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Rebels, Rogues, and Risk-takers: Insights into Personal Characteristics of National Tertiary Teaching Excellence Awardees

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Abstract

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This article focuses on the personal characteristics of this group of awardees, highlighted through analysis of their narratives. Educators, mentors, and curriculum designers can gain a deeper understanding of teaching excellence, and of how teachers perceive their own practice and their impact on others. It is hoped too that educators will recognise elements of themselves and their practice, and will feel motivated and inspired to share these with their peers.

Keywords

teaching excellence, narrative inquiry, teaching awards, teacher identity, professional practice, SoTL

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Rebels, Rogues, and Risk-takers: Insights into Personal Characteristics of National Tertiary Teaching Excellence Awardees

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Challenges exist with the discourse in education around terms such as ‘best practice’, ‘excellence’, and ‘impact’, which raises questions around who decides what ‘excellent’ teaching looks like. To better understand the different facets of teaching excellence, this research project investigates the stories of twelve national Tertiary Teaching Excellence awardees in New Zealand, exploring awardees’ trajectories and practice, including views on their identity, and on what they consider to be excellence in tertiary teaching.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper draws on a research project, undertaken in New Zealand, to explore different facets of teaching excellence. One way of doing this is to look at a group of practitioners defined as ‘excellent’ by a national body. The paper begins by considering the problematic discourse around teaching excellence and how excellence is rewarded. I then move to outlining the narrative inquiry methodology, before setting out my findings. While the project was guided by three research questions, this paper focuses on key findings in response to my first question - “How does the concept of excellence unfurl in the narratives of Tertiary Teaching Excellence awardees?” - referring in particular to personality characteristics of participants, and their drivers and motivation to teach.

In search of definitions

In contemporary higher education, we often hear talk of ‘best practice’ or ‘teaching excellence’, with an assumption that all practitioners either know of or can demonstrate examples of these. These terms can refer, however, to a wide range of systems, procedures, and behaviours, which “may or may not have been rigorously evaluated” (Arendale, 2018). An extensive review of the literature suggests that considerations around the notion of ‘teaching excellence’ have been varied and complex for some time (Bartram et al., 2019; Dixon & Pilkington, 2017; Little et al., 2007; Miller-Young et al., 2020). As far back as 2005, Skelton described teaching excellence as a “contested, value-laden concept” (p. 4). This is echoed by Stevenson et al. (2017) when they explain that “excellence is, of course, a multi-faceted concept, and it is not surprising that the term operates ambiguously, contradictorily, and contentiously” (p. 63), and by Madriaga and Morley (2016, p. 166) who question the “steady effort to make an intangible, ambiguous, multifaceted notion of teaching excellence incarnate”. Various authors emphasise the need for greater clarity, perhaps best summarised by Gravett and Kinchin (2020, p. 1033), who assert that “conceptions of teaching excellence are due a reimagining”. In essence, then, there is no widely accepted understanding of ‘excellence’ in teaching.

Is it impact which is the best determinant of teaching excellence? If so, how might that be defined? ‘Impact’ is another multi-layered and complex term increasingly used in education (Ashwin, 2016; O’Regan & Gray, 2018). One factor contributing to this complexity is that “to be able to evaluate impact, we need to know where we are starting from” (Cambridge Assessment International Education: Teaching and Learning Team, n.d., para. 4), so baseline data is needed. In Australia, the State Government of Victoria suggests that “excellence in teaching and learning” comes from curriculum and content knowledge, and “the skills to utilise *high-impact pedagogical strategies* to improve student learning” (2018, para. 3, emphasis added), yet provides no details on what those ‘high-impact’ strategies might be. In the United Kingdom (UK), the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), introduced in 2017 (Barkas et al., 2019), is described by Massie as using “student satisfaction, retention rates and destination of leavers as a proxy for teaching excellence” (2018, p. 332), and by Shattock (2018, p. 21) as a framework which “does not actually assess teaching but only the imperfectly recorded reactions to it”. Deem and Baird (2019) outline how it draws on various measures, including the numbers of alumni moving on to further study or entering employment (and how sustained that employment is), and/or earning “above median” salaries (p. 228). However, O’Leary et al. (2019), whose study involved more than 6000 staff working in Higher Education across the UK, found that “overall, participants reported limited evidence that the TEF recognised, promoted and/or rewarded teaching excellence” (p. 4), which suggests that those participants see ‘teaching excellence’ as something else.

