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# Rereading Metaphors as Cultural Texts: A Case Study of Early Childhood Teacher Attrition

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## Abstract

*This article revisits a phenomenological case study in which I used metaphor to explore, over a seven-year span, the blossoming and wilting of an early childhood teacher's career due to the complex interplay between a range of personal, relational and contextual influences (Sumsion 2002). Following Kamler (2001), I now bring a critical lens to my rereading of Sarah's metaphors as cultural texts that reflect the cultural storylines, positionings and practices that Sarah perceived were available to her. I argue that deconstructing these cultural texts draws attention to the limitations of discourses commonly available to preservice and early career teachers. Implications for teacher educators are discussed.*

## Introduction

As an early childhood teacher educator, I am disturbed by the continuing high rates of teacher attrition from the early childhood field and conscious of my responsibility to contribute to efforts to address this seemingly entrenched problem. Within New South Wales, attrition is most serious in the children's services (i.e. the prior-to-school) sector, with Lyons (1997) estimating an annual staff attrition rate in children's services in Sydney of around 25 per cent. Anecdotal evidence suggests that school systems in NSW are also becoming increasingly concerned about the loss of teachers in the early years of their career.

In this article, I continue my efforts to understand why Sarah (a pseudonym), a young early childhood teacher whom I regarded as exceptionally talented and committed, left teaching after four years. Sarah's decision came despite working in the school sector, an option preferred by many early childhood graduates because they perceive

that salaries, conditions and career paths are superior to those offered by children's services (Warilow et al. 2002). While I focus on Sarah, my stance reflects the Bakhtinian view that no account can be attributed solely to the informant, but rather needs to be recognised 'as the product ... of the whole complex social situation' in which it is produced (Todorov 1984, p. 30). Insights into an individual's decision to leave teaching, therefore, have the potential to inform larger scale efforts to address attrition.

This article departs from my earlier attempts to understand Sarah's decision to leave the field from an interpretivist perspective (Garrick 1999) within a phenomenological tradition (van Manen 1990). My purpose previously had been to understand how Sarah experienced her world, as a preservice teacher and in the early years of her career; the meaning she made of her experiences; and the metaphors she used to represent that meaning. I then used these metaphors to explore the blossoming and wilting of Sarah's commitment to a career in early childhood education (Sumsion 2002). As such, my earlier reading positioned Sarah as a discrete, individual entity 'pursuing personal meaning' (Kamler 2001, p. 38).

The impetus to revisit my earlier reading of Sarah's metaphors came from Barbara Kamler's (2001) account of her shift, theoretically and pedagogically, from the personal to the critical. Her account resonated with my growing concerns about the limitations of humanistic and interpretivist-phenomenological traditions that, to date, have underpinned my teaching and research, and encouraged me to bring a more critical lens to my reading of Sarah's metaphors. My intention is not to devalue, in any way, her experiences, the meaning she attributed to these experiences, or the high regard in which I hold Sarah. Rather, I want to consider her metaphors as cultural texts that represent the 'cultural storylines' (Kamler 2001, p. 57), positionings and practices Sarah perceived were available to her. I argue that, ultimately, these cultural texts afforded Sarah limited agency and contributed to her decision to leave the field.

## **Theoretical orientation**

There are many possible interpretations of why and how Sarah came to construct herself as she did. Drawing on critical and post-structuralist perspectives, this rereading of Sarah's metaphors focuses on her embeddedness in the socio-cultural and pedagogical contexts in which her becoming, being and unbecoming an early childhood teacher unfolded. In doing so, it seeks to identify the dominant discourses within these contexts and the cultural texts these discourses reproduce.

By discourses, I mean 'socially organized frameworks of meaning embodying particular values and practices that stipulate rules and domains of what can be said

and done, by whom and when' (Ryan, Ochsner and Genishi 2001, p. 51). Discourses reflect 'characteristic ways of talking, acting, interacting, thinking, believing, ... valuing ... and interpreting' (Gee 1996, p. 131). As such, they legitimise and proscribe certain ways of operating in the world. From the discourses we perceive to be available to us, we select ways to construct ourselves and to engage with our worlds.

How we see and define ourselves in the contexts in which we are located is not fixed for we are constantly exposed to multiple, unstable and circulating discourses that we can either take up or resist (Ryan et al. 2001, Grieshaber 2001). Our sense of who and how we are in the world, in other words our subjectivity (Mac Naughton 1998, O'Loughlin 2001), reflects the discourses to which we have been exposed and those we have come to name our own. Like the discourses that shape it, our subjectivity is fluid, sometimes contradictory and constantly evolving. Sarah's ongoing construction of subjectivity is reflected in the metaphors that span her seven years as an early childhood student/teacher.

Sarah's metaphors can be read as 'texts of personal experience' (Kamler 2001, p. 36); they can also be seen as texts of 'learned cultural practice' (Kamler 2001, p. 46). Flourishing through their telling and retelling, these texts both reflect and shape experience. Moreover, as Kamler (2001, p. 46) points out, because they are discursively produced, both 'the process of production and the stories [metaphors] produced can be unpicked, examined and analysed rather than just celebrated or surveilled'. Through this process of deconstruction, Kamler argues, we can begin to re-imagine, reshape, and rewrite the cultural texts we use to interpret and represent our experiences. In so doing, we can expand the possibilities of our experience.

