

Teachers' Reflections on Students' Stories about Educational Conditions – Guidance for Professional Development?*

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Abstract

The starting point is the ongoing processes of changes within school systems and new discourses about education that arises. The present paper is an extension of a study where students were invited to write stories about their school situation. We took the results from the students study back to their teachers and invited the teachers to write reflections on their students' stories. How are the discourses of educational conditions visible in teachers' reflections? In total, 16 teachers reflected on four different topics. Data analysis was inspired by critical discourse analysis. Three discourses appeared; teacher focus, student focus, and frame focus. All discourses are present in almost every teacher's reflections, which reveal dialectics in the teacher's role. Ongoing changes in compulsory schooling require reconsiderations of the teacher's role and professional development.

Keywords: Educational environment, Teacher work, Qualitative research, Discourses, Educational relations

1. Introduction

In the last twenty years, there have been ongoing changes in compulsory schooling in many Western countries (Walsh 2006; Watkins 2008; Comber and Nixon 2009), including Sweden and the Nordic countries (Carlgren and Klette 2008), where marketisation and consumer orientation have been in the forefront. Voices are raised that education has adopted a new language and is becoming more characterized as a transaction between a supplier and a customer. Biesta (2004) means that the language of education has been replaced by the language of learning. The consequences of this, is according to Biesta (ibid), that the latter language facilitates an economic understanding of the process of education, which results is to meet the needs of the learner, which in a prolonging makes it difficult to raise questions about content and purpose of education going beyond the wants and needs of the market. Watkins (2008) addresses this as a 'depersonalisation' of public services in general and education in particular, becoming more like a production line of produced goods, where the teacher is the deliverer of quality and testing of students' knowledge levels is crucial. This 'corporate discourse', where quality in teaching and learning is connected to standardisation and quantification of knowledge, is a process supported by reforms and policy makers (Comber and Nixon 2009; Larsen 2010). Comber and Nixon (2009) address this as an era of accountability in school. Wahlström (2008) and Nilholm et al. (2007) have studied the consequences of the Swedish decentralized school system and both their studies show how the meaning of the concept of equivalence shifts over time, from a more collective target achievement for the educational system as a whole to a more individually interpreted goal fulfillment.

* Sponsoring information: The present study is a part of a larger research project: 'School stinks or? Giving voice to children and youths experiences of psychosocial health in their learning community'. The project is funded by The Swedish Research Council (Dnr 2008-5334).

According to Aspelin and Persson (2011), focus on standardised measurements has increased during the recent decades, and knowledge and education have become synonymous with the individuals' performance. Fenstermacher and Richardson (2010) use the term "aggressive individualism" to describe a form of individual's focus on each student, each teacher, each school unit, and so on, that lead to redefined relations in the classroom. According to the authors, the classroom environment has become a place where a number of individuals meet to individually acquire certain knowledge instead of to develop relationships with moral, aesthetic and democratic aspects, and consequently, the common aspects of education get displaced. Fenstermacher and Richardson (ibid) consider the teacher's role in the reform wave of accountability as something of a paradox. Although the teacher's central role and contribution for the pupils' progress is emphasized, at the same time the reforms towards individual basis makes it difficult for teachers to work according to the beliefs and community ideals that often made them choose the teaching profession. The dominating discourses of education thus risk changing the relations in the classroom. Walsh (2006) means that "the educational focus has shifted from the post-war emphasis on the extension of democratic freedoms ... to an emphasis on narrowly assessed, utilitarian outcomes" (p. 114). Larsen (2010) means that this is supported by discourses of the centrality of the teacher and the decontextualisation of education, and she argues that we must reclaim teaching and take in the context in the teaching process again.

According to OECD – the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2005), teachers are important because of their impact on student learning, and raising teacher quality is perhaps the policy direction most likely to lead to substantial gains in school performance. The Swedish New Education Act (Sverige 2010) affirms the right of all students to an equal education, and the right of all to develop as far as possible on the basis of their own prerequisites. A Swedish Commission for School, (SOU 2010:95), refers to the Education Act and regards the school as a strongly person-dependent arena of activity and considers that one central factor of success is the relationship that arises between teachers and students in educational situations. According to the Commission there is a need for more research and increased knowledge of how young people themselves, in various ways, may give expression to their educational environment.

