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Student autonomy and the teacher' professional growth: fostering collegial culture in language teacher education

1. Introduction

Language teachers have an important role in how their students experience their foreign language learning. They are significant resource persons for self-directed, reflective learning aimed at student autonomy. Developing autonomy in foreign language education is a complex process that requires time, commitment, expertise and explicit pedagogical guidance. As David Little (1999) points out, students do not become autonomous learners simply by being told that they are now in charge of their learning. They can take control of more and more aspects of the learning process only to the extent that they acquire the appropriate knowledge, skills and motivation. To enhance their learning they also need to be actively involved in the whole process, interacting with their peers (in small groups) to share their learning experiences.

I wish to emphasise the importance of the learning culture of the whole school for promoting self-directed language learning. I see student autonomy as part of a more general concept of *values education* in school. Being an autonomous person means respecting one's dignity as a moral person and valuing others by treating them with dignity. An essence in human dignity is the notion of moral agency: being morally aware of one's conduct and its effects on others. Values education is thus an inherent part of any encounters between the students and the school staff. As Jackson et al. (1993) point out, schools do much more than pass on knowledge. They also affect the way in which learning is valued and organised, laying the foundations of life-long habits of action. Schools have the potential for having a positive moral influence on the members of its community, but they also have the potential for doing moral harm. Consequently, the teacher's commitment to the moral life in school is significant for the quality of student learning.

Enhancing autonomy underscores the need for a *collegial school culture* whereby teachers work together with the students (and the school's stakeholders) in order to develop their school as a collaborative learning

community. It is desirable to link student guidance for autonomous language learning with a school-wide approach of promoting socially responsible student learning. Such a policy should, in fact, become a shared and publicly acknowledged pedagogical orientation of the school joined in by the whole staff, as far as possible. This entails a reculturing of the school as a work place and leads to a *new educational paradigm*: from teacher isolation towards teacher collaboration and professional autonomy.

To outline the paradigm shift briefly, I can just contrast some properties of the traditional positivistic paradigm with the emerging critical-emancipatory paradigm. In the *positivistic paradigm*, the teacher's role is restricted to a consumer of expert knowledge produced by researchers and administrators. Teachers see themselves as implementors of the curricula and materials produced by outside experts, acting according to their guidance (and also inspection, in a number of national contexts). Top-down administration imposes on them a dependent role as didactic technicians. Implicitly, this also encourages them to use a similar hierarchical power relationship with their students, maintaining a dependent learner role. This interest of knowledge is generally known as the technical interest whereby knowledge is used as a guide to efficient action (Kohonen 2000a; 2001a).

In the *critical - emancipatory paradigm*, on the other hand, the teacher's role is that of a reflective practitioner. Teachers need to assume a critical stance to their profession in order to understand the constraints imposed on their work by external circumstances. When necessary, critical reflection can also lead to a determined course of action. In accordance with this emancipatory interest of knowledge, teachers need to voice their justified disapproval of their working conditions and resources and take active charge of developing their profession. In this orientation teachers need to assume an interactive professional identity to foster learning and personal growth. The new role emphasises *teacher autonomy* and the moral nature of teaching (Kohonen 2000a; 2001a,c).

The implications of these developments underscore the need for a deliberate shift towards collaborative, active and socially responsible learning in school. Professionalising teaching towards such goals involves a new kind of collegial culture in school, with an explicit commitment by teachers to enhance their professional growth and the learning of all participants. Such a culture also requires new principles and practices in

teacher education. The change processes need to be investigated if they are to be understood and facilitated.

2. Professional growth and school culture: the OK project

To pursue this research, I undertook an action-research school development project with my colleague Pauli Kaikkonen at the Department of Teacher Education in Tampere University: the OK School Development Project (1994 – 98). A central goal in the project was to enhance the teacher's professional growth and socially responsible student learning by fostering a collegial school culture. The teachers' participation in the project was voluntary. The schools were also expected to make a basic commitment to the project, providing support to the participating teachers. The project was joined by about 40 teachers from six schools in the vicinity of Tampere. (See Kohonen and Kaikkonen 1996; 2001; Kaikkonen and Kohonen (eds) 1997; 1999a;1999b; Kohonen 2000a; 2001b,c.)

