

The personal domain: Exploring what sustains professionals in urban fringe communities

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Abstract

At the AARE Annual Conference hosted in Adelaide in November 2006, Prosser presented a paper that reported on a pilot study into the role of imagery, emotion and hope in sustaining teacher's work in difficult socio-economic contexts. Now, three years later, this project has expanded to embrace colleagues in Social Work and Psychology to examine the role of the personal domain in sustaining the work of service professionals in urban fringe communities.

The imposition of work into the private lives of Australians is at its highest level since the introduction of the eight-hour day. However, for service professionals working in low-income communities, this imposition can often go beyond long working hours and employee stress. Each day their motivation and wellbeing are challenged by conflict, poverty, trauma and tragedy.

This paper will present the early findings of one study with teachers within a broader project that interviewed service professionals working in Adelaide's northern suburbs. While many teachers leave the profession within the first five years, others have been able to draw on resources from the personal domain to sustain their wellbeing and support their work for significant periods of time. Specifically, this paper will consider how these teaching professionals understand, articulate and mobilise personal resources to sustain themselves in tough working environments.

The paper will also reflect on the challenges of developing an interdisciplinary study, as well as the inadequacy of both professional and disciplinary languages to engage meaningfully with the concept of the personal domain as part of the work of professionals. This inadequacy, the paper contends, is not only due to the slippery conceptual category 'personal domain', but also to the lack of discourses to interrogate this realm and the inability of different disciplines to construct a mutual lexicon to develop these discourses.

The paper hopes to feed into discussion about the importance of 'personal domain' resources in improving professional retention in urban fringe communities, in employers helping sustain the health and wellbeing of their workers, and in university educators preparing graduates that are more likely to be retained within their chosen profession.

Introduction

So there's sometimes too much going on that you can't teach, [but] you just deal with it, you have to (Teacher participant L).

What is 'going on' in our classrooms to the extent that some teachers no longer feel they can teach?

What do teachers mean when they say they 'just deal with it'?

And how do we understand how they successfully do so?

This paper considers these three questions, but does so in a way that is perhaps less common amongst educational discourse. Often such matters are looked at through the lenses of an increasingly crowded curriculum or growing levels of special needs in the classroom. While these are important factors, a focus on these alone can result in more 'chalk and talk' teaching techniques and an emphasis on 'silver bullet' behaviour management strategies. Both of these run contrary to models of pedagogy that contend that engaged learning emerges through relevance and relationships (Lusted, 1986).

In contrast, this paper ponders these questions not only in a broader sociological context, but also in what some have called a holistic consideration of the teacher. This paper does so in three ways. Firstly, it considers contemporary work pressures on service professionals, and particularly those working in urban fringe communities. Secondly, it considers the impact of such pressures on teaching professionals, before, thirdly, it reports on a narrative scoping research study into teachers' and social workers' use of the personal domain to sustain their practice.

In doing so, the paper will argue that there is more 'going on' with service professionals than we currently have common discourses to consider, and that while many professionals can 'deal with it', we too rarely hear or recognise this vital work.

Work-life pressures on service professionals

The entry of Australia into competitive global markets in the nineteen eighties resulted in the majority of workers experiencing increased productivity demands, longer working hours and greater work-related stress. Further, changing technology is making work more cognitively demanding and mentally exhausting, while less physically and emotionally fulfilling. Increasingly, the theme of 'work-life collision' (Pocock, 2003) has gained prominence in public debate, media reporting and academic research.

While the above changes are felt keenly by all modern workers, they have had unique implications for service professionals. Where once a family doctor would care for a community throughout a lifetime, a teacher oversee a student for a school lifetime, or a police officer would maintain order and protect local livelihoods, these professions can now be less personal, less embedded and less easy to experience inherent reward.

Admittedly, these professions have retained the personal contact that enables a greater sense of meaning and motivation. However, these responsibilities also add to the pressure that professionals feel as the intensification and specialisation of work clashes with their requirement to balance service obligations and relationships with those they serve.

Previously, theoretical work has considered the importance of service professionals ‘turning off’ their emotions in their practice or times of crisis so they can apply their skills in a range of professional, and possibly life threatening, situations. This work has focussed on how these demands impose on the personal domain and how, if significant, consistent and intense, these demands can result in worker burnout or stress. Consequentially, the themes of emotional work, burnout and professional distance, are all common amongst existing professional discourses.

