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Making sense of what it means to teach: Artful representations as meaning-making tools

ABSTRACT

Making sense of what it means to teach is an increasingly challenging task as teachers' work becomes progressively more ambiguous and demanding. This is a problem for both the person who teaches and the people who teach about teaching. This paper draws on a teacher's story to illustrate how creative, non-linear forms of representation such as visual imagery and writing, together with narrative reporting, can be catalysts for revealing meanings for actions, and for eliciting self-awareness and the products and processes of reflection. Artful representations can make visible the way conceptions of teaching and self-as-teacher are constructed and re-constructed. Attending to these ways of knowing can focus reflection on what meanings have been internalised and how these enter practice. Artful representations can also help the field more generally, nourishing efforts to convey a sense of what it means to teach and providing supportive scaffolding for making connections with the knowledge that guides action.

Changing contexts, changing expectations

What does the new century hold for teachers and teachers' work? The teaching profession is recognising that future teachers will be expected to perform new roles to meet the challenging expectations of educational practice (Hargreaves, 1994). There is increasing acknowledgment that teaching is a multi-faceted endeavour and a teacher is not merely a technician, a person who does defined tasks at set times, in particular ways (Beattie, 1995). Separating what is and what is not teachers' work is becoming increasingly difficult (Hatch, 1999). The pace of social change means the work of the teacher is becoming progressively more ambiguous and demanding, with external forces strongly influencing what it means to teach (Burton & Halliwell, 2001; Hatch, 1999).

Yet many teachers are entering the profession inadequately prepared for the environment they will face (Moore, 1992). Limited opportunities to examine contexts, conflicts and teaching identities can jeopardise their chances of survival (Hamberger & Moore, 1997; Hatch, 1999).

Knowing what it means to teach in contemporary contexts will be essential if teachers are to be effective in adapting to and shaping the contexts in which they work (Black, 2000). Knowing what it means to teach involves understanding the real world conditions and day-to-day realities that influence teaching, as well as a developed sense of self-as-teacher (Black & Halliwell, 2000).

Finding out who teachers are, what they do, and how they know is crucial to understanding the action world of contemporary teaching. This involves attending to the experiences of teachers in everyday teaching situations, making teachers' work visible and recognisable, and finding out how teachers engage in their search for understanding what it means to teach (Hatch, 1999; Rust, 1999). In recent years teacher education research has made significant progress in studying the complex relationship between teacher knowledge and practice (Ethell & McMeniman, 2000; Rust, 1999; Sumsion, 1997). The study of teaching and teachers' work has acknowledged the importance of focusing on teachers'

thinking, beliefs, knowledge and meaning-making efforts (Ghaith & Shaaban, 1999). The underlying assumptions are that teachers are knowledgeable professionals who make decisions within complex, uncertain and ambiguous contexts, and that this knowledge, a rich store of knowing about practice, people, events and past experiences, guides action (Fang, 1996)

Teachers are meaning-makers who know in artful and aesthetic ways

The conception of teaching underpinning this inquiry is one where the teacher is seen as an active searcher and maker of meaning, and where action is the meaning that propels and is embedded in what teachers do. The materials of one's life are essential to an understanding of one's work, particularly when one's life and work are concerned with education (Sumsion, 1997).

Teaching has been characterised as the way in which a teacher responds aesthetically to make meaning that is professionally significant; meaning that is deeply personal and invested with great emotion and feeling (Coldron & Smith, 1999). The way this meaning is created is characteristic of artistic expression and artistic discourse (McDonald, 1992). Research on teacher knowledge has shown that teachers often employ a type of thinking that expresses itself in aesthetic ways, rather than linear prescriptions (Bullough & Stokes, 1994; Eisner, 1997; Weber & Mitchell, 1996). Non-linear forms of representation, such as visual imagery, drawing and metaphor, have great potential for revealing teacher knowledge and meanings and for eliciting reflection.

Teachers have knowledge in many forms. This knowledge is practical, personal, situated, and embodied in their actions (Clandinin, 1986; Elbaz, 1981). It is expressed by their stories and metaphors about teaching, organised by images, and embedded in and shaped by experiences past and present (Carter, 1993; Clandinin, 1992; Stremmel, Fu, Patet, & Shah, 1995). Teachers' knowledge involves combinations of understanding, intuition, artistry, values, feelings and emotionality (Hargreaves, 1998; Sumsion, 1997). It is often tacit and therefore not easily accessible without guided reflection (Roth, Masciotra, & Boyd, 1999).

