Teachers’ narratives on professional identities and inclusive education

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Introduction

This article discusses how teachers construct their professional identity within educational and institutional frameworks. Focus here is on how Norwegian teachers narrate their professional identity and position, especially in connection with inclusive education and the challenges that come with it. The article draws from a research project on teachers’ professional identity, knowledge, and practice.

Since the 1990s, inclusion has been a key concept in policies at the international level and has been adapted to education, social policies, and welfare development (Befring, 2002). In terms of democratic values and ideals, inclusion is closely linked to life and societal perspectives. Inclusion of all children in mainstream education has been encouraged through national legislation for over 20 years (cf. The Salamanca Statement, 1994; UN: The Aims of Education, 2001). In policy documents, inclusion is associated with diversity and pluralism as a positive value of “mainstream” school. Legislation and the National Curriculum of Norway (Knowledge Promotion, 2006)
state that all students are entitled to schooling that takes individual differences into consideration. While teachers tend to be broadly positive about the principle of inclusion, they simultaneously view its practical implementation as problematic (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). Some studies indicate that teacher attitudes may be a contributory barrier to successful inclusive practices (De Boer, Pijl & Minnaert, 2010). By examining how they talk about their role and duties as teachers, I study their construction of professional identity and how they position themselves in regard to inclusion.

Teacher perceptions of their own profession reflect a wider cultural and educational policy context. Public opinion formation, negotiations, and political constraints indicate the extent to which there is agreement on the teacher’s role and its legitimacy and authority. During the last decade, the Nordic countries have given more attention to international educational trends. New national curricula that are linked to discourses on an educational regime of national quality assessment systems have a stronger emphasis on basic skills and individualization (Arnesen & Lundahl, 2006). According to Busch, Klausen and Vanebo (2001), management by objectives of education has a clear connection to New Public Management (NPM) as an international reform movement with liberal and conservative roots (Busch et al., 2001). In 1989, the OECD censured the Norwegian government for not having sufficient control over the national education. There was a need for further evaluation and control of what schools were doing. Inspired by the principles of NPM, target documents and reports back to school leaders are now expected to realize the present educational policy ambitions. The neo-liberal influence on Norwegian school policy has accelerated since the turn of millennium (Imsen, 2012).

A new school administration regime, which especially considers global comparison and national tests, represents a change in the priority of school objectives in many countries (Apple, 2006). In Norway, a stronger focus has been placed on the quality of teachers’ work, their skills, and competencies (White Paper 11 [2008–2009]). With reference to Weber (1999), Aasen (2006) distinguishes between two forms of rationality: value rationality, where action takes place on the basis of fundamental values and professional evaluations; and objective rationality, where actions are directed towards future results. School leaders today are caught between management-oriented ideals and profession-based ideals based on value rationality (Aasen, 2006).

Some recent research has problematized the new school policies in the Nordic countries, especially when it comes to teacher and student perspectives on schooling (Dovemark, 2010; Holm (2013); Persson & Persson, 2011). International studies by Clandinin & Connelly (2000) and Day (2002) on the professional lives of teachers, discuss the differentiated impact of critical influences on teachers. National curriculum and policy documents have an influence on public expectations for teachers and teaching. In some ways this contributes to the shaping of teacher identity.

**Approach to the field**

The Nordic countries show similarities but also specific differences in how the school systems are organized and how they solve educational diversity issues. Norwegian primary/lower secondary school and upper secondary school are separate organizations. They are owned by respectively the local authorities (primary and lower secondary school) and the county authority (upper secondary education). In Norway, the upper
secondary school system includes both general and vocational education programmes in a common school structure.

The Nordic countries are all welfare states, in which equality and inclusiveness are central values for educational policies. Despite the fact that they share democratic values and overall goals of an inclusive education for all, the educational solutions differ when it comes to realizing inclusive education. The recent Norwegian school reforms underline the idea of a “school-for-all”. Legislation and the National Curriculum state that all students are entitled to a schooling that takes individual differences into consideration. Norway no longer maintains a network of special schools. Special education is organized within the ordinary school system in different ways, ranging from completely individualized remedial tuition in a separate room, to teachers cooperating to meet the demands of all students within the same grades. There are two types of additional funds for special education: extra resources earmarked for the individual child as a result of assessments, and a grant to each school to adapt general education. All students have the right to be given “equitable and suitably adapted education”, usually abbreviated to “adapted education” (Nordahl & Hausstätter, 2009). As a general rule, pupils with special needs are expected to join mainstream school in their own district and acquire their education within the ordinary class.

