Author: W. Hastings

Title: The role of the researcher in 'storying' - hearing the emotions of school-based teacher educators.

Editor: E. B. Mavis Haigh, Dennis Rose

Conference Name: Towards Excellence in PEPE: A collaborative endeavour. proceedings of Practical Experiences in Professional education

Conference Location: New Zealand

Publisher: The University of Auckland

Year: 2006

Pages: 1-12p

Date: 1-3 February 2006

Abstract: Research in the field of emotions in relation to professional experience programs is emerging but as yet there is still a silence in the literature addressing the emotional dimension of professional experience programs from the perspective of school (or centre)-based teacher educators. This paper reports the findings from a study conducted as part of a doctoral program. The focus of the study is the emotional dimension of the practicum for school-based teacher educators as they support preservice teacher colleagues. The study adopts a feminist poststructuralist stance to attempt to make sense of the emotions teachers experience while supporting a preservice teacher in their workplace. It investigates teachers shifting sense of agency throughout the experience as they work within apparently competing discursive frames. The case study reveals the depth of emotions experienced by teachers and examines the impact of the emotions on the teachers identity. This paper focuses specifically on the way in which school-based teacher educators may be empowered through -storying- about their difficult experiences with problematic preservice teachers with whom they are working (Zembylas 2003).

Author Address: whastings@csu.edu.au

http://researchoutput.csu.edu.au/R/-?func=dbin-jump-full&amp;object_id=8629&amp;local_base=GEN01-CSU01

CRO identification number: 8629
The role of the researcher in “storying” - hearing the emotions of school-based teacher educators.

Wendy Hastings  
Charles Sturt University  
Panorama Avenue  
BATHURST. 2795  
NSW  
Australia

Research in the field of emotions in relation to professional experience programs is emerging but as yet there is still a silence in the literature addressing the emotional dimension of professional experience programs from the perspective of school (or centre)-based teacher educators. This paper reports the findings from a study conducted as part of a doctoral program. The focus of the study is the emotional dimension of the practicum for school-based teacher educators as they support preservice teacher colleagues. The study adopts a feminist poststructuralist stance to attempt to make sense of the emotions teachers experience while supporting a preservice teacher in their workplace. It investigates teachers’ shifting sense of agency throughout the experience as they work within apparently competing discursive frames. The case study reveals the depth of emotions experienced by teachers and examines the impact of the emotions on the teacher’s identity. This paper focuses specifically on the way in which school-based teacher educators may be empowered through “storying” about their difficult experiences with problematic preservice teachers with whom they are working (Zembylas 2003).

Introduction

Research in the field of emotions is relatively under explored in preservice teacher education. The limited research in the field is possibly related to the fact that emotions have long been deemed negative/irrational and related to the feminine, whereas rationality is cognitive/positive and related to the masculine (Erickson & Ritter 2001). Teaching is a much gendered profession and the emotions/feminine not necessarily valued (Blackmore 1996). Boler (1999) asserts ‘emotions have been assigned to the “private” sphere and have not been considered “noteworthy” within the male-defined parameters of historical scholarship’ (p.19). Blackmore (1996) argues the complexity of teachers’ stories ‘demand that we theorise emotions better’ and move away from the notion that emotions are irrelevant and part of the private expressive lives of individuals.

University staff who are responsible for finding sufficient quality school-based placements for preservice teachers know all too well the impact on a teacher and a school following the presence of
a problematic preservice teacher. Teachers are reluctant to “take another one’ after an experience that has resulted in negative emotions for the participants. The major study, from which this paper reports one small part, attempts to make sense of the impact on teachers’ emotional well being, of supervising or mentoring problematic preservice teacher. The study specifically explores the emotionality of that social interaction by examining the relationship between discursive practices, power, culture and teacher identity. Teachers report significant negative emotional experiences when working with problematic preservice teachers (Hastings 2004). Investigating emotions that result from an interactive relationship (such as the one that exists between co-operating teacher and preservice teacher) can provide an understanding of ‘more subtle, often unspoken elements in human interactions’ (Lasky, 2001 p. 844).

One of the accepted ‘truths’ of the teaching profession is that ‘teachers’ are professionals who typically interact with one another and provide collegial support and ideas. However, when the demands of their classroom, their colleagues and their profession compete for time and energy, teachers’ emotional resilience is stretched, often to breaking point. How teachers deal with their emotions and particularly the different emotions associated with competing discourses at play in the induction and assessment of new professional colleagues is an important area of study. Teachers’ narratives provide an avenue for such discovery. This paper explores the outcomes for teachers who are given the opportunity to talk about their emotional experiences with problematic students, and builds on the work of Zembylas (2003), who suggests that such an opportunity may be empowering.