In what follows, I set out to show how Sarah's metaphors shaped and reflected her experiences and contributed to the reproduction of cultural texts about teaching and being a teacher. First, though, I briefly introduce Sarah and explain the context and methods of the study.

### **Sarah and her metaphors**

Sarah entered the three-year BEd (early childhood) program as an 18-year-old high school leaver from a socially and economically advantaged Anglo-Australian background. The program prepared graduates to work with children aged from six weeks to eight years, typically in childcare centres, preschools and the early years of school. Sarah's cohort was the first to proceed through the program after it had been substantially revised to emphasise reflective practice as a basis for personal and professional development. Within the program, reflective practice was used as a generic term for processes involved in exploring experience as a means of enhancing

understanding (Boud, Keogh and Walker 1985). These processes included looking back on experiences, decisions and actions; recognising the beliefs and values underpinning these decisions and actions; considering a range of possible consequences and implications of actions and beliefs; and investigating alternatives and reconsidering former viewpoints. This developmental orientation to reflection, as opposed to a technical or social justice orientation (Zeichner 1992), was consistent with the humanitarian progressive tradition underpinning the program. As such, it encouraged student teachers to develop what Johnson (1997, p. 815) refers to as a 'personalist frame' that foregrounded their experiences, emotions, intentions and beliefs.

My involvement in the revision of the program prompted me to follow a group of preservice teachers from Sarah's cohort through their preservice years and into their early years of teaching. The study reported in this article is drawn from that larger investigation.

Sarah's metaphors were elicited during in-depth, conversational interviews between March 1993 and April 2000. Our first conversation took place three weeks after Sarah commenced her preservice program. We continued our conversations on at least four occasions each year for the next seven years. We met in many locations, including my office on the university campus, Sarah's practicum placements and classrooms, and local cafes.

Frequently, our conversations began with my inviting to Sarah to represent the meaning she was making from her experiences, initially as a preservice teacher, and later as an early childhood teacher in the beginning stages of her career. She responded enthusiastically to my suggestion that she explore alternative forms of representation such as drawings and three-dimensional constructions. As others have similarly found, these alternative forms seemed to assist in articulating previously tacit understandings and unexamined tensions (Black and Halliwell 2000) and in bringing 'to light nuances and ambivalences ... that might otherwise remain hidden' (Weber and Mitchell 1996, p. 303). In many instances, Sarah would spend much of the remainder of the interview explaining and reflecting on the representation she had created. I audio-taped and transcribed our conversations and returned the transcripts to Sarah for verification and comment. We set aside part of each subsequent interview to discuss and reflect on emerging patterns and themes.

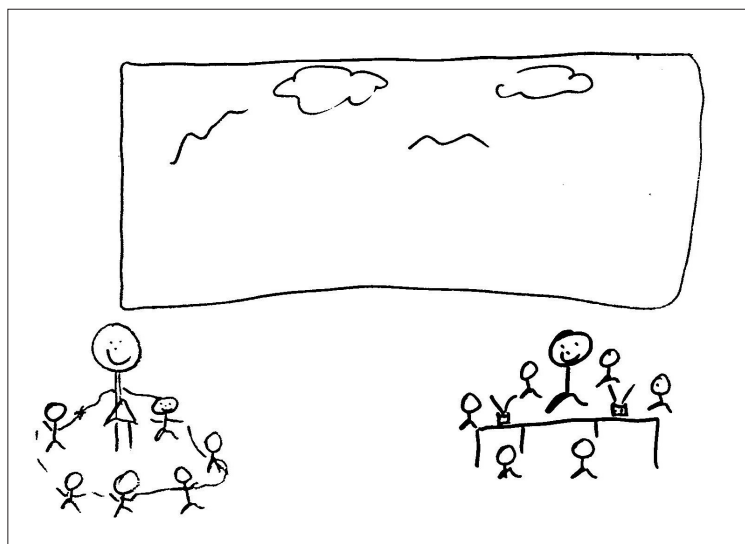
The following selection of Sarah's representations spans six of the seven years of the study and seems to me to illuminate most powerfully the meaning she made of her experiences. For each representation I provide a brief explanatory overview (see Sumsion 2002 for further detail). I then focus on the central metaphor(s) in Sarah's

visual images and her accompanying text, and ask ‘What do these metaphors suggest about the discourses available to, and taken up by Sarah?’; and ‘What cultural texts do these discourses reproduce?’

### **‘The wall at the back of my classroom’ (1993)**

Sarah entered her preservice program with great excitement. ‘I have wanted to teach young children for as long as I can remember, and finally it is a dream come true!’, she wrote in her journal during her first week at university. Recalling her childhood as ‘a wonderful experience – secure, stable, supportive, and loving’, she anticipated that as an early childhood teacher she could help children have similarly ‘happy memories’.

