

## **Study, Stance, and Stamina in the Research on Teachers' Lives: A Rejoinder to Robert V. Bullough, Jr.**

**By Geert Kelchtermans**

Having to comment on Bob Bullough's article is not an easy thing to do. The article represents a brilliant and very rich specimen of committed scholarly work on lives of teachers. So, on the one hand I feel honored and grateful for being part of this discussion, on the other I feel puzzled and challenged. How to discuss the work of a man that has been very inspiring, encouraging, and eye-opening for my own work? I admit: I deeply admire Bullough's work, which has been a crucial and powerful source in my narrative-biographical research on teachers' lives (e.g., Kelchtermans, 1993, 1996, 2007a; Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002a, 2002b). Furthermore, over the years I've been lucky enough to meet and talk with him on several occasions. Those conversations always happened during "escape walks" in the margins of the American Educational Research Association conferences. In my experience escaping this way from the conference venue often brings the most powerful opportunities to 'confer.' The conversations with Bob Bullough always had that wonderful mixture of the academic and the intellectual passion on the one hand and the personal—our 'selves' as committed human beings— on the other. The stories of our work, work lives, and personal involvement were triggered and revealed themselves in their entanglement (in the same way as Bullough's article does). These genuine encounters of the personal and the professional are a rare thing in an academic

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world that so often is driven by competition, and that has made them even more rewarding, meaningful, and most enjoyable. Therefore I also deeply admire and appreciate the person in Bob Bullough and feel blessed by our friendship.

Yet, let me move beyond this level of praise and testimony—however appropriate I feel they are—and rather try to develop a rational set of comments, triggered by Bullough’s article. In order of doing so and to structure my thoughts, I’d like to quote the title of one of Paul Simon’s albums. The album is called “You’re the One.” After this introduction it should come as no surprise that in my opinion Bob Bullough definitely “is the one” who deserves the second Michael Huberman Award.

### **Stories of Stance and Belonging**

But why is that so? The answer can also be found on the same album from Simon, and more in particular in the opening lyrics where he sings:

*Somewhere  
In a burst of glory  
Sound becomes a song.  
I am bound  
To tell a story  
That’s where I belong*

With these lines Simon nicely captures some of the key issues in the study of teachers’ lives, more in particular in the narrative approach of it.

Firstly, it is obvious throughout the entire article: Bob Bullough was bound to tell a story, more precisely to tell several stories as a means to make his point, to illustrate and explain why and how he has become the scholar he is, why the research he has done is what it is. He shared several autobiographical accounts that illuminate his personal, professional, and academic interest in the lives of teachers. Through their narrative form, these accounts do more than just transferring information. Narrative texts perform both a referential and an evaluative function, as Labov and Waletzky (1973) argue. The referential function describes events and experiences from the past in a temporal order. The evaluative function links the events with the moment of narrating by revealing what the experiences meant for the people involved in the present, how they appreciated the experience. Because of this evaluative function narratives always allow the storyteller to *position him- or herself*.

This positioning is important in several respects. Firstly, it situates the narrator in the biographical context of his/her life: the position taken in the present incorporates and reflects both experiences from one’s past and expectations of one’s future. The awareness of the temporality of human existence, of one’s inevitable situatedness in time, allows the narrator to make explicit “where he belongs.” With the word “belonging” a second meaning of the positioning becomes clear: one’s position implies choices and taking a stance. Or—to quote Bullough’s words—to be a teacher is to stand for something, for a particular idea of what a good life is. The

“belonging” thus not only refers to one’s place in time (and space), but also to one’s being part of a community, of people who share the same interest, agenda, and the underlying values and norms. In our stories we cannot but tell, show where we stand, where we belong to, whose side we’re on.

Bullough’s narrative accounts further demonstrate how his positioning and his sense of belonging have evolved over time, as he learned and developed professionally. It is important to stress that one’s life story is not a predefined script that unfolds, but rather a series of experiences, events, choices and actions over time, that are constructed by the narrator into a meaningful whole, the life story. Polkinghorne argued that “narrative is the discourse structure in which human action receives its form and through which it is meaningful” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 135).

This reminds me of a piece of advice I got from Michael Huberman when I was still a Ph.D. student. He said: “life is long, let research be short,” meaning: don’t try to achieve all your research ambitions in one project. Make choices and set an agenda, carry it out, finish it, and learn from it, and take what you have learned from that one project into your design of the next one.

