

What's Bred in the Bone: Transference and Countertransference in Teachers



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Abstract

Countertransference and transference have been well researched in the context of the client–therapist relationship, but the few studies look at these unconscious processes in other helping professions, such as teaching. Utilizing a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology, we investigated how transference and countertransference are understood and experienced by classroom teachers. We interviewed four school teachers on their understanding and management of the two concepts in the classroom and arrived at the following themes derived from the transcribed interviews for transference and countertransference, respectively: schema, relationship, context, unconscious, background experience, self–awareness, and self–reflection. We conclude with implications for teachers and counsellors alike.

Keywords: teacher reflection, transference, countertransference, relationship building, hermeneutic phenomenology

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Bion (1994) suggests that “when two personalities meet, an emotional storm is created” (p. 321). Transference and countertransference are indicators of that emotional storm. Both concepts have been well researched, with foci ranging from role reversal in the client–therapist relationship (Borgogno & Vigna–Taglianti, 2013), to repetition compulsion in nurses (Jones, 2005), to unconscious displacement in the college classroom (Robertson, 1999), to expert teachers (Slater et al., 2013), to nonverbal cues in clinical practice settings (Jacobs, 2013). Recognizing that transference and countertransference have been well researched in counselling settings, we set out to investigate both their recognition and management in public–school teachers.

Most teachers experience countertransference and transference daily in the classroom with limited understanding of how these crucial ideas impact their relationship development with students, consequently impacting their teaching. To this end, our aims are to provide examples from the extant literature on these two psychoanalytic phenomena and then provide field examples from practising teachers in one region of one Canadian province. We believe our study is unique as it provides data on elementary and secondary teachers’ understanding of the phenomena and their roles in teaching and learning.

Psychoanalysis is one of the oldest psychological theories, beginning with the work of Sigmund Freud in the early 1880s. In general terms, the unconscious indicates that there are parts of us, as human beings, that are unknown and therefore are not responsible for logical or rational thinking. These parts are primitive and may be experienced as emotions, anxieties, and physical urges and unnameable pressures that impact the way we go about our daily lives and connect with others (Boldt, 2009).

Freud popularly referred to teaching as the “impossible profession,” thus acknowledging the complicated unconscious emotional dynamics present in the teacher–student relationship and anxiety felt by teachers to effect change in their students (Britzman, 2009; Farley, 2013). Since this connection, psychoanalytic theory has been used to further understand the emotional and relational dynamics within the classroom and the student–teacher relationship. To exemplify the diversity of psychoanalytic educational literature, one need only look to a small sample of the literature.

Specifically, in education— which is largely dominated by educational psychology and in which psychoanalysis is often marginalized—Boldt (2009) used psychoanalytic understanding of the unconscious feelings of love to better identify the way in which readers engage in reading activities. Bibby (2011) and Pitt and Brushwood Rose (2007) adopted psychoanalytic theory to consider emotional intelligence–based approaches to learning as an alternative to social cognitive approaches to learning. Lewkowich’s (2016) work examined reading as a “transferential structure between reader and text ... with uncertain effects of the untranslatable

unconscious” (p. 65) and how this process relates to dreams as understood by psychoanalysis. Youell (2005) reviewed how unconscious processes for both students and teachers could impact assessment and evaluation including exam anxiety, written submissions, inspections, and standardized attainment tests. Cohler and Galatzer-Levy (2006) investigated the role of desire in teaching and learning in classrooms and the impacts of suppression of this desire. Finally, Britzman (2009) provided a strong foundation of psychoanalysis in the classroom with a focus on the ways in which emotional dynamics can impact teaching and how this relates to current pedagogy of an idealized teaching setting.

From our unconscious come the concepts of both transference and countertransference. Transference is the “unconscious displacement of thoughts, feelings and behaviours from a previous significant relationship onto current relationships” while countertransference represents the counsellor’s reactions to the client based on the counsellor’s unresolved conflict (Robertson, 1999, p. 151). This process of transference and countertransference is an inevitable and natural occurrence within the therapeutic relationship and relates to the unconscious of both the therapist and client (Miller Friedman & Gelso, 2000). Similar to a therapeutic relationship and other helper–helpee relationships, transference and countertransference are organic and innate to the teacher–student relationship (Britzman, 2009, 2012, 2014, 2015; Cohler & Galatzer–Leby, 2006; Elkan, 1984; Pitt & Brushwood Rose, 2007; Price, 2006; Robertson, 1999).

