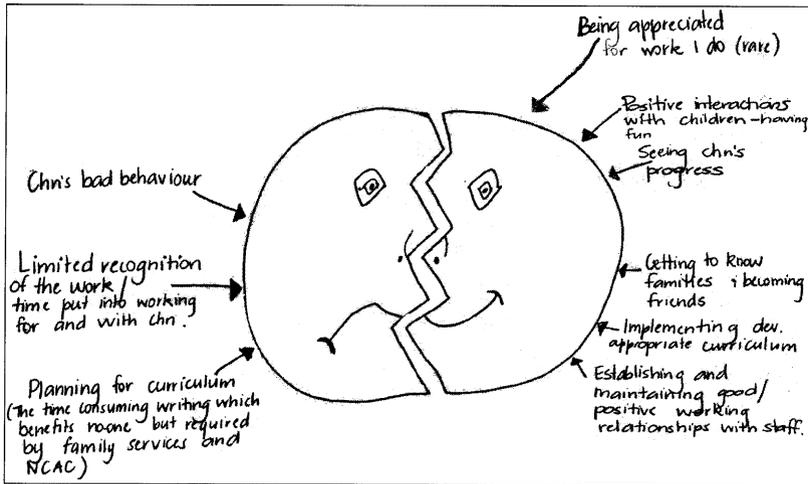
When Sandy revisited her first drawing, the happy face and emphasis on positive interactions and relationships remained, BUT she added another dimension — teacher as torn down the middle — with happy on one side, and sad on the other. The metaphor she provided led to further insight into her feelings of inner conflict.

4.3. *Erosion — a metaphor*

Exploring personal images through metaphor helped Sandy gain access to her emotional responses to contradictions surrounding her efforts to teach. "Sometimes I feel like an island. Years come and children come to visit a while, have the fun they can, and learn what they can then they leave again — like tourists. The island (me) is providing as much for them as possible while they are there. Part of the island is being eroded by wind, ocean etc. — like how I feel when I cannot do much for a particular child — I'm being worn out. Of course the other side of the island has a resort where people are having a great time and are completely unaware of how the other side of the island is being worn away. Even though the island has solid foundations and is not going anywhere despite cyclones and bad weather something must be done about the eroding section or in time it will all wear away."

Sandy's second drawing depicted more of the complexities tied up in her images and her subsequent decisions. The metaphor evoked an awareness of the demands and pressures of her work in child care, and her need for some 'erosion protection' measures. Used alongside her drawing, it helped her get in touch with her feelings of distress about the behaviour of Nicholas and other children with complicated family backgrounds. It helped her identify her own needs, her knowledge needs: What to do to help these children? How to cope with the pressures of her work? Creating this metaphor assisted the process of examining the enduring images

Sandy's second drawing



which guided her work, her emotions, and current and ongoing actions.

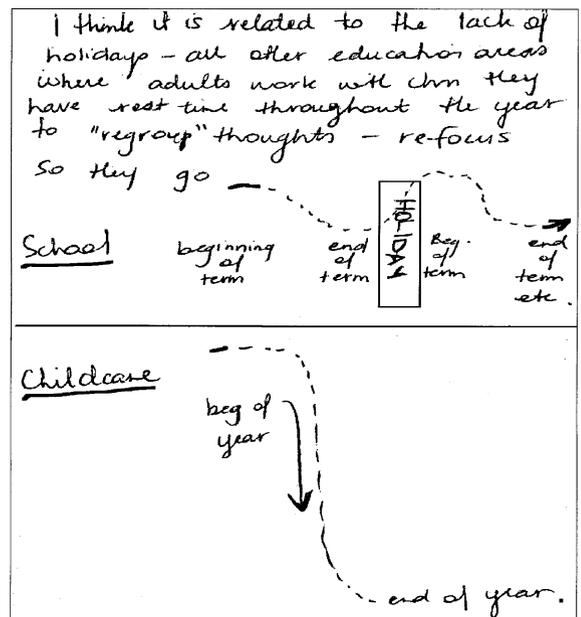
In subsequent discussions and in written reflections, Sandy described how the conflict between her images of keeping the peace and Nicholas's situation affected her deeply — to such an extent that people around her “have been commenting on the change they see” in her. Instead of being “vibrant and enthusiastic” about her job, she has been “quiet, preoccupied, stressed out.” She can feel her body carrying the weight of her stress and wonders what she can do to make her work less stressful. This is the first time in her teaching life that she has felt like this. Sandy is 25 years old and has been teaching preschool aged children in this particular centre for four years, since graduating with a Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood).

