

**THEMES AND METAPHORS IN THE  
AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVES OF  
NEW SECTOR SECONDARY TEACHERS  
IN TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO  
A Case Study<sup>1</sup>**

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This paper analyzes autobiographical narratives of 14 female and 2 male secondary school teachers of English, employed at schools in the new education sector of Trinidad and Tobago and enrolled in an in-service postgraduate teacher education programme. The study investigates the major themes and metaphors that shape the realities of these teachers and their students. A secondary aim is to find out what culture permeates Language Arts teaching at their schools. The analysis indicates that metaphors of control, blame, and survival are common signifiers of how teachers deal with perceptions of inadequate teacher preparation, helplessness, and a sense of failure. Teachers' narratives impute indiscipline and low academic ability to their students. With regard to Language Arts, teachers express feelings of inadequacy about language teaching as compared to literature teaching. In examining assumptions, contradictions, and hidden perspectives, the paper suggests that the valuable insights gained from self-referential documents need to play a more important part in teacher education programmes and planners' deliberations, if Universal Secondary Education is here to stay in its present format. Language Arts teachers, in particular, need to review their positions; also teacher educators who serve the sector should encourage teachers to review their narratives on a more frequent basis, in order to periodically reassess where they have been, in the context of future goals.

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## **Introduction**

The need for a large cohort of “good” secondary school teachers is arguably the most crucial element of educational expansion in Trinidad and Tobago since the advent of Universal Secondary Education (2000). Through the Secondary Education Modernization Programme (SEMP), attempts are being made to address past and continuing educational failings such as:

the low level of literacy and numeracy; a noticeable general lack of creative, analytical and problem solving skills among students; unsatisfactory performance by way of examination passes and test scores; and an uncomfortably high level of cases of serious student misbehaviour. (Lochan, 2000)

Investment in areas such as curriculum development and the writing of new syllabuses aims at increasing student learning. Professional development initiatives target the enhancement of teacher effectiveness, and the construction of new, modern buildings provides environments aimed at ensuring equity for those previously left out of secondary education, and equipping them with facilities of high quality. If universal secondary education is here to stay as presently conceptualized, the Language Arts teacher is perhaps the teacher who will make the widest contact with students within the expanding secondary school sector. This is not only because Language Arts (also called English) is compulsory, but also because regardless of type of secondary education envisaged for the adolescent, proficiency in language is considered basic for communication.

It is against this background that this paper examines the metaphors and themes in the autobiographical narratives of 16 secondary school teachers of English at the commencement of their enrollment in an in-service postgraduate programme. It investigates the learnings that have informed their practices, as a platform for teacher reflection, before they undertake the in-service teacher education programme.

## **Research Questions**

1. What are the overriding themes and metaphors shaping the realities of teachers and students as they negotiate learning?

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2. What culture permeates the teaching of Language Arts in the New Sector schools at which these teachers teach?

### **Explanation of Terms**

“New Sector school” in this study refers to schools constructed since 1975 to accommodate the expansion of secondary education in Trinidad and Tobago. The first schools were junior secondary and senior comprehensive schools, followed by composite schools. With the goal of universal secondary education, more schools have gradually been built under SEMP. New Sector schools receive 80% of the secondary school population, comprising of students who do not score a high enough mark on the Secondary Entrance Assessment (SEA) to get into the “prestige” and traditional grammar-type government secondary schools.

### **Significance of the Study**

The use of teachers’ life histories or autobiographical narratives to generate reflection toward professional development in teacher education programmes is well known. However, examination of autobiographical documents is rare in the Caribbean. Teachers’ conscious or unconscious selections of events, not only reveal their philosophies and beliefs, but do so in the context of the past and present social systems in which they have been, or are still, grounded. Themes or broad recurrent ideas in life histories or narratives are usually brought to light and analyzed. Also linguistic markers, such as metaphors and analogies that teachers use in describing their experiences, can be explored in an attempt to develop teachers’ critical thinking about the psychological dimensions that these markers imply.

The critical evaluation of themes and metaphors in narratives can guide not only professional development, but also the design of work programmes, based on insights into consciously and unconsciously expressed teachers’ needs. Judicious and ethical use of autobiographical narratives can ensure that they are not misused as indicators of the individual teacher’s potential, but as guides to developing pedagogical strengths and eliminating weaknesses. With specific reference to the New Sector schools, monitoring of school culture and teachers’

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challenges can be an important insight into the state of the sector, and an indicator for informed action.

### **Literature Review**

According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980) “human thought processes are largely metaphorical”(p. 6). Our experiences are bonded in conceptual frameworks that are systematic and coherent. In both language and actions we express one thing in terms of another quite as a matter of course, since metaphors are embedded in human communication in ways that have become natural. The systematicity and coherence of our conceptual frameworks are not simply self-referential. They remain experiential, because they go outward to embrace notions of participants, actions, and sequential structures as reference points (p. 82). When a teacher describes her school as a “war zone” for instance, it is this type of multidimensional, interrelational gestalt that is being projected.

While metaphor underpins the coherence of texts, themes distinguish patterns, not only of presences and similarities, but also of silence, omission, and difference. And herein lies the usefulness of the conjunctive deployment of both thematic and metaphorical analysis of teachers’ autobiographical texts. For since themes and metaphors interlock and encode the tensions inherent in texts, examining them can help with unravelling and deconstruction meaning, which is so crucial to framing and reframing situations, leading to learning from reflective practice. Current research is aware of “the powerful effect of the [teacher’s] childhood heritage as a learner, and the quality of the relationships experienced in educational contexts” (Tann, 1993 p. 55) to undermine the impact of teacher education programmes, thus making them “low impact-enterprise[s].” Therefore, the focus is now on maximizing the usefulness of autobiographical statements, through applying post-structural and deconstructive approaches to their interpretation. The purpose behind this more rigorous scrutiny of narratives is to get them to yield much more than the platitudinous and self-satisfying outcomes that have been known to limit their usefulness.

