



Reflective Teaching and How it Aids in Coping with Heavy Workloads, Mandated Policies and Disagreements with Colleagues

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Abstract

The main aim of this study is to understand (from the perspective of local teachers) what constitute reflective teaching, negative in-school factors, and how teaching reflectively aid in coping with negative factors. In-school factors cited by teachers in the study are: heavy workload, mandated policies and disagreement with colleagues. By reflecting on these, the respondents arrived at a number of solutions and employed both direct and indirect coping strategies.

Keywords: reflection, reflective teaching, coping strategies, negative in-school factors, Cayman Islands, students, school context, teaching, heavy workload, policy

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Current Issues in Education

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The connection between reflective teaching and coping with negative in-school factors is documented in international literature. There is, however, no known local research in the Cayman Islands which examines these areas. This paper contributes to filling this literary gap by reporting on a study which seeks to understand (from the perspective of local teachers) what constitute reflective teaching, negative in-school factors, and how teaching reflectively aid in coping with negative factors. A review of literature on reflective teaching, indicators of the practice, and what generally constitute negative in-school factors, establishes a framework for the paper. The study, which forms the basis for the paper, is outlined and its findings discussed.

Teaching reflectively and indicators of the practice

Minott (2009), defines reflection as careful consideration or thought; it is a process of disciplined intellectual criticism combining research; knowledge of context, and balanced judgment (critical thinking) about previous, present, and future actions, events or decisions. In light of this, reflective teaching is an approach to teaching, learning and problem solving that uses reflection as the main tool. It encourages teachers to create distance between themselves and their practice, as outlined by Bengtsson (1993). It involves them in analysing, discussing, evaluating, changing and developing their practice, by adopting an analytical approach to their work as purported by Martin Jr. Wood, & Stevens (1988).

A common feature of the reflective process is the questioning of 'self', that is, one's beliefs, values, assumptions, context, and goals, in relation to actions, events, or decisions, as outlined by Cruickshank (1987). Zeichner and Liston (1996) put this in practical terms when they point out that reflective teaching involves teachers in examining, framing, attempting to

solve dilemmas of classroom and schools, and asking questions about assumptions and values they bring to teaching. It also involves attending to the institutional and cultural context in which they teach, taking part in curriculum development, being involved in school change and taking responsibility for their professional development.

The advantages of teaching reflectively are many, for individual teachers, the teaching profession, and schools that are willing to employ and encourage its use. For example, I can infer from Farrell (2001) that reflective teaching demands that teachers employ and develop their cognitive skills as a means of improving their practice. They would recall, consider, and evaluate their teaching experiences as a means of improving future ones. Cole (1997) and Calderhead (1992) point out that reflective teachers develop and use self-directed critical thinking and ongoing critical inquiry in their practice, initiated by them and not administratively decreed. This results in the development of contextualised knowledge. Elder and Paul (1994), and Halpern (1996) also point out that reflective teachers would think critically, which involves the willingness to question, take risks in learning, try out new strategies and ideas, seek alternatives, take control of learning, use higher order thinking skills and reflect upon their own learning processes. They would discuss and analyse with others, problems they encounter in their classroom, to aid their analysis of situations, which could result in improved future classroom encounters, as suggested by (Cunningham 2001). I also infer from Zeichner and Liston (1996) that reflective teachers would be subject conscious as well as standard conscious because teaching reflectively promotes the individual as responsible for identifying subject content deficiencies and, through the act of reflection and being autonomous, address such deficiencies.

Reflective teaching also demands that teachers use and develop their affective skills as a means of improving their practice. According to Markham (1999), they would use their intuition,

initiative, values, and experience during teaching, and exercise judgment about the use of various teaching and research skills. Reiman (1999) suggests that they would identify personal meaning and or significance of a classroom or school situation and this would include the disclosure and examination of personal feelings. Markham (1999) further suggests that teachers would also take personal risks, for reflective teaching demands the sharing of perceptions and beliefs with others. They would engage in the disclosure of feeling, ideas, receiving and giving feedback as a part of a collaborative experience, as purported by (Day 1999) and, as Cunningham (2001) states, they would confront the uncertainty about their teaching philosophies and indeed their competence.

