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TEACHER-STUDENT PARTNERSHIPS IN A STUDY OF SPECIALIST TEACHERS' FULFILLMENT

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Introduction

At its essence, my PhD was a study of how teachers co-construct and navigate their lives in order to practise in ways that feel true, effective, and fulfilling. The research was situated in Aotearoa New Zealand, with fourteen teachers enrolled in a postgraduate specialist teaching programme supported by the Ministry of Education as part of its aim of creating a fully inclusive society. The study provided a snapshot of these teachers' lives, over a two-year period, as they worked to integrate life, practice, and study. As a lecturer on the programme in which they were enrolled, I found that the study provided me with an opportunity to craft a methodology based in genuine partnership.

The wondering that led to this partnership

Postgraduate students on the Specialist Teaching programme are typically experienced teachers exchanging the classroom for itinerant roles as specialist teachers. They work in a range of roles supporting classroom teachers to implement inclusive approaches to enhance the presence, participation, and learning of all children and young people. They also support children identified as priority learners, including children who experience barriers to their full participation. These roles bring with them new challenges and opportunities, such as the increased scope to work with families, teachers, schools and early childhood centres, and other providers in the sector. Working in new ways, specialist teachers come to see themselves as agents of change, working to shift attitudes and practices and foregrounding matters of equity and inclusion for those who have been marginalised in education.

As experienced teachers training for and working in specialist roles, this group encounters the range of rewards and tensions typically experienced by all teachers. Additionally, they face the challenges of returning to study, balancing advanced degree completion with full-time practice and busy lives, and shifting their focus to supporting teachers and systems to cater more effectively for all children and young people.

As a tertiary educator, I wondered how best to fortify specialist teachers personally and professionally, as well as the ways postgraduate study might support them to negotiate their future professional journeys with authenticity, purpose, and wellbeing. These wonderings felt timely, as teachers navigate the challenges and tensions of an increasingly complex and demanding world, and could only be explored in partnership with specialist teachers themselves.

The approach I took to engaging actively with teachers as partners in inquiry

The fourteen women in this study varied in age and stage, ethnicity, career path, personal and professional context, professional role, and area of specialisation. Collectively, they had experienced the deaths and suicides of significant others; divorce and widowhood; cancer, major surgery and brain injury; solo parenting and parenting children with complex needs, as well as professional burnout. Their interest in wellbeing was what drew them to the study, and the first connection they made with one another. Many of the participants were working full time alongside their postgraduate study, often in professional roles that were new to them. As such, they often reflected on how to

integrate work and study with other areas of their lives in ways that were sustainable and meaningful for them.

The study was framed as a co-inquiry of specialist teachers' experiences and understandings within the contexts of their lives and their postgraduate study. Using a collaborative and participatory approach, we explored the ways teachers make sense of the concepts of professional identity, wellbeing, and authentic practice. We considered the connections between these ideas, as well as the barriers and tensions, and how they position themselves within and against these tensions in their professional lives. Throughout, we reflected on how tertiary educators might support the development of teachers' fulfilment, stance, supports, and stamina.

Our partnership developed through interviews at the beginning and end of each year and seven *whānau* or family group meetings over the two-year period. Palmer asserts that "knowing is always communal" as knowing "is a human way to seek relationship and, in the process, to have encounters and exchanges that will inevitably alter us" (Palmer, 2007, p. 55). To facilitate communal ways of knowing, we conceptualised interviews as deep conversations (Kovach, 2010) and shifted the dynamic from interviewer-interviewee to listener and narrator to a conversation between co-inquirers. In the time it took to make this shift, we cultivated honesty, openness, and reciprocity through subtle shifts away from traditional interviewing techniques. Rather than asking participants to generalise about life experiences, I invited them to share specific stories; my interview schedule became less of a script and more of "a guide that may or may not be useful when one follows the narrator's story" (Chase, 2011, p. 61). I invited participants to share stories of their lives and their practices in relation to a few strengths-based questions (e.g. "Tell me about a time when your practice felt the most authentic to you").

