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Teacher Vulnerability: understanding its moral and political roots

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ABSTRACT *Many teachers experience a sense of vulnerability in their work. Analysing primary school teachers' professional biographies, the author reconstructed the main sources of this vulnerability: administrative or policy measures; professional relationships in the school; limits to teachers' efficacy. Further analysis of the meaning this vulnerability has for teachers revealed its moral and political roots. Vulnerability implies the feeling that one's professional identity and moral integrity are questioned. Coping with it therefore implies political action in order to (re)gain the social recognition of one's professional self and restore the necessary workplace conditions for good job performance. Finally, autobiographical reflection and story telling are suggested as effective strategies to deal successfully with the sense of vulnerability.*

INTRODUCTION

There is more to teaching than thorough subject knowledge and technical teaching skills. When teachers are asked about what they find motivating or satisfying in their jobs, they spontaneously refer to feelings of joy, fascination, pride, wonder and enthusiasm, resulting from the fact that they work with 'human material', as they often call it. Teachers' talk about their work immediately reveals that emotions are at the heart of teaching.

This emotional dimension, however, also has another side. Teachers do not experience only positive feelings. Teaching also implies feelings of powerlessness, frustration, disappointment, disillusion, guilt and even anger and fear. In this article I will explore teachers' feelings of *vulnerability*. This vulnerability refers to one way in which teachers experience their interactions with other actors in the school and the community. It thus encompasses not only emotions (feelings), but also cognitive processes (perception, interpretation).

Although I will argue that for teachers vulnerability constitutes a significant experience, I want to stress that this is only one way in which teachers can live in their job situation. When I discussed this theme with teachers, they often expressed embarrassment, because they felt that it was as if they, as teachers, were seen as pitiful victims, looking for compassion. This is not the idea I want

to present in this article, neither do I want to reinforce the negative image of teachers that has recently been promoted by certain media. However, vulnerability in teaching is real and profoundly affects teachers' job satisfaction and the quality of their professional performance. Understanding this vulnerability is crucial for a proper understanding of teachers and the development of their teaching. I wish to contribute to this understanding.

After briefly describing the research context that provides the empirical basis of my argument, I will present the different sources of teacher vulnerability, as identified in my study of teachers' professional biographies. Using one teacher's case, I will move the analysis a step further and argue that the feeling of vulnerability has moral and political roots in the workplace conditions of the teacher. In order to reduce the negative effects of teacher vulnerability and to open up perspectives for the development of successful coping strategies, it is essential to acknowledge and understand this moral and political dimension in teachers' emotional experience of their work.

VULNERABILITY: A THEME IN TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL BIOGRAPHIES

Vulnerability turned out to be one of the recurring themes in the narrative, retrospective accounts experienced Flemish primary school teachers gave of their careers. I collected these *professional biographies* in a study on teachers' professional development, using a narrative biographical approach. One of the major aims of this study was the reconstruction of teachers' *personal interpretive frameworks* as the mental sediment of their career experiences. Throughout their career experiences teachers develop a subjective 'lens' through which they perceive their job situation, give meaning to it and act in it. In other words, I used teachers' career stories to understand their way of thinking about teaching and themselves as teachers. Within this personal interpretive framework, I could distinguish two important, interwoven domains: the *professional self* (a teacher's conceptions about her/himself as a teacher) and the *subjective educational theory* (the personal system of a teacher's knowledge and beliefs about teaching). The professional self could be further differentiated conceptually into five components: self-image (descriptive component), self-esteem (evaluative component), job motivation (conative component), task perception (normative component) and future perspective (Kelchtermans, 1993a,b, 1994) [1].

The teachers' sense of vulnerability became particularly clear in the narrative accounts of so-called 'critical incidents' (Measor, 1985): events in teachers' careers that were experienced as 'turning points' or 'key experiences', having a significant personal meaning for the teacher. Critical incidents question the status quo, the normal daily routine and force teachers to rethink and to reconsider it. As such, critical incidents always provoke emotions of distress, unease, doubt and uncertainty [2].

For the purpose of this article, I 'revisited' the career stories in a second,

hermeneutical analysis. This took the form of different cycles of 'close interpretive reading', guided by three questions:

- what are the sources of vulnerability in teachers' stories?
- what does the experience of vulnerability mean to the teachers in terms of their personal interpretive frameworks?
- how do teachers cope with it in their specific job situations?

