

## **The Phenomenology of Teacher Work: Images of Control, Chaos and Care**

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### **Abstract**

*Extensive reforms and standardization on a global level have changed the expectations of education in the last decade. The ways in which teachers understand and experience their work are central to the ways in which this work is carried out. Children also have their own understandings of teachers' work. The aim of this study is to explore how teacher work is experienced and portrayed by teachers and children. The study takes its starting point in the phenomenology of the life-world as expressed by Merleau-Ponty and van Manen, and is based on teachers' and children's drawings and associated comments concerning teacher work. The result shows a multi-dimensional and ambiguous reality, presented as three themes: To control and be controlled, To manage or enjoy chaos, and, To care, nurture and protect. The paper offers a phenomenological analysis of the result and a discussion in relation to contemporary issues in education.*

**Key-words:** teacher work; educational change; chaos; caring; control; phenomenology of the life-world; Merleau-Ponty, van Manen

### **1. Introduction**

Extensive reforms and standardization on a global level have changed the expectations of education in the last decade (Hargreaves, 2009). The ways in which teachers understand and experience their work are central to the ways in which this work is carried out. While some of these understandings and experiences are explicit, available for reflection, critique and change, others are less readily available and as a result, more resistant to change. Children also have their own understandings of teachers' work and again these can be explicit or implicit. Interplay between these, at times, conflicting understandings and experiences influences interaction and work in the classroom. Whether understandings of education and teacher work are held by teachers themselves, by children or by the society, they have great impact on all those involved (Peters, 2007).

The aim of the study reported in this article is to explore the phenomenological ways in which teacher work is experienced and portrayed by teachers and children. The study takes its starting point in the phenomenology of the life-world as expressed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2002/1945; 1968) and Max van Manen (1990), and is based on teachers' and children's drawings and associated comments concerning the phenomenon, *teacher work*. Due to the phenomenological nature of the study, we explore the phenomenology of teacher work as it is lived by teachers and children. As such, we regionalize the phenomenon studied and focus on dimensions of teacher work that are experienced in similar ways although the participants come from different countries. This has the potential to offer an insight into human nature in terms of "*a possible human experience*" as van Manen (1990, p. 58, italics in original) expresses it.

### **2. Teacher work and educational change**

What is considered to be the mission of institutions such as school and early childhood education and care largely determines what is going on within the institutions and how teacher work is considered (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2002).

Accordingly, ideas of teaching and teacher work in part depend on the culture and ideals of what constitutes a good society in each country, or as Osborn (2006) points out, on each country's different political, economic and accountability structures. At the same time, traditional notions of 'ideal teachers' may shift in reaction to rapid changes in the ideological, political and economic global setting (Cumming, 1999; Tatto, 2006). Ball (2003) describes these reforms as follows: "An unstable, uneven but apparently unstoppable flood of closely inter-related reform ideas is permeating and reorienting education systems in diverse social and political locations which have very different histories" (p.215). Accordingly, global and cultural educational dynamics influence national patterns of schooling world-wide and thereby a growing convergence of thoughts about education and teachers' work emerges (LeTendre et al. 2001; Tatto, 2006). For example, trends towards neo-liberal rationalism in western societies have also impacted on other parts of the world, which has resulted in less appreciation and understanding of complexity and diversity among, and within, countries (Dillabough, 1999; Hargreaves, 2001; Mockler, 2011).

Teacher work has generally been described either as shaped and limited by structural constraints or as a work with considerable personal autonomy (Mander, 1997). The notion of the ideal teacher shifts over time between extremes and everything in between. More specifically, the ideal teacher as authoritarian, distanced, intimidating and individually working professional shifts to, that of an equal, democratic, respectful and collaborative coach, and vice versa. As well, policies and national curriculum are reviewed, either in the direction of giving schools and teachers more freedom to decide how to teach and meet the needs of the children or towards stronger governance of content and teacher work. Policy affects teacher work, and as Ball (2003) emphasizes, education reforms change not only what teachers do but who they are. According to O'Connor (2008) there is a discrepancy between technical rationalist assumptions in policy and standard discourses and the lived experiences of teachers. For example, aspects that teachers themselves often stress when talking about their work, such as emotional and empathic dimensions, are marginalized in educational policy and teacher standards (Hargreaves, 1994; Kelchtermans, 2005; O'Connor, 2008). The performativity in teacher work expands at the expense of the caring aspects (Forrester, 2005) and, according to Kelchtermans (2005) the imposition of normative beliefs through reforms may generate strong feelings resulting in acts of resistance by teachers.