Methodological Reflections

This article is based on data generated during 2011–2012. Seven schools were involved in the project: four lower secondary and three upper secondary schools. The schools were located in southern and central regions of Norway, and in both urban and rural areas. In addition, the headmasters of the schools selected 24 teachers and special educators. This article presents analyses of teacher statements from the collection of semi-structured interviews. The interviewees are all experienced teachers in their 40s and 50s.¹

Professional identity is, according to Heggen (2008), the foundation of individual, meaningful orientation and action (p. 323). Teachers position themselves as in favour of or opposed to existing culturally or socially situated categories of identity constructions. According to Connelly and Clandinin (1999), the individual construction of teacher identity is realized in an interaction between experience and narrative about “the teachers’ living life” as a basis for practice (p. 4). Teacher identity is also considered as a collective identity; teachers have something in common that provides answers to the question of who they are and what they know. Hargreaves (1996) argues that the power to define the teaching profession lies partly within a community of professional practitioners through their unions (Hargreaves, 1996).

Bakhtin (1981) focuses on how human narratives consist of many interacting voices that can be either in harmony or conflict. Human utterances can be considered situated, in the sense that they are part of already on-going dialogues. Teacher utterances are therefore coloured by the interaction and communication that takes place. Inspired by these perspectives, the analysis of teacher utterances may show how expressions in different discourses on education, both political and public, and those that arise within the school culture, can be manifested in teachers’ construction of identity.

Participants in school activities construe collective and individual meaning within a social dependency (Gergen, 2005). Through discourse analysis of narratives I obtain the tools for examining how meaning is socially
formulated and also how the teachers’ professional comprehension impacts identity. Silverman (2001) emphasizes that people interpret repertoire when describing topics that are known within a particular culture. Discourses in school are construed and also limited by social structures and discourses on a public and political level.

Fairclough (2008) argues that discourses help construct social identities, social relations, but also knowledge and meaning systems. His concept of discursive practice focuses on the production, distribution, and consumption of texts situated in social settings. Discursive practice manifests itself in what he calls “text”, understood in a broad sense as both written and spoken language. Discursive practice is regarded as one special form of social practice (Fairclough 2008, p.26). Using his concepts I can understand how discourses regulate social action and influence teachers’ self-images – how they perceive the situations and challenges they face.

Discourse analysis helps to clarify teachers’ personal perceptions of the phenomena involved in the conversation. Teachers make descriptions and construct texts in light of the context established by the participants in the conversation. Through discourse analysis I thus identify conversation patterns and rules, and also what tools teachers use when they talk about self-understanding and how they deal with cultural patterns.

Connelly and Clandinin (1996) have provided extensive contributions to how teacher knowledge, teacher context, and teacher identity are interlinked and can be understood narratively. In her project, Søreide (2007) claims that narrative approaches are advantageous in teacher research, because they provide opportunities to preserve tensions, complexities, and dynamics that characterize teaching practices. In my approach, I focus on the narrative form, both during the interview and in the analysis. I try to draw out stories during the interview by asking for stories and also by encouraging the interviewees to continue to elaborate on their stories.

I regard professional narratives, on the one hand, as a relational phenomenon, which is stable and rooted in a core set of values and practices. On the other hand, identity may be seen as unstable, flexible, and dependent on contextual or personal changes (Berg & Collin-Hansen, 2012). To understand teacher identity as a narrative and discursive construction, I explore how identity is situated in a school context through the production and interpretation of oral texts. I do not analyse the characteristics or genres of the texts, but identify the academic and institutional functions of teacher utterances as they structure their social practice and gain importance for identity and positioning.

