Opposing discourses within the school

The teaching profession is under pressure. From without, a declining social prestige and political interventions resulting in de-professionalisation have challenged the teachers’ professional self-understanding. Within, the school organisation tensions exist, too; amongst others, the hierarchy between school subjects whereby some subjects are given significant political and economic support while others are not. These outer and inner circumstances influence teachers in general and call for newly educated teachers to consider their position in their future profession.

In 19th century Denmark the school teacher in primary and lower secondary schools was autocratic and taught the peasants’ children everything that was necessary for a proper life. Later, at the beginning of 20th century, teacher education became specialised; the teacher-student was expected to choose to pursue some subjects and omit others. In practice, however, this specialisation was often negated by the school’s concrete needs and many teachers taught subjects in which they had no education. Towards the end of the century criticism grew, pointing out teachers' weak professional competences, a claim confirmed through the rise of international testing. One of the consequences was that teacher students today must choose between training to teaching either language and literature or maths and therefore, and as a consequence, early in their studies choose between the main areas of culture and nature.

Starting from this basis, we want to see if, and in which ways, perspectives from the humanities and natural sciences influence the newly educated teachers’ understanding of the teaching profession. From earlier research on teachers in natural science subjects it became clear that teachers from the two major areas are in conflict: Mutual understanding is lacking; the organization of the school day gives priority to cultural subjects; the physical design of the school implies that natural science subjects are of a special kind. Consequently teachers within cultural subjects appear to regard natural science subjects as peripheral educationally to pupils development.

Our starting point will be the phenomena which in the 1960s was labelled ’two cultures’ (Snow, 1959). Through the narratives of newly educated teachers and mindful of the changing conditions of the teacher profession, we will investigate whether there exist two distinct ways of thinking ’how to be a teacher’? Inspired by research which shows that most of a teacher's professionalism has its roots in childhood and youth, especially outside school (Goodson 1996), we will use biographical interviews to ascertain teacher students’ thoughts on their school subjects, the source of their interest, and how these considerations relate to aspects of their professional life. Through analysis of the character of the narratives (Polkinghorne, 1995) and their structure (Bruner, 2004) we will go on to discuss if, and in which ways ’two cultures’ are present in today’s school.

References

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