Andy Convery (1999), for instance, examines the linguistic conventions of the autobiographical genre, and cites a lack of understanding of the manipulation of audience inherent in the genre. Therefore, he acknowledges past research on the usefulness of life histories; however,

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more pointedly, he explores the susceptibility of the genre to identity enhancement. Using deconstructive approaches on his own teaching narratives, he shows how autobiographies can be used to enact “moral individuality through the selection, organization, and presentation of personal experience” (p. 132). He argues that the conventions and linguistic devices inherent in autobiography predispose the genre to the “narrative tradition of completeness,” (p. 134) thus allowing epiphanies, for example, to lead to expected “successful narrative conclusion” (p. 136). Convery sees autobiographical narrative as a performative genre that creates identity rather than reveals it. Through implied and direct comparison of themselves with discredited peers, teachers can impute a superior integrity to themselves, when, in fact, the “discreditable self might be privately anxious lest his or her practice is publicly exposed as being inadequate” (p. 141).

The result can often be the heroic teacher displaying a missionary zeal, which “may conflict with the students’ learning needs” (p. 140). Additionally, autobiographical narratives can propagate psychological manipulation by projecting a voice that attracts the uncritical sympathy of the audience to the role of teacher as victim. In the final analysis, Convery’s attack is not on teachers’ autobiographies, but on researchers’ use of them.

Like Convery, Greer Cavallaro Johnson (2002) goes after deeper introspection, but her emphasis is on the usefulness of combining different types of teachers’ accounting. She “resists the romantic view” (p. 21) of teachers’ accounting, arguing for greater interrogation, because, as she says, “those accounts are not ‘out there’ and fixed, waiting to be retold time and time again in the same manner” (p. 21). In a case study involving one teacher, she uses three methods of accounting:

1. A teacher- generated picture book with a comic book, bubble style, which engages other voices.
2. An interview protocol (question sheet) given to the teacher half an hour before an interview, which requires the teacher to talk about the meaning the picture book intended to convey and to challenge the assumptions therein.
3. The interview itself.

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The three-pronged strategy positions the teacher to resist storytelling, confession, and the happy-ending format that come from linear narratives. It forces the teacher to “position” at the centre of her reflection, a multiplicity of other stakeholders’ voices, including that of the student. Citing Britzman (1986), Johnson says she intends the interview to move the teacher from the personal to a “post-personal” focus, and so engender a “reconceptualization of school teaching as a social rather than as an individual practice, thus liberating the teacher ‘to challenge her institutional biography’ ” (p. 28).

Both Convery and Johnson advocate a post-structural investigative approach to themes and metaphors of teachers’ personal accounts, which inverts the power play, the positioning, and the assumptions of teachers’ conventional stances. They also exhort researchers and interviewers to “recognize the part they play in making data, as opposed to passively collecting it” (Johnson, p. 36).

### **Design and Methodology**

This study uses a qualitative case study approach in its analysis of the autobiographical narratives of 16 of the 22 teachers of English enrolled in a postgraduate teacher education in-service teacher education programme. The autobiographical narratives were collected during the first week. Of the 16 teachers, 14 are male and 2 are female. What the 16 teachers have in common is that they teach at non-grammar type schools (New Sector schools) in Trinidad and Tobago, built for secondary school children since the secondary school expansion in 1975. The six teachers excluded from this study teach at schools structured on the traditional grammar-type model.

Three types of personal narratives were collected from the 16 teachers:

- an Autobiographical Assignment
- a “Letter to Myself”
- a 3-5 minute self-introduction

The Autobiographical Assignment and Letter to Myself are course requirements submitted in the first week of the programme to initiate the reflective process that takes place throughout the programme (The

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University of the West Indies [UWI], 2004). They reflect the positions of teachers as they enter from their respective schools. To supplement the Autobiographical Assignment and the Letter to Myself, which are take-home components of an ongoing teacher portfolio, the researcher utilized a videotaped self-introduction on orientation day – the first day of the teachers’ entry into the programme – particularly aimed at the teachers’ curriculum area of Language Arts teaching. In the self-introduction, teachers were asked to talk about their teaching history, to give an idea of their strengths and weaknesses, and to say what they expected from the Language Arts curriculum component of the course. Thus, one oral and two written documents are the materials on which this study is based. The guidelines for the three autobiographical narratives are appended (Appendix A).

#### **Procedure**

The Autobiographical Assignment was used to address Research Question 1, looking at overriding themes and metaphors shaping the realities of teachers and students as they negotiate learning. The 3-5 minute self-introduction was used to provide data for Research Question 2, investigating the culture that permeates the teaching of Language Arts in the teachers’ schools. The Letter to Myself was used as a triangulating tool and findings from it are included under Research Question 2. An overlap of data was anticipated, given the autobiographical nature of three documents. The entire study tried to maintain an autobiographical unity. Much less data were collected in the self-introduction, which was devised to extend the autobiographical focus to take in the consciousness of teachers as Language Arts practitioners. The analysis of data is poststructuralist and deconstructive in design. In other words, the documents are analyzed for what they say as much as what they do not say, in their unconscious erasures and contradictions.

#### **Limitations of the Study**

The limitations of “truth” and the tendency to self-enhancement, as they affect autobiographical documents, apply to this investigation, but triangulation enhances its validity. With regard to the self-introductions, the fact that the teachers were in a new environment and were called upon to give appraisals of themselves, impromptu and within hours of their arrival, in front of peers they were meeting for the first time, could

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have affected their responses. It is accepted that the limitations of self-enhancement or under-representing of self, due to factors such as modesty, anxiety, and surprise that apply to personal statements, can affect outcomes of this paper.

