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# THE ART AND SCIENCE OF IMPROVISATION IN EDUCATION

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## DEVELOPING THE ART OF IMPROVISATION IN EXPERT TEACHERS

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper reports on the findings of a PhD research project into the improvisatory nature of teacher expertise. The data is taken from a series of comparative case studies (Thomas, 2011) of seven experienced teachers working in secondary schools in the South West of England and who have been identified as being expert within their school setting. Constant comparative methods of analysis have been used to draw out themes from the data. This has contributed to a grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) that identifies the nature of teacher expertise.*

*The findings that arise from the data are that teacher's expertise is best expressed as continually evolving practice, a process as opposed to an end state, that reflects a prototype model (Sternberg and Horvath, 1995). Advanced professional practice is best described as a 'teacher with expertises' and this is preferable to the term 'expert teacher'. The data shows that teacher expertise is fundamentally improvisatory through being socially constructed (Burr, 2003; Shotter, 2008; Gergen, 2009) and that this has a positive impact on the quality of teaching. The improvisational nature of teacher expertise is derived from four processes: the expression of tacit knowledge, relational and interactional practice, personalisation of the learning environment and self-reflection leading to the continual adaptation of pedagogy.*

*The resulting model of teacher expertise casts new light on how we understand advanced professional practice and this paper explores the implications of this contribution to knowledge for school leaders, teachers, researchers and those with responsibility for the initial training and the continuing professional development of teachers.*

Keywords: improvisation, teacher expertise, social constructionism, grounded theory

## A PROLOGUE

### About Takeshi Yasuda

In September 2014 the eminent Japanese ceramicist Takeshi Yasuda was awarded an Honorary Doctorate by Bath Spa University. In his acceptance speech he mentioned that he did not go to a college or a university to learn his craft. Instead he travelled to a village where there was a pottery and there he learnt how to make pots, eventually opening his own studio. As his expertise and reputation developed he taught at a number of art schools and universities across the United Kingdom and was made Professor of Applied Arts at the University of Ulster. Although he had never received formal training as a teacher he wanted to offer his views on teaching, which he proceeded to do with a Zen-like succinctness.

Two comments in particular resonated with my own views. The first was that “you cannot teach anything, you can only teach people how to learn”. The second was that his practice as a potter was directed by the principle that he would make the object first and then decide what its function might be.

I struck me that this ‘outsider’ view provides an excellent starting point for the journey of ‘rethinking models of professional learning’ on a number of levels. For me Takeshi Yasuda reminds us that we are principally engaged in learning rather than teaching and that practice comes before and gives rise to theory. His second comment illuminates a truth about the educational process: that it leads to unknown outcomes. If we accept the assumption that teaching and learning are fundamentally improvisatory acts then we can never be sure of where we are going or what we will learn and that educational practice which is tied down by specific outcomes is impoverished. And as I reflect on this image of his pottery I am reminded of them as a metaphor for our work as educators and our priority to ‘draw out’ as opposed to ‘fill up’.

## INTRODUCTION

The ongoing impact of neo-liberal policies on educational practice has challenged and shaped our understanding of what it means to be an effective professional; the nature of teacher professionalism has become a contested concept subject to historical, political and cultural assumptions (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2000). The debate about the management and regulation of teaching and teacher education, long dominated by the rhetoric of ‘standards’ and ‘accountability’, has given rise to the ‘performativity’ agenda. This approach to the management of public services is characterised by three strands of policy and practice: an audit and target based culture, interventionist regulatory mechanisms and a market environment (Wilkins 2010). Critics of this system argue that performativity has led to a target chasing culture where ends justify the means, teachers become averse to risk and there is a move away from notions of context-specific practice emerging through professional dialogue (Seddon, 1997). As Ball points out (2003) the requirements of performativity result in ‘inauthentic practices and relationships’, what is important is what works.

The performativity debate has created a discourse that locates ‘the teacher’ as the crucial factor in the drive to raise educational standards (previously the key factor was perceived to be leadership). This discourse can be seen in recent policy documents. The UK Coalition government’s White Paper, titled ‘The Importance of Teaching’, stated that ‘the first, and most important, lesson is that no education system can be better than the quality of its teachers’ (DfE, 2010: 3). This view, driven by comparisons with ‘international competitors’ (ibid: 3) cites The McKinsey Report ‘Closing the talent gap: attracting and retaining top-third graduates to careers in teaching’ (Auguste et al. 2010) which states that ‘of all the controllable factors in an education system, the most important by far is the effectiveness of the classroom teacher. The world’s best performing systems make great teaching their “north star”’ (ibid: 5).