For the purposes of clarity, we offer two working definitions. Transference is an unconscious process in which a person projects feelings from a person in the past to a person in the present. For example, a demanding student may be reenacting a previous experience with a parent/caregiver. Countertransference is an unconscious process in which a helping professional (e.g., teacher) transfers feelings from the past to a person in the present (e.g., student). For example, a teacher responding in an overly concerned way for one student while feeling annoyed or frustrated with another may have something to do with similar previous experiences in that helping professional’s personal life (e.g., caretaking of a parent, sibling).

Transference and countertransference can be considered as expected or implicit to human relationships. We learn how to build relationships and connect with others within our family of origin; these learnings then serve to guide relationships and how we relate to others throughout our lives. Transference and countertransference can be a natural process in which our past informs our thoughts, feelings, and behaviours in our relationships in the present moment. Although we all aspire to have a separation between work and home, transference and countertransference at times can come as knee–jerk reactions to a combination of internal and external events. It is through thoughtful reflection that we become aware of “what is bred in the bone.”

We will present an overview of transference and countertransference studies, primarily in the helping professions, with the acknowledgement that the review is not intended to be comprehensive. Next, we outline the main research methods and why these methods were appropriate for our hermeneutic phenomenological study. Then, we display the results of the interview data, followed by the discussion of the findings. We conclude with recommendations and implications.

Literature Review

We begin this review with a discussion of key research articles that investigate transference and countertransference related to teaching. We have limited our review to three studies that outline the impact of transference and countertransference in the university classroom setting.

In her doctoral dissertation, Slater Pasternak (2007) investigated expert teachers' experiences of countertransference in their college classrooms. She discussed classic countertransference triggers for therapists, including specific issues or content presented by a client, as well as particular personal issues or conflicts of the therapist, and concluded that for teachers countertransference will be "stimulated by the content of the individual discourse of students, by particular topics that might arise in discussion and/or by certain student populations or student characteristics" (p. 39). As a result of these experiences, teachers may unconsciously change their behaviours towards their students. She used consensual qualitative research (CQR) in the form of semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions in which she compared across individuals, as well as an in-depth examination of individual experiences of 14 participants from the University of Minnesota campuses. She also utilized several judges to examine data and achieve consensus about the meaning of the data and auditor to check interpretations. Slater Pasternak concluded that college teachers varied in their understanding of countertransference (indicating that they did not share a common understanding of the phenomenon), argued that extra- and intrapersonal factors evoke countertransference in the college classroom, outlined specific triggers of countertransference from challenges to teacher identity to ambiguity in the teacher's role, and pointed out that the college teachers' countertransference affected their thoughts, feelings, and actions.

In a later study, Slater et al. (2013) expanded the investigation and concentrated on teachers' management of countertransference. Using the data from Slater Pasternak's (2007) doctoral study, they probed deeper into the triggers and manifestations of countertransference in the college classroom. Their sample was eight males and six females who represented 13 different disciplines from across the colleges and schools. Their interviews included 16 open-ended questions that were posed in approximately the same order for each participant. Their results revealed distinct countertransference triggers that included challenging student behaviours, reactions such as frustration and identification with students, and countertransference

management strategies from seeking social reflection to building relationships with students to drawing on teaching experience. The authors concluded with two recommendations for practice: (a) formal training on countertransference and its management and (b) facilitation of discussion among faculty to share their experiences with and management of countertransference in the college classroom.