Accordingly, while contemporary societies, post-modernity and globalisation demands teacher work to be flexible, ethical and respectfully open to diversity and change, the demands of educational reforms and standardizations work in another direction. Due to this mismatch between internal and global forces on policies directed at teachers, Tatto (2006) finds it relevant to question the implications of current global tendencies on education reform and thus on the work and education of teachers. As Rodgers and Raider-Roth (2006) stress, education and teaching has come to be regarded as simplified, motivated through high or low test results. "As less time, money, space and value are given to more complex notions of teaching, the voices of both teachers and students are being squeezed out and we are losing sight of what it means to teach" (Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006, p. 265). Words we use to refer to a certain phenomenon seem to have lost their dignity or, to have become flat (van Manen, 1990). By returning to the lived and basic experience of a phenomenon, in this case teacher work, we have the possibility to re-awaken and deepen the understanding of this phenomenon—an issue we find of utmost importance.

How then do the teachers and children experience the work of teachers? What are the phenomenological dimensions of their experiences? In the following we clarify the theoretical and methodological foundation for the study before presenting and discussing the results.

### ***3. Theoretical and methodological foundation: exploring experiences of teacher work from a life-world approach***

The ontological assumptions underpinning theories of the life-world are based on the belief that reality has many complex and subtle nuances. It is these nuanced ambiguities which characterize our existence (Merleau-Ponty, 2002/1945). Rather than understanding these apparent contradictions as existing in an ambivalent or dualistic relationship, they should be regarded as irreducible and inseparable aspects and components of a whole (Langer, 2003; Merleau-Ponty, 2002/1945; Merleau-Ponty & Lefort, 1968; Weiss, 2008). Within the life-world ontology, reality exists as a pluralistic and integrative entity. The world and life affect each other mutually in the sense that life is always worldly and the world is always what it is for a living being. Mind and body are intimately and inseparably intertwined in the world of existence (Merleau-Ponty & Lefort, 1968).

Drawing on Merleau-Ponty, van Manen (1990) emphasizes four significant dimensions of lived experience; *lived other, lived space, lived time, and lived body*. These dimensions are closely inter-connected in the lived world.

This ontological way of thinking about reality has epistemological and, methodological consequences for the researcher. As outlined above, reality cannot be reduced to two basic qualities of body and mind. As a result we have to develop a variety of methods to grasp other qualities we may not expect to find. The answer is not to adopt ready methodological guidelines (Alerby & Bergmark, 2012). If we are to do justice to the complex nature of reality, we need to think creatively about the ways in which we approach our research while being responsive to new understandings of the phenomenon (Bengtsson, 1999). It is about an openness and humbleness towards the phenomenon of the research which, in this study, is the ways in which teacher work is experienced and depicted by those most intimately connected with this work—teachers and children.

### **3.1 Data collection—to grasp experiences**

The data collection took place between the years 2009 and 2012, in Sweden, Hong Kong and Australia, with participants from a range of countries. Data from the teachers were collected during four workshops. Three workshops were held in Sweden for groups of Swedish teachers, and another was held in Hong Kong with a group of international teachers. Data from the children were collected in classes during their ordinary school-work at schools in Australia and Sweden. The children were all aged between seven and fifteen years. A total of 50 teachers and 112 children participated. The teachers in the study were not the teachers of the participating children.

The teachers and the children were invited to reflect on their experiences of teacher work in general by making a drawing depicting what came to their minds concerning teacher work. The participants were told that the important issue was to make their thoughts explicit, regardless of how skilful their drawings were. The participants also had the opportunity to discuss their drawings with the researchers. These conversations were audio recorded and later transcribed or written down by the researchers.

