UNDERSTANDING PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE
THROUGH THE IDENTIFICATION OF
IMAGES HELD BY STUDENT TEACHERS

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INTRODUCTION
In spite of much research and scholarly writing, the way in which teachers make decisions about their professional practice is not well understood. Mechanistic decision-making frameworks seem inappropriate to explain how solutions are found for the complex practical problems continually faced by teachers within the milieu of their classrooms as well as in the many longer term decisions they must make. There is considerable evidence that practice for these professionals is usually not guided directly by the conscious application of theoretical knowledge.
Unfortunately, this uncertainty about how teachers make decisions is reflected in the difficulty which teachers, particularly those who are inexperienced, have when discussing their own professional practice. Yinger (1987) uses the term "language of practice" to describe this avenue through which teachers articulate why they make particular decisions about their teaching and through which they engage in professional discourse. Yinger (1987) argued that teachers are disadvantaged in their professional development and in their standing as professionals because they often lack a language a practice. This language of practice, as defined by Yinger (1987), is not merely a "verbal matter" (p.295).

Rather, a language of practice is a set of integrated patterns of thought and action. These patterns themselves constitute a kind of syntax and semantics for action. The words and phrases in this language are behaviour, activities, and routines (Yinger, 1987, p.295).

Thus, Yinger's language of practice is closely linked with action and can be seen as a
way of thinking about or giving meaning to professional practice. There are many similarities between the notion of a language of practice and Schon's (1983) notion of reflection-in-action. Although the exact form of this language of practice is not described by Yinger, some of its features are implied from his discussion and from the work of others interested in this field (for example, Bolster, 1983; Clandinin, 1986; Elbaz, 1983; Schon, 1983). Their findings suggest that professional knowledge about practice develops from a range of personal and professional experiences. It appears to be very context-specific in that it is understood as generalizations but is applied selectively to specific situations and it seems to be characterized by flexibility, ambiguity and inconsistency. These features often lead to criticism of teachers as professionals because they are perceived as making ad hoc and irrational decisions which do not emanate from a satisfactory theory base. Such a perception can readily be attributed to insufficient understanding of the way in which professional knowledge and practice are linked in teaching. Teachers seem to have inadequate avenues for articulating understanding about professional knowledge and how it relates to their practice. This confusion is transferred to debate in teacher education. Teacher education which emphasizes technical and mechanical skills will not assist students to develop the type of professional knowledge described above nor will it assist students to understand their practice sufficiently to acquire a satisfactory language of practice. Similarly, Yinger (1987) suggests that an effective language of practice will not result from a heavy reliance in teacher education on expository written texts which promote abstract meanings presented in impersonal and unquestioned forms. A logical conclusion would be that students who lack a satisfactory language of practice will not be able to reflect critically on their practice - an espoused goal of most programs of teacher education. The study described in this paper attempted to address some of these issues. Its focus was student teachers near completion of their teacher education course and it aimed to provide some understanding of the professional knowledge used by these student teachers in making decisions about practice. The study also explored one means by which student teachers can be assisted to reflect on their professional practice.

RESEARCH PERSPECTIVE

Research at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) has utilized a concept termed personal practical knowledge to describe the type of knowledge which guides the practice of professionals. Personal practical knowledge is defined by Connelly and Dienes (1982) as:

... a comprehensive view teachers have of themselves, their situations, and their role within a situation. It is composed of theoretical knowledge elements, elements of understanding of the teacher’s practical curriculum situation, and of personal beliefs and values concerning what can and should be done in the teacher’s circumstances. (p. 183/4)

This concept offered a useful research perspective for the study because it captured the need to focus on theoretical and personal elements of knowledge while remaining closely linked with practice. The particular component of personal practical knowledge which was used as an organizing and explanatory construct in the study was that of teacher images. Images evolve from past experience and guide actions. They are a means of representing how individual teachers view themselves in their teaching contexts and how this influences the way they teach. Images are not usually consciously articulated without some assistance, but rather they form the subconscious assumptions on which practice is based. When Clandinin (1986) used the construct of image to explore the professional practice of experienced teachers, she defined image as:

... a personal, meta-level, organizing concept in personal practical knowledge in that it embodies a person's experience; finds expression in practice, and is the perspective
from which new experience is taken (p.166).

