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Who I am in how I teach is the message: self-understanding, vulnerability and reflection

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The person of the teacher is an essential element in what constitutes professional teaching and therefore needs careful conceptualisation. In this article the author argues for this central thesis, presenting a wrap up of his theoretical and empirical work on the issue over the past decade. These studies have been inspired – both conceptually and methodologically – by teacher thinking-research as well as the narrative-biographical approach to teaching and teacher development. The result is an empirically grounded conceptual framework on teacher development and teacher professionalism. Central concepts are ‘professional self-understanding’ and ‘subjective educational theory’ as components of the personal interpretative framework every individual teacher develops throughout his/her career. This personal framework results from the reflective and meaningful interactions between the individual teacher and the social, cultural and structural working conditions constituting his/her job context(s). As such the framework is the dynamic outcome of an ongoing process of professional learning (development). Furthermore, it is argued, that the particular professionalism or scholarship of teachers is fundamentally characterised by personal commitment and vulnerability, which eventually have consequences for the kind of reflective attitudes and skills professional teachers should master.

Keywords: teaching; professional practice; self-understanding; subjective theory; emotions in teaching

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack in everything
That’s how the light gets in

— L. Cohen, ‘Anthem’

Teaching as enactment of scholarship

The debate about the qualification of the teaching job is not new. In the past several authors have argued that teaching was a ‘profession’, or at least a ‘semi-profession’, whereas others contended that it was more appropriate to conceive of teaching as a ‘craft’ (e.g. Pratte & Rury, 1991). And recently Loughran and Russell (2007) have held a plea to understand teaching as a discipline in its own right. At least two issues become apparent in these discussions. On the one hand, the question of the social status of teaching, and more in particular, the social and public acknowledgement that what teaching

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contributes to the community (society) is important, and that the ability to enact this demands the mastery of a particular set of knowledge, skills and attitudes. Although this qualification may sound to educationalists a mere sociological concern of classification, it is of course not without importance whether teaching is recognised as socially important and grounded in a particular form of expertise. The social status of a job has immediate consequences for the recruitment of student teachers, the retention of experienced teachers, but also for the way policy makers treat the field (Kelchtermans 2007a). Think for example of the policy on scripted curricula and teacher proof materials in parts of the USA, as an exponent of the belief that the teacher as such doesn’t really matter and can be replaced by strict instructions, behavioural performance, standards for output and quality control. An illustration of the dramatic consequences of this policy can be found in Achinstein and Ogawa (2006).

The second – educationally more challenging – issue in the debate is the question about what makes up the content of that particular discipline or profession. If a particular kind of expertise – knowledge, skills and attitudes – is needed to teach, what are they and how are they developed? And what do they imply for the person who enacts them?

In this article, I will limit myself to one element in the answer to that question, namely the fact that teaching is done by somebody. Teaching is an act, or teaching is enacted by someone. It matters who the teacher is. ‘The teacher as a person is held by many within the profession and outside it to be at the centre of not only the classroom but also the educational process. By implication, therefore, it matters to teachers themselves, as well as to their pupils, who and what they are. Their self-image is more important to them as practitioners than is the case in occupations where the person can easily be separated from the craft’ (Nias, 1989, pp. 202–203). So, the importance of the sense of self to the teaching job is far from a new idea and may even sound like stating the obvious. Yet, exactly because of its almost self-evident and taken for granted character, any attempt to conceptualise teaching needs to include a concept of the teacher as a person or his/her sense of self.

Before developing the issue of the teachers’ self, two remarks need to be made. Firstly, although I emphasise in this article the person of the teachers, that doesn’t change my more fundamental conception of teaching being an inter-personal and relational endeavour. Teaching implies a relationship of responsibility for a group of pupils or students. And to take up the image of the classic ‘didactic triangle’, teaching involves also the subject matter, the curriculum. It is against the background of this general frame – the triangular relationship of teacher, students and curriculum – that my arguments on teachers’ sense of self need to be understood.

Secondly, I do subscribe to the project of acknowledging the particular expertise that is enacted in teaching and thus constitutes the professional quality of teachers and teaching. Rather than speaking about a ‘discipline of teaching’, I prefer the image in what Loughran (2006), following Shulman (1999), labels as ‘scholarship of teaching’. This scholarship – he argues – rests on at least three key attributes: becoming public; becoming an object of critical review and evaluation of the members of that community; and, members of that community beginning to use, build upon and develop those acts of mind and creation (see also Loughran, 2006, p. 81).