With regard to the self-introductions as well, analysis of the body language of the respondents, which could have helped to enhance interpretation of teachers' responses, was beyond the competence of this researcher. Behaviours such as shifting eye movement were noted, but not used in the determination of interpretations. However, in many cases, where students were uncomfortable, their discomfort had a tendency to be registered in their use of language and so are embedded in the transcription of the self-introductions.

Because the self-introductions were not done one-on-one with the researcher, but in open group, the tendency to echo the format of previous speakers was apparent in teachers' responses. However, the content of teachers' responses was different, given their different life histories, experiences, and the different schools in which they taught.

The researcher felt that an analysis of themes and metaphors was the best way to approach the autobiographical documents in light of the overwhelming linear and narrative responses of the teachers to the Autobiographical Assignment. Teachers' responses to the Autobiographical Assignment—the document that produced the most material, developed through commenting on the eight guiding points of the question—focused little or not at all on synthesizing experiences towards “philosophy.” There was also more focus on following the stages outlined in the question prompt than on “learning” derived from them, as the assignment sought. The deconstructive, post-structural approach was very useful in analyzing teachers' responses.

The findings of this investigation are applicable to the 16 teacher respondents, although they contain wider implications for the education system, teachers, and teacher educators of Trinidad and Tobago.

## Analysis

### **Research Question 1: What are the overriding themes and metaphors shaping the realities of teachers and students as they negotiate learning?**

#### **Autobiographical Assignment**

As outlined in the methodology, the Autobiographical Assignment will be used to answer Research Question 1. For purposes of organization, the metaphors and themes are set down following the three main influences that teachers detailed: (1) childhood influences, (2) becoming a teacher, and (3) teaching and exposure to training. Realities of both teachers and students are discussed simultaneously since the findings are interdependent. It must be emphasized that the accounts of the 16 teachers in this study are not representative of the entire secondary school sector.

#### **Themes and Metaphors Shaping Realities of Teachers and Students**

##### **(1) Childhood influences**

##### **Metaphors of control**

Teacher as beater and disciplinarian is the most pervasive image emanating from the teachers' early years. Learning is associated with fear and pressure in most of the teachers' experiences, even when they were taught by their parents. They express with wry humour how they emulated these roles in play. Some attribute their desire to be teachers to a desire to control students:

I have always wanted to be a teacher. During my early days at primary school it was my favourite pastime to 'teach' the concrete blocks of the garage walls. I often used a ruler to beat the blocks and shouted a lot to keep the 'students' in line. I was unconsciously mimicking the teachers at my school.

. . . the principal was a lady named Aunty S and I 'hated' her. She would beat us for any reason.

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One teacher even wryly wished to be a teacher to take revenge on the children of the teacher who caused her so much embarrassment in primary school:

Being reprimanded by Ms. B was the ultimate embarrassment; thus my wish to one day be the instrument in reprimanding her children.

This teacher's learning from the experience is quite baldly stated:

She along with my uncle proved to be role models for me as I eventually became a 'reprimanding tool' at the \_\_\_ Secondary Comprehensive School.

The beaters of primary school are legion, but of course there are a few memories of kind teachers, whom the teachers give the impression that they try to emulate now that they have become teachers themselves. There are also other tempered childhood images of teachers in a similar vein:

I spent hours communicating with my 'students', administering punishments, teaching lessons and correcting books. At this tender age (7 or 8 years old), I expressed my desire to become a teacher to my parents. My father was horrified and attempted to dissuade me from joining this profession.

The childhood learnings carry the implication that the teacher is the ultimate controller of the student in the learning process. Normally, in secondary school teachers are not allowed to beat, and adolescents are unlikely to brook domination. Teachers with a legacy of beatings behind them have to find alternative concepts of getting children to learn. The idea of control seems to be maintained on various fronts:

Several students and teachers advised me that I should let the students know who was in charge. Thinking that this had been sufficiently accomplished by laying down the rules, what I expected and asking what they expected of me, I proceeded to help them hone their examination techniques.

It may be a challenge for some teachers, used to control frameworks, to enact autonomous methods of learning, and for some students to respond naturally to teachers who do not have the power to beat.

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- **The good student as the compliant learner who works hard and passes exams**

Alongside models of the controller in the classroom, teachers portray themselves as having been good examples of discipline and self-control throughout their careers. The role-model student is the teacher herself who is portrayed as a hard-working, high achiever. This teacher usually “manage[s] to pass Common Entrance for [her] first choice; has never had any academic failures; and “was an avid reader.” Among teachers’ accounts are: “We all got our chance at a good education”; “A small library corner was created in our home.” Eight of the teachers have parents who are teachers. Even where teachers are from working-class families, they attribute their success to walking the-straight-and-narrow:

I did not rebel because my brother and sister rebelled and faced the consequences. At a young age I learnt a very important lesson, ‘Obedience is better than sacrifice.’ My siblings’ actions caused my parents to grow me up in sheltered life [sic] and as a result, many occurrences in my village were not determining factors on what kind of person or adult I became.

**How metaphors of control shape the realities of the students whom teachers teach at present**

- **The student as undisciplined**

The majority of teachers consider their students undisciplined. One disliked the school she was assigned to even before she got there. She was largely influenced by public opinion about the students’ lack of discipline:

Honestly, I was aghast when I was first told that this was the school to which they were sending me. I had been reared in the environs and was only too familiar with the school and its students . . . . Everyone I knew, including my father [a teacher himself], kept telling me to try to get out of there as quickly as possible. I was told about the low pass rate, serious reading problems, the violence, the negative environment, and the high teacher turnover.

