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Who wants to employ a bossy loudmouth?’ Teacher’s pedagogical vision and strategies when promoting students’ self-perception and social awareness

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We must mirror society, the demands made by society; and the expectations society has of human beings as regards interpersonal relationships, and work. If you don’t work on these issues it doesn’t matter how good test results the students get in academic subjects; if they don’t have these skills when they are out of school, they are really not going to make it regarding everything, such as work and social relations.
(Quoted from a teacher called ‘Hilmar’.)

When discussing successful educational practices, researchers are turning more and more attention to teachers’ reflections on their teaching and their work with students. (Russell and Munby, 1992; Richardsson, 1994; Shulman, 1987). One of the ways proposed to explore the ideas teachers have regarding their work is to analyse their pedagogical vision (Adalbjarnardóttir & Selman, 1997). By the phrase pedagogical vision we refer to the way in which teachers relate their ideas about the importance of education to their role as educators. We have presented a developmental framework where we explore this vision and its development when fostering students’ interpersonal skills and socio-moral growth (ibid.) This developmental framework has been used to explore the pedagogical vision of teachers as described by themselves, but to a lesser degree how teachers actualise their vision in the classroom. The first steps towards such an analysis will be taken here.

In this paper we mainly turn our attention to one particular teacher, Hilmar Bjornsson (a pseudonym). We present his aims in teaching, the strategies he chooses in order to fulfil these aims, and finally his teaching activities.

Programme: diverse studies

Hilmar teaches life-skills in the first year of a secondary school. His school offers a special course for students that have graduated from elementary school with low marks. This is an innovation project organised to prevent dropout from the secondary school. The main aims of the project are: to enhance the students’ self-perception and their belief in their own study skills; to foster students’ social skills such as their ability to solve social conflicts successfully; and to help students in gaining more positive feelings and increased responsibility towards the school and further work. The purpose is to make the students better prepared for an active participation in society. Efforts are made to enhance these skills in each subject.

The innovation project includes the main subjects of mathematics, Icelandic, English and life-skills. Life-skills integrates the subjects of sociology, psychology, philosophy, expression and arts. When discussing Hilmar’s ideas and work, we get a better insight into the innovation project.

The theoretical and analytical tool

The developmental framework, on which the analysis of Hilmar Bjornsson's ideas is based, consists of four dimensions of developmental awareness and four themes. The themes are: motivation, aims, act of teaching and pedagogical vision. Each theme (motivation for instance) is subdivided according to the four dimensions. Here we stress the description of the dimensions for two themes, i.e. aims and strategies. In Table 1 these themes are shown (Adalbjarnardóttir and Selman, 1997; Adalbjarnardóttir, 1999a. Adalbjarnardóttir, 1999b).

Figure 1: An analysis of professional development of teachers' perspectives: four awareness dimensions and two themes

Awareness Dimensions	Themes	
	aims	strategies
Student-oriented focus/externally-based reflection	Focus on improving students' behaviour in the classroom	Focus on additive teaching skills to improve students' overt behaviour
Teacher-oriented focus/personally-based reflection	Focus on wishes for a better classroom atmosphere for both the students and self as a teacher	Focus on additive teaching skills to improve the classroom atmosphere
Student-teacher relationship focus psycho-social need-based reflection	Focus on the psychosocial needs of both the students and the teacher in relation to each other	Focus on various teaching strategies and activities to promote students' social growth and life skills but not contextualised
Pedagogical contextualisation	Focus on own responsibility and efficacy in preparing the students for an active participation in society with a reference to differentiated and contextualised long-term effects.	Focus on various teaching strategies and activities to promote students' social growth and life skills, which are contextualised with reference to different background and competencies...

Figure 1 shows that four dimensions of developmental awareness can be used to study the increased differentiation in the teacher's reflection. These awareness dimensions range from focusing primarily on observable outcomes (e.g. students' class behaviour) to emphasising developmental processes (e.g. improved perspective taking ability and conflict resolution for an active participation in society).

It is important to keep in mind when using the framework that each teacher's vision is individual. The teacher's vision may depend on the context: for example, which subject matter he or she is teaching. Thus teachers do not necessarily express themselves within the same awareness dimension across all themes. Certainly, how consistently teachers express each of the dimensions over time and in different contexts is a researchable question (Adalbjarnardóttir and Selman, 1997).

Method and participants

In the study we use qualitative research methods: interviews with teachers and observations in classrooms. Hilmar Bjornsson is one of four secondary school teachers participating in the research. The 30 students were mostly born in 1982. The analysis is built on two one-hour interviews with Hilmar and four observations (ten lessons) in his classroom. In the analysis we first and foremost look for themes and patterns in the data (Strauss, 1987).

First we present those of Hilmar's aims that were directed at his students' personal and social growth. Subsequently we will explore which strategies he thinks are appropriate to fulfil these aims. Finally we will explore if and how he uses these strategies in his work with his students, according to observations made in his class.

Analysis

Hilmar's Pedagogical Vision

Hilmar reports on his aims:

We are trying to work on factors that lie a bit to the side of the national curriculum, trying to connect them... [So] that the kids will be less confused about themselves and their environment... [We are] trying to promote their self-perception, their potential, desires and possibilities.

We see that Hilmar emphasises personal and social factors. He also reports that it is important for the students to 'gain clear self-perception, confidence and personal strength', as well as 'social skills' and that they will become 'responsible' towards themselves and others (see Figure 2). According to Hilmar these aims are important since adolescents that do not feel good about themselves are more likely to drop out of school, and then tend to have more trouble socially and with employment. His colleague also has specific aims for the same group of students, which can be compared to those of Hilmar:

The aim is to promote these students' growth and to help them find the right path in their studies again. To let them feel how capable they are ... Some of them of course get good results and then easily can advance to studies they might not have had the motivation for previously. (Rakel Arnadóttir).

Hilmar and Rakel have several aims in common. Both of them state how important it is that the students grow further under their guidance. If we only take notice of their words we can see that they differ mainly on two points. Firstly, Rakel is rather vague about what she means when she mentions students' growth. Secondly, they seem to understand differently why students' growth is important. Rakel considers growth important for students, as they will be able to carry on with their studies. In Hilmar's opinion developmental aims are important because of his students' future as participants in society, not only in relation to their education.

Obviously Hilmar's aims coincide well with the fourth dimension in the developmental framework discussed beