Teaching in the age of accountability: Restrained by school culture?

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Abstract

In this paper we explore how 'teaching communication' in the classroom is connected to school culture. In the age of accountability the outcome focus force to the forefront a 'blame game' which either blame students' achievements on the teachers and teacher education, or the students and their socio-economic background. We argue that to succeed with teaching and learning is dependent on the school culture more than the single teacher or the students' background. School culture is understood as attitudes, communication, student focus and engagement. Teaching communication in this paper is studied as teachers' and students' talk about subject matter in whole-class teaching. We explore how different school cultures give students different opportunities to experience meaning from teaching communication. The perspective on meaning is derived from Bildung-centred didactics.

By using qualitative comparative case method in Norwegian Lower Secondary schools we find three different types of 'teaching communication' typical for different school cultures: 'Dialogic teaching communication', 'storytelling teaching communication' and 'reproducing teaching communication'. The school culture with the 'dialogic' variant is characterised by trust and reciprocity, making students' experiencing meaning a possibility.

Keywords

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1. Introduction

In the 'age of accountability' some of the main topics of educational policy are the implementation of competency standards and high stake assessment, represented by international comparative studies of student achievement, such as PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS (Mullis, Martin, Foy, & Arora, 2012; Mullis, Martin, Foy, & Drucker, 2012; OECD, 2012). The research field seeks to explain student achievements through statistical correlation between school results and students' socio-economic backgrounds (Coleman et al., 1966), factors within schools, by means of quantitative research and mixed methods (Bliss, Firestone, & Richards, 1991; Sammons et al., 2006), teacher effectiveness (Chingos & Peterson, 2011; Noor, Aman, Mustaffa, & Seong, 2010), teacher professionalism, teacher organisations and educational leadership (Hargreaves, 2012; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009). This focus results in a 'blame game': Students' achievements are blamed on teachers and teacher education, or the students and their socio-economic background (Khan Al-Daami & Wallace, 2007; Hopmann, 2008; Tanner, 2013). Contrary to the blame game, we chose to focus on how school cultures give students opportunities to experience meaning, which possibly also contributes to students' achievements. We argue that the quality of teaching and learning is dependent on the school culture. More specifically, this paper will show, through an empirical classroom study, how 'teaching communication', defined in this paper as teachers' and students' talk about subject matter in whole-class teaching, gives students different opportunities.

By exploring 'teaching communication' embedded in school culture this paper lifts the communication of content in teaching to the foreground, and studies it in the context of the school. Central to this perspective is also that the content is constructed by teachers and students together, through verbal participation and interpretation of subject matter. To

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investigate the connection between teachers and students utterings on subject matter and the context in which it is embedded, Bildung-centred general didactics (Allgemeine Didaktik) is a fruitful perspective and hence this theoretical perspective is chosen in the study (Midtsundstad, 2010). There are three reasons for this:

Firstly, in general didactic theory all three basic elements in teaching must be considered as a whole: teacher, students and content (Westbury et al., 2000). Didactic reflection regarding one of the three cannot be done without considering the other two. International linguistic research on meaning construction in classroom teaching (Freebody, 2013; Gregory & Michaelis, 2001) and studies of systemic functional linguistics (Halliday & Webster, 2002; Kress, 1976; Martin, 2012; McNaught, Maton, Martin, & Matruglio, 2013), focus mainly on the verbal expressions (content) without considering them from the didactical perspective of teacher-student-content. Studies of questioning techniques (Chin & Osborne), focus mainly on the teacher-perspective, and studies linking talk to individual learning (Lardner, 1989; Mills, 2009; Staab, 1991; Merill, 2002; Parrish, 2009) and subject matter studies (Purdy, 2008; Lloyd, 2008; Tobin & Malone, 1989) focus mainly on learning from the student-perspective. Neither linguistic studies, nor studies of learning, lift to the forefront how 'teaching communication' is constructed in different school cultures. Several studies on school culture focus on the professionals, the students, the organization and the quality of the learning environment (Schon & Teddlie, 2008; Thapa, Cohen, Guffey & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013), but lack the possibility to address how school culture influences the content developed in 'teaching communication'. Hence, the general didactic perspective used in this paper can contribute by connecting content as a joint effort by teacher and students, and its contextual conditions. The contextual conditions affect how and if interpretation and participation takes place in classroom practice.