Britzman (2015) has written extensively on psychoanalysis in the classroom with a specific emphasis on the human condition. As a psychoanalyst and professor, she knows the theory and practice of psychoanalysis in the university classroom and provides several examples of transference and countertransference in her university classroom. In particular, she highlighted her experiences with 100 undergraduate students in a teacher education Educational Psychology class. She invited these students, who hope to join the teaching ranks as qualified teachers, to remember their adolescence as they work with adolescents so that they see where teenage angst can come from and in dealing with the many conflicts that can occur between the teacher and the adolescent and acknowledging the possibility of transference and countertransference in their classrooms, in order to enhance the teaching and learning process. As she poignantly wrote:

In the classroom, too, the teacher as character—her passion, knowledge, and authority, and her ignorance, mistakes, and indifference—is oddly familiar and so animates the student and teacher's transference of love and hate onto the presence of pedagogy. Yes, the transference has a different flavor in the classroom, though the problem of unwilling recognition—the emotional situation of not wanting to know anything about that—leaves indigestion, even as we try to relieve it with the antacid of pedagogy that we must also admit is hard to swallow. (Britzman, 2015, p. 34)

Britzman argued that education is a recapitulation of the human condition and posited that transference forces teachers and students to manage any uncomfortable situations and then, in working out the conflicts, they construct those complex social interrelationships that are the foundations of the teaching and learning process. Her anecdotes are noteworthy and provide an in-depth examination of psychoanalysis, in general, and transference and countertransference, in particular; however, what is missing in her 2015 work is the study of practising public-school teachers rather than postsecondary graduate and undergraduate students who may or may not be in teacher education. This gap is important since what should be known, in theory, and what is known, in practice, regarding transference and countertransference is fundamental as what teachers do in the classroom to implement the theory is, in essence, the proof of the pudding.

This brief literature review has presented a sampling of studies that examined transference and countertransference in the helping professions. What appears to be missing is a study on transference and countertransference that investigates the experiences of in-situ classroom teachers and discusses their awareness of them, their management, and their poignant examples of their presence in and out of the classroom.

Methods

Given the richness of the interview data, we adopted a qualitatively driven mixed-method design (Kitchenham, 2009) in which “the theoretical drive and the core component are inductive. That is, the overall drive is one of discovery, of exploration, as a means of finding something out” (Morse & Niehaus, 2009, p. 85). For the qualitative research, we adopted a hermeneutic phenomenology methodology for this study as we were very interested in the lived experiences of our participants (van Manen, 1990, 1991). The aim of this type of phenomenology is

to transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence—in such a way that the effect of the text is at once a reflexive re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful: a notion by which a reader is powerfully animated in his or her own lived experience. (van Manen, 1990, p. 36)

That is, it was important to us to capture the experiences of each interviewee and to represent those experiences in text so that others could understand better their own experiences.

At the conclusion of the survey, participants were asked if they would take part in a semi-structured, face-to-face interview. Four participants volunteered to be interviewed and interviews were set up at a convenient place. All four were interviewed by the second author. The three of us designed the interview questions as a team, but based them on the statements in the survey. Table 1 provides a sample interview protocol which varied from person to person.

In relation to transference, all interviewees were asked the same seven questions:

1. Prior to this study, what was your understanding of transference? How was it addressed if it came up in the past?
2. Tell me about a typical example of transference for you.
3. How comfortable are you with discussing transference with others (colleagues, administrators, friends)?
4. What helps you to respond to transference in the way that you would like?
5. How do you develop the qualities that help you manage transference?
6. How do you think your understanding and management of transference contributes to your effectiveness as a teacher?
7. What training or preparation would you recommend to someone to help him or her respond appropriately to transference?

Then the interviewer chose specific survey statements and responses and asked the interviewee to expand on the answers. For instance, one participant stated, “On the survey, to the statement, ‘Your student appears to dislike you but it is unclear why he or she dislikes you,’ you chose a ‘7’ as it happened *very frequently*. Tell me more about the frequency of occurrence.” This type of embellishment was asked three to five times for each participant. For the countertransference part of the interview, the interviewees were asked the same questions:

1. Prior to this study, what was your understanding of countertransference? How was it addressed if it came up in the past?
2. Tell me about a typical example of countertransference for you.
3. How comfortable are you with discussing countertransference with others (colleagues, administrators, friends)?
4. What helps you to respond to countertransference in the way that you would like?
5. How do you develop the qualities that help you manage countertransference?
6. How do you think your understanding and management of countertransference contributes to your effectiveness as a teacher?
7. What training or preparation would you recommend to someone to help him or her respond appropriately to countertransference?

