CAN TEACHER EMPOWERMENT CONTRIBUTE TO BETTER LEARNING?

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Empowerment in education is often recognized as teacher effectiveness. This paper focuses on the question if teacher empowerment also will contribute to better learning? The assumption is that teachers who freely design and control their daily work are more effective than teachers who feel vulnerable and powerless when they face challenges in everyday work. Empowerment may provide increasing awareness of useful methods and strategies for teaching. To achieve this, teachers need to reflect on their situation and learn from other teachers in order to find new solutions in dealing with unwanted behavior. Reflecting Team has proven to be an effective method to start reflective processes and collaboration among teachers. By increasing their skills in communication and the teachers will find new ways of teaching, aimed at better learning and greater fulfillment of education goals. Discovering new perspectives may lead to a difference that makes a difference (Bateson, 1972)

In this article, we wish to discuss whether mentoring using reflecting teams can help to raise awareness of teachers' possibilities to develop and strengthen their competence and talents in their teaching. Research shows that the relationship between teacher and student is crucial to the learning process. This means that the teacher is one of the most important factors in relation to student learning (Hattie 2009, 2012). In order to succeed, teachers should be able to use all sides of themselves in their teaching. The academic level should be high, but so should the teacher's belief in combining knowledge dissemination with cooperation, management and care skills and other skills in the learning process. Whether or not a student succeeds at school could also depend on the teacher's perception of himself and his competence. In addition, the teacher must be strong enough to use all his qualities and skills in such a way that the teacher's ability to use his qualities influences the learning environment. In a postmodern society (Bauman, 1991) where education and the authorities' requirements as regards school results could be very important

to a positive development, it may be a dilemma that the teacher's tasks are becoming increasingly academic (Meland, 2011). The risk that the primary task of the educational system becomes to produce results could force teachers to use instrumental solutions to teaching-related problems rather than combing reflection and knowledge and making considered use of all their skills to provide education adapted to the needs of all their students (Klemp, 2013). In this article, we look at how teachers' opportunity for further development of their competence and qualities through mentoring contributes to empowerment (Chally, 1992; Segedin, 2011) and allows for sufficient freedom of action to create change where necessary and help to justify good practice, which is also part of the empowerment philosophy discussed in this article.

The school system is evaluated and measured by political authorities that use target figures to distinguish between schools (Prenzel, Kobarg, Schöps & Rönnebeck, 2013). It is debatable whether this helps to promote learning or whether such pressure to produce results is harmful to learning processes, for example when a focus on target attainment is used to justify financial sanctions if targets are not met. In Norway, there is also a system that highlights individual teachers in schools who, in addition to their teaching duties, are required to function as resource persons above and beyond what is expected of other staff at the school. Teachers normally have a heavy workload with strictly defined duties and areas of responsibility. This can cause stress and contribute to negative unease in the workplace. Empowerment can act as a counterforce against the factors that draw attention away from the teacher's most important tasks (Ginnodo, B, 1997). Heavy workloads in combination with increasing demands for focus on results is a drain on energy and could affect interaction in the learning process. The idea behind strengthening empowerment in teamwork is to boost ideas and create the energy required to achieve better learning.

There could be reason to examine whether peer mentoring (Midthassel, 2003) can help to make the teacher even more competent and thereby benefit both the teacher's teaching and students' learning. The teacher specialist initiative entails a risk of dividing the staff into different classes rather than promoting solidarity and collective solutions.

In this article, we look at how a research group at Østfold University College, in collaboration with primary school teachers, has cooperated on reflective processes in mentoring, both in relation to challenges faced by individual teachers and in relation to cooperation in a team of teachers (Sträng, Sørmo & Navestad, 2016). Reflective processes take place over time and develop through systematic reflection aimed at stimulating good ideas and creating learning, both between teachers and in terms of the children's freedom of action. Mentoring allows for a new way of thinking about teaching. On this basis, we wish to find out whether reflecting team mentoring can contribute to promoting empowerment in a school, so that teachers can increase their cooperation and teaching capacity and help to create a better learning environment.

