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Exam Coping Strategies – in the perspective of pedagogic framing and social differentiation

Karen Andreassen and Annette Rasmussen

Introduction

Evaluation and assessment in school systems are important topics these years. Following the OECD efforts that give significance to a shift from input to output indicators of education in order to compare the efficiency and quality of school systems, most member states have increased efforts on school evaluations and pupil assessments. (Jones et al. p. 49). Their political systems vest strong interests in measuring whether pupils at school learn what they are supposed to learn, which typically means assessing learning against the curricula and thus emphasises the close relationship between curriculum and assessment (Broadfoot 2007).

In the Danish Folkeskole (the compulsory and comprehensive school in Denmark) the actual assessment practice is framed by international demands for comparability of levels of subject knowledge versus individualisation tendencies of increased self reference (Bendixen 2005, p. 59; Krejsler 2004). The tension in this framework causes a dilemma between outcome oriented, allegedly “objective” assessments of pupil skills through standardised tests, and process oriented, negotiable assessments that apply subjective criteria to assess the pupil as an individual. This dilemma or double bind of demands for subject knowledge skills and demands for personal competences is further accompanied by a distinction between assessment purposes *of* learning and assessment purposes *for* learning – whether the assessment could be termed summative or formative.

The dilemma between different understandings of assessment manifests itself in particular by the application of new, so-called progressive or unstructured pedagogies such as project work. In such practices the participants are faced with contradictory messages of interdisciplinarity, problem-based learning, independence and autonomy on the one hand and on the other hand subject knowledge, discipline and teacher regulation/supervision. As pointed out by the Danish Professor Karen Borgnakke the project assignment of the Folkeskole suffers from a kind of double bind: It has to transform, develop and practise new teaching and working methods on the one hand, on the other hand it has to maintain assignments, assessment marks and examinations, but also renew their forms (Borgnakke 2008, p. 22).

This paper focuses on the assessment/examination of the project assignment in the 9th year of the Folkeskole. Departing in a comparative study of the practices of and the participant accounts on the project assignment at two schools we discuss partly the relations of curriculum, pedagogy and evaluation – the pedagogic idea and practice of the project assignment – partly the relations between the pedagogic practices and the social diversity of the pedagogic context.

Methodology and conceptual framework

The departure of the study is the apparent paradox of the project assignment. Thus, in spite of its underlying pedagogic idea of considering new working methods and more diversified ways of expression and learning than the usual subjects at school permit, it still seems to favour the same types of pupils, the academic types with the most privileged backgrounds. On this background we pose the question which pedagogic code is contained in this pedagogy – its discourses and practices

– and what implications does this code have to its reception by pupils of different social backgrounds?

In continuation of this paradox we have carried out the comparative study at two schools, called the City School and the Suburb School¹, which are located in different socioeconomic areas². The City School neighbourhood is characterised by medium-sized or big houses, not much new build but rather modernised housing, or new builds replacing existing older ones. According to the cars, exclusive makes of car, parked in front of the houses the families living here are well-off. The neighbourhood population, belonging to the upper middle classes, appears stable, whereas the Suburb School neighbourhood is characterised by change and upward mobility of its population, which appear from the statistics as well as from our observations. In the Suburb School neighbourhood new types of owner housing have been built during recent years, so now as opposed to the previous larger amount of rented housing a growing number of houses are owner housing.

The fieldwork at these schools was carried out during the winter months from November 2004 to April 2005. It includes observations before, during and after the project week, interviews with pupils and teachers from both schools, and various documentaries including law texts, assignment hand outs and reports/logbooks. We carried out interviews with eight pupils, all interviewed twice – before and after the project week, and two 9th form teachers, a senior (above 50) and a junior (below 35) at each school.

The study is ethnographically inspired as it aims at confrontations and breaks/ruptures – between discourse and practice, between articulated intention and practical implementation, and between commonsense and sociological knowledge (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1996). We apply a multiplicity of methods and approaches to the field (observations, interviews, documentaries), include different participant perspectives, actions, and contexts, and reflect on the researcher position in the construction and analysis of the empirical knowledge (Walford 2008).

As analytical tools we apply the concepts of classification and framing (Bernstein 1975/2003) that emphasise the relationship between curriculum and pedagogy and so become relevant to an understanding of current assessment practices. We apply them to analyse which kind of knowledge is dominating (classification) and how it dominates (framing) in the pedagogic practices and its underlying codes.

