The tensions between the ideal and experienced: teacher-student relationships in stories told by beginning Japanese teachers

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Abstract

This narrative research explores the tensions that beginning teachers tell about their relationships with students between the ideals they have, and how the teachers experience those relationships in the micropolitical and relational environment of their everyday work. The phenomenon is approached through stories told by three Japanese beginning teachers. The stories illustrate the tensions originating from within oneself, and how they relate to relationships with senior colleagues or the hierarchical relations within the school organisation. The tensions are meaningful for the emotional distance created between the teacher and his/her students. Implications, in particular, for teacher training are considered.

Keywords: beginning teachers, emotions, Japan, narrativity, teacher-student relationships

Introduction

In recent years a significant amount of research has focused on the experiences of beginning teachers[1], the challenges they face during their first years of teaching in the field and how to support them in their work (e.g. Caspersen and Raaen 2014; Kudomi and Satô 2010; Le Maistre and Paré 2010). Amongst the many challenges faced by the beginning teachers, the most demanding have to do with the relational nature of the work: finding one's place in the school organisation and learning to manage relationships with meaningful others (Kelchtermans and Ballet 2002). There is previous research on tensions in beginning teachers' work (Craig 2013; Pillen, Beijaard, and den Brok 2013), especially on the tension between the expectations and reality of the work, often described as the '*praxis shock'* (Veenman 1984). However, this research about tensions has not sufficiently focused on the relational, emotional and moral aspects central to the teachers' work (Aspfors and Bondas 2013; Peters and Pearce 2011; Sutton and Wheatley 2003). Therefore, in-depth research of these

aspects and how they are experienced and narrated by the teachers themselves is needed.

The teacher-student relationship is the most fundamental relationship: the reason for the profession to exist and the one that teachers gain the greatest satisfaction and meaning in their work from (Hargreaves 1998; Nias 1989). Yet, if teachers do not have enough time to build the relationships and/or the student encounters in the classroom get difficult, it can also be the main reason for becoming disheartened, alienated in one's work and may ultimately result in leaving teaching (Pyhältö, Pietarinen, and Salmela-Aro 2011). The teachers have their own ideals about interacting with students also based on the encounters with their own teachers and the cultural story of teaching. However, these ideals can rarely be lived out as such, because the relationships are formed within, and conditioned by, the wider cultural and micropolitical context of the school and the collegial and parental relationships (e.g. Kelchtermans and Ballet 2002). These conditions propose professional restrictions to the teacher-student relationships.

In this article we ask: what do beginning teachers tell about the tensions between the ideal and experienced in their teacher-student relationships? We examine this phenomenon through stories told by three beginning teachers, aiming to deepen the understanding of these tensions.

Theoretical framework

The relationships with students are at the heart of teachers' work, this being one of the main reasons for choosing the profession and the main source of job satisfaction (Hargreaves 2000; Lasky 2005). These relationships do not develop and exist in a vacuum, but within a micropolitical context of the school containing the working conditions, power relationships and the sociopolitical and cultural influences (Shapiro 2010). Emotions are an inseparable part of the teaching profession and are always implicitly or explicitly present in the relationships teachers have with students, colleagues, parents and administration (Hargreaves 2001; Nias 1996; Zembylas 2007). Emotions are not just teachers' personal experiences, but social by nature and influenced by the norms of the

surrounding culture, resulting from the interaction between the teacher and his/her working environment (Lasky 2000; Zembylas 2004, 2005). The emotions tied to experiences also act as a base for the teachers to build their professional selves and identities on (Day and Kington 2008, Shapiro 2010). Teachers' practice is also built upon the emotional experiences as they are linked to moral purposes, such as being in caring relationships with their students and supporting their growth, and teachers' ability to achieve these purposes (Hargreaves 1998).

Whilst there are cultural ideals, norms and institutional expectations on what it means to be a good teacher and what the ideal teacher-student relationships should be like, most teachers also have very personal and deep beliefs on the matter, based on their own past experiences. The encounters with their own former teachers and experiences as students can act as models when teachers interact with their students (Nias 1989) and can be significant reasons for entering teaching in the first place (Chang-Kredl and Kingsley 2014). In addition to these first-hand experiences, the cultural images and stories of what a teacher is supposed to be like are circulated in media, popular culture and everyday conversations and these images act as models, against which to reflect one's own capabilities and beliefs and to make one's own work understandable (Mitchell and Weber 1999; Shapiro 2010). These personal ideals are born within, and are affected by, wider cultural stories and models. Cultural models constitute what is moral, imperative and desirable concerning oneself and one's relationships at the level of beliefs and social practices. These practices mediate the emotions that people experience and express. (Hofstede 2001; Mesquita and Walker 2002.)

In prior research, the prevailing cultural model in Japan has been identified as that of an interdependent self where the self is thought to be fundamentally interrelated with others and adjusting to the group is more important than self-realisation (Markus and Kitayama 1994). Instead of being aware of and expressing one's own emotions, people pay more attention understanding emotions of others and try to align themselves with them. Positive emotions are linked with closeness and unity with others and negative emotions are caused by disturbances to the

interdependent relationships. (Markus and Kitayama 1994). Heeding to this model, teachers place a strong emphasis on emotional connections with the students and fostering close relations within the community as a whole in Japanese schools. These kinds of teacher-student relationships based on close personal bonds *(kakawari)* require deep interest in the well-being of the children and intimate knowledge about them. Japanese teachers put in a lot of effort to create these trustful relationships upon which Japanese teaching and classroom management is built, by creating unpretentious experiences that engage children, such as cleaning the classroom together, playing with them during break time or guiding them in after school clubs (*bukatsu*). (Shimahara 2002.)

