



Student-to-teacher violation and the threat to a teacher's self



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HIGHLIGHTS

- 14 physically and threatened teachers interviewed one-to-one.
- Student-to-teacher violation affects teacher's self.
- The study identified a weakened, threatened and reduced self.
- Support or lack of support modifies violated teachers' self.

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ABSTRACT

This paper is based on a study of fourteen Norwegian K-12 teachers who have been violated by students in schools. One key theme emerged during the process of analysis: the threat to the teachers' self. This threat appears to be intensified due to lack of support. The findings in this small-scale Norwegian study indicate that student-to-teacher violation can have a serious impact on teachers' perceptions of their individual and professional self. The findings disclose that the teachers' self is affected leading to changed, weakened and disrupted experience of teachers' self-understanding. This knowledge may influence how teachers can continue working when critical incidents occur.

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1. Introduction

'To mention violations from students would mean the loss of one's self'¹

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the impact of student violence on teachers. Research has discussed this under a number of different headings, such as student violence, school violence, bullying, and work place violence. In this paper I report on a small-scale qualitative case study conducted with Norwegian

teachers on their experience of being violated by students. Rather than focusing on the acts of violence, I highlight the subjective experiences of 'being violated'. In other words, the ways in which teachers, who are exposed to various forms of student violence, experience a transgression of their personal and/or professional integrity. I discuss this under the heading of 'threat to the teacher's self.' The research is based on semi-structured interviews with 14 Norwegian teachers, all of whom had been exposed to some form of student violence. I show that the teachers said relatively little about the actual acts of violence, but focused more strongly on the impact on their sense of self. In addition to this, the presence or absence of recognition and support from colleagues and superiors also turned out to be a significant factor in the experience of being violated. After an overview of existing research on the topic, I present the design of the research and the theoretical frameworks used. Against this background, I present the main findings from the

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¹ Genuine statement from one of the interviewed teachers who had been violated by a student.

interviews. I conclude with a critical discussion of the findings and suggest implications for policy, practice, and further research.

Problem: How do teachers experience their self is being affected when violated by students, based on om-depth interviews with fourteen violated teachers?

2. Theoretical anchoring

Definitions of the self, often defined as ‘identity’ (Saldaña, 2013), ‘self-understanding’ (Rots, Kelchtermans, & Aelterman, 2012) and also ‘ontological security’ (Giddens, 1994; Laing, 1960) are connected to teachers’ experience of their self. Giddens links self-identity to ontological security and describes identity as both ‘fragile’ and ‘robust’ (1991).

Professional identity describes a teacher’s personal practical identity image of himself/herself as a teacher (Sutherland, Howard, & Markauskaite, 2010). Their article underlines that this way of understanding teachers’ voice implies a continuous process where teachers negotiate their self by continuously interpreting and reinterpreting events in an ongoing reflection of the meaning they attach to practical episodes (p. 456). Teachers’ professional identity is therefore not a fixed entity. Stavik-Karlsen (2014) describes teachers as continuously negating their identities during and following encounters in the classroom. Farouk (2014) finds the teachers’ self emerges as a ‘fluid’ and ‘interpersonal construct’ in his studies on teachers’ self-understanding. Having a professional identity is regarding oneself a member of a community of practice (Wenger, 1998). James refers to the norms of the community of practice as ‘club-opinion’ (1890/1990).

The professional self is linked to what roles people take on in the working arena. Park mentions that teachers play various roles (also as parents, etc.): “It is in these roles that we know each other; it is in these roles that we know ourselves” (Park, 1950, p. 249). Nevertheless we can lose this knowledge of who we are as teachers, and Park describes that the Jew who is leaving the ghetto, can lose “even his soul” (p. 247).

The individual self is a concept similar to Erikson’s ‘Personal Identity’ (Erikson, 1959/1980). It refers to one’s self - sameness and continuity in time and that this sameness is recognized by others. This view is somewhat different from the reflexive project of the self -as presented by Giddens. Kristjánsson (2010) uses the concept ‘private self’ (p. 40). Zhao and Biesta (2011) add to Kristjánsson’s point of ‘sameness’ and state that the self is more than a reflexive project. Other literature supports the flexible aspect of the self being a teacher. McNally and Blake (2012) introduce the concept of the teacher’s ‘Reciprocal Ontological Security’, stating that a teacher’s security, or identity, is a gift from the student. Rots et al. (2012) reason for using teacher ‘self-understanding’ instead of identity, arguing that the former demonstrates the flexibility of how teachers experience their self.