This perspective of scholarship may keep us from getting stuck in the pitfall of individualism and a romantic over-emphasising of idiosyncrasy. At the same time it defines an agenda for (student) teachers to work on, in order to develop and improve that scholarship. As such the scholarship refers on the one hand to a system of know-how that
is or can be shared among the professionals in the field, and on the other hand to the
particular professionalism of individual teachers (as the ‘enacter’ of that scholarship).
After explaining briefly the two research traditions that have inspired my research,
I will elaborate on the central concepts of self-understanding and subjective educa-
tional theory, as the domains in teachers’ personal interpretative framework. This
conceptual clarification brings me to a discussion of the commitment and vulnerability
that characterise teaching and teachers, all of which has consequences for the way
teacher professional development and more in particular the reflective attitudes and
skills in it are to be understood.

How I teach is the message
Thinking of teaching as an act automatically implies its observation by others. More
than three decades ago Lortie (1975) coined the term ‘apprenticeship of observation’
to capture the fact that the teaching act is always being watched and experienced by
students. In other words, the experience of ‘being taught’ implies complex processes
of sense-making. In the students’ experience, the teaching can be engaging or rather
boring, challenging or repetitive, etc. Its meaning for the learners is never fully
predictable, nor are the outcomes of the process. Furthermore, teaching implies visi-
bility and thus – to quote another image from Lortie – is like ‘living in a fishbowl’
(Lortie, 1975). This visibility reflects the relational and interactive nature of teaching.
One’s actions while teaching are being looked at, evaluated and made sense of.

In line with this, Russell (1997) has argued that ‘how I teach is the message’
constitutes a central principle in the pedagogy of teacher education. In my reading, the
principle firstly refers to the issue of credibility: if one wants student teachers to
accept, ‘believe’ and thus understand what is being taught, the way this message is
transferred to them is critical for its credibility (‘teach as you preach’). Secondly,
however, the principle also implies that for student teachers it is not only important to
rationally see and understand the message that is conveyed, but also to personally
experience what particular forms of teaching actually do to them as learners. The
awareness and analysis of those experiences adds to their developing insights in the
learning processes that take place in learners/students and thus enhances their skill of
getting into their students’ skin while teaching (empathy), anticipating the possible
impact of their teaching acts on learners.

In my opinion, however, the argument still needs to be taken a step further.
Implicit in the claim ‘how I teach is the message’ is the acknowledgement of teaching
as a relational, social and public act. The teacher (educator) wants to be seen by the
students in a particular way, but at the same time his/her ideas about him/herself as a
teacher (educator) are influenced by what others – in this case their students – think
about him/her. The way teachers understand themselves as teachers thus matters, yet
this to a large extent is influenced by how others see him/her or what others say about
him/her as a teacher (educator). That’s why I want to argue that ‘who I am in how
I teach is the message’. And that’s why a teacher’s self-understanding is of key impor-
tance in the scholarship of teaching.

Taking a narrative-biographical approach
My research on teachers, their learning and growth throughout their career (starting
with initial teacher education), has been strongly influenced by the so-called ‘teacher
thinking’ research and the tradition of biographical and narrative approaches in social and educational research.

Since the mid 1980s of last century, research on teachers and teaching has become strongly influenced by the developments in cognitive psychology and more in particular the growing understanding how people’s actions are influenced by their cognitions. In order to understand (but also to influence or train) teachers’ actions, one needs to identify and analyse their ‘thinking’ (cognitive processes and representations) (see, e.g. Clark & Peterson, 1986). This ‘teacher thinking’ research developed into different strands of research and methodologies. One of them was the narrative approach (Carter & Doyle, 1996; Casey, 1995–1996; Clandinin, 2006; Gudmundsdottir, 2001). Since ‘narrative is the discourse structure in which human action receives its form and through which it is meaningful’ (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 135), narratives were considered to be a powerful way to unravel and understand the complex processes of sense-making that constitute teaching.

Teachers’ talking about their professional lives and practices is very often spontaneously framed in narrative form. They use anecdotes, metaphors, images and other types of storytelling to recall, share, exchange or account for their experiences in classrooms and schools. Storytelling is the natural way through which people make sense of the events, situations and encounters they find themselves in: ‘Humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. The study of narrative, therefore, is the study of the ways humans experience the world’ (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2; see also Clandinin, 2006).

A different research tradition (mainly in sociology and anthropology), that became intertwined with these narrative developments in research on teaching, is the biographical perspective (see, e.g. Goodson, 1984, 1992; Krüger & Marotzki, 1996). Central to this approach is the idea that human existence is fundamentally characterised by temporality. People have a personal history. Their life develops in time, between birth and death. Interpretations, thoughts and actions in the present are influenced by experiences from the past and expectations for the future.