Our goals for the project evolved gradually into the following *common principles* that guided our work during the four-year project:

- 1 providing support for site-based curriculum design, while leaving the ownership of the project to the participating teachers;
- 2 supporting collegial collaboration by facilitating joint planning of the project and working in a number of different groupings;
- 3 helping the schools to establish networks through various interest groups, including international networking;
- 4 promoting openness of professional discussions and exchange of ideas between the participants, and
- 5 developing the notion of teachers as researchers through an action research orientation and dissemination of the findings.

These principles still allowed ample room for the teachers to make their own site-based decisions. We introduced our *educational goals* to the schools at the onset of the project as a broad pedagogical approach. The project aimed at developing instruction within an experiential learning approach emphasizing reflective, autonomous learning and intercultural learning (see Kohonen 2001a; Kaikkonen 2001; Jaatinen 2001; Lehtovaara 2001). The participating teachers accepted the position and conducted their schools' projects independently within the agreed approach. They also evaluated their site-based project work by collecting mainly qualitative data on the process.

We established a joint *project planning group* right from the beginning of the project, consisting of the two researchers and one teacher from each participating school. The group soon became a centre of professional interaction in the project. We had regular monthly planning meetings in which made the decisions about the inservice workshop programmes and evaluated the progress. We organised workshops almost monthly during the project (with a total of 32 workshops between 1994-98), usually lasting half a working day or a full working day. In the design of the inservice workshops, we encouraged the collaborative culture through an extensive use of reflective work both alone and in small groups, providing ample time for the teachers to share their experiences and personal discoveries. Various kinds of partnerships were developed in the project for mutual learning (see Kohonen 2000a; 2001b,c; Kohonen and Kaikkonen 1996; 2001).

We encouraged the participating teachers to clarify their professional aims and interests for themselves. For this purpose we provided several sessions on reflective learning, qualitative research and hermeneutical philosophy as a theoretical underpinning at the beginning of the project. We also introduced the idea of developing *student portfolios* for reflective learning and self-assessment. As a companion to this concept, we encouraged the teachers to consider their own *professional growth portfolios* as a tool for increasing self-awareness and facilitating professional reflection. Based on their portfolios we invited the teachers to write a personal developmental essay at the end of each year and submit them to us as research material. About half the teachers undertook this task. The findings discussed in this paper are based on the developmental essays and the open-ended thematic interviews of two teachers from each school, conducted regularly at the end of each school year.

In connection with the workshops, the teachers frequently undertook *bridging tasks* to work on further in their classes and to report on their findings and experiences at the following seminar. The reports created a spirit of openness, shared responsibility and mutual learning in the project. The OK project thus provided a *common forum* for exchanging pedagogical ideas and experiences. Many of the teachers were also readily willing to report on their findings to other teachers in a host of seminars both locally, nationally and internationally. Another important way of disseminating the findings were the three collections of papers written by a number of the participating teachers and the two researchers (Kaikkonen and Kohonen (eds.) 1997; 1999a, b).

3. Some empirical findings on professional growth

3.1. Enhanced language teacher's professional identity. The language teachers took up the idea of *portfolio-oriented language learning* as an important pedagogic tool for encouraging self-directed, reflective language learning. They soon discovered that tutoring their students' portfolios required a great deal of time for designing and guiding the work, negotiating the groundrules and deadlines, answering questions, reading the student assignments and giving feedback about their work. It also required a new kind of firmness in setting the tone of the work, negotiating the processes and expecting that the students also observe the agreed deadlines. Encountering the students on a more personal basis in an open negotiation was a new experience for many teachers.

