Contrasts in Teacher Educators’ Discursive Positions; an Effect of Changes in Educational Policy Discourses?

Author(s): Marie-Helene Zimmerman Nilsson (presenting)

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Contribution

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During the last decades, higher education in general and teacher education in particular have been subjected to significant changes. Education policy discourses of teacher education tend to change towards a teacher training paradigm where notions of best practice and effective teaching influence at the expense of teaching based on research. Beach and Bagley (2013), define professions as consisting of both professional knowledge and scientific studies. The findings indicate that in higher education, changes in policies have also been influential on professionalism and professional identity. In their comparative study of teacher education policy analysis in Sweden and England, it is argued that a changing discourse is aiming towards a teacher training paradigm as opposed to a professional education (Beach & Bagley, 2013). Besides defining a different teacher role and professional conceptions of teacher educators, there is also a focus on effective and practically competent teacher educators (Author, 2014; Gilis, et. al, 2008; Stremmel, et. al, 2015). As there are few studies examining how actors rhetorically position themselves within this context in higher education and more specifically teacher education, the ambition of this paper is to study conversations between teacher educators related to norms and values in education, with relevance to an European context. The aim is to analyse teacher educators’ rhetorical constructions and to problematize identified discursive positions related to quality and educational policies. The research question that pertains to the study is: How can teacher educators’ rhetorical constructions be understood related to changes in educational policies in teacher education?
The theoretical framework emanates from social constructionist and poststructuralist theory, with discursive psychology and discourse theory as methodological approach (Burr, 1995; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Potter, 1996; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). The analysis is conducted by using discursive psychology (Potter & Whetherell, 1987; Potter, 1996) and discourse theory (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). Thus, the discourse concept both relates to a micro-sociological perspective, where teacher educators’ verbal interactions and organisation of language are studied, and to a macro perspective, based on the notion of subject positions as produced by overarching social and institutional discourses. In discursive psychology, there is a sensitivity to various accounts about reality, as well as to different knowledge constructions (Potter & Whetherell, 1987; Potter, 1996). In this study, knowledge is seen as continuously being constructed by the participants in group conversations. Discursive psychology emphasises rhetorics and how language activities are made convincing in social settings.

Method

The analytical concepts primarily relevant to this study are; extremisation, minimisation, consensus, function and effect, derives from Potter (1996). The analysis based on these concepts aims at focusing rhetoric strategies used by the actors in group conversations. The first three terms are used in a micro perspective to analyse how rhetorical strategies are articulated. The last two concerns a broader perspective where the researcher creates hypotheses about what function or effect a specific rhetorical strategy has.

In the initial phase of the analysis, several questions were asked of the material on a micro level, focusing on what function and effect a certain statement has and on rhetorical strategies used to achieve a certain purpose. The analysis is essential to the study as it visualizes the rhetorical resources used by the teacher educators, which in turn form the basis for interpretive repertoires (Potter, 1996) where discursive positions are constructed. The macro perspective, used in the second phase of the analysis, relates to discourse theory by Laclau & Mouffe (1985) and is used to illuminate and discuss different subject positions. In this study, discourses are understood as both constituted and constitutive. Thus, it is assumed that what is said is both controlled by established beliefs in society and, at the same time, continuously creates new conceptions and beliefs.

The article is based on a study where the empirical material consists of group conversations with teacher educators from two universities in Sweden. The selection of participants derives from that the participant should have experience of and currently possess a position as a teacher educator in higher education. Four teacher educators were selected from each university. Group conversations were conducted and video-documented. The conversations were transcribed verbatim. Distinct sequences where the teacher educators reasons about themselves and about teacher education were selected. Rhetorical strategies were analyzed and categorized in different interpretative repertoires. Through several readings, three prominent interpretative repertoires emerged. Within these repertoires, the teacher educators positioned themselves and others. A central aspect throughout the analysis was variations in the empirical material, as these contribute to the pattern of interpretative repertoires that the teachers are drawing on. Thus, it is the rhetorical strategies of the teachers that has been categorized, not the teachers as persons.

Expected Outcomes

Based on the analysis of rhetorical strategies and subject positions among the participants, the findings are presented as three interpretative repertoires within which the teachers rhetorically position themselves in different ways. The practically experienced teacher educator positions him-/herself as a master of practical skills, where a distinct boarder between practical skills and scientific theoretical academic knowledge becomes apparent. The relational teacher educator positions himherself as a student negotiator, where problematic teacher tasks are solved by asking the students to make the decision. Also, within this repertoire, the teachers position themselves as team members at the expense of its opposite, the individualistic subject matter expert. The critically reflective teacher educator positions him-/herself as a reluctant student transformer that offers resistance towards the academic education’s way of approaching beginner students. Accordingly, you have to subject to your assignment as a teacher educator and convert the students into a researcher identity, the accepted norm at the academy.

As earlier studies show similarities between tendencies in educational policy discourses in Sweden and England, (Beach and Bagley, 2013) it is reasonable to suggest that the findings in this paper also relates to a broader, European perspective. The analysis gave rise to the main result, the practical and theoretical in contrast, based on the analysis of rhetorical strategies in teacher educators’ conversations. This is considered as a possible consequence of policy discourse tendencies, aiming at a teacher training paradigm at the expense of a professional education. This becomes problematic in relation to professional education quality. In conclusion, it is argued that teacher educators’ discursive positions not only indicate that teacher education is aiming towards a training paradigm (Beach & Bagley, 2013), but that this is already existing and established.

References

Author (2014).


Author Information

Marie-Helene Zimmerman Nilsson (presenting)
Halmstad University
Halmstad