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How to conduct research on the inherent moral significance of teaching: A phenomenological elaboration of the standard repertory grid application

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ABSTRACT

George Kelly's repertory grid application seems a promising method for researching the moral significance of teaching from a 'life world' perspective. However, we encountered several challenges employing the repertory grid in its standard form for an inquiry into the inherent moral significance of teachers' everyday classroom interactions. In this article we will set out in detail how, on the basis of the standard repertory grid application, we developed a repertory interview method that can be used to collect data that could foster a thorough understanding of the inherent moral significance of teachers' day-to-day classroom interactions.

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1. Introduction

1.1. The moral significance of teaching

Several theories about teaching practice claim that teaching is more than anything else a moral practice (Hansen, 2001). The moral significance of teaching has been an important topic of debate from ancient times right through to the present day. Although contemporary theories on the moral significance of teaching are quite versatile, a general division can be made between those that have an external perspective and those that have an internal perspective. Theories that have an external perspective refer to the moral in teaching as a set of values and virtues, embraced by a particular group, which can be explicitly taught to teachers, students and pupils. From this perspective, an externally defined set of conditions, issues, or actions determines whether or not teaching practice has moral significance (Beck, 1990; Cohen, 1995; Kelsey, 1993; Lickona, 1991; Nucci, 1989). In contrast, theories that consider teaching an inherent moral practice have an internal perspective and view the moral significance of teaching as an inextricable part

of teachers' everyday practices. From this perspective, the moral significance of teaching is construed as something that permeates the work of teaching: any specific teaching act has an inherent moral significance (Ax & Ponte, 2010; Biesta, 2007; Biesta & Miedema, 2002; Goodlad, Soder, & Sirotnik, 1990; Jackson, Boostrom, & Hansen, 1993; Van Manen, 1991). Because the moral significance of teaching from the latter perspective is connected to teachers' everyday classroom experiences, we refer to this as a 'life world' perspective. The concept of 'life world' can be considered an essential element of phenomenology and can be described as the relational world of lived experience as opposed to an objective world 'out there' (Todres, Galvin, & Dahlberg, 2007; Van Manen, 2007).

1.2. A methodological challenge

Our ongoing research project on the moral significance of teachers' everyday practices has adopted the 'life world' perspective. Its aim is to explore teachers' interpretations of the inherent moral significance of their everyday classroom interactions. This research is being conducted in the context of both special and regular education. A total of thirty-seven teachers working in elementary and secondary schools participated in the data collection phase of this study.

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We adopted Kelly's (1955) personal construct theory to study teachers' interpretations of the inherent moral significance of their day-to-day classroom interaction. Initially we thought the repertory grid, which is inextricably connected to the personal construct theory, would be a suitable method. This method aims to explore how people understand their worlds by eliciting personal constructs, i.e. in our case eliciting personal ways of construing the moral significance of their classroom interactions. However, a straightforward application of the standard repertory grid with this particular aim proved to be quite challenging. Although several aspects of the standard repertory grid application were very useful as a starting point, we found that a careful rethinking of these aspects was needed when conducting 'life world' research.

In this paper we primarily focus on how we realized a phenomenological elaboration of five basis aspects of the standard repertory grid application in accordance with the 'life world' perspective. We used samples of the empirical data we gathered with this newly developed method to illustrate its 'life world' qualities.

Section 2 elaborates on the methodological implications and promising qualities of the repertory grid. Section 3 provides background information on Kelly's personal construct theory and the standard application of the repertory grid, and then goes on to examine the problems with using its standard application and to provide five desiderata. Section 4 sets out how we realized a phenomenological elaboration of these five desiderata, illustrating each desideratum with empirical data. Finally, in Section 5 we reflect on the qualities of our phenomenological interpretation and its relation to the standard repertory grid application.

2. Methodological implications of a 'life world' perspective

Adopting a 'life world' perspective on the moral significance of teaching has some specific methodological implications, which differ from an external perspective. This section focuses on methodological implications that are connected to (a) the research aim and (b) research instruments for conducting 'life world' research on the way teachers interpret the moral significance of their classroom interactions. It then presents our reflections on the repertory grid as a research method that could meet the methodological implications connected to a 'life world' perspective.

The first methodological implication is connected to the aim of the study. The difference between an 'external' aim and a 'life world' aim with regard to a study on the moral significance of teaching can be summarized in the following dichotomy; explaining versus understanding. An external perspective is largely congruent with effects research. Borko, Whitcomb, and Byrnes (2008, p. 1020) described the aim of effects research as follows: 'This research genre seeks to identify generalized patterns of relationships between characteristics of teachers (candidates), features of (teacher) education practices and programs, and learning of teachers (candidates) and K–12 students...' (brackets inserted by the author) This research genre enables moral educational programs or interventions of some sort to be considered the explanatory variables in experimental or quasi-experimental research designs. A 'life world' perspective is more in line with interpretative research. Borko et al. (2008, p. 1025) described the aim of interpretative research: 'Interpretative research seeks to perceive, describe, analyse, and interpret a specific situation or context, preserving its complexity and communicating the perspectives of the actual participants.' From a 'life world' perspective, teaching practice is considered moral by its very nature. Consequently, the question is not whether teaching practice has moral significance, but how the inherent moral significance of teaching is interpreted by the persons who are part of that practice,

and how to understand the implications of these interpretations (Ponte, 2009). The first important methodological implication of adopting a life world perspective when researching the moral significance of teaching is to find a research method that fosters a deep understanding of the way teachers interpret their own classroom interactions.