Classification is a matter of boundary definitions, maintenance and validation of domains of knowledge, which can be either strong or weak. The implications of classifications for a hierarchical ordering of knowledge is one of the many specific ways in which Bernstein's sociology grows near to that of Bourdieu (e.g. Bourdieu & Passeron 1979), who argues that it serves to demarcate taste and to the organisation of exclusiveness (Atkinson 1985 p.135).

Classification is paralleled by the notion of framing that is also related to the nature of strength of boundary, but in a somewhat different sense. Where classification characterizes curriculum, framing

¹ The names of the schools are pseudonyms for their proper names, and likewise all other proper names in the analysis are made anonymous.

² Statistics from the AE

<http://www.aeraadet.dk/media/filebank/org/boliganalyse-3.pdf>

<http://www.aeraadet.dk/media/filebank/org/boliganalyse-1.pdf>

refers to the context of knowledge transmission, the pedagogic encounter. With strong framing control lies with the teacher, whereas with weak framing control lies apparently with the pupils.

From the different types of classification Bernstein derives two codes, which are fundamental to the boundaries of classification and frame, the collection code and the integrated code. The collection code implies didactic teaching whereby facts are inculcated, while the integrated code is implicated in a theory of teaching and learning predicated on the self-regulation of individuals or groups of pupils. This theory of learning is fundamental to that weakly classified and weakly framed mode Bernstein refers to under the rubric of invisible pedagogy (Atkinson 1985, Bernstein 2000).

Pedagogic ideas and discourses of the project assignment

The project assignment in the 9th form level of the Folkeskole was formally introduced and made mandatory in 1993. It is inspired from the project pedagogy which has run through reforms and alternative models for education and learning in the Danish context, where it was introduced and became popular at some universities³ already from the early 1970'ies. The principles of the project pedagogy are project organisation, interdisciplinary work, problem orientation/solving, participant management and exemplary learning (Holten-Andersen et al. 1983; Berthelsen et al. 1993) that have a broad theoretical background and have links to the ideas of Piaget (1969), Vygotsky (1962/82), Dewey (1002/90) and Negt (1971). Differentiation is often seen as one of the most important potentials of the project pedagogy in the Folkeskole (Schjoldager 2001; Kristensen 1995), as it opens up for a setting in which pupils by focusing on specific problems and building on their own experiences can actively and purposefully study their surroundings.

The education enactment states that the *project assignment gives students the opportunity to complete and present an interdisciplinary project* (Danish Ministry of Education 2009). Thus it can be understood as an attempt to introduce new working methods in school, a way of working, which is more explicitly characterized by these elements: The identification of a theme with one or more problems, the definition of the content of the project, selecting and applying contents and methods from various subjects, selecting and applying references and materials, selecting and applying a form of expression, making a product and arranging the presentation (From the § 3 in the Act on the project assignment).

At the Uni-C⁴ homepage for the Danish Ministry of Education, we have noticed that it is quite explicitly described what the project assignment is not. Indicating that it is hard to define the precise status of the project assignment, it is stated that it *is not a study of a theme* and it *is not an exam* (www.emu.dk). Following the above statements it seems contradictory that the project assignment is placed under the education act of examinations and forms of assessment, which states:

The project assignment is assessed in a written statement on the content, working process and presentation of the final result. The written statement affords a broader and more detailed assessment of the student's ability. At the student's request, a mark can also be given. The assessment of the project assignment can be indicated in the leaving certificate.

So unlike other exams, the assessment of the project does not necessarily imply a mark and is not necessarily indicated in the leaving certificate. Thus compared to the school-leaving examinations

³ At university level the modern reform universities, first Roskilde University Centre, then Aalborg University, are the institutions where the project pedagogy has been both official and most effectively realised (Borgnakke 2005).

⁴ The Uni-C is the Danish IT-centre for Education and Research

at the conclusion of the form level 9, it enjoys a particular status, which however might not be perceived as such by the pupils and teachers.

The teachers in our study tend to understand the project assignment in relation to its alternative pedagogic principles as compared to the more subject specific and teacher controlled forms. This is seen from teacher statements at both schools.

