Teachers’ peer group mentoring – Nine steps to heaven?

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Abstract
Various kinds of mentoring processes to enhance teachers’ collective learning and professional development have become popular. Collective learning and collective practice development within professions may be approached as an integral part of ‘professional learning communities’. Research emphasises that learning communities cannot be commanded into existence and that they require voluntary participation. It is implicit that the participating teachers are open-minded and willing to share their teaching experiences. Yet in this article the situation is different. The article draws on a three-year-long case study in a Swedish secondary school involving one teacher team ‘forced’ to participate in peer group mentoring. The project aimed to develop teaching team facilitation using a nine-step model of peer group mentoring (PGM). Framed by Michel Foucault’s notion of power, the analysis shows that the disciplining practice of PGM generated new and complex processes. These processes can be described as disciplining, democratising and developmental for both the individual and the teacher team.

Keywords: teaching team facilitation, professional learning communities, peer group mentoring, power relations

Introduction
The responsibility of teachers to develop both their own teaching expertise and the school practice has been expected for a long time in both Swedish and international contexts. In the Swedish legislation governing education (e.g. the curricula Lpo 94; Lgr 11) teachers are explicitly required to engage in school development based on the latest research findings and their own practical experience (Rönnerman, 2005). Further, teachers are supposed to collaborate and develop “communities of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991). For this reason, Swedish teachers have been organised in various forms of teacher teams since the 1980s, with their organisation being formalised by a 1994 Bill (curricula Lpo 94; Lgr 80) (e.g. Knutas, 2008; Ohlsson, 2004a). To support school development as well as teachers’ professional development, various forms of professional group mentoring have been an increasing phenomenon in Swedish schools for about 20 years (Kroksmark & Åberg, 2007; Åberg, 2009). During a group mentoring process teachers are supposed to develop their professional expertise.
through (collective) reflections on their practice (Lauvås & Handal, 2001; Lendahls Rosendahl & Rönnerman, 2006; Åberg, 2009). In spring 2011 the Swedish government formalised the notions of professional mentoring. New teachers are to have an experienced teacher as a mentor during their first year of teaching (Bill: 2010/11:20). Research into teachers’ professional group mentoring often highlights collaboration and mentoring processes among teachers who choose each other and/or choose to participate in group mentoring (e.g. McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Lauvås & Handal, 2001; Rönnerman, 2005; Åberg, 2009).

However, the focus in this article is on a teaching team put together by school management and more or less ‘forced’ to participate in peer group mentoring. The teachers in the study on which this article draws were following a nine-step model developed by Lauvås, Hofgaard Lycke & Handal (1997) for the mentoring process to improve peer facilitation within teacher teams. Further, the teachers wanted to improve their teaching to enhance students’ learning. In the article the specific model is named Peer Group Mentoring (PGM, in Swedish Kollegahandledning). Not a lot of research has been conducted on the area of professional group mentoring within teacher teams that do not have an external facilitator. Not much is known about the character of group mentoring for teachers’ professional development, the content or the theoretical basis that would best illuminate mentoring issues (cf. Åberg, 2009; Kroksmark & Åberg, 2007). Nor are the processes that generate professional learning communities (PLC) in any great focus in reported studies (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Hipp, Huffman, Pankake & Oliver, 2008; Opfer & Pedder, 2011). Moreover, power relations need to be highlighted and scrutinised in research about PLC and in professional group mentoring, and this has been neglected in the mentoring literature.

The aim of this article is to understand and interpret mentoring processes. Two questions are central: Which kinds of processes does peer group mentoring enhance? How can those processes be understood according to the notions of power as a productive force? The focus in the article is these processes and the constrained character of Peer Group Mentoring.

In what follows, a brief literature review concerning teacher teams, professional learning communities and professional group mentoring is outlined, as well as the theoretical framework and methodology of the study. The results of the study are presented as three interrelated processes: processes of discipline; processes of democratisation; and processes of development. At the end, some general conclusions are made.

**Teacher teams**

The discourse of lifelong learning has become significant in post-modern society (Kvale, 2007; Sjöberg, 2011). For teachers, the lifelong-learning discourse is visible in different policy texts as various forms of disciplining technologies and techniques e.g. institutionalised and performative technologies. These technologies constitute and regulate teachers (Sjöberg, 2011:85). One disciplining technology is the organisation
of teacher teams. As mentioned, the majority of Swedish teachers are organised in teams. The team organisation was formalised in the 1994 Bill (curricula Lpo-94). The Bill stated that a “teacher team” should be created to support teachers’ professional development. In other words, teachers are responsible not only for students’ education, but also for their own professional and collective development in professional learning communities (PLC). Despite this, both national and international research illustrate that it is difficult to alter the individualistic tradition in the teacher profession. Hargreaves (1998) analyses the organisation of teachers in teacher teams and points out that this does not automatically lead to collaboration or collective learning. Ohlsson (2004b:17) highlights that resistance to learning and collaborative teaching teams is related to individual teachers, the culture of a school and structural dilemmas. Within a teacher team it seems difficult to achieve the normative ambitions of a PLC.