SOURCES OF TEACHERS' VULNERABILITY

The analysis of the professional biographies showed that a sense of vulnerability can be provoked by a wide variety of causes or sources. Three major categories of sources, at different levels of the educational system, could be distinguished. At the micro-level (the classroom), teachers experience vulnerability in their struggle with the limits of their teaching impact on pupils' learning. Principal, colleagues and parents constitute a second potential source of vulnerability at the level of the school. Beyond the school, (local) educational policy makers are a third source of vulnerability. I will discuss these three sources now in more detail, starting with the last one.

Educational Administration/Policy

Policy decisions by (local) educational administrators (e.g. school board) were an important source of teacher vulnerability. This was best illustrated from the biographical accounts of teachers' *lifelong assignment*. When starting their career, getting a tenured position in a school was a high priority concern to almost all the teachers (Kelchtermans, 1993a, p. 452). Once they had this assignment their job situation was secure (statutory civil servant). However, to get their assignment teachers often had to do more than good classroom teaching: taking up commitments in the local community (e.g. involvement in the local youth movement; directing the youth choir) and using mediation and (kinship) relations. This is clearly illustrated in the career story of Chris, a first grade teacher. He recalls how he worked like hell after he got his first job. Since the school wanted to attract more pupils, extra services were provided to the parents (e.g. sport activities on Wednesday afternoon, when schools were normally closed). Chris took on all these jobs, together with the organisation of fundraising activities for the school. 'Those were the days of "pressure to perform". You always had to be prepared and willing. Always working, taking up responsibilities....All because of that assignment. I wanted that assignment at all price'. He even went to do small jobs of repair and maintenance at the houses of the principal and the school board's president. In exchange for those efforts, he not only got his own assignment, but also managed to get his wife, a nursery school teacher, an assignment in the same school.

As long as they are not tenured, teachers are objectively vulnerable to the decisional power of the school board (e.g. forced changes in grade and job

insecurity; see also Blase, 1988, pp. 133–134). This is a kind of formal, statutory vulnerability. When, however, teachers start doubting their own professional qualities, because the assignment does not occur, or if they feel that the assignment is purposely denied for whatever reasons, then this formal fact becomes subjectively meaningful [3]. Individuals wonder what they are doing wrong or in what respect they are not meeting the never-explicitly-stated expectations of the school board. Nadine, a fourth grade teacher, had to wait for several years before she got her assignment:

Yes, I did have to wait quite long. I didn't got any support from the principal. We didn't seem to fit....I saw my colleagues getting along well with her, but I never managed to develop that kind of relation with her. Well, yes, then you start asking yourself: 'What am I doing wrong?' and that really put a damper on my enthusiasm as a young teacher.

This uncertainty, the lack of clear reasons and norms, makes teachers feel very vulnerable.

Another clear example from the career stories concerns decisions about *school merger*, especially when teachers were denied any voice in these decisions and their implementation. School merger processes are often regarded by the administrators (i.e. school board members) as strictly technical, organisational matters. They more or less consciously overlook what these processes mean to the people working in the school, in terms of changing interpersonal relations, professional culture (atmosphere, values and norms), workplace conditions, etc. Because these changes heavily affect teachers' daily workplace context and conditions, they are personally and emotionally involved. The sense that decisions with such impact are taken 'over their heads' provokes intense feelings of disappointment and vulnerability. Teachers realize that they lack control over important workplace conditions and at the same time feel underestimated personally and professionally. Moni, a teacher who had been working for her entire career in the same school, is deeply shocked by the board's decision to merge with the boys' school:

We were treated as if we were nobody. Just a number on the pay roll. And, I mean, I have been working in this school for so long. I really hold to that school. I would have gone through fire and water for that school and then....That decision....that treatment, it really sticks in my throat....Things will never be the same again.

This example reveals more than just the absence of participation structures or the consciousness of one's lack of control over workplace conditions. It is not only a matter of feeling ignored or depreciated as a professional member of the organisation. The vulnerability also lies in experiencing the *loss of something professionally valuable*. In Moni's case, this is the loss of what Strike calls 'goods of relationships', namely 'those that human beings experience through their relationships with one another, such as caring, love, friendship, and community'

(Strike, 1990, p. 216). She believes that the cherished collegial school climate of the girls' school will disappear because of the merger and 'it will never be the same...'.

