

ED 395 921

SP 036 755

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 TITLE Becoming Political: A Dimension in Teachers' Professional Development. A Micropolitical Analysis of Teachers' Professional Biographies.
 PUB DATE 96
 NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New York, NY, April 8-12, 1996).
 PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)
 EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
 DESCRIPTORS Careers; Case Studies; Elementary Education; *Elementary School Teachers; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; Personal Narratives; Political Influences; *Politics of Education; *Power Structure; *Professional Development; *Quality of Working Life; *School Culture; Teaching (Occupation); Teaching Conditions

ABSTRACT

This study examined 10 elementary school teachers' narratives of their teaching experiences to determine the political aspects of that development, particularly the processes of control, power, dominance, conflict and ideology that interacted with the teacher's developing sense of the working conditions necessary for proper job performance. Data were collected using cumulative biographical interviews, participant observation in classrooms, and document analysis. Through different cycles of interpretive close reading, fragments in the career stories with political relevance were analyzed. The resulting data were compared to develop a categorization of the interests in terms of working conditions and a conceptual scheme to unravel the political meaning of the professional biographies. Professional interests that teachers worked for in their professional behavior were categorized as material, organizational, social, cultural-ideological, and self-interests. The analysis showed that every situation in which a teacher becomes conscious about its micropolitical aspects can be conceptualized in terms of the perceived power position: the subjective perception of one's position on a continuum of power-powerlessness. This continuum depends upon the teacher establishing the working conditions perceived necessary for proper job performance. The perceived power position is operationalized by three aspects of that position: the experiential, related to job satisfaction; the operational, related to ability to change the situation; and knowledge, related to political acuteness. (Contains 31 references.) (JPB)

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**BECOMING POLITICAL:
A DIMENSION IN TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT.
A micropolitical analysis of teachers' professional biographies**

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New York, 1996, April 8-12

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BECOMING POLITICAL: A DIMENSION IN TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

A micropolitical analysis of teachers' professional biographies

by Geert Kelchtermans & Roland Vandenberghe

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0. INTRODUCTION

In this paper we report a first explorative study on the (micro)political aspects of teachers' professional development. This study is part of a larger project, that builds on our previous research on teacher development based on a narrative-biographical approach. By combining the biographical and the micropolitical perspective, we aim to deepen our understanding of the complexities of teacher development. In this study we used the combination of both perspectives in our analysis of teachers' career stories. Teachers' subjective meaning of career experiences were central in our approach. So in fact, our data and analysis concern the "political cognitions" (rather than actual political actions).

In this paper we first situate our research interest and the combination of those two theoretical perspectives and then report our attempts to develop a grounded conceptualization of the micropolitical aspects of teacher development. In the last part of this paper we briefly sketch our further research plans.

1. BACKGROUND AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

1.1. Teachers' professional development from a biographical perspective

Teachers' professional development has been the focus of our research for several years (Kelchtermans, 1993a, 1993b; Kelchtermans & Vandenberghe, 1993). In this study we used a narrative-biographical approach to reconstruct teachers' career stories. The analysis of these career stories resulted in a grounded conceptual framework about professional development. Professional development was conceived of as a life-long learning process throughout the career. This learning process, based on concrete career experiences, not only results in changes in teachers' professional actions, but is also reflected at a the level of cognitions. In other words, in our research we described how teachers -on the basis of their career experiences- build a "*personal interpretive framework*" (PIF), a set of cognitions through which they perceive their jobsituation, give meaning to it and act in it. Because it is the result of the individual learning process throughout the career, this personal interpretive framework is highly idiosyncratic. However, comparative analysis of the career stories revealed two central domains in this personal interpretive framework. First there is the *professional self*: the teacher's conceptions about him/herself as a teacher. Within this professional self we could distinguish 5 components, grounded in the data:

- self image: descriptive; 'what am I like as a teacher?'
- self esteem: evaluative; 'how good am I doing as a teacher?'
- job motivation: conative; 'what motives made me choose to become, remain or quit being a teacher?'
- task perception: normative, 'what must I do to be a good teacher?'
- future perspective: 'how do I perceive my future as a teacher and how do I feel about it?'

Secondly there is the personal system of knowledge and beliefs about teaching, the *subjective educational theory*. An overview of the conceptual framework is given in Figure 1.

 INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

Teachers' PIF thus results from teachers' career experiences. Since we thought of professional development as a life-long learning process, based on career experiences, the PIF can be used as an indicator of that professional development. However, although we focused on teachers' learning process throughout the career, we had a similar experience as the one Blase reports on in the introduction of his *The politics of life in schools*, a volume on micropolitical studies in schools:

"I was interested in the processes of teacher socialization and investigated how teachers' perspectives on work changed over time as a result of their experiences in schools. From my research, I discovered that one of the most profound changes in teachers was the development of a 'political' orientation toward work: Becoming political was considered a major dimension of experienced teachers' perspectives. Repeatedly, teachers reported that to understand the 'realities' of teaching and the school generally, knowledge of politics was required" (Blase, 1991, p.XI).

One of the recurring themes we found in teachers' career stories was their feeling of vulnerability, a theme that clearly referred to experiences of power(lessness) and thus more generally to a (micro)political reality in teaching (Kelchtermans, 1993a, p.453-454). Since "power" and politics had been left largely unaddressed in our work so far, we wanted to explore it more systematically and integrate it in our conceptual work on teachers' professional development. In this paper we report on the first attempt to fill in this "white spot" in our research and develop a grounded conceptualization of the (micro)political in teachers' professional development.

1.2. Combining the biographical and the political perspective

1.2.1. *The biographical perspective: theoretical assumptions*

We characterized the biographical perspective in our work as narrative, contextualised, interactionistic, constructivistic and dynamic (Kelchtermans, 1993a, p.443-444). Career stories are retrospective *narrative* accounts, in which teachers' development is *reconstructed* as resulting from the ongoing (*dynamic*) *interactions* of the individual with the specific *contexts* of (different) schools in a specific historical time period.

