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Teacher knowing or not knowing about students

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Based on a critical ethnography of an urban high school that exemplifies the many changes of post-apartheid South Africa, this paper presents data about two teachers who propose opposing perspectives and practices of knowing students. The analysis of the teachers' narratives shows that they came to know their students through solicited, unsolicited and professional knowing processes. A surprise finding for successful teaching, in what may be considered difficult yet not uncommon conditions of schooling in South Africa, is that knowing about students can be dangerous, and that *not* knowing students can be useful for teachers. These counter-intuitive findings are generative of questions requiring further exploration.

Keywords: critical ethnography; not knowing students; successful teaching; teacher knowing; urban school

Introduction

We cannot teach students well if we do not know them well.

Theodore R.Sizer (1999:6)

Writing from within the context of the US school system, with this assertion, Theodore Sizer succinctly captures a long-held wisdom that links teacher knowing to successful learning, and which underpins conventional inclinations that a good teacher knows her students. In other words, a knowing relationship allows good teachers to "connect with their students" (Hargreaves, 1998:835). The value of knowing students can be traced to particular interpretations of the nature of schools and the nature of humans. The former refers to spaces where human interaction is intrinsic to education, while the latter characterises humans as "built to be knowers" (Centore, 2005:1). Against the acceptance of this compelling and taken-for-granted relationship, to know and thereby to "teach well", is it possible to consider that a teacher could choose to not know students and still "teach well", or that to know students disrupts teaching? To answer the questions posed, this paper narrates, analyses and theorises the practices and perspectives of a pair of teachers who teach the same cohort of students; one who chooses to know and another, *not* to know those they teach.

Both teachers work in a school that serves students from a poverty-stricken community in a materially-deprived, urban school. Their stories are treated as stimuli for an analysis of an epistemology of practice in the way that Fenstermacher (1997) theorised, rather than as mere data. Understanding the practice of teaching in a developing context is important as it foregrounds the complexities, peculiarities and ironies that can emerge in a classroom in the South. Developing countries are not homogeneous (Guthrie, 2011). Identified in a number of international reports (see for example International Monetary Fund (IMF), 2014; United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2013) as a developing state, a school in South Africa provides the material basis to analyse the value of "knowing" extolled in developed contexts. The uncritical acceptance and application of the processes and approaches of schooling and education from the developed world can be problematic in specific settings in South Africa. Nevertheless, the insights gleaned from an isolated case can be instructive for both kinds of education contexts.

The use of knowing in this paper is a deliberate stance, despite knowledge being inextricably bound to the word education. The differences between knowing and knowledge are often blurred and it is in juxtaposing the two, we argue, that clarity can emerge. For instance, Cunliffe (2005:547) defines knowledge in terms of knowing. Knowledge, he surmises, is constituted of two types: "procedural knowledge or 'knowing how' and declarative knowledge or 'knowing that'". His analysis, situated in the field of art education, suggests that these two forms of knowledge are also expressions of knowing. Tekippe's (1996) separation of knowledge and knowing has also resulted in reducing both concepts to knowing. Knowledge, he avers, is conceptual knowing, and knowing is a form of primordial understanding. From Tekippe's (1996) perspective, conceptual knowing can be interpreted as a clarifying process, which distills thoughts and ideas from a myriad ideations; while primordial knowing is messy, unclear thinking, which precedes conceptual thinking. Whether conceptual or primordial, each kind is, undoubtedly, important and useful.

Dooyeweerd (1997), in contrast to Cunliffe (2005) and Tekippe (1996), offers a distinction by describing knowing as an activity and knowledge as a commodity. Ontologically, however, there are differences. Knowledge is the culmination and outcome of knowing. It acquires its value through the processes of classification, structuring, and essentialisation to convey circumscribed meanings and interpretations. By contrast, knowing is tentative and fluid and, following Skovsmose's (1994) elaboration, knowing is dynamic. Furthermore, knowledge is a body of information that is often impersonal, abstract, and imposed (Belenky,

Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986), while knowing is internalised belief, informed and influenced by relationships existing between knowers, and the known.

Despite the valuing of knowledge over knowing, the decision to use knowing in this paper has been guided by the need to explore teachers' personal and practical knowing practices, rather than the need for scientific objectivity, as is implied by the term 'knowledge'. The idea is not to identify a shared construct of truth, but to explore the complexities of knowing, as expressed in the multiple realities and interpretations of research participants in their historicised, localised, and cultural lives, amidst a complex and adversarial educational space.

