Teachers as Engineers of Learning or Ambassadors of Intellectual Disciplines? How to construct a knowledge base for "professional" teachers

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Talking about teachers as `professionals` has become commonplace within teacher education, education policies and in everyday discourse. However, the meaning ascribed to the concept of teacher professionalism in these different contexts is often not made explicit. What does it really imply for teachers to be `professionals` and how are we to make sense of the idea of professionalism when applied to teaching? Such questions become extra relevant in the context of Sweden, where education policymakers, not teachers themselves, launched the idea of teachers as professionals as part of a process of educational deregulation in the late 1980s. A result of this political introduction of the idea of teachers as professionals has been that the only politically significant associations of teachers, the teacher unions, have adopted an agenda of teacher professionalization as their overall policy objective. However, the professional projects of the two Swedish unions are fundamentally different concerning what is to constitute the knowledgebase of a teaching profession (Author, Author). The largest union, The Swedish Teachers Union, is strongly in favor of a view emphasizing the idea of a professional knowledgebase common for all teachers, grounded in the discipline of didactics. The other union, The National Union of Teachers, however, rejects such claims and argues that the only knowledgebase viable for a teaching profession must depart from the subject discipline taught by the teacher in question. Resulting from these opposing positions the unions also disagree on how the relationship between teacher education and the traditional academic structure is to be understood in order to produce professional teachers.

The conflicts of vision between Sweden’s two teacher unions underline the difficulty associated with articulating an all-inclusive knowledgebase for professional teachers. Professionalism is, in itself, a contested concept. Hanlon (1998, 51) has argued that the classic version of social welfare professionalism is replaced in contemporary western societies by a kind of ‘commercialized professionalism’, aimed ‘to make professionals accountable and enforce financial and managerial discipline upon them’, resulting in a situation where professional success is measured in terms of profitability and effectiveness and not in terms of serving citizens. Contemporary studies of professionalism has also described it as a *discourse of occupational change and control* within work organizations ‘applied and utilized by managers’ (Evets 2010, 127). Fournier (1999) claims that in this view, professionalism works as a disciplinary mechanism, primarily when it is introduced into occupational contexts not normally considered ‘professional’. By using the desires of members of a certain occupation to be considered, or to feel like, professionals a rhetoric emphasizing the normative value of professionalism is applied but, simultaneously, transformed into a discourse ‘which inscribes “autonomous” professional practice within a network of accountability and governs professional conduct at a distance’ (Fournier 1999, 280).

Such an understanding of professionalism is very well aligned with the fundamental values of the New Public Management School of welfare service restructuring currently influencing educational policies in most Westerns states. The view of teacher professionalism inherent in this political discourse is thereby centered on a particular discourse of ‘good teaching’, what Moore (2004) refers to as ‘the competent craftsperson’: This is a kind of teacher that works effectively with his/her ‘raw material’ in order to produce students whose knowledge can be easily evaluated, thereby also judging the technical skills of the craftsperson in question. Viewing teaching in this rather instrumental manner has been severely criticized within educational research, not least because it hides fundamental aspects of what it is to be a teacher, not least in relation to questions of ethics (e.g. Ball 2003, Hargreaves 2000, Sachs 2001, Helsby 1999). From a more philosophical point of departure, Maxwell (2014), using metaphor theory, argues that speaking of teachers as professionals constitutes a metaphor that restricts our view of certain aspects of teaching while highlighting others. First, a professional view on teaching is unable to account for the socio-moral dimension of the
occupation, resulting from the close and sustained interpersonal contacts that constitute a fundamental part of teachers' work. Second, it hides the fact that teachers are accountable to multiple parties, such as children, parents, colleagues, taxpayers, governments etc., placing competing demands on them (Maxwell 2014, 18).

Also critical of the instrumentalism of debates on teacher professionalism, Strike (2007, 177) argues that if we are to construct a knowledgebase for a teaching profession, it is vital that we ‘differentiate claims about the knowledgebase from claims about the capacity of teachers’. To try to make teachers into ‘engineers of a technology of learning’ is to ‘uproot them from their role as emissaries of the life and the mind’ (Strike 2007, 184). For Strike, building a knowledgebase for teachers based on some idea of a shared pedagogical practice or technology is neither possible nor desirable. Strike argues forcefully for constructing a knowledgebase for teachers exclusively based on their belonging to an academic discipline, ‘teachers are professionals because they are ambassadors to children from the intellectual disciplines’ (Strike 2007, 183). Such a view however, according to Strike (2007) suggests that there is, in fact, not a teaching profession per se, it does not ground teachers in any professional practice, thus excluding pre-school and possibly elementary school teachers and it is not child or student-centered in that it ‘does not require teachers to care for children’ (Strike 2007, 185).

Departing from the complexities presented above, the intention of this workshop is to discuss how we are to make sense of what is to constitute a knowledgebase for teaching as a profession. Is it possible to overcome the seemingly persistent divide between basing teacher professionalism on some kind of pedagogical technology or in the academic traditions of already existing subject disciplines? How are we to account for the ethical and relational dimensions of teaching in relation to the rather instrumental way that teacher professionalism is constituted within contemporary PISA-driven educational policymaking? Or should we, consequently, perhaps give up on the idea of teachers as professionals all together?

References

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