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Emotions as a lens to explore teacher identity and change: Different theoretical approaches

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Editorial

Emotions as a lens to explore teacher identity and change: Different theoretical approaches

This special issue contributes to the growing body of empirical research on emotions in teaching of the last decade by offering several different theoretical approaches to understand the relationships among teacher's emotion, professional identity, and educational change. In previous decades emotions were largely neglected in educational research on teaching and teachers, but recently, more attention has been paid to the role of emotions in teaching and teachers' professional lives, starting with a special issue of the *Cambridge Journal of Education* (Nias, 1996). Since then, many studies have been published as shown by a first literature review on teachers' emotions and teaching (Sutton & Wheatley, 2003). The study of emotions in teaching and teachers' professional lives is increasingly considered to be relevant in educational research: the term "emotion" can be found now for the first time in the list of session descriptors for the American Educational Research Association's annual meeting (2005).

The relevance of exploring emotions in teaching and teachers' professional lives has been discussed by several others in an elaborated manner (Hargreaves, 1998, 2001; Nias, 1996; Sutton & Wheatley, 2003). In this introduction, we focus primarily on the literature most closely related to the theme of this special issue. First, and most obviously, is how emotions relate to the nature of teaching and learning. As Nias (1996) noted, teaching involves human interaction and therefore has an emotional dimension. Moreover, it involves "intensive personal interactions, often in crowded

conditions, with large numbers of pupils who are frequently energetic, spontaneous, immature and preoccupied with their own interests" (Nias, 1996, p. 296). Many teachers also invest their 'selves' in their work (Nias, 1996) and receive feelings of job satisfaction from the psychic rewards of teaching (Day, 2002, Hargreaves, 1998; Lortie, 1975). As the studies in the special issue of the *Cambridge Journal* illustrate, teachers "often so closely merge their sense of personal and professional identity that the classroom (...) becomes a main site for their self-esteem and fulfillment, and so too for their vulnerability" (Nias, 1996, p. 297).

A second, more general reason is that emotion and cognition are understood by some researchers to be inextricably interconnected and are thus difficult to separate (Frijda, 2000; Nias, 1996). The claim that is made in some studies on teachers' emotions is that taking emotions into account will provide more complex understanding of teachers' learning and thinking. Furthermore, if teaching and learning have an emotional dimension, then to more completely understand processes of teaching and learning necessitates exploring the emotional and cognitive aspects of both. For instance, most research on the ways teachers understand and respond to change displays teachers' experiences with change in rather cognitive, rational terms, failing to articulate the layers of emotion that seem to be involved. The analysis of teachers' emotions while implementing reforms can provide deeper understanding of the ways teachers experience their work and educational change, and can thus

inform such areas as change theory and professional development.

A third reason to explore emotions in teaching and teachers' professional lives is, as Hargreaves (2001) argues, that emotions are not only the product of the nature of teaching or personal dispositions and commitments, but also of how particular ways of organizing teaching shape teachers' emotions. Nias (1996) notes that both cognition and emotion cannot be separated from the social and cultural forces which help to form them and which are in turn shaped by them. So, exploring emotions from this perspective can also provide insights into the historical, social, and political environments in which teaching and teachers' work is embedded.

A systematic understanding and conceptualization of teachers' emotions in relation to their work and identity is still missing, even with the growing body of educational research on emotions in teaching and teachers' professional lives (Hargreaves, 2001; van den Berg, 2002) and little research has examined teacher emotion within the framework of an explicit theory of emotion (cf. Sutton & Wheatley, 2003). For instance, while the various studies in the aforementioned Cambridge special issue emphasized the strong emotional dimension in teachers' work, few of the contributors defined emotion, or made explicit the theoretical framework used in their research. In the widespread literature on emotions in other disciplines (see for an overview Lewis & Haviland-Jones, 2000; Oatley, 2000), a wide range of theoretical perspectives can be found, including the physiological, philosophical, historical, sociological, feminist, organizational, anthropological, and psychological perspectives. The primary aim of the present special issue is to incorporate several different theoretical approaches in the study of teachers' emotions, to contribute to a more complex understanding of the ways teachers experience their work, especially in a context of reforms, and how their working conditions affect their professional identity.

This special issue contains five papers, focusing on teachers' emotions in relation to educational change or teachers' professional identity or both.

Different theoretical approaches to emotions are used, derived from social-psychology, sociology, philosophy, and education. The papers draw from research conducted in three different countries, across elementary and secondary schools, and describe different work and reform contexts. They have in common a focus on the social context in which teachers' emotions are embedded. However, the papers differ in the way they examine the relations among emotions, identity, and context. We first present the papers that explicitly analyze the broader social and political context as it intersects with identity to affect emotion, and then present papers that have more of an explicit focus on the school and classroom context.