At the City School, project work is generally viewed in a positive light. According to Martin (junior teacher at the City School) project work “ought to be applied any time it is appropriate” and “not just due to the project assignment in the 9th form”. The other teacher also expresses a positive attitude towards project work:

”The attitude here is that it is a good way of working, and [...] this is how we do thing at the City School, and [...] I think it has been the way of working at this place for many years here. Of course it also has something to do with the pupils at this school, from this catchment area the pupils have a background that makes it possible for them to work in this way [...]”. (Astrid, senior teacher at the City School)

The senior teacher describes the project way of working as very closely related to ordinary pedagogic practices at the City School and views it as suitable for pupils, who have the required competences. The junior teacher indicates that the project way of working is very focused on the project assignment in the 9th form level and would like it to be applied more extensively.

The teachers further claim that they have been trying to integrate project work in their everyday teaching practices from the 1st form level and upwards in such a way that demands are slowly increased towards the final project assignment in the 9th form level.

In general, the teachers also have positive views on exams. For instance Martin attaches to exams the meaning that the pupils will be “doing their best”. Both teachers emphasise that they try to organize their teaching in such a way that the demands from the exams by the end of the 9th form are taken into account. This also appears in their everyday teaching, where they are working hard to prepare the pupils for the exams to come. Both teachers have introduced the practice of test exams or training-exams, where the pupils are trained in the exams they will meet by the end of the 9th form. They also practice elements from the exams in other ways in their everyday practices.

The Suburb School teachers also express the prevailing positive attitude to the project assignment. As Birgit (senior teacher at the Suburb School) puts it, the teachers here are trying, to be “loyal to the work and the intentions they have with the project assignment”. She describes these intentions as

”to make the pupils think of it as something different from a theme, and to make them find their information other places than in books. The important thing is to do research and that you should get an insight into something that you do not already know and cannot get to know by just reading a book.” (Birgit, senior teacher at the Suburb School)

By making it clear *what it is not* the teacher is defining the project assignment in a similar way to that of the Ministry of Education. She also describes that it should integrate research that goes beyond the mere reading of books. Reflecting on the project assignment demands to the pupils she continues:

"perhaps it is difficult for the academically disadvantaged pupils to add a structure to it, if they do not get the help they need. [...] The intention was that the academically disadvantaged pupils should benefit from it as well [...]. Even if you are skilled in ways that are not academically, the project assignment is not just a matter of cutting a piece of wood – so to speak – and hammering nails into it! There has to be some structure to it and you have to do research. It takes a lot of independency, which I think could be one of the negative aspects of it. Not everyone will benefit from it, but most children like to work in that way". (Birgit, senior teacher at the Suburb School)

The other teacher at the Suburb School expresses similar opinions, saying that

"The project assignment is very much an exam for the pupils, who have already learned certain things. They really get the opportunity to show their competences. But there are children who feel uncomfortable about it, and who do not like to work in this way, who are unable to handle it. And here we often find the academically disadvantaged pupils". (Helle, junior teacher at the Suburb School)

These excerpts express views on the project assignment as being very special. It is emphasised that it opens up for non-academic skill, though not merely practical skills, but a way of working that demands of the pupils the abilities to add structure to their activities, to do research and to work independently. Both teachers also point to the problem that not all pupils are able to meet such demands and thereby "benefit from it", which in particular goes for the academically disadvantaged pupils. The project way of working is seen as appealing especially to the children who have academic skills and advantages, even if the expression "academically disadvantaged" is referring both to being academically disadvantaged and to having other competences than the academic ones.

At the Suburb School the teachers point to the huge gap between their everyday teaching practices and the pedagogic practice of the project assignment. They experience the practices as contrasting.

The pedagogic practice of the project assignment: Preparations and time span

At the City School the project assignment is carried out during the first weeks of January, and at the Suburb School during the first week of February. But at both schools the preparatory work takes its beginning several weeks ahead of the actual project weeks.

At the City School the preparations extended to eight weeks before the project assignment. Preparations consisted in activities for all pupils at the 9th form level and included such activities as agreeing on the general theme, forming groups, deciding on sub-themes and setting up initial plans for the work. It was up to the teachers to decide how much time they would take from the ordinary teaching activities and devote to project activities. But the junior teacher claims that he has spent quite a lot of time at it, which is also indicated in the pupils' logbooks.

