Beginning teaching:
the theory/practice divide

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Teacher education, has for many years, discussed the importance of the role of either practical experience or theoretical insight, into how beginning teachers develop an understanding of their professional practice. Reviews of research over the last four decades (Fuller and Brown, 1975; Kagan, 1992; Wideen, Mayer-Smith and Moon, 1998; Cameron and Bake, 2004; Korthagen, Loughran and Russell 2006; Webster-Wright, 2009) have revealed commonalities in the early career development of beginning teachers. These highlight a preference for practical experience in the work place and the tendency for student teachers to reject or not engage with the knowledge base of their chosen profession. Gardner (1994) refers to this period rather eloquently as a 'furor to teach', where knowledge is actively rejected and only practical experience is seen to have value.

Further to this, Fuller and Brown (1975), Darling-Hammond (2000), Kagan (1992) and Webster-Wright (2009) have shown that it can take up to three to five years before there is a desire to consider theoretical aspects. Kagan (1992) also makes it clear how student teachers regard the learning of skills during their early practical experiences as far more vital than considering theory as they focus on classroom control and their own teaching performance (see also Fuller and Brown, 1975). Ritchie and Wilson (2001) warn against the seductive nature of early practical experiences as such times can elicit powerful feelings in relation to what is happening in the present. So much so, that either theoretical explanations or other possible interpretations are refuted in favour of the personal reaction to and explanation of the present situation.

Encountering professional knowledge:

It is difficult in this paper to represent the vast array of teacher education/training programmes on offer in the UK but what can be reliably confirmed from each of the main research reviews, is that the dominant mode of delivery is still the 'traditional' transmission of knowledge. Such approaches are agreed to tend towards the 'training' of educational professionals rather than providing a more open discursive process of education. Johnson and Golombek (2002) claim the transmission of knowledge diminishes and marginalises those being trained by ignoring what each individual brings to their new (professional) experiences. There is an

assumption that all trainees start from the same position (Ritchie and Wilson, 2001) and Korthagen et al. (2006) doubt whether it is possible to 'bestow' knowledge and therefore create a subject/pedagogy. For Segall (2001) this is a worrying situation as it tends towards preserving the old established knowledge and prevents new ideas from emerging. Felman (1982) confirms this view and asserts that the content of pedagogical knowledge for teachers is less important than developing their own disposition to learn.

Cameron and Baker (2004) question with some justified pessimism whether, due to the complexity, workplace experience can become a site for real (professional) learning but recognise that it is during these encounters that new professionals begin to explore their working environment. Throughout this time their life experiences and the subsequent expectations of the new role are seen to encounter the reality of professional practice. The personal nature of this encounter makes the experience distinctive and important. Connelly and Clandinin (1988) describe this situation as having the effect of 'pulling out' what they refer to as personal practical knowledge. By which they infer that the professional skills employed and the knowledge that is developed are determined in conjunction with the personal experiences that have been brought to the present professional situation.

The interaction between the past and the present is at the very heart of an early student teacher experience, that is concerned with 'doing what a professional should be doing' but at this early stage it is situated within what the student brings from their past and what experience and advice they receive in the present. Jalongo and Isenberg (1995) note that it is only possible to build on what is already known and so it should be no surprise that the responses during this time are correlated to past experiences. Research into the career pathways of teachers confirms this relationship, for example Huberman (1995) noted how easy or painful early careers could be related to earlier life experiences. The continuity of building on past experience is for Clandinin and Connelly (2000), the underlying fundamental process in developing a professional practice. They see the early practical experience, as one in which new knowledge and skills can be developed in the professional and social world that is now being lived. What is of significance to this debate is how this encounter impacts on the development of professional knowledge. The findings of Darling-Hammond, (2000); Elbaz, (1997); Fuller and Brown, (1975); Kagan, (1992) and Moore, (2006) suggest that individual dispositions may have an impact on how both professional knowledge and skills are derived and that it can realistically take up to five years before there is an effective encounter with knowledge. It is therefore worth considering how individuals relate to knowledge and the role this plays during the early stages of their career.