Within the academy, ‘emotional labour’ (Hochschild, 1983) has been the predominant conceptual tool in considerations of employee’s emotional effort over the last twenty-five years (Brook, 2009). This concept considers the requirement placed on workers to produce or replicate certain emotional states either to meet the expectations of their organisations or to elicit positive responses from their clients. While all workers are involved in a mix of emotional, physical or mental labour to varying degrees, Hochschild argues that the emotions of some workers are colonised and commercialised extensively as part of the expectations of their service provision, and it is this process that the term ‘emotional labour’ represents. While Hochschild (1993) acknowledges that the concept of ‘emotional labour’ can apply to workers in hospitals, welfare offices and schools, so far, the term has been used primarily to apply to those working in retail or service industries.

With this in mind, there would appear to be potential in mobilising ‘emotional labour’ in relation to our interest in the work of teachers and social workers in urban fringe communities. However, there have been three broad criticisms of Hochschild’s work (Brook, 2009), to which we would add a further constraint, which we would argue limits the concept’s use within our research.

Firstly, ‘emotional labour’ suggests a dichotomy between the private and public self which can contribute to a one dimensional understanding that emphasises the ownership of emotion by the organisation, rather than consider the agency of the worker. Secondly, it tends to emphasise the negative aspects of emotion in workplaces and neglects the potential for interactions to be empowering and satisfying. Thirdly, it is limited in its capacity to capture the complexity and contradictory nature of the emotional labour process. In our preliminary work, what has become apparent is the agency of the worker, the motivation provided by emotional reward in professional work, and the multi-dimensional fluidity of these experiences. In addition to these limitations, our inquiry seeks to grapple with more than just the emotional; we are also seeking to begin to grasp the intangible and often inexpressible personal domain resources, that some might call the imaginal, the mythical or the spiritual.

It is also important to note debate about the extent to which the 'emotional labour' concept is fundamentally Marxist. Some, such as Brook (2009) emphasize the relationship between emotional production and capital, while others, such as Bolton (2009), warn against an overly Marxist interpretation. Bolton explains that Hochschild's analysis of emotional labour rests more on concerns over the struggle of identity, rather than bargaining over labour. Again based on our preliminary work (Prosser, 2007), we too feel the role of identity development is central to service professionals. Further, we are concerned that a classically Marxist interpretation may also stunt our capacity to consider non-rational elements (such as the spiritual) because of the potential to relegate them to forms of false consciousness. So while we concur that 'emotional labour' can highlight the inequalities in emotional exchange and can particularly apply to 'public services as nurses and teachers use their emotional work to paper over the cracks of failing public services' (Bolton, 2009, 556), we are also looking for a conceptual category that can provide greater versatility in interrogating the broad range of resources that are being used by service professionals to negotiate work-life pressures.

We would argue that these pressures are being experienced by all service professionals, however, a case can be mounted that because urban fringe communities have felt the impact of this nation's restructuring more dramatically and that this has implications for service professionals working in these areas. For instance, these changes were felt keenly by those working in Adelaide's northern urban fringe (Megalogenis, 2006; Thomson, 2002), in places such as Elizabeth, which swiftly changed from a best practice example of manufacturing production to a synonym with poverty, crime and need (Peel, 1995). Where once this community was built around the factory, working class pride, and strong social networks, soon such qualities eroded as the community started to fracture. The decline in profitability of manufacturing saw managers move to more affluent suburbs or new jobs in different regions, leaving only behind those who could not afford to leave. For those who managed to keep their jobs, these changes resulted in the majority of these workers now experiencing increased productivity demands, working hours and worker-related stress, which placed greater demands on relationships and families. As property and rental prices fell, the population in these areas expanded as families sought to buy homes because they could not afford to purchase closer to the city. Meanwhile, the newly unemployed and the underemployed became a more significant component within the community. These changes in work conditions, expansion in population and altered demographics resulted in an erosion of previous social networks and conventions. Increasingly, residents did not know their neighbours, social needs spilled out into the community and the media reported crime, leaving a community living with fear and concern.

Such changes increase the occupational demands on service professionals (Dollard et al., 2003). As unemployment and reduced income placed financial pressure on these communities, it has pushed some individuals and families to breaking point. For service professionals (such as teachers, nurses, social workers and emergency service workers), this has resulted in more frequent encounters with conflict, poverty, trauma and tragedy. As need has increased, Government policy to reduce real term public funding for services has resulted in less time for service professionals to negotiate both service and emotional

labour demands. Further, the expansion and change in community populations mean that many service professionals find it harder to build ongoing relationships with those they serve in their communities. For some, this demand has been too great and there has been a growing levels of attrition amongst those most often sent to urban fringe communities, namely early career professionals (Huxley et al., 2005; Manuel, 2003; Markiewicz, 1996), while for others, fatigue and depression is a constant challenge as they continue in their position, but struggle to sustain the passion (Lasky, 2005; Morrison, 2007). Meanwhile, others have been able to draw on resources from the personal domain to sustain their wellbeing and support their service work for significant periods of time.