### **The Political in Living Moral Lives: Agency and Structure**

The stance that goes with the “belonging” is not a neutral one, nor necessarily a safe and politically correct one. It is a moral stance, with political consequences. Bullough’s article demonstrated in an impressive way how autobiographical accounts, as well as single person narratives, are intertwined with much larger issues in society, international politics, and economical interests, as well as consequences for people in general and educators in particular. The way he proves capable of listening to and re-telling the stories his wife Dawn Ann brings from her practice as a teacher, shows how the particular encompasses and reveals the universal, how in the single case the complexity of more general processes and patterns is manifested. I’d say, it is still the neo-Marxist critical and analytical inspiration, but overcoming its structuralist limitations by opening up for the dynamics of human agency. It is a very nice example of a tribute to the dedication and expertise of a particular teacher, as well as a powerful demonstration of the revealing power of narratives for deepening, understanding, and encouraging informed action in teaching.

The same applies to his thoughts about the policy environment of performativity and how that affects teachers’ work and identity, as well as their partners’ view. This to me is one of the strongest points his lecture makes, one that is—unfortunately—often missing from narrative research, where the stories are supposed to stand on their own, without the critical analysis that looks for meaning, understanding, and relevance beyond the story per se. Here—again—we must recall Ivor Goodson’s claim from about two and a half decades ago that research on “life stories” should be embedded in “life histories” (Goodson, 1984). If not, we really run the risk that

the call for making the teachers' voice heard through collecting their stories, in fact results in just another tool for domestication, de-professionalisation, actually letting teachers celebrate and wallow in their own little stories, thus leading themselves away from a critical questioning of the situation they are being put in, the external political agendas that are imposed on them. I fully subscribe in the same way to Bob's critical reflections on a concept like "professional learning community," a concept that is very appealing at first sight, but that may serve very different agendas, some of them only contributing to teachers' deprofessionalisation (Kelchtermans, 2006, 2007b).

### **The Transformative Power of Narrative Research**

Carefully and thoughtfully listening beyond the story opens up wider perspectives of meaningfulness. Or—back to Paul Simon—this is why sound can become a song. Revealing coherence, meaningfulness, more sophisticated understanding and beauty. This is what David Hansen points at, writing about the moral in teaching and using a quote from James Elkins "seeing is metamorphosis, not mechanism (...)" it alters the thing that is seen and transforms the seer" (Hansen, 2007, p. 35). Committed, thoughtful, and thorough study of teachers' lives not only deepens our understanding, contributing to the theoretical knowledge base of the profession. It also transforms and adds to the professionalism of the researcher.

For the work on lives of teachers two important issues are at stake here. First of all the need for methodological rigor, for systematic, concentrated, and skillful work as researchers if the study of teachers' lives wants to contribute to understanding or improvement of practice. Whether the research agenda is defined in narrative or in paradigmatic terms, the research itself should be performed in a scholarly way.

Secondly, that scholarly way does not only apply to the methodological quality, but also to the indispensable role of theoretical frameworks in collecting and analysing the data. For example, I have been working on the lives of beginning teachers, strongly inspired by Bullough's work on new teachers' socialization, but also by the micro-political perspective (e.g., Ball, 1987; Blase, 1991). It was only through the latter that I was able to more deeply understand what was revealed in beginning teachers' narratives about their early career struggles, as well as their professional learning (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002a, 2002b). Studying the lives of teachers, of course, implies the recognition of the value and the specificity of their personal-practical knowledge (subjective theory), but that should not be an excuse to eliminate or reduce the role of formal theory in this research. Again Bullough's article clearly illustrates this point. His discussion of the possible pitfalls of both the narrative and the paradigmatic approaches in terms of the wood and the trees just hits a key issue.

### **The Emotional and Vulnerable in the Intellectual**

The coherence, balance, clarity of sound becoming a song—again—is not a neutral issue, but implies beauty and therefore joy. The insightful accounts of teachers' lives are not neutral, not only in a moral sense, but also in an emotional and even an esthetical sense of the word. Simon sings about a “burst of glory” that resonates when the storied song appears. Emotions are an inevitable part of teachers' professional lives (as is being recognized in the work of an increasing number of educational researchers—e.g., Hargreaves, 2001; Kelchtermans, 2007b; Nias, 1996; Van Veen, 2005; Zembylas, 2002).