Relationship with knowledge - a psychodynamic view:

It will be argued that an understanding of the dynamic unconscious provides helpful insight into what has been shown to be a fundamentally personal encounter with professional knowledge during early practical experience. Psychodynamic theory considers how mental processes become established due to the interaction between an internal (unconscious) dynamic and the external world. This analysis will be mainly situated within an object relations modality as it provides a particularly pertinent framework, where the central premise recognises the importance of relationships and the interaction between the individual and environment. For example, Fairbairn (1952) illustrates how the experience of real or phantasised relationships with external objects can become assimilated as internal objects. These internalised object relationships now become the basis for the personality of individuals and to a large extent can influence future thinking and patterns of relating with others.

As the new professional struggles with understanding their developing practice, so this induces memories of the psychological work required during early learning experiences and subsequently enhances emotional responses. This playing out of the past in the present corresponds to the fundamental psychodynamic phenomenon of the transference where early object relationships have been internalised and then serve as templates for similar relationships experienced in the present. For example, Lucy had entered the education profession as a Teaching Assistant and in her interviews with me it became clear how her past 'cast a shadow' over the present. Lucy had been a rebel in her school days; she shunned academic study in favour of sports and her disruptive behaviour often got her into trouble. Then, in her early 30's, Lucy returned to work in a school and began to re-create these past dramas. As a member of staff she rebelled against the 'unsuitable' curriculum and found it difficult to support the school rules and finally resigned. After this she took on a role working with excluded pupils and found this to be an environment she was able to function in. The suggestion here is that early relationships, both with those in education and the process of education itself has provided an internal representation that is evoked again, in the transference, as the new professional seeks to develop their practice. This, of course, would also account for the much reported preference towards personal experience rather than theoretical insight as becoming an educational professional is a profoundly unique and personal encounter.

Psychodynamic theory supports this assertion, as it is widely acknowledged that the relationship between internal and external objects is initially best explored experientially, given it involves feelings and emotions, before becoming cognitively and consciously known and understood. For example, Mahler, Pine and Bergman (1975), all proposed that the infant develops an early internal representation of the relationship between themselves and the external primary care-giver and that understanding is pre-verbal and

informed by feeling states relating, for example, to containment or abandonment. In fact Bollas (1987) describes this as an 'unthought known'. Significantly this knowing casts a shadow of the internalized object, the mother, on future relationships such as Lucy's unsure and rebellious relationship with education.

Britzman (2005) acknowledges the difficulty in engaging with professional knowledge, for just like an infant the new professional has to encounter the experience before they become competent and have an understanding of their situation. Learning about the professional world requires the personal and professional, the imaginary and the real to be successfully negotiated. The personal knowledge that is brought to the profession is effused with expectation and anticipations and Britzman (2003) argues that these will be used to defend against the complex and uncertain world of working in educational settings. Thus making it challenging to accept and engage with professional learning as this would mean that already established views had to be abandoned.

Bion (1985) contends that understanding how groups function requires a war metaphor, where the individual is always battling to maintain their sense of self and avoid being overwhelmed by the majority. In the context of the beginning teacher such a battle can be envisaged between the knowledge that is brought to the professional setting as a result of personal experience and the knowledge that is being promulgated by the representatives of the profession. Brown (2006) also sees the tension between the personal and the professional knowledge in terms of power and suggests that the power of the institution is greater than that of the individual. The consequence of this may be to make it harder for some to reject professional knowledge and to defend their self-knowledge.

Britzman et al (1997) offer a word of warning and suggest that new practices may in fact not be developed. But instead, the social nature of the experience may lead to the compliance and acceptance of existing practices, as students either compromise their views to avoid being isolated within the new work force or to seek approval from mentors and tutors. Therefore the process of becoming a new teaching professional is beginning to be seen as increasingly complex as it is not sufficient to simply 'transfer' the knowledge and skills of a professional practice; the interactions within the early practical experience are such that an individual's past and dispositions need to be considered; and crucially the social nature of this process cannot be ignored as those already operating within this professional practice will have an impact on how newcomers negotiate their developing professional practice.

Defending the 'attack' of knowledge:

Deborah Britzman (2003) claims that education inaugurates a crisis as it augments the influence of the present external world on that of the past

world now represented by (unconscious) internal conflicts. Thus new knowledge creates fear as it threatens the existing knowledge, and what is known about the self. It can be seen as putting the ego, the self, under unreasonable pressure to deal with contrasting internal and external demands. This heightened level of anxiety increases the potential for the dynamic unconscious to mobilize its defences against the 'attack' of new knowledge. For those entering educational settings this is manifest in dealing with the required professional knowledge and the associated rejection of this in favour of immediate practical experience. Pitt and Britzman (2003) highlight the notion of 'difficult knowledge' and recognise that no knowledge is valueless and requires dealing with as it becomes aligned to existing values or rejected.