Policy decisions at the macro-level were not systematically included in my study. The recent policy of the Flemish Ministry of Education is characterised by a strong move toward decentralisation and giving more financial responsibility to the local level. This is, however, accompanied by the implementation of new procedures for quality control (i.e. by the inspectorate), prescribed educational basic goals (minimal curriculum) and financial cutbacks which threaten jobs. Although further research is needed, it seems plausible that these policy measures also contribute to teachers' feelings of vulnerability at the local level.

Professional Relationships in the School

A second source of vulnerability concerns *teachers' relationships in the school* with the principal, parents and to a lesser degree with colleagues. Authors on the micro-politics of schools (e.g. Ball, 1987, 1994; Blase, 1991; Altrichter & Salzgeber, 1995) criticise the dominant systems theory approach in organisational theory, because it holds unrealistic assumptions on rational efficiency and overestimates the importance of structural variables and goal consensus among the members of an organisation. Schools are much more characterised by disagreement over goals. Principals, teachers and occasionally parents do not necessarily all act from the same, commonly held vision of what 'good education' is (see below: Nicole's case). Very often team members have different opinions about the best way to 'be a school'. This lack of consensus is further enhanced by the 'whole set of often contradictory demands and expectations from outside audiences and agencies' (Ball, 1987, p. 13). In other words, teachers find themselves in a micropolitical organisational reality in which individuals and/or (sub)groups 'seek to use their resources of power and influence to further their interests' (Hoyle, 1982, p. 88).

These interests can be thought of in terms of *desired workplace conditions*. Different members of the school strive for or try to maintain different workplace conditions (Kelchtermans & Vandenberghe, 1996). These workplace conditions include *material needs* (e.g. decisions about which new teaching handbook should be used) or *resources* (time, information, funds, infrastructure facilities) and *organizational and social interests* (e.g. procedures, roles and positions in the organisation, types of interpersonal relations). Another group of workplace conditions that are always at stake, include what Ball calls '*self interests*' (Ball, 1987, pp. 16–17), referring to the teacher's professional self (task perception, self-esteem, social recognition, etc.) and its place in the social network. A final, but very important, workplace condition concerns the '*definition of the organisation*', i.e. the processes of social construction determining what norms and goals get acknowledged as legitimate within the school. Because of the intrinsically value-laden nature of educational practices, control over these definition pro-

cesses is decisive for the 'cultural' workplace context in the school (Schein, 1985, p. 6; Staessens, 1993).

Vulnerability occurs when teachers feel *powerless* or politically ineffective in the micro-political struggles about their desired workplace conditions (Kelchtermans & Vandenberghe, 1996). An extreme example of this is recalled by Kurt about a Catholic school he worked in during his first year as a teacher. Life and teaching in that school were authoritarian, very strictly organised and managed by an extensive set of rules and prescriptions. Teachers had to move through the curriculum in perfect parallel.

It was awful. I hated working there. That was a school with military discipline, for pupils and for teachers. I simply had to teach the lessons my colleague gave me. He photocopied his preparations and I could start. No creativity allowed, no personal style. Nothing, just do as you're told. I still can't believe that such a school existed.

The demands about teaching methodology and treatment of the pupils were almost completely the opposite of what Kurt believed in as a beginning teacher. However, as an individual he felt powerless to change things and he was very happy when he 'got rescued' by a job offer in another school.

Other respondents mentioned their powerlessness in the face of *gossip* or *envy* from colleagues (e.g. because of their commitment to innovative teaching methods). Criticism from parents can also provoke vulnerability (see below: Nicole's case).

Teachers' vulnerability was further enhanced by the *high visibility of their professional activities*. In spite of teachers' relative isolation in classrooms, they could be observed in action by their colleagues, principal and/or parents, especially when they also lived in the village in which their school was located. Their job situation could be characterised as 'living in a fishbowl' (Blase, 1988, p. 135). This is one reason why the teachers in our study spontaneously and frequently mentioned order, discipline and authority over the pupils (e.g. keeping order and discipline, making pupils be silent), especially when moving from playground to classroom (or vice versa) or on extra-mural activities.

Kurt (Grade 5): We have had quite some discussions about discipline recently. The principal accused me of having no authority with my pupils. But I don't agree with that. In my classroom they're silent. If not, I couldn't teach those 11 year olds. So, when I am teaching I see to it that they're quiet and that is no problem. But on the playground or in the corridor....Well, and she (the principal) would say: 'What do you do to those kids that they become so naughty when in your class. Rascals always turn out to be pupils from the fifth...'. But she doesn't realize that kids change around the age of eleven, when they enter puberty...