From therapy to mentoring in an education context

Reflecting team mentoring is part of a process of reflection (Andersen, 1987). This process is about time and about how teachers, through communication and reflection, can arrive at expedient solutions. Schools often tend to find individual interpretations and explanations for things that are perceived as problems or undesirable challenges. If a child is perceived as difficult or as having learning difficulties, the prevailing view has often been that learning difficulties and restlessness at school originate with the students themselves rather than in the system of which the student is a part (Eriksen, 2008). In this way, students' socio-emotional difficulties and individual challenges are linked to diagnoses; something that the children somehow carry with them (Ogden, 2002; Sørlie, 2000).

We use the term socio-emotional challenges to describe children and young people who have a tendency to fall short of their family's and society's expectations of adequate behaviour due to various social or emotional stresses (Befring 1997). According to Befring, such behaviour is also described as restlessness and learning disorders, and is often most common in boys. There may be reason to ask whether the present school system is less suited to the present situation than it was when only a small percentage of the population received an education or whether there is something wrong with children and young people who cannot cope with the social and emotional challenges of being together in such groups for a long time. Such behaviour can give rise to concern and have a disruptive effect. Is there reason to see this as a deviation or disease that requires diagnosis and treatment?

Opinions differ about everyday experiences in kindergartens and schools. Sometimes, different cultures exist where individuals are perceived as more or less legitimate leaders. Some of them are more dominant than others. This could contribute to a culture characterised by sub-cultures that prevent good teamwork and good solutions, both in planning and teaching (Blase, 1991; Sträng, 2011). In such cases, language can also be part of a domination technique used to control other people's views and thoughts (Hargreaves & Dawe, 1990; Glasø, 2008). The parent group is also an important part of children's overall system, both in kindergartens and at school. As a result, the leadership role is challenged in a new way that was unknown a few decades ago. Since society is changing rapidly, the same applies to kindergartens and schools.

Understanding change and keeping up to date professionally is crucial in such a change culture. It is equally important to question what is happening and how actions and attitudes influence everyday life. Mentoring using the reflecting team method provides opportunities for thinking differently and finding new ways forward in a complicated world (Andersen, 1991)

Empowerment – the opposite of paternalism

It is difficult to find a Norwegian equivalent for the term 'empowerment'; it must be explained on the basis of the context in which it occurs (Page & Szuba, 1999; Zimmerman, 1981). In our context, we often use the word to mean to strengthen something that is weak or give power to someone who is powerless. It can also be used about giving people back power of decision and responsibility for their own lives. In healthcare, it can be used about motivating patients to find their own strength and will to get well (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995).In an organisational context, it is often used to describe taking active action as opposed to resignation and powerlessness when faced with everyday challenges (Askheim & Starrin, 2007; Yukl & Becker, 2006).

Another term used as an antonym to empowerment is paternalism (Grill, 2007). Paternalism is based on the idea that people don't know what is best for them. Empowerment is about reclaiming this power or authority. Empowerment enables people to create change and experience the mastery that is necessary to face challenges and problems.

The term empowerment is also linked to language and how it is used (Klopper, 2002). This is not about different linguistic categories, but about the content of the words chosen to express an emotional or mental state. The words are linked to the person's thoughts. By choosing between the different words available, thoughts are structured into a meaningful form. In the empowerment context, encouraging and constructive words can of course have a different meaning from words that limit activity and freedom of action. This can be crucial in a mentoring situation, particularly when the mentee wants to talk about setbacks and adversity. In mentoring situations focusing on empowerment, the goal of the mentoring is to identify opportunities and look for concepts and actions that promote empowerment. In school, this is about bringing about changes in practice, better teaching and better learning (Lazarova, Sträng, Jensen, & Sørmo, 2016).

Instrumental or reflective teaching?