If teachers hone their cognitive and affective skills via reflective teaching, this could improve their ability to react and respond—as they are teaching—to assess, revise, and implement approaches and activities on the spot. According to Cunningham (2001) and Bengtsson (1993), this could also develop further self-awareness and knowledge through personal experience. More importantly, this could aid in encouraging teachers in their role as autonomous professionals, by encouraging them to take greater responsibilities for their own professional growth by deepening an awareness of their practice, set within their unique particular socio-political contexts.

Defining reflective teaching and outlining its benefits point to its value and role in encouraging effective teaching and teachers. However, given the focus of the paper, there is also the need to highlight potentially, what constitute negative in-school factors.

What generally constitute negative in-school factors?

The literature draws attention to a number of important in-school factors which affect teachers and teaching: teachers' heavy workload, administrative requirement/mandated policies,

poor student behaviour and inadequate interpersonal relational skills.

Teachers' workload.

The study of Johnstone (1993), Bridge (2004), and McAvoy (2004) are examples of studies of teachers' workload and its impact on teachers' stress, lesson planning, and various aspects of their lives in and out of school. Workload is the most important in-school factor that contributes to teachers leaving the classroom. Those who headed for new jobs stressed excessive workload as the main reason for leaving, and not the attraction of opportunities elsewhere (Smithers and Robinson 2003). Merttens and Robertson (2002) for example, point out that some primary school teachers spend many hours on Sundays on work for which there is no cover provided during the week. There are, however, suggestions for addressing this issue of heavy workload. For example, a solution to one aspect of the problem of teachers' workload i.e. lesson planning could be the use of electronic and computerized aids to planning. This includes making use of available pre-prepared lesson plans found on the World Wide Web, thus reducing teachers' workload by reducing time spent on planning (Hamilton-trust 2004 & Whittaker 2002).

For areas that are administrative in nature, the solution could involve hiring more support/administrative or specialists staff to relieve teachers of certain tasks. The additional staff would take on routine but essential administrative tasks to support behaviour management and provide guidance to pupils, thus giving the classroom teacher more time for planning and teaching (Bridge 2004, Department for Education and Skills 2002). Another suggestion by Braggins (2004) involves structural changes in schools. This requires adjusting timetables to accommodate specialist staff and/or changes in timetabling and school practices to accommodate time for lesson planning in school and during the school day. Finding full solutions to these issues is not easy; therefore, what is required is further systematic research into policy, practice,

culture of schools, and school systems, which are outside the scope and focus of this paper. The other in-school factor identified in the literature and hinted at in this paragraph is administrative requirements and in particular mandated government or school policies.

Administrative requirements/mandated school or government policies.

Administrative requirements and or mandated government or school policies are also factors affecting teachers. It is understood that not every government or school mandated policy or decree is eagerly adhered to by teachers. Scott (1999), in a questionnaire survey of teachers in 114 schools in eight Local Education Authorities (LEAs) found that school teaching staff felt increasingly inadequate in the face of rising expectations, greater responsibilities being placed upon them and by government demands that impact their autonomy. In reference to government-mandated policies and reform and how these affect teachers, Lasky, Moore, and Sutherland (2001) in their study, found that—in response to mandated government educational reform in Ontario—ten percent (10%) of teachers in the schools they researched took early retirement or decided to leave teaching altogether. Maxwell-Jolly (2000) in her study on factors influencing the implementation of mandated policy, states that teachers adapted to the situations they faced in a number of ways. Essentially, then, instead of open rebuttal and defiance of mandated government and school policies, teachers performed subtle forms of resistance. Maxwell-Jolly's work brings to my attention the fact that both school-mandated policy and the subsequent covert and adaptive behaviour of teachers to such policy could be either detrimental or beneficial to students' learning. Here too, what is required is further systematic research.

Away from government-mandated policies, teacher also saw other factors such as attending required workshops, completing home visits, attending meetings and conducting developmental review as factors affecting them; for these activities result in a loss of weekly or

daily planning or teaching time (Venn and McCollum 2002). Often, visits to homes are required because of another in-school factor i.e. poor student behavior.

Poor student behavior.