In other words, Kurt is held responsible by the principal for the 'naughty' behaviour of his pupils. The principal argues that kids become naughty from the

moment they come to the fifth grade, so the teacher of that grade should, at least in part, be held responsible and thus be seen as professionally in default. Kurt defends himself by referring to developmental psychological arguments. What upsets him is the injustice of depreciating his professionalism as a teacher because of his pupils' misbehaviour in school.

Disciplinary efficacy is especially visible to others. Teachers feel that judgements about their professional competence by these 'others' often rely too heavily on this visible part of their job. They experience this as unjust, because this is only one part of the job and so too limited as a basis for assessing their professional quality, especially when compared with the full demands and responsibilities teachers actually have.

Limits to Teachers' Efficacy

The third source of vulnerability that could be identified in teachers' career stories is at the classroom level. One of the major professional realities teachers have to come to terms with is the *limits of their professional efficacy*: teaching activities only determine a part of student learning outcomes. Many other factors, over which they have little or no control, determine pupil learning. Several teachers recalled their sense of disappointment and powerlessness, especially at the beginning of their careers, toward pupils who did not manage to learn the curriculum and whom they could not help properly. Leo refers to this 'helplessness', recalling problems with one pupil during his first year of teaching:

This kid in second grade could not write at all. He could only make some curls on paper. That was all. And his parents absolutely didn't want to send him to a school for special education. I sweated blood in trying to help him. But it was no use....I don't know what further happened to the kid. But I didn't manage to teach him any writing. It made me feel pretty frustrated, helpless....

In their pupils' failures, these teachers felt that they were falling short themselves. In spite of their efforts, they had not been able to make a difference. The more committed beginning teachers are, the bigger the risk of this disappointment. Dealing with this professional reality implies learning to balance job commitment and personal distance. Unrealistic expectations about their influence can lead individuals to disappointment, demotivation or even burnout. Equally, unwitting cynicism ('You can't make a difference') may lead to reduced commitment, lack of job satisfaction and negative feelings about one's own professional competence.

A variant of these stories concerns pupils with whom the teacher did not really succeed in 'making contact' or 'building a relation'. This variant is especially prominent among teachers with a strong caring ethic, who place high

value on a trustful, positive relation with the children as a major condition for successful development and good learning.

Marc: You know, a terrible thing is kids who don't let you get into personal contact. I mean, who close themselves for you. It's 'you're there and I am here'. You can't get any closer. Well, if I can't get to them, can't develop a relationship, things just don't work as they should. That is very frustrating. You remain a stranger, an outsider....

This experience often leads to feelings of guilt (see Hargreaves, 1994, p. 141 ff.) and personal failure [4]. Here too, teachers have to learn to cope with the limits of their efficacy.

In these experiences, teachers are confronted not only with the limits of their impact, but also with the limits of their professional knowledge and skills. In other words, they realise that their professional competences (knowledge, skills), although they can certainly always be improved and developed, never provide a technical guarantee for success. Teaching and educating children is a complex process that is only partly affected and determined by intentional educational interventions. Whatever effort and good intentions teachers put into their work, successful outcomes are uncertain.

In this 'vulnerability to inefficacy' one also sees the specific nature of teachers' professional knowledge base (subjective educational theory) exemplified. This subjective educational theory is a personally organised set of knowledge and beliefs that guides teachers' professional behaviour. For the teacher his/her subjective educational theory has a subjective truth and legitimacy because these knowledge and beliefs have proved to work in practice (practicality ethic, Doyle & Ponder, 1977–1978). This 'knowledge' is further strongly affected by the task perception (teachers' personal, normative professional programme, their value choices and ethics). However, as experiential and value laden knowledge, it constitutes a weak basis from which to defend practice, if this is attacked or questioned by others.

THE MORAL AND POLITICAL ROOTS OF VULNERABILITY

The different sources of vulnerability that were identified from an analysis of the career stories remain very close to the content of these stories. However, moving the analysis one step further and getting beyond the direct events or interactions that caused the feelings of vulnerability, I came to understand that within this apparent diversity and variety, a common pattern can be discerned. Vulnerability for teachers always has political and moral roots. In other words, the emotions in teaching are linked to matters of interests and values. In order to argue this I will first present a more extended fragment of one teacher's career story. It concerns a critical incident in the biography of Nicole, a sixth grade teacher, in which the *interplay of the different sources* of vulnerability becomes clear. Nicole's case will be used as an illustrative exemplar to explain the moral and political roots of teacher vulnerability.

