



## SENSING EXPERTISE IN PRE-SERVICE TEACHER EDUCATION

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Upon entering a school as a pre-service teacher you will encounter and observe teachers in action. Your observations will lead to an awareness of the many prerequisites required to educate students. These prerequisites are often labelled quite simply 'teacher expertise'. Expertise, though, is not precise enough to communicate effectively what the observer has noted either overtly via observation or intuitively via reflection. The pre-service teacher needs to dialogue with expert teachers; however, education is fast-paced and leaves little time for discussion that is neither deep nor accurate because much of what expert teachers do is tacit, unnamed and complex.

It is tempting for young teachers to try to emulate experienced educators because they see someone apparently experiencing none of the problems they seem to encounter. In other words, some veteran teachers inadvertently '... reinforce the myth that "good" teachers encounter few if any uncertainties in their everyday practice and by mitigating against raising questions about practice of self and/or others, the culture of teaching promotes isolation and the virtue of self-reliance' (Hannay, 1998: 19). Education does suffer from the 'constraints of overload, isolation, and compartmentalization that are endemic to schools' (Earl & Cousins, 1995: 42). Therefore, pre-service teachers need to understand expertise before they enter classrooms, so that they can better identify, label and discuss their observations with mentors and peers. What follows are six constructs (see Figure 1) that provide useful concise descriptions of expertise and the associated traits that permeate each.

### **CONSTRUCT ONE: THE KNOWLEDGEABLE COMMUNICATOR**

As you begin your practicum, you will notice capable teachers and their expertise within the school. Some of your fellow teachers will be skilled in areas that you would like to be also. You may become aware of a colleague who has a profound understanding of the discipline(s) they teach to the point where respect is shown by all students. This understanding and perspective allows these educators to communicate successfully (put in plain words) and simplify curricula for all students. In fact a 'teacher's ability to explain and clarify is foremost in developing authority' (Levin, Nolan, Kerr, & Elliot, 2005: 70). This type of expertise can be realized by most, if not all teachers; however, it demands that a teacher become both a content specialist and an effectual communicator. To do this requires time (experience), professional development and interpersonal intelligence. Teachers, due to new standards within the curricula and the curriculum, are obliged to engage in sustained, intellectually rigorous study of what they teach. Once achieved the *knowledgeable*

*communicator* identity provides an authority base from which to operate in the classroom.

Teachers are authorities and are required to be sensitive, and sense emotional tones within the class in order maintain a healthy learning environment. As well, 'activities connected with rules and procedures require the teacher's most salient verbal and nonverbal communication skills' (Goethals, Howard & Sanders, 2004: 117), as it is these rules and procedures that can be utilized to establish and maintain a functional classroom. To become a knowledgeable communicator requires each pre-service teacher to make informed decisions. It is these thoughtful decisions that will guide what they choose to say as a teacher, and how it is said, that can be the difference between effective and ineffective teaching, community relations and classroom management. In addition, Martin, Sugarman and McNamara (2000) point out that

successful classrooms are not a direct result of the implementation of abstracted principles of teaching, learning, development or management. Rather, the successful implementation of any educational, psychological or administrative theories relevant to the creation of effective classroom environments ultimately depends on the quality of the moment by moment interactions that occur between teachers and their students. Effective communication is the 'bedrock' on which productive teaching and learning are built.

(p.22)

Knowing the content is requisite, however, knowing how to communicate is just as important in healthy successful classrooms.

## **CONSTRUCT TWO: THE SELF-AWARE AUTHENTIC TEACHER**

On another day you become aware of the extent that a fellow teacher possesses self-knowledge. Self, according to Baumeister (1995)

must encompass several things, first, it includes the body, second it includes the social identity, which can be understood as a cluster of meaningful definitions that become attached to the body, including a name, social roles, membership in various groups, and various other attributes ... Third, self is the active agent involved in making decisions.

(pp.52-53)

This situation informs the maxim, 'you teach who you are' and it is this self knowledge that is utilized to select a teaching mode or style that complements the teacher as a self-informed person. This teacher employs tacit self-knowledge to instruct in a manner that matches who they are in the classroom. It is a reflexive awareness that fuels this element of expertise. Garmston (1998) suggests these teachers

are conscious of their own beliefs and values. Because the curriculum is far too full to teach everything, the teacher constantly chooses what to omit. A knowledge of the organizing principles of the discipline and knowledge of teacher values inform these decisions. A calculus teacher once said to me, 'I do not teach calculus. I teach life through calculus.'

(p.1)

This self-informed educator connects with students and is comfortable shaping the curricula and the means to bring it to life via authentic experiences. Obviously, these teachers, since they have so much information about themselves, cannot think of their total self all at once. Only a small part of the entire self-concept can be present in awareness at any one time (Baumeister, 1995). It is a developing awareness that influences beginning teachers often filling them with angst. However, even a small part of self-knowledge can be enough to empower the self-aware teacher in the classroom.

