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Teaching as a social practice

Abstract

This article expands upon current educational research on teachers as important actors for children's learning and well-being, but it also questions a linear relationship between learning and teaching, addressing the question, “What is teaching in practice?” The theoretical framework for this work is the concept of social practice as presented by Dreier, Lave, Axel and Jensen, among others, and a critical psychological understanding of subjectivity as presented by Holzkamp and Dreier. Additionally, the work is framed by learning theory informed by social practice theory, recognizing that learning is neither exclusively caused by nor the result of teaching. By focusing on everyday teaching, this paper examines what it *really* means to teach in everyday life. The analysis is based on participant observations in two Danish primary schools and on interviews with four teachers over a period of two years. The analysis strengthens the argument for focusing on teachers as intentional, attentional subjects who act in reasoned ways. The main conclusion is that teachers must do more than “consider social conditions” as a set of circumstances to contend with. Instead, we must recognize that teaching is itself a social practice that inevitably constitutes an integral part of everyday school life.

Keywords: teaching, teacher professionalism, social practice theory, dialectics

Introduction

Both education research and education policy have focused in recent years on *teachers' importance* and their responsibility for students' learning and well-being (Biesta, 2015; Day, Sammons & Stobart, 2007; Hattie, 2008; Nordenbo, 2008; OECD, 2005, 2011; Priestley, Biesta & Robinson, 2015; Ratner, 2013). Policy objectives and reforms within schools have led to increased attention to the relationships between improvements in students' academic level and improvements in teaching. This spotlight on teachers in education research and political debates is part of an influential line of school effectiveness and improvement research, where teachers are viewed as one of the most important “factors” in education system change (Biesta, 2015; Priestley, Biesta & Robinson, 2015). In other words *teachers matter!*

This article expands upon previous work on the importance of teachers for children's learning and well-being in school by addressing the question, "What is teaching in practice?" with an empirical focus on the question, "What matters to teachers?"

The theoretical background for this analytical approach is the concept of social practice, as presented by Dreier (2003, 2008), Lave (1988), Axel (2009, 2011) and Jensen (2001), among others, and a perception that both knowledge and concepts are anchored in practice (Dreier, 2007; Højholt, 2001; Jensen, 2001). My ambition is to contribute to theoretical discussions about the concept of teaching, with a focus on what we can learn when we consider teachers as subjects who act in reasoned ways and when we understand their reasons as situated in social practice in their particular school setting.

Taking teachers' concerns, experiences, thoughts and actions as the starting point represents a fundamental analytical shift away from well-known earlier viewpoints: an individualistic-personalizing perspective and an external, abstract and universalistic perspective (Schraube, 2015). Many researchers and politicians seem eager to measure, manage and alter teachers' practices based on their understanding that, if teachers teach better, then children will learn more; if teachers become better at relationship work, then children will thrive better (OECD, 2005, 2011; Nordenbo, 2008). Conversely, if students do not learn enough or thrive, then it must be because their teachers are not proficient or reflective enough (for a critique of this, see Ratner, 2013), or because the teachers' methods are not good enough.

Such understandings about problems and causal relationships reflect the dominant "management discourse" in educational research and current political debates on school development. Management discourse is understood here as the idea that teachers can potentially solve school difficulties with children's learning and well-being if they are provided with the right tools and the right knowledge and otherwise act according to accepted standards for good teaching. A marked "learning optimization discourse" is coupled with an equally marked "teaching optimization discourse" (Kampmann, 2015). This dominant perspective represents a functionalistic framework where teaching is viewed as something that has a causal effect on children's learning rather than as something that is produced in ongoing human practice. Furthermore, this perspective is *abstract* in the sense

that teaching is approached as “something in itself”- something that can be understood and assessed apart from the social, political, and historical school practice where it takes place and of which teaching is an integral part.

By using a situated approach and focusing on teaching in practice in this study, my aim is to take a more realistic and less idiosyncratic analytical approach to theory-building on complex, social, and sometimes messy everyday school life.