The second methodological implication has to do with the research method. We refer to this as the difference between measuring and describing. Methods in line with an external perspective or effects research are intended to measure the influence of isolated variables on a targeted outcome. Moral practices or programs are expected, for instance, to influence teachers' moral reasoning or moral judgment (see Blatt and Kohlberg (1975), Thoma, Narvaez, Rest, and Derryberry (1999) and Bebeau (2002, 2006) for specific examples). The effects of these 'moral interventions' are regularly articulated in quantifiable terms. Typical research instruments in effects research are standardized tests, questionnaires and observation lists. Methods that concur with a 'life world' perspective or interpretative research aim to describe the way people give meaning to their worlds. Borko et al. (2008, p. 1026) described the particularities of methods in interpretative research as follows: 'Participants' voice and discourse are critical to capture, so researchers record interactions in naturalistic settings, conduct interviews, and review written artefacts... Specific examples of such studies can be found in the works of Van Manen (1999), Lippitz and Levering (2002) and Buzzelli and Johnston (2002). The research methods used in interpretative research, thus, focus mainly on capturing qualitative data. A second important methodological implication of adopting a life world perspective when researching the moral significance of teaching is the need to find a research method that is able to thoroughly describe the way teachers give meaning to their own classroom interactions.

When researching how teachers interpret the moral meaning of their classroom interactions from a 'life world' perspective, the challenge is to find a research method that fosters understanding rather than explanation and, furthermore, fosters description rather than measurement. To address the methodological implications raised, we considered Kelly's personal construct theory and, more specifically, the research method associated with it, the repertory grid, to be a feasible approach (Kelly, 1955). The first promising quality of the repertory grid is connected to its focus on understanding the way people make sense of their life worlds by asking them to interpret specific phenomena from their life worlds (Walker & Winter, 2007); in our case their classroom interactions. This quality is congruent with our first methodological implication of 'life world' research, i.e. understanding instead of explaining. Furthermore, the repertory grid offers a structured way to help people explore and describe their views in their own terms (Jankowicz, 2004); in our case personal descriptions of the way teachers conceive their classroom interactions. This quality is in line with our second methodological implication of a 'life world' perspective, i.e. describing instead of measuring. However, during some initial tryouts with the standard repertory grid application we encountered some serious challenges with regard to these two implications.

The next section sets out these challenges in detail. It then goes on to examine the problems with using the repertory grid in its standard form and formulates five desiderata for conducting 'life world' research.

3. The merits of the repertory grid for 'life world' research

3.1. Kelly's personal construct theory

According to the personal construct theory, people build a system of internal representations of the phenomena they

experience. People adjust and broaden this system of internal representations by recognizing regularities and recurring patterns in their experience, which they represent internally by means of discriminations, called constructs (Jankowicz, 2004). These personal constructs help people to predict the way future phenomena will be experienced and interpreted; in this sense Kelly (1955) considered every individual his or her own scientist.

3.2. The standard repertory grid application

Kelly devised a method for operationalizing his personal construct theory by means of the repertory grid procedure. The standard procedure of the repertory grid involves formulating a topic of investigation, defining a set of elements, eliciting a set of constructs that distinguish among these elements, and relating elements to constructs (Bannister & Mair, 1968; Fransella, Bell, & Bannister, 2004; Jankowicz, 2004). Elements can be people, events, situations or things. Constructs can be expressed as bipolar adjective pairs (friendly–hostile, competitive–cooperative). A possible topic of investigation might, for example, be the way teachers construe their professional relationships in terms of their effectiveness. In that case pictures or name tags of a number of colleagues (e.g. Omar, Judith and Kim, see Table 1) could serve the purpose of elements in a grid. In order for the particular teacher to discriminate between the elements, an elicitation phrase is formulated such as: 'In what way are two relationships with your colleagues alike and different from a third in terms of their professional effectiveness?' A possible reply might be that relationships with Omar and Judith are alike in the sense that they are professionally enriching, and the relationship with Kim is different because that relationship is professionally insignificant to the particular teacher. The bipolar adjective labels 'professionally enriching'–'professionally insignificant' together constitute a personal construct. The poles of the construct can be regarded as representing extremes on a five-point scale, running left to right from a value of 1 to a value of 5 (Henze, 2006). The table below shows a grid display of this example.

In our particular study eliciting teachers' constructs took the form of eliciting teachers to interpret and articulate their views on morally meaningful classroom interactions. At first sight the repertory grid procedure seemed to have the potential to systematically enquire into how teachers give meaning to the inherent moral significance of their classroom interactions.