The study followed the appropriate procedures for ethical code of conduct for educational research. Participants were fully informed of all aspects of the study. It was made clear that participation was voluntary and that they were free to withdraw from the study without any explanation. As the children involved were under the age of eighteen, parental consent was obtained.

### **3.2 Using drawings**

There are many ways in which people communicate meaning. As Merleau-Ponty (1964b) points out, people speak to each other through different ‘languages’ connected to the body. Indirect languages and voices of silence, such as gestures, pauses and even art, are all equally valuable forms of expression. Given that body and mind not are regarded as separated, expression and thought are intertwined as well. vanManen (1990) emphasises the importance of understandings which cannot be expressed in words. He calls this communication beyond verbal language “*epistemological silence*” (p.113, italics in original). It is claimed that we all possess this silent and tacit dimension (Polanyi, 1974/1958) and, according to van Manen (1990), artistic expression speaks the language of this dimension in that ‘it transcends the experiential world in an act of reflective existence’ (van Manen, 1990, p. 97). Hence a work of art can be viewed as a text. This text does not consist of a verbal language, but despite this, it is a language with its own grammar and vocabulary. In this way a drawing provides the means to communicate meaning which cannot easily be spoken. The use of drawings is therefore *one* methodological approach which can be used in the attempt to grasp people’s thoughts, experiences, understandings, visions and so forth concerning different phenomenon in the world (Alerby & Bergmark, 2012; Alerby & Brown, 2008). As van Manen (1990) argues, a work of art can be understood as lived experiences transformed into transcended configurations. This means that in making drawings people are giving shape to lived experience.

### **3.3 Methods of analyzing the empirical material**

Analysis of the drawings, including the accompanying oral comments, aimed to understand the meaning of the experiences to which the participants gave form. It is important to note that in research based on the phenomenology of the life-world, the focus is not on experiences per se, but on a collective understanding of the phenomenon, consisting of internal variations (Alerby & Bergmark, 2012). During the analysis, the drawings and oral comments were viewed as a whole. The materials were analyzed moving from whole to parts or what van Manen (1990) expresses as isolating thematic aspects through both an holistic and detailed approach.

According to this procedure, all the drawings were analyzed repeatedly and thoroughly in which qualitative similarities and differences were noticed. These were then combined in themes, taking the central and common characteristics of the patterns as the point of departure. van Manen (1990) points out that it is these different themes that make the phenomenon what it is. Analysis is therefore a matter of forming themes from the data which reflect the experiences and understandings of the participants. It is essential to stress the turn towards the empirical data with openness and attentiveness. The aim is to allow the phenomenon to appear precisely as it is in a free act of ‘seeing’ (van Manen, 1990).

The themes, which gradually emerged, consist of different aspects that reflect the variety of experiences within each. It became clear that the themes were not to be regarded as independent and autonomous, qualitatively divided. Instead there were connections and links within and between the themes. A picture of a complex and ambiguous reality that constitutes teacher work emerged from the data. As a last phase of the analysis, the findings were interrogated and related to the four significant dimensions of the life-world (van Manen, 1990). This concluding analysis enriches the phenomenological understanding of the phenomenon, *teacher work*.

#### 4. Findings—an ambiguous reality

The result reflecting teachers’ and children’s experiences of teacher work is presented as three themes: *To control and be controlled*, *To manage or enjoy chaos*, and, *To care, nurture and protect*. The themes symbolize different dimensions of teacher work. The interpretations and understandings of the themes are elaborated below, visualized through presentation of a number of drawings from teachers and children with accompanying oral comments. After the presentation of the three themes, a phenomenological analysis is presented.

##### 4.1 To control and be controlled

The theme of control includes both control of the children by the teacher and control of the teacher by factors external to the classroom. The majority of the drawings about control show the teacher as the central figure in the classroom, often depicted as both larger and more detailed than the surrounding children. An example of this is found in the drawing below by one of the teacher participants (see Figure 1).