Teachers found that teaching such lessons to their students was changing their personal views and images of teaching in a fundamental way. The portfolio-oriented learning opened them significant new perspectives to their work. Student portfolios clearly helped them in getting to know their students better as individuals with their own lives, interests and hopes for the future (Kohonen 2000b; 2001c). For one secondary school teacher, the language portfolio opened a new world of professional growth and student guidance and tutoring. She used her personal diary as a vehicle for tracking and reflecting on her own growth while developing the student portfolio as a tool for guiding student progress. The whole concept of "teaching" was gradually unfolding to her in a new way (Kohonen 2000a; 2001c):

'I still "teach," of course, and am still a certain authority and adult in my class, but I have also become a counsellor of my students' learning. I attempt to create a positive climate in my classes and I also have the courage to take risks. I have become an observer of learning and I continuously encourage my students by giving them positive and still honest feedback, both orally and in writing.'

Another language teacher found that she was more than just a teacher of the languages in her school. At times she felt like being '*. . . a social educator, a psychologist, a family therapist, a listener, a referee, someone who comforts.*' Increased personal collaboration with the parents in the parent meetings also gave the teachers a better knowledge and understanding of their students' home backgrounds. However, the meetings also raised the question of where to find the time for them, particularly as they need to be organised in the evenings.

An upper secondary language teacher analysed her developments, noting that ‘. . . *knowledge transmission and authority were not the basic idea of being a teacher. What then? Could it be that the teacher is also a human being in class, someone who can also make mistakes and admit them?*’ Important for her was a two-year intensive course on counselling, and a long-term work as a mentor of student teachers. After a thirty-year career, her current view of teachership consisted of elements of guiding her students, talking and negotiating with them, giving space for student questions and being an adult person in the class. Portfolio-oriented work gave her essential tools for this orientation. She noted that all her experiences and formative incidents had been necessary for her development during her long professional career (Kohonen 2001c).

Language teachers found that collaboration was mutually beneficial to everybody. At the same time they noted that cooperation across the curriculum was also useful, providing new perspectives for thinking. The colleagues provided, as it were, a mirror for the teacher to reflect on her own teaching. The teachers’ reflections suggest an enhanced notion of the secondary teacher’s professional competence. This competence consists of the following dimensions of expertise (Kohonen 2000a,b; 2001c):

- a *Subject-matter expertise*: the knowledge of the subject(s) taught and the discipline-based theoretical understanding of them. This is, of course, the traditional role identity of the secondary teachers.
- b *Pedagogical expertise*: knowledge of the students and individuals, how to encounter and guide them individually, how to facilitate their learning and teach them to be more competent and skilful learners; how to make the curriculum contents more readily accessible to them.
- c *Expertise in school development*: understanding of the change processes and assuming a responsible role in developing the school as a collegial work place, and a commitment to the ethical dimensions of the teacher’s work.

3.2. Teacher growth as emotional involvement. Facing professional change is not just an intellectual and rational matter of learning the factual information. It is also very much a question of undertaking the necessary emotional work inherent in any major changes (in any profession). This is because changes imply that part of the teacher’s competence has become obsolete and needs to be replaced by new attitudes, skills and understandings. Changes thus pose a threat to the teacher’s professional self-understanding and belief systems. This requires modifications in the beliefs and assumptions of the role identity (Kohonen 2000a; 2001c; Leitch and Day 1998).

Teachers related differently to such emotional demands. On the one hand, the new discoveries were rewarding and entailed feelings of increased professional competence and even a kind of “empowerment”, feeling energised and stimulated by the work and the collegial community. Professional growth was thus a personally enriching experience for many teachers. They learned to accept their limitations and imperfections and realised that they were still good teachers. Not having to be perfect was thus a liberating experience. Teachers assumed the courage to bring up their thoughts more openly in the community and did not get discouraged when facing resistance (Kohonen 2000a; 2001c).

Teachers felt a strong need to learn more, to increase their understanding of the work. At the same time, they also realised that they needed to look after their own well-being and mental resources by taking the time for rest, privacy and self-reflection. They noted that an exhausted teacher could not be helpful to anyone. Increased self-understanding encouraged them to give presentations about their work to colleagues at various professional meetings. Teachers felt that they had gained more belief in the significance of their work: they could make a difference to their students’ lives.