In our concept of the biographical perspective, we wanted to take teachers' own perspectives and experiences seriously and to "give teachers voice". The biographical perspective, we argued allows a contextualised understanding of teachers' professional development, both in time and space (see Kelchtermans, 1993a, p.444). This contextualization is important if one wants to avoid the danger of romanticization and decontextualisation of the teachers' voice, as Hargreaves rightly criticizes (Hargreaves, 1996, p.15-17). This way we also acknowledged Goodson's argument to "locate the teacher's own life story alongside a broader contextual analysis" (Goodson, 1992, p.6). The biographical perspective -as we used it- thus reconstructed and analyzed teachers' career stories (professional biographies) as "life histories", by placing teachers' stories in their historical context (see also Goodson, 1991).

1.2.2. *The (Micro)Political perspective*

Throughout their career experiences, teachers develop a task perception (as part of their professional self). This task perception constitutes a kind of personal professional program: what should I do to be a proper teacher? The task perception includes the professional norms a teacher uses to evaluate his/her professional performance. The balance between self-image and task perception determines teachers' self esteem and thus his/her job satisfaction (Kelchtermans, 1993a, p.449).

However, these "norms" are not self-evidently shared by all teachers in all schools. Schools are (to a higher or lesser degree) characterized by goal dissensus and diversity, instability, complexity and conflict (Ball, 1987, p.13; 1994, p.3822). The dominant rational and systems models of organizations have failed to account for these characteristics as well as for the individual differences among members of the school as an organization (e.g. in values, ideologies, choices, goals, interests, etc.) (Blase, 1991, p.3). In the micropolitical perspective on schools as organizations, these factors become the central focus of attention. From this perspective schools are conceived of as "arena's for political action" (Ball, 1994, p.3821; 1987, p.19). Even in studies from the so-called "cultural perspective" on organizations, giving a central place to teachers' understandings and subjective interpretation of professional experiences, the political is often blended out by overestimating the commonalities (the culture as a set of shared

values and norms) (Hargreaves, 1991, p.50).

The **micropolitical perspective** "embraces those strategies by which individuals and groups in organizational contexts seek to use their resources of power and influence to further their interests" (Hoyle, 1982, p.88). Research from this perspective sheds new light on processes of control, power, dominance, conflict, ideological disputation, etc. These are not "merely reified qualities of organizational functioning but outcomes of deliberate tactics and face-to-face interactions. (...) Micropolitics is about relationships rather than structures, knowledge rather than information, skills rather than positions, verbal interaction rather than minutes and memos" (Ball, 1994, p.3822). In organizations the domains of control and influence are not clearly demarcated structurally, nor given "once and for all". Control and influence, or more in general "power", are not conceived of as attributes of individual actors or specific roles or structures, but as the outcomes of negotiations and exchange relations within the organisation (Altrichter & Salzgeber, 1995, p.15-16).

Two important remarks have to be made about the micropolitical perspective.

Although a lot of attention is given to processes of control, conflict, struggle etc. micropolitics "do not deny or ignore the possibilities of cooperative relations" (Ball, 1994, p.3822; see also Blase, 1991, p.12).

Secondly, in spite of its "emphasis on internecine and interpersonal struggles and relationships, micropolitics does not ignore extra-organizational interactions and effects" (Ball, 1994, p.3822). In sum, processes of cooperation and the macro-political context are -in principle- also included in the micropolitical analysis.

In an effort to capture the micropolitical perspective in an encompassing definition, Blase summarizes: "Micropolitics refers to the use of formal and informal power by individuals and groups to achieve their goals in organizations. In large part political actions result from perceived differences between individuals and groups, coupled with the motivation to use power to influence and/or protect. Although such actions are consciously motivated, any action, consciously or unconsciously motivated, may have political "significance" in a given situation. Both cooperative and conflictive actions and processes are part of the realm of micropolitics. Moreover, macro- and micropolitical factors frequently interact" (Blase, 1991, p.11).

For the purpose of our analysis the micropolitical perspective offers an interesting approach to link individual teachers' task perception, an element of the professional self (and the PIF), with the school context. The development of the teachers' personal interpretive framework takes place in the organizational context of a specific school. Because of our interest in teachers' own perceptions of their experiences, we thought it relevant to confine our "political scope" in this study to the micropolitical processes at the level of the local school and as interpreted by the teachers themselves. In this first exploratory study, the macro-political reality is largely left aside, but will be included in further studies (see below).

2. THE STUDY

2.1. Operational concepts and research questions

Teachers' professional development results from the interactions between the individual and his/her work environment (context), i.e. the school as an organization. The specific reality of this school (e.g. school culture; structural characteristics; size; school population; professional relations, etc.) can be conceptualized in terms of a set of **working conditions** (Kievit & Vandenberghe, 1993; Little & McLaughlin, 1993). As a result of their task perception and job motivation the teacher (more or less consciously) holds a set of desired or preferred working conditions. These desired working conditions constitute the professional interests that drive his/her "political" behaviour.

Thus, in line with the interactionist, constructivist and narrative assumptions in our theoretical framework, the analysis of the political in teachers' career stories was framed in terms of *the working conditions the teacher considers desirable or necessary for proper job performance*. This operational definition proved a useful heuristic tool in the analysis of the career stories, since it

allowed an understanding of teachers' (accounts of) politically relevant experiences and actions from their subjective point of view (Blase, 1988, p.125). The teachers' subjective meaning of the experiences thus remained at the center of our approach. "Desired or proper working conditions" is not understood in terms of objective, structural or material prerequisites, but as a teacher's personal construction (meaning), grounded in his/her professional self (e.g. self-esteem; job motivation; task perception) and subjective educational theory. In other words, what counts as "proper working conditions" depends on how a teacher understands him/herself as a teacher on the one hand and on the teacher's knowledge and beliefs about how the teaching job can/should be done effectively on the other.

"Proper" working conditions evidently includes a normative idea about good teaching (a value-laden criterium). Professional norms and values -as parts of teachers' 'task perception' (= a component of the professional self)- differ among teachers, even within the same school. What counts as proper working conditions therefore is not necessary a commonly shared idea among the different members of the school team.