Pitt (1998) considers the role of resistance and draws attention to the psychoanalytical position that resistance is initiated when one approaches their unconscious knowledge, as this is after all what the unconscious has been defending from the conscious mind. For the clinician this is a well-known phenomenon and one function of the therapeutic encounter is for the analyst to recognise the unconscious material and bring it into awareness. What makes the work difficult is that the dynamic unconscious of the patient will defend against accepting the difficult unconscious knowledge. This can result in recovery being resisted and significant periods of impasse as the ego defences actively block access to unconscious knowledge.

Resistance can also be viewed in terms of the notion of an archaic omnipotence which builds on Winnicott's idea of how the infant defends against feelings of helplessness. Winnicott (1965) argues that the infant has to create a delusion of omnipotence that enables them to 'magic up' mother on demand. In the close relationship between mother and infant, the mother becomes sufficiently attuned to the child such that she can anticipate their needs. The delusion created by the infant is that their wishes, either vocalized or fantasized, always come true and without this delusion the infant would realise their utter helplessness and dependence on the mother. The dynamic unconscious therefore protects them from this sense of hopelessness by creating the delusion of omnipotence. Omnipotence can still be witnessed in later life when adults refuse to admit to the limits of their own real power. For Winnicott, the process of learning is linked to the realisation and renouncing of this delusion. Within the context of an educational setting, Pitt (1998) argues that this process can be manifest through the process of disavowal. This is a defence where there is a resistance to admit to the reality of not knowing, or of being helpless and utterly dependent on an 'other' and the subsequent rejection of 'imposed' professional knowledge.

Felman (1982) and Schleifer (1987) both provide a Lacanian insight into teachers' encounters with new knowledge and confirm the resistance noted by Britzman (2003) and Pitt (1998). Felman maintains that total knowledge can never be known as it cannot be experienced due to the unconscious

defences protecting the individual from being overwhelmed with new knowledge. For Pitt (1998) it is an impossible endeavour to know what is in the unconscious as is it uncomfortable, containing taboos and painful conflicts, and therefore defended. But also it is forever changing as the effects of present experience continually change and interact with the perceived historical truth. Consequently, the truth about ourselves that we can be aware of, is never quite the truth based on a complete self-knowledge, as the ego defences resist attempts to uncover this material. Schleifer sees this in the context of Lacan's 'passion for ignorance' as this is not a passive 'not knowing' but the result of a dynamic unconscious that seeks to defend against new knowledge. This passion for ignorance is a barrier to learning, both for the professional and the pupil. The assimilation of new knowledge can therefore only occur when the internal psychic defences are sufficient to support the potential threat that this may represent (Brown, 2006). Both Felman (1982) and Schleifer (1987) suggest that because of this passion for ignorance, teacher 'education' will be resisted and the best that can be hoped for is to create the conditions for learning and dealing with new knowledge. One of the conditions for learning is to be able to consider the desire not to know as pedagogically important as what is known and to accept, as the clinician does, that what is not known or resisted can teach us something.

For the beginning or experienced teacher the psychic defence mechanisms to reject and resist new knowledge can explain the unwillingness to engage with theory or continued professional development. Student teachers act out what Gardner (1994) calls a 'furor to teach', in which they defend ,against this capacity to doubt and the interest in using knowledge as a means for world making and self-making' (Britzman, 2000 p. 203).

The furor to teach is demonstrated as a desire to reject theory in favour of a focus on their teaching experience and in doing so they reduce the possibility of doubting their actions and prevent the inevitable risky encounter with new knowledge. If the anxiety becomes too troublesome then defences will be employed on the theory and practice, where theory, or new knowledge, is regarded as bad and practice, that reflects personal experience, as good.

It is therefore incumbent on those who are responsible for the training and/or education of teachers to create a disposition for learning that recognises the difficulty new knowledge creates. Such a process should involve the opportunity to consider how the personal and professional worlds interact and ultimately how each individual's biography can be implicated in their developing professional practice.

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