Sarah’s first representation (see Figure 1) encapsulates in rainbow-coloured hues the beginnings of her vision for herself as a teacher. It reflects her image of teaching as an individual undertaking involving nurturing relationships within a caring community founded on enjoyment of learning, creativity, choice and freedom. To Sarah, both learning and teaching are creative endeavours. Dominating her representation ‘is the wall at the back of my classroom where the children can paint and draw whatever they like’. The ‘wall’ symbolises Sarah’s vision in several ways: it provides (key structural) space in her classroom for fostering and celebrating children’s learning; it delimits her classroom from traditional, formal classrooms; and it reflects her strong desire for the independence, freedom and opportunities to explore the creative possibilities of teaching (‘a classroom of my own’) in which to pursue her vision.



**Figure 1**

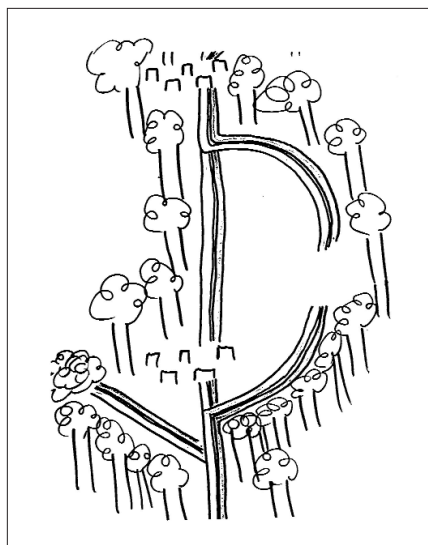
Sarah's metaphor of the wall reflects, above all, a romantic view of teaching derived from humanist progressive discourses. Consistent with these discourses, she saw teaching and learning as 'a quest for personal meaning and identity, with considerable emphasis on personal creativity and self-expression' (Symes and Preston 1997, p. 71). Her belief that individual growth and development is best fostered within a context of caring relationships reflects an 'ethic of care' (Noddings 1984). Caring, to Sarah, involves responsiveness to and responsibility for self as well as others; it constitutes the foundation for the community of learners of which she envisages she will be part.

Together, these discourses suggest that Sarah is adhering to cultural texts of teaching as a nurturing undertaking, enacted and experienced in a supportive, enclosed community, rather than as a site for intellectual or political work. These cultural texts decontextualise teaching for they make relatively little reference to the socio-cultural dimensions of teachers' work, or to power relations and how these are played out in teachers' work. Variations of these texts, and the silences surrounding them, are reflected in the discourses underpinning Sarah's metaphors throughout her preservice program.

### **'The journey through the forest' (1994)**

During Sarah's second year in the program the rainbow-coloured hues of her earlier representation crystallised into an enduring motif of the 'rainbow path' along which she anticipated she would travel as an early childhood teacher (see Figure 2). 'Rainbows don't end', she explained. 'They are very bright and positive.' Sarah's rainbow path illuminated her journey through a forest of complexity and uncertainty. In Sarah's words,

Sometimes the [rainbow] path takes you to unknown places. It's like walking in a forest because you don't know what is ahead of you. There are so many unexpected paths, and it's up to you to decide which ones to take. You have to make up your own mind. The paths leading off the main path are where I need to make decisions ... To get back to where you want to go, you have to analyse what happened to see where you went wrong. I try to see what I can learn from things that don't go the way I want them too. I think about how I could change things and make different decisions next time. And that helps to get you back on track ... Sometimes there are hurdles on the path that stop you from going where you want to go ... I try in advance to plan the best way to tackle them. You have to work really hard at them, but you eventually succeed.



**Figure 2**

Sarah's metaphorical rainbow pathway heralds an optimistic vision of the anticipated joys and fulfilment of teaching. Her forest pathways reflect her commitment to reflective practice as a means of negotiating the complexities she encountered as a student teacher, and her confidence that, eventually, she would realise her vision. These metaphors suggest that she was embracing discourses of reflective practice that privilege individual responsibility, autonomy, personal agency and problem solving. There is little evidence of alternative discourses of reflective practice as a collaborative or critical undertaking. Nor is there an awareness of discourses that draw attention to the social and cultural complexities that have the potential to disrupt her vision.

Discourses of reflective practice that focus solely on an individual's personal professional development, such as those in Sarah's metaphor, reproduce cultural texts of learning to teach as a challenging and ultimately rewarding, but essentially individual and apolitical, journey. These texts imply that the intrinsic rewards of teaching and of continuing professional growth will be sufficient to sustain teachers' commitment. They invite little critical consideration of the impact of power relationships, structural factors such as low salaries and status and poor working conditions, or workplace cultures characterised by demoralisation and antipathy to change. These romanticised texts continued to underpin Sarah's metaphors throughout her preservice program. Their durability reflects the failure of the teacher education program to engage Sarah in deconstructing her romantic vision.

**'My path to professionalism: bringing together the pieces of the puzzle' (1995)**

By Sarah's third and final year in her preservice program, her earlier trepidation and uncertainty characterising her journey through the forest gave way to an emerging and welcome sense of coherency represented in her 'path to professionalism' (Figure 3a). The rainbow-coloured path comprised multiple, interlinking parts, like those of a puzzle (Figure 3b). 'These are all the pieces I think about in becoming a teacher', Sarah explained.