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Secondly, the understanding of knowledge inherent in the Bildung-centred general didactic perspective on content is unexploited in empirical classroom research. Within Bildung-centred didactics there are many theoretical contributions on how meaning is constructed in teaching, but the field lacks empirical studies available to English-speaking readers (Hillen, Sturm, & Willbergh, 2011; Kim, 2013; Krüger, 2008; Menck, 2010; Meyer, 2007; Midtsundstad & Werler, 2011; Midtsundstad & Willbergh, 2010; Pikkarainen, 2011; Vásquez-Levy, 2002; Westbury, Hopmann, & Riquarts, 2000; Willbergh, 2011, 2015). Hence, this study is an empirical contribution to a tradition dominated by theoretical studies. Further, classroom research also focuses on teaching being the result of teachers and students joint enquiry (Bruner, 1996; Cazden, 1988). The importance of instruction being dialogic, an idea dating back to Socrates, was revived in modern times via the thoughts of Freire, Bakhtin and Vygotsky, and reappeared as empirical classroom research around the turn of the millennium as 'dialogic teaching' (Alexander, 2000, 2001; Lefstein & Snell, 2014; Linden & Renshaw, 2004; Littleton & Howe, 2010; Mercer & Littleton, 2007). Dialogic teaching is characterized by classroom talk being collective, reciprocal, supportive, cumulative and purposeful, seeking the 'perfect marriage of pedagogical form and content' (Alexander, 2001). However, according to Alexander (2001), the formal aspect of classroom communication seems to dominate over the content-aspects in theories of dialogic teaching. The Bildung-centered general didactic perspective used in this paper, can contribute to the field of dialogic teaching by theorizing on the content aspect of teaching as a question of meaning: From a Bildung-centred perspective, the teachers' primary task is to interpret teaching content or matter (Bildungsinhalt) in such a way so that it can give opportunities for students to experience meaning (educative substance/Bildungsinhalt) (Hopmann, 2007; Klafki, 2000a). Furthermore, from the Bildung-perspective, connecting teaching content with

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students' life-worlds is crucial (Herbart & Stern, 2002). Classroom interpretations of subject matter are unique in every classroom (Aasebø, 2011; Willbergh, 2015), when students' interpretations of subject matter, based on their own experience, are uttered in classroom talk. It is, however, essential in this theoretical construct that neither the teachers, nor anyone else, can know how each student interprets the content or whether it is meaningful for that student. This is a necessary risk in the teaching process when educating for human autonomy (Biesta, 2014; Westbury et al., 2000).

Thirdly, the Bildung-perspective represents a critical perspective on accountability, a major challenge for contemporary schooling. From a Bildung-perspective questions have been raised as to whether competency standards fail to cater to the social, political, emotional, moral and aesthetic abilities of students (Hörmann, 2011; Klafki, 2000b; Meyer, Prenzel, & Hellekamps, 2008) and whether standardised testing is based on 'one specific meaning of a given matter', namely the right answer to the task, which is problematic from a Bildung-centred didactic perspective (Hopmann, 2007). Bildung brings the inner life of students to the fore, while testing measurable external, observable achievements in a competitive environment (Hyland, 1991; Standish, 2012; Diamond, 2012; Hopmann, 2007, 2008, 2013; Hopmann, Brinek, & Retzl, 2007; Langfeldt, Elstad, & Hopmann, 2008; Tanner, 2013; Willbergh, 2015).

The study's research question is: How do different school cultures give different opportunities for students to experience meaning from 'teaching communication' from a Bildung-centred didactic perspective? To explore this question we analyse qualitative data from case studies in Norwegian lower secondary schools. Firstly we analyse which forms of 'teaching communication' is found in whole-class talk on subject matter. Secondly we analyse and compare the school culture in the schools, to explore how the school cultures

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are connected to the forms of 'teaching communication'. Finally we conclude and discuss the implication of the Bildung-centred didactic perspective, related to achievement and school culture.

2. Theory

2.1 Bildung-centred didactics

The German general didactic tradition, or *Allgeimeine Didaktik* (Hillen, Sturm & Willbergh, 2011; Klafki, 2001; Midtsundstad & Willbergh, 2010; Westbury et al., 2000), was established as the leading professional language of teachers and teacher education in the nineteenth century in Germany and the Nordic countries (Hopmann, 2007). The institutionalisation of schooling promoted the need for autonomous teachers to adapt the national curriculum to the local schools. Hence, teachers should interpret what significance the content expressed in the curriculum (matter/Bildungsinhalt) can mean to their unique students ('meaning'/Bildungsgehalt) (Klafki, 2000a). The teachers are to connect subject matter to the students' daily lives, experiences and cultural and societal questions that concern them. Schooling is about preparing for responsible adulthood, formulated, for example, by Klafki as self-determination, co-determination and solidarity (Klafki, 2001). In classroom talk, references, examples and concepts in interpreting the content in a way probably familiar to the students are important as they increase the possibility of students experiencing meaning: of understanding that school knowledge is focused on their participation in society (Willbergh, 2011). 'Meaning' in the perspective of this study is limited to talk on subject matter: 'teaching communication'. Furthermore, if a multitude of different interpretations of subject matter is uttered in whole-class talk, this study argues that the possibility of students experiencing meaning increases: A broadly nuanced picture of a given subject matter increases the possibility of finding one's own interpretation, especially if students participate

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in interpreting the content, as peers know each other's life-world in another way than the teachers (Midtsundstad, 2011). Hence, from what is said in the classroom (what examples, words and references are used in explaining the content) and who says it how (whether the students are participating with their interpretations) the different forms of 'teaching communication' create different opportunities for students to experience meaning.

