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# Out of control: A teacher's account

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## Abstract

This paper draws on data collected from my recent exploration of how teachers become competent in the area of relationships. In an interview, a student teacher, Kristin, voiced the challenges she faced: 'I think it is easy enough to get the knowledge the student needs. The problem is, in a way, when people are involved'. This paper presents an encounter between Kristin and a student after Kristin had started to work as a teacher. It shows the difficulty of being professional when 'people are involved', that is, when emotions are at work.

## A Study of Emotional Work

For many years, I have been interested in the special demands made on professionals who work in close personal contact with other people and for whom empathy and the ability to build relationships are crucial (Ramvi, 1996; Ramvi and Roland, 1998; Ramvi, 2007). Teaching is one such 'relationship profession' (Moos *et al* , 2004). Teachers realise that emotional bonding, emotional understanding and building relationships are essential to good teaching (Lortie, 1975; Nias, 1989; Woods and Jeffrey, 1996; Hargreaves, 2000; Price, 2001; Moos *et al* , 2004; Zembylas, 2005).

The literature on teachers' experiences characterises the first years of teaching as a struggle for survival (Woods, 1987; Flores, 2002), as beset by uncertainty (Woods and Jeffrey, 1996; Munthe, 2003). Recent research illustrates the significance of understanding emotions as an inextricable aspect of teaching (Zembylas, 2005) and highlights emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995), or emotional literacy (for example, Day, 2004; Leithwood and Beatty, 2007; Delaney, 2008). The literature emphasises the need for students and teachers alike to understand their own feelings and those of others and to be able to handle and express those feelings (Hargreaves, 2000).

In my own research on teachers (Ramvi, 2007), I explored teachers' emotions so as to understand the conditions optimal for professional development. Using a psychoanalytic framework, I applied Wilfred Bion's (1962) concept of 'learning from experience' to the understanding of teachers' everyday life and the requisite conditions for professional development and growth.

A psychoanalytic approach to emotions and human development is unusual in educational settings (even in studies of emotions). Instead, a social constructionist approach is usually taken, in particular Hochschild's (1979, 1983) theory of 'emotional labour' and 'feeling rules'. My interest lay in how a social constructionist viewpoint might (or might not) complement a psychoanalytic perspective when it is applied to the same empirical material.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, such a comparative study would be a very large undertaking; so I limit myself here to a comparison of the way Bion and Hochschild would understand the psychological work of a teacher in a particular instance. The material discussed was collected in fieldwork in two middle schools over a period of one school year (2002-2003).

## A Social Constructionist Perspective on Emotional Work

The work of Arlie Russell Hochschild is among the most significant contributions to the literature about emotion in organisations (Brown, 2000). From a social constructionist perspective, she discusses *emotional labour* (or she uses the term emotion work, emotion management or 'deep acting') - what employees do with their feelings to comply with the role requirements of an organisation. Emotional labour refers to the *effort* a person makes in response to the emotions of others (Hochschild, 1979,

1983). Note that the emphasis is on the effort, the act of trying, and not the outcome, that may or may not be successful. She coined the term to amplify an aspect of paid work that involves labour 'of the heart', as distinct from labour of the hand or mind (Price, 2001).

Hochschild's work is about employees who, because of the demands of the organisation, must show feelings different from those they actually have. The employees lose touch with their own feelings and must follow *feeling rules*. Hochschild (1979) explains, 'We feel. We try to feel. We want to try to feel. The social guidelines that direct how we want to try to feel may be describable as a set of socially shared, albeit often latent (not thought about unless probed at) rules' (p. 563). Price (2001), exploring Hochschild's concept of feeling rules, says that they are contained in an authoritative cultural 'dictionary' of emotions. In managing our emotional response, we always have one eye on other people's readings of our emotional response. Hochschild's constructionist approach suggests that our emotional experience is defined by our culture: 'Hochschild's work has caused us to re-evaluate the ways in which we construct emotional experience and 'perform' our emotions' (Brown, 2000, p. 284).