I'm at a stage where I'm drawing a lot of knowledge together. I'm creating the puzzle with bits of information from all my courses at university. Like A for advocacy; B for balanced program; C for child-centred; D for developmentally appropriate practice; E for evaluation ... These are all separate issues but when you put them together, like in a puzzle, they all relate. I like to see things linking, so I'm working on that. But drawing everything that you believe in together is difficult. But ... it's only when they come together that it all works. But I find it hard trying to bring everything together, because I don't think I'll ever see myself in just one

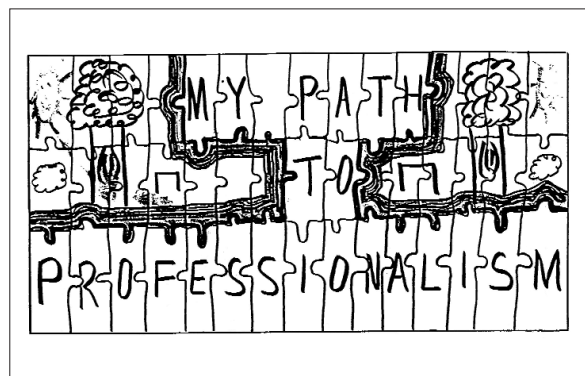


Figure 3a

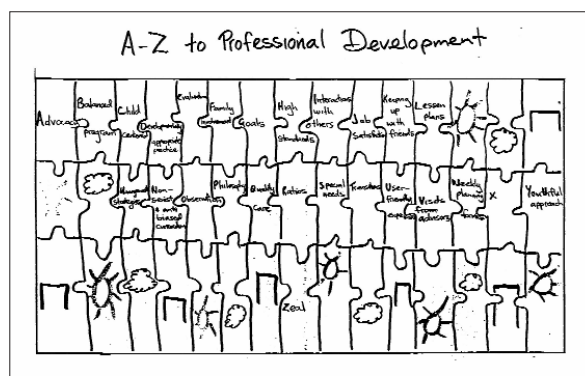


Figure 3b



way as a teacher. I think I'll always see myself in a different light in new situations. So I find that the emphasis that I place on each of the pieces in the puzzle isn't necessarily stable.

The discourses of professional practice grounded in specialist, disciplinary-based knowledge, in this case developmental psychology and developmentally appropriate practice, are central to Sarah's 'pathways to professionalism' metaphor. Constructivist discourses that conceptualise learning as an active process of establishing meaningful connections are also evident. Tensions between these respective discourses raise questions about Sarah's agency in constructing her professional self and practice.

McLean (1999) articulates these tensions well. She writes that 'becoming a teacher is a process of choosing yourself – making deeply personal choices about who you will be' (p. 60). She warns, however, that the process of becoming is not 'a solitary or self-contained process – it occurs in a time and space where others, some much more powerful than yourself, also are bent on constructing "you" in an image they value' (McLean 1999, p. 60, citing Greene 1981 and Britzman 1991). Sarah's metaphor suggests little questioning of the constituent components of the professional practice puzzle she is attempting to piece together or of the discourses of professionalism that she has come to name as her own. In other words, there is little sense of her 'asking questions which are not meant to be asked' (Reynolds and Trehan 2000, p. 267). In many respects, she appears a product of the dominant discourses of her teacher education program. In these discourses, as Johnson (1997, p. 815) reminds us, 'to be uncertain about what comprises ideal practice has not been part of the image of a good teacher'.

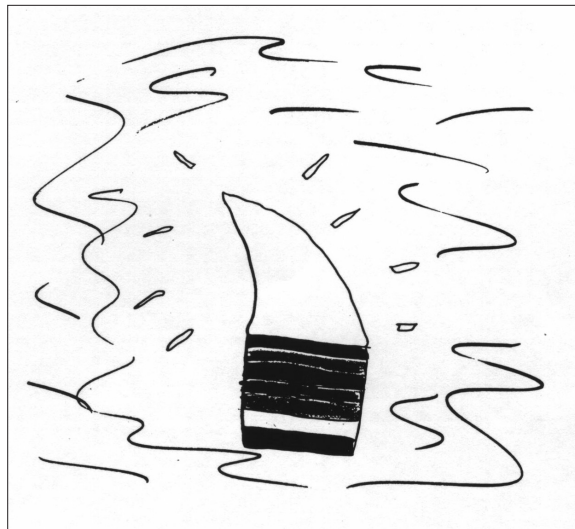
Nevertheless, Sarah does allude to some uncertainty. She expresses doubts that the tenets of professional knowledge, as proscribed by developmental psychology and developmentally appropriate practice, will provide a fixed and unchanging foundation for her professional practice. Her references to the lack of stability and certainty in the positioning of the pieces in her puzzle, and thus in her professional identity, suggest some tacit awareness of multiple subjectivities and their potential to problematise taken-for-granted truths. These traces of postmodernist discourses remain faint, however, their power unrealised.

Collectively, these discourses suggest that, while ostensibly student teachers may be encouraged to reflect on the complexities, uncertainties and ambiguities of teaching, they may see the dominant discourses of their teacher education program as publicly incontestable. Teacher education programs, therefore, may be perpetuating the cultural text that their essential function is a normalising process. Their role may be perceived, by teacher educators and student teachers alike, as one of inculcating the latter into 'regimes of truth' (Foucault 1980). Sarah's next metaphor reflects, in part, this disciplining effect.