It is important to point out that this understanding of meaning does not aim to grasp what is in the individual student's mind. From the Bildung perspective this would also contradict its intentions: Bildung-centred didactics is a pedagogical tradition driven by the 'interest' of the freedom of the students (Saeverot, 2013). To educate for autonomy, students must be treated as autonomous. Bildung cannot be forced, as the central idea is the free will of the learner (Humboldt, 2000). The understanding of teaching content inherent in the pair concept of matter-meaning is based on an understanding of knowledge stating that all teaching content can be interpreted into many different meanings (Hopmann, 2007; Klafki, 2000a; Schwab, 1971). Hence, the outcome of teaching is unpredictable, and it should be unpredictable, as in the opposite case one would override the judgmental power of the student.

The concept of 'teaching communication' in this study is inspired from Niklas Luhmann's concept of communication (Luhmann, 2000) and further developed in a school theoretical framework based on the Allgemeine Didaktik tradition (Midtsundstad, 2010). Communication in a teaching context is here understood as the relationship between teachers' choice of content (what) and their choice of how to communicate this content (how). The students in class explore this relationship between what and how and the question is how they interpret the content and choose to understand or not (Keiding, 2003).

Hence, 'teaching communication' is a matter of how teachers and students cooperatively express subject matter (Midtsundstad, 2011). The understanding of the concept of communication gives possibilities to explore the connection between students' participation and school cultures.

2.2 School culture

The possibility to explore this connection is dependent on how we define school culture. The concept has historically been fraught with conceptual complexity and confusion (Van Houtte 2005; Schon & Teddlie, 2008). Here we understand school culture as a complex construct comprised of four dimensions: Professional orientations, organizational structures, the quality of the learning environment and student centred focus (Schoen & Teddlie, 2008, p. 141). We use these dimensions to develop four analytical concepts: 'communication style', 'student role', 'professional attitude' and 'student focus'. These aspects of school culture are chosen because they are supposed to have bearing on students' achievements (Schoen & Teddlie, 2008, p. 146).). They also are chosen because how the analytical concepts interrelate reveals the school's values, and this is essential to analyses of school culture (Schein, 1982).

'Communication style' describes the communication which is typical for all levels in the school organization (Stoll & Fink, 1996; Schon & Teddlie, 2008). Research on school organisations documents the relationships between school and classroom conditions (Ainscow, Barrs & Ainscow, 1998; Hargreaves, 2014). This means that the 'communication style' of the organisation most likely will influence the possibilities of 'teaching communication'.

The 'student role' is analysed to find characteristics of what is expected of students in the school organisation. The student role is developed according to the quality of the

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learning environment, and this analytical concept reveals aspects of the school culture (Hargreaves, 2014). It is documented that a positive school climate has a powerful influence on the motivation to learn (Martin & Dowson, 2009; Thapa et.al. 2013), and thus how the students develop their student role. The characteristics of the school's student role will probably influence the joint development of content in 'teaching communication'.

The 'professional attitude' is focused in this paper to explore how the professionals relate to what's common and how to cooperate in the school organisation. Research on this topic shows for example how professionals commit and participate in activities initiated in school and how the professionals as a group understand and commit to the schools expectations (Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace & Thomas, 2006; Hopkins, Stringfield, Harris, Stoll & Mackay, 2014). The 'professional attitude' toward common decisions and projects can influence how unified the school culture can appear and most likely influence the form of 'teaching communication'.

'Student focus' is the analytical concept which point at the professionals' collective focus on students learning, possibilities and achievements. Research has documented the benefit of the professionals' effort and support to students' achievements (Schoen & Teddlie, 2008, p. 140). Research also point to the positive effect of schools with common student focus (York-Barr & Duke, 2004; Clark, Triggs & Nielsen, 2014). How the teachers are being supportive, reveals how the teachers direct their 'student focus'. How they choose to support the students might influence how they can make 'teaching communication' a collective effort, and hence this is focused in this paper.

In addition to the four analytical concepts and what values they reveal, we also argue that school culture is influenced by how the professionals perceive the expectations from the local environment (Goodson, 2001; Midtsundstad 2010). 'Teaching communication' is

thus connected to how the school culture is constructed in different schools according to their local environment. The analytical concepts will be used to analyse the focus group discussions and will reveal how different school cultures give different opportunities for students to experience meaning through 'teaching communication'.

3. Data collection and methodological considerations

The empirical study was carried out as a multiple-case study. According to Stake (2005), a multiple-case study is a study providing insight into an issue (instrumental case study) extended to several cases. Each school is considered a case, chosen from the schools' and the counties' score on national tests. The sample consists of two lower secondary schools from a county with high scores, and two from a county with low scores, on national tests. The two schools in each county were selected from schools which perform lower than expected and better than expected according to municipal scores on statistical variables, usually decisive for schools' test results: Parents' level of education, mothers' employment and the number of single-parent families (Bakken, 2004; Markussen, Frøseth, & Sandberg, 2011; Hassan, 2009). The data was collected by observation of 'teaching communication', interviews of teachers and headmasters, and focus group discussions with teachers, and is hermeneutically analysed and interpreted.