**Methodology**

Because of my own involvement and participation in the work of preservice teacher education, the research has been designed using a qualitative approach as ‘it enables researchers to see the world through their subjects’ eyes and … [so it] can be made more responsive to the needs of respondents and the nature of the subject matter’ (Williams, 1998), p. 128). The subject matter addressed in this study is primarily about the needs and often-silenced emotions of colleagues in educational settings and accordingly must be dealt with in an empathetic and reflexive manner.

Experiencing emotion is a social, interactional, linguistic and physiological process (Denzin, 1984 p.31). Accordingly it was appropriate to be guided by feminist poststructuralist theory as a conceptual framework for the study. Such a framework emphasises the dynamic nature of emotions, and their

---

1 I am currently Sub-Dean responsible for Professional Experience programs in my Faculty, after 25 years as a school-based or university based teacher educator. I typically undertake the responsibility of supporting inservice and preservice teachers when difficulties arise.
impact. Such a perspective provides the author with an opportunity to make explicit the ‘technologies of power that govern [teachers] emotions at the personal and institutional level’ (Zembylas, 2003 (b) p. 117) and assumes that this can be read from discourse analysis of narrative accounts or school-based teacher educators recalling their experiences.

It is extremely important that teachers feel they can trust the researcher and I acknowledge my own experiences as an active participant in university-school relationships that exist around professional experience programs. I am privileged to be trusted to the extent that teachers recall quite openly, the many strong emotions they have felt as they struggle with their ‘problematic’ preservice teacher.

*Research Participants*

I engaged the support of colleagues in universities throughout Australia to contact school-based teacher educators from their own programs who had recently been involved with problematic practicum students. Using cases from other universities enables me to adopt a stance independent of my own context and each of the other universities. Further, my ‘distance’ from the host university may have enhanced the sense of ‘voluntarism’ among my research participants, which may not have been the case if I had approached teachers directly or invited teachers working with students from my own university to participate.

I interviewed sixteen teachers from six different universities. Of the sixteen participants, thirteen are female and seven were primary school teachers though, none was working in the early childhood sector. All participants had worked with preservice teachers prior to the occasion of the problematic student. It may be worth noting at this point that eleven of the preservice teachers were post graduates; ten were mature-aged (not recent school leavers or university graduates). The gender split was even, which of course does not reflect the typical balance of gender in teacher education programs.

*Data Collection*

I conducted the semi-structured interviews over a period of five weeks and completed all transcriptions within a month. Each interview was approximately ninety minutes duration and was undertaken at the teachers’ school. I used recently published research related to emotions, across a range of disciplines, to develop probe questions for use following the teachers’ original responses to my open question about their experiences (Hand 2003, Marland & McSherry, 1997; Oermann & Sperling, 1999, Urdang 1995)
Throughout the interview process I maintained connections with the participants by sharing anonymously other stories to help them ‘believe’ that they were not alone in this ‘story’, as well as to make explicit my reasons for undertaking the study. Kincheloe (1991) asserts that it is essential for the researcher ‘to reveal their allegiances, to admit their solidarities, their value structures and the ways such orientations affect their inquiries’ (p. 38). Hand (2003) asserts sharing the stories addresses a need for reflexivity which, according to feminist theory, is most appropriate as it ‘contributes towards making the relationship between the researcher and researched more transparent and, thereby, to the feminist notion of strong objectivity’ (Williams, 1998 p. 132). Following the interviews I returned transcripts to each teacher for comments and have maintained an ongoing email conversation with several participants. After six months I focussed the follow-up questions on their perceptions of themself in the triadic preservice arrangement.

**Data Analysis**

I commenced my analysis with a simple qualitative iterative approach to interrogate the data, for major themes. School-based teacher educators told stories of their experience with problematic practicum students and their feelings associated with this work. Oliver, (1998) suggests that ‘the use of narrative allows researchers to study and reveal how humans experience their world’ (p. 250). Clearly, my analysis is my world view of the teachers' voices and can never be a ‘true’ representation of their world view in that time and space. However, I am firm in the belief that 'by studying and interpreting self-narratives, I can access not only the individual identity and its systems of meaning but also the teller's culture and social world' (Lieblich et al., 1998 p. 9). The initial analysis revealed some more deeply embedded ideas and these are being investigated using discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992).

