

Education and identity, curriculum experiences in Norway

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Abstract

What is the role of education related to young student's identity construction? This question seems to be more important than ever before as cultural changes take place to an extent and at a tempo never experienced. In this process former traditions may lose its meanings, and thus influence young students' possibilities of identity construction.

The concept of identity is complex, and should be related to a macro and micro level. The paper discusses identity from a sociological and a psychological point of view related to the role of education at both levels. An important question is how different aspects of identity are expressed in the national curriculum at a macro level, and in the next turn experienced by young students at a micro level.

The paper discusses what seems to be important to the students in their struggle for a positive identity construction, and to what extent education seems to stimulate this process.

In short: How is the relation between education and identity expressed in the curriculum and experienced by the students?

Resumo

Educação e identidade. Discursos relacionados com o currículo formal e o experiencial na Noruega.

Qual o papel da educação quando relacionada com a construção da identidade nos jovens alunos? Esta questão parece assumir ainda maior pertinência no momento em que têm lugar mudanças culturais a um nível e a um ritmo nunca antes experimentado. Neste processo, as tradições antigas podem perder os seus significados, influenciando assim as hipóteses de construção de identidade nos jovens. O conceito de identidade é complexo, devendo ser relacionado com o nível macro e micro.

Uma questão importante é a seguinte: Como é que diferentes aspectos de identidade estão expressos no currículo nacional a um nível macro e experienciados, por sua vez, pelos alunos, a um nível micro?

Esta comunicação aborda a identidade sob um ponto de vista sociológico e psicológico relacionado com o papel da educação em ambos os níveis. Ela aborda aquilo que considera ser mais importante para os alunos na sua luta por uma construção positiva de identidade, verificando até que ponto a educação parece estimular este processo. Em resumo: Como é a relação entre educação e identidade, expressa no currículo e vivida pelos alunos?

Introduction

During the 1990s we experienced growing political interest in policy making in education. Today educational politics has become a political process. As a result of this political change, a fundamental question emerges: What is the role of education?

One way of answering this question is to focus on four different functions of schooling, two of which are what we call production and reproduction. This implies that education is expected to stimulate a well rounded personal development. The function of production means that students are supposed to leave school as creative and well-informed individuals. At the same time the students are expected to be socially well adjusted, and able to cope with different social demands. An important educational task in this respect is therefore to socialize young pupils so they internalize values and interests defined at a macro level, this process has to do with reproduction. A third function of education is to sort pupils into different educational levels and into pathways that will lead them into very different parts of the labour market. This is one among several reasons for grades in school. The fourth aspect is the fact that education indeed has an identity forming function. In fact, this role may prove to be one of the most important related to education in late modernity. In the following I will therefore concentrate on this dimension, which so far has been paid little attention in Norwegian education discourses. This is, however, by no means an easy task since education and identity are wide and complex concepts, with different aspects at different levels.

Côté (1996) states that the study of human identity has proven to be a formidable task to cope with. He stresses that the concept of identity is multidimensional, which makes it difficult to arrive at a consensus regarding what it is. This multidimensionality comprises social, personal and psychological manifestations of the concept of identity. Whereas psychology has its focus on personal development and identity formation at a micro level, sociology is concerned about how different macrosocial contexts can affect human development and identity formation. The concept of identity thus consists of psychological as well as sociological aspects which means that both dimensions ought to be taken into consideration. For this reason it is also important to focus on the relationship between the micro and macro levels.

Different institutions represent macrosocial contexts that affect identity formation at a micro level. Among the most influential institutions in this respect is school. The educational system has got a powerful position in influencing identity and identity construction during adolescence.

Research questions

In the following I will therefore discuss the relation between education and identity as it is expressed in the national curriculum at a macro level, and experienced by students in lower secondary school. During the last nine years the Norwegian primary and lower secondary school (compulsory school) aged 6 to 16, has been reformed twice. The analysis will focus on the reforms of 1997 and

2006 at a macro level. My research question is what kind of pedagogic identity the two educational reforms are oriented towards. At a micro level the research question is what kind of pedagogic identity that seems to be important to the young students. To what extent do the pedagogic identities at different levels match each other? The concept of pedagogic identities is taken from Bernstein's theoretical framework (2000) and will be presented in the following.