When the beginning teachers enter the field, one of the key challenges they face is learning how to integrate their personal knowledge, beliefs, attitudes and norms with the professional demands of the profession and its widely accepted values, standards of teaching and needs of particular institutions and schools as a part of their teacher identity (Pillen, Beijaard, and den Brok 2013). This tension between the personal and the professional also extends to the teacher-student relationships within a given educational context: for example, teachers have to try and maintain a professionally suitable emotional distance with the students and manage the classroom in line with the other teachers, even if their personal interaction styles might be different (Yamazaki 2012). The process of socialising oneself into the organisational environment of the school involves the teachers actively interacting with their environment and balancing their personal interests on one hand and institutional interests on the other (Kelchtermans and Ballet 2002). Kelchtermans (2005, 2009) has further drawn attention to how there are many aspects in the working conditions of schools that the teachers have no control over and just have to be accepted as realities of one's work, such as policies and regulations of schools and districts or the composition of the school staff. Often, these uncontrollable aspects of the working conditions create tensions in teachers' work and bring about various emotions. For Japanese teachers, these include such things as the deeply culturally ingrained and demanding seniority-based relationships, difficulties in refusing tasks not

belonging to their official responsibilities and expectations for close cooperation with colleagues (Howe 2005; Miyajima 2008).

Japanese teachers' working context

The beginning teachers participating in this research work in Japanese schools have graduated from programmes in teacher training institutions that are typically four-years-long undergraduate programs and that include a two- or three-week teaching practicum. Qualification for teaching is granted via licensing tests (*nintei shiken*) organised by educational institutions according to the guidelines of the Ministry of Education. To become fully employed the teachers also have to pass an employment test (*saiyou shiken*) organised once a year by the local boards of education. These tests usually consist of written examination, individual and group interviews and giving model lessons. Failing the test typically means having to work as a part-time teacher (*rinji kyouin*) until the next test. (Okano and Tsuchiya 1999.) The competition for teaching positions is keen: in 2014 the national average for applicants passing the test was about 20% (Kyôiku shinbun 2015). Those who pass the employment test are assigned a mentoring teacher responsible for monitoring and guiding the professional growth of the newly employed teachers as a part of the mandatory induction program *(shinjin kenshuu)* lasting for the first year. Senior teachers too are expected to take an active role nurturing the growth of the newcomer by sharing knowledge and repertoire within both formal and informal relationships in the school. Compared to their international colleagues, the Japanese teachers enter the field with relatively little experience of teaching and interacting with students. Therefore, the teachers are expected to participate frequently in various official in-service training programs outside the school as well as activities within the school promoting professional growth. (Howe 2005; Shimahara 2002.)

In Japan, children typically enter elementary school at the age of six and study in the elementary level from grades one to six. In Japanese elementary schools, a class has only one

homeroom teacher who teaches most of the subjects of the curricula whereas the more specialised subjects, such as music, are often taught by a subject teacher. The grades from seven to nine are spent in junior high schools where subject specialists teach lessons while homeroom teachers take charge of the general progress and academic guidance of the students. Teachers are also in charge of non-academic activities such as after school clubs and special events important for promoting the holistic growth of the students. Many of the studies and activities in junior high school also aim to prepare the students for upcoming entrance examinations and studies. Therefore, one of the main responsibilities of junior high school homeroom teachers is to act as guidance counsellors for the students. The class sizes in Japanese schools are large compared to OECD average of about 20 students, with elementary school averaging slightly less, and junior high slightly over 30 students (OEDC 2012).

Narrativity: teachers' stories and their analysis

Narrativity forms the theoretical and methodological starting point in this research: it is understood in narrative research that people construct stories about the social reality (Spector-Mersel 2010). Stories are a way for people to gain knowledge of themselves and the world around them: by telling stories, people make sense of their lives and experiences (Clandinin and Connelly 2000).

Erkki was introduced to Japanese beginning teachers via mutual contacts and he interviewed 11 beginning teachers twice altogether. These interviews were conducted fully in Japanese[2] and audio-recorded by Erkki. They were conducted between March and September 2014 and took place in a location of the teacher's choosing. The interviews lasted from about 40 minutes to two hours and were conversational in nature: the interviewees would often ask the interviewer about Finnish schooling. Narrative interviews were conducted: the interviews mostly progressed in a more discussion-like manner, although some topics had been considered beforehand by the interviewer

(Hyvärinen and Löyttyniemi 2005). In the first interviews, teachers were invited to tell about their background and the reasons for choosing to become teachers. Every teacher was also asked to tell about their positive and negative work-related experiences. Other topics discussed were the struggles of everyday life as a beginning teacher, the role assigned to them in the school and the relationships within the work.