**Professional learning communities**

Another dominant discourse within the teacher profession is that of “the reflective practitioner”, a concept coined by Schön in 1983. Reflective practitioners as well as “collective reflections” are crucial elements of “teacher learning communities”, as shown by McLaughlin & Talbert (2006) in their research on PLC, school development and teachers’ professional development. McLaughlin & Talbert highlight three functions as unique. A teacher learning community:

- builds and manages knowledge;
- creates shared language and standards for practice and student outcomes; and
- sustains aspects of their school’s culture vital to continued, consistent norms and instructional practice (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006:5).

A critical perspective (such as e.g. Lauvås et al., 1997) is emphasised as being fundamental to professional development (cf. Carr & Kemmis, 1986), but it is not salient in the ‘teacher learning community’ concept.

One way to enhance collective reflection, build and manage knowledge and create shared language and standards for practice is through various forms of professional group mentoring (e.g. Lauvås & Handal, 2001; Lendahls Rosendahl & Rönnerman, 2002; 2006). This has become a growing area in Swedish schools (Åberg, 2009). In the following section the theoretical foundations of mentoring traditions and various forms of professional group mentoring are outlined.

**Theoretical foundations in professional (group) mentoring**

Mentoring related to professional development stems from two traditions – the psychodynamic and the apprenticeship. The apprenticeship tradition focuses on external practice and organisation rather than individuals “inner lives” (Högberg, 2005).
According to Handal (2007), the apprenticeship tradition derives from a sociocultural perspective of learning. In this mentoring tradition, learning is about novices’ observation and imitation of a role model as well as correction from the experienced practitioners within a professional community. Handal (2007:22) uses the metaphor of a “guru” to exemplify the role of the mentor. The guru knows how to carry out the actual practice well and acts like a role model, e.g. teaching in the classroom. With this view, Handal (ibid.) stresses there is a risk of a reduction to a technical understanding of a complex profession. The participants involved talk in the practice rather than about the practice. Of course, this may lead to the reproduction of existing practice (and not development and changes). He states that he and Per Lauvås (his research colleague) use reflection for professional development, “reflective mentoring”, to understand the ideological foundations the practice (in which one is practising) represent and which knowledge traditions and values it is built upon. The role model of the mentor is “the reflective practitioner” as Schön (1983) put it. The theoretical foundation is a socio-cognitive perspective on learning; the concept of meaning is crucial and the development of meaning and understanding is related to language. The metaphor used relative to the role of the mentor is a “critical friend” (Handal, 2007). The “reflective mentoring” model seems to combine the two traditions – both external practice and individuals’ reflections (inner lives) are of interest.

According to Lauvås et al. (1997), peer group mentoring is about constructing common professional knowledge, professional ethics and professional practice starting in the teacher’s own every-day practice. Further, teachers are supposed to take a critical stance and challenge taken-for-granted knowledge in the actual school culture. In other words, teachers themselves can construct a new (and better) educational practice. This practice shall be built on teachers’ own experiences via (group) mentoring. Through reflections in teaching teams facilitated by e.g. the nine-step model (PGM) the classroom practice as well as the school context will change.

**Various forms of professional group mentoring**

There are varieties of mentoring for professional development and they may be hard to conceptualise and capture (Lindén 2005). Lauvås et al. (1997) argue that neither coaching nor peer group mentoring can be given a universal definition. Still, professional mentoring and counselling are about knowledge and learning that occurs in an intersection between theory and practice (Lindén 2005). Mentoring can be described as a phenomenon that takes place between two or more individuals in an organised activity. Professional group mentoring can take various forms and focus either on thinking about the own practice to enhance understanding, or it can transform practice (Lendahls Rosendahl & Rönnerman, 2002:27).

Åberg (2009:6) identified three main types of group mentoring (supervision) when interviewing headmasters (school-leaders); activity-oriented, professional development and personnel support. Åberg’s (2009) focused on group mentoring
(supervision) with a facilitator. She asserts that contextual understanding of the headmaster creates different conditions for professional group mentoring. In activity-oriented mentoring e.g. the headmaster facilitates the process. When professional and personnel development are focused there is an external facilitator. According to Lendahls Rosendahl & Rönnerman (2002; 2006), it is common to collaborate with an external facilitator e.g. from the university during group mentoring processes. Näslund (2004) asserts that an external facilitator is significant for the process. The facilitator may take a catalytic role to provoke ideas taken for granted within the profession or the group (Näslund, 2004; Lendahls Rosendahl & Rönnerman, 2009; Åberg, 2009) or highlight power relations in the group (e.g. Näslund, 2004). Näslund (2004) illustrates with reference to Proctor that there are four different kinds of professional group mentoring. The role of the (external) facilitator and the participants differ due to the mentoring form (Näslund, 2004:40-41):

- the facilitator can facilitate one participant at a time within a group – mentoring in a group;
- the participants co-facilitate with the facilitator – mentoring with a group;
- the facilitator has external co-facilitators – mentoring of a group; and
- the participants facilitate each other – mentoring by a group.