The developmental mode of teacher education is a process of self-analysis and discovery. The requirement to clearly formulate and express one's educational philosophy in tasks assigned by professors seems understandable and necessary in order to construct sturdy internal and external connections that can withstand mere questioning from stakeholders. Knowing yourself better can improve self-analysis and an educational philosophy grounds us, as we can stand tall in turbulent times amidst debate and criticism, self-assured.

### **CONSTRUCT THREE: THE INFORMED AND CARING TEACHER**

In a meeting at your school you discover just how well another teacher knows the students they are teaching. The teacher has taken time to learn about each student and cares about each student in a positive manner. In return the students respect and obey because they like the teacher as a person. In fact, 'expert teachers ... are sensitive to developmental stages, cultural factors, gender differences, and style preferences. For example, they know that perhaps as few as 20 percent of their eighth-grade students operate at a formal logical level of thinking' (Garmston, 1998: 1). These informed and caring teachers 'who use referent power are authority figures and do make demands on students' (Levin et al., 2005: 83). The well liked teacher (referent power) succeeds because they care and know their students very well socially and developmentally. Students prefer teachers 'who are warm, supportive, and caring (i.e., high in responsiveness) and that students are less likely to misbehave among teachers who demonstrate these qualities, particularly when they are combined with demandingness' (Bear, Cavalier, & Manning, 2005: 206).

Furthermore, we are told by the Ontario College of Teachers (2004) that 'good teachers build society one student at a time. Good teachers are organized, flexible, thoughtful, caring and nurturing ... Today's teachers wear many hats and perform different roles. They are communicators, counselors, classroom managers, and role models' (p.3). As pre-service teachers, we need to remind ourselves that our purpose is to build society one person at a time so

how we handle people can be a lesson to all. How we act, think about and speak to parents, colleagues and school community members sends important messages.

#### **CONSTRUCT FOUR: THE TEACHER WITHIN A COLLEGIAL COMMUNITY**

As a pre-service teacher you will sense that 'community' is of pivotal importance in the success of each quality school you enter. Community is not limited to one level however; there are two stages that require daily maintenance.

##### **Level one – school-wide**

Teachers, whether they are new or experienced, who choose to reach out to other teachers, parents and the community reduce their isolation and improve their collegiality. These collaborations can empower teachers as the team approach surfaces. This teaching team can achieve more; they are enriched, united, more informed, and motivated, than a teacher who chooses not to engage others in professional dialogue and teaching. Often, school teams cooperatively problem-solve to improve school management and resolve discipline issues. School-based professional communities support teacher learning and improve student learning. Garmston (1998) reports that 'collective responsibility emerged for student learning and student achievement gain was realized school-wide in school communities that had a shared sense of purpose, a collective focus on student learning, collaborative activity, de-privatized practice, and reflective dialogue' (p.1). An empowered school community is not limited to teachers, it needs to include all stakeholders such as parents (student family/caregivers), school colleagues, administration and outside agencies.

##### **Level two – classroom**

Pre-service teachers will notice that teachers who create communities of learners in the classroom via cooperative learning activities work tirelessly to encourage face-to-face interactions, positive interdependence and individual accountability. Often these actions create a call for the teaching of social skills and group functioning in order to realize a positive impact on student motivation and behaviour (Bear et al., 2005; Levin et al., 2005) that infuses the classroom collegial community. Ultimately, both levels of community reward the teacher who cultivates the collegiality.

#### **CONSTRUCT FIVE: THE PEDAGOGIC STRATEGIST**

A pre-service teacher may encounter a teacher teaching in a manner that impresses and motivates the student-teacher to the point that they attempt to emulate that teacher. They are impressed by the other teacher's repertoire of teaching skills – something referred to as pedagogy. In fact, what the student-teacher is observing is teaching expertise (skill, know-how). It is not just a matter of copying the observed mode or style of teaching since

expert teachers have complex understandings of teaching strategies and know which teaching strategies are most appropriate for the content being taught. This is in addition to the more generalized teaching knowledge like managing classroom routines, setting expectations, organizing transitions, and teaching for transfer.

(Garmston, 1998: 1)

To be a *pedagogic strategist* a teacher needs to become proficient in several areas.

Moreover, a new teaching strategy (behaviour pattern) has to be adapted to fit in less than ideal conditions since the 'existing behavior patterns can inhibit the ability to master new teaching strategies' (Pajak, 2000: 192). Most novice teachers will rely on restrictive, transmissive, authoritative practice whereas the expert teacher has an expanded, interactive balance of authoritative and dialogic practice that focuses on the progress of students, teaching and learning, and not on the teaching performance and content that can occupy the mind of a pre-service teacher.