3.3. Challenges concerning the standard repertory grid application

Even though at first glance the repertory grid looked promising, after some initial tryouts with the standard repertory grid application we came across some serious difficulties with regard to researching the moral significance of teaching practice from a 'life world' perspective. This section describes these difficulties in detail. Five considerations are formulated accompanied by five challenges specifically associated with the standard repertory grid application (see Table 2). Each subsection concludes with a methodological desideratum.

Table 1
Example of a grid display.

Topic: professional relationships				
Elements: colleagues				
Constructs: 1 construct elicited from the teacher				
Ratings: on a 5-point scale				
	Omar	Judith	Kim	
Enriching	1	2	5	Insignificant

Table 2
Considerations and challenges with the standard repertory grid application.

Aspects of the standard repertory grid application that need further consideration	Challenges with regard to the standard repertory grid application
1 The method for obtaining elements	The provision of elements by the researcher without involving the subject
2 The representation of elements	The abstracted representations of elements primarily created by the researcher
3 The standard method of eliciting constructs	The complexity of the standard method for eliciting constructs
4 The bipolarity of constructs	The strictly dichotomous character of constructs
5 The meaningfulness of constructs	The superficiality of constructs

3.3.1. The method for obtaining elements

In the standard repertory grid application, the researcher provides elements beforehand, e.g. cards with written names of several pupils. This makes it possible to compare the way a group of people give meaning to predetermined elements. This aspect is in line with a more nomothetic approach but, in our experience, does not fit the purpose of understanding teachers' individual perspectives or intentions with regard to their everyday classroom interactions. Stephens and Gammack (1994, p. 176) argued in connection with this: 'When elements are provided by an experimenter, this can compromise subjects' freedom to choose elements meaningful to themselves and requires the experimenter to assume that a subject's construal of the elements is in some way compatible with the rationale for the choice of elements themselves.' Consequently, our first desideratum was that teachers should be allowed to be actively involved in the process of selecting elements.

3.3.2. The representation of elements

In the standard repertory grid application, elements are mostly represented by visual abstractions or general descriptions created solely by the researcher. Traditional elements are often generalizations of a specific aspect of the problem that is under investigation. An example of such general elements could be pictograms representing a variety of phrases which in turn represent different kinds of pupils. A point of concern is that these sorts of generic elements might compromise the elicitation of personal meanings that are connected to teachers' own practices. Yorke (1978), for instance, wrote about the use of superficial discriminations when responding to the TARGET (teaching appraisal by repertory grid elicitation techniques) grid of Hopwood and Keen (1978), which uses videotaped extracts of the teaching of individuals unknown to the subject. Our goal was to obtain elements that could be considered authentic slices from teachers' life worlds. Accordingly, our second desideratum was that the elements were created in a spirit of cooperation and were authentic representations of teachers' day-to-day teaching practices.

3.3.3. The standard method of eliciting constructs

The standard process of eliciting constructs from elements is known as the triadic method. The normal elicitation phrase would have the following structure: In what way are two elements (for example pupils) the same as each other and different from a third in terms of the particular topic under investigation (for example in terms of their potential). This triadic method is administered in order to capture the bipolarity of the construct. Because we wanted to work with embodied and contextualized elements (i.e. interactions in classroom situations), we considered this triadic method to be too complex. The issue of complexity overload, although mostly

ascribed to the capabilities of the subject rather than the elements themselves, has been encountered in earlier research (Baillie-Graham, 1975; Barton, Walton, & Rowe, 1976; Salmon, 1976). Our third desideratum, therefore, was that constructs were elicited using a simple method that has discriminating qualities.

3.3.4. The bipolarity of constructs

In the standard repertory grid procedure, the bipolarity of constructs has often been equated with constructs having to have a strictly dichotomous character (see Millis and Neimeyer (1990) and Riemann (1990) for a further discussion on this topic). As a consequence, numerous grid studies have made use of constructs that have clear-cut contrasting or opposite poles. In addition, most constructs in these studies have been evaluative, having a preferable and less preferable pole. Examples of construct pairs that have this kind of structure, taken from a study about the way teachers view their pupils (Christie & Menmuir, 1997), are: quiet–talkative, good listener–easily distracted, well behaved–boisterous. Strictly dichotomous constructs, however, run the risk of reducing the complexity of the topic under investigation into unrefined black and white categories (Bonarius et al., 1984). The difficulty in our research was that teachers' constructs needed to apply to rather complex elements (specific interactions in social situations), which can be very ambiguous. As a consequence, the constructs that we were looking at did not necessarily have one clear-cut preferred pole. Our fourth desideratum was that both poles of the construct should be considered feasible options.

3.3.5. The meaningfulness of constructs

In the standard repertory grid procedure, the focus is on the initial elicited constructs. For the elicited constructs to be used in a grid, they are mostly represented in the form of briefly worded labels or sentences, e.g. 'enjoyable relationship – awkward relationship'. The grid structure leaves only limited space for writing construct labels, let alone specifying any context (Riemann, 1990). As a consequence, a lot of grid studies tend to represent (or elicit) rather general constructs, which are, in themselves, not particularly illuminating (Solás, 1992). When it comes to deepening our understanding of the moral significance that is conveyed in the life world of teachers, we consider the meaning that is behind the initial construct to be of crucial importance. Our fifth desideratum was that the repertory grid procedure should allow initially elicited constructs to be explored and described in depth.