**Teacher's Narratives**

Each participant in this study had a different story to tell – some more obviously painful to themselves than others, and these detailed stories and analysis will be published elsewhere. However, there are some common threads to each of their stories worth noting at this point in time. All the teachers recall experiences of emotional discomfort during and after the in-school program. They talk of feeling shame, anxiety, guilt, anger, fear, embarrassment, frustration, indignation, abandonment, and powerlessness in their dealings with the preservice teacher, university staff, colleagues, principals and family members. None of them had been provided with a formal program of preparation for a role as co-operating teacher and none had received any counselling at the conclusion of the professional experience program. Many spoke positively of the role played by university staff and
almost all had access to supportive colleagues in their workplace. Some, however, chose not to seek the support of colleagues, and others found themselves unable to do so.

It is not common but not unusual for problematic preservice teachers to cause difficulties for school staff. However, it is worth noting all my participants were surprised that I would be interested in hearing the story of their work with problematic preservice teachers. It wasn't until I revisited the data for the second time that I noted the consistency of the sense of gratitude that was evident in teachers’ voices simply because I was [apparently] interested in their experiences.

At the conclusion of my interview with Renee, for instance, as we were leaving the room (and tape recorder turned off) she said ‘that was cathartic – I am really pleased you’re doing this’. This sentiment was repeated in most of the interviews, if only to the simple level of … ‘why would anybody be interested? I wouldn’t have thought anybody cared.’ (Loretta).

As all researchers do I continued to read more about methodology. Issues of ‘reflexivity’ (Williams, 1998), the role of storying and the impact of the interview became areas of further interest. Consequently, I decided to explore in more depth how the actual interview and subsequent reading of transcripts may have affected/influenced the teachers. I was able to contact seven of the participants again and asked if the opportunity to tell their story to an outsider had any affect on their perceptions of their role and/or if they had learnt anything through the interview process. The following are extracts from their responses.

Renee has recently changed schools and has supported one preservice teacher since I interviewed her last year. Her student didn’t fail the school component but Renee suggests that was more a function of the level and kind of support she gave the student than the student’s ability.

**Renee**

Yes, talking to you did make me feel differently about the issue. I had felt that having such a difficult preservice teacher was probably a fairly rare occurrence, but your study made me think that perhaps it's not so uncommon. I felt better knowing that there were a lot of teachers across Australia who had been in the same situation.

I also felt as I went through with you what had happened that I really did do the best that I could in dealing with my student. Although, if I ever took another student, I feel that I would handle a difficult situation in a different way. I had told you that I

---

2 I was particularly keen to hear from Renee, who was the initial spark for this aspect of the broader doctoral study.
had spent hours with my student preparing the lesson that the university person would watch. Next time, I would offer much less support so that the problems would be obvious. I would also highlight the problems much earlier with the university, despite my misgivings that you are then left with a potentially disgruntled preservice teacher for a number of weeks.

Bryce has changed schools since our interview, and is seeking promotion but he has not taken another preservice teacher since his experiences with the student who was unsuccessful. Bryce’s experience included not only attempting to support an unsatisfactory student but having to contend with university and school staff who called into question his professional judgement – that he had set his expectations too high. He eventually found support in a university lecturer who was appointed to resolve the dispute related to his decision to fail the preservice teacher.

**Bryce**

In terms of your process and interview, I think it is great that someone is doing research into the stress on mentoring teachers. It was good to have someone listen and value my comments.

Emily has now taken on the role of in-school Practicum Co-ordinator and has developed some systematic procedures for the induction of preservice teachers into the school context. She provided me with examples of her protocols. Emily recalled how her professional judgement was called into question by the university supervisor, who believed that Emily was requiring the preservice teacher to achieve the outcomes she had herself achieved as an undergraduate. While the university supervisor was unhelpful, her colleagues provided great assistance as she tried to cope with the stress caused by her student’s unsatisfactory progress.

**Emily**

After my negative experience with that particular prac student I changed the way I organise prac students at school (being the prac coordinator). The way I handle each new student is also different - I sit down with them and talk about the expectations I have etc. I had a bit of an issue with a student / cooperating teacher this prac and having spoken to you and also because I am familiar with the 'prac process’ I rang the uni straight away. After talking to you and some reflection, I think I am (all in all) quite fair when it comes to prac students - I don’t expect miracles etc, but I do expect students to work hard and put in some kind of effort. I am clearer about what I am looking for with particular lessons from my students.