This set of questions was followed with a series of hypothetical situations, and the interviewee was asked to choose a number (1 [extremely infrequently] to 9 [extremely frequently]) and to rationalize the choice of number. For instance, an interviewee was asked, "If I gave you the statement, 'You have had a strong reaction to your students—either positive or negative—and you're unclear why,' how frequently would you say that this occurs in your teaching?" Each interview ended with the request to supply any information that the interviewer might have missed or the interviewee wanted to share. The interviewer then transcribed the interviews and all three researchers used those transcriptions for analysis.

Using consensual qualitative analysis (CQA; Hill et al., 2005), the three authors examined the transcriptions of the interviews and coded each separately from each other. Then we came together as a group and placed the codes on chart paper. For instance, when one participant indicated that "I had some understanding of it. It is a fairly common psychological concept" one of us coded it as Conceptual vs. Actual. Then we came together and discussed each interviewee's responses line by line, and shared our codes. Once we exhausted the coding, we looked to compress, merge, subsume, and discard codes until we reached agreement that all responses were coded satisfactorily. The last stage was to repeat the process with the codes so that we had defensible themes. In the end, the original 27 transference codes became four themes: Schema, Relationship, Context, and Unconscious. Similarly, the 17 countertransference codes were combined into three themes: Background Experience, Self-Awareness, and Self-Reflection (see Tables 1 and 2).

Results

As Table 1 demonstrates, there were many comments related to transference in the school setting. For ease of presentation, we will discuss each of the four main themes under separate headings and provide the lived experiences of the participants through their own words.

Table 1*Transference Themes and Codes (From Most- to Least-Frequent)*

Themes	Codes	Total no.
Schema	Conceptual vs, actual Experience Mentorship Collateral Incidental Training Psychology	339
Relationship	Attachment Surrogate family Long-term vs. short-term Disposition vs. training Expectations Cues Acknowledgement Openness Authenticity	241
Context	Role vs. person Equals knowledge School size Student background Taboo	180
Unconscious	Role model Defender Identity Trust vs. respect Openness Alpha male	101

Schema

We were interested in the teachers' perceptions and understanding of transference in the classroom. To this end, we identified 339 coded statements related to this theme. Comments varied across the four teachers but many centred on their understanding of transference. For instance, one teacher indicated: "I had some understanding of it. It is a fairly common psychological concept. ... Transference was something I was aware of but not really entirely

interested in” (Participant 7). This teacher indicated that there was a conceptual understanding of transference but was not cognizant of the concept being present in the classroom.

Another teacher reflected on past teacher training but indicated that there was an awareness of transference in the classroom: “And it just happened by fluke. ... The courses opened up my way of thinking beyond coming from a little country school to other things that I was not prepared for or not experienced with” (Participant 50).

Other teachers provided examples of transference in the classroom or an actual recognition of its existence in the classroom. For instance, one teacher said, “as the professional in class, you’re kind of left wondering like ‘hey we had things, things were good and now the kid has pulled away’” (Participant 42) and embellished the point by stating,

I think [the students] see it as that type of leadership and the classroom environment as their family as they are with the whole group for most of the day. ... The actual classroom has a very community, extended-family type of atmosphere. (Participant 42)

Further in the interview, this teacher discussed the different elements of transference and how to deal with both the positive and negative aspects: “For the negative parts of [transference] you develop a thick skin and for the positive parts of it you, in alternate teaching, for the teacher the sense of reward is maybe slightly different than the academic teacher” (Participant 42).

Another teacher pointed out that years of teaching and working with students can play a major factor in transference as “experience plays a large role in [recognizing transference] ... to be honest, experience is a huge thing but you kinda got to sort it out” (Participant 7).