Methodology

Teacher knowing was explored through the deployment of critical ethnographic methods (Carspecken, 1996; Noblit, Flores & Murillo, 2004). Ethnographic approaches are sensitive to recognising the influences of context on rituals, habits, discourses, practices and activities of particular groups. A school can, from this perspective, be regarded as a cultural unit, which is, in some respects, both similar and different to other schools. The school, situated in a major South African city, is a dynamic and challenging space, exemplifying activities and conditions not usually associated with education or with children between the ages of 12 and 18. Amethyst High School (a pseudonym) was established for those individuals defined under apartheid as Indian.¹ After the fall of apartheid, desegregation, characterised by the inflow of poor African students and the outflow of middle class Indian students, was accompanied by violent altercations between students and teachers. Students were involved in activities such as dealing and using drugs, petty theft, sexual harassment and violence. The intimidation of teaching personnel was reported by a majority of the teachers participating in the study.

Eight teachers volunteered to participate in the study. In this paper, only two narratives, those of Navin and Bernice (pseudonyms) are offered. Both teachers began their teaching careers in secondary schools and at the time the study was conducted, Navin had been teaching for 25 years and Bernice for 22 years. Both lived in a middle class suburb about 20 kilometres away from the school. While Navin taught Life Orientation, Mathematics and Technology, Bernice taught Business Economics and Typing. In the national Grade 12 exam, a high stakes end-of-schooling evaluation that determines who qualifies for university entrance, Business Economics and Typing, both taught by Bernice, were the only two subjects in which the school excelled.

To generate data, the conversations were restricted to Navin and Bernice's 'knowing' about one group of Grade Eight students that both teachers taught. This group, numbering 50 students, comprised Indian, Coloured and African children in their first year at a secondary school. Many of the students who attended Amethyst came from poor socio-economic backgrounds, living at distances of 15 kilometres or more from the school, or in informal settlements surrounding the school. The students' ages ranged from 12 to 17, indicating that some of them had repeated grades in primary school, or did not attend school for some years, or had begun school at an older age. Grade Eight was deliberately selected on the assumption that the teachers did not have prior knowing of students and, in so doing, to allow for teacher knowing to be explored.

To generate evidence of teacher knowing, Grade Eight teachers were interviewed. In this case, the interviews were informal, unstructured conversations, focusing on one main question: "what do you know about students in Grade Eight A?" The conversations moved back and forth with as many questions asked of the interviewer as were asked of the participants. Data veered from discussions of the day at school, to students, to private lives, to television programmes, news headlines, school functions, personal opinion, the School Governing Body, the Principal, other interests, and so on. It was rarely a smooth trajectory that focused on students' lives only. These long, protracted conversations were captured on tape, and then transcribed. Segments from conversations with teachers, dealing mainly with students' lives and school, were extracted, and are represented as teachers' stories.

The conversations occurred after about six months of being embedded in the school and developing relationships with personnel and students, and becoming familiar with the context. Informality allowed for a less intimidating and more relaxed approach, resembling everyday modes of communication. The focus on creating an atmosphere which was conducive for sharing their points of view, meant that consistency of what was asked or discussed with each participant was sacrificed. In practice, this meant that predetermined categories like precision, and reliability, which are characteristics of scientism, were absent. Following Patton (1990), while interviews in the form of conversations are coherent with participant observation fieldwork, the representation and analysis of data can be onerous.

The teacher stories, comprised of verbatim accounts collected from the participants, were derived from these conversations for the purpose of analysis (Amin, 2010). In this paper, abbreviated versions of the stories have been deployed to

enable the theorising of the nature of teacher knowing.

Approval to conduct the study was obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee. Care has been taken to ensure that the descriptions and analyses are offered in ways that will not enable the participants to be identified.

Narratives of Teachers' Knowing Practices

Two contrasting, if not opposing, teacher narratives are presented in this section.

Teacher Navin

The biggest problem facing our school is to get learners into class. The issue is if you tend to give them a lot of work, they won't do the work and they won't attend classes. So it's a fine line between being strict but not strict enough; strict in the sense that these learners need to be nurtured with small amounts of work that they can handle and that they can enjoy doing. Initially I used to end up being frustrated when I gave them work. But now I realise, you start with the very simple work, and you progressively increase the intensity, but over a longer period of time.

