Teacher union and teacher identity

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Teacher identity has increasingly been studied from different perspectives and with different aims over the last decades. My approach to teacher identity is inspired by theories about narrative identity, discourse theory and poststructuralist conceptions of subjectivity (Weedon, 1997; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001; Wetherell, Taylor & Yates, 2001; Foucault, 2002). Studies of teacher identity with a narrative approach have predominantly focused on teachers’ own narrative accounts and how these construct teacher identities. There is a lack of studies that investigate how public narratives told by other agents, such as Norwegian teacher unions, construct teacher identity. To fill this void and because the Union of Education Norway is a powerful agent in the Norwegian educational system I find it important to investigate what understandings the union currently has of teachers and teacher identity.

In 2002 two of the most central teacher unions in Norway merged into a new national union called Utdanningsforbundet (Union of Education Norway). This is the largest union for educational workers in Norway with more than 136.000 members from all levels of educational institutions. In 2004 the Union launched the Profession ideals-campaign with the aim to develop some common ideals for the teaching professions in Norway. Although it was not explicitly described as an identity campaign it is preoccupied with questions and themes that are highly relevant for teacher identity, such as what ideals, values, actions and practices that is suitable for teachers. The union-
campaign therefore offered a useful and interesting material source for studying the construction of teacher identity.

**Public narratives, counter-narratives and teacher identity**

Teacher identities are constructed within discourses and partly constituted and negotiated in public narratives about teachers (Weber & Mitchell, 1995; Connelly & Clandinin, 1999; Zembylas, 2003). *Public narratives* are narratives that are told for example by media, researchers, politicians and/or persons and «attached to cultural and institutional formations larger than the single individual» (Somers & Gibson, 1994, p. 62), such as groups or professions. As these public narratives explain, structure, and make sense of teachers’ everyday world, they also give access to different kind of narrative resources for identity construction (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000).

How the individual teacher or groups of teachers use these narrative resources to construct their identities may vary (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; Davies & Harre, 2001). In public narratives about teachers, narrative resources are combined, recognised, rejected and redefined in different ways. The narrative construction of teacher identity is thus considered a continuous process of negotiation and reconstruction of public narratives about teachers (Somers & Gibson, 1994; Weedon, 1997; Mishler, 1999; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001).

Some public teacher narratives will get a higher status, become more widespread, dominant or considered more significant than others. Such dominant public narratives are significant elements in the construction of teacher identity because they «provide an important cultural resource which people can both draw on and resist in order to produce their own accounts» (Jones, 2002, p. 121). When people or institutions produce alternative public narratives as an attempt to resist or oppose one or several of dominant cultural storylines, these narratives can be understood as counter-narratives. Counter-narratives that argue for certain ways to understand teachers and teaching will simultaneously position teachers within certain identity constructions.

**Present study**

My initial question for the study of the Union campaign was quite general: «How is teacher identity narratively constructed in the Union of Education Norway’s Profession Ideals-campaign material?» In my preliminary readings of the campaign material I became aware of how teachers were encouraged to be opposed to or sceptic to understandings of teachers and teaching inscribed in current educational policy changes. The Union campaign provided alternative views and thus could be perceived as an attempt to construct alternatives to dominant trends in current educational policy. I found the concept of counter-narrative to be a productive point of departure for the analysis of the material and included the following questions:

- What understandings of teachers and teaching are considered to be negative by the union campaign?
- What counter-narrative(s) can be identified in the campaign material?
- What teacher identities are teachers positioned in by the counter narrative(s)?

I used a narrative approach to analyse the material. The aim of the analysis was to investigate how resistance to dominant public narratives and the construction of counter-narratives in the campaign material position teachers within certain teacher
identities. I will first provide some more information about the Union campaign and how I selected the material for analysis and then describe how the study was conducted.

Collection and selection of material

The Profession ideals-campaign was primarily run from the campaign's own web-page and the Union's official web-page where members can find information about the campaign and advice on how the local branches may structure work with the development of the ideals. The results of the local discussions as well as individual members' comments about the ideals were published on the web-page. The empirical material for the study was collected from these two Union web-sites in a period of 15 months, from the start of the campaign in November 2004, until February 2006. During this period I browsed these web-sites for new texts times each month, and downloaded and printed all relevant texts.