The theory of pedagogic identities

Bernstein's (2000) concept of pedagogic identities may represent a new and interesting way of discussing and analysing the impact of educational reforms on society as well as on human beings. The concept is strongly related to the official knowledge within the curriculum i.e. knowledge that has been accepted in curricular programmes. Official knowledge refers to the educational knowledge constructed and distributed by the state within educational institutions. This official knowledge is constructed through the official re-contextualizing field by means of a pedagogic discourse. Bernstein is concerned with changes in the bias and focus of this official knowledge that are engendered by contemporary ongoing curricula reforms. In these processes different social groups will struggle to control the pedagogic discourse, which in turn gives the premises for what is to be considered official knowledge. In this way pedagogic identities might be considered a tool in the state's socialization process - as the state by means of this official knowledge wants to form a certain kind of human being.

In other words, Bernstein's perspective on curriculum reform emerges from the struggle between different social groups to influence state policy and practice. The bias and focus of the official discourse, and the official knowledge, "are expected to construct in teachers and students a particular moral disposition, motivation and aspiration, embedded in particular performances and practices" (Bernstein 2000, p.65). From this perspective Bernstein develops a simple model of the official arena in which the struggle between different groups takes place. He outlines four different positions which project corresponding pedagogic identities. The four positions represent different approaches to regulating and managing change, in moral, cultural, technological and economic areas.

According to Bernstein, any educational reform can be regarded as «the outcome of the struggle to produce and institutionalise particular identities» (Bernstein 2000, p.66). The pedagogic identities are as follows: a retrospective pedagogic identity, a prospective pedagogic identity, a market pedagogic identity and a therapeutic pedagogic identity, all of which represent different values and interests. I will now look at each of these in turn.

(From Bernstein 2000)

To start with retrospective pedagogic identities (R.I.), these are shaped by "national religious, cultural, grand narratives of the past. These narratives are appropriately re-contextualized to stabilise that past in the future. An important feature of the resources that construct R.I. is that the discourse does not enter into

an exchange relation with the economy" (Bernstein 2000, pp. 66-67). This identity has a collective social base, and the individual careers are of less interest.

Next, the prospective identities represent different values and interests as compared to the retrospective. These pedagogic identities are constructed to deal with cultural, economic and technological change. These identities "are shaped by selected features of the past to defend or raise economic performance" (Bernstein, *op. cit.*, p.67). Bernstein states that the state in this pedagogic identity wants to control both the input and output of education. The prospective pedagogic identities are future oriented, whereas the retrospective are oriented towards the past. The retrospective and the prospective identities are both considered as centred identities. This means that they are generated by resources managed by the state.

Third, the market and the therapeutic pedagogic identities are both called 'decentred identities', which means that the relevant institutions have some autonomy over their resources. These identities construct different presents (here-and-now), but they are ideologically quite different. With regard to the market pedagogic identity, the main thing is to produce an identity whose product has an exchange value in a market. A competitive output is of great importance. Focus is upon "those inputs which optimise this exchange value. We have here a culture and context to facilitate the survival of the fittest as judged by market demands" (Bernstein, *op. cit.*, p.69). The therapeutic pedagogic identity, on the other hand, "is produced by complex theories of personal, cognitive and social development" (Bernstein 2000: 68). This identity is expensive to produce, and the outputs are not easily measured. Consequently, the therapeutic identity has a very weak position within contemporary educational reforms. Whereas the market identity produces differentiated competitive identities, the therapeutic identity produces stable and integrated identities. Whereas the market identity is instrumental and has an economic base, the therapeutic is concerned with sense-making and internal coherence.

Bernstein (*op. cit.*) claims that through the construction of dominant pedagogic identities policy makers want to prepare the ground to influence pupils' consciousness, their self esteem and attitudes as well as their cognitive, social and emotional development. This perspective takes us directly to the Norwegian case and the analysis at a macro and micro level. We will start at a macro level by asking which pedagogic identities seem to have been given a dominant position.

The construction of pedagogic identities at a macro level.