Alison had two difficult experiences in succession and it was particularly stressful for her, even though she had very positive support form colleagues and university staff. During the period of the
practicum Alison went through phases of doubting her own judgement as she felt she was to blame for the student’s lack of progress. She recounts how support from colleagues (both school and university) helped her cope.

_Alison_

From talking with you and being a member of [university professional experience group], I am more likely to voice my concerns. I feel confident in raising my concerns knowing that they are valued by someone like yourself. I have a greater awareness of the impact of practicum experiences on the whole e.g. How the success of a person’s professional experience can affect both the training providers, education department as well as the individuals involved. When dealing with students I now get to the point knowing that time is important (after reflecting with you I realised that I need to make better use of my time and empower myself). I am more determined to give clear and explicit expectations of what I wish to see from preservice teachers and, in what time frame. I do this now so that there is no confusion or ambiguity for the preservice teacher. This approach may be perceived as not valuing the preservice teacher as a ‘colleague’, however I feel that most pre-service teachers want and need this to clarify their own ideas, expectations and goals. In being more open with yourself and the University I became more confident by knowing that I am supported. I now know that I can contact the University over the smallest of concerns. Direct channel of communication has helped me.

Lyndall is an experienced teacher and mentor of preservice teachers. She felt that she was not supported by the university in her experiences with a preservice teacher. Lyndall was determined to prevent him from entering the profession as she believed he had not demonstrated in any way the requisite personal or professional competencies essential in the profession. She had engaged in some stressful discussions with university staff, who she felt were not willing take a strong stand with the preservice teacher.

_Lyndall_

Having spoken to you really hasn't changed the way I handle prac teachers. I was actually pleased that I wasn’t the only one in the world who has had to fail someone.

Sylvia describes in her interview how little support she received from the university - no visits or interactions throughout the practicum. Her anxiety was exacerbated because this was her first experience with students in a post-graduate primary program. She was left to deal with the situation on her own when the preservice teacher experienced difficulties.
Sylvia

Yes, talking to you has helped me to clarify my expectations of both the university & my school-based co-ordinator & the confidence to be more demanding of their direct, & immediate, support & intervention. I am more conscious of using intervention strategies ASAP with my pre-service teachers to avoid At Risk Notification although I still worry & find it emotionally stressful to deal with their doubt, or disappointment, in my judgement. ... (The fact that the pre-service teacher that I failed on the grounds of emotional instability is now employed ... doesn't bolster my confidence in my judgement either.) It was especially helpful to find out, in my discussions with you, that other school-based educators have had similar experiences. I have had to face the fact that, as hard as it is, we do have to bite the bullet & fail underperforming pre-service teachers in the best interest of the teaching profession &, importantly, the children.(But the task doesn't get any easier!)

Elizabeth is also a very experienced teacher and mentor. When the preservice teacher with whom she was working failed to make progress in the practicum, she was able to contact the university and they sent a supervisor to assist her and the preservice teacher. According to Elizabeth that proved to be a fruitless exercise, due in part to lack of time for genuine discussion and opportunity to observe the PST interacting with more than one group. Ultimately, Elizabeth was hesitant to fail the student but the Principal determined the student had not satisfied the requirements of the program (based on Elizabeth’s written comments). He insisted on awarding a failing grade, thus removing the responsibility for the final decision from Elizabeth.

Elizabeth

The whole experience of telling it through helped to clarify my thoughts on the aspects of the problems I experienced with the student and what I would’ve done to avert the problem. I now realise there was little to be done because she was very set in her ways and was not interested in advice. It helped me understand that some of the problems occurred because of a clash of personality with the Head Teacher, who took offence at her comments and then could not see anything positive about the student- re rock music.

I know it helped to ensure that I look carefully at my own teaching practice and set very careful, well thought out rules for a future student. I would ensure that I would warn a student about making non-constructive comments about another teacher’s work.

The experience I believe has made me stronger and has made me realise that my skills as a teacher and as a member of staff are good and that I should not be afraid to say “This is how I do it - try it – it might work for you. If not, try this way.”

I also realise that the Principal was very supportive of me and my teaching style and obviously thought I knew what I was talking about.