It is against this backdrop of change, that we seek to ponder what the implications of these changes may be for current and future service professionals.

Emotion, identity, and imagery as resources for teachers' work

Prosser first took up this theme as part of a symposium at the most recent AARE Annual Conference in Adelaide (Prosser, 2007). This paper reported on a pilot study which interviewed three teachers working in Adelaide's northern suburbs about what motivated and sustained them in their work. Each of these teachers had worked in Adelaide's north for over ten years and each was proud to teach in that area. The key themes that emerged from these interviews were the importance of relationships, emotion, identity and imagery as foundations to their work.

Numerous examples of emotional work emerged through the interviews. Teachers reported that emotions could not be separated from school life, which was a roller-coaster of emotion. They also spoke of the emotional implications for teachers when working in a school community that experienced such hardship and need. Further, as is increasingly recognised in educational research literature (Boler, 1999; Nias, 1996; van Veen & Lasky, 2005), emotion is vital to pedagogical moments, educative relationships and cultivating democracy. The insights of these teachers highlighted that teaching in these contexts provided unavoidable emotional challenges which demanded some response from the teacher.

The negotiation of teacher identity was another key theme. Against a backdrop of dramatic educational reform in the last twenty years, these teachers spoke of the challenges surrounding attempts to hold on to key values and pedagogical practices as an anchor in the storm. These teachers bore out the findings of Lasky (2005) that career teachers in tough environments put into action what they maintained was important, often at the cost of their health, emotions and careers. To sustain themselves in such rough seas, these teachers drew on philosophical resources, often in the form of images and metaphors.

The imagery, or mythic, resources enacted by the teachers took a number of forms. These included a fight against negative stereotypes of the students and the region, often with a class based rationale. They also included religious and humanitarian beliefs about the greater purpose of their vocation and the need to persist despite the grind of teaching.

Another common resource that was referred to was the way that the role of parent was significant in how these teachers thought about their work.

However, what was patently clear from this pilot study was that there is a lot more to teaching in urban fringe communities than providing knowledge for students to absorb and then assess through testing. For teachers to reach the point where they can do their jobs, there is plenty of preparatory work to do and often 'too much going on' to deal with, which makes significant personal and professional demands on the teacher.

The Personal Domain: what sustains professionals in urban fringe communities?

The three authors of this paper first met through an Early Career Researcher Development program hosted by the University of South Australia in 2006. This year long program sought to improve the quality and quantity of research outputs, as well as enhance networks and interdisciplinary work across the university. Through informal conversations about each other's work over a number of months, the three authors discovered a common curiosity within their research work.

Each author was intrigued by a consistent echo that emanated from within their interviews, which seemed to be contrasted by a deafening silence within their discipline. For Prosser it was the emotional demand surrounding teachers' pedagogical change, for Wendt it was the religious orientations that supported the practice of many regional social workers, while for Tuckey it was the compartmental separation of work and life amongst experienced emergency service workers. What struck the three authors in their discussions were not only the connections across disciplines and professions, as well as the lack of recognition of these themes amongst the academy, but, more specifically, the lack of preparation for pre-service professionals around these themes.

In a context where each of the professions associated with our disciplines experience significant challenges with retention beyond the first five years and high reported levels of worker stress, we believe that these areas deserve more attention. Further, we believe that what is colloquially known as 'first year shock' within our professions (which is nourished by a professional discourse that claims that 'there is no way university can prepare you for the real world of practice'), is also worthy of closer consideration. In our discussions around these matters, it has increasingly become our view that these challenges are due in part to a lack of language, either within or across disciplines, with which to examine them. By this we mean that there are neither the common words nor alternate discourses through which to analyse and understand these experiences.

The origins of this view came from our own experiences trying to communicate what was troubling each of us across the traditional disciplinary barriers. For instance, Prosser, working in education, brought concepts such as 'the mythopoetic' (Leonard & Willis, 2009), 'non-rational potential' and 'emotional work' to the discussion. While the first term is still esoteric amongst academics (which would make it impractical for work with professionals) and the second term reinforces a reason-emotion binary (which could exclude other personal resources), the third seemed to offer more potential. However, it

was decided that the use of ‘emotional work’ could cause confusion as it is also a term used by Hochschild (1983; 1989) to distinguish between the process of managing emotion in the private sphere (emotional work) versus the same process in the public sphere (emotional labour).