A Fragment of Nicole's Story

Nicole had been teaching the sixth grade in the Nightingale, a suburban Catholic primary school, for about 20 years when she experienced a very frustrating conflict with the mother of a pupil. On the day of the Regional Testing [5] one pupil did not show up. She was said to be ill. Afterwards it emerged that the girl's mother had forbidden her to do the test, because Nicole had not completely finished the exercise book for mathematics. The mother had judged that her daughter was not well prepared for the test, although the girl was quite a good student. At the same time and without ever mentioning the matter directly to Nicole, the mother informed the inspector and even 'phoned the Ministry of Education about Nicole's professional shortcoming. Further, she launched it as gossip-rumour in the parents' committee and in the local community. The incident happened just after a new principal, a former colleague in the Nightingale, was appointed. He reacted with a 'wait-and-see' attitude. This hesitation in showing his explicit and unconditional support was perceived by Nicole as a form of distrust. She felt that her reputation as a teacher was threatened, but at the same time found herself unable to defend her case.

Nevertheless, Nicole had a clear professional justification for the situation. That year she had spent more time than usual on some geometrical subject topics (calculation of scale, volume, area). By a rich variety of learning activities, like building maquettes and calculating the amount of carpet necessary to cover the classroom floor, Nicole had tried to give her pupils better opportunities really to learn and understand this curriculum topic. From her experience she knew that every year these curriculum elements caused trouble for several pupils.

Her husband was very angry about all this and insisted that she should put a complaint for defamation against the woman. Nicole did not want to go that far, but still, she felt 'deeply unhappy' at the incident.

...my self esteem was very low. It really hurt me to find myself working on gaining back my professional confidence after all these years of experience (...). I started doubting about myself. Was I wrong in deciding to spend more time on these difficult calculation problems? Was I really the proper teacher I believed myself to be?

The experience left her upset and troubled for months, even after the principal and the inspector had explicitly expressed their support for and confidence in Nicole's competence as a teacher.

For several years afterwards, I experienced the Regional Testing as an evaluation of my professional competence. It always was a relief to see my pupils getting good results. Also their results in secondary school became very important to me.

The intensity of this incident and the experienced vulnerability were very well illustrated by one of Nicole's 'countering' activities.

You know, one year later, a pupil from that girl's classgroup passed by to show me the fine marks he got in his Secondary School. I took his mark-book, made an enlarged photocopy and hung it in the front window of my class, so that everybody passing by could see it.

For a long time Nicole felt the need to 'prove herself' as a competent teacher in the eyes of others (parents, colleagues, principal, inspectorate).

The Moral behind the Emotional

This critical incident from Nicole's career story illustrates how the different sources of vulnerability often work together and reinforce each other. The school board had just appointed a new principal who hesitated to back up Nicole in the conflict. The mother made the incident expand into the local community. She also informed the regional inspector and even the National Ministry of Education. Her personal disagreement with Nicole was thus made very public.

However, all these elements do not explain why the incident made Nicole feel so vulnerable, uncertain, full of self-doubts. After all, she had a tenured position, so her job security was not in danger. No sanctions were taken against her. Her colleagues sympathised. In time, the principal and the inspector backed her up. Nicole could account very well for her decisions. Notwithstanding, the deep emotional effect was real. As she recalled the incident during the interview, Nicole lived through the emotions again. It had really been a significant, deeply moving experience.

So the question remains: why did the incident have such a profound and disturbing effect on this experienced, highly committed teacher? In order to answer this question we must understand *what the experience meant to the teacher*. What was at stake for her? This implies carefully listening to and interpreting the narrative account, in the context of the entire professional biography. 'Giving trust and being trusted' was a recurring theme in Nicole's career story and an important element in her personal interpretive framework. Several fragments of her life history exemplify this (e.g. from childhood, from her induction period as a beginning teacher). From this background we come to see that the lack of trust by the mother constituted the heart of the experience for Nicole. In essence, this lack of trust meant to her that her *professional self and personal integrity were under question*. The girl's mother questioned Nicole's professional decisions and thus publicly challenged her reputation as a *proper teacher*. It is this attack that caused the feelings of vulnerability and made the conflict into a critical incident.