We thus wanted to explore the different kinds of interests (in terms of working conditions) and come to a categorization. Further we were also interested in conceptually linking micropolitical reflections in terms of professional interests and teachers' professional development.

2.2. Data collection and analysis

In order to explore this political dimension, we "*revisited*" the career stories of the ten experienced elementary school teachers from our previous biographical research (Kelchtermans, 1993a). In that study we developed a procedure for data collection and analysis, combining several techniques (a.o. cumulative biographical interviews; participant observation in classrooms and schools, document analysis) resulting in the reconstruction of the teachers' career stories (see Kelchtermans, 1994 for a detailed description of the research procedure). These career stories thus were reconstructed professional biographies: narrative, retrospective accounts of personal career experiences.

Revisiting those career stories in this study implied a second, hermeneutical analysis of the data. Through different cycles of "interpretive close reading", we looked for fragments in the career stories with political relevance. The selection of the relevant fragments was done, using the operational concept of "desired working conditions" as described above. First we collected, coded and interpreted the fragments of every individual respondent in the context of his/her career story. In a second analytic step we interpretatively compared the data to develop:

- a categorization of the interests in terms of working conditions;
- a conceptual scheme to unravel the political meaning of the professional biographies.

3. EXAMPLES FROM NICOLE'S STORY¹

Next we present here two fragments of one teacher's career story. The analysis of those fragments will illustrate how we combined the biographical and the micropolitical perspective in our analysis. The fragments were taken from the career story of Nicole, a 6th Grade teacher with 25 years of classroom experience.

3.1. Fragments from Nicole's career story

a. experiences from the early school days

Nicole recalls several significant experiences from her days as a pupil in elementary and in secondary school. One of them is very illustrative. As a pupil of the third Grade Nicole was repeatedly railed at for being lazy. "*you're fat because of laziness, she (=her teacher) told me time and again. And I knew it was unfair. I have always been an active and busy child. But that's what she always told me*". One day her mother thought that the situation was getting unacceptable and she came to school to see Nicole's teacher. However, this made things even worse. Just as her mother left, the teacher repeated in front of the entire class:

"and she (=Nicole) who is fat of laziness, believes that it helps to bring her mother to school..." Nicole concludes "Oh, that was a bitch of a teacher".

Nicole refers to this and other incidents to explain why she puts so much emphasis on the pupils' emotional well being, as a crucial condition for good learning. As a teacher, she invests a lot of energy in building a good, trustfull relation with her pupils. In other words: "trust" was already a key notion in her personal interpretive framework when she entered teacher training and later when she started her career.

b. the first year of teaching

Nicole started her career as a 5th Grade teacher. The first year however was "a very bad year". Nicole felt completely overwhelmed by the complexity of the job. The complete responsibility for teaching an entire class was a task she did not feel properly prepared for in the teacher training. Furthermore, she didn't get any support from her principal, nor from the older colleagues. *"You know, that principal, she took me to my classroom on the first day and said: 'There are your books, you can start' and then she walked out the door and left me there. And I started crying, crying...I really didn't know where to begin...Actually I didn't have any valid idea of what it meant to manage a class. Practical training at the teachers' college had been very limited. Actually, it had been restricted to the planning and teaching of single lessons on well-defined subject topics".* Recalling those days, Nicole also reflects: *"maybe I was also simply too young, not mature enough"* (she was 19 years old; her pupils were 11). But apart from this "internal causal attribution" of her problems, Nicole also points at several factors at the school level. First, the principal acted very suspicious: *"she didn't have confidence in her teachers. If she saw you talking to a colleague, she always thought that it was about her. Sort of paranoia, you know. If we, as colleagues didn't talk, because we didn't dare to, she came and said: 'Come on, why don't you have a nice chat. You're colleagues after all and you should build good relations. We could never do some good to her eyes".* By bringing her little presents, like pralines or cakes, the staff members 'bought off' temporary improvements of the relation with the principal. After school time, the principal also used to come and control the pupils' exercise-books and the teachers' planning in the classroom.

The school culture was very individualistic: teachers worked in isolation from each other. Nicole's colleague of the other 5th Grade-class was trying to improve her relation with the principal (battering up), by gossiping about Nicole, accusing her of laziness and lack of commitment. She even set up situations to discredit Nicole in the principal's eyes. *"and I worked like hell there. I still remember my birthday. She (=colleague) had written 'Happy birthday' on the blackboard and told the pupils that they should sing me a birthday song. The kids did that and even brought some small presents. I believed that was the usual way birthdays were celebrated there, but after school time the principal sent for me in her office and I was reprimanded for the noise in my classroom and for having had my children sing loud and bring me presents".* This way the principal was constantly misinformed about her. This explains also why the principal, after controlling Nicole's planning and her pupils exercise-books, always expressed her wonder that everything was in order. The same wonder she showed after visits in Nicole's class.

Nicole remembers that she often cried at home and that her parents had quite a difficult time in motivating her to go on. *"You know, if I would have had to stay in that school, I would probably have left teaching".* She "survived" that year thanks to another colleague -also an inductee-, from her teachers' college. They had started to work in that school in the same year. Both "fellow-sufferers" travelled to school every day in the same bus, talking a lot and sharing their experiences, helping each other in the preparation of lessons, etc. Of crucial importance were also Nicole's pupils. She had a good relation with them, it was nice working in the class.

The second year Nicole was offered a job in the Nightingale, the school where she remained for the rest of her career. The contrast with her first year could hardly have been greater. *"At the first meeting with the principal I already felt accepted and appreciated by the principal. She gave me confidence; she trusted me to be a competent teacher...Oh, that was 'heaven on earth'. I felt supported. If I had any problems, I could discuss them with her. She let me develop new initiatives with the kids...I was free to be myself. There I finally started to enjoy my job."*

3.2. Working conditions as professional interests

The fragments from Nicole's career story clearly show the tensions or even conflicts between her task perception and the organisational reality of the school in which she has to start her career. Nicole's task perception, as a component of the personal interpretive framework she developed from her own experiences as a pupil and from her teacher education, implies quiet different working conditions than the ones she is confronted with in the school. For Nicole important working conditions are:

- being trusted as a competent teacher (not yet a perfect one, but one who is doing her best);
- supportive interpersonal relations with colleagues and principal, who could function as resources to help solving problems.