Most, if not all expert teachers will explain that some instructional strategies are more influential and useful than others in a particular subject area and that it takes time to master the subtleties of particular teaching strategies. For instance, knowing how much time to allow for small group discussion before proactively intervening or moving along a particular class of students to the next task requires insight, understanding and expertise that is often tacit. The fact that this expertise is tacit may mean that the expert teacher has yet to label or name the strategy (intuitive decisions) they use on a regular basis. This limits or removes opportunities to discuss this area of expertise even though it can be observed by student teachers.

## **CONSTRUCT SIX: THE THEORETICIAN**

Theory offers teachers a means to examine and understand both people and things (social cognition). Teachers who theorize often can manage student and teacher behaviour more competently than a person who does not. After all, the difference between people and objects is that people do things intentionally and your car does not. People are causal agents who are driven internally toward their actions. The importance of theory and the impact it has on each teacher's orientation to other people suggests that theory informs everyday thinking about other people (Fiske, 1995). Teachers who embrace theory and value it become tacticians who have

higher conceptual levels which are more adaptive, flexible, and successful in their teaching than teachers with lower conceptual levels. Their students learn more, are more cooperative, and are more involved in their work than students of lower conceptual teachers ... Teachers' developmental levels have a direct correlation to their performance in the classroom. Teachers who function at

higher conceptual levels are capable of greater degrees of complexity in the classroom and are more effective with students. Teachers with more advanced conceptual levels are more flexible, stress tolerant, and adaptive in their teaching style. Thus, they are able to assume multiple perspectives, employ a variety of coping strategies, and apply a wide repertoire of teaching models.

(Garmston, 1998: 1)

A teacher who is a theoretician operating at a high conceptual level achieves the expert status because of their efforts to theorize and put in play these same theories on a day-to-day basis. Theory must be fundamentally rooted in practical experience if it is to be of value. The common professorial disclaimer that

we are 'not equipped' to talk about practical matters appears humble but is in fact arrogant; and it betrays a lack of understanding of theory. *If we are not equipped to talk about practice, we are not equipped to talk about theory.* We must as far as possible address both theory and practice.

(Beck, 1993: 2)

Students completing a pre-service educational programme experience both *practicum* (student teaching) and *theory classes* that delve into teacher education requisites. The completion of either requisite does not suddenly cause someone to become a theoretician, or even think differently; however, at the conclusion of an education programme successful candidates do become qualified teachers with diploma or degree and teaching certification. These documents permit a person to teach in an area that is limited to, and defined by their certification. What they teach is often clearly prescribed by curricular documents and even the manner in which they teach is suggested in these same documents. However, what they believe and value in education is often unexamined yet surfaces recursively via behaviour and reflective thoughts while teaching and theorizing. Do you recall the Biology class with its various theoretical, abstract and intangible qualities put in place by the roaming white-jacket that clothed the Biology teacher?

## SUMMARY

In sum, each educator, whether a novice or a veteran, will need to be reminded and hopefully understand that all new teachers require time to build skills, know-how, and develop expertise since they must also learn how to become a supportive member of their learning communities (class, school). The novice teacher is learning not only about pedagogy but also about the subjects they teach. The new teacher is learning via observation, practice and reflection how to teach various subjects to students just by being immersed within a school. This is quite a difficult transition since they are no longer looking at University-level materials; they have to revisit classroom-level content