The main questions to be paid attention to are as follows: What kind of pedagogic identities did the Norwegian state want to construct through Reform 97? And to what extent is this identity construction in harmony with the students' wishes and needs at a micro (local) level? According to my analysis (Hovdenak 2000, 2005) the conclusion is that the dominant pedagogic identity of Reform 97 is a kind of prospective identity due to the fact that the driving forces, as expressed in the basic documents, are identified mainly for coping with economic and technological change in the future. Economic growth and technological

development are given priority, whereas social and cultural development are hardly mentioned. However, the connection between economy and education is strongly stressed.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that all four pedagogic identities can be identified to various degrees in the curriculum. At first glance, when concentrating on the *general part* of the National Curriculum, one might get the impression that the state wanted to construct a kind of retrospective pedagogic identity. This is because the development of a national identity was emphasized together with the importance of developing moral values. This part of the curriculum also seems, to a greater extent than the basic documents, to be concerned with the development of the individual, and in this way the link to a therapeutic identity seems relevant. However, when seen together with the two other parts of the National Curriculum which deals with a) *principles and strategies* and b) *school subjects*, the impression of a therapeutic pedagogic identity fades away. These two parts seem to give preference to knowledge linked to economic reproduction. The aspects mentioned above give associations to the theory of human-capital. In sum all these aspects point to the fact that a prospective pedagogic identity has got the *dominant* position in Reform 97. However, as has already been stated, we may find features from the other positions as well.

The most difficult pedagogic identity to identify in the Norwegian curriculum is the decentred market identity. The production of this identity is completely incompatible with the Norwegian "enhetsskoleideologi" ("unitary schooling ideology") due to market identity being based on competition among private schools, whereas the Norwegian education system is first and foremost based on state institutions. As long as the "enhetsskoleideologi" has a dominant position in the policy of education, the politicians will be prevented from constructing a decentred market pedagogic identity. Consequently, the only possible economic oriented pedagogic identity to be accepted so far, is a kind of prospective pedagogic identity constructed at a macro level. So much about Reform 97 and pedagogic identities at a macro level. In the following I will focus on the micro level by presenting pupils' experiences of lower secondary school and its dominant prospective pedagogic identity.

Pedagogic identities at a micro level, based on student experiences

The data presented here is based on qualitative individual interviews throughout a period of two years while the respondents were students in the 9th and 10th form, i.e. the senior classes of lower secondary school. Each interview lasted about 45 minutes and took place once a year. In addition to the interviews, an open questionnaire was used as the background for the first interviews. The study was supported by the Research Council of Norway. The respondents comprised 78 randomly chosen students, 45 girls and 33 boys, from six different schools, in urban as well as rural areas. The research questions are: What kind of pedagogic identities are important to the students? How does the pedagogic identity expressed by the students at a micro level correspond to the construction of a dominant prospective pedagogic identity at a macro level?

The analysis of data tell us that the students ask for weaker external classification and framing¹, i.e. less separation between school and the community. This dimension has to do with the students' own possibilities for future orientation. A future oriented identity is defined as the way in which young people think about their future options, and the aspects that are taken into consideration in their future planning. It appears that the discussion concerning the construction of a future oriented identity is related to the transition from lower secondary level to upper secondary school i.e. from compulsory to optional education. This is a period of life during which students are simply forced to think more about their future plans, since they have to choose between different occupational alternatives. In other words, at this part of time young people have to start thinking about, and gradually construct their future identities by means of the choices they make at upper secondary level. Initially this involves choosing between two different directions: a vocational and an academic one.

All the respondents interviewed experienced the transition from lower secondary level to upper secondary level as an important future educational choice. As one boy in the 10th form said: "Up to now, this is my most important choice. I wish I knew more about occupational life." A girl 10th form commented: "This is an important choice which gives the premises for the coming years, perhaps for the rest of my life." The students' needs with regard to a closer connection to occupational life is interesting. We should bear in mind the reasons why pupils ask for a closer connection, for example their lack of experience from other social arenas outside school. Wyn and White (1997) argue that there is a growing sense of the life experiences of many young people having been greatly impoverished in the 1990s. Therefore the students want to participate in different social arenas of occupational life in order to test out their own abilities and interests. This opportunity, they think, will make it easier for them to find a future route and to construct future oriented identities.

