



Emotional aspects of teacher collegiality: A narrative approach



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HIGHLIGHTS

- This study challenge research promoting an understanding of collegiality as good or bad for teacher professional work.
- Conceptions of collegiality in school emerge as emotionally charged in teachers' stories about interaction with colleagues.
- Teachers refer to different narratives on teachers' work when they position themselves vis-à-vis their colleagues.

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ABSTRACT

This paper studies emotions as an important aspect of teacher collegiality. It aims to investigate emotionally charged aspects of teacher collegiality in teachers' stories about colleagues in order to problematize a polarized understanding within this field of research into collegiality as either good or bad. The positioning of teachers in the stories draws on culturally available narratives of teacher's responsibility to: *foster and care for students* and to *engage in the subject* they teach. Findings argue for an understanding of teacher collegiality as processes of conflict and consensus that impact on teachers' professional work and development.

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1. Introduction

The fact that teachers meet and talk to each other has been considered an antidote to the teacher isolation described by Lortie (1975) and as something that might strengthen their professional learning (Mawhinney, 2010) and professional development (Hofman & Dijkstra, 2010). A central issue for successful collaborative work is that teachers trust one another and develop quality collegial relations (Graves, 2001; Kelchtermans, 2006; Nias, 1998). In this paper, we therefore stress emotions as an important aspect of teacher collegiality and teachers' work. By bridging research on teacher collegiality and teachers' emotions, and by using a narrative analysis, we argue for a more complex understanding of collegiality that considers the multiple emotions and meanings involved when teachers position themselves in relation to their colleagues in

narratives of past events. Earlier research has identified different forms of collegiality (Hargreaves, 1994; Harris & Anthony, 2001; Little, 1990) and later research has focused on how different forms of collegiality take shape in local school contexts (Jurasaite–Harbison & Rex, 2010; Sato & Kleinsasser, 2004). This research has been fruitful in investigating the links between different forms of teacher collegiality or school cultures and teachers' collaborative work. However, we argue that this research also tends to polarize the discussion about collegiality as either normatively good or bad. We adhere to research that argues for the need to problematize and nuance the view of collegiality by emphasizing both pros and cons when describing how collegial communities at a school become important for the work of teachers (Hargreaves, 1994). Such analysis “demands a certain level of sophistication” (Kelchtermans, 2006, p. 234) and should focus on the emotions of the teachers involved (Clement & Vandenberghe, 2000; Craig, 2013; Hargreaves, 2002).

It is well known that relations in school are complex and are influenced by the emotions involved among different actors in school (Cowie, 2011; Uitto, Jokikokko, & Estola, 2015). Clement and

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Vandenberghe (2000) have demonstrated that feelings of mutual trust and warm relations on a personal basis between teachers in school are essential for the development of “professionally challenging relationships, leaving scope for teachers individuality” (p. 98), but also that such feelings sometimes install relations of dependence and paternalism. In the same vein, Hargreaves (2001, 2002) has stressed that, for example, feelings of appreciation as well as feelings of betrayal are at stake when teachers shape their relations with colleagues.

In line with Hargreaves (1994, 2002), Clement and Vandenberghe (2000) and Kelchtermans (2006), we argue that it is time to take another step on the road towards a less polarized, and more complex and situated understanding of teacher collegiality. We wish to question assumptions about teachers' professional work as characterized by autonomy or collaboration, and problematize views of collegiality as something unambiguously ‘good’ or ‘bad’, where teachers either work smoothly together or get into micro-political conflicts that conserve their working methods. In order to question these polarizations, we adopt a narrative perspective that embraces the richness of different stories on teacher collegiality in school. Through this paper, we wish to contribute to this field of research with one example of how emotional aspects of teacher collegiality emerge and take different shapes in teachers' storied experiences of collegial relations at one Swedish compulsory school.

The study presented in this paper is based on 15 life-history interviews (Goodson & Sikes, 2001) with 8 teachers during the years 2007–2009 (Löfgren, 2012). The teachers had been working at the same upper level compulsory school in a mid-sized Swedish town. The school opened in 1965 and closed down in 2007. In this paper, we especially focus on three teachers' stories about working together with a specific group of colleagues at the school. The stories are viewed as socially situated actions (Mishler, 1999), and through a positioning analysis (Bamberg, 1997) we target emotions emerging in the positioning of both story characters and storyteller.