After the first interviews Erkki transcribed the recordings and wrote them into narrative accounts in Japanese: the interview material was organised into a narrative according to its plot. This phase in itself constitutes the first step of the analysis process. This version also included comments on tentative reading and understanding of the stories. Erkki read these accounts together with the teachers during the second interview to check whether the teacher's narration had been understood properly. All the corrections made there by the teachers were purely regarding the language and not on the content of the discussion. The accounts were also used as a starting point for the second interview, where the topics touched upon in the first interview were deepened. After the second interviews had been conducted, Erkki wrote updated versions of the narrative accounts, now in English, and re-read them with Minna. At that point, we noticed how the narration on interaction with students was emotionally quite intense and how external matters often seemed to be affecting the teacher-student relationships. We decided to re-read the accounts more closely from the viewpoint of the teacher-student relationships and their entanglement with other relationships (such as those with colleagues) and working conditions of the schools as told by the teachers. We paid attention to tensions in how the teachers expressed the student relationships as experienced in their everyday work and what they (had) wanted, or imagined, the relationships to be like. Based on this note we chose the stories of three teachers, whose stories were very articulate on the subject of teacher-student relationships and each brought a new viewpoint to the tensions concerning this relationship: tensions originating from within the teacher her/himself, from the relationships with senior colleagues or the hierarchical relations within the school organisation.

The three selected teachers were Sumitani, Arai and Sekiguchi-senseis. They are referred to by their surnames (pseudonyms) and the honorary 'sensei' title. This culturally sensitive way of referring to the teachers is how they are addressed in their schools and reflects the ethos of equality between teachers in Japanese schools. Sumitani-sensei, is an elementary school teacher and was in his seventh year as a teacher during the time of the interviews. However, he had only taught for three in his current prefecture and hence, was still treated as a beginning teacher in new the context[3] Arai-sensei and Sekiguchi-sensei each had less than four years of teaching experience and taught in junior high schools. They all worked in major Japanese urban centres. All three teachers were interviewed twice with at least two months in between. Interviews with Arai-sensei and Sumitani-sensei were conducted at their schools behind closed doors. The first interview with Sekiguchi-sensei took place in a counselling room at a university campus and the second one was conducted by Skype.

Stories are more than a sum of their parts and so, instead of just isolating certain parts of the teachers' stories for closer analysis, we treated the stories as whole units for the purpose of analysis (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber 1998; Riessman 2008). The narrative accounts contain moments that are very revealing on the teacher-student relationships and are given prominence when discussing the findings. These moments are read against the whole of the story with the aim to see how the teacher-student relationships and the tensions in them are connected to the other dimensions of the story, such as the collegial relationships or teachers' personal histories for example. Using this kind of means to uncover the interrelatedness of these relational, cultural and micropolitical aspects in the multidimensional stories, means utilising a multidimensional lens (Spector-Mersel 2010).

Narrative tradition is committed to the researcher-participant relationships in all the phases of the research (Clandinin and Connelly 2000) and participants are typically made active agents of the research (Spector-Mersel 2010). We too sought to involve the teachers in the research process

as much as their interest and schedule permitted. As honouring the voice of the participant is an important guiding principle in narrative research (Josselson 2007), we wanted to ensure that we were using the teachers' stories respectfully and in a way that they were comfortable with. To achieve this, a member check was carried out and the interpretations were negotiated with the teachers in different stages of the research, including getting an approval for the final accounts before submitting the article to a journal.

The stories

Sumitani-sensei: Tensions originating within from oneself

In Sumitani-sensei's story the tensions stem from within the teacher himself as he compares his way of constructing student-relationships to other teachers. These tensions are between the ideals he had set for teacher-student relationships based on his encounters with inspirational teachers during his own school years, examples set by colleagues on one hand and the difficulty of achieving those ideals in his work on the other. Creating close relationships and strong bonds with the students is a priority for Sumitani-sensei and whether or not he can develop an understanding with the students by accessing their hidden emotions and thinking, comes out as the central theme of his story.

Sumitani-sensei is a male teacher in his late twenties working in a quite newly founded elementary school in a large Japanese city. He was teaching his seventh year at the time of the interviews, but still defined himself as a beginning teacher. After passing the license examination on the third attempt he worked for four years at one prefecture, but moved to a different prefecture due to personal reasons and re-took the examination. After passing it, he had been teaching for three years in the current school. At the time of the interviews he was the homeroom teacher of a class of

32 first-graders. He had originally been studying to become an early childhood education teacher, but after teaching practicum decided that he would rather become an elementary school teacher, feeling that he could connect better with older children.

The first-grade teachers in Sumitani-sensei's current school teach the same things at about the same pace, cooperate frequently, and sometimes take turns in teaching each other's classes. He told that this did not restrict him or affect his relationships with the students in anything but a good way. Having the chance to see other teachers approach his students in a different way has allowed him to learn new things about how to interact with the students, and learn how to teach them better himself. But the other teachers also acted as models against which to measure one's own capabilities, which is one source of negative emotions in Sumitani-sensei's story: *'I feel very strongly that my skills are not enough and don't really know how to better myself. I compare myself to other teachers who have the same amount of experience and feel quite inferior to them. I also feel bad for the students for not being as good as I could be.'*

Regarding the collegial relationships in the school, Sumitani-sensei comments that: *'There might be some teachers who don't get along with each other that well in our school, but I get along with everyone, including the principals, quite well.'* The school as a relational environment seems to be quite unproblematic for him and one that allows certain freedoms to teachers as he tells that he can continue to address the students in a gender-neutral way that he grew into when working in a different prefecture, even though it goes against the culture prevalent in the school and the surrounding area.