1.1 Aim

The present paper is a continuation of a study where students were invited to write stories about their school situation (Backman et al. 2012a; Backman et al. 2012b). The results from that study was the starting point in the present study, as we took the results from the students back to the teachers in their schools and gave the teachers the opportunity to write their reflections on the students' stories. We argue that this method, using students' voices as the starting point for teachers understanding, can contribute to an increased knowledge and deeper understanding of educational conditions for the students. Therefore, this paper will put focus on teachers' reflections on students' stories about school, and how discourses of educational conditions are visible. What are the teachers focusing on when reflecting on the students' stories? Which discourses of school as a social practice are revealed in the teachers' reflections, and how can these discourses be understood?

1.2 Educational relations

There are several studies that analyse the relational dimension in the educational situation. Frelin (2010) has studied what she means is an important, underestimated, and under-researched dimension of teacher practice and professionalism: the relational dimension, involving the establishment and maintenance of educational relations with and among students. Frelin argues that teachers' work and professionalism, involves not only their reasoning about what to teach and how to teach it, but also of what it is that makes education possible. What emerges in Frelin's study is an understanding of educational relations, established and maintained by practices that seek genuine human contact with students, and that views relational attributes such as trust, social justice, benevolence, empathy, and openness to the other as being of vital importance to the entirety of the educational process. The findings of Frelin's study strongly suggest that relations in schools often require conscious attention, rigorous work, and delicate negotiations on the part of teachers in order to be, or to become, educational. The process of education is sustained by an array of subtle relational conditions. Westling Allodi (2010) underlines that it is important to realize that psychological and emotional aspects, for example, expectations, commitments, different types of motivational orientations, and ability to work and complete one's tasks, are important aspects of the learning process and that these aspects cannot be separated from the learning process. According to Thoonen et al. (2011), the teacher's ability to connect to the student's personal world, affects both the student's learning and well-being positively.

Nordevall (2011) emphasises that a dialogue between a teacher and a student seems to create a space for mutual learning and to provide a good overall picture of the student's school situation. Lyle, Sue and Thomas-Williams (2011) have studied the perceptions and attitudes of teachers, head teachers, and local educational authorities towards embedding new initiatives in form of dialogic pedagogy in primary schools. Lyle et al. found that teachers, head teachers, and local educational authority officers expressed their commitment to promoting student dialogue and saw its potential value as a mechanism of inclusion that could support all students, especially students in special needs. Dialogic pedagogy was seen as something that could contribute to raising standards in schools and support shared values for a more inclusive school. At the same time their study shows that achieving change in schools by introducing new practices is a challenge for teachers and head teachers: Although there is evidence of positive effects on school in the form of, for example, a more inclusive classroom, it seems complicated to establish dialogic approaches to classroom discourse.

This is in accordance with Nilholm et al. (2007), who indicate that many municipalities articulate that they seek for a more inclusive approach, which is something that also challenges traditional approaches in school. Westling Allodi (2010) considers that good teacher relations appears to be a critical factor in working with vulnerable children, and good educational relations can also protect against the negative influence of other risk factors in students' backgrounds. Smyth (2007) considers the marketizing agenda as a risk for developing educational relationships, and puts forward arguments for recapturing relationships in teaching and learning. He stresses; "Creating trusting and respectful relationships in schools and classrooms is the indispensable and single most crucial element to learning." (p. 228). In contrast, Smyth (ibid.) argues that many processes in policy making about school is contradictory to the relational basis of teaching and learning.