Was Nicole right in spending more time on the geometrical subjects with which a significant number of the pupils had problems? Did her decision harm the individual pupil's chances of good results on the Regional Test? (The results of that Test had no effect on the girl's possible choice of study career.) And if so, should Nicole have made another decision? At first sight these appear to be

straightforward, even rather banal, questions about technical matters (decisions about teaching time and curriculum priorities). However, this technical discussion conceals a *moral* conflict. The crucial question in the incident was: did Nicole's decision to offer the entire class extra learning opportunities do injustice to the educational needs of the individual pupil? Put this way, the incident reveals its *moral dimension*: it is a conflict between two competing ideas (values, norms) about the nature of 'good teaching'. Or, in Greenfield's words, between two 'moral orientations', a moral orientation being 'a point of view or reference point for action, influence, or decision that is rooted in an understanding of and a commitment to what is in the best interests of children from an educational and developmental perspective' (Greenfield, 1991, p. 161).

From her moral orientation, Nicole accepts her *responsibility* as a teacher and makes a choice. Her guiding principle is that all pupils should get optimal learning opportunities and thus extra efforts have to be made in favour of the weaker students. The mother, however, challenges this equity norm by insisting on her daughter's individual rights. As Hoyle and John argue in their analysis of teachers' professionalism: 'The teacher's commitment to equity, difficult though it may be to achieve in practice, is in conflict with the parent's understandable desire for preferential treatment' (Hoyle & John, 1995, p. 119).

Teachers find themselves permanently forced to make decisions with moral consequences in their dealing with the multiple, diffuse and even contradictory demands by their different clients (pupils, parents, community) (Hoyle & John, 1995, p. 113 ff.; Hargreaves, 1995, p. 15). Hargreaves aptly characterises the complexity of teachers' moral choices:

Attending to the moral dimensions of teaching usually involves distinguishing between better and worse courses of action, rather than right and wrong ones. There are no clear rules of thumb, no useful universal principles for deciding what to do. (...) They (the teachers) must live their moral lives in the swamp, (...) especially when moral certainties grounded in tradition or science are collapsing and people must rely on their own reflective resources as a basis for moral judgment. (Hargreaves, 1995, p. 15)

In the reality of classroom and school, teachers thus have no choice but to act: to decide on what to do and then do it (Loewenberg-Ball & Wilson, 1996, p. 187). In short, although teaching demands daily decisions with moral consequences, teachers can seldom rely on commonly held and acknowledged ethical principles. And even when these seem to exist, teachers themselves have to make the transfer from the abstract principle to the demands of concrete 'real life' situations. Moreover, this transfer is far from easy, especially at a time when, as Hargreaves argues (Hargreaves, 1995), post-modernity has undermined many accepted certainties.

In fact, for responsible decisions in these moral matters, teachers can rely only on their task perception, the subjective, normative professional programme of basic goals and commitments that is part of their professional self. This also

means that the teachers' professional self, including their self-esteem and the moral 'correctness' of their task perception, are at stake in discussions about being 'a proper teacher'. 'Proper teaching', and its social recognition, include not only the mastery and skilful application of knowledge and skills, but also the capacity to make sound judgements. Hoyle and John rightly state that 'despite a general agreement on the basic skills and knowledge which teachers need, there remain important areas in which teachers have to decide between a range of pedagogical options' (Hoyle & John, 1995, pp. 122–123). It is clear that teachers' basic value positions and choices (task perception) guide the decisions between different alternatives in concrete situations. To Nicole, for example, 'giving trust and being trusted' ranks highly in her task perception and as such constitutes an important guideline for her professional behaviour and decisions. Teachers' choices between pedagogical options are thus not merely technical. Rather they are moral in character, because they involve the need to do justice to children's educational needs. It is not hard to see that this moral dimension in teaching contributes a great deal to teachers' vulnerability. This is especially the case because even in technical matters about effective teaching strategies and pupils' learning conditions, teachers often lack a solid technical or scientific knowledge base on which to ground their decisions and their accounts of their practice.

Thus, when a teacher feels attacked about 'being a proper teacher', as is the case in Nicole's story, s/he has little solid ground from which to mount an effective defense. Yet, because threats to 'being a proper teacher' are so closely connected to one's personal and professional identity, they arouse intense emotional reactions. This moral base to teachers' vulnerability and its accompanying feelings were present in all the accounts in our study, whatever the source of the vulnerability.