Most of these learners come from single-parent homes, probably living with their mothers. Their mothers aren't able to supervise their work after school and to see whether they are coming to school on a regular basis. We have had girls getting up as early as four in the morning, doing the complete housework until seven, and only coming to school after that. When they return home after school, they have to wash the clothes, cook the meals, and by the time they are finished they don't have time to study. These learners cannot cope because they don't have the time. Then also there are living conditions, many of them are living under terrible conditions in the squatter settlements.

I know of a girl, Thandi, in my class who is depressed. She lives with her brother and sister. Her parents are late [deceased]. She is forced to have a boyfriend who is a policeman, because her brother and her sister, although they are at work, they don't give her any money. When her brother comes home, all the lights must be off, with the result she finds it absolutely difficult to study [sic]. Her boyfriend gives her money to buy candles, to come to school, clothe herself, and have pocket money. She also told me that her sister gets drunk and even hits her, and she showed me the marks.

What I've been doing, in consultation with the Principal; I have asked these learners to contact the welfare authorities. We also inform them of clinic dates, and have given learners telephone numbers of the department of welfare. You've got to be [sic] very cautious when you handle issues like this...

Teachers say they don't have time but with the new system of teaching, if you have a 55-minute lesson period, no teacher can teach for 55 minutes. You teach for about 30 minutes and for 20-25 minutes you set them work. And that gives you enough time to supervise their work as well as to counsel one or two of them at a time.

Teacher Bernice

I regard myself as a professional and as a professional I have a piece of work [sic] to do and that is to educate these kids. I have engaged in a lot of disciplinary en-

richment. I furthered my studies; I've attended numerous workshops, seminars and staff development programmes. I regard myself as a highly skilled and developed educator. I can tell, quite honestly, my lessons are planned, executed, and assessed with precision.

When the kids walk into my class they know what I expect. I get on with the lesson. There is no unnecessary chitchat. I set the standards and I expect each and every one to achieve. I accept no excuses; I don't condone disrespect and ill discipline. Everyone has to be punctual and show interest. I don't tolerate any nonsense. In class, teaching is of the highest priority. You see, I don't have to know my learners. I know myself and they have to conform, it is the only way to achieve. What does it help me to know them personally? I'm not interested. And if I were, where is the time to know them, their problems and life trials? I can't do anything about their life. My job is not to listen to their problems.

I am a teacher. Everyone is equal and I treat them equally. In any case, they always use emotional blackmail. I don't fall for their stories. All of us have had some difficulties in life. They must learn that that is life. They will have to find their own paths otherwise we are creating a culture of dependence on others to solve problems. My job is to provide them with skills to think, to find jobs, to become independent, and to accept life as it comes.

I take my job very seriously. I spend hours and hours after school to get my paper work done. I sacrifice my personal time to give these kids a good education. I am definitely not going to sacrifice teaching time to [sic] getting to know them. In any case, they will only allow me to know that which will benefit them – like why they come late to school, or why they can't do homework. Somehow my attitude works. They do my homework, they come on time to class and as you will note from my register, absenteeism is very low in my class. Maybe that says a lot. I don't know my kids and they do well. Others know the kids but the kids don't perform. I think that says everything.

Discussion

Ways of Knowing Students

The data yielded three ways in which teachers get to know their students: solicited knowing, unsolicited knowing, and professional knowing (Amin, 2010). Navin was found to have demonstrated the first two ways mentioned, whilst the latter-mentioned best describes the way in which Bernice came to know her students.

Solicited knowing

Navin got to know students by soliciting information directly from learners during teaching time, when he also provided them with counselling. Due to the way in which knowing was sourced, solicited knowing was uncertain and tentative, and was an unreliable means of knowing students, as it depended entirely on learners' testimony. Additionally, Navin regarded the personal intimations provided by some students as the experiences of all students, which resulted in partial and incomplete knowing. Solicited teacher knowing can be seen to be limited to a deliberate mental activity, as defined by Dooyeweerd (1997); not as a systematic and

organised body of knowledge as Dooyeweerd may have intended it to be, but instead, as a mental process of translating solicited knowing into social knowledge. To express it differently, teacher Navin's knowing was conflated with knowledge (Cunliffe, 2005), and was accepted as factual knowing about students' lives.