Bullough concludes his article by stating that he realizes “how important it is . . . that the issues of our times be linked to the troubles of teachers, and that these troubles be portrayed accurately and well. At this moment in time, as we research teachers' lives there may be no more important task before us than championing the cause of teachers and making clear the ineluctable connection between their well-being and the well-being of children.” And of course this conclusion is absolutely valid. A word of caution, however, in my opinion is needed with the concept of “well-being.” It is a concept with high face-validity, with a high degree of obviousness, yet—just as with other taken-for-granted “goodies” like “professional learning community” or “collaboration and collegiality”—we need to critically ask what exactly is meant by it and for what purpose it is used. Although I trust that Bullough's use of the concept “teacher well-being” refers to a state of sufficient self-confidence, positive self-esteem, etc., that allows teachers to continue their personal commitment in their work, the concept might also become misunderstood/abused as a synonym for “cocooning,” for “wellness” (the kind of happy physical and mental state that is promised by posters in fitness centres), for not being disturbed in one's taken-for-granted routines. In that case well-being becomes an alibi for keeping things the way they are, for opposing any change or improvement, and if we really care for teachers' professionalism, expertise, and commitment in their work lives, this is not where we want to end up.

Bullough's commitment to teacher well-being might be linked with what I have called the “vulnerability” that constitutes a fundamental, structural—some would even say existential (Van den Berg, 2002)—condition and characteristic of teachers' work lives (Kelchtermans, 1996, 2005, 2007b; see also Bullough, 2005). Vulnerability in that sense refers not so much to an emotional state (although the experience of being vulnerable definitely triggers intense emotions), but to a complex experience. A first aspect of vulnerability results from teachers not being in full control of the conditions they have to work in (regulations, quality control systems, policy demands). This becomes very clear in the increasing number of studies that document the dramatic consequences for teachers of the international policy climate of performativity (e.g., Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006; Ball, 2003; Deretchin & Craig, 2007; Simons & Masschelein, 2006a, 2006b).

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Secondly, vulnerability is linked to the fact that teachers can only to a very limited degree prove their effectiveness by claiming that pupils' results directly follow from their actions (it is not only difficult to prove to what extent a teacher can argue that students' results are his/her own achievement, but equally difficult to know when a result of teachers' actions possibly may occur and become visible at all). Very often teachers are not allowed to witness when the seed of their efforts finds fertile ground to develop (efficacy). That is why the quality control systems, being based only or primarily on students' test scores, are felt by so many teachers as an unfair evaluation of their work, doing injustice to their specific working conditions as well as to their professional commitment.

Finally—and this is the most fundamental meaning of the concept “vulnerability”—teachers cannot but make dozens of decisions about when and how to act in order to support students' development and learning, but they don't have firm ground on which to base their decisions. Even when the justification for teachers' decisions can be explicitly stated, with reference to a certain idea of good education in general and good education for this pupil here and now, that judgement and decision can always be challenged or questioned. The right and duty for teachers as professionals to take decisions, to act and make responsibility for their actions, thus has a price: one can never fully prove to be right and thus decisions made remain open to criticism and questioning. Since in teaching the person of the teacher is always deeply involved, the condition of vulnerability implies that when a teacher's decisions are being challenged this always spreads into a questioning of his/her professional and personal integrity. In that sense the discourse on “high stakes testing” completely misses some of the most fundamental “high stakes” that are inherent to teaching. So teachers pay a price for their position as professional. Yet, this is a price that one has to endure, since there is no escape. This is where *stamina* has to be built. Vulnerability is the position teachers “find themselves in,” it is part of the dimension of passivity, of being exposed to others, that also constitutes teachers' work lives (and thus complements the activist dimension of striving, working towards, aiming, purposefully acting, etc.). There is no uncontested ground for teachers' decisions. Here lies another reason for the key role reflection or forms of self-study have to play in coming to understand one's professional knowledge, one's personal educational value system, and—eventually—one's own professional self-understanding, sense of identity (Kelchtermans, 2007a). Well-being then, is linked with critical self-analysis, with the courage to speak out and stand for something, and with the inner strength to engage in dialogues—possibly critical dialogues—about one's actions as a teacher and the stamina to make this a basic attitude in the profession. That is what resonates in Bullough's account of both the experiences of his wife and the comments from the partners of the teachers he interviewed in one of his studies.