The reality of the school however is very different. Nicole has to learn that professional norms and values -as parts of teachers' task perceptions- differ among teachers, even within the same school. What counts as "proper" working conditions is not necessarily a commonly shared idea among the different members of the school team. As Nicole's case illustrates, different conceptions of proper working conditions might be competing within the same school. In other words, discussions about working conditions are in essence a struggle of different interests. Based on her own experiences as a pupil, Nicole puts high value to trustful relations, confidence, acceptance and emotional well being. Not only in her relations with the pupils in her class, but also as a general school culture for teachers to work in. It thus constituted a highly valued cultural working condition (non-material professional interest). *"I really can't work if I feel that people don't have confidence in me...on the other hand if I feel that they trust me...that gives me wings"*. Her experiences as a beginning teacher made her clear -in a rather rude, conflictuous way- that this norm is not commonly shared. Moreover, from the confrontation with a concrete school, she starts realizing that schools are places of struggles between different opinions, values, norms. In essence these are struggles between different interests, in which the participants try to get the best out of it for themselves. Schools turn out not to be simply places where everybody wants the best for the children or even places where there is consensus about what counts as "best for the children". On the contrary, in schools different views on values and norms -more or less overtly- compete with each other.

Anderson uses the concept "politics of cognition" to refer to the processes of control and influence in the definition of the organisation (Anderson, 1991). Nicole finds herself in conflict between her own personal interpretive framework (especially its normative and evaluative elements) and the actual school culture. She learns that being a teacher is not merely a matter of subject knowledge and methodological skills. Teaching also implies operating as a member of an organization, that is "loosely coupled" and highly political because different members act from (more or less) different sets of interests.

Coping with this political dimension in her job demands the development of specific strategies and tactics. This demand is very coercive: Nicole's survival as a teacher is at stake. Finding the core values and norms of her professional self questioned and threatened, Nicole even thinks of leaving the job. However, she successfully coped with the situation by developing a effective, supportive relation with a colleague, who is in a similar situation. Through mutual support and creating a territory of their own, they "survived". This is an example of "positive opposition" as Ball mentions it: "...opposition in schools is by no means simply a matter of personal disaffection and disgruntlement but can be a commitment to challenge and attempt to change the policies, in whole or part, of the dominant coalition. Opposition (...) cannot be reduced to a clash of personalities; it is a micro-political concept that at heart concerns conflicts of interests" (Ball, 1987, p. 148). Or more in general: the political is not only about conflict, but also encompasses cooperative actions and strategies. Also Nias provides indepth analyses of the strategies by which teachers defend their self esteem in school contexts where the majority of the teachers holds different or conflicting values and priorities. She framed the supportive role of colleagues in terms of reference group theory: "In-school reference groups did not have to be large in order to provide (...) reassurance. The existence of 'just one other', (...) confirmed the goals and aspirations of otherwise isolated individuals, kept them from leaving their schools, supported them in innovation or retrenchment, deepened their satisfaction, and fuelled their discontents" (Nias, 1989b, p.51).

3.3. Categories of professional interests

From the illustrative single case of Nicole, we move now to the results of the systematic comparative analysis of the ten career stories. In the micropolitical perspective, the behaviour of organisation members is understood as driven by interests (Hoyle, 1982). We operationalized interests in terms of working conditions. What are these "interests" teachers are striving for in their professional behaviour?

Ball distinguishes between three different groups of interests; guiding teachers' behaviour: vested, ideological and self interests (Ball, 1987, p.16-17). Vested interests encompass teachers' material concerns about the availability of and access to resources (time, funds, teaching materials, infrastructure). Ideological interests concern values, philosophical commitments, and educational preferences. Self interests refer to the teacher's identity as a teacher. In specific situations those three groups of interests will mostly operate simultaneously and interwoven.

The results of our analysis come close to Ball's categorization, but we believe it is useful and conceptually clearer to differentiate them further and at the same time link the categories to specific aspects of the school reality (working conditions). In our data we distinguished: material, organizational, social, cultural-ideological and self interests.

- **material interests** include the availability of and access to teaching materials or technical devices like the copier, audio-visual equipment, school library, specific infrastructure (e.g. one's "own" classroom), funds (e.g. subventions for excursions). Time is also an important resource in schools (see also Hargreaves, 1990). In one of the schools in our study fund raising for the payment of the new school building, is a permanent concern for the principal. Since she is not good in practical organization, she puts Chris -a first grade teacher- in charge of the fundraising activities. In exchange for this work, Chris' class is taken over by colleagues at regular times to give him time for his organisational activities during the school hours.

Although these material interests can be important as such, their political value is often also symbolical. E.g. a conflict between Kurt and his principal about the availability of the copier hides an underlying conflict between two methodological opinions. E.g. 'teachers should remain creative and not simply copy the exercise sheets every year' (principal) versus 'by copying exercise sheets that have proved their usefulness in the classroom, I can spend more energy in developing extra-support material for pupils with learning problems' (Kurt, 5th grade teacher).

Another example is the introduction of a new handbook. The discussions in favour of or against the new handbook often imply struggles around other (disguised) agendas, like being able to continue teaching the way one has been doing for so many years or refusing the new handbook -although in many respects better than the old one- because proper use implies collaboration between colleagues from different grades and thus threatens individual teachers' desire for autonomy.

- **organizational interests** refer to procedures, roles and positions in the organization. The most dominant organizational interest that we found in our data concerns the tenured position. Getting a lifelong assignment in the status of civil servant is a highly valued working condition (beginning) teachers actively strive for.

