Getting to the heart of teacher experience: The journeying of reflexivity, self-study and conscious attention

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Abstract

This article presents an analysis of the testimonies of teachers who participated in an innovative training program whose goal was to develop teachers' attention to their personal and professional experience. This approach to teacher training can be located within the discourses of reflexivity and self-study, and moves teachers toward an intra- and inter-subjective understanding of their role as teachers. Closer attention to experience generates both difficult and transformative knowledge that necessitates evolutions in teacher identity with both individualized and shared components. Teachers develop a greater tolerance of ambivalence and multiplicity, as well as increased autonomy, showing signs of moving toward a new professional *ethos* grounded in an enhanced attention to the here and now of teaching and its highly relational nature. This new *ethos* is perhaps better suited to contribute to the growing policy trends that emphasize the educational importance of school climate.

Llegar al centro de la experiencia docente: la travesía por la reflexividad, el estudio de sí mismo y la atención consciente

Resumen

Este artículo presenta un análisis de los testimonios de docentes que participaron en un programa innovador de formación cuyo objetivo fue desarrollar mayor atención a su experiencia personal y profesional. Este acercamiento a la formación docente se puede ubicar dentro de los discursos de la reflexividad y el estudio de sí mismo, los cuales mueven a los docentes hacia el entendimiento de las características intra e intersubjetivas de su papel. La atención fina a su experiencia genera un conocimiento tanto incómodo como transformador que requiere evoluciones de su identidad y práctica docentes con componentes individualizados y compartidos. Los maestros desarrollan una mayor tolerancia a la ambivalencia y a la multiplicidad, junto con un aumento de autonomía, y demuestran evidencias de estar acercándose a un nuevo *ethos* profesional anclado en una atención en el aquí y ahora de su práctica y su naturaleza altamente relacional. Este nuevo *ethos* se acopla mejor a las tendencias de las

políticas educativas que enfatizan cada vez más la importancia edu-
cativa de la convivencia escolar.

Introduction

Conscious attention and the discourses of teacher reflexivity and self-study

Conscious attention would appear, superficially, to be the
life-blood of schools, the ether that allows teaching and
learning to occur. But conscious attention is not an un-
problematic concept within schools. On the one hand, teachers
struggle to maintain the attention of students whose thoughts,
actions and desires are drawn toward things extra-curricular. And,
on the other hand, it is clear that the attention bias of schooling is
selective – schools in their traditional form exist by virtue of their
focus on certain features of the landscape, and their ignorance of
others. Education's attention is 'blinkered' – generally requiring
reality to be simplified – and its successful functioning requires
teachers and students to buy into a similar simplification of expe-
rience.

This simplifying principle within education means that
classrooms are sites of exclusion. Britzman (2009) asserts that a
problem of unreality permeates the classroom, and that teacher
identity is often constructed around the psychological defenses
of "idealization and omnipotence" (p. 97). Similarly, Bion (1961)
maintains that education itself is idealized; its structures, systems
and theories deriving from an exaggerated power of universality.
Schwab (1971/1978) argues against the leveling effect of the cur-
riculum and points to its clash with the multiplicity of the here
and now. For Schwab, curriculum (understood as an education
system's schematized organization of the when, what and how
of education with a universalizing tendency) is an idealization of
the messiness of reality, a teaching-learning utopia. As Bibby (2011)
points out, such idealizations are not neutral, they involve an
abandonment of reality:

> The very real difficulties faced by individual teachers and
> learners in particular classrooms are, under these acts of aban-
> donment, unthinkable. Real people in real schools struggle to
> act in a context where there is little listening. (p. 138)

Teachers are abandoned by education, or by the institutions of
education, at the point where the idealizations and simplifica-
tions that constitute the institution's intended rationality require
that all experiences which question this rationality be ignored or
marginalized. Attention to teachers' narratives often reveals the

struggle of these teachers against the exclusion of their real experience and their voice by the structures, theories and systems of the institution.

One teacher practice that gives form to teacher voice and experience is reflexivity. In contrast to the programmatic and universal of education, the reflexivity discourse invites teachers to pay conscious attention to the nuances and detail of their real experience. This requires teachers to look beyond the smooth surfaces of the system, and, furthermore, to problematize their own agency:

> To put it bluntly, in understanding the development of pedagogical practice, one needs to access not only what is 'immediate' and 'visible,' but also what is not always immediately accessible in the specific classroom situation – what is sometimes called 'the baggage' teachers bring into the classroom with them – which offers a broader, typically unacknowledged context both for developing practice and for understanding and facilitating it. (Moore, 2004, p. 20)

Getting 'real' about education requires conscious attention to teachers' baggage across the spectrum of their professional life. Berry (2004, 2009), for example, values self-study for its capacity to "shape the way in which [teaching] practice is enacted and understood" (2009, p. 316), yet she also underlines the difficulty of such work:

> The development of self-understanding through self-study is ongoing, complex and demanding work. Uncovering deeply held assumptions about practice is a challenging task because an individual's patterns of behaviour, particularly those long-held and deeply engrained behaviours, can be hard to uncover and resistant to examination. (2009, p. 315)

Yet Berry's description of the mechanisms of her own self-study is illustrative of a significant problem of interpretation within self-study. How do teachers interpret their experience? Who interprets the interpreter? Perhaps, then, thinking about what we do is only one part of the conscious attention of reflexivity or self-study. Another necessary dimension might be to think about our own thinking, about how we interpret what we do. An attention to thought itself contains an essential skepticism as regards the surfaces of our human interaction and reasoning. Foucault hints at this skepticism when he says that knowledge itself is "an 'invention' behind which lies something completely different from itself: a play of instincts, impulses, desires, fear, a will to appropriate. It is on the stage where these elements battle one another that knowledge is produced" (Foucault in Miller, 1994, p. 214).