On the other hand, however, professional growth also entailed feelings of uncertainty and insufficiency. In addition to their own uncertainty, innovative secondary teachers also had to face the suspicions and resistance from a number of their colleagues as well as from many students. Many teachers were also asking themselves how they could behave in their classes in a confident way while having inner doubts about the sufficiency of their own professional skills. How to give an impression of being a competent and encouraging teacher while feeling professionally uncertain and confused? This paradox of being an innovative teacher was causing stress and anxiety to several teachers. Changing the professional beliefs and assumptions in the middle of the full work load was at times felt to be emotionally heavy and even overwhelming. However, there were big individual differences between teachers: what was a stressing situation for one teacher could be challenging for another teacher.

One lower secondary teacher discovered that she had to learn to proceed in small enough steps and also allow herself to make mistakes. Failures and mistakes were part of life, and they could contain seeds for growth. When the teacher encounters her own insufficiencies it is also easier for her to understand and appreciate imperfections in the others: *‘We touch*

others through our insufficiency, not through our impeccability and excellence.' For her, facing the changes was thus a question of humility, endurance, maturation and personal growth. Sharing the feelings with a colleague was a significant help for her in the process (Kohonen 2000a; 2001c).

4. Discussion of the findings

4.1. A model of awareness in foreign language education.

Autonomous language learning has a solid basis in a holistic, experiential learning approach as a broad theoretical orientation. In terms of the conception of man, the student is seen as a self-directed, intentional person who can be guided to develop his or her competences in three inter-related areas of knowledge, skills and awareness: (a) personal awareness and self-direction, (b) awareness of language and communication, and (c) awareness of learning processes. These components of learner development need to be accompanied by and consciously linked to the teacher's professional growth. Further, teacher development needs to be embedded in the context of a purposeful staff development towards a collegial institutional culture, connected with the society developments at large. I will discuss these perspectives briefly in this section (see Kohonen 1992; 1999; 2000a,b; 2001a).

(a) Personal awareness and self-direction develop in learning processes throughout the life cycle. The development can be facilitated in language education by designing the learning environments so that they foster the student's healthy (and realistic) personal growth. This is a question of working towards such a community of learners in which the students feel safe to explore the uncertainties involved in language learning and communication. In this process language learning expands beyond the notion of communicative competence towards intercultural competence: relating to otherness in human encounters (Kaikkonen 2001).

(b) Awareness of language and communication. An important part of foreign (and particularly second) language learning will obviously take place in informal contexts, outside the classroom settings. However, language classrooms still provide a powerful environment for learning. They allow language, communication and learning to be made explicit and discussed and explored together, with the teacher as a professional guide and organiser of the learning opportunities. The quality of this environment is a question of what kind of tasks the students do and how they are

guided to work on what they do. The students need to understand and conceptualise the big picture of the whole foreign language learning enterprise they are undertaking. The means facilitating them to acquire for themselves a kind of personal map of their learning task, helping them to orient themselves in the fuzzy terrain of human communication (Kohonen 2000b; 2001a).

(c) Awareness of the learning processes helps language students to monitor their learning towards increasingly self-directed, negotiated language learning and self-assessment. This involves knowledge about learning strategies. At a higher level of abstraction, the metacognitive knowledge of learning helps students to improve their ways of planning and monitoring their learning processes (Kohonen 2000b; 2001a).

Facilitating student autonomy thus makes it necessary for the language teacher to reflect on his or her professional identity as an educator. Teachers need to work on their beliefs and assumptions of their role as language educators. They need to see themselves as reflective professionals and encounter the uncertainties of guiding and supporting self-assessment and self-directed student learning. In experiential learning the teacher becomes a facilitator of learning, an organizer of learning opportunities, a resource person providing learners with feedback and encouragement, and a creator of the learning atmosphere and the learning space. The essential question is how the teacher exercises his or her pedagogical power in the class.