If organisational leaders were asked how they measure the impact of teaching, they would probably refer to key performance indicators, such as retention rates, completion levels, and destination surveys (not unlike the TEF referred to above). However, I would argue that, while those measures are certainly important, if learners were asked the same question, these elements would not come into play. Ashwin (2016), acknowledging that views on ‘impact’ change depending on how the relationship between teaching and learning is perceived, suggests that if “we... ask ‘what has impact?’ and ‘who owns the impact?’”, then the answer is simple. It is teaching and learning that has impact and it is the teachers

and the students who own that impact” (para. 4). For the learner, impact might be about confidence, motivation, behaviour, creating opportunities, and empowering individuals and groups through learning. Is it, then, these things which demonstrate teaching excellence?

If we view both teachers and learners as being involved in “dynamic engagement” (Johnson-Farmer & Frenn, 2009, p. 7) within the teaching excellence process, it is still unlikely that both parties view excellence in the same way (Bradley et al., 2015; Greatbatch & Holland, 2016; Miller-Young et al., 2020). McLean (2001), for example, summarises differences between student and staff perceptions of ‘teaching excellence’ and, perhaps more importantly, asks whose opinions we should value, and against what criteria excellence is measured. In other words, we ask the question who decides who (or what) is ‘excellent’?

Evaluating excellence

In order to evaluate teaching excellence, politicians, educational institutions, and stakeholders would first need to agree on whether they are more interested in a top-down or bottom-up perspective, or whether the ideal lies somewhere between the two, and then reach a consensus on how it should be measured (preferably via a model which can also be used to guide teacher development). Cashmore et al. (2013) call for teaching excellence criteria to be built into a flexible framework, and Polkinghorne et al. (2017, p. 214) urge institutions to ensure they are “evaluating teaching excellence in the same way so that realistic comparisons can be made”. In reality, however, looking at the literature, a single framework or system, no matter how flexible, is still some way off.

Evaluating a teacher’s practice through performance reviews, classroom observations, and/or through student surveys, for example, are all possible (and common practice), and may be complementary. These still, though, reveal only part of the picture. Teaching evaluations, however they are conducted, can be formative, providing meaningful feedback to the staff member for their own development, or summative, assigning a grade or score to the staff member, with implications for performance reviews and promotion (Mintrop et al., 2018; Steinberg & Kraft, 2017). Nalla (2018) reminds us that they should also be multi-dimensional. In student evaluations of teaching, for instance, students who are surveyed may not realise how their feedback is used or reported (El-Sayed et al., 2018; Sharpe, 2019), their evaluations can be vague and unclear (Carlucci et al., 2019), contain known or unintended biases (Dennin et al., 2017), and/or may be based more on a teacher’s popularity than on their effectiveness (English et al., 2015; Zabaleta, 2007). As Hornstein (2017) summarises, then, student evaluations of teaching, on their own, are an “inadequate” tool to measure staff performance.

Away from institutional or political attempts to define and/or measure ‘teaching excellence’, Bain (2004) studied almost 100 of “the best” college teachers across the United States, over a fifteen-year period, looking for indicators of excellence by selecting educators who had “achieved remarkable success in helping their students learn in ways that made a sustained, substantial, and positive influence on how those students think, act, and feel” (p. 5). He reports on multiple aspects of the knowledge and practice of these teachers, including how they prepare to teach, how they treat their students, and how they evaluate both their learners and themselves. Hattie (2003), whose research involved “an extensive review of literature and a synthesis of over half a million

studies” (p. 15), also suggests that numerous elements make up the profile of an expert teacher, describing them as “facets of the gem-stone”, and clarifying that “there is no one necessary facet, nor the equal presence of all, but the overlapping of many facets into the whole” (p. 10). Kane et al. (2004) propose a model of excellence incorporating subject knowledge, skill, interpersonal relationships, personality, and research/teaching links, and integrating reflective practice throughout. For them, “skills are far from being the most important determinant of teaching excellence” (p. 295). Many authors over the years (including Brophy & Good, 1974; Burant et al., 2007; Jones, 1989; Seymour, 1963) have suggested that teaching excellence is related to personal qualities: “Personality is a very dominant and important characteristic of the ideal teacher” (Arnon & Reichel, 2007, p. 451). For Palmer (2017, p. 10), “good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher”. This would appear to be supported by Skelton (2005), citing two studies which found that both teachers and students see teaching excellence as a reflection of particular qualities of the teacher’s personality, by Fitzmaurice (2010, p. 53), who describes teaching as “a matter of human relations”, and by Johannessen et al. (1997) and Weinstein (1990), who emphasise the importance of affective traits in teachers. In summary then, although there may be “no off-the-shelf blueprint for building a highly successful teacher” (Tomlinson, 2010, p. 26), the literature suggests that there is a lot more to excellence than simply techniques and skills, and personal characteristics are worth exploring further.

