What are they talking about?

The construction of good teaching among students, teachers and management in the reformed Danish upper secondary school

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Abstract

This paper analyses how leaders, teachers and students are realising the reform of the Danish upper secondary school. We illustrate how they articulate good teaching: what they say characterises it, and what they think can facilitate and prevent it. Our claim is that reform discourses and changes to the organisation of teaching and teacher work create new ways of talking about teaching: new values are espoused, new dilemmas, rationalities and conflicts show up. From our point of departure in discourse and actantial analysis, we show that students, teachers and school management speak differently about good teaching. They have different ways of relating to other discourses when articulating good teaching. Management takes up the reform discourse when speaking of good teaching, which is related to the realisation of self-governing teacher teams. The teachers also refer to the reform discourse. But they also speak within a ‘typical’ teacher discourse in which good teaching depends on the teacher’s autonomy to exercise individual judgement. The students, on the other hand, position themselves within a psychodynamic discourse where good teaching is related to the teacher’s personal signature. Therefore, as we will argue, realisation of the reform of Danish upper secondary school is happening in unforeseen ways.

Keywords: discourse analysis, narratives, good teaching, school reforms, Denmark, education policy, upper secondary education

Introduction

The Danish upper secondary school has undergone radical changes in the last ten years (Beck and Paulsen 2010; Boje et al. 2007; Hjort 2010; Hjort and Raæ 2011). The latest reform from 2005 introduced various cross-curricular activities both between and within faculties. Teachers must therefore collaborate in teacher teams where competence building and cross-curricular activities are planned. These teams are also sites for handling various epistemological positions. Previously, the Danish upper secondary school was primarily oriented to the reproduction of established knowledge, but as the dynamics of the competitive market society intensify the upper secondary school is expected to produce students who can act as national “competitive soldiers” in the global market (Pedersen 2011).

Inspired by the New Public Management (NPM) and New Public Governance (NPG) discourses (Hood 1991; Greve and Hodge 2010; Osborne 2006), upper
secondary schools must now emphasise standardisation, output, management, and market rationality. As part of the reform process, Danish upper secondary schools were also turned into self-governing institutions in 2007. Budgets now depend on the number of enrolled students, the number of graduating students, and the ability to compete against other educational institutions in a semi-privatised market. The logic is: win or lose. As self-governing institutions, upper secondary schools are assigned greater responsibility for their self-management, but at the same time the state controls whether the institutions live up to their responsibilities and show accountability (Rüsselbæk Hansen and Qvortrup 2013).

Due to these changes, management has become an increasingly important feature of schools. At the same time, implementing the NPM and NPG ideas has made schools very sensitive to market mechanisms and structures of policy incitements. Such changes may impact how management, teachers and students conceptualise good teaching and what they care about (Ball 2008; Hudson 2007; Lundahl 2002; Frederiksson 2008).

The aim of this article is to study: How the reform of upper secondary school in Denmark is being realised by leaders, teachers and students? We illustrate how they articulate good teaching: what they say characterises it, and what they think can facilitate and prevent good teaching. As such, ‘good teaching’ is regarded as a nodal point for realising the reform of the Danish upper secondary school. At the same time, we regard ‘good teaching’ as a free-floating signifier (Foucault 1995; Laclau and Mouffe 1985) which various subjects, i.e. leaders, teachers and students, struggle to define differently. The dominating or hegemonic definition will tell us about how the reform of upper secondary school is being realised, and what that realisation implies in terms of new/old and perhaps lost subjectivities among leaders, teachers and students.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we elaborate the background from which we pose our research question. This means describing Danish educational policies, and the Danish upper secondary school as ‘a special case’ in comparison to educational policies in the USA and the UK. Then we present our strategy for analysis, which includes the introduction of a special way of analysing what we call ‘micro discourses’ or narratives – namely actantial analysis (Greimas 1973, 1983), which we relate to our way of understanding structuralisation processes. In the next three sections we analyse interviews with management, teachers and students, respectively, in order to find out how they refer to different discourses when they talk about what characterises and facilitates/prevents good teaching. At the end of the article, we conclude on our research question and point out new perspectives for the continued reform of upper secondary school in Denmark.