An even cursory review of recent research on teachers' emotions reveals the pervasiveness of a social constructionist viewpoint and, in particular, Hochschild's concept of emotional labour and rules (for example, Zembylas, 2005; Näring *et al*, 2006; Oplatka, 2007; Coupland *et al*, 2008). Teaching is recognised as a profession demanding a high level of emotional labour. Day (2004) says, for instance, 'To be warm and encouraging to a student who is persistently rude or uninterested requires emotional work' (p. 37).

### **A Psychoanalytic Perspective on Emotional Work**

In Bion's (1962) theory of emotional experience, thinking and learning are connected. A mother's capacity to contain and transform her child's raw emotion creates the experiential foundation for the child's ability to think. In the process of learning from experience, acknowledgement of emotions and thought processes leads to what Bion called action. Failure to learn from experience is linked with fear of thinking and a consequent inability to contain feelings. Given that teachers' work is suffused with uncertainty, learning from experience is difficult, and learning (or failure to learn) from experience in a frustrating situation is related to the person's capacity to tolerate the uncertainty that exists until a thought is able to emerge.

According to Bion, we do not always want to know; that is, we unconsciously avoid or resist knowledge. We seek minus knowledge, -K, as he called it. There is always a frustrating aspect to thoughts, as there is to all insight. This is why thinking is difficult. Whether or not we seek knowledge depends on our capacity to contain the frustration and pain of not knowing or our capacity to tolerate the pain inherent in reality. To learn from experience, as Bion noted, we need to put in some hard mental work; we must be able to recognise, and think about, our own emotions. The process of 'antidevelopment' (-K) is one of repetition and stagnation. From Bion's perspective, emotional work, thinking and learning are about being able to endure and contain the frustration of not knowing.

A teacher does not work alone. In a teacher's work organisation, teachers and administrators function as a group. Using the same model, K and -K, Bion (1961) also described development and antidevelopment in groups - work groups (W groups) and basic assumption groups (BA groups). In K, the group grows with the introduction of new ideas or people. In -K, the new idea (or person) is stripped of its value, and the group, in turn, feels devalued by the new idea. In K, the climate is conducive to mental health. In -K, neither the group nor the idea can survive because of the detrimental effects of devaluation (Bion, 1962, p. 99).

In other words, the W group consciously defines and accepts tasks from the group and learns from experience. When the group is stuck as a BA group, however, the group's functioning is characterised by -K activities. All the group members share an unspoken and unconscious agreement that the work task can be resolved without any effort, without thinking and learning. 'There is a hatred of having to

learn by experience at all, and lack of faith in the worth of such a kind of learning' (Bion, 1961, p. 89). Functioning at the BA level is common and inevitable, at times, for all groups.

Psychoanalytic research in educational settings has focused mainly on how psychoanalysis can contribute to teachers' understanding of their students (Hellman, 1987; Price, 2001; Golland, 2002; Weiss, 2002; Archangelo, 2007). Robert French (1997) claims, however, that anxiety is underestimated both in teaching and in learning and that, therefore, we must explore not only students' but also *teachers'* learning in educational settings. A psychoanalytic lens may be used to see a school as an organisation emphasising the primary task, that is, the overt work-oriented purpose of Bion's W group and working culture, in which the defence in the organisation manifests (for example, Miller and Rice, 1967; Bain *et al* , 1992; French, 1999).

Heather Price (2001) has combined both a social constructionist and a psychoanalytic approach to explore the nature of the emotional labour that teachers perform in their daily professional lives. Price stresses, at the same time, how teachers can develop *students'* capacity to learn by working with the students' emotions. I, on the other hand, am focusing on *teachers'* learning from their emotions, precisely because they are charged with developing their students' ability to do this kind of emotional work. My question is, how can Hochschild's theory about emotional work and Bion's theory about learning from experience contribute, together and separately, to the understanding of teachers' experiences of losing control over their feelings?