3.4. Phenomenological reading of the repertory grid

The formulated desiderata with regard to the standard repertory grid application connect well with a phenomenological reading of the personal construct theory, which can be found in the writings of Warren (1998), Chiari and Nuzzo (2003) and Butt (2004, 2005) among others. The repertory grid, in their writings, is seen as a way to help people to describe their worlds and spell out their intentions. Stressing the resemblance between Kelly's work and phenomenology, Butt (2001, p. 25) argued: 'His (Kelly's) advocating of the credulous approach precisely mirrors Husserl's phenomenological attitude in contrast to a natural attitude. The phenomenological attitude is one of openness to new possibilities and constructions.' The phenomenological method (Ihde, 1986) which is characterized by (a) bracketing off the researchers' interpretations from those of the interviewee and (b) describing phenomena instead of explaining them resonates well with the aforementioned methodological implications and desiderata. However, in order to address the formulated desiderata, several aspects of the standard repertory grid application needed to be thoroughly reshaped. As a consequence, we considered several aspects of the repertory grid

Table 3

Desiderata and aspects of a phenomenological interpretation of the repertory grid.

	Desiderata with regard to the repertory grid procedure	Aspects of a phenomenological interpretation of the repertory grid
1	Subjects should be involved in the process of selecting elements	Involving teachers by indicating bumpy moments from a videotaped lesson
2	Elements should be authentic representations created in a spirit of cooperation	Composing storyboards of videotaped elements
3	Constructs should be elicited using a simple method	Presenting only one dilemma-laden element at a time
4	Constructs should not have one preferable pole	Formulating a construct elicitation phrase that addresses both sides of the dilemma
5	Elicited constructs should be explored and described in depth	Subjecting teachers' initial constructs to recursive questioning

to be valuable starting points, which needed further elaboration to fit our 'life world' perspective. In connection with the importance of adapting the repertory grid procedure for a particular purpose, Pope and Denicolo (2001, p. 67) stated: 'Many practitioners are now adopting the repertory grid as a means of entering the phenomenological world of an individual by exploring the nature and inter-relationships between various elements and constructs elicited by the method. However, since there is no such creature as 'the grid', it is necessary to make certain methodological decisions vis-à-vis the format of a grid for any particular project.' In our research, Pope and Denicolo's 'methodological decisions' had to do with the way the repertory grid could best be tailored to get a grip on how teachers interpret the inherent moral significance of their classroom interactions. An overview of the desiderata and aspects of a phenomenological interpretation of the standard repertory grid application is given in Table 3. These aspects will be further elaborated in Section 4.

4. Phenomenological elaboration of the standard repertory grid

4.1. Introduction

In this section we describe and explain how we translated the desiderata into aspects of a method that suits a phenomenological purpose. We designed and refined these phenomenological aspects on the basis of the five articulated desiderata, empirical tryouts, and insights that emerged during the data collection phase of our research. The elaboration of the desiderata is illustrated by empirical data from our 'life world' study.¹

4.1.1. Subjects should be involved in the process of selecting elements

The involvement of teachers in identifying meaningful elements was incorporated into the study by taking each teacher's own practice as the point of departure. In order to make it possible for each teacher to be involved in the process of indicating elements, an everyday lesson was recorded on video. We assumed that this would best reflect their normal teaching activities. In a follow-up appointment (within two weeks), the teacher watched his or her recorded lesson with the researcher. While watching the recording, the teachers were asked to indicate meaningful teacher–pupil interactions, which could serve as possible elements. We asked the

¹ The quotations from the participating teachers in the text and images were translated from Dutch by the author.

teachers: 'Could you please indicate those moments where you acted in a particular way and with hindsight feel that that you could just as well have acted in another way?' We adopted the term 'bumpy moment' (Romano, 2006) to signify these dilemma-laden moments. The term bumpy moment did not refer to a situation in which teachers did not know what to do (incapacity to act) but to a situation that could, with hindsight, convey several legitimate and competing courses of action with regard to classroom interactions. We assumed that these mini dilemmas have an inherent moral significance. This is because, from a 'life world' perspective, every teaching act is capable of conveying moral meaning, consequently every dilemma connected to these teaching acts, however small, could be considered a moral dilemma. There is a long tradition of interrelating moral dilemmas to individuals' perspectives in the field of moral research (Blatt, 1969; Blatt & Kohlberg, 1975; Lind, 2006).

