

Sólveig Karvelsdóttir

What do we know about teachers' working lives?

The working life of teachers has been of interest for many years. Research on teacher's lives and work has given valuable knowledge of their development and profession. Less is known about their thoughts, feelings and emotions, when teaching in challenging situations. The aim of this article is to give knowledge of teachers' feelings when faced with ongoing difficulties among their students and parents. A research was done in one primary and lower secondary school in Iceland with student population of about 500. The school is located in an area where many disadvantaged families lived. Data was mostly collected by interviewing the teachers. The findings give an insight into the working life of teachers who teach in challenging school. We learn how they view their work and discuss the needs of the students and their families. The teachers are faced with problems that they can't solve and they are affected mentally by the situation. In their own words they share with us their anger and worries, feelings and emotions.

Introduction

Icelandic society has undergone many and diverse changes during the last few decades. Like in other Western countries concise changes have taken place both in primary and lower secondary schools. Experienced teachers are aware of the changes that have occurred in the teacher's job which manifest themselves, among other things, in the fact that the upbringing of children is an increasing part of their work. They teach in mixed ability classes since inclusion is a mandate and public schools accept pupils with special educational needs who previously attended special schools. Another factor is the growing number of students with other cultural backgrounds who now attend Icelandic schools. Furthermore students with a variety of problems seem to be on the increase (Auður Kristinsdóttir, 2000) and teachers complain that resources are missing for this group of students (Sólveig Karvelsdóttir, 2004).

In his research on the teaching profession in Iceland Ingólfur Ásgeir Jóhannesson (2006) concludes that the teacher's job is both more complicated and more difficult than it used to be. When asked about changes in their job, teachers predominantly mentioned social changes and different children who make "all kinds of demands, fair and unfair" (p. 142). Teachers maintained that there was less restraint in society and thus more

difficult to uphold discipline. Growing demands and less discipline made the teacher's job more "physically and emotionally stressful" (Jóhannesson, 1999, pp. 76 - 77). He argues that: "the new demands and responsibilities have disturbed the ways in which teachers think about their job and they also change how the teachers view themselves. Among their worries are insecurity about their role as educators . . ." (Jóhannesson, 2006, pp. 143).

The burden of teachers seems to have grown in other countries as well and their job has become more complicated, demanding and stressful (Hargreaves, 1994; Hargreaves and Fullan, 1998). According to Hargreaves (1994) teachers constantly complain about shortage of time. They seem to have less time for planning and preparing, less time for checking students work, less time for collaboration with colleagues and for reflecting. There is an increasing emphasis on home-school cooperation, on meeting the individual students' educational need and to improve their learning and achievement (Epstein, 2001; Tomlinson, 1999). In often too crowded classrooms, the teachers are on their toes regarding students' behavior and work. They must keep things going, cover the curriculum, motivate students and make sure everyone is working according to ability. Among stressful things are behavior management and discipline matters. This problem is having a marked effect on the stress levels and self-esteem of teachers who are often unwilling to share concerns or management problems for fear of imputed failure (Brophy and Good, 2008). They are often judged by parents and colleagues according to their ability to control the class (Nias, 1992). "Management difficulties are associated with teacher anxiety and stress. If prolonged, they can lead to depression and burnout" (Brophy and Good, 2008, p. 49). This is just among few things that keep teachers occupied and there seem to be constant demands of additional duties and responsibilities.

In writing about this reform and educational changes Hargreaves (1998) argues that many "ignore or underplay one of the most fundamental aspects of teaching and of how teachers change: the emotional dimension" (p. 835). He says that schools are full of emotions and therefore it should be given more attention. Human interactions include emotions and when interacting with many students with various needs each working day the teachers use their emotions all the time.

In every society there are individuals and families that for various reasons do not succeed in life. In Iceland there are a growing number of people who cannot get by without assistance (Njálsdóttir, 1998). There are many factors that can upset family life and impair financial standing, wellbeing and social status. Families who are socially and financially weak and have a limited support from relatives and friends are the ones that suffer under the stress. Sometimes the problems persist from one generation to the next. This has impact on the upbringing of children and it may prove difficult to change the existing pattern (Dencik and Jørgensen, 1999).

