

Reflections from the Margins on Education and the Culture of Audit and Performativity

Kevin Mc Dermott

Kevin Mc Dermott

*Navan Education Centre,
County Meath, Ireland*

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Abstract

This article seeks to contribute to the scholarly debate on teacher commitment, in a manner that is, in itself, committed and personal. It is written in response to the sense of marginalisation I experience, as a teacher and teacher educator, in the midst of education reform. The article begins with an account of two important life events and attempts to locate them in the problematic of teacher motivation and education policy. It suggests that such life events can help teachers find the personal and professional moorings, which will sustain their commitment to teaching. In doing so, the article addresses the disjunction, which currently exists between educational policy and personal values. It argues that the current policy emphasis on student outcomes risks undermining the value of human experience and insight. Finally the article argues the need for individual teachers to consider how best they can sustain their commitment, exercise agency and contribute to the discourse of education so that education will continue to be characterised by the ethics of caring and solidarity.

Keywords: Teacher commitment; Important life events; Personal values; Educational policy; Educational reform; Measurement; Solidarity.

*Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?*

From "The Rock", T.S. Eliot

Introduction

Two intensely personal, singular but also common life experiences occurred in the last few years which have had a profound effect upon me as a person and as an educator: my mother died and I turned fifty. My face-to-face encounter with mortality has caused me to reflect on my identity as a temporal being and also to reflect on the things I value most. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes writing of the death of his mother observes that no one is indispensable but his mother is irreplaceable (Barthes, 1993, p. 75). I know that my relationship with my mother was very important but I am not sure that I can or want to reckon that importance. Like the hope that Derrida expresses that his texts will not be transparently intelligible, I hope that the significance and importance of our mother-son relationship will flow beyond the present and exist into the future (Derrida and Ferraris, 2001, p. 30). Derrida declares a hope that a "sort of opening, play, indetermination be left, signifying hospitality for what is to come" (Derrida and Ferraris, 2001, p. 31). In the same way I hope that I will be hospitable to the yet-to-come meaning of my recent experiences and the loving relationship of which I am now the one who remains. However, I am not ready to have the last word on them. Like Steiner, I believe "that which we know by heart will ripen and deploy within us" (Steiner, 2003, p. 32). Just as the texts we learn by heart interact with "our temporal being", modifying our experience and being, in turn, modified by them so, too, do the memories of those relationships we have taken to heart become generative of future understanding and insight (Steiner, 2003, p. 32).

The themes of death and mortality are ones which, as a teacher of English and a teacher educator, fall within my field of study and I have discussed them many times in the classroom. This discussion took the character of what Barthes calls "stadium", a form of sympathetic critical and cultural engagement that is interested without that interest becoming sharp or acute (Barthes, 1993, p. 26). However, my mother's death, followed soon after by my fiftieth birthday, constituted what Barthes refers to as a "punctum", something which punctuated, wounded, marked and disturbed my docile studium of death and mortality (Barthes, 1993, p. 26). Derrida in his memorial essay, "The Deaths of Roland Barthes" further elaborates the sharp force of this "punctum": "It pierces, strikes me, wounds me, bruises me, and, first of all, seems to concern only me. Its very definition is that it addresses itself to me." (Derrida, 2001, p. 39)

In other words, the most common human experience (the death of a beloved other) is felt by each of us as something unique, absolute and singular. However, a "punctum", with its play on the meanings of "point" and "poignant", directs me back to the world with a new sensibility, a sympathy "almost a kind of tenderness", an awareness that countless others have experienced, or will experience, a similar, though singular, overwhelming feeling of loss (Barthes, 1993, p. 43). After a loved one dies, both life and death are haunted by the ghost of the other (Derrida, 2001, p. 41). Thus the death of my mother becomes the invisible "punctum" that colours my work. If, as Palmer suggests and I believe, teaching is bound to our inwardness and selfhood, then the personal experience of loss will influence, in some

part, my teaching and my work with teachers or, at a minimum, my attitude to my work. (Palmer, 1997, p. 14).

This invisible “punctum” calls out feelings of tenderness in me for those whom I have taught and will teach in the future, making me aware of what Benjamin calls the “the tiny, fragile human body” (Benjamin, 1999, p. 84). Just as Benjamin argues that death gives authority to stories of human experience, so the death of a loved one sanctions the sympathy and pedagogical tenderness I feel for students in all their bodily materiality and temporality. Bauman argues that this mode of “being for others” is what stands between each individual “and the absurd emptiness of contingent existence” (Bauman, 1992, p. 40). In educational terms, being for others is what stands between this individual teacher and what I experience as the increasing emptiness of educational policies which value information over human experience and interaction.