**'The candle and the tunnel' (1996)**

Here, Sarah draws on age-old metaphors of the tunnel, darkness and the candle (see Figure 4). The tunnel represents her passage from the world of the preservice program to the world of teaching. The darkness represents the traditional, highly structured teaching practices adhered to by the teachers in the school in which Sarah accepted her first teaching position, while the candle represents Sarah's guiding vision of the teacher she wanted to be. Sarah described how:

My first impression was of walking into a situation that was so different and so scary, like a dark tunnel. It was up to me to find the light. But I had a candle and on the candle you can see my rainbow path that I took with me into my new job. It lit up all the paths that I can choose from in my teaching, and in my choices as a teacher. When I have really bad days, it's like my candle isn't glowing ... it's like you've just got to plod through the tunnel.



**Figure 4**

Here, Sarah's metaphors reflect humanist discourses of agency that highlight the power of the individual to construct their identities and determine their personal/professional trajectories. From a humanist perspective, Sarah's ability to resist conforming to the norms of the school resided in her commitment to becoming the teacher she has articulated in her vision and to engaging in reflective practice to enable her to refine and to move closer to achieving that vision. To borrow from Rose (1989, p. 60), the power of 'the unceasing reflexive gaze of our own ... self-scrutiny'

enabled Sarah to maintain her sense of self as teacher, despite the normalising pressures of a school culture predicated on ‘traditional’ constructions of teaching.

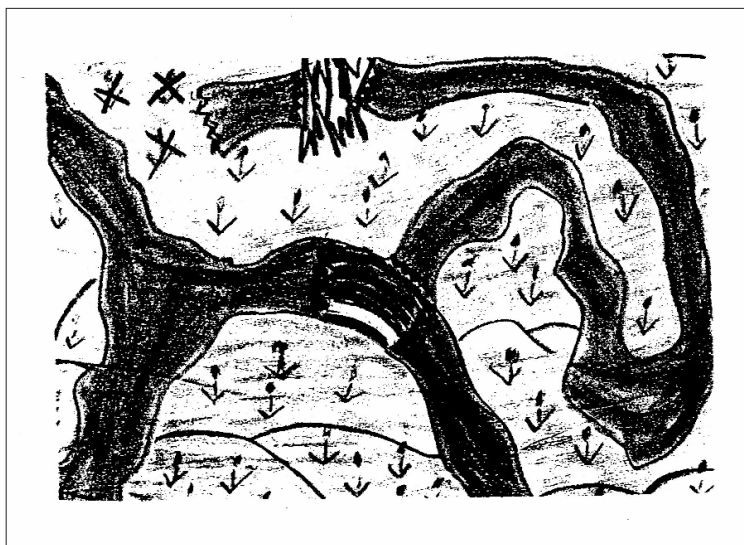
Humanist discourses reproduce cultural texts that assume and celebrate teachers’ personal agency. These texts position teachers, especially those with vision, as (potentially) powerful actors. Yet, it seems that for the most part only the voices of those teachers who achieve, or come close to achieving, their vision are heard; those whose struggles are ultimately unsuccessful are usually silenced. This selective silencing propagates romantic views of teaching of the kind evident in Sarah’s metaphors.

These romanticised cultural texts also tend to overlook the possibility that vision may be less a source of personal agency than a means of self-regulation; an example of what Foucault (1979) refers to as ‘technologies of self’. By this, he means internally constructed and imposed self-disciplinary mechanisms that secure an individual’s adherence to accepted orthodoxies or ‘regimes of truth’. As a form of self-governance, Sarah’s vision may have confined her to the child-centred, romantic discourses that underpin her vision. If her vision constrained her from moving beyond these discourses, the sense of agency apparent in her metaphor may have been illusory. Cultural texts that uncritically celebrate teachers’ vision and agency can also create unhelpful binaries by categorising teachers as those who have vision and agency, and those who do not. Sarah’s next metaphor reflects this dichotomy.

### **‘The garden’ (1997)**

Sarah likened her second year in the field to ‘walking in a beautiful, well-established garden’. Similarly to the forest and the tunnel, there were many paths within the garden and many ‘choices about which paths to take’ (see Figure 5). Sarah was committed to taking paths that would enable her to tend and care for the garden. ‘Because the garden is so beautiful, you have a responsibility not to ruin it’, she explained. Gesturing to a rainbow-coloured footbridge in the centre of her drawing, she continued:

So if you come across a problem in the garden, say a footbridge that is in poor repair, you shouldn’t just ignore it, or try to repair it using ugly materials. You should try to make sure that the repair blends in with the beauty of the rest of the environment, rather than just patching it up with any old simplistic measure that comes to hand. But some teachers choose not to do that. And some don’t even see there is a problem; they don’t want to try new ideas. They get stuck in the one spot where they are treading on the flowers. They don’t realise it, but they are ruining the garden.