The teachers in the project found it helpful to share their experiences with their colleagues in teacher seminars and workshops. Working closely together improved personal relationships and made it easier to give and receive feedback. Through collegial collaboration teachers found better ways of tackling with the problems of student motivation, discipline and bullying, gaining rewarding experiences of working together (Kohonen 2000a,b; 2001b,c).

To summarise this brief discussion, I propose the following holistic framework for experiential foreign language education (Figure 1; Kohonen 2001a, 49-50).

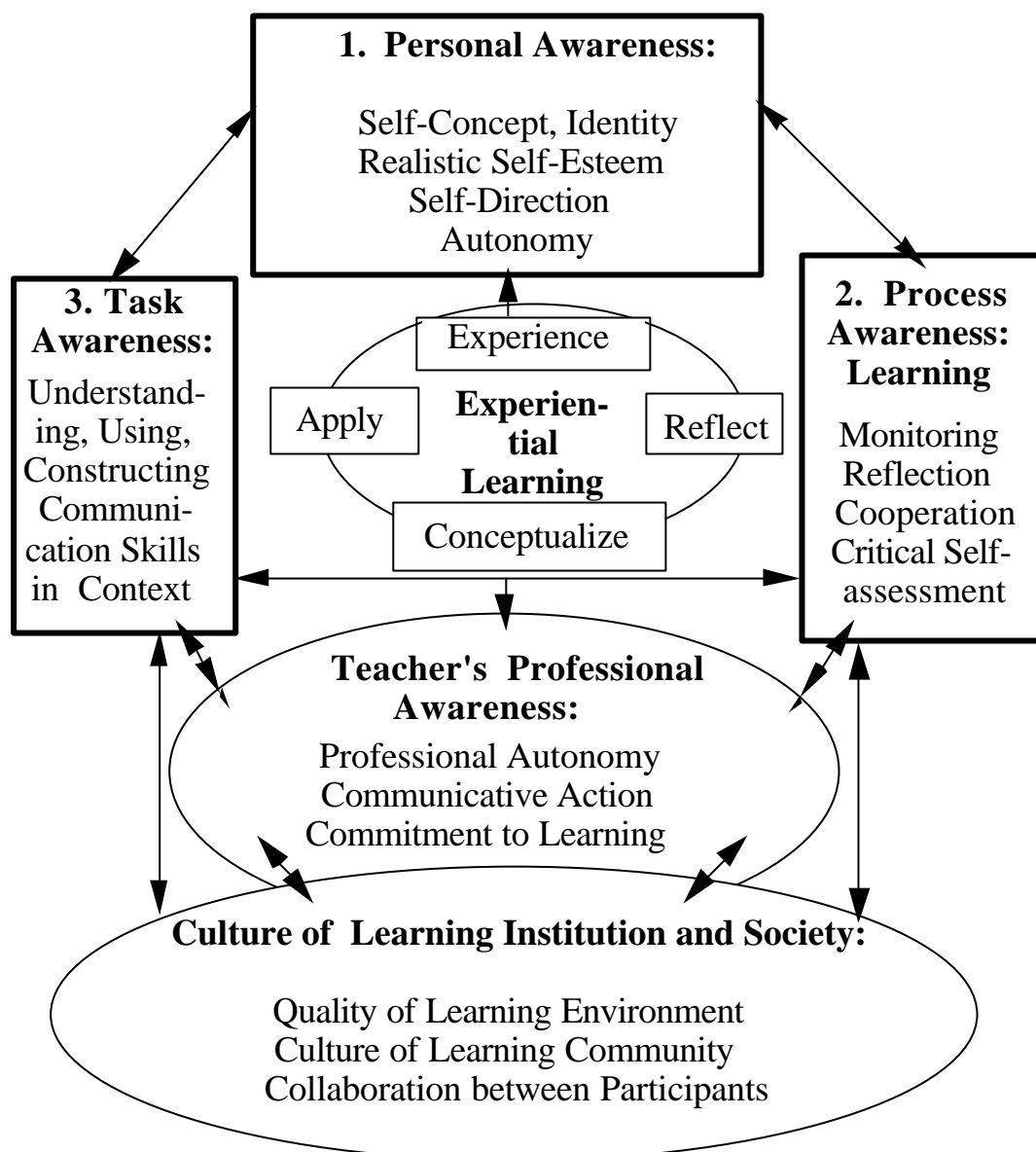


Figure 1. Experiential language education in the institutional context. To promote experiential foreign language education we thus need to consider the learning processes at the levels of the individual learner, the teacher and the school organisation as part of the surrounding society. This entails nothing less than redesigning the language teaching profession and reculturing the schools as collaborative work places.

As shown by the cyclic process in the middle of the diagram, experiential learning constitutes the reflective core orientation at each level. Intuitive experiences are grasped and made sense of through conscious reflection and abstract conceptualisation. This involves a tension between unconscious and conscious learning. The experience is transformed into personally meaningful learnings through reflection and active experimentation. This creates another tension between the elements of

detached reflection and active risk-taking. All these modes of learning are necessary for the development of the components of intercultural communicative competence (see Kolb 1984; Kohonen 2001a; Kaikkonen 2001).

4.2. Professional growth as transformative learning. The teacher's professional growth and the possibilities of supporting the process through inservice teacher education have been discussed in recent literature with reference to *transformative learning*. Essential in this concept is that the teachers emancipate themselves from their constraining beliefs and assumptions and create new pedagogical solutions. The change is an experiential process that integrates the cognitive, social and emotional aspects of professional learning. The process is community-based and aims at a culture of collegial sharing and interactive learning, while creating space for individual growth.