## **Methodology**

This paper describes an event that occurred during a 1-year fieldwork project called 'Learning from Experience? A Psychoanalytical Approach to Teachers' Learning' (Ramvi, 2007). I studied two teachers (Kristin and Solveig, both 26 years old) at two different middle schools in their first year of work (2002-2003) after graduation from the Teachers' Training College. I observed them in their daily life, in the classroom, in the staff room and at different staff meetings. After the fieldwork had gone on for some time and various events had taken place, I included other teachers and the rest of the school administrations from the two schools in my sample.<sup>2</sup> The two newly trained teachers, nevertheless, formed the base as key informants. I collected data through more or less structured conversations with teachers and by field observation. In many situations, I recorded the conversations for later transcription. I also took field notes on a regular basis.<sup>3</sup>

My empirical research method was influenced by three methodological approaches, each adding something important to my ability to grasp the teachers' emotional experience. The first influence was ethnographic fieldwork (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1998). To gain insight into the teachers' perspective, it was important that the ethnographic approach emphasise long-lasting, contextualised observations with repeated recognition of significant phenomena. Not taking anything for granted was also important, especially in view of Bion's (1962) idea that understanding the concept of 'not knowing' is vital.

The second methodological influence was Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson's (2003) work on the *free association narrative interview*, in which researchers sought to elicit stories about relationships and frustrating and challenging situations. I was interested in the psychological work that teachers faced in particular situations over a period of time.

Third, my approach was influenced by the clinical infant observation method (Miller *et al* , 1989), which can be described as a means for emotional learning. This method fruitfully combines the two methodologies already described and addresses what each lacks: ethnographic methodology's lack of concern with the unconscious, and the free association narrative interview's lack of focus on long-lasting contact with participants. The infant observation method emphasises being 'experience near' and not interpreting too quickly, but, rather, waiting, observing and thinking over a long period of time. To keep the material open as long as possible is vital in a hermeneutic process. One understands

by oscillating between the whole and its parts, and I had to have a solid understanding of the whole before I could find the best way to put together and present the final material. In the process of analysing the data, it was important not to remove source citations from their context. With my method of analysis, readers gain access to the raw material as it was told to me. The stories form independent units.

Inasmuch as I was engaged in capturing the teachers' lived experience, it was natural that I retain a narrative form in my reports, because that is how we usually tell somebody about our daily life (Murray, 2003). Every story I heard placed in a new light earlier episodes or something the teacher had expressed; thus, the story could, in a way, be filled out. Likewise, after a story had been told to me, I always tried to follow it up later by asking how things were continuing.

I was interested mainly in the teachers' stories about relationships that were frustrating or challenging in some way. Harkening back to Hochschild's (1979) concept of emotional work and feeling rules, I also asked all the teachers in my study about possible differences between private and professional feelings and if they felt restrictions (written or unwritten 'rules') on how they could express feelings towards the students.

In the material collected during the overall study, I found a clue to how a good relationship between student and teacher could be defined: it is a relationship built on trust, where both show that they care about each other, the student by being open and willing to talk about himself or herself and the teacher by offering care and concern (Ramvi, 2007, p. 161).

My data from the overall study indicate that teachers want to 'know' their students; they want to 'like' them and thus be able to see themselves as good teachers. In other words, to be a good teacher demands considerable personal investment, and a teacher's self-image is highly dependent on his or her relationships with the students.

### **Kristin's Ideal**

When Kristin reflects on her first year as a teacher, she remembers most vividly an episode when she became uncontrollably angry at Ole, one of her students. She says, 'I did not master the situation; at least, that is what I think. But, I wonder whether such negative feelings seem stronger than the positive? That the negative feelings are stronger because they destroy the good feelings?'<sup>4</sup>

Kristin held an ideal of how a teacher should deal with feelings. I start with her ideal because one of my findings in the overall project was that maintaining strong ideals was important in the teachers' work. These ideals seemed to have important motivating power for the teachers and had the character of feeling rules.

I interviewed Kristin first while she was still a student teacher (May 2002). She spoke about, among other things, the difficulty knowing how angry one is allowed to be. When I asked if there were any ideals connected to this, Kristin answered:

*I know at any rate that I will never be so enormously angry that in some way I lose my head, for example, if it came to such things, eh, but ... I think it is possible to try to be a bit stable and even-tempered. Not that you are like a yo-yo that whips up and down, but that you are a little stable and even, it has to do with the students' feeling of security, that they know where they are with me ... mmm.*

In the same interview, I asked her about the difference between personal and professional relations, and she wondered if she would feel more 'naked' in private relations; she continued:

*On the private level, they know you, they know something about you in a way, without you having told it, because you are so much together that they ... right? But at work it is more ... straight communication ... On the private level they know it, whether you want them to or not.*

Here Kristin was implying that she, as a professional, should be able to control what she wants to show of herself in relationships she enters into. Kristin made a distinction between herself at her job, where she wanted to be a person directed by conscious feelings that gave her an opportunity to make deliberate choices, and her private self, whom she saw as a person unable to make such conscious choice and exercise such control. The difference, she said, has to do with how well the people in the different relationships *know* her. The teacher Kristin wants to be is one who is able to control her feelings.