Building on this tradition, as well as the narrative turn in the teacher thinking research (Elbaz, 2006), I developed a cycle of biographical interviews, aimed at stimulating teachers to recall the experiences throughout their career and eventually resulting in the reconstruction of their career stories (or professional biographies) (Kelchtermans, 1994). Over the last two decades I have used this method to collect data from teachers in different stages of their careers (student teachers, new teachers, experienced teachers, nearly-retired teachers) or in different positions in schools (principals, remedial teachers, …) (see also Kelchtermans, 1993, 1999, 2005; Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002a, 2002b). These narrative-biographical data were the basis for my interpretative reconstruction of these teachers’ thinking about themselves and their teaching and eventually resulted in the theoretical frame on teachers’ professional development that I am presenting below.

**Personal interpretative framework: self-understanding and subjective educational theory**

Based on my narrative-biographical research, I have argued that throughout their careers teachers develop a personal interpretative framework: a set of cognitions, of mental representations that operates as a lens through which teachers look at their job, give meaning to it and act in it. This framework thus guides their interpretations and
actions in particular situations (context), but is at the same time also modified by and resulting from these meaningful interactions (sense-making) with that context. As such it is both a condition for and a result of the interaction, and represents the – always preliminary – ‘mental sediment’ of teachers’ learning and developing over time.

The metaphor of a pair of glasses provides a good way to capture its constructive, interactionist, dynamic, contextualised and narrative nature. People who wear glasses are most of the time not consciously aware that they do so. If the glasses provide a clear view or fit correctly, one tends to forget about them. However, when one’s perceptions become hazy or when the frame starts to irritate or – even more importantly – when others comment that the frame is out-dated, then one becomes aware of the glasses, of the way they ‘frame’ reality and thus influence what one sees and how one is ‘seen’ (evaluated, appreciated) by others. This awareness then triggers a response, including a critical examination of the lenses (or better of one’s eyes in order to adapt the lenses) or eventually going to get a new frame. All of these actions are often afterwards commented on in vivid stories, for example elicited by others’ comments on how nicely the new frame fits, how ‘cool’ one looks … In a similar way the developments in the personal interpretative framework of teachers can be looked at. Within the framework two different, yet interconnected domains need to be distinguished: the personal self-understanding and the subjective educational theory.

The professional self-understanding

The first domain in the personal interpretative framework of teachers is their conception of themselves as teachers. Nias was right when she observed and labelled teachers’ ‘persistent self-referentialism’: the fact that when talking about their professional actions and activities, teachers cannot but speak about themselves (Nias, 1989, p. 5). And as such their sense of self is very prominent in their accounts about their practice (a practice enacted by them as singular person). This again reflects and illustrates the interpersonal character of teaching and its impact on the sense of self teachers develop. I have, however, purposefully avoided the notion of ‘identity’ because of its association with a static essence, implicitly ignoring or denying its dynamic and biographical nature. Instead I have used the word ‘self-understanding’. The term refers to both the understanding one has of one’s ‘self’ at a certain moment in time (product), as well as to the fact that this product results from an ongoing process of making sense of one’s experiences and their impact on the ‘self’. By stressing the narrative nature the possible essentialist pitfall in conceptualising ‘identity’ can be avoided. In this view, we should not look for a ‘deep’, ‘essential’ or ‘true’ personal core that makes up the ‘real’ self. The narrative character implies that one’s self-understanding only appears in the act of ‘telling’ (or in the act of explicit self-reflection and as such ‘telling oneself’). As such the intersubjective nature of the self-understanding is immediately included in the concept itself, since the telling that reveals the self-understanding always presupposes an audience of ‘listeners’.

My analysis of teachers’ career stories resulted in the identification of five components that together make up teachers’ self-understanding: self-image, self-esteem, job motivation, task perception and future perspective.

The self-image is the descriptive component, the way teachers typify themselves as teachers. This image is based on self-perception, but to a large degree also on what others mirror back to the teachers (e.g. comments from pupils, parents, colleagues,
principals, etc.). The self-image is therefore strongly influenced by the way one is perceived by others.

Very closely linked to the self-image is the evaluative component of the self-understanding or the self-esteem. Self-esteem refers to the teacher’s appreciation of his/her actual job performance (how well am I doing in my job as a teacher?). Again the feedback from others is important, but that feedback is filtered and interpreted. Feedback from some is considered more relevant, valuable or important than that of others. The person defines particular individuals or groups as more ‘significant others’ (see, e.g. Nias, 1985). To most teachers, students are the first and most important source of feedback, since they are the ultimate ‘raison d’être’ for teachers and their teaching. Or even stronger, it is only the presence of pupils and students that makes the teacher a teacher; that allows him/her to enact teaching.

Self-esteem further refers to the fact that emotions matter a great deal in teaching as well. Positive self-esteem is crucial for feeling at ease in the job, for experiencing job satisfaction and a sense of fulfilment, for one’s well-being as a teacher (Bullough, in press). Those positive self-evaluations, however, are fragile, fluctuate in time and have to be re-established time and again. That’s why negative public judgements, which for an outsider look almost trivial, may have a devastating impact on teachers (see, e.g. Kelchtermans, 1996, 1999, 2005).