The narratives I have included in this article show how teachers in this study present themselves. The themes extracted are as follows: Being an ordinary teacher, Maintaining control, Categorization discourses, Expressing competence, and Teacher negotiation.

**Professional identity constructions**

As they are part of an educational institution, the teachers’ experiences are situated. The narratives describe an apprehended role, position, and profession, and also show how the interviewees interpret various interactions and school practices.

**Being an ordinary teacher**

School work includes various on-going dialogues between the school’s professionals (cf. Bakhtin, 1981) and the responsibilities involved. Svein is a teacher at Solhaug lower secondary, and his main school subjects are English and Geography. He has a dream of
being “a ‘pure’ teacher, who teaches (his) subjects to students”.

My starting point as a teacher is to give knowledge to the students, and I wish to impart knowledge. But… it would have been…a dreamlike situation to concentrate on subject matter…and you come to a school, and you become more an educator than you had expected beforehand […]. I do like the role of being an educator…that is…when students come to you and trust you… But that’s not the real teacher’s role, because the teacher should teach, bringing knowledge to them (Svein 15/11/11).

In starting his school career, Svein’s primary expectation was the notion of being a subject teacher, but he ended up with the frustration of being an educator, “to an ever increasing extent responsible for the upbringing of students’ lives”. His dream is to be a teacher without “problematic students”, to escape the role of being “an educator instead of a teacher”, but he is ambivalent and vacillates between two different situated discourses: the “pure teacher”, giving subject lessons, and the wider one involving the encounter with a personal and learning situation. His identity as a teacher is primarily related to teaching subject knowledge. Student diversity in behaviour and learning ability complicates his attempt to realize the subject teacher role. By confining himself to the role of the teacher, Svein presents himself as a teacher according to general discourses among teachers and stated political aims for greater focus on academic competence (White Paper 11 (2008–2009)). The notion of a limited assignment can be considered as an example of how teacher attitudes may be closed to inclusive practice (cf. De Boer et al. 2010). Other teachers refer to similar experiences of dealing with a more complex teacher’s role than they had assumed would be the case. The next narrative gives an example of another position.

**Maintaining control**

In school, institutional knowledge and roles are structured hierarchically. The communication structure *per se* is not in focus here, but the study reveals some of the relations between ordinary teachers and special educators within the local school organization. Vibeke, a homeroom teacher in the ninth grade at Vik lower secondary school, reflects on the teacher’s role. She tells me about how the special educator gives her sufficient support:

Last week Sigve in ninth grade completely lost his temper! In that specific situation Veronica, the head of the special education section at our school, gave me consolation. She sometimes acts like a “friendly ear” for me, a good listener…and she’s always understanding and supportive. Now and then she even enters my classes to observe or even to support me when I have problems handling the situation… Sometimes the challenges in class become too exhausting for me…and she helps me to cool myself down and control my feelings… Because we’re supposed to be like…eh…professionals, and not to get bogged down when things get turbulent and spin out of control. We’re expected to know how…like…to soldier on… (Vibeke 09/12/11).

Vibeke administers her teaching in a context of supportiveness. She expresses that she feels secure in her role, even when things are spinning out of control. Asking the special education teacher for assistance helps her to manage class learning activities and at the same time ensures Sigve’s learning and belonging to the class community.

We are continuously practising how to deal with the student’s various problems and needs. Sometimes it is extremely challenging and provoking…
for me too! But as the head of the class I try – I really do – to be well prepared and flexible… but also to be intuitive and spontaneously professional. It’s important to enforce the rules and keep the social structures clear for everyone, to promote security and wellbeing for Sigve and the rest of the gang (Vibeke 09/12/11).

Vibeke shows how her identity as a professional implies the role of a stable and skilled adult who is in charge and maintains control in challenging situations. She experiences that school policy makes it possible for her to make progress and feel safe even in turbulent classroom situations: “I’m not alone or something… can always lean on the team or… and the principal’s door is always open if there is anything, so…” Vibeke seem to benefit from a pretty clear and distinct leadership. Freedom, flexibility and responsibility are the school’s hallmarks, according to Vibeke. Studies by MacFarlane and Woolfson (2013) emphasize the connection between teacher perceptions of their school principals’ expectations and actual teacher behaviour. School principals seem to play an important role in promoting an inclusive ethos within their schools.