Sumitani-sensei talks enthusiastically about three inspiring teachers he had during his own school years, and his relationships with them which represent the kind of ideal that he strives for with his own students. He describes how he tries to live out the best sides of these relationships in his own everyday work. First of these three teachers is his homeroom teacher in elementary school. *'He was a young first-time teacher, who had just graduated from college. He played with us kids a*

lot, but when he got angry he did show it. During the first two years my teachers were older men and women and they didn't really play with children, so having a teacher doing those things felt really refreshing.' This willingness to play is echoed in his own teaching: *'I want to play with students, be close to them and interact with them from an "older brother" standpoint regardless of my actual age, though when I get visibly older and my own children go to school, my understanding of their thinking and problems will grow and the role will probably become more father-like, but still I would like the children to think of me as someone who they can play with.'*

The second teacher Sumitani-sensei recalls from his own school years, was a geography and social studies teacher in junior high school from whom he learned that teaching is a one-on-one thing when it comes to getting students drawn into to the lesson – there needs to be admiration and love between the teacher and the student. *'He got me to like the subjects very much and they became my favourites. This teacher was very frank with students, told a lot of jokes and was a skilled talker in general. He acted with his true emotions [honne] in an easy-going way, joking with students a lot. I try to act the same way as that teacher when dealing with children in the hallways and during school events.'*

The third teacher is his high school badminton club teacher, whose style Sumitani-sensei incorporates into his own teaching in the classroom and whose frankness and open-heartedness forms a guideline for himself – by being earnest yourself you get treated earnestly by others. *'In the classroom, I act in a more serious manner, like him, trying not to do any unnecessary things. He was a very warm-hearted teacher and enthusiastic in his shidô*[4]; he *always did his best when with students and was very supportive. He was also direct with his emotions and talked with me very warmly and frankly when I was having worries.'*

Judging by these descriptions it is obvious that Sumitani-sensei has set the bar quite high when it comes to teacher-student relationships and that living out these ideals in the work can be challenging.

The following episode in Sumitani-sensei's story illustrates his ideal on accessing and understanding *"the backs of the minds of children"* that echoes from the encounters with his own teachers and how seemingly innocent things can be significant for the formation of teacher-student relationships. This also illustrates how the tension between the ideal and the experienced cease to exist when the teacher is earnest with the students and opens his private life to the students. At the end of a second year with a class of sixth graders in his first school, Sumitani-sensei says he was too busy to go to work because he had to help his wife who was expecting their first child at the time. When the children asked him the reason for his absence, he told the class that he and his wife were about to have a baby. Learning this, the students, who had already up to that point been really informal, close and unassuming with him, gave applause and congratulated him. *'I felt like I could see behind the children's light-hearted side and finally confirmed that they thought very dearly of me, which I had been suspecting all along. Our relationships changed in a good way, becoming closer and more intimate. This happened near the end of the year, so I wanted to send the students off with a lot of good memories. I spent a lot of time with them outside the lessons playing and doing all kinds of silly things. I felt like there was more compassion in everyone's actions; students were helping each other and taking each other into consideration. I think I became more loved by the students who kept on asking me about how the baby was doing, and I think they understood for the first time that behind a teacher there is a real person.'*

Being open with students and sharing details about his personal life tightened the emotional bonds between Sumitani-sensei and the students, bringing the relationship closer to his personal ideals and reflecting the influences from his own teachers.

Arai-sensei: Tensions related to senior colleagues

In Arai-sensei's story, the tension between the ideal and the experienced in the student-relationships is connected to the collegial relationships, especially to those with more senior and

experienced colleagues. Whether or not directly instructing her, the senior colleagues had a strong influence on her teacher-student relationships, which becomes apparent when compared to the situations in her story where she is alone with her students. The presence and influence of the senior colleagues could also be seen through the rules and ethos of the schools that Arai-sensei worked in.

Arai-sensei is a female language teacher (English) in her mid-twenties, working on a temporary contract at an urban junior high school with around 300 students and 30 teachers, the majority of them senior to her. At the time the interviews took place, she had not passed the employment examination despite several attempts. She had worked as a temporary teacher for two years and mentioned early on that she was still struggling with lesson planning and student relationships, especially in situations where fast pedagogical decisions were required. Despite numerous difficulties and emotionally challenging times, she says she is strongly committed to the profession and cannot imagine her life without teaching: '*when the students come to me to talk casually or say jokes, I feel happy. These encounters act as sources for motivation and healing in my work.'* For Arai-sensei too, one of her own high-school teachers, inspired her to become a teacher. This teacher had helped her during the difficult times: '*I know there are a lot of kids that struggle with same kind of things and I decided to become a teacher to return the favour*.'

Two contrasting episodes from two different schools illustrate the collegial nature of the tension in her teacher-student relationships. The first one is situated to her second year of teaching at a school where she had previously worked for sixth months. Despite having no previous experience she was made an instructor of an after-school sports club[5] together with another more experienced female teacher skilled at the sport. This teacher started her maternity leave, leaving Arai-sensei to take charge of the club alone, as she tells. *'There were many problems at the beginning, I only had a little previous experience of the sport and had never taught it before. I was not good with technical instructions that the students were hoping for, but through reaching to children in my own way in a sincere manner, admitting that I couldn't do the technical stuff but*

would try my best to become a little better and help them become better too, this intention of mine got through to the students and I was able to create good relationships with the students. When I was leaving the school they sent me off very warmly and afterwards when I went to see them play at a citywide tournament I was really moved seeing the students play really well.'

