

A Decade of Dedication: Giving, Giving, Giving... and Giving Up Teaching

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Abstract

In this paper, we explore the circumstances leading to an elementary teacher's decision to leave the profession. We analyse her accounts of eleven years of teaching using a storyline technique and a framework provided by the five aspects of teacher self-understandings (Kelchtermans, 2009). We also analyse the interplay between vulnerability, micro-political literacy and self-understanding. We suggest that particular types of perception can predispose teachers to high levels of vulnerability. We suggest that teachers need to consider reaching an understanding of their personal giving capacity in teaching contexts in order to manage vulnerability and negative impact of self-understanding.

Keywords: teachers' careers, teacher identity, caring, teacher attrition, storyline.

Précis/Résumé

Dans cet article nous analysons les circonstances qui ont conduit une enseignante de niveau élémentaire à abandonner l'enseignement. Nous analysons les récits dans lesquels elle raconte ses onze années d'enseignement, au moyen d'une technique de récit et d'un cadre donné par les cinq aspects de la compréhension de soi chez les enseignants (Kelchtermans, 2009), et nous nous penchons également sur l'interaction entre la vulnérabilité, les connaissances micro-politiques et la compréhension de soi. Nous croyons que certains types de perception de leur travail prédisposent les enseignants à une plus grande vulnérabilité. Outre les connaissances micro-politiques, les enseignants doivent développer une meilleure compréhension de leur capacité personnelle de se donner en contexte d'enseignement, afin de gérer leur vulnérabilité et l'impact négatif de la compréhension de soi.

Background

There is a growing concern with the attrition of teachers from their profession, with large numbers exiting early in their careers (Borman & Dowling, 2008). Teachers leave the profession for a range of reasons, including better salaries, working conditions and the promise of intrinsic rewards in other professions (Guarino, Santibanez and Daley, 2006). Work conditions seem to be a particularly important factor. Buchanan (2010), for example, points to student behaviour, workload and a lack of collegiality as key drivers of teacher attrition. This view is supported by Ingersoll (2001) who adds “inadequate support from the school administration”, and “limited faculty input into school decision-making” (p.3) to the list. Borman and Dowling (2008) in a meta-analysis of 34 studies of teacher attrition, suggest that working conditions such as those mentioned, combine with personal factors including teachers’ qualifications and backgrounds to play major roles in teacher attrition. They find that work conditions and personal satisfaction are more important than previously thought and argue that more needs to be known about teachers’ career paths and the complex interplay of factors leading to resignation.

Some researchers suggest that those leaving the profession belong largely to two groups, early career teachers or older member of the profession who become disenchanted (Grissmer & Kirby, 1997; Rinke, 2007). However it is evident that experienced mid-career teachers are also at risk of leaving and are experiencing the same dissatisfactions with their jobs as others who leave (Day, Stobart, Sammons & Kington, 2005). In fact, often, the best qualified and most committed teachers leave (Connell, 2007).

In this article, we examine the experiences of one teacher, with the pseudonym, Jean, whom we have worked with since 1993/94 when she commenced her initial teacher

education program. The case study employs a storyline technique to elucidate her experiences over her whole teaching career and offers insights into her reasons for leaving the profession. Our aim is a better understanding of how teachers come to make the decision to leave teaching and how personal and contextual factors influence this decision.

Jean obtained her first teaching position at an Australian primary school in 1995 and agreed to continue as part of a longitudinal study of her development as a teacher of primary school science (Authors, 2003). We revisited her classroom in 2002/03 when she had been teaching for eight years to document her progress and consider the development of her knowledge for teaching (Authors, 2008). We came to know Jean through this work as a conscientious caring teacher whose approach to teaching science was based on her own learning experiences, her careful planning and her consideration of the needs of individual learners. It was therefore surprising in 2005, when Jean telephoned to say that she had resigned and was now working in another occupation. She asked if we would like to interview her again and we could sense that she wanted to talk about her decision.