**Figure 5**

In this representation, there is a continuation of the pastoral metaphors and romantic Rousseauian and Froebelian discourses that emphasise growth, cultivation and nurturing within the ancient symbol of garden as (potential) paradise (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1996). This metaphor, however, signifies a shift in Sarah's focus on teaching as an individualist undertaking enacted in isolation to her growing recognition of teaching as communal endeavour. Sarah struggles, though, to find a discourse that can encompass a collaborative undertaking with those whose perspectives she perceives to be so different from her own. She resorts instead to binary discourses that categorise teachers as those with vision and those without; those who teach with passion and those who do not; those who see themselves as reformers and those who cling to the status quo. Positioning herself as 'other' to her colleagues enabled her to resist discourses that privileged traditional constructions of teaching, but in doing so led her to distance herself from her colleagues.

The binary discourses underpinning Sarah's metaphor of the broken footbridge perpetuate constructions of teaching as a profession dominated by 'isolationism and conservatism, and a general lack of enthusiasm for substantive growth and change' (Knowles, Cole and Squire 1999, p. 375). These constructions suggests that those, like Sarah, who see themselves as potential agents of change and who choose to resist institutional norms, and 'strive to uphold their beliefs ... do so usually at great cost' (Cole 1997, p. 15). These discourses imply, in a Bourdieuan sense, that teachers are dispositioned towards certain ways of acting and reacting; they have acquired a system of schemas for constructing and regulating their work, and have an investment in maintaining these (Usher, Bryant and Johnston 1997). Sarah recognised the

conservative disposition of her fellow teachers but appeared to have no access to discourses that might accommodate diverse and multiple perspectives within a sustained push for change (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence 1999). Rather than engage with the discourses and cultural texts underpinning her colleagues' positionings and practices, Sarah's response was to retreat.

### 'The theme park' (1998)

In her third year of teaching, Sarah's garden metaphor was supplanted by the metaphor of a theme park (see Figure 6). She explained:

There's the roller coaster with all its ups and downs; that's what teaching is like ... And then you've got the hall of mirrors and the reflection that you see of yourself as a teacher. But the reflection is often distorted by what is going on around us. When I was putting a lot of effort into making my classroom so child-centred, I was so excited about it and I wanted to share what was happening with people, but no-one seemed to be interested; they didn't really care. When you get a completely different reaction from what you had expected that distorts the image you have of yourself, even if it doesn't change your thoughts, deep down ... But where I see myself in the theme park is in one of those 'small worlds' where there is a separate, enclosed area; an area that is more 'together' – more secure and less threatening, more a sense of community. People don't get hurt; there are challenges but it's not really scary. You feel more in control.

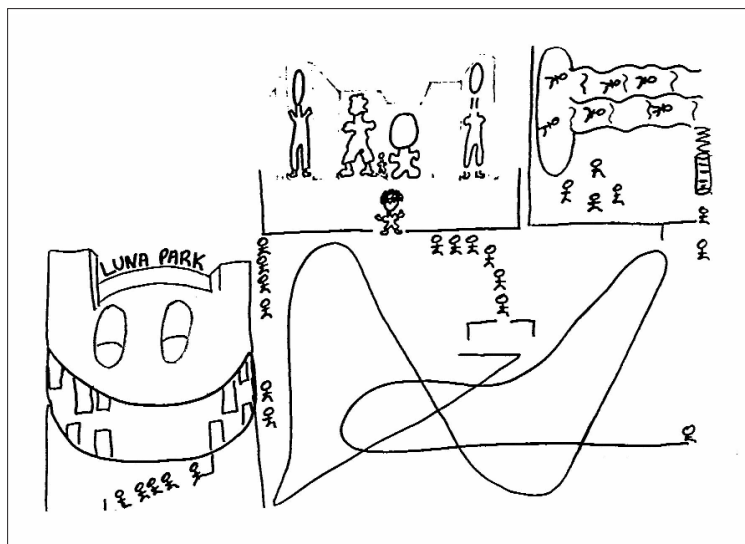


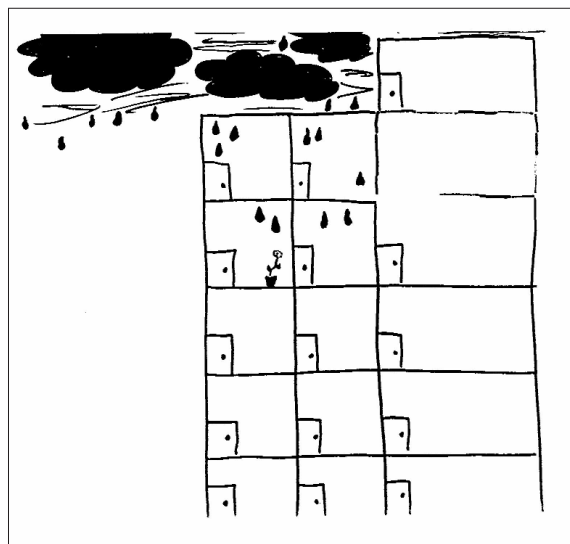
Figure 6

Collectively, these metaphors reflect discourses that construct teaching as such a demanding and depleting undertaking that maintaining one's commitment as a teacher demands the development of survival strategies. To Sarah, survival entailed protecting her identity as a teacher committed to child-centred practices. Within the humanist progressive discourses underpinning her earlier metaphors, identity is innate, stable and non-negotiable. Sarah's metaphorical 'hall of mirrors', in contrast, suggests a shift towards postmodernist perspectives that recognise multiple, constantly evolving subjectivities. Sarah seemed troubled by this shift. To protect her idealised identity, she withdrew into the 'small world' of her classroom where she envisaged that she would be less exposed to competing and destabilising discourses.