The self-esteem as the evaluative component has to be understood as intertwined with the normative component of self-understanding: the task perception. This encompasses the teacher’s idea of what constitutes his/her professional programme, his/her tasks and duties in order to do a good job. It reflects a teacher’s personal answer to the question: what must I do to be a proper teacher?; what are the essential tasks I have to perform in order to have the justified feeling that I am doing well?; what do I consider as legitimate duties to perform and what do I refuse to accept as part of ‘my job’? The task perception reflects the fact that teaching and being a teacher is not a neutral endeavour. It implies value-laden choices, moral considerations (see, e.g. Fenstermacher, 1990; Hargreaves, 1995; Oser, Dick, & Patry 1992). The task perception encompasses deeply held beliefs about what constitutes good education, about one’s moral duties and responsibilities in order to do justice to students. When these deeply held beliefs are questioned – and the risk that this happens is always present (see below) – teachers feel that they themselves as a person are called into question. Evaluation systems, new regulations, calls for educational change that differ from or contradict teachers’ task perception will deeply affect their self-esteem, their job satisfaction, etc. The emotional impact is very strong because teachers feel that their moral integrity as a person and a professional are called into question. Seeing these deeply held beliefs being called into question may even result in turnover, burnout, etc. (see, e.g. Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006; Ballet & Kelchtermans, 2008; Hargreaves, 1995; Kelchtermans, 1996, 1999; Nias, 1996). Research on beginning teachers’ micropolitical literacy, for example, clearly documents how teachers develop a way of reading (making sense of) situations in terms of the working conditions they consider crucial for doing a good job and – in line with this – how the development of effective strategies and tactics for negotiating, navigating, influencing and controlling their working conditions is definitely part of their development as professionals (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002a, 2002b).

The job motivation (or conative component) refers to the motives or drives that make people choose to become a teacher, to stay in teaching or to give it up for another career. Again, it is rather easy to understand that the task perception as well
As the working conditions that allow a teacher to work and act according to that personal normative programme are crucial determinants for the job motivation. It is important to note, however, that the motives for working as a teacher may develop over time. Especially with secondary school teachers, I often found shifts in their motivation. Most of them first of all got into teaching because of their love for and interest in their subject discipline. Over time, however, several of them came to understand that their work, presence, actions were also meaningful to their students for other reasons than just being a qualified source of subject matter knowledge. Meaning something as a person to youngsters who are struggling with their life project, their individual identity, with growing up; in other words being important to them in a broader educational sense, became a very motivating factor in their careers as well as a source for job satisfaction and positive self-esteem.

Finally, self-understanding also includes a time-element: the future perspective reveals a teacher’s expectations about his/her future in the job (‘how do I see myself as a teacher in the years to come and how do I feel about it?’). This component explicitly also refers to the dynamic character of the self-understanding. It is not a static, fixed identity, but rather the result of an ongoing interactive process of sense-making and construction. It thus also indicates how temporality pervades self-understanding: one’s actions in the present are influenced by meaningful experiences in the past and expectations about the future. The person of the teacher is always somebody at some particular moment in his/her life, with a particular past and future. This ‘historicity’ deeply characterises every human being and should therefore be included in our conception of professional self-understanding (and thus in our thinking of what it means to be a professional teacher, enacting the scholarship of teaching).

These five components of self-understanding can be distinguished analytically, but are all intertwined and refer to each other. This way self-understanding is both an encompassing (integrative) and an analytical (differentiated) concept. As such it does justice to the dynamic nature and the contextual embeddedness of teachers’ sense of self and still provides an analytical conceptual tool to unravel the way the ‘self’ pervades all aspects of teaching. That is why I would argue: ‘who I am in how I teach is the message’.

Teachers’ narrative accounts of their experiences are not just informative about how they think about themselves. Rather they construct that self-understanding in the interactive act, at the same time (implicitly or explicitly) inviting the ‘audience’ to acknowledge, confirm or question and contradict the statement. Narrative accounts revealing one’s self-understanding are moments of interactive sense-making. Because the issue at stake is not a neutral statement, but one’s self and the moral choices and emotions it encompasses, the narrative accounts always entail an aspect of negotiation (seeking recognition or acknowledgement). The value-laden choices in the task perception, for example, can be contested, questioned, but this task perception also offers strong possibilities for negotiating shared understandings and shared moral and political choices among colleagues.

