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A beginning teacher in emotionally intensive micropolitical situations

Katri Jokikokko^{a,*}, Minna Uitto^a, Ann Deketelaere^{b,c}, Eila Estola^a^a Faculty of Education, University of Oulu, P.O. Box 2000, 90014, Finland^b Faculty of Medicine, University of Leuven, Herestraat 49, B-3000 Leuven, Belgium^c Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, University of Leuven, Herestraat 49, B-3000 Leuven, Belgium

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ABSTRACT

This narrative research focuses on two questions: how do emotions and micropolitics appear in a beginning teacher's work and, what kind of strategies does a beginning teacher use when negotiating emotionally intensive situations in the micropolitical context of the school? The research material consists of three narrative interviews with one beginning Finnish secondary teacher. The results illustrate the significance of school's micropolitics for a beginning teacher's work and the various relational and emotional aspects that are present when a beginning teacher tries to balance between school's micropolitics and a teacher's own values. In addition, the research increases knowledge about how beginning teachers learn to negotiate emotionally intensive situations and use various strategies in the micropolitical context of their work.

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1. Introduction

The previous international research on beginning teachers¹ is rather extensive. However, only few studies touch upon successful first years as a teacher (as an exception, [Hebert & Worthy, 2001](#)). Instead, the challenges, concerns, tensions and problems of the beginning teachers have interested researchers in different parts of the world, e.g. Israel ([Orland-Barack & Maskit, 2011](#)), Netherlands ([Pillen, Beijaard, & den Brok, 2013](#)), United States ([Shoffner, 2011](#)) and North of England ([Kyriacou & Kunc, 2007](#)). Research has also indicated the fragmented and casual employment experiences of beginning teachers ([Hulme & Menter, 2014](#)). The issue of beginning teachers leaving the profession in the first few years of their career has been considered as a global problem ([Burke et al., 2013; Craig, 2014; Harfitt, 2015](#)). Hence, attention has been paid on ways how to support beginning teachers ([Estola, Syrjäälä, & Maunu, 2012; Fantilli & McDougall, 2009; Gore & Bowe, 2015](#)), although it has also been pointed out that too often beginning teachers are left alone to cope with the challenges they encounter in their work ([Le Maistre & Paré, 2010](#)).

Research on beginning teachers has mostly related directly to classroom teaching and less attention has been given to the organisational traditions, habits and power relations (micropolitics) that the beginning teacher is confronted and has to

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: katri.jokikokko@oulu.fi (K. Jokikokko), minna.uitto@oulu.fi (M. Uitto), ann.deketelaere@med.kuleuven.be (A. Deketelaere), eila.estola@oulu.fi (E. Estola).¹ We use the term 'a beginning teacher' (e.g. [Craig, 2014; Pillen et al., 2013](#)) in our research. Based on prior research literature, also terms 'novice teacher' ([Fantilli & McDougall, 2009](#)), 'early career teacher' ([Hulme & Menter, 2014](#)), 'newly qualified teacher' ([Ulvik & Langørgen, 2012](#)) and 'first-year teacher' ([Hebert & Worthy, 2001](#)) are used.

negotiate with (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002a). Yet, this organisational socialisation forms an essential task for a teacher as studies by Kelchtermans and Ballet (2002a, 2002b) show: their research demonstrates how beginning teachers negotiate finding their place in the micropolitical context of the school. Our research continues this too rarely studied topic by emphasising the emotional dimension of beginning teachers' work in the micropolitical context of the school. This viewpoint is important, since at the expense of emphasising mind, cognition and rationality, emotions have long been left aside in educational research (Schutz & Zembylas, 2009). Yet, increasingly in recent years the significance of emotions has been acknowledged for example in the relationships and educational changes related to teachers' work, teachers' professional identity, learning, wellbeing, and exhaustion (see Uitto, Jokikokko, & Estola, 2015a). In addition, instead of highlighting the individuality and privacy of emotions, their social and interactional nature has been emphasised in research (e.g. Zembylas, 2007).