Arai-sensei places a lot of importance on interacting with her students using her sincere/true emotions (*honne)*. *'I want to teach using my own style and work with the students with my honne, I always open up my heart and try to connect with the student by thinking that comes directly from the heart, but there is also a need to do things the same way on the grade and school level, to match with what other teachers are doing. Regardless, in situations where that is not necessary I want to act in my own way.' Honne* can be translated as real intention, one's true colours or feelings. Its counterpart *tatemae* means the socially-tuned intentions shaped by the norms of the society and is connected closely to maintaining harmony in social relations, whereas acting on *honne* is more likely to have unwanted social outcomes (Davies and Ikeno 2002). In the episode illustrated before, Arai-sensei managed to act using her *honne* and according to her own way and ideal, but the following second episode is situated in her current school where the situation is different: *'There are two older teachers also in charge of the club. They know a lot better what they are doing and take charge of most of the teaching which often leaves me with nothing much to do and [because of her position as a younger teacher] can't really even comment on anything. Sometimes, I feel that my presence is not needed there at all.'* The episode illustrates how being in a subordinate position leads to a situation in which Arai-sensei cannot interact with the students in a way meaningful for her and as a cause of that, she has to match her own methods to what the other teachers are doing, working essentially through her *tatemae* and acting according to the role expectations, which leaves her feeling unattached and unimportant.

A more direct influence of the senior colleagues on teacher-student relationships is illustrated when Arai-sensei told of her struggles with a class she was put in charge of when the

homeroom teacher was on sick leave. Trying to control the restless class, which had many students with learning difficulties, she told how she had to toughen up and learn how to be stricter: *'I have learned to be stricter on purpose, up to a point where I've gotten a bit too angry with the students a few times. Yet, I have been yelled at for not saying anything. An older teacher, known to be a strict educator, often came to my class and used to get mad at me for not getting angry enough at the students when I was supposed to. It got me feeling nervous and afraid and I started saying to myself 'I have to get angry, I have to get angry.'*

In Arai-sensei's story, the way that she talks about interacting with the students using her *honne* echoes the Japanese cultural ideal of teacher-student relationships based on close emotional bonds. However, her story also illustrates how her own beliefs and ideals of how to interact with the students differ from the moral purposes of the senior colleagues, which, according to her, also form the basis for the school rules. Sometimes Arai-sensei seems to intentionally not obey some of the (unwritten) rules of the school and sides with the students at least in her own thoughts: *'There is a great gap between the way I think and how the majority of the older teachers think about various things. I don't want to say 'You can't do that' to the students, if I don't think that way of the forbidden thing myself. I also don't like lying and these things usually shine through which might be why some of the things I try to say don't reach the students properly.'*

Arai-sensei described one particular incident, in which she considered one rule of the school to be too strict for the occasion and for that reason unintentionally used such an ambiguous expression when talking with her students that they ended up thinking that if the teachers did not notice, breaking the rule would be acceptable. But, she continues: *'Because of my bad choice of words the message I was supposed to convey did not reach the children properly and I ended up causing trouble for everyone around me; the after school clubs were cancelled for the whole week and so on.'* She was also reprimanded by the other teachers, which illustrates how acting on one's *honne* carries a risk of causing unwanted social outcomes.

Sekiguchi-sensei: Tensions related to formal hierarchical relations within the school organisation

In Sekiguchi-sensei's story, the tension between her ideals and experiences of being in relationships with the students originates from the decisions made by those who hold the power in the school concerning the expected interaction with the students. Her story also illustrates how the relationship with the whole class of students can be strongly mediated by individual students, and that the tensions connected to formal relations can be found at the classroom level too.

Sekiguchi-sensei is a female teacher in her mid-twenties. She had been working for four years as a fully-employed (has passed the employment test) mathematics teacher at a junior high school in a big Japanese city, but was taking a break from teaching and doing her Master's studies in special education at a teacher training institution at the time of the interviews. Her school had plenty of both young teachers and those in their late career, and had a relatively easy working environment. For the first year, Sekiguchi-sensei was an assistant homeroom teacher of eighth graders, but in the second year she became a homeroom teacher of seventh graders whom she guided for three years until their graduation. The way she describes her path to teaching describes a strong sense of calling: *'I used to hate going to school, but learned to like mathematics and enjoyed learning thanks to my elementary school teacher. The reason I wanted to become a teacher was, that I had positive experiences teaching mathematics to fellow classmates and wanted to help raise the weakened academic level in mathematics*.'

Sekiguchi-sensei describes her ideal relationships with the students being equal and based on mutual trust; that the students think of her as their friend, but still respect her authority as a teacher. She does not want to be a teacher who does not work hard together with the students and tries to spend as much time with them as possible.