The attempt to decipher our knowledge of self does not always make comfortable reading. Žižek (2011) asserts that the "spontaneous state of our daily lives is that of a lived lie, to break out of which requires continuous struggle. The starting point for which is to become terrified by oneself" (p. xii). Likewise, Britzman (1998) argues from a psychoanalytic footing in claiming that:

> For the self to be more than a prisoner of its own narcissism, the self must bother itself. It must learn to obligate itself *to notice* the breaches and losses between acts and thoughts, between wishes and responsibilities, between dreams and waking life. To think is to haunt one's thoughts, to be hunted by thoughts. (p. 32, emphasis added)

According to Britzman (2003), attention to "breaches and losses" leads us toward a meeting with the unconscious. Whilst knowledge of the unconscious has traditionally been resisted in public life, this willful ignorance has its price (for example, in the unreality of schooling). In contrast, Britzman (2003) advocates "using analytic insight to move beyond repetitive conflicts, with one provision: we must witness the unconscious" (pp. 109-110).

Willful ignorance and the ethical challenge of psycho-spiritual practice

The psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion, for example, argued for the existence of "not just ignorance but the active avoidance of knowledge, or even the wish to destroy the capacity for it" (Parsons, 2000, p. 48), by which individuals, groups and systems purposefully avoided attending to information that was uncomfortable or challenging. According to Bion, the existence of the unconscious is proof of our need to disown much of what threatens to destabilize our beliefs and perceptions. In part drawing on the psychoanalytically inspired work of Bion, Britzman argues that an institution's pretention to rationality, its *ethos* of systematicity, occurs in the shadow of this will to ignorance, and Bass (1998) goes so far as to depict systematicity itself as an attempt to divert attention from reality. He states that "wherever one finds systematicity, one can, from a psychoanalytic point of view, ask the question of what unbearable piece of reality is being defended against by means of the system" (p. 452).

If Bass' critique of systems has obvious implications for schooling, individual teacher identity can also be understood as a defensive structure that permits teachers to escape a deep awareness of their experience. If identity can be defined as "the totality of one's self-construal" (Weinreich, 1986, p. 299), then teacher identity can be understood as the totality of a person's construal

as teacher. As with identity this self-construal is charged with the idea of possessing certain coherence over time (past-present-future). Avraamidou (2014) characterizes teacher identity as "the way in which a teacher represents herself through her views, orientations, attitudes, content knowledge, knowledge, and beliefs about . . . teaching, and the ways in which she acts within specific contexts" (p. 224). Concepts such as views, orientations, and attitudes are highly permeable to a psycho-emotional life whose origins fall outside the space established as the professional sphere. Such a permeable teacher identity must be seen more accurately as a space negotiated in the meeting between the personal and the professional. Research into pre-service teacher training programs, for example, have consistently shown that teachers' prior beliefs and perceptions act as filters and affect the ways in which these programs are experienced and approached (Alfonso, 2001; Hollingsworth, 1989; Weinstein, 1989; Wideen, Meyer-Smith & Moon, 1998). Moore (2004) compares the filtering found in pre-service teachers to Mezirow's wider analysis of adult learning "in which acquired 'meaning schemes' and perspectives effectively 'protect' the individual from challenging existing assumptions and beliefs, acting as a mechanism through which new information, advice, and experience are accommodated within an essentially unchanging philosophy" (p. 15).

In terms that echo Naranjo's (1974, 1994) description of the selective intelligence of our so-called normal psychology, Mezirow (1991) argues that our mental schemes "constitute our 'boundary structure' for perceiving and comprehending new data . . . [allowing] our meaning system to diminish our awareness of how things really are in order to avoid anxiety, creating a zone of blocked action and self-deception" (p. 49).

Wherever a defensive, boundary structure is in play, teacher identity will play out around a curious mixture of learning and resistance to learning (or of knowledge and ignorance). What we might conclude is that teacher identities are often sustained as much by what teachers don't know as by what they do know. That is to say, teacher identity is as much negative as positive, as much a product of what teachers successfully ignore as what they have successfully learnt. Identity is rendered unstable and vulnerable once we see it as vitally dependent upon a resistance to new knowledge or conscious attention (see Bion, 1961), a construct that keeps things out as much as it holds things in relation.

The witnessing of our unconscious motivations can only occur where conscious attention is active within our lives. According to Naranjo (1974), "developing consciousness", including "the simple awareness and attention to the immediacy of experience" (pp. 224-225), is the central and common goal of psychotherapeutic and spiritual disciplines. This development can be likened to Wenger's "opening up of identities" (1998, p. 263) and points

toward an end-state or *telos* "as one that is characterized by *the experience* of openness to the reality of every moment" (Naranjo, 1974, p. 228). This desired or cultivated end-state implies self-acceptance of a self-reality that is in flux. Above all it is an *experience of experiencing*:

> For this is what consciousness means, what openness means, what surrendering leads into, what remains after the veils of conditioned perception are raised, and what the aim of acceptance is. (p. 229)

In Naranjo's conclusion we are not far from Foucault's call for an "intensification of subjectivity" (Foucault & Rabinow, 1997, p. 239). Indeed, Naranjo states that "the complete human being may be described as *more* himself, *more* in contact with reality, *more* able to both participate and maintain detachment, *more* free and yet *more* able to surrender, *more* accepting of his nature and limitations, and *more* conscious" (1974, p. 127, emphasis added).

The subject's connection with this enhanced sense of being is the mirror in which they become reflected. By such means a teacher can come upon an interpretation of "the real actions behind the apparent ones," and these real, inner actions are "experiential realities" (Naranjo, 1974, p. 127) concerned with the relation of self to self.

Whilst the idea of psycho-spiritual practice often conjures up solipsistic images of self-indulgent navel-gazing, a Foucaultian *telos* for the relationship of self with self makes possible an ethico-political interpretation of psycho-spiritual discourse. Self-study is rescued from self-absorption to the degree that it is embedded within a Foucaultian practice of freedom with political implications. As Blacker (1998) writes about Foucault's *ethics of the care of the self*, "This is not self-absorption, but being absorbed into the world: a 'losing-finding' of the self" (p. 363). For teachers, a politicized reflexivity ceases to be about teaching *per se*; rather, it attains the status of a kind of politics of ourselves, "a new ethic of self-creation that avoids the pitfalls of both narcissistic aestheticism on the one hand, and the alienation of political obsession on the other" (Blacker, 1998, p. 363). Practices of self-overcoming are the holy grail of Foucault's ethics, in as much as self-relations are ontologically prior to self-other relations. Teachers must first unchain themselves from history before they can unchain their students. The examination of our un-freedom is the type of thought that can be associated with a radical reflexivity. It enables us "to learn to what extent the effort to think one's own history can free thought from what it silently thinks, and so enable it to think differently" (Foucault, 1985, p. 9).