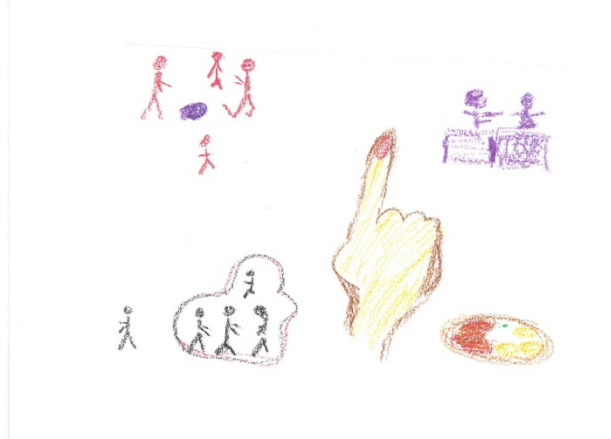


Figure 1. The drawing illustrates aspects of teacher work as controlling the children, experienced by a teacher.

The drawing shows the teacher as a large hand with a raised index finger, in control of every aspect of school-life, whether in the classroom, in the play-ground or when children are having lunch. The size of the hand positioned in the middle of the drawing suggests that the teacher is experienced as a giant. In contrast the children are tiny stick-figures placed in the corners of the drawing. The teacher says: “I have to control them everywhere, especially their social relationships. There is no time left for fun things”.

Control of the teacher by factors and pressures external to the classroom is another aspect of control repeated in the drawings of the teachers. One such factor is that of time and the amount of work to be done, much of this outside school hours. Several drawings show clocks, piles of student work and an exhausted teacher overwhelmed by the task confronting him or her. In the figure 2 below, it is the early hours of the morning and the teacher is still hard at work.

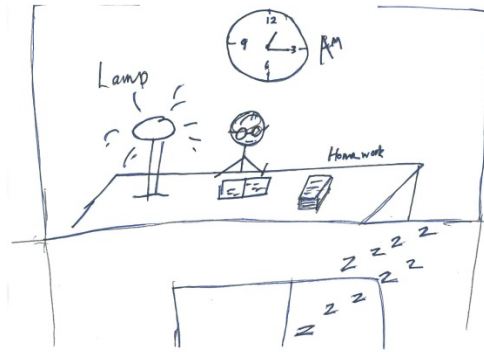


Figure 2. The drawing illustrates aspects of teacher work as teachers being controlled by external factors, experienced by a teacher.

The oral comments in connection to the drawing in figure 2 describe the teacher work as follows: “The teacher is marking homework at home at 12.15 am while others are sleeping.” The teacher seems to be isolated from the rest of the world with work which occupies several hours outside school.

These two different aspects of control—teachers controlling children and teachers being controlled—are also found in the drawings of the children, many of which show the teacher as the dominant figure in the classroom placed in the centre of the drawings and drawn in more detail than the children. The teacher is shown facing the class while the children, if they are other than stick figures, are viewed from the back as if the person responsible for the drawing is a member of the class. There is also an understanding of other elements which impact on teacher work, such as time and externally imposed assessment requirements. There are large clocks on the wall of the classroom shown in several drawings. The drawing below (see figure 3) shows both these aspects of control. Although the teacher is drawn on the same scale as the children, he/she is placed at the front of the class and most of the children are clearly attending to the lesson. Both teacher and children are objectified, reduced to robot-like figures due to the impact of the external pressures on teacher and children.



Figure 3. A drawing illustrating aspects of teacher work connected to control as experienced by a child.

Although most of the children are focused on the teacher, one exhausted child is slumped over the desk fast asleep. The teacher does not recognize the child’s need for rest and continues teaching. This child’s immediate need for rest is in marked contrast to the two students in front of her/him who are motivated by the future imperative to achieve results that will guarantee entry to university. The clock in the top left corner of the picture and the schedule on the wall illustrates the extent to which their lives are regulated by the demands of the curriculum and of time. The clock shows that it is early in the day while the schedule shows that classes will continue until late in the evening.