Practical understandings, personal experiences and tacit knowledge are powerful forces guiding teachers' action but often go unexamined due to their abstract and illusive nature (Freppon & MacGillivray, 1996). Inquiry which supports the knowledge and language of teachers by using artful forms such as stories, metaphor and drawings is therefore extremely important (Carter, 1993; Sack, 1997; Weber & Mitchell, 1996).

The story used in this paper was developed as part of a research project interested in the relationship between forms of understanding and forms of representation (Eisner, 1997). Methodological decisions were based on conceptions about the nature of knowledge and the relationship between what a teacher knows and how this knowledge is represented. Interested in matters of meaning, and recognising the limits of some methods that are conventionally employed, this inquiry explored alternative forms of data representation (Eisner, 1993). 'Alternative forms of data representation' refers to those forms that support the articulation of teachers' experiences and which are not normally used in the educational research community to represent educational worlds, "...forms whose limits differ from those imposed by propositional discourse and number" (Eisner, 1997, p.5).

Narrative forms of meaning-making

A narrative methodology united several forms of data representation. Conversation, metaphor, drawing, and written reflection (i.e. life history writing and journal writing), enabled teachers to make multiple probes into their ways of knowing about how to manage the ambiguity, contradictions and competing imperatives characteristic of many everyday teaching situations. Combined, these were useful tools for eliciting the products and processes of reflection, self-awareness and change.

Stories and metaphor, drawing, and reflective writing can be used to support teachers' explorations of their experiences and to help teachers address problems that have no definitive resolution. Such methods can explore teachers'

own affective and experiential responses, their internal resources, their aesthetic ways of knowing, and their creative approaches to problem solving. The purpose of using alternative forms of data representation within educational research is to illuminate meaning, to invite attention to complexity, to be evocative, to generate insight, to give a sense that what is being portrayed is real, and to increase the variety of questions that can be asked about the educational situations studied (Eisner, 1997).

Narrative accounts of teachers' experiences were created during this inquiry. One of these accounts - Kim's story - is presented in this paper. Kim was one of fourteen early childhood teachers employed in child care centres who engaged in cycles of reflective inquiry for a period of four months. As part of a professional development program we met on at least six occasions for two hours to discuss experiences and engage in reflective conversations. A variety of forms of representation were introduced to teachers to gain a more holistic understanding of how their knowledge entered into teaching actions.

Several forms of representation were united to assist teachers' meaning-making and sense-making efforts, and to reveal and represent teachers' tacit ways of knowing in dynamic and holistic ways. Visual information provided information at once, narrative telling and writing provided information over time, and metaphor and drawing contributed to understandings of relationships by enabling the qualities of experiences to be seen, heard and felt (Eisner, 1993). Combined, these forms provided a collage of meaning, a layering and a weaving of knowledge, experience and action, and a means through which new meaning could be made.

Why artful representations?

If researchers want to understand how teachers make sense of their work, then artistic forms of representation that can grasp and reveal these not always definable emotions and ways of knowing, are valuable tools (Efron & Joseph, 1994).

Drawings are a useful tool for eliciting reflection, self-analysis and change (Sack, 1997). Drawings offer a glimpse into human sense-making - a different, deeper glimpse; a glimpse of the whole at a glance (Weber & Mitchell, 1996). They trigger memories and discussions about home-life, schooling, courses, philosophies and values, and support reflection and self-awareness (Sack, 1997). They bring to light nuances and ambivalences in teaching identities that might otherwise remain hidden, capturing the influences of past and present, and stereotypes and contradictions in teacher identity and practice (Weber & Mitchell, 1996). Drawings are immediately evocative, generating insights into ways of knowing that are implicit and held unconsciously.

Metaphors are closely linked with teachers' views of teaching and learning, and are grounded in teachers' personal histories as learners and educators (Stofflett, 1996). Like drawing, metaphors reveal teachers' self-understandings (Bullough & Stokes, 1994).

Metaphors about teaching and learning have been used to help teachers explore difficulties in the classroom, and to examine the influence of their beliefs and assumptions about teaching and learning on their practice (Dooley, 1998). Creating metaphors facilitates links between practical knowledge, theory and practice (Janesick, 1994).

In this inquiry, artful representations of drawing and metaphor acted as windows into teachers' experiences, facilitating discoveries of relationships between forms of representation and beliefs about teaching. Such reflection enabled the meanings that teachers brought to the teaching context to be used as a backdrop for more in-depth understanding of their workplaces and problematic situations.

