



An Chomhairle Mhúinteoireachta
The Teaching Council

Formal launch of *Re-imagining Initial Teacher Education: Perspectives on Transformation*

(Eds. Fionnuala Waldron, John Smith, Maeve Fitzpatrick, Thérèse Dooley)

By Tomás Ó Ruairc, Teaching Council Director

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Thank you Fionnuala, I would like to thank you for the very kind invitation to launch this book here in St. Patrick's College this evening. What I propose to do in launching this book is to give you a flavour of the process that I went through as I read it – the thoughts and questions that the contributions generated.

The best way I can find of articulating what I am trying to say here is encapsulated in the quote from Dewey in the chapter on school placement, by Bernadette Ní Aingléis, Paula Murphy and Brian Ruane, where referring to an educative experience he said:

“... [it is one which] takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after” (Dewey, 1938).

This book has been written by those who have gone before me into research and discussion, I have had the good fortune to pick it up and read it, and I hope to enhance the quality of the reading experience for those who will read it after me through my comments here this evening.

Fionnuala passed the book on to me some weeks ago. When I sat down to read it, I started with chapter 8, Jim Deegan's contribution on bridging being and becoming. So it could be said that my reading of the book was coloured somewhat by starting in this way. Nevertheless, many of the key messages which I took from each of the contributions throughout the book did seem to come back to these core conceptual dynamics of "being" and "becoming" in one way or another. Each of the contributions in its own way grapples with how the dynamics of upheaval at a number of levels in education seem to be impacting on the "who" and "how" of being a teacher and becoming a teacher. Jim discusses bridging as an animating metaphor for re-imagining initial teacher education. That is a very good starting point for reading this book.

But I would take it a step further. We could also talk about "bridgings" of becoming - more like a spaghetti junction on the M50 rather than a single bridge. Prof. Kari Smith talked about bridges in her recent keynote to the EU Presidency conference which we hosted on the teacher educator. I thought it was interesting that she described her home island as the area of practice, and the mainland as the territory of theory! This book would caution against such a potentially overly simplistic imagining of the dynamics!

What have I gained from reading this book? Why should anyone who has not already done so make the time to read it? If I could sum up the answer in one word, it would, for those familiar with my background, come as little surprise - language.

It gives us a language to puzzle out loud and articulate the questions about many of the issues affecting initial teacher education at the moment. It gives us a language to engage with others who care, but do not necessarily agree with us, about these issues.

It gives us a language to do this in a way that will generate heat, yes, light, certainly, but above all else, insight. I cannot make you believe this statement - only you can establish its veracity to your own satisfaction by reading the book. But I can certainly encourage you to start that journey of reading by hopefully giving a genuine sense of how much I enjoyed reading the book and how much I learned from it.

Heat? There are certain views expressed in parts of this book that I would disagree with. Suffice it to say that a certain amount of heat was generated in my mind when I read them! But there would be something wrong if a book as comprehensive as this, on an area of learning and knowledge as contested as teacher education was completely devoid of such views.

Light? The book is replete with examples of this. To take one such example, Jim Deegan's exploration of the processes of being and becoming is fascinating. His contribution brings into sharp focus the broader dynamic running throughout Irish education - that of blurring boundaries and shifting roles. But he does so in a way that highlights the opportunities for transformational teaching and learning in these shifting dynamics. This will happen as the "becoming teachers" he refers to work with teachers who "became" in the past to jointly, together, continue "becoming" teachers for the future.

As such, there is much solace in this message, and in the book as whole, for teacher educators. Such light, insight perhaps, is the best indication we can hope for that the work we do now will have an ongoing positive impact on the greater good in a sustainable way.

The future of our own lifetimes is unknowable, the future beyond that is practically, if not virtually, unimaginable. This book identifies flows and dynamics that will ensure that generations to come

will be re-imagining initial teacher education so that the future will emerge into the realm of the “imaginable” for our children and young people.

