Editorial 3-4/2015

From Standardized Tests to Teaching and Beyond

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We have chosen to merge issues 3 and 4 of the journal, both of which raise many important questions for contemporary education. Issue 3 starts with theme testing which has become a common practice in schools. Many have criticized this system, and there are many good arguments supporting this criticism. Although much of this criticism is legitimate, there is also good reason to look into other matters relating to the testing of pupils. In the article “Vidensformers legitimitet i skolepraksis”, Kristine Kousholt has chosen to examine whether standardized tests can be perceived as meaningful for school practice.

In the next article – “A policy on the shelf or a map for future action?” – Ragnhild Sandvoll addresses other issues of importance for education. What happens when strategic plans are implemented in higher education? How are these plans assessed by those who make use of them, particularly with regard to criteria relating to teaching and learning? Do the plans lead to improvements in these areas or do they allow other activities in practice? Of course we know that schoolchildren spend a lot of time at school, and most of this time is spent learning in the classroom. However, what happens in the schoolyard during their breaks? In her article “Skolgården som socialt rum”, Maria Rönnlund examines this question with the help of Henri Lefebvre’s concept of space.

Moreover, issues around gender have always been interesting in relation to school practice. This is apparent in Maria Zackariasson’s article “Handling gender and sexuality issues in
schools”. The article deals with the following problem: What students learn about gender and sexuality in their university education does not necessarily correspond with the views of their school mentors during their periods of teaching practice. Thus, students often face a dilemma as they have to relate to opposite perspectives regarding aspects of gender and sexuality related to school. At the same time, some pupils tend to form stereotypical images of what is regarded as feminine and masculine. One may, for example, associate emotions with femininity, and so on. Similar problems are found in the last article of issue 3 – “Becoming a woman and a man”. In this article, the authors Auli Arvola Orlander, Sharon Todd and Per-Olof Wickman challenge stereotypical images of femininity and masculinity and aim to re-imagine pupils’ conceptions of femininity and masculinity.

Issue 4 begins with Anne Kristin Røn sen’s and Knut Steinar Engelsen’s article “Endret vurderingskompetanse i praksis – utvikling av profesjonskompetanse i klasserommets”. The article is concerned with two concepts that are emphasized to a great extent in modern education, namely assessment and learning. Key questions are explored in the article, including: How should teachers assess students? And not least, how to assess learning? Teaching, on the other hand, seems to have been marginalized in modern education. In the article “Whatever happened to teaching?”, Carl-Anders Säfström, Niclas Månsson and Ali Osman argue that teaching has been given less emphasis in, and even been excluded from, educational discourses. Even though teaching is a natural part of educational activities, it seems teaching has more or less been replaced by learning, specifically a psychological conception of learning. According to the authors, it is therefore time to re-invent teaching as a liberating force in education, thus making it possible to regain a focus on emancipation and change. These two important aspects are present in teaching but absent in learning, according to the authors.

Regarding open-ended questions, educational literature includes many examples of open-ended questions being preferable to closed-ended questions, at least in certain contexts. However, what exactly is an open-ended question? Moreover, are the questions we believe to be open-ended really open? Such questions are implicitly present in Emilia Andersson-Bakken’s article “Når åpne spørsmål ikke er åpne”. The article leads us to understand that teachers may think they ask open-ended questions, in which the pupils are given choices, but the so-called open-ended questions are actually closed-ended questions; in other words, the teacher is controlling the pupils’ responses to a far greater extent than she or he might realize.

The last two articles are closely related to education policy issues. In the article “Möjligheterna att bedöma, följa upp och effektutvärdera utbildnings- och fortbildningspolitiken”, Erik Mellander claims that the formulation of education policy documents creates a number of problems and challenges. A specific challenge is that many politicians do not have the time to finalize their political projects. Therefore, Mellander proposes a series of measures to solve such problems. Among others, he points out that politicians should work more closely with researchers. In the last article – “Ideological Dilemmas in Leisure-time Centers” – children’s leisure-time centers in Sweden are discussed. The authors Linnea Holmberg and Mats Börjes son take a critical look at the concept of “meaningfulness”, which is often used concerning children’s activities. The analysis is inserted into the framework of democracy-authority dilemma, in which meaningfulness – according to the authors – more or less emerges as a rhetorical resource.
As the reader of Nordic Studies in Education can see, issues 3 and 4 include many educational issues that are highly relevant to current educational debates. We hope that the different views presented in the various contributions will trigger the reader's curiosity and interest in continuing the various debates. Finally, it is a great honor to announce the upcoming 44th Congress of the Nordic Educational Research Association. The theme of the congress is “Social justice, equality and solidarity in education” and will be held on the 9th - 11th March 2016 in Helsinki, Finland.

Happy reading and let’s meet at NERA 2016!