I only selected material for analysis that was produced or published by the Union board, administration and/or leaders, because the aim for the study is to investigate how the Union narrates teacher identity in this campaign. The texts that were selected for analysis from the two web-sites are:

- Descriptions of goal and process in the campaign,
- resolutions and documents relating to the case,
- information about how union members and local branches should go about developing suggestions for profession ideals,
- summaries and comments to the contributions from members and local branches,
- challenges in the further process of developing profession ideals, and
- draft formulations of professional consciousness to be discussed during the local annual union meetings.

In addition I included an interview with the Union leaders’ introduction of the Profession ideals-campaign in one of the Union’s journals Bedre Skole (Better School). This interview clarified why the Union leaders considered the campaign necessary and what their goals and expectations were.

Analytical aims and readings

The analysis of the selected material has been conducted in four readings, each with a different analytical aim and focus. The schematic overview of the analytical readings in Table 1 below, offers a brief description of the aim(s) and research questions in each reading. Together the four readings will answer the overarching research question of how teacher identity is narratively constructed in this campaign.

In the readings I was attentive to “particular ways in which culturally available forms for representing oneself are both appropriated and resisted” (Mishler, 1999, p. 25; italics G.S.) in the campaign text. A main element of these readings was therefore to identify where the text resisted or appropriated certain ways of talking about teachers and teaching. To identify phrases in the campaign material that explicitly opposed certain conceptions of education, teaching and teachers was therefore the point of departure for the first analytical reading. In the second and third reading I first identified what conception of teachers and teaching the campaign was opposed to and in favor of.
Secondly I used these conceptions as basis for the construction of two public narratives about teachers and teaching: (i) the negated narrative of «Accountability in education» and its counter-narrative (ii) «The teacher as responsible and loyal to the child». In the forth reading I eventually identified, categorized and described different conceptions of teacher identity within the counter-narrative. In the following sections of this article I present the findings of these analyses. In the presentations I will include some examples and descriptions of how the findings were generated from the material to ensure transparency and thereby enhance the reader validity of my study. I will start with the presentation of the first reading.

**Indications to telling a counter-narrative: disagreeing statements**

A striking feature of the campaign material is the many references to changes and a great concern for what consequences these changes might have for teachers, education in Norway in general and for the Union’s possibilities for influencing educational policy. There are three main themes:

- changing government/political regulation and control with the educational sector,
- increased commercialisation of education and a market liberalist attitude to education, and
- increasing pressure on teachers.

The whole campaign can be understood as an answer, response to or disagreement with expectations, beliefs and understandings about teachers and teaching inscribed in these changes.

As it is possible to read disagreeing statements as an indication to telling a counter-narrative (Jones, 2002), I highlighted phrases in the campaign material which explicitly stated that the whole campaign or certain opinions was meant to be an alternative, a
correction or an opposition to public understandings and narratives about teachers. Throughout the campaign material teachers are encouraged to be opposed to or sceptic to current changes in educational policy. This encouraged scepticism is formulated in evaluative phrases in the material such as; «we have been opposed to important elements of these changes – and we should remain so» (transl. G.E.S.)\(^5\) and «should be a safeguard against ideologies and suggestions that is a threat to the aims of elementary school» (Boude, 2004, p. 33).

In the interview introducing the campaign in the union journal Bedre skole the union leaders say: «There are also many trends that are introduced into the school, such as New Public Management and schools as production units.» (Boude, 2004, p. 32) By describing these elements as «trends», thus as something that will pass as all trends do; the union leaders briefly refer to current trends within educational policy and then reject them. This is another way to indicate an orientation to telling a counter-narrative (Jones, 2002). To be able to further investigate how the campaign material could be read as counter-narrative I however first had to get a better sense of exactly what understandings of education, teachers and teaching the campaign opposes.

**A negated dominant narrative: The public narrative of accountability in education**

In the second reading I identified descriptions of the understandings of education, teachers and teaching the campaign explicitly disagrees with. These descriptions were highlighted, as exemplified in the excerpt below:

> There are strong tensions concerning both the content and the regulations of the exertion of our profession. There are tendencies to consider education solely as a means for increased economic growth and compatibility. As workers in this field we are in risk of becoming passive spectators – in an instrumentalist educational strategy. We do not want that to happen. We must help each other to avoid this. (transl. G.E.S.)\(^6\)

The following quotes from (what?) are other examples of descriptions that the campaign signals an opposition to «[a] whole field of education is being subjected to an extensive» (transl. G.E.S.)\(^6\) market orientation, and «the quality in education is increasingly being related to different kinds of test-results» (transl. G.E.S.)\(^7\). The campaign is also concerned with how the policy makers appear to be «aiming at a shift in the governing of education towards a combination of testing and measuring and better opportunities for the population to choose freely between options» (transl. G.E.S.)\(^5\).