Aim

In this study, we use a storyline technique (Beijaard, van Driel & Verloop, 1999) to represent Jean's sense of her overall experience as a primary school teacher and to try to understand the events and circumstances leading to, her unexpected decision. Our work was designed to answer three research questions:

How does a well-respected teacher come to the decision to leave the profession?
What, from the teacher's perspective are the major influences on this decision?

How can we explain this decision in theoretical terms?

This article is organised into four parts: an explanation of our data collection methods, including the storyline technique; the theoretical lens of self-understanding (Keltchermans, 2009) as tool for interpreting Jean's narrative; Jean's career path using her storyline as a framework and finally, we use the theoretical lens to interpret the Jean's story and evaluate its contribution to the understanding of teachers' careers.

Methods

Storyline

The storyline method described by Beijaard, van Driel and Verloop (1999) in their research on teachers' practical knowledge, is based on the work of Gergen (1988) who first used this approach to study college students' sense of wellbeing. The method has also been used in studies of professional identity (Bijaard, 1995), and professional competencies (Taconis, van der Plasb & van der Sandena, 2004). Essentially, a participant is invited to sketch a graph representing their evaluation of their level of a particular phenomenon and its fluctuation over time. Levels vary across a Y axis from extremely positive to extremely negative with a neutral position mid-way between these two extremes. The X axis represents the time period for which the phenomenon is experienced. An interview is conducted so that the participants can tell the story of the graph and relate the slopes, and curves to lived experiences. Beijaard et al (1999) say that the gradient of the line is steep if an experience is influential and that a change in direction of a line indicates an important event.

The advantages of this method are ease of use, and providing the participant with an opportunity to evaluate experiences rather than leaving evaluation to the researcher

(Gergen, 1988). However, the subjectivity of the process must be acknowledged as the storyline “reflects the respondent’s memory and valuation of the past from a current point of view” (Taconis, van der Plasb & van der Sandena, 2004, p 227). In this study we used a career satisfaction storyline as an extension of narrative method.

Jean was asked to sketch a storyline by plotting a point in the storyline space, to show her recollection of her overall level of satisfaction with her teaching career during each year of her employment. During the initial interview in 2005, Jean recalled major events from each year of her career and explained why her graph rose and fell. She was invited to speak about her experiences again in 2008 so that we could explore some of the more vivid episodes in more depth, particularly those she found difficult to discuss originally. The second interview contained more detail of some of the events, particularly Jean’s final day at the school, but was largely consistent with the first account.

In analysing the interview data we chose a narrative strategy and constructed a story of Jean’s teaching career by selecting events that related to changes in direction of the graph as these have great importance (Beijaard et al, 1999) and accounted for changes in Jean’s career satisfaction. We have also described working conditions, illustrated by Jean’s comments, which explain the overall shape of the graph at other times.

The Theoretical Lens: Self Understanding

In seeking to analyse and explain Jean’s career moves, we will use the five components of self-understanding as proposed by Kelcherman (1993, 2005). Closely related to self-understanding are the concepts of vulnerability and micro-political literacy. Vulnerability, an essential feature of teaching, interacts constantly with the components

of self-understanding to shape self-understanding and determine its ever-changing nature. Micro-political literacy has been advanced as knowledge of context that can mitigate some harmful effects of vulnerability. Together these ideas provide a powerful explanatory framework for understanding teachers' work.

Kelchtermans' (1993; 2005) proposes a model for what he terms, teacher self-understanding. This term is used to convey the idea of a concept of self, namely self-understanding that is both, how I understand myself at this moment, and an ever adapting and growing knowledge of self as a teacher. The choice of the term self-understanding, as opposed to teacher identity, carries with it an expectation of attempts to understand the self. Kelchtermans says that self-understanding has five components: self-esteem, the teacher's sense of his/her performance (how well do I perform my teaching role?); job motivation, what teachers consider to be rewarding in their job (why am I a teacher?); futures perspective, a teacher's expectations about his/her future as a teacher (what will I be doing in future years?); task perception, the teacher's idea of what doing a good job means (what does a proper teacher do?); self-image, the way teachers see themselves (what sort of teacher am I?) (Kelchtermans, 2005). In this article we use the components of self-understanding to assist our understanding of Jean's experiences and her decision to leave teaching.