Unsolicited knowing

Information volunteered by students, on the other hand, was an unsolicited means of coming to know students. In the case of Thandi, Navin came to know about her domestic situation because she confided in him. Unsolicited knowing in this case changed the teacher-student relationship into a counsellor-client relationship, based on personal interpretations, in the absence of verification of the information provided. He had no reason to doubt the information given to him.

In this instance, unsolicited knowing occurred because two groups (teachers and students) were bifurcated by social class (middle and poor), race (Indian and African), and generational differences (adults and children). At Amethyst, a poor Black student and a middle-class Indian teacher had different experiences and conceptions of family, childhood and community. Indeed, knowing students required Navin to look beyond behaviours in the classroom. Unsolicited knowing delivered descriptions that made Navin's knowing uncertain and misleading, as he extrapolated his knowing of a few students to all the students he taught.

Professional knowing

Professional knowing was linked to the way in which the participants' conceptions of teaching, their roles and functions, and academic training and practices enabled them to know students. It related to how their professional responsibilities were influenced by what they knew about students. Navin and Bernice were aware that they worked within a complex set of arrangements. Navin was frustrated by the lack of student interest in, and commitment to education. Homework was not done; students stayed away, or did not attend classes. He did make attempts to adapt to prevailing circumstances. He provided tuition in small doses, allowing students to complete homework in class, and he used teaching time to counsel students. In Navin's class, the tensions between teaching and meeting students' needs were resolved by taking on a counselling role at the expense of pedagogy.

In sharp contrast, Bernice deliberately chose not to know or to talk to students about their lives and experiences. Though she averred that knowing herself as a professional was more important than knowing about students, the underlying reason may have had to do with a preconceived idea that students were dishonest. She assumed that students

came up with "excuses", manufactured "stories, and only allow[ed her] to know that which [would] benefit them". Hence, she preferred to focus on her roles and functions at school. She approached teaching according to a 'recipe' that worked for her, namely one where: "[t]hey know what I expect. I get on with the lesson. There is no unnecessary chitchat. I set the standards and I expect everyone to achieve. I accept no excuses. I don't condone disrespect and ill-discipline."

Compared to Navin, Bernice relied on her professional training to succeed in a challenging context. She did not, reportedly, experience frustration, anger, impotence and demoralisation, because in her class, students completed homework tasks at home, were punctual, attended classes regularly, and performed successfully.

As professionals, Navin modified teaching strategies to students' accommodate psychological needs whilst Bernice, directed her energies to teaching, which she described as "the highest priority". She relied on professional skills acquired through continuing teacher professional development programmes. She was not sympathetic to students' personal stories and excuses. Her "attitude work[ed]" because teachers like Navin, provided the emotional support students needed, and his counselling role, we presume, was the pressure valve that allowed for students' pent-up emotions to be released in his presence and contained in Bernice's classroom. Though she came across as unsympathetic, she did care about ensuring that learners gained from schooling, acquiring knowledge and skills useful in the future.

Bernice exemplified the way in which it was possible to reclaim a teacher professional identity within a context like Amethyst and provided insights into the way in which students from difficult backgrounds can be disciplined and educated. It is important to remember, that though Bernice claimed to not know, she knew what she did not want to know. Paradoxically, Bernice's stance to *not* know students was a way of knowing them. Furthermore, the counselling and the emotional caring offered by Navin, indirectly supported Bernice's success, because the students had a sympathetic space to seek assistance, and to release suppressed emotions. Navin's approach, was, perhaps, a necessary preparation step for students to learn and to complete the tasks given by Bernice.

Teacher Knowing is Dangerous

Navin and Bernice's accounts about students exteriorises the nature of teachers' knowing by unveiling the way in which they constituted students, through knowing them in particular ways. Teachers' knowing can be seen to have been useful in Navin's approaches to assist students, and also in Bernice's academic outcomes focus.