The Danish case: Negotiated modernisation
The above-mentioned changes to upper secondary school in Denmark are not unique. The changes are inspired by the global ideas of NPM and NPG (Hood 1991;
Osborne 2006). However, these ideas are not the same everywhere. They ‘travel’ around the world, but are embedded in the traditions of national education systems (Ozga and Jones 2006). As a result, Denmark (and other Nordic countries) seems to be quite a ‘special case’ compared to e.g. the USA and the UK.

In the USA, Michael Apple (2001) and Alan Sadovnik (2006) described changes to the education system along the lines of what they call conservative modernisation. They refer to the standards movement and its focus on ‘real knowledge’, ‘facts’, ‘traditional methods’ and ‘tests’. According to Apple, conservative modernisation is a complex phenomenon made up of a coalition of four forces: (1) neoliberals; (2) neoconservatives; (3) authoritarian populists; and (4) the managerial and professional new middle class (Apple 2001: 11). Sometimes, these forces conflict, e.g. when neoliberals want a ‘weak state’ and neoconservatives want a ‘strong state’. But mostly these forces work together in an attempt to push American schools in a new rightist direction. This implies a special combination of standards, tests and new comparative methods on the one side and market forces on the other. Apple puts it in this way:

Once state wide and/or national curricula and tests are put in place, comparative school-by-school data will be available and will be published in a manner similar to the ‘league tables’ on school achievement published in England. Only when there is standardized content and assessment can the market be set free, since the ‘consumer’ then can have ‘objective’ data on which schools are ‘succeeding’ and which schools are not (Apple 2001, 59–60).

In the UK, this particular combination of standards and markets, centralisation and decentralisation seems to have developed further. Junemann and Ball (2013), among others (Goodson 2003; Hargreaves 2003; Jeffrey and Woods 1996), have used words such as “accountability” and “performativity” to describe the British case. According to Ball, performativity is:

... a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change – based on rewards and sanctions (Ball 2003, 216).

This new technology or culture has real consequences for the lives of both teachers and students. It tends to promote promiscuous and enterprising selves with a passion for excellence, while subjects who do not perform according to targets are doomed to live through inner conflicts and resistance.

In Denmark and in other Nordic countries the neoconservative and neoliberal forces have not (yet) had the same impact on the education system (also see Lundahl, Arreman, Holm and Lundström 2013). National plans for NPM and NPG clearly draw on and combine neoconservative and neoliberal ideas but, due to the tradition of the Nordic welfare state, these ideas have not been realised to the same extent – and in the same way – as in the USA and the UK. The Danish case can
therefore best be described as one of “negotiated modernization” (Hjort 2002, 2012; Pedersen 2004).

Negotiated modernisation implies a revision of the Nordic welfare state where public services (education, health, social security etc.) are paid via progressive taxation, in the direction of what has been called the Competitive State (Pedersen 2011). The competitive state extends the traditions and institutions built up in the Nordic welfare state but, at the same time, it transforms these traditions and institutions. In the competitive state, taxes are kept at a high rate (approximately 50 percent), but taxes and their use are viewed differently compared to the ‘classic’ Nordic welfare state: they are not viewed as an expense which every citizen must make for the common good (the public system), but as an investment which every ‘player of the team’ is encouraged to make in Denmark as a global enterprise. As such, the state becomes a ‘board of directors’ in that enterprise, and the market becomes a means – not an end – for strategic management. In the same way, public servants are transformed into employees who hold a new type of ‘productive’ work ethos, and students are seen as ‘little soldiers’ who ‘fight a global war with peaceful means’ (Pedersen 2011).

The 2005 reform of the Danish upper secondary school expressed the phenomenon of negotiated modernisation in different ways. According to Bøje et al. (2007), it was the result of a discursive alliance between: (1) a reform pedagogical project discourse; and (2) a competence-based human resource discourse. The alliance of these two discourses rested on an antagonism against the ‘old’ upper secondary school, a school that, supposedly, was based on a canon discourse where reproductive skills were prioritised, where every subject was its own entity, and where the teacher was an authority and had individual autonomy in his or her own classroom. Against this image of the ‘old’ upper secondary school, the project discourse and the competence discourse could create an alliance where cross-curricular activities were welcomed, teachers were encouraged to collaborate in teacher teams, and pupils were encouraged to become students who were able to produce knowledge instead of (just) reproduce knowledge. In that way, the reform discourse expressed some of the ideas of the broader phenomenon of negotiated modernisation, first of all the idea of a new subjectivity/identity for management, teachers and students: Management as strategic and reform progressive player on the competitive ‘educational market’, the teacher as a cross-curricular team player, and the student as a ‘knowledge producing soldier’ in the service of the nation. In the next section, we will describe our theory and method in detail.