The general theme agreed on was entitled "Yesterday, today, and tomorrow"⁵. To get to this theme the teachers had prepared "some input for the pupils to widen their horizons concerning what a general theme could be", as Martin explains and continues that some of them had performed a role

⁵ In this analysis the titles of the general themes in both classes are replaced by synonymous titles carrying similar meanings.

play with the aim of “opening up the eyes of the pupils to all the different possibilities” of the project assignment, and they arranged a joint meeting for all 9th form-classes starting with a brainstorm “with the pupils describing all their ideas and what they are engaged in”. The results of the joint brainstorm were written on big sheets of paper and were displayed on the corridor walls, so the pupils could discuss it with each other and with the teachers.

At this point the pupils were given some influence, but the final choice of theme was made by the teachers. One of them explains that the pupils have to “choose a theme which we can assure will be able to integrate their interests and will make them able to carry out in-depth studies of it”. (Astrid, senior teacher at the City School)

The teachers describe that they have been guiding the pupils in their choice of sub-themes by for instance recommending them to do reflection-writing to get ideas. Martin describes reflection-writing as “writing down all of the reflections you have on a certain theme”. A pupil has described the initiation of this process in her logbook as follows:

Wednesday 10/11-2004:

Today a sheet of paper: *Reflections – introduction to the project assignment* was handed out to us. On that sheet we should write our names, classes, expectations to our work with the project, and if I have any interests or ideas. I had not at all been thinking that much about my project, so I did not do much that day. (Miranda, pupil at the City School)

Another pupil, who had the experience of having his group’s problem definition disapproved by the teachers, states in his logbook:

“We were therefore asked to do some reflection-writing and a brainstorm. This was really helpful, and soon we had made a new problem definition, which was approved by Martin before Christmas”. (Christian, pupil at the City School)

In this way reflection-writing was used by the teachers as a tool for guiding and making the pupils continue in the direction that they have defined, and some pupils, as above, claim to have found the tool of reflection-writing useful in getting on with their projects.

At the Suburb School preparations for the project assignment also took place several weeks ahead of the week. But unlike at the City School, they were carried out separately in each class, with no joint activities for all 9th form classes. One of the teachers describes that in class they “had a brainstorm on what the pupils found interesting to have as their general theme”. Following this, she and her colleague “decided ourselves which theme to choose, but we had our starting point in the themes they had proposed and chose one of them” (Helle, junior teacher at the Suburb School).

So the teachers at the City School made the final decision on the general theme, but with some input and inspiration from the pupils. In the pupils logbooks it is described:

Monday 3/1-2005

It was the very moment. Our umbrella [general theme] was to be revealed. We were all excited – what could it be? Helle and Birgit [the teachers] had had a couple of weeks to choose the general theme, and we were to be told just after the Christmas holidays. At last Helle moved the chalk over the blackboard and wrote: *Clouds*. Afterward we had a joint brainstorm on class. (Ida, pupil at the Suburb School)

The above excerpt from the logbook shows that the pupils consider the choice of the *umbrella*, the general theme, to be the teachers' undisputed decision. The pupils do not see themselves as directly involved in this decision. In the ensuing preparations some pupils quickly found their sub-theme, while others did not find it until in the last minute before the project week.

Teacher expectations and announcements

Teacher expectations concerning product and working process were communicated to the pupils in class and in some written hand-outs beforehand.

At the City School the papers handed out describe what the pupils are expected to hand in by the end of the week in these words:

To be returned in two copies:

- Problem statement
- Conclusion
- Bibliography
- Report (Not mandatory. You decide if you want to make a report – discuss it with your supervisor)
- Personal logbook

The possibilities of making a report and the demand for a bibliography point to the somewhat academic product thinking.

One of the teachers describes that the teachers “had an agreement with the groups to have a daily meeting with their supervisor” and before the week he also “wanted to see a plan for the week [...] describing from one hour to the next, what they were doing, what they expected their task to be at that specific time” (Martin, junior teacher at the City School).

As far as the teacher knows all of the other teachers did the same, and this is confirmed by the other teacher. The detailed demands to the work process indicate attempts to keeping an eye on the pupils' working processes and controlling them. But it also provides an insight into the working, which makes it possible for the teachers to estimate if supervision is needed.