Moreover, taking as his example the "ethico-political spirituality" (Connolly, 1993) of Hellenic aesthetics, Foucault claimed that

this attention to self provided a training that permitted its practitioners to get prepared for power, responsibility, beauty, and for death and posterity. Its aesthetics and ascetics were not pursued for the purpose of renunciation,

> but [for] the progressive consideration of the self, or mastery over oneself, obtained not through the renunciation of reality but through the acquisition and assimilation of truth. It has as its final aim not the preparation for another reality but access to the reality of this world. The Greek word for this is *paraskeuazo* ("to get prepared"). It is a set of practices by which one can acquire, assimilate, and transform truth into a permanent principle of action. *Aletheia* [truth, that which is evident] becomes *ethos*. It is a process of the intensification of subjectivity. (Foucault & Rabinow, 1997, pp. 238-239)

An ethic of the care of self, understood as a rigorous attention to subjectivity, could provide present-day teachers with the experience that they need to take their place in education's relations of power in full consciousness. Such consciousness necessarily places them in permanent negotiation between pragmatic capitulation to the *status quo* and a bellicose due diligence that resists the given, just as it searches for something new. In the words of Butler (2005), "self-reflection and social recognition [are] essential to any substantive account of ethical life" (p. 49).

With respect to the provision of a psycho-spiritually inspired self-study for teachers – one which might enable Butler's self-reflection and social recognition – it has been said (Boote, 2003) that teacher educators as a body are as yet unprepared to assume leadership in this field, even if they frequently "dabble" in activities that have a therapeutic component. Likewise, Palmer (2003) asserts that the culture of higher education (which includes teacher training) is incompatible with the work of soul-searching. Given these shortcomings in the official realm, teachers interested in developing a radical reflexivity and a conscious attention to self might need to look beyond their immediate institutional realm for deeper inspiration. One place to start looking could be the work with teachers that is being undertaken by Claudio Naranjo, work based on his beliefs about educators:

> Teachers, more than anyone, need an experimental complement to the present scientific, humanistic, and pedagogical curriculum; a novel curriculum that would comprise self-knowledge, interpersonal repair, and a spiritual culture based on lived experience (and thus free from dogmatism). (Naranjo, 2010, p. 158)

Naranjo's 'novel curriculum' for teachers – known as the Seekers After Truth (SAT) – is inspired by psycho-spiritual practice, and its

facilitators are psychotherapists, actors, movement and dance special-
ists, and meditation teachers, among others. It is an intentioned learn-
ing environment for teachers far removed from schools or universities,
and yet teacher testimony (Keck, 2012, 2015) provides evidence that
the learning taking place catalyses teacher transformation within in-
stitutional settings. What follows in this article is an attempt to com-
municate how the SAT experience promotes conscious attention in
teachers, and how conscious attention to experience generates both
uncomfortable knowledge and identity transformations in teachers.

A case study – the background of methodology

Due to the exploratory nature of this study, an interpretivist ap-
proach was used that found expression in a grounded approach
to the qualitative data (Charmez, 2001). The use of a grounded
methodology was deemed apt for a research proposal that sought
to map complex social and psychological processes and trans-
formations, and to build understanding from a broad collection
of subjective data. It permitted the use of interview as an in-
teraction in which research participants were able to construct
their own knowledge over the course of the interview (Silverman
2006; Holstein & Gubrium 2004; Miller & Glassner 2004) and
ensured that a socially constructed knowledge of teacher experi-
ence could take centre stage in the research.

The SAT program (the case)

The case study involved a sample of teachers who participated in
a kind of psycho-spiritual retreat program entitled Seekers After
Truth (SAT). This program promotes teacher self-knowledge and
personal growth and the case study documented teachers' ex-
periences and understanding of their learning and development.
The scope of the present article permits only a brief description
of the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of the SAT
program (see Naranjo, 2010, for a detailed description).
     The SAT program was developed by the psychiatrist, Dr. Clau-
dio Naranjo, as a training for psychotherapists. It was conceived
from an understanding that a psychotherapist's ability to accom-
pany so-called clients was best served not by ever increasing the-
oretical and technical sophistication, but by an increased depth
of humanity brought about by experientially based knowledge of
their own neurosis, suffering, trauma, and the contrasting pos-
sibility of transcending these supposedly natural limitations. The
intensive, retreat-based program is a journey towards specific and
shared truths, and incorporates an eclectic array of practices from
the spiritual and psychological traditions and disciplines.

Its central body of knowledge is a diagnostic map of personality known as the Enneagram of Personality enabling participants to locate underlying cognitive and emotional patterns or structures within a constellation of behaviors. It is these patterns or structures, understood to be deficient and defensive, that become the SAT's object of self-study through a variety of practices (for example, meditation, body work and movement, theatre, peer therapy, group therapy). These practices cultivate a conscious attention to compulsive behavior patterns and thereby lessen our identification with our personality, thus freeing the subject to explore new ways of thinking, feeling and doing.

This approach to working with teachers can be understood as a "radical reflexivity" (Keck, 2012, 2015), in acknowledgement both of the intensity of the retreat experience (three retreats, each of eight days and spread over three years) and of the fact that the participants do not work on themselves as teachers, or in reference to teaching, but as people or humans, that is to say in the light of their whole life experience.

Data collection

Interviews were used to gather data in recognition of their "potential of providing rich and highly illuminating material" (Robson, 2002, p. 273). The interview technique resembled the "focused interview" (Cohen & Manion, 1994). Situational analysis previous to the interviews was used to generate an interview guide covering the major areas of enquiry. This knowledge comprised a long experience of working with teachers and considerable familiarity with the theory and practice of the SAT program and proved invaluable in eliciting "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) from teachers. My foreknowledge helped guide or facilitate the interviewees' elaboration of their own experience. Furthermore, my psychotherapeutic training enabled me to occupy a client-centered therapeutic style, as proposed by Rogers (1989), as a means of diminishing the defensive tendencies in the interviewee (Cohen & Manion, 1994, p. 288).