Transformative learning includes the following properties (Edge 1992; Cranton 1996; Darling-Hammond 1998; Askew & Carnell 1998; Kohonen 2000a,b; 2001a,c):

- 1 Realising the significance of *professional interaction* for growth
- 2 Developing an *open, critical stance to professional work* and seeing oneself as a continuous learner
- 3 Developing a *reflective attitude as a basic habit of mind*, involving reflection on educational practices and their philosophical underpinnings,
- 4 Developing *new self-understandings* in concrete situations,
- 5 Reflecting on *critical events or incidents* in life history and learning from the personal insights
- 6 Conscious *risk-taking*: acting in new ways in classes and in the work community
- 7 *Ambiguity tolerance*: learning to live with uncertainty concerning the decisions to be made

The approach emphasises the teacher's self-understanding based on *pedagogical reflection* in concrete situations with the students. Linda Darling-Hammond points out that teachers learn by observing and listening to their students carefully and looking at their work thoughtfully. This develops their understanding of what students believe about themselves, what they care about, and what tasks are likely to give them enough challenge and success to sustain motivation. *Teacher learning* therefore needs to be connected with actual teaching, supported by ongoing theory building: "Teachers learn best by studying, doing, and

reflecting; by collaborating with other teachers; by looking closely at students and their work; and by sharing what they see.” (Darling-Hammond 1998,8).

Teachers often seem to make a distinction between their personal and professional selves. Leitch and Day (1998) point out that teachers’ professional growth is adequate only when it is placed in the big context of their careers and personal lives. Professional growth is a complex phenomenon involving both cognitive and affective learning. It is important for teachers to attend also to their emotional selves and their life histories in their reflections (see Jaatinen 2001). The purpose of the reflective work is to integrate their beliefs and images, their theoretical knowledge and their classroom experiences into what Julian Edge (1992) calls *experiential understanding*. The transformation process often involves experiences of cognitive and emotional dissonance and feelings of uncertainty and ambiguity.