The Political in the Moral: politics of identity

'Being a proper teacher' implies the social recognition of both one's technical skills and competences and one's moral integrity. It is a very crucial element in teachers' professional self (self-esteem and task perception). At the same time, this recognition by colleagues and principal, but also by pupils, parents and administrators, constitutes a highly valued, non-material, social workplace condition. Teachers strive to establish and maintain it and as such it is a professional interest to them. Blase & Anderson also observe that

the development of a political perspective in teachers stemmed primarily from a sense of vulnerability to criticism and threat from others. (...) A political perspective is developed to *influence* students and parents on substantive issues and to *protect* the teacher from student and parental criticism. (Blase & Anderson, 1995, pp. 50–51; their italics)

However, because this recognition depends on others' perceptions, it is very vulnerable to contestation. It can be questioned by others and eventually withdrawn. This is what happened to Nicole and in this light we can understand the profound meaning for her of this incident, as well as her intense reaction to it. The way in which Nicole copes with the situation can thus be understood as a form of *politics of identity*, a struggle for recognition by others and for self-recognition (Calhoun, 1994, p. 20). She engaged in intentional actions or strategies to regain a sense of the professional self that was recognized and morally valued by others. This recognition was a necessary condition, if she was to perform her job duties both effectively and with feelings of satisfaction, joy and personal fulfilment. These feelings are themselves important because good teaching always involves commitment as a person. In teaching there cannot be a strict separation between the professional and the personal self (Nias, 1989, pp. 202–203).

Put more generally, the experience of vulnerability has not only moral roots, but also political consequences. The threat, or actual loss, of valued workplace conditions engages teachers in struggles for their maintenance or (re)establishment. Nicole's symbolic 'counter-attack', by hanging out the mark book, is an example of such a struggle. As Blase concludes in his study on the micro-politics of schools, 'Issues and processes that challenge basic educational and professional values (...) are likely to provoke significant levels of political activity in schools' (Blase, 1991, p. 244). Teachers' vulnerability has to be understood in *micro-political* terms. The experience of vulnerability includes feelings of powerlessness or political inefficacy, i.e. of an inability to create the workplace conditions one considers necessary for good job performance and job satisfaction (Kelchtermans & Vandenberghe, 1996). These workplace conditions, whether material, organisational, social or cultural, always affect teachers' professional selves. So, teachers' political actions always to some extent involve the politics of identity.

A PERSPECTIVE BEYOND VULNERABILITY

In this article I have focused on teachers' experience of vulnerability. After describing the different sources of that vulnerability, as they were identified in the career stories of experienced Flemish primary school teachers. I used one exemplary case to explore this vulnerability in greater depth. The analysis of Nicole's case shows how trivial incidents can provoke intense feelings for teachers. The same is true for all the different sources of vulnerability that were identified above. The *basic structure* in vulnerability is always one of feeling that one's professional identity and moral integrity, as part of being 'a proper teacher', are questioned and that valued workplace conditions are thereby threatened or lost. Coping with this vulnerability therefore implies political actions, aimed at (re)gaining the social recognition of one's professional self and restoring the necessary workplace conditions for good job performance [6].

Because of its link to the professional self of individual teachers, vulnerability is inherent in the teaching job and as such never completely avoidable. I think that it is necessary to acknowledge this and to try to reduce its effects. From the experience of collecting and working with teachers' autobiographical accounts of their careers I have come to believe that more systematic forms of *autobiographical reflection* and *storytelling* can effectively contribute to successful coping. Through autobiographical reflection teachers can come to understand how particular events and experiences are situated in the 'story' of their careers. The experience of vulnerability is always a particular experience, in a particular context, by a particular person. This person has his/her own biography and an individual interpretive framework, resulting from his/her meaningful dealing with the events and experiences of his/her personal and professional life. Understanding vulnerability in the context of one's professional life implies taking seriously one's own career story and the particularities of context. In other words, whether or in what circumstances the potential sources of vulnerability actually provoke this feeling is heavily determined by the social, historical and biographical context, as well as by the perceptions of the person involved (personal interpretive framework).