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Another compares the students he now teaches with himself, the students' parents with his parents, his era with that of his students, and his values with theirs, all to the students' disadvantage:

Indiscipline among students in the school was causing many to underachieve. Worse still was the fact that children with potential were not getting the support at home. . . . I have vivid memories of myself returning home after school to perform enrichment or reinforcement exercises under the supervision of my parents. 'So, who looks after these unsupervised children many of whom are from single parent homes?' I often enquired.

What comes across strongly is that many teachers at New Sector schools have a negative attitude towards teaching their students, and that many do not know what to do with children who do not have the same backgrounds as them. By and large, the mass wears the label of undisciplined. Teachers do not think themselves or the school responsible for or being able to make much of an impact on the children's indiscipline. Indiscipline is a characteristic the students arrive with. It is suggested that if the students come with discipline they are teachable. If they come without it, there is little that teachers can do for the "unfortunates":

Throughout my years as a teacher, the drive and determination to assist these unfortunate children have increased and become a core part of my being. I sincerely believe there is a crisis of Biblical proportions within our educational system . . . . My personal investigations have led me to believe that the primary school system as well as the role of proper parenting both contribute to this educational apocalypse . . . .

Most teachers suffer culture shock and need to be helped to move out of their state of paralysis, if they are to do the duty that signed themselves up for. The responses of the 16 teachers suggest that elements such as class prejudice and teacher personality factor greatly in their approach. Teachers need to reconcile the gap between their past schooling and their present duties.

**(2) Becoming a teacher**

**Investigating unconscious erasures about entry procedures**

One of the most noticeable features of the teachers' autobiographies is their silence about the actual process of entry into the profession itself. In spite of the fact that many teachers said they knew that they wanted to be teachers from childhood, there is no record about the application process, the interview, the preparation for their first morning; or thoughts about the seriousness of their mission. While the older teachers would have entered without protocols, those who have entered over the last ten years would have had an interview and some period of waiting before they were assigned. However, about this there is silence.

While the silence may be due to some failing in the wording of the assignment, it is more likely due to the fact that teachers did not see anything significant about the procedure or the choice they had made. The unspoken jump from university straight into the classroom suggests that not much thought went into becoming a teacher. This is an area that needs to be explored. With the expansion in education there are still many vacancies to be filled in the profession, and perhaps it is not that difficult to get employed as a teacher. It is also possible that the teachers had made up their minds so long before about being teachers, that entry was just the completion stage of their childhood fantasies.

One teacher expresses her jolt while she is on the way to her first appointment; but thoughts about likely scenarios, the places at which they would be posted, preferences in type of schools, are not areas they wrote about. Also, perhaps knowing that they could be posted anywhere in Trinidad and Tobago influenced what they wrote. However, they relate the shock that comes after they enter the classroom. The following indicate how they gloss over the intervening gap from university into the profession itself:

In October 19--, I landed a teaching job at the ---Junior Secondary School.

I began teaching just after I finished my first degree in December 19--. . . About three months afterwards, I began teaching at ---Senior

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Comprehensive, eventually moving in August of 19—where I have remained.

Since the desire to teach was still there, I entered the Teaching Service, and on September \_\_, \_\_ I was assigned to my first appointment at \_\_\_ College. It was only when I was on my way to the school that I realized that I did not know how to teach! What was I to do in front of the class? How was I to impart the knowledge that I had acquired?

For most, becoming a teacher seems a place they arrived at, and though they may have moved from school to school, they just stayed.

### **Becoming a teacher as an area of anger or shame**

For two teachers, entry into the profession was a matter of anger and disappointment:

For most of my life teaching seemed nothing but a last resort. From a very young age people told me that they were sure I would be a teacher just like my dad, my aunt and my grandfather and this made me quite angry. I didn't like it because it seemed as if I was not in charge of how my life would turn out. . . . There was a time when I even hoped to be a veterinarian, but I realized because of my grades and my inability to do well in science that veterinary school would not be in my future.

For the following teacher, a similar anger rings through her disappointment at occupying a status beneath her estimation of her worth:

I knew I would never be a teacher. I remember as an undergraduate telling a fellow student who expressed an earnest desire to be a teacher, that she showed no ambition, because to say that one actively, consciously wanted to be a teacher was like wanting to grow up to be a housewife. Well, I am now a teacher and the irony of that is not lost on me.

These views by themselves do not indicate dysfunctionality—there are many people who spend their entire lives contributing above and beyond the call of duty at jobs that they never envisaged themselves in, and that they do not like. In fact, because they have had to examine their disappointments these two teachers demonstrate later on that they have developed a greater sensitivity to their students than many of those who

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are still in the fairy-tale stage. For this discussion, I turn to examine how haphazard entry into the profession shapes the realities that students face.

#### **How themes of haphazard entry shape the realities that students face**

- **Developing caring profiles**

The two teachers above, whose accounts depict alienation and stress at entry, later show greater kindness and understanding for students than many of their colleagues. Personal changes in their private lives caused them to show students a more human face. One teacher's account suggests that there is the danger of teachers becoming patronizing and still not being effective teachers, in this move to greater acceptance of students; yet the move is a positive one because the teacher's change in attitude helps her to see her students as human beings:

I started teaching with the firm belief forged out of the fires of personal experience that children just had to learn to cope. . . . I resisted every effort of my students to know me, the person better: I was not important to their success in life, the information I had to give them was. I did become a little concerned about the rough time I had with my classes, but that was obviously because they were undisciplined. Then in 19—I had my first child and my perspective on the teaching process changed. I became softer, more patient and I did not think that anyone had noticed until a child in my form class remarked to another girl that Miss had become a nicer person since she had her baby.