Rewarding excellence

Despite the challenges of the discourse, there is certainly enthusiasm in higher education for recognising excellence. Existing literature looks at various aspects of teaching awards and their impact, including conceptions of teaching excellence underlying different award schemes (Cattell-Holden, 2020; Lubicz-Nawrocka & Bunting, 2019; Miller-Young et al., 2020; Pusateri, 2020), connections between excellence awards and processes of teaching evaluation (Efimenko et al., 2018; Gunn & Fisk, 2013), impact on winners of national teaching awards (Seppala & Smith, 2020; Warnes, 2019; Zhu & Turcic, 2018), and institutions’ views on teaching awards, their benefits and drawbacks (Madruga & Morley, 2016; Seppala & Smith, 2020).

Many institutions reward ‘teaching excellence’ (even if, in most cases, their criteria are poorly defined (McLean, 2001)), with similar awards existing at a national level in several countries, including New Zealand (NZ), Australia, the UK, Malaysia, South Africa, Canada, and the United States.

National and organisational context

In NZ, where this research was undertaken, the national Tertiary Teaching Excellence Awards, established in 2001 (Ako Aotearoa, n.d.-b), are administered by Ako Aotearoa, the National Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence, with their primary goal being “to foster, promote and support the development of excellent tertiary teachers throughout New Zealand” (Ako Aotearoa, n.d.-a). In some institutions, teachers can nominate themselves for an award; in others, it is through peer-nomination. In every case, nominations are submitted through the educational organisation to Ako Aotearoa.

At Otago Polytechnic, before being asked to prepare an application for the national awards, staff members have, in most cases,

received an institutional ‘Excellence in Teaching’ award, presented in February each year (Otago Polytechnic, 2020). Because of Otago Polytechnic’s commitment to fostering excellence and wanting excellent teachers to be recognised, the organisation allows for time to be provided for mentoring of people writing award portfolios. In addition, new academic staff members are supported through a graduate teaching qualification in their first three years at the institution, recognising the importance of people being teaching practitioners as well as experts in their respective fields: “It is not sufficient for academics to be experts in their disciplinary area; they also need to know how best to teach that discipline” (Department of Education, Government of Ireland, 2011, p. 59). This is particularly significant when we consider that, in the tertiary context, many educators move directly from industry or practice into a teaching role, and often receive no teacher training (Haggerty et al., 2019; Slowey et al., 2014).

At the time of writing, 22 national Tertiary Teaching Excellence Awards have been won by educators at Otago Polytechnic since 2007, which is a very high rate of success. In order to better understand the different facets of teaching excellence, my research involved one-to-one conversations with many of these awardees, investigating their respective stories and practice, including views on their identity, and on what they consider to be excellence in tertiary teaching.

METHODOLOGY

Scholars in the field of narrative inquiry broadly agree that we live and make sense of our lives through stories (Bruner, 1986, 2002; Clandinin, 2007; Garvis, 2015; Polkinghorne, 1988, 1995; Squire, 2008). Our stories are essential to our identity and personality (Fish, 2020), and give life “an overall sense of coherence and purpose” (McAdams et al., 2006, p. 1372). Narrative inquiry enables systematic gathering, analysis, and representation of people’s stories, and, although cross-disciplinary (Clandinin, 2006; Kearney & Andrew, 2019), is increasingly used in educational research (Huber et al., 2013), with stories providing “an unparalleled method of reaching practitioners’ mindsets” (Thody, 1997, p. 331). Expert teachers have “a rich store of situated or storied knowledge of curriculum content, classroom social processes, academic tasks, and students’ understandings and intentions” (Carter, 1993, p. 7), and it is this store that I draw on in exploring the stories of award-winning teachers.