The theme *To control and be controlled* includes, as we have shown, both features of teachers controlling children and of teachers being controlled by external factors.

#### 4.2 To manage or enjoy chaos

In this theme, the world of teacher work is one of chaos, far from control. Drawings show the teacher struggling in vain to cope with the many demands of teacher work. There are different aspects of this chaos. According to the drawings, chaos can appear within the group of children, both in terms of non-functional relationships and the ways the teacher struggles to be sufficient to the children. Several drawings show the teacher as an octopus-like figure with many arms and legs. These multiple limbs are needed to respond to the diverse individual needs of the children and to cope with all the different moments that need to be interwoven in class activities. In figure 4 below the teacher is a stick-figure with numerous legs and many eyes.



Figure 4. The drawing illustrates aspects of teacher work as manage chaos in the classroom, experienced by a teacher.

The teacher in figure 4 is surrounded by much smaller stick-figure children who appear to be circling the teacher as she/he tries to respond to their needs and activities, while coping with the chaotic situation.

The drawings also show another aspect of chaos. There can be chaos in the amount of correction, lesson preparation and administrative paperwork associated with teacher work. In figure 5 the teacher is visible only as a tiny figure in the bottom right corner of the drawing, overwhelmed by the task confronting her/him. The rest of the drawing shows some of the information needed for teacher work—piles of books, mountains of correction and a computer.

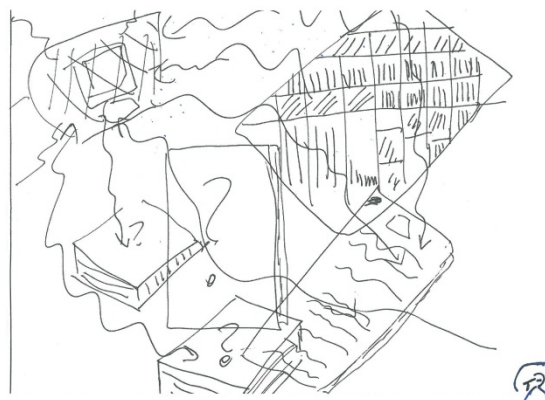


Figure 5. The drawing illustrates aspects of teacher work as chaos in terms of administrative tasks, experienced by a teacher.

The teacher in the drawing comments: “I’m in the corner, tiny, [with] constant feeling of how much I don’t know and how many problems there are to solve”. This tiny powerless teacher-figure is in strong contrast to the giant controlling hand shown in figure 1. It appears that chaos and control are closely connected, and affect each other simultaneously. This aspect of chaos thus emphasises a need to manage chaos in terms of administrative tasks.

The aspects above can be seen as examples of destructive chaos. However, the theme *To manage or enjoy chaos* also includes dimensions of a creative chaos.

In contrast to teachers' drawings of destructive chaos, there are other drawings showing chaotic disorder and complex situations as a positive aspect of teacher work. In these drawings it is a chaos which leads to creativity. Figure 6 below exemplifies such a creative chaos by showing the teacher and the children, free from the constraints of the classroom.



Figure 6.A drawing illustrating aspects of teacher work as a creative chaos, experienced by a teacher.

In this drawing the teacher and the children are excited and happy in their exploration of the natural world. For some teachers, situations such as these may seem chaotic or messy in a negative way but it is clear that, for this teacher and for others, this is a creative chaos. The teacher explains the drawing as follows: “The children are in focus. The teachers are enjoying the happiness of the children. It’s an empowering moment. We explore the details together which makes us see the whole. The sun and the stars are smiling, glistening. The children make the nature glistening to me. It’s unity, it’s connectedness, we are together, it’s power”.

As we have shown, the theme *To manage or enjoy chaos* describes the ways in which teachers relate to chaotic situations and feelings. Chaos is experienced by teachers both when working with the group of children and in relation to administrative tasks, and can be experienced as either devastating or empowering. It is note-worthy that the theme of chaos is absent from the drawings of the children. Although they experience the other aspects of control, they seem not to notice the chaos which is found among the experiences of many of the teacher participants.

