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The social dynamics of teacher passion in the wake of *Problem Based Learning*

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Introduction and encounter

Quests for interdisciplinarity in school have been voiced throughout the 20th century. First as part of alternative movements such as *New Education Fellowship* that from the 1920s promoted child psychology, thematic work, caring environments as opposed to the organization of school in separate subject areas (Brehony, 2004; Jenkins, 2000; Øland, 2010, 2013). From 1960, pursuits for interdisciplinarity were institutionalized in Danish statutory instruments, in 1993 a project assignment was introduced in the statutory law for the Danish public school's final exam (Øland, 2009), and in 2013, the idea of a flexible public school with a focus on learning management was launched as part of a new statute.

This paper is based on an (ongoing) in-depth study of one of the concepts that was made possible by the 2013 statute, i.e. the concept *Problem Based Learning* (PBL) as it is enacted in a Copenhagen public school. The school is organized in units spanning three year-groups of 75 children, divided into smaller groups, depending on the tasks, and a team of 7 adults, and it is structured in 8-week project cycles with running milestones throughout the school year. The teachers have responsibility for particular subject areas but within the project, and sometimes a subject area can be excluded from the project and taught separately. The projects are planned by the team of adults (teachers and social educators), and an educational manager from the school's overall management team assists the team and meets with them once a week. Here they talk about the ongoing project, and they plan the projects to come. Quests for interdisciplinarity is in this context interweaved with quests for transgressing boundaries on a more general level. The study encompasses fieldwork focusing on one 8-week project for 3., 4., and 5. grades, collection of relevant documents and interviews with the educational manager and the five teachers involved.

About the appearance of PBL in this school, the educational manager says that it was something the local management decided on and then articulated for staff:

“It is something that we did rather suddenly,¹ right? And then we just *really really* made an effort to articulate that it was built on what was already there, and how it should do us good” (Hanna, educational manager, interview transcript p. 9-10)

The school had previously been into thematic work and innovation didactics, and all the managers, teachers and social educators at the school then and now were and are in different ways very much in favour of doing school in ‘other ways’ and ‘making a pedagogy that makes sense to the children and to the world’. Previously, the motto was: “‘use to’ is not moving in”², which referred to what was done last time or last year, and what was done in traditional teaching had no place in this school. Educational practice where one teacher is teaching one class in one subject at a time using one textbook (voiced as the *tyranny of figure one* in the context) was banned and still is. What the management means by *doing good* in this context is on the one hand about doing good for the children by securing that the school’s ‘other ways’ continued and authentic learning still would unfold. On the other hand, it is about doing good for the staff and making the organization sustainable by making it *less* dependent on dedicated staff, although dedication was still needed, and *more* dependent on a predictable organizational structure, meaning that some sort of ‘use to’ or recurrence was advocated for.

The focus of this paper is my encounter with what I term *teacher passion* and my preliminary attempt to understand such passion as part of broader social dynamics of order and disorder in and through teacher work.³ In other words, I want to understand how teacher passion is calibrated anew, how it operates and what powers operate through it. I consider my material a fruitful site for studying these processes because it lays bare how teacher passions are (sought re-)configured in the wake of the PBL intervention.

¹ In Danish: ‘rimelig BUM’ (rather BUM)

² In Danish: ‘plejer flytter ikke ind’.

³ At the moment, I have formulated the overall analytical theme of my study as *coordinating uncoordination* which is about the school’s efforts to (re)create a structure, making subject matters visible and valued but also understood as uncoordinated matters that must be recontextualised. Three subthemes have proliferated from this: *the gathering, passion and boredom*, and *sociability*. This paper’s focus is part of *passion and boredom*.

Opening concepts used as thinking tools – or focusing an analytical object of study

While initially trying to come to grips with what was going on in my material, I gained conceptual help from existing conceptualizations of comparable teacher or welfare work. First, Dan Lortie's concepts *endemic uncertainties* and *diffuse anxiety* have helped to understand a social dynamic within teacher work related to a so-called gap between high social expectations and low technical capacity of teachers who engage in a craft whose outcome is remote in time and difficult to assess for the outside world and the teacher herself (Lortie 1975: 134-135, 143). Second, Tess Lea's concepts of *remedial circularity*, *coordinating uncoordination* and *emotional compulsiveness* have assisted in conceptualizing the circularity *and* compulsion involved in welfare state interventions (Lea 2008: 13, 62-67; Lea 2012: 109). Furthermore, they have facilitated an acknowledgment of the agency involved in upholding the myth of the rational welfare state; a myth fuelled by and kept in place by interiorised interventionist thinking that 'thrive on the emotional thrill of surfing crises' (Lea 2012: 111). Third, Lauren Berlant's concept *cruel optimism* as: 'a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility' (Berlant 2006: 21) has aided to envision that the promise of an optimistic fantasy may have silent and silenced social functions that nevertheless are effective (Ibid.: 35). Moreover, Berlant's concept *compassion*, denoting a social relation and a social technology, and emphasising the spectator's pleasure in feeling compassion and pain of the other, has made it possible to think about how it is that modern welfare work seems circular and providing: 'an alibi for an ethical and political betrayal as it can initiate a circuit of practical belief' (Berlant 2004: 11).