This notion of great teaching as the “north star” of the best performing education systems raises many questions about the advanced professional practice of teachers. What does it look like? How is it facilitated

and supported? What words do we use to describe it? How do teachers view their practice? Wanting to find answers to these questions provided the impetus to this research that asked the question ‘what is the relationship between teacher expertise and improvisation?’ Two further interests also influenced the research.

The first of these arose from the author’s professional role of supporting the continuing professional development of teachers, currently as a Senior Lecturer in Higher Education leading a Professional Masters Programme (PMP). This work is informed by Hoban’s view (2002) that there is a need for a theoretical framework for long-term teacher development and Coffield and Edwards (2009) who question what we should call ‘good teaching’ and what it means to be an advanced professional. Previous writing that has influenced this research include the development of a four-phase framework articulating advanced professional practice (Sorensen and Coombs, 2010a) and the concept of the ‘authorised teacher’ (Sorensen and Coombs, 2010b) which offers an alternative title for the advanced practitioner. The ‘authorised teacher’ privileges notions of professional autonomy grounded in critical reflective practice, drawing on the related concepts of ‘authenticity’, ‘authorisation’ and ‘authoring’.

The second interest is concerned with the role that improvisation plays within social contexts, specifically within education. Piaget’s (1990) view of intelligence, “what you use when you don’t know what to do”, has explicitly informed metacognitive pedagogic practice and the encouragement of the independent learner (Claxton, 1999; 2002; Deakin Crick et al., 2004; Deakin Crick, 2006). Social constructionist views of learning, based on notions of intersubjectivity and the social nature of learning (Vygotsky, 1978) acknowledge a reality that is constructed through dialogue and description. A dialogic practice, often accompanied by an attribution to Bakhtin, ‘always implies at least two voices, (and) assumes underlying difference rather than identity’ (Wegerif, 2008: 348). Constructivist and dialogic pedagogies acknowledge that the unpredictability of multiple competing voices make discussion a uniquely effective tool and these are viewed as being ‘fundamentally improvisational’ (Sawyer, 2004: 190). This suggests that the improvisational nature of teaching is closely aligned to notions of ‘great teaching’ and therefore is an area that deserves to be researched.

This research is located within two emerging fields of academic interest in the social sciences: critical studies in improvisation and expertise. The former is based on the core hypothesis that musical improvisation needs to be understood as a crucial model for political, cultural, and ethical dialogue and action.

‘Improvisation, in short, has much to tell us about the ways in which communities based on such forms are politically and materially pertinent to envisioning and sounding alternative ways of knowing and being in the world .....

If humanities research and teaching have for too long operated on the flawed assumption that knowledge is a fixed and permanent commodity, then the most absorbing testimony of improvisations power and potential may well reside in the spirit of movement, mobility and momentum that it articulates and exemplifies’ (Heble and Waterman, 2008: 3).

The engagement with improvisation as a model of practice provides a critical alternative to the essentialist notions of teaching that dominate the discourse of performativity whilst acknowledging that one of the fundamental and crucial elements of teaching is the unplanned, spontaneous nature of the relationship between teacher and pupil. Improvisation studies encourage us to look at the living, embodied reality of the teaching experience and the ways in which these qualities contribute to ‘great teaching’.

The process of describing and defining the advanced professional practice of teachers is both complex and controversial. There are many competing voices attempting to articulate the nature of effective teaching and, consequently, many terms have gained specific and contextualised meanings: for example the ways in which The Office for Standard in Education (Ofsted) have used ‘good’ and ‘outstanding’ and how teachers standards have used the terms ‘excellent’ and ‘advanced skills’. In order to gain a critical perspective on this debate this

research has viewed advanced practice from the perspective of experts and expertise. This comparatively new field of research is concerned with the study of expertise and expert performance (Ericsson et al., 2006) based on the premise that 'there are sufficient similarities in the theoretical principles mediating the phenomena and the methods for studying them that it would be possible to propose a general theory of expertise and expert performance' (Ericsson et al., 2006: 9).

The two fields of critical studies in improvisation and expertise and expert performance have shaped the theoretical framework for the research based on an ontological assumption that the world is continually changing and that phenomena need to be viewed holistically. Parallels have been drawn between improvisation and social constructionism (Burr, 2003; Shotter, 2008 and Gergen, 2009) and the critical theory of Habermas with particular reference to his theory of knowing (Habermas, 1972) and his theory of communicative action (Habermas 1984; 1987).

## PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the research was to gain a greater understanding of teachers' expertise and to determine the extent to which improvisation was a facet of advanced professional practice. Specifically the study aimed to find answers to the following 7 questions:

1. What are the qualities that define an expert teacher?
2. How do teachers become identified as experts?
3. To what extent do 'expert teachers' see themselves as experts?
4. How do expert teachers display their expertise in the classroom?
5. In what ways do they improvise?
6. To what extent is improvisation a conscious and intentional facet of their expertise?
7. Is there a positive relationship between improvisation and teacher expertise?

Attempting to find answers to these questions would potentially challenge, extend or complement existing notions of what it means to be an expert teacher which, in turn, will inform the way that we conceptualise and engage in professional learning. There is broad evidence, both anecdotal and from research, that improvisation is an aspect of expert teaching (Hattie, 2009; Goodwyn, 2001) and therefore it would be valuable to determine the extent to which this is the case and whether expert teachers perceive their practice to be improvisatory and use this aspect of professional practice in a conscious and intentional way.

The purpose of the research was to offer contributions to new knowledge based on a fuller understanding of advanced professional practice than that offered by the performativity agenda. This new knowledge would hopefully contribute to the new fields of critical studies in improvisation and the study of expertise and expert performance. The findings would also have implications for Initial teacher Education (ITE) and the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) of teachers as well as providing insights for headteachers and policy makers into the cultural conditions that foster teacher expertise. Finally, and possibly of greatest importance, the purpose of the research was to offer an innovative methodological approach to the empirical study of teacher expertise that privileges the voice of teachers and acknowledges expertise as a social construction.

## METHODOLOGY

## **Research design**

The research took the form of a qualitative case study design (Thomas, 2011) of teachers who were deemed to be experts within their respective schools. A pilot case study and six comparative case studies were undertaken between November 2011 and April 2013. Final interviews with each of the participants took place in December 2013 and January 2014. The research took the philosophical position of social constructionism (Burr, 2003; Shotter, 2008 and Gergen, 2009) and employed a methodology that combined case study and grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) in order to privilege the voices of teachers (primarily) and headteachers. Reflecting the approach taken by Wilkins (2010) with regard to teacher professionalism the intention was not to define teacher expertise (within an essentialist discourse) but to position it as a socially constructed and contested concept.

## **Research sites**

The selection of the research site for the pilot case study was made on the basis of it being a local knowledge case (Thomas, 2011) drawing upon my own professional network of contacts and guided by data, empirical evidence and intuition. Issues of sampling were not seen as a priority given that case studies are concerned with particularisation and not generalisation (Stake, 1995: 8). The priority was to gain access to a school that would be hospitable to my research proposal and this was evident on my initial conversation with 'Derek', the head who offered his school for the pilot case study:

*Derek: It would be good for them (the teachers) to talk about it (expert teaching) ..... it would be really good for us; you can have a free hand and a free rein.*

This offer provided an ideal research opportunity: as Stake says (1995: 4) 'if we can, we need to pick cases that are easy to get at and hospitable to our enquiry, perhaps for which a prospective informant can be identified and with actors (the people studied) willing to comment on certain draft materials'.

I used this process to identify four additional schools located across the South West of England based on my professional network of headteacher colleagues. Including the pilot project, the research took place in five schools: two in Wiltshire, one in Hampshire, one in Somerset and one in Devon.

## **Participants**

The selection of expert teachers for research purposes is fraught with difficulties. Berliner, who undertook ground-breaking research 'In Pursuit of the Expert Pedagogue' (1986), was not sure that the issue of identifying expert teachers had been satisfactorily solved. He developed his own selection process based on three criteria: reputation, classroom observations by three independent observers and performance in laboratory tasks. In this research the initial approach to selecting the participants was to develop criteria in which to evaluate the teachers that I was researching. However the need to create external criteria was in order to validate the choice of participants or 'prove' that they really were expert was discarded during the pilot case study. Questions arose about the processes by which teachers came to be viewed as experts within specific school cultures, such as 'in this school culture who is considered to be an expert, and why?'; 'how does their observed behaviour inform our understanding of what it is to be an expert teacher?' The selection process for identifying the participants took the form of an initial interview with the headteacher, outlining the range and purpose of the research in order to negotiate access to the research site. The headteacher was then asked to identify the characteristics of an expert teacher and to select a teacher who, in their view, met those requirements. The headteacher asked if the teacher wished to take part in the project and this then led to an initial meeting with the teacher in order to gain their informed consent to participate.

## **Data collection**

The data set for the research can be divided into four categories: interviews, observations, conversations and documentary evidence.