We take our point of departure from a definition of the concept of collegiality as referring to ideas about reciprocity, cohesion and mechanisms for internal control among colleagues with similar competences (Svensson, 2010). While collaboration refers to teachers' cooperative actions, collegiality is a concept with normative and relational dimensions. In this paper, our main focus is on collegiality, although we refer to research in which the terms collaboration and collegiality are used interchangeably. More specifically, collegiality is here referred to as “the quality of the relationships among staff members in a school” (Kelchtermans, 2006, p. 221).

Departing from this definition of teacher collegiality, we ask:

What aspects of teacher collegiality emerge as emotionally charged in teachers' stories about social interaction with colleagues, and how can these emotional aspects of collegiality contribute to a less polarized understanding of teacher collegiality?

In what follows, we present an overview of research on teacher collegiality and emotions in which we point out and critique what we see as a polarization between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ collegiality within this field of research. Subsequently, the narrative approach is presented, followed by a description of the data and method of analysis. The results of the positioning analysis are then presented and discussed in the concluding sections of the paper.

2. Research on teacher collegiality and emotions

We have outlined a polarization related to the pros and cons of

different forms of teacher collegiality. We have also found that collegiality, when described in relation to certain school contexts, tends to be described in the *singular* as if the teachers in a school agreed on what it meant. In what follows, we describe the polarization and singularity of meaning characterizing research on teacher collegiality. We end this section with a discussion of the need to study emotions as an aspect of collegiality.

2.1. Pros and cons of different forms of teacher collegiality

After the influential work of Lortie (1975), there was a strong emphasis on the positive effects of teacher collaboration. Teachers working alone was seen as a problem for the profession and collaboration as a means of professionalization (Hargreaves, 2006). It was, for example, suggested that shared decision-making and consultation among teachers promotes good results in schools, and that collaborative work could “take teacher development beyond personal, idiosyncratic reflection, or dependence on outside experts” (Hargreaves, 1994, p. 186).

Hargreaves (1994) describes two major forms of collegial teacher cultures. In the “collaborative cultures” (p. 192), the relations between teachers are spontaneous, voluntary, development-oriented, pervasive over time and space and unpredictable, while in conditions of “contrived collegiality” (p. 195) relations are administratively regulated, compulsory, implementation-oriented, fixed in time and space and predictable. Little (1990) has suggested another distinction between four forms of collegial relations and positions them on a scale from independence to interdependence between teachers in school. These forms – e.g. *storytelling and scanning for ideas, aid and assistance, sharing* and finally *joint work* – describe teachers' work on a continuum from individual to collective conceptions of professional autonomy. Harris and Anthony (2001) have suggested two forms of collegial relations. *Emotionally supportive collegiality* is characterized by open communication, listening to ideas and a respect for each other's work, and is described as an insufficient condition for teacher development. The other form of collegiality, *collegial interaction*, which really encourages teacher development, is characterized by personal, intensive relations between colleagues who share values, goals and visions about teaching. These kinds of descriptions of forms of collegiality have proven useful when investigating collegiality as an aspect of teachers' work. However, they also tend to encourage research that describes collegiality as one-sidedly and normatively good or bad.

In a literature review on teacher collegiality, Shah (2012b) claims that collegiality plays a “vital role in augmenting teacher professional growth and development, job satisfaction, organizational and professional commitment as well as school quality and student performance” (p. 1242). Several studies support claims that collegiality, for example, promotes teachers' professional development (Park, Oliver, Johnson, Graham, & Oppong, 2007), professional growth (Harris & Anthony, 2001) and commitment, prevents teacher attrition (Heider, 2005), and has a positive impact on students' results (Shah, 2012b).

This celebration of teacher collegiality among researchers in the field has been met with criticism from studies that highlight the cons of collegiality or the vagueness of the term (Ben Sasson & Somech, 2015; Kelchtermans, 2006). An example of studies that take a more critical stance as regards teacher collegiality is Ben Sasson and Somech (2015), which asserts that expressions of hostility towards colleagues involving obstructionist behaviour and

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