Now, given my encounter with teacher passion in my material and the opening concepts that I have turned to, the analytical object of study that has been stabilized, seems to be *the social dynamics of teacher passion*. I will engage in this object of study by displaying some fragments of my material.

Feeling good about not being responsible, but being managed as a collective

Generally, the teachers put energy into talking about management. Their work histories are developed in close relation to how they adapted to – or not – to previous management. It seems as if it is part of the teacher's DNA to adapt to management; to find out whether they are able to and will accept being governed 'like that' to use a phrase from Michél Foucault's genealogy of critique in Western society (2007). One teacher, Benny, describes how he came

to ‘really like’ being managed as part of a collective team. When thinking about this, it may be that Benny has found a way to deal with what Lortie named endemic uncertainties in teacher work. Benny no longer feels responsible as an isolated teacher:

“I have not necessarily been teaching them in Danish the last couple of projects, because it might as well have been Fiona or Camilla. In that way, it is not possible to say, if good results appear: yes, that was me! Or if bad results appear: it was me. It is always something we do together and we take joint responsibility. I like that. I thought I wouldn’t like it, because for many years, I have been somewhat of a solo rider. But I really like it. Actually, I am crazy about it. And inspired by it.” (Benny, teacher, interview transcript, p. 9)

Benny is willing to give up his individual independence and freedom as a teacher and instead belong to a team of professionals. To act as part of a team and not least be governed as a team and be part of a professional bureaucracy where common professional procedures are formed. To Benny it is a given thing to accept the governmental order and management structure of the school in general. He may be striving for better government and more flexibility, but basically, he accepts to work with and within the hegemony of the system, and thus manage the dilemmas of being dominated and governed ‘like that’ at all times as a professional welfare worker.

Keep step – and reach the nerd level

At team meetings, time is spent to discuss how they coordinate different matters. They work on (re)creating a structure within which they can organize meaningful activities. The school subjects’ distinct disciplinary competences are made visible and valued, but also seen as uncoordinated matters that must be re-contextualized in order to protect the thorough pupil and adult and fuel the project with skill power. The goal is clearly to reach the nerd level, i.e. a level where teachers and children become absorbed by the project and the subject specific areas involved. To reach that level, a structure must be in place, they think.

Discussing how they get the children ‘to follow’, they talk about how they as teachers must keep step:

“Camilla: In our English classes there is an explicit frame which everybody understands (i.e., they begin and end the class in exact the same way each time, ed.). It is quite an experience and I think we can transfer that to the daily structure for all of us (referring to the time spent on projects), exactly so that we keep step. I am very eager to make us keep step as a team. Because, the more we keep step, the more will

the children become co-players and the less children will be walking the corridors” (Observation transcript, p. 120)

The other teachers object and say that not many children walk the corridors anymore, and the educational manager takes the opportunity to finalise this part of the agenda.

“Hanna: I will close this item so we can move on. However, we should make a celebration: what I hear you say is that the amount of ‘flying children’ and corridor walkers⁴ have decreased as have the need to remind the children about what they are supposed to do and stay tuned, doing the task. Something *has* happened. Then there are spaces and change-over situations that works more smoothly than others. Wednesday and Friday they know what they are supposed to do.” (Observation transcript, p. 121)

The discussion continues, and the educational manager tries to conclude again.

“Hanna: All right! Listen: celebration! We will return to this in subsequent team meetings. We want to say: now we have an overall structure that works well, and now we can move on to the daily structure: how does it look? Are we going to regulate it even more, to mark beginning and end of a ‘subject band’?⁵ How do we proceed from breaks; I know it is rather ‘uhuhuhu’, but the devil resides in the details.

Benny: I would like to make a comment, because now I had time to think about what was said earlier about the importance of flow and a mood or an atmosphere building up. It is very nice if you work as an autonomous group not depending on the others, but we depend on each other in this team, and then it actually disturbs more than anything else (i.e. if a small-group is allowed to stay in a flow while the others wait for them to finish, ed.).

Camilla: Yes, we have to keep step!

Benny: Well, yes, because otherwise someone will ... the breaks differ and then someone will be late ... [...]... It also does something to me, if I do not settle it with the others when we make a break. Then, I am in there thinking: well, should I initiate this or that, because I know that as soon as they start running and peeping into the room from the outside, my teaching goes down the ...

Hanna: I saw it yesterday; I do not know how they are able to sense it. There seems to be energies breaking through the walls. Something just happens when they sense that one of the groups are done.” (Observation transcript, p. 123-124)

At this meeting, they also talk about how the individual subjects, the skills and the thorough study operate in the projects or besides them, and not least how that touches upon a teacher desire to be a nerd and how that in turn makes the teachers even better at pin-pointing the children’s deficiencies. Camilla refer to what she just talked to her colleague Sarah about in a short organised pair-talk within the team meeting:

“Camilla: For instance in this project about gaming, I only taught the children how to write the game instruction. I was only a clean-cut Danish teacher. It was so cool,

⁴ In Danish: ‘flyvere og gangbørn’

⁵ In Danish: ‘fagbånd’ which is, a phrase for a period of approximately 2 or 3 hours.

because I could really dig into my subject area⁶. I did not have to worry about their games or feedback on the games. I just did my little part and then the rest of the team worked on other things around me. I like that. We are also better at separating a subject area from the project, if needed .. [...]. The sharper you are in regards to what your own subject area has to offer; the sharper you will be at pinpointing what the children lack. We find that very exciting and very nerdy.” (Observation transcript, p. 126).