An interview was defined as a pre-arranged meeting with an individual (or a group of people) with the agreed purpose of undertaking a semi-structured or unstructured interview. In each school interviews took place with the headteacher, and the selected teacher. The teachers were interviewed regarding their views of what teacher expertise means to them and to give a narrative of their professional lives. A short interview took place after each lesson observation. A final interview with all the teacher participants was undertaken to 'close down' the research, share some of the initial findings and to ask what impact the research had upon them. Audio recordings were made of the interviews supplemented by field notes.

Observations were defined as a pre-arranged opportunity to observe the teachers carrying out their professional duties. Each teacher was observed for a minimum of three and a maximum of five occasions teaching classes of their choosing. Data was captured through the use of field notes in order to minimise the researcher effect on the setting. In some of the schools the selected participant also arranged observations of other teachers who they thought that I ought to witness.

Conversations were defined as an informal and unplanned encounter or exchange that provided information, insights or opinions pertinent to the case study. This data was used following verbal consent.

A range of documentary evidence was also collected. This included the prospectus and other school produced literature, Ofsted reports, published material and photographs.

### **Data analysis**

The data was analysed using a constant comparative method (Thomas, 2011) in order to generate a grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) given that grounded theory complements a case study approach as both are concerned with the structures, concepts and processes associated with human behaviour (Savin-Baden and Major, 2013). The analysis of the data followed a three-phase process: initial coding, the generation of categories of codes (focussed coding) and the creation of conceptual or theoretical constructs.

The collection of data fell into two broad categories: semi-structured interviews that were audio recorded and the field notes of lesson observations. All of the interviews were fully transcribed and then subjected to a process of initial coding. This was undertaken in a quick and spontaneous manner in order to generate fresh ideas about the data (Charmaz, 2006) and, following Glaser's suggestion (1978), utilised gerunds to help detect processes and to keep the codes close to the data. The first step of coding was conducted on a line-by-line basis. The field notes of the observations were coded in a similar way.

The second phase of data analysis involved looking for connections between the initial codes, comparing data sets and creating groupings or categories of focussed codes. These categories were refined and tested against the data. The focussed codes were then, in the third phase of data analysis, related to each other within a conceptual framework: the process of theoretical coding. It is from these conceptual frameworks that the grounded theory was generated.

### **Ethics**

Undertaking this research raised a number of ethical issues. Informed consent was obtained from the headteacher and the identified expert teachers who, at the outset, were briefed on the value and aims of the research and signed letters of consent. Confidentiality was observed through providing pseudonyms for the schools and all the participants. As a researcher it is important to ensure that the physical, social and psychological well being of the participants is not affected in an adverse manner by the research. This included comments that could have been made about other members of staff in each of the school settings. On one

occasion a participant shared personal information with me. At a later date a discussion was held with them to allow them to decide if this information should be included in the final write and how it should be reported. A further ethical issue was raised when the participants involved other teachers in the research, for example by arranging for me to observe them teach or through informal conversations. In these cases all other parties were made aware of my research and gave assent to recording any comments that they made.

## FINDINGS

The findings of the research offered two postulates and five tentative conclusions.

The two postulates were:

- That as all cultures are concerned with, and defined by, the relationship between fixed and emergent structures that they are therefore improvisatory in their social nature and their constructed being;
- That as all dynamic cultures are improvisatory through social interaction, this social effort represents new social improvement and advancement through adaptive and incremental progress.

This finding is significant because it claims that improvisation is a fundamental, and defining, characteristic of schools as organisations. By viewing teachers with expertise not as individuals but as being part of, and relating to, the culture of a school acknowledges that they are working within an improvisational context. Consequently their improvisational response to this is seen as being of significance. Furthermore improvement and advancement is seen as being adaptive and incremental nature, the consequence of social effort. These postulates outline the position for viewing teacher expertise as a social construction.

The five conclusions are presented in turn with a commentary on each one.

### **1. That advanced professional practice is best described through the notion of 'a teacher with expertises' and that this is a preferable to the term 'the expert teacher'.**

One of the clear messages that came through from all of the participants was that the designation of 'the expert teacher' is an unhelpful and inappropriate way of characterising advanced professional practice. There were a number of reasons for this: the views arising from the data suggest that the teachers did not want to 'stand out' from their colleagues and they did not accept that they were 'expert' or indeed that it was possible to become an expert teacher. Instead the more acceptable term for advanced professional practice was perceived to be 'a teacher with expertises' and that these expertises are the consequence of a continual striving towards 'what works' within a particular context at a particular time. This view of expert practice is based on assumptions that teaching is a complex activity and that 'what works' is essentially unknowable and unpredictable. However, advanced practitioners use their expertise to adapt and to interact with their pupils in order to create the conditions in which learning can, and does, take place.