Other recent research on experienced teachers involved in curriculum innovation identified images which described how an individual teacher viewed himself or herself as a teacher, how the school context, the teacher's role within the school and the subject matter to be taught were viewed (Johnston, 1989). All of these images played a vital role in determining the way the teacher acted both within the classroom and within the wider school context. This research showed images to be a powerful tool for understanding a teacher's professional practice. It suggested that images actually provided a language of practice for teachers because, with some assistance, the teachers in the study could articulate the basis of their decisions and explore the reasons why they held particular beliefs.

Because past research on teacher images had focused on experienced teachers, the study described in this paper explored the applicability of the theory to students being prepared for the teaching profession. The aim was to utilize the construct of image to explore the professional practice of student teachers and to ascertain how student teachers might be assisted to reflect more critically on their practice through an understanding of their own images.

The perspective of personal practical knowledge values the knowledge and understanding of practitioners and seeks to explore practice from their point of view, in terms of their own personal meanings and experiences. Such a perspective has the effect of empowering the participants and enhancing their own self-understanding. This emancipatory process was an additional outcome sought from the study.

METHODOLOGY

Images were identified using a collaborative approach where both researcher and participant searched to uncover the subconscious assumptions which guided the participant's actions in teaching. Analysis of unstructured, open-ended interview data and observation of practice teaching provided the substance for discussion. As themes emerged in the discussions, these were fed back to the participant by the researcher and were further explored and clarified. Themes became images when they emerged as persistent threads in discussion and when they seemed to form an integral platform for the participant's thinking. Once identified, the participant and researcher worked together to clarify the image, test its validity and explore how it had evolved in the participant's thinking.

The unstructured, open-ended interviews focused on the student teachers' ideas about teaching and how they made decisions about what and how to teach. Incidents observed during practice teaching were described by the researcher to the student teacher who was asked to comment. Inconsistencies between stated beliefs about teaching and practice were explored. Initial questions centred around the basis of beliefs about teaching and probing explored the origin of these beliefs and how they influenced practice. A grounded theory approach was taken. Rather than asking predetermined questions, the researcher set the general context for discussion and probed or prompted according to the responses given.

As the researcher explored with the student teachers their ideas about teaching, themes emerged in the dialogue for each individual. Through progressive interviews and through observation of teaching, the researcher probed the extent and nature of these themes. Themes emerged as images when they were characterised by their persistence through progressive interviews, by their links with the student teacher's classroom practice and by their ability to provide coherence and structure to a range of experiences. Images were not defined by their outward linguistic form as in the research of Elbaz (1983), but rather by their explanatory qualities and their ability to organize the student teacher's knowledge. They seemed to emerge from the data as a short phrase which encapsulated a perspective taken by the student teacher and which permeated many aspects of what the student teacher had experienced and how teaching was organized.

In researching personal practical knowledge, it is impossible and undesirable for a researcher to adopt a neutral, objective stance with respect to the participants. Instead, the researcher adopted an "agent central" role where a "caring, subjective stance" was taken and where methods highlighted the values and purposes of both the
researcher and student teachers participating in the study (Clandinin, 1986, p.13). The interpretive process moved from "a researcher's interpretation of observed data to a mutual researcher-participant reconstruction of meaning in action" (Connelly and Clandinin, 1986, p.295).

It should be emphasized that the aim was not to identify generalizable images for all student teachers. Images are unique for each individual and evolve from that individual's unique previous experiences and his or her personal meanings associated with those experiences. The research methodology of personal practical knowledge is designed to highlight the individuality of teacher images and not to sacrifice the sensitivity of this probe by forming generalizable images across populations. On the other hand, image is a universal construct and the nature of this construct, the ways in which images evolve and the manner in which images guide actions are all generalizable. Within the study, images were used as a probe to explore the ways in which individuals think about their practice.

LAURA'S IMAGE OF TEACHING

The study involved interviews with ten first year students and ten third year students in a three year primary teacher education program. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. Follow up observations of practice teaching and interviews were conducted with two third year students over three sessions. To reveal the richness of the data and to permit a more detailed analysis, this paper will refer to only one of the third year students for whom observations and progressive interviews were carried out. This student, who will be referred to as 'Laura', was twenty-seven years of age at the time of the interviews. Previously she had almost completed another professional degree before turning to full time employment and then entering a teacher education program. Laura wished to specialize in early childhood education and her practice teaching placement was in a team teaching, multi-age group of Year One and Two children.