At the Suburb School, directions for the process and product were described in this way:

- Choose a partner
- Choose your sub-theme, complete page 1 and 2 (at the sheet, describing product and tasks during the week), hand in the pages for acceptance week 3
- Start your planning
- Plan your presentation
- Collect materials, make appointments, take care of reservation of technical remedies, make appointments with teachers, get bus passes etc.
- Make sure that questionnaires / statistics, photographs etc. are ready before week 5.

These directions were accompanied by more specific descriptions of product expectations. The pupils were encouraged to be creative in their choices. But nothing was mentioned about a written presentation/report. It was described that the product would be assessed according to “the

substance, the work process and the presentation". The pupils were also asked to keep a diary (usually talked about as the logbook). The demanded content of this diary were presented to the pupils in a fairly long and detailed written description. The diary could be seen as a kind of written presentation parallel to the report, demanding and building on academic skills, although it does not explicitly demand a presentation of academic knowledge gained through the project.

The demands of the diary could also be seen as the teachers' attempt to add structure and control to the pupils work process. But apart from this, there are no demands on the pupils concerning physical attendance or use of teacher supervision. According to one of them:

"If you need supervision you could ask for it and have it, make an appointment about it and show up" (Magnus, pupil at the Suburb School)

With no demands from the teachers when it comes to the extent and times for supervision, it was very much up to the pupils to determine if they needed supervision. Likewise, it was matter for the pupil to determine what kind of problems it would be legal to ask the teachers about. This pedagogic practice presupposes competences that some of the pupils have not yet developed and so are incapable of using. Therefore, intentions of realising differentiation can be questioned. The teachers are aware of such problems and mention that

"Some are good at it [asking for supervision] and others are not" (Birgit, senior teacher at the Suburb School).

The content of the diaries indicate that some of the pupils had hardly any contact with a teacher/supervisor. This is confirmed by a pupil stating:

"Actually we did not ask any of the teachers, we did not take contact to them, we did not feel like it, because that week I remember that I was not friends with [my teacher], so we did not use it at all, we were just ourselves, without any help at all". (Sofie, pupil at the Suburb School)

The excerpt shows that there are various reasons for not asking for supervision. Among other things it seems important whether you consider the teacher a friend or not. The pupil also describes the feeling they have of being left to themselves, without any help. Another pupil comments on the question of supervision in this way:

"[we] did not need supervision that much, but we had been told, that if we needed it, there would be teachers to ask, or we could make an appointment, come and ask, we mostly asked questions of where things were and such things, not much". (Caroline, pupil at the Suburb School)

This excerpt indicates that pupils might hesitate in asking for supervision, even if they might feel the need for it, because they have doubts if their need is legal/if they really have the need.

As appears from the demands communicated to the pupils on the products and on the working processes they are quite different at the two schools. The demands posed by teachers at the City School are somewhat more academic than those at the Suburb School, and the demands for the logbook (or diary) are different. The teachers are trying to keep some control with the pupils work process in different ways at the two schools, and the logbook seems to play a role in this in this in two different ways. Such differences also appear in the analyses of the pupil products.

Group work or individual work – teacher attitudes and practices

Cooperation on the project assignment is emphasised and highly valued by the teachers at both schools. Astrid (senior teacher at the City School) finds it important to “teach them the art of cooperation, or at least give them some input about it”. And according to Helle (junior teacher at the Suburb School) cooperation will develop your understanding of “what you are able to on your own and what you would need a partner to do, when solving problems in cooperation with others”.

But when it comes to the formation of groups the teachers at the two schools practice it in quite different ways. The teachers at the Suburb School played a dominating part in this process, “had meetings with the pupils in the autumn and asked them if they had any considerations on whom to cooperate with in the project assignment”, one of them tells us. To those pupils that still had no partner “we wrote a note telling them that we know that these pupils still need a partner” (Helle, junior teacher at the Suburb School). Their emphasis on cooperation was also seen by them listing as the first task/thing to do, to choose a partner, and in the way they presented it to the pupils. As one of them says:

“To be honest, we almost tried to make the pupils believe that they were not allowed to work on their own. Without really discussing it with us, one of them chose to work alone, and when we found out [...], we were not really able to change it”. (Helle, junior teacher at the Suburb School)

Thus, allegedly the teachers could not change anything, because it was too late in the process.