This finding reflects theories of teacher expertise that are based on variation and adaptation, in other words a 'prototype' model (Stenberg and Horvath, 1995). This view of teacher expertise is based on three assumptions: that there are no well-defined standards that all experts meet and that no non-experts meet; experts bear a family resemblance to each other and it is this resemblance that structures the category 'expert' and that a convenient way of talking about this is through the concept of a prototype.

The prototype approach is valuable as it acknowledges the diversity in the population of expert teachers and does not require a set of individually necessary and jointly sufficient features of an expert teacher. A consequence of this is that teacher expertise becomes concerned with the encouragement of individuality. This aspect was acknowledged by the one of the headteachers.



Charles: *Well the kids don't like it (i.e. teachers being the same), they want variety. They don't want to go from one (expert teacher) to another to another. They want to go from a really good lesson to a really good lesson to a really good lesson.*

This leads to the second finding

## 2. Teachers with expertise have much in common but they are not all the same

Sternberg and Horvath's (1995) model of the 'prototype' maintains that there is no well-defined standard that all experts meet but that they bear a family resemblance. This view rejects essentialist assumptions that there can be a category of teachers that can be labelled 'experts'.

The grounded theory of teacher expertise (see Figure 1) proposes what these areas of commonality family resemblances might be:

- Seeing expertise as a journey;
- Reflecting on practice and continual adaptation of teaching;
- Focus on outcomes;
- Dialogic practice;
- Inclusive attitude to pupils as individuals;
- Vocational commitment (to teaching and to the school);
- Building relationships through personalisation.



**Figure 1: Grounded theory model of teacher expertise (Sorensen, 2014: 212)**

These areas of expertise have much in common with the findings of Smith and Strahan (2004) who identified six shared tendencies.

1. They had a sense of confidence in themselves and their profession;

2. Talked about their classrooms as communities of learners;
3. Maximised the importance of relationships with students;
4. Employed student-centred approaches to instruction;
5. Contributed to the teaching profession through leadership and service;
6. Were masters of their content area.

My thesis differs from this account in a number of respects. It identifies a distinct area of knowledge that is concerned with a detailed understanding of examination and assessment processes. This form of teacher knowledge is not represented within existing notions of content knowledge, pedagogic knowledge and pedagogic content knowledge. The emergence of this form of knowledge is presumably a consequence of the target driven accountability culture that is a feature of all schools. Greater emphasis is also given to self-reflection and the continual adaptation of practice. Less attention was paid to content knowledge as an aspect of teacher expertise in the research findings; for many of the participants it was taken for granted but less important than being able to communicate, motivate and enthuse pupils. A further significant factor that was identified in this research was the ability for the teachers to create a unique and personalised climate for learning in their classroom and I have called this the *lifeworld* of the classroom, drawing on Habermas's concept of a place where communicative action takes place (Habermas, 1984).

### **3. The range of expertises are interrelated and socially constructed**

The thesis offered by this research emphasises the interrelationship between these expertises. This interrelationship can be explained as follows. The central assumption of the model is that teacher expertise is a journey towards an uncertain future; it is an aspiration that is continually being striven for. It is based on practices that involve the continual adaptation of teaching strategies as a consequence of interaction with pupils. This improvisational quality is seen as a positive and desirable professional attribute when it is concerned with responding to the needs of individuals and groups of students within the classroom. Around this central assumption are other beliefs and practices that are all linked. A key practice is that of building relationships through personalisation (a reciprocal practice whereby the teacher wants to know the pupils as individuals *and* wants them to know the teacher as a person) which is motivated by a belief that all can achieve. An interest in pupils as individuals encourages an approach to teaching in which they can play a part (dialogic practice). The adaptation of preconceived plans and intentions 'in real time' is also supported by a continual reflection on practice and a willingness to incorporate changes into their classroom practice.

The process of reflection on practice also includes talking about teaching with other teachers and is encouraged by cultures that make it acceptable to talk about failure and encourage risk taking. The research noted the significance of 'safe' spaces where teachers can share information about what they really feel about their teaching. The sub-cultures developed in spaces such as departmental offices are examples of this. Reflection on practice is directed by the accountability agenda, specifically a focus on outcomes. This is partly driven intrinsically by the personal belief that all pupils can achieve but is also affected by the extrinsic nature of the accountability agenda. The extrinsic factors have given rise to a particular form of professional knowledge: a detailed knowledge of examination and assessment systems. The final factor in this model of teacher expertise is vocational commitment which is demonstrated through sustained motivation and interest in being a teacher and particularly both an engagement and enjoyment of the 'nuts and bolts' of teaching. Consequently it can be argued that teacher expertise is a social construction that arises out of the relationships between teacher and pupils as well as the relationships with other members of staff and members of the school community. The argument of the thesis is that teacher expertise is culturally situated and embedded.

