



Recalling life-changing teachers: Positive memories of teacher-student relationships and the emotions involved

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ABSTRACT

Little empirical research has been done about teacher-student relationships and the emotions involved from the students' perspective. Our research employs narrative approach and addresses such memories of teachers that former students described as having very positive, even life-changing significance for them. We ask what do positive memories of teachers tell us about teacher-student relationships and the emotions involved. The findings illustrate how teachers establish emotional bonds with their students as well as their sensitivity towards the students' life-circumstances and emotions. In addition, teachers' socio-emotional involvement in students' lives is reflected in students' emotions. For teacher education, we argue the need to implement the understanding of the meaning of emotions in teacher-student relationships.

1. Introduction

Emotions and their significance for teachers' work have too rarely been fully taken into account in educational research (Boler, 1999; Hargreaves, 2000; Nias, 1996; O'Connor, 2008; Zembylas, 2007). However, the situation has rapidly changed during the last decade (Uitto, Jokikokko, & Estola, 2015; see also Fried, Mansfield, & Dobozy, 2015). The significant role of emotions has been recognised in the various relationships related to teachers' work, for example in teachers' relationships with students (Newberry, 2010) and students' parents (Lasky, 2000). Also, the meaning of emotions for teachers' professional identity and professional learning (e.g. Day & Leitch, 2001; O'Connor, 2008; Shapiro, 2010; Zembylas, 2003), and in the case of educational changes and reforms (e.g. Hargreaves, 2005; Kelchtermans, 2005) has been illustrated. In addition, emotional exhaustion among teachers (e.g. Chan, 2009; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2009), their emotional intelligence (e.g. Corcoran & Tormey, 2012) as well as regulation of emotions (e.g. Hosotani & Imai-Matsumura, 2011) have been studied. Furthermore, it has been pointed out that teachers' emotions affect students' emotions (e.g. Becker, Goetz, Morger, & Ranellucci, 2014) and that emotions play an important role in students' learning (e.g. Morcom, 2014).

Prior research on former students' memories of school and their teachers has paid attention to the meaning of teacher-student relationships for former students (e.g. Uitto, 2012). However, prior research has infrequently taken into account the aspect of emotions (exceptions include: Southgate, 2003; Uitto & Estola, 2009) in these relationships. There are some studies with a focus on students' positive and negative memories of their teachers (e.g. Chang-Kredl & Colannino, 2017). However, prior research has often highlighted students' negative memories of their teachers, especially related to inequality, domination, punishment, favouritism, humiliation, subordination and misuse of authority (e.g. DePalma, Membiola, & Suárez, 2011; Luttrell, 1993; Mitchell & Weber, 1999; Salo, 2005). Special attention in research has been paid to memories that future and practicing teachers have about school and teachers (e.g. Chang-Kredl & Kingsley, 2014; DePalma et al., 2011; Kaasila, 2007; Lutovac & Kaasila, 2014; Mitchell & Weber, 1999;

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Paul & Smith, 2000). These studies have emphasised, for example, the significance of one's own teachers for becoming a teacher oneself (e.g. Flores & Day, 2006).

In this article, we address the following gap in research. First, there is little research on the emotions in teacher–student relationships, especially from the viewpoint of former students. Thus, we here focus on former students' memories of their teachers to explore what the memories reveal about teacher–student relationships and the emotions involved. Second, the research in terms of teacher memories has focused on the meaning of negative school time memories for students. Also the research material used in this article has already been studied from the viewpoint of negative memories (Uitto, 2011). Therefore, we here focus namely on such memories of teachers that former students described as having very positive, even life-changing significance for them. Our research question is: what do positive memories of teachers tell us about teacher–student relationships and the emotions involved?