Sekiguchi-sensei's first year as a teacher was really busy and she tells feeling that she did not have enough time to connect with her students. Despite working late every day and being constantly tired, she said that: '*I enjoyed working with the children and liked planning lessons. I was always excited to see what the next lesson would turn out to be like.'* The mentor that was appointed for Sekiguchi-sensei had radically different views of teaching to her own and it took a long time to get the mentor to approve her way of teaching. *'The mentor was famously really strict and gave me very straight orders on what to do, typically such things that were beyond my capacities, and would also barge into the classroom with advice, interrupting the class and making the children confused. It was quite challenging. I made an effort to include the mentor's ways into my own teaching to an extent which eventually won me the mentor's approval, after which life was quite easy.'*

This extract illustrates how the mentor-mentee interaction actually caused tension and shaped the relationship between the teacher and her students. The mentor interrupting the teaching in cases when s/he considers the beginning teacher to perform poorly is somewhat rare according to previous research[6], but the meaning of such interruptions for teacher-student relationships is evident as they undermine the teacher's authority in the eyes of the students.

Sekiguchi-sensei too was made the instructor of an after school club and was required to teach a wind instrument club despite not knowing how to play any of the instruments. Because of this she says she had a lot of difficulties with the students: *'I used to love music, but started to hate it and did not want to lead the club. I started practicing myself and the students gradually got better and recognised my efforts, so in the end everything was ok, but the experience itself was really bitter and I actually got ill from all the stress it caused me.'*

In Sekiguchi-sensei's story one of the overarching themes concerning her student relationships and her work as a teacher is her desire to get by with her own means and skills, but yet she is forced to face her weaknesses and rely on her students. Sekiguchi-sensei tells that the moments when she realised her insufficient skills, inabilities to control the class or the situation,

came as a shock to her, but she decided not to show them to her students. She also kept the difficulties with the class secret from her colleagues: *'Because I could not admit to myself that I didn't understand or couldn't do things on my own, I did not tell the other teachers about the problems I had with classroom management or ask for help, even though I often asked them about subject matter related things.'*

Sekiguchi-sensei describes her third year as a teacher as a really difficult time. Between the second and third year the head teacher of the academic year[7] had changed. The new head teacher decided that all the teachers should do as they see fit when disciplining the students. During the previous year there had been a very clear consensus among the teachers on the boundaries set for student behaviour. In the new order, teachers for example did not stop or reprimand students for running in the halls because they were not supposed to get angry at students. Suddenly the interaction between the teachers and the students was expected to be conducted in a totally different manner than before and as a beginning teacher, Sekiguchi-sensei did not know how to act. The students were quite confused too and did not know where the boundary between acceptable and non-acceptable behaviour was. Sekiguchi-sensei tells she continued to be stricter which, confused the students even more, increased their rebellious behaviour and they started to become distanced from her.

This growing emotional distancing with the students culminated in the 'diary episode'[8,] where the central role played by a class president further illustrates how the formal relationships within the school organisation are meaningful for the teacher-student relationships. Sekiguchi-sensei began by telling: *'Usually around 30 of the 39 students in the class returned their diaries to my desk, but one day there were only 10. I started inquiring why this was. I found out that because I had commented on the sloppy presentation of the class president, and that it was not fitting of her status, I had gotten this student mad and she told other students that it was ok not to return the diaries. It was really big shock that I couldn't communicate with the students, I thought that they*

didn't want to speak to me. That was the only time when I thought that I wanted to stop being a teacher.'

Days passed and the number of diaries returned kept on getting smaller until there were only eight returned. But then one of the girl students suddenly spoke out in front of everyone and said: '*I'm going to return my diary'*, which persuaded even those who were afraid of the class leader to return their diaries. '*The situation never returned to what it was before, but I was really saved by that girl.'* Here both the trigger of the incident and the eventual resolution centre on the relationship between the teacher and one particular student, which sent ripples out to the rest of the class. Rather ironically, here, the diaries, used as a means of communication to bring the teacher and the students closer together, instead separated them from each other. Sekiguchi-sensei describes this experience: '*I felt that the students had been slowly drifting away and separating from me during the second year which was tsurai.' Tsurai* (lit. hard, painful, bitter) as an expression can hide behind it a variety of emotions such as anxiety, anguish, sadness and anger. *'The situation with the class improved notably during my third year with the class. The students made a decision on their own to make the class united, seeing how I had struggled and suffered the previous year.'* Sekiguchi-sensei commented on this saying that she was effectively saved by the students and felt indebted to the class, and that being able to give something back was part of the reason why she decided to improve her skills in guiding special needs students. Sekiguchi-sensei also recounted joyous episodes with her students: *'My class took part in a group jump-rope contest in the school's sports festival, but when the practices did not go very well, one of the boys started crying in front of everyone. Seeing this, the rest of the class decided to put in their best effort for this boy and let out a yell of support.'* Eventually, the class won the competition, but more than that, Sekiguchi-sensei tells she was content that the class had been unified. She was also moved when the students sang a song that they had performed in a choir competition to her at the graduation ceremony.