For a teacher, this tenderness is more acute precisely because schools create an illusion of eternal youth. The age profile of the students never changes, never varies. In such a context, it is not surprising that the silence around death is almost complete. In school, death is hidden, almost forgotten. And this forgetting, this suppression of knowledge, occurs in the place where knowledge is intended to be pursued. Yet, when I teach somebody, that body is mortal, as I am. For me, this knowledge and the tenderness it evokes, lies at the heart of teaching and the pedagogic relations we form as teachers.

All teaching is personal, situated and contextualised. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes says, “I see, I feel hence I notice, I observe, and I think” (Barthes, 1993, p. 35). In writing about teaching, I want to maintain my attachment to the particular, to the personal. The choice to write in a personal and biographical way about teaching is not a refusal of academic discourse or rigour. On the contrary, it is born of a desire to write with rigour and to infuse the academic discourse I employ with the energy which sustains “the inner landscape” of this teacher’s life (Palmer, 1997, p. 14).

My increased awareness of mortality and death has sharpened my response to current policy priorities and emphases. A number of influential OECD publications capture the policy spirit of the age, with their emphasis on outcomes-based education (OECD, 2008), performance-based evaluation (OECD, 2005), and the science of learning and cognitive functioning (OECD, 2002, 2007). As I struggle to discover and re-discover my bearings as a teacher, the discourse and concepts of the market economy and state administration colonise my lifeworld, and I feel an urgent necessity to resist by voicing the passion and ethical concerns which give meaning to my actions as a teacher; which support my sense of personal integrity; and which form the basis of the contract I make with myself in being a teacher. I also feel an urgent necessity to use words that both express and create who I am (my subjective identity) and express the sense I make of the world (my understanding). In doing so, I hope to contribute to the scholarly debate on teacher commitment, in a manner that is, in itself, committed and personal.

The complex interaction between commitment, important life events, career-phase, age and educational policy is addressed in a large-scale study of teachers’ lives and work (Day et al., 2006). The study identifies commitment as a key factor in “the success of education”:

(Commitment) is a term often used by teachers to describe themselves and each other (Nias, 1981, 1989), is a part of their professional identity (Elliott and Cresswell, 2001), and may be enhanced or diminished by factors such as student behaviour, collegial and administrative support, parental demands, and national education policies (Day, 2000; Louis, 1998; Riehl and Sipple, 1996; Tsui and Cheng, 1999).

Ebmeier and Nicklaus (1999) connected the concepts of commitment and emotion and defined commitment as part of a teacher's affective or emotional reaction to their experience in a school setting and part of the process regarding the level of personal investment to make to a particular school or group of pupils. This connection is central to understanding teachers' perceptions of their work, colleagues, school leadership, and the interaction between these and personal life. It is also key, therefore, to professional life phase, identity and the discourse between these and educational reform (Day et al., 2006, p. 49).

One of the key questions posed by the research, commissioned by the UK Department for Education and Skills, was the role of identity and biography in variations in teachers' effectiveness. In undertaking this essay on professional identity and biography, I pose the questions: "How have two key personal life events affected the contract I make with myself in being a teacher and how have they enhanced my commitment and resilience as a teacher in the context of educational reform?" In effect, this essay teases out one of the findings of the research, namely that the trajectory of a teacher's professional life journey, and the commitment, resilience and well-being that mark the journey, is influenced by the interplay between the professional and the personal, between life and work, between situated factors and external structures, though to express it in these oppositional terms risks creating a false dichotomy between the personal and the professional. In teaching the two tend to merge into one.

This exercise is not simply a matter of me as an individual telling my story in my own words, as if the words I choose were mine and mine only. The "I" who writes this essay can only do so because this "I" has been formed and shaped by others whose values provided the framework for these thoughts and sentiments. These formative influences come from education, critical theory, and feminism. They include Dewey's writing on education and experience; Habermas's writing on the lifeworld and the system; Noddings' writing on the caring as the foundation of ethics, as well as the example of Barthes writing and Derrida's response to it. For individuals who want to assert the value of human experience and who feel uneasy about the current reform of education along economic and managerial lines, it is important to recognise that the small "I" belongs to a larger "We", and it is the aggregation of the many individual voices which has the power to assert the values by which individual teachers live and would like to live their teaching lives. The various discourse communities whose values and language shape my discourse provide me with what Lasky (2005, p. 902) refers to as "mediational means". In this context the telling of individual stories is as much a public and professional speech act as it is a private and personal one and, at a time when many teachers feel marginalised (Long, 2008) there is a need to translate personal questions, anxieties and insights into the public discourse of the teaching profession.