The opposite of an instrumental approach to actions is a process of reflection (Andersen, 1991). A classroom teaching session can be carried out according to a template without taking into consideration how the teaching is perceived or whether learning actually occurs. A lesson can be planned based on a structure and goal without thinking through the significance of professionalism and its relationship to the learning situation. The teacher can perform an act without asking himself whether he is successful or whether what he is teaching is being understood. The teacher's own view of the structure of the lesson and the way in which it was taught could be that it was well executed, without considering quality or other assessment criteria. If this form of teaching is unsuccessful, that it not because the teacher has failed the students, but because the students are poor students, lack concentration or ability,

or were incapable of following the structure and plan for the lesson. The teacher might perhaps argue that the lesson was perfectly taught and that he followed the textbook to the letter?

A teacher who is familiar with learning theory from educational science will start a thought process about the challenges presented by the teaching and the topic long before the lesson starts. He thereby initiates a reflecting process, an action that will develop into quality over time. Such a process can nevertheless have several qualities and be part of the process of developing the students' as well as colleagues' competence. In our context, we have linked this process to mentoring, where the reflecting team method is used to continue work on improving the quality of teaching. A mentee could get many ideas from mentoring. These ideas must be processed, and then selected and tested. This process is a process of reflection aimed at creating the best possible learning arena and a good learning environment for all kinds of students, including those with special learning-related and behavioural challenges (Sträng, Sørmo, & Navestad, 2016).

Mentoring using reflecting teams promotes empowerment

Reflecting team is a method used in different contexts (Skjerve and Reichelt, 2009). It is used both in psychological therapy and family therapy as a tool for bringing out different opinions and points of view. Tom Andersen's (Andersen 2005) idea concerns how the language and words people use in reflecting mentoring can help people to clarify and understand their own thoughts. They could be ideas or events that the person has not been aware of before. Through mentoring, the mentee is challenged to identify justifications and voices that the mentee has been unaware of. Others sit and listen, and can provide feedback on what is said and ask questions and reflect on how the words are presented. This provides new perspectives and helps to strengthen the mentee's empowerment. At the same time, such a conversation gives ample opportunity to listen to one's own thoughts and also to check how others perceive them. In this context, it is therefore possible to adjust the impression given to arrive at as correct a version as possible of the conversation.

We all have many words to choose from when we speak, but people have to make choices in order to get their meaning across. Meaning is created when words are combined. Such reflection focuses on mastery and on coping well with everyday challenges. By listening to answers to open questions, the mentor tries to identify what should be discussed more and what things are less important (Anderson & Jensen, 2008). Kierkegaard claims that the ability to listen and try to understand what is in another person's thoughts can be a challenge and a precondition for understanding the other. This is seen as an undisputed truth (Pedersen, 2007).

Through such reflection, many voices inside the mentee will attempt to make themselves heard. The reflecting team provides an opportunity to listen and reflect on everything that is said. The thoughts can be confused and disorganised but, by putting them into words, they can be tidied up so that the words help to create

meaning. The person talking can hear himself think (Andersen 2005). In a therapy setting, this provides an opportunity to understand oneself and one's own experiences in a new way. Thoughts become words that express both frustration and positive emotions. This makes it easier to face such a reality with new strategies that enable the talker to understand and act according to a different or new pattern. This could be a road to empowerment for the mentee.

The reflecting team's task during such mentoring is not to solve other people's problems, but, through reflection, to help the mentee to find his own solutions. The team's mission is to pay positive attention to the words spoken, the meaning behind them, what it might be wise to talk more about, and to be supportive of thoughts that show a shift towards new and different ways of thinking. The team's job is not to discuss and arrive at new solutions, but to actively support the mentee in finding them for himself. Since the team is also placed behind an imaginary curtain, they are present without being present. They only communicate with the mentor. The team is placed in such a way that they do not distract the mentee, which makes it easier for the mentor to have the mentee's undivided attention. Since the reflecting team cannot communicate with the mentee, the mentee has the opportunity to listen and reflect in peace on how the others perceived the mentee (Andersen, 2005). This, in turn, could facilitate further clarification of what the mentee really means. When there are many people present during a mentoring session, it could be crucial to ensure that the conversation is on as equal terms and as balanced as possible. This balance can easily be disrupted when many are present. The invitation gives the team an opportunity to wonder and comment on every aspect, from the practical and physical level to the metalevel. The mentoring concludes with a summary and concrete measures, and often with a schedule for follow-up, if any (Skjerve & Reichelt, 2009).