However, there is a mismatch between what is regarded proper knowledge at a macro level compared to what students ask for at the micro level in order to prepare themselves for life and future challenges. The curriculum defined at a macro level values knowledge which is expected to stimulate a kind of prospective pedagogic identity that is rooted in economic thinking. The students, on the other hand, ask for official knowledge that values "objective" as well as subjective dimensions. The "objective" relevance means that school subjects should point at facts and information, which also may be expressed as academic knowledge. It is important to underline that this does not mean that the students reject the school subjects. What is missing, according to them, is the dimension of subjective relevance. This means that school subjects should take into account the experiences of the pupils as a motivating factor in the learning process. Furthermore, the students want knowledge that is concerned with their inner commitments and interests. According to the students, school knowledge should pay more attention to the subjective and expressive dimensions and also allow the students to be more creative.

¹ Classification and framing are concepts from Bernstein's (2000) theoretical framework.

This lack of subjective relevance, as expressed by the students, is a signal to start analysing the content of the curriculum in a socio-cultural perspective. First, however, we should take into account that the experience of subjective relevance may be transitory. Subjects which are considered boring at one level, may gain in relevance later on at a professional level. We should also bear in mind that when the students speak about subjective relevance this is a multifaceted concept, because the students in this investigation have different social, cultural and economic backgrounds that influence their wishes and needs.

In other words, this investigation shows that many of the students seem to compromise with regard to their own needs as they try to cope with the official knowledge, which projects a prospective oriented pedagogic identity. This contradiction is explained by them in this way expressed by a girl in the 10th form: "We have no choice, we have to adapt ourselves to the system in order to safeguard our future possibilities". Pupils who are not able to adapt themselves to the system may be given special programmes. One of the teachers, who was also the head teacher at the school, said that a number of working-class boys had come to her and asked for a special programme for the last year in order to keep up with their studies.

The construction of a fifth pedagogic identity

The key question is what kind of pedagogic identity will be produced in compliance with the students' perspective? I suppose this will result in the development of a *fifth* position of pedagogic identity because the data collected in this study indicates the necessity of extending and developing Bernstein's theory of pedagogic identities since those original four positions do not seem to catch the perspectives of the pupils at the micro level. This fifth position will have to bridge the gap between values and interests at the macro and the micro level and thus take into account the fact that education has to do with development of both levels. Thus, this fifth pedagogic identity will be a complex one, probably a composite of different positions where the student's voice is heard and the identity forming effect of education is given a stronger position in curriculum development.

The students in this study have mostly focused upon the possibility of *personal development* and *future orientation*, which seem to be a mixture of therapeutic and prospective pedagogic identities. The expressed need for a therapeutic identity is related to the fact that students experience that lower secondary school does not adequately stimulate their personal development. They want to test out their talents and abilities in different ways, and to a greater extent than they are allowed to. With regard to the prospective pedagogic identity we may strongly emphasize that the students' future orientation does not seem too concerned about economic development and international competition at the macro level. Instead, their future orientation has to do with the possibilities of being educated, getting a job and being a citizen. So far about the construction of pedagogic identities at macro and micro levels.

In the following I will pay attention to the dominant pedagogic identity distributed in Reform 2006.

Pedagogic identities in Reform 2006

Hovdenak and Riksaasen (forthcoming 2007) found in their analysis of Reform 2006 that the prospective orientation of the pedagogic identity was strengthened compared in the previous reform. However, there has been an important change in curriculum making during this period. Whereas the previous reform presented a detailed curriculum for each subject year by year, the present curriculum reform has a more flexible design. Whereas the previous outlined fixed aims each year, the present curriculum is built upon what has been called "competency goals" for periods of two or three years. During these periods it is expected that teachers interpret, define and operationalise (make concrete) these competency goals. This change in curriculum design and structure means that the teachers to a greater extent than in Reform 97 are considered professionals who are able to decide the content, the methods, the pacing and the sequencing within certain curricular frames. This change in curriculum making is a result of the evaluation of Reform 97, in which both researchers and teachers criticized this curriculum for being too detailed.