Teaching in schools, like inner-city schools, where many students come from socially disadvantaged families, makes the work of teachers still more demanding. The requirements and demands do not only come from outside. Teachers themselves want to do their best and often overexert themselves in their attempts to reach their goals. When discussing work with teachers, Hargreaves (1994) reports that they often feel guilty and find that they have never done enough. This can result in difficult feelings and if disappointment and anxiety are also present this can reduce teachers' interest and active involvement. He maintains that many factors in the teacher's job can lead to bad conscience, among them teaching in a mixed ability class where teachers' fear that some students needs will not be met (Hargreaves and Fullan, 1998). Much is known about teachers work, how they teach, how they plan their teaching and what they think when teaching. Articles and books have been written on the reflective teacher that have added to our knowledge but; "While what teachers do and how teachers think is now more familiar territory to those who study teaching, we know much less about how teachers feel while they teach; about the emotions and desires which motivate and moderate their work" (Hargreaves, 1994, p. 141). What has been written about the emotions of teaching is much less from teachers themselves but has been interpreted and applied to teaching. "There has been rather less focus on how teachers themselves talk about the emotional dimensions of their work" says Hargreaves (1994, pp. 141).

In order to learn about the working life of teachers who teach in a challenging public school, I set off with the following research questions:

How do teachers, who teach in a challenging school, feel in their teaching job?

How do they describe their feelings?

In their opinion, what causes most pressure in teaching?

Method and data sources

This is a case study carried out in a medium-sized basic school in Reykjavik. Data was collected during one school year. Interviews were taken with 45 teachers and six professionals. The method used was group interviewing (focus groups) with 3-5 teachers in each group. The interviews were semi –structured with focus on the teachers work and its emotional dimension. The interviews took place at the school and each lasted for 1-1½ hour. In addition to the interviews, documentary data was collected and observation notes taken in classrooms and at teachers' meetings. Data from the interviews with teachers is used in this presentation. The data were analyzed according to Taylor and Bogdan (1998) and Bogdan and Biklen (1992).

The school is located in an area where many disadvantaged families lived. The families had limited education, were contingent upon public support and had various social problems. The number of lone mothers was higher in this area than in other parts of the city. The school had a higher percentage of students in need of support than other public schools. Their academic outcome was below average according to National standard tests and they were troubled socially, behaviorally and emotionally. For decades the teachers had worked hard and extended themselves to assist these students both academically and socially. They struggled to get more support for the students in need, some of which had behavioral and emotional problems, some which had learning difficulties and a few that were mentally disturbed.

Findings

At the time of the study things had become worse. The number of students with special needs had increased and outgrown the teacher's possibilities to meet their needs. In addition behavioral problems had become more frequent. Too many of the students had insufficient family background. In spite of teachers' struggle to motivate the students and

advice their families, their academic performances did not improve. Quotation: *“They don’t do their homework and their attendance is low. They are anxious, unhappy and emotionally disturbed. One can see how badly they feel, their vulnerability and incompetence”*.

According to the teachers, many of the parents had limited education and some lacked the ability to assist their children. The teachers tried to support students by advising their parents regarding common things like sleeping and child care as well as homework. They arranged meetings with parents and tried their best to support them. One of the teachers said: *“I’m struggling with the child, calling the parents and manage to arrange a meeting with them, but after the meeting I am often surprised how able the child is [compared to the parents]”*.

The teachers tell about behavioral problems and disturbances in the classroom: *“There is a constant struggle with certain students and all your energy is spent on keeping them down instead of spending it on those who want to learn”*. One of them said disturbing students don’t fit into the school system the way it is. They discussed rules and the students’ need for strict limits, but they said that the students were not used to limits at home and therefore they found it hard to follow rules at school.

The teachers of younger students felt that classes were too crowded for them to meet individual student’s needs in a mixed ability classroom. Some of the students were diagnosed with ADHD and according to the teachers they didn’t get enough help and attention. Although the teachers did their best to assist students with ADHD they felt it was not enough. They also said that other students, those with no diagnoses, were also deprived the help and assistance they needed. The teachers were concerned about the situation and said they needed smaller classes and assistance in the classrooms: *“We have to take care of the pupils who can and want to learn. They do not get enough attention... This is a big problem”*.

Shortage of time was persistent in the teachers discussions: *“Everything is done on the run. No time to sit down, breaks are short, lunchtime is short”*. They wanted more time for individual guidance and for communication with parents. Not least did they want more time for cooperation with colleagues: *“We need more time for cooperation and discussions about teaching”*.