Relationship

All the teachers discussed the importance of relationships as part of the transference process (241 instances). Comments included responses related to attachment, authenticity, openness, and surrogate family status. One teacher pointed out that a great deal of transference is related to parental roles as she indicated that the students “will start yelling at you because they have been yelling at their mom ... they can make that switch quite quickly” (Participant 48).

Another teacher explained how transference is just a natural part of the relationship-building with students:

My understanding of transference is not a clinical situation; it’s just been incorporated into who I am. I do not analyze it, so when filling out the [questionnaire], I was completely wandering, not even thinking about what it was or the fine points of it. (Participant 50)

Another teacher echoed this sentiment: “The biggest thing though is it comes down to relationship, you know if you have a good relationship with your students any transference or countertransference can be dealt with. ... I do tell the kids occasionally that I am like that second mother that they wish they never had” (Participant 48). Still another teacher was

forthright in discussing the relationship part of transference as she said, “it probably leads into that transference thing because the more you can do that tight rope between rapport and almost the friendship level within the classroom but still be the disciplinarian” (Participant 42).

Context

As the interviews progressed, it became apparent that the teaching context was a factor in transference as evidenced by the 180 comments. One teacher explained that the teacher role can be paramount, as can the size of the school:

I work in a very small school so I have known all the kids, many of the kids, since the day they were born. So when they get up into high school, I have a pretty good idea of who they are and they have a pretty good idea of who I am so it's very interesting when a new kid comes into the school and has no idea, and they kind of assume that certain people have certain identities and certain roles and such and so they react in a way that is more stereotypical than what you could expect. (Participant 7)

Later on, the same teacher followed up with a comment on perceptions of the teacher: “Those ideas [of teacher identity] are much more fluid as you move from one venue to the next, so you can kind of see that there are all these different layers to each different person, and you get so much more of that in a smaller town” (Participant 7).

Another teacher expanded on that sentiment and discussed the classroom context and how important it can be in transference:

The more you know about where [transference] is coming from, the easier it is to deal with. Part of it is also just building the safety in the classroom so if you're coming in with all kinds of other stuff that you would normally maybe transfer to other people this is a safe place, you can just put it away and get back to work. ... If you give them permission to do that, they will. If you don't, they'll come in and you're going to see that transference all over the place, they're going to act it out. (Participant 48)

Other teachers also provided comments that supported that sentiment.

This teacher discussed the role of the teacher from the students' point of view: “It's almost like they're scared of disappointing me which might, it's kind of a weird thing in teaching, when they have established you as a teacher type of thing more than just the teacher but somebody that they are trying to please even in their social life” (Participant 42).

Unconscious

Some teachers also discussed the unconscious nature of transference in teaching but, with 101 comments, it was not the strongest theme. Several teachers pointed out that they are often “defenders” of the students so the transference occurs as result of how the students see them as proponents for them. One teacher said:

I work with all the kids that have learning problems and behaviour disorders so yeah, they

flare up and attack me personally when it is actually their frustration with how they are learning, how they see themselves as “dumb” and they [project] that frustration on me. (Participant 50)

Later on, the same teacher expanded on the teacher’s role: “today it is just something that happens. It can be dangerous in the sense of becoming too attached and knowing that often some of the things that you’re exposed to can be painful and you cannot fix all problems” (Participant 50).

Another teacher shared her observations on how the student transfers to the teacher, and perceives her as someone to please:

It all boils down to trying to please the teacher; more academic kids do it too but they try and do it by making a better essay or scoring higher on a test. Their motivation is not intrinsic; it is to try and please the significant adult. (Participant 42)

Table 2 outlines the results of the coded and themed interviews from the four participants as they discussed countertransference. Once again, we will discuss each of the three main themes under separate headings and through the words of the interviewees.