Chris 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). He took on his all these jobs, together with the the fund-raising activities. *"Those were the days of 'pressure to perform'. You always had to be prepared to work and commit yourself. Always working, taken up responsibilities...All because of that assignment. I wanted that assignment at all price".²*

Avoiding certain roles or positions can also be an important interest. E.g. Nicole talks about her refusal -two years ago- when the principal had asked her to become the internal coordinator for the implementation of a new curriculum for language (mother tongue). She argued that she didn't want to take any position that would suggest a difference in hierarchy with her colleagues. About half of the team had started in the school more or less at the

same time, they were about the same age and had very good collegial relations. Securing those relations is more important to Nicole than making sure that the innovation -which she actively supports- is well implemented ("I don't want them to think about me as 'playing bossy'"). As these examples show, it is not the role/position as such that is important, but rather the meaning (value) ascribed to it by the teacher. Only from that meaning one can understand how and why striving for or avoiding roles/positions becomes an interest, leading to micropolitical actions.

- **social interests** refer to the social relations within the school: among colleagues, between teachers and principal, between teachers and parents and between school team members and external people (e.g. inspectorate, school facilitators, members of the school board) etc.³ E.g. the lack of support and recognition by the principal and the discrediting efforts of her colleague in Nicole's case. Moni -see below- strongly valued her first principal, who simply wanted her to teach the children in her classroom and took herself care of all the rest (school organisation; relations with parents; etc.).
- **cultural-ideological interests** refer to the sphere of the values, norms and ideals that are acknowledged as legitimate and important within the school. This is the field of the "definition of the organization" and the "politics of cognition" we mentioned earlier. Nicole's experiences in her first school illustrate the conflicts and interest struggles that can exist here. Examples are e.g. finding a shared commitment to children's well being among the colleagues in the school team (Nicole); controlling the relations between the staff members and confirming one's authority (the principal in her "divide-and-rule-policy").
- **self-interests** is used in the same sense as Ball does. Within the teacher's personal interpretive framework, the professional self takes a very central position. Since teaching is a job in which the teacher as a person is always deeply involved (Ball & Goodson, 1985; Nias, 1989b), it is no surprise that working conditions, affecting the teacher's conceptions about him/herself, constitute very important interests. Examples: Nicole's idea of the teacher she wants to be (e.g. central place of a caring ethic) is contested by her colleague's preoccupation with jealousy and gossip. Her colleague on the other hand, might have had 'good' reasons for acting the way she did (at least from her own perspective). She might have felt threatened by Nicole's arrival in the school as a parallel-colleague (= in another class of the same Grade): the presence of a young, enthusiastic and hard working colleague might lead to a shift in the school's norms of required staff commitment to the school. So her actions might have been induced by her personal strive to maintain the status quo in her teaching and her personal interpretive framework.
One's social recognition as "being a proper teacher" probably is one of the most central professional interests a teacher seeks to establish and maintain. In all the career stories we found examples of this. From our analysis, we would even conclude that the self-interests constitute a kind of more basic background, underlying all political activities and professional interests. The "me as a teacher" is always at stake in teachers' micropolitical activities. The feeling that their professional self is involved, might explain the often very emotional and intense reactions of teachers on apparently technical or organisational issue that are discussed. An apparently trivial matter thus can get a much deeper and obtrusive meaning because at a symbolical level it threatens a teacher's self esteem.

As has become clear from the examples already, in one event or situation, several categories of interests can play a part at the same time. In order to understand a situation properly this interwovenness of interests must be carefully taken into consideration.

As we argued above, these professional interests can be interpreted in terms of desired working conditions, that then (can) operate as motives for micropolitical action.

4. THE MICROPOLITICAL IN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

4.1. Micropolitics, teacher development and critical incidents

Until now we focused on the different interests (in terms of desired working conditions) that

could help us understand the political fragments in teachers' career stories. Our analysis showed that the combination of the biographical and the micropolitical perspective sheds new light on the meanings and motives behind teachers' thoughts and actions.

Our main interest however was the role and place of the political in teachers' professional development. Hargreaves stresses the political as one of the four essential dimensions of the teachers' job that should be included in any proper conceptualization of *teacher development*. Teaching and being a teacher, he argues, is not simply a matter of technical skills and curriculum knowledge, but also implies moral decision-making (choosing among different values), political consciousness, acuity and competence and emotional commitment (Hargreaves, 1995). In other words, the political must be acknowledged as an essential dimension in teachers' thoughts and actions and in the functioning of schools. Throughout their career teachers must learn to cope with the micropolitical reality in schools. Therefore we were interested in teachers' *micropolitical learning*. From our narrative-biographical approach, we focus on this learning "through the teacher's eye" (their subjective interpretation of their own career experiences). We were thus interested in the question: *how the political is/becomes part of teachers' actions and thoughts in the process of professional development*.

However, the micropolitical processes in schools often operate in a largely implicit, taken-for-granted way.

"...the day-to-day routines of school life normally overlay and obscure basic micropolitical tensions. Only occasionally do fundamental differences of interest burst into full view via issues or events of particular significance (...) They provoke the reexamination of basic assumptions and previously selected lines of actions, and often produce changes of direction or in the nature of social relations in the organization" (Ball & Bowe, 1991, p.35).

Political processes thus can best be studied in those times of change, when the daily routines (partly/temporarily) lose their self-evidence and are questioned. Examples of those politically relevant career moments are: moments of intense conflict between a teacher and others in the school context, the induction phase, periods of structural reorganisation (e.g. school mergers), the appointment of a new principal and so on.

In that respect the notions "critical incidents, persons and phases" -we had already used in our biographical analysis- proved again very useful heuristic tools in analyzing the career stories from a micropolitical perspective. Critical incidents are "key events in an individual's life, and around which pivotal decisions revolve. They provoke the individual into selecting particular kinds of actions, which lead in particular directions" (Sikes, Measor & Woods, 1985, p.57). The experience of critical incidents or the confrontation with critical persons often imply "micropolitical" interpretations and reactions, i.e. if they constitute a questioning or more directly a threat to the teacher's deeply held values and norms about good teaching. This is the case for Nicole and her first real job (see above).