Meanwhile, Tuckey, working in psychology, brought terms such as ‘stress’, ‘resilience’ and ‘personal resources’. Each of these has different specific meanings and associations within our disciplines and is often used in relation to having, or not having, certain tangible qualities or skills that immunise the individual from harm. It was agreed that the use of such terms could exclude a range of other important factors, including the role of gender, social contexts and meta-narratives.

Wendt brought the concept of ‘spirituality’ from her past research in social work, but a subsequent literature review across the disciplines revealed strong associations of this term with religious beliefs and religious institutions. We decided that this could be alienating and could exclude a range of other spiritual experience, such as a connection with nature or eastern beliefs. These discussions continue as we struggle to find a term and conceptual category to open up an intangible to further consideration.

These considerations were set against our emerging awareness of the terms ‘work-life balance’ and ‘work-life collision’. Prominent in the work of Pocock (2003), this term encapsulates recent social and economic changes in Australia to argue that there is a greater imposition of work on the potential for recreation, contribution to the community, and home life. While this dichotomous use of work and life (or work and leisure, private and professional) is influential within both academic and professional conceptualisations of work, we are interested in the potential to go beyond oppositional categories at a time when longer working hours, work intensification, technological change and the boundaries between work and home are becoming increasingly blurred. Instead, we ponder if this ‘either/or’ conceptualisation may be limiting and are interested in a model that is grounded in the experiences of service professionals as they use personal domain resources to sustain their working lives and their work experiences to sustain their personal lives. Hence, we continue to seek an appropriate conceptual category.

Currently, our working conceptual category is the ‘personal domain’ (Cheers, Darracott & Lonne, 2005). Researching in the discipline of social work, Cheers et al. proposed that the work of service professionals can be grouped into various practice domains (i.e., discourses about practice), which are comprised of narratives relating to how one should practise and what factors one should take most account of in their practice decision making. They identified eight domains:

1. *‘professional’* (knowledge, education, values, ethics);
2. *‘structural’* (policies and procedures of employing organisations);
3. *‘practice fields’* (areas of work or expertise);
4. *‘society’* (the grand narratives of society);
5. *‘practice wisdom’* (professional experience);
6. *‘community’* (local narratives and dynamics);
7. *‘geographic’* (location-specific factors such as environment and remoteness); and

8. *'personal'*.

While we recognise the interplay of all these domains as professionals bring their characteristics, worlds, histories and contexts into their practice, we believe the notion of the 'personal domain' provides opportunity for further exploration, particularly of unforeseen or unique experiences. While we do not see this term to be as theoretically robust as 'work-life balance', on a practical level, we agreed that it could incorporate the ideas that each author brought to discussion, while being accessible to service professionals and still open to refinement as we discover and theorise more about this aspect of professional life.

However, once agreement was reached around a term, the next challenge was to develop a research approach. While each author has experience across a range of methods, each brought their own epistemological and methodological foundation. Discussion was lively and driven by a genuine curiosity, which often resulted in either passionate exchange or perplexed silence. Tuckey brought expertise in statistical analysis and positivist epistemology, while Wendt brought expertise in qualitative interviews and an interpretivist approach, and Prosser brought expertise in narrative research with its roots in post modern philosophy. As we explored the relative merit of different research approaches and consequent limitations to truth claims, we sought a common approach for which we could argue a defence with colleagues in our various disciplines. It is such an approach that is detailed below.

The Personal Domain project

The result of our discussions was the development of an interdisciplinary pilot project that seeks to use an appreciative inquiry approach to identify what sustains professionals in their work over time. By appreciative inquiry we mean an approach that focuses on service professionals that have demonstrated success in sustaining well being and best practice in difficult fields of practice for over a decade (Ludema et al, 2001). The rationale behind the appreciative inquiry approach is not to ignore the many complex challenges facing service professionals, rather it is to view them through a more positive lens of understanding how these challenges can be addressed or overcome.

This project conducted a narrative scoping study around the personal domain of professionals working in high demanding fields of practice, specifically examining what personal resources professionals use to sustain them in their work. The purpose of using a narrative approach was not to identify 'the story' of all professionals (Prosser, 2009); rather it was to identify a diverse range of themes from within their experiences that could inform the development of a theoretical framework for the personal domain (Crossley, 2007).

Participants were recruited through non-probability purposive and snowball sampling. This targeted professionals who had been working in Adelaide's northern fringe for over a decade. As Neuman (2006) states this sampling method supports projects that aim to explore a theoretical concept with a small sample. Specifically, social workers and

teachers were sought to recount their professional biographies. It was assumed that working in a service profession for over a decade allowed for sufficient exposure to a variety of work experiences and articulation of a personal/professional identity, hence workers would have the ability to talk about the personal domain and identify what personal resources within this domain have sustained them over this time. The research team used established professional networks to purposively target service professionals who have been working in Adelaide's northern urban fringe for over a decade. A member of the research team contacted a professional that they knew via email and invited them to participate. At the end of the interview the professional was asked if she knew others who may be interested in the study. Six teachers and six social workers were recruited using snowball sampling.