4.4. Replenishing time

In written reflections and discussions, Sandy revisited her “erosion” metaphor and wondered if the stress she was feeling would gradually lead to burnout. She worried about burnout: “burnout is prevalent in child care because of the extra responsibilities (like attendance quotas), long hours, limited holidays and award conditions.”

After two consecutive long weekends due to public holidays, Sandy noted in her journal that she

Sandy: “There is no time in child care to replenish resources”



was feeling better about her work. The time-out was what made the difference and she felt that she had more energy to cope with work dilemmas and with Nicholas's behaviour. She wished that she had regular holidays to enable her to replenish her energy levels. The reality was that her award did not allow for this break: “All other education areas

where adults work with children have rest times throughout the year to regroup thoughts and refocus. Teachers in child care work a week, and then a week, and then another week, and then another week, ahhhhh — public holiday, then week, after week, after week. It is a big thing to have a public holiday.”

Finding value in using drawings to capture ideas, Sandy drew the preceding diagram. She was now aware that she was feeling symptoms of burnout and she concluded that she would need to make an extra effort to keep physically and mentally strong in order to deal with these feelings.

4.5. *A professional?*

Professional acknowledgment is important to teachers who work in child care. The teachers shared how discouraged they were that some parents and people in the community did not see them as “professionals, or qualified teachers” but rather as “child minders”. Sandy was one of these teachers. This theme was woven through many of her forms of representation — her second drawing, her erosion metaphor, her conversations and her journal writing, illuminating how important being appreciated for her work as a teacher was to her. Sandy also shared moments of encouragement: A psychologist had visited her centre to observe a particular child. The psychologist had noticed the behaviour of several children and congratulated Sandy on how well she worked with “an obviously very difficult group of children”. This acknowledgment did wonders for Sandy. She reported that she, “felt better about herself as a teacher, better about her strategies and encouraged that her work had been recognised.”

The experience of being part of a team working collaboratively to understand and improve teaching ability also contributed to her sense of self worth as a teacher. Towards the end of the program she wrote, “In a way (being involved with the group) helps me feel like a professional, which brings up the subject of teacher recognition in child care. To know that others feel the same as me is also a comfort. Child care teachers could be seen by those working in the public sector as having a “bee under their bonnet” — why, one might wonder?

I think what it boils down to is the vast differences in conditions of employment and the old community view that state preschools “teach” and child care centres “look after”. Therefore preschools, and by association their teachers, are regarded more highly and are seen to do a better job. We child care teachers studied the same subjects, went to the same universities and work as hard — if not harder due to contact hours — as our public sector colleagues, so it seems extremely unfair to be regarded as “baby-sitters” by the wider community”.

Others in the group reported similar outcomes. Debbie, a teacher who had felt severely constrained by her work dilemmas, identified the benefits of the program for her: “I feel like more of a professional at work, through the affirmation I have received from the program. I also feel more inspired and confident to take professional risks.” She went on to comment that: “The networking and sharing of experiences show I am not alone in my work dilemmas. They are common and shared — there is a comfort in this. I am not alone. We can draw from each other’s experiences, good and bad.”

4.6. *Protecting against further erosion*

The opportunity to talk reflectively with other teachers helped Sandy understand her teaching context and self-as-teacher better. It provided opportunities for her to talk about teaching experiences within non-competitive professional relationships, to listen to others, receive emotional support, and identify what she needed to know more about in order to deal with the challenges of her work. Hearing what other teachers working in child care had to say gave her confidence in her own ideas and decisions and the sense of professional remoteness and aloneness lifted. Knowing that other teachers were experiencing similar dilemmas alleviated some of her anxiety.

Sandy had felt very isolated as a teacher and her confidence and enthusiasm for teaching was low — according to her metaphor she was an island eroding. She described the benefits of her involvement with the group in terms of professional and personal growth — she felt like a professional again, she felt valued as an early childhood teacher — not merely a child minder. She gained so much

from being part of a supportive network that she continued to meet with two teachers from the group on a regular basis.

However, this did not lead to dependence on her colleagues. Rather, it made her more self-directing, better able to judge what it meant to her to teach at an optimum level. She decided that she needed to step back to rejuvenate, to take the following year off to travel overseas. She wanted to consider other possible career paths and believed that upon her return she would be able to take on director responsibilities in another centre. She has since resigned from her centre, boarded the plane and we are awaiting postcards.

4.7. *Examining knowledge needs*

At the conclusion of the group collaboration, Sandy wrote that it: “made me reflect on the information I use which guides many of my decisions and actions/reactions. It was interesting within the group that the base from which we worked developed from our own childhood experiences and that the university study was used or discarded on the basis of beliefs and feelings which had been preconceived before enrolling at university.”