Human Experience Has Fallen in Value

One source of my unease with the direction of educational policy and reform relates, primarily, to the diminished value afforded to the human experience and insight of both teachers and students in reckoning educational success. In his essay, "The Storyteller", Walter Benjamin compares the contemporary age of information with one of storytelling (Benjamin, 1999, p. 88). The claims of verifiability and plausibility, which give information its warrant are, in Benjamin's estimation, "incompatible with the spirit of storytelling" (Benjamin, 1999, p. 88). Benjamin argues that the decline in storytelling signals the loss of our ability to exchange experiences and he attributes this loss to the fact that human "experience has fallen in value." He suggests that a consequence of this decline is a decrease in the exchange of wisdom and counsel, shared meanings and mutual understanding, and an increase in the exchange of information, which "does not survive the moment in which it was new" (Benjamin, 1999, p. 89). Reflecting on the changes brought about by educational reform it seems clear, given the policy emphasis on school improvement and effective teaching, that information, especially that which relates to learning outcomes as defined by test results, is of interest and value to policy makers. Where this becomes a problem for the individual teacher, for this teacher, is when information is perceived to have more value than any wisdom or insight I have accumulated over my career. This is where the feeling of marginalisation comes into play.

Lyotard echoes Benjamin's analysis in his account of the postmodern condition (Lyotard, 1984). Lyotard argues that, in this age of information technology, only knowledge that can be translated into information retains its value (Lyotard, 1984, p. 4). In the global market economy, knowledge has become a valuable commodity. As knowledge is increasingly tied into the economy and falls under the sway of economic and technological interests, efficiency and productivity as much if not more than ethics or aesthetics, become the standards by which knowledge is valued (Lyotard, 1984, p. 46). In a process which he refers to as the "mercantilization of knowledge", Lyotard, echoing Socrates' criticism of the Sophists, suggests that the question "is it useful, saleable, efficient" takes precedent over the questions "is it true" and "is it just" (Lyotard, 1984, p. 51). Lyotard argues that this shift towards the exteriorisation of knowledge in a knowledge economy/society is likely to have a demoralising effect on teachers and researchers.

From this vantage point, one cannot deny the prescience of Lyotard's analysis. With the exteriorisation of knowledge, the rise in the value of information and the related emphasis on test results, there is less possibility that the practice of teaching will be influenced and informed by the personal experiences of teachers and the wisdom and counsel which emerges from reflection upon those experiences. As Pring argues, the current reform of education conceives of teachers as workers skilled in meeting strategic targets, set by policy makers and expert administrators, and these targets are measured in terms of efficiency, productivity and the value-added measures of pupils' attainments (Pring, 2000, p. 12). In the mercantilization of knowledge, human experience falls in value and information, verifiable and objective, rises. This is not to say, of course, that a change in the way knowledge is viewed, and the policy direction that arises from this change, can or will eliminate the importance of values and educational purposes that are not measurable in terms of performance and productivity but it does shift the balance between exterior and

interior, between information and narrative, between the personal and the public and it alters the way teachers perceive themselves and are perceived. The mercantile paradigm, as O'Sullivan describes it, with its audit and performance culture, which influences the current discourse and practices of teaching and learning, is not congenial to the cultivation of the educational values I espouse, and makes it more problematic, though not impossible, to practice or advocate the kind of teaching in which I believe (O'Sullivan, 2005). And what is true for me is also true for other teachers. The culture of audit and performance makes teachers more visible and more vulnerable than ever before. In this situation it is easy to lose confidence in personal values and meaning and to feel cut adrift. However, the personal life events I described earlier helped me to find my personal, biographical and professional moorings. This interaction between personal life events and professional contexts has received little attention in the research on teachers' lives up until recently (See Day et al., 2006, pp. 84-85). From my perspective, the decision to express these views comes not from a growing sense of demotivation but from an upsurge or renewal of commitment caused by recent life events.

This sense of renewal, this refreshment of the spirit, sustains my commitment as I manage the tension between who I am (my being, my lifeworld) and what I am expected to do (my role) in the new culture of audit and performativity. A source of tension is the feeling that, within the context of "the economising of education" (Leathwood and Hayton, 2002), the new consumerist model of education is disconnected from what Ricoeur refers to as "the ontology of human reality" and the temporality of the lifeworld of teachers (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 40).

Time and Understanding

One example of this disconnection is the difference between the way I, as an individual teacher and someone who mourns for a loved one, think about the relationship between time and understanding, and the way in which this relationship is expressed in the language of educational reform. Phrases like "accelerated learning" (Smith, 1998) or "learning time" (Earl et al., 2002) and the inspection of individual lessons with a view to improving efficiency and achieving measurable learning outcomes (see Cullingford, 1999) belong to a world that I hardly recognise as "educational" and I feel the need to pause and recover Habermas's "forgotten experience of reflection" (Habermas, 1971, p. 9) or Bauman's sociological imagination (Blackshaw, 2005). Put simply, I need time to make sense of the new situation in which I find myself, which the World Bank on its website characterises in this way:

Many schools have simply become obsolete in new global environment. "Schoolstoday," writes Per Dalin, "prepare students mainly for yesterday." Even in the better education systems around the world, schools are struggling to meet the challenges imposed by the major changes occurring around them. There are dramatic revolutions in world economy, technology, knowledge and information, politics, social relationships, and values that already have altered what young people of tomorrow must know and be able to do. (<http://info.worldbank.org/etools/docs/library/94825>)

I need a still point from which I can review the accelerated changes which are forced upon me. I need the slow time conducive to reflection and learning by heart. Thought, Bauman says, “calls for pause and rest, for “taking one’s time”, recapitulating the steps already taken, looking closely at the place reached and the wisdom (or imprudence, as the case may be) of reaching it” (Bauman, 2001, pp. 209-210). I need time to return to the foundational texts of the profession, like *Meno* and *Phaedra*, and foundational texts from my own biography, such as “The Windows of Wonder” (Mac Mahon, 1955), to explore and interpret the wisdom they express and relate that wisdom to the situation in which I find myself. The speed at which educational change is taking place, led by shifts in global capital and information technology, means that the connection between life and time, between “the temporal and the essential” is loosened if not severed (Benjamin, 1999, p. 98). Indeed, uncertainty pervades all aspects of my teaching life, both individual and communal, including the “values worth pursuing as much as the ways to pursue them” (Bauman, 2000, p. 135). Many of the methods, standards and concepts associated with the audit culture of educational reform do not speak to my deepest sense of self, or my deepest sense of education, and if they do not speak to my sense of self they cannot guide my teaching except in ways that are superficial and external. In the “calculating, computing spirit of our age” (Bauman, 1992, p. 200) there is a danger that education will lose its identity as something cumulative, whose meaning emerges over time. The educational gaze that looks towards a distant, future horizon could well be replaced, in the new educational paradigm, by short-term aims and objectives.

European Policy: Towards a Culture of Audit and Performativity

In the course of writing this article, in October 2009, we in Ireland voted in the second referendum on the Lisbon Treaty. The Lisbon Strategy, agreed between the member states of the European Union at a summit meeting in Lisbon in 2002, has the aim of making the EU the most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy in the world. In pursuit of this aim, the Lisbon Strategy set “ambitious targets in education and training” with “subsequent agreement of benchmarks for European education to be achieved by 2010” (Grek and Ozga, 2008, p. 2). Because education policy is a matter for the individual member states, one of the chief means through which the education targets of the Lisbon Strategy are advanced is through the production of data for establishing “benchmarks” and “indicators”.

In turn, these benchmarks and indicators are used to make comparisons between countries and to audit educational performance (Grek and Ozga, 2008, p. 1). The OECD PISA programme is an example of how the publication of data on tests results and “the international spectacle” of this comparative exercise defines “good” education systems and puts pressures on individual member states to adopt a measurement and audit agenda in a bid to improve or maintain their position in the international league table of educational performance (See Nóvoa and Yariv-Mashal, 2003). The significant decline in the achievement scores of Irish students in mathematics and reading, in the 2009 round of PISA, led to questions in the national parliament. The publication of the results coincided with the

launch of a draft national plan to improve literacy and numeracy in schools by the Department of Education and Skills.

Critique of a measurement-and-outcome conception of education goes back to the time of Plato's denunciation of the Sophists (Eg ea-Kuehne, 2003; Burke, 2007). In nineteenth century Britain, in the wake of the industrial revolution, when the link between economic prosperity and education became a matter of public policy, Charles Dickens warned of the dangers of allowing utilitarian and pragmatic considerations to dominate educational practice. In *Hard Times* first published in 1854, Dickens set out to alert us to the dangers of applying the principles of industrial production and economics to the education of the young. The book had a profound effect upon me when I first read it as a young, graduate teacher. Thomas Gradgrind, the utilitarian philosopher and school-owner, is portrayed by Dickens as always carrying a rule, a pair of scales and a multiplication table so that, at any given moment, he could "weigh and measure any parcel of human nature and tell you what it comes to" (Dickens, 1987, p. 16). Gradgrind's elevation of the factual and the measurable occurs at the expense of the hidden, interior life; the life of the imagination and the heart; and warm human relationships. Dickens's novel explores the calamitous effects of a climate of auditing and measurement on the heart of education, the invisible pulse that gives education its energy and spirit; qualities that are impossible to measure but which are, nonetheless, real and important. As Louisa says to her father, Gradgrind, the "languid and monotonous smoke" of the factory chimneys is always visible and measurable but the fire that feeds them only rarely glimpsed" (Dickens, 1987, p. 105). If, as Ozga suggests (2003, p. 2) "the use of indicators of performance as a way of managing and improving performance in education is now so widespread across schools, colleges and universities that it is difficult to imagine educational life without them" then we may well be in a situation where we see the smoke and miss the fire.