In celebrating the individual, humanist progressive discourses can tend to reproduce cultural texts that reify a teacher's core identity and efforts to preserve this identity. They can also perpetuate constructs of a community as a protective haven, rather than a site of challenge where competing discourses might be contested and problematised, and productive ways of dealing with difference played out. Sarah's final representation illustrates the limitations of withdrawing into a protective space.

#### **'The rain clouds' (1999)**

In this representation, the flower distinguishing Sarah's classroom from those of her colleagues (Figure 7) represents her vision of her classroom as a community in which children and teacher alike can thrive. To her distress, however, heavy, dark rain clouds began to obscure her ideals of a learning community. Despite her best efforts to seal off her classroom from outside forces that threatened her ideal, slowly but



**Figure 7**

relentlessly rain began to seep into her protected and protective space. Over time, the rain continued to dampen, and eventually erode, her passion for teaching. In Sarah's words, 'There are too many things that engulf you as a teacher and I'm beginning to think that my enjoyment ... doesn't outweigh the negative things.' The following year Sarah left teaching.

Sarah's metaphor is strikingly reminiscent of the egg carton metaphor Lortie (1975) used to portray schools as cultures of fragmented individualism. It suggests that she believed that her survival as a teacher depended on her ability to distance herself from the discourses of her colleagues. Withdrawing enabled her to resist their normalising influence and hold true to her humanist progressive ideals, allowing her, at least initially, to maintain her sense of agency. Yet, by withdrawing, she isolated herself from alternative discourses, some of which might have enabled her to construct more productive relationships with her colleagues, and to bring about changes within the school culture.

Discourses of teaching as fragmented individualism recreate cultural texts pessimistic about change. They cite burnout and disillusionment as the probable outcome for idealists like Sarah. Rarely do they portray accounts of teachers who have found ways to enact their idealism in ways that successfully challenge the status quo. Access to such accounts may have enabled Sarah to interpret and respond to her situation differently.

## **Discussion**

As Kamler (2001, p. 59) reminds us, Sarah's metaphors are one 'particular way of representing her experience ..., one which could be examined and rewritten differently'. My reading of her metaphors, the discourses underpinning them and the cultural texts they reproduce is only one possible reading. I now consider possible implications of this reading, particularly for teacher educators and teacher education programs.

Sarah's metaphors suggest that she was drawing on a powerful but limited range of discourses to make sense of her experiences. These discourses closely reflected the dominant humanitarian progressive discourses of her teacher education program. For the most part, she seemed unaware of alternative discourses that might have shaped her experiences and her responses to those experiences differently. Her discursive resources (Davies 1990), in this sense, were limited.

Discursive resources, according to Davies (1990, p. 360), include access to 'a range of alternative ways of seeing and being ... such that the positioning one currently finds

oneself in are not experienced as inevitable'. They also include an understanding of self 'as one who can refuse discourses, or positions within discourses, who can stand aside outside of any particular discursive/interactive practices, who can take up these practices as their own, or not, as they choose' (Davies 1990, p. 360). Sarah was able to refuse and distance herself from the discourses and practices of her colleagues. Her metaphors suggested, however, that she had access to a limited range of discourses from which to draw in making sense of her experiences.

From a humanist progressive perspective, agency arises from individuals forging their own stable and continuous identity that in turn forms the basis for their decisions and actions (Davies 1991). From this perspective, Sarah had considerable agency. As a preservice teacher, she formulated a clear sense of her identity and her ideals. As an early career teacher, she realised her vision of a child-centred classroom in which learning and teaching were creative endeavours, despite the traditional culture of the school and the conservative practices of her colleagues.

Humanist perspectives of identity and agency, however, were not particularly helpful in assisting Sarah to respond to the impact of her decision to maintain her identity by positioning herself differently from her colleagues. Her fixed sense of identity made her feel uncomfortable and vulnerable when she perceived that her identity was being challenged. Rather than explore the possibilities of multiple subjectivities that surfaced briefly in her shifting emphasis on the pieces of her jigsaw puzzle or the distorting mirrors of her theme park metaphor, Sarah chose to retreat to a protected space where her identity would not be continually challenged. Ultimately, however, the protective nature of this space proved self-limiting and unable to sustain her passion for teaching.

It is interesting to speculate whether exposure to postmodernist discourses would have provided Sarah with alternative and possibly more productive ways of responding to her experiences. Like Davies (1990), Phelan (1996, p. 344) argues, from a postmodernist perspective, that agency is dependent on one's understanding of how one's 'beliefs and practices have been framed by particular discourses'. Would it have been helpful to Sarah, therefore, to have been exposed to understandings of identity not as fixed and unchanging but as an outcome of 'a constant ... negotiation among discourses' (Phelan 1996, p. 344)? Would an understanding of the ways in which she was positioned by respective discourses have enabled Sarah to explore a diversity of discursive possibilities, some of which might have been more sustaining for her as a teacher? If so, would her metaphors have been different?