Vibeke says: “Our school has a clear and distinct leadership”. Other informants at Vik also underline how institutional leadership, support systems, and staff attitudes can help prevent dilemmas and promote inclusive teacher work. “We feel free and committed at the same time,” Vibeke’s colleague Viggo explains. Day (in Day & Gu, 1010, p. 173) calls this phenomenon relational and organizational resilience, referring to Horne and Orr (1998), who propose seven Cs to describe the key features of a resilient organization: community, competence, connections, commitment, communication, coordination, and consideration. These characteristics can be used to portray schools as learning-communities, in which both students and teachers are able to experience enriched relationships with others, enhanced efficacy and commitment, but also increased job fulfilment.

**Categorization discourses**

Teachers in this project tell various stories about how school professionals act and how they reflect on their role and function when students are categorized. It sometimes seems to represent a form of relief (and release) for the teacher “to have it confirmed that it was not my fault,” as Bjarne, teaching Norwegian and social sciences at Bjørnevika lower secondary school, claimed, when one of his students in 9th grade finally got an ADHD diagnosis.

At last we succeeded in figuring out Roar. He has been given an ADHD diagnosis. It was really a huge relief for me… my responsibility as teacher is finally clarified, so to speak. The diagnosis confirms Roar’s special problems. It’s not me that is wrong or bad or something. I always knew that, of course, but you start putting yourself down when you fail to manage class, and things get worse and you’re feeling bad. Now Roar has been given his medicine, and consequently I can expect him to behave properly and to adjust to the behavioural norms. From now on… I mean… things are going to be normal again. If not, he’ll be moved to “the group for the badly behaved ones” (Bjarne 09/12/11).

The special education discourse of diversity and diagnosis actualizes Bjarne’s feelings of responsibility. From being a teacher without control, to a situation where the student is seen as problematic apparently reconstructs his agenda as a teacher. Pedagogical perspectives on Roar’s further development and situation is moderated by expecting good behaviour, but without reflecting on his lack of diagnostic knowledge and his pedagogical and didactic contribution to Roar’s further learning situation. As opposed to Vibeke’s
reflections on her work with Sigve, Bjarne looks forward to a “normal” situation in class without disciplinary problems. He wants to focus on ordinary teaching activities. The segregated group of “badly behaved ones” seems to be a tempting possible solution.

Categorization practices may in some cases become seductive because teachers can relax and absolve themselves of blame. This may lead to a sense of being free from responsibility. The special educators’ classification practice is interesting, because a student’s need for extra support and assistance is in practice very much determined through hierarchic professional strains, testing, and diagnosis (cf. Penne, 2006; Pihl, 2005).

Bjarne’s narrative reflects professional and institutional discourses that underline segregation solutions for diversity issues in school. Several of the teachers in the study expressed the creation of demarcation lines in everyday life in school through different segregating solutions. In this study streaming on the basis of behavioural or academic abilities seems to be in frequent use as a more or less general or permanent solution for student diversity. According to official statistics, the number of students placed in special study groups has grown significantly in recent years (White Paper 18, 2010–2011). Research shows, however, that both students and teachers seem to have greater benefits without segregation measures, as these often lead to poorer relationships with both teachers and students in class (De Boer et al., 2010; Jahnsen et al., 2011).

The next excerpt highlights the relation and collaboration between special educator and teachers to realize inclusive education in diverse classrooms.

Expressing competence

School policy and organizational solutions may be important for ordinary teachers if they are to realize an inclusive ambition and give proper educational support to everyone, no matter the educational challenges. Discourses on the ordinary teacher’s role and competence may have some effect on teacher practices. The picture is not clear or simple however; I find different experiences from one school to the next and also differences in the teacher narratives on attitudes.

Hedvig is a foreign language teacher at Hoff upper secondary school. She has supplemented her teacher competence with special needs education and moved from lower to upper secondary school. Her identity is situated in a mix of teacher and special educator competences, external discourses on school assessments of teacher management, and the social practice of professionals. She finds her role frustrating when colleagues try to “get rid of” students who are in need of extra support.