Pilot interviews in Mexico provided me with the "exploratory pole" for the subsequent research design (Robson, 2002, p. 185). The one-off interviews with 20 teachers lasted between one and two hours and were audio taped and transcribed. All participants were volunteers who responded either to an invitation extended to them during a SAT, or via an email distributed through the SAT database. Those responding positively were chosen on the following basis: personality type, location (Spain or Mexico, and accessibility), gender, age, teaching level. Of the twenty interviewees, eight were from Mexico and twelve from Spain.

Data analysis

The interviews were treated as narratives which reported a before, during and after centered on an event (the SAT program). The study's narrative sensibility comprised two moments. The first, at the time of interview, ensured, through appropriate questioning, that there was, indeed, a story being told. The second involved the selection of critical moments from any one transcript. This process of selection had two functions: it identified key transformations occurring within each narrative, and common themes across narratives. Critical movements or shifts were generally divided into a *before* and *after* (I used to be, or to do such and such, but now I am more like, or have begun to do, so and so).

Coding of the transcripts was undertaken by hand and was supported by the constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2000). Analysis software was not used; rather, a mastery of the data was achieved through continual re-reading of transcripts and selected material. "Meaning interpretation" (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009) was used to enable more expansive interpretations of meaning coded material, and to place testimonies within the widest possible frame of reference.

Observable changes in behavior were sought to provide evidence of a change in underlying attitudes, values and beliefs. In this sense analysis of practice provided a window onto the complex patchwork of identity. Trent (2010) cites Varghese *et al.*'s (2005) distinction between "identity-in-discourse" and "identity-in-practice", whereby the later involves an action-oriented approach to understanding identity that emphasizes identity as immersed in social activity and operationalized through the medium of concrete practices and tasks. This study draws on this theoretical focus on identity-in-practice to infer meaningful transformations in teacher identity.

Results

My intention in this section is twofold. In the first place I will provide a description of teachers' conscious attention to uncomfortable truths about their real lives. And secondly, I will provide an account of how uncomfortable knowledge and ongoing conscious attention to experience are providing teachers with a motor of change, pushing them toward new ways of being and doing. Habitual patterns of feeling, thinking and doing are unsustainable when conscious attention to experience is practiced, succumbing to a greater or lesser degree to new information generated by a new quality of awareness.

Increased attention and the uncomfortable knowledge of reality

Conrado's description of himself communicates that he was born to follow ("one can adapt to anything, and I have been adapting"). His declaration that "it used to be the staff team first, and me in second place", demonstrates his previous concern to blend in and to collaborate. His early teaching experience was in a small and harmonious staff team where "everyone played their part". However, as is so often the case when looking more closely at the teachers in the study, Conrado is more complex than this. He was not simply a follower; he was a critical follower, a selective follower, an ideologue whose capacity to "adapt to anything" should not be confused with an unquestioning acceptance of the *status quo*. It appears that Conrado had aligned himself with certain (progressive) ideals embodied in the small, committed and communicative staff team at his first school. When serious staff division emerged around a teacher's strike, Conrado felt that he could no longer face the children and withdrew from teaching. More than a crisis of insecurity, Conrado's retrospective understanding is that this was a crisis of faith in which "the values that I believed in fell apart, so there was no point in carrying on climbing the mountain because the mountain no longer existed". Something about this disappearing solidity (of the mountain) is reminiscent of Žižek's comments on the crisis of

> the "*totally mediatized subject*," fully immersed in virtual reality: while "spontaneously" he thinks that he is in direct contact with reality, his relationship to reality is in fact sustained by complex digital machinery. Recall Neo, the hero of *The Matrix*, who all of a sudden discovers that what he perceives as everyday reality is constructed and manipulated by a mega computer. (Žižek, 2011, p. 314)

Conrado's rude awakening from his "virtual reality" is more than a disappointment with the group. There are undertones of a thwarted utopian drive toward transparent, collaborative relations. His ability to teach appears to have been partly dependent on being aligned within an exemplary collective movement which could be trusted to build a better future. The subsequent voluntary retreat from teaching as a result of this crisis is a graphic illustration of the 'reality gap' and his inability to resolve the misalignment between the imaginary and real (Jaramillo, 2010) of his school and collegial relations.

Whilst the bursting of Conrado's imaginary was traumatic, there is reason to believe that it may be a necessary feature of maturation. As Britzman points out, Freud's early description of the ego claimed that, unlike the id, the ego "wears 'a cap of

hearing' – on one side only . . . it might be said to wear it awry" (Freud in Britzman, 1998, p. 44). Britzman (1998) clarifies this strange statement by saying that the "ego hears selectively and through distortion" (p. 44). In other words, the ego actively creates reality, and what we see as reality has its roots in an imaginative faculty or disposition of the ego that would, for its own purposes, stamp a certain order on the world. As Naranjo points out, extinguishing such imagination has long been the target of spiritual endeavor. He illustrates his point with a quote from Hindu spiritual philosophy: "The essence of Nirvana consists simply in the extinction of the constructive activity of our imagination" (Chandrakirti in Naranjo, 1974, p. 153). In the modern, Western paradigm, which values so highly the so-called rich imaginings of thought, such statements can seem strange. However, Naranjo (1974) clarifies the problem of imagination, or the problem of illusion *versus* reality, by reference to madness:

> In the spheres of thinking and perception the psychotic patient displays a feeble grasp of reality. Delusional thinking, by no means exclusively psychotic, is also part of neurotic patterns or characterologic patterns. . . . In fact all neurotic behavior may be interpreted as stemming from misperceptions of reality, a reality wrapped in superimposed illusory threats. (p. 154)

Likewise, for the classical thinker the delusional is endemic to society:

> There is no madness other than in every man, because it is man that constitutes madness, thanks to the affect they have for themselves . . . the attachment to self is the first sign of madness; and such is the attachment that it causes man to accept error as truth, lies as reality, violence and ugliness as justice and beauty. (Foucault 2001, pp. 44-45)

This is not to say that Conrado was mad; rather, that we should not be surprised to find madness, understood as degrees of delusion, within his worldview. What Conrado lived and hoped for at his school, amongst his colleagues, "the mountain" they were climbing, can be understood as a manifestation of liberal humanism's dream for the Man [*sic*] of Reason. Indeed, one might argue that Conrado's retreat from this idealized collective, his realization that "the mountain no longer existed", represents a moment of tragic lucidity on his part, an expansion of consciousness.