### **4. The practice of 'teachers with expertise' is fundamentally improvisatory**

The argument that teacher expertise is culturally situated brings us back to the first key postulate. This is that as all cultures are concerned with, and defined by, the relationship between fixed and emergent structures they are therefore improvisatory in their social nature and their constructed being. Consequently, the thesis claims that the practice of 'teachers with expertise' is fundamentally improvisatory. This claim is supported by evidence derived from observations of teaching in which the dominant concern was with developing relationships with pupils, based on assumptions that all are worthy of attention and that all can achieve. A primary concern of the teachers was to employ dialogic strategies in the classroom in order to maximise interaction. The motivation to know the pupils well meant that the teachers were able to adapt their teaching in order to meet the specific needs and interests of their classes, a process of personalising the teaching process. Continually reflecting on how they were meeting the needs of their classes meant that all the teachers were engaged in adaptive strategies, reflecting on their teaching and adjusting what they were doing in the light of this. In doing so they are engaging in an uncertain future; they are never sure exactly what will work but are prepared and able to change what they are doing.

##### **5. The improvisational practice of 'teachers with expertise' is derived from four processes**

One of the assumptions of this research is that Improvisation is a feature of all forms of social interaction. Within the domain of teaching it can be seen at all levels. This thesis does not claim that improvisation is only to be found in advanced professional practice but that it takes on a particular form in that it has a positive impact on educational outcomes for pupils, in both instrumental terms (measurable progress and attainment) as well as human terms (as expressed through value based educational outcomes). The improvisational aspect of teacher expertise can be summarised as being concerned with four processes:

- the expression of tacit knowledge;
- the relational and interactive;
- personalisation (of learning, the teacher and the learning environment);
- self-reflective and adaptive.

This view of teaching is consistent with the working definition of improvisation that has been used in this research: 'a mode of intentional creative action that has unpredictable and uncertain outcomes, derived from "real time" interactions (with other people or materials). Improvisations are determined by spontaneous and intuitive decisions arriving from the dynamic interplay between fixed and informal, generative structures. Improvisations are a feature of all aspects of life and the conditions for improvisational action are dependent on the permission that the improviser gives themselves, or is given, to act in this way'.

How do the ideas expressed in the thesis relate to other theoretical views? As has already been suggested the idea that teacher expertise is grouped under a number of common characteristics reflects Sternberg and Horvath's idea of a 'prototype' (Sternberg and Horvath, 1995). Variations between the different teachers can be accounted for due to the cultural and situated nature of their practice.

## **THE IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF OUTSTANDING TEACHERS**

The claims to knowledge made by this research have a number of implications with respect to the assumptions that we hold about teaching and expert practise. These will impact upon the way we conceptualise teacher's professional development and the long-term teacher development of advanced practice. This paper focusses on one of these areas: the implications for the continuing professional development of teachers in order to develop and sustain expertise practice.

The research findings offer some clear messages about advanced professional practice that can be expressed around two key principles. First, that the expert practise of teachers cannot be represented as an end state. Instead it needs to be viewed as a process of continually 'working towards' improving the ways in which the teacher relates to their pupils. Secondly, and arising out of the first point, teacher expertise cannot be expressed as an essentialist list of skills or competencies.

These assumptions challenge currently accepted notions of what teacher development is and how it takes place. If it is not possible to arrive at an essentialist and universal understanding view of what it means to be an 'expert teacher' then it is not possible to identify 'best practice' that should be transferred from one context to another. Current assumptions of the 'in-house professional' are based on hierarchical notions in that not only are some teachers deemed to be better than others but that their knowledge, skills and understanding needs to be shared with less experienced teachers. Less-experienced teachers are perceived as needing 'more' professional development than their peers. Whilst this situation is understandable (and indeed deserves encouragement) it masks an inherent problem. Within this scenario the professional development of the most experienced teachers is often expressed as sharing their understanding, knowledge and skills with others. The professional development of their own practice is rarely addressed. The research findings suggest that the professional development of the best teachers is of equal importance to other less experienced teachers. Notions of differentiated professional development are now commonly accepted. This paper considers five principles that should inform a differentiated professional development programme to develop and sustain teacher expertise.