Poor student behavior seems to be a world-wide concern for teachers. Smithers and Robinson (2003) in their study found that teachers leaving secondary schools were more likely to cite the school situation, particularly poor student behavior, as a factor that contributed to their leaving. Poor student behavior also puts a strain on teacher-parent relationships. While there are many tried and tested strategies i.e. non-punitive and punitive, (Long, Frye & Long 1985) the area of poor student behaviour, especially among students in secondary schools continues to be an in-school challenge for teachers. Despite this seeming challenge, Reid (1991), encourages teachers to persist, and suggests way to manage behavioral problems. She points out that behavior is a result and not a cause, so there is the need to start with identifying the cause as a part of the process of attending to the behavior recognizing that at times, the cause is beyond the teachers' control. The writer points out that while corrective measures are of value, the social-emotional climate of the classroom must be attended to, for this can contribute positively to changing poor student behavior. The social-emotional climate of the classroom involves good interpersonal relationship or the cultivation of good human relation i.e. friendliness, understanding, warmth and courtesies. This recommendation seems to place the responsibility on teachers to hone and cultivate relevant interpersonal skills, but this is not always adhered to as will be shown later in this paper.

Interpersonal Relational skills.

Apart from contributing to addressing the in-school factor of poor students' behavior, teachers must be in possession of certain interpersonal relational skills because teaching is a

social activity involving relationships (Markham 1999) and peoples' emotions and feelings are being exposed and examined. Gladding (2000), Belkin (1988), Jacobs (1998) Switzer (1986) proposed empathy as a relational skill needed by teachers. Empathy refers to perceiving what another person might be feeling, or experiencing another's emotions from the point of view of that person. This is what Feldman (1997) refers to as the 'understanding of what another individual feels' (p. 279). McCann and Baker (2001), in defining the term take it further by suggesting that to empathize is to understand your client, this means giving them time, listening to them so as to be able to hear their perspective. This also involves an attempt to understand the emotions being expressed. 'Tuning in' is another relational skill needed, which McCann and Baker (2001), Hutchins & Vaught (1997), suggest involves adopting a flexible and open approach to relating, including the ability to listen effectively which means carefully listening to what is said.

Being friendly and disclosing oneself are also necessary relational skills for teachers. McCann and Baker (2001) interpret 'being friendly' as treating colleagues and students as people. They are not to be dealt with in a detached manner, which involves relating to them at their own level and not speaking in a condescending manner. This demands that teachers develop a non-confrontational and non-judgmental relationship in which students and colleagues feel their concerns can be openly and freely discussed. Writers such as Gladding (2000) and Switzer (1986) suggest that a conscious sharing of personal information can facilitate a relationship. Information shared between colleagues might not be a secret, but can be quite personal. The sharing of such information might demand confidentiality, which Belkin (1988), Jacobs (1998); McCann and Baker (2001) pointed out is a relationship of trust in which one person imparts private or secret matters to a second party. Belkin (1988), Jacobs (1998) and McCann and Baker

(2001) also suggest that the level of commitment to this principle also reflects one's commitment to professionalism.

Now that we have an understanding of what is involved in teaching reflectively and what generally constitutes in-school factors affecting teachers, there is the need to point out, potentially, how teaching reflectively aids teachers in coping with in-school factors.

Teaching reflectively and negative in-school factors

The role of reflective teaching in aiding teachers to cope with negative in-school factors is outlined by a number of writers. Posner (1989) points out that it is by critically thinking about these factors that teachers will be able to make adjustments and arrive at solutions. Cunningham (2001) introduces the idea of a collaborative approach when she suggests that teachers should not face in-school factors alone, but should do so by engaging with colleagues in problem solving. She makes the point that reflective teaching demands that teachers discuss and analyse with others, problems they encounter in their classrooms, to aid their analysis of situations, and this could result in improved future classroom encounters. Writers such as Cole (1997), and Calderhead (1992), also point out that employing reflective teaching could result in creative and innovative approaches to classroom and school situations and problems and this can result in improved learning opportunities for students. Cultivating interpersonal relational skills are necessary for reflective teachers if they are going to carry out the following affective behaviour and learning methods: an examination of self, beliefs and values, share their interpretations and thoughts, become involved in interaction, analysis, personal learning logs and partnership as suggested by (Posner 1989, & Cunningham 2001), they need to be able to do these knowing that they are being listened to and that their thoughts are seriously considered.

While the connection between reflective teaching and coping with negative in-school factors

seems to be well documented in international literature, there is no known local research in the Cayman Islands that examines these areas. Based on this fact, a study was carried out.

Method

The aim of the study and research questions

The purpose of this small study was twofold, one, to aid in filling this seeming literary gap. Two, to identify from the perspective of local teachers what constitute teaching reflectively, negative in-school factors, and how teaching reflectively aid them in coping with the identified factors. Three broad research questions were formulated. What constitute reflective teaching? What do participants consider negative in-school factors? How does teaching reflectively aid teachers in coping with negative in-school factors?

