

Ph.D. project: Teachers' contribution to school development; what enables and restrict their work?

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Introduction and purpose

The aim of the study is to inquire into teachers work with school development. By studying teachers' initiative, elaboration, accomplishment and judgment of processes in school development, it is a goal to gain knowledge about possibilities and restrictions for school development. This will implicate what we may understand as teacher quality. This project will seek to understand the teachers practice in relation to a structural level. Educational policies influence on the teachers' way of carry on their profession, is of interest.

I want to study and compare educational policies and teachers' conceptions of own professionalism on these issues. The aim is to contribute with knowledge for the discussion and construction of the role of the teacher.

Context and theoretical perspectives

Both national and international policy-documents express increased emphasis on research and development-projects in schools. OECD points out in "Teachers matter" (2005) a need for research and development competence among teachers. In Norway, school development is a central issue in the white paper "Culture for learning" (White Paper nr. 30 (2003-2004)). This document was followed up by a "Program for school development" witch in the period from 2005-2009 distributed 195 million NOK to school development projects. White paper "Teacher – the role and training" also points out the need for strengthening the research and development processes in schools. Teachers are to become more oriented towards school development, and this also implicates that teacher education should increase the students' research competence and educational research on these issues (White Paper nr. 11 (2008-2009:24)).

Research and development work, and associated competence among teachers, is emphasized in today's educational policy in Norway. In my research I want to study the signals and strategies, and how this is influence teachers practice. A question I address is how teachers interact with premises and possibilities they are presented with.

An often referred characteristic of present educational politics is "accountability". To explain this concept, it is noted monitoring of performance, responsibility and transparence as key elements (Hammersley 2002). This may be one aspect in the field of education I want to look into with a view to teachers practice.

As I have been working with my project I have several times returned to the term "professional". I will claim that this term have had an increased attention the last years in Norway. A quick search in the White Paper "The teacher – the role and training" from 08-09 show significantly more hits for the search term "profession", than in the White Paper "About the Teacher" from 96-97. It is also a commonly referred term in the present reform work of teacher education in Norway. Where does this emphasize come from, and what does it implicate? When a concept is central in the understanding of the teacher's role, I find it interesting to inquire the concept further, both from

policy-view and the teacher's perspective. Critical educational theory will be the projects theoretical framework (Apple 1995).

Research question

Changes in the design during the research process may find place, for instance the meeting with the research field may influence the research questions. The description of my design at this point in time, operates with the following research questions. Generally I want to examine teachers' actions considering school development, and how teachers consider their professional identity. The project wants to examine the practitioners' relations to educational policymaking and to the field of pedagogy and educational research on these issues.

- How do teachers act within their professional room for action, and how does this relate to educational policymaking?
- What makes possible and what restricts the teachers' exercise of their profession?

Methodology

As evident in the introduction, my comprehension is that there are different understandings of the issues my research will inquire into, and I therefor place my research within a constructivist paradigm. Constructivism is a collective term for a variety of positioning that view knowledge of the world as constructed and that reality therefor cannot render, or not only exists, in one way. Instead, knowledge is considered constructed and dynamic (Kjørup 2008).

Constructionism may be placed as a position within the constructivist paradigm. This position emphasizes the social aspect when it comes to the construction of knowledge, hence also the term socialconstructionism. For instance, concepts and language are viewed as central for the understanding of knowledge (Kjørup 2008:163).

When entering the field of research I am interested in language and concepts relating to my questions. I am of the opinion that the understanding of a phenomenon, in the construction of knowledge about the world, operates within the context of social processes and social action. For my project this may for instance implicate that the concept of professionalism, and processes that dominate and changes this concept, is related to the teachers' everyday practice. The relation between knowledge, power and the influence on reality is a key premise of the discourse approach in methodology (Jørgensen & Philips 1999:14).

Data materials of current interest are policy documents, interview with teachers and observations of teachers practice. To get an insight in the experienced from the people involved, I plan to conduct interviews. Interviews are "particularly suited to provide information about personal experiences, views and self-understanding" (Thagaard 2003:12). It may be conducted group interviews, which may also provide as a base for teams of teacher's to reflect upon their research and development work. Observation of teacher's work will provide knowledge about conditional expression of the issues I will study. With the focus directed at the teacher's opportunities and constraints to engage in development work, the observation could shed light on aspects beyond the understanding arrived at in the interview situation.

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