The survey of literature indicates that humans have a desire to know (Centore, 2005) and that knowing is, from a positivist perspective, certain and precise. Bernice's approach challenged Centore's (2005) assertion, albeit from a perspective that is equally certain and precise, a desire to not know that which cannot be proven as certain truth. The form of knowing taken as dynamic (Skovsmose, 1994) is shown to be static, as evidenced by both Bernice's refusal to know, and Navin's acceptance of the certainty of the knowledge he garnered from the time the students were admitted to Amethyst. Knowing of any kind is never neutral or innocent, and this also applies to teacher knowing about students. Navin knew that they had problematic backgrounds and troubled lives and generalised it to all students, just as Bernice believed that all students were manipulative. These kinds of generalisations, we argue, are dangerous, and as Lather (2006:47) posits, "Foucault's maxim that nothing is innocent and everything is dangerous" is often quoted without its rider "that just because something is dangerous does not mean that it cannot be useful". Consequently, we can ask in what sense and in what ways teacher knowing about learners can be dangerous, or in what ways not knowing about them can be useful.

In teacher Navin we observe the conventional usefulness of knowing about one's students. He reportedly went to great lengths to know his students and intervened in when requested. He even made provision during teaching time to get to know and assist his students. So, in what ways can this teacher's knowing at Amethyst be dangerous or useful?

The first danger arises from the nature of teachers' knowing as partial, incomplete, and unverified generalisations, as indicated in the data. Navin made various conclusions from having listened to and observed a few students. Teacher knowing in this case, we argue, cannot be seen as what Goldman (1988) and Pappas and Swain (1978) would describe as justified, reliable truth, because Navin interpreted student actions from his own perspectives, not as students in fact were, but from his own meaning-making or interpretations as their teacher. Navin's explanations for learner absence from class exemplified the assumptions that underpinned his knowing:

They are not made to understand and value education, and the other reason could be that these kids [sic] are coming from schools where they have been kicked out [sic], where no work has been done in the classroom, expecting the same atmosphere in this school. So they haven't really been disciplined to go to class, to listen, to do what the educators want them to do.

There is much that Navin did not know about students' lives inside and outside school. Conjectures interpolated the details that he did not know, and some knowing about students was

extrapolated and presented as a global sense of knowledge about the students he taught. Teacher knowing in this instance is dangerous, because Navin's professional ways of knowing students included other non-educational expertise domains (e.g. psychological or social work). Navin gave, in addition to the case of Thandi, another example of a student he called, Agnes:

There was another case that I had this week, Agnes, came to me. She told me that her mother actually boiled a pot of water and wanted to throw it at her. She has been abused every day from the time she can remember. The mother gets drunk and takes out all her frustration and the mother told her straight [sic] that they are so poor that she should get fat and leave school and go to Point Road, so that they can be rich; in other words, to become a prostitute. But she is very interested in being educated.

This kind of knowing, while important, may not be useful, and can be debilitating and counter-productive for teachers and for the pedagogical processes of a school. In a developing context, without the sophisticated resources to provide for emotional, psychological and social welfare support, teachers, on the one hand, do not have the means to ameliorate the problems and, on the other, instead of offering respite from such difficulties, teachers' risk putting students under the gaze of pity. Through their middle-class lenses, teachers are precluded from understanding how students' material conditions of living enable and also impose limits on agency, family life, and academic potential. The different cultural capitals of students and teachers not only provide a vantage point to judge each other, but also allow for the knowing of how schools operate and what their values are. They also allow for performative acts (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) of teaching, or a hegemony in the Gramscian (Gramsci, 1977) sense of giving meaning to, and setting the standard of how, and what, being a student ought to be.

When Bernice purported to know students, she conflated student knowing with self-knowing. In other words, she knew herself, she knew the limits of her professional competence and she knew that she was not professionally trained for a changing socio-political landscape. What was being expressed was not so much about knowing students, but rather about *not* knowing students, analogous to the proverbial builder (fluid, undecidable and dynamic knower) becoming the building (monolithic, codified knowledge).

Teacher knowing about students was also dangerous, because it displaced teachers' pedagogical and professional knowing. Navin, in accommodating the many, varied and extremely serious problems and difficulties of his students, in effect watered down the official and actual curriculum, utilising only a fraction of the teaching time and effort for growing and developing pe-

pedagogical and content knowledge for his high school learners. While knowing about students was necessary, this extreme kind of care risks compromising teachers' professional work and relationships with students. Moreover, teachers may not be able to extend this care to all learners in large classes. Not only is it uninformed, it is also a patchy, hit and miss affair, through which teachers may assist some learners, but also exacerbate the situation for others.