Teachers need to note that students **do** recognize teachers' distancing of them and the contempt in which they are held.

- **Jumping in at the deep end**

In both old and young teachers' accounts, there are victimhood metaphors at entry into the profession, such as "thrown to the wolves," "baptism of fire," "nightmare," "sink or swim," "jumping in at the deep end." The younger New Sector teachers seem to be at the same school at which they entered the service. By contrast, the older teachers report being sent as replacement teachers from school to school with different cultures, and sometimes at very distant points from each other, before

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finding resting places. Teachers' autobiographies focus on the unsettling impact of their travels on them, but the neglect and instability students would have faced as a result of their visiting stints have doubtlessly impacted negatively on many young careers.

### **(3) Teaching and exposure to training**

- **Teacher as survivor**

The teacher respondents in this study have all gone past the initiation phase of their teaching careers, and are settled at their respective schools, some as senior teachers and acting heads of departments. However, the majority of them express concern about their practices and about their effectiveness. They are not sure what it is they lack, but they seem to have bought the idea that they should have had pre-service teacher education. They do not seem to think that they themselves should have sought this training; nor do they seem to consider that the lack of such training should have deterred them from applying for teaching appointments. What they imply is that their employers should have trained them before employing them. Some rely on a mixture of teacher models from their own experience and on the syllabus:

Apart from the content aspect of my degree, I don't think any training in actual teaching was done . . . We were given the knowledge but not taught the means by which to deliver this knowledge. I relied on past experiences with teachers (models) and what I thought appropriate based on the syllabus and textbooks recommended.

Truthfully, as head of the English Department I feel powerless. I still feel as if I began teaching last week but I am supposed to help other teachers . . . Teacher training should be mandatory before teachers are put in front of classes and retraining should be undertaken to keep all teachers abreast of the latest tools and techniques that are available to them.

Teachers judge their effectiveness by factors such as their students' progress, by examination results, and by their effectiveness at classroom management—a term they use to describe their ability to control their students. They also evaluate themselves by their success at getting across the syllabus and the content of their subject specialization. By these yardsticks, most of them consider themselves failing.

**Contradictions about teacher training and other aporia**

• **Teacher as complainer**

Autobiographies reveal many inconsistencies in teachers' accounts about their teacher education. For one, it is a myth to think that they have had no exposure to teacher education. Nine of the teachers' autobiographies reveal varying degrees of exposure: short pre-service training, on-the-job training (OJT), SEMP training, reading readiness courses, and instructional workshops at the Instructional Development Unit (IDU) of The University of the West Indies (UWI). Among these nine teachers, one has done the two- year primary school teachers' education programme. However, the impact and helpfulness of these courses vary in teachers' accounts:

I completed a six month workshop run by the Ministry of Education . . . The instructors or facilitators for the most part, though, were unprofessional. They came to the sessions unprepared; one in particular was distinctly unapproachable – he saw every question as an attack on his credibility; another told us she could not change her preferred style of presentation to accommodate anybody . . . .

I have attended four or five training programmes organized by the Ministry of Education. . . . All of these courses have enriched my understanding of the task I am employed to do, but they fall short sometimes in theory, as the practical application of some of their proposals, in my humble opinion, requires more attention and input from those in the actual practice of teaching the type of students being targeted here.

The New Sector teachers have been exposed to teacher education. However, they do not count certain types of teacher education, such as workshops or teacher education programmes conducted under the auspices of the Ministry of Education, as serious teacher education. Instead they give more weight to what they have learnt from experiences with teachers in their childhood. They blame their short-lived improvement and their continued lack of success in the classroom on factors such as the lack of follow-up and short duration of these courses. Their comments also suggest that they do not think the persons

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delivering the courses competent. For them, the big training is the Postgraduate Diploma in Education Programme they presently attend.

It seems that teachers need to examine themselves more from within, and also that teacher education courses need to place more emphasis on experimentation, creativity, and reflection. However, although these life skills can be taught, much depends on the teacher's own sustained effort and initiative, as well as the esteem in which teachers hold facilitators.

A resource that teachers tend to overlook is the support of their staff. Autobiographies indicate that the teachers in schools with the greatest challenges need to be exposed to ways of building confidence from this resource. Some degree of teacher collaboration is reported, but one gets the impression that it varies from school to school, and that in most cases it is absent. The following two excerpts from teachers who have teacher-parents can be compared in this regard. It may be noted that as a group, teachers whose parents are teachers do not fare any better than their colleagues. However, among the 16 autobiographies, one stands out in terms of reflective acumen and perspicacity, which suggests that in addition to school culture, personal teacher attributes play a large part in determining teachers' responsiveness to their call to duty. The two comments that reflect different attitudes and different levels of staff support from schools are juxtaposed below:

As an 'inexperienced' teacher in 1998, I made a conscious decision to be an effective teacher in the classroom, and so I closely observed the more experienced teachers in the classroom, asked many questions and adhered to suitable advice. . . . In addition at ---Secondary Comprehensive, the Language Arts Department provides a solid support structure. The Head of Department and teachers, new and old, often collaborate so that many ideas are exchanged and improvements made where necessary.

Although there is a high teacher turnover rate at \_\_\_ \_\_\_ Secondary School, there is a core group of teachers who have been there for fifteen years or more. Several of these teachers have their Diploma in Education. Are they able to cope because of the skills they have acquired or have they just settled and are comfortable where they are? I do not know.