### **4.3 To care, nurture and protect**

Within this theme the caring parts of teacher work are emphasized. The drawings by both teachers and children show examples of the teacher in this role. In many drawings by the teachers, care is embodied, symbolized as caring hands, a large heart, listening ears and observant eyes. Figure 7 below shows a drawing where the teacher is, as expressed by the teacher’s own words “protecting the students”.



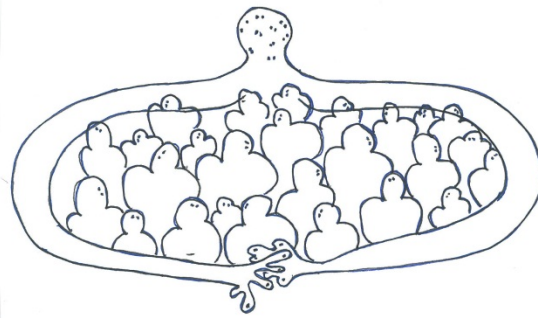


Figure 7. A drawing which illustrates aspects of teachers' work as care, experienced by a teacher.

The teacher is caring for the students by enfolding them in hers/his long arms, holding them in a protective and warm embrace. The teacher's head is full of eyes, and the teacher explains that these are necessary to "keep an eye" on each person in the group. Accordingly, both individuals and group need to be cared for and protected. It is not obvious in the picture what is threatening them.

The children also experience care as a significant part of teacher work. Similar to the teachers' experiences of care, the children depict the caring aspects of teachers' work as connected to the body. One of the children uses the metaphor of a tree to illustrate the ways in which teachers care for children. This experience and understanding of teacher work is shown in figure 8 below.



Figure 8. This drawing illustrates caring aspects of teacher work, experienced by a child.

In this drawing the children are shown as the fruit on a large tree. The tree has '2B', the class to which the children belong, carved into the trunk. The three class teachers are shown as gardeners, carefully nurturing the tree to ensure that the children, who are the fruit, grow to their full potential. In the words of the student: "This tree is my class and this one is my classmates. I think classmate like fruit, like apples. The teachers' job is to grow the tree. Mr X gives me water. Miss Y manure and Miss P mud to make the tree strong and the fruit grow".

The theme *To care, nurture and protect* shows a dimension of teacher work which is closely connected to values, expressed in teachers' emotional, social and physical actions.

#### 4.4 Concluding analysis—a phenomenological reflection

In the three themes reflecting teachers' and children's experiences of teachers' work, different encounters appear where relationality, spatiality, temporality and corporeality, are significant. For example; i) encounters between teacher and children, and between different children in a group are experiences of the *lived other*, ii)



between the teacher/child and place or context such as different demands or expectations are experiences of *lived place*, iii) between teacher/child and temporal aspects of teacher work are experiences of *lived time*. These different encounters are all experienced through the *lived body*. As Merleau-Ponty (2002/1945; 1968) points out, human's bodily being in the world is closely connected to the lived experience of time and place. For example, *lived time* is significant in the result, often as a governing force since objective and linear time seems to rule in schools. In a situation such as school or early childhood education and care where teachers are working, the time and the place constitutes the kind of activities that are going to happen there, and how the people involved will experience this activity. We "become the space we are in" (van Manen, 1990, p. 102).

In the result we find that teachers' lived body is experienced as a huge and powerful person with a large finger, when controlling the children. The finger is a tool for command, and the teacher becomes the finger, without an explicit empathic or inter-subjective relation to the children involved. As such, control makes the relation to the lived other distanced and vague. In contrast, the lived body is experienced as small and lonely in relation to the demands of external factors and the environment, when being controlled. These different experiences of the lived body are strongly connected to the lived time.

The teachers describe how control makes them run out of time for "the fun things" in the words of one teacher. Further, as shown in one of the children's drawings, the lived body of both teachers and children is experienced as reduced to robots in a world where time-schedules and desks in rows governs them, as a result of the objectifying of school inhabitants by external demands.