Two teachers from each school were selected for observation, making a total of eight teachers. The qualitative observation of 'teaching communication' was conducted as non-participant observation. Pure non-participant observation is impossible from an epistemological point of view (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1987). According to Fangen (2004), non-participant observation often makes the observed person uncomfortable and stressed, which in turn leads to the observer effect: the observed person behaves in an unusual

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manner because he or she is being watched. However, Fangen mentions classroom observation as an example of contexts with formal and predetermined structures which can reduce the discomfort of the participants. Two researchers followed each teacher in lessons in academic subjects over a week, which comprise several classes and grades.

Whole-class talk was chosen as the context of the observation because the context provides opportunities for a variety of interpretations to be expressed and for a variety of ways of expressing them. The observation part of the study uses an inductive device, even though the descriptions in some sense always will be theory-based (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This means that the theoretical foundation of the study and value-ladeness of facts mainly emerge in the process of categorisation and analysis of the data. The observation data of 'teaching communication' emerges from the recording of all teachers' subjects matter-utterances (instructions, information, explanations, comments, questions, and answers to students' initiatives) and students' answers, questions and comments regarding subject matter. Most of the talk is recorded exactly, while some teacher's lectures and some students' activities (for example reading aloud from textbook) were reported in summaries. In addition the sequences in the lessons were described (for example introduction, presentation of subject matter, discussion, interruption and so on). Finally, an observation schema was used to record the frequencies and variation of students' participation in 'teaching communication'. The observation material includes from 12 to 19 relevant lessons at each school. In the end of the week the observed teachers were interviewed. The semi-structured interview was partly about issues we had observed in the teacher's lessons, partly about their teaching in general. The interview took about 45 minutes and was tape-recorded and transcribed.

To explore the school culture the teaching staffs have collectively participated in focus-group discussions or group discussions, a concept used by Bohnsack (2004). When the discussion group belongs to 'the same milieu or the same "interpretative" community', its structural expressions can be considered as *'represented* and updated in discourse, and thereby constantly *re*produced' (Bohnsack, 2004, p. 216). The issues for discussion have been teaching, students, national tests, projects the schools were involved in, and the school's relationship to the local community. Each of the issues was introduced by one main question. The discussion between the teachers emerged from the questions, sometimes also from new questions emerging during discussion. The focus-group discussion took about an hour and was also tape-recorded and transcribed. The complete data material consists of observation records from 62 lessons, 8 teacher interviews, 5 headmaster interviews (2 at one school due to recent change of headmaster) and 8 focus-group discussions. In addition, we have notes from discussions with teaching staff from three return visits to the schools when we presented some preliminary analysis.

The analysis of the data is inspired by Phillips & Schweisfurth's (2006, p. 100) structure for comparative inquiry. The observation data of 'teaching communication' in each school is interpreted by developing characteristics on the content of the communication influenced by the Bildung perspective (teachers' and students' nuancing of subjects matter, references to students' experiences, local community, social issues and so on). Participation was analysed through teachers' inviting students' to participate in talk on subject matter (questions, asking for comments and so on), students' responses and initiatives. Then we defined and generated three concepts of 'teaching communication', which is described in 4.1. The concepts are used to describe how 'teaching communication' appears in the schools.

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Finally, the school culture is analysed from the focus-group discussions. The four analytical concepts of school culture are used to analyse the schools individually: The 'professional attitude' affects the 'student focus' and 'communications style' which also affect the 'student role'. How the four dimensions are pieced together in each school is compared, and thus each school's typical values are revealed (Schon & Teddlie, 2008). We also analyse how the professionals perceive the expectations from their local environment in order to understand the dimensions in the individual school's context.

Comparison does not give attention to thick descriptions; instead it focuses on some few attributes. The relationship between 'teaching communication' and school culture is according to Stake's (2005) perspective on qualitative case studies, a description of sequences or events which are 'interrelated and contextually bound, purposive but questionably determinative' (p 449). The interrelation between teaching communication and school culture in this study is considered as a meaning structure (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 1994), which has to be assessed through criteria of coherence and the possibility for being recognised and applied in new contexts.