**How teacher as complainer and survivor shapes the realities that students face**

- **Negative labelling**

The main outcome for students from teachers' insecurities is negative labelling. Indeed, teachers express surprise when the students prove to be different from their expectations:

They were not what I had expected to meet, given the school's reputation. These were well-behaved technical classes – boys who were the expected trouble makers and under-achievers.

This teacher, who underwent short pre-service preparation and OJT training under a mentor teacher, reasons that the positive effect on her students was attributable to the fact that "teachers regularly consulted each other about the students and the majority was successful in their courses." She goes on to say that the boys' "families and peers supported" them, and that "though the bonding as a class took time, it was a major support system for them."

However, with the new intake a year later, she reports, "Some of the better performers are declining and don't seem to mind. Their helping weaker colleagues does not seem to be to their benefit academically, though they are becoming a more cohesive unit." She closes her autobiography by saying: "Wishing to be an effective teacher, I think that at this point much needs to be re-strategized." The backsliding into helplessness seems to be related partly to a degeneration of support, suggesting both personality issues and changed relationships between teacher and staff.

Also, although some teachers are aware of their shortcomings, they tend to place the blame for their lack of success on their students' behaviour and lack of ability:

My students were aggressive and frustrated with my traditional teaching techniques. Regardless of my present students' abilities, I have decided to refrain from the name calling and embarrassing them because it will lower their low self-esteem.

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There is doublespeak in this teacher's remark. The teacher implies that her traditional teaching techniques are inadequate, but this point of self-criticism is couched in terms of negative appraisal of her students. First of all, they are aggressive when it seems that she thinks they have no right to be. Second, it is implied that they do not understand because they lack ability. Third, she would like to call them names and embarrass them, but they are already deemed to be suffering from low self-esteem.

Teachers distance themselves from students who are not like them and tend to perceive disruptive behaviour as an indication that the particular student does not want to learn. Learning is equated with subject knowledge. In the following remark, counselling is referred to as being of less value than subject content. Children who need counselling seem outside the pale of learning.

Unfortunately 30% of valuable teaching time was spent counselling 12% of the students who had disruptive propensities. . . . I was not alone since most concluded that each child had the ability to learn but was indeed not from our generation. They were definitely "Generation Next."

With such large-scale rejections of the students that they teach, there is a need for teachers to wrestle with self-examination on questions such as:

- (1) What is likely to become of such a sizeable population of young people who are rejected?
- (2) Is teaching/learning just luck and chance—luck if the teacher gets sent to a peaceable environment, bad luck if the teacher gets sent to face "Generation Next"?
- (3) Is it fair to exclude students who are considered not "normal" or "ready to learn"?
- (4) Can teaching ever be "effortless"?

The tendency to use clichés to blame children and their parents, using phrases such as "from single parent homes," is also common. Another common assumption is that when students do not do schoolwork they are not interested in school. There are many assumptions founded on class and cultural differences. Many of the negative assumptions require a study of the varied cultures of the children whom the teachers serve, if they are to be successful in educating them. Among the 16 teachers, only one seems to have arrived at a place where reflective practices seem to

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have served her well. Teacher personality and respect for the children that they teach also seem to play an important part in the level of difficulty that teachers display. The following teacher's remarks suggest this:

The students themselves have also played the role of teacher in my life. . . . Some are 'Street Smart', others 'Book Smart.' Some are wise beyond their years . . . All in all, there is no one type of student. No student is perfect. Thus I must be flexible.

#### **Research Question 2: What culture permeates the teaching of Language Arts at the schools at which the teachers teach?**

##### **Self Introduction and Letter to Myself**

The analysis that follows examines the live 3-5 minute statements and the short Letters to Myself of the 16 teachers, seeking to bring to the fore, themes and metaphors particular to the context of their being secondary school teachers of English. The analysis also seeks to bring to light their relationships with the silent, but embedded, student-learner. Although the material collected for this section is small in comparison to the data from the Autobiographical Assignment, it maintains a similar autobiographical focus.

With regard to Language Arts teaching, three main themes emerge from teachers' statements with almost equal prominence. They are:

- (1) The delay of teachers with families in seeking professional certification due to personal and domestic reasons.
- (2) Teachers' lack of learner autonomy, and their dependency mental frameworks with regard to teacher education.
- (3) Teachers' feelings of inadequacy about language aspects of English teaching.

##### **The delay of teachers with families in seeking professional certification due to personal and domestic reasons**

Taking care of their own children has caused teachers to put seeking professionalism on the back burner; in some cases not only during the

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formative years of their own children, but for as many as 18 to 20 years. The fact that the majority of the teachers in this study are female is perhaps the reason for the prominence of issues of a domestic nature in their responses:

- **Teacher with 18 years service:**

What has kept me back is family reasons. Now I feel that my children are a bit settled, and now is the time for me to develop professionally.

- **Teacher with 20 years service:**

I was interested in doing the Dip. Ed., but kept putting it off. My children were growing up. Last year the 3 of them took important exams, so I said this year I have to start seeing about myself and improving myself professionally, because the years are passing by and I am not getting any younger.

In their self-introductions, female teachers made spontaneous disclosures about the ages of their children. In fact, the pleasure this brought them and the entertainment it brought to their colleagues made it the major release valve at the Orientation Day self-introduction. Apart from the sense of achievement and self-worth contained in these domestic disclosures (which they used to contrast with the rigorous time they saw themselves about to endure), the residual theme was that their domestic life was more important than their professionalism. Age of teacher did not matter; but marriage seemed a factor:

I am recently married which is one of the reasons that I didn't do this before.

The domestic theme did not appear in the conversation of the two male teachers.