The teachers at the City School were not that involved in these processes. According to Martin (junior teacher at the City School) the teachers were not involved in “any other way than having been very much aware that matching of pupils was to follow interests”. He finds that the process was fairly unproblematic but mentions the problem of not all pupils finding a partner, and adds that perhaps it is not coincidental when some pupils end up working alone. He says:

“One might consider that, when exactly those two [pupils who are not doing well at school] end up alone, [...] it could be a consequence of the fact that there are no natural partners for them”. (Martin, junior teacher at the City School)

Helle (junior teacher at the Suburb School) points to the same problem saying that it “takes some energy to start working at the project”. She is aware that especially the pupils with the more resources benefit from the opportunities provided by the project assignment for being creative and innovative. She remembers that last year, in the previous course of the project assignment, she had “other pupils, who were also working alone, and in both cases they were the academically poor pupils”.

In the process of forming groups, an overriding problem is that the academically disadvantaged pupils can be marginalised. When excluded from group work they will not have access to sharing knowledge with other pupils, or in other ways benefit from cooperation. In this way the project assignment might end up differentiating between the pupils in a discriminating way rather than making it possible to realise principles of differentiation in teaching according to the diverse needs of the pupils.

Pupils' products and presentations

According to the practice at both schools the product should include a logbook and some kind of a presentation. This could include a written presentation/report (different from the logbook), which was explicitly suggested at the City School. Within the schools there was much variation in the character and presentation of the products, but also between the schools there were variations, of which three general distinctions are worth mentioning.

The first distinction concerns the aspect of the written presentation/report (not the logbook).

At the City School nearly all groups (eleven out of twelve) had produced a written presentation like some sort of report, a newspaper or similar, while at the Suburb School this was due for only two out of thirteen groups. This difference can be seen as directly related to the different announcements by the teachers. In the hand outs at the Suburb School a written report was not mentioned at all, whereas at the City School it was described as a task, which although it was described as mandatory seemed to be taken for granted. This appears in a pupil's logbook "reflections" in the below excerpt:

"The reason why I want to write about rap music is that this is almost the only kind of music I am listening to. I do not know much about when and where it all developed, how they were doing rap in the past, and how rap will develop in the future. I think that will be most difficult to find out about. Perhaps I can develop some rapping for my presentation, if I seem to have the time for it. What I like about rap music is the beat and the artists singing / rapping about their own lives, broken hearts, childhood, parties and about being a celebrity [...]". (Allan, pupil at the City School)

Here it is remarkable that the pupil uses the word "write" and not "work" in his reflections on the theme. He is describing how he should make his sub-theme fit into the general theme (Yesterday, today, and tomorrow), how it is interesting to him, and how he finds it relevant as a theme for research.

Several City School pupils express expectations of being assessed on both the written report and the oral presentation. Therefore to them, the written report was an obvious choice, which it was not to the Suburb School pupils, of which the majority did not write a report on their themes.

The second distinction has to do with the logbooks, their volumes and how they are used by the pupils.

According to the City School teachers the logbook "is about to write what you are doing" and is meant to document work process (Martin, junior teacher at the City School). They are not sure however that the pupils understands it as a process description and reflection tool but are aware that some pupils tend to "forget [...] the importance of the logbook and just see it as our way of keeping control with their work, they do not see it as their own tool" (Astrid, senior teacher at the City School).

The logbooks made by the pupils at the City School are generally less voluminous and less detailed than those made by the pupils at the Suburb School. Thus more than half of the City School logbooks are between two and four pages, while most of the Suburb School logbooks are between seven and fourteen pages. In most cases the City School logbooks include only short descriptions of

the work process and reflections on it, but no descriptions of the cooperation and working in the groups. As seen from the below example, they might be even very brief in their descriptions:

13/1-2005

Today we have finished our model; we have collected our texts and made them into a report. We were working at home at Niels' until 16.00. Tomorrow we are going to print.