The research project

As part of a research project entitled, “Conflicts about children's school life,”¹ I followed the everyday life of four Danish teachers across activities and social contexts during a two-year period in two primary schools in two large Danish municipalities. A typical day entailed 1) preliminary activities before the school bell rang, such as relaying messages to colleagues, copying, collecting materials for the first lesson, and welcoming students to the class; 2) teaching situations across disciplines and classes; 3) non-instructional responsibilities, such as hallway or playground duty during the students’ breaks; 4) meetings; 5) preparation periods; and 6) breaks. My general interest in the activities teachers engage in, what teachers actually do, and what factors influence teachers’ actions have, in part, guided this observational study. I hope to illuminate the conflictual constitution of everyday life in schools² by concentrating on the way teachers conduct everyday teaching, rather than on a “code of conduct” for teachers.

¹ Footnote 1 is temporarily removed as it contains information about the article's author and the funding of the research project.

² The concept of conduct of everyday life is not a central analytical concept in this article. Conduct of everyday life emphasizes “*the everyday activities of individual subjects to organize, integrate and make sense of the multiplicity of social relations and contradictory demands in and across the different contexts in which they are engaged in their daily life*” (Schraube & Højholt, 2016, p.1. Also see Holzkamp, 2016 and Dreier, 2016). In this article, the concept is relevant because it emphasizes how teaching in practice is a many-sided matter that teachers engage in across time and places in school. I use the concept as a way of conceptualizing teaching as a creative and conflictual engagement in the structural arrangements of school in collaboration with the students and others. I call this teachers’ subjective conduct of everyday teaching. (Also see Mardahl-Hansen in preparation.)

Learning as social participation

In this article, I focus on how teachers teach, not on what students learn. However, I will address the theoretical relationship between learning and teaching as a starting point. As noted above, current political discussions emphasize the measurement, efficiency and optimization of children's learning (results) and focus on learning as an end in itself. However, philosophers, psychologists and educators have increasingly been critical towards "*representationalist understandings of knowledge, cognition and learning and have set out to re-conceptualize learning along 'post-Cartesian' frameworks*" (Buch, 2016). For example, Lave and Wenger and scholars rooted in the German-Danish research tradition, including Holzkamp and Dreier, have developed the concept of learning along the concept of practice and have thereby provided an understanding of learning as a subjective and creative process that relates to transformations of possibilities for taking part in social and historical practices.

In his work, Holzkamp challenges and contributes to the concept of learning based on studies of children's school life (2013a, 2013b). Other significant studies based in social practice theory have mainly concentrated on non-scholastic aspects of learning outside of school settings, such as tailor apprentices in Liberia (Lave & Wenger, 1991), bakery apprentices (Nielsen 2006, 2008), housewives in California (Lave, 1988), claim processors in an insurance company (Wenger, 1998), and therapeutic practice (Dreier, 2008). These studies contribute in various ways to understandings of learning that contrast with intellectualized and individualized learning concepts often emphasized in school settings. They also contribute to important understandings of learning as something other than the result of teaching, as it is typically defined or characterized.

From learning theory informed by social practice theory in relation to teaching, we discover that learning is neither *caused by* nor an exclusive *result of* teaching. There is now a relatively widespread understanding that learning is linked to participation and involvement in social practices. Still, we need further insight into how we can perceive *teaching* in school within the social practice theory paradigm. This calls for connecting concepts of teaching with teachers' work to create conditions for children's participation within the context of the school's social practice. The following question then arises: if we understand learning as participation in social practice, how can we then understand teaching in schools?

Learning from learning theory

Focusing on learning as related to participation in social practice implies a conceptualization of learning as change. In school settings, this understanding of learning necessarily takes into account opportunities and constraints that promote or impede children's participation.

Learning is not to be understood as changes *in* the individual child but rather as changes in the child's relationship to the social world. This view on the concept of learning has at least three important implications that must be considered in a theoretical discussion about teaching.

