



## Caring as a salutogenic aspect in teachers' lives



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### H I G H L I G H T S

- Caring relationships are vital for teachers' well-being.
- Caring is channeled through "being" and "doing".
- Teacher education and management would benefit by including a health perspective.
- The study contributes to knowledge on how to retain teachers in their profession.

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### A B S T R A C T

This inquiry explored how a group of teachers experienced resources for their well-being, both at work and in their private lives. The findings indicate that caring, for others and for oneself, is central for teachers' well-being. Caring is manifested in being present in the moment, and in actions which promote the well-being of oneself and others. Implications from the findings suggest that both school administration and teacher education should pay special attention to the caring aspects of teaching, as they influence teachers' well-being and retention, as well as the pupils' learning. Health promotion interventions could benefit from these findings.

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## 1. Introduction

If you have read a newspaper some time in the last few years, chances are that you have read about the difficult work situation for today's teachers. They fight a struggle against reduced resources, increased demands and impaired health and well-being. If this is a "true" picture – why do people still choose to work as teachers? There is another perspective, which is seldom presented in the public media. It is this perspective that we aim to adopt in the present inquiry: the positive, strengthening aspects of the lives of teachers.

## 2. Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework underlying the present inquiry consists of a salutogenic perspective and the discipline of health promotion.

When looking at health development the traditional perspective has been to focus on determinants of ill health, also known as risk factors (Bauer, Davies, & Pelikan, 2006). This pathogenic perspective emanates from ill health and aims at protecting and preventing people from falling ill. A complementary perspective to the pathogenic one was presented by Antonovsky (1987), labeled salutogenesis. The salutogenic perspective focuses on resources which support people to maintain and enhance health instead of avoiding ill health. Both perspectives are, however, needed. As Bauer et al. (2006) point out, salutogenesis and pathogenesis are simultaneous and complementary: "an individual can experience positive (e.g. well-being) and negative aspects of health (e.g. chronic disease) at the same time" (p. 156).

By adopting a salutogenic perspective, we focus on resources which strengthen the well-being and health of teachers. We reject the dichotomy between healthy and ill people, and assume a

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perspective where the dimension of health/ill-health or ease/disease is seen as a continuum (Antonovsky, 1987; Bauer et al., 2006). In line with the salutogenic perspective, Antonovsky (1987) introduced the Sense of Coherence (SOC) theory, stating that a strong sense of coherence enables people to make sense and deal with life's different stressors. Having a strong sense of coherence is believed to have an important bearing on health and well-being. The concepts of comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness are the core components of the SOC theory. Comprehensibility describes how an individual perceives life's stressors as structured, predictable and explicable. Manageability is about perceiving that one has access to resources to meet life's stressors, while meaningfulness is the conviction that the demands of the stressors are worth commitment and engagement (Antonovsky, 1987). According to Antonovsky (1996), the salutogenic orientation is a more viable paradigm for health promotion research and practice than the disease orientation.

Health promotion is described as the process of enabling people to increase control over, and to improve, their health, while health is seen as a resource for everyday life and not the objective of living (World Health Organization (WHO), 1986). The Ottawa Charter for Health promotion has been used as a conceptual framework, adopting a socioecological approach to health. This approach states that there are inextricable links between people and their environment, and accordingly we assume that people and their work influence each other in a continuing and dialectical process, both in a salutogenic manner and in a pathogenic one. In health promotion a holistic perspective is assumed, claiming that the entire life situation is important for people's health, including individual factors as well as e.g. social, political and economic factors. Accordingly we assume a perspective that focus on a holistic view of the everyday lives of teachers, an everyday such as it is perceived by the teachers themselves. The participatory approach is another important aspect in the Ottawa Charter, and as such is included in the present inquiry. In the Ottawa Charter different priority action areas are presented. One of these action areas, creating supportive environments, is relevant to this inquiry and therefore we view work as a possible environment for supporting teachers' well-being.

The present inquiry adopts a settings approach to health promotion. This means addressing the contexts within which people live, work, and play (Poland, Krupa, & McCall, 2009). The Ottawa Charter describes health as a resource that is created in the context of everyday life and states that work and leisure time should be a source of health for people. We place this inquiry in the participants' work context, but also aim to include their family domain, and their leisure time.