4.3. Conditions for professional growth. Teachers need to address the basic questions of the purpose of education and what it means, for them, to be teachers in today’s school. In so doing they can develop a *critical understanding* of their profession and themselves as human beings. This makes it possible for them to take active charge of developing their work together. Action research provides a framework and tools for this pedagogical inquiry. It underscores the educational motives for undertaking the research and development work: improving the quality of teaching and learning in the local school context (Kohonen and Kaikkonen 1996; 2001; Edge (ed.) 2001; Edge and Richards (eds.) 1993).

Essential in the process is to promote the teacher’s professional growth and school development in order to improve student learning. Research is geared to the classroom realities and is carried out mainly by the teacher (rather than by an outside researcher), in collaboration with other teachers. In a collaborative school culture teachers and students can encounter each other in a more holistic way as genuine persons and partners in learning. As Edge (2001) argues, they can build a new teaching and learning community, encouraging authentic communication while respecting diversity.

Grimmett (1996) points out that pursuing their professional growth involves teachers in a struggle because the conditions and settings in which teachers work pose obstacles for professionalism. The teacher’s work is constrained by situational and social factors. Frequently these

factors offer teachers the technical curriculum implementor's role, rather than invite them to work towards an innovative educator's position. Dealing with such obstacles requires commitment, effort and persistence. Grimmitt argues further that teachers are involved in a *struggle for increased professional authenticity* in which they examine their professional beliefs and assumptions and reflect on what actually happens in their classes.

Professional growth is thus essentially a question of time, struggle, commitment and support. Well-intentioned (and relevant) school innovations may, in many cases, become counter-productive if they are introduced at such a rate that the teachers cannot cope with them properly. Transformative teacher learning requires time for thoughtful reflection and internal processing, and time for collegial discussions and planning the pedagogical procedures. Teachers also need time for collecting their observations, reflecting on them and modifying their action, based on the findings. This is why transformative learning should not be pushed through too hastily. Changes of the magnitude of paradigmatic shifts in teacher thinking, pedagogical action and school culture just do not take place overnight. They are inevitably a function of time and commitment in any profession. Besides, students are similarly in need of time, guidance and support in the process. Increasing pressures without appropriate support can therefore entail feelings of powerlessness and frustration and lead to withdrawal, fatigue and a professional crisis (Fullan 1996; Kohonen 2000a; 2001b,c).

The current trend of introducing the mechanisms of the market economy into schools to improve their efficiency is undermining the conditions of education aimed at fostering student autonomy. Instead of competition, rush, sanctions and additional external pressures (or threats of them) evident in the fashionable practices of 'quality control', what is needed in school at the moment is time, professional effort and administrative support (Kohonen 2000a; 2001b,c). Michael Fullan (1996) similarly emphasizes the importance of time for real change to take place in school. If there is not enough time for collegial discussion and the development of a culture of caring and sharing in schools, the innovative work that is done easily remains superficial, fragments and is lost.

4.4. Towards collegial culture in teacher education. The university – school partnership that we developed in the OK project is an example of developing new possibilities for the university (or a college) to support schools and teachers. In the traditional models of university - school

cooperation, researchers have usually given teachers lectures and seminars on learning and teaching while remaining outside experts and evaluators of the results. Such orientations have encouraged the teachers to remain in a dependent role. We set out to develop a new model for the collaboration, based on the socio-constructivistic and emancipatory educational paradigms.

Essential in the new concept of university — school partnership is that it is based on an equal status of the partners and a mutual trust and respect. It also encourages the teachers to take charge of developing their school through an action research orientation. This means assuming an inquiring attitude to the work: becoming sensitive to potentially interesting problems and learning to think of them systematically and rigorously. To facilitate these processes, teacher educators need to develop a supportive culture for the intensive work on self-understanding, in an equal partnership with the participating teachers and schools.

As the discussion of the OK project design and some findings in this paper shows, we were able to develop a number of ways for facilitating the processes of professional growth towards a new collegial culture. The data on the teachers' professional growth indicates that the participants were actively engaged in their efforts for increased professional learning. In an environment of trust and openness, teachers can feel safe to expose their professional images, beliefs and assumptions and take the risks of questioning and modifying them where they see it possible and appropriate.

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