Semi-structured interviews were used to explore personal resources and how participants believed such resources helped them in their work. Professionals were asked to tell their stories of how and why they became a social worker or teacher, what motivated and drove them in their work and life, what were the greatest joys and heartaches they had experienced throughout their work, what personal values, beliefs, philosophies they drew on to help sustain them in their work, how they coped with and dealt with emotions experienced in the workplace, and what they believed had changed over time for them being a social worker or teacher. Semi-structured interviews (of approximately 1.5 hours) allowed the researcher to ask a range of structured questions around these themes but also allowed for the collection of specific information from each participant, allowing them to elaborate on areas of the interview where intricacies could be explored (Hall, 2008). The project was approved by University of South Australia's Human Research Ethics Committee in September 2008.

Thematic analysis was conducted on interview transcripts by three researchers. Before analysis began the three researchers met and discussed the processes of thematic analysis, that is, open, axial and selective coding. When the researchers felt comfortable and familiar with the steps of thematic analysis each went away and separately coded the data in line with following steps outlined by Neuman (2006). Firstly, the interview questions were used as initial categories to help manage the volume of qualitative data. Open coding was then conducted, whereby the researcher read all the answers grouped under the interview questions and assigned initial themes in a first attempt to condense the mass of data into categories. Secondly, axial coding was used. This involved the researchers reading through the grouped information again and focusing on the initial themes to review and confirm them. Finally, selective coding was used, whereby the researchers read the themes for a third time to confirm their interpretation and looked selectively for quotes or cases that illustrated the identified themes. After analysis was completed the researchers met again to discuss the themes they had individually identified.

Based on the above data collection and analysis methods, the following section will report on the early findings of this study specifically in relation to the teacher participants in the project.

Teachers and the Personal Domain – early themes

Insights from teacher experiences

Of the interviews conducted in the pilot, six were with teachers. Teachers B and R were in junior primary settings, Teachers A and D were in primary settings, while Teachers L and J taught middle years classes (years 6-10). No participants were able to be recruited from the senior secondary years. The participants all came from public schools. From these interviews, the thematic analysis of the six transcripts revealed a number of common themes.

One of the most prominent was the level of stress experienced by these teachers in their work.

It's harder now than when I started, thirty plus years ago (Teacher A).

As each year goes on, teaching seems to become wider and wider, you know, we're expected to take on more things and I guess parents are having to work a lot more than they used to have to, so lots of things are falling to us to educate kids about now as well... sometimes it's frustrating because, you know, our core business is meant to be curriculum based... but, yeah, I guess society starts to look at schools to fix all the problems... so it's a fair bit of pressure to meet all the needs of the stakeholders (Teacher D).

The pressures of the job are just getting greater and greater, the demands on energy levels are getting greater and greater, and as I get older I'm finding it more and more difficult and becoming more and more cynical, and I suppose, the way that the department treats you well it's quite demoralising (Teacher B).

I guess it's constantly adding on things to our role that... that, pressure's been put on schools and teachers to kind of pick up the slack (Teacher R).

These teachers also expressed that their levels of stress were increased by additional complexities that were introduced to their classrooms.

I've a few behaviour boys in my class, which I am now having for a second year because I do a really good job. I'm going to have to stop doing a good job, I just get the bad kids (Teacher L).

So, to know that you could make that huge difference but you're never going to be able to, because you don't have the time or the resources to do it. So, I mean, that causes a lot of frustration (Teacher R).

However, different teachers used different resources to respond to this challenge.

Most of these six teachers stressed the importance of humour and laughter in supporting both their and student wellbeing:

I use humour a lot to get through situations that are frustrating or upsetting (Teacher D).

The day I stop having fun is the day I stop teaching (Teacher L).

There's always something you can laugh about, something that happens at school that is a positive thing (Teacher A).

Most of them also noted that making a difference in students' lives was the most significant factor in making teaching rewarding and sustaining them in their work:

It's the kids, it's the kids, it's the kids, that's what motivates me every day (Teacher L).

You know, long term it's yes I can make a difference to these kid's lives... you know, the look on the kid's face when they, like when they have a light bulb moment (Teacher B).

I just enjoyed the rewards that you get from the, you know, when kids have learnt or achieved something, and improved (Teacher D).