Application in this inquiry – getting in touch with aesthetic ways of knowing

At the commencement of the program, teachers were asked to draw themselves as teacher and to engage in written reflection about how they represented

'teacher'. The drawing, writing and discussing of experiences enabled teachers to articulate unexamined tensions around their identity and teaching work. During the program the teachers returned to these representations to re-examine teaching experiences and dilemma situations. They examined connections between feelings, aspirations, past experiences, relationships and events, and considered how these had shaped and were shaping their teacher identities. As teachers refined early drawings and created a series of new pictures to portray new meanings and understandings, the ongoing nature of dilemmas surfaced. A range of dissonant experiences and feelings were represented as teachers grappled with what it meant to teach.

Teachers used metaphors during discussion and personal writing to describe what their work was like and what being a teacher meant. These metaphors captured the experiential and changing dimensions of knowing, the feelings and emotions, perceptions and previously unexplored tensions.

What follows is the story of Kim, and her examination of self-as-teacher as she tries to make sense of the tensions and realities of her teaching context. Artful representations enabled an understanding of the interaction and relationships between herself and her teaching context, and identification that personal meanings had been lost in the demands of her work. Discussions with others and reflections on representations provided Kim with resources for understanding the dynamic, personal activity of what teaching meant for her and facilitated more intentional approaches for reconciling tensions and improving teaching practice. Kim's account details how she used personal insights to (re-)construct professional knowledge and plan a better fit for herself as teacher in her workplace.

KIM: AN EVOLVING IMAGE OF TEACHER AS OLYMPIC GYMNAST

Kim had been teaching for five years and this was the fourth child care centre in which she had worked. Her husband's work required frequent relocation between states and so Kim had moved with him, finding employment in a variety of

centres. She was now working as a preschool teacher in a 53 place centre which had a director, an assistant director, and an administrator. There were four age groups ranging from 0-5 years. The centre opened in 1976 and had some recent renovations. Kim had been the teacher in the preschool room for over a year.

It was useful for Kim to think about and identify her images of self-as-teacher. The program gave her an opportunity to pause, to think about her practices and consider her teaching values. Representing her images of teaching enabled Kim to see things in a different way, to gain a new perspective:

I really liked reflecting on my images because it outlined how I really do feel about my work and what I am doing. I sort of knew that I didn't feel happy in my job. It just really hit home to me after reflecting on my images. I now know what I need, and what I need to do now.

It helped to clarify my roles, my feelings, my job – it was there, but I had never really thought about it. I had pushed it aside because I had too many other things to worry about.

Reflecting on my images gave me a chance to take a step back and really have a think. It has made me stop and think about what I am doing and why I am doing it. This is good.

At work I don't get the chance. At work it is all about the children, and the parents and the families, and the other staff. It was good to go back and really look at myself and how I am feeling. There are real benefits because now I can see how I am feeling and can think about how I can change that.

I feel like I have gotten lost at work – I am working for everybody else. It has been good to reflect because it has brought ME back. I can see the things I need too. I have really taken my needs on board.

I have had a lot of demands on me and that came out in my drawings. I felt like I was a hundred people at once and I just can't be that all the time.

I have now taken a step back realising there are things that I have to do first. I can see that 'this' is more important than 'that', and 'this' is what I am going to do now.

I feel empowered and positive, I feel I am taking more control over what I am doing. I feel like I am doing the right thing.

Kim's first drawing was of a teacher surrounded by pictures and words (see Figure 1). She drew herself with broad shoulders to metaphorically depict the scope and complexity of her work.