Table 2

Countertransference Themes and Codes (From Most- to Least-Frequent)

Themes	Codes	Total no.
Background experience	Trigger	246
	– Own schooling	
	– Caretaker	
	– Defender	
	Family dynamics	
	Disposition	
Self-Awareness	Training	121
	Mentorship	
	Healthy vs. unhealthy	
	Attachment (1–5)	
	Consciousness vs. unconsciousness	
	Empathy	
Self-Reflection	Reciprocity	78
	Recognition	
	Us vs. others	
Self-Reflection	Safety	78
	Time and space	

Background Experience

The teachers provided responses related to countertransference and identified triggers, family dynamics, disposition, and training as key elements of the concept. One teacher discussed their feelings as students graduate from the school:

As kids move towards graduation it's kind of like letting go, in that sense it's a tough one because you do start to distance yourself from them because you know consciously that they are going, that they are leaving. So for me, I've always done that and it has more to do with I know I have to refocus my energy to another group and for me in some cases these are very exhausting relationships so letting go of that is often part of that whole process. (Participant 7)

Another added that "I try to distance myself as [the students] get closer to graduation [so] that it hurts less" (Participant 42).

When asked what training or preparation they would recommend to colleagues to assist them in responding appropriately to countertransference, the teachers had pointed comments to share.

One teacher discussed the role of schooling in countertransference:

Just because you have watched someone teach for 12 years does not mean you know who they are; ... it's like 16 years of sitting and watching and not necessarily understanding that there is something beyond the role. So I think they need to have a good understanding of why they are there and what they want to achieve and how well they are in those relationships in general because a lot of teachers go from high school to university and then back into the classroom and it's the only thing they know. ... It takes years to evolve ... [and] gain some ideas about how they can best affect a kid's life. (Participant 7)

This teacher went on to provide a comment on family dynamics and how it influences countertransference in the classroom: "I grew up in an environment where we were always kind of challenging; it was very open discussion about what we were like but that was kind of bred in the bone ... so unconscious behaviours and ideas were always something I was interested in" (Participant 7).

Another teacher discussed both triggers and her own schooling in relation to countertransference:

School was hell; nobody had the right to treat a child the way I was treated, humiliated, and I didn't want that to happen to anybody else. ... It was things like that, the humiliation, the denigration, the physical punishment that nobody had the right to treat another person that way and I knew I was smart, I just couldn't get it out. ... And there are things that I have experienced over my lifetime ... that make me sensitive to what they are thinking and what they are feeling. (Participant 50)

Background schooling came up several times as exemplified by this teacher's comment: "lots of

times there will be things that the kids will say and it will trigger a little bit [of my past experiences] and then I'll say yeah, I totally understand and they don't know how I understand" (Participant 48).

Self-Awareness

These four teachers demonstrated a clear sense of self-awareness when discussing countertransference in their classrooms. For instance, this teacher outlined his conscious and unconscious acknowledgement:

For me it has more to do with looking at personality types and in some ways I am very conscious of how I am feeling about this student or that student or this kid and it has more to do with managing or not necessarily managing but rather categorizing certain behaviours and interactions. It's more like "Oh my god, she reminds me of this person"...or "Oh he's one of those." ... I don't know how unconscious it is to be honest; I am sure it's there so if it's really that unconscious I couldn't tell you. ... You try not to do it but I mean I think unconsciously I am pretty sure I do that, just to get a read of the land. You always try to move beyond that but I think unconsciously we all do that. (Participant 7)

He expanded on this sentiment later on in the interview:

[Self awareness] allows me to move beyond those labels to a more richer [sic] relationship with kids in many ways. Because they are in many instances teenagers and young adults but at the same time, they are all very interesting, they all have their own beliefs, and interesting ideas, they are all very much an individual. (Participant 7)

Another teacher discussed a tacit awareness of countertransference when he indicated, "I don't take countertransference as something that like, 'Oh I am going to countertransfer with that child today'; it is just something that happens" (Participant 50). He elaborated, "It can be dangerous in the sense of becoming too attached and knowing that often some of the things that you're exposed to can be painful and you cannot fix all problems" (Participant 50).