Because teaching is a public moral act and involves an ethical relationship with students, teachers are vulnerable to others: students, school principal, parents, employing authorities and other staff. Vulnerability is seen, not as a part of emotions related to teaching, but as a "structural condition" of educational relationships (Kelchtermans, 2005). There are three major reasons for vulnerability in teaching, first, that teachers cannot control many aspects of the context they work in; secondly that teachers need to

make informed judgments in the classroom without any guarantee that these judgments will be absolutely correct; and, finally, that teachers cannot claim full credit for their pupils' successes and need to work through others for their own success (Kelchtermans, 2005).

The negative aspect of vulnerability, that comes from criticism or changed working conditions, for example, can challenge one or more of the components of self-understanding. Criticism can affect self-esteem and cause one to question one's self image as a teacher. Changed working conditions, such as new approaches to curriculum, can cause teachers to question their task perception and provide a challenge to job motivation and self-esteem (Kelchtermans, 2005). The positive aspect of vulnerability comes from the ethical educational relationship as the "joy, pride, existential personal fulfilment" (p.999) that strengthen a teacher's job motivation and self-esteem when positive impact is made upon a pupil's life. Thus, positive and negative aspects of vulnerability need to be kept in balance if a teacher's career satisfaction is to be sufficient for them to remain as members of the profession.

Kelchtermans and Ballet (2002) suggest that a different type of knowledge, micro-political literacy, needs to be developed in parallel with self-understanding in order to mitigate some of the negative aspects of vulnerability related to teaching context. Micro-political literacy requires that a teacher can understand the school culture and know under what conditions he/she can influence this context for own career benefit or career satisfaction. They suggest that the importance of developing micro-political literacy, in teaching careers challenges the popular notion of teaching as a caring, altruistic profession.

Results: The Story

In Jean's career satisfaction storyline, Figure 1, we have identified three career phases (or 'chapters'), each consisting of three to four years. We have called the straight line in the highly positive area of the chart linking the satisfaction points for 1995-1997, Chapter One: Beginnings, Launching a New Career; the zig-zag section linking the points for 1998-2001 we have named Chapter Two: Continuing, The Rollercoaster Ride; and the final plunge from 2002-2005, Chapter Three: Ending, Going Down. Each of these three chapters is narrated using our commentary and Jean's words from interviews in 2005 and 2008. In each period, we draw links to elements of the theory of self-understanding.

Chapter One: Beginnings, Launching a New Career

In an interview in 1995, Jean explained that it was her love of children and the importance of a primary school teacher's role that had persuaded her to become a teacher:

I think children. I think primary teaching is the most important thing ... if you don't get the kids through those basic concepts in primary, they're not going to make it into high school. I think it's a really important job - you get to meet lots of people, have contact with a lot of children. I've always loved children. I think more than the influence of teachers – it's just the general job itself. (Interview, 1995)

Jean chose to put her first three years of teaching on the storyline grid in the top of the highly positive area. She had the following to say about her first year in 1995 when she obtained a year-long contract in a suburban school:

Well, coming out first year was really good. That was high satisfaction being in a new job, using the skills that I'd studied for and practised for three years. (Interview, 2005)

We noted during observations at this time that her classroom was organised and managed so that children received as much individual attention as possible and that everyone had the opportunity to try activities. Parent helpers were used to achieve this.

So we did that in a small group so that every child got a turn because I felt it was important that every child had a turn at that so each child came up put their hand in, guessed the items and described them like it was crumbly or soft. (Interview 1995)

As Jean looked back on her second year of teaching, she reflected that she felt more in control of her classroom and had started to do more teaching guided by her own ideas about what mattered and less based on the work of other teachers. She was well organised as a teacher and in an interview in 1996 explained that she spent every Saturdays planning for the week at school. She felt very responsible for the children in her class and planned her day so that each child received individual attention. She was disappointed when she missed an opportunity to move to a permanent position at the school:

When I asked why, they said I didn't have enough experience. So I said to the Principal, "Give me experience; put me in a different year level". (Interview, 2005)

In 2008, Jean provided further information that clearly indicated her beginning teachers' lack of micro-political literacy:

They said to me “is there any reason why you should get this over the other people applying”? Being naive I suppose and just being me, I thought, one of them is a single father. One of them is a single mother ... they deserve it more than me. I’ve got the good marriage; I’ve got my husband’s income. (Interview, 2008)

The school principal gave Jean a Year Three class in 1997 so that she would have wider experience and improve her chances of a permanent position. She found this class considerably easier to teach and was able to incorporate a wider variety to activities into her teaching repertoire:

I had a fantastic class. I didn’t realise how hard I’d worked in Year One until I got to Year Three and actually sat at my desk for a little bit. We could do independent work; I could set up workstations for them ... we looked into the De Bono’s Six Hats, that was a good year. (Interview, 2005)

In reflecting on this first chapter of her story, Jean recalls a generally positive time in her career. Any negative aspects of vulnerability, such as uncertainty about judgments made in the classroom, appeared to be balanced by the rewards of the job. Our analysis of this period suggests that all aspects of her self-understanding as a teacher, although not fully developed, seemed to be positive. She was obviously disadvantaged by her initial lack of micro-political literacy and disappointed by missing out on a permanent position at the school. However, she began to try to manage the context by requesting a move out of Year One. It then became evident, that while she enjoyed teaching Year One, she derived great satisfaction for working with older children where she could give free reign to innovative teaching approaches.

Chapter Two: Continuing, the Rollercoaster Ride

In the following year, Jean's fourth as a teacher, the storyline shows a rapid decline and for the first time is in the negative part of the story space. The school principal, unable to offer Jean a permanent position, teamed her with the Assistant to the Principal Academic (APA) teaching Year Seven. The advantage of this role was that the APA position was ongoing so she had a degree of job security. However, Jean's work with Year Seven began after morning tea so she was not employed in the first session of the day. Jean showed signs of diminished self-esteem and job satisfaction when she said:

I was happy I still had a job but I wasn't happy sharing a class, I wanted my own class, I wanted to be in control of that and do what I wanted. (Interview, 2005)

Later in the year, the principal was able to offer her an additional role in the mornings working in a literacy intervention program with Year Two children. While Jean was pleased about the return to a full time job, she had mixed feelings about her situation:

It was a lot of extra planning. With intervention I was given a room but I had to share it with other people. We weren't set up properly; it wasn't our own little area. So it kind of gives you the hidden message that this isn't overly important. (Interview, 2005)

Although Jean had the same arrangement in the following year, her storyline returned to positive territory. She described this year in the following way:

So in the next year, I was able to get my teeth into some really good things. We did inter-class debating, and invited other teachers to come and judge. That particular class and I formed a very close bond. (Interview, 2005)

In 2000, a new principal was appointed, Jean and the APA moved to Year Five. Jean still wanted her own class and was not happy with a member of her year level team, describing one incident:

I got on alright with her, but she just was not my cup of tea as a person. She's loud and she would stand at the door and say "Ah yeah, having a rough day today, he's a little shit". I'm sure the kids would hear what she said. So it wasn't a great year. (Interview, 2005)

Another factor making the year difficult was that Jean and the APA had a number of children with special needs. This was a compliment, as parents had particularly chosen the classroom because they felt the teaching team would be the best for their children. Jean explained:

I had three children with special needs that year. They were all put in our class specifically. It was just ... they were nice kids, which made it bearable, but it was a hard year. When the parents see that you might be good, they request you. (Interview, 2005)

At this point, Jean was still seeking a permanent position. She described what happened at the end of a school year with summer holidays imminent, when she had still not heard about a new contract:

At the Parents and Friends end of year drinks, I can picture it still - we were on the deck outside my classroom. The principal said "we hope to keep Jean for next year" and said some nice things about me. But I was the last person acknowledged and when he finished speaking I just had to go away because I had burst into tears. It was such an anxious time. (Interview, 2005)

A Permanent Position

The new principal supported Jean's push for a permanent position. Jean also became more active in this quest:

The new principal really worked hard to get me the permanency and I ended up, every time the area supervisor came to our school I'd make him listen to me and hand him my resume ... I said I'd take Year One knowing that nobody else would take it and that might give me a foot in for the permanency. (Interview, 2005)