**Discourses and narratives**

Applying a discourse analytical perspective, we are looking at how different discourses allow certain ways of speaking, thinking and acting to be considered correct, good and acceptable within the reformed upper secondary school while
others are viewed as incorrect, bad or unacceptable (Foucault 1995). We look at how students, teachers, and school management are regimented to speak within certain types of discourses. However, although managers, teachers and students are regulated by powerful discourses, they are not paralysed victims of such discourses. We draw on Foucault’s idea that discourses transcend and penetrate different areas which are not interrelated in any intuitive way; the modernisation discourse within several areas of public life may be seen as such a phenomenon (Foucault 1997). It is up to concrete empirical research to show how subjective positions and identities are constructed by using ‘resources’ from existing discourses, but also to analyse how managers, teachers and students react to altered structural and discursive frames and which changes in power relations can be observed.

Based on these considerations, we stress the productive character of discourse instead of its inert and reproductive nature (Foucault 1980). Thus, our analyses will be relatively ‘inductive’ in the sense that we do not have a fixed idea as to what kind of discourse and narrative exists and prevails in upper secondary school. We do not, like other types of Foucault-inspired analyses (e.g. Fournier 1999; Tynell 2002), have a firm model for how discourses impose themselves on practice and subjects. Instead, we are interested in researching the discourse in-between, so to speak, where data from interviews with students, teachers, and school managers is our starting point in the given context (see Michael Hardt 1999 for a similar use of Foucault). In such a way we want to stress the connection between macro discourse (the reform discourse) and micro discourse or narrative.

First, we will analyse our interviews for statements related to: what students, teachers, and school management say characterises and facilitates/prevents good teaching. Second, while analysing these statements we will also analyse the subject positions from which our subjects speak, and from which they designate and negotiate other subject positions. Afterwards, we will perform an actantial analysis, stressing some narrative aspects of the discourse and the way subjectification works at a micro level. This will allow us to obtain a dynamic picture of the practice of discourse, seeing how management, teachers and students ‘tell the story’ about good teaching, and what they think can facilitate/prevent it. Third, we will articulate the dominating discourse, but also describe its marginal cases. These would be the ambivalence, insecurity, detours etc. that the subjects express while articulating the dominant discourse.

The actantial model we use in our analyses was originally created by the Russian formalist Vladimir Propp (1984), and later used by the structural linguist Algirdas Greimas in his influential book Structural Semantics (Greimas 1983). The point here is when we express ourselves we often construct what can be described as a narration about our subject. In spite of the millions of different stories in the world, they all seem to have the same fundamental structure if we – instead of focusing on ‘subjects’ and ‘themes’ – look at the actantial functions of subjects, things and abstract properties. In the actantial model, an action is broken down into six components
called actants. Propp used folk stories and fairytales to make this point clear. The young man arrives in a Kingdom where the princess has been kidnapped by a goblin. The king promises that the man who has the power and the courage to free his daughter from the cruel goblin will get the princess and half of the kingdom in reward. The prince sets out to find the princess and, on his journey, he meets a fairy who gives him three wishes after having sent him on three trials, one of which involved fighting a cruel dragon. The young man finds the goblin, and by using his three new powers he succeeds in killing the goblin and frees the princess. The young man leads the princess back to the king’s castle and the story ends with a happy wedding. Propp and Greimas’ point is that even very sophisticated stories have the same actants as fairytales. There is no narrative without a subject having a project. The rationale of the project is to attain the desired object, which construes an intrigue. Without this, narratives could hardly exist. The object can be a subject, happiness, love and power. In other words, the subject finds himself missing something and, by attaining the object, he will attain a condition of fulfilment. There is always someone or something which holds the power to give the desired object to the subject. In the fairytale it can be a subject such as the king, but it can also be an abstract power such as God or some ‘inner’ quality like faith or courage. In order to possess the object, the subject must pass some tests to qualify him to attain the object (see Figure 1). In the fairytale one of the tests is the fight with the dragon. In the typical narrative there are always helpers facilitating the efforts of the subject such as the fairy, and opponents trying to prevent him from fulfilling his task. In the fairytale the fairy is a helper, while the evil wizard is the opponent.