Polkinghorne (1995) provides a clear distinction between two principal types of narrative inquiry, ‘analysis of narratives’ and ‘narrative analysis’, and asserts that “both... can make important contributions to the body of social science knowledge” (p. 21). In the first type, the focus is on the text of the story(-ies), with the researcher analysing themes that occur across a series of narratives. In the second, ‘narrative analysis’, “the research product is a story... that is composed by the researcher to represent the events, characters, and issues that he or she has studied” (Bochner & Riggs, 2014, p. 204). In summary, “analysis of narratives moves from stories to common elements, and narrative analysis moves from elements to stories” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 12). Having said this, the literature (including Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Czarniawska, 2004; Wells, 2011) suggests that the two are not mutually exclusive.

My aim in this project has been to “produce rounded understandings on the basis of rich, contextual and detailed data” (Mason, 2018, p. 4). By providing a ‘thick description’ (Geertz,

1973) of the qualitative data, findings should be richer and carry more meaning for readers (Creswell, 2014). Furthermore, “the sharing of common stories creates an interpretive community... [that promotes] cultural cohesion” (Bruner, 2002, p. 25). In addition, Clandinin (2009) emphasises “the power and importance of engaging teachers and teacher educators in inquiring into their past and present stories” (p. xii), believing that they can provide insights into teaching and teacher development, and “models of possibility” (p. xiii). In other words, we can learn about the past and present experiences of our participant educators, and look to the future to consider how their learning might be applied more broadly.

Participant Interviews

One semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant (six female and six male, ranging in age between 44 and 64 years old¹), on a one-to-one basis. A total of 13 hours and 58 minutes of discussion took place, with conversations lasting between 44 minutes and 1 hour 22 minutes. Some pre-planned questions, focusing on key areas including the educator, their life experience and career, the community, and reflections on teaching excellence, were set out in an interview guide / prompt sheet to provide a skeleton structure and consistency to the interview process. It was important for participants’ stories to emerge, so guiding questions were reframed as the conversation developed. Questions were not shared with participants ahead of time, so as not to affect the naturally developing conversations and stories.

Interviews were audio-recorded, and then transcribed. The main reason for transcribing the interviews myself was so that I could engage deeply with their content from the outset (O’Leary, 2014), and start to familiarise myself with the data, something Riessman (2008, p. 50) calls the “process of infiltration”. Indeed, “one cannot fully understand data unless one has been in on it from the beginning” (Chafe, 2014, p. 61), and this immersion certainly helped me with analysis.

Once each transcript had been completed and proof-read, it was then shared with the individual participant. Asking interviewees to review their transcripts reinforces both their rights as research participants, and the participant-researcher relationship (Hagens et al., 2009). It also serves as a way of triangulating the data, with participants having a second voice through this ‘member checking’ (their first voice being through the one-to-one interviews).

Data Analysis

In this paper, I focus on selected findings resulting from the analysis of narratives (Polkinghorne, 1995), looking at themes occurring across the set of twelve stories. My analysis followed the six phases of Braun and Clarke’s (2006) framework. Maguire and Delahunt (2017, p. 3353) assert that, in the social sciences, this “is arguably the most influential approach, ... probably because it offers such a clear and usable framework for doing thematic analysis”. A general inductive approach was used, with patterns and themes being induced from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). An iterative cycle enabled themes to be identified, compared, and consolidated (for example, by considering whether similar themes could be merged into one, and whether large, less-defined themes could be split into more defined ones for clarity). Just as O’Toole (2018, p. 184) mentions her “cyclic process of analysis”, and Shagoury (2011, p. 303) highlights a “cycle of action” in analysis,

Dey (1993, pp. 31-32) also talks about the “circular” and “related processes of describing phenomena, classifying [them], and seeing how our concepts interconnect”. Having said that, in qualitative research, it is important to remember that:

the language data are not simply single words, but interrelated words combined into sentences, and sentences into discourses... The evidence itself is not the marks on the paper but the meanings represented in these texts. It is not the printed words themselves that can be analysed by counting how many times a particular word appears in the text. Rather, the evidence is the ideas and thoughts that have been expressed by the participants. (Polkinghorne, 2005, p. 138)