Several teachers needed time to allow themselves to indicate those moments that conveyed competing courses of interaction instead of directly judging their interactions as good or bad. A quote from one female physical education teacher at the beginning of her lesson exemplified this judgmental stance that some teachers adopted when watching recordings of their own lessons: 'I should have chosen to let the pupils run around for a bit, instead of putting them directly onto a bench, which clearly did not work'. Although this could be a very important observation for the teacher, we did not consider this to be a bumpy moment, because no real dilemma seemed to be involved. In the process of getting to grips with the intention of the assignment, the bumpy moments became more and more succinct for the teachers involved, and for the researcher. Most teachers indicated 15–25 bumpy moments in half an hour of footage. As researchers we intervened in this identification process by offering instructional pointers; for example, by pausing the videotape from time to time and remembering the assignment in order to help the teacher refocus. The following examples of bumpy moments were indicated multiple times by several teachers:

- A pupil gives a wrong answer to a question and the teacher turns to another pupil for the possible right answer.
- A pupil shouts out the right answer without raising his hand, and so the teacher ignores him.
- A teacher gives some further explanation on an assignment to an individual pupil leaving less time for the rest of the group.

All these bumpy moments have different sides to them, because their moral meaning is connected to specific contexts. Working with dilemmas prompted teachers to weigh the pros and cons of two or more alternative ways of interacting with hindsight. Although the teachers were instructed as to which kind of moments to choose from their videotaped lessons, the exact content of these moments was for every individual teacher to decide. They could choose moments from their own lessons that they themselves considered to be important and most relevant to the task at hand. We considered this kind of deep involvement in the process of element selection to be congruent with our first desideratum.

We selected 8 bumpy moments per teacher at random before continuing to the next step. The first reason for this was that we did not set out to create a representative set of dilemma-laden teacher–pupil interactions of classroom practices in general. A second, more practical, reason had to do with reducing the number of bumpy moments to a workable number for interviewing purposes.

4.1.2. Elements should be authentic and created in a spirit of cooperation

The bumpy moments identified on the video recordings needed to be processed in such a way that they could serve as elements to

reflect upon. The inherent moral significance of the bumpy moments needed to be interpreted by the participating teachers later on in the procedure. In order for the particular content of the bumpy moments to be personally meaningful and easily accessible to the teachers, it was very important that the interaction sequence in a bumpy moment was represented in an authentic way. In order to realize this, we decided to use full transcripts of the interactions conveyed in the bumpy moments. However, a transcript alone made it difficult to take the context of the particular bumpy moment into consideration. Our challenge was to embed the transcribed interactions into an authentic context. A single photograph representing the context in which the interaction took place was not a very convincing option because it would not capture the dynamic features of an interaction sufficiently. A possible alternative could have been the use of video vignettes to take the specific context of the interactions into account (Holm, 2008; Parsons, Graham, & Honess, 1983). The downside of using video vignettes could be that teachers would be bothered by unnecessary stimuli that could divert their focus away from the interactions in question. On a more practical note, multiple rewinding, forwarding and pausing of the video vignettes would not help the participating teachers' or the researchers' concentration. To cope with these foreseeable problems, the bumpy moments in the video recordings were captured and transferred on to storyboards. A storyboard was a series of 3 or 4 pictures displayed in a sequence in order to visualize the content (i.e. the interactions in context) of a particular bumpy moment. Stills were taken from the video footage and they served as pictures in the storyboards. Text balloons were added with the exact transcription of the words that were spoken. These 3 or 4 pictures together accounted for a good representation of a bumpy moment and avoided the problems mentioned earlier with textual transcription, single photos or videos. On the top of every storyboard a plot sentence was formulated to summarize the particular teacher–pupil interaction. The teacher had already approved this plot sentence during the process of indicating elements. The plot sentence assisted the teacher later on in recapturing the essence of the bumpy moment in the construct elicitation process. Two examples of storyboards are given below.

Composing storyboards is quite time consuming, but they turned out to be very useful as elements for the purpose of eliciting teachers' constructs on the inherent moral significance of their classroom interactions. The storyboards made it possible for teachers, although some time had passed since they watched the video, to go back to that particular interaction in context and give meaning to it. One teacher working in a special secondary school put it like this: 'These storyboards give me pointers from which I can tell my story...I can easily make sense of the situation, because I know the behavioural and learning difficulties these pupils are dealing with. I know, for example, looking at the storyboard, that Tom is keeping up appearances and Mandy is bullying others.' This quotation illustrates how the storyboards helped teachers to relive a bumpy moment in such a way that it became personally meaningful again. We want to stress that it was not our aim to literally let the teachers relive the moment as one would set out to do in a stimulated recall procedure (Verloop, 1989; Clark & Peterson, 1986). Our aim was to give teachers the opportunity to articulate the moral meaning of their everyday classroom interactions in an interview setting.

We consider that the storyboards did justice to the authenticity we desired, because they made it possible to interpret social interactions with hindsight, embedded in a meaningful context. In addition, we consider that the storyboards were composed in a spirit of cooperation because they were directly derived from teachers' personally selected video fragments, and they were involved in formulating the plot sentences.

