

Surviving the cacophony of educational worlds: The transformative potential of aesthetic inquiry

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Abstract

If unprepared for them, the realities of teaching can challenge, confront and paralyse the valued ideals and philosophies of teachers. An orientation to teacher education that embraces the ambiguous, dilemma ridden nature of teaching and encourages teachers to contextualise personal knowledge and ways of knowing within an understanding of story, time and place is crucial if teachers are to stay the course, manage surprise, and maintain their hope and vision.

As the nature and complexity of teachers' work has continued to intensify so has the realisation that different approaches to understanding educational dilemmas are needed. A desire to create knowledge based on resonance and understanding has encouraged educational researchers to look beyond traditional research approaches to new methodological genres capable of exploring educational questions in personal, social, engaging and connected ways. There is a growing awareness that narrative forms of knowledge and arts-based inquiry (research inquiry which embraces aesthetic ways of knowing and the language, practices and forms commonly employed in the arts) offer unique representational resources for understanding experience and for illuminating the particular educational dilemmas and situations we care about.

This paper reveals something of the incredible meaning-making and pedagogical capabilities of arts-based research methods, where metaphor, drawing, and story serve as research methods and representational resources central to inquiry and reflection. A metaphor of teaching as 'a composing of a music' frames a sonata-formatted narrative which tracks the journey of an early childhood teacher as she engages in a personal and collaborative inquiry into what it means to teach. It follows her experimentation with narrative and arts-based resources as she (re) lives and (re) tells her story about the challenges of working and teaching in a privately owned childcare centre, and demonstrates how these resources acted as catalysts for discourse, awareness, insight and clarity.

Prepared for uncertain educational worlds?

There is agreement and acceptance that teaching is a complex endeavour which is becoming progressively more ambiguous and demanding as constant social change and external and political forces influence what and how to teach (Markauskaite, 2011; Rowan, 1994). Universities recognise future teachers will need to be constantly available to respond to changing demands and expectations. They will need to re-invent themselves, be flexible, be innovators, and skilled curriculum developers in order to manage their world of work (Hamberger & Moore, 1997; Rethinking Schools, 2004).

This paper asserts that an understanding of self-as-teacher, and an awareness of possible realities, challenges and characteristics of work contexts are essential to teacher preparedness, intentional action and coping (Clandinin, 2010; Craig, 2010; Denscombe, 1980). A developed sense of self, an ability to articulate the images that guide practice, and an understanding of real world conditions and day to day realities that influence teaching are critical (Black, 2000; Kelchtermans, 2009). When images and realities are not examined teachers can feel overwhelmed by circumstances and responsibilities (Clandinin, Murphy, Huber, & Orr, 2009; Sumsion, 2002). They can begin to feel drained, cynical and ineffective, questioning themselves and their work.

The conscious examination of teaching images and contextual realities are necessary if teachers are to effectively adapt to and respond to shape the contexts in which they work (Bullock, 2009). Viewing teaching as a lifelong and evolving journey of reinvention, and ongoing opportunities to examine work contexts, cultures and conflicts can enhance teachers' chances of survival (Black, 2000; Leitch, 2010). In order to assist a process where teachers can take charge of their own growth "supported opportunities to reflect upon their own funds of knowledge, explore their attitudes and beliefs, and extend the repertoire of skills and strategies that form the underpinnings of their work" are required (Rust, 1999, p.370).