Half a year after our first conversation, Kristin has begun her work as a teacher in the middle school. I am doing my fieldwork and we talk once again about feelings (2 November). I asked whether, now that she is a teacher, there are any rules connected to feelings. Are there feelings that she can show or must not show? Kristin thinks before she answers.

*It is more like, not a fear exactly ... not anxiety ... but more the feeling ... no let me call it fear for the time being, then perhaps I'll find a better word, but fear of doing things that you don't wish to do, that you are not able to look after all of them ... For example, that is a thing that you don't want to occur ... Or explode because you become so incredibly angry that you just lose control.*

She goes on to say that she thinks there is a limit to how angry she can get with students. No one has told her this; she has decided herself what these limits are.

Looking back at Kristin's reflections in those two situations - the first when she was a student teacher, the next after just a few months of teaching - one can define her ideals connected to feelings as a feeling rule, which can be summarised in this way: 'I must have control over my feelings, not lose my composure, but be even tempered and stable'. This feeling rule is so strong that she experiences fear or anxiety about not being able to live up to it.

### **When Kristin Lost Control**

One day in February 2003, Kristin tells me, 'You should have been here the day before yesterday. There was a hullabaloo'. The 'hullabaloo' was related to an incident between her and eighth grader Ole (about 13 years old). Ole is a student whom the school has found difficult over several years. Kristin says that they have 'tried to work in a deliberate way with him', but it is difficult for me to discover what has actually been done. Kristin says, 'We have taken him out in the hall and said that this won't do, but nothing happens'. Contact with the home has not brought any results, she says, 'for they seem to support his behaviour'.

Kristin and Marit (a colleague) often talk about Ole. They tell each other stories about him: 'We have been a bit like this: Today he did this and that, and Do you know what he said to me?' Kristin continues, 'So he has irritated us. We get complaints from other teachers; he goes into other classrooms and throws paper around, trips people, says nasty things'. Clearly, it is not only she and Marit who have told negative stories about Ole but also the other teachers.

Kristin tells me in detail what happened on the day she lost control. It began when Marit came from a class where Ole had again pestered a fellow student. Marit said to Kristin, 'Do you know what - I can't stand him any longer. I am so fed up and he is so awful'. Marit said that in the last class, she had moved Ole to a desk apart from the others. She said that they now had to do something.

Kristin went to the classroom. Ole tried to sit with the other students, but Kristin stopped him. He answered by saying that he would like to change classes because Marit and Kristin 'don't like' him. 'I

was about to say that it would be a real pleasure if he changed classes. But I didn't say it ... I am glad that I controlled myself to the extent of not uttering something so unprofessional', Kristin said. Then Ole left the classroom to join a group project. Ole had neither asked nor received permission to leave. In the hall, many students were gathered and there was a lot of noise. After a few minutes, Kristin went out and asked everyone in her class to go back into the classroom. 'My God, do you see how she keeps going on?' Ole said.

Kristin continued:

*I said, 'In the classroom, it's quiet and here in the hall it's noisy. Usually, if you go out in the hall, it's because it is quiet, but it isn't now'. Then he said something very bad, and then he said, 'It's obvious you don't like me'. I responded, 'Do you know what?' He stood in front of me, and all the students in the A and B classes were standing behind me. I got so angry that I said, 'Now I'm fed up with you. I'm sorry to say it, but I can't stand you. You behave so. ... I've never experienced this before', I said. 'That so much filth can come out of that mouth of yours, I don't understand!'*

Kristin told me that she had spoken so loudly that the students heard her through the vents in the classroom wall. She continued her story:

*I don't remember word for word what I said, but they came like beads on a string. I was, at any rate, so stupid as to say that there have been complaints from his class and from the parallel class, and they talk about him in the teachers' room, about what filthy words he uses. I said I'm never going to give in, I'm going to give you bad marks all the time, because I won't accept that kind of behaviour, never! While I'm talking, he stands there, glancing at the ceiling and rolling his eyes. 'Yes, yes, sorry, sorry'. He tries to grasp the door handle to go in, but I stop him and say, 'I'm not finished with you'. Then I continue on the same key, scolding and scolding: 'Look at me when I'm talking to you', I said. It was now completely quiet in the hall.*

Kristin said she felt the blood throbbing in her head, she was so angry. Afterwards, they went into the classroom. There were 10 minutes left. Ole sat still and Kristin continued her rounds among the students.

After class, Kristin told Marit what had happened and that she had given Ole a severe reprimand and a bad mark for behaviour. Marit thinks it is important that such incidents be documented, in case the parents ask. With this remark, Marit turned the situation away from the emotional world and to the practical.

### **Analysis**

After Kristin told me the course of events, we reflected on what had happened. Her reflections tie in with my analysis of the story. Kristin herself hit upon the main theme. She had spoken about the importance of control over one's own feelings. In my analysis, I look more closely at controlling feelings through the lenses of Hochschild and Bion. I also discuss how Kristin's feeling rules influence her capacity to learn from experience.

### **Controlling Feelings**

My fieldwork suggested that the relationship between the teachers and students is often a struggle for power. In the case of Kristin, this struggle became clear. One way of understanding the situation is to say that Kristin struggled for power in the relationship with Ole, so that she could follow the feeling rule I formulated earlier: I must have control over my feelings, not lose my composure, but be even-tempered and stable.

Through my fieldwork, I also became increasingly aware that the problems that arose in the classroom were seldom brought up for serious discussion among colleagues. The teachers often spoke about the students in the teachers' room and with each other, but in a way that Kristin describes as, 'Today he did this' and 'Do you know what he said to me?' and so forth. They exchanged stories over which they shook their heads or laughed. An earlier study of special education teachers (Ramvi and Roland, 1998) showed that they experience a great need to 'let off steam' (as they expressed it) with other adults after difficult experiences. My study showed the same phenomenon. The teachers did not talk seriously about the everyday worries and frustrations they experienced. It was as if the pain would evaporate if they could only tell each other about the difficult event. The teachers as a group seemed to follow feeling rules that they should act as if their own feelings were not important, nothing to reflect upon or take seriously.

Kristin's story underlines how crucial the emotion work is for professional socialisation (Yanay and Shahar, 1998). Zembylas (2005), citing Reddy, describes an 'emotional regime' in teachers' development. This regime offers 'strong emotional management tools at the expense of allowing greater scope for self-exploration and navigation' (p. 476). Those who do not respond well to the regime have goal conflicts, which induce feelings of vulnerability in the teachers, the vulnerability to either obey the regime or experience crisis, self-doubt and guilt for not doing so.

The collegial group itself can be seen as a BA group (Bion, 1961). The way they talk about Ole and how awful he is promotes BA functioning. There is massive projection onto the boy. The stories allow few opportunities for Ole to grow; there is little curiosity about him, little identification and little personal knowledge of him, just a general stereotype of a bad boy. They excuse themselves from responsibility or feelings for him. Such an environment prepares for, or reduces the threshold for, what Bion calls 'acting' (-K). The teachers evacuate difficult feelings rather than create conditions for learning from experience. People can be 'so intolerant of pain or frustration that they feel the pain but will not suffer it and so cannot be said to discover it' (Bion, 1970, p. 9). They have 'pain without suffering it' (p. 11). The ability to suffer pain is a precondition for thought. Bion is sceptical of knowledge stripped of emotional experience; such knowledge substitutes rigid control for the uncertainty of being open to new experiences through thinking (Hollway, 2000).