The themes identified in their individual and collective stories guided the development of a framework for teachers and tertiary teachers wanting to support learning that is sustainable and transformative—learning that changes and harmonizes who we are with what we do in our practice (Korthagen, Kim, & Greene, 2012).

Benefits of our approach to partnership

Not every researcher has the opportunity to evaluate a piece of research in real time and alongside participants. I took this opportunity, ending my final interviews with the question: "What, if any, benefits did you experience in being part of the study?" Their responses can be divided into four themes, which may have useful implications for tertiary providers wishing to develop the wellbeing and professional fulfilment of their students as well as researchers aspiring to work alongside their participants. These themes included the space and place to consider wellbeing; having a teacher or other mentor; belonging to our community of practice; and being part of something that was making a difference. The first two themes seemed to focus more on receiving, whereas the last two themes focused on giving and receiving within the partnership.

All four themes resonate with Duncan-Andrade's (2008) tenets of emancipatory pedagogy, which are equally useful in reflecting on participatory research methodology, by giving research partners the opportunity to:

- Engage – participate in genuine dialogues that validate their unique knowledge and explore topics that were important to them.
- Empower – strengthen their sense of individual and collective agency, to respond to barriers they see as impacting their lives and the lives of others.

- Experience – consider diverse perspectives, including those often unheard in their daily encounters, in a safe and supportive space
- Enact – utilise their growing agency; learn from the enablers, barriers and tensions, and note the implications for their practice. (Duncan-Andrade, 2008, p. 3)

Engage: Foregrounding spaces, places and faces of wellbeing

Participants valued having space for discussions around wellbeing, including formal places in the academy. They appreciated the opportunity to deeply consider their own beliefs, knowledge and practices in a way that was meaningful to them and validated their lived wisdom.

I don't have those conversations. I don't have the opportunity to talk about wellbeing, talk about authentic practice, talk about our practice and our study. I don't get that at home; I don't get that. I don't have friends that do the same sort of thing or are even teachers. But those conversations [in our whānau group] and even talking about authentic practice with you, wow that's fulfilling. (Friend, in Holley-Boen, 2017)

Universities are starting the conversation, for instance through posters around campus offering support for things like stress and anxiety. While the intention of such programmes is commendable, the language can reflect deficit thinking by focusing on what might be wrong with students. Secondly, rather than incorporating wellbeing into discussions of professional identity and professional practice, the conversations are siloed when responsibility is delegated to health and counselling centres. This gives the unintended impression that wellbeing is optional, on the side, and personal rather than inextricably linked to the professional. There is a risk also that the message implies that only some people experience feelings of stress and anxiety, rather than framing these responses as a natural part of being human.

The very first time I listened to you in that auditorium, talking about the importance of wellbeing, I thought I was in a parallel universe. Because it was something else to be in an academic tertiary environment and somebody talking on a human level of what it means to be on that learning journey. It was like a breath of fresh air. (Finella, in Holley-Boen, 2018)

Integrating wellbeing into professional competencies and course content may be a more productive approach for Universities and other tertiary institutions. This could include critical conversations of wellbeing and identity which deconstruct popularised notions of wellbeing and quick fixes reminiscent of that which is promised by fitness centres (Kelchtermans, 2008).

The self-reflection has been part of it – asking these questions and actually thinking about it. ... The first interview made me reflect on why I am talking about [positive examples] that I did twenty years ago and why aren't I talking about things that I'm doing now? ... Because I wasn't doing what I want to do. (Sam, in Holley-Boen, 2018)

If conversations are narrowed to wellbeing, there is a risk they will be minimised, dismissed or taken up selectively. Belinda's response foregrounds wellbeing as a by-product of a larger conversation around professional practice and belonging.

I can say anything to you and you are not going to judge me. ... It's a chance to talk and I like the fact that it has continued to make me think about what I have studied and how I

have applied it and who I've become and who I am going to continue to be. For me it's a really future-focused thing and it has helped me decide what my continuing path is going to be.