1) Children participate in school as *subjects* in their own lives. Children's subjective experiences, intentions, actions and social relations, both inside and outside the school, have a major impact on their learning opportunities in teaching situations (Nielsen, 2008). Children's differing perspectives on their own life situations, positions, and action possibilities in specific social contexts significantly influence and are influenced by children's learning opportunities in the school. Schraube and Marvakis (2016) refer to this as the "subjective dimension" of learning processes. From this framework, teaching cannot be understood as a subject's (the teacher) transfer of knowledge to a passive and standardized object (the student). The "subjective dimension" challenges perceptions of teaching as linear communication or a set of "fixed procedures" (Kvale, 1976; Lave, 1996). Instead, teaching must be understood as a phenomenon involving an intersubjective relationship, highlighting mutuality and collaboration as characteristics of teaching in practice.

2) The social dimension of learning processes emphasises that children's learning must be understood as related to participation in *specific social contexts with others*. Children's learning opportunities are linked to their opportunities for participation in social communities with other children and adults inside and outside school, as well as their opportunities to influence these social communities and the extant participation possibilities. This implies that engagement in children's social lives must be understood as a general requirement for creating conditions for children's learning.

3) The theoretical concept of learning within the tradition of social practice theory focuses on *subjects* in a *social world*. Furthermore, social practice theory relates learning to *participation* in a social world that is constituted by *practices*. School is a societal

arrangement designed for certain purposes, interests, and forms of practices. School, as a concept and in practice, relies on certain historical ideas, such as work and time structures, as well as structures of meaning and structures of relevance. As Tanggaard and Nielsen (2011) wrote:

The school is not an isolated system or a container for autonomous individuals, but a practice that has been developed over time to take care of specific social needs and political intentions (p. 133).

My point here is not to define the purposes and structures of school practice, since these are negotiated and developed in everyday school life. Rather, my point is that teachers and their students participate from particular and partial *positions* in schools which, as explained above, are societal and historical arrangements regulated by diverse practices, laws, traditions and norms. Despite their shared historical and cultural contexts within a given society or circumstance, schools are sometimes alienated from children's subjective engagements in their everyday life, as well as from children's opportunities and constraints for participating and influencing participation in social school practice.

Theoretical considerations about the relationship between teaching and learning described above generate more comprehensive understandings of teaching than those articulated in earlier views of teaching as dissemination of knowledge from teacher to pupil. These more recent theoretical perspectives give rise to important questions. How do teachers create conditions for other subjects' learning within the context of everyday life that is largely arranged by an institution, the primary or lower secondary school, which, itself is regulated and structured through legislation, traditions, divisions of workloads and responsibilities, time structures and numerous other contributing influences? How can we take into account that teachers' responsibilities require them to commit children to an institutionally-arranged learning agenda and, at the same time, to relate to them as subjects, who are engaged in conducting their lives and making sense of everyday situations with many different engagements, commitments, opportunities and difficulties?

Although I cannot fully answer these questions, I will unfold some empirical analysis and theoretical concepts to underline the importance of asking questions like these in situated ways to better understand how teachers create conditions for children's learning in school.

Academic agendas and social relations as mutual prerequisites

From a practice perspective, relations between children's social life and teaching in school must be understood as relations *produced* by those involved and *not* as relations that are defined in advance. Recent research on children's involvement in school illustrates how children and adolescents *work actively to create* relations between their participation in social communities and the school's teaching agenda (Poulsen, 2017; Schwartz 2018, Stanek, 2011; Testmann 2018 & Kousholt 2018). Children's social lives represent a significant aspect of the conditions for their participation in school activities. This applies regardless of whether individual children or groups of children organize their participation in "school appropriate ways" or in ways that interfere with teaching, such as causing disturbances or conflicts.