Both the psychoanalytic and the social constructionist perspectives agree that emotional labour consists of 'surviving' in the face of conflicting goals. In the social constructionist perspective, 'performing emotion management [is] necessary to feel what, according to the emotional rules, it would seem appropriate to feel' (Zembylas, 2005, p. 480). From a psychoanalytic perspective, on the other hand, the conflict is between inner goals, a conflict between what Kristin can allow herself to feel and what she can show. It is the relationship work, the fact of being mutually interdependent with the students, that threatens the teachers' identity and permits transference and countertransference to come into play. Kristin does not want to reveal herself and she protects herself from doing so by following feeling rules. As it is for any individual teacher, Kristin's inner goal conflict derives as well from early life experiences. From the psychoanalytic perspective, Kristin consciously *wants* to follow the feeling rules at the workplace because she unconsciously needs them. The emotional regime and feeling rules help her to survive.

Before exploring these statements further, let us return to the story.

What should not have happened did happen. Kristin lost her temper and became furious. She broke her feeling rule. The outburst, the loss of control is the turning point in the story. Kristin breaks out of a somewhat rigid reaction pattern. She yells at Ole and bawls him out. Afterwards she says, almost amazed, 'In a way it was also rather good. I have to say that, even though it sounds cold'.

Kristin showed Ole the emotions she actually felt in the situation. Hochschild (1979) claims that the problem with following feeling rules is that the employee loses touch with his or her own feelings. Kristin simultaneously felt both good and bad. Hochschild might say that Kristin felt a sense of relief

by not simulating feelings. Nevertheless, Kristin's main conclusion was that acting out was wrong and she hoped never to do it again. Why was it so important that Kristin not lose control? Why did she experience *a feeling of fear* or *anxiety* that she would not be able to live up to the feeling rules? Let us look more closely at the anxiety behind the fear of losing control.

### **The Fear of Feelings**

From a psychoanalytic perspective, it is important to emphasise that it is not only as an employee that Kristin is motivated by fears of experiencing emotions that are out of control. Kristin is, as we all are, alarmed by her destructive urges, which can lead us to deny, repress or project them, or to attempt reparation. Having some kind of control is seen as necessary; it is not only a culturally oppressive feeling rule. But, here I focus on Kristin as a teacher and how her relationship work affects her fear of losing control.

Kristin herself says that it is important to control her feelings because of her students' needs for predictability in relationships. The anxiety she talks about suggests that she also needs to maintain control for her own reasons. She says that in private relations people know something about her whether she wants them to or not. As a professional, Kristin wants to direct what she displays of herself in relationships. But what happened in the relation with Ole?

Psychoanalytic theory postulates that a person's forgotten past can shape his or her behaviour in the present. That is why in a psychoanalytic interpretation, we would be more likely to call Kristin's situation a re-enactment rather than a power struggle. The professional literature for understanding classroom dynamics has given minimal consideration to transference in the classroom (Weiss, 2002). Weiss writes, 'Teachers are often unaware of their personal subjective involvement in what they consider to be objective professional decisions about children' (p. 112).

Kristin does not know why she lost control, but her interview material suggests that, when her authority is undermined, she is unable to live up to her model of the ideal teacher. At one level, Kristin has to abandon her ideal because her real self does not always permit her to get close to this ideal. She does not like to be enraged. She does not want to let Ole see her as she really is. The outburst could be seen as coming from the self she does not want Ole or others to see. The material speaks to her shame in revealing herself.

The teachers seem so deadlocked in the external power struggle that they fail to see that the problem really concerns an internal power struggle between the different conceptions they have of themselves. Kristin uses words that make it seem like a power struggle ('I'm not going to give in'; 'He tries to see how far he can go'); but the situation has to do with feelings that Ole is demanding, feelings that Kristin is not prepared to acknowledge. According to Weiss (2002), 'Experience suggests that the more intense the teacher's reaction, the more complex are the factors behind the countertransference' (p. 118).

Kristin's fear of strong feelings can also be understood as an inability to differentiate between feelings and actions. Kristin seems to think it is as wrong to have negative feelings towards a student as it is to act out the anger. She seems to think that just having negative feelings breaks the feeling rules. The expressions 'gets angry', 'loses control' and so forth are in the same respect both a feeling and an action. Her descriptions of right and wrong feelings mean the same to her as doing right or wrong.