Participants

I used an instrumental case study approach, which involves using the participants to provide insight into the concerns of the study. They were two female teachers – William and Maxwell (obviously, these are pseudonyms and giving the respondents male names, further enhanced anonymity) with a number of years of teaching experience. Maxwell was a Junior high school teacher of Social Studies, History and Religious Education with over twenty-five years teaching experience and William a primary school teacher with over twenty years of teaching experience.

Data collection methods

I used the process of purposeful convenient or opportunity sampling (Creswell, 1998), in their selection, based on their years of experience of teaching in a number of different countries and contexts. Their years of experience allowed them to have experienced negative in-school factors. Interviews and documentary analysis i.e. teachers' lesson plans, were the data collection

methods employed. The main instrument used for the collection of data was a semi-structured interview schedule which I piloted twice (Wragg 2002). I chose to use interview, for there was the need to get in-depth information. However, the main reason for employing this method is the fact that it provides the opportunity to include follow-up as well as supplementary questions thought of during the actual interview and used as necessary to illuminate or clarify, thus facilitating depth in responses, as suggested by Joffe (2001). Interviews focused on participants' experience and observations of their practice, and were approximately one and a half hours in length. Participants also agreed to participate in a second round of interview, if necessary.

Data analysis process

The data from the interviews (which were transcribed from tape recordings) were analyzed using 'within and cross-case' analyses. This meant that an analysis was done of each participant's views, as was a cross-examination of emerging categories to discern findings that were common to all two cases. I also used direct interpretation of the data, which involved looking at each case and drawing meaning from it, and categorical aggregation, where a collection of instances was sought with the hope that issue-relevant meanings would emerge (Creswell 1998). I examined all the responses to the interview questions to identify similarities and differences. By highlighting similarities and differences from what was said or how the respondents said it, I constructed an understanding of what constitute teaching reflectively, negative in-school factors and how teaching reflectively aid then in coping with negative factors.

I also used participants' lesson plans to supplement, that is, to confirm or make more or less plausible, findings of the interview.

Before commencing actual analysis of the data, I asked respondents to read transcripts of their interview and say if the account faithfully represented their experience. Elliott (1991) refers

to this as validating by appealing to the participants. They both agreed and carried out this task and only minor corrections needed to be made.

Results and Discussion

What constitute reflective teaching locally?

During the data analysis, three useful categories emerged in response to the question of what constitute teaching reflectively. Each represents facets of teaching that the respondents described when speaking of reflective teaching. The categories are students (S), teaching context (TC), and mechanics (M). The category of students refers to the use of students in peer evaluation or their engagement in other activities specifically geared to facilitate the acquisition of information, or references made to students' well-being, welfare, their activities, roles and learning styles. The category of teaching context, includes policies, teaching and teaching material/supplies, facilities, school responsibilities, school physical layout, school philosophy and how each respondent interpreted, conformed, interacted with, and utilised these aspects in their practice. The category of mechanics emerged from the data because the responses were replete with descriptions of 'when', 'how' and 'what was done' during their practice.

Students and teaching reflectively.

Both respondents seemed to believe that students were significant to the process of teaching; however, similarities and differences exist in their use of elements of reflective teaching in relation to their students. Both employed reflection or 'thinking about' and questioned the relevance of their schools' curricula to students' needs for example:

I find that, people say 'oh you try to do too much' but it is my belief that the children must be actively engaged. And so I am always thinking, ' what can I do

to actively engage them' while someone will just come and give them the text books and the paper and ' that's a no no.' So they are an active part of the learning process and this is one of the philosophy which guides my own teaching' (Maxwell)

Now I think about it a lot, you teach them things and you wonder, 'Why am I teaching them about active and passive voice or stuff like that?' Why are we teaching them to convert fractions when in everyday life we don't do those kinds of fractions? If we truly look at genuine life, we don't convert anything to anything now, so it is just nonsense! It frightens me' (William)

Giving thought to, and the employment of questions is compatible with the view of Zeichner and Liston (1996), who saw the use of questions by teachers as an aspect of reflective teaching. Maxwell's engagement in a process of questioning led her to become proactive in addressing students' perceived need by joining the national curriculum planning team. Zeicher and Liston (1996), in their definition of a reflective teacher, highlight pro-activity and involvement with curriculum issues.