Diversity is challenging…it’s often hard to find satisfactory solutions for all the students. I see that some of the teachers at Hoff refuse to draw up individual subject syllabuses for those who need it. Instead they often lower the marks, giving individual assessments, so to speak…trying to avoid using time to do the work needed. It is not a motivating job for my colleagues for sure, not for me either, to write down this individual plan. Teachers are often trying to transfer the task to the special educator. When students make a racket in class, teachers often ask for help to exclude the students, not begging for help to do a more beneficial and better job within the class (Hedvig 17/10/11).

Hedvig’s position is complex. She would like to collaborate on the basis of the school’s inclusive goals, but feels that her position as a teacher and her knowledge as special educator are not easy to deal with when relating to teachers’ needs for support and relief.

Studies show that teachers appreciate the emotional ties to the students and that they consider good relationships as a basis for
good teaching (Day & Gu, 2010; Hargreaves, 2000). Frustration among teachers when dealing with problematic students is, however, often expressed by the respondents in this study and may indicate teacher vulnerability in school. In their research, Day and Gu (2010) use the notion of *critical events*. Teachers see critical events as key influences relating to both their professional and personal lives. The incidents revealed patterns of *critical influences* on the teachers’ sense of commitment, resilience, and ability to manage (Day & Gu, 2010, p. 51). When teachers ask for help with “behavioural problems” in class, Hedvig perceives that the teaching situation is spinning out of control, and teachers first and foremost concerned themselves with avoiding responsibility for the student.

At Hoff upper secondary school, staff dialogues are described as unsatisfying and not open and safe enough to empower teachers to formulate an individual educational plan (IEP). Furthermore, the way that competence and responsibility are organized gives few opportunities for significant staff support.

This interpretation can be combined with communication of position and knowledge. The special educators in lower and upper secondary schools are supposed to extend support to teachers, test students for educational problems, and set up suitable educational programmes for students in need of extra support of any kind. However, they seem to maintain an unclear role in school’s daily life. The organizational structures are complex and I find huge differences from one school to the next.

The informants in this study relate to students and colleagues in different ways. Even so, the collected material has some indications of negotiation situations about roles, responsibilities and, in some cases, also about opportunities to influence the decisions on inclusive strategies. In contrast with Hedvig at Hoff upper secondary and Bjarne at Bjørnevik lower secondary, professionals at Vik lower secondary seem to be institutionally united. Common procedures are appreciated on all sides, and the principal plays an important role in creating a school culture of supportiveness and trust that allows teachers like Vibeke to feel safe about being insecure when facing problems in the classroom.

The next narrative focuses on school management influenced by political and global educational discourses and shows consequences these discourses may have for teacher identity and teacher practice.

**Teacher negotiation**

The policy of an educational control regime implemented in Norway, focuses more intensively on how to evaluate the quality of teacher work by using national tests in specific subjects (Dons, 2012). Main perspectives concentrate on how to improve their practices and the capacity to hold teachers accountable for what they do. According to some informants, the control systems are regarded as alarming or devastating. Teacher identity and management may be interpreted as a sort of negotiation or defence against instructions from the school owners (local authorities or county authority (cf. p. 4)). In this study, interestingly enough, some of them seem to be more focused on local developmental possibilities or restraints than on international educational trends or beating other schools. When they talk about the new educational regime, teachers refer more to opinions on principles and public professional discourses than to their personal experiences.

Martin is a master joiner, teacher and special educator, and now the head of a vocational programme of study at Myren upper secondary. He is worried about his staff of teachers, especially when it comes to the new mandatory guidelines on dropouts, decisions to exclude students, and the setting of
marks. His agenda is to provide internal programmes to educate the vocational teachers to be better equipped for their teaching, and to identify themselves not only as tradesmen, but more as teachers.