The identified, highlighted and excerpted phrases were categorised thematically. This process revealed three thematic foci areas in the negated descriptions: (i) the New Public Management approach to governmental and political regulation and control with the educational sector, (ii) the increased commercialisation and market liberalist attitude towards education, and (iii) a conception of teachers as obedient public servants. These three themes are intertwined into a public narrative about educational policy, governing of schools and teachers and quality assurance that I have called: «The public narrative of accountability in education». This narrative is congruent with current global changes in educational policy, inspired by a neo-liberalist conception of education as a commodity and an emphasis on market accountability and parental choice (Vidovich & Slee, 2001; Day, 2002; Woods & Jeffreys, 2002; Ranson, 2003; Biesta, 2004; Angus, 2004; Hurst, 2005; Webb, 2006)
This narrative and its conception of teachers is continuously rejected and negated in the Union of Education Norway’s campaign material (ref?). Within The public narrative about accountability in education, the Union of Education Norway perceives teachers to be «under pressure» and in risk of becoming subjected to «an instrumentalist educational strategy» that will turn them in to obedient civil servants. Such a development will make teachers’ professional judgement and knowledge less significant, which again will reduce educational quality. In the next section I will present the campaign material’s alternative conceptions of education, teachers and teaching that are created to counteract the accountability narrative.

The counter-narrative of «The teacher as responsible and loyal to the child»

In the third reading I identified descriptions of such alternative conceptions about education, teaching and teachers. The highlights in the following quote is an example of this:

“We are active agents, and not passive spectators. When we meet children, pupils and students we are active and free. We use our professional judgement in the planning and facilitating of our work. (transl. G.E.S.)”

The highlighted parts of this quote positions teachers as more than just passive spectators to an implementation of economic and neoliberal educational policy. The quote also describes teachers as something apart from an obedient civil servant or mere means for the fulfilment of politically determined objectives. Hence, an alternative to the obedient and accountable teacher highlighted in The public narrative of accountability in education. I identified similar alternative statements in the whole campaign material. In the following I will show how these descriptions of education, teachers and teaching are intertwined into the counter-narrative of The teacher as responsible and loyal to the child. I will also illuminate how this narrative process simultaneously positions the teacher within three teacher identities, namely (i) the caring and loyal teacher, (ii) the conscious, stable and engaged teacher, and (iii) the responsible teacher with a unique competence.

«We use our professional judgement»

As most Norwegian elementary schools are public, most Norwegian teachers are public employees, and thereby given some obligations and responsibilities from the state. In the selected campaign material teachers are encouraged to acknowledge their responsibilities, meet their obligations and show their loyalty to them. According to the campaign material teachers and school leaders show this loyalty through «the professional exercise of their job» (transl. G.E.S.)6. The professionalism the campaign material here refers to is closely connected to teachers’ competence. As professionals with unique knowledge, teachers are experts on school, pedagogy, teaching, pupils and subject matter. As a consequence teachers’ competence is by the campaign material described as «a competence that gives us exclusive rights to a series of responsibilities within the educational system» (transl. G.E.S.7).

In addition the campaign material claims that teachers must be able to «forward their own professional reasons for their practice» without «reference to centrally defined rules and regulations» (transl. G.E.S.8). Through such statements, the Union of Education Norway describes the professional teacher as someone who can verbalise his or her tacit knowledge, competence and values, and thereby give explicit reasons for the things s/he does that goes beyond formal rules and regulations. When the campaign material combi-
nes teachers’ explicitness with a unique competence, they get an autonomous status that enables them to evaluate, decide, choose and work in accordance with their independent and individual professional judgement. According to the material, the teacher can therefore also take full responsibility for his or her actions, decisions and results, and thus be accountable for the professional exercise of their job. Through such descriptions the campaign material position the teacher within a teacher identity we might call «The responsible teacher with a unique competence».