Maxwell was not only generally concerned with the students in her class, but also reflected on their differences, with the aim to improve how she taught them. The analysis of her lesson plan supports this claim, because the focus of the objectives and overall lesson were the students' needs. For example, there was a focus on students' need to be able to identify, list, categorise, utilise the computer, work in pairs, to critically examine a video show and participate in discussion. The idea of reflecting on any aspect of teaching with the aim to improve or change is a characteristic of reflective teaching (Cunningham 2001). Maxwell also seemed to have reflected on her belief regarding matters to do with students and students' activities, for she was

able to articulate a particular personal view regarding this matter. In addition, she also carried out self-evaluation or reflection-on-action as described by (Schon 1987), regarding students' activities she included in her lessons, and the degree to which students had been actively engaged in the lessons.

Teaching context and teaching reflectively.

Similarities and differences also exist in respondents' view regarding the use of elements of reflective teaching in relation to teaching contexts. Both respondents reflected on their school layout and the extent to which it influenced their teaching activities. William reflected on, or thought about, her school layout and the extent to which it influenced her choice of student activities. She, however, extended her thinking to include the availability of school resources, space, and the degree to which the lack of these resources negatively influenced lesson implementation.

Maxwell reflected on the school layout and the extent to which it influenced her choice of student activities, but only in relation to class size and special occasions. She said she thinks about this when she invites special speakers to address a number of classes at the same time, which requires a large area for the students to congregate. Maxwell's lesson plan that I analysed revealed the fact that she reflected on resources, school facilities, and supplies, in relation to the lesson, and she listed these in a specific section labeled 'resources'.

Differences in this area were seen in the fact that while both William and Maxwell reflected on their school layout and the extent to which it influenced their choice of student activities, they did so either in relation to how their classroom could be arranged to accommodate student activities, when they were planning special events for students, when a large space and special teaching resources were required for the lesson, or when a lesson required the students to

be out of their self-contained classroom. William, however, employed reflection-on-context and the degree to which this influenced her mood. Difficult circumstances at school, for example, difficulty with the school system, act as a trigger for her to question her values, beliefs, and assumptions about teaching generally, and this includes her mood. She also questions her whole interaction with students, her attitude about discipline, and not only in relation to how she planned lessons. Cunningham (2001) recognizes this act of self-examination as an element of reflective teaching.

The mechanics of teaching and teaching reflectively.

Similarities and differences also exist in the respondents' view about the use of elements of reflective teaching in the mechanics of teaching. To varying degrees, both respondents reflected and were reflective about their teaching. Both carried out reflection-in-action, framing students' activities as the cause for making unplanned changes during a single lesson. Periodically, changes to a whole lesson occurred. William tried to avoid making changes during a single lesson, by carrying out pre-testing. However, sometimes-misplaced teaching resources caused her to make changes. For Maxwell, various interruptions caused changes to occur within a single lesson.

Maxwell and William reflected on their feelings, values, beliefs and assumptions, about teaching, and the degree to which these influenced their teaching generally. Maxwell for example, considered the degree to which lessons that she planned displayed her assumptions, values, and beliefs about teaching. She also questioned the way she went about planning lessons and, by so doing had, over the year, used a number of ways of planning, which she shared with her colleagues.

Yes- over the years, I have done different ways [of planning], I share with

colleagues to say 'this is what I did, what do you do' 'asking what do they do, for I am always looking for best practices. (Maxwell)

During this sharing, she tried to get their ideas about teaching, for she was interested in 'best practice'. While focusing on making her lessons 'student centred', she even questioned the effectiveness of that kind of approach to teaching and compared it with other methods that her grandmother had used.

William also used established research, carried out research using students and colleagues, and read generally to improve her teaching.

'With all the reading that I am doing, the things I learnt in college is a bit, outdated now, I do my reading and I try to make sense of all the new things that are happening now and I might plan it [Lesson] that way instead' (William).

Maxwell and William reflected on self and made notes about their role in making lessons a success or failure. In other words, they employed reflection-on-action during their lesson evaluations. Differences rested in the elements of reflective teaching that they emphasized or on which they focused. William periodically questioned her role in the success or failure of lessons and employed 'flashback' during lesson evaluation. Reflecting on lesson plans in order to identify possible difficulties that students might encounter during actual implementation, is a practice of William. This results in creative and innovative approaches to classroom and school situations.