This resonates with Zita Lysaght's contribution on the Professional Gold Standard of adaptive expertise, where she quotes Barbara Ragoff's term of "apprenticeship of thinking". The wonderful idea that the pinnacle of professional accomplishment is to be always adapting and changing, reminding me of the phrase quoted by Fionnuala in the introduction - “inquiry as stance” – a dynamic process defining or encompassing a potentially static concept. Such insight for me is the epitome of re-imagining.

Whether you read this book straight through, or zig-zag and skip back and forth, many of the same key messages keep resonating from one contribution to the next. Although Lysaght's point is given in chapter 7, it resonates strongly with the following quote from Cochran-Smith's opening chapter:

“This latter conception of the teacher as a professional [knowledge of practice] is one who is always raising questions, always uncertain in a sense. **This means that professional teachers have doubts and raise questions, not because they are failing, but because they are learning**” (p.46). *[My emphasis]*

If any one quote sums up the sheer joy that I have gleaned from reading this book, this is it. The idea, which is almost a cliché now, that at the heart of an excellent teacher will be the heart of an excellent learner. The wonderfully consoling idea that to ask a question is not to expose yourself to accusations of ignorance but to unlock learning for others. If our country is to have any hope of emerging from this crisis, and avoiding the mistakes of the past, then openness to learning, and a constant, rigorous, honest questioning of all assumptions and received wisdom, will be essential.

The vision of the professional captured by Cochran-Smith in the quote that I have just read sums this up perfectly for me.

It is echoed in the closing stages of the book, where Ní Aingléis, Murphy and Ruane cite Paulo Freire's salutary warnings on a misinterpretation of the relationship between "master" and "apprentice":

"In this regard, even the more experienced party is not considered to be 'all knowing', but rather one who provides a particular perspective on a dialogue to which both contribute"
(p.314).

Clearly, therefore, the Master can ask questions in a spirit of "inquiry as stance" as much as the apprentice!

This redefinition of the questioning role of the teacher gives a nice foretaste of Ríona Ní Fhrighil's exploration of the important difference between Learning Autonomy and Learner Autonomy. She cites the literature to show that learner autonomy is not a given at the beginning of the language acquisition process but a more fluid concept that crystallises itself in an almost symbiotic dance with the role of the teacher. Thus the author deftly highlights the dangers of an overly simplistic analysis of this dynamic, especially as it relates to the role of the teacher in a pedagogical environment that pulsates so strongly with the hum of the PC, or indeed, the iPad!

In so far as these quotes from Cochran-Smith and Ní Fhrighil raise the interesting prospect of re-imagining language, then Fionnuala's introduction sets the tone perfectly for the book overall.

Take these phrases from the first two pages:

- shared space;

- rich tapestry – (see the artwork on the cover - a space that is shared by all as they reflect on it; a rich tapestry that defies definition but is nonetheless quite clear for all that);
- conversations;
- navigating spaces;
- language in initial teacher education;
- student voices;
- the web of possibilities;
- the inherent complexity of teaching;
- the importance of purpose;
- the generation of authentic knowledge;
- the beautiful paradox of "inquiry as stance";
- a move towards less certainty for teachers
- space to breathe;
- growing into practice.

As I read through that list of words, the following concepts seemed to resonate with me:

Space, language, voice, web, purpose, authenticity, paradox, less certainty, breathing, growing.

When you distil these words further, you get a sense of teaching, and teacher education, as an organic process, a distinctly human one that hinges on integrity, a process that can be subversive in the most liberating sense of that word, a process that can defy many efforts at prediction - hence the various cautionary notes about a tendency towards reductionism in the discourse.

Take this quote from the introduction: "Teacher education in Ireland, for example, as elsewhere, has entered a period of increased surveillance and control ... " (p.3). I know from recent events that there are some who would include the Teaching Council in this statement! I would ask those people to step back for a moment and calmly re-assess our policy documentation and our various public utterances over the last year or so.

I submit that our policies are not a prescriptive formula that seek to micromanage teaching and teacher education, but rather that they endeavour to construct a framework of policy consistency that will enable teacher educators, and teachers, to embrace and indeed drive their own change with courage and confidence. There will always be tensions between policy makers and those who implement policy. But perhaps those who view the Council solely as policy makers are missing the point. If they could see the work the Council has done in terms of policy development, in the way it has sought to develop policy to date and will be doing in the near future, then perhaps they might relocate us in their own view of the education firmament.