Examining images of teaching and teaching dilemmas enriched self-knowledge. For Sandy this resulted in her understanding that caught up in her concerns about teaching Nicholas were her experiences as a child, her need for recognition and acknowledgment, her ideals relating to teaching practices, the physical and emotional demands of her work, and particular knowledge needs related to working with families.

She reflected on how she was dealing with Nicholas and how she was drawing on past experiences to assist her. Doing this identified a “lack of knowledge”. Sandy came from a stable nuclear family and so she felt that she had no knowledge about how to deal with complex family problems. Having limited experience with families like Nicholas’s meant that she lacked confidence and lacked the necessary knowledge and skills to deal effectively with his complicated situation. Reflecting on this led her to conclude that meeting Nicholas’s needs required specific knowledge,

knowledge which she had yet to acquire. Becoming more aware of these factors enhanced understanding of herself and her work.

Sandy said that she was happy to let the owner take responsibility for these difficulties. This lack of experience led to questioning her own capabilities and the images she was holding about herself as teacher/director. She did not feel she could successfully apply for a director position at another centre, and so her lack of experience and confidence limited her consideration of other job prospects. She wrote: “I think when I hear the problems other directors have I don’t know if I’m capable of dealing with these because (the owner) has always done this. I think it is a confidence issue because of the role the owner has in the centre. I feel more like just the teacher rather than director. Won’t other centres want a four-year trained teacher to take on additional responsibilities?”

Other teachers in the study group shared similar concerns about how difficult it was to meet the needs of children and families who attended their centres. They noted that they were all working with children and families markedly different from and seemingly more complicated than their own. The knowledge and skills required by these teachers certainly moved beyond knowing how to observe, plan and implement educational programs. In her journal Sandy began to examine the types of knowledge she and the other teachers needed to deal with the complexities of their work: “Many dilemmas which have been spoken about can generally be considered people problems — whether they stem from problems with staff, parents/family members, children, or employers. At first, one would not think that a teacher’s dilemmas would result from these relationships/interactions — but (think) instead that (dilemmas) would result from planning, implementation and evaluation of curriculum. Wrong! This is the easy part. Learning and teaching can only occur in an environment which is conducive to this, and for an environment to be harmonious, interactions and relationships need to be positive. Establishing and maintaining these relationships requires much knowledge and many skills and I feel university courses need to address subjects which aim to develop these in future child care teachers.”

5. Learning by representing what teachers' know

The teachers who generated (with the researcher) personal stories of practice, claimed it was liberating to think and talk about teaching using drawing, metaphor, conversation and reflective journal writing. These were integrating forms of representation suited to depicting multiple, competing imperatives. Telling about the situations that worried them (and sometimes those that delighted them), re-viewing and re-telling, enabled each teacher to see that complexity was endemic to teaching, even if the situations they pictured were particular to teaching in child care. Being able to depict this complexity enhanced their efforts to imagine what they needed to know to teach.

Constructing and re-constructing personal narratives helped each individual to identify enduring images guiding her practice, resulting in greater awareness and better understandings of who she was, and why she did what she did. The opportunity to understand connections among life experiences and professional dilemmas was a crucial element of teacher development as it allowed the teachers to enlarge their imaginative capacities for dealing with the dilemma situations they faced, and to identify other possibilities for action.

Another exciting outcome of the process was the way that this combining of drawing, metaphor, story telling and story writing provided a holistic portrayal of knowledge in action. Encouraging teachers to produce and then talk reflectively about drawings and metaphors facilitated the constructing of accounts that were anchored in everyday teaching realities. These are welcome alternatives to the impersonal propositions about practice that dominate scholarly discourses. Teachers claimed that they felt liberated, better able to communicate about what they know about teaching situations and teacher knowledge.

“Much of what we have seen or known, thought or imagined, remembered or repressed, slips unbidden into our drawings, revealing unexplored ambiguities, contradictions and connections. That which we have forgotten, which we might censor from our speech and writing, often es-

apes into our drawings” (Weber & Mitchell, 1996, p. 304).

Drawing helped Sandy to secure elusive threads caught up in the images informing her teaching decisions. She was able to recognise how images of “keeping the peace” were driving forces in her teaching decisions and relationships. She could see how these images had been shaped by past experiences as well as identify their influence in current teaching practices.