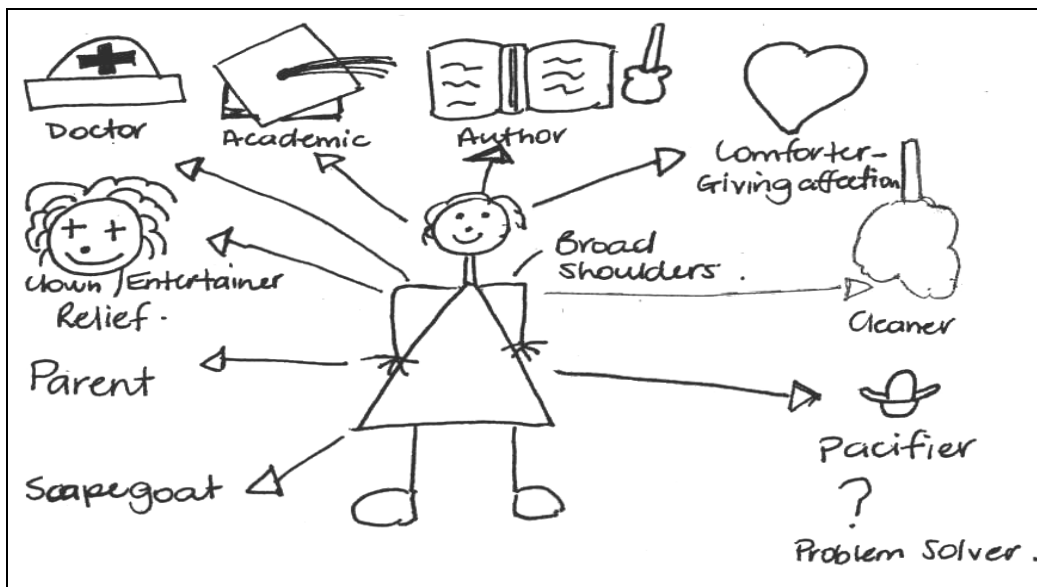


Figure 1: Kim's first drawing

When describing her drawing to the group Kim explained:

I feel like I'm one of the children in home corner most of the time. I feel like there are so many different things I have to do in the day. Some days I am a scapegoat and everyone wants to put the blame on me, so I have to take it and deal with it.

Some days I feel like a relief parent - some of the children are there longer than I am most days. They need a lot of affection. At the moment we are going through staff cutbacks because we are losing numbers - especially in my room. I get the children coming up from the room below me because their room is full, and to keep the numbers they put the children in with me. So some days I spend all day just comforting those children and not spending as much time with the children in my room that I'd like to.

Some days I feel like a clown or an entertainer. I seem to be a doctor too - someone is always falling over and scraping their knees, so you have to get bandaids and soothe them. Some days I feel like an academic, trying to justify why my program is just as good as the preschool round the corner or the Creche and Kindergarten centre. Then author - writing newsletters, and signs for my room, trying to make up stories for the children to keep them interested.

Some days I am the comforter and need to give the children affection and show them that I care. I have to make the room inviting for the children and help them feel comfortable while they are with me.

Some days I feel like the cleaner, constantly cleaning up and wiping tables and mopping floors and sweeping up. Some days I am the pacifier - some days children come in and all they want to do is fight with each other and I have to separate them a hundred times and they still go back to each other.

Some days I am the problem solver- everybody has got a problem and they want me to give them advice. The only word for all that is 'flexible' - flexible as a person, as a leader, and flexible in routines.

Metaphor helped Kim get in touch with her feelings of discord. She described her tensions in terms of *a magic pudding*:

Looking back at my images of myself as a teacher I realise I feel a lot of negativity and dissatisfaction with my job and my role as a teacher. I have

been at the crossroads for maybe twelve months now and have been thinking about a change. I guess I never sat down and thought about just how much my job has been getting me down.

I feel a bit like the 'Magic Pudding' from children's literature. People, staff, parents, management, and children, take pieces from me daily.

I then go home at night and am supposed to revitalise and regenerate so that I can go back again the next day ready for people to take more pieces out. I feel that I'm not getting enough back for myself.

There are rewards of course, like seeing children develop and grow, seeing children safe and secure in your care, and having children want to hug and kiss you. More often these are outweighed by staffing issues, cutbacks and so on, by parental attitudes that we are a babysitting service, and therefore undervalued as a profession, and by negative morale in the centre caused by centre mis-management.

By the third discussion evening, Kim had changed her first drawing slightly but it still communicated the pressure of her work, the sense of having too much to do, the impact of the expectations of others (see Figure 2).

