Lacking structures of communication for teachers in Sweden, a focus group study

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Abstract

In light of the changing circumstances for teaching, teachers' views on organizational communication processes were explored. Empirically, this paper is based on five semi-structured focus groups, each interviewed on two occasions. In total, 44 primary and lower secondary-school teachers working in one municipality in Sweden participated. The interviews were framed by a pre-survey concerning demographic data and a post-survey collecting data on the teachers' assessment of the group climate. In the analysis, four themes that illustrate aspects of teachers' perceptions and experiences of workplace communication were identified. The findings point to a lack of adequate and comprehensive structures for organizational communication.

Keywords: Focus group interview, organizational communication, teachers, technology, work life, Sweden

Introduction

During recent years, teachers in Sweden have experienced changes in their working conditions. Some of which relate to cutbacks and legal reforms (Lundström, 2015), while others are due to advancement of modern technology, such as e-mail use and implementation of online learning and administrative platforms. In addition, reports (Arbetsmiljöverket, 2016; Försäkringskassan, 2014) consistent with international research point to the teaching profession as one of the most stressful occupations today (Travers, 2017). High turnover and incidence of sick-leave among teachers is of concern for society. Although recent national studies have investigated the occurrence of burnout (Arvidsson, Håkansson, Karlson, Björk, & Persson, 2016a) and work-life conflict (Richter, Näswall, Lindfors, & Sverke, 2015), there is a need to explore teachers' own perceptions and concerns regarding their daily work-situation.

Despite the strong tradition of teachers being highly autonomous and performing solitary work, teachers nowadays often work in teams, with high demands for effective communication and collaborative learning. Organizational communication (OC) is central to school-based activities, and

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although an extensively studied area, several aspects such as new technology and changing organizational structures are relevant. Furthermore, research shows that OC is fundamental for organizations and for organizing work (Keyton, 2017). In addition, there is limited knowledge of the relationship between OC in schools and work-related variables. A notable exception is work by De Nobile (2016) who demonstrated the importance of channels of, formal and informal, communication for occupational stress and by (Schad, 2017) who showed OC to be a strong predictor for job satisfaction.

To get a bottom-up perspective, this study explores teachers' perceptions of OC as it occurs between themselves during daily activities. In-depth knowledge about how, when, and with whom teachers communicate and interact might elucidate the relationship between individual perceptions, conduct and organizational processes. Interventions aimed at improving communication practices in schools depend on an understanding of teachers' hands-on reality and up-to-date comprehension of teachers' work-situation. The research reported on here is part of a project aiming to explore teachers' perceptions of OC to increase the understanding of supportive and hindering factors in schools today.

OC in schools

OC has been defined as a process through which information about the workplace and employee's work is transferred by the organization to its employees (Price, 1997). The aim of OC is, beyond information exchange, to create a community within the organization (Francis, 1989) and to organize work (Weick, 1976). To communicate literally means to share and communication processes in a workplace can be considered a cornerstone of the organization (Putnam & Nicotera, 2009). As such, communication practices have the important function of organizing work (Christensen & Cornelissen (2011), and are a prerequisite for sustainable collaborative processes in schools. Moreover, as stated by Iedema and Wodak already in 1999, the process of organizing is "created and recreated in the acts of communication between members" (p. 7).

OC has been studied from many different angles. Relevant for today's fast paced society are, for example quantitative aspects, such as receiving too much or too little information (overload and underload) as studied by Housel and Waldhart (1981). High quality-interactions, such as openness was early identified as an important aspect of OC (Rogers, 1987).

Knowledge-intense workplaces require constant development, where learning and creative problem-solving are important resources for work. Many schools in Sweden have implemented structured programs for classroom observations coupled with feedback sessions. This is encouraging since timely and adequate feedback can enhance skill-development, learning, creativity, and job performance (Crommelinck & Anseel, 2013).

The communication climate in a workplace is one important part of the more general organizational climate (Falcione, Sussman, & Herden, 1987). Of particular interest for teachers are relational aspects such as openness, trust, perceived participation, and having a voice in the organization (Smidts, Pruyn, & Van Riel, 2001). Furthermore, previous research has shown that employees'

perceptions of the workplace communication climate is important for organizational identification and group belongingness.