The practices of teacher Navin could possibly provide some of the explanations for poor schooling outcomes in developing contexts. When a teacher has to choose between pedagogy and care work, the outcome is not measurable for either teacher or student. Indeed, teacher knowing can be dangerous when it is thought of as "knowledge", and becomes essentialised in the mind of the teacher, because it produces a false sense of certainty, of regarding knowing, not as a dynamic concept as espoused by Skovsmose (1994), but as irrefutable knowledge used in the same conflating and interchangeably synonymous ways that theorists like Belenky et al. (1986), Cunliffe (2005), and Fenstermacher (1994) understand the act of knowing. Teachers cannot keep track of the constantly changing and fluid situations of learners who navigate extremely poor, violent, abusive or conflict-ridden home and living situations. The challenges are especially exacerbated in a school like Amethyst, where the numbers of children living in conditions of poverty outnumber those with more favourable home backgrounds, giving credence to Glewwe and Kremer's (2006) claim that there is little learnt in schools and that the drop-out rates are high. Additionally, there is little that a school or a teacher can offer to change the material conditions of children's lives.

The notion that teacher knowing about students can be dangerous is not to be interpreted as promoting an idea that teachers are dangerous persons in the school system. The danger lies at the cognitive level, specifically, of not being aware of the contradictory, partial, incomplete, and complex segments that are signified by their claims to know students. Teachers, of course, are influenced by dominant rhetoric that enshrines the usefulness of knowing, which has been extensively propagated and promoted within the profession of teaching, where the empty signifier 'knowing your students' is a respected and important value. Information about students is consciously sought, shared and remembered. But the way in which teachers purport to know is not simply based on their personal ideas about students, it is experientially significant, making its impact felt in the lives of individuals in terms of how they teach and what students learn. The theoretical differences between knowing which is tentative and 'fluid', and knowledge which is certain and established, gets blurred in practice,

with both knowing and not knowing accepted as infallible, irrefutable knowledge. Teachers are not dangerous; but they too are seduced by a belief in a dangerous idea, and an empty signifier, namely that 'knowing your students' is useful.

Teacher Not Knowing is Useful

Notions of a will to know as espoused by Cunliffe (2005) and Lonergan (1978) preclude discussions about the merits of not knowing. But in this study, the notion of not knowing, that is, a refusal to know students, emerges as a useful approach. Amethyst teacher, Bernice, exemplified the approach of not knowing. She consciously made the decision not to know students despite this being counter-intuitive and, purportedly, enjoyed successful teaching in a context where those who chose to know struggled to meet the demands of teaching, and were overwhelmed by the challenges of teaching those they knew (or thought they knew).

So how and why is the danger of not knowing useful? Bernice's pedagogical stance provides us clues. The students in her class were punctual, completed assignments, paid attention during teaching, actively participated in lessons, and passed the subjects she taught. These were the same students who were taught by Navin, a teacher who experienced quite the opposite. What explains the different experiences of Bernice and Navin at Amethyst? We posit that it is related to Bernice's refusal to know students, where it appears that there may have been a relationship between not knowing and successful teaching.

It makes sense to 'not know' because knowing, the data showed, is flawed and incomplete, and the teachers were – in not knowing – privy to students' experiences as gendered, classed, cultural, racial, and professional learning subjects. If we argue for knowing students then we are, by implication, arguing for flawed, incomplete, and misinformed knowing, and for that which makes teaching far more challenging at schools like Amethyst. If that be the case, then *not* knowing has to be both viable, and valuable.

The strength of not knowing is its applicability to working in untenable conditions and contexts, where social, economic, and emotional traumas are so intricately bound together, and where the tyranny of 'frustrating teaching' as a hegemonic form of knowing, can be displaced with an approach to pedagogy that delivers hope, achievement, and success.

In school contexts like Amethyst, not knowing offers a more critically and socially just approach to teaching, as it allows teachers to function without succumbing to a marginalisation of the non-traumatised and those without challenges at a personal level; in effect, it translates into treating all students as equals in an academic setting, such that in one instantiation, students are

driven to strive for academic achievement, instead of focusing on emotionally debilitating distractions that cannot be resolved by teachers' knowing, understanding, or sympathy. Not knowing offers viable possibilities for working with students, whose lives are compromised by low socio-economic conditions and problematic family relations. Caring work is draining, both in terms of energy and emotion, taking away from the enthusiasm and effort required for intellectual and educational work. Not knowing allows a future-focused approach, because teachers can choose to be freed from that over which they have limited expertise, understanding and the potential to change.