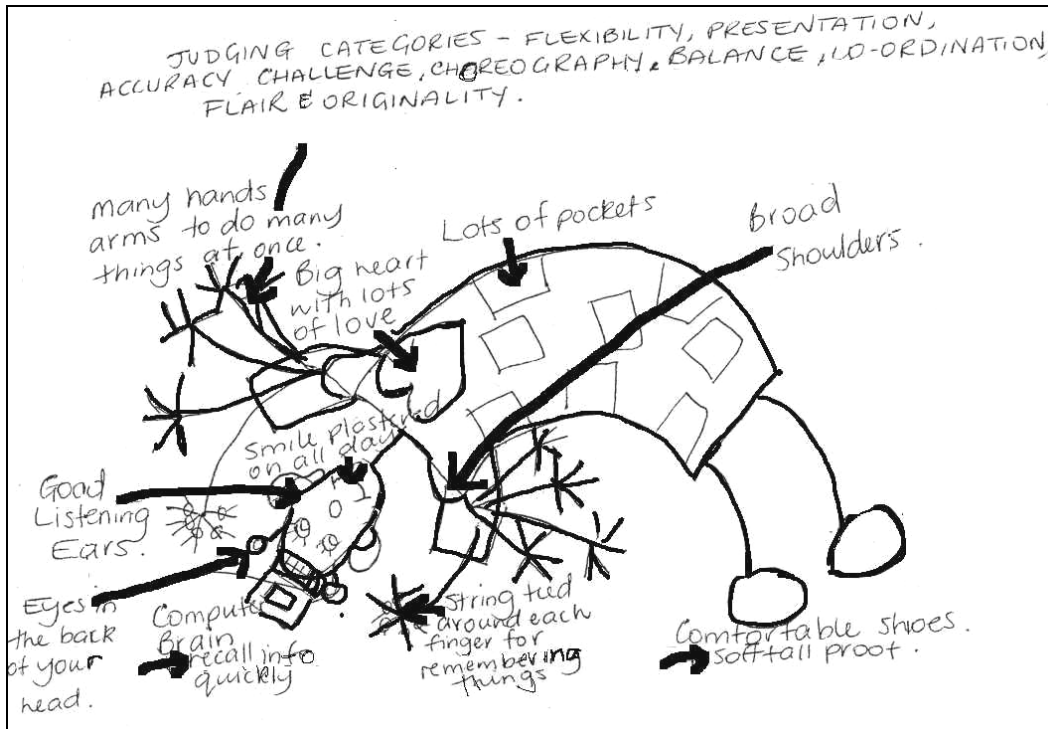


Figure 2: Kim's second drawing

During collaborative conversation, Kim shared why she developed her second drawing and what it represented:

I changed my drawing a bit. Originally I did something similar (to Corinne) where I was wearing lots of different hats and had lots of different things that were pulling on me. I decided that in my work I feel like an Olympic gymnast.

There are certain criteria that I have to cover. People like the management, the accreditation council and the licensees are all like the judges. They judge me on things like being flexible, presenting well. We, as a centre, have to use flair and originality to make sure our centre is offering things that other centres aren't offering. Co-ordination is required in relation to balancing the program, my needs, the children's needs, my goals in my room, the centre goals.

Even things like how you present your room, everybody is watching and making an opinion on that, on accuracy. I feel like I'm getting a score.

Kim linked a second metaphor to her second drawing to delve further. A metaphor of *teaching as training for the Olympics*:

Teaching is a long-term thing, you don't tend to go in for just a couple of weeks. Usually when you take on a group you try and stick with them for a year or more. It is ongoing and long term. Sometimes you reach the goals that you have set for yourself and sometimes you don't - just like an Olympic swimmer. I'm sure they set goals for themselves over a week or a month and they don't always achieve them, so they then have to re-evaluate their direction.

There are people who have expectations of you when you are a great athlete. You have to live up to them - just the same as a teacher - the parents of the children in my group have expectations of me, as does my director and my licensee. Everyone has expectations that I have to live up to.

Everything is not going to happen at once. Just like a swimmer's experience, they work up to a certain level and then have to taper off. This is similar to teaching.

Athletes have a definite routine, teachers do too. I have a definite routine where I am, and even though I am flexible within that routine there still has to be some sort of structure to the day. What happens each day is not necessarily predictable - I'm sure that is like training. Athletes get illness or injuries and that affects how well they train.

There are some metaphors, like 'teaching as gardening' which seem to me to only represent ideals. I really like the idea of the garden metaphor where you have the seed and you give it the right nutrients and it grows into a beautiful tree. But, I don't feel that that is how I am or how teaching is in the real world.

I feel that this is a goal to work towards and it is how I would like teaching to be, but because there are so many other things that impact on my day, and impact on my work, it just doesn't happen like this.

Key themes were emerging in reflection and Kim could see that her representations depicted *a sense of being pulled in many directions* and that this was due to *meeting the needs of others' before my own and tending to let others come first a lot*. She realised that she needed to spend more time satisfying her own goals.