The point is that all stories contain some deep structural logics consisting of the six actantial functions. Narratives are different, but there are some deep structural logics at work in every one of them. The narrative function of semantic units can be shown in the actantial model:

![Figure 1. The actantial model](#)
The actantial model can be analysed by pointing out three main axes which can be found in every narrative, namely the axis of desire (subject – object), the axis of power (helper – opponent) and the axis of transmission (sender – receiver).

Our point of departure is that actantial functions cannot only be found in narratives, but also in micro discourses, which often have clear narrative features. By using actantial analysis we cannot only find out how micro stories are told, but also how the world is constructed and how the telling subject is installed in a universe of ‘power’. Whether such narrative universes are true or untrue is not relevant. What matters is that some vital elements of discourse are presented in narratives, and that these narratives have the power to construct subject-positions and the functions of the subjects involved in the narrative.

Data generation
The data for this study are taken from a larger case study building upon data from a single school in 2007. The school is located in a town where there is another upper secondary school and some other educational institutions. This is important information because the school competes with other schools in attracting students, and therefore may have realised the upper secondary school reform in particular ways according to what was thought could attract students. However, Zeuner et al. (2007; 2008; 2010) show that these discursive practices seem to be quite typical in the Danish upper secondary school. This is especially the case when it comes to reform progressive schools where ambitious management does not hesitate to realise the new strategies about teamwork.

We conducted interviews with two school managers (a principal and a vice-principal), two teachers (Lars and Maria), and four students (Mark, Stine, Peter and Alice). We were interested in relational, conversional, expressive and discursive aspects of culture. The respondents were asked to talk about ‘school life’ and the ‘school culture’ in general. But they were also asked specific questions. They were asked to describe what good teaching is about, and what they think can facilitate/prevent good teaching from their point of view. This way of asking very specific questions may have forced some subjects to speak about things that were not relevant to them, or from an angle they did not agree with. Some students may e.g. have found it hard to say something positive about teaching while ‘bad teaching’ would perhaps have been a more obvious theme. By asking these very specific questions, we may to some extent have had an impact on the answers. On the other hand, we believe we gave enough room for the informants to speak from their own point of view. Especially the first part of our interviews, on school life and school culture in general, opened up for new insights.

By prioritising an in-depth study instead of a broader approach including more schools and thereby more subject positions, we are able to show how discourses ‘work’, what they do, and how they are produced and reproduced in micro speech. This can show how a process such as realisation of the upper secondary school reform takes place qualitatively.
Management

In our interviews with the two principals they positioned themselves as subjects of the reform. Asked what facilitates good teaching, they focused on teacher teams as a vehicle of a strong modern organisation, and this can be seen as a nodal point in their narrative. At the beginning, the idea was to make tightly coupled teacher teams for each class where decisions about competence plans, inter-disciplinarity and how to build a classroom culture were taken. According to the vice-principal, the idea was to transfer some elements from traditional teacher autonomy and personal responsibility to the new team structure:

The point of return for teacher thinking often seems to be the old days before these changes [the reform] arose. It consisted of a very independent or self-regulated teacher culture where you expected that no one would interfere in anything or express opinions about anything, not even management. We wanted that responsibility to stay where the teachers are.

In the interview the principal talked about the team-organised school as a success, but he was swiftly corrected by the vice-principal. First, she informed that the model had not succeeded because different individuals in the leader group had acted without coordination with regard to the monthly meetings with management:

It was very individual how various people in the leader group handled the collaboration with the teacher teams. Some did it by mail and some went to meetings. It was handled in very different ways.

The vice-principal also said that in the first year of the implementation process the school had to centralise decisions more than was originally planned. The teacher teams were initially meant to take many decisions, but management quickly expressed frustration because of the teams’ ‘lack of management competencies’. The result was that the teachers asked the formal management of the school to take more decisions.