The latter, without an external facilitator, is according to Näslund (2004) not a professional mentoring process. He defines it as “collaborative consultation work”. At first, the nine-step model (PGM) used in this study seems to fit with the description “collaborative consultation work” (ibid.). The participants are supposed to manage the facilitation themselves without an external facilitator – mentoring by the group; collaborative consultation work. On second thought, it appears not that distinctive and easy to separate. The moderator and the other participants co-facilitate one of the participants (one case) at a time – mentoring in the group and with the group (cf. Näslund, 2004). Lauvås et al. (1997) and Lauvås & Handal (2001) claim that practitioners e.g. teachers can take a catalytic and challenging role themselves in a professional mentoring process.

There are nine steps in the PGM model, as the following description shows:

- each participant has the opportunity to present a case or a problem;
- the participants choose one case to focus on;
- a moderator and a secretary are appointed;
- the case owner carefully describes the case/problem without any interrupting;
- each participant raises one question each about the case until there are no more questions left;
- each participant formulates his/her perspective on the case;
- good advice is presented by each participant, one at a time;
• the case owner describes how he/she is going to handle the problem, everyone reflects;
• summing up: Meta reflection – what do we need to consider to ensure a more fruitful next session? (cf. Lauvås et al., 1997:69-70; the author’s translation from Swedish).

To summarise, there are at least two different ways to facilitate professional group mentoring: either with or without an external facilitator. The latter is used in this study as the teachers facilitated the mentoring process themselves using the specific nine-step model (PGM). There are various forms of theoretical foundations for mentoring e.g. a socio-cultural perspective and a socio-cognitive view on learning. Professional mentoring can either focus thinking in practice or thinking about practice to enhance development (Handal, 2007; Lendahls Rosendahl & Rönnerman, 2006). There are three main types of group mentoring; activity-oriented, professional development and personnel support (Åberg, 2009). Taken together, the above research overview reveals that there is agreement about the importance of teachers coming together to develop their profession. Further, a variety of mentoring processes enhance such development.

Various kinds of teacher learning gatherings are usually built on “voluntary participation”. McLaughlin and Talbert (2006:11) claim teacher learning communities cannot be commanded into existence. Voluntary participation is also contained in ‘professional learning communities’ and in Lave & Wenger’s (1991) definition of a “community of practice”. In addition, the view that participation must be voluntary is also frequently expressed in the literature on mentoring (e.g. Lauvås & Handal, 2001). Moreover, it is implicit that all teachers taking part in such communities and mentoring processes are ‘open-minded’ and willing to share their experiences and reflections to develop knowledge. Nevertheless, the situation focused on in this study was different. The teachers were forced by majority decisions within the teaching team and by a forcing/encouraging headmaster to participate in a peer group mentoring process. A couple of the teachers stated that they only participated because they had to. An increasingly relevant question is what happens within a teaching team when a constrained nine-step model to enhance peer facilitation is implemented under duress. Before presenting the result, an illustration of the theoretical framework and methodology used in the study now follows.

**Theoretical framework and methodology**

The theoretical framework is influenced by Michel Foucault’s notions of power. According to Foucault (2002), power is exercised and productive rather than possessed and repressive. He emphasises that there is power in play in every relation and that it affects all actions. Power goes back and forth and is always relational. Power cannot be acquired, neither deprived nor shared; power is the interplay of inequality in variable
situations. There is always resistance where power is. Both power and resistance are productive and creative (Foucault, 2002:104). Several studies of Foucault show how disciplining power operates in institutions such as e.g. hospitals, prisons and schools (Nilsson, 2008). According to Foucault (2000), disciplining power focuses on the soul of the subject via techniques like “pastoral power”. A pastoral power technique is salvation-oriented and “linked with a production of truth – the truth of the individual himself” (ibid.: 333). Foucault (1988) believes another form of disciplining power is the process of normalisation. The individual is disciplined via corrections and various evaluation processes to become “normal” (compared to “un-normal”).

In a relational situation such as, for example, a PGM session the subjects are invited (required) to reflect upon their professional actions. Due to the reflections and confessions of the teacher (the subject) one may obtain knowledge of how power regulates and emancipate the subjects as well as various processes related to the PGM sessions. Foucault (2000) highlights the dialectic relation between domination and emancipation which is significant in this study. Foucault’s notion of disciplining power as productive is often used in relation to subject constructions (e.g. Nilsson, 2008; Sjöberg, 2010). Nevertheless, in this article power related to processes and actions constitutes the main focus.