Methods

Study design

Critical for this semi-structured focus group study was that, as a study population, teachers can be considered a group with shared experiences and a willingness to discuss work-related issues (Gibbs, 2012). Moreover, teachers often share responsibility for a specific group of students and as such, teachers are naturally required to interact with each other on a daily basis and acquire shared experiences. The subject matter studied is suitable for group interviews as it involves ideas and conceptualizations that can be developed by differing thoughts and opinions. Because the social context is central for the research questions and the nature of data collected, the focus group method was well suited. Work-related situations can be compared and contrasted based on the subjective experiences of the participants, resulting in a description refined by group processes rather than in-depth personal accounts, as would be expected in individual interviews (Silverman, 2013).

Data collection

The study was done on location in three schools located in a suburban municipality (population around 35 000) in Scania, a province of Sweden. School-related statistics for the schools (A-C), Scania, and Sweden are presented in Table 1.

Table 1.

Distribution of teachers and students at the participating schools as well as the number of students per teacher at the respective schools. The last two columns present data on the mean number of teachers and students per school in the province of Scania and nationally in Sweden (The National Agency for Education, 2015).

	School A N	School B N	School C N	Scania	Sweden
Teachers	23	23	37	24	23
Students	241	268	445	228	203
Students per teacher	10.5	11.6	12.0	9.5	8.8

Information was distributed to teachers working at least 75% of full-time. The groups had seven to nine participants, for mean age and years of experience see Table 2. The five groups consisted of 44 participants (33 women and 11 men). At two of the schools, two groups formed while at a third school only one group was formed. The groups met twice within a two-week period at the respective schools during the period February-April 2015.

A semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions was used (e.g., Who do you communicate with at work? What difficulties related to communication do you experience? What

possibilities do you see? What type of feedback do you need?). Data were collected electronically, the audio files entered into MAXQDA (version 11), and transcribed for clean read. The interviews lasted on average 1 hour and 13 minutes (SD = 4.5 minutes), generating over 12 hours of recorded material.

To gather demographic data such as age, educational background, and years of work experience a pre-survey was administered (Table 2). The group discussion climate was evaluated with a post-survey (Table 2).

Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis was done in an iterative manner, including re-reading of transcripts (Rice & Ezzy, 1999). The analysis was conducted in three steps: 1) Preliminary coding of one focus group (both meetings). 2) The preliminary coding framework was then further expanded and modified in order to adjust the themes to the data from the remaining four groups. 3) The findings were presented to teachers at two of the schools and they were given ample time for discussion. The themes were not altered, however, because of this final step.

Table 2.

Descriptive data from the pre-survey presented at school level (N = 44). In the last two columns results from the post-survey (N = 30) regarding group climate and the participants' own levels of comfort concerning participation are presented.

School	Pre-survey N	First meeting N	Second meeting N	Post-survey N	Age M	SD	Years of experience M	SD	Communication climate (1–6)[a]		Own participation (1–6)[b]	
A	18	16	14	14	50.6	10.6	21.8	13.2	5.7	0.5	5.7	0.6
B	18	18	15	11	48.4	10.7	17.8	11.2	5.4	0.7	5.7	0.5
C	8	7	8	5	39.1	7.8	11.3	5.9	5.4	1.3	5.6	0.6
Total	44	41	37	30								

[a]Question: How did you experience the communication climate in your group? (Both questions were responded to on a 6-point continuous rating-scale with verbal anchors at the endpoints) 1 = *closed*, 6 = *open*.
[b]Question: How did it feel for you to participate? 1 = *I felt uncomfortable*, 6 = *I felt comfortable*.

Ethical considerations

Information regarding the purpose and procedure of the study was presented during the recruitment process and at the first group meeting. The author acted as moderator and stressed that participation was voluntary and that all information would be treated with confidentiality. The participants were asked to respect each other's integrity by not disclosing the content of the interviews elsewhere. At the beginning of the first session, participants were given an opportunity to ask questions about the study and to sign a consent form, a copy of which they received at the second meeting. To ensure the anonymity of the research participants, quotations are presented without any reference to age, gender, or school. The study was approved by the Ethical Review Board in Lund, Sweden.