When they actually achieve something or realise something and you've been a part of that, that's the biggest buzz for me (Teacher J).

Others hold on to the rare signs of gratitude to get them by:

Sometimes it's really hard and you get really, really down... that's when it is nice that senior staff write something nice... or you get a card that says something nice... I keep those little treasures (Teacher A).

However, there was also a sense amongst these teachers that you cannot allow yourself to be too open with the students. Some of these teachers described a tension between balancing the role of professional and building relationships with students and parents.

I guess it puts you on your guard all the time to be kind of – protect yourself from that... [you can be] a bit bitter that you have to live your life like that, that you can't just be open and friendly, because you are scared that if you do that, then someone is going to attack you straight away (Teacher R).

Yeah, I'm far more cynical about the job than I ever was. I put less emotional energy into it than I used to... you can't let your guard down, you know, you have to be constantly wary and it's emotionally draining (Teacher B).

Such reflections connect with what has more broadly been described as the emotional work done by service professionals.

Aligned with this notion, there was a sense amongst the interviews that positive emotions could be shared in the classroom, but negative ones had to be dealt with in other ways;

You put your superman outfit on. You just deal with it, you have to. Because if you crack a little smidge, then the kids see a crack, then you've lost it, and you can't lose it, because if you lose it, you've lost it for the rest of the year and then that year is terrible (Teacher L).

I had so much more energy in those first few years of teaching, than I do now, and I guess that's age related and the fact that I now have a child... but yeah, it's quite draining... I think it's mentally draining and exhausting, you know, you go through so many emotions in a day, and dealing with so many people in a day, and trying to solve so many problems in a day, it can just wear you down (Teacher D).

So I don't know quite what they [other teachers] do with their feelings but I am getting better at handling that. I mean, it's an enormous pressure all of this, it's an incredibly stressful job. It's mind bogglingly stressful (Teacher J).

Another theme was the importance of support from family and friends to sustain teachers' work. Families were especially identified as playing an important support role:

Often my poor husband, he will come home and say 'How was your day', and if you have had a day like that it's like 'Oh, my God', and even though he's not a teacher, he certainly knows a lot about teaching from the lots of things that I talk to him about (Teacher D).

I mean that if something terrible happened to one of the kids at school, then I would probably bring that home... But I have learnt after teaching at... that I have to stop bringing stuff home... and the amount of teachers that are divorced and it would have to be from this (Teacher L).

However, most of the teachers felt there was a need, no matter how difficult, to try and draw a line between school and home:

Cutting off your school life from your home life [gets you through tough times] (Teacher R).

I'm getting better as I get older, at switching off when I get home... I think I have just got better at letting that go... (Teacher D).

For these teachers, the requirement to keep a professional image at school was paramount and hence they felt they needed to deal with emotionally demanding things in their own (personal) time. But not all teachers agreed that drawing such a line was essential:

So I'm constantly challenged. Mind you not everybody would be. Some people just turn off and do the bare minimum. But I'm not cut from that cloth. I prefer to be engaged in whatever is going on (Teacher J).

These teachers identified the other major source of emotional support coming from professional colleagues:

I've worked in a team situation, and that's huge, you know, to have someone else to bounce things off, or, you know, have a bitch with when you are frustrated or had enough, that's really helpful. I found that working in a single classroom is really isolating (Teacher D).

I think a lot depends on the people you work with. If you have sort of a close knit staff... it makes it a lot easier (Teacher R).

I think having a really good mentor in their school [is important to sustain teachers through tough times] ... while it might not always fix the problem it always makes it seem better (Teacher R).

I think it is your colleagues that get you through... and the support of the senior staff (Teacher A).

However, relationships with colleagues are not without their stresses:

Yeah, it's not the kids, it's staff. They're the most stressful part of my day (Teacher L).

Teacher D recalled an experience where working in a classroom next to an 'old school traditional teacher' had made her feel judged and incompetent. After the first term:

My self esteem was a mess, yeah, I cried, cried and cried, woke up, cried the way to school, yeah it was horrible, and I kept thinking that teaching was not for me... I think my lowest point was I ended up in tears in front of the kids one day, and it was at that, I don't know what I did, I got my stuff together and thought no, you can do this, keep going, and I ended up having a great year... I think it was my perception of me, made me, yeah, I just didn't cope. (Teacher D).

Some teachers also seemed to draw support through strategies other than looking to colleagues. For some it is a balanced lifestyle:

I try to draw some lines... I do go to yoga... so I use meditation in there, and walking the dog. I mean simple family activities. And interaction with people... just forgetting that I am a teacher for a few hours (Teacher J).