Viewed in the light of transference-countertransference, the overall picture suggests parallel processes (Gediman and Wolkenfeld, 1980) between teachers and students with regard to anxiety. Both are anxious about feeling ignorant, about lacking influence/power and about the possibility of being subject to a malicious authority (Price, 2001). For the teacher, an unconscious tension arises between two conflicting needs: the need to live up to one's ideal of being a good teacher and the need to resist the vulnerable state of not knowing, not mastering, lacking skills. According to Bion's theory, the

process of containment will be difficult in such conditions. People are likely to relate to each other in an omnipotent or punishing way that denies recognition of 'the other' or of aspects of oneself. Kristin's response suggests an anxiety regarding her own impotence. Kristin's considerable anxiety results in her holding her strong negative feelings in check; she is afraid of the harm they might do. These feelings are reinforced by her professional ethic. Her recognition of her place in the power relation also ties in to the fear of harm.

### **Learning from Experience**

Kristin's attempt to control herself even more after the incident can lead to an avoidance of or insensitivity to feelings. This is a crucial point in my analysis of learning from experience. The challenge faced by every human being is to integrate love and hate. Benjamin (cited in Hollway, 2006) talks about 'negative moments'. She claims that it is not merely love, or understanding, or mutuality that ensures against a romanticised understanding of the capacity to care. That understanding must also take into account aggression, misunderstanding and competition. According to Bion (1962), the capacity to remain sensitive to both positive and negative feelings provides an opportunity to understand the complexity of relationships. No matter how much teachers love their students, they cannot avoid hating and fearing them as well. The more a teacher realizes this ambivalence, the less will hate and fear be determining motives for behaviour towards a student. Winnicott (1947) wrote, 'Hate that is justified in the present setting has to be sorted out and kept in storage and available for eventual interpretation' (p. 196).

To accept and tolerate is also to forgive oneself. It is important that Kristin could be able to forgive herself, not because it was not wrong to act out towards Ole, but because it was wrong. Kristin has to suffer the pain of hurting another person, but at the same time she has to forgive herself without blaming others. She has to accept the feeling of being a person who does wrong as well as good. It is painful, but necessary, for her to move on and grow as a human being. Bion's theory of thinking emphasises this potential pain of knowing. To acknowledge that one is out of control in certain situations may make it possible to contain that feeling. Kristin can put her feelings into words (I feel angry, frustrated and so forth), but can she accept the feelings? It is easy to say I lost control, but difficult to accept and realise that I am out of control, or enraged.

The expression *thinking with feeling* (Williams, 1998) is a good description of the emotional labour that is required to learn from experience. The emotional labour (according to Bion) required of Kristin is that she is able to observe her own and her student's feelings and to reflect on them, thereby avoiding the automatic response from feeling to action. Kristin has to acknowledge the difference between being driven by a feeling and thinking about a feeling. In Bion's theory, it is exactly the space between feeling and action that is so important; Winnicott (1985) speaks about *the moment of hesitation*. If Kristin cannot make this distinction, she will continue to lose control. To think with feeling makes it possible for one to take responsibility for one's own actions and put them into words. A psychoanalytic insight does not always save one from acting out and 'losing it' in a classroom setting, because projection is so powerful, but thinking about these dynamics does increase the possibility of metabolising the experience.

To learn from experience, it is important that the teacher remain in a relationship to the student and contain the pain of her own fear of ignorance. By doing so, she may also be able to help students to contain their similar fear. It might even be possible for students to feel pride in the struggle to understand, rather than to feel fear and uncertainty (Price, 2001). Learning from experience is about the capacity to contain one's feelings and not deny them, to take responsibility for having them and for how one passes them on.

Although teachers are not therapists, there are therapeutic elements in their relationship to their students. Like therapists, teachers face the emotional challenge of experiencing strong negative feelings alongside an ideal of being empathetic, fair and protective. Indeed, it could be argued that for

teachers to develop as persons within their professional roles, and not be held static by them, this element (the therapeutic) must be present' (Wright, 1993, p. 4). Had the therapeutic element been present in the situation between Kristin and Ole, the disciplinary issue could have been resolved in a more creative, mutually respectful way. Whether or not the therapeutic element in the relationship between the two is present has to do with Kristin's tolerance of emotional knowledge, her capacity for thinking about difficult feelings.