### **1: Acknowledge the diversity of teacher expertise**

Being an expert teacher implies being an expert of something. If we view teaching as a complex activity then not only will teachers display a range of expertises but they will not all be the same. The data clearly showed that the teachers had each developed a personalised approach to teaching based on their values and beliefs, the relationships they established with the pupils and the personalisation of the learning environment. This view supports Sternberg and Horvath's (1995) concept of the prototype, which suggests teachers with expertises share family resemblances but they are all different. Therefore the different ways and contexts in which teachers demonstrate their expertise need to be given further attention. As the range of expertises is potentially always expanding then 'divergence' of practice should be encouraged rather than the 'convergence' of a teacher's repertoire into a common vocabulary of 'best practice'. A key question then is 'what are the ways in which teachers manifest their expertise in a particular school culture?' and 'how can we develop and extend this repertoire of expertise?' The professional development of teacher expertise needs to be based on generative principles (how many different ways are there of posing open questions, for example) rather than reductive principles of 'finding best practice'.

### **2: See improvisation as a 'conscious competence'**

One of the main claims made by this research is that teacher expertise is fundamentally improvisatory and that this makes a positive contribution to the quality of learning. When discussing this research project with a range of professionals and non-professionals there was strong acceptance of the idea that good teaching was improvisatory. The problem however is that this aspect of professional practice is ignored or unacknowledged. If we accept the proposition that improvisation is a fundamental and significant aspect of advanced professional practice then we need to give explicit attention to this. As Dezutter (2011) argues, simply being aware that teaching is improvisational is not enough. If we view teaching from the perspective of a constructivist learning theory and as a socially constructed process then we need to be able to talk about improvisation from an intentional and informed position.

One of the differences between improvisational practice in the arts and that occurring within social contexts is that within music, theatre and drama, dance and poetry there exists a wealth of theory and reflective writing

about the nature and practice of improvisation. I support the view that ‘we need a similar body of knowledge in the teaching profession, including a well-elaborated vision of good improvisational teaching, a shared vocabulary, learning goals for new teachers, and accompanying techniques for developing improvisational ability’ (Dezutter, 2011: 35). Improvisation needs to become a ‘conscious competence’ (add ref) and there is clearly a role for scholarship and the academy to work alongside professionals to explore why it is important to acknowledge teaching as an improvisational activity, why we should try to improvise well and what this means. This is a large project that requires vision, a conceptual framework, a vocabulary and pedagogical techniques that are specific to teaching. The opportunity to develop intentional improvisatory practice could begin by exploring the planning of lessons, the interactions and dialogue with students and the personalisation of the teaching space. Such creative risk taking counters the fear that it is too easy for teaching to become formulaic as a response to the demands for performativity. This supports Days (ref) claim that we need to counter inauthentic practices in schools. Through reflecting on the ways in which teacher improvisation contributes to advanced professional practice we acknowledge “the complexity of what we do spontaneously, without prior deliberation, problem solving, interpretation, or other intellectual working out” (Shotter, 1994: 5).

### **3: Give your best the best**

Professional development activities for advanced practitioners have a tendency to be focussed on working with other teachers in order to share good practice. There is great value in honouring the expertise that exists within schools and other educational settings. This paper argues that, on its own, that this is insufficient for developing expertise. There should be opportunities for the best teachers to be able to meet together and discuss their practice and how it might be developed further.

This became apparent during the research process. Each of the participants developed a different relationship with the researcher and this could be represented on a continuum. At one extreme it was ‘helping to complete a PhD’ and the other extreme was a full engagement with the process as a ‘bespoke professional development opportunity’. In the latter cases it was apparent that teachers who were involved in supporting others (for example in an Advanced Skills Teacher role) had the need and desire to advance their own practice. Hence the principle that the best teachers have an entitlement to have their own professional development needs met within a differentiated approach to CPD: schools need to consider whether they are giving the best professional development to their best teachers

### **4: Acknowledge and develop relational expertise**

One of the key aspects of teacher expertise focusses around the ability to develop positive relationships with pupils across the whole of the ability range. This stems from a number of factors. The personal values and beliefs of the teachers informs an approach that acknowledges that knowing the pupils (as individuals), building mutual respect and creating an atmosphere in the classroom in which pupils can, and want to, learn are all facets of teacher expertise. This relational expertise extends to the teachers being able to control and consciously change the emotional climate of the classroom. How to establish a ‘serious’ atmosphere at one moment and then lighten the mood with appropriate laughter is an important skill. A further aspect is the ability to empower pupils and create a climate where the teacher is not relying on their authority to ‘control’ the class. This shift can also be expressed as the difference between a teacher centred (controlled) classroom and a learner centred classroom where the teacher is facilitating the learning process.