4. Findings: 'teaching communication' in schools

Derived from the data on whole-class talk on subject matter we found three concepts of 'teaching communication'. The three concepts combine the two aspects of communication; the content aspect ('what') and the speech aspect ('how'). The content aspect of 'teaching communication', as adapted or expressed curriculum ('what do they talk about'), is considered to have more or less 'diverse' or 'homogeneous' interpretations. The speech aspect ('how do they talk and who is talking')' is considered to be more or less 'conversing' or 'lecturing'. While all the three forms of 'teaching communication' are found in all the four

schools we studied, the comparison of the schools reveals differences which makes it possible to characterise three of the schools by different forms of 'teaching communication'. The fourth school, in which different forms of 'teaching communication' exist side by side, but strictly separate and dependent of the individual teacher, will be brought in to underline the conclusion about school culture. The characterisations of the schools are based on 'teaching communication' across different academic subjects. In our study we have no reason to address differences between academic subjects, because we have found different forms of teaching communication across topics and subjects.

4.1. 'Dialogic teaching communication'

The combination of diverse interpretations of content and conversational speech, gives what we call 'dialogic teaching communication'. Diverse interpretations of subject matter contain references to students' own lives, experiences and understandings, as well as cultural and societal questions concerning students' current or future affairs. Conversational speech means that students take part in 'teaching communication' with their opinions, experiences, reasonings, examples, alternatives, interpretations, imaginations or reflections on the subject matter. 'Dialogic teaching communication' also provides opportunities for the teacher to further develop students' contributions to the subject matter, by repeating, discussing or exploring the contributions.

School A is characterised by 'dialogic teaching communication': A wide range of interpretations are raised in 'teaching communication' by teachers and students. Sometimes the items of diversity of interpretation in subject matter topics are single utterances within sequences characterised by other kinds of 'teaching communication', and sometimes they are long dialogic sequences. Teachers invite the students to interpret the subject matter and students respond by contributing. In the example below from a lesson in mathematics

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on calculation of electricity-use, the teacher introduces some tasks by showing the first one on the Smart-board; a graph of various power consumption-rates at different times of the day. The students are given some time to look at the task before the teacher starts to talk about it.

> *Teacher*: What does the graph show?
>
> *Student:* Consumption is increasing when they get up in the morning, doing the morning chores, making food and so on, and then they go to work. They're probably going to sleep at that point there.
>
> *Student*: At that point they're probably doing their laundry.
>
> Teacher: Why does the power consumption decrease at this point?
>
> *Student:* Perhaps they turn off the lights?
>
> *Student*: Perhaps they light candles?
>
> *Teacher*: When does this family go to bed?
>
> *Student*: When the power consumption is low.
>
> *Teacher:* You can look at the time here, at eleven o'clock, it's a bit too early.
>
> *Student*: They started a fire in the fireplace at eight, and then they turned off the panel heaters.
>
> Teacher: They turned off the panel heaters, could be that. Do you think it's summer or winter?
>
> *Student*: Winter. If it was summer the power consumption would have been much less (*10th grade*).

The subject matter is explored by the teacher's questioning and the students' willingness to participate. The students respond by using their imaginations of family life, a family's

ordinary activities through the cycle of the day, and even cycles of the year. Hence, the students interpret the subject matter from their personal experience, creativity and reasons, which can make the subject matter (calculating power-consumption) meaningful. At school A we also find that the teacher challenges the students' utterances and initiates further imaginings, as she does above when she replies 'it's a bit too early'. Further, the teacher applies the students' way of reasoning in the question, and uses the students' words later in the discussion.

'Dialogic teaching communication' depends on students' responses to teacher's invitations to participate, which makes it possible to develop the subject matter together. At school A many of the students are willing to engage in the conversation. Sometimes the lesson starts with students talking about their own experiences, which makes the rest of the 'teaching communication' taking place a mixture of teacher's comments and questions and students' responses and new initiatives.

4.2 'Storytelling teaching communication'

Diverse interpretations of content and lecturing speech give what we call 'storytelling teaching communication'. Although a diversity of interpretations of subject matter topics is expressed in whole-class talk, the teacher's speech is lecturing, meaning that the diversity of content is mainly expressed by the teacher; what he or she thinks could be relevant to the students, while the students themselves are not participating with their own experience, thoughts or opinions. School B is characterised by 'storytelling teaching communication' as shown in the example below from a Norwegian lesson about drama.

Teacher: Do you know "retro" in any connection?

Student: "Retro".

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Teacher: What do we think about then?

Student: Old things.

Teacher: Old things, yes. "Retro" is when old things from the sixties become cool again. Today when people set up house for the first time, they often buy things from the fifties. Contrary to what we older people do. I visited a friend of mine and she didn't have a kitchen. She had moved into an apartment with kitchen cupboards and fixtures that were made in the fifties. She advertised in the paper that people could have the kitchen if they came and removed it. She received 30 inquiries. It was quite chaotic without a kitchen, and she hadn't imagined being without the kitchen while I was visiting her. But we just pulled down one of the walls and removed the wood panelling. Retro is like the kitchen becoming modern again. It has nothing to do with games but with the concept retrospective – looking back. In new-Norwegian (one of the two official Norwegian languages) it should be literally like 'sight back' *('skue'),* or literally back sight. A storyteller who tells us what we have been seeing, what we are blabbing about (*10th grade*).