Although Kim was aware before the program that she was unhappy in her work, having an opportunity to express these feelings, and seeing them emerge in representations seemed to validate that they were real. She was able to tease out why she felt negative and address issues head-on. Guided reflection had provided perspective, and reasons for the constant feelings of unhappiness. It pinpointed issues to tackle. Rather than succumb to pressure and loss of identity, Kim now had information to help her make deliberate steps to change her work situation. Her positive strategies included dealing with her own expectations, taking the pressure off herself and focusing more on her needs. Changing priorities, to attend to her needs and goals first, helped her feel immediately better about her work demands. Kim realised that there were only so many things she could get done in a day and so there was no point getting frustrated about not being able to achieve everything at once. Her metaphor was having an impact. Kim began to establish a personal agenda, and she set manageable goals for her work. Kim was clearer about what she wanted to achieve in her work and why.

Even though Kim 'sort of knew' how she experienced her work, her representations helped her actively acknowledge teaching as tough, complex and demanding. It wasn't as simple as tending a garden; it was gruelling, like training for the Olympics. Kim also came to understand that she was putting pressure on herself – pressure to meet expectations, to do the right thing, to

regenerate overnight. Hearing how others were managing difficult work environments gave her confidence, reduced her feelings of powerlessness and isolation and encouraged her to set some different goals:

I have really examined how I feel about what I am doing. This has been helpful in clarifying my goals and aims as a teacher and for my future. Having the opportunity to talk to others has helped me feel that I am not alone and that teaching in child care is challenging in many ways.

Kim's reflections showed her that experiencing feelings of discord and disharmony were part of being a teacher; part of making sense of what it means to teach. She realised that dilemmas would be ongoing and that finding 'harmony' was an unrealistic goal. Rather than hold on to romantic tales of teaching, Kim listened to her teacher voice, examined her conceptions of teaching, and attended to the complexity of teaching. However, she did this with a greater awareness of the teacher she wanted to be, equipped with strategies for reflecting on and representing her experiential and aesthetic ways of knowing about her work.

Kim's account shows how picturing her work and herself-as-teacher helped her pay attention to the negativity and dissatisfaction she was feeling, and provided the impetus needed to begin balancing and reconciling inner tensions. Kim's perceptions of teaching had been dominated by competing expectations and imperatives that she felt compelled to address.

Metaphor and drawing presented dilemmas and tensions in recognisable forms - forms that emphasised connections between contextual factors and her teaching identity. Kim could see that she was losing something of herself in her efforts to meet expectations. Reflecting on her personal ways of knowing enabled her to focus on herself-as-teacher and give consideration to how her valued conceptions of teaching could be enacted. She began to locate herself in her work, to set personal goals and priorities. More aware of how she could create a

better fit for herself as teacher, Kim described feeling confident to take control and deal more purposefully with work demands.

It is acknowledged that these data represent only a fragment of Kim's experience; and that experiences are changeable and transient - they shift with the contexts and discourses in which teachers operate. 'Long-term' celebratory conclusions cannot be made. Even 'short-term' celebratory conclusions are identified as problematical by some critical theorists (Gore, 1991; Lather, 1998). The purpose of the paper is not to make long-term claims about empowerment or emancipation, but rather to emphasise how representational tools, particularly drawing and metaphor, can support teachers' sense-making about their work, about themselves as teachers, and about the teachers they want to be. Artful representations have potential for helping teachers to make new meaning, and to revise existing meanings as new events and experiences are added to their lives. They are resources that can become self-directing and self-sustaining ways of understanding complex, changing teaching contexts, and personal ways of knowing.

Implications

Opportunities for student teachers and teachers to clarify and critique the personal theories they bring with them to teacher education and to teaching will assist their ways of knowing and understanding about what it means to be a teacher (Ethell & McMeniman, 2000).

Kim's account illustrates how feeling and responding to the dissonance of teaching realities, while also attending to personal meanings, can make a difference to how teachers perceive and experience their work. Identifying and expressing personal ways of knowing can better equip teachers to anchor knowledge to the demands of their work, and divert that sense of being overwhelmed, burnt out and ineffective. Used regularly, these resources can contribute to the strengthening and maintenance of teachers' shifting conceptions

of what it means to teach within ever-changing workplaces, and with practice may produce more long-term results.

Artful representations assist sense-making by helping teachers get in touch with their emotions, ideas, intuition, and values in personal conceptions of teaching and learning. They have a capacity to bring knowledge into forms which communicate a teacher's way of knowing and doing within a whole range of work demands. As teachers consciously examine the knowledge they use, and bring this knowledge into their deliberations about teaching, they gain heightened understanding of themselves as teachers and how they respond to teaching situations. This is professionally valuable because it can provide the impetus for teachers to re-negotiate their relationships with their work environment and to develop more intentional teaching strategies.

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