Nurture and Presence

From family experience and from my experience as a teacher, I am wary of the conflation of good teaching with the measurement of student outcomes and performance. This is not to say that I reject teacher accountability. Of the contrary, I believe teachers should be accountable and account for themselves. Nor am I saying that I cannot work within the present climate. I can. However, in doing so, I risk altering the contract I make with myself and drift from the values which anchor my identity as a teacher. If I construct a personal genealogy of the concept of education, nurture and presence are foundational qualities but there is nothing biographical, thematic or contextual that relates the concept of measurement to my understanding of the fundamental purposes of education.

In childhood, for example, my parents, my primary educators, made measurements associated with running a house and raising a family. They measured the area of the living room for new floor covering or estimated the number of rolls it would take to wallpaper a given area. I remember using a cup to measure flour and raisins when I assisted my mother as she baked. I remember my father measuring my height and that of my brother, and marking our respective heights on the frame of the kitchen door.

I can and do remember some of the outcomes of that weighing and measuring. My father got the measurements wrong and we were short a roll of wallpaper. Another roll was nowhere to be found. My mother was not happy; my father was in the dog-house. I felt embarrassed for him. Yet, when I look back, it is not the minor failures that matter. What matters is that I stood on a chair with my mother and helped her bake and I got flour on my nose and she laughed. It matters little whether the scones were burnt or the mixture had the right quantities. What influences me is the climate of encouragement and nurture my parents created for me and my siblings, and the manner in which they were present for us. Their influence helps to anchor my identity as a teacher and to negotiate my way between the Scylla of educational reform and the Charybdis of bureaucratic control. I am sure that every teacher has similar personal and biographical moorings which anchor them and guide them as they manage the interaction between their professional values and external policies and demands. Rousseau has elaborated the concept of I-deals, the idiosyncratic work arrangements negotiated between individuals and their employers (Rousseau, 2005). She suggests that individuals can find ways of exercising agency in managing employment relationships. But the term "I-deals" might also be used to describe the intrapersonal contracts individual teachers make with themselves in managing their relationships with administrators and new regimes of accountability. An I-deal, in this context, recognises the efforts of individual teachers to realise their personal values while complying with external policies and the contractual obligations that arise from them.

Education Is Personal

Of course the experiences I describe are personal and biographical. But then all education, both formal and informal, takes place at the point where the personal intersects with the societal, the biographical with the historical and the intimate with the general and public. Clearly there is a singularity of educational experience and there is a repetition of that experience. Education is unique for every child who passes through the doors of a school at age four and who leaves it at age seventeen or eighteen. My fear, as an educator, is that the current audit-and-measurement policy agenda will place too great an emphasis on the repetition and ignore the singularity. To teachers, the singularity of the pedagogic relation is important because teaching is, primarily, relational (Hargreaves, 2000; Mc Dermott and Richardson, 2005). After forty years of teaching Patrick Murray, teacher and scholar, in an interview published in the *Teaching English* magazine in Autumn 2006, described the greatest pleasure of teaching as: "The rapport with the students. Being their friend and they being mine." What place will the concept of pedagogic friendship and the values and emotions which underpin have in "the increasingly rationalised, cognitively driven and behaviour priorities" (Hargreaves, 2000, p. 812) of the policy and administrative agenda of educational reform?

I believe that students and teachers always remain, in many ways, unknown to each other. In the pedagogical relationship, in the influence of that relationship even after students have left school, there is an openness and an unpredictability, a possibility that keeps the potential of that relationship alive, such that, in the pedagogical relationship, everything still remains to come and to be understood. There is no terminal examination

that can measure the significance of the educational experience for our lives or the effectiveness of teachers. However, this does not mean that we should avoid attempts to explore or describe or reckon on that significance.

Measuring and Reckoning

The editors of a selection of Derrida's texts, published as *The Work of Mourning*, write of the manner in which Derrida, when called upon to respond to the death of a friend, has sought to relate life and friendship to death and mourning while exploring the relationship between "the singularity of death and its inevitable repetition" and "what is means to reckon with death." They gloss the verb "to reckon" in the following way: "to say, to recount, relate, or narrate, to consider, judge or evaluate, even to estimate, enumerate, and calculate (Brault and Naas, 2001, p. 2). This expansive definition is, from a teacher's perspective, a richer concept than the managerial concept of measurement. It is not as if there is no evaluation but evaluation is bound to the concepts of narration, consideration and judgement. As elaborated by Brault and Naas, the concept of reckoning accords with my intuitive sense of how we might do justice to the richness of educational experience. In the light of the comments of Patrick Murray, the question "How do you reckon pedagogical friendship?" might speak more directly to the experience of teachers than the question which seems to motivate educational reform: "How do you measure the relative effectiveness of teachers in the results attained by their students?"