Camilla and Sarah are pointing to a structure so explicit and detailed that it can distil the teacher’s specific competences and make room for them to be nerdy, and ultimately to discover children’s lacks. As the meeting proceeds, they translate this discussion into a discussion about absorption for the children, but in a strictly governed way.

“Fiona: We need to find out where we can make more room for the children at this point in time where we are experimenting with PBL; we are really sharp and really governing the children, so the more we experiment, the more we will find out where to turn the screw.⁷

Camilla: The children miss children’s democracy and they say it *all the time*. We need to find some space for them.

Hanna: Okay, listen! What I take down, and you must correct me if I am wrong and just taking down what I want to. But at the moment, I am just happy as hell that Trine is here and has listened to what we are talking about, which is, and this is what it is all about: *Even* though we are project organised ... or .. no, *because* we do PBL, then we can be really sharp in subject areas. They are not opposites. It creates motivation, frames for absorption, engagement to work in-depth with subject matters, because of the overall framing.

Camilla: It is because when it comes down to it, we are real nerds in this school – in a good way.” (Observation transcript, p. 128-129)

Boredom and choking in subordinated and managed teacher work

The efforts to ‘turn the screws’ are also expressed by Luna, who has just handed in her dismissal when I interviewed her. She can no longer accept the way things are organised. She thinks ‘use to’ has returned and has been translated into ‘this is just how it needs to be’. To her, the organisation activates boredom, not absorption, and usually she (also) understands herself as a nerd, like Camilla.

“Luna: I think they (the management, ed.) have a great need for saying: It is under control now; It is good now. I think they forgot to inform us, though. They keep

⁶ In Danish: ‘virkelig fagnørde’

⁷ Danish wording: ‘kan skrue’

singing the tune: I know what good looks like. I have come to realise: Yes, but it is not PBL. It is just not good. I think if you ask almost anyone in the staff room, then they will not be able to explain why we are doing this. ‘It is because someone says so.’” (Luna, teacher, interview transcript, p. 10)

Luna verbalise that – with PBL – teacher work turns out to be under siege: it is dominated work that the teacher, regardless of all the educational ability and subject knowledge she has, is told to do as any other employee in the organisation. To Luna, the idea of educational work, teacher discretion, and the *relative autonomy* of teacher work – to use a phrase from the vocabulary of Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1996) – is drying out, and this realisation has made her resign. Whereas the teachers who stay, think that PBL helps them calibrate their relative autonomy in a new and sustainable way.

The social dynamics of teacher passion – circular and mediating

The assemblage of fragments indicate some aspects of the social dynamics of teacher passion. It seems to involve a subordinated and managed teacher corps, and it seems to suggest a corps interested in keeping step, i.e. finding a way to organise everyday life – not as in a ‘traditional’ school with traditional authority – but in a way that all the same reproduces the school as an institutional reality of a collective of (subordinated) teachers and children. A need to keep step is clearly voiced but in accordance with what is performed as authenticity, good moods and ‘doing good’ for children and staff. This last aspect is what makes it possible for the teacher to realise oneself as a nerd, absorbed in a project’s subject matters, and this is how the teachers (still) recognise themselves as good teachers able to detect what the children lack so they can provide remedy. This makes me think that the social dynamics of teacher passion implicates a circular and mediated logic that makes the PBL school work around the clock. The assemblage of fragments may picture how teachers – like other welfare professionals and intellectuals – manage to be in a contradictory position: they are socially conditioned and as professionals with symbolic dominating and distributive power, they are also dominated by holders of political and economic power, in this case the school management and the political system (cf. also Rosengard and Øland 2018). This position makes them notice and believe in specific things such as children’s lacks. The teachers thrive on the capacity of doing good and adhere to normative optimism and remedialism. As the texts Berlant has analysed, the teachers’ vocalisations seem to:

“... stage moments when it could become otherwise, but shifts in affective atmosphere are not equal to changing the world. They are, here, only pieces of an argument about the centrality of optimistic fantasy to reproducing and surviving in zones of compromised ordinariness. And that is one way to take the measure of the impasse of living in the overwhelmingly present moment” (Berlant 2006:35).

The social dynamics of teacher passion, i.e. their reproducing and circular implications seem however evaded and ignored in the context. The circuit of passionate remedial circularity is making noise – or providing an alibi for the betrayal which is imbedded in the contradictory position and which among other things makes the evasion possible. It may not be unlike the effects of the prophetic discourse that sets in motion emotional preaching, which is made for crises, and (re)produces collective representations and identifications of unity as Gisela Sapiro (2003) has laid bare in a rather different context, i.e. the context of writers in 19th century national romanticism.

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