I currently have [another student] and have talked to her about relationships with staff and office personnel etc and told her the importance of making sure that you
try to relate to other staff and appear to have a rapport with them (not ignore them ) and not expect everything done for you as the other student did.

Discussion

Situations where teachers learn from one another, as in a preservice triad, involve moments of discomfort and anxiety, according to Hargreaves (1998). When teachers open their classroom, their pedagogical understandings and personal belief structure to the critique of two other people, who typically are not close colleagues, emotional experiences are heightened as their sense of who they are is closely intertwined with their success in the classroom. Emotions are socially constructed and are a reference point for self understanding (Lasky 2001). ‘They help us discern when we are safe, threatened, satisfied with a job well done or frustrated because our purposes cannot be met’ (ibid p. 844). The teachers’ original stories are replete with episodes where they had to deal with the competing discursive practices and emotional dynamics associated with the different roles they are required to undertake throughout the normal teaching day, let alone the when there is the added dimension of the preservice teacher in their classroom.

Emotions were always be associated with notions of power and status in relationships and are related to an individual’s moral purpose (Hargreaves, 1998). The teachers described how at times they may have felt in control with some sense of power eg in their own classroom or when determining that a preservice teacher was not suitably competent to enter the teaching profession (Lyndall, Bryce and Claire). However, they felt their efforts were subverted when confronted by senior academics from the university who call into question their professional competence. In relation to the role of university staff, teachers commented that early contact with them was important which would indicate that teachers want the endeavour to be seen as a partnership rather than a passing of responsibility. Sylvia felt abandoned by the university when she is left to cope with a difficult student. Her colleagues provide some level of support but she still questions her decision to fail the student knowing that the student has been deemed passable by another teacher.

Talking to somebody who shares an understanding of their situation (in this case a researcher) helps the teachers clarify their thoughts and reflect upon their actions and ultimately feel more positive about their situation due to an increased sense of control. I would suggest that talking to somebody with a sound understanding of the issues which the teachers faced enhanced the sense of empowerment. Lasky asserts that ‘collective meanings must first be present before people can move to deeper levels of shared emotional experiences’ (2001 p. 845). It is evident from the responses of
these teachers to the follow-up question that the role of 'storying' can be a tool of empowerment. Zembylas (2003a) asserts teachers becoming aware of their emotional responses through storying may in fact be empowering as it enables them to interrogate often constraining emotional rules and create strategies of resistance.

Obvious sources of support for these teachers might be colleagues and family, but that is not always possible. Therese, for example, spoke of feeling embarrassed in front of colleagues when she is unable to manage a preservice teacher who is openly rude, while Annette would not let her colleagues know the children in her class were unruly because of poor management by the preservice teacher. Consequently these women did not seek colleagues as confidants or listeners. Teachers who do not have a significant partner at home lack that essential level of personal support. Alison and Sylvia both spent nights at home alone “stewing over” how to most effectively support and ultimately find the strength to fail their respective student.

**Conclusion**

Teachers are bound by the emotional rules of the school context. Teachers adopt display rules according to cultural and ideological standards (Heise & O’Brien 1993). They are expected to be firm and caring with their students at the same time as being in control and emotionally detached from other significant adults (Grummet, 1988). It could be argued talking in a situation that is not bound by the same contextual/cultural constraints enabled the teachers to be released from the rules of emotional behaviour and to speak freely about their feelings and the impact of the problematic preservice teacher. The role of critical friend can not be underestimated in situations where teachers need to debrief.

The purpose of this article has been to expose the importance storying can have on the emotional wellbeing of teachers, specifically those involved in interactions with problematic preservice teachers. In this situation the listener happened to be a researcher with similar personal experiences. As noted earlier, none of the participants were provided with any form of follow-up support from the university who employed them for the task of supporting a preservice teacher. Clearly, there is potential for assisting teachers to cope with the emotional impact of a problematic preservice teacher if university personnel make time to hear the teacher’s stories, particularly those with negative experiences. If universities are to maintain sound professional relationships with schools and specifically co-
operating teachers, they must attend to the emotional well being of such valued members of the teacher education triad.

Further examination of the research process itself, and in this instance emotional understanding in the research process, will add to the knowledge of emotional understanding in general, as clearly there are situations of power and agency occurring during interactions when conducting research with teachers.

Thanks to my supervisor Associate Professor Jo-Anne Reid for her generous support and advice.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