Across my observations of teachers' everyday life, it became evident that teachers continuously related to and acted in relation to social interaction with and between their students. To create conditions for learning, teachers must explore, form an opinion about, and intervene in social interactions between children. Teachers' have a long list of professional responsibilities to establish and sustain conditions for learning in their specific school community. These responsibilities include, among many other things, getting to know the students; designing and enforcing rules in class; creating an atmosphere of focus, fun, and safety; organizing the physical space in the classroom; determining seating/table arrangements; helping students become better acquainted with each other; making arrangements for occasions like Christmas and birthdays; developing schemes for maintain order, such as turn taking; arranging activities outside of school (e.g. play groups); and assessing and intervening in conflicts between children. Teachers relate to and seek to create connections between the class's social life and teaching activities by establishing favorable conditions for learning and anticipating conflicts and disturbances that may interfere with the school's teaching agenda. Rhythms, routines, rules, assigned seats, rituals, agendas, goals, and lists are examples of "social technologies" teachers use to promote continuity and common focus and to minimize potential conflicts and disturbances. However, it is equally essential that teachers relate to what is actually happening between the students and between

teachers and students. Unforeseen events, disruptions to the schedule, and interferences with the teaching agenda are all part of teachers' daily life and their interaction with the students. Since the "social aspect" cannot be controlled and constantly acquires new meanings, teachers must continuously reorganise, re-evaluate, learn and improvise in situated interactions with the students.

Conditions for children's learning in school is not something that can be planned or managed but something teachers must (re)produce in situated collaboration with the students. One teacher in the study, Ole, explained it this way:

What motivates me is to have an idea and then develop it into a process that works. However, often there are many intermediate calculations before I can get an idea to succeed. It's actually part of *making it work* (emphasis added)³.

Ole has been a teacher for 16 years. He clearly loves history and the other subjects he teaches. Ole explained that he feels motivated when he has good ideas for an academic process, such as a new idea for introducing a historical theme, new educational materials, or a new way to make history relevant and accessible for his students. The process of bringing the idea to fruition requires preparation time to develop the idea, but it also requires dealing with what Ole calls "a lot of intermediate calculations". Ole elaborated:

You cannot plan what happens in the room with the students. Anything might suddenly happen. That can be both positive or negative. Something may have occurred at home, something during the break, or something may suddenly happen. The planning must not negatively affect the execution of the teaching.

From my observations of Ole's teaching and from my conversations with him, I realized that planning, as well as professional ambitions and goals, are central to his work. Other teachers in the project expressed similar views. Further, when Ole talked about "making teaching

³ My interviews and fieldnotes are in Danish and I have produced the English translations throughout based on my contemporaneous notes.

work,” he pointed out that preparations, plans, rules, goals and routines should be developed in relation to the concrete social interactions in the particular classroom with a specific group of students. Ole described teaching as involving relatively “open situations.”

Ole tries to maintain an open attitude to social circumstances to make academic plans function as intended. He realizes that he cannot predict or determine social circumstances in advance. He must remain open-minded and curious to get his teaching process to work. Ole helps us to see that teaching is neither random nor controllable; it must be both intentional and socially distributed.

As noted above, from a social practice learning theory perspective, teaching must be understood as intersubjective and dynamic. Ole addressed this point when he said that to “make teaching work,” he must not control. Instead, in situated ways, he must develop both subjective and common conditions for children’s engagement in academic content. As he plans academic activities, Ole attends to social conditions as an important aspect of the shared focus and student engagement he hopes to achieve with his students. However, Ole recognizes that “irregularities” may occur when these situated conditions change in the moment. In this sense, irregularities are part of “making teaching work,” not mistakes, coincidences, or signs of too little ambition.

As Axel (2011) pointed out, changes and irregularities are central aspects of human collaboration.

...when subjects act together toward a common objective, when they coordinate their activities, which they have developed and distributed among themselves, their connections must appear as irregularities in the acts they try to accomplish. But these irregularities have reason, and in them, many social issues are hidden. (p. 60).