It is a natural idea to use reflecting teams to strengthen the philosophy of empowerment (Somech, 2005). However, unlike understanding and finding a way out of a difficult life situation, this is about assessing and understanding one's own professional actions and planning new ones with a view to improving one's actions. It is about fresh thinking and giving the teacher confidence that he is on the right path or is planning in a constructive manner towards the next learning arena. It may also be important that such mentoring allows the mentee to see connections in a new and systematic manner. The mentor practises listening to what is really being said and is challenged to interpret this into his own notions and contexts (Sørmo & Sträng, 2015). Awareness of the difference between hearing or listening and hearing and listening attentively could be crucial. The mentor listens for connections and what it can be useful to talk more about and what will not be productive. Listening is part of the mentor's observation. Body language and tone of voice can help to confirm or refute statements to which attention is drawn that could form the basis for new questions. For example, the mentor can ask why the mentee is happy or sad when he touches on a certain topic, or why the mentee sighs or shows signs of restlessness during a conversation. This is precisely why the

analogue language of a conversation has a completely different quality from the digital written language, which consists of signs alone. Summarising, paraphrasing, confirming and asking questions help to get to the real meaning of the conversation. This way of working converts the therapeutic element of the conversation into a teaching aid that contributes to empowerment and fresh thinking.

Reflecting team – a method that promotes empowerment

The reflecting team method originated in the field of therapy, where it has been developed into a useful tool in family therapy (Andersen 2005). However, since the school system does not engage in therapy, the issues will be different. We view this method as a tool for strengthening and justifying work processes, and we will return to how this is done below. Through our way of envisaging the method being used in an education context, we convert it into a mentoring tool for teaching practice. Our experience so far has yielded interesting information about whether this is possible (Sörmo & Sträng, 2015). Even in therapeutic contexts, the method is primarily used as a mentoring method that place the mentee at the centre for the mentoring with a view to promoting empowerment (Skjerve and Reichelt, 2009). It is not the mentor's help that is important here, but how the mentee finds a way of resolving his own challenges based on input from others.

The invisible curtain – furnishing for reflection

Skjerve and Reichelt (2009) refer to different ways of doing this, both by the team proposing possible solutions and by the team being located in another room. In our context, it has been important to emphasise how the mentoring room is furnished and where the different participants are placed during the mentoring session. In order to emphasise the importance of the mentee relating to the mentor, we have placed them opposite each other. We have often placed a table between them to help them feel comfortable and to respect their personal space. Originally, the reflecting team was placed in another room, from which they could see and hear the mentoring. This practice is still used in some contexts (Skjerve and Reichelt, 2009). In our model, we have brought the team into the same room and placed it in such a way that it does not distract the mentee more than necessary. The mentee can hear the team, but cannot talk or discuss with them. In a way, an imaginary curtain is drawn between the mentee and the team during the session. The mentor has the mentee's undivided attention. It is also up to the mentor to involve the reflecting team once the mentoring session has progressed so far that it can be interesting to hear their observations and thoughts about what has been said. The 'curtain' is then drawn aside, and they are all together in the same room (Andersen 2005). During this conversation, the mentee has time to listen and hear how what has been discussed in the session so far has been perceived, but still without being allowed to talk to the reflecting team.