Central in the discussion is the relationship between centralisation and decentralisation. On one hand, the two principals were obviously inspired by the idea of self-governing teams as a way to facilitate good teaching. The fundamental assumption is that the closer the decisions are to the individual teacher, the more the teacher will perceive his or her work as meaningful. Expressed in the discourse of New Public Management and New Public Governance, the argument is that decentralisation and commitment create a will to take initiative and responsibility for the mission of the organisation, which in the long run generates good and effective teaching. On the other hand, it is clear that this discourse reached a limit at some point. This was connected to management’s basic assumption about the positive valorisation of autonomy among teachers. However, the teachers did not seem willing to take the responsibility of autonomy as a collective group.

The vice-principal spoke about the definitive importance of the school order or the culture when reforms are implemented. She also mentioned the lack of success in
transferring responsibility from the individual teacher to the collective team domain. Drawing on a psychological discourse she said:

I think the reason is that many of the teachers are not very structured in their thinking; they feel a fierce need to work within frames. They think that it is incredibly difficult to make complex manoeuvres, and they become stressed. I think that there is a clear relationship between the feeling of being pressed and being stressed and how they think and feel towards changes and being a part of a system based on the knowledge that things change all the time.

Lack of capacity to handle complexity and navigate in chaotic systems seems to have alienated some from taking responsibility in their work. However, there are conflicts in the implementation process. The vice-principal was concerned about what she saw as psychological deficiencies within the group of teachers. According to the vice-principal, some teachers are too vulnerable, afraid of changes and become easily stressed. In other words, there is a mismatch between subjective dispositions and objective demands. The two principals seem to wholeheartedly identify with the reform discourse. Everything that comes in the way of the implementation can and must certainly be addressed, but in this case it is addressed as a pathology. The two principals create an idea of normality and abnormality (Foucault 2006). They create the idea of normality and truth at the same moment as the idea of vanity, untruth and false ideas. With the idea of needing flexible teachers in an ever-changing organisation where culture seems to be a burden, management uses a psychological discourse to create the idea of the ‘right’ self-governing team player who is able to work in the interest of the organisation.

By using the actantial model we can now ask how management tells a story about good teaching and what, in the view of management, facilitates and prevents it.

![Figure 2. Management narratives](image-url)
If we take a look at the *axis of transmission* (sender-receiver), management constructs a story about a visionary reform which gives it the power and tools to ensure teacher-collaboration and thereby promote competencies among students. Teamwork is essential to this project, not only because teacher-collaboration is important for student learning and social well-being, but also because there are governmental benefits in such a structure since the coupling between management and teachers becomes tighter. Teachers are made more accountable towards targets and are evaluated more often by management. As for the *axis of desire* (subject-object), which is closely connected to the idea of the reformed school in which everybody contributes to quality and development, the two principals talked about two main tests (see Figure 2), which they are still trying to deal with in their strategic thinking. The starting point is that the teacher team has a strategic role to play as a domain where the teacher’s role is combined with the role of being a staff member in an organisation. The two principals’ utopian idea seems to be a *monoculture* where the organisational ‘we’ reaches some kind of consensus on didactical questions through planning and shared reflection. Team organisation is an instrument to reach the desired consensus because it forces the individual teacher (with his/her cultural ‘burden’ as an individualistic thinker) to adjust to the common good. In short, teams are created to make adaptation possible. If this model is to be realised in a successful way, management needs to make teachers internalise the political and managerial vision of organisational learning.

There are obvious problems in this reform-inspired discourse when it is translated to the micro-narrative of the school. The main problem seems to be that teachers do not always act in accordance with the idea of the reformed school. According to the management’s regime of truth, teachers who are vulnerable, stressed, and afraid of changes prevent school reforms. This group of teachers is not ready to realise the vision of the mono-cultural and team-driven school since they seem to lack the potential for self-governance. Management therefore had to make a defensive move until the teachers were ready to reform the school and make the weakness of under-structured teachers disappear.

By using the actantial model, the managerial regime of truth and the way managers articulate their own and other subject positions is linked to a narrative logic whereby cultural experiences and conflicts are interpreted and filtered in such a way that a certain story shows up. Our aim is not to judge the management narrative as true or false, but to show how their truth is constructed and which discursive and narrative logic there is at stake here. To tell a story about ‘what is going on’ is to exclude other possible stories which could be told from other subject positions and in other ways. Now we will turn to the teachers at the same school in order to see what they believe characterises, facilitates and prevents good teaching.
Teachers

Our analysis shows that the teachers’ statements about good teaching are related to statements about management and conflicts in the teacher culture, bureaucracy and lack of time. It becomes clear when Maria spoke of teacher culture:

There are some who share an opinion that everything the management does is wrong (…). That’s kind of a historical thing because that power has gone. And now it has come back to where it belongs, hasn’t it? (…) But as the saying goes, teachers in upper secondary school don’t like to be managed, do they? But on the other hand we do like some things to happen, don’t we? And some things do definitely happen.