For others it is to take leave:

I chucked a half a day sickie yesterday. I know I had an abscess in my mouth, but I could have dealt with it... [but I was] still messed up in my mind about the negative stuff at work... so my family were going to be affected by that and I did not want them to be. So I took a half a day (Teacher L).

For still others, it is to indulge themselves:

I'm a big chocolate person, when I'm feeling tired or stressed, I tend to reach for the chocolate (Teacher D).

I don't drink much any more. I used to drink wine every night and if I got stressed I'd go to drink a glass of wine, I'd never get drunk or anything silly like that... [but I'd be] tipsy because I hadn't eaten as well. And smoked heaps of cigarettes. And of course now I don't smoke, that means now that I don't have something to fall to, but the stuff that I used to fall to before was not very good anyway (Teacher L).

A commonality throughout the six interviews, was a tendency to focus on the practical side of these teachers' work, and especially what they did with the students each day. Generally, they were sceptical of discussion about pedagogy and reflection, which made it difficult for them to articulate how they accessed the personal domain and responded to the contradictions they faced in their work.

Oh yeah, that's hard, the unsolvable contradictions [of being a teacher]. I know what you mean, but I don't know how to answer (Teacher D).

No doubt, part of this difficulty is due to a professional discourse that argues that it is important to 'draw a line' and to 'turn off' once you leave work. Addressing this lack of available discourse and conceptual resources to articulate what it is that long-term teachers in urban-fringe communities 'do without thinking' to sustain themselves, will be an important challenge for the next stage of the project.

Comparisons between teacher experiences in the two pilot studies

There is a danger in trying to read too much into six interviews from a pilot study, but as a means to begin to examine the possible scope of a future study into the range of perspectives that are held by teachers, they are useful. In a similar way, it is also useful to examine any similarities or differences between this pilot study, and Prosser's (2007) previous pilot study.

In both studies, teacher made it clear that emotions could not be separated from the demands of teaching in urban fringe schools. In this study, Teacher J recalled learning about the neglect, drug abuse and rape of her students and how she then tried to support them at school as ‘the wheels fell off’:

So that sort of thing is heartbreaking, but I've driven home weeping, I've turned up on the doorstep ashen white and wrecked, and I think that gradually you learn to sort of orient yourself a little differently because you can't allow that to overwhelm you (Teacher J).

Teacher D also reflected on how trauma and tragedy reached into the classroom context:

When it's a death thing, and you immediately think of your own experiences, that I guess could be difficult if you let yourself dwell on that, but the reality is there's 24, 25 other kids in the room, so you know, you try and deal with it as sensibly as you can, but, also as quickly as you can, so that, yeah I mean, if I sat down at my desk and thought about it, I'd probably cry too (Teacher D).

However, the teachers in this pilot study also picked up on changing contextual and systemic challenges to their work, much as the teachers in the previous study.

I do what I can manage, and what's right for the kids, and I guess that changes from year to year (Teacher D).

The biggest one is frustration – frustration with the system, frustration with people (Teacher B).

It's one of those things where it's sort of divided – you know, there's the school of thought that you're a sort of respected person that can be trusted and that you're doing something that's really worthwhile and important, and then you've got others that think that you don't know what you are doing and you're being constantly questioned, whether it's by parents or politicians... that think they've been to school they know what to do, and they could do the same sort of job (Teacher R).

How did teachers respond to these immense challenges?

Firstly, they drew on the resources identified in the previous section. However, like the teacher participants in the previous study, some drew on broader belief systems to make sense of their work. For Teacher R, it was a working class, ‘roll up your sleeves and do it’, philosophy:

I guess, coming from a family background where it was fend for yourself and if you want to get anywhere you have to do it yourself, I guess that's the kind of person that made me into, so I understand if there is something that I want that it's up to me to go ahead and get them (Teacher R).

For Teacher J, it was a more critically reflective social justice philosophy:

I motivated in this school environment by a desire to empower students to be able to take some control over their lives and... to be able to think critically... There's a social justice motivator in there for me because I am very acutely aware often that I am working in an environment where there are many students who come from a socially dysfunctional background and who don't have a tradition of academic achievement in their family (Teacher J).

Meanwhile, Teacher A drew on her religious background.

I think that the saddest thing that I have had to live through my teaching, is to watch a little kid go, you know, six months, from being diagnosed to being dead, and just, you know, going to hospital and watching her and visiting her, but then you now out of those sad things come good things... this is not a good thing, but in the end it will be a good thing for some reason... I'm a real believer in prayer, but I'm not a fanatical religious person... I don't know if it is to do with my Christianity, but I just take the belief that most people are good (Teacher A).