Therefore, the current curriculum provides a pedagogical professional space where the teachers are more responsible for the whole pedagogic process, from you interpreting the different competency goals to evaluating the outcomes and the different aspects of the teaching process. This means that the new curriculum requires another professional standard where teachers are expected to interpret and operationalise curriculum to a greater extent than before. As a consequence the Department of Research and Education has initiated a new national programme called Programme for School Development to improve the teachers' competence and to stimulate schools as learning organizations. As a result of this programme, several schools in Oslo, including primary schools as well as lower secondary school and upper secondary level, now focus on adapted teaching and evaluation. This means that teaching to a greater extent takes into consideration the pupils' abilities, talents and interests in order to stimulate further learning. This three year programme started up in the autumn of 2006.

Youth, identity and education

Why is it essential to focus on identity and education during adolescence? There are two main aspects that deserve attention. The first is that changes in the development of society, which means from modernity to late modernity in which the individual no longer can rely on traditions, but have to construct one's own identity, which according to Giddens (1991), is a self-reflective process. Consequently the second aspect is concerned with the role of education in late modernity. Giddens claims that late modernity is characterized by what he calls the reflexive society in which the individual has to construct his/her future

identity in between social possibilities and risks. This is a demanding process which depends on the individual's ability to reflect and analyze. Whereas young people in modern societies could to some extent, rely on traditions and their identity forming effect, late modernity does not offer the same possibilities. On the contrary, late modernity is by some sociologists described as a risk society (Beck 1992) in which the future is no longer as predictable as it was some years ago. This macro level change influences the individuals' possibilities regarding identity and identity construction. What we also know is that in advanced industrial societies growing up has become a complex process. As a consequence, a key question in this respect is the role of education. A number of studies stress that education is of the utmost importance in young people's lives (Wynn and White 1997, Andersson 2001, Hovdenak 2004, Heggen and Øia 2005). Not only young people today are increasingly subject to different forms of education, for many of them education also lasts for longer periods of their lives. In addition, young people's access to the labour market is strongly restricted, and as Wyn and White (1997:2) state: "Young people are often forced to seek refuge in education and training institutions because they cannot find work."

Educational researchers state that education policy has been grounded on the basis of an economic agenda in which young people are on value as an investment in the future, and as workers for a restructured economy. The young students are regarded as bearers of skills which will be capitalized on in the future (Wyn and White 1997, Hovdenak 2005). In the Norwegian case the result of this ideology is the construction of a prospective oriented pedagogic identity as the dominant at a macro level. However, this identity is by no means sufficient in curriculum making. The young students want other identities as well. The values they ask for seem to be represented in a therapeutic oriented pedagogic identity with its focus on a well rounded personal development. Wyn and White (1997:89) state: "How young people create, take on and change their identity(ies) is thus a complex process. It is a process featuring a high degree of social interaction, many diverse personal and institutional influences, and differing levels of consciousness and reflection."

In this perspective, education is more important than ever in this complex and demanding process, and marginalization in education has become a hot topic. A flexible curriculum will therefore give room for other pedagogic identities and thus help young students in constructing future oriented identities. The construction of identity is not just a matter of individual identity, it is also a cultural, collective and political issue (Wyn and White 1997). In this perspective schools have become vitally important institutions.

Conclusion and further challenges

To sum up, while it seems that the curriculum at a macro level has strengthened its orientation towards a prospective pedagogic identity from Reform 1997 to Reform 2006, the prospective orientation may still take another direction and become more concrete at a local level. In addition we may experience that the teaching process at school level to a greater extent than before may be more

oriented towards a therapeutic pedagogic identity because of the flexible design of the curriculum. A change like this will be in accordance with students' wishes and needs, depending on to what extent the teachers feel free to use the local pedagogic space created in the new curriculum. In this respect national tests and evaluation systems may either support or prevent the use of this pedagogic space.

The described change in curriculum making indicates that the teachers will have a more powerful position in defining content and methods. At school level this means that the new curriculum may give other pedagogic identities a chance to strengthen their positions. I am especially thinking of the possibility for the teachers to change their teaching towards a more therapeutically oriented pedagogic identity to comply with the wishes, interests and needs as expressed by the students. A more flexible curriculum design also offers a more flexible pedagogic professional space at school level, a gift to the teachers who want to pay more attention to the identity forming effect of education.

Education and identity are closely related concepts. In the Norwegian curriculum context the future challenge is to focus on young students, their wishes and needs in order to help them construct a future oriented identity. The identity forming effect of school in late modernity is a crucial theme which deserves much more attention.

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