Findings

Four themes illustrating teachers' perceptions and evaluations of factors related to OC were identified: (1) organizational, (2) relational, (3) work, and (4) individual. The first theme covers conditions for work and exposes teachers' perceptions of communication strategies. Theme two organizes thoughts on interpersonal communication. Themes three and four are associated with teachers' views on their work-situation. Each theme is represented by subthemes as elaborated in Table 3.

Theme one: organizational factors

Organizational aspects related to communication are presented in this theme. The subthemes relate to organizational issues such as *processes and decision-making*, *distribution of tasks*, both short and long-term *scheduling issues*, *flow of information*.

The following quotation from one of the interviews exemplifies several aspects of *organizational factors* while revealing a positive and change-oriented attitude on the part of the teacher:

> I think we could do quite a lot if we, at an earlier stage, started talking about the organization. The first thing would be to have regular dialogues with each other, and from those we could try to pick up on the small changes we could make in order to make things easier and then to evaluate things after each year. We write an evaluation, but we never discuss it and we never make any changes based on it, so I think actually quite small things could help ease the workload we experience.

Several teachers claimed *work-processes and decision-making* were unorganized and conflicted with their views on good professional practice. There was, for example, a lack of structured evaluations of projects causing frustration. The teachers expressed a need for better meeting structure and active involvement in how teaching was structured.

Table 3.

Themes and subthemes.

Theme 1: Organizational factors	
Subthemes	*Sample quotes*
Processes and decision-making	"We write our evaluations, but we never discuss them and make changes"
Distribution of tasks	"The routines must be looked at, who does what?"
Scheduling issues	"I need access to my colleagues when I am free, we have tried to book a meeting but can't find a time" "To communicate, we have to go find each other; we don't have a set time. I make rounds all over the place"
Flow of information	"I am irritated by all the mailings that don't have anything to do with me" "Finding information on *V-klass*[1] takes so much time"

Theme 2: Relational factors	
Subthemes	*Sample quotes*
Interactions with students	"Conversations about students are in general positively worded…it is a culture here"
Supportive and trusting climate	"We don't have a supportive climate so we can be critical"
Friendly and relaxed atmosphere	"We had been planning a get-together and we had a cake and some fun"
Loneliness	"There is no one to exchange ideas with"
Theme 3: Work-factors	
Subthemes	*Sample quotes*
Intensity of work	"You step over the threshold here and you have to handle that, there are no limits"
Blurred boundaries between work and private life	"I check my e-mails in the evening because I don't want any unpleasant surprises when I come to work"
Individual strategies	"We went to my house to find peace and quiet to fill out those forms", "You stay in your classroom because of the workload"
Collaborative learning and feedback	"Just think of the things I could learn from my colleagues"
Theme 4: Individual factors	
Subthemes	*Sample quotes*
To have personal energy	"To have the energy to work until retirement"
To experience professional autonomy	"I would find it extremely boring to work at a school that was centrally controlled"
To feel satisfied and motivated	"To wake up in the morning with a feeling of, yes, I'm going to work, it's fun to meet my colleagues, and it's fun to meet the students"
To maintain one's health	"One should have the strength to have a private life and not just work and not have any social relations"

Online learning and administrative platform.

Regarding the *distribution of tasks* and responsibilities, the teachers brought up that information regarding distribution of tasks was often unclear, and perceived this as hindering. Opinions were raised that such lack of clarity led to things being done inefficiently and sometimes haphazardly. A general lack of procedures for how matters were organized and carried out was also brought up as problematic, and hindering work, causing confusion, leading to inefficient communication, and incidents of miscommunication.

Scheduling issues had to do with concerns regarding short-term scheduling issues such as cancelled meetings, low participation in meetings, and lack of meeting-time to discuss urgent issues. Long-term scheduling practices were considered inflexible and lacking allotted time slots for interacting with colleagues. The teachers experienced a great deal of frustration regarding the perceived lack of influence over scheduling processes. Issues of concern also centered on time and space for communication regarding urgent day-to-day issues. They reported being frustrated with locating

colleagues, finding time to talk and plan, evaluate their work, and to exchange information and learn from others.