Pedagogical Friendship and Loss

In *The Politics of Friendship* Derrida suggests that the law of friendship is that one friend will always go before the other; and one friend will always remain. And the sense of loss that is felt by the one who remains is allied to the sense of hope that there will be a life to come for the one who has gone away. The emotions of loss and hope are experienced by all teachers as they bid farewell to their students at graduation, at the end of a school cycle. More than most, teachers understand how education exists in the shadow of temporality, which is the shadow of mortality, and it this understanding which creates one of the most important educational virtues and emotions: tenderness. Indeed, I think tenderness is probably the most important pedagogical virtue. Of course, tenderness, as a concept, is personal, expressive and bound up with relationships. And that is how many teachers see education (McDermott and Richardson, 2005). From my perspective, the perspective of my continuing commitment to teaching, the reform agenda and the modernisation of education places too great a focus "on entrepreneurship, competition and economic development" (Ball 2005, p. 216) and is too concerned to link educational change to the requirements of the economy and the labour market. For me, this is not the ultimate hope of education. Therefore, this focus does not inspire me or connect to the attitudes and dispositions that are the touchstones of my identity as a teacher. If policy makers want me, as an individual teacher, to adapt and change and show resilience and commitment, then they need to speak more persuasively to the values, hopes, understanding and social objectives which define me as a teacher. Nor am I unique in this. Teachers in one Dublin school associated teaching

with relationships, optimism and possibility (McDermott and Richardson, 2005, p. 33). Another group of teachers, who were on secondment to the Second Level Support Service, identified “passion” as a motivating force:

Most people joined the support service because they were passionate about some aspect of their work. A lot of us would have come from disadvantaged schools and would be passionate about promoting the lot of those kids and that would be fundamental to a lot of what we do and it just carries through into all aspects of our work (Mc Dermott et al., 2007, p. 250).

This passion is grounded in an ethics of care, which “makes room in the moral domain for actions motivated by emotions such as compassion, sympathy, care – what one might call the “altruistic emotions” (Rehg, 1994, p. 13). Noddings (1984) argues that caring is an essential component of what it means to be human. For her “the student is infinitely more important than the subject-matter of teaching” (Noddings, 1984, p. 176). Teachers’ passion for their students is a form of empathetic solidarity that is associated with justice (Habermas, 1990, p. 202). This empathetic solidarity is a vital source of teachers’ motivation and creativity and offers a critical perspective from which the current educational reforms can be viewed.

This kind of solidarity cannot afford to be weak-kneed or misty-eyed. As Hargreaves points out:

In schools themselves, excessive emphasis on emotional caring for poor and marginalised students can also condemn them to a warm “welfarist” culture, where immediate comfort that makes school a haven for children can easily occlude the long-term achievement goals and expectations that are essential if children are to make their permanent escape (Hargreaves, 2000, p. 813).

While a welfarist school culture can work against individual students, complex external factors are also at play in determining the impact of education on the lives of poor and marginalised students. In Ireland the long-term achievement goals and expectations, of which Hargreaves speaks, may include those of caring and active citizenship as promoted by Noddings (2203) or may be equated with performance and achievement in public examinations.

Working Class Girls and Existential Knowledge

It is arguable that the current focus in post-primary education in Ireland on a narrow set of educational outcomes, linked to a prescribed curricula and state examinations which preserve traditional academic divisions, is in itself one of the causes of certain students being marginalised. For one working-class girl, the role of teachers is not to prepare their students for an examination but to offer moral guidance, “to tell you what’s right from wrong” (Fagan, 2004, p. 44). This is not an abstract concept for this young woman, whose brother is in jail and who has no desire to follow the road he has travelled: “And the way he turned out, the way he’s so bad and all, it shows me that I don’t want to go that way (...) I

want to go a good way. Like, I want to take the other road" (Fagan, 2004, p. 45). Following her interview with this young woman, Fagan observes:

Teachers are valued, not for the knowledge they possess but as adults who can be trusted, confidants who, nonetheless, know the boundaries between being a caring adult and a friend. A good teacher is someone who knows the boundaries; someone who puts you in your place; someone who shows young people right from wrong. It is a sophisticated view of education, which is based on a relation of care and directed towards moral formation. It runs counter to the instrumentalist, middle-class view of education as the accumulation of cultural capital (Fagan, 2004, p. 44-45).

Fagan sketches a vivid account of the circumstances of the life of another of the young women whom she interviewed:

As A tells her story it is clear that the formation of the self has taken place in circumstances of family disintegration, domestic violence and dislocation. Prematurely, A assumed familial responsibilities. "By the age of seven," she remarks, "I could make a Christmas dinner." As a child, she stayed at home from school to "mind the kids", and to observe the chaotic drama of her parents' life, "and watch me da get stabbed, or, you know, me ma end up in hospital. There was always just violence – violence, drink, drugs, whatever..."