Connelly, Clandinin, and Applebaum (1999) define teacher identity as consisting of ‘stories to live by’, which shape their professional identity. Communication about what takes place when teachers encounter violations from students must be seen in the light of “the fear of looking incompetent” (Karsenti & Collin, 2013, p. 147). The teacher role is a self-perceived role often in conflict between the human being and the professional “model teacher” described by Shapiro as “a pedagogical whiz who appears pleasant and calm in all situations” (2009, p. 618). Findings in this Norwegian study point to teachers losing their stories to live by, fearing their sameness is at stake and that violations do away with their reciprocal ontological security as teachers and human beings.

The relationship between students and teachers appears to play

a significant role in teachers’ experience of well-being (Van Droogenbroeck, Spruyt, & Vanroelen, 2014, p. 106). When this relationship is at stake a Portuguese study finds that teachers experience apprehension, worry, disappointment, anxiety and tenseness connected to emotions of ‘shame’, ‘remorse’, ‘regret’ and ‘guilt’ connected to “critical moments in the classroom” (Bahia, Freire, Amaral, & Teresa Estrela, 2013, p. 282).

The professional and individual self influence each other, as indicated by the findings presented later. There is a close connection between the two, perhaps especially in the teaching profession, a profession often considered as ‘what you are, more than what you do’ (Goodson, 2003; Hargreaves, 1980; McNally & Blake, 2012; Messina, 2012; Nieto, 2003, 2005). In reference to the above sources, the role of a teacher is often considered something more than a profession, with additional roles as father, friend and model (Allen, 2006, p. 125). This in-between-position leaves a teacher especially vulnerable when critical episodes like threats and assaults from their students occur. It can be a threatening experience, or it can imply a weakened self or even a loss of self. Charmaz (2011) describes loss of self as “losing their way of being in the world” (p. 178). The teacher’s self is described as ‘vulnerable’ in more recent Norwegian literature on the teaching profession (Smith, 2014; Stavik-Karlsen, 2014; Østern, 2014).

According to Lortie (1975/2002), the main teacher narrative is that of the single teacher who encounters a problem, manages to save a student with various problems (learning or behavioral), one who manages through adversity by establishing a relationship with the student, helping him/her to manage her/his life. This is, according to Lortie, considered the discourse of the professional self of the good teacher. Hargreaves (1980) describes how “teachers’ occupational culture” is occupied with “status, competence, and (social) relationships” (p. 127). Because of the significance put on these themes teachers experience “competence anxieties” (p. 141) in addition to shame, embarrassment and guilt when they do not live up to the norms of ‘the good teacher’ described in relevant studies (Gil-Monte, 2012; Gruenewald, Dickerson, & Kemeny, 2007; Skårderud, 2001).

Reactions from Finnish care workers add to the knowledge of how being exposed to violent acts might result in a diminished self-image. Viitasara (2004) states that “Violent events can be associated with guilt and shame, self-reproach, or a sense of lack of personal professionalism, even failure” (p. 38). The conflict between their ideal stories and their lived stories may result in them becoming isolated and frustrated (Schaefer, 2013, p. 269). There is a need for teachers to come across positively among the staff as, “an expert, certain teacher, someone who was competent” (p. 267).

Two studies from Finland add to the findings from Minnesota and show that teachers working with impaired students as a particularly vulnerable group. One study (Ervasti et al., 2011, pp. 465; 469) found that male special education teachers had about 60% higher sickness absenteeism than their female and male colleagues working in general education (pp. 465, 469). A related study (Ervasti et al., 2012) found male special educators three times more likely to be exposed to mental abuse, and five times more likely to be exposed to physical violence compared to male teachers teaching general education (p. 336). The percentages for female teachers were somewhat lower, two and three fold, compared to teachers teaching general education.

A study from Pennsylvania (Tiesman, Konda, Hendricks, Mercer, & Amandus, 2013) presents results similar to the studies from Finland and Minnesota when dealing with special educators’ exposure to work place violence. Tiesman et al.’s study states that special educators are more exposed to violence than other professions like taxi drivers, nurses and mental health professionals (p. 65). Special educators are exposed to a prevalence of physical

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