The article draws on a three-year-long empirical study. The research approach derives from social constructionism. Knowledge is according to e.g. Burr (2003) constructed among people in social settings. All kinds of social interaction and especially language are of interest in the tradition. A critical approach to knowledge is crucial, although knowledge and identities are constructed and therefore can be re-constructed. Taken-for-granted knowledge is questioned as knowledge is understood to be influenced and changed by historical and cultural forces. Further, processes and people’s interactions are focused on while knowledge is understood as something people “do” together (Burr, 2003; Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2000). Accordingly, the social constructionist approach was combined with an interactive research strategy. The research process and the mentoring process became closely related over the years. The practice of Peer Group Mentoring developed into a “collaborative arena”, a concept used by Rönnerman, Salo & Moksnes Furu (2008:267) to describe the relationship between the researcher and teachers in interactive research. However, the point of departure in this study was that the observation was prior to participation.

**Some ethical considerations**

The close relationship between the researcher and teacher in interactive and participative research may cause ethical dilemmas (cf. Lendahls Rosendahl & Rönnerman, 2006) as there is power in play in all relations (Foucault, 2000). Mutual negotiations about the researcher’s role and how to continue the PGM process were therefore significant for the research process. The role of the researcher and the interactive research approach were included as part of the continual process of analysis and
reflection during the whole research process and are partly presented in the results so as to highlight the research’s impact on the mentoring processes. According to Eldén (2005), the visibility of the researcher’s role is crucial for analysing the intentions and the agency of the researcher. Hence, the research interest and intentions were continually communicated to the teachers, both orally and via written summaries of the PGM sessions. In addition, the teachers’ permission to audio-record the PGM conversations was asked for each time. A few times the teachers asked for the audio-recorder to be turned off as they were discussing certain students by name or sensitive questions – these sequences are excluded from the data. The name of the school, the teachers’ names and the name of the headmaster are excluded from the article to ensure their anonymity.

**Participants and data production**

The teachers in this study were organised in a formal teacher team, teaching the same students but different subjects. They had varied experiences and time spent in the profession. Over the years as the study went on the number of teachers within the team differed, ranging between nine and six, but six of them became the ‘core’ of the PGM process. They participated in the mentoring sessions for at least two years. In year two, another teacher became part of the core group; it is in particular the voices of the core group that are included in the analysis.

The teacher team followed the fixed nine-step model (described above) during its monthly mentoring sessions (PGM). The PGM conversations were moderated by the teachers themselves. The focus of each PGM varied depending on who the ‘problem owner’ was and which theme/problem had been chosen. The themes were professionally related and focused on topics such as classroom situations, instructional difficulties, organisational problems, the heterogenic and changing student group, tensions and issues in the teacher team or relations with the school’s management. The role of the researcher was to observe. At the end of each session, when the mentoring conversation was complete, there was however a shift in the researcher’s role. Ad hoc analyses of the PGM and mutual reflections among the teachers and the researcher moved into focus.

Over the first semester (three PGM sessions) only written notes and summaries of the PGM conversations were taken by the researcher. The written notes included the researcher’s first reflections and ad hoc analyses related to the PGM sessions, along with notes about how the teachers placed themselves around the meeting table, who spoke and what was said and how they acted towards each other during the PGM sessions. As the relations between the researcher and the teachers grew, it turned out to be appropriate to ask if the PGM conversations could also be audio-recorded and so they were (semester 2-5). Sixteen sessions of Peer Group Mentoring and six teaching team meetings, to evaluate the PGM sessions and vote whether to continue with the PGM or not, were audio-recorded (written notes/reflections were also taken).
The content of the PGM conversations and the reflections of the researcher were summarised by the researcher. These written summaries (three in total) of the PGM sessions were handed out to the teachers at the end of three semesters as a basis for the teachers’ oral group evaluations of the PGM process. This material has been included in the analysis.

Further, six interviews (audio-recorded and written up) were carried out with the individual teachers, focusing on their experiences of the PGM process and three meetings with the headmaster to discuss his point of view on and experiences related to the PGM process. During the second year, two conversations with the headmaster were also tape-recorded and analysed.