The subjective educational theory

By the subjective educational theory I mean the personal system of knowledge and beliefs about education that teachers use when performing their job. It thus encompasses their professional know-how, the basis on which teachers ground their decisions.
for actions. Knowledge refers to more or less formal insights and understandings, as derived from teacher education or in-service training, professional reading, etc. Beliefs refer to more person-based, idiosyncratic convictions, built up through different career experiences. If juxtaposed like this the knowledge and belief suggest two different categories of information, but in teachers’ thinking they are much more mixed and intertwined and may be better conceived of as the extremes of a continuum. The actual border between knowledge (grounded in and based on research or collective and explicit experiences over time) and more personal beliefs (based on individual experience, single cases, ‘hear say’) is not always that clear.

The subjective educational theory reflects the teacher’s personal answer to the questions: ‘how should I deal with this particular situation?’ (= what to do?) and ‘why should I do it that way?’ (= why do I think that action is appropriate now?). ‘Using’ or ‘applying’ one’s subjective educational theory thus demands first of all a process of judgement and deliberation, an interpretative reading of the situation before deciding on which approach may be most appropriate. This ability to read, judge and then act is essential for competent teaching or is a vital indication that one masters the ‘discipline of teaching’ (Loughran & Russell, 2007).

The content of the subjective educational theory is largely idiosyncratic and based on personal experiences. Formal knowledge (for example from the curriculum of teacher education programmes or in-service training) only takes root in the subjective educational theory if (student) teachers have experienced that ‘it works for them’ or ‘is true for their practice’. The same applies to the beliefs e.g. suggestions or rules of thumb inherited from more experienced colleagues. The epistemological status of the subjective educational theory is that its content ‘holds true’ for the teacher involved. Whether or to what extent this claim of truth is justified beyond one’s own situation is not the teacher’s immediate concern.

Here lies an important agenda for teacher education or initiatives for professional development. The content of the subjective educational theory is largely idiosyncratic, based on personal experiences and therefore potentially incomplete, one-sided or simply wrong (even if it ‘works’ for the teacher involved). Making the implicit educational theory explicit through reflection is of crucial importance if teachers want to develop the validity of their professional know-how, refine or extend it. Only if its content is made explicit, others can comment, question, elaborate, contradict and thus contribute to furthering its validity. Or put differently, this ongoing process of framing and reframing allows teachers to better specify and ground their knowledge (Argyris, Putnam, & McLain-Smith, 1985; Schön, 1983).

Yet, even if its validity, its ‘truth’ is better grounded, ‘using’ that subjective educational theory is never simply applying a rule, but still always demands that the teacher judges whether a particular situation warrants the use of a particular rule or technique. This judgement about good or appropriate action inevitably raises the question of the norm: good or appropriate in relation to what norm? (or for whom?). Enhancing the validity of subjective educational theory thus cannot suffice with making teachers give up ‘unproven’ beliefs and replace them by ‘proved’ truth or theory. The process of judging remains essential (and for example deciding that in this particular situation the most appropriate action is to make an exception of what normally is the rule). This illustrates the link between self-understanding (more in particular the component of task perception) and the subjective educational theory, with the first encompassing the personal programme of goals and norms (the ‘what?’), and the latter consisting of the knowledge to achieve them (the ‘how to?’).
Since teaching is highly contextual and since the judgement of the particular situation is an essential part of teaching, the explicit reflection and sharing of what one would do or has done and why remains a necessary and powerful learning situation for (student) teachers. The content of the subjective educational theory can in principal be made explicit through purposeful reflection (Mandl & Huber, 1983), yet the form or language in which it is explicated can be different. Some teachers use metaphors or images that capture both a type of a situation, as well as the strategies for action and their justification (see also Bullough & Knowles, 1991; Elbaz, 1981), others formulate principles or rules of thumb (e.g. Loughran, 2006).

To sum up, I want to repeat that professional self-understanding and subjective educational theory always need to be considered as two interwoven domains in the personal framework teachers develop and use to interpret and make sense of the professional situations they find themselves in. For research this implies that the research lines on teacher identity on the one hand and on teachers’ professional knowledge on the other would benefit from an integrated approach, rather than continue to develop as largely separate fields of study (see for an example of the latter Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004).

Commitment and vulnerability

Typical for narrative self-accounts is that they all reflect the intersubjective nature of teaching (and thus of oneself as a teacher): the way one narratively understands oneself includes the presence and role of the others. Those others are not just a sociologically relevant category of reference persons, but – especially the pupils/students – are the ones that ultimately justify one’s sense of oneself as a teacher, because of one’s ethical responsibility. This ethical commitment, together with the curricular agenda, sets the scene for teachers’ professional actions.

Yet, this conceptualisation of the personal interpretative framework in terms of ‘enactment’ and ‘agenda’ may run into another pitfall: an activist bias. Teaching/being a teacher is too exclusively thought about as a matter of intentional and purposeful action. This way, however, important aspects of teaching are neglected, ignored or downplayed. The aspect I want to stress here is the fact that teaching – because of its relational and ethical nature – is also and importantly characterised by passivity, by being exposed to others and thus being vulnerable.