In order to say something about the teacher culture she finds it necessary to explain how such a culture is related to and affected by management. Maria also talked about bureaucracy and the lack of time:

I think that one of the key reasons why we are not so good at handling conflicts is simply time. There is no time for discussion in our teacher team. Everything comes down to planning. We have to get things done. And right now we are going into one of those interdisciplinary courses on study preparation – who is copying, who does this, who does that? That’s what time is spent on. And the things we should discuss in the team, we never get time for that.

Positions and conflicts between reform-minded and non-reform-minded teachers and young and old teachers within the teacher culture were also mentioned by Maria:

And then I also think we are a good team. We have good working relations. But that’s where it is. There are some colleagues who don’t want to take it further than that. But after some younger teachers have come to the school, these old voices have kind of been outsourced, although some still have a voice which can be heard some times. I think it’s lovely to see that the younger teachers have what it takes when it comes to cooperation, that they have a community, which also involves life outside school.

Generally, she talked herself into a subject position, which is in line with the reform discourse. She spoke about the potential of teamwork and thought it is positive “that the younger teachers have what it takes when it comes to cooperation”. However, Maria also expressed some ambivalence in her identification with management and, more generally, with how the teamwork was being realised. She stated that they use a lot of time on “technical issues” in their teamwork. They need more time and less bureaucracy to improve their teamwork.

Maria’s and Lars’ views on good teaching are in the same way defined by the subject positions they take up in relation to management. Lars talked about the importance of student activity and teaching methods which are able to activate the students. As he noted:

Student activity is important. It is not I who is to stand at the blackboard and play the entertainer. They may sit and talk two and two, reflect, get new inputs, or go do some group work, where a dialogue turns up. I see that as the most important task.
He added that: “I am convinced this is the way they learn best”. Asked how the
reform is helping him in this respect, he stated:

I think it helps me, it gives me a lot of opportunities. One has to use the old-fashioned
method where one does some teaching at the blackboard and tries to focus on the subjects
first. And then, after a while, get the students going, invite them to discuss the content, find
a model, which they can present and so on.

As mentioned, ‘student activity’ and ‘student activating teaching’ seem to be the
key words Lars used when describing his own ‘good teaching’. However, some
ambivalence may also be noted in this case. It is significant that he did not at first
answer the question posed by the interviewer. He simply stated that the reform was
helping him and that it was giving him a lot of opportunities. When asked the same
question again, he tried to provide an answer but, interestingly it is one which includes
“the old-fashioned method”. There is not necessarily a contradiction between the
modernising teacher and the old-fashioned approach, but his statement nevertheless
suggests that he is not ‘all in’ for the student activating teaching methods. This is
also the case when he talked about teacher teams as very important, but also
time-consuming:

Right now I feel that it is significant that we meet and collaborate while using the copy-
machine. To a high degree we use mails as a medium of information.

At the same time, he talked about the overall importance of legitimising teacher
work:

There is a study plan, there is the teaching plan, there is . . . Then you have to make an
evaluation after every sequence which has to be written down in order to be used in the
quality plan of the school.

Lars talked here about the bureaucratisation of teaching, not so much about all the
benefits of working together in a teacher team. Instead, Lars emphasised that good
teaching is closely related to teachers’ autonomy.

Maria generally shares Lars’ views on good teaching. Her main problem seemed to
be that she did not have the same discursive references as the students. When she
talked about novels or movies, for instance, she could not refer to the same movies as
the students:

My references fall to the ground. Because one is at a completely different place than they
are, right? But then again, they are so sweet. Sometimes they need a hard push, and
sometimes they need a little tickle.

The important thing to note here is the way Maria talked about her relation to the
students. On one hand, it is possible to interpret that due to her age and seniority
Maria subjectifies herself into a position as one of the ‘old’ and thereby not very reform-minded teachers. On the other hand, her relation to the “sweet students” suggests that she to some degree can sustain a position as one of the more modern teachers who empathises and understands the students’ needs that range from having firm structures to being gently encouraged.