The *flow of information* with numerous e-mails from management and colleagues regarding various things was considered a problem causing frustration. The flow of unnecessary e-mails had to do with projects one was not involved in and the habit of hitting "reply all" when responding to e-mails. As one teacher put it when the group discussed the abundance of e-mails, "I don't need to read everyone's response to things that don't concern me". The teachers consequently wished for better structure and organization regarding e-mail procedures.

Theme two: relational factors

This theme organizes the relational aspects of communication processes. Many of the participants expressed how communication about and *interaction with students* had a positive and respectful tone, and several teachers were satisfied with their own and their colleagues' problem-solving attitude regarding student issues.

Several of the teachers, however, felt that they lacked a *supportive and trusting climate* among themselves*,* resulting in a sense of wariness in expressing their opinions. These concerns were directed towards both management and colleagues. There was also a strong agreement among the participants that communication processes were not something intentionally and purposefully put on the agenda. Because this was considered by the participants to be essential, the lack of such processes was particularly telling.

Being part of a *friendly and relaxed atmosphere* was considered important and rewarding for the participants, as exemplified in the following quote by a teacher talking about her need for a more sociable relationship with her principal:

> It's not about talking about the job, but it's more of a casual relationship, so it's easier to work with someone, you get to know each other, who you are as a person, how you handle information in different ways. And if you go a little deeper into it, then it is easier to see that it is not about going to the principal just because I want something all the time, but that we can meet spontaneously.

Examples having to do with different aspects of positive social interactions and fun experiences were often coupled with a sad sense of loss, as older teachers described how they previously used to have more fun and more time to interact informally.

Some teachers expressed sentiments of *loneliness*, feelings that they themselves partly attributed to a perception of the school being too small and that they missed having colleagues teaching the same subjects, or simply a lack of someone to collaborate with. There were also examples to the contrary, as participants expressed being satisfied with sharing an office with a close colleague making communication easier.

Theme three: work-factors

This theme contains findings having to do with work-factors, focusing on *intensity of work*, *blurred boundaries between work and private life*, *individual strategies* and having opportunities for *collaborative learning and feedback.*

In terms of their work, the participants described *the intensity of work* that teaching entails. Classes without sufficient breaks coupled with a need to attend to student concerns and other practical matters, was describes as resulting in workdays completely lacking in flexibility and downtime.

The teachers experienced *blurred boundaries between work and private life*. This was reported as being due to the amount of work they had to do at home such as lesson planning and correcting assignments.

In order to handle a complex work-situation, a myriad of *individual strategies* were described. To stay abreast of work some teachers answered e-mails on the weekends. In the following quote, some teachers discuss how they handle e-mail correspondence with parents:

Anna[2]: It's so easy for parents to contact us now, via email. Communication with the parents has intensified in some way. I have found that I spend a great deal of my time responding to parent e-mails, it does not have to be something negative, it can be something that requires an explanation.

Bea: It's both good and bad.

Anna: Yes, both good and bad.

Cecilia: Doris and I have had a dialogue. We do not respond to e-mails in the evenings and weekends. Before, Doris answered and I didn't. We cannot do differently because we have the same class.
Doris: It's strange if I answer [on the weekends] and you don't.

Regarding lesson-planning and correcting assignments, some avoided taking work home, some met in their respective homes to plan, while others met at school in the mornings outside regular working hours, to have time for last-minute preparations.

Another coping-mechanism was withdrawal from collegial interaction, often coupled with the need to have time to work or simply a lack of energy to interact with others, resulting in them staying in their classrooms by themselves or with their co-teacher.

To experience *collaborative learning and* receiving *feedback* as in the form of continuous learning at work, together with colleagues who teach the same subjects, was considered most valuable. Being observed in the classroom by somebody without any knowledge of one's subject was, however, not perceived as especially meaningful. The general sentiment was, nevertheless, that the major obstacle for collaborative learning was lack of time and opportunities to meet.