Interestingly, Conrado, when he left his school, returned to the village where he grew up, and took up a practical life of manual labor. His intellectual life stripped back, Conrado faced his self-delusions as he came into contact with reality as event. Specifically, he describes his time working as a fruit picker among immigrant labor-

ers, where in having to share a room with "an Arab" and a "black man", he comes face to face with his intellectually denied racism:

> And me: What have you always defended? What have you always said? You've said this and that, well, live it! So, from the point onwards I realized that intellectually I am not a racist, but in practice, in my feelings, in the here and now, yes it comes out. . . . So, I went through that type of experience, like anybody who lives, but obviously, by not having work [as a teacher], by not having those five hours of teaching, the corrections, the preparations. (Conrado)

Two things are notable in this extract: firstly, he clearly became aware of the limits of his own reason, the difference between the professed and the experienced; secondly, he intimates that the institutionalized orders of teaching were opposed to this type of life knowledge, and its routine, an impediment to real experience and conscious attention.

As we might expect from the above, delusional thinking is a feature of many of the narratives in the study. One example is Reina's belief that relentless hard work and application were vital for belonging and acceptance in her university. Many of Reina's so-called neurotic symptoms of tenacity might well be seized upon positively in the workplace, evidence of commitment, determination, cooperation, leadership, confidence, responsibility, discipline, and generosity. But Reina is clear that whilst her efforts may have been appreciated by others, the problem for her was in her own self-relations. As she becomes consciously aware of the human cost of her tenaciousness, this style of hers becomes increasingly uncomfortable:

> The process of [my] growth is bubbling, little by little, taking small steps towards serenity and towards affection. It's true. That's all it is! First of all, towards myself, because *I have treated myself like a dog*. (Reina, emphasis added)

For Reina, serenity and affection become manifest as alternatives to self-domination. Her key turn is toward acceptance, including the acceptance of limitation, and toward appreciation (of things as they are). In short, her renunciation of an illusion of perfectibility and her previous compulsion to force and manipulate reality, including one's own reality, in the service of a particular need, desire or fear.

Similarly, Muriel has become aware that her meaningful struggle is to stop struggling; the old order of total struggle must be relinquished in favor of a new order of non-struggle, or of selective struggle:

> Now, when I look back it seems to me that in that search, with so much effort put into change-change, there was an error, which was that this change-change meant that I did not accept myself as I was, at any time. It seems that it was a big discovery. In the moment that I really began to accept myself, I really began to grow . . . I have accepted that I get embarrassed, that I feel guilty about many things, that I feel inadequate, that I feel useless . . . [and I no longer] try to stop it being noticeable, try to be something else that I am not and hope that nobody notices. (Muriel)

For Muriel the possibility of breaking the grasp of her dissatisfaction does not lie in a movement away from, but toward; it lies in the full acceptance of dissatisfaction, an acceptance in which dissatisfaction itself is held (lovingly) in her field of conscious attention. The Gestaltian discourse would see this move as a "total involvement" in the situation as opposed to the "partial involvement" or the "interrupted" experience implied in the attempt to negate the unsatisfactory nature of the present (Perls, 1973, p. 68).

Other features of psychological terminology are detectable in the narratives. Araceli, for example, describes how the mechanism of transference came to dominate her way of seeing the world:

> My way of relating to the world has been the way of relating to my father . . . that anxiety to change that world [is rooted in] the desire to change my father and the way he looked at me, a fairer way, a kinder way, more understandable, clearer. (Araceli)

Araceli's highlighting of the effect of relations with her parents – a domineering, aggressive, absent father, an absent, depressive mother – gives some indication of how her self-understanding is now linked to her sense of history. She now regards the particularities of her subjectivity not as natural, inevitable, reasonable, but as the product of the arbitrary circumstances of her history. She learnt a particular form of seeing the world, a particular distortion of consciousness, but it could have been otherwise. Araceli has paid a high price for this history, it has haunted her, and she has been its prisoner:

> Combining that internal world and that external world has always been very difficult. Or I lost myself completely in the external, or at the other extreme I disappeared inside myself. I was either very sociable or antisocial. The middle way, the shades of grey, have not worked for me, and sometimes they still don't. (Araceli)

This statement is an extreme expression of an existential problem at the centre of our experience as so-called social animals. It is, at heart, a problem of attention – do we attend to the demands of our inner world or to the demands of our social environment. Araceli now searches for a middle way. It is this middle way to which Perls (1973) refers when he states:

> The man [*sic*] who can live in *concernful contact* with his society, neither being swallowed up by it nor withdrawing from it completely, is the well-integrated man. He is self-supportive because he understands the relationship between himself and his society, as the parts of the body instinctively seem to understand their relationship to the body-as-a-whole. (p. 26, emphasis added)

Perls' "concernful contact" echoes with a practice of conscious attention that is able to encompass both the inner reality and outer reality without recourse to delusion. It is a difficult balancing act, and one that sits at the heart of education. Teachers, who find themselves at the centre of a complex and multilayered social nexus, would do well to learn how to balance their attention between competing demands. Fernando eloquently summarizes the difficulty he observes for Mexican teachers:

> A teacher can be very good, but they will still go crazy if they want to achieve all that is asked of them. So they need to have priorities, and I believe that the number one priority has to be themselves. So, like I tell them [my students]; "You have to open up your umbrella and bring the students under the umbrella, and work under the umbrella. It's going to rain down hard on you, but you have to know who you are with. Are you there to serve your paymaster? . . . Or are you there to serve your kids? You have to decide. It's tough – if you decide to serve your bosses you are going to have a hard time, and if you decide to serve the kids then you are going to have a hard time. You will have to make a moral choice, because you can't keep them both happy". (Fernando)

According to Fernando the more a teacher really pays conscious attention to their students, the more difficult it becomes to fall in line with education's institutional demands. For Fernando, in getting the balance right between student and institution, teachers are also taking responsibility for their own professional well-being:

> If you choose the kids, well at least you will know that you are doing something well, in keeping with your professional ethic. Here, your professional training is not the question. Everything

else is external – if you know math, if you don't know math. (Fernando)

Britzman (1998) asks, "Can pedagogy take the side of the learner?" (p. 47), and Fernando's testimony reveals this intention. To choose the children, to consciously attend to them, is, for Fernando, to resist education's madness, and to maintain his vocational *ethos* and faith.