If we return to the actantial model, we may say that the “sweet students” are the helpers who facilitate Maria to take up the position of a modernising teacher even though she is not exactly a young and ‘modern’ teacher. Summing up this analysis, we employ the actantial model again and show the narrative, which is told by the two teachers in quite similar ways:

![Diagram of actantial model]

**Figure 3. Teacher narratives**

The teachers’ story is told from another subject position than that of the management, but it is not antagonistic to the management story. They both articulate the reform discourse, and in many ways the ‘giver’ is the same – namely the reform. The main *difference* between the two groups seems to lie in the way they approach conflicts related to good teaching. While the actantial analysis of management shows ‘psychologically strong teachers’ to be the helpers and facilitators of good teaching, the teachers’ helpers or facilitators are the students themselves (see Figure 3). As such, the narrative has been extended to encompass another subject who seems to be very important to the teachers (the ‘active’ and ‘sweet students’). Also the ambivalence towards implementation is much more manifest among the teachers compared to the management. While the management seems to identify fully with the new ideas of reform and organisation, the teachers express great ambivalence, and their articulations are not exactly coherent. They accept that they have to work in teams, but they do not always do teamwork. Therefore, management’s idea of self-regulating teams,
carrying out the dimensions of the reform, is somewhat out of place. What is also going on is a kind of re-bureaucratisation creating quite unintended subject positions for the teachers.

**Students**

The students in our interview spoke within a reform discourse too. They mentioned cross-curricular activities and the increased focus on successful study habits. At the same time, it is clear that their identification with the ideal student of the reform (the knowledge producing subject) is not very strong. The students first and foremost pay interest to whether their teachers are able to perform good teaching, as they see it. They are not always impressed when it comes to reformed teaching, e.g. cross-curricular learning. Alice said:

> It was very confusing. We met on Monday morning and didn’t know anything about what was going to happen, and then we were given some papers and had to start (...) but in a way we learned to work under pressure, so to say.

Such a statement not only concerns the content that has to be learned, but also the way to learn it. Talking about learning to work under pressure, the student addresses contemporary ideas of lifelong learning and ‘the will to learn’. In the competitive global society, we must learn to ‘go meta’ on ourselves and discipline ourselves in periods of stress. So when the students talked about how they learn to perform under pressure, they seemed to speak within the dominant reform discourse.

When asked what good teaching is about, another student named Mark pointed out: “Teaching must be interesting”. Here we also find a connection between the student statements and the reform discourse. Within the overall goal to educate 95 percent of the youth generation, the explicit ambition of schools is to prevent dropouts and make students complete their upper secondary school (The Danish Government 2006). Thus, teachers must teach in interesting ways and give room for all students’ active participation. In such a situation, the teachers’ ‘relation competence’ has become a buzzword addressing the need to motivate and create personal relations to students who are not as interested in the subjects as others. Talking about interesting teaching and the need for motivating teachers, the students clearly point out what they want and how they want it. Stine stated: “the most important task for the teacher is to teach subjects in an interesting way”. This statement is interesting for several reasons. First, ‘interesting teaching’ is closely connected to the teacher’s actions. Second, the subjects being taught are not interesting per se. As an alchemist, the teacher must transform ‘boring’ into ‘interesting’. Third, the teacher is the active part who promotes something (interesting teaching) to someone (the students).

Although the students talked about good teaching in ways that are connected to the reform discourse, their dominant discourse seemed different. When the students spoke
about good teaching, they were deeply rooted in what we will call a psychodynamic discourse (Salzberger-Wittenberg, Williams and Osborne 1999). Here focus is attached to relations between teacher-student(s) and student-student(s). Peter said:

The teachers must motivate us, and he/she must be interested in who we are as persons, not only as students. The teacher must also have humour and be able to make witty remarks.

Alice continued:

The teachers must also be able to keep order in the class, get the class to ‘work’ and solve conflicts between the students if needed.