Finally at the beginning of her seventh year at the school, Jean obtained permanent position. Her comments indicated the importance of a positive futures perspective in a teacher's self-understanding:

When I got permanency I said to them, I'm one of you now. You never felt like one of the team ... I didn't feel like I should be having too much say, you didn't know if you're going to be there again next year. (Interview, 2005)

Jean continued to work in Year One. She felt as if she was highly valued as a teacher of children with special needs or behavioural problems. Jean was looking for a challenge, so she introduced a new phonics program. However, she commented that in spite of all the positives she was becoming a little bored:

The next year was, I was starting to get a bit bored, I recognised the children really needed picking up in the area of English, so I brought in the Jolly Phonics program. I kind of became the early year's expert. There was a feeling being important. One of the parents nominated me for an excellence in teaching award. Her son was a handful, so of course I got him, they'd ask me, and I could never say no. I've never said no to having a child. (Interview, 2005)

Jean's career satisfaction story-line moved into negative space for the first time during this chapter. In analysing this period of her career, it seems that her vulnerability was context related and closely connected with the lack of a permanent position, linked to anxiety and feelings of not belonging. Jean's high points were based on satisfaction in working with children, and finally getting a permanent full time appointment. However, in her push for permanency she again accepted a role in Year One, thinking that this would improve her chances. Jean indicated that, she was developing a good reputation for working with children who were considered difficult or who had special needs. We suggest that, although she had demonstrated improved micro-political literacy, she accepted a heavy workload in a section of the school that was not her ideal.

Chapter Three: Ending, Going Down

Jean described the year prior to her resignation as "when I really started to go downhill" (Interview, 2005). She recalled working very hard, continuing certain extracurricular activities, and also caring for a number of children with special needs. Jean began to feel that she was not supported. She said:

I had a difficult class. I had a child who I thought was intellectually impaired and I was getting no support for that child whatsoever. I also had another little boy that was just naughty. Between the two of them I didn't get a five minute break all day, they were just constant. There were a couple of others in the class about five that I had to keep an eye on. One of these children broke her ankle, she had to go into a wheelchair, and that was when I went downhill. That's not that child's fault, but she started definitely displaying difficult behaviours. Very attention seeking, not just with me but her whole life; parents, friends, everything. I got no support.

I had to toilet that child, which meant morning tea came and you know morning tea's a short break, I had to take her up, toilet her. I'd always grab a teacher's aide because I wasn't going to go to the toilet by myself with a child. Then they decided the teacher's aide could do that for me, but again I couldn't let the teacher aide go by themselves. I had to find her somewhere she could be (during the rest of the break). So that gave me no time. (Interview, 2005)

Jean remembered being tired and becoming very negative. On some days she chose to stay away from the staffroom because she "wouldn't have anything pleasant to say". Jean was aware that sometimes she took on too much:

I think I cared a little bit too much and I would look at who else was teaching and think well you're a bit abrupt, I can't see this child go into your room. Or you have a chaotic classroom; this child's not going to cope. Not that I thought I was the best person, I just cared and couldn't say no and the combination of the two was bad I suppose. (Interview, 2005)

This was Jean's fourth consecutive year as a Year One teacher. Other teachers had begun to notice that she was tired. Jean saw the issue as a need for a complete break from the classroom and decided to look at other career option in education:

I wanted to get out of the classroom. I would have been happy to stay in education. I had developed an interest in curriculum support the year before and would really love to be out there supporting teachers. I went for the job; I didn't get it. I said to the principal that if I could find another job, I'm going to take it. I need a change. He said "you've floored me, I can't believe it". (Interview, 2005)

Jean's job satisfaction decreased as she began to resent some issues at school. For example, she was annoyed that plans to adopt new curricula were moving so slowly, felt that teachers had little assistance with difficult children and resented the seemingly casual attitudes of parents and support staff:

It was the whole teaching package I think. I couldn't pinpoint one thing. It was the parents not respecting you, not turning up on time, not wanting to help in the classroom. The kids discipline at the school was hopeless. I had three 30 minute teacher aide periods a week. If she turned up, she would turn up ten/fifteen minutes late. I mean ten minutes over three days takes out a whole one of your teacher aide times. It was a very negative environment. (Interview, 2005)

The Final Year

Jean returned to the school at the beginning of 2005, once more in Year One and describes the experience as just staying "till I didn't have one more ounce to give". Some of the children in Jean's class that year often arrived late to school. Jean recalled that she tried a number of strategies to encourage them to arrive in time and finally, she invited the principal to her classroom to see first-hand what was happening:

He came at about ten to nine and the kids were just running around the room, I mean they were safe, I was keeping an eye on them, and he looked at me and I said "I will not start until I have at least half of my class here". The parents just weren't bringing them on time, which says, this isn't important. I'm so aware of hidden messages in actions. (Interview, 2005)

By this stage Jean said she lacked the energy to try to change things. She had wanted to do a program, to develop the children's motor skills and so required some room for the children to move about. The spare room next to hers was a resource room,

so even though it sometimes had only the resource teacher and a few children in it, she was not permitted to use it. She then asked to be able to use the play room:

I wasn't allowed to use that because that was the play room. And this really got me angry, that sat there empty and I couldn't use it for the motor program - so I gave up. (Interview, 2005)

The Last Day

When Jean finally left teaching she did so somewhat abruptly, during the school sports day. Jean provided this account of her last day:

Of course I had all these kids late on sports day and you're trying to tag them with their house colour etc. So by the time I got out to the oval I was already negative. Why do you bother trying to do the best for the child when somebody else just turns around and ignores it? I had really had enough and was struggling to go to school every day.

So I got them down to the oval and then I had another struggle with the teacher aide because as soon as we arrived Year Ones had to do their run. Generally, I had them put their bags down, know where their bags were, line them up again and take them up (to run). The teacher aide liked to think she was very important and she was in charge. She was like I need them. I said to her they'll be ready in a minute or so, I've just got to get them all together. No I need them now. So I just said to her, take them and I walked away because I knew that if I didn't walk away I'd say something.

So I left her with the chaos of children everywhere. I went over to our assistant principal in tears and said I cannot do this anymore. It took a lot of them by

surprise but I feel like I just cracked. I didn't have one more ounce to give. I left.

(Interview, 2008)

In this final chapter the storyline moves into the very lowest part of the negative space. Jean leaves teaching she says, not because she does not want to be a teacher but because she has no more to give. For her, the whole school has become a source of negativity, making her feel unappreciated and unsupported. Uncooperative parents and teacher aides on sports day were the final straw. Jean's career satisfaction was at its lowest ever and she walked away from her job. Listening to Jean's account of these times, it was interesting to us that although other areas of her self-understanding were negatively impacted, she did not have a diminished self-image as a teacher. She said:

I have not come away from teaching ever thinking I didn't do a good job. I know I did a good job. I'm sure I did a good job, even to the end ... The problem wasn't that I didn't want to be a teacher; the problem was the other pressures that were coming in on the actual job. (Interview, 2008)

Discussion

In this study, we have documented Jean's career as we recorded it at the time and as she recalled it after her resignation from teaching. In the preceding sections, as we described her career in three 'chapters', beginnings, continuing, and ending, we also analysed what happened in terms of the theoretical lens of self-understanding. In the discussion, we revisit the data and the framework and offer our observations on the importance of self-understanding, vulnerability and micro-political literacy in teaching.

Vulnerability is inbuilt into the teaching role and is a source of pain but also of satisfaction and reward. One source of vulnerability, suggested by Kelchtermans (2009), is that teachers are unable to control their teaching contexts and require a degree of

micro-political literacy in order to manage negative aspects of context. Mindful of Ingersoll's (2001) view that teaching contexts are as important to issues of teacher attrition as characteristics of the teachers themselves, we can see that context, played a significant role in Jean's vulnerability. Of the major examples of vulnerability related to context such as, difficulty working with some teaching teams, being regarded as a Year One teacher when she preferred older children and not having a permanent position for more than half of her teaching career, the latter appears to have caused Jean the most injury. Her sense of not belonging was a source of particular pain as, illustrated by her story of the end of year gathering. Further, her time without full employment or without a class of her own, laid the seeds for her growing sense of her work not being appreciated and thus lowering her self-esteem and job satisfaction. Her futures perspective was also impacted and a cause of much anxiety as she waited from year to year to find out whether or not she still had a job.