In other words, analysis of the interviews was primarily qualitative and content-based, rather than statistical, with each participant’s whole story (or transcript, to be exact) being the unit of analysis (Cohen et al., 2011; Denscombe, 2014). As Braun and Clarke (2016) emphasise, in thematic analysis, “frequency is not the only (or even primary) determinant for theme development: patterning across (some) data items is important, but relevance to addressing the research question is key” (p. 741). In this paper, the focus is on my first research question—“How does the concept of excellence unfurl in the narratives of Tertiary Teaching Excellence awardees?”—referring in particular to personality characteristics of participants, and their drivers and motivation to teach.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section sets out selected findings from the analysis of narratives, presenting themes which occur the most often across the series of narratives, and discussing the findings by linking them with existing literature. I have woven the literature into the analysis as I feel this is more natural and relevant for the reader than if presented separately. As Arlidge asserts, “learning is a process of sense-making, of adding and synthesising new information within existing knowledge structures” (2000, p. 34). Furthermore, integrating personal and professional knowledge with academic research informs professional practice and how it evolves.

Here, when participants’ own words are used, the line number given refers to the transcription of our conversation. Participants have been assigned letters (A-L) at random.

Personal characteristics

Analysis of the conversations with my participants revealed different characteristics which form part of their respective identities and impact on their professional practice. Schaefer and Clandinin (2019) highlight how, for teachers, personal and professional identities meld, and “how who they were as teachers was entwined with who they were as people” (p. 57).

A love of learning was described by two-thirds of participants:

If it interests me, I’ll always go and learn it... I love, love, love learning new stuff. (Participant A, lines 124-125)

I would always pick something that I would have to go and learn... before I taught others... It was a challenge, and I enjoyed going right back to basics, to getting the books out, to looking at it, to learning about it, so I could learn together... with my students. (Participant C, lines 85-86; 106-107)

I’d been a long-term student ‘cause, you know, back then it was free, so you could just study because you love learning. (Participant L, lines 76-77)

This can be extended to the idea that our teacher identity changes as we learn:

Our views about teaching and learning, and our own role in this process tend to evolve over time. These changes may be prompted by critical incidents, growth in confidence..., work with colleagues, and interactions with students, and deliberate reading, professional development, or research around teaching. (Spiller, 2011, p. 2)

Beard (2018, p. 34), drawing on Dewey’s principle of continuity, would agree: “Teachers of children and adults themselves undergo continuous educative experiences, and so, they [move] forward in their perspective and practices”.

For participants in this study, a love of learning often sits alongside an ability and willingness to recognise that there is always more to learn:

I really didn’t have many years when I didn’t do any self-development at all... there’s always something on the go... and I think it’s a good way to be in the shoes of the learner. (Participant E, lines 382-384)

You come to realise, the more that you’re involved in education and the more people you meet and the experiences that you have... you know nothing... You’ve got to be open every day to every new idea. (Participant H, lines 155-156; 201-202)

Ewing and Smith (2001, p. 22), when considering the nature of professional practice, highlight that “it is through the increasing experience of practice that practitioners are provided with the potential to learn and develop as professionals and to steadily increase the knowledge base on which they base their judgements and actions”. A landmark Carnegie report asserts that “good teaching means that faculty, as scholars, are also learners” (Boyer, 1990, p. 24), and Tomlinson suggests that “excellent teachers never fall prey to the belief that they are good enough. The best teachers I have known are humbled by how much more they need to learn” (2010, p. 24). This sense of humility also came through in the conversations with my participants, with many having no perception of themselves as excellent, or explicitly referring to excellent teachers as “they”:

I know how many other amazing teachers are out there... I don’t feel that I’m better than anyone else. (Participant A, lines 740-741)

“Do you see yourself as ‘excellent’?” Not yet... working on it... but definitely not yet. (Participant H, lines 190-191)

[I] felt a little bit false when [I] won the award... I’d never seen myself as an excellent teacher. I see myself as doing the best that I can for the learners. (Participant I, lines 318-320)

I don’t think I thought ‘I’m a great teacher’, because I got the award; it’s more... all of these things that I’ve learned, it’s made me very aware of what my teaching practice is... there’s millions, there’s so many good teachers here at Otago Polytechnic, and they’re not all award-winning teachers, still there’s lots of great teachers. (Participant J, lines 214-216; 528-530)

