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Peer group as a meeting place: Reconstructions of teachers' self-understanding and the presence of vulnerability

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A B S T R A C T

Prior research on peer groups and their potential for student teachers and teachers is still very limited. This article focuses on how a teacher's self-understanding is reconstructed in a peer group and how vulnerability is present in this process. The data focusing on one teacher's story is from a long-term peer group of 11 Finnish teachers. The research demonstrates how teachers' self-understanding develops and is reconstructed throughout interactions with others. In addition, the research shows the intertwinement of teacher vulnerability with the reconstruction of self-understanding. Groups in which pre-service and in-service teachers can share personal and professional experiences create a powerful site and opportunity that can be used in teacher education.

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1. Theoretical considerations

Meeting with colleagues to exchange experiences can constitute a powerful environment for professional development (Kemmis, Heikkinen, Fransson, Aspfors, & Edwards-Groves, 2014); therefore, creating opportunities for teachers to meet with their peers seems a valuable strategy for in-service teacher education. In this article, we discuss the phenomenon of teachers' professional development in the context of a peer group.

Teacher development is a central concern in research on teachers' work lives and school improvement, as teachers are expected to continue learning professionally throughout their careers (Avalos, 2011; Hadar & Brody, 2013; Osborn, 2006; Vandenberghe, 2002). An essential part of professional development is the way in which a teacher makes sense of her/himself, in this article referred to as self-understanding (Kelchtermans, 2009). Day (1999, p. 4) outlines professional development as a continuous process, encompassing teachers' individual and shared learning experiences in formal and informal situations by which: "teachers review, renew and extend their commitment as change agents to the moral purposes of teaching; and by which they acquire and develop critically the knowledge, skills and emotional intelligence essential to good professional thinking, planning, and practice [. . .]."

Teacher development entails a technical, moral, emotional, and political dimension (Hargreaves, 1995). The technical dimension constitutes the ongoing development of teachers' professional knowledge and pedagogical skills. The moral dimension (see a.o. Bullough, 2011; Hansen, 1998) stems from the continuous process of value-laden decision making about

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how to do justice to pupils' educational needs. This moral nature is grounded and becomes evident in the relationships teachers have with the students, parents, and colleagues (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2005). Engaging in these relationships demands committed judgments that are based on values and norms, and, as such, cannot be emotionally neutral (Biesta, 2013; Kelchtermans, 2009). Put differently, emotions are an intrinsic part of teachers' work experiences and the way they make sense of these experiences (Schutz & Zembylas, 2009). Finally, teaching involves issues of power and influence, which make it political in nature. The normative stance in particular situations may differ between colleagues or between teachers and principals or parents. This, then, raises the questions of what to do and who decides what is wrong or right in situations (Hargreaves, 1995; Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002). The political, normative, and emotional dimensions of teaching and of teacher development contribute to what Kelchtermans (2009, 2011) has called the vulnerability as a structural characteristic of the teaching profession. Vulnerability is an inevitable part of teaching that should be embraced, not simply managed, by teachers (Bullough, 2005; Dale & Frye, 2009; Lasky, 2005).

Teacher development or teachers' work in general must be understood as situated in a particular context of time and space (Kelchtermans, 2004). Teacher development results from the meaningful interaction of the teacher with her/his professional context. The temporal context entails a teacher's life history and her/his learning experiences from the past, which impact the present. The spatial context refers to the social and organizational environment of the school and the wider community with which the teacher engages. In this article, the peer group creates a particular social context for shared sense-making and the construction of new understandings through the meaningful interactions among the peers (Hadar & Brody, 2013; Heikkinen, Tynjälä, & Jokinen, 2012; McCotter, 2001).

Teacher development is both a personal and professional process and meaningful for both teachers' practices and thinking (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2005). We draw on Kelchtermans' (2009) conceptualization with the notion of the "personal interpretative framework", which refers to the set of representations and cognitions that operate together as a lens through which teachers perceive, make sense of and act in particular situations. In the framework, Kelchtermans distinguishes two interwoven domains: subjective educational theory and professional self-understanding. The subjective educational theory is the teacher's professional know-how, her/his personal system of knowledge and beliefs on teaching. Professional self-understanding refers to the way a teacher thinks about her/himself as a teacher. More precisely, the concept refers to (1) the ongoing, dynamic process of the teacher building a sense of self, based on her/his interpretation of experiences, as well as (2) the (always preliminary) product, the teacher's understanding of her/himself at a particular moment in time (Kelchtermans, 2009).

Self-understanding consists of five intertwined components that can be distinguished analytically (Kelchtermans, 2009). The descriptive component of self-image refers to the way teachers describe and typify themselves as teachers. It is strongly affected by how others (such as pupils, parents, and colleagues) perceive the teacher. The evaluative component of self-esteem is related to how teachers appreciate and value their own job performance and reflects at an individual level, the emotional dimension of teaching. The normative component of task perception describes a teacher's understanding of what s/he needs to do to "feel" like a "proper teacher" (i.e., the tasks that constitute the personal professional agenda). In the task perception, we see the normative, moral stance of an individual teacher. The conative component of job motivation relates to the reasons why teachers enter, remain in, or leave the teaching job. Finally, self-understanding has a prospective component: the future perspective, which is a teacher's expectations for the future and her/his feelings about it.

Drawing on the longitudinal data from a larger research (Uitto & Estola, 2009; Uitto, Kaunisto, Syrjälä, & Estola, 2015), this article focuses on how a teacher's self-understanding is reconstructed in a peer group and how vulnerability is present in this process.

2. Conducting the research

2.1. The research context

We use data collected during the peer group meetings of 11 Finnish teachers. The peer group was organized for teachers as an in-service course in a project called Inspirational Narratives of Teaching as an Opportunity (INTO).[1] The project was carried out in co-operation between the University of Oulu and the city of Oulu in 2004–2005. The group met 16 times during 18 months and was established to support teachers' coping and emotional renewal at work. The participants worked in primary and secondary schools, vocational institutions, and day care centers. They were all females at different stages of their careers and ranged in age from 30 to 60. Each group meeting lasted about 3 h and centered on a particular theme suggested and agreed upon by the participating teachers and/or the facilitators.

Saara-Leena Kaunisto and Eila Estola were the facilitators of the group. They conducted the time management and encouraged storytelling in the group by introducing different narrative working methods such as oral discussions, sharing of cases, drama, and sociometric techniques. The facilitators also participated in the group discussions by asking questions, making comments, or sharing their own experiences. Minna Uitto videotaped the meetings. Geert Kelchtermans joined the research team in the phase of data analysis.