Use of reflecting teams by school management

The most important aspect of practising the teaching profession is to create meaning, both for the students and for the teachers who contribute to learning. It is easy for teachers to become dispirited when their workload is increasing, the freedom of action to deal with restlessness is limited, and it feels uncomfortable to ask others to intervene or help. The road from dispiritedness to burnout and despondency may be short. It is important to students to have a teacher who is capable of using all his qualities, both his professional expertise and his ability to create good relations and working conditions for the students and himself. That is why the teacher needs confirmation that what he is doing is helping the students in their learning and that the boundaries that he sets are in line with the rules for behaviour and manners that the authorities expect. It is the school management's job to facilitate such opportunities and to take responsibility for it. This could mean facilitating cooperation between teachers and putting together functional teams. If such cooperation is also concerned with creating a basis for preparedness by fostering empowerment, the teacher team can use the reflecting team method to develop this. This could in turn relieve the school management, which is responsible for the schools' educational activities.

Time-related obstacles

What obstacles can a school encounter when working on fresh thinking in its day-to-day activities? The school system is tailored to a pattern where time is a dominant factor. The students have their allocated time for teaching and other activities, and the teachers are bound by the duties defined in their employment contracts. Teachers are often alone with a large group of students and have little opportunity to create room for reflection and mentoring. Many teachers find that they do not have time for tasks other than those for which time has been allocated within the available timeframe. Most teachers are also allocated preparation and assessment time, which is tailored to the working hours at their disposal. Teachers often feel that further and continuing education and cooperation with parents and other public agencies must take precedence over new ideas and reform work. The time factor is often cited as a stressor in relation to all the duties that a teacher's day-to-day work involves. For the school management, it is also a matter of finding time for mentoring and follow-up of the school's many challenges. The school owner expects reporting and contributions to school development. In addition, time is also needed to deal with parents and guardians and to resolve conflicts between students, their families and school staff. The pressure from the school owner adds to the pressures of day-to-day challenges. There is a considerable risk that the school manager will end up in a kind of hostage situation, caught between these forces (Sträng, Sørmo, & Navestad, 2016).

Conclusion – strengthened professionalism

On the basis of observation, logs and interviews, we see that participants have benefitted considerably from these processes in terms of empowerment (Sørmo & Sträng, 2015). Participants in individual mentoring sessions and reflecting teams claim that the reflection and mentoring have enabled them to meet new challenges and strengthened their professionalism (Sørmo, 2015). Experience from the reflection process expressed during mentoring has strengthened the participants' confidence that they have developed their teaching more than before and contributed to openness and cooperation in their own work team. Some have also stated that it feels liberating to have the opportunity to talk about their work situation and hear their colleagues talk positively about the things that are important to them in their day-to-day work. All the participants consider the experience a positive one, even when they have touched on challenging and emotionally stressful topics. In the logs, they also show that they have gained in terms of personal strength from being asked about their own opinions and that this has helped them to be braver and think more professionally. The logs also show that the teachers feel that their students end up with better a teacher at the end of the project.

According to Bateson, everything is communication (Bateson 1972). Not all communication is equally expedient, however. In this context, we see that communication can also represent an obstacle if it causes anxiety and misunder-standings. Bateson's famous words that information is 'a difference which makes a difference' also means that some differences are more important than others (Andersen, 1991, 2005). Communication that expresses what the mentor really intended therefore makes a fundamental and significant difference. Using the reflecting team method can make it easier to find the strength to justify actions that have been taken and to plan future measures in an adequate manner. This opens up opportunities for fresh thinking, which in turn helps to strengthen the mentee's professional role in kindergartens and schools. We have seen that this helps teachers to regain confidence in their own strength and find new solutions and possibilities, and enables them to plan and execute teaching activities and function well as part of a team. Based on our material from projects carried out in primary schools, reflecting team mentoring appears to have a beneficial effect on such stressors (Sørmo 2015). The teachers find that they are facing the same challenges, and the mentoring is therefore very helpful. Time is about organising their days so that a mentoring session is possible. In light of our experience that reflecting mentoring promotes empowerment (Sørmo & Sträng, 2015), it would be interesting to see whether such mentoring would also be effective during students' periods of teaching practice in terms of strengthening the students' confidence that they can do even better in the teacher education programme and, eventually, also in the teaching profession.

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