Sekiguchi-sensei told how she had discovered, during her recent visits to a school in a

different prefecture as part of her Master's studies, how teaching cultures can differ radically: '*In the metropolitan area there seems to be a lot of schools where the teachers do not interact with the students during break time or pay attention to what they are doing, but instead just spend time in the staff room. The students in these kinds of schools tend to become more expressionless than in schools where the teachers spend more time connecting with the students, as was the case in my own school. Talking with the teachers from other schools of the same prefecture, this seemed to be the case throughout the area.*'

Discussion

In this article, by studying three stories told by beginning teachers in a Japanese context, we have explored the tensions between the ideal and experienced in the teacher-student relationships. The ideals that the teachers of this research narrated, echo the Japanese culturally cherished idea for teacher-student relationships characterised by long-lasting emotional attachment and understanding. The relationships with the students, however, were not always such as the teachers had imagined or wished them to be (see Pillen, Beijaard, and den Brok 2013). When the teachers entered the field, they were surprised by the shortness of the time available to spend with students because of the amount of paperwork they had to do, which is also illustrated in previous research (Murai 2012; Yamazaki and Satô 2013). In their stories, the student relationships were told as the most important aspect of their work and the most emotionally rewarding episodes involved students in various ways. Many of these episodes happened outside the normal classroom setting, during special activities and after school clubs, where the personal side of the teacher is allowed to be stronger than the professional one (see also Hargreaves 2000) and the expression of emotions is more open and relaxed.

In the teachers' stories, the working conditions, as part of the micropolitical context of the school, came between the teachers and their idealised way of interacting with the students.

Furthermore, the tensions were ultimately connected to the significant others in education, most importantly other teachers. Their influence could be observed both on the ideal side, in the form of being inspiring examples, or on the experienced side, as the other teachers formed the most important part of the micropolitical working conditions of the school.

Three main sources for tensions were found. Firstly, the tensions originate from within the teachers themselves: the ideals and models the beginning teachers acquire from their own teachers and colleagues at work, and how these ideals act as yardsticks against which the teacher measures his/her own performance as illustrated in Sumitani-sensei's story. He put in a lot of effort to create relationships with his students to match his ideals, but situational and personal things, like the announcement of his wife's pregnancy, played an important role in reaching those ideals as well. Even in an open working environment like his', where the other more experienced teachers did not say or do anything specific, they are still embodying professional expectations and setting examples. Sumitani-sensei's story also illustrates how teachers' self-worth is connected to being able to give their best to the students.

Secondly, relationships with one's senior colleagues can be a source for tensions. The colleagues can have an effect upon how teachers interact with their students, for instance, by interrupting the lesson to give advice or urging them to teach and interact in a certain manner, as Sekiguchi-sensei's mentor and Arai-sensei's senior colleagues did. Seniority-focused hierarchy affects the power dynamics of the school, and veteran teachers are often credited as the strongest force shaping the workplace culture in Japanese schools (Miyajima 2008). Because of the way that the senior-junior teacher power relationships work in Japan, the senior teachers have a significant effect upon how the beginning teachers can interact with their students indirectly by just being present in the situation, and casting the teacher in a socially and professionally expected (lesser) role, as happened to Arai-sensei in the after-school sports club.

Thirdly, tensions can arise from the formal hierarchical relationships of the school as an

organisation. If the colleagues are in a position of power within the school organisation, they can make decisions, set policies or alter the atmosphere of the school in ways that create tensions to the teacher-student relationships. In Japanese schools, both the management and middle-leaders hold this kind of influencing power, illustrated in Sekiguchi-sensei's story, where the successive grade level heads' greatly different views on how the students should be disciplined on misbehaviour created confusion for Sekiguchi-sensei and her students. Even though not referenced explicitly in the stories, senior teachers in power positions are also behind the decisions to make teachers the supervisors of the after school clubs, which had meaning for the teacher-student relationships in both Arai- and Sekiguchi-sensei's stories.

Additionally, professional expectations for teacher-student relationships can differ from region to region, as hinted in Sekiguchi-sensei's story, and school cultures also differ depending on the location of the school and composition of the teaching staff (Yuu 1988). These also create tensions in the teacher-student relationships and force the beginning teachers to decide whether to try and fit in with the ethos of the school, or go against it. Particularly for beginning teachers, acting on their own personal ideals can be problematic, as open disagreements with colleagues risk their position within the school or future employment in the school or region, and so the beginning teachers often choose to be silent and compliant (Kelchtermans and Ballet 2002; Uitto et al. 2015). Careful observation, maintaining good relationships with everyone and trying not to cause conflicts have been identified as central coping strategies for beginning female teachers in Japan (Miyajima 2008). Experienced and expressed anger is regarded as extremely negative for potentially breaking or disturbing the interdependent relationships (Markus and Kitayama 1994) which is echoed in the stories: the participating teachers did not voice anger towards what came between them and their idealised way of being in relationships with the students, although they made it clear that they did not appreciate the situation as such.

A range of emotions were connected to the tensions between the ideal teacher-student

relationships and how the relationships were experienced by the teachers according to their stories in their actual work. To what extent the teachers could resolve the tension, in other words, to live out the ideal relationship in their work was meaningful from the viewpoint of the emotional experience of their work. When the tensions were unresolved, the emotional distance between the teacher and his/her students widened, there was not sufficient emotional understanding and the teachers seemed to feel separated from the students, experiencing emotions like sadness and disappointment. When the tensions resolved or did not exist, the teachers seemed to feel that the emotional distance to the students was close and emotional understanding existed between them. This situation was described as bringing about such emotions as joy and satisfaction. These observations are in line with the theory on how interdependent selves experience emotions as part of human relationships (Markus and Kitayama 1994).