1.3 Power in educational relations

The school is a place characterized by power in educational relations on different levels. Fairclough and Wodak (1997) raise the issue of how power relations are exercised and negotiated in discourse. They highlight 'power in discourse' and 'power over discourse' as the exercise of power here and now and the longer term of shaping orders of discourses. According to the authors, this should be seen as ongoing and dynamic processes and negotiations of power relations in social practices. These dynamic processes can also be seen in Foucault's writings. Foucault (1980) highlights the close relationship between knowledge and power in modern disciplinary organisations, such as the school. Power and knowledge are mutually dependent; there is no power relation without the creation of a context of knowledge and there is no knowledge that does not require a power relationship. Thus, there is a fundamental link between power and knowledge, which also involves history. Power is, however, according to Foucault (ibid.), something that is exercised rather than something one possesses; it is practiced not only vertically but is available as a network through the disciplinary organisations. These monitoring institutions can be said to be the base for a massive strengthening of the organisational power that Giddens (1990) says is linked to the emergence of modern social life. The teachers have an obvious position of power in the students' daily work through the mandate to assess students' academic success. Meanwhile, the teacher is controlled by school principals, other teachers, parents, and children based on the mission to carry out the curriculum. The teacher is thus, according to Foucault (1980), involved in a web of power relations, which operates both horizontally and vertically.

There is, according to Wenger (1998), always an outspoken and a silent dimension in social practices, such as the school organisation. The outspoken is present as language, tools, documents, pictures, symbols, roles, criteria, procedures, and so on. The silent side contains, for example, informal relations, quiet conventions, unspoken rules, and underlying assumptions. What is considered as meaningful is an ongoing negotiation – the negotiated experience. The negotiation of meaning is a negotiation of through which discourses of the practice should be understood. This can involve disagreement, tensions, and conflicts. There is thus a dialectic relationship between the individual and the collective. We consider the reflections from the teachers as a part of this ongoing negotiation of meaning, based on discourses. Therefore, we argue that critical discourse analysis is relevant for analysing and interpreting the teacher's reflections.

2. Methods for data collection and analysis

2.1 Design of the study

The study with students, as this paper is a continuation of, was conducted in 2009.

Two hundred students, Grades 5 to 9, in eleven school classes in four different compulsory schools in the north of Sweden, were invited to write reflections on their educational conditions. The task given to the students was to continue two sentences: “Now I will tell you about one time when I had a good time in school, it was ...” and “If I could decide how the school could be the best place for learning, I would like to ...”. The method with the students has similarities to a study conducted by Denessen, Hornstra and van den Bergh (2010), where Dutch schoolchildren were invited to write about what they would do if they were to rule The Netherlands. The authors stressed that the students’ writings could serve as a starting point for teachers in moral education. In our study, the students’ writings served as a starting point for teachers to reflect on the students’ thoughts about the school environment. After analysis of the students’ reflections, we went back to the teachers in the two upper secondary schools (Grades 7 to 9) from the student study and presented the results and invited the teachers to write reflections on their students’ stories about school. In total, 16 teachers participated with their written reflections.

The subjects for the teachers’ reflections were created with the starting point in the results of the former study with the students. Based on the results, we gave the teachers four topics to reflect on: Topic 1, *Reasons for students to elucidate teachers and school subjects as associated to positive experiences of school*; Topic 2, *Possibilities and challenges to create good learning environments*; Topic 3, *Teachers’ possibilities to create close relations to every student*; and Topic 4, *The most important factors to focus for students well-being in school*.

According to van Manen (1997), writing can bring individuals closer to their experiences, and this writing task gave the teachers an opportunity to express their reflections on paper. Dysthe (1993) argues that because writing is a much slower process than talking, the writer gets an opportunity to mediate, and according to Vygotsky (1978), writing is the highest form of symbolic thinking. Applebee (1984) stresses that written reflections describe thoughts and experiences and that these thoughts and experiences can be analysed explicitly. Van Manen (1997) emphasises that the process of writing represents a way of making personal and internal experiences more public and explicit, which we regard as a support in making the teachers’ reflections explicit. A problem, according to van Manen (ibid), can be a lack of ability to express oneself in writing, but as the group in this study is upper secondary teachers, we considered that risk as limited. The written reflections have been analysed, and during the analysis there have been themes of discourses formed out of the teachers’ reflections.