I speak in particular of our forthcoming consultation on induction and probation, and the proposed pilot. The broad thrust of our message here will be that we as a Council are setting out the aims of the process, and the values which we feel should underpin it. We are then approaching the profession, seeking their help to populate the framework with more detail.

The warnings throughout the book on the dangers of instrumentalism and reductionism dominating the discourse are well made. This of course highlights the importance of a holistic approach to education. Equally, it can be too easy for us teachers to fall into the trap of dismissing what may be legitimate or even fruitful inquiry by levelling such accusations at those posing the questions - *you cannot reduce teaching to a scientific formula*. As we all know, there is an element

of science to teaching - we call it pedagogy. And our understanding of it has evolved over time - that is one of the great benefits of living after others and inquiring about their work! There is of course a lot more to teaching than just science, but it is a part of it. And we do need a language to talk about that, in order to ensure that we as teachers, and the broader public, come to a deeper and more authentic understanding of the "inherent complexities" of teaching.

This is important - teachers need a language to describe what they do. Teachers need this language to support and inform the process of continuous improvement. And they need this language as much as an emotional support as a pedagogical one. This was highlighted for me in Dolores Corcoran's contributions on the beguiling concept of contingency moments, and the incredible opportunities for learning contained in them, which can only be really unlocked if we have the emotional courage and self-awareness to do so. We cannot even commence this process if we do not have some kind of language to scaffold our journey into the inner unknown, which is far more daunting than the external unknown of the future.

The importance of language in education and in pedagogy in general is foregrounded in the chapter from Áine Furlong, Brendan McMahon and Sinéad Ní Ghuidhir, where at one point they say:

"If we accept the relation between a word and consciousness, then we must also accept that learning is its outcome. Consequently, in this light, language becomes central to the process of mediation. While this may be stating the obvious, educationalists have felt the need to remind teachers and subject specialists of the multiple functions of language. These include the use of language to understand, to communicate, to think, to create, to explain, to use, to make, to recall, and to memorise" (p.290).

And they close with this quote from Van Lier:

“... it is impossible to separate education and language. You cannot do pedagogy without language and language learning is the essence of pedagogy” (p.299).

Is a launch of a book tantamount to an endorsement of all that the book contains? In an area of learning and knowledge that is as contested as initial teacher education, to borrow John Furlong's term, that would seem to be an impossible task.

As I have said, there are certain viewpoints in this book that I would disagree with - that will probably come as little surprise to the authors of the relevant pieces! But for all that, I would be strongly of the view that anybody with an interest in maintaining and enhancing the quality of teaching for our children and young people should read this book from cover to cover. For although the book confines itself to re-imagining initial teacher education, it poses questions and provides insights that will enlighten, inform and challenge all policy development in this area throughout the continuum of teacher education.

This may seem to be a claim too far. Even with the Teaching Council's Policy on the Continuum, and its emphasis on the seamless flow from one phase to another, and our statement that no one phase is more important than the other, can the study of one phase truly inform the discourse of all others?

This book, to my mind, shows that in this case at least, it certainly has the potential to do so. The extent to which it does is ultimately a matter for all teacher educators working with the “becoming teacher” in this phase. It will also depend on the extent to which those self-same educators, and indeed all of us, are prepared to engage openly and honestly with the type of

questions posed by the authors of the articles in this book. If the future of our education system is going to be framed more in the context of a learning society than a knowledge one, then it appears to me that the dynamics of our processes of engagement and discourse will be as important, if not more so, than the initial fruits of that engagement and discourse.

For in identifying the great opportunities for insight and learning in a situation where roles are shifting and blending, where questions are being posed with no guarantee of a clear answer in the near future, and in giving a flavour of how enriching the process of puzzling out loud can be, this book has done a singular service to the teaching professional of the future, no matter when they started their journey of becoming. And for that alone, I say to all the authors, go raibh míle maith agaibh.

Tomás Ó Ruairc