Jean's comments about the occasion when she failed to obtain a permanent position show that she disadvantaged herself by considering reasons that others might deserve the job more than she did, rather than articulating what she had to offer the school. Initially, she lacked the micro-political literacy that would have allowed her to manage her context more effectively. Although Jean did develop a degree of micro-political literacy during this period and became much more active in pursuing permanent employment, she took up roles she did not really want, such as volunteering to return to Year One, in order to improve her chances of a permanent position.

While context itself and the fact that teachers depend on others, such as pupils, parents and teacher aides, as well as their own efforts to succeed, are external sources of

vulnerability for Jean, we suggest that job perception and self-image as a teacher, were sources of her vulnerability. A key to understanding Jean's story is to understand the way in which her task perception, as well as her self-image as a teacher both related to giving and caring made her particularly vulnerable. We recognise that Jean is not alone in choosing her particular beliefs and that in doing so she represents many of our best and most able teachers. We problematise this aspect of her work, not in order to present it as deficit, but so as to indicate a way forward to keep our best teachers in the classroom.

Acker (1995) suggests that the stresses experienced by many primary school teachers can be attributed to the very high expectations teachers have of themselves, associated a view of work as both labour and love combined with working conditions that make it almost impossible for teachers to measure up to their own expectations. Nias (1999) says that primary school teachers willingly blur the boundaries between personal and professional identity when working with a class. However, when a large part of their emotional satisfaction comes from the classroom, teachers are inclined to take on additional work and then feel guilty or become disillusioned when they cannot meet demands.

Just as micro-political literacy has been advanced as an essential knowledge to be developed in parallel with self-understanding as a teacher, literature on caring suggests the development of ways to manage aspects of caring so that it remains possible rather than becoming overwhelming and all consuming. Research on caring and teaching has identified categories of caring available to teachers. Nias (1999) identifies six categories of care in primary schools: "care as affectivity, as responsibility for learners, as responsibility for the relationships in the school, as self-sacrifice, as over-conscientiousness and as identity" (p.66). Vogt, (2002), drawing on Nias's (1999) dimensions of care, proposed a continuum of care, "highly linked with femininity at one

end and with a less gendered identity at the other” (p.262). The continuum “moves from caring as being committed, care as developing relationships, caring as maintaining physical well-being, to expressing care with a cuddle, caring as parenting and caring as mothering” (Vogt, 2002, p.262). She recommends that caring be redefined to emphasise the importance of the professional end of the continuum so permitting the valuing of caring without “perpetuating the patriarchal discourses which link caring to femininity” (2002, p.262). A care perspective also allows for different ways of thinking about care, for example, in ways that caution females in particular not to over commit themselves to the mothering/self-sacrificing aspects of the job. Further, considering the professional end of the continuum as genuine caring, gives permission to teachers of both genders to maintain a self-image as a caring teacher while avoiding over conscientiousness and “parenting” as part of a teaching role.

Gascoigne (2009) suggests that in relationships such as the pupil-teacher relationship, that are not based solely on extrinsic goals, but also on the commitment to “the other”, there needs to be reflection on the “capacity to give” .. “affected by the deepest sense of one’s own identity and to what would lead to loss of that identity” (p. 97). This stance is taken from the position of a philosophy of the common good as opposed to a philosophy of individualism and supports the idea that giving, like vulnerability, although a source of reward to be cherished and welcomed rather than just avoided, needs to be rationally approached. Accordingly, awareness of having a “capacity to give” in the teaching role might allow teachers to limit the demands they make of themselves, without damage to their self-image as caring a teacher. In conjunction with an enhanced view of caring that encompasses the professional end of the caring spectrum,

understanding the there are legitimate limits to giving might assist teachers to appropriately monitor and manage their task perceptions and self-images as their careers unfold.