Three-quarters of these participants (nine out of twelve) reflected on a sense of empathy with, and a genuine feeling of caring for learners:

It's all about them... and you've got to put yourself in their shoes... that's been the most successful thing for me with students, is putting yourself in their shoes. (Participant A, lines 136; 165-166)

I think that people who tend to become... who I think are great teachers... are people who genuinely come from a position of care... I think people who come from a position of genuine care and doing things in the best interests [of learners] tend to make great teachers. (Participant F, lines 379-380; 382-384)

An excellent teacher or an excellent facilitator of learning is... someone who cares for people. (Participant K, lines 325-326)

The literature suggests that “caring is the very bedrock of all successful education” (Noddings, 1992, p. 27), and that teachers are more effective when they care about each learner (Lumpkin, 2007; Nguyen, 2016; Ransom, 2020; Wadsorn, 2017). For Blackie et al. (2010), “the key element which facilitates the transition from a good education to a transformative one is empathy” (p. 641).

It is difficult to perceive how student/early-career teachers might be encouraged to adopt these attitudes, if they are not already present. Nevertheless, these findings still contribute to our understanding of the characteristics of excellent teachers, and could be food for thought both for new teachers and for teacher developers.

Another theme which came through for many participants (nine of the twelve) was a sense of ‘going rogue’, or being a risk-taker, or even a rebel:

I remember some other lecturer going by and saying, “What’s going on here?”... People would be suspicious and say “What’s going on? Why are you doing this?” (Participant C, lines 302-311)

I was kind of playing with things, because I knew I could kind of get away with them, but I was... doing it literally sometimes behind closed doors... You’re kind of doing it in secrecy, because it’s not normalised, it’s not the norm. (Participant F, lines 175-179)

Any opportunity to do things differently to what the system is, I’ve taken... I’ve always changed how we did things... I’ve always wanted to push the boundaries. (Participant G, lines 60-63; 284-285)

I think excellent teachers are quite brave people; I think often they step out and away from the collective... I have perhaps utilised particular learning tools or strategies that people have said “I don’t know if you can do that”... ‘cause it wasn’t on that checklist of things that we’d agreed on... So I think, often, excellent teachers are prepared to look wide... not just accepting the status quo. (Participant K, lines 337-338; 340-352)

I would contend that this willingness to take risks or rebel against, for example, systems and/or processes is driven by the desire to do the best that one can for the learners. It is not a wilful arrogance or challenge to authority, but a belief that there is a better

solution, in a particular context of learning and teaching. This leads us nicely into the next theme of drivers and motivation.

Drivers and motivation

In terms of what motivates people in life, or what drives their actions and decisions, all twelve participants talked about the importance of empowering and encouraging others, sometimes expressed simply as helping others:

Me being able to do something, that’s great, but me being able to do something that makes things better for the team, that’s even better... My personal value comes out of making things better for the team. (Participant B, lines 119-120; 401-402)

Maybe the most important [thing]... it’s that sense of give and take, and of an open discussion and learning from one another... I think that there’s an empowerment element in that... I’m trying to help other people... It’s not about me, it’s about... whatever they need to achieve. (Participant D, lines 225-228; 303-304)

Giving people responsibilities and that ability to develop themselves is always something that I’d wanted. (Participant G, lines 154-155)

Tomlinson (2010) cites Csikszentmihalyi’s ‘flow’ concept (1990) when she highlights that “what makes the difference in the work ethic of high-quality teachers is that their work is regenerative; they draw energy from what they do... [the] individual feels aligned with a task and the work becomes its own reward” (p. 26). Again, these findings add to our understanding of how teaching excellence emerges, and what motivates these people to work in education.

Bain (2004) reminds us that excellent teaching starts with the students, rather than with the subject matter.

[An excellent teacher] is someone who will be able to adapt their teaching, mentoring, guiding, whatever you want to call it, to meet the students’ needs. (Participant G, lines 250-251)

For all twelve participants, wanting their learners to succeed is another element of their focus on learners:

Ultimately, you’ve got to have the students’ best interests at heart. (Participant G, lines 372-373)

One other participant described excellence as a “philosophy”, which perhaps calls to mind the much-cited quote (often mis-attributed to Aristotle), “We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit” (Durant, 1926, p. 87):

I think [excellence] is a reflection of many things; I think it’s a reflection of people who do it... it’s something they do all the time... I think it’s someone that’s reached a level where it’s second nature to do it to the absolute best, not only the ability, but that they’re absolutely committed to it being all about the learner and not themselves. (Participant K, lines 291-292; 296-298)

To summarise, these are the personal characteristics and drivers to work in education which were most present in the analysis of narratives of these twelve practitioners. There were, naturally, other similarities which were less common. Traits in some participants but not others include, for instance, determination, cultural intelligence, and different levels of self-belief, and diverse life expe-

periences have contributed to how these participants embody and convey excellence in their practice (Goode, 2021).