What A values most is her collection of photographs. However, A has no images from the period of her life between the age of two and the age of nine. In this context her observation that photographs allow you to "remember the time that was taken" is indicative of her experience of loss in relation to her childhood. This sense of loss and the feelings of suffocation she experienced, expressed in a remarkable series of vivid images, make her appreciate her present circumstances:

...at that time it just felt like there was...you were in this room and you couldn't get out of it, and there was no air. And it felt you'd never, ever get out of it. And I used to always imagine myself crawling up the wall, getting to the top and that the ceiling was going to open and it eventually did so...that's the way...that's my other side, like...that's the way I look at it. I got out of that bad side, that's the dark side. Now I'm in the light side (Fagan, 2004, p. 51).

This account of a young life lived in troubled circumstances brings home Noddings' assertion that education and educators must be concerned with the present experience and happiness of students: "Happiness in the present is not incompatible with future happiness and it may even be instrumental for future happiness. Educators should therefore give attention to the quality of students' experience. (Noddings, 2003, p. 240)

Faced with the breakup of her family; the drug taking of her mother, domestic violence and the responsibility of looking after her younger siblings, the relevance and meaning of the Leaving Certificate Examination, the summative state examination taken by students at the end of secondary school in Ireland, in this young woman's life is open to question. This poses real dilemmas for the teacher. How do you practice empathetic solidarity in these circumstances? How do you support this young woman and provide the broader education that she needs while keeping in mind "the long-term achievement goals and expectations that are essential if children are to make their permanent escape"? (Hargreaves, 2000, p. 813).

Part of the difficulty resides in the individualism of the model of education promoted by the reform agenda, which is out of kilter with the more communal values of working class culture. As Fagan observes, the discourse of this young woman is a discourse of the other and care for the other. Her personal space is constricted and she assumes a burden of care for her siblings and for her parents. Even her hopes and wishes for the future are focused on others. In these circumstances, directing all her personal resources towards the Leaving Certificate would seem selfish. Skeggs (1997, p. 161) argues that the investment working class women make in caring closes off possibilities for investing in themselves. The young woman in Fagan's study has no doubt about the importance of school in her life or the importance of her Year Head:

She would be a very big part of my life so she would. And you know you can trust her (...) I think that's very important to have supportive teachers 'cause if you don't you're in the world alone, especially because school is a big part of your life so, if you don't have teachers to support you... I don't know what I'd do. (Fagan, 2004, p. 17).

What this anonymous teacher clearly understands is that teaching is a relation of care and she has provided what Noddings (2003) calls careful education. Based on the evidence of the Leaving Certificate results obtained by this student, the educational climate in the school she attended might be judged undemanding (McLean, 2003) or welfarist because the student failed to gain enough points to pursue the options she had chosen through the state's central application procedure. These are the kinds of judgements that a performance-led conception of education encourages, judgements which can undermine the primacy of human relationships in the production of value. Another reading of the script of this young woman's life might find evidence of the system's failure to recognise, reckon or even measure the existential knowledge and the philosophical outlook she brings to bear on her life and the circumstances which have shaped it. Equally worrying, from a teacher's perspective, is that the current focus on examination results means that pedagogic relationships, such as those described by this young woman, are marginalised. We have created a system that is geared to measuring information rather than reckoning educational experience. Even an international study of child well-being used "traditional meritocratic and achievement oriented paradigms" to indicate educational well-being and ignored the social and affective aspects of education (O'Brien, 2008, p. 152).

We could do things differently. We could satisfy the need for evidence of educational success while giving more value to human experience and insight. Fagan (2004, p. 71) suggests that schools could develop courses in critical thinking and philosophy, built on a conversational model, in which students reflect on their lives and consider the choices available to them. She goes on to remark:

...the knowledge that the girls possess in abundance, existential knowledge (...) is not really validated in school or used as the springboard for thoughtful, educational dialogue. These girls might best be served by a move away from knowledge as something fixed, something to be learned, towards a more dynamic and interpersonal view of knowledge. None of the girls had a confident academic-self-image, yet they were thoughtful and insightful in their conversation (Fagan, 2004, p. 71).