My major focus of concern is how we can learn together...how to cooperate smoothly...not building walls of insecurity, because we must manage without strengthening the professional mutual loyalty to the controllers...against students and their parents, so to speak [...]. Internal learning processes will widen relevant teacher knowledge and increase the teacher competence in vocational programmes and areas of study to adjust the teaching to all the students [...]. We must unite...to give young struggling students a fair chance to learn and manage their lives. That's our number one job (Martin 10/12/11).

Martin is concerned with the direction of the teacher's loyalty. He points to the risk that when the teacher's work is closely examined and measured, the loyalty given upwards in the system could be at the expense of loyalty to the students. In this way, school result management could threaten inclusive ambitions.

His approach to his job, and his reflections on what is at stake, corresponds to other informants in this study, and shows how teachers relate to existing discourses (cf. Fairclough 2008). The relations to students and their need for support to cope and progress in their lives is, after all, perceived, or at least formulated, as “the number one job” (Martin 10/12/11) for most of the interviewees. Even so, Svein at Solhaug lower secondary is not the only one dreaming of a pure teacher's role. This may represent some inconsistency in their identity discourses, which is probably a phenomenon that calls attention to the situated construction of roles in communication upwards within and outside school.

Viggo, a teacher of mathematics and science at Vik lower secondary, gives perspectives on the teachers’ room to act within the National Quality Assessment systems.

In fact...we discuss the results on tests internally to find out where we can improve, do things better. The national tests represent at their best only a direction pointer [...]. At our school almost all students take the tests. Last year the attendance in 5th grade was 100%! We don't do like Oslo schools, we're not excluding students from the tests [...]. On the contrary...We want to see the whole picture, so to speak, so we can progress in our work. Our socioeconomic context here is very low, and our results reflect Vik's student recruitment area. That is our situation and point of departure (Viggo 09/12/11).

Viggo describes how teachers at Vik make their own decisions, focusing on internal priority issues to manage their local educational challenges. That makes teachers succeed in supporting their students’ school careers. Viggo refers to the open-door policy and a strong and clear leadership setting definite aims for their management. The process of professional identity construction under the new regime seems here to be more openly connected to the impact of independence and control, freedom, and responsibility within the educational practice. The teachers' self-reflection and action are placed within these complex elements of possibilities and restraints.

Discussion

In this study teacher knowledge and identity are considered narrative phenomena. I find the teachers narrating by positioning themselves in different ways at the same time (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999). The informants seem to select themes according to some wide positional aims, in relation to how they
perceive both the actual and concrete discourse and the discourses within wider contexts of official and collegial expectations (cf. Fairclough, 2008; Søreide, 2007). They construct whom they are and also how they want to be known. In narrative interpretation, according to Riessman and Speedy (2007), identity is always a co-construct, a result of social interaction and action. The dominant narratives of teachers as such operate as a form of narrative control in the sense that they ultimately construct certain preferred narrative identities (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000).

Teachers’ stories show how prevalent school discourses have gained access to their professional agenda. Connelly and Clandinin (1996) point out how these contexts express teachers’ lives. The study reflects the professional ambitions to realize an inclusive school. Since discourses are socially influenced, they raise different issues and power relations. Fairclough and Wodak (1997) put it this way:

Discourse is not produced without context and cannot be understood without taking context into consideration... Discourses are always connected to other discourses which were produced earlier, as well as those which are produced synchronically and subsequently (p. 277).

Teachers exercise their profession within the framework of legislation and regulations, and the way the school’s activities are organized. When teachers in inclusive schools position themselves as professional teachers, they are supposed to have the competence and knowledge to satisfy the learners’ various needs. Traditionally, and to a certain extent even today, special educational knowledge and practice are considered to be expertise knowledge outside the ordinary teacher’s domain (Nordahl & Hausstätter, 2009; Nordenbo, 2008; Pihl, 2005). Some teachers, like Hedvig and Martin, have added special education competence to their ordinary teacher education.

Identity construction is analyzed from the perspective of teachers managing student diversity, and their reflections on their professional role, knowledge, and challenges. This raises questions about suppositions, ambitions, wishes, and hopes. In practice teachers are frequently confronted by complex tasks within the areas of diversity and adapted education. As Heggen (2008) claims, the construction of professional identity occurs within the interaction between experience and narrative. When teachers tell their professional story they use narrative, editing techniques to position themselves in specific situations, and they emphasize different aspects of teacher challenges.