From a student perspective, much is up to the teacher and the ideal teacher is a being with power to both govern and to love. There are elements of the Freudian father figure here; an authority who can establish social order and ‘solve conflicts’ between the students. At the same time, the ‘tongue of the mother’ can be heard: in the first of the above quotations, the student clearly stated that the teacher must be interested in whom we are as persons, not only as students. With such a statement, the good teacher is talked into an androgynous subject position with both traditional masculine (father) and feminine (mother) characteristics. As mentioned earlier, the ideal of the androgynous teacher is closely connected to a certain ‘object-making’ of the student role, but it also shows how a combination of different character-aspects seems to be becoming important in an era where both social order (guaranteeing classroom culture) and affective relations (guaranteeing individual and individualised needs) are appreciated. Summing up our student analysis, we again use the actantial model:

The student narrative about good teaching has – in one important aspect – similarities with the management story: much depends on the teacher. From the student point of view, success and failure depends on the androgynous teacher’s power and will to establish social order in class and to take care of the students. However, the students talked about quite another teacher than the teacher envisioned by management. Where management talked about rational teachers building competencies and using various methods, the students focused on the personal signature of the teacher.

This is an interesting difference. While management talked about students in terms of the official point of view, which is that students in upper secondary school are young people interested in academic knowledge, the students defined themselves as much more dependent beings in need of motivation and teachers who can fulfil their affective needs (see Figure 4).

**Conclusion and perspectives**

Based on our analysis, we conclude that the reform discourse has become somewhat determinant of what can be said by management and teachers while the
students seem to articulate their experiences and views on good teaching in a *psychodynamic discourse*.

Management and teachers generally tell the same story of good teaching after the reform, but their stories differ in some respects. The utopian ideal for management was to create *self-governing teacher teams* working with inter-disciplinary issues in meaningful ways, but their efforts were met with resistance among teachers because they missed competencies and time allowing for meaningful teamwork. According to management, the existence of psychologically under-structured teachers could explain some of the frustrations regarding the new organisational structure. The two teachers correspond in some points with the management. Both teachers saw some positive aspects of teamwork which can facilitate good teaching, but they also saw bureaucratisation as a consequence which can prevent good teaching. They felt they are being watched and controlled in an absurd and non-rational way and were unsure where this was all leading to. As such, they expressed some ambivalence in their identification with the reform discourse as they hold on to a *‘typical’ teacher discourse* where individual teacher autonomy is valued. The teachers fear that their individual autonomy is being ignored in favour of ‘team-based autonomy’.

As mentioned, the students did not really talk within the reform discourse. Their narrative is about the almost overwhelming importance of the teachers and their *personal* signature as motivating factors. It was pointed out by the students – which is very typical of students in general (also see Coren 1997) – that the teacher is the most important single factor for good and interesting teaching. From the management perspective, teachers were seen as a whole, making the team a kind
of ‘collective subject’. On the contrary, the students only saw teachers as ‘individual subjects’.

There also seems to be a gap between the ideas of the reform when it comes to the ‘knowledge producing soldiers’ and what seems important to the students. Therefore, we do not find that the reform of the Danish upper secondary school has been realised according to its intentions. New problems, dilemmas and not-very-soldier-like students seem to make the master plan hard to realise.

One might therefore also ask whether the Danish experiment of negotiated modernisation will continue as a balance between the classic Nordic welfare state and the liberal minimal state – or whether new displacements, balances and neo-isms will find way into the upper secondary school? Looking at our study, the pupils/students seem to be the ‘missing link’ for the idea of negotiated modernisation to be realised. In Denmark, 65 percent of every youth generation enters high school (Ministry of Education 2013), and for some while there has been a discussion going on as to whether that is too much, and whether some young people are better suited to a vocational training programme. With so many young people entering upper secondary school, carrying so many different ideas about their own identities, it seems almost impossible to operate with only one identity for upper secondary students – as ‘knowledge producing soldiers’. More ‘open schools’ with a wider variety of options seem like a better solution.

At the time of writing, we are witness to new ‘enforcements’ of negotiated modernisation, e.g. through a new agreement between the teachers and their employers (Raae and Jørgensen 2013). This agreement means that teachers are given new kinds of responsibility, and they are made accountable in ways not formerly known: they must now live up to shifting and rather unclear assignments, defined by the local management, instead of working on a national accord, with fixed time frames for preparation, confrontation, meetings etc. In return, they receive a bit more in their pay packet.

The question is whether such an accountability system will help realise and continue the Danish experiment of negotiated modernisation? Or will such a system in the long run alter the balance and pull the Danish upper secondary school in the direction of the UK experience with neoliberalism where teachers and students seem to suffer from the terrors of performativity?

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