[Thinking of the Masters] I thought I won't bother doing that and don't need to do that. Now I am like 'No, I really want to go back.' I miss the study and I want to be able to interact with everybody and go on to the next step and take time to talk more. ... I love interacting with people and looking at their worlds. For me I suppose by doing this with you it's kept that alive; it's reassured me that I do want to go and do [the Masters] now. (Belinda, in Holley-Boen, 2018)

Universities and organisations could also expand existing supports to truly address the wellbeing needs of students. In my role on the programme, my first clue that a student is struggling is often through an extension request. Students frequently ask for an additional week to complete an assignment, whether or not time is the actual issue or the likely remedy. Regardless, the request begins a conversation, which then leads to richer conversations about integrating study with practice, challenging perfectionism and so on.

I have really enjoyed [being in the research]; it has been one of the highlights of the study ... that opportunity to just sit down and have just two or three hours to think about wellbeing you know, it's been really good. (Hannah, in Holley-Boen, 2018)

Empower: Relationship with a teacher/mentor

Participants indicated that dialogues with someone they regarded as one step ahead on the journey empowered them to enact their self-understandings in their own lives and work. Their responses suggested the importance of partnerships predicated on trust and positive regard with another person prepared to reflect on the big issues. "You know how you are always so grateful for our time? It doesn't feel like that, it feels like it is really nice to sit down and talk to someone about this kind of stuff" (Friend, in Holley-Boen, 2018).

The relationship is based on trust – "I can be honest with you" (Finella, in Holley-Boen, 2018) – but also having someone reaffirm their contributions and gifts. Like the teachers in Bullough's (2005) study, these participants valued the emotional support from a mentor first and foremost:

Honestly it has made a huge difference for me and part of that is just feeling heard because I completely feel unheard in my [workplace], that I have no voice and no recognition of anything that I do. So it is just such a blessing to have a forum where I can share my frustrations but also celebrate the things that are good. ... So to have that opportunity and to hear from you that I do actually bring something of value to this role is just absolutely invaluable. (Katie, in Holley-Boen, 2018)

According to participants, specialist teachers may need faces of wellbeing, people in leadership roles who grapple openly with the tensions inherent in developing stance, stamina and fulfilment. For Finella, I was able to be one of those faces:

I do feel like I've been almost completely wrung out in this job and feel like I need to give myself a bit of a break, because it's a job where you feel like you do give so much

of yourself. Again, you are like superwoman to me because of how much you manage to do and give of yourself to so many people. (Finella, Post-2015)

It was, of course, important to deconstruct notions of 'superwoman' by talking candidly about the pressures that all of us face. Done genuinely, there are benefits for both parties: tangibly, as strategies are shared, and less tangibly, in feelings of not being alone. For Mia, the benefits included a sense of connection and increased confidence: "What I got out of it was absolute confidence in myself, but also somebody to be a sounding board to talk to about stuff and you totally get it and I just love that" (Mia, in Holley-Boen, 2018).

Daphne's comment reinforced the importance of reciprocity and equal footing in every relationship, and foregrounded the importance of transparent relationships between researchers and participants, teachers, and students. Supporting the research, and me in particular, reaffirmed her own strengths and potential to contribute. "I think an awareness that everybody needs support at whatever level; PhDs are way up there and the fact that we can all support each other at whatever level" (in Holley-Boen, 2018).

Experience: Belonging to a culturally authentic community of practice

Whānau groups are an optional support for every student in the programme, and a bespoke aspect of the present study. They bring together diverse people and allow for deep discussion of important issues. Participants had diverse beliefs, backgrounds, and skill sets. As such, the group provided opportunities to hear from others, including parents of diverse learners working as specialist teachers; people with varying degrees of fulfilment; and those with different cultural perspectives on fulfilment and wellbeing.

People typically join a community of practice for one of three reasons – the head (domain knowledge), heart (community) or hands (practical tools) – but stay for the sense of community (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). As with whānau groups across the programme, the focus whānau group was designed in hopes of meeting participants' needs in all three areas. Additionally, irrespective of why a specialist teacher joined the present study, I hoped they would benefit from the connection to others.