Figure 1: Data production and type of data sharing

| Period | Semester & type of data collection | Participants (+ the researcher) | PGM sessions | Teaching team meetings to start up/evaluate the PGM at the beginning/end of each semester | Type of written research response to the teacher team |
|--------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| Year 1 | Autumn - 08 written notes          | The core group (6) + 3 temporary teachers | 3            | 1 starting up meeting, 1 evaluation meeting (orally, collective incl. the headmaster) | 1 written summary (Dec. – 08)                      |
|        | Spring - 09 written notes + audio-recordings | The core group (6) + 2 temporary teachers | 5            | 1 SWOT-analysis (orally, collective – based on some individual written questions from the researcher to each teacher (6) in the core group) | 1 written summary (June – 09)                      |
| Year 2 | Autumn - 09 written notes + audio-recordings | The core group (7)               | 4            | 1 starting up meeting                                                             |                                                   |
|        | Spring - 10 written notes + audio-recordings | The core group (7)               | 3 (4 planned but one cancelled by the researcher) | 1 evaluation meeting (orally, collective)                                          | 1 written summary (June -10)                       |
| Year 3 | Autumn - 10 written notes + audio-recordings | The core group (6) + 2 newly employed teachers | 4            | 1                                                                                 | PP- presentation based on a conference paper (January -11) |
Analysis

As usual in qualitative research, the analysis process started at once at the beginning of the research project (cf. Merriam, 1994; Kvale, 1997). Although the analysis process is embedded in continually reflective work, it may be structured into several phases:

- As mentioned, written notes including reflections and ad hoc analyses of the researcher were taken during the PGM sessions. These notes have been used as a foundation when analysing the PGM conversations. The audio-recorded conversations were listened to between two and five times. It was easy to recognise and hear each voice as the participants followed the structured nine-step model when talking. These conversations were also written up and read. The written notes from the PGM sessions (and from the starting up/evaluation meetings) as well as individual interviews were also read and/or listened through several times to enable a sense of the whole (cf. Hycner, 1985).

- In the tradition of learning as a participative action and knowledge constructed (and re-constructed) in shared communicative practices (cf. Burr, 1995), the first descriptive analysis (e.g. reflections and summaries of the PGM sessions) was discussed with the teaching team, the headmaster and research peers to see whether the essence of the first analysis had been accurately and captured (cf. Hycner, 1985).

- These discussions led to new reflections and re-reading/listening of the data. Continual reading of research literature and theory deepened the re-reading/listening and interpretation of the data. Over the research process ideas, insights, questions and reflections on the data (every so often associated with e.g. theory) have continually been written down on memos/note books to advance interpretation of the PGM process (cf. Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007/2009).

- Eventually, the data (particularly the teachers’ “sayings” and “doings” (cf. Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008)) showed for example that the PGM enhanced new and complex processes in the teaching team and in the teachers’ everyday work. One question became central when interpreting the data and also constitutes the focus of this article: Which kinds of processes does peer group mentoring enhance?

- A social constructionist perspective is critical to knowledge taken for granted (e.g. Burr, 1995). Therefore ‘the obvious’ in the data were turned ‘inside out’ and ‘swapped around’ in the analysis. For example, when analyses showed a democratising process was going on, contradictions were also scrutinised. To understand the processes and how they came about, Foucault’s (2000, 2002) notion of power became a useful, analytical frame.
• In focused during the later analyses was the interplay between various power
relations and processes caused by the PGM sessions. The following question
is another focus of this study: How can those processes be understood ac-
cording to the notions of power as productive and creative? (cf. Foucault,
2002).

The teachers are named “T1, T2” etc. firstly so as not to omit any individual and,
secondly, so as not to disturb the reader with any unnecessary associations triggered
by their names. The researcher is named R and the headmaster HM.

Findings
The analysis shows that the PGM resulted in a variety of processes for the individual
teacher, for the teacher team and in the teaching practice. The processes focused on
here can be described as disciplining, democratising and developing (personnel &
professionally increasing). The disciplining practice of PGM, the democratising and
the developing processes are analytically separable but sustain each other’s de-
velopment. The democratising process was nurtured in a developing and permissive
atmosphere – where teachers ‘showed’ themselves – enhanced by the disciplining peer
group mentoring. The processes nurtured each other enhanced in the practice of PGM
where confessions revealed and examined the teachers (cf. Foucault, 1988; 2000).

However, to make this visible, the practice and the processes were separated in
the analysis. The following descriptions include examples from different mentoring
sessions over the years and from individual interviews. The examples illustrate how
a teaching team – which used to contain individuals who were uncertain about being
part of the team and had low trust in each other – developed towards a team where
listening and professional cooperation became important features. This can be in-
terpreted as a process towards a more “mature teacher team” which is crucial for
developing teacher learning communities (cf. McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006).

The disciplining practice of peer group mentoring
The peer group mentoring was implicitly forced by the management as the headmaster
expressed his expectations of professional growth as well as school development through
PGM. Even though it was not explicitly articulated, the headmaster and some of the
teachers seemed convinced that PGM could develop the teacher team towards a teacher
learning community. The headmaster stressed everybody’s responsibility to contribute
to the school’s development. He emphasised the importance of a researcher’s interest
and presence as well. He also suggested that the team invite an expert on counselling
to their first session of group mentoring. In today’s society knowledge and science can
be understood as one of the most disciplining power technologies (Foucault, 2000).

