Understanding Teacher Professionalism: Teachers as Engineers of Learning or Ambassadors of Intellectual Disciplines?

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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? In Sweden, a result of the introduction of the idea of teachers as professionals has been that 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. The largest union, The Swedish Teachers Union, is strongly in favor of viewing 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. 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. 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 crafts-person’. This is a kind of technique 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 crafts-person 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.

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 of 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. It is the intention of this paper to expand on the analysis of how Sweden’s teacher unions define the concept of ‘teacher professionalism’ and how they use it in order to promote their policy priorities. In particular, it will discuss the implications this may have for how teaching is understood, within Swedish educational policy debates, as a ‘professional’ occupation. 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?

Methodology, Methods, Research Instruments or Sources Used
The study is based on analyses of public union documents, as they are considered the best way to access the “public voice” of the two organizations. The primary material consists of referrals in which the Unions are responding to the suggestions of governmentally appointed public commissions suggesting how certain political initiatives are to be realized. These commission reports are, after the referrals have been taken into account, transformed into green papers to be decided by parliament. In addition to these formal statements, debate articles by (primarily) the Union chairs are also included into the analyses in order to provide a kind of narrative sense of how the Unions place their policies in relation to the overall education policy debates of Sweden.

The textual analyses draws on the ideas of “policy sociology” as sociological concepts are used to interpret and understand the policies of the Unions. It is not an analysis for policy, in the sense that it is aimed to provide the Unions with strategies for how the are best to accomplish their policy objectives, but rather a critical analysis of the policies they employ and how they can be understood in the context where they arise. In this sense the study is critical in its ambition to problematize the Unions’ use of professional terminology. The analysis is guided by an abductive approach as the interpretations have been developed in a continuous process where theory has provided new insights in relation to the empirical material at the same time as that same material has required new theoretical tools to be put in use in order to provide reasonable explanations.

Conclusions, Expected Outcomes or Findings
A preliminary reading of the material used for analysis in this study underlines the importance of tradition in discussions of what is to be considered a professional teacher. Despite decades of political ambitions to unite Swedish teachers into one single profession, the historical differences between two separate teacher identities continue to fundamentally affect the policy positions of the Teacher Unions, a development that the recent reorientation of Swedish education policy seems to reinforce. Furthermore, the analysis shows that each respective union, from their own points of departure, are using different interpretations of the idea of ‘teacher professionalism’. When used in order to promote an overall image of teachers work, a traditional model of professionalism is applied. However, in order to find political support for certain specific policy demands, both unions revert to a more instrumental, NPM-influenced rhetoric.

References