«[S]how resistance when needed»

The uniqueness of teacher competence, their professional judgement and responsibility is connected to a second thematic element in the counter narrative of The teacher as responsible and loyal to the child. This second element emphasises the teacher as a conscious and stable protector of core values and is a description of a responsible and dedicated teacher. The teacher is self-conscious and self confident in the sense that s/he really knows what the most important values of school and teaching are, and is able to hold on to these values through changes, due to their unique competence and ability to conduct professional judgement. Such a description positions the teacher within an identity construction we might call «The conscious, stable and engaged teacher».

The union campaign carefully underscores that teachers should «not resist changes, but will be more confident concerning what we consider important to preserve along the way» (Boude, 2004, p. 32). Nevertheless, the campaign encourages teachers to «show resistance towards the [school] owners’ demand for efficiency» and to «hold on to the core values of teaching» (Boude, 2004, p. 34). This encouragement seems to be legitimised in teachers’ knowledge of the complexity of learning processes and their engagement in educational policy. According to the campaign material, this ability to stabilise and hold on to educational values makes the teacher resist haphazard pedagogical and political trends, such as the ones implicit in the accountability narrative.

This teacher will not be «pushed around» by policy demands if these demands are in contradiction to the fundamental values of teaching, education and the teachers’ own professional judgement. The point that although most teachers are state employees, they are not to be considered as obedient civil servants, is carefully underscored several times in the campaign material through phrases such as; «[t]eachers are not just an extended arm of the state» (transl G.E.S.)5, and «when we meet children, pupils and students we are active and free» (transl G.E.S.)6.

«[L]oyalty with and respect for the child as the most important value»

Although the campaign material underscores that teachers must be loyal to their responsibilities the state and the broader Norwegian community, the teachers’ main loyalty is supposed to be reserved for the pupil. In phrases such as «the main value is to be loyal to the wellbeing of the child, pupil, student» (transl. G.E.S.)9 and «stand fast to central values and continuously remain the loyalty to ... the pupil» (Boude, 2004, p. 33), the campaign material establish loyalty to the child as one of the most fundamental values of teaching.

This element of loyalty is connected to the two previously described elements and thus creates a narrative of a teacher that will take action if political decisions, curriculum, other people or circumstances puts the child’s best at jeopardy. The campaign material positions teachers as defenders of the wellbeing of the pupil as a contrast to the image of the teacher as an efficient state ser-
vant with a competitive focus on learning results.

The campaign material emphasis the importance of teachers interest in the pupils in phrases such as «teachers genuine interest for children and youth is one of the most significant factors of good education» (transl. G.E.S.)\(^5\). This emphasis combined with the loyalty to the child as a core value; position the teacher within the identity construction The caring and loyal teacher. This teacher cares for the pupils and make sure their needs are met. As s/he has a genuine interest in the pupils, s/he builds the relation to the pupils on trust, equality and respect and also has the ability to se the potential in every child. This teacher identity is very much in keeping with a prominent discourse within the Norwegian elementary school, where teachers are considered as caregivers and concerned with the inclusion of each child (Stephens, Tonnesen & Kyriacou, 2004; Søreide, 2006, 2007).

Dichotomised narratives and teacher identity

The counter-narrative of The teacher as responsible and loyal to the child presented above, gives an image of the Norwegian elementary school teacher that due to his/her professional judgement and competence will hold on to central professional values and take the responsibility and actions necessary to protect pupils from dangerous political, educational and theoretical trends. Market accountability and neo-liberalist informed policies are obviously considered to be such dangerous trends.

The neo-liberal Public narrative of accountability in education holds a strong position and currently underwrites educational policy in several countries. This is especially visible in England and the US (Day, 2002; Hurst, 2005; Tolofari, 2005; Sloan, 2006). Through the texts in the Profession ideals-campaign the Union expresses a concern that Norwegian teachers and the educational sector might experience something similar in the near future. The teacher as responsible and loyal to the child is a very ideologically reasonable attempt to show opposition to an increased future influence of neo-liberal accountability-thinking in Norwegian education.

The Union appears to consider the future position of teachers as uncertain, under pressure and threatened. A way of dealing with external pressure, uncertainty and changes is to categorise and dichotomise values, ideas and standpoints. Throughout the campaign, commercial interests, management by objectives and competition are posed as running counter to care for pupils, education for all and democracy. How the Union understand this dichotomous relationship draws heavily on a dominant discourse of accountability as «all bad» found in much educational research (Sloan, 2006). Within this discourse, accountability is considered to be disruptive of teachers’ possibilities of good teaching.