2.2 The analysing process

The data analysis was inspired by critical discourse analysis (CDA), based on Fairclough’s writings. Fairclough (2003) defines social structures as abstract entities, such as language, social class or economy, and social events refer to what actually occurs. There is a complicated relationship between these, and the relation between them is mediated in social practices, for example, practices of teaching. According to Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999), focusing on social practices bridges the gap between the actor and the structure. The articulation of discourse within a certain social practice reveals the dialectic fields of tension between actor-structure and consensus-conflict. Such an approach sets, according to Lund and Sundberg (2004), a focus on analysing which linguistic inter-subjective interaction conditions are possible to present as legitimate truth claims at a given historical moment. This has been an important standpoint when analysing the reflections from the teachers, which has turned us to Fairclough’s (1995, 2003) CDA. The analysis is based on Fairclough’s three-dimensional conception of discourse. According to this conception, there are three levels of analysis – text, discourse practice, and socio cultural practice, referring to events, practices, and structures. There is no hierarchical order between the levels. They are different aspects of the systematic analysis of relations between discourse practices and texts on one hand, and social and cultural structures on the other hand. Texts and discourses must be interpreted in a historical and socio cultural practice (institutional; societal). These levels of interpretation are in a dialectical relationship to each other. Focus of interpretation in this study will be on the discourse practice and how this relates to the social practice.

As stated earlier, we had two questions guiding the analysing process: *What are the teachers focusing when reflecting on the students stories, and which discourses of school as a social practice are revealed in the teachers’ reflections?*

Our process of analysis began with all of the teachers’ written reflections being read by the two researchers, before the first discussion of the results. Reflections were then made and discussed together on similarities and differences.

It was noted that the teachers' responses were very diverse, while there were also similarities that clearly appeared. Thereafter, all the written stories were studied by asking 'which discourses appear in relation to school as a social practice'. The similarities and differences of the responses that were noted served as a starting point for the following discussion between the researchers. The preliminary aspects were then compared and discussed. During further analysis on the particular aspects and the whole, we saw three main tendencies and found it relevant to divide them into three main discourses. To enhance credibility, quotations were identified and used when describing the results.

3. Results

When analysing the teachers' reflections, three discourses appeared: teacher's skilfulness, competent students, and bounded by structural circumstances. These three discourses appear in all four topics that the teachers were invited to reflect on. This is, by no means a quantitative study and the aim of Table 1 is just to give the reader a first conception of the discourses and in what extent they occurred.

Table I. The table shows the teachers varied discourses in their reflections.

Expressed discourse	Topic 1	Topic 2	Topic 3	Topic 4	Total
Teacher's skilfulness	11	3	11	7	32
Competent students	5	3	2	2	12
Bounded by structural circumstances	2	15	6	10	33

As one can see in Table 1, on occasions several focuses could appear in the same topic. Another thing, which can not be read in the table, is the fact that just a few of the teachers showed just one focus (i.e. only teacher's skilfulness) in all four topics. Most teachers had different focuses in different topics. Our interest in this study has, however, not been to identify specific teachers, but rather to identify discourses mediated from the teachers in their reflections. This first look at the material also shows tensions and contradictions, both within and among the teachers.

3.1 Teacher's skilfulness

In one of the discourses that appeared, the teachers find the role of being a teacher as the centre of schooling, and the teachers are reflecting on their abilities as persons. According to this discourse, the teacher is the main mediator of knowledge, and is considered as central to create interest and motivation among the students. One teacher articulates:

I think that we teachers are very important for the students. Their view on school and schoolwork is of course affected by our ability to motivate and inspire. To be versed in your subject and a good pedagogue create confidence and safety. (Teacher 2)

In this discourse, creating a good learning environment is dependent on the skilfulness of the teachers to mediate their subject. If the teacher has the skills, the learning environment will be favourable, but the teacher can also destroy interest, as one teacher writes about the teachers' importance for the subject:

The students know why they are in school and if they have a good teacher they also want to learn. A teacher can create interest for a certain subject but can also kill the interest for a certain subject. (Teacher 14)

When reflecting on possibilities building educational relations with the students, the responsibility of creating the relations to students lies, within this discourse, on the teachers. One example that illustrates that:

To create relations is the most important in school. As a teacher you create relations to every student in your class. The relations are different and less or more good. You also create relations to other students during for example lunches, outings and so on. It is, however, difficult to have relations to exactly every student at the school. (Teacher 4)

This discourse reveals the centrality of the teacher. The teachers consider the skilfulness of the teacher as central concerning motivating students and creating interest for the subject and emphasise the teacher's centrality in the creation of good educational relations. In this discourse, centrality of the teacher and the subject are in focus, and context comes in the background.