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[2]The names have been altered

Theme four: individual factors

This theme contains findings having to do with the teacher as a person, focusing on statements that concern feelings of *personal energy*, *satisfaction and motivation* with work, *professional autonomy*, and *health*-related issues. One teacher expresses her concerns as follows:

> To have the endurance to work until retirement, with some remaining vitality, yes, energy. To be able to have a private life, a balance. To be able to sleep at night…a sustainable work life should not bring about sleeping-problems.

Turning to the first subtheme, the participants stated that *to have personal energy* or the drive to do a good job throughout the day was an essential part of work. Many, however, considered work draining and the workdays depleting them of energy. Worries were raised regarding the sustainability of their work-situation, which they thought would ultimately exhaust them

Even if the teachers enjoyed collaborating with their colleagues, they also expressed a need for *autonomy* regarding things like teaching methods. Some felt pressure from their principal and colleagues to follow the latest didactic trends.

One large part of sustainable work life, as underpinned by the discussions, was the feeling of *satisfaction and motivation*. As expressed by one teacher:

> To have the satisfaction to come to work, to feel motivated and get up in the morning and go to work, it should feel like a desire. If you don't feel that way, you must take responsibility for that, and do something else, I think, change something.

The teachers' statements that were coded as *health issues* center on reports of sleeping problems, lack of ability to concentrate, and frequent anxiety. A lack of downtime during the day was a common stressor. Working at home with planning, correcting student work, and corresponding with parents, were examples of tasks done at night, which for some had consequences for their sleep, as exemplified in the following quotes:

> I get anxious about all the e-mails anytime of the day.
> One has to work at home as well; if I work late at night then I cannot sleep.

Discussion

The findings suggest that the primary and lower secondary-school teachers taking part in this study lack adequate and comprehensive structures for OC. In addition, the findings reveal the reciprocal nature of OC and the work-situation as experienced by the participating teachers.

Organizational factors

The results show that the participants felt left out from work-processes and decision-making at their schools, because of various communication problems and thus OC processes are intertwined with circumstances for work. These results are unfortunate since the performance of a complex organization such as a school, increasingly, relies on shared responsibility, democracy, and active participation among the employees (Sweetland & Hoy, 2000). Deficient democratic decision-making is especially problematic when an organization is dependent on the ability and skills of professionals (Bouchikhi & Kimberly, 2003). To miss out on teachers' contributions has proven to undercut work engagement, stifle creativity and innovation, and have negative consequences for organizational growth and development (Bouchikhi & Kimberly, 2003). Ample empirical evidence from educational research has pointed to a connection between shared-decision making and job satisfaction (Rice & Schneider, 1994). Moreover, involving all levels of an organization in decision-making processes has been shown to be important for collective sense-making (Tschannen-Moran, Uline, Woolfolk Hoy, & Mackley, 2000), or as Christensen and Cornelissen (2011) state, "the organization is dependent on the many voices of its individual speakers" (p. 20), reportedly an area of much needed improvement in the studied schools.

One issue that arose concerned teachers' perception of unclear or *ad hoc* work circumstances which portrayed communication problems as frequent and relating to flow of information, scheduling conflicts, distribution of work tasks, and lack of organized collaboration. To counter such occurrences, management has a strategically critical role, in improving working conditions through active collaboration with teachers (Wenner & Campbell, 2017).

Consistent with contemporary trends to diverge from the tradition of teachers being highly autonomous and performing solitary work (Park, Henkin, & Egley, 2005), all groups in this study had experienced changing conditions for collegial interaction and collaboration at work during recent years. Indeed, governmental demands for collaboration between teachers have increased due to requirements related to the current national curriculum. Concurrently the prospects of working together appear to have decreased. For example, the participants describe that they lack both the opportunity to meet and socialize during work-breaks, as well as a difficulty finding time to collaborate. Reasons given for this related to scheduling conflicts and requirements for teachers to carry out tasks such as playground duties and eating meals together with students, thus hindering them from meeting with colleagues. The time they had set aside for work-related tasks such as joint planning was instead used to discuss and solve student matters.

These reports are disconcerting because, as stated by Avalos (2011), the basis for teacher learning has largely to do with informal exchanges between co-workers and collegial collaboration. The problems noted in this study appears pervasive and could be countered by the provision of time for shared work and collaboration, with a focus on re-purposing time-usage (Murphy, 2015).