Furthermore, the trope of not knowing can be judged against the historical trajectory of South Africa's political transformation. The separatist policies of the apartheid era provided a platform of not knowing, which resulted in alienation and marginalisation, and created a climate of fear, which prevented interracial socialisation. In reality, racial stereotypes and pejorative beliefs about those who were dissimilar were not automatically unlearned in the post-apartheid era. Bernice, it can be argued, subverted the potentially pernicious practice of knowing that results in forms of pseudo-knowledge, paradoxically deploying a means of not knowing towards more successful teaching outcomes.

What if this argument is flawed because the success imputed to not knowing is an example of the Gettier Problem (Steup, 2001)? Pryor (2004:1) explains the Problem thus:

You're in the meadow, and you see a rock which looks to you like a sheep. So you say to yourself, "There's a sheep in the meadow." In fact there is a sheep in the meadow (behind the rock, where you can't see it). [...] Now one salient feature of this case is that you can't really see the sheep. You just think you do. The fact that there *really* is a sheep in the meadow, which you don't see, seems to be a gratuitous accident. It doesn't have anything to do with your belief or evidence for your belief (italics in original).

In other words, the Gettier Problem highlights the illusion of truth, certainty, and reason, and when applied to the study at hand, may undermine the reliability of the foundations of Bernice's not knowing, by raising the possibility of coincidence and chance. The idea that not knowing is useful may possibly be flawed from an analytical perspective; however, Bernice offered this as an explanation for the academic success of the cohort of students in question (who did not do as well in subjects taught by teachers who chose to know them).

Teacher Knowing and Not Knowing about Students
The two teachers at Amethyst, Navin and Bernice, characterised two very different positions and app-

roaches to knowing students. For Navin, knowing about students and their backgrounds was important, where a strong pastoral role was evidenced by the teacher, which emphasised the emotional and the care-oriented aspects of education. By contrast, for Bernice there was a strong focus on attending to students' crucial academic and educational needs, and in which a professional role was asserted by the teacher, with attention carefully and deliberately paid to the intellectual aspects of students' lives. In some sense, these represented two opposite extremes, though the two ends are connected in response to the question of how to address the challenges of knowing the students one teaches.

Knowing about students' backgrounds is accepted common educational wisdom. Teachers can plan better and accommodate the particular features of their learners' backgrounds to optimise learning. However, this conventional logic presupposes particular kinds of learner backgrounds and teachers' ability to assess, understand and appropriately engage with learners' backgrounds. In schools like Amethyst, this gets turned on its head. From Navin's narrative, the difficulties he confronted become apparent, and demonstrate how any attempt to deal with them is fraught with complexities. He had incomplete knowing, and he relied on solicited and unsolicited approaches to come to know students.

Bernice steered clear of this challenge; she chose instead to focus on the educational challenges that lay ahead for learners' academic success. Though Bernice refused to know students, she expected compliance with educational demands, and the very same students did, indeed, rise to the challenges she clearly and explicitly set out for them. This focus on what Skovsmose (2005) calls student foregrounds, as opposed to student backgrounds, offers a useful conceptual tool to understanding how and why the same students may action their learning in very different ways in different teachers' classrooms. Although teachers offer various accounts for both backgrounds and foregrounds in their teaching, Bernice appears to have prioritised student foregrounds in her pedagogical approach, while Navin seemed to have concentrated on student backgrounds.

For Skovsmose (2005:6), the foreground of a person refers to "the opportunities, which the social, political and cultural situation provides for this person [...] not the opportunities as they might exist in any socially well defined or 'objective' way, but the opportunities as perceived by the person." By this analysis, what Bernice did was to make visible to students both what it takes and how they could choose to succeed in their schooling. Background, which refers to what a person has done and experienced, and situations in which they may have been involved (such as cultural, socio-

political contexts or family traditions), is also interpreted by the person, and when the person takes both background and foreground together as a disposition he or she “manifest[s the disposition] in actions, choices, priorities, perspectives and practices” (Skovsmose, 2005:7).

In the context of Amethyst, teacher knowing of students’ extremely severe and difficult backgrounds can result in undue attention to background, or alternatively, can obscure or undermine a focus on foregrounds and become debilitating, not only for learners, but also for teachers. Navin noted the time he spent on advising and supporting students, which, it might be argued, took place at the expense of educational tasks and actions. By consciously refusing to know students, Bernice made it possible for students to let go of their past and present hardships, and capacitated them to engage the main functions of schools, which was to teach and learn. Foreground offers an explanation for why Bernice is successful; it is a future-focused approach.