The headmaster expressed that the teachers who did not teach or handle the stu-
dents very well could learn from the ‘good’ teachers. The socio-cultural approach that
the headmaster’s strategy was built on was tacit and provided a *disciplining frame*. The teachers were supposed to learn from each other and there was an idea about collective learning and tacit knowledge, as the following description of peer group mentoring shows.

*One will come up to something; our collective knowledge will be visible* (T1, PGM, February 2009).

Knowledge as constructed between people and learning understood as social interaction was also embedded in the research strategy. As mentioned, the mentoring sessions developed into a “collaborative arena” (cf. Rönnerman et al., 2008). The various processes that developed over the years of the PGM sessions also affected the relations between the researcher and the teaching team. As the relationship grew stronger it became harder for all to finish the mentoring sessions. The teachers knew that the research process depended on it. One of the teachers joked about this when he described the aim of PGM for new participants in the teacher team:

*Well, we are doing this mostly for Lill’s sake (some of the teachers giggle)... No, we are doing it for our own! To develop the team and learn how to listen to each other and maybe increase empathy, to understand other peers’ situations and how to facilitate new solutions... yeah, it’s roughly about that* (T2, PGM, August 2010).

In addition, I was aware of my encouraging (driving?) and catalytic role during the mentoring sessions. When I cancelled one meeting (in March 2010), the teachers did not accomplish the PGM themselves. They chose to work individually that time. The teachers (each one of the core group) as well as the headmaster asserted over the years that they were pleased with the research strategy. It “cheered them up” and helped them to “look upon things in new ways”.

T5 & T4 stayed after the session – they wanted to tell me that they thought it was clever when asking about T4’s ‘hidden agenda’ (Written notes, January 2009).

*You told us to follow the nine-step model and so on* (T3, October 2010).

Power as exercised (Foucault, 2002) and fluid among the teachers and the researcher were significant for the process. The relationship and aims became intertwined and dependent on each other – a forcing and *disciplining relationship* grew. However, a few of the teachers expressed that they did not think working with PGM was going to be beneficial. During the first year the teachers voted every third time to decide whether they should continue with the PGM sessions or not. Two of the teachers stated they did not want to continue. Nevertheless, they had to obey the majority decisions. Foucault (2000) isolates disciplinary techniques and practices that consolidate disciplinary power. Here the headmaster’s coercion and the research strategy as well as the (democratic) voting and the nine-step PGM model disciplined the individual
teacher. At the same time, some of the teachers tried to resist, expressing in the group that they did not want to continue the process. Yet both power and resistance are productive (Foucault, 2000; 2002). The disciplining practice of PGM can also be understood as fruitful; nurturing democratising processes within the team and towards the pupils.

Democratising processes

Over the years democratising processes such as listening, respecting everyone’s right to speak, cooperation and emancipation became visible. Common professional ethics developed (cf. Lauvås et al., 1997). The disciplining method strained the participants to actively participate during the sessions. Even if one of the teachers did not want to bring a problem or a solution, she/he always had to orally reject her/his turn since everyone was asked by name to contribute.

• The disciplining nine-step PGM model enhances new ways of listening

The disciplined way of talking when following the nine-step model was asserted as frustrating and hard to manage. Every session took about an hour and the conversation was, as illustrated above (pp. 379–380), structured into nine steps. The teachers presented their cases, problems or practical questions. One of them ‘confessed’ his/her problems related to the teaching practice. The other teachers tried to come up with solutions for how to handle the problem. Pastoral power and the power of normalisation via corrections (cf. Foucault, 1982) came into play during the sessions.

However, the disciplining model made the participants limit their talking and focus their questions. The model encouraged them to listen to each other in a new and, as they thought, better way.

We listen in a better way (Written notes, Evaluation meeting, May 2009).

Everyone gets the opportunity to express him or herself instead of just one or two doing the talking (T2, PGM, December 2008).

In addition, it made quiet individuals talk; multiple voices became important.

I think it (PGM) is interesting and everyone actually says something... compared to other team meetings where not everyone talks ... (T3, PGM, February 2009).

• Multiple voices are important

The listening approach developed to include the students and the parents as well. The parents’ and students’ voices became part of their classroom practice in a new way. For example, after a parents meeting (in spring 2010) the teachers decided to have a students’ meeting in order to discuss the situation in a ‘problematic class’.
The suggestion of the parents was that we should decide rules together – me and the students in the class. … and so we did … and they (the students) had a solution: Let the parents of the misbehaving student participate in the classroom (T4, PGM, March 2010).