Contradictions exist in social coordination and collaboration. In school settings, for instance, highly structured, historically and culturally situated routines, schedules, and goals represent aspects of teaching practice that are both crucial and potentially contradictory to children’s engagements in everyday life in non-linear ways that are not always obvious. To connect the

academic agenda of the school with children's social life, teaching practice has to be developed continuously through what Ole called "a lot of intermediate calculations."

Challenging theoretical conceptualizations of teaching

Few people who have actually engaged in teaching would argue that teaching solely involves *dissemination* of academic knowledge. Most would agree that teaching and social life in schools are related phenomena, even though, as Plaugborg (2016) pointed out, public debate and political texts on teaching often imply that there is marked distinction between the "academic" and the "social," and, in recent years, the academic has become increasingly more privileged.

The term "class management" has, in many ways, replaced "dissemination" in discourses about what teachers do -- and *should do* -- when they teach. With a focus on teaching and teacher professionalism, class management is now a dominant theme in educational research (Krejsler & Moos, 2014; Priestley, Biesta & Robinson, 2015; Undervisningsministeriet, 2014). Class management emphasizes the necessity for teachers to plan, lead, control, organize, assess and manage social conditions for learning. This suggests that social life in school is something teachers can – and ought to – *manage*. In other words, teachers are expected to teach *and* manage their class. From this perspective, class management becomes an additional task on top of teachers' main task of teaching the academic content(s) for which they are responsible (e.g, math, biology, etc.). Therefore, a management approach underlines the arbitrary distinction between the academic and the social often found in research and strongly implies that the social exists as an *external condition* for learning and teaching.

On the contrary, my empirical analysis points to the need to discuss relations between the academic agenda and social life in school in ways other than as potential causal or external relationships. Otherwise, there is a risk that teachers' abilities to think, act and reflect relationally and contextually will be devalued or ignored, *and* that the everyday complexity

(or, as Ole put it, “a lot of intermediate calculations”) will not be recognized as an integral *part of* both teaching and learning processes.

It is not only from the learning theory perspective that learning in school and children’s participation in social life inside and outside of school should be understood as mutually dependent and constitutive. The tendency to understand teaching and learning, academic goals, and children’s everyday school life as isolated phenomena or as external relationships is also a *basic problem in teaching* and a *theoretical challenge* arising in various definitions and descriptions of teaching.

We need to understand that teaching practice is about developing *connections* between teaching aims and learning possibilities by developing social conditions for children’s participation in school practice. This implies that teachers must find ways to connect matters often treated as if they are separate in ideological debates, social conflicts, and work divisions. In practice these seemingly incompatible aspects of social practice must somehow “go together” to make teaching relevant to the children (Axel 2009, 2011).

Teaching as a social practice

Social practice can be understood as a complex and coherent bundle of activities, requirements and considerations; or, as both Dreier (2008, 2015) and Schatzki (2012, 2017) propose, social practice is “a nexus of practices.” In social practices, it is not *only* people who are connected (bundled) and who have to organize themselves in relation to each other; social practices are also characterized, and distinguished from each other, because they involve specific, differing and related demands, considerations and exposures that must be organized in relation to each other for the specific social practice to work. *Teaching practice* can be understood as a bundle of different activities, processes, concerns and tasks that must be coordinated with each other in school practice with limited resources.

Education has several historical purposes (see Biesta & Stengel, 2016). As Bjerg (2015) and others have pointed out, teaching is a multi-faceted professional assignment with a plurality that is not accidental, but rather, historically constituted and situated. In a society with a differentiated labor market where social segregation migrates into schools, teachers have a

duty to nurture *all* students, creating additional complexities. Teachers must present factual, technical knowledge while also supporting the students' ability to discuss, argue, understand and cooperate. Teachers must prepare the students to manage their own lives and to participate in society in increasingly more conscious and successful ways in accordance with their own expectations, orientations, motivations and efficacy. Teachers must have some authority to control and decide, while simultaneously engaging on an equal footing with both students and parents. Teachers must foster children's growing ability to participate in democracy and to both contribute to and adapt to the community, while also teaching them to work independently, compete, and deal with an assessment system that rewards individual performance (Bjerg, 2015). Different aspects of social teaching practice are not linked by virtue of their unity, but rather, because teaching practices are characterized by the conflictual connectivity among the different aspects that comprise them.