For Finella, learning in community was essential; it was the whānau group infrastructure within the Specialist Teaching programme and the research that resonated for her. She reflected back on her first day on the programme, deciding to join her local whānau group and also this research with its whānau group component.

When you started talking about whānau groups I suddenly felt like I was going to be able to do this, and do it knowing I wasn't alone. ... It resonated with my cultural understanding of what it meant to be present, to be alive, to be learning, to be engaged. It was the first time in an educational setting that I thought someone was talking with some authenticity about what it meant to be a learner and to have that support. (Finella, in Holley-Boen, 2018)

Like Finella, every participant commented on the value of being part of the community of practice wrapped around the research. They valued the "opportunity to come together with likeminded people ... who really get it and they are on the same kind of wavelength, ... willing

to give something to other people and to put themselves out there” (Katie, in Holley-Boen, 2018).

As they reflected back on the benefits of the whānau group, they weighted different aspects of the experience differently. In line with Wenger et al.’s (2002) research, some participants commented on the benefits for their practice (hands). Sam, for instance, valued the opportunity to hear diverse perspectives within the group, and to apply some of the cultural understandings in particular in her own practice. There is a growing expectation that specialist teachers will develop their understandings of Māori knowledge, values, and philosophies in order to respond in culturally authentic ways (Macfarlane & Macfarlane, 2013). Well aware that she must first know herself – including her cultures, worldviews, identities, and biases – before she could work effectively with Māori (Macfarlane & Macfarlane, 2013), Sam valued the window and mirror offered by the group.

An area I’m still developing is my cultural awareness. ... I have done it in my study but then you go back into your cultural bubble. ... [When people share diverse perspectives] you think ‘Wow, that really is a different cultural view from my own’. And that reminder to be more open and look at my way of looking at things as just my cultural perspective, and there are better ones out there or better ways that I certainly could embrace more. (Sam, in Holley-Boen, 2018).

For other participants, it was the domain knowledge (head) within the community that excited them. In particular, several participants valued learning about wellbeing from a diverse group of teachers with a shared interest in keeping themselves well and supporting the wellbeing of others.

To have the time to sit down and just think about wellbeing with a group of like-minded people. I don’t mean we all think the same but we all are concerned about wellbeing and to have the opportunity to test ideas out in a ... right from the beginning in quite a supportive way. ... The fact that we had some quite interesting discussions and obviously people coming from different places, but it was good to be able to have those discussions and set time aside to be able to do that. (Hannah, in Holley-Boen, 2018)

Notably, in line with Wenger et al.’s (2002) notion that people join communities of practice for various reasons but stay for the community, these participants valued the connection to other specialist teachers the most.

Just being with others I think and just talking around [wellbeing] has been lovely. Because I think when you do your study you don’t get to really know people ... and it is really nice just to get to know people from different backgrounds, different teaching experiences and on different journeys. I think that is fantastic, all different cultures and just sharing a piece of themselves has been wonderful. (Mia, in Holley-Boen, 2018)

Kirsten summarised the group’s sentiments eloquently, with a focus on community and the way it lifted her understandings, motivation and sense of connection.

Honestly being part of the group has been, how can I describe it? It has just brought everything alive. Often the study is a very personal thing and you take from it and it's very selfish. The group itself has been very giving; I have met new people with different perspectives, wonderful perspectives that I hadn't even considered. Sharing not just their knowledge but their experiences and their ideas. I am going to say the word passion and I hate the word passion but I don't know how else to describe it in such an authentic way. They are so motivated and honest; they are just such a great bunch of people. (Kirsten, in Holley-Boen, 2018)

Enact: Being part of something that was making a difference

Duncan-Andrade (2008) urges educators to go beyond the traditional narrative of social justice, which he summarises as using education to escape inequitable conditions, to return knowledge and skills in ways that transform the community. The findings from the present study underscore the extent to which specialist teachers are committed to the aims of social justice in their work with children and families/whānau who have been marginalised.