Another teacher echoed this awareness:

It does surface; I find myself comparing to my sister and going "oh yeah, okay I get this." All it really does is give me more experience to deal with the situation; if I didn't have this experience which seems negative in itself to have a sister like that, it gives me the experience to take it. (Participant 48)

Later on, this teacher discussed her colleagues' awareness of countertransference in their classrooms:

Not enough teachers understand the transference and the countertransference that it actually exists. ... They don't realize that what is going on out here, whether they've had that fight with husband or whatever, it comes into the classroom and the kids pick up on

that and feed off of that ... and whatever they bring in they can transfer to other kids, they can transfer to you, and then you've got the countertransference happening so you've got to have skills to bring it all to a spot where people can actually function. (Participant 48)

Another teacher fully admitted to countertransference in her teaching and pointed out some perceptions of others that can make admitting to countertransference a taboo notion:

You do get students who you start treating a little bit more like a son or daughter type of thing ... It's professionally appropriate, it doesn't go to a weird place at all. ... I can actually see vaguely how if a teacher has no sense of boundaries, how that type of relationship can be misconstrued or manipulated in a way that just isn't proper. (Participant 42)

Self-Reflection

The last theme dealing with countertransference was coded as a sense of safety, external factors, and time and space. For example, this teacher discussed how teachers do not always reflect on their interactions with students as she pointed that "teachers typically work in isolation and because of that we're not always aware of what, or how we are interacting with kids. I suspect ... we have a sense of what we are doing but it's not always something we discuss with our colleagues" (Participant 7).

Another teacher shared, "Usually if I have a reaction that is out of the normal, I am introspective" (Participant 42) and followed up with the exemplary comment:

Quite often I am laying awake, staring at the ceiling and what runs through your head is the situations of the day. And you try for some personal growth, try for some different things [but] ... I do have trouble with the countertransference; it's a little bit more sensitive. (Participant 42)

One teacher's comment sums up much of what we heard from the teachers on the topic of transference: "It's just a matter of giving it that space, thinking about it, and then going back" (Participant 48).

Discussion

It is apparent that these teachers demonstrated an understanding of transference and countertransference but they are not always aware of the students' transference or their own countertransference. All teachers provided answers that showed examples of transference and countertransference; however, at times, they were not cognizant of these demonstrations. Similar to Baron's (1960) observation, we noted that transference can be used by the teacher as a "highly effective catalyst in the learning process" (p. 89). Positive transference should be recognized in the classroom and when it interferes with the teaching process addressed, similar

to psychoanalysis where it should be resolved (Baron, 1960). Students do best in classrooms when there are positive transference feelings, positive expectations, and enthusiasm; however, this may lead to favouritism or special treatment and is something to monitor.

Teachers provided countertransference examples that were “a response to transference and influenced by the particular qualities of whatever is being transferred materially” (Jones, 2005, p. 1178). Similar to Jones’s (2005) nursing examples with Kate and Michael, our teachers were drawn to teaching because of upbringing and early events in their lives that impacted them and came back into their teaching. Some teachers pointed out that the educator must monitor the relationship for “extraneous emotional elements that may enter and distort the educational partnership and thus impede smooth functioning” (Elkan, 1984, p. 233). In this sense, the teacher’s position is similar to therapist—he or she must remain neutral and should use professional integrity to treat students fairly and objectively (Elkan, 1984).

Similar to Price’s (2006) finding that teachers and therapists “can guide, train, instruct and facilitate learning” with more power and knowledge than the child” (p. 150), we found that the teacher sits structurally in the place of the superego for the student. Teachers hold the position of authority, as recalled by many of our interviewees’ comments on the teacher’s role in transference and countertransference interactions. In other words, individual teachers and children respond differently to the structural dynamic of the teaching and learning task so that the “child must manage a greater degree of dependence and need... [and] the teacher must manage greater degree of power” (Price, 2006, p. 151).

Building relationships and rapport were key areas that surfaced in the teacher interviewees. In reviewing what effective teaching was, Slater Pasternak (2007) argued that

interpersonal rapport contributes to exemplary teaching [and] is evidenced by low inference and high inference behaviours that include showing concern, care and respect for the individual student, offering help, encouraging discussion and providing feedback to students. [These factors] are related both to perceptions of effective teaching and positive classroom climate. (p. 23)

The teachers in this study pointed out that rapport with students was important to the learning that occurred in the classroom. In many cases, the teachers reflected that it was their own life experiences that allowed them to connect with the children they taught. Having had similar life experiences or recalling their own experiences growing up or in school allowed them to build empathy and exhibit these low- and high-inference behaviours to build rapport with those they teach. Building relationships with students is complex and comes in different forms, but the common thread is around the concern that the student experiences.