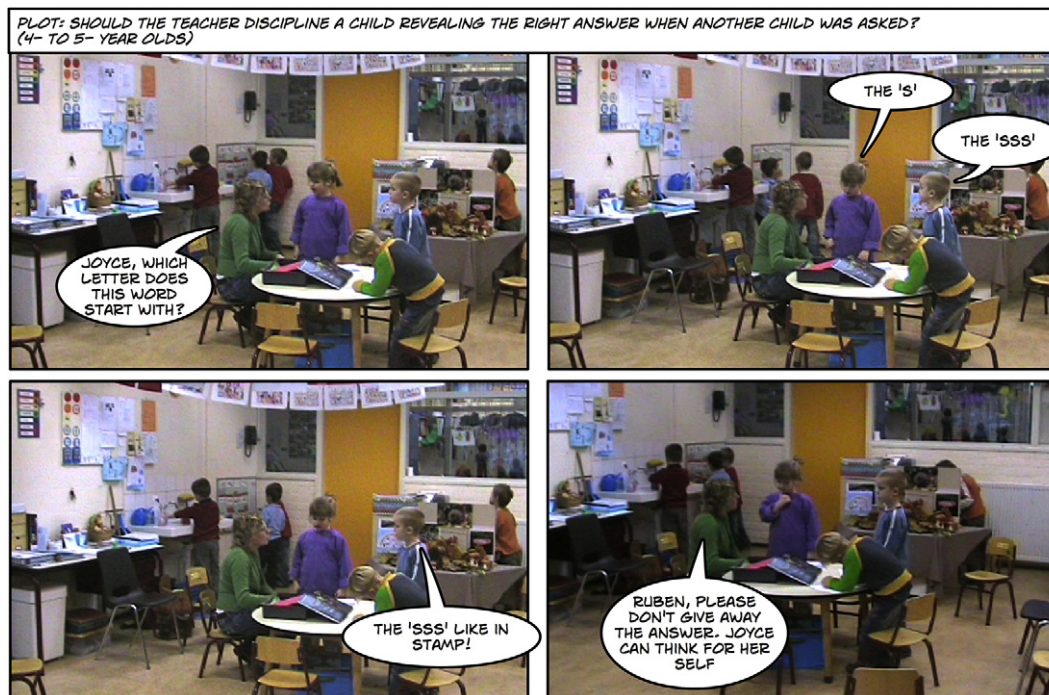


Image 1. Storyboard of a teacher's bumpy moment in primary education.

4.1.3. Constructs should be elicited using a simple method

The risk that in comparing three rather complex elements at the same time too much attention is paid to the rules of the method instead of the content of the elements proved to be quite great in our initial tryouts. As a consequence, we felt the need to devise a less complicated method for eliciting constructs. As explained earlier, the main purpose of the standardized triadic method is that it fosters discrimination, by comparing several elements at a time. During some initial tryouts we asked teachers to compare 2 or 3 bumpy

moments at a time. This particular method quite often caused an overload of different considerations and as a consequence paralyzed teachers in the interpretation process instead of fostering it. The following examples of bumpy moments illustrate this point:

1. The teacher asks a Turkish pupil about her faith in a predominately Christian classroom.
2. The teacher does not directly indicate whether a given answer is true or false, leaving the child guessing for a moment.



Image 2. Storyboard of a teacher's bumpy moment in lower secondary education.

3. A pupil asks the teacher if she can do the task with a different pupil from the one she has been paired with.

All three of these particular bumpy moments have different sides to them. It might be possible to find meaningful commonalities and differences between them but it would be very difficult. However, the main trait of a bumpy moment is that it already has a certain kind of bipolarity incorporated into it, because it conveys a mini dilemma. To reduce the complexity of this assignment, we decided to present single elements to the participating teachers (for other studies with single elements, see Fransella et al., 2004; Hinkle, 1965; Landfield, Stefan, & Dempsey, 1990). Only on a few occasions was an extra storyboard added at the request of a particular teacher, because some striking similarities or differences between the storyboards were indicated by the teacher in question. Presenting one bumpy moment at a time enabled the participating teachers to have in-depth focus. They were subjected to extended questioning about the different sides of the dilemmas incorporated in each single element. Focusing on both sides of a dilemma automatically inclined teachers to articulate discriminations. An example of such a discrimination made by a teacher when confronted with a student overtly rejecting her help, was: 'On the one hand, I feel it is important to persist in offering him my help; on the other hand, I think it is important to accept his rejection.' In some cases a bumpy moment incorporated several dilemmas at once in the eyes of the teacher. An example of such a bumpy moment, indicated by a teacher working in a regular elementary school was: The teacher compliments a child following a special program on his work, allowing him to present his work in front of the class. She considers this to be a bumpy moment, because with hindsight she is thinking: 'Should I have emphasized the special position of this particular pupil or should I have tried to encourage him to blend in?' Another dilemma she recognized had to do with her expectations of this child's work: 'Should I be just as critical towards his work as I am with other pupils or should I set a somewhat lower standard when it comes to the learning achievements of this particular pupil?'

The possibility of finding more than one dilemma in a particular bumpy moment underpinned the complexity of a single element. Moreover, it confirmed our assumption that in principle no more than one bumpy moment at a time should be presented to a teacher in order to foster a thorough interpretation. Reducing the complexity of the method to increase the focus on the content of a particular bumpy moment was congruent with our third desideratum.

4.1.4. Both poles of the construct should be considered feasible options

The initial tryouts showed that contrasts or opposites did not seem to grasp the finesse or do justice to the potential versatility of teachers' constructs with regard to the inherent moral significance of bumpy moments. Teachers were forced to fit their interpretations into narrow black and white categories, when they were explicitly asked about the contrast pole of a construct. The following example illustrates this point.