Maxwell's willingness and desire to participate in collaborative exercises in order to improve an aspect of her teaching is characterised by Day (1999) as a reflective act; additionally, she questioned the usefulness of a 'student-centered' approach to teaching. She also reflected on her role regarding students' activities and the degree to which they were actively engaged in the

lessons she taught.

What constitute negative in-school factors locally?

During the data analysis, three factors were identified in response to the question of what constitute negative in-school factors, these are: heavy workload, mandated policies and disagreement with colleagues.

Heavy workload.

In line with the literature review, Both respondents spoke of being heavily involved with either additional school responsibilities or having to give certain prescribed number of hours to teaching students, and the negative impact that these had on where and how lessons were planned. This is best summed up by William:

You don't have time; you might share a thought about something that really went well or share resources, that's about it. We don't have time and that's one of my areas of interest that I could go on about. In all they want us to have 190 teaching days and directed instruction and all that garbage but they don't give teachers time to sit down and plan, talk about what is happening in the classroom, share ideas and I think this is so important but they don't give us time for that'
(William)

An examination of William's statement specifically reveals administrative hindrances to the sharing and discussion of lesson plans with colleagues. For, she said, there was no time for this and the authorities stipulated teachers' contact-time/ teaching time and the number of hours that they should allocate to teaching. She, however, found a solution in the use of the internet, which she uses to facilitate her lesson planning.

Maxwell also highlights the fact that during the school term, her heavy school

responsibilities deterred her from going over her lesson plans, looking for possible difficulties that students might encounter during the actual lesson. In an effort to improve students' learning and to make lesson planning easier, thus reducing the stress of heavy workload, Maxwell encourages colleagues to share lesson plans on the school intranet to make available a number of lesson plans from which they could easily pull ideas and 'free up time' to accomplish otherschool responsibilities.

Mandated policy and disagreement with colleagues.

William's mood influenced by a school mandated policy and disagreement with colleagues affected how she planned and, especially, how she implemented a particular lesson.

There are times as teachers our moods affect the teaching. For, depend on your mood you may decide to write on the black board and let the student 'copy' the notes and we will discuss it 'another day kind of thing'. We all have days like that ... any teacher who is without days like these she needs to teach me a thing or two, Sometimes you start a lesson and you know that nobody is into it, not you, not them, so you say, let's try this another way and another day (William).

According to William, both the mandated policy and disagreement with her colleagues influenced her 'bad' mood on that occasion. For her, the policy was unnecessary and the disagreement with her colleague was related to an issue in the school, hence they were negative in-school factors. This is reflective of the thoughts of Maxwell-Jolly (2000) who points out that mandated policies are not always embraced by all teachers.

Maxwell believes that students must be an active part of the process of learning and this philosophy guides her teaching. She explained this in the next excerpt, from which I will also infer that she must have reflected on her belief regarding this matter, hence, she is able to

articulate this particular view:

I find that, people say 'Oh you try to do too much; but it is my belief that the children must be actively engaged. And so I am always thinking, 'What can I do to actively engage them' while someone will just come and give them the text books and the paper and 'that's a no no' (Maxwell).

The important thing about this quotation is that she identified that her colleagues' response to her beliefs about students' involvement was indifferent. As a result, she decided not to share her lesson evaluation with all colleagues but with a select few.

How does teaching reflectively aid in coping with these negative in-school factors?

Gage (1977) and Clark and Peterson (1986), state that teachers' practical knowledge is credited with forming a large part of the knowledge base which shapes their classroom actions. Marland (1998) agrees and states that teachers, and in particular expert teachers, draw heavily on their practical knowledge about how to teach and they rely less on research. Their practical knowledge—that which they build up on the job as they grapple with the daily challenges of teaching and as they seek to refine their professional practice—inevitably influences how they address the issue of heavy workload.

By reflecting on the nature of the heavy workload i.e. administrative or pedagogical, and pulling on their practical knowledge, participants arrived at solutions which help them cope with heavy workload. For example, William (after reflection), decided to use the internet as a place for planning lessons which is in-line with suggestions from the literature or Maxwell (after reflection) decided to encourage colleagues to place their lesson plans on the school intranet. Doing so allowed access to a variety of available lesson plans that could be easily utilised at any time (Hamilton-trust 2004 & Whittaker 2002). This no doubt reduces the stress of their heavy

workload by 'freeing up time' to accomplish other school responsibilities.