3.2 Competent students

Another discourse that appeared when analysing the teachers' reflections was the focus on competent students. A focus on the students became visible in almost all of the teachers' reflections on the four topics that they were invited to reflect on. There is a discourse where the teachers consider the students' answers as relevant and also of great interest for why good relations are important to make the school a good place for learning. Here are quotations from two teachers that demonstrate that:

Children and young people are wiser than we adults sometimes think. I see this often when I read the students write in evaluations and other writing assignments. Being a teacher of Swedish is a great privilege, because I often take advantage of students' inner thoughts. (Teacher 6)

I think that most students are well aware of why they are in school and the importance of having good relations to succeed and develop. (Teacher 12)

The teachers regard close relations with each student as very important in their work. They point out dilemmas in their work and stress both possibilities and challenges to create good educational relations with the students. Sometimes the teachers transfer the responsibility to the students to create good relations with teachers.

I usually talk about this in the beginning of year seven with the students and mean that it is good if the student can find someone grown up in the school to have relate to and have trust in. (Teacher 7)

This can also somehow involve moving responsibility to students to understand why school is important for them. One teacher writes:

A challenge is to be able to make all students understand why they really are in school, to make them understand why they must learn different things, to make them interested. (Teacher 4)

The teachers are concerned of what they consider as important factors to focus on regarding students' educational conditions in school. One teacher points out:

Security, togetherness, respect and responsibility for each other. It is probably the breaks, the locker rooms and the way to school that are worst for the students. (Teacher 9)

As can be seen in the teachers' reflections, the focus on students' competences was central for teachers' view about the importance of good educational relations to create the school as a good place for learning. The teachers consider relations with students as very important in their work, but at the same time, they point out dilemmas they have to deal with in their work. They also emphasise the students' abilities to give serious opinions and visions.

3.3 Bounded by structural circumstances

There is a discourse where frames and conditions surrounding the assignment as a teacher are highlighted. This involves economical cutbacks, too big classes, organisational changes, and more administrative tasks in the teacher assignment. There are expressions among the teachers that the consequences of economical cutbacks have pedagogical consequences.

In the past we had distinct shaped teams with regular meetings, where a comprehensively perspective on the student appeared. Today, after all economical savings, there are no distinct teams and not a good system for dialogues about students. (Teacher 5)

In the discourse, the teachers express a changing assignment with frames which affects their work as teachers. These circumstances are, according to the teachers, out of reach for them, and something they just have to adjust to. One teacher expresses it like this.

It is thanks to all intelligent students that we teachers manage to continue being a teacher. Against all odds, with poor wages, poor economy, constantly new head teachers, parents who set unreasonable requirements, the media's narrow view, friends puzzled faces, piles of marking jobs, questionnaires to be completed, reports, notifications, individual development plans, student welfare conferences etc. (Teacher 6)

Another teacher elucidates the tension between the school as a social practice with its conditions and the demands from society.

There is a tension between the pace that children and adults have in their daily lives (manage many things and activities) and a learning environment that is expected to be quiet and reflective in order to achieve the best results. How will it work that learning should take place in a relaxed and quiet pace, while society as a recipient requires speed, accuracy, efficiency, and that preferably have several balls in the air? (Teacher 15)

For the teachers, the discourse of structural circumstances is present on many different levels. They see changed pedagogical prerequisites where cooperation between teachers has declined due to economical setbacks. They also see much more administrative work and tensions between the pedagogical ideas of school and demands from society. The common thing in this discourse is an expression of helplessness; the teachers just have to adjust to these frames and circumstances.