The relationships with the students often emerged in the stories as being with the whole class, not just with individual students. Teachers for example told that: '*things did not go well with the class'* instead of attributing the problems to few misbehaving individual students. When individual students and the relationships with them were mentioned in the stories, they were told as significant to the relationship that the teacher had with the whole class. These individual students were mentioned as an example illustrating the interrelatedness of everyone in the classroom or as contributing to the general atmosphere or the cohesion of the class, like the disheartened boy in Sekiguchi-sensei's story whose tears made all the students give their best performance at a sports competition. As a negative example, the relationships that Sekiguchi-sensei had with the class president central to the diary episode gains its meaning through the wider relational context of the class, and is mentioned for altering the relationships that the teacher had with all the other students in the class.

By examining the stories we have gained new understanding of the tensions that shape the teacher-student relationships and the emotions involved in the beginning teachers' work. The

stories, while unique and specific in one hand, always illustrate what is universal as well and allow examining the phenomenon of interest in great detail and depth. The stories presented here can be seen as *narrative exemplars* (Mishler 1990) offering a glimpse into the experiences within the complex relational environment of schools that other (beginning) teachers are likely to be able to relate to. Having two researchers analysing the data and involving the teachers in the research process acted as a means of triangulation (Zembylas 2004), bringing out the diversity of the teachers' work and increasing the transparency of the research. Additionally, being involved in the research can also be evocative for the teachers, as narrative research has the possibility to introduce change into the lives of participants by opening new subjective possibilities (Wolgemuth 2006). The teachers in this research all reported that narrating their experiences, and negotiating the interpretations of their stories, allowed them to gain new understanding of themselves and their work, and they were glad to have participated.

Teachers are usually aware of most issues going on in their everyday work on a relational level, but the complexity of the entwining relationships within the school context, and the result that certain working conditions have on the teacher-student relationships, is something we think does not get reflected in-depth often enough. In order to support teachers to gain better understanding on the complexity of the entwining emotional relationships in their daily work, we recommend creating opportunities for teachers to share and discuss stories from different working conditions/school cultures and reflect upon them with each other during pre-service and in-service teacher training activities (see Elbaz-Luwisch 2005). These themes should be taken into account when designing the curricula, courses and contents of teacher training. The spaces for discussion could be integrated into existing contents or courses that deal with collegial or teacher-student relationships, the social nature of teachers' work or teachers' work in more general terms. In their teaching practicum student teachers could observe the relational phenomenon in the school writing down and reflecting them in a diary. Some of the issues raised in this article are not immediately

obvious to teachers because they may be something that are culturally taken for granted, or if the teachers have only been teaching in one school (or region), they do not have a good point of reference when it comes to evaluating which things are more universal to teaching and which just result from the school's unique working conditions. Furthermore, there are many things that the beginning teachers are in no position to change and just have to accept quietly. However, even if these issues and conditions cannot be changed, just being aware of their influence can help the teachers to understand the nature of various relationships in teachers' work better. It can also help to realise that a failure to create good working relationships with the students is not to be blamed solely on the lack effort of teachers, their character or on the students either. This can help teachers to create a more constructive views and attitudes towards their own work and the working conditions. Even though the research was conducted in a Japanese context, the relational issues are universal in teaching profession and thus the results are also useful for teachers and educators working in other contexts as well.

Notes

[1] We understand a beginning teacher to be someone with 0 -7 years of teaching experience. The term 'beginning teacher' was chosen instead of 'newly qualified teachers' (Aspfors and Bondas 2012) or 'novice teachers' (Caspersen and Raaen 2014) because it is frequently used in previous literature (Le Maistre and Pare 2010, Craig 2013), also in the Japanese context (Miyajima 2004, Shimahara 2002) and in the larger research project that this research is a part of.

[2] Erkki, originally from Finland, has studied the Japanese language since 2005. He lived and studied in Japan 2007-2008 for one year and has been conducting research in a Japanese university context since October 2013. The co-author Minna (situated in Finland) became involved at the analysis stage of the research.

[3] Japanese teachers are usually transferred to another school after 6 years of service as fully employed teachers and no longer treated as beginners (Shimahara 2002). However, as many aspects of working conditions vary between prefectures enough for the teachers have to retake the employment test when moving from prefecture to another it means that even teachers with reasonable amount of experience enter the schools practically as beginners.

[4] Shidô can be translated simply as 'to teach', but as teaching is considered to be a holistic undertaking, most teachers consider every teacher-student interaction to involve shidô (Shimahara 2002, p. 33).

[5] Supervising the after school clubs is voluntary in principle (Shimahara 2002), but beginning teachers, in particular, are frequently made teach them against their own will in situations where suitably skilled teachers are not available. Depending on the school, the decision is made either by the principals or teachers in charge of extracurricular activities.

[6] Typically mentors observe classes, but do not give straight answers to problems or comment on the teacher's performance without being specifically asked, unless in cases where the teacher is really out of line (Shimahara 2002; see Howe 2005).

[7] Teachers in elementary and junior high schools are organised into functionally separate grade units led by a senior teacher (*gakunen shunin*), who hold quite a lot of power as the middle leaders of the teaching staff. These units deal with issues salient to that academic year and through close interaction, being situated physically close in the staff room, and shared tasks, create a strong subculture of teaching within the school (Shimahara 2002)

[8] In Japanese schools, teachers commonly use diaries as a method of communicating with the students on a daily basis and creating emotional bonds with them (Shimahara 2002).

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