In this example the teacher is asking about the word 'retro'. After connecting it to the students' associations; 'old things'; she interprets the subject matter issue according to her own experience by attempting to use the word in different ways, and by different meanings.

At school B the students are often invited to take part in the interpretation of subject matter. But the students are reluctant and often resist participating in conversational speech. They do not respond or they give answers which seem to indicate resistance, non-interest or random guesses on the right answers, despite the teacher's innumerable attempts to get them involved. When the teacher asks about associations to drama one

student replies by saying 'bad, unintelligible novel', and when the teacher reminds the class about previous teaching on the subject at hand, nobody says they remember.

The reciprocity which is necessary for a conversational speech is deficient in the whole-class talk on subject matter at school B. Instead 'storytelling teaching communication' takes place. When the conversational speech fails, the teachers still continue on their own and present diverse interpretations of the subject matter, from their own life as well as what *could be* the students' lives or interests.

4.3 *'Reproducing teaching communication'*

Homogenous interpretation of content and conversational speech is referred to as 'reproducing teaching communication'. Homogenous interpretation of content means that interpretations of subject matter expressed has a limited scope: Teachers follow their own script and stick to their own presentation of the content. Few, if any, other interpretations of subject matter are expressed. The conversational speech has IRE-structure (Cazden, 1988), Initiation-Response-Evaluation, appearing to be the most dominating structure of plenary lessons in the classroom (Evaldsson, Lindblad, Sahlström, & Bergquist, 2001). Students mainly participate by answering the teacher's questions, which vary between questions posed to the entire group (anybody who wants to answer) and questions aimed at particular students.

School C is characterised by 'reproducing teaching communication'. The subject matter has a limited scope of interpretation: The content is interpreted by the teacher or the textbook, and when interpretations are uttered in whole-class talk, the scope of interpretations is mostly limited to references to subject matter taught at an earlier stage. The limited scope of interpretation is often followed by emphasising the importance of learning the topic to prepare for upcoming tests. The use of students' experiences and

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interpretations occurs, but more abruptly and randomly and without attempting further exploration. The reproductive nature of the content is obvious in the example below:

Teacher: What did Napoleon do when he saw that the day was lost?

Student: He returned to Paris.

Teacher: Exactly… next question… how do the other people respond to that?

Student: *(: indiscernible*)

Teacher: Yes, they ally… who is the one who takes power?

Student: Louis XVIII.

Teacher: What happens to Napoleon?... more hands!... what happens to Napoleon?... it rarely happens nowadays.

Student: He's exiled.

Teacher: He's exiled to the island of Elba…. read some more… as quiet as a mouse… afterwards you'll get another piece of paper from me (8th grade).

The teacher is constantly asking for facts or procedures and evaluates the students' responses, as in the IRE-structure. The 'reproducing teaching communication' here repeats subject matter from previous lessons, textbooks or tasks. Additionally, the teacher also frequently asks questions about students' learning process or level of difficulty, like 'do you get it', 'how many understood this' or 'is it difficult to understand'. Questions from students are usually posed and included in the IRE-structure as questions about facts or asking for the teacher's assessment of students' comprehension of the facts. Sometimes questions are answered by another student before the answer is revealed and evaluated by the teacher. Students' experiences or interpretations are rarely questioned, and when they are, it

happens more abruptly and randomly, and without attempting to encourage further exploration.

At school C the questions are sometimes posed to all the students one by one, and sometimes to students who want to answer. The first case often means that almost all the students are invited to participate during a single lesson. This may explain why school C has the highest score on students' participation compared to the other schools.

4.4 'Teaching communication' and meaning

From a Bildung-centred didactic perspective 'dialogic teaching communication' provides students with opportunities to experience meaning. 'Dialogic teaching communication' is the product of a joint effort by teachers and students, opening opportunities for students to experience meaning through peers sharing their experiences and opinions; a valuable aspect of 'teaching communication' as peers know each other's life-worlds in another way than the teachers do. On the content-side a multitude of interpretations are uttered in whole-class talk possibly relevant to the life-worlds and experiences of the students. References to social and cultural questions are also displayed, giving opportunities for students to prepare for societal participation. The diverse interpretations of subject matter displayed can be interpreted as an understanding of knowledge indicating that teaching content can be interpreted into many different meanings.

On the contrary, 'reproducing teaching communication', where subject matter is displayed as 'homogenous' and it appears as if knowledge and content are considered to have only one, or a few, legitimate interpretations, appears to have a limited content-aspect. 'Storytelling teaching communication' can be characterised by diverse interpretations of

content, but references, examples and concepts interpreting subject matter are mainly displayed by teachers' talk.

On the speech-side 'storytelling communication' can thus be considered as an expression of the teacher's professional use of judgmental power to interpret and explain subject matter in a way meaningful to his or her students (Westbury et al., 2000), catering to the understanding of knowledge inherent in the pair-concept of matter-meaning (Hopmann, 2007). However, the interpretations uttered are merely the teachers, not the students', and the peer-participation remains an untapped resource. In 'reproducing teaching communication' the conversational style of speech supplies few opportunities for students to experience meaning even though they are participating in the speech.