**Teachers' lack of learner autonomy and their dependency mental frameworks with regard to teacher education**

Most of the teachers seem to regard teacher training as a quick fix. Their statements indicate an emphasis on "strategies," which seems to have bred a culture of dependency. They judge the effectiveness of teacher education programmes by how effectively they impact on the difficulties

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and inadequacies they face at present with teaching English – problems such as student motivation, classroom management, and delivery.

One of the male teachers, who has been a primary school teacher and has done the primary school two-year teacher education programme, expressed a veiled doubt about the present programme to deliver more than he had got from previous training. The other, who wrote in his autobiography that he had done “several training courses over the years,” spoke about his enrollment in the context of a recommendation made by a previous graduate about skills and strategies, and that he had come to see if that was true:

- **Male Teacher 1**

I am especially interested in seeing how this programme compares or contrasts with the Teachers’ College Diploma at Corinth. Very curious about that aspect of it. Finally, I would like to see how my literature teaching can be improved via this course and see what new and innovative strategies this course has to offer us.

- **Male Teacher 2**

One of my friends recently completed the Dip. Ed. and she said that they introduce you to a lot of strategies which help and I want to see if that is true and try them and see how successful I would be in that area.

The female teachers’ responses seem less judgmental, but they, too, see teacher education as the acquisition of skills and strategies, which they can apply to their situations:

I am hoping that this course will provide me with some strategies to remedy that [classroom management]. I have had others who have found it to be of benefit; therefore, I am here and hope to find the same thing.

Being here, doing my Dip. Ed., I am hopeful that I would be more effective and I will learn a lot of the terminologies and terms that they usually use.

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**Teachers' feelings of inadequacy about language aspects of English teaching**

Teachers' self-introductions reveal two issues with regard to Language Arts teaching. One is their feelings about teaching language as opposed to teaching literature. The other is about the interference of the Creole in the teaching of Standard English. As one teacher put the latter issue:

While I was marking an essay for one of my students one day, I realized these children know what they want to say, but they have a problem in saying it.

In response to the question about their strengths and weakness, six teachers say that they lack competence in the teaching of grammar and language, as compared to two who indicate their area of weakness as the teaching of literature. In their separation of the domains—a separation that has been maintained in most schools to suit examination purposes—teachers indicate that they do not approach or perceive the teaching of English in an integrated way. The following statement is typical of the six who have problems teaching language:

It has been very difficult for me both in classroom management and especially in the area of grammatical knowledge. That's my problem area. I am good in the Literature because I like a lot of dramatics and I like to make my classes fun.

Of note in this response, is that problems with classroom management seem linked to teacher inadequacy in the subject area, while fun classes without classroom management problems seem linked with teacher competence and positive teacher attitude.

An important finding is that not all of the 16 teachers have been teachers of English throughout their careers. Three have been teachers of Spanish as recently as 2-5 years previously and began teaching English without induction; one teacher began her teaching career as a teacher of mathematics and then "branched off to English Language;" one is a "qualified librarian who came across to teaching 3 years ago;" and two others also teach social studies. The assumption that teachers of English in the New Sector schools are subject specialists of either language or literature seems not a valid one. The interdisciplinary teaching and

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varied backgrounds of these teachers have the potential to enrich their teaching, once they have a good enough base in the respective areas.

#### **Non-pervasive but important concerns**

In only three cases did autobiographical narratives link exposure to teacher education with promotion. However, one Letter to Myself raised two areas of insecurity that had not appeared in other narratives. They are: (1) the effects of examination centeredness on the teacher's practices, and (2) the teacher's feelings of inadequacy about teaching at various levels throughout the system. The teacher expressed her insecurities in these terms:

What worked in the past is now no longer working efficiently. Are my students now being sufficiently prepared for their examinations? That is what I am. An examination teacher. Oh, I could teach the lower forms but I don't want to. Why? Am I scared? To start, the first and second forms classes [sic] are large and it is a fact that classroom management is very difficult. . . . The tuition at lower form level is very different from the "examination" level where the CXC syllabus serves as a comprehensive guide.

Another inadequacy that two teachers expressed in the Letter to Myself lies in the areas of lesson planning, making schemes of work, and making records of students' progress:

Lesson Planning has been taught on some level in the various courses I have attended, but there never seemed to be time for much depth or practice . . . . Formulation of Scheme of Work is another area of organization that I hope to get assistance with in this programme. Also there is the problem of proper documentation of student progress apart from the very general information that can be given in the Mark Book.

#### **Corroborations Among the Three Autobiographical Documents – the Autobiographical Assignment, the Self-introduction, and the Letter to Myself**

Overall, the three autobiographical documents support each other, both in the profiles they present of individual teachers, and in the coherence of themes and metaphors throughout the entire data collected. The Letter to Myself indicates that generally speaking, the teachers have moved into the role of students vis-à-vis their tutors. In their new perceived

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roles as students, they speak of the teacher education programme that they are about to undergo in terms of “back to school,” “taking the plunge,” “a tough nut to crack,” and “like the birth process—nine months of increased growth, with some intense labour pains.” Areas of focus include self-encouragement, uncertainty, fears about the course, fears about neglecting loved ones, reminders about personal strengths that they can capitalize on, weaknesses in themselves that they know they should avoid, and appeals to God for guidance and protection.

### **Discussion**

The foregoing analysis of the various issues that the teachers of English wrestle with indicates that autobiographical narratives can serve, not only teachers’ personal growth, but also as useful planning guides for teacher educators and educational planners. The study concludes with an examination of the implications of the growth and understandings that can accrue from the narratives of the 16 teachers.