## Issues for a Research Agenda:

### Language and Theory

Finally, I am reading Bullough's article also as setting an agenda for further research on teachers' lives. A first theme for that agenda is linked to his wondering about the time it took before lives of teachers became an acknowledged and established area of research within the educational academia. From a European point of view, however, another observation can be made in this respect. Research on lives of teachers may be relatively recent, but it developed since the late 1970s, early 1980s in different countries and in different language areas. Michael Huberman's study, for example, was done in the French-speaking part of Switzerland and the original report in 1989 was published in French (note that the book version in English was only published in 1993) (Huberman, Grounauer, & Marti, 1989, 1993). His study was replicated in another part of Switzerland, German speaking, by Gertrude Hirsch (1990, 1993). Furthermore, both in the French (*récits de vie*) and the German (*pädagogische Biographieforschung*) educational research circuits a clear line of (often narrative and biographical) research on teachers' lives has developed in the eighties and nineties, published in French and in German journals and therefore largely separated from each other and from the international English-spoken research scene. I know of similar developments in Portugal and in Finland. These developments have remained relatively isolated towards each other.<sup>1</sup> And yet, the confrontation of these different circuits, with very different theoretical traditions and empirical contexts, with the work in the Anglo-Saxon world would in my opinion constitute a very powerful and intellectually challenging impetus for further development of theories on teachers' work lives. Trying to link the local, contextualized, particular with the global would further help to better understand for example the role of contexts and traditions in the way teachers' lives are being shaped and maybe discover that globalized economical developments and regimes also contribute to a standardization, homogenization of teachers' lives around the globe.

Thinking a bit further about the language issue brings me to still another topic. In his article Bullough has rightly stressed that studies on teachers' lives must do more than tell a story. They need to be analytical and the outcome of that analysis has to be translated and made explicit in the published research report (book, article). That's where the understanding of the particular can reveal and inspire the more universal. Achieving this is not easy, or—in Bullough's words—"Seeking to understand then portray the quotidian and mundane presents a tremendous challenge to narrative researchers as prose writers that demands both technical competence and artistry." This is very true for any researcher. However, an issue linked to this but rarely discussed, nor reflected on for its possible consequences, is the question of what happens to the data, the narratives of teachers' work lives, if the writing has to be done in a language that was not the one in which the data were collected originally. This "translation" is not just a technical matter of putting

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ideas from one linguistic system into another. Translation implies interpretation, implies argumentation to have a point made, and thus implies pervasive editing of data and findings. A series of complex epistemological and political issues turn up here that need to be addressed. Because I fear that if we don't seriously consider them, the study of teachers' lives might be fundamentally biased and impoverished. If the linguistic frame imposed on work lives, as experienced by Belgian, Finnish, German, Dutch, Polish, French, Vietnamese, etc. teachers is English, it may reduce those experiences to fit those of teachers from the Anglo-Saxon world. The language issue is a complex one that we'll have to consider, both in its technical sense, but also the language as part of the cultural environment and thus part of the sources for teachers' sense-making of their professional experiences.

The second theme for the agenda Bullough's article made me think of concerns the role of theory and overall theoretical perspectives in the study of teachers' work lives. Bullough has described how he broke out of the structuralist bonds of neo-Marxist approaches to allow human agency to play out fully in his research. In my own work I have made an opposite move. Drawing on the interpretative traditions in sociology, symbolic interactionism, grounded theory, etc., I have always put human agency first. Yet, working with a number of colleagues who are well-trained in post-structuralist approaches (for example the governmentality studies of the late Foucault—e.g., Masschelein & Simons, 2002; Simons & Kelchtermans, in press; Simons & Masschelein, 2006a, 2006b)—has brought me to the awareness of similar blinding limitations. Overemphasizing human agency may result in being blind for the impact of discourses (systems of thought, language, and action) that govern our way of looking at and conceiving of the world. Here lies a major pitfall for research on lives of teachers, if the theoretical lenses used lack the capacity to see how processes of sense-making, the experience of one's self and subjectivity, are being framed and defined by particular, discursive structures. The challenging research agenda that is set is implicitly reflected in Bullough's claim that both the narrative and the paradigmatic approaches have their rights of being.

The question remains, however, how to combine the approaches in a research agenda that increases the strengths and avoids the pitfalls of both: an approach that allows us to see the wood for the trees as well as the trees for the wood. This is not only intellectually engaging and challenging, but it is also crucial if we want to take seriously Bullough's conclusion about "championing the cause of teachers."

### **Note**

<sup>1</sup>Two exceptions being Terhart's book from 1991, containing the translation into German of several American research articles; and Schönknecht, 1997, who integrated the English literature in her study of innovative teachers' work lives, yet only published about her work in German.

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