The following discussion focuses on an image which seemed to guide Laura's thinking and practice. As a result of linking observations of Laura's practice teaching with this image, some dilemmas were identified and these will also be discussed. The aim of the paper is to analyse the ways in which this construct of image can be used to understand professional practice of a student teacher.

During one of the early interviews, Laura spoke of the need to set priorities in her development as a teacher. One of her high priorities was that of establishing a relationship with the children. This notion persisted in her subsequent discussions forming an image which guided her thinking about teaching and which underpinned many of her decisions during practice teaching. Laura's practice seemed to be guided by an image of teaching as "setting up a relationship with the children".

One of the first things that would be important at this stage would be to set up a relationship with the children. Because I see everything streaming from that.

My plans are going to stream from that - to find out who they are, what they are and where they are at, especially, then, developmentally and what they need.

(27/9/89, 75)

It is interesting that Laura's image of teaching as setting up a relationship with the children was seen in terms of providing accurate information about the children's needs so that planning decisions could be tailored to the individual.

The same with evaluation, resourcing, setting up activities, the environment, what suits them and all kinds of things.

They all string from my relationships with them [the children].

... my relationship with them and how real it is.

... not just "Okay, I've got a bunch of six year olds in Grade One. I'm going to do
With relationships such a high priority for Laura, it was not surprising to find her stressing the importance of seeing children as individuals each with different and unique backgrounds and experiences. She saw developing a relationship with the children as the means of understanding those differences. Furthermore, relationships were seen as a means of providing input from the children. Laura explained that a good relationship between her and the children would establish a channel of communication whereby children could plan their own learning. (27/9/89, 134)

I think they should have an input and say what they need and what they like. ... encouraging children not just to receive. (27/9/89, 147)

The same thinking was evident in Laura's ideas on discipline. Again, she saw the need to establish a relationship with the children to determine which strategies would be most likely to work with individual children. The children's input would also be used to form a behaviour code for the class.

After three weeks of practice teaching, Laura continued to stress the importance of the relationship she had established with the children and how this was linked to generating involvement from her class.

I will never get through to them - I'm not going to be able to elicit things from them - if they don't feel that they want to talk to me or if I'm the sort of person that they don't want to be near. (8/11/89, 248)

She described her increasing level of comfort with the class in terms of her growing awareness of the children, yet she could see the limitations of practice teaching in allowing the depth of understanding she sought.

My development during prac always becomes better as the prac goes on.

They become more aware of me and I become more aware of them. The whole essence, to me, is knowing children - knowing, in particular, the ones who are within my four walls, my class.

But it is very difficult to get to know a classroom of children in three weeks, to use them as springboards for planning. (8/11/89, 242)

Several specific incidents during practice teaching supported the notion that Laura's practice was guided by her image of teaching as setting up a relationship with the children. At the beginning of one lesson she asked a particular child several times if he was ready to start. Later she explained that she had discovered that this particular strategy was more effective with the child than raising her voice or becoming more forceful. Laura believed that a personal and individual request to the child, followed by eye contact increased her chances of successfully gaining the child's attention.

I need only to say, "Michael, are you ready?", and when he looks, he will read me. That's why I'm doing it with Michael. I wouldn't do that with all children. Michael needs more, because he doesn't often look people in the face and because he is a real problem in behaviour. (2/11/89, 89)

Other incidents were observed during Laura's teaching which indicated the efforts she
made to set up individual relationships with the children. She seemed conscious of the
time that this required but she was observed to reap the benefits in using effective,
individualized strategies to cope with potentially difficult situations. (2/11/89,
92-122)

This morning, I was walking along the verandah and the girls were walking past,
following the leader. As I walked in the opposite direction, they jumped behind me and
followed me. Instead of walking straight, I went up and down some steps and around
some circles.

I was terribly rushed this morning. It probably took me a minute, but it just built
something there.
(2/11/89, 152)

Like most student teachers, Laura found the need to establish parameters for the
relationship she formed with the children. Towards the end of her practice teaching
experience, she described this relationship in the following terms.

Much friendlier, much more one to one, much more interactive in that we're bouncing
from each other. It's not a friendship, by any means. It is more aware, though. It's
a status of better awareness than it was, but there is still a line that has to be kept
drawn.