The images of chaos that the teachers experience are often linked to demands of control and assessment that teachers are obliged to carry out. As a result, the lived body becomes vanishingly tiny, losing control in the chaos of the demands of administrative tasks. The body is so reduced and powerless that it is not possible to do anything about the chaos. In this situation the classroom, which is the lived space, is dominated by question marks, the bookshelves threaten to fall, and the computer is overheated. It appears that there may literally be a risk to become lost in the mess; the lived time is endless, full of never-ending tasks.

In the chaotic situations among the children, the teacher's lived body is experienced as a spider or an octopus with numerous arms, legs and compound eyes; the children are everywhere and the teacher stands in the middle of the space trying to grasp the whole. Unlike these situations, the teacher's lived body as caring, nurturing and protecting, has succeeded in grasping the situation with embracing arms and observant eyes. In these situations the teacher's body constitutes a security-space for the children. Whether containing, or enjoying, chaos, teachers seem to be in the present moment beyond timely frames, just as they are in the caring moments. Handling chaos in terms of administrative tasks seems to be a situation in which no lived other appears, and teachers exist in a vacuum. In situations of creative chaos on the other hand, the intertwined encounters between teachers and children—the lived other— and nature—the lived space—and their lived bodies are prominent. It is remarkable that the only situation, in which the teacher's lived body seems to be experienced as full of joy, is a situation of creative chaos. It is relevant to ask whether teachers' work is so overloaded with responsibility and demands that teachers can never be satisfied with their performance and therefore are never able to enjoy their work. It is also striking that control, whether controlling or being controlled, seems to result in situations in which teachers have no lived other with whom to relate, although they are physically surrounded by children in school, or near the sleeping family when working at night.

Consequently, teacher work involves different aspects and roles which include totally different or ambiguous experiences of the lived other, the lived space, the lived time and the lived body.

## **5. Discussion**

According to the findings, teachers' and children's experiences of teacher work can be described as a multi-dimensional reality, containing ambiguous parts which at first seem contradictory, but in fact are parts of a whole.

It is reasonable to suggest that, if other teachers and children were to be involved in the study, the drawings would have been different in some aspects due to their different life-world. Still, similarities would most likely have arisen as well. Although the participants in this study come from different contexts, there are similarities in their drawings—a kind of existential way of experiencing teacher work. As LeTendre et al. (2001) found in a comparative study, there were more differences in how teacher work was organized than in teachers' beliefs which showed many similarities.

Due to the international trends where focus on goals of knowledge and evaluation systems is significant, the role of the teacher defined as a technician is prominent in Western societies such as, for example, in the US and UK (Dahlberg et al., 2002; Scribner, 2005). The intensification of the teaching profession, prescribed programs, curricula and assessment tools has reduced teachers' motivation and creativity and made them feel controlled and inadequate, even keen to leave the profession, according to both American and English studies (Ball, 2003; Benham Tye & O'Brien, 2002; Forrester, 2005; Hargreaves, 1994, 2009). The intensification of teacher work in many countries has also led to difficulties and uncertainties in teachers' professional identity (Gannerud & Rönnerman, 2006; Hargreaves, 1994; Kelchtermans, 2005; Persson & Tallberg Broman, 2002). If we are to believe Ball (2003) the uncertainty that the reform agenda brings with it, in terms of being constantly judged, not knowing what aspects of work are valued or what the reasons for actions are, the aims and values of teacher work in all its dimensions has become unclear. Thus, there is a risk that the embodied parts of teacher work and actions which are built upon their individual values and professional judgements are overshadowed or instrumentalized. Consequently, the lived other is reduced to an object in the gaze of a teacher whose values and intentions have been sacrificed—a defeat for the teachers and children involved, and for education in general.

There are other 'costs', as indicated already – personal and psychological. A kind of *values schizophrenia* is experienced by individual teachers where commitment, judgement and authenticity within practice are sacrificed for impression and performance. Here there is a potential 'splitting' between the teachers own judgements about 'good practice' and students' 'needs' and the rigours of performance (Ball, 2003, p. 221).