The paper by Lasky paper uses a sociocultural theoretical lens, incorporating mediated agency, to examine the dynamic interplay among teacher identity, agency, and context as these affect how secondary teachers report experiencing professional vulnerability, particularly in terms of their abilities to achieve their primary purposes in teaching students. Emotions in this paper are understood as being both biological and a social construction, mediated by social structures, cultural tools, and identity. A mixed-method approach was used to understand the early influences on teacher identity, how teacher identity and sense of purpose affected the ways they worked with their students, and how identity served as an interpretive lens for mediating teacher understanding of reforms and their experiences of professional vulnerability.

The paper by van Veen, Slegers, and van de Ven adopts a social-psychological approach to emotions, in which the emphasis is on the individual perspective. Emotions in this theoretical approach depend on the way the individual appraises the environment in relation to the identity of the person. Emotions, therefore, are assumed to reveal much about a person's identity and the way she or he perceives the environment. The usefulness of this approach is illustrated by the case of one experienced Dutch secondary school teacher who is faced with several reforms that strongly affect his initial enthusiasm for the reform. The analysis of his emotions show in detail

how several aspects of his professional identity become affected.

The paper by Zembylas uses a post-structuralist approach to explore emotions as discursive practices. Emotions in this approach are assumed not to be private or universal, but refer to a wider social life. Identity is theorized as constantly becoming a context embedded in power relationships, ideology, and culture. These context characteristics are also assumed to shape the expression of emotions by permitting the teacher to feel some emotions while prohibiting others. This longitudinal ethnographic case study explores the emotions of one teacher and shows the historical contingency of emotional rules in teaching, the part a teacher plays in her own emotional control, and the constitution of her identity in relation to those emotional rules of her context.

Schmidt and Datnow's paper incorporates several concepts from sociological theory and education. Their focus is on how teachers make sense of different kind of reforms and on the emotions that arise in the process. Emotions are defined as social constructs, and are affected by how well teachers understand reforms, and the nature of reforms particularly as they are translated into classroom practice. Their qualitative study examines emotions and sense-making of primary school teachers from several schools in California and Florida regarding comprehensive school reform, and shows that teachers' sense-making of the reforms particularly when they are being implemented in the classroom influence the ways teachers feel about particular comprehensive school reform models.

The last research paper by Hargreaves uses a social-constructionist approach to explore how age and career stages affect teachers' emotional responses to reforms in their schools. Next to personality and personal development, the paper argues that age, career stage, and generational identity and attachment also matter in how teachers respond to educational change. In the method section of this paper, the difficulty of investigating emotional experiences is discussed in several ways. This qualitative study, involving elementary and secondary school teachers from

various schools in Canada, shows how teachers' emotional experiences of educational change varied over the course of their career stages.

The special issue concludes with two extended discussion papers by Tom Reio from the University of Louisville and Geert Kelchtermans of the University of Leuven (Belgium). Tom Reio is primarily a quantitative researcher, and has a special interest in emotion, risk-taking, and curiosity development in learning and change processes. Geert Kelchtermans focuses on narrative biographical approaches in studying teachers' self understanding and biography, working conditions, and the micro political dimensions of teachers' lives. Both discussants add to the epistemological diversity represented in this special issue, which results in a rich discussion of the relevance of teachers' emotions, identity and educational change, and of the way emotions are theorized and examined.

Finally, on behalf of all authors, the guest-editors of this special issue would like to thank the editorial board of this journal for publishing this special issue, and especially Greta Morine-Deshimer, who on behalf of the journal, contributed enormously with her insightful and constructive comments and support. Furthermore, we would like to thank Thomas Reio and Geert Kelchtermans for being our discussants.

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A sociocultural approach to understanding teacher identity, agency and professional vulnerability in a context of secondary school reform

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Abstract

This paper uses a sociocultural theoretical lens, incorporating mediated agency [Wertsch et al. (1993). A sociocultural approach to agency. In A. Forman, N. Minick, & A. Stone (Eds.), *Contexts for learning sociocultural dynamics in children's development* (pp. 336–357). New York: Oxford University Press] to examine the dynamic interplay among teacher identity, agency, and context as these affect how secondary teachers report experiencing professional vulnerability, particularly in terms of their abilities to achieve their primary purposes in teaching students. Two mediational systems that shape teacher agency and their professional vulnerability are addressed. These are: (a) the early influences on teacher identity; and (b) the current reform context. Interview data revealed that the political and social context along with early teacher development shaped teachers' sense of identity and sense of purpose as a teacher. Survey and interview data indicate that there was a disjuncture between teacher identity and expectations of the new reform mandates. Teacher agency was clearly constrained in the new reform context. Teachers struggled to remain openly vulnerable with their students, and to create trusting learning environments in what they described as a more managerial profession with increased accountability pressures. Directions for future research are also discussed.

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Keywords: Reform; Teacher identity; Emotion

1. Introduction

Little is understood about the ways in which teacher identity interacts with reform mandates to

affect teachers' experiences of professional vulnerability, particularly when policies are accompanied with new tools (e.g. curricula or accountability practices) and expectations for teaching. A sociocultural theoretical lens incorporating mediated agency (Wertsch, Tulviste, & Hagstrom, 1993) is used to understand the interplay among structure,

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