Reflecting on the question of whether the concept of excellence is more attached to *teachers* or to *teaching*, and how these are different, there are elements inherent in these awardees (such as their love of learning, or their desire to empower people) which would suggest we are actually talking more about excellent teachers. Having said that, many of the elements of excellence which came through in more extensive findings (such as the importance of facilitating learning, sharing stories, and reflecting on practice) are things which we can embed into teacher development, and which can develop with practice.

SIGNIFICANCE

These findings are significant for several reasons. First, they contribute to the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) which recognises “the importance of taking a critical and research-based approach to teaching and learning” (Tight, 2018, p. 61). They also highlight that investigating and promoting teaching and learning practices does not have to be discipline specific. SoTL inquiries can be conducted and shared widely, so that we might better “understand or improve student learning in higher education and the teaching approaches and practices that affect student learning” (Chick, 2018). Trigwell (2021) cites the work of Healey et al. (2019) when he reminds us that “engagement with SoTL can accelerate growth as a teacher, [and] provide access to a language and values that lead to more meaningful conversations about teaching and learning”.

In addition, the findings contribute to existing research and knowledge around what teaching excellence looks like. While previous literature has examined different aspects of teaching excellence, teaching awards, and/or their impact, there does not appear to be anyone who has looked at the development or trajectory of award-winning teachers.

I also hope that educators will recognise elements of their own practice, to (re-)inspire and (re-)motivate them in their work. Johnson (2019, p. 253) cites multiple authors when he reminds us that “Teachers are the most significant variable in determining the quality of education students receive and the amount of learning that occurs”. Developing teaching excellence in oneself and in others, then, raises the quality of learning for our students, which is ultimately why we work in education.

LIMITATIONS

This research does not offer a definitive definition of ‘teaching excellence’, but that was never the intention. It does, however, contribute to the literature and to ongoing conversations around this complex subject.

Some may consider twelve to be a small sample size. However, I would argue that it is in the ‘richness’ of the data, rather than in the number of participants, that the value lies. Indeed, “bigger isn’t necessarily better. The bigger the sample, the greater the risk of failing to do justice to the complexity and nuance contained within the data” (Braun & Clarke, 2016, p. 742).

I also recognise that the narrative inquiry here has captured the stories of twelve practitioners in a particular organisation within the tertiary context in NZ. Nevertheless, participants do have different backgrounds, ethnicities, and come from different discipline areas. I firmly believe that others will be able to both

relate to and recognise elements of their own professional practice, regardless of geographical or educational context.

CONCLUSION

This paper draws on research investigating the trajectory and professional practice of national Tertiary Teaching Excellence awardees, to explore their background and evolution as educators, their current practice, and their thoughts around teacher development.

Given the complexities surrounding the concept of teaching excellence, I sought to explore different facets of practitioners recognised at a national level as ‘excellent’. While the literature suggests that there is no widely accepted understanding of what teaching excellence looks like, research does indicate that it is made up of multiple aspects, with personality traits sitting alongside skills and knowledge.

This research found that intrinsic motivators, such as a love of learning and a desire to empower and encourage others, underpins the practice of these educators. Along with genuine empathy and care for their students, participants expressed a willingness to take risks and bend or break rules, in their efforts to do the best that they can for learners and ultimately see them succeed.

Understanding how we can develop excellent practice in teachers and in educational developers, both through formal teacher training programmes and through continuing professional development, is important nationally and internationally, and this project will feed into future research as I expand on my findings and their implications. These findings add to our understanding of what motivates these people to work in education, and of how teaching excellence emerges.

NOTES

1. The gender balance here was entirely coincidental. While I do not feel that age, gender, or ethnicity impact on or inform teaching excellence (and was not investigating these elements), I do appreciate that some readers may be interested in this data.

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