The main differences between teachers are related, according to Nordahl and Hausstätter (2009), to how they realize inclusive education. This study does not say anything definitive about the extent to which international and global perspectives on education directly affect teacher awareness, knowledge, and practices. The data does not provide a clear picture of possible controversies regarding teacher attention to basic skills, internationally comparable skills, and on an inclusive school for all, but gives some suggestions. Critical utterances reflect a wider public discourse on how New Public Management is changing Norwegian education and the teacher. The data questions how these differences influence teachers’ construction of identity, and the study gives an impression of autonomous teachers despite external requirements, provided that local school leaders facilitate and communicate clear goals of inclusion.

It is interesting to explore how teacher construction of identity and their professional work refer to a complex set of discourses. Globalization and individualization combined with ideals of efficiency and man-
agement by objectives contribute to the emphasis upon student performance concerning specific knowledge and skill (Apple, 2006; Bush et al., 2001). There has long been an ideological debate in England about the cost effectiveness of public services (Day & Gu, 2010), and concerns have also been voiced in Norway that some students’ educational support will concentrate on what might pay off as test results in a competitive situation between schools as test results (Marsdal, 2011). Given the increasing number of segregating measures for students with special needs (cf. Nordahl & Hausstätter, 2009) this may indicate that professional identity among teachers must accommodate an apparently contradictory public discourse on the teacher’s mandate; on the one hand, about inclusion goals, on the other about performance, effectiveness, and among schools competing in regard to national and international tests. This is only partly visible in the narratives, not an overall trait.

According to Colnerud (2006), the teaching profession is distinguished from other professions in two ways. While most professionals interact with their clients individually, the teachers interact with students collectively. Furthermore, they are responsible for what students do, not only for their own behaviour (Colnerud, 2006). This entails a kind of occupational vulnerability, obviously playing a central role that impacts the interviewees’ self-image as teachers. Vibeke and Bjarne talk explicitly, but in quite different ways, about how they experience a sort of vulnerability when students need special support. The negotiations within an organizational and ideological structure of education are characterized by elements of support and staff collectivism.

Despite a common concern over meaningful challenges in giving students a fair chance to learn and manage school, the material shows interesting differences, reflecting perspectives on personal experiences and agendas, including teacher knowledge and management, collective perspectives of collaboration and support, and also an institutional or developmental perspective concerning improvement of inclusive teaching.

The interview material uncovers different positions among teachers. Some teachers try to draw demarcation lines between ordinary and special students, between teaching and upbringing, and between ordinary and special tasks when explaining their individual experience of teaching. This refers to Bjarne, who longs for “ordinary teaching activities”, and Svein, who dreams of an “ordinary teacher role according to (his) competence”. Vibeke, on the other hand, struggles “not to get bogged down when things get turbulent”. The utterances reflect research on inclusion that point out differences in how teachers realize inclusive education (Nordahl & Hausstätter, 2009). It may be claimed that they are really trying to do their best. The conditions to succeed depend, according to the teachers, on demands, explicit expectations, and the room for flexibility within school organization.

The teacher narratives in this study contain collective perspectives related both to students and colleagues. The narratives are interpreted as related to each individual’s social and normative surroundings. Bjarne looks forward to a classroom situation where “disturbing elements” are eliminated. Vibeke, on the other hand, identifies with her task of achieving an inclusive and profitable learning situation for all students. She appreciates the collaboration with other professionals to complete her mission. Hedvig looks for acceptance and recognition, and wants to use her special competence for the benefit of other teachers. She feels uncomfortable being responsible for segregating students from their classes. Gergen (2005) maintains that when individuals talk about
identity, the narrative about challenges in relation to cooperation parties is seen as a product of social interaction. This makes professional narratives dynamic. They are flexible as part of a social interaction between individuals who confirm each other, according to Gergen (2005).