Concludingly, 'dialogic teaching communication' is the form of 'teaching communication' which gives the optimal opportunities for students to experience that their own interpretations are welcome, important and relevant, acknowledging them as human beings and thus creating opportunities to exercise autonomy.

4.5 'Teaching communication' and school culture

The Bildung-centred didactic concept 'teaching communication' depends on the participation of both teachers and students, and the relation between them is crucial. We assume that the students' interest in participating depends on how they experience the conditions for doing so. We also have reason to assume that the school culture creates conditions that influence how to teach (Hargreaves, 2004). Bearing this in mind, we will argue that the school culture will provide different opportunities for students to participate in developing the content and experiencing meaning from 'teaching communication'. School culture is analysed by the four interdependent dimensions: 'communication style', 'student role', 'professional attitude' and 'student focus'. Each school is analysed singly and then

compared to the others, to explore the differences between the schools' values. How the professionals perceive the extern expectations from their local environment is also analysed (Goodson 2001; Midtsundstad, 2010). The analyses are compared in order to find how 'teaching communication' is restrained by school culture.

School A, which is characterised by 'dialogic teaching communication', has a local environment with faith in the staff taking equal responsibility for all students. The school has chosen an inclusive form of organisation, by dividing the classes rather than giving individual students special training outside the classroom. They also make an effort to fetch students who do not show up for class. The examples show their 'student focus' and their attitude towards the school community as professionals. School A has a consistent focus on sharing: 'It might have something to do with the culture here'. 'We are not afraid to ask each other (…)'. The teachers share their plans for teaching in different subjects and they share their feelings when they have had a good or bad experience in class: '(…) if a lesson is unsuccessful (...) then it's good to receive comfort from a colleague'. 'This is characterising their communication style'. They also say that they want 'to make it easy for each other' by using the same kind of teaching style. One teacher says: 'It is relatively easy to develop a charismatic way of teaching (…) it makes it easy for yourself, but not for the other teachers (...) that's something you ought to be aware of'. Another goal is to make it easy to be a student in their school and every student is 'our student'. They say: 'The values in this work (...) it helps to make it easier to be a student'.

The culture in school A, which can be characterized as 'unified', includes both teachers and students. All members are expected to participate, and the students also demand to do so which is characteristic for the school's student role. The values revealed

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are characterized by having trust in each other, as expressed by the focus on sharing and making it easy for everyone to be a part of the organisation. Research have for a long time described the importance of trust according to the students achievements and school development (Stoll & Fink, 1996, p. 192), and here we argue that trust also support the students' ability to participate in 'teaching communication' exploring the common content and increasing their possibilities to experience meaning.

School B is characterised by 'storytelling communication'. They have a bad reputation in their local community in dealing with bad behaviour among students. They say: 'Our reputation is that we have big trouble with bad behaviour. We have to work on our reputation'. This affects the teachers' 'student focus and 'professional attitude'. With a new group of challenging students signing up for their school, they are implementing a program to improve the teachers' ability to handle behaviour by having equal rules for all students: '(…) that's our goal I think (...) to become alike. We are not very good at that'. The teachers in school B have until now been describing themselves like this: 'We are not any good at sharing'. 'Many of us are probably closest to private practice (laughs a little)'. This describes both the teachers' common attitude and their communication style. They describe the introduction of the program as a restructuring process: from openness to control. 'We've had much more freedom before, open classrooms, students allowed to be in the school building, the data room, during the recesses. Now they have to stay outside' and the restructuring process changes the school's student role. As a consequence, school B has experienced a change in the relations between teachers and students.

School B's cultural dimensions reveal that their important values are connected to the teachers' ability to control students' behaviour. The conditions for developing good

relations are affected by the changes in the school's expectations of students. The relation between teachers and students can be characterised as insecure and their reaction as one of mistrust. Research has documented that changes in the school organisations influence teachers' ability and student role (D. H. Hargreaves, 2014, p. 705). Here we argue that changes in the school organisation influence the student's willingness to participate and thus the 'teaching communication'.

School C is characterised by 'reproducing teaching communication'. This school experiences severe pressure from the local politicians, as well as the school administration and media (newspaper), to improve students' results on national tests. They have been working hard for some years to improve students' academic results, as well as they explain the achievements as dependent on the students' socio-economic background. They comment the results: 'It depends on the "material" in the classroom'. 'It's not easy for us to change where they come from'. This 'student focus' is seen in several situations in the data. The school has also succeeded in making some improvements on the national-test results. They say: 'The results may point out which students who need courses in reading'. They give individual students special training outside the classroom. This school is proud of its good reputation as a school which deals well with students with behavioural issues: 'I think we are good at allocating students with problems to different classes'. 'They cause many worries out there'. This attitude and way of communicating is characteristic for this school. For some years they have had a challenging group of students due to bad behaviour: 'We are particularly good at getting students with bad behaviour to work, they come from elementary school and we often get the swing of them'. Both achievements and behaviour seem to be part of the teachers' 'student focus' and it is highly valued for the teachers to

have students whom 'comply with the rules' rather than engaged in 'teaching communication'.