We will now illustrate our "micropolitical reading" of professional development with fragments from the career story of Moni, a mid-career first grade teacher.

4.2. Fragments from Moni's story

At the time of the data collection, Moni's school for girls was in the middle of a merger process with the school for boys in the same village. This merger process clearly constituted a critical phase for her. This explains why the theme of "participation in decision making" ran through her story as a red thread.

Moni's career started about 25 years ago in the Marabout, a school for girls, organized by a catholic nunnery, where she still works. So her entire career took place in the same school. Moni got her job and as a young female teacher, she was even offered a room in the convent to live during the week. The principal of the school was a very severe nun, respected and even feared by the -mainly young- teachers. Her demands toward the teachers were very clear: every teacher was responsible for her grade. No less, no more. She never gave any feedback about the quality of the teachers' work, although the teachers knew that she would regularly come in the classrooms to control the pupils' notebooks. "So you never knew whether you were doing okay". The principal also operated as a buffer toward the outside

world (parents, inspectorate, etc.). It was a very clear job situation: Moni had to concentrate on the curriculum and the lessons for her pupils in her grade, and that was it. On the one hand, she didn't have to bother about anything else; on the other hand, she had absolutely no part in decision making and school policy. Moni typifies her relation with the principal as very hierarchical: *"Our position to her was the same as our pupils' positions to us as teachers. It was as if we ourselves were children. You had no voice in decisions. She was the boss"*.

During her first years in teaching, Moni thus simply conformed to the demands and did as she was told to do. Because of fluctuations in the number of pupils she had to switch grades several times. After her marriage, her husband pushed her to demand *"a grade of my own. The principal was a bit surprised to find me asking that so straightforward, but it was accepted"*.

Her next principal is recalled as a much less hierarchical and authoritarian person. She contributed a lot to the development of a "team spirit" among the teachers and to the improvement of the working climate in the school. It became more a relaxed, friendly, collegial atmosphere to work in. At the same time the principal tried to engage the school team in innovative projects (e.g. the Renewed Primary School - see e.g. Vandenberghe, 1987), but those were successfully blocked by the team. *"We didn't want to change. We believed that we were doing our job well and that we could very well keep on doing so, without those innovations"* In fact, this resistance to change was repeated every time the principal proposed innovations. Moni mentions the fact that almost all teachers were women, with a household and children to take care of. As another reason for their striving to keep the status quo, she also refers to the increasing expectations towards the primary school by the parents and the local community.

However, some years ago, the school board decided to make the girls' school a gender mixed school. The teachers disapproved this decision, but had no say in it. Two years later, the school board decided to merge with the board of the school for boys in order to stop the unhealthy competition between both schools in the same village. Once again, the teachers had no voice in that decision and this constituted a turning point in Moni's career. Although she often recalls the old times, where she only had to worry about her own grade (micro-level), she now feels very frustrated because at the meso-level decisions were taken that heavily affected the situation in her classroom, without even asking her opinion. Although she can understand the rationale for the board's decisions, she feels offended by the way the decisions are taken. *"We were treated as if we were nobody, just a number. And, I mean, I have been working so long in this school. I really hold to that school. I would have gone through fire and water for that school and now... it really sticks in my throat.... Things will never be the same. But my eyes have been opened and I am no longer afraid of raising my voice and say what I think"*. These experiences had an important impact on Moni's behaviour in the school. She revealed herself as the "spokeswomen" of the team from the former girls' school. More specifically, she speaks for her colleagues in the discussion about an internal reorganisation after the merger (e.g. nursery, first and second grade in the former girls' school; the other grades in the former boys' school): this would definitely ruin the specificity of the girls' school and its typical collegial atmosphere. She raises her voice in the team meetings and doesn't hesitate to argue in public with the (male) principal. During the interviews Moni extensively reflected about the differences in atmosphere and style between the two teams, but also about differences in teaching methodology etc.

Although we can only present a small part of Moni's career story, it will be clear that her professional biography can be read as a story of emancipation. Moni develops from the obedient, "nice" young first grade teacher, over the collegial member of the girls' school team to the spokeswoman of the same team in the struggle against the loss of the cherished cultural working conditions because of the school merger. In terms of professional development, her story illustrates the move from an exclusive (and legitimate) focus on her responsibilities at the micro-level of her classroom, toward attention for and active political action at the meso-level of the school as organisation. One could say that throughout her career, she broadens her professional "radius of action" from the class to the school level. The most important professional learning processes in Moni's career had to do with the school as an organization and her position in it. But this broadening of interest is motivated by a complex striving for the status quo: *"as a teacher I am responsible for my class and that should be enough"*. Changes in

teaching methodology, in the number of team meetings, in the school climate, etc. are all disapproved and resisted.

This move in the professional radius of action from the micro- to the meso-level we also found in other career stories. Especially after getting a tenured position (status of civil servant), teachers apparently begin to include the meso-level in their professional scope. Their commitment at meso-level takes different forms and is motivated by different incentives, depending on the teachers' task perception and job motivation. Maintaining the status quo is a very important one: securing the status quo at the classroom level through interventions at the meso-level. This however should not simply be condemned as 'typical conservative reflex', because for the teachers involved it is a meaningful answer to their perception and evaluation of the situation in the school: e.g. the increase of job demands; their concern to combine family life and job; their concerns to protect their "parallel careers" (e.g. chair of the local sports club; member of an amateur jazz group; librarian)⁴. In other words, from their point of view, the teachers have "good reasons" to resist the changes (see also Gitlin & Margonis, 1995).