Bernice and Navin embodied the two forms of the foundations of teachers’ work: knowing how to teach, and knowing how to care, where both teaching and caring are connected to knowing. The former implies knowing about content and pedagogy. The latter implies knowing about students as learning and social beings. In other words, there was a choice between ‘knowing that’ (pedagogy) and ‘knowing them’ (students) that a teacher at Amethyst might have embraced.

When Bernice engaged in activities like explaining a concept, or giving instructions, the focus was on teaching. When Navin counselled students, the focus was on caring. The former met their intellectual needs; the latter, their emotional needs. These two processes were in a ‘complementarity’ (Vithal, 2008), and could not take place simultaneously at Amethyst, because the nature of the work involved in caring and teaching demanded different kinds of conscious attention. Even though attention to one precluded the other, both were always present through the different kinds of work in which the teachers respectively chose to engage.

Since teacher knowing and not knowing were in a complementarity, they were in both co-operation *as well as* in opposition in an educational setting. Teacher knowing was needed in order to teach and to build from and on what students knew, yet not knowing students enabled learning to proceed when the extreme situation, endemic to Amethyst, was unlikely to change or be sustained through any action of a teacher or the school. The conditions of poverty and unemployment at Amethyst may have been ameliorated in small ways, or temporarily (for example, by providing lunches or counselling), but they could not be addressed systemically by teachers and the school because the majority of students required support. Navin’s

caring work, nevertheless, was essential for Bernice’s teaching work to be successful.

Caring required identifying and responding to students’ emotions and diverted from the thinking required to provide intellectual stimulation. Likewise, when Bernice engaged in teaching, attention was focused on pedagogy and content, with emotions relegated to the margins. Thus Bernice was not a cold, unfeeling teacher. She did not marginalise caring, but expressed it instead as a form of care, specifically the care for meeting students’ intellectual and academic needs. And Navin who chose to use teaching time to counsel students was, in a sense, teaching students for emotional survival. In reality, it may appear that the two concept pairs, namely, knowing and not knowing, and caring and teaching, are oppositional concepts, because they are vested in two distinct individuals (namely Navin, who chose to know and to care, and Bernice, who chose to not know and to teach), but in practice both kinds of caring and knowing complemented one another and were important to and significant for their work at Amethyst.

Conclusion

The study provides evidence that in a demanding context, where students’ emotional, personal, and social needs are severe, both teaching and caring are required in equal measure. It was not possible for these functions to be carried out, in a conventional sense, by a single individual. The depth and breadth of challenges the teachers at Amethyst faced meant that either teaching or caring had to be sacrificed in order to survive, where teaching and caring functions needed to be both collective and collaborative efforts, and that these core functions had to be shared amongst teaching personnel.

We propose both teacher knowing and *not* knowing about students as useful and dangerous, because embodied in the descriptions of teachers, Navin and Bernice respectively, are analytical categories, which are not mutually exclusive, and do not in fact exist. In reality, teacher knowing and not knowing are messy, incomplete, intertwined and fragmented, and are deployed in a myriad of forms and for many varied reasons.

What is evident is that researching teacher knowing or not knowing about students in difficult or extreme conditions of schooling can be generative of alternative, counter-intuitive conceptions of taken-for-granted teaching practices (Vithal & Valero, 2003). Amethyst is arguably and typically an outlier context on the periphery of research contexts from which educational theory and practices are usually generated, and yet, its conditions of schooling are not uncommon in poor or developing world contexts (Halai & William, 2011). What is brought into sharp relief is the need to constantly interrogate generalisations about teacher knowing that are transferred from one

context to another, and peddled as truth or common sense for all schools and all students.

As emerging categories, teacher knowing and not knowing require deeper interrogation in at least three ways: to fathom the extent to which both knowing and not knowing are valuable or dangerous (in harmful and useful ways, respectively); to explore the relationship between teacher knowers and not-knowers, particularly the ways in which knowing supports the success or impediments of teachers choosing not to know those they teach, and vice versa; and to examine the influence of school context on teacher knowing or not knowing.

Notes

- i. Apartheid-created categories of race continue to have currency in the post-apartheid period; in this paper they are used to make visible and engage issues of disadvantage and redress.

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