Schools C's culture reveals values characterized by obedience, as expressed by the focus on their good reputation on handling bad behaviour, as well as their ability to get students with bad behaviour to work. The relation between teachers and students is dependent by students 'complying with the rules' and limits the possibilities for participation. Research shows that behaviour patterns in organisations influences students' achievements (D. H. Hargreaves, 2014; Sammons, 2006). In addition our analyses show how it influences the possibilities and the quality in how students participate in 'teaching communication'.

School D, which can be characterised by a mixture of different forms of 'teaching communication' strongly dependent of the individual teacher, can support the discussion of school culture. School D participates in several projects aimed to improve various aspects of teaching and learning. The multitude of projects, have resulted in a lack of common focus and teachers are forced to individually choose between them. Lack of common 'focus' and 'attitude' may result in a weaker common school culture in school D compared to the other schools, which also means that 'teaching communication' is less restrained by the school culture. The possibility for students to experience meaning is dependent in the individual teacher, and the students have to relate to different expectations from different teachers.

The analyses of the schools show how the analytical concepts reveal different basic values of school culture. 'Trust', 'control' and 'obedience' are values influencing the relation between teachers and students and thus the 'teaching communication'. This connection gives us the possibilities to answer the research question.

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5. Conclusion and discussion

The paper's research question was: How do different school cultures give different opportunities for students to experience meaning from 'teaching communication' from a Bildung-centred didactic perspective?

We have already concluded that 'dialogical teaching communication', with a multitude of interpretations of content and opportunities for students to contribute to the various interpretations, is the form of 'teaching communication' providing students with opportunities to experience meaning. Students' opportunities to experience meaning from 'reproducing teaching communication', and 'storytelling teaching communication', is limited from a Bildung-centred didactic perspective.

Research supports the importance of the school culture for school improvement, but it focuses either on school leaders, teachers, or student's possibilities and performances (Thapa et.al, 2013). We argue that the possibilities for the students to experience meaning in 'teaching communication' is connected with the quality of the school culture. The analysis indicates that schools which are dominated by 'dialogic teaching communication' is connected to a school culture of 'trust', 'storytelling teaching communication' is connected to a school culture of 'control' and 'reproducing teaching communication' is connected to a school culture of 'obedience'. Schools with a 'unified' culture based on trust gives the best conditions for 'dialogic teaching communication'. When 'obedience' characterizes the school culture, the content is chosen by the teacher, and the speech act is performed on the teacher's premises. This limits the students' participation and possibilities to develop the

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content. When 'control' characterizes the school culture, the teacher is left with the responsibility to develop the content. The school culture restrains in this way the students' possibilities to experience meaning through 'teaching communication'.

This study contributes with empirical research in a Bildung-centred didactic tradition dominated by theoretical studies. It also contributes to classroom studies which consider teaching as a joint enquiry (Bruner, 1996; Cazden, 1988; Alexander, 2000), without developing the content-aspects of classroom dialogue (Alexander, 2001). According to Alexander (2001), the content-aspects of dialogic teaching can be described as content being 'cumulative' and 'purposeful'. Empirically based Bildung-centred didactic concepts address these issues. When students' interpretations are welcome, knowledge accumulation stands a chance. Regarding the question of purpose, references to social and cultural questions displayed in 'dialogic teaching communication' gives students opportunities to prepare for societal participation, acknowledging them as human beings, building autonomy.

The Bildung-centred didactic perspective does not focus on achievement; nevertheless it can contribute to achievements as one perspective among others. Based on our sample and our results we argue that school culture, 'teaching communication' and students' achievements are connected. School A in the study, characterised by at trusting culture and 'dialogic teaching communication', also has high scores on National tests. This is interesting due to the parental socio-economic background in the local community. This local community has in fact lower socio-economic score than the national socio-economic mean (Statistisk Sentralbyrå, 2014), which means that students' achievements are better than expected (Blekesaune, 2011).

Consequently, it is interesting to ask whether 'dialogic teaching communication' in a culture of trust can reduce the effect of students' socio-economic background. Several studies have discussed whether schools' quality is able to increase the achievements of all students (Labaree, 2012; D.H. Hargreaves, 2014; Sammons et.al 2006). Some of them argue that even if students' social background is a strong factor, the quality of the school also makes a difference (Bakken, 2009; Sammons et.al 2006). We assume that the connection between quality of school culture and the quality of 'teaching communication' will compensate for lack of parental resources. Could this mean that school culture becomes more important than students' socio-economic background? This should be one of the questions to pose and elaborate in further research.

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