The alchemy of attention and transformation through knowledge

Teacher experience in the SAT program facilitates a personal archaeology, as teachers become engaged in uncovering and recovering what has been lost to them. It is, at heart, a work of conscious attention. What must be confronted are the anxieties which the subject attempts to avoid in the act of burying those artefacts of experience that caused them discomfort. Fernando describes his facing down of the challenge of acting the clown (literally) in the SAT programme. As a clown he found himself "jumping into an abyss" previously unthinkable, terrifying. The unreason of the clown threatens his supposedly adult aspirations of being taken seriously, and it is, perhaps, this adult fear of foolishness that haunts the strained and purposeful seriousness of classrooms.

It is this fear that erupts in Carla when she makes a mistake on the blackboard. Her defensive reaction of anger at the class serves to distract attention from her helplessness. Carla, as adult, as teacher, has forgotten how "to make significance out of the drama of [her] helplessness" (Britzman, 1998, p. 25). In contrast, children generally find significant drama in their helplessness, it being met with tears, laughter, palpable fear, and determination. This drama maintains the child connected to vulnerability, and, paradoxically, this connection is one of childhood's characteristic virtues. When Fernando talks about the need to recover his history, his child, he is in part talking about this same *dramatis personae* whose enactment, whose agency, is not to superimpose themselves on the world through power and control, but to be totally involved in the world through a complete, uninterrupted response to its vicissitudes. The guiding principle of a return to this engagement can be thought of as an embrace of the never-ending journey. Semetsky (2006) reminds us of the moral of imperative of this journeying:

Too often we mature adults assume the position that Dewey (1925/1958) ironically dubbed the supreme dignity of adulthood, therefore betraying the very continuity of the growth

> process while at the same time trying to foster "growth" in our students. But for them to learn, shouldn't we too? As Noddings (2002) keeps reminding us, the aim of moral education is to contribute to the continuous education of students and teachers.
>
> For Deleuze and Dewey alike, the spiritual dimension is inseparable from organic life, and it is *becoming-child*[1] that is an indication of this inseparability. How, when, where, under what circumstances, by means of which events is one capable of *becoming-child*? (p. 122)

It could be argued that one man's greatest pyrrhic victories is to have left the childish/animal realm of conscious attention and responsiveness to the present in favor of a realm of dominating protagonisms and manipulations that is both powerful and fragile (susceptible to the anxiety of humiliation and decay). The psychoanalyst Aldo Carotenuto describes our lack of tolerance for anxiety as "the frustration of insignificance" (Carotenuto quoted in Britzman, 1998, p. 25). Britzman asks the question, "What then is lost when insignificance and meaninglessness cannot be tolerated?" The narrative testimonies provide some clues about what has been lost by these particular teachers. Fernando lost his own history, the sensation of ever having been a child. Lorena lost her desire; she is able only to say what she *doesn't* want ("I want to know what *I* want"). Yvete lost her sensitivity to herself, not comprehending her own mysterious tears ("I said, 'Why am I crying? I don't have any reason!'"). Angeles became estranged from the calm banality of life ("My fantasies kept me fooled"). Julia felt "polyphonic", the words coming out of her mouth being those of others ("What would it be to be me, and not this polyphony?"). Reina lost a sense of worth, justifying her existence by hard work. Conrado lost the ability to stand his own ground ("It's as if I was in limbo, as if I wasn't able to see that I was insecure."). Muriel lost the simple satisfaction of being herself ("it's like I've been going along with this effort to not like myself and of 'I want to be something else', putting on layers and layers, putting on an armor that has prevented me, over many years, from making contact with myself, from being what I really am and want").

Such statements are not just evidence of neurosis, they demonstrate an increasing ability among these teachers to distance

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1 Deleuze and Guattari have the following to say about their motif of becoming: "A *becoming* is always in the middle; . . . it is the in-between, the border or line of flight or descent running perpendicular to both . . . it constitutes a zone of proximity and indiscernibility, a no-man's land, a nonlocalizable relation sweeping up the two distant or contiguous points, carrying one into the proximity of the other" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 29). For example, the (re)incorporation in to 'adult' life of the child's eye view, including its gift for being surprised and fascinated necessarily decodes (or offers a line of flight) from adult norms of behaviour.

themselves from neurotic traits sufficiently to be able to truly see them. To be able to denounce these situations represents a victory of reality over delusion, of perspicacity over blindness, a confrontation with meaninglessness and insignificance. If the delusional states that characterize the social madness of our commonplace neuroses depend for their genesis and survival upon the atrophying of our faculties of perception as a defense against the "vicissitudes of love and hate" (Britzman, 1998, p. 20), then the expansion of consciousness, the shining of light into shadowy corners of the psyche, represents an important opportunity to redress the most important loss of all, which is the loss of sensibility or consciousness. Britzman (1998) indicates as much when she says that the "ego's learning . . . is neither linear nor progressive but entangled in its capacity to touch and to be touched" (p. 12).

The commonplace, functional neurotic displays what has sometimes been referred to as a *normosis*, playing host to a parasitic delusion that depends for its survival on going unnoticed, on supposedly appearing natural, organic to the form of your own life. Naranjo (1974) states that "normality is pseudo-objectivity", a "cognitive map" that should not be conflated with "objective experience":

> Such a map covers up our pathology; a layer of accurate fantasy covers our deeper layer of inaccurate fantasy, which only manifests itself as symptoms, unwarranted moods, dreams. . . . Such dealings, therefore, do not stem from the total personality, but from the masklike censor with which the person identifies. (p. 159)

The foremost challenge, then, is to bear witness against yourself, against that within you which may appear to actually define who you are, but which alienates you from a deeper experience of self and other. Freud's image of the ego's cap of perception worn awry is useful here, implying, as it does, that we must become aware of the particular slant of our own cap. The interviews provide evidence of just such a cultivation of awareness, discernment, and a corresponding expansion in the teacher's field of sensibility and connectivity. Fernando maintains that "self-observation" (conscious attention to self) has become second nature to him; a vital tool allows him greater involvement in his own experience. In particular, he is able to see when he begins to "fragment" as a result of his labyrinthine thought patterns. This act of observation provides a sense of a globalizing consciousness that sustains the different (dis)orders of his thought. Post-SAT, Fernando claims that he realizes when he has fallen into a diminishing cognitive spiral and is able not only to detain himself, but to establish "internal conversations that

are even in my favor". It is not hard to imagine the benefit of this dis-identification with his tortuous thought patterns, and a contrasting space made for agreeable, constructive, sufficient thinking.