Reality can never be entirely frozen, because it is constantly being re-construed when people interact with each other (Gergen, 2005). When teachers narrate their identities, their utterances are part of a meaning context that is both socially construed and part of confirmation processes connected to various forms of identity markers. Several of the interviewees note that it is important to have an institutional system of ambitions, support and collective identity, if they should be able to manage the role as teachers today. The school staff, the public discourses on school topics, and the teachers’ union all distribute teachers’ professional narratives about identity and responsibilities. The utterances are linked to broader social scripts or local expectations (cf. Bakhtin, 1981). Moreover, it is still a tradition to consider special education as teaching beyond ordinary class and outside the teacher’s remit. Reflections on the teaching role may be interpreted as efforts to create meaning and coherence in their professional life (cf. Gubrium & Holstein 1998).

Nevertheless, this study points out a number of factors that seem to have important impact on teacher identity construction and educational practice. Vik lower secondary school, with student recruitment marked by low education, unrewarding occupations and low-income families, has made some successful choices to realize both inclusion aims and adjusted learning strategies. Appropriate support, combined with the teacher independence and freedom to use professional insight and judgment builds a professional collective attitude within the school. They share visions, actions, and relationships based on a clear understanding of the current context and actual challenges. That seems to promote collective agency among teachers, professional knowledge development, and to sustain their capacities to teach to the best of their abilities (cf. Day & Gu, 2010).

As much research literature demonstrates, teacher reflections and identity construction are saturated by both internal and external discourses on school effectiveness, basic knowledge, social divergences, and various expectations (Day & Gu, 2010). Even if most students in Norway are physically inside the school gate, teacher language, practice, and school culture feed the expectation that student diversity is supposed to be addressed by different types of professionals, teachers, and special educators. In general, alternative learning areas both inside and outside school have become even more common in Norwegian education in recent years. This is happening in spite of relatively strong political and public inclusive discourses. Examining teacher narratives more closely seems to reveal substantial tension between inclusion and marginalization strategies, between the exercise of influence and knowledge, and also between the profession’s individual and collective perspectives on student diversity, educational ambitions, and teacher identity and practice.

According to dominating discourses among teachers, such as demands for assessment and documentation, and the widespread and growing educational dilemmas that arise due to inclusion, teachers may need an official type of discourse meant for the world outside school, and another more day-to-day discourse between colleagues within school. Obviously several student needs and behaviour really do challenge the image of a successful teacher, making him/her vulnerable. Discourses within a specific school context can, however, provide some
general opportunities to both negotiate and develop a robust professional identity and a profession al practice. This seems to be connected to school management and staff consensus on collective values.

Furthermore, a school culture of supportiveness seems to give trust and courage. On the other hand, restricted or insufficient support and lack of intrinsic and extrinsic recognition seem to evoke the need to defend a narrow role and limit teacher identification of school tasks. When confronted with new demands and placed under stronger control, the teaching profession seems to become more explicitly aware of the limits of the teacher’s role.

The national tests have made teachers more aware of adapted teaching as well, both challenging them to vary their teaching for students with different needs, but also probably activating a procedural strategy for moving specific students out of the ordinary classroom. This study reveals tendencies towards exclusion mechanisms and segregation processes, apparent in the professional discourses. In addition to the even more dominant special pedagogic discourse, several teachers seem to protect themselves in different ways against failures, trying to enhance or maintain the image of a successful teacher.

What are the connections, and why do teachers construct their identity and meaning as professionals the way they do? This study has pointed out a connection but also a disjunction between outer and inner expectations and requirements for teacher management abilities. The study has focused on some key perspectives, but has also raised a number of questions about teachers and professional teams in school. In spite of considerable and rich access to teacher research in European and Nordic countries, we will most likely need further investigation into the institutional, professional, and personal factors involved when adapted education is at stake.

Notes

1 This article refers to six teachers from five schools. Three lower secondary schools (l.s.): Vik l.s.: Vibeke and Viggo, Solhaug l.s.: Svein, and Bjørnevik l.s.: Bjarne. Two upper secondary schools (u.s.): Hoff u.s.: Hedvig, and Myren u.s.: Martin. All are fictive names.

References


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