The historically- and politically-constituted plurality challenges any clear-cut definition or understanding of teaching practice. More precisely, it challenges the notion that teaching is fundamentally about reaching "one educational goal" or "the *right* educational goal" and points out that teaching is a conflictual matter.

Relations between different aspects of everyday life in school must be understood as *produced* and *procedural* relations, and *not* as relations that are defined – or fixed - in advance. From the standpoint of teachers, relations between different aspects of children's school life are not just a matter of agendas, discourses or different ideas in the heads of teachers, politicians or researchers. Instead, relationships between differing aspects of children's school life involve concrete, social and embodied dilemmas relating to various aspects of teaching, which teachers must handle, often in the moment; reflect on; negotiate; and reformulate in their everyday teaching practice.

Ole, whom we met earlier, added clarity when he pointed out that, in practice, teaching is not solely a result of teachers' academic plans, ideas and aspirations and neither is teaching fully determined by situated social interaction between children and teachers. Rather, as Ingold (2000) noted, teaching is carried forward by intentions; but *at the same time*, it is continuously responsive to an ever-changing situation.

Monday morning in 7th grade

As a participating observer, I have experienced teachers' everyday life as a whirlwind of activities, interactions and events. I have been fascinated by the number and variety of tasks and the diversity of the teachers' conditions for succeeding in their tasks, as well as by how these tasks present themselves differently to teachers over time and place. As an example of a teacher's daily life, I will share some of my field notes from what the teacher considered as "just one lesson." We will follow Karen, a 7th-grade teacher, at the beginning of a school day, knowing that after this lesson, she will change to a new class, a new subject, and also participate in other activities and duties at the school:

Karen welcomes the students when they arrive in the classroom while she turns on her computer turns on the whiteboard and takes materials from her bag. The students arrive alone or in groups. A student arrives with his mother, who has a message for Karen. Some students chat, others shout and laugh, while some still seem sleepy when they quietly and heavily sit down in their places.

It's raining, so wet clothes have to be handled, information and pictures from Facebook are shared and discussed intensively, some are eating their breakfast and most are sitting with their mobile phones.

Due to Karen's conversation with the attendant parent, the class starts a few minutes later than scheduled.

Karen explains that she has been lucky enough to drive a car today, but it seems that not everyone arrived dry. 'How many of you have wet legs?' Karen wants to know? She gets an overview. Some students need to hang their wet jackets outside - otherwise it will become stuffy in the classroom, says Karen. She asks a boy to turn up the heating and announces: 'It is Monday today. It's 8 o'clock. It's time for German⁴. Even if it is

⁴ I do not focus here on how different subjects (in this example, German) relate to changes in the possibilities and limitations for teachers in specific teaching situations. My studies have been conducted across a wide range of content areas. My analyses show that, while the specific content matters to the interactions among students and teachers, these differences are situated, ambiguous, and changeable.

raining'.

A student comes running through the door and Karen bids her welcome. "Today I am not strict about arriving late, I know how it is".

Karen marks the transition from the students' arrival, small talk and conversations about wet clothes, by introducing the programme for the next two German lessons. The programme is an overview of the activities that Karen has planned and that she expects the students to participate in. Several students propose changes to the programme: 'Shouldn't we watch a German film?' Another student suggests that they should bake a German cake instead. Karen insists on the preselected activities and reminds the students of the learning goals, which are on a list hanging at the back of the class. As Karen explained to me on another occasion, it is a requirement for the management that they should be able to stop any student, at any time, and he/she should then be able to list off the learning goals.