As things stand the knowledge that the girls possess is not measureable and is not, therefore, convertible or tradable within the education system into symbolic capital and future economic reward (see Skeggs, 1997, p. 161). Moreover, there is little formal recognition of the teaching that draws out this knowledge. Ball (2005) gives a gloomy analysis of the position of working class students within the market economy of reformed education in England. He points out how local schools compete “to recruit those students most likely to contribute to “improvements” and ‘performance’” (Ball, 2005, p. 13). Certain classes of students carry higher value. A school with a good reputation “can attract more middle class students and the recruitment of more middle class students can be ‘cashed-in’ for ‘improved’ school performance” (Ball, 2003, p. 15). This desire to attract students of “higher value” in a performative culture leads to a diverse range of strategies to control student intake. For Ball, “the economy of student worth (...) is very much a product, albeit a side-effect, of current educational policy” (Ball, 2005, p. 15). Flynn’s report in *The Irish Times* on April 28, 2008 on the Department of Education and Science audit of school enrolment policies suggests “there is a class divide permeating the Irish education system at second level.” Furthermore, many schools perceived as elite have “virtually no provision for special needs students.” The research reviewed by O’Brien, including research undertaken in Irish schools, shows that the devaluing of students on the basis of their classed and gendered identities has a negative impact on their well-being. (O’Brien, 2008, p. 158)

Nomenclature

At national policy level, investment in education is increasingly discussed in terms of its contribution to economic success and development (Government of Ireland, 2007, p. 20). The National Development Plan speaks of the need to attune education to the needs of the “modern knowledge-driven economy” (Government of Ireland, 2007, p. 196). This economic view of education brings with it a management set of judgements on educational success. Efficiency and effectiveness in relation to educational outcomes are the new currencies. The annual league table of schools compiled by *The Irish Times* for the last six years publicises the comparative performance data of our schools in relation to university entrance. Here information, rather than narration or experience, is privileged and this information encourages an instrumental view of education. Getting the results, and being seen to get the results, rather than the quality of care or the nature of the pedagogic relationships within a school, is the measure of success.

As Ball suggests, a new kind of teacher is called up by educational reform (Ball, 2005, p. 21). The OECD has named this new teacher for us – it is the effective teacher (OECD, 2005). Not the moral, imaginative or caring teacher; not the socially-committed, enthusiastic, creative or just teacher, but the “effective” teacher. It is such a meagre, uninspiring word. The effective teacher is one who can maximise the performance of students “for whom excellence and improvement (in whatever forms required) are the driving force of their practice” (Ball, 2005, p. 21). The professionalism of the effective teacher is measured by his or her success in responding to external requirements and targets as set by policy makers. The discourse of reform is the discourse of innovation, improvement, performance and effectiveness. It is a discourse, which needs to find more ways to accommodate and celebrate the social relations of education and the ethics of caring and empathetic solidarity that define them.

Conclusion

The logic of reform carried to the conclusion of impersonal efficiency - where life events become something to be managed to avoid interruptions to the smooth operation of productive teaching; where information is valued above experience and social networks are informational rather than narrational; where students are more valued for their performance in examinations than for their personalities; where successful teaching is equated with outcomes rather than ethical solidarity; where individual success is recognised above the creation of learning communities - would signal the death of teaching as I know and understand it. Death, as Bauman suggests is a descent into “depersonalised nothingness” and teaching will become such a nothingness if it becomes disassociated from the ontological primacy of caring and the ethical primacy of solidarity (Bauman, 1992, p. 51).

This dystopian vision will not come to pass because the logic of any dominant discourse will always be checked and re-directed by the daily human interactions which, in effect, create the system. At school level, as long as individual teachers stay connected to the values which anchor their identity they will sustain their commitment to their profession and to the students whom they serve. And, as this paper illustrates, important life events can renew commitment. The personal life experiences described at the beginning of this essay contributed to my determination to review my I-deal, the contract I make with myself in managing my relationship with administrators and the discourse of educational reform. They have strengthened my resolve to maintain the values which anchor my identity as a teacher. As the meaning of what it is to be a teacher and the nature of the social relations within teaching are being re-defined by the discourse of global educational reforms and national administrations, there is greater need than ever for individual teachers to consider how best they can sustain their commitment, exercise agency and contribute to the discourse of education in a context that, from a policy perspective, is increasingly characterised by what Beck calls “expertocracy” (as cited in Bauman, 2000, p. 210). Within the daily interactions of school life there are opportunities to embody values and enact practices which express these values, and teachers need to seize these opportunities.

This essay is confessional in parts but it strives to be more than a public display of private feelings. On the contrary it takes as its starting point experiences, which are “lived through as thoroughly personal and subjective” and attempts to locate them in the problematic of educational policy and discourse (Bauman, 2000, p. 50). It strives to connect or reconnect subjective experience to educational policy and translate private questions into public issues. Above all, it strives to express the ethical concerns and emotions, the beliefs and values which define my identity as a teacher and which seem to have been displaced or become less visible in the discourse of educational reform. This is not only a “disjunction between policy and preferred practice” but a disjunction between policy and personal and professional integrity (McNess et al., as cited in Ball, 2005, p. 20). And integrity, authenticity and personal meaning are key to sustaining the commitment of teachers in the difficult times in which we find ourselves.

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