This loosening of thought patterns is borne out by his new-found ability to "say sorry", a gesture that had previously been impossible. This capacity to apologize derives from two important developments in his awareness of reality. Firstly, he has become more aware that he is not himself without fault; and secondly, he is able to sustain the possibility of unity in duality, of being nei-ther wholly good, nor wholly bad. Having previously "navigated under the flag of being very good", (recalling Bollas' "violence of innocence" (1992)), Fernando is now able to entertain the posi-tion of being simultaneously 'good' and 'evil', and in so doing he transcends their polarity.

Fernando's new moral order would seem to be more com-plete, more real, more connected than the mad assertion of total innocence, which made him, by default, other-worldly, a perma-nent victim of outrageous circumstance (Why me again, when I am trying hard to be good?). We might say that previously his cognitive ordering of the world had succeeded in removing him from its vicissitudes, whereas his growing attention to multiplic-ity is rooting him within reality, converting him from somebody to whom things happened, to somebody who is fully implicated in their experience of the world. It is worth quoting Naranjo's de-scription of this journey toward experience:

> Deepening our contact with reality entails far more than a shift from conceptualization to experience. Once the veil of reason and pseudoreality is removed, there is still the path from il-lusion to reality, from assumptions and distorted images of reality (now exposed) to true contact. Behind the screens of the ego there are deeper screens, based on less conscious but greater fears. (1974, p. 170)

According to Naranjo (1974), one avenue for the transforma-tion of delusion and ungrounded fear into reality "is that of letting the delusional system 'wear itself out' spontaneously as it is exposed to conscious scrutiny . . . we outgrow ourselves through reflective awareness and choice" (p. 171). Fernando con-sciously observes himself and experiences new perspectives for understanding, not least in permitting the sudden and unusu-al experience of moments "of harmony . . . of beauty" in situa-tions that unfold before his eyes. Fernando's description of these moments reveals a different order of understanding from his normally fragmented universe. It is the order of experience as-sociated with the other reasonings of the spiritual dimension of comprehension, an epiphany of connection and unity.

Araceli's narrative most fully encapsulates the idea of being delivered or saved from oneself. Araceli admits she was considered "freaky", provoking either loyalty or loathing in her colleagues. She dominated, argued, bullied, manipulated, protected, triumphed, was defeated, raged, resisted and was, to use her own words, "neurosis taken to its extreme". In the SAT her attention was directed toward

> the clarity of the day to day, observing myself, able to choose and not choose consciously. . . . I can choose, continue, or not continue, and if I continue, it is like Gurdjieff says, observe yourself, don't lie to yourself, and don't judge yourself, and to cross that is what I learnt in the SAT and in Gestalt [therapy]. . . . I re-situated myself in the world. I felt like I had a place again, because my sensation was, I am so lost, so alone, so crazy, I was a beast. And the fact of re-finding myself [in my personality type] with other people who are the same as me . . . it made me feel grounded . . . and comforted. Also, there is no salvation, but there is a path to being happy, given who I am. (Araceli)

Araceli's journey of growth toward increased well-being is dependent on a central shift in her attention – she has moved from an imposing protagonism (fuelled by an attention to her compulsion for control) to a place of receptivity to multiplicity (fuelled by her desire for connection and meaning). This apparently simple movement has "re-situated" her in the world. It is a movement echoed not only in Fernando's "self-observation," but in a new-found awareness of self and other across all the teacher narratives of the study.

Discussion

The intention of psycho-spiritual practices is to ensure a positive or fruitful direction for human growth. Naranjo (1974) states that their central concern is one of "developing consciousness", including a "simple awareness and attention to the immediacy of experience" (pp. 224-225). This developing of consciousness can be likened to Wenger's "opening up of identities" (1998, p. 263) whereby a subject is able to hold more information in their field of conscious attention.

The results section presented examples of how an increased attention to intra and inter-subjective reality generated uncomfortable and transformative knowledge among the participating teachers. The examination of the teacher testimony reveals identities that are expanding and fragmenting under the effect of a conscious attention to the nuances of their experience. The

idiosyncratic component of this evolution is partly determined by each teacher's personality (Carla, for example, has become more indulgent and playful, while Juan has become more serious). Whilst such individualized development is significant, when assessing the importance of reflexivity or self-study, it is also important to determine overall tendencies across the sample.

This meta-analysis of the testimonial data reveals commonalities that amount to a movement *en masse* toward an awareness of, and attention to, ambivalence. This shift can be interpreted from a psychological perspective as a shift toward what Klein termed the "depressive" position and away from the idealizations, rejections and manipulations required to sustain the "paranoid-schizoid" position[2] (Klein, 1946; Segal, 1988). The ambivalence of the depressive state denies the subject the privilege of standing apart from the unpleasantness of the world and incites a movement toward reparation. If the paranoid-schizoid position marks a defensive wall against experience, what stands out across the narratives is that these teachers, post-SAT, experience an increasing hunger for the ambivalences of contact, communication and relationship as an antidote/resistance to the threat/experience of alienation. This existential hunger radiates as a manifestation of increasing consciousness in three directions – toward self-knowledge and contact, toward an authentic exchange with the Other, and toward a situatedness within the Other (the bigger picture).