Debbie drew a picture of herself as a juggler. When she reflected on this she wrote: “These pictorial representations have consolidated my feelings at particular times over the past months. They helped me to clarify what I was feeling, so then I could effectively address these feelings. After seeing myself as a ‘juggler’ with the ball representing my needs being significantly smaller than the rest, I addressed this at work by changing my focus during decision making. When making decisions I carefully reflected on my needs and feelings as part of the process. An important step for me.”

As a visual form of representation, expressing images metaphorically proved to have the capacity to communicate meaning that was difficult to access using literal language alone (Bullough & Stokes, 1994; Carter, 1990). Tobin (1990) has emphasised that reflection, in and on action, can lead to change, especially when metaphors are used to make sense of teaching roles.

The reflective writing of the teachers indicated that this was indeed an outcome for them. Corinne wrote: “I think for me looking at the metaphors has been very beneficial. I saw being a teacher like gardening. Being able to relate my feelings to something like this helps to point out the areas that need nourishment and assistance and those that are flourishing on their own.”

Annette mentioned other benefits: “It has made me realise that the dilemmas I have faced are important — (for instance), despite my owner not putting money back into my centre, I can still do all I can to make it a quality place for children — the garden metaphor — I want to become more involved with the programming of all rooms so that my children will be blooming flowers rather than wilted ones.”

Lyn wrote about her new insights in this way: “Using these forms . . . enabled further reflection, self-examination and understanding of self . . . setting things in perspective, becoming more positive, becoming more tolerant of the job, focussing on the teacher as professional aspect and putting energies into maintaining professionalism and sense of self as teacher helps (my strategies in relation to) the program, child interactions etc. I’m more aware of how important tolerance and understanding of others, adults and children is to me and I’m not so angry — as I see the direction I want to go in more clearly. I feel more enthusiastic to modify and try change.”

6. Commitment to the teacher’s story

“...the story is the very stuff of teaching, the landscape within which we live as teachers and researchers, and within which the work of teachers is seen as making sense.” (Elbaz, 1991, p. 3)

Using alternative forms of representation proved to be professionally valuable for the teachers involved. The writers of this paper believe that this was related to the commitment made to hearing and representing teachers’ ways of knowing about acting within the whole range of demands operating in their day-to-day work. This commitment kept the focus on probing even more deeply into tacit knowledge. Alternative forms of representation brought this knowledge into group deliberations in forms that captured something of the whole, providing new tools for communicating about teaching realities.

There is potential in this type of inquiry for enhancing what students learning to be teachers come to understand about complex educational phenomena (Eisner, 1997). In this concluding section this potential is explored briefly.

The teachers reported that their stories from the workplace helped them to imagine new possibilities for managing complex teaching situations. It is this complexity that student teachers find so difficult to comprehend through the language of formal the-

ory, where descriptions of teaching situations are stripped of the particulars of time and place. Stories from the workplace are invaluable for bringing students into contact with these particulars and many teacher educators now use film, video, published stories about teachers and occasionally stories told by the teachers themselves, to illuminate something of the realities of teaching.

The finished story brings contact with the complex world of teaching, but looking at, listening to and reading about educational phenomena, leaves out an essential element of what was so liberating for the teachers reported here. This was the opportunity to reflect on themselves in relation to complex teaching situations. Student teachers may also gain from involvement in using a variety of representations to probe unreflected personal images of teaching that enter into every situation where they can imagine themselves as teachers. Learning to reflect on self as teacher having to deal with the types of situations they encounter in their reading and in practice teaching may be as liberating for them as it was for the experienced teachers. It may even lead students to see more relevance in the formal theories that are such an important part of preparing to be a teacher.

For instance, students learning to be early childhood teachers often have a predominant, almost exclusive, interest in learning techniques for planning, implementing and assessing their daily programs (Kelly & Berthelsen, 1997). They may see little relevance in studying theories about family life in modern societies or social relationships among adults. Theories related to these two areas are taught in early childhood teacher education courses and the teachers in the study had completed practice teaching in child care centres. What they had not encountered in their course was the opportunity to become critically aware of what they themselves brought to being a teacher in these programs (Kelly, Kerr, Corse, Bale & Hill, 1997). Being able to imagine self in the types of situations students see and read about can develop awareness of personal images that come into play in teaching situations. Awareness is the precursor to further development and can be fostered through courses that give serious attention to what students have to say, write and draw about themselves as students,

encouraging them to insert self knowledge into their deliberations about teaching situations.

Becoming critically reflective about personal reactions to teaching situations involving relationships with families and other adults may be the springboard to making connections among public theories and personal images of teaching. The result may be critical awareness of knowledge needs, with students posing their own questions and being motivated to seek knowledge that will help them be the teachers they want to be.

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