The other significant influence identified by these teachers, which echoed the previous study, was the importance of becoming a parent to their approach to teaching. Indicative of the consensus were comments such as these:

If anyone had said to me before I had my own children that you can't teach unless you've got kids, you sort of say that's rubbish, but once you've got kids you certainly have a different insight and you sort of look in a little bit deeper than you did before (Teacher R).

I didn't have kids of my own when I started, so parenting has probably grown my confidence (Teacher A).

The above areas of similarity between the two pilot studies are worthy of further consideration, as are the silences or differences. This early analysis of thematic trends will guide our planning for future research, especially as they indicate the diversity in ways that individual teachers access the personal domain.

Comparisons between teacher and social worker experience

The analysis of the data collected in the broader project is ongoing, however a number of early comparisons between teacher and social worker experience also appear to be emerging. This data will be the subject of a paper that is due for publication next year (Wendt, Tuckey & Prosser, 2010).

However, our preliminary analysis shows that, firstly, it seems that teachers found it harder than social workers to reflect on their practice, particularly teachers working with

junior primary students. These teachers also appeared to find it more difficult to discuss the personal domain as there seems to be a stronger emphasis amongst teachers to talk about what the students do, or the teacher needs to do, rather than reflecting on if, how or why they draw on the personal domain. Hence, developing a robust but workable linguistic and conceptual framework in which to locate our future research will be an important challenge to its future success.

Secondly, there also appears to be very different personal and emotional demands made on teachers depending on the age of the students that they work with. While early primary teachers discuss the challenges presented by parents or the challenge of increasingly being expected to play the role of parent, the senior primary or early secondary teachers talk more about the pressures of competing demands and the emotional work from building close relationships and feeling the needs of students. One possible interpretation of this is that primary teachers have more 'adult power' over their students and seem to act 'on' or 'for' their passive students, making the other adult, the parent, more of an issue. Meanwhile, secondary teachers are negotiating with emerging adults and have more pressure coming from having to work with the student, and perhaps this evokes different demands on the personal domain. These demands are different again in the work of social workers with adults. Such nuances will need to be considered as we continue to refine our research methodology.

Future directions

This paper reports on a research project in its early stages of development. It aims to point a direction and prompt debate about the importance of recognising and theorising the personal domain in the work of service professionals. Initial analysis of the data shows that there are clearly similarities and differences between teachers (as well as teachers and social workers) in relation to how they draw on the personal domain to sustain their work in tough urban fringe communities. It also shows that more work is needed to develop a conceptual category that is both rigorous enough to theorise this aspect of the work of service professionals, but also accessible enough to facilitate language and discourse for service professionals to articulate their experience. This may occur through further refinement of the term 'personal domain' to become a more robust conceptual category, or a new conceptual frame may be required. Responding to this challenge is vital to the direction of our work as we seek to expand this pilot project in the future. With this in mind, we believe our research focus is a significant one because it contributes to the understanding of the current challenges and future development of service professions in three ways.

Firstly, in a context where many new service professionals commence their careers in urban fringe or regional communities that can face a diverse range of social, cultural and economic demands, the focus of this project on the demands placed on worker in such communities can provide useful insights. Further, its consideration of how the personal domain can contribute to developing and sustaining professional identity can be used by universities as a resource for the pre-service and in-service training of early career professionals.

Secondly, in a context where many new employees in the service professions leave within the first five years, we are faced with substantial resultant costs. There is not only the cost to the community through retraining, but also the cost associated with maintaining service quality, especially in urban fringe communities where professional 'churn' is greater, making the provision of quality services a social equity and inclusion issue. An understanding of what sustains service professionals in demanding regions can contribute to better professional training, professional support, and quality services, as well as improved retention and reduced costs.

Thirdly, in the knowledge that people working in jobs that require the development of professional relationships can be exposed to conflict, poverty, trauma and tragedy (especially in poorer socio-economic regions), we must acknowledge that this makes emotional demands on professionals, who must develop their own responses. It is important to recognise these demands on professionals and then, by supporting professionals to develop and draw on the personal domain, to contribute to greater wellbeing and employment satisfaction.

Finally, beyond these obvious benefits to the work-life balance of the worker and the health of the professions, this project seeks to work across disciplines to further understand our colleagues in service professions. Particularly, it helps us appreciate that they are people who must daily, due to the very nature of their work, bring their whole person to that work. Such labour can take a heavy personal toll, but it can also provide amazing rewards. We believe that sharing this story in all its complexity and diversity will not only enhance the reputation of our professions, but also provide new impetus for our professions into the future.

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PRO09893

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