This is a complex and challenging aspect of teaching that demands further attention. The research suggests that there is a need to be able to understand the nature of ‘emotion rich’ learning environments in order that we can develop them and sustain them. This principle is supported by Evans (2014) who argues that there are gaps in our processual models of teacher development in that they

- fail to elucidate the micro-level processes of professional development (the singular unit of development)
- fall short in explaining deviance, atypicality, relationality and causality.

These perceived shortcomings correspond to the area of professional development that I have identified.

### **5: Developing research methodologies to support evidence-based practice**

The previous four principles suggest that there is a significant new knowledge base concerning teacher expertise that needs to be developed. This knowledge base is concerned with understanding the ways in which improvisation makes a positive contribution to notions of teacher expertise and covers a wide number of issues which include:

- developing a vision of good improvisational teaching;
- articulating a shared vocabulary and concepts;
- discovering the techniques for developing improvisational ability in teachers (from initial training through to advanced professional practice);
- developing a body of theory and practice for the teaching profession;
- understanding the relationship between structure and improvisation, getting the balance right between the fixed (design) structures and the improvisational (emergent) structures;
- learning from the wealth of practice, theory and reflective writing about improvisation that can be found in other (artistic) contexts;
- determining what the differences are between 'inauthentic' and 'authentic' practice;
- understanding the emotional climate of the classroom and the development of expertise in developing teacher / student relationships
- exploring the personalisation of pedagogy and classroom spaces and the impact that this has on learning.

As the above list suggests this identifies a broad research project. There are a number of research methods that could make a positive contribution to building and extending this body of knowledge.

One of the main themes of this research was the impact that school culture has upon the development of teacher expertise supported by the position that teacher expertise is socially constructed. The personalisation of the teaching and learning process is expressed through Habermas's theory of the lifeworld (Habermas, 1984, 1987) and the way in which this is socially constructed (Burr, 2003) Ethnographic study could provide an understanding of the ways in which the relationships and interactions bring this personalised space in being. Attention could also be given to the ways in which teachers with expertise gain, or are given, autonomy.

Whilst the design of my research was based on a comparative case study methodology the relationships with the teachers in the study developed in different ways. In one instance this became a relationship where my research stimulated the teacher to engage, informally, with researching and developing their own practice. Whilst action research has long been recognised a mode of practitioner based research in order to improve practice I would argue that participatory action research (PAR) would be an appropriate methodology given that it would actively engage a range of stakeholders in the development of the project in order to generate shared solutions to shared problems (Munn-Giddings, 2012).

A further important contribution could be made through narrative enquiry and the reflective case study of self. This approach that is based on personal inquiry and reflection offers researchers the opportunity to articulate the values, beliefs and practices that inform their professional life. It can provide the key ideas and concepts through which the teacher can bring their own personal values and approaches into their pedagogic repertoire and contribute to the personalisation of their practice.

## CONCLUSIONS

One of the defining features of a neo-liberal ideology is the assumption that it holds about self-interested individuals and the superiority of free markets. A consequence of this has seen the centralised control over schools which has led to the intensification of teachers work, the de-professionalisation of teachers as their autonomy and their judgments have been restricted and the development of a performative culture in which teachers are required to align their practice to external targets and evaluations (Passy, 2013: 1060). The potential for isolationism and vulnerability that an accountability culture places on individual teachers is significant. Therefore the findings of this research, located within a social constructionist paradigm, offer a critical alternative to the neo-liberal agenda. Social constructionist approaches that take account of the transformative power of school culture can provide an additional dimension to the transformative expectations of individual teachers to make a difference to all the pupils that they teach. This reinforces the importance of a school context in which teachers can develop a resilience to continual change and sustain a long-term commitment to the profession (Gu and Day, 2011).

This research however is not an isolated example of the case for greater teacher autonomy. There is a growing body of researchers and teachers who are exploring alternative professional practices that reflect an open-ended and improvisatory approach to teaching and learning. There is evidence of a paradigm shift that offers an alternative understanding of advanced pedagogy and the process of teaching and learning, shift that focuses on the relational nature of teaching and learning, a 'radically open and undetermined process and hence a process that is always "in deconstruction"' (Biesta, 2013: 139). The research findings reported above suggest new approaches to the professional development of advanced practitioners that is not only innovative but is perhaps long overdue.

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