Further, the teachers in this study pointed out that trust is an important aspect of the relationship-building framework. Raider-Roth (2005), Brownlee (2004), and Wang (2012) argued that the

students' learning environments should be centred on a relational pedagogy in which students are encouraged to include personal beliefs/experiences, evidence, and theory to support their beliefs in an atmosphere of caring and trust (Brownlee, 2004). Relationships, trust in self, and trust in others are the foundation of learning (Raider–Roth, 2005) so once this foundation is built, a teacher should be encouraged to choose “strategies that fit his/her personality, skills, thinking, beliefs, subject matter, students in class, and other factors of the particular teaching context” (Hativa et al., 2001, p. 726). As relationships develop, transference and countertransference emerge as well and, with insight and understanding, are something to be utilized as part of the continued desire to build rapport with students.

All four teachers were adamant that teacher education training or professional development in dealing with transference and countertransference in the classroom should be a priority for universities and school districts. Gaining insight into personal lives and receiving training similar to therapists is important for successful teachers; training that reflects on how to respond to transference and countertransference in the classroom. Self-awareness and insight are important instruments in the classroom (Baron, 1960) and once this foundation is built, a teacher should be encouraged to choose “strategies that fit his/her personality, skills, thinking, beliefs, subject matter, students in class, and other factors of the particular teaching context” (Hativa et al., 2001, p. 726), requiring reflective practice to consider what strategies they actually use, what they planned to use, and their success at using them.

Conclusion

This exploratory study has demonstrated that teachers are aware of transference in their students but may not always be aware of countertransference in themselves, as demonstrated by the comments our interviewees made about their colleagues. It was clear that these teachers recognized transference and countertransference in the classroom, but they argued that more awareness training needs to occur for other teachers. They also recognized the importance of acknowledging psychoanalytical concepts in teaching—eloquently described as “bred in the bone” for teachers.

To this end, we argue that an implication of our research is that teachers need time in their schedules to discuss their experiences with transference and countertransference in the sense of talking about the feelings that arise around particular students and not mentioning names. If there is an open forum for teachers to outline their experience with these unconscious behaviours and to share their coping mechanisms, a channel for further discussion could be opened. For example, if a teacher explains how one student treats her differently or how she treats a student differently and realizes that it is because of past experiences with other people, her peers might be able to share ways to deal with the emotions evoked.

Similarly, we argue that additional training and professional development for teachers should be provided so that teachers can identify transference and countertransference in the classroom from a conceptual to actual understanding. Many teachers were exposed to transference and countertransference as concepts, when they were in teacher training; however, their understanding of them only came when they started teaching students. Some teachers continue to be trained without any exposure to the concepts so additional training from experts in the field would be beneficial. In British Columbia, teachers now have required professional development (PD) with a certain degree of accountability on whether or not they attend PD days as written in their contracts. Recognition and management of transference and countertransference could be a welcome change and certainly advantageous to the teaching profession.

Clinical peer supervision is a process through which peers provide support and guidance with a focus on professional development. Although the idea of discussing unconscious dynamics between teachers and students may be atypical in the teaching profession due to ethical considerations when working with vulnerable people in a fiduciary role, there are instances in other non-counselling professions where it occurs. Without this type of support for teachers, the potential for teachers to “act out” feelings that emerge as a result of countertransference is more likely. A peer support group would provide teachers with the opportunity to support and be supported by their peers, so crucial to sustaining positive, continuous improvement in their work.

We perceive another implication of our research is the use of a support group. The idea of participating in a psychosocial support group, one in which it is safe to share a multitude of feelings that often come up around teacher-student interactions, would likely have multiple benefits including an understanding of why some relationships may be strained. Only when teachers understand the range of intense emotion that often comes up in their work can they regulate and appraise their emotions rather than suppress them.

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