The students were invited to suggest solutions for how to handle disturbing situations in the classroom. According to the students, one solution was to ensure parent involvement. They suggested that if someone misbehaved his/her parent could participate in the classroom since that was “the worst that could ever happen”. The students seemed to want public punishment. One of the teachers who had repetitive discipline problems in the classroom was encouraged (forced?) during a mentoring session (May 2010) to invite the parents of a troublesome student. Hence, a parent was invited to participate in a couple of lessons. The teacher, who at the beginning had been sceptical and unsure about inviting parents, later said that it had worked out well. He described his doubt concerning the parents related to his own position and (lack of) status in the classroom. This teacher was more regulated by the team than the other teachers. This regulation and coercion disciplined the individual teacher. In addition, it opened up the classroom practice to influences from the teacher team, the pupils and the parents. Power relations are, according to Foucault (2000:345), rooted in the whole network of the social. According to Biesta (2006), a democratic education requires educators who are sincerely interested in the initiative of their students. Further, it requires a school where individuals are able to act. Here I would like to add the importance of teachers who are interested in the initiative of their teacher peers as well.

- Cooperation and emancipation

The peer mentoring supported collaboration and new initiatives within the team but also with other teachers. For example, during one session (in February 2009) one of the teachers suggested cooperating with a teacher from another team when grading the pupils. She asserted that she would never have come up with this solution on her own; the cooperation during the mentoring sessions led to changes in the teachers’ every-day practice. Moreover, they opened up their PGM sessions to share (and regulate) standards for educational practice (cf. McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006) with teachers from other teams. At the beginning of the third year (September 2010), the team invited a teacher who taught the same students but worked in another teacher team to join one PGM session.

Further, during the mentoring sessions the teachers started to discuss the importance of having more influence on their work. For example, they came up with an idea about ‘owning the schedule’.

The teaching team ought to make their own schedule to increase collaboration (T3, PGM, October 2009).
As the teamwork developed and the team became more comfortable, they started to encourage collaboration with (other) teachers. They also encouraged individual teachers to confront the management; empowering processes increased. Over the years, the individuals – the teachers, the pupils and the parents – to a greater extent became subjects able to act. According to Biesta (2006: 128), a democratic education ought to be built on the idea of democracy as a situation where individuals can act as subjects. In one way, the mentoring sessions were disciplining the individual but, in addition, they became visible to each other as subjects, as the following examples of the developing processes show.

Developing processes – personnel and professional growth

We have become a more comfy team/.../ I think there is a huge difference in how we talk now compared to how it was before we started this. It is more open, one could say /.../ constructive criticism, it feels like everyone can handle it. One does not take it as a personal attack anymore (T3, PGM, August 2009).

The mentoring sessions enhanced the individuals’ as well as the collective’s professional development. The teachers asserted that every-day practice in the teacher team had evolved and that they had “other kinds of conversations” after the first year of group mentoring. They stated that they became better able to discuss educational and instructional issues with each other and search for peer support in the teaching team when their teaching was failing. They ‘showed’ themselves for the first time. For example, one of the teachers who had extensive experience (30 years) asserted her surprise that everyone seemed to have similar problems with their teaching and students. It became, as some teachers said, “not private but everyone’s problem”, showing with their hands how the problem was put on the table and separated from the individual.

In addition, interpersonal relations developed. They asserted they felt trust in each other and that they had got to know each other in new ways. It made individuals look at themselves and their teacher peers in new ways, as the following excerpt shows:

T4: /.../ it has affected the working team/.../
R: How?
T4: Well, maybe we have learned to know each other in a deeper way. I think we have. Moreover, we understand each other’s working situations in a better way. I think so as well. It is nothing that I would have liked to be without /.../ I have become more understanding and ‘softer’ towards my peers (T4, October 2010).

We understand each other in a better way and each other’s subjects (Evaluation-notes, May 2009).

The relationships between the team participants improved. As the research process moved on it became clear, although it was not explicitly mentioned at the beginning
of the process, that some teachers within the core of the team had long had disagreements. This was not something they talked about at the beginning of the PGM process. Högberg (2005) highlights that mentoring and counselling for professional development has become an institutional social practice always considered as “good”. She asserts that sometimes there is a hidden agenda behind decisions about using mentoring or counselling in a professional group. There may be management and organisational problems and professional mentoring is used as a “baby blanket” for comfort rather than a tool for professional development (ibid.). However, the conflicts within the teacher team were reduced over the years. In 2008 the core team was not interested in doing any team-building activities in their spare time. In spring 2010 they went on a weekend trip together. The teachers asserted that they felt an openness in the team since they started with the peer group mentoring as the following excerpt shows:

R: Do you think the sessions have developed anything? Is there a change?
T5: I think there has been a greater openness and that we have got to know each other better.
R: In the teacher team?
T5: Yeah, /…/ one feels maybe more secure in his/her role in the team anyway. It has contributed to openness; you can put a problem on the table on an ordinary day
L: And you did not do that before?
T5: Maybe just to someone you felt comfortable with and it did not have to be to someone in the team (T5, November, 2010).