### 3. Literature review

In many Western countries, there has been a negative development in the work environment and well-being among teachers (Ahlgrén & Gillander Gådin, 2011; Gu & Day, 2007; Hemström, 2001; Konu, Viitanen, & Lintonen, 2010; Ross, Romer, & Horner, 2012; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). The work conditions for teachers have undergone profound changes, with broadening curriculum and increasing accountability, assessment and paperwork (Carlgren & Klette, 2008; Grenville-Cleave & Boniwell, 2012; Konu et al., 2010; Lambert & McCarthy, 2006; Månsson, 2004), and research addressing issues such as stress and burnout are ample (Grayson & Alvarez, 2008; Gu & Day, 2013; Kokkinos, 2007; Kovess-Masféty, Rios-Seidel, & Sevilla-Dedieu, 2007; Mearns & Cain, 2003). In England, teaching has become one of the most stressful professions (Roffey, 2012) and teacher retention is a major concern in many countries such as Australia, USA and in Europe (Ingersoll, 2001; Parker & Martin, 2009; Roffey, 2012). As a counterbalance to the

detrimental aspects of teaching, there has been an attempt to shift the focus from teacher stress and burnout to teacher resilience (e.g. Gu & Day, 2007; Klassen et al., 2012) and to buoyancy (e.g. Cinamon, Rich, & Westman, 2007; Grenville-Cleave & Boniwell, 2012; Parker & Martin, 2009). This research provides a way of understanding what enables teachers to persist in the face of challenges (Beltman, Mansfield, & Price, 2011) and can be seen as a process that occurs in the context of person–environment interaction (Egeland, Carlson, & Sroufe, 1993). Gu and Day (2013) found that teacher resilience is much more than the capacity to survive and thrive in adversity. It is “the capacity to maintain equilibrium and a sense of commitment and agency in the everyday worlds in which the teachers teach” (p. 26). Work engagement research is another area which has received increased attention (Klassen et al., 2012), and is believed to be connected to teachers' health (Hakanen, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2006). Research focusing on salutogenic aspects in teachers' lives (for example Aelterman, Engels, Van Petegem, & Pierre Verhaeghe, 2007) is, however, not as prevalent as research from a pathogenic perspective. Moreover, much of the research field of teachers has focused on work-related aspects, whereas research on their entire life situation is rare.

A relevant research area when investigating the entire life situation is work life balance. In recent years, the area of work-life balance has attracted considerable focus, in the scientific literature, as well as in the media. Research on work life balance has predominantly been conducted from a pathogenic perspective (Grönlund & Öun, 2010; Peeters, 2005; Rantanen, Kinnunen, Mauno, & Tillemann, 2011), often focusing on the individual's experience of lack of control, leading to negative health effect (Bohle, Willaby, Quinlan, & McNamara, 2011). Although some research has been published from a salutogenic perspective, there is still a need for research focusing on resources instead of risk factors within the area of work life balance (Barnett & Hyde, 2001; Frone, 2003; Gatrell, Burnett, Cooper, & Sparrow, 2013; Parasuraman & Greenhaus, 2002; Özbilgin, Beauregard, Tatli, & Bell, 2011). When reviewing research on the work-life balance of teachers, the picture remains the same: the focus has been on a pathogenic perspective (Bragger, Rodriguez-Srednicki, Kutcher, Indovino, & Rosner, 2005; Cinamon & Rich, 2005; Cinamon et al., 2007; Cooke & Rouseach, 1984; Netemeyer, Boles, & McMurrian, 1996). Consequently, there is a need for a further understanding of salutogenic aspects in the lives of teachers so they can be promoted.

## 4. Aim

To gain a deeper understanding of how teachers at a compulsory school experience the salutogenic aspects of their lives.

## 5. Methods

### 5.1. Design and procedure

Our research questions were “How do teachers experience their everyday lives?” and more precisely, “What are the salutogenic aspects of their everyday lives?”. A qualitative and interpretive approach seemed appropriate, and we chose to use hermeneutics, not only as a philosophical foundation but a methodological tool as well. The hermeneutic theory can be useful when we seek to understand statements about how people experience their life situation (Selander & Ödman, 2004), as well as when doing qualitative empirical research in the human sciences (Smith, 2007). The epistemological base has been existential hermeneutics, mainly inspired by Gadamer (1989). It is the Gadamerian stance that we are never free from our experiences, and therefore always interpret and understand things on the basis of our preunderstanding. Our

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