Drawing from a larger pool of research material, this article focuses in depth on narrative interviews with one beginning teacher. This particular teacher was chosen for this article because her first year as a teacher can be considered to be successful despite the challenges that she faced. Furthermore, her story does not include those characteristics and emotions that are often related to beginning teachers such as feeling inexperienced and uncertain. Studying individual stories of beginning teachers enables research to acknowledge that beginning teachers are not a homogenous group; they have different experiences and backgrounds before entering the field. The article focuses on two questions: how do emotions and micropolitics appear in a beginning teacher's work and, what kind of strategies does a beginning teacher use when negotiating emotionally intensive situations in the micropolitical context of the school?

2. Micropolitics and emotions in beginning teachers' work

Our theoretical understanding of teachers' work is based on the idea that it is moral by nature and its core lies in human relationships (Hansen, 1998; Hargreaves, 2000; Noddings, 2001). However, relationships with students, their parents, colleagues, head teachers and other staff members do not develop in a vacuum, but as a part of micropolitical contexts that include the social, political, and cultural conditions that determine teachers' work (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002a).

Whereas prior research on beginning teachers has often focused on problems and emphasised beginning teachers' lack of competence and agency (the 'deficiency approach'), 'emotional exhaustion', 'survival' or 'coping', (see Johnson et al., 2014), we take a different approach in this article. Our emphasis is on seeing beginning teachers as active participants who have various skills and ways of acting in their working communities (see Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002b). Although the micropolitical context of the school affects teachers' actions, emotions and relationships and, to a certain extent, regulates them, finding one's place as a teacher in the school's existing micropolitical context is not a passive adjustment; it takes place as part of a process in which a beginning teacher actively interprets and interacts with the context (Beijaard, Meijer & Verloop, 2004; Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen & Hökkiä, 2015; Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002a). Thus, the aspects of school organisation, politics and culture necessarily interact with teachers' inner lives, values and internal qualities (Helsing, 2007).

Finding one's place in the micropolitical context of the school, and especially efforts to affect unproductive work contexts and conditions as a beginning teacher (which is very much the case in this article), inevitably involves work on and through the emotions (Bullough, 2009). We understand emotions not just as teachers' private experiences, but as resulting from meaningful interactions between teachers and their working conditions (Zembylas, 2007). In addition, Bullough (2009) and Solomon (1990), among others, have indicated the connection between the moral and emotions; if people feel strongly about something, this feeling most likely means that it is important and meaningful for them. Furthermore, people value emotions in culturally determined ways (Hargreaves, 2001); they are triggered, interpreted and expressed by virtue of human membership in a particular group such as a nation, community, occupation or gender (Van Veen & Sleegers, 2006).

Previous research has shown that beginning teachers experience and respond to emotionally challenging work conditions in the micropolitical context of the school in different ways: some may withdraw and become cautious and timid, while for others these conditions act as opportunities for professional growth and learning (Bullough, 2009; Kelchtermans, 2005). Some teachers start using regressive coping strategies by employing high levels of routinisation and carefully managing problems. However, for others teachers' work becomes a 'form of energizing improvisation'. (Bullough, 2009, p. 37). The micropolitical context of the school plays a significant role in how teachers experience and respond to their work and its emotional intensity.

As Curry, Jaxon, Russell, Callahan, and Bicais (2008) highlight, becoming a teacher is a political endeavour including negotiations in complex organisations with multiple actors who may resist the ideas of beginning teachers. Kelchtermans and Ballet (2002a) (see also Kelchtermans, 2009) have shown how beginning teachers (as part of their micropolitical literacy) develop a way of making sense of situations in terms of the working conditions they consider crucial for doing a good job. In line with this, they also develop effective strategies for negotiating and influencing their working conditions. These strategies are always connected to the local context and affected by social interaction as well as institutional structures, norms and cultures (Curry et al., 2008). In this article, we elaborate these strategies and negotiations: how they appear and how emotions are intertwined in them in stories of a beginning teacher.

Narrativity forms the theoretical and methodological framework of the study. We understand that while telling, people reconstruct and make sense of their lives and experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Elbaz-Luwisch, 2005). Narrativity makes it possible to understand the meanings constructed in the teachers' experiences related to emotions and the

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