Bullough (in press) argues that teaching means standing for something, for a particular idea of what constitutes a good life: a meaningful, valuable life. Teaching implies taking a stance, choosing for a particular set of values and norms (goals) and engaging in their pursuit. This moral commitment, with its emotionally and personally engaging consequences is an inherent part of teaching and therefore of teaching as a discipline. As a result, however, teaching is fundamentally characterised and constituted by vulnerability (Kelchtermans, 2005, in press). Vulnerability in that sense is not so much to be understood as an emotional state or experience (although the experience of being vulnerable definitely triggers intense emotions), but as a structural characteristic of the profession.

There are at least three elements that make up vulnerability in teaching. A first element lies in the fact that teachers are not in full control of the conditions they have to work in (regulations, quality control systems, policy demands). Teachers’ working conditions are to a large extent imposed on them: they work within particular legal frameworks and regulations, in a particular school, with a particular infrastructure,
population of students, composition of the staff. One could say that this is a formal or political vulnerability, which raises the agenda of power to influence and define one’s working conditions. The ‘times of performativity’ teachers are living in (with its exclusive emphasis on effectiveness and efficiency, based on strict standards and output measurement) definitely intensifies this experience of vulnerability (see, e.g. Ball, 2003; Kelchtermans, 2007a, 2007b).

Secondly, vulnerability refers to the experience that teachers can, only to a very limited degree, prove their effectiveness by claiming that pupils’ results directly follow from their actions. All teachers realise that student outcomes are only partially determined by their teaching. Equally or sometimes even more decisive are personal factors (motivation, perseverance, etc.) or social factors, that are often very hard to influence, change or control. It is not only difficult to prove to what extent a teacher can argue that students’ results are his/her own achievement, but equally difficult to know when a result of teachers’ actions possibly may occur and become visible at all. Very often teachers are not allowed to witness when the seed of their efforts finds fertile ground to develop. That is why the quality control systems, being based only or primarily on students’ test scores are felt by so many teachers as an unfair evaluation of their work, doing injustice to their specific working conditions. This creates ambivalence among the teachers. Teachers with a high internal locus of control may experience high job satisfaction when student outcomes are good. On the other hand, when pupils’ learning outcomes are poor, they may tend to blame themselves and feel frustrated and inefficacious. Teachers with a high external ‘locus of control’ often ascribe student outcomes to factors beyond their efforts and often beyond their control. This may then have a negative impact on their personal feelings of professional competence (‘I can’t make a difference’) and thus have a depressing effect on their motivation and eventually on their sense of self-esteem. During their career teachers find themselves challenged to properly balance between internal and external locus of control, between a satisfying sense of efficacy and a realistic acknowledgement of one’s limited impact (Kelchtermans, 1993), between exhausting personal commitment and cynical disengagement (see also Huberman, 1989).

Finally, and this is the most fundamental meaning of the concept ‘vulnerability’: teachers cannot but make dozens of decisions about when and how to act in order to support students’ development and learning, but they don’t have a firm ground to base their decisions on. Even when the justification for teachers’ decisions can be explicitly stated, with reference to a certain idea (argument) of good education in general and good education for this pupil here and now, that judgement and decision can always be challenged or questioned. And still, it is this capacity to judge, to act and to take responsibility for one’s actions which constitutes a key part of teachers’ professionalism. There is no escape: the particular scholarship of teaching (professionality) demands that one endures this vulnerability. Vulnerability is the fundamental condition a teacher ‘finds himself/herself in’. The expression is important: it reveals the inevitable element of passivity, of exposure that characterises teaching. It is not something one ‘makes happen’. Although in much research, training and analysis the emphasis is on acting, planning, designing, there is also this passive dimension of undergoing, surprise, puzzlement, powerlessness.

Yet, at the same time, it is this committed judging and caring action that opens up the ‘educational space’ in the relationship between teachers and students. In that relationship not everything is fixed, roles and positions are not fully defined or prescribed, the careful judgement can be wrong, etc. In other words, the scholarship of teaching
contains a fundamental *paradox*: one has to engage in knowledgeable, thoughtful and purposeful action in order to achieve as good as possible predefined goals, yet at the same time this committed and purposeful action allows things to happen, events to literally take place, educationally meaningful experiences to appear for students. Or to put it differently, in teaching there is always at the same time happening both more and less than one had planned for. Acknowledging this is not an alibi for lousy lesson plans, careless interventions or technically bad teaching performance. On the contrary, only carefully prepared and professionally enacted teaching allows the unforeseen and meaningful to happen. The passivity that characterises the educational relationship is thus also a positive reality. Since not everything can be planned for, authentic interaction between people can take place and that interaction can have deeply meaningful educational value just because it ‘happened’, it ‘took place’. This truth is poetically captured in Cohen’s image of the cracks which – while in a sense destroying the ambition of perfection or the solidity of unquestionable expertise – at the same time open up new perspectives, allow enlightening experiences to take place.³

This dimension of passivity, of exposure and vulnerability should be acknowledged and thoughtfully conceptualised in the scholarship of teaching. Professional teachers then incarnate the paradox of on the one hand taking a stance, speaking out for normative ideas and values and in line with that designing educational conditions that must help students to learn and to develop their individual capacities and identities as much as possible, while at the same time knowing that their purposeful action doesn’t fully capture, direct or predict what will happen.