The headmaster also highlighted that he did not have to resolve personal conflicts between the teachers anymore.

HM: Well, there have been conflicts (mmm), which I was aware of /…/ they have been reduced. They can handle tough stuff and describe it in better ways. To be more specific: I used to have conversations with some of the teachers about their internal conflicts and I do not have to handle that anymore (Headmaster, spring 2010).

The meta-discussions about how to improve facilitation developed how the teachers approached the solutions and ideas presented during the sessions. They discussed the importance of not valuing each other’s problems, solutions or ideas during the mentoring sessions. This (disciplining) non-valuing approach developed a permissive atmosphere. As mentioned, in the third year (2010) the team invited a teacher from another teaching team to participate in one PGM session. When there was a new participant in the group it became clear that they had developed a more non-valuing way of communicating. The following field-notes were taken:

The core group has developed their skills and techniques in listening without valuing which is visible when guest J from the other team obviously values A’s solutions at once. She is shaking her head and orally disapproves with a sound (Written notes, PGM, September 2010).
In addition, as the relationships in the team developed a common approach to the pupils grew. During a PGM session in November 2009 – a year and a half after the first session – the team decided to handle two troublesome students in a new way. They decided to have a joint meeting with the students. The following excerpt from the PGM in December 2009 (session 12) shows their satisfaction with this successful cooperative acting:

T4: mmm and it turned out so good! /.../ We took them by surprise and all of us who teach them were gathered and both of them came and we had a first-class conversation. It started with our concern about them and their grades and how they felt and that we just wanted their best. /.../
T5: I think this is a trick we can use more often...
T3: But it is because they saw that we acted together. It was not just me or Ulrika who spoke with them – we were all together! (T3, T4, T5, PGM, September 2010).

The students they were talking about also seemed pleased as they had asked for a follow-up meeting. In one year and six months, the teachers had developed consistent norms within the team and towards the pupils (cf. Lauvås et al., 1997; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). They had made a collective decision to handle the students and they implemented this decision together.

Pastoral power such as it was practiced during the PGM sessions demands “the truth” about the individual teacher (cf. Foucault, 2000) and made the participants “show themselves” as professionals; developing processes for the individual teacher as well as for the teacher team enhanced. They acted in new ways. Multiple voices, listening to and understanding (each other) had become important features of their every-day practice.

HM: There is a change... I have noticed that they (the teachers) are taking help from each other to handle tough situations related to the students. They cooperate in classroom situations. They find new solutions... (Headmaster, spring 2010).

Conclusion: PGM – nine steps to heaven?
Framed by Michel Foucault’s notion of power as disciplining as well as productive, this article shows how a constrained peer group mentoring model (PGM) enhanced various processes. These processes saw a teaching team – where cooperation was uncommon – moving towards a professional learning community (PLC) where relationships improved. Power came in the interplay between the teachers, the headmaster and the interactive research approach in the practice of PGM. It constrained individual teachers. At the same time, it developed democratising processes and cooperation in the teacher team.

A lack of trust and collaboration among teachers are rarely highlighted in the literature on group mentoring and professional learning communities. Sharing often seems
to be taken for granted (cf. Lauvås et al. 1997; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Opfer & Pedder, 2011). In this study, repetitive mentoring sessions focused on cooperation and the (lack of) relationships in the teacher team. The teachers had to deal with their lack of confidence in each other (and perhaps in the researcher). The teachers developed their relationships within the teacher team. They asserted that their understanding of each other had increased through the PGM sessions, despite the fact they had more or less been forced to participate. The first practice the teachers had to improve was the practice of collaboration before they could enhance their teaching practice. The teachers started to develop shared standards for how to behave towards each other and the students during the PGM sessions. When the atmosphere in the teacher team became permissive and collaborative, the teachers were able to change the learning environments for the students as well; democratising processes evolved. However, the analysis showed that the teachers held various statuses within the team. Some of them were more regulated and described how to behave than others. Perhaps this is a consequence for the individual teacher if teachers are supposed (forced) to collaborate and develop the profession together? Connell (2009) argues that good teachers and good teaching are to be understood as a collective work, not as individual performance. However, collective work may not come easily and smoothly as this article shows. It shows that peer group mentoring may nurture new complex processes that hang together in a disciplining practice. It may not lead to 'heaven' – although, it may develop fundamental features for (a democratic) education. My point is that PGM may enhance professional development as well as professional learning communities. At the same time, it may cause ethical dilemmas related to the individual teacher. It may constrain as well as emancipate the individuals and may sometimes also cause painful development. This article focused on power related to various processes. According to Foucault (2000), pastoral power is an important aspect of processes of subjectification. A question for future research is which types of teacher subjects are constituted during peer group mentoring sessions.

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