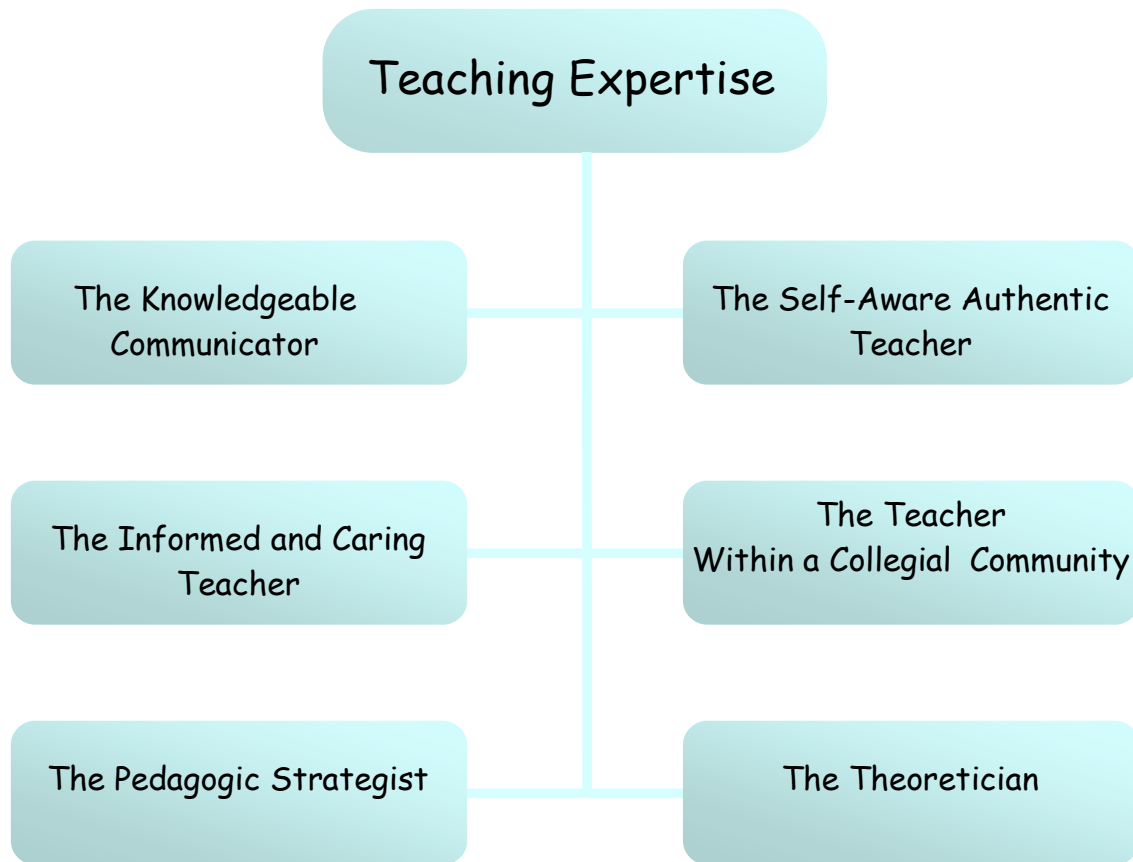
that may have changed drastically since they were a student on the other side of the desk.

The new teacher, even though they appear to be committed to students and their learning, will learn that it requires deeper thought, and wider reflection to cultivate loyal students and self-understanding. The need to consider self in relation to society is a developmental outcome within teacher education. In fact, meaning making in a pre-service programme requires reflection upon self in relation to others as a means to self-monitor (Schoonmaker, 1998). This inward reflexive gaze creates personal knowledge, and education professors have a responsibility to require reflection within a teacher education programme as it is a centre point that can shore developmental moments within teacher education. Teaching requires a systematic approach and new teachers must constantly learn from their experience reflexively (self-analysis). To do this requires a management and monitoring system that may elude teachers in the first few years. It is this elusiveness within teaching that slows progress towards expertise that in turn may impact long-term durability in the classroom and school system.

Teachers teach in a certain manner for many unexamined and inaccessible reasons yet, some have suggested, 'the single most important factor in determining the learning environment is teacher behavior. Intentionally or unintentionally, teachers' verbal and nonverbal behaviors influence student behaviors' (Levin & Nolan, 2004: 1). Accepting this notion and working to utilize such an assertion can ensure certain outcomes, some expected and some unexpected. Arguably, all behaviour is connected to a teacher's philosophy, beliefs, values and motivations that become visible during teaching because teaching demands action, reflective thought and revision as success is pursued and challenges are expected.

Pre-service students in turn learn about the content of the curricula and surrounding curriculum via the actions of teachers who are key experts. Talking to students about teachers, we often learn about a teacher's words, actions, humility and expertise. Students describe teachers in colourful terms and note their actions and general disposition since it is the expertise of a teacher that may be of most interest to a student. Stories of teachers abound in our society and there have even been several popular movies released about teachers, such as *The Blackboard Jungle*, *To Sir With Love*, *Coach Carter*, *Mr. Chips* and *Mr. Holland's Opus*, to name but a few, that build characters that are brought to life via plot and setting. In each movie, what is clear is that these teachers have expertise and a philosophy that informs and guides their teaching. We learn who they are by the manner in which they teach.

In fact, the Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF) recent survey asked: 'What determines a child's success in school?' The data imply that almost 9 in 10 Canadians surveyed (87%) said the quality of the teachers has 'a lot' of influence on whether children fail or succeed in school, and this aspect ranked the highest among six factors surveyed. With this belief firmly entrenched in Canadian society, it is important from many perspectives to ensure that Canadian teachers strive to become experts and build multiple modes of expertise.



**Figure 1:** Six expert teacher constructs

A teacher may possess more than one trait and in fact, many do however, understanding these descriptors can give rise to goal setting and clarity within the first years of practice.



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Dr. Thomas G. Ryan has been teaching since 1985. He began teaching at the Post-Secondary level for Confederation College in Thunder Bay, Ontario, Canada. He then moved into the Secondary level and taught Physical Education, Law, History and Special Education in Ontario. He then moved to the Elementary level teaching mostly within Special Education in Ontario.

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