**Reflection and narrativity**

Throughout the discussion of teaching as enacted scholarship, with the central role of the personal interpretative framework, it has become clear that this conceptualisation also impacts the meaning of reflection and reflectivity in teaching and teacher development.

Few educationalists will deny the importance of reflection in teaching and teacher development. Since the early 1980s – especially with the publication of Schön’s seminal book on the reflective practitioner (1983) – the term has never left the hit-parade of trendy educational concepts. I am using the term ‘reflection’ here in a very broad sense to refer to both the skill and the attitude of making one’s own actions, feelings, experiences the object of one’s thinking. Yet, there is a need for caution. Very often we see that reflective skills and practices are being used in a predominantly instrumental and technical way. Teaching as enacted scholarship demands a concept of reflection that is both deep and broad enough to encompass its moral, political and emotional dimensions (Hargreaves, 1995).

**Broad reflection: beyond the instrumental and the technical**

Both the agenda of research on teaching and of teacher education (initial and in-service) are often dominated by instrumental concerns: finding the appropriate means to achieve the desired ends. Through reflective analysis one strives to acquire knowledge and skills in order to improve the effectiveness of one’s teaching. Or the reflection may be driven by a concern for technical problem-solving. This thinking (and the research based on it) remains embedded in what Schön (1983) called a rational, instrumental and technical approach to reflection. A lot of research aimed at the development of
‘knowledge for practice’ (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1999) also echoes this idea. Of course, technical issues are neither irrelevant nor illegitimate. Teachers do need a solid knowledge base and the mastery of a broad range of teaching skills (Korthagen, 2001). Teachers live and work under the pressure of day-to-day practice. They must maintain the smooth functioning of the classroom and the school. This pressures them to ask for simple, quick-fix solutions, because schooling has to go on (Hopkins, 2001).

The dominant concern with technical questions is probably to some extent an unintended side effect of the success of formal models for reflection, like the widely used ALACT-model (Action/Looking back on the action/Awareness of essential aspects/Creating alternative methods of action/Trial – Korthagen, 2001, p. 44). These models have proven to be very useful in guiding and supporting the development of reflective skills during the process of becoming a teacher, just because of their formal character. They can be applied independently from decisions on what counts as good teaching, but can therefore easily be limited to instrumental interests of effectiveness.4

Yet, at the same time there is more to teaching than questions of effectiveness and efficiency. As argued above, teaching always implies an engagement in relationships of responsibility with students, colleagues, parents, etc. and thus involves also moral, political and emotional dimensions (Hargreaves, 1995). Reflective practice should be broad enough to encompass all four dimensions (and their interconnections).

**Broad reflection: encompassing the moral, the political and the emotional**

*The moral in the technical*

Teaching is ‘a profoundly moral activity’ (Fenstermacher, 1990, p. 132): firstly, because it contributes to the creation and recreation of future generations; and secondly, because teachers constantly make small but morally significant judgements in their interactions with children, parents and one another (Hargreaves, 1995, p. 14). What seem to be technical decisions on teaching strategies, on the use of instructional materials, or on interventions for classroom management, are moral decisions in their consequences (Nias, 1999; Oser, Dick, & Patry, 1992). The moral dimension in teaching fundamentally refers to the question of what is educationally in the best interest of the students and thus what I should do as teacher/teacher educator? (see also Greenfield, 1991). There is, however, no agreement about what is best for the students and what actions might best achieve that purpose (see above the issue of vulnerability).

*The political behind the moral*

Issues and dilemmas in teaching that look moral at first sight often hide questions about power and interests. Who benefits from what I/we as a teacher/teachers do? In whose interests are we working? Who is actually determining the what? – and why? – questions in my/our work? These are not only matters of values and norms, but refer to the political dimension of teaching and teacher development. Power and interests are words that still carry a strong taboo for many teachers and teacher educators. Many teachers feel uncomfortable when these issues are brought up as linked to their work. The political is often still considered as something improper, marginal, just an unfortunate aspect of their particular working conditions or at best a peripheral phenomenon that does not really belong to teaching. This denial makes it more difficult for teachers...
to see the intrinsically political nature of their work and its fundamental relevance to their effectiveness, job satisfaction and the quality of learning opportunities for their pupils (Kelchtermans, 1996).