Relational factors

Workplace communication whether informal or formal is at the heart of teachers' interactions with each other and they valued their colleagues and found trusting and supportive relationships important. This was clear from accounts of how well things worked and how easily problems were solved when there was trust and support, but also how misunderstandings and defensiveness caused a negative climate and dissatisfaction. Although currently regulators and administrators strive to stimulate collaborative learning, old practices prevail and teachers often view themselves as highly autonomous professionals. In the schools studied here, all groups described a lack of focus on communication and collaboration processes *per se*. Hence, a lack of reflection needed for improving the culture of communication. Interestingly, all groups expressed that, although taking part in the study had taken time away from their normal tasks, the fact that they had been given the opportunity to sit down and reflect was valuable in and of itself.

Indeed, ordinary social interactions and strong social groups at work have been shown to be important for teachers' ability to cope with demands (Lakey & Orehek, 2011) and to be negatively associated with teacher burnout (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). Moreover, social interactions fulfil employees' relatedness needs (Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, & Ryan, 2000), help create an atmosphere of trust and shared vision (Price, 2012), and reduce teacher turnover (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013). Consequently, stimulating positive social interactions while minimizing negative interactions is important for retaining new teachers as turnover is frequent early in the career (Griffeth & Hom, 2001).

These findings are consistent with previous educational research underlining the importance of trust as a prerequisite for collaboration (Van Maele, Moolenaar, & Daly, 2015). For example, trusting relationships build on high-quality interactions with peers (Van Maele et al., 2015), school level collaborations, (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998), informal and formal interactions with management (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015), and productive parent-teacher interactions (Forsyth, Barnes, & Adams, 2006). It is in the advent of such exchanges that relationships can be established, tested, and reaffirmed. In the studied schools, there appears to be a need to establish and maintain such conditions and opportunities to nurture growth of the teacher community.

Work-factors

The participants struggled to handle the intensity of work by devising individual strategies. There is evidence of each teacher being required to prioritize and sift through work tasks without support,

shown in this study to result in idiosyncratic approaches. Indeed, the teachers described a myriad ways to define, plan, and fulfill work giving each teacher personal freedom, but also potentially a sense of uncertainty. Something which might ultimately stifle creativity, divergent thinking, and problem-solving capacities (Andrews & Smith, 1996). At least one teacher in each group expressed that to reach a satisfactory level of completion in work tasks there was a need to withdraw from social interactions and instead stay in the classroom. This self-selected behavior was attributed to the need for private-time, concurrent with pressure to get things done. These declarations are worrisome from a psychosocial aspect. Coupled with the presence of high demands on each individual teacher this is indicative of an unsustainable work-situation and point to the need for well-communicated and structured support serving as some sort of glue for work (Allvin, 2008).

The participants also reported how changes in modern technology have contributed to an increase in communication-related tasks with students and parents, thereby increasing the amount of administrative work. According to the participants, they experience an unmanageable work-situation with a constant flow of e-mails and cumbersome technology. Again, there is evidence of highly idiosyncratic ways of managing administration; as some evidently avoid taking work home, while others reportedly try to stay abreast of the workload by being online constantly. In light of this, there is a need for organized and deliberate school-level structures regarding the lines of communication between parents and teachers, preventing a situation where each teacher has to fend for him- or herself. This is consistent with recent finding by Dormann et al. (2017) who found the usefulness of technology to be highly dependent of local school implementation.

The teachers expressed positive views on both observing each other and being observed by the principal. Consistent with previous research on formalized feedback programs (Delvaux et al., 2013), the teachers in this study preferred the observer to be someone whom they both know and trust. They also articulated a desire for frequent visits by the principal to get varied feedback.

It could be reasoned that communication problems between teachers and parents could be prevented to a large extent and instead lead to fruitful school development where problems and conflicts are viewed upon as opportunities for learning and growth Hoy's (2003). Hoy further states that schools need "appropriately designed formal procedures and hierarchical structures to prevent chaos and promote efficiency" (p. 87-88); concurrently, however, he also points to the need for *enabling structures* to prevent rules and regulations from becoming coercive or counter-productive. Modern day problems, such as teachers' frustrations with e-mails from parents, could be regarded as opportunities for development and more efficient ways to operate schools.