Birrell et al (1999) make the point that when the teaching context presents a serious challenge to self, 'strategic defensive adaptations', or coping strategies, emerged. Coping strategies may be indirect, for example, changing the way one thought about or physically responded to the situation to reduce its impact and active, for example, taking some action to change oneself or the situation. Based on the study of Cooley and Yovanoff (1996) reflection can facilitate these coping strategies.

In Cooley and Yovanoff's study of how to cope with perceived contextual challenges, the writers proposed a Peer Collaboration Program. Its strength was the use of reflective problem-solving interactions between two teachers about student-related problems. An overview of the process reveals that it closely resembled the activities commonly employed by a reflective teacher, for example, framing the problem as promoted by Schon (1987), and asking questions, as suggested by Zeichner and Liston (1996).

The respondents in my study employed these kinds of coping strategies based on their use of reflection. William, when faced with a mandated school policy and a disagreement with colleagues decided to teach the lesson even though these contextual situations affected her mood negatively. The way she taught the lesson (after reflecting on the issue) was also a means of coping. At that time, she felt it necessary to write notes on the chalkboard for the students to copy, instead of employing activities that were interactive and demanded verbal communication between the students and her. The decision she took was one that protected the students from possible negative reaction that could have resulted from her negative mood. In addition, her actions were acts of safeguarding her job, hence herself. Here again, according to Birrell et al (1999), William was employing an indirect coping strategy by changing the way she physically

carried out the lesson and she was being active in her coping, in that she took a particular action to reduce the impact of the situation.

In the case of Maxwell, when faced with a disagreement with her colleagues based on the fact that they lacked the interpersonal relational skills of ‘empathy’ and ‘tuning in’ Gladding (2000), Belkin (1988), Jacobs (1998) Switzer (1986) and (after reflection), decided not to share her lesson evaluation with all colleagues. She did so because of seemingly negative responses she had received and these seemed to have affected her emotionally, given the fact that she was able to vividly recount this in the interview (Cahill 2003 & Mcgaugh 2003). According to Birrell et al (1999), Maxwell was employing an indirect coping strategy, by changing the way she thought about or physically responded to the situation, and she was being active in her coping, in that she took a particular action to reduce the impact of the situation.

Conclusion

Firstly, the findings of this study highlight the fact that school context and situations can be challenging. Therefore, what is required in these ever changing, demanding, and sometimes-difficult contexts are teachers who employ an approach to teaching that incorporates an understanding of their particular contexts, personal beliefs, practical knowledge and particular content knowledge. This approach should enable them to survive the many contextual constraints and irritations and allow them to draw on knowledge to solve problems that are unique to their particular teaching situation. This approach should also enable creative and innovative approaches to classroom and school situations and problems, which should result in improved learning opportunities for students. Reflective teaching provides an excellent opportunity to achieve these.

Secondly, while the study’s aim was achieved the ways portrayed of how the respondents

arrived at solutions may seem simplistic, for by simply reflection on situations and encounters they found solutions. The process however is anything but simply, for what is required is careful consideration or thought, a process of disciplined intellectual criticism combining research, knowledge of context/classroom, and balanced judgment (critical thinking) (Minott, 2009). This implies there is the need to ‘make the time’ to accomplish this task and requires a willingness to adapt an attitude of inquiry and an engagement in self-assessment. Achieving these are not without challenges, given that teachers are not always willing to engage in self-assessment and they are saddled with numerous and varied tasks daily.

Limitations of the study

When considering my study and its contributions, the following limitations must be borne in mind. The study examined the impact of negative in-school factors on teachers and teaching from a narrow empirical perspective, that is, two respondents and my own. However, given my limited financial resources as an independent researcher, this narrow focus made the study both manageable and achievable.

Clegg (1990) states that an aim underlying almost all scientific investigation was that the findings are applicable from the specific to the general. By looking for similarities and differences between the respondents, I was able to make relatively general statements regarding their understanding of the area being researched. However, given the nature of the research I engaged in, large-scale generalization was neither appropriate nor was it the outcome I sought. Therefore, while this study provided findings that might be similarly obtained from like groups and situations elsewhere, and sufficient details of the research context, data collection, and analysis provided, I would leave my readers to make their own judgments about transferability to other settings.

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