Participants' responses foregrounded their belief in what we were doing as a group. They perceived discussion topics as meaningful for them as specialist teachers, and relevant for their work with teachers, children, and families/whānau in an Aotearoa New Zealand context. Pākehā (non-Māori) participants particularly valued being part of a culturally diverse group, one in which they could experience and discuss bicultural and multicultural practices. Māori and Niuean participants said it was empowering to instil cultural understandings within our framework.

You are guiding people like myself to go out there and the fact that you are a Pākehā woman coming into this country and speaking on the level you are speaking on, we are so lucky ... because for a lot of Māori ... sometimes I feel it's very hard to get the message through that you are getting through to people because even though when we talk we are talking about the same thing and yet it's a language that's easy to digest when you do it for the masses. For me it's huge for [people] ... to be reminded that they are important and they matter. You have ... helped Pākehā begin to grasp concepts ... and to use concepts like whānau groups [is] huge. (Finella, in Holley-Boen, 2018)

The research was reflexive, responding to participants' needs and preferences in real-time changes to the research and the Specialist Teaching programme. Participants could see the difference they were making. They shared that the act of working in community to consider and challenge aspects of their lives empowered them to make changes in their practice. Akin to research by Leana and colleagues, which introduced collective job crafting through communities of practice, the present study provided a space for "considering how employees working together might craft their jobs" (Leana, Appelbaum, & Shevchuk, 2009). In a field as new as specialist teaching, participants saw this as a unique opportunity.

I find it difficult to sit down and to think and to write, scared that I'm not doing it right and I am not disciplined ... but when I am with [the whānau group] and I am sharing and being able to listen to the stuff that you are getting from people it's like, it's mind blowing stuff to be hearing that people are hearing this stuff because [we] are starting the conversation. I feel really honoured ... like I have got this little treat that I have got to be a part of. (Finella, in Holley-Boen, 2018)

Reflecting back on the partnership

Teachers in the present study valued four aspects of participation: being able to engage with ideas; having a relationship with a teacher; engaging with and learning from a community; and being part of something that was making a difference. These benefits fit well with emancipatory pedagogies' overarching goals of engaging, empowering, experiencing and enacting (Duncan-Andrade, 2008) and with the intention of research in partnership with students. Participants engaged with content and community in ways that drew on and stretched their personal understandings whilst contributing to a framework with potential impact for children, families/whānau and teachers and other educational professionals.

Along the way, participants developed their own stamina, found a new source of support and lifted their own stamina as professionals. An unintended but key finding of the present study was that the *what* and *how* of the research influenced the content as well as the form of participants' experiences. Through genuine dialogue, as participants focused on certain ideas, those ideas developed. Participants shared the ways they refined their stance as a result of conversations about stance; they increased their supports as they engaged with others in the focus group, and their stamina was fortified through the research process, content and community. In essence, being part of the research not only provided opportunities to explore the ideas of stance, stamina, supports and fulfilment, but actually developed these areas in participants' lives in ways that were not developing naturally outside the research space.

Macfarlane and Macfarlane (2013) highlight the essential components of culturally responsive research as: incorporating Māori knowledge; building relationships and self-awareness; ensuring relevance and power-sharing, and unleashing potential. In the present study, working to construct and carry out culturally responsive, participatory research was complex and messy. As an embedded researcher, I found that the rewards were in the complexity. The structure of the research enabled opportunities to find and create shared ground, and I learned so much from trying to cultivate the partnerships and spaces that make this possible. Equally, we valued the challenges to our taken-for-granted assumptions, the sense of being in this together, and the solidarity that empowered us to act on our own lives.

Another, unintended gift of the research was the chance to reflect on and develop my own stance, supports, and stamina. Being part of a true community of practice, with fourteen other women grappling with similar tensions in their lives, emboldened me as a researcher, professional, student and writer. When my stamina was lacking, they reminded me how important our findings were, and how needed they were in the field. When my stance as a researcher felt new and flimsy, they affirmed what I was trying to do. And most of all, I valued the experience of being part of such a caring group of women and experienced teachers.

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