So I think we are friendlier in that sense, without being buddy-buddy and losing that
fine line.
(8/11/89, 57)

THE UNCERTAINTIES OF PRACTICE TEACHING
Images may be compared with idealized notions of teaching similar to the espoused
theories described by Schon (1983). However, unlike espoused theories, images evolve
from experience and seem to be more closely linked with practice. They are
personalized and represent a means by which teachers or student teachers may picture
themselves involved in practices they consider effective and desirable. Because the
teacher is the key actor within the image and because the image is grounded in the past
experience of the teacher, there is less likelihood of the image representing
idealistic, unachievable goals.

However, for the student teachers involved in this study, there was evidence of the
need for considerable renegotiation and clarification of their images as they moved
into the reality of the practice teaching situation. This confusion and uncertainty
seemed to arise from two sources. The first was the limited amount of teaching
experience on which the students could draw to form their images. This resulted in
less clarity in their images than was the case with experienced teachers, with
inconsistencies and uncertainties being progressively resolved as further experiences
during practice teaching contributed to the clarification process. Such a situation
indicates the importance of field experience for student teachers, but more
importantly, it highlights the need to use these experiences to construct and validate
images of teaching in the most effective and efficient way.

The second reason for the uncertainty observed in the student teachers came from the
nature of the practice teaching experience. Laura and the other students within the
study were very conscious of the artificial situation of their practice teaching.
Laura explained:

To me, all pracs are a false situation. I've walked into an environment that has been
built and set. I can't just change it around. I could no more come into here and say,
"Forget your program. I imagine it this way." It's not on for the kids, if no-one
else. They have a routine and it works for them.
(26/10/89, 247)
For a student teacher such as Laura who had a relatively well developed image of teaching which she could not fully effect in someone else's class, the dilemmas were apparent. Her image guided her towards a form of organization which responded to children's needs, which "flowed with the moment" (2/11/89, 251) and in which children had maximum input to choice of activities and the general direction taken. Laura perceived such organization to be impossible given the routine already developed in the classroom and the guidelines given to her by the supervising teacher. Fortunately, in Laura's case, she was able to identify and cope with this dilemma. For her, it was a matter of working within the given constraints, while still recognizing that this was not the way she would work in her own classroom.

I can only fit in and gain what I can from it.

(2/11/89, 295)

It's disappointing, but I know who I am and what I am. So, it's still a model - one to be examined, not just dismissed. So, I've still got my eyes open.

(26/10/89, 258)

Because Laura had a relatively clear image of teaching, she was able to use the experience to reject those ideas inconsistent with her image and accept ideas with which she felt comfortable. There was little evidence of Laura changing her image of teaching to fit the situation, although she did consciously tailor her practice accordingly. One wonders if those student teachers with less clear and consistent images of teaching would find practice teaching a more confusing and compromising experience.

CONCLUSION

This study attempted to understand the professional practice of student teachers through the construct of image. Images, as a component of personal practical knowledge, proved to be a means of analysing the way in which student teachers understood themselves as teachers. More than this, images linked closely with practice. They provided an avenue for relating discussion about teaching with the reality of decisions made within the classroom. Images explained a range of practices and, in so doing, provided a coherent platform from which the professional practice of the student teacher could be understood.

Images may hold an important key to assisting student teachers to understand their own practice and through this to reflect critically on the decisions they make. Further research in this area is continuing. Already there is evidence that images may be useful in explaining congruence or otherwise between the way student teachers and supervising teachers view teaching. When there is congruence, student teachers are likely to find that they fit more comfortably into existing classroom routine. Without that congruence, conflict or at least a certain level of discomfort is likely. There may well be implications here for the matching of student teachers to classrooms for their practice teaching. At the very least there are implications for assisting student teachers to analyse the dilemmas and constraints they face in entering an established classroom environment for a short period of time.

To complement earlier research involving experienced teachers, this study has provided evidence that images are a means of understanding the professional knowledge of student teachers. Unlike theoretical knowledge elements which do not always seem to link with practice, images provide a language of practice. Images guided the professional practice of student teachers and provided an avenue for understanding and articulating that practice.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


1 Laura is not the real name of the student teacher to whom the data refer.

2 All quotations from the data refer to transcripts from taped interviews with Laura. Slight changes have been made to punctuation and expression to overcome some of the difficulties inherent in reading transcripts from conversational speech. The date of the interview and the counter number of the audiotape are shown in parenthesis after each quotation.

achers in this study, the profiles emerging would be similar to those from other studies of innovative teachers in this study, the profiles emerging would be similar to those from other
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