It is true that modernization of the new education sector, especially with the recent advent of universal secondary education, is an ongoing project with varied and changing dynamics. But it is quite clear that teachers and planners are not on the same page. Constant reappraisals and remedying of positions and attitudes should be undertaken if students’ learning potential, intellectual well-being, and academic futures are not to continue to be negatively affected. Whatever the plans for the education of sectors of the population that have not traditionally been exposed to secondary schooling, Language Arts teachers, more so than the teachers of other subject disciplines, cannot escape involvement. It is therefore disturbing that so much unease attends language teachers’ view of their task, and that they feel that they can only make limited use of the workshops and teacher education programmes designed for them.

Not only have perspectives on teacher education changed, but also with the advent of universal secondary education the opportunity has arrived for teachers to earn the designation “teacher” by becoming experts at their chosen profession. It is not a good reflection on them, then, that students should have to wait for best practice until some of them resolve their own domestic and personal issues. The issue of postponing exposure to teacher education goes beyond gender; for male secondary teachers are not known to submit to teacher education with any greater

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alacrity that female teachers. Making teacher professionalism compulsory and expanding the opportunities are two important requirements for the secondary education sector. These are not new suggestions. It must be obvious, though, that secondary school teachers are constrained by the teacher education opportunities available to them. For females, the rigours of an in-service programme, which calls upon them to wear the hats of mother, teacher, and student simultaneously, could be very daunting. Unlike primary school teachers, secondary school teachers have only an in-service option. It seems that after 30 years, other less stressful opportunities for acquiring basic teaching professionalism are long overdue.

As vital as exposure to teacher education is, however, a much more pressing concern is *how* teacher education is done. It is not to downplay the efforts of the programmes that the teachers of this study have done, including the one being done at the university, to point to the fact that teachers do say that they submit to teacher education without finding it useful, or of lasting benefit. However, the use of reflective tools, alongside traditional pedagogic approaches, can help both teacher and teacher educator to better understand those gaps. The subjective and self-referential nature of reflection—often considered its limitations—is where its strength lies, in the first instance, as an introspective agent of change. In many ways, the teacher educator is the greatest learner from teachers' autobiographical documents, because the overall weave of texts is studied by her alone. Therefore, as researcher and teacher educator, I share a few insights out of the experience of doing this study on a component of the course that I have been doing for years without as great attention.

Autobiographical documents are largely personal testimonies, but with teachers' permission it would be good to try to break down barriers of individuality in dealing with them. It is one thing for the individual teacher to get her feedback, but it is crucial for the teacher educator to be skilful and sensitive in dissolving the aloneness of teachers on issues that they feel are personal to them, but that the teacher educator notices is shared by the group. Teachers need to be able to share on some topics to initiate the dissolution of obsessions and paralysis that lead to the recurrent stalemate of blame. In future work with autobiographical documents, I would also pay more attention to teachers' review of documents written in the past on a more frequent basis, to have teachers

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reassess periodically where they have been, in the context of where they would like to be heading. Another point of learning was in the area of the wording of rubrics and question prompts, and how this relates to the handling of self-examination and productive analysis of scenarios in self-referential documents. Good examples and explanations of procedure need to be given to ensure that teachers understand how to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate self-referential narrative instead of merely producing voluminous linear text.

With regard to Language Arts teaching, a clearly outlined programme for the teaching of English as a second language to guide teachers in Trinidad and Tobago is overdue. The 30-year-old debates about the position of Creole in the Caribbean classroom, and how to deal with varying reactions to it, have not disappeared, in spite of the founding treatises of the 1970s and of current scholarly articles and research.

In closing, two final comments are made, one with regard to teacher education and teacher educators, the other with regard to teachers. The first is that at this present juncture, in spite of cost, a dynamic should be worked out for a level of teacher education, stronger than OJT, to take place in the New Sector schools themselves. Training heads of departments whose duties span various subject areas is not enough to provide the support that teachers claim they lack. Also, teacher educators across the board need to keep in closer contact with graduates from their programmes in order to give continued support and to evaluate the effectiveness of their own methods. The second comment is that teachers need to be encouraged to take responsibility for their own professionalism, for thinking for themselves, and for being proactive in seeking the knowledge that they lack. Thus, they need to develop the learner autonomy (Carter, 2002) expected of professionals, who are experimental, action research oriented, reflective, and geared toward continuous self-improvement.

#### **Note**

1. I would like to thank the teachers of this study for permission to use their documents and the Diploma in Education programme for use of its Autobiographical Assignment.

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## Appendix A

### Guidelines for Three Autobiographical Assignments Used in this Case Study

#### A. Autobiographical Assignment

Explore to what extent your philosophy of teaching has been influenced by your own learning experiences. Bear in mind:

1. Your childhood learning experiences at home
2. The influence of your learning experiences at school both primary and secondary
3. Other formal experiences as an adult
4. Training in your subject area at university
5. The influence of teacher training (if any)
6. Your own teaching experiences to the present
7. Discussions with other teachers, professional development programmes and meetings of subject associations
8. Literature on teaching in general and the teaching of your subject area in particular.

Examine particular ideas, experiences, or practices that have influenced you, identifying sources. Consider changes in your philosophy of teaching over time. What do you consider to be dominant influences on your theory?

Source: *Diploma in Education Handbook 2004/2005*, School of Education, The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago, p. 16.

#### B. "Letter to Myself" (about your expectations for the programme)

Source: *Diploma in Education Handbook 2004/2005*, School of Education, The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago, p. 13.

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**C. Self-Introduction**

Introduce yourself.

1. Name, School etc.
2. Why you applied to do the Postgraduate Diploma in Education Programme.
3. Your strongest area of English teaching; your weakest.
4. How you expect the Postgraduate Diploma in Education to impact on your teaching, classroom strategies, and subject knowledge.

Video-taped Orientation Day oral assignment of English Curriculum teacher educator.