4.3. Conceptualizing the micropolitical in teachers' professional development

The analysis of experienced teachers' career stories showed the importance of the (micro)political dimension for the professional development of teachers. Professional development, conceived as a life-long learning process during the career, thus encompasses processes of "political learning". From our interest in developing an encompassing conceptual framework on teachers' professional development, the question remained: *how can we conceptualize this political dimension of the teaching job and of the school as organization in such a way that it can be linked to the narrative-biographical idea of understanding teachers' actions and thoughts from the background of their professional biographies? Or in other words, can the political dimension be linked to teachers' personal interpretive framework in a conceptually sound way?*

The analysis of teachers' career stories, showed that every situation in which a teacher becomes more or less conscious about its (micro)political aspects, can be conceptualized in terms of the "**Perceived Power Position**": the subjective perception by the teacher of his/her position on the continuum "power-powerless". This continuum of power refers to the teacher's perceived efficacy in establishing the working conditions for proper job performance. What counts as "proper working conditions" depends on teachers' task perception, a component of their professional self, determined by their professional biography (see above).

This kind of conceptualization is in line with our interpretive approach. It focuses on the subjective perception and the meaning given by the teacher to certain circumstances. By conceptualizing teachers' experienced power-position on a continuum, we further avoid to think of politics in a negative way. The continuum-concept keeps us aware of the "positive" possibilities for proactively striving to change inappropriate working conditions. Working conditions are to a large degree a matter of negotiated order and can thus be influenced (for the good or the bad)(Altrichter & Salzgeber, 1995, p.15-16).

At the same time it allows a link with the concept of professional development. The idea of the Perceived Power Position can be made more operational, by distinguishing three different, though interconnected aspects in that position.

The first aspect that can be distinguished in teachers' perception of their individual position on the power continuum is *experiential*. It refers to the emotional and normative load of the perceived position and thus to teachers' *job satisfaction*: to what extent am I as a teacher satisfied with this position? This is linked to self esteem and task perception, components of teachers' professional self. Taking up the example of Moni's experience with the board's decision, the experience was highly negative: feelings of loss, offense, anger. It was clearly a very dissatisfying situation. However, the reasons for those feelings referred to her idea of optimal working conditions (i.e. a rather traditional school organisation where every teacher took care of her own grade, without much collaboration or meetings at the school level, but with a pleasant, "cosy" collegial atmosphere).

Secondly, the *operational or instrumental* aspect refers to the perception of one's mastery of micropolitical skills in order to engage in effective strategical and tactical actions to influence (change) the situation. This aspect thus is about *political efficacy or in-efficacy*: "to what degree am I capable to select and successfully implement political actions, to deal with the actual situation effectively?". In Moni's case, the board's decision is made and can't be changed. What can be influenced however, are the organisational consequences of this decision (mixing both teams) and at this point Moni concentrates her political actions.

The experiential and the operational aspect can also interfere: the confrontation with the decision stimulates Moni to engage actively in the discussion of the practical reorganisation. In other words, the anger and frustration about the situation triggered high motivation and commitment to intervene, thus adding new elements to her professional self. Moni recalls the reactions of her colleagues being surprised about her assertivity, but at the same time grateful and stimulating it. For other colleagues the experience of crucial decision being taken over their heads, lead to passivity and cynism. Disappointment, anger and feelings of powerlessness lead to the conclusion that decisions at meso-level are simply beyond teachers' control (inefficacy).

Finally and closely linked to the operational aspect, the *knowledge* aspect refers to political acuteness: to what degree does the teacher "see" and "understand" what is at stake in the situation. The political knowledge thus encompasses understanding of how and why political processes work the way they do. This knowledge is part of teachers' subjective educational theory and as such also linked to teachers' "learning" from career experiences. One could say that this knowledge aspect refers to teachers' *"political professionalism"*: their ability to thematize and reflect on their power position from a clear rationale. Moni learned a lot about the processes of influence and control in the school as an organization from the merger operation. E.g. she learns that the principal in fact is quite powerless toward the school board's decisions and is used by that board to do the *"dirty work"* of implementing unpopular decisions. She further learns that policy decisions by the board are often inspired by other than educational motives. But the merger experience also makes her reflect on the differences in culture between both schools (and on the school culture-phenomenon as such) and how one can effectively deal with such differences.

Figure 2 summarizes the different elements in this conceptualisation.

 INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

4.4. Special attention for the induction phase

All politically relevant career experiences can be framed in terms of this Perceived Power Position.

We can further illustrate this conceptualization, by applying it to the example of Nicole's experiences during her induction phase. This example reveals at the same time the fact that the intrinsically critical character of the induction phase (Sikes et al., 1985, p.57-58; Kelchtermans, 1993b, p.206-211) has also to do with its (micro)political aspects (Schempp, Sparkes & Templin, 1993; Altrichter & Salzgeber, 1995).

Nicole's *experience* is also quite negative. She finds herself confronted with the fact that some of the core values in her personal interpretive framework are not selfevidently shared by all teachers. Cole & Knowles use the metaphor of the "shattered images" to describe this experience of beginning teachers (Cole & Knowles, 1993). Being a teacher is a much more complex and encompassing task, than most inductees expected. The confrontation "shatters" (at least to a certain degree) the images and beliefs (task perception, subjective educational theory) beginning teachers hold when entering the job. E.g. the incentives' for the behaviour of principal or colleagues can lie far beyond educational concerns.

The so-called praxis shock for beginning teachers therefor not only has to do with the (often overwhelming) responsibilities as a classroom teacher, but also with the fact that the micropolitical reality in schools is often more or less completely absent in beginning teachers' personal interpretive framework. "Becoming political", in terms of understanding and adapting to

(or influencing) a school culture, constitutes a necessary, almost existential task for beginning teachers (see also Schempp, Sparkes & Templin, 1993, p.468).

Nicole's induction problems were rooted in the professional relations among the staff members and simply changing them was not possible. Her answer (*operational or instrumental aspect*) to the situation was not trying to solve the fundamental problem -she might have tried but quickly learned that she couldn't succeed-, but concentrated on survival within the context by creating a form of "safe territory" (her classroom) and minimal collegial support (from one "fellow-sufferer"). She thus successfully creates a "niche" within the school context to live out her deeply held values and ideas about what being a teacher should look like. At the same time we should mention that Nicole's experiences with the pupils in her classroom were very positive and also constituted a consoling and motivating environment. "*They kept me going*".