Postmodernist discourses may also have had an impact on Sarah's metaphors by alerting her to the dangers of positioning herself and her colleagues within a



framework of binary oppositions. In addition, access to postmodernist discourses may have encouraged her to be sceptical of the 'grand narratives' of traditional discourses of early childhood education and humanist progressive perspectives, especially those that focus unremittingly on the individual and the importance of realising the potential of the individual. Had Sarah been aware of critical discourses, she may have chosen to construct teaching in terms that moved beyond her primary focus on her beliefs and ideals as a teacher and to consider her potential contribution, through working collaboratively with others, to enhancing social capital and creating a more socially just society. A broader vision, such as this, may have assisted her to weather her disappointment and disillusionment with her current school context and provided the impetus to search for a more sustaining teaching context elsewhere.

Findings from Johnson's (2002) investigation into how secondary student teachers might be assisted to move beyond personal frames of reference and to draw on a broader range of more critical discourses are not encouraging. The nineteen participants in the project (which was additional to course requirements and did not count for credit) produced visual and narrative texts of their teaching experience. Like Sarah, these students were able to read their text from a personal perspective by focusing on feelings and themes elicited by the experiences they portrayed. They found it difficult, however, to draw on post-structuralist discourses to produce an alternative and more critical reading of their text. Johnson's findings suggest that, in Sarah's case, exposure to a wider range of discourses in her teacher education program may not have made a great deal of difference, either to the metaphors she generated, or to her reading of these metaphors.

Nevertheless, Phelan (1996, 2001) argues convincingly for preservice teachers to be exposed to a wider range of discourses than are traditionally sanctioned by teacher education programs. More specifically, she contends, teacher education needs to be conceptualised as a discursive project.

If teacher education is to be one of the means by which educators learn new ways of seeing ... then teacher education needs to become a discursive project. There is no escaping discourse. There is no escaping that language/discourse constitutes experience generally, and our experience of place specifically. Teacher educators may need to consider how we can help prospective teachers to recognize the multiple discourses that shape and often restrict their thinking about experience and place. (Phelan 2001, p. 594).

Implicit in her argument is that this conceptualisation must be woven into the very fabric of the program. She advocates that preservice teachers be encouraged,

throughout their program, to map, analyse and continually revisit the 'biographical, institutional, and educational discourses which have shaped their thinking and actions and those they continue to encounter' (Phelan 1996, p. 344). Sustained engagement in these processes, she argues, may assist preservice teachers to realise that 'nothing is ever settled completely' (Phelan 1996, p. 344). It is interesting to speculate about whether opportunity for sustained engagement with alternative discourses might have made a difference to the textual readings produced by the students in Johnson's (2002) study; and whether an appreciation of the fluidity referred to by Phelan might have led Sarah to respond to and to shape her experiences differently.

What is more certain is that involving preservice teachers in mapping and analysing the discourses they encounter, and how their sense of identity shifts in relation to those discourses, will present challenges for teacher educators. We will need, for example, to identify explicitly the discourses we introduce to students; to acknowledge that we privilege some discourses over others; and to invite critique of the discourses in which we have invested considerable passion. Above all, argue Phelan and McLaughlin (1995, p. 172), we will need to abandon discourses of certainty in favour of those that 'promote tension and uncertainty'.

It is encouraging to see accounts emerging of early childhood teacher education programs conceived as discursive projects (e.g. Kantor and Fernie 2001, Miller Marsh 2002, Robinson and Jones Diaz 1999). Much is not yet clear, however. For example, how do we avoid replacing one set of discourses, one 'regime of truth', with another? How do we respond when preservice teachers resist or challenge the discourses that we, as teacher educators, privilege? Should we reconsider our current practices of examining students on their ability and willingness to internalise these discourses (Phelan and McLaughlin 1995). Why do we hear so few accounts of preservice teachers who resist the normalising discourses of their teacher education program to construct and refine alternative discourses? As teacher educators, we need to continue to share our efforts to grapple with these and similar issues.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, I have used Sarah's metaphors to raise questions that might further our understandings about why talented and seemingly committed early childhood teachers like Sarah leave the field after only a few years. I have argued that Sarah's metaphors suggest that, as teacher educators, we need to identify the dominant discourses of our teacher education programs and to consider how these discourses might contribute to the production and perpetuation of sometimes limiting cultural texts about being an early childhood teacher. Broadening the discursive base of teacher education programs may enable preservice and early career teachers to select

from a wider range of discursive possibilities, responses and actions than those seemingly available to Sarah. As Phelan (2001, p. 585) writes, 'wider discourses do not force us to act in any manner; in fact, understanding the nature of our discourse ... may gain us a space to alter thought and practice'. Perhaps new thoughts, practices, metaphors and cultural texts about early childhood teaching and teachers may hold keys to addressing the disturbingly high levels of attrition from the early childhood field.

### Author's note

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 10<sup>th</sup> Reconceptualizing Early Childhood Education Conference, New York, October 2001.

### Acknowledgments

I extend my deep appreciation to Sarah for her commitment to the project. I am also grateful to Colin Symes for his insightful comments on a draft of this article, and to Macquarie University and the Australian Research Council for funding components of the project.

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