Our analysis suggests that giving, as well as maternal types of caring, were issues for Jean in her relationships with children and with staff. Although Jean enjoyed the intellectual aspects of teaching as evidenced by her work with Year Seven, extra demands appear to have been placed on her, because of a growing reputation for being capable with young children especially those who were difficult or had special needs. Her comment that she has “never said no” to having a child with special needs suggests a raised conscientiousness (Nias, 1999). That she was continued to toilet a child in a wheelchair, while demonstrating a lack of micro-political literacy (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002), also shows a propensity to care and to give, that made her job more difficult. Jean’s task perception was linked to caring and giving, even in conditions that called for compromise. She kept her teacher self-image intact, but at the price of exhaustion and irreparable damage to her job satisfaction.

The examination of Jean’s story of leaving teaching, has led us to conclude that task perception and self-image as a teacher are sources of vulnerability which, if unexamined, may be equally as damaging to career satisfaction as other sources of vulnerability in teaching, for example, context. In particular, teachers need to be careful about limiting themselves to particular types of caring (Acker, 1995; Nias, 1999). If self-understanding is a growing, developing part of being a teacher (Keltchermans, 2005) then developing deeper insights into the teaching role and enhanced self-awareness are also necessary.

Conclusions

In this story of a decade of dedication to teaching, we reveal how one teacher's identity as a caring person and a professional brings her to the profession in the first place and sustains her for a time before becoming such an encumbrance that she feels compelled to resign. She gives until she has no more to give. Jean's story of giving to the point of exhaustion may not be every teacher's trajectory, but it does reveal something fundamental about teachers' work. Teachers have a job perception related to giving and a self-image that leads to high expectations of the self. Teachers are also vulnerable, to students, to parents, administrators and others. Vulnerability is not something that is simply imposed upon teachers but is part of the landscape of teaching — by caring, teachers make themselves vulnerable. The downside, of course, is that teachers are also vulnerable to the vagaries of the profession, which can include long hours, challenging students, demanding parents, unsupportive administrators, and high curriculum demands. Balancing the positive and negative aspects of vulnerability is a challenge for teachers, as it is for others in the caring professions (such as health and social workers). Here we agree with Kelchtermans (2005), that it is important for teachers to develop a strong sense of self-understanding, to understand for example, what it means to be a teacher, to do a good job, to do what it takes to build a career. An importance component of this self-understanding is the development of micro-political literacy and agency so that teachers can actively manage their teaching contexts. We advocate a thoughtful re-imagining of the range of ways in which it is possible to give in a caring profession, coupled with a better (self)understanding of what, based on Gascoigne's (2009) capacity to give might be thought of as a personal giving capacity. We argue that capacity to give should be flexible and adaptable to particular contexts. Teachers need to change their task

perceptions as conditions require while maintaining a positive self-image. While such initiatives may challenge the long-standing idea of teaching as an altruistic profession (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002), we argue that increasing teachers' understanding of their giving capacity will lead to a more robust, competent, confident and stable workforce, with benefits for students, individual teachers, and the profession as a whole.

This is not a simple task in a profession infused with a culture of giving, and a society that expects as much. A good starting point we believe is teacher education. In the same way that doctors are taught during their training about holding their personal selves apart from their professional selves, teacher candidates need strategies for managing their capacity to give. In school, administrators can actively support teachers in developing micro-political literacy. And, most importantly, teachers need to take it upon themselves to increase their self-awareness by asking the kinds of question posed by Kelchtermans (2005) — what is a teacher, why am I am teacher, how well am I doing, and what about the future?

Jean's experiences provide a stark reminder of the importance of helping teachers to come to a better awareness of their identities as teachers. We suggest that the notion of giving capacity is an important way of thinking about how to support teachers in their career development. But more importantly, teachers need to develop micro-political literacy to better manage the teaching context and increase their understanding of how to manage other sources of vulnerability, particularly those related to job perception and self-image. Deeper awareness of these issues can assist teachers and their communities to understand the potential and limits to teaching as a profession, and help keep the best people in the classroom.

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