Karen positions herself at a whiteboard facing the students, where she communicates information about German grammar, which the students will use in the grammar exercise that she subsequently distributes and initiates, and which the student will perform with the student beside them. During Karen's review of the subject material, she attracts and continually re-attracts attention to her presentation by 'radiating a high level of energy' and by rebuking unrest and inattention when individual students become engaged in talking to the student sitting next to them, playing with their phone or playing games on their computer.

When the students subsequently work on the grammatical exercise in pairs, Karen is available so that the students can get assistance. She chats with them, corrects them and enquires about a student who appears to be very tired. While the students are performing more independent work, she allows conversation between the students, but she also

*assesses and determines when this chat is too loud and is removing the focus too much from the task*⁵

At the same time, Karen initiates and supports two boys who are participating in a special process that Karen has planned. One of these boys is dyslexic and the other is unable to concentrate in the classroom with the other students. By agreement, this student has the opportunity to work somewhere other than in the classroom. Karen provides a key, introduces tasks and tries to assist in relation to technical difficulties with technological aids.

Two (other) students have forgotten their computer and need Karen's guidance on how they should participate in the activities of the school day.

One group has quickly finished with the exercise paper and they would like to be challenged further. What should they do now? Karen complements them for their enthusiasm and she cooperates and improvises additional exercises. A student leaves the classroom, probably to go to the toilet.

Karen ensures that a student keeps an appointment with the school psychologist and sends the student off at the agreed time.

There is continuous dialogue and negotiation between Karen and the students. For example, about whether the students should work in the classroom or whether they have the option to work elsewhere, for example in the hallway, and about how much time the exercises require. Unrest characterizes the class, both because of the students'

⁵ It is no coincidence how Karen has positioned the students in the class and whom she asks to cooperate with whom. When asked in an interview about the arrangement of the tables, with 4 students sitting together at 2 tables, and about her decisions on seating, Karen said, "I have tried to place them with someone they like and have fun with. I have also focused strongly on teams. I have tried to put very academically strong students opposite very academically weak students, and then put one average student next to the academically weak student and one next to the academically strong student. In other words, when they cooperate with the person opposite them, the strong and the weak students are together, but when they cooperate with the person beside them, then the strong student has an average student to work with. When I think that now the weak students need some help, I can say team up with the student in front and when I think that they need some relief, I can team them up with the student beside them."

participation in the academic group work, and because of both discussions and fun between the students and between individual students and Karen.

Karen both accepts the unrest and continuously strives to restore calm.

“When I think that now the weak students need some help, I can say team up with the student in front, and when I think that they need some relief, I can team them up with the student beside them.”

At the end of the class, a girl tells Karen that she has a headache. She would like to go home and asks Karen for permission. Karen enquires about the girl's headache and asks the girl to eat and drink a little. If the headache persists, then she can go home during the next class.

Karen goes through the exercises that they have worked on so far with the students: 'What was difficult and what was less difficult?', 'What sentences have they formulated?'. Karen summarises the grammatical points.

A dialectical perspective on teaching

During my observation, Karen was engaged in an extensive list of behaviors, activities and foci, including curriculum, general education, evaluation, well-being of the children, democracy, training, administration, test preparation, health (potentially threatened by wet clothing), fun, collaboration, teamwork, motivation, discipline, inclusion, preparation, planning, learning processes, learning outcomes, materials, methods, documentation, and political reforms. These are just some subtitles under the broader and more complex obligations, demands, and intentions that Karen engages in together with the students as part of her teaching.

It is amazing to consider the number and extent of teachers' tasks and engagements in a “single lesson,” as with Karen's German grammar lesson above, and even more when we magnify these across several different classes, lessons, and content areas in a given day. Exploring how teaching is produced as a social practice involves a focus on the diverse

relationships between the different activities and tasks in teachers' everyday life with students.

As Karen explained to me in an interview:

Social conversation and conflict resolution is part of what we have to do. Some of our [teachers'] task is also to educate for democracy. They [students] must therefore learn to verbalize conflicts, both in pairs or how many they are, but also in plenum [in the class], because even if you are not a participant, it may still be instructive. But it is a *balancing act* because it should not take up too much time. We must achieve the academic goals ... so in the classes where it takes up too much time, then I have to say that we need to talk about it at some other time than in class, e.g. during the breaks.