From these induction experiences Nicole learns (*knowledge aspect*) that schools are not simply places where everybody only means "the best for the children". Educational values and norms are not necessarily shared by all the school members and thus schools also contain struggles of interests, conflict and unequal power relations. Coping with these micropolitical realities is inevitable, even if -as Nicole realizes- she was not prepared for this in teacher training. She thus also learns a lot about her professional self and becomes conscious about certain core values that are so fundamentally important to her that giving them up would imply total demotivation for the teaching job.

5. DISCUSSION AND PERSPECTIVES

By combining the biographical and the micropolitical perspective in our analysis of teachers' career stories, we aimed at expanding our conceptualization of teachers' professional development. We were able to integrate the (micro)political aspects of the teacher career in our analysis and grasp them conceptually.

As a consequence of both perspectives however, we were limited to retrospective, narrative accounts of former experiences. This did allow us to explore and understand the subjective meaning of those experiences for the teachers and the ways they "cognitively" dealt with them. However this approach has also important limitations that we shouldn't lose out of sight if we want to develop an "ecologically valid" understanding of the teacher's career and his/her development in it.

A first restriction concerns the fact that we could only look back on certain experiences through the teacher's eyes. We believe that it would be better to triangulate this teacher's perspective by others, e.g. the principal's or the researcher's perspective. This would allow us to broaden our database beyond the "cognitions of politics" to include also actual political actions and processes.

As a second limitation we must keep in mind that not only micropolitics are important, but that they always take place in a macro-political context (educational policy measures).

In two recently started studies in this project on "the political dimension in teachers' professional development", we try to overcome these restrictions, by actually observing and studying teachers and schools in "politically relevant moments". One study analyzes how schools deal with the possibility to involve external facilitators in processes of school development (improvement of teaching quality). More specifically we study how schools react on the "audit" by a team of inspectors from the Ministry of Education, who officially assess the school quality (with reference to the legally installed basic aims for all schools). We believe that this audit sets in motion reflections, discussions and actions to deal with the experience of being externally assessed. Since these audits, as well as the basic aims are recently established procedures by the Ministry of education, this study allows us to understand the micropolitical processes from the background of macropolitical decisions.

The second study focuses on the induction phase. Our own research, as well as that of others (e.g. Schempp et al., 1993) showed the importance of that career phase in (micro)political terms. In the study we follow a group of beginning teachers during the first two years of their

career, using ethnographic and qualitative (interview; reflective logs) research techniques to document their professional development, with special attention to the micropolitical elements.

We believe that our approach will not only deepen and broaden our empirically grounded understanding of teacher's professional development and school improvement, but also will contribute to the development of effective approaches for teacher empowerment (Prawat, 1991).

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NOTES

- 1.. First names in the text are all pseudonyms for our respondents. Respondents working in the same school have a pseudonym beginning with the same character.
2. Elsewhere, we described the example of Leo who was forced to give up his position/role as remedial teacher and become the third grade teacher (Kelchtermans, 1993a).
3. Several examples can also found in the research on teacher autonomy/collegiality (see e.g. Little, 1990; Clement & Staessens, 1993).
- 4.. We borrow the concept "parallel careers" from Nias (1989a, p.399; see also Kelchtermans, 1993, p.453).

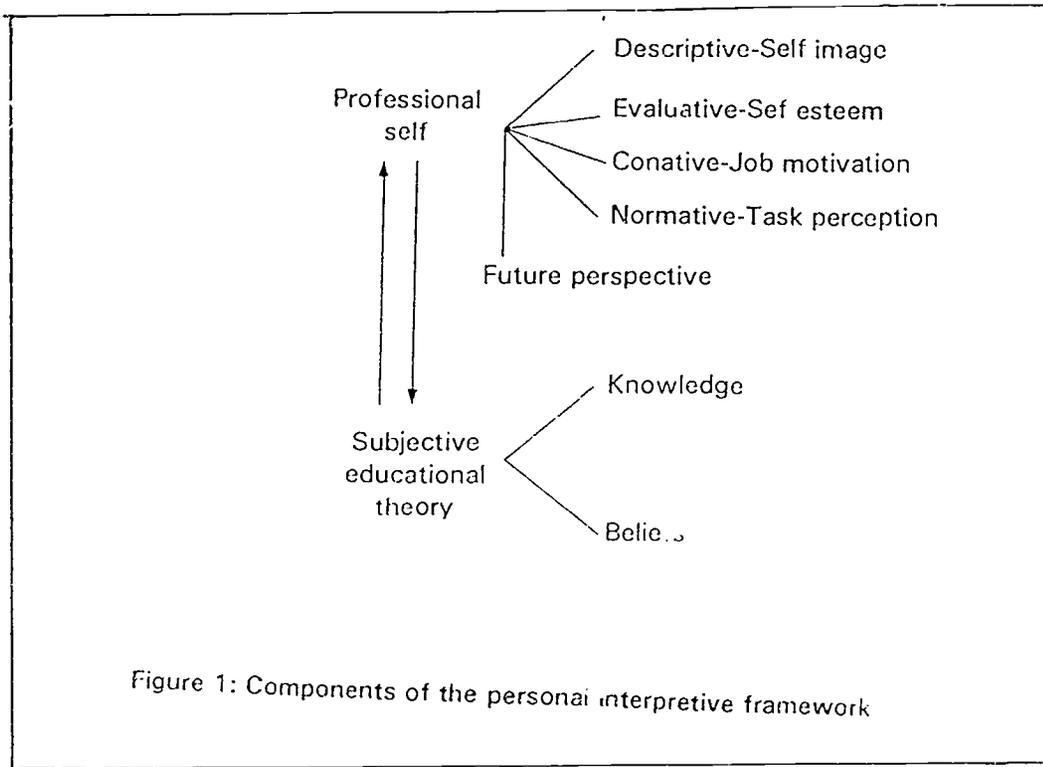


Figure 2: Teachers' subjective power position