These three directions of movement can be detailed as re-calibrations of their positioning along a variety of axes, re-calibrations that, like Araceli, re-situate the teachers in their world. In nearly all cases the movements made by these teachers are a shift toward the first, left-hand pole on the following axes:

▶ Relationship *vs.* knowledge
▶ Multiplicity *vs.* simplicity
▶ Flexibility *vs.* rigidity
▶ Connectivity *vs.* compartmentalization
▶ Responsibility *vs.* representativity / impotence
▶ Authority *vs.* domination
▶ Risk *vs.* caution
▶ Fallibility *vs.* correctness

2 "Klein posited that a healthy development implies that the infant has to split its external world, its objects and itself into two categories: good (i.e., gratifying, loved, loving) and bad (i.e. frustrating, hated, persecutory). This splitting [undertaken in the paranoid-schizoid position] makes it possible to introject and identify with the good. In other words: splitting in this stage is useful because it protects the good from being destroyed by the bad. Later, when the ego has developed sufficiently, the bad can be integrated, and ambivalence and conflict can be tolerated [within what she termed the depressive position]", cited in *Wikipedia* (2014), Paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions (n. d.).

▶ Care / involvement *vs.* objectivity
▶ Local *vs.* universal.

The combined effect of what might be relatively small shifts along any particular axes generated, without exception, a significant change in the way these teachers negotiate their agency within the school. If one axis could be identified as catalytic and synthetic of the other axes, it would perhaps be the axis authority-domination. What teachers are exploring might be summed up as a new type of authority. Whilst pre-SAT authority was more likely to have derived from the teacher as a representative of power-knowledge (a living, agentive *nexus* of structure or of ideology), post-SAT authority aligned itself to a professional *ethos* derived from the ability to negotiate the unfolding present of self and other by reference to the singularities and multiplicities of that present, rather than by recourse to the smooth surfaces of identity, curriculum and dogma. In Foucaultian terms we might say that it is an authority made possible by the teachers' access to a new order of truth, an alternative valuation of 'reality'.

This "inter-individual" and "generative" authority (Bracher, 2006) appeals to connection, awareness, and transparency as opposed to the authority of representation, in other words being representative of power-knowledge in the classroom (e.g. Carla and Igor), or, conversely, of the forces of resistance (e.g. Yvete and Araceli). This representative authority blurs easily into the experience of being dominated and/or dominating through the demands of curriculum, official discourse, or ideologies. Often a teacher's problem, pre-SAT, was a capitulation to a universe of expectations and judgments. By re-calibrating their focus of attention, and by developing their conscious attention to their history and to their present, many of these teachers have been able to supplant relations of power that are skewed toward domination with relations of power that derive from the authority of being more real, in as much as what is being proposed for teaching and learning is more responsive to the idiosyncrasies of the local.

Post SAT, Igor, for example, wants to see and be seen in the moment, and to respond from the ground of that contact: "I say to them [the students] that I want to be able to look them in the eyes, that I have nothing to hide from them, that they can see me, they can go ahead and examine me, nothing will happen, or more likely things will happen – there is trust" (Igor). He is clear that being in relation represents a shift in power that is, ultimately, beneficial for his well-being and effectiveness as a teacher. For Igor, transcending his previous identification with authoritarianism has involved "taking away some of my authority, power, but that authority, that power had become a burden and a source of fatigue for me. So removing that authority, that power, has left me freer and I do a better job, that is, it has many more

benefits for me".

Igor is clear that he has traded the manipulations of control and being controlled (by curriculum), for an authority that approximates to an Aristotelian "practical wisdom" or *phronesis* (Aristotle, 1934).

The true importance of this new authority lies in the degree of autonomy it permits the teacher. Across the narratives, teachers, post-SAT, exercise this new authority by either contemplating or taking up practices that are not externally defined, but are seen by them to respond to their immediate conditions, including their interpretation of their desire and capacity. These practices involve positive and negative components. The positive component is what is proposed as congruent to the situation, and the negative component involves the relegation of external demands to a second order of importance. Both of these can occur only in as much as the teacher has assumed the authority of a connection with reality that takes precedence over the call to embody official discourse.

The situatedness of this new authority has one important feature: it is not absolutist. As the moment of the here-and-now is in continual flux there can be no absolute ideal in terms of behaviour. What takes the place of an idealized image of teaching is the experience of being a "good-enough" teacher, (very much after Winnicott's (1986) notion of the "good-enough" mother). However, this good-enough teaching is arbitrated by the minimal but stringent demand of awareness (conscious attention), and the ability to construct a professional identity that arises from a connectedness with the emergent, even if this response may in itself not be perfect.

If these teachers are renouncing static notions of perfected practice, they are, perhaps, embarking on a yet more difficult, though more vital road whose end is "to become worthy of the event" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p. 160). These teachers are finding the challenge of discovering the singular manifestations of life within their classroom, manifestations which include the structures of curriculum and the "dark side of teaching" (Pajak, 1998), as well as the relations between the intensified subjectivities of themselves and their students. In some senses, we can say that it is the intensification of the here and now of the "empirical happening" (Semetsky, 2006, p. 110) that permits a deconstruction of the colonizations of past learning and of the overbearing temptation of education's universalizing tendencies.

Whilst this journey begins with a cultivation of attention to their personal and professional discomfort and game-playing, their arrival point is a pedagogy of attention, what Rodgers and Raider-Roth (2006) call a "pedagogy of presence". The notion of teacher presence is characterized by "a state of alert awareness, receptivity, and connectedness to the mental, emotional and

physical workings of both the individual and the group" (p. 266). Attention to the classroom's cognitive and affective relations is necessary not only as a palliative, more importantly it is key to student achievement (Midgley *et al.*, 1989; Pianta, 1999; Roeser *et al.*, 2000; Raider-Roth, 2005a, b). An inclusive and reflexive teaching "cannot be reduced to a series of behaviours or skills, but is *a practice that demands presence*" (Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006, p. 266, emphasis added). A "key aspect of [this] presence *is being present to oneself*" (Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006, p. 271, emphasis added). And being present to oneself requires conscious attention, self-study, and reflexivity.

Conclusion

The narratives of this study reveal how teachers are learning a new presence and quality of attention through their experience of the SAT program. Likewise, the testimony shows how conscious attention is more than an activity; rather, once cultivated it has a transformative and curative capacity, offering teachers an ethical tool to help them determine their best course of action in any particular circumstance. In Mexico's present educational climate, which is beginning to emphasize school's relational component (SEP, 2014), we could do worse than to look to training processes, such as the SAT, whose goal is to cultivate teachers' conscious attention to intra- and inter-subjectivity, and place the quality of self-self and self-other relations at the problematic heart of teaching.

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