From my work with teachers (as an interviewer, a supervisor and an in-service trainer) I have learnt that teachers are very willing to tell their career stories and to share them, provided that a psychologically safe and inviting context is created. These collaborative sharings of stories could become exemplars of the 'genealogy of contexts' that Goodson argues for as an essential complement to the 'narratives of action', which still dominate most research and development work from a narrative-biographical perspective (Goodson, 1992, p. 240). During and by means of autobiographical reflection and the transformation of these reflections into a narrative whole (that is their career 'story'), teachers come to grips with their experiences and the meaning that these have in their lives. Narrative reconstruction and teachers' willingness to tell their stories have a great potential for empowering teacher or staff development, because they provide 'meaningful intellectual, social, and emotional engagement with ideas, with materials, and with colleagues both in and out of teaching' (Little, 1993, p. 138). In order to understand teachers' vulnerability and its impact on their lives and careers, it is necessary carefully to 'listen beyond' the descriptive account of events and to move to the moral and political layers of meaning. In this way too the 'author' of the story can come to deeper or even new understandings of his/her career experiences in general and of vulnerability in particular. One could say that it allows them to 'read' their story of vulnerability as a chapter or a sub-story in the 'book' of their career, encompassing a whole web of stories. Sharing one's way of 'reading' (interpreting) with others and listening to their stories of experiencing and coping with vulnerability opens up perspectives for alternative 'readings' of one's own experiences. For example, it may help the individual to understand the particularities of person and context, instead of falling back upon more deterministic readings of the experience (e.g. 'It's is my character', 'It results from my education as a girl').

However, in order to reach the perspectives that facilitate empowering action, those who share their stories should push their reflection beyond technical matters of knowledge and skills to the moral and political roots of the stories. Only then will the basic moral choices and commitments which underlie and drive the individual's teaching and professional identity be revealed. These moral choices and commitments are also political in that they lead to strategies and actions to influence teachers' job situations. This influence can be conservative, directed towards maintaining the status quo, or innovative, directed toward changing the situation.

Teachers' awareness of the moral and political base of their professional behaviour can help them to defend their decisions as thoughtful and responsible, thus providing a more solid basis for their accountability. It can further contribute to teachers' understanding and delineating of their professional responsibilities, e.g. helping them to balance commitment and expected impact on the pupils in order to reduce the vulnerability stemming from inefficacy and from unclear goals (Nias, 1989, p. 193).

This awareness seems especially important in present turbulent educational policy contexts which result in increasing and often contradictory demands on schools and teachers. In times where, as post-modernism teaches, the big, encompassing 'stories' lose their power as sources of existential meaning, people are thrown back on their individual stories, personal reflections and judgments. Even though such individuality may give a sense of personal autonomy and freedom, it also implies high vulnerability to feelings of loneliness, uncertainty and doubts. Acknowledging and understanding one's own career story, especially in the company of others, is one step toward effective coping with these uncertainties. It provides a perspective from which to move beyond the stressful threat of vulnerability and make teaching individually and collegially a personally meaningful, experientially rich and enjoyable job.

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NOTES

- [1] The data were collected in 1990 and 1991 in four Flemish primary schools from 10 teachers, with between 15 and 25 years of teaching experience. From every school at least two teachers were included in the research group in order to get triangulated information about the school context. The procedure for data collection included a cumulative cycle of semi-structured biographical interviews, enriched with data from school and classroom observations and interviews with key informants (inspector, principal). Qualitative within-case and between-

- case analyses were used to interpret the data. For a detailed description of the research methodology see Kelchtermans (1994). The conceptual framework and major outcomes are presented extensively in Kelchtermans (1993a,b).
- [2] In the German psychological 'Kritische Ereignisforschung' (research on critical incidents) this 'emotional non-indifference' ('emotionale Nicht-Gleichgültigkeit') is considered as a constitutive and distinctive characteristic that makes these events appear as pregnant and striking in the ongoing stream of daily experiences (Filipp, 1990, p. 24).
 - [3] See also the example of Leo, as described in Kelchtermans (1993a, pp. 445–446).
 - [4] Our findings confirm those of Hargreaves in his study of teachers' feeling of guilt. Hargreaves identified 'guilt traps' in teaching as a job that are 'socially located at the intersection of four specific paths of determination and job motivation in teachers' work: the commitment to goals of care and nurturance, the open-ended nature of the job, the pressures of accountability and intensification, and the persona of perfectionism' (Hargreaves, 1994, p. 145 ff.).
 - [5] Regional Testing refers to a testing in which all the sixth grade pupils of the different elementary schools in a certain region have to participate. This cross-school test constitutes a basis for comparison of pupil results among the different schools. For sixth grade teachers in Flanders, these tests are an important concern because they often feel evaluated themselves in their pupils' results. School teams and principals often put some pressure on the sixth grade teachers to prepare the pupils as well as possible in order to get a good result for the school (public relations).
 - [6] As such the analysis of our data empirically supports the four dimensions Hargreaves distinguishes in teacher development: a dimension of technical skills and knowledge and a moral, an emotional and a political dimension (Hargreaves, 1995).

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