Evidently, teachers have a multitude of tasks, as discussed above, for which there is no regulated time. Indeed, tasks such as planning, documentation, monitoring and supporting students, as well as cooperating with guardians may swell far beyond the regulated working hours. This way of organizing work, combined with the reported high demands and limited support-structures, might have consequences for work-related stress. Previous studies on secondary-school teachers in Sweden found

that lack of sufficient recuperation from work stress was associated with symptoms of ill-health and illness-related absences(Aronsson, Svensson, & Gustafsson, 2003; Arvidsson, Håkansson, Karlson, Björk, & Persson, 2016b).

Individual factors

Being personally involved, experiencing autonomy, and feeling committed to one's work was fundamental for the teachers in this study and they appeared motivated and engaged in their teaching and in their students. It was evident from the interviews that a loss of commitment for teaching entails personal responsibility to act and even reconsider one's career choice. Fully aware of the demands of work, the participants grappled with the unmanageable working conditions they experienced. Juxtaposed with that being involved and feeling excited about work at a first glance appears to be positive, it can also result in personal vulnerability and feelings of inadequacy (Hobfoll, 2002). If personal ambitions clash with possibilities at work, and rewards are not be in line with expectations a mismatch between the individual and the environment occurs. School leaders and principals have a central role in preventing, detecting, and managing unfavorable working conditions. Empirical research clearly points to the central role of the principal in balancing demands on teachers, by clarifying, shielding and restructuring work (Murphy, 2015) and thus help create an environment in which teachers can thrive.

Methodological considerations

A strength of this study is the design with two consecutive group interviews which provided opportunities to clarify discussion points raised in the first interview. The potential for an open and relaxed discussion climate was good due to the group size and composition of colleagues working together daily. Focus group research with members already know each other has, however, been criticized for potentially encompassing group bias (Thomas, MacMillan, McColl, Hale, & Bond, 1995). In light of the nature of the topics studied and the potential benefits of a lively and dynamic discussion climate, it was beneficial that teachers who worked together could relate to each other's statements and encourage expressions of views.

As a way of controlling for group composition, teachers' individual thoughts on having participated were assessed, it being concluded that a majority felt comfortable. In addition, verbal feedback given to the moderator indicated a high degree of satisfaction among the participants with having taken part.

Regarding the selection of the participating municipality, it should be noted that student achievement is above average, with virtually all students being eligible to apply to post-secondary-schools as compared with the national average of 86.5 % (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2015). Hence, the schools in our study were at the positive end of the national scale, possibly challenging the representativeness of our study in representing a broader trend. Although several of the issues

addressed in this study most likely apply to other schools with poorer results, appropriate caution is warranted when making extrapolations (Patton, 2015).

Practical implications

Naturally, requirements for OC will vary over time and teachers will in the future need to be flexible and resourceful in order to stay abreast of work environment challenges. To this end, school leaders may consider teachers' thoughts and evaluations of OC as useful individual representations of the work environment (e.g., Ashforth, 1985). For example, teachers' perceptions of lack of time to talk about key school-related issues could lead to individually accumulated frustrations and function as a job stressor, or in other words, work environment demands. In the long term, such experiences could influence the individual employee in a harmful way, and negatively affect organizational outcomes (e.g., Karasek, 1979). On the other hand, well-functioning OC will function as a resource for work, providing opportunities for interaction and exchange of ideas and support. Teachers whom report that they experience strong communicative processes, adequate time for communication, and supportive formal and informal structures for communication, will likely be more satisfied with work.

Conclusions

In this study, several problem-areas regarding especially the structure and time aspects of OC were voiced. One noteworthy observation was the many ways teachers handled daily challenges. In order to counter these idiosyncratic tendencies, well-designed structures for OC, ranging from communication platforms to meeting structures need to be established.

The observations suggest problems of deficient and weak communication patterns, and a resulting negative outlook on teachers' work sustainability. In light of the exploratory nature of this study, the results are not conclusive; but they speak directly to the relevance of OC processes as these occur between teachers in today's fast-paced schools.

Acknowledgements

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