These political issues go beyond the level of the individual teacher/teacher educator and his/her group of students (class). They also include context issues at the level of the school as an organisation (for instance, relationship with heads of department, management staff, etc.) and at more central levels of educational policy (for instance, issues of decentralisation; quality control). Discussions about values, goals and teaching procedures can, in fact, carry a strong political agenda that is sometimes disguised as technical or moral.

The emotional in the heart of the relationship

Hardly any teacher or teacher educator will deny that emotions play an important part in their work. As with the political – it is still often hard for teachers to see that emotions are not simply a matter of personality or idiosyncratic teaching style, but constitute a fundamental aspect of the job. Emotions have to be acknowledged as part of educational practices, driven by moral commitment and care for others for whom one feels responsible. They reflect teachers’ experience of their job situation and commitment and such constitute one dimension of teachers’ professionalism (Hargreaves, 1995; Kelchtermans & Hamilton, 2004; Nias, 1996).

Deep reflection: moving beyond the action level

A concept of reflection that does justice to the specificity of the teaching profession does not only need to be broad or wide in its content, but also deep enough. By this ‘depth’ I mean that it should move beyond the level of action to the level of underlying beliefs, ideas, knowledge and goals – in other words to the personal interpretative framework with its self-understanding and subjective educational theory.

Only in this way can teachers’ thinking become genuinely critical. By examining and unmasking the moral and political agendas in the work context and their impact on one’s self-understanding, one’s thinking and actions, reflection can open up perspectives for empowerment and for re-establishing the conditions for teaching and learning that allow for pedagogical processes to take place in which people can regain the authorship of their selves (see also Zembylas, 2003a, 2003b).

Critical and deep reflection further implies a contextualised approach in which the particularities of one’s working context are carefully taken into account, whilst also being fundamentally questioned. Reflection should aim at understanding one’s actions in the context of that particular school or institute, at that particular time, in that particular social, political and cultural environment (Goodson, 2001). Experiences and actions have to be looked at and understood in their context. Without this deep and critical character, reflection runs the risk of being just another procedure, a method or coping strategy that confirms and continues the status quo.

Perspectives for practice: the promise of the narrative

Teaching as enacted scholarship implies not only a technical agenda of effectiveness (achieving the curriculum goals), but also a complex relationship with others, characterised by moral responsibilities, political interests and emotional experiences.
Furthermore, apart from the activist dimension of intentional and purposeful action, there is also the reality of being exposed to others, of passivity.

Taking all of this seriously, means that the scholarship of teaching is a risky endeavour (see also Loughran, 2006). Finding oneself confronted with opinions and practices that differ from or even contradict one’s own opinions and deeply held beliefs. This can be very disconcerting. Yet, without these disconcerting experiences, deep reflection – in which the content of one’s personal interpretative framework is thoroughly challenged and questioned – will far less often be triggered. And without deep reflection, one’s personal scholarship cannot be developed, nor the scholarship of teaching in general (as a publicly reviewed set of knowledge to build on). In order to achieve this, teacher education as well as in-service training need to provide spaces to engage in disconcerting dialogues. Perhaps the most fundamental contribution of the narrative and biographical perspective to this lies in the fact that it provides a different language that allows for the non-technical dimensions of teaching and being a teacher to be conceptualised, talked about, shared and critically challenged. Moral dilemmas, emotional experiences and political struggles can find a place there and thus be acknowledged as fundamental to the experience of teaching and to the scholarship of teaching.

Notes

1. I am aware that the phenomenon I am referring to has been labelled differently by other authors, like ‘subjective theory’ (Mandl & Huber, 1983); ‘implicit theory’ (Clark & Peterson, 1986), ‘practical knowledge’ (Elbaz, 1981), ‘personal practical knowledge’ (Clandinin, 1986), etc. and that adding another label may contribute to a further proliferation of concepts rather than contributing to synthesis and theory building. Yet, this risk is outweighed by the advantage that subjective educational theory as a label explicitly includes some of its essential characteristics: it is an ordered, more or less systematic whole ‘theory’ of knowledge and beliefs, constructed by the person involved (subjective) about ‘education’.

2. Several authors have introduced concepts to stress the holistic, integrative nature of this ‘knowledge’: Gestalts (Korthagen, 2001), images (Elbaz, 1981; Clandinin, 1986).

3. With thanks to Dr Cornelia Löhmer for pointing me to Cohen’s line.

4. This remains true even though – for example – the ALACT model clearly emphasises the importance of taking into account not only the teachers’ but also the pupils’ perspective, and not only thoughts but also feelings (Korthagen, 2001, p. 210).

References