4. Discussion

This paper focuses on teachers' reflections on students' stories about school, and how discourses of educational conditions are visible. When analysing the material, we found three different discourses: teacher's skilfulness, competent students, and bounded by structural circumstances. These discourses are not parallel discourses that live their own separate lives in school as a social practice. They are intertwined and not mutually exclusive, but in a dialectic relationship. What one can see is that all three discourses are present in almost every teacher's reflections, which reveals dialectics in the mission of the teacher role. Seeing this in relation to Fairclough's and Wodak's (1997) concepts of 'power in discourse' and 'power over discourse', one interpretation is that the teachers' reflections deal with the question of daily matters in the discourse. These daily matters are affected by new discourses of education such as corporate discourses, new concepts of learning affected by new public management ideas, accountability and decontextualisation of the role as a teacher, which were emphasised in the beginning of the article (Biesta 2004; Comber and Nixon 2009; Larsen 2010; Walsh 2006; Watkins 2008). These can be seen as processes that shape orders of discourses in the longer term, which Fairclough and Wodak (1997) refer to as 'power over discourse'. The shaping of the role as a teacher is an ongoing struggling negotiation of discourses on different levels, both in the daily work in school, but also on a more general level connected to school as an organisation and to society.

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2005), teachers are important for students' learning, which is in accordance both with the teachers' opinions in this study as in the former study that this study is based on, Backman et al (2012a) and Backman et al (2012b). How could this be reflected on concerning educational relations in the school situation? Seeing it from the perspective of Foucault (1980), the teachers are involved in a web of power relations, which operates both horizontally and vertically. This means that the negotiation of discourses is not only exclusive among teachers, but also a matter of negotiation with principals, parents, children, curriculum, and society. This negotiation also affects which discourses that could be presented as legitimate truth within the given school situation, something that affects the educational relations with the students. In the discourse of teacher focus, there is an element of decontextualisation (Larsen 2010), and in the discourse of competent students, there is an element of individualism (Fenstermacher and Richardson 2010; Nilholm et al. 2007; Wahlström 2008; Walsh 2006), two discourses which have consequences for the educational relations.

The teachers in our study indicate dilemmas in their work regarding attitudes to the meaning of educational relations. Many of them state that good relations between teachers and students are central in their work as a teacher for shaping good education environments, but they also articulate how difficult and complicated it is for them to deal with that in their daily work (cf. Lyle et al. 2011; Nilholm et al. 2007; Smyth 2007).

It seems that the ongoing changes in compulsory schooling in many Western countries, towards what Comber and Nixon (2009) address as an “era of accountability in school” and Fenstermacher and Richardson (2010) terms as “aggressive individualism”, have changed the conditions for the teachers’ work. The teachers express a sort of frustration of the fact that they are aware of the importance on educational relations and they wish to focus on good relations with the students, but they can hardly manage it. In our study, it is notable that structural circumstances (e.g. economical, societal, and organisational factors), have a central position in the teachers’ reflections. As a solution of their dilemmas, some of the teachers transfer the responsibility *to the students* to create good relations with teachers. Other teachers have a more declared attitude, and highlight structural circumstances as limitations for creation of good educational relations.

There is a need for increased knowledge of how young people themselves gives expression to their educational environment (cf. SOU 2010:95). The methodology of the study appears to have added increased knowledge of educational conditions for the students. We argue that the method has contributed to a deeper understanding of educational conditions, although the teachers have had the students’ actual stories as their starting point, not how the teachers *think* of the students’ estimation of educational conditions. It seems that the teachers in the study look at their students as serious and worthwhile to listen to and they consider the students’ answers as relevant and of great interest in order to understand important factors regarding good educational relations. The teachers also regard their students as important as a satisfying factor in their work, as one teacher explores: ”It is thanks to all intelligent students that we teachers manage to continue being a teacher”.

There is a complex array of factors such as political, economical, and societal, both on the school system level and on the school level, which has effects on educational relations, and it is important to identify the ways that these factors interact. The teachers in this study are well aware of the importance of good educational relations, but they also stress several structural circumstances that affect them in a problematical way concerning the educational relations. This can be seen as consequences of the Swedish decentralized school system (cf. Carlgren and Klette, 2008; Wahlström, 2008). Thus, the changes in compulsory schooling require a reconsideration of the role of teachers and their work. This also puts other requirements on teachers’ professional development, and in this process the students’ reflections can be of guidance.

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