Good teaching is closely linked to «the creation of socially productive and inclusive classrooms» (Sloan, 2006, p. 121) and «more child focused instruction» (Sloan, 2006, p. 120), and such values are expected to have less room in a school where accountability-thinking is prominent. When the relationship between The public narrative of accountability in education and The responsible and loyal teacher are dichotomised, the two narratives are made mutually excluding. In other words, if teachers identify positively with one narrative, they are simultaneously forced to reject the other, and vice versa.

As the previous section of this article show, dichotomising processes also position teachers within certain identity constructions, which again have consequences for the range of actions, practices and value
systems teachers can subscribe to. As negotiation between binary positions is an important element of a narrative construction of teacher identities (Søreide, 2006), it is the relationship between the different conceptions of teachers and teaching that has constitutive force.

When The public narrative of accountability in education and The responsible and loyal teacher are developed in a dichotomous relationship, each narrative is defined by the existence of the other. The narratives are thereby inscribed into each other and the binaries are thus not only mutually excluding, but also parts of the same phenomenon. Consequently The public narrative of accountability in education serves as an important resource for the Union of Education Norway’s positioning of teachers as loyal and concerned with the pupils best interests.

Concluding comments

The aim of this article has been to explore how teacher identity is narratively constructed in the Union of Education Norway’s Profession ideals-campaign. Through analysis and discussions I have clarified how the public narrative of The teacher as responsible and loyal to the child is produced as a counter-narrative to the dominant Public narrative of accountability in education. In addition I have explicated how this counter-narrative positions the teacher within certain teacher identities, as for example The teacher as responsible and loyal to the child.

In a Nordic educational model, inclusion, adaptive learning and equality has been significant for decades (Arnesen & Lundahl, 2006; Carlgren, Klette, Myrdal, Schnack & Simola, 2006; Telhaug, Mediås, & Aasen, 2006) and the teacher as engaged in adaptive learning and care for the individual pupil is one prominent teacher identity within the Norwegian educational discourse (Stephens, Tønnessen & Kyriacu, 2004; Arnesen & Lundahl, 2006; Carlgren et al., 2006; Søreide, 2006, 2007). For those already familiar with Norwegian elementary school, the prominence of the counter-narrative of The teacher as responsible and loyal to the child underscored in this article might therefore not provide any new knowledge about what teacher identities that have a strong position in this context.

What the article however can provide is a nuanced insight into how this public teacher narrative and its inherent identity constructions gain prominence. The article show how educational policy causes resistance and how this resistance strengthen already vital elements in the educational discourse and consequently also strengthen certain teacher identities. The identification of dichotomies, the identity constructions they produce and the possibilities for negotiation between these broaden the understanding of why some teacher identities, such as The caring and loyal teacher, gain prominence. The narrative approach used in this article turned out to be a fruitful way to illuminate these identity processes in a new way.

Questions of teacher identity need to be approached from different perspectives and with different methods, as this eventually will give a rich description of the field. Explication and analysis of public teacher narratives told by a variety of actors is crucial in order to obtain a broad and more nuanced understanding of how teacher identity is constructed, negotiated, maintained and altered. This article show how possible identity resources are inscribed in narratives of economy and policy. On a macro level it would be interesting to investigate in what ways other historical, national and global meta-narratives of for example educational systems, childhood, and society construct teacher identity. Such analyses would add an extra dimension to the knowledge that is al-
ready gained from the extensive research done on construction of identity in teachers’ and teacher students’ autobiographical narratives.

Notes
2 http://profesjonsidealer.utdanningsforbundet.no
3 http://utdanningsforbundet.no
4 As my project-period ended in the beginning of May 2006 I was unable to follow the whole campaign to its final conclusions at the Union of Education’s national annual meeting in November 2006. Most of the campaign material was however published within the time-frame of my study.
5 http://profesjonsidealer.utdanningsforbundet.no/udf_kampanjTemplates/Page____59.aspx (2008.08.25)
6 http://utdanningsforbundet.no/udf_Templates/Page____24706.aspx (2008.08.25)
7 http://profesjonsidealer.utdanningsforbundet.no/udf_kampanjTemplates/Page____263.aspx (2008.08.25)
8 http://profesjonsidealer.utdanningsforbundet.no/upload/UDF_Profesjonsidealer_invitasjon.pdf (2008.08.05)
9 http://www.utdanningsforbundet.no/

Literature
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