2. Theoretical framework

We approach teachers' work as being relational by nature (e.g. Aultman, Williams-Johnson, & Schutz, 2009; Hansen, 1998; Kelchtermans, 2009; Van Manen, 1991). Teachers are in relationships with their colleagues, principals and students' parents, for example, but the most significant relationships in their work are naturally the ones that they have with their students. Those student relationships are essential in making teaching possible (e.g. Kelchtermans, 2009; Van Manen, 1991). The significance of teacher–student relationships for students' learning outcomes (Newberry & Davis, 2008; Newberry, 2010) and for the well-being of teachers and students at school (Soini, Pyhältö, & Pietarinen, 2010) has been acknowledged. Studies on students' experiences have also brought up the meaning of teacher–student relationships and how students value teachers who appreciate them and show them individual consideration and sympathy (Raufelder et al., 2016).

Van Manen (1991, 1994, 2002), among others, talks about the pedagogical relationship and its intentional nature: teachers care for their students as they are now and as they may become (Van Manen, 1991). Teacher–student relationships are personal relationships embracing each student's individuality (e.g. Van Manen & Li, 2002), but yet they always form in the midst of other relationships. For example, teachers are at the same time in relationships not just with individual students, but a group of students (Van Manen, 1991).

When discussing the relational nature of teachers' work in this article, two other concepts by Van Manen (1991) are also relevant: pedagogical moments and pedagogical tact. Van Manen defines pedagogical moments as active encounters, i.e. the situations that require teachers' action or inaction. Pedagogical tact, for Van Manen, manifests itself in as openness to children's experiences, as being attuned to subjectivity, as a subtle influence, as situational confidence, as an improvisational gift and sometimes also as holding back from doing something.

Since teachers' work is relational, it is inseparably emotional (e.g. Hargreaves, 2000, 2001; Nias, 1996). Hargreaves (1998, 2000) even conceptualises teachers' work as “an emotional practice” (see also Mayer, 2009). We understand emotions not only as personal and private experiences, but as constructed in social interaction (Zembylas, 2007). Social interaction is here understood in the form of teacher–student relationships; however, as mentioned earlier, these relationships are constructed amid other relationships in educational and institutional settings. Being a teacher is then a matter of socio-emotional involvement in teaching; it requires teachers' emotional involvement with students and this involvement is then reflected in students' emotions, too. Since relationships between teachers and students are emotional, those relationships guide the decisions that teachers make as well as their ways of teaching and organising the teaching (Hargreaves, 1998).

There is a vast amount of research on teacher–student relationships (e.g. Van Manen, 1991), but rarely has this research raised up the meaning of emotions in these relationships. It is notable that prior research on emotions in teacher–student relationships has focused rather on teacher perspective instead of students. Prior research has illustrated the significance of emotions in how teachers build and foster teacher–student relationships (Newberry, 2010; Yan, Evans, & Harvey, 2011). In addition, research has paid attention to teachers' perceptions or conceptions about the emotions involved in teacher–student relationships (Hargreaves, 2000; Newberry & Davis, 2008). Furthermore, teachers have described their need for close relationships with students and the strong feelings of emotional warmth towards them (Cowie, 2011). Emotions and their involvement in teacher–student relationships have also been studied via themes such as closeness (Newberry & Davis, 2008), gratitude (Howells, 2014), emotional labour of caring (Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006), teachers' professional identity (den Brok, van der Want, Beijjaard, & Wubbels, 2013), ethical boundaries (Aultman et al., 2009) and teacher emotions within the particular social and cultural context (Zembylas, 2004). Prior research on emotions in teacher–student relationships has also brought understanding to how school structures, pedagogy and curriculum planning affect the formation of these relationships (Hargreaves, 1998).

Emotions have long had a marginal role in educational research, which has consequences, also for teacher education: previous studies have discussed the long-lasting image among teachers that they should be rational professionals who are able to manage their own emotions and control their students' emotional expressions (Boler, 1999; Schutz & Zembylas, 2009; Uitto et al., 2015). Although nowadays many researchers seem to agree that emotions in teachers' work should be dealt with more profoundly in teacher education, methods of achieving that have been discussed less (Uitto et al., 2015). Supporting the social and emotional development of future teachers is crucial. For teacher education, we will argue the need to implement the understanding of the meaning of emotions in teachers' work and especially in teacher–student relationships.

3. Methodology

We employ a narrative approach. Arguably, it is only through storytelling that we can get hold of people's memories (Carter,

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