Here, Karen was referring to a specific teaching situation; but she also pointed out a more general premise, namely, that teachers act in relation to complex and simultaneous tasks, placing them in the midst of continuous prioritization dilemmas and conflicts. (See Fransson & Grannäs, 2013). Karen noted that, in her view, teaching is not a result of political visions for primary school or political and historical demands for teachers, but rather, it is carried forward by teachers who actively handle and recontextualize conflicting political ambitions as part of their everyday life in school with their students.

Assembling and dividing

When Karen talked about a “balancing act,” she was not saying, as I interpret it, that by maintaining a balance, she can fulfill all responsibilities, abide by all parameters, or please everyone. Rather, Karen was referring to the fact that, in her specific teaching situations, she must continuously prioritize resources and action possibilities and decide where to focus her attention. In so doing, she necessarily deselects other important matters, so she must later circle back or reprioritize to develop social conditions for common engagement with the children in activities that are both social and academic. In other words, she sees this balancing act as a continuous, dynamic process, not something static or the simple outcome her intentions and plans.

Teaching is linked to *both* dynamically assembling (creating coherences) and dividing (e.g. through setting priorities) different aspects of children's school life. Because relations

between different aspects of teaching practices are understood and handled from a subjective standpoint, they are always potentially conflictual, as is reciprocity between teachers and other members of the school community, including students, parents, colleagues, and school management (Axel, 2011).

To describe teaching as a balancing act is to emphasize that teaching is related to a concrete social world. Teachers ‘balance’ in order *to produce teaching practices (in collaboration with others)*. Secondly, this terminology emphasizes teaching as an unstable and developmental process. Thirdly, it emphasizes that teaching processes are characterized by both mutuality and conflictuality in the relationship between students and teachers.

This perspective challenges how researchers and politicians often think and talk about teaching. The current political emphasis on academic achievement needs to be coordinated with attention to social relations to connect teaching to children’s participation and transformation in social practices. To stabilize a common focus on the academic content, to structure and manage their work, teachers must act flexibly in social relations (Mardahl-Hansen 2018). This further challenges the notion of methods as separate from the rest of teaching and problematizes the search for external solutions to school problems, thereby strengthening the argument for focusing on teachers as intentional, attentional and acting subjects. Exploring, prioritizing, engaging in trial and error, cooperating, and seeking compromises represent a repertoire of situated approaches through which teachers seek to manage the historical and social complexity of teaching in subjective and prioritized ways and, as Ole said, to get teaching to work.

The question of whether teachers can succeed in making their teaching work necessarily involves opportunities and constraints in teachers’ efforts to develop conditions for teaching practice in a social and conflictual interaction with the students and other participants at the school (Mardahl-Hansen & Schwartz, 2017). This calls for flexible and situated judgements and resolutions rather than static methods or one-sided solutions.

Conclusion

Exploring how different aspects of teaching “hang together” in situated ways creates possibilities for shifting away from a focus on teachers or students “in themselves” as the center of school problems and school development dilemmas. Instead, this perspective enables us to think and talk analytically about how problems are produced within the context of multi-dimensional school practices where many aspects of children’s and teachers’ lives are inextricably linked. To support teachers’ engagement in resolving school problems, we must develop conditions for promoting teachers’ success in such complex matters rather than tearing apart their work, piece by piece, in dualist conflicts and in eagerness to optimize.

If we accept the notion that teaching practice is reproduced and developed through connections situated in everyday school life—where situations must be handled, solutions must be produced, and where solutions will often produce new problems – then we must be aware of the conditions that promote teachers’ abilities and inclinations to explore, prioritize, and integrate these connections, to articulate the contradictions they face, and to foster collaboration with children, parents, and other professionals regarding the connections and contradictions inherent in everyday school life.

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