Bumpy moment: A pupil has already finished his work satisfactorily, yet the teacher asks the pupil to have another look at it.

I: What do you feel is in the best interest of this pupil?

R: This pupil needs to learn to optimize his potential.

I: What do you feel is in contrast with that?

R: A pupil that learns to be easily satisfied.

Elicited construct: optimize potential vs. easily satisfied

This example shows that understanding the bipolarity of constructs as contrasts or opposites leads to constructs that have a clear positive and negative pole, and which therefore have a rather

judgmental connotation. In our research, however, we were looking for considerations rather than clear-cut judgments with regard to everyday classroom interactions between teachers and their pupils. Another point of concern was that the traditional construct elicitation phrase tends to give rise to general, and sometimes rather meaningless, oppositions when it comes to interpreting social situations. A construct that distinguishes 'promoting the child's independence' from 'promoting the child's dependence' is not particularly illuminating, nor is it grounded in reality. An additional point of concern is that in order to help teachers articulate the implicit contrast pole, a rather coercive elicitation procedure needed to be administered. The chance of such a procedure being experienced as artificial or coercive by the participating teachers proved to be quite considerable. The following fragment of an interview transcript with a female primary school teacher illustrates this point:

I: What do you feel is in the best interest of this pupil?

R: It is in the best interest of this pupil to offer him a safe learning environment.

I: What do you feel is in contrast with that?

R: I'm reluctant to say offering the child a harmful or unsafe learning environment, because that doesn't seem particularly meaningful to me.

Reflecting on the interview session, this teacher said that she could very naturally come up with the first construct pole when interpreting a particular bumpy moment. However, whenever she had to come up with a well-formulated contrast pole, she had the feeling she lost her focus on the particular situation. Whereas the answer to the question 'What do you feel is in the best interest of this pupil?' is related to the actual bumpy moment at hand, the answer to the question 'What do you feel is in contrast with that?' needs to be made up by the particular teacher. As a consequence, this part of the interview turned into a word game rather than an interpretation of the particular situation. Our challenge was to find a guiding, unforced procedure that allowed for a less judgmental and more meaningful kind of bipolarity.

A possible way to realize a procedure that will elicit constructs that are bipolar in a meaningful way is to relate both poles of the constructs to the actual bumpy moment at hand. This was done using a sentence completion assignment (Grice, Burkley, Burkley, Wright, & Slaby, 2004). The participating teachers were asked to complete the following sentence: 'On the one hand, I think it could be important for the pupil to...; on the other hand, I think it could be important for the pupil to...' Our assumption was that this sentence completion assignment (i.e. elicitation phrase) would explicitly address both sides of the dilemmas incorporated in bumpy moments. The different sides of a dilemma could be considered the different poles of a construct. By eliciting construct poles in this way, we tried to prevent teachers from becoming caught up in predictable and unrefined black and white schemes. The following example shows how this sentence completion assignment was administered in the actual process of construct elicitation:

Bumpy moment: A pupil asks a teacher for assistance because she got caught up in a quarrel about the use of some colour markers.

I: Please could you complete the following phrase; on the one hand I think it could be important for the pupil to...; on the other hand I think it could be important for the pupil to...

R: On the one hand, I think it could be important for my pupil to be thrown upon her own resources; on the other hand, I think it could be important for her to be lent a helping hand.

Elicited construct: thrown upon her own resources (emergent pole) vs. to be lent a helping hand (emergent pole)

In this case both construct poles elicited from the bumpy moment related, in the eyes of the teacher, to legitimate ways of interacting with pupils. This seems a much more natural and meaningful way to elicit both poles of a teacher's construct. This kind of construct elicitation enables both poles of the construct to be derived from a real embodied context, instead of one of them being disconnected from reality. Our fourth desideratum was realized by formulating a construct elicitation sentence that addressed both sides of the dilemma conveyed in a bumpy moment.

4.1.5. Elicited constructs should be explored and described in depth

Although the elicited constructs looked quite promising, an in-depth exploration of these constructs was still missing. For the profundity of these constructs to be captured, they needed to go beyond an initial 'action level' and address the 'why' behind certain competing courses of action. It was striking in this connection to see that teachers were initially inclined to articulate constructs that merely focused on their own actions rather than on the implications of these actions for the child's best interests. Several studies have shown that, when asked to interpret their own practices, teachers too often stop at the 'action' or 'technical' levels, when no help from researchers is offered (see for example Mansvelder-Longayroux, Beijaard & Verloop, 2007; Hatton & Smith, 1995; Zeichner & Gore, 1995). The following initial elicited constructs illustrate this point.

I: Please could you complete the following phrase: On the one hand I think it could be important for the pupil to...; on the other hand I think it could important for the pupil to...