The Suburb School teachers emphasise the logbook and its importance in their assessment of the project. This appears from the hand outs to the pupils as well as from them telling the pupils how they expect them to use the logbook, as the teacher states:

"We assess their logbook, and we emphasise that they should write more than just a summary of their day. If they describe their problems then reflections on – how they solved them and what they thought about it. Something we find very important is that they reflect on their cooperation, [...] that they do not just write that their cooperation was good, which we find quite useless but rather, why did we cooperate well". (Helle junior teacher at the Suburb School)

Several pupils point to the importance of the logbook for the assessment of the project, as they say:

"One third of the mark is the logbook, where you are supposed to describe what you have been doing and how, and problems and so on, where you discuss what you have been doing during the day and emotions and such things, and they look at the cooperation as well". (Caroline, pupil at the Suburb School)

"Last time we did a project assignment we did not think much about the logbook, because we were not aware of the importance of it. And I think that we have become much better at saying: Hey! we should remember to write in our logbook! Because it is pretty important, it is one third of the project". (Oliver, pupil at the Suburb School)

Thus the pupils seem very aware that the logbooks count and how much they count. Oliver states a certain ambivalence regarding the logbook. On the one hand he is aware that it is important for the assessment and explains why he did a little better than average last year. On the other hand he does not really seem to understand the reasons why it is so important. To him the logbook is one of the most difficult things about the project assignment, and he also finds it difficult to make a presentation of the right time-span, but in general the project assignment is one of the things he "likes best about school".

The Suburb School logbooks generally contain a lot of descriptions about group work/cooperation. In most cases they have described the cooperation in remarkably positive terms, but might have included a few comments on which problems they had, and how they solved them, as in the below examples:

31/1-2005 [Magnus]

In my opinion our cooperation today has been a +13 [highest mark]. It has been so good, we have both been working and have had fun – and talked! It is great both to talk and have fun, and get things done – later we will see, how well it is done.

2/2-2005 [Emma]

Magnus and I are having so much fun together, and we have not had any disagreements yet. We have lots of laughing and are looking at the bright sides of things – even if there might be some clouds now and then, but we stay in a good mood.

There are more similar examples of describing the cooperation in groups in very positive terms. This is not surprising, when considering the importance attached to cooperation by the teachers. But two pupils, who had written one of the less voluminous logbooks, did not appear to have the same awareness of the importance of the logbook to the assessment. When interviewed about the important things, they emphasize such things as the settings and decorations, on which they have worked a lot for their presentation. Asked if there was anything they had needed help for, one of them states:

“We would have liked to have some help with the logbook, but we could not keep up with it, and we were in last moment with the logbook” (Sofie, pupil at the Suburb School).

Thus the weak frames implicitly make high demands on certain competences, such as independence and planning your own time (cf. Österlind 1999), which becomes a disadvantage for pupils, who have not developed such competences.

The third distinction between the schools is related to the presentations.

At the City School presentations vary a lot in their forms of expression. Some has the character of lectures followed by for instance PowerPoint; some are inspired from the media and take the forms of a TV-programme, a debate or a kind of show. In most of the presentations the pupils, compared to the Suburb School pupils, use more traditional ways of presenting, but they are ambitious and well-prepared. The pupils are clearly integrating their experiences from former assessments of similar projects. One pupil refers to an earlier experience:

“We thought that [this time] we would make a different presentation, because last time we were told that they considered [the presentation] the poorest part. We were aware of using our own phrases, because we have been told a couple of times that you should not just copy a text but use you own phrases, and we were also aware that it should not last too long”. (Sara, pupil at the City School)

At the Suburb School the pupils have been encouraged to be “creative” in their presentation. Much variation can be observed in the presentations when it comes to selecting form, and there are several presentations characterized by alternative and untraditional forms, e.g. having the form of multi-media show including experiments with lights, sounds, recitation, video, settings etc. The general theme *Clouds* might has supported such thinking.

The pupils’ descriptions, filled out at the beginning of the week, demonstrate their ideas. Their attempts to be creative appear in the below extracts form such presentation sheets:

“- lots of decoration, evocative, perhaps drama, more creative presentation than last year”

”- using shadows, settings, PowerPoint, facts, a serious and a funny part”

“- some kind of performance with shadows, music in the background, small plays in the presentation and a video recorded interview”

In the actual presentations it also appeared that they had been able to realize such ideas. The weak framing thus made it possible for some pupils to use and develop competences that are not usually given priority in school.

Conclusion

The project assignment in the Folkeskole is deeply rooted in the progressive pedagogy inspired by Dewey and the underlying principles of progressivism. Thus it builds on principles of problem orientation, participant management and exemplary learning that also carries the aim of a differentiated teaching practice. The project assignment is weakly defined, as it is only defined as a way of working/learning but otherwise mainly defined in terms of what it is not, and moreover characterised by weak classification and weak framing it can be described as an invisible pedagogy (Bernstein 1975/2000). The question is whether this invisible pedagogy, which allegedly allows for and builds on the pupils' personal differences, also creates and extends differences between them.