Merleau-Ponty (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a, 1982, 2000) emphasises the ways in which subjects are objectified due to practices which are dominated by economic-politic goals. He argues that the effects of control on human beings shows when mutual connections and experiences of the lived other are put aside and persons are objectified in the gaze of the other. In such moments, we feel that our actions and expressions are not "taken up or understood, but observed as if they were an insect's . . . the objectification of each by the other's gaze is felt unbearable only because it takes the place of possible communication" (Merleau-Ponty, 2002/1945, p. 420). This is significant in situations when teachers experience that they are controlled by external factors. Similarly, the teachers are not open to dialogue and communication with the children in situations when focusing on controlling them, resulting in the same feeling for the children. Consequently, a non-communicative vacuum appears within the inter-subjective space with both teachers and children like insects being observed and trapped, floundering in the cobwebs of control.

According to the results in this study, the diverse and ambiguous aspects of teacher work not only demand technical competences, but a pedagogical tactfulness—what van Manen calls 'the tact of teaching' (1991)—which includes aspects of care but also an openness towards the child and the group of children and their life-world. "Children who come to school come from somewhere. Teachers need to have some sense of what it is children bring with them" (van Manen, 1991, p. 7). Therefore, skills to listen to children and challenge their learning beyond control or chaos are also important. As teaching is dependent on human interaction and emotional understanding, caring teachers are an important factor for children's education shown by researchers already fifteen and twenty years ago (cf. Hargreaves, Earl, & Ryan, 1996; Noddings, 1992). Accordingly, the nature of teaching cannot be articulated as technical competencies (van Manen, 1991). Despite this, policy change and the reform agenda reduce the domain of the personal, social and affective aspects of teacher work in preference to the academic (Osborn, 2006).

Noddings (2010) discusses the ethical aspects connected to care in education and states that: "Approaching the world through the relational ethic of caring, we are more likely to listen attentively to others" (p.391). Thus, caring in education includes an ethical way of relating to the lived other. However, "the ethics of competition and performance are very different from the older ethics of professional judgment and co-operation" (Ball, 2003, p. 218). There are many aspects of care within education, and these would benefit from being more illuminated and problematized in practice and in teacher education. Philosophical, sociological and psychological perspectives could therefore enrich views on care in educational institutions, beyond how it is espoused in policies (Carr, 2011; Hedge & Mackenzie, 2012).

## **5.1 Concluding reflections**

In this study we have explored embodied lived experience of the phenomenon of *teacher work*. The result shows that teacher work is experienced as ambiguous, complex and connected to different encounters within the concrete

every day practice of education. Intertwinings of fundamental structures of the life-world—*lived other, lived space, lived time, and lived body*—as well as intertwinings of different roles constitutes this inherent ambiguity. When placing the result in the contemporary educational context signified by globalization, standardization-trends and policy changes, it is relevant to regard teacher work as demanding and challenging, under constant change, which involves not only teachers' intellectual capacities and skills, but their emotional and embodied being as well. Accordingly, teacher work involves the whole body, without binary delineation, although contemporary educational reforms tend to appreciate only the cognitive and rational aspects, due to the focus on control and assessment in education. This discrepancy may lead to an unbearable situation for teachers in terms of losing sight of values and aspects they experience as important for their work as a whole.

Supported by the result of this study and by earlier research, we stress the importance for teachers, student-teachers and policymakers to locate their own assumptions and notions about teacher work in relation to a broader view, looking for links between micro and macro perspectives, as well as national and global trends.

Thereby understandings about the conditions under which teacher work might be recognized and valued, and blame for educational shortcomings can be moved from teachers to those who have political and economical power. We also stress the ways in which philosophical perspectives may enrich and clarify notions about teaching and education that are complex and ambiguous. Appreciating teacher work with all its inherent ambiguities, while at the same time reconsidering the conditions under which such work is carried out, may open the way for teachers to fulfill their mission without feeling inadequate as a result of the pressures exerted on them.

## 6. References

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