- (that I) show some vulnerability – show a certain infallibility
- (that I) give detailed instructions – give brief instructions
- (that I) create a competitive learning environment – create a learning environment based on equality

The three constructs above are all formulated in terms of what the teacher is doing and not yet in terms of what is in the child's best interests and why these possible ways of interacting are in the

child's best interests. In order to further explore teachers' initial constructs, we pursued a form of recursive questioning. In personal construct theory this recursive questioning is referred to as 'laddering' (Hinkle, 1965). According to a number of scholars, using this technique makes it more likely that value-laden constructs will come up (Butler, 2006; Button, 1980; Fransella, 1972; Neimeyer, Anderson, & Stockton, 2001). The laddering technique essentially involved nothing more than subjecting teachers' initially elicited construct to extended questioning by repeatedly asking 'why?' (Jankowicz, 2004). An example of laddering as applied in our study is given below.

1. Teacher-pupil interaction that needs to be interpreted by the teacher.
2. Interview procedure for eliciting teachers' constructs with regard to the inherent moral significance of their classroom interactions.

I: Please could you tell me what mini dilemma you're facing in this situation?

R: On the one hand, I think it could be important to stimulate the pupils to value their own work for what it is; on the other hand, I think it could be important to challenge the pupils to strive for the best.

I: In what way could both sides of the mini dilemma be in the best interest of your pupils?

R: To tell the pupils to value their work for what it is could be in their best interest because they will gain self-confidence; to challenge the pupils to strive for the best could be in their best interest because they need to have high expectations.

I: Why do you think both answers could be in your pupils' best interest?

R: I do think the pupils need to feel confident about themselves in order to appreciate their achievements. I do think the pupils need to have high expectations in order to make them persevere to achieve the best possible results.



Image 3. Storyboard of a teacher's bumpy moment in upper secondary education.

Probing teachers to thoroughly think through the possible consequences of the alternative ways of interacting by use of recursive questioning is very important to elicit higher order implications of their initial constructs. The laddering technique can be considered a powerful procedure for exploring and eliciting the profundity of teachers' constructs with regard to the inherent moral significance of their everyday classroom interactions. Adopting this procedure for the purpose of our study adequately supported the realization of our fifth desideratum.

5. Conclusions and discussion

We set out in this study to develop a method that would be suitable for collecting data on the inherent moral significance of teaching. The need for such a method was prompted by our ongoing research project on teachers' interpretations of the inherent moral meaning of their everyday classroom interactions. Initially, the standard repertory grid application seemed a fruitful starting point for our inquiry, mainly because this method is grounded in the personal construct theory, which is known for its qualities with regard to addressing personal interpretations related to meaningful phenomena. However, our focus on understanding and describing the way teachers interpret their classroom interactions could not be sufficiently realized with the standard repertory grid application. In order to align the standard repertory grid procedure with a 'life world' perspective, we formulated five desiderata. To strengthen the focus on understanding and describing teachers' perspectives on their lived experiences we (1) involved teachers in selecting meaningful classroom interactions, (2) created snap shots of lived experiences by means of storyboards, (3) used a simple structure to elicit (4) dilemma-laden constructs, and finally, (5) used a laddering procedure to gain a deeper understanding of teachers' initial interpretations. Our phenomenological interpretation of the standard repertory grid application allowed us to 'pause' teachers' lived experiences and help them to thoroughly interpret the inherent moral significance of their classroom interactions.

The question now is whether our phenomenological elaboration of the standard repertory grid application still qualifies as a repertory grid method. The basic aspects of the repertory grid procedure entail: (a) formulating a topic of investigation; (b) defining a set of elements; (c) eliciting a set of constructs that distinguish among these elements; and (d) relating elements to constructs. Clearly we did formulate a topic of investigation i.e. the way teachers interpret the inherent moral meaning of their classroom interactions. The second step in the standard repertory grid procedure is also accounted for, although the process of defining the elements was largely steered by the teachers themselves instead of the researcher. Even though we provided a structure for the selection of bumpy moments, the teachers themselves indicated the exact bumpy moments. Furthermore the elements were represented in the form of storyboards, which has not been done before. The third step in the standard repertory grid procedure involves eliciting a set of constructs. With this step we took the liberty to broaden the concept of bipolarity and adjust the method of elicitation to fit our research purpose. We chose to work with dilemmas, which helped the teachers to interpret their classroom interactions from competing perspectives. These perspectives are not necessarily strictly dichotomous, but do foster alternative ways of construing. Building on the dilemma structure already conveyed in every single bumpy moment, we decided that using more than one bumpy moment at a time makes the method of eliciting views unnecessarily complex. Finally the fourth step consists of relating elements to constructs. In the standard repertory grid application each element is rated on each construct to provide an exact picture of

views on a particular topic, hence the word 'grid' (Jankowicz, 2004). We chose to seek the meaning behind the initial constructs of teachers, thereby focusing on qualitative rather than quantitative data. Putting the rating component aside makes it safe to say that, although we drew upon several valuable aspects of the standard repertory grid application and insights from the personal construct theory, our phenomenological elaboration does not qualify as an authentic repertory grid application anymore. The term 'repertory' is however still accurate because it refers to a persons repertoire of meanings with regard to a certain topic (Jankowicz, 2004). Consequently one could think of our method as a repertory interview instead of a repertory grid method.

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