All this bothers the teachers, and in spite of their hard work and good will they feel they have failed and talk about depressing conditions. *“It is depressing to know about difficult circumstances and suffering of children but more so to be without the means to do anything about it. It irritates me tremendously”*. Because of the situation they become frustrated. They say it ruins their energy and they can not concentrate to the same extent on teaching. *“It takes its toll to be so frustrated. It drains me of my energy”*. The teachers feel disappointed, resentful and worried. *“What will become of these children?”* Their worries don’t leave them when they go home and even recoil upon their families. *“Sometimes I feel as if I have no private life”* said one of them.

When assisting students and families they feel more like social workers. *“We have not been trained to be social workers”*, said one of them and another said: *“I was not educated to be a student counselor, a nurse or a psychiatrist”*. The teachers are under a constant pressure and they feel they need counseling or supervision for themselves, which they don’t get. However they talk freely and openly about their emotions to colleagues and get their support. They encourage each other and their unity, more than anything else, is what gives them strength to go on.

What has been written here is just some of the results. The teachers discussed many other things regarding their work such as why the teaching methods that used to give good results didn’t work any more. They said the students have changed and they felt the need to find new ways to reach out to them. The curriculum does not suit these students. They should be taught other things, more practical and appropriate things according to their situation and interests.

Discussion

This study tells about a group of experienced teachers who teach in a prolonged stressful situation. They discuss their feelings, like helplessness, anxiety, worries, resentment and guilt. It is not the least their awareness of the student’s problems that depress them. It would be worthwhile for people outside the teaching profession to realize the heavy burden and the tough reality facing teachers who teach difficult classes, says Gilligan

(1998). She also says that a better understanding of teachers work in such situations is needed.

The importance of this study lies in the fact that teacher's voices have been heard. Teachers in challenging school have opened a window to their working life and to their personal feelings which they hardly ever discuss with anyone besides their colleagues.

The results from this study leave us with many questions such as:

How can teachers better be supported and prepared to work with challenging students?

How can the students abilities and cultural experience be better invested for their own and others benefit?

References

- Bogdan, R. C. and Biklen, S. K. (1992). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to the theory and methods* (2nd edition). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Dencik, L. and Jørgensen, P.S. (1999). *Børn og familie i det postmoderne samfund*. København: Hans Reitzels Forlag.
- Epstein, J. L. (2001). *School, family and community partnerships: preparing educators, and improving schools*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press.
- Gilligan, R. (1998). The importance of schools and teachers in child welfare. *Child and Family Social Work*, 3,13-25.
- Good, T.L. and Good, J.E. (2008). *Looking in classrooms* (9th edition). Boston: Pearson Education.
- Hargreaves, A. (1994). *Changing teachers, changing times: Teachers' work and culture in the postmodern age*. London: Casell
- Hargreaves, A. (1998). The emotional practice of teaching. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 14(8), 835-854.
- Hargreaves, A. and Fullan, M. (1998). *What's worth fighting for out there*. New York: Teachers College Columbia University.
- Jóhannesson, I.Á. (1999). Sérhæfð þekking kennara. *Uppeldi og menntun*, 8, 71-89.
- Jóhannesson, I.Á. (2006). 'Different Children – a tougher job'. Icelandic teachers reflect on changes in their work. *European Educational Research Journal*, 5(2), 140-151.
- Karvelsdóttir, S. (2004). Kennsla við erfiðan grunnskóla. *Tímarit um menntarannsóknir*, 1, 103-114.
- Kristinsdóttir, A. (2000). Greining á starfi sérkennara. *Glæður. Fagtímarit félags íslenskra sérkennara*, 1(10), 24-25.
- Nias, J. (1992). Introduction. In C. Biott and J. Nias (Editors), *Working and learning together for change*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Njálsdóttir, H. (1998). *Fátækt í velferðarsamfélagi*. Unpublished B.A.thesis. University of Iceland.

- Pétursdóttir, G. (1999). *Fjölmennningarleg kennsla. Forvörn gegn kynþáttahatri og fordómum*. Reykjavík: Author.
- Taylor, S. J. and Bogdan, R. C. (1998). *Introduction to qualitative research methods: A guidebook and resource* (3rd edition). New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Tomlinson, C.A. (1999). *The Differentiated classroom: Responding to the needs of all learners*. Alexandria: ASCD.