The practice of the project assignment is preceded by several weeks of preparing before the actual project week and the final presentations by the pupils. It is generally characterised by weak framing, but with some variations in the practice of the principles, such as with the participant management. Judged from the amount of time spent on deciding the general project theme, there is a higher degree of pupil influence in this process at the City School. Here the decision making process is devoted more time, as it is carried out in a time-consuming dialogue between teachers and pupils. At the Suburb School the process is shorter and is finished by the teachers making the final decision on the general theme.

At both schools the teachers control the pupils but in different ways. The teachers at the City School demand of the pupils that they attend school every day during the project week, although there is no teaching, but so that they can follow their working processes. At the Suburb school the pupils are not met with this demand, but instead they are asked every day to hand in written process descriptions/logbooks, which are also subject to assessment. Further, the pupils are met with different project demands, which are very academic at the City School, where they are asked to hand in a written assignment on the chosen topic, whereas at the Suburb School they are 'merely' asked to reflect on and write about their working processes.

The formation of working groups is a process, which is subject to some teacher management at the Suburb School. But at the City School it is almost completely left to the pupils to form the groups and decide, whether they want to cooperate in groups and with whom they want to cooperate. But regardless of this difference between them the pedagogic practices lead to segregation of the weaker pupils in the group formation processes, which can be compared to a marketplace, where the trade is centred on diligence and subject knowledge (cf. Gregersen and Mikkelsen 2005). The Suburb School teachers, as opposed to the City School teachers, express knowledge and concern about this problem of segregation but find it hard to solve and do not interfere directly to curb it.

The products and presentations by the pupils in the two contexts are characterised by three general distinctions. Firstly, most of the pupils at the City School hand in a written assignment on their project topic, while almost none of the pupils at the Suburb School do so. Secondly, the logbooks of the Suburb School pupils are longer and deal more extensively with the processes of cooperation between them than the logbooks of the City School pupils. Thirdly, the presentations by the City School pupils are generally more academic, lecture like presentations, while the Suburb School pupils tend to apply more creative and performance like modes of expression.

The above distinctions are probably related to the weak framing allowing the teachers to having differentiated their pedagogic practices and demands to the pupils. In this way it happens that different modes of expression are given different priorities and appearances at the two schools. It is also possible that the distinctions relate to the variations in the cultural preference systems of the school catchment areas, where there might be similar variations in the cultural preferences of the economically oriented middle class population of the City School that favour the more conservative academic deeds, while the aspiring middle class population of the Suburb School allow for more alternative modes of expression – the City School and the Suburb School being seen as belonging to primarily the old and the new middle classes respectively (Bernstein 1975/2003). Thus the pupils are given an apparent freedom of choice, but only if they possess the necessary competences and resources, belonging to the dominant class culture, in other word the dominant forms of capital (Bourdieu 1986/2003) that are acknowledged at school. As we have seen from the analysis, not all forms of capital are apt for success within the pedagogic practice of the project assignment.

Another important finding is that pupils perceive the assessment of the project assignment as equivalent to an examination. The schism between the weak frames of the invisible pedagogy practiced in the project context and the strong frames connected to an exam context is pushed to an extreme, because it is does not appear as evident to the pupils what is being assessed at this “exam”, which again is connected with the weak framing and invisible pedagogy. When it is not communicated clearly to the pupils what the assessment criteria are, what demands they have to meet, and how they have to meet them, it becomes a necessity for them to have or obtain this knowledge from elsewhere, which means from home. Therefore this pedagogic practice is unfavourable to such pupils who do not possess this knowledge in advance and who do not recognise the underlying pedagogic code of it.

There is a pedagogic potential in the project assignment providing the possibility of differentiated teaching and of taking the departure in different experiences and competences of existing resources in the child (Dewey 1902/90). But if the pedagogic practice of the project assignment is embedded in the context of examinations, which is almost unavoidable in the current situation of the widely increasing focus on evaluation and assessment in school, and if it implies a practice of assessment favouring certain implicit forms of knowledge in which the pupils are not explicitly initiated in school, this potential might be lost.

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