When Kristin expresses genuine feelings, Ole too has an opportunity to learn from experience. He knows that Kristin and Marit dislike him (even though they have tried to follow the feeling rules). However, during the outburst, Kristin gives Ole a 'piece of her mind'. Maybe it is better for Ole to experience Kristin's genuine feelings rather than being part of what Winnicott (1947) called a *sentimental environment* (p. 202), one that denies hate. If Ole experiences Kristin's reaction as authentic, it could make him either feel sorry for her or feel concerned or guilty. He might also derive some comfort from seeing her authentic reactions.

## **Conclusion**

The theoretical frameworks of both Bion and Hochschild contribute to the analysis and understanding of a teacher's everyday feelings, where fear of being out of control and the need for control are urgent. I would like to stress that the purpose of outlining Kristin's story was not to analyse Kristin as a person, but to understand the work of Kristin, the teacher. Her professional ideal is not unique. Historically, the ideal in Western culture has always been to curb emotions through discipline and self-restraint, rather than to take emotions into account, investigate them and try to understand what they express (Mastenbroek, 1999). Kristin, like all the other teachers in this study, has a strong wish to sustain her ideal of a good teacher. In our postmodern society, however, schools as well as the role of teachers are changing. Teachers' authority is said to be reduced, and teachers now have to rely far more on their personality and emotions to create their own authority (Hargreaves, 1994). Strong emotions are linked to the anxiety of not being able to control oneself or not being able to solve interpersonal conflicts. This connection is evident in Kristin's story. It is in the staff room that teachers manage their feelings (Hochschild, 1979, 1983) and maintain the 'emotional regime' (Reddy, cited in Zembylas, 2005).

According to Bion, the colleague group functions as a common denial of the teachers' emotional experience (a BA group), or as a defence at an institutional level (Menzies-Lyth, 1959).<sup>5</sup> The defence arises from the school's attempt to protect the teachers where they are vulnerable. In my thesis (Ramvi, 2007), I argue that the schools' social defence system helps to keep the emotional at a distance, and thereby paradoxically works against developing teacher-student relations. The defence system 'helps' teachers to feel protected in a community where one teacher is not better than the other, and where teachers can evade acknowledging mutual vulnerability in their relationships with the students. The way to achieve this end, according to Bion (1962), is to stop thinking and avoid giving meaning to these experiences. In this social defence system, teachers can 'see' neither themselves nor their students.

New recruits are being taught these feeling rules, and there is little room for learning from experience. If teachers are to learn from experience, schools must allow room for reconciliation between the teachers' ideal and reality. The teachers would need to reflect on the meaning of the interactions that take place in the classroom. In a social defence system, this kind of reflection is difficult. Schools seem to leave it to individual teachers to process offences and deal with their own vulnerability. When omnipotent control gives way to the process of suffering pain, a great deal of anxiety may occur. But, according to Bion, this can be the beginning of learning from one's own experience.

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## Footnote

<sup>1</sup> Fineman and Gabriel (2000) juxtapose psychoanalytic and social constructionist approaches in the study of emotions in organisations. Vince (2001) and Antonacopoulou and Gabriel (2001) also offer rich overviews of this literature.

<sup>2</sup> I spent 326 hours over 99 days in fieldwork. I interviewed 12 individual teachers at one school (some of them several times, eight women and four men) and eight individual teachers at the other school (some of them several times, seven women and one man). I also held four focus groups, two at each school.

<sup>3</sup> I can describe the total process of analysis in several stages: (1) Fieldwork (conversations and observation, the field notes and interviews transcribed); (2) coding of transcribed material (NVivo - qualitative research software) and putting together in different 'stories' to give me new perspectives and challenge my experience from the fieldwork; (3) analysis of Kristin's and Solveig's narratives gave clues that I tested against other raw material (including all the teachers' accounts); and (4) psychoanalytic interpretations of established clues for understanding the conditions that undermine or support teachers in their efforts to learn from experience.

<sup>4</sup> I have translated the Norwegian into English.

<sup>5</sup> The concept of *Basic Assumptions* has much in common with Jaques's (1955) notion of *social defence systems*. Menzies-Lyth (1959) used that term in her classical paper. 'Social defence' occurs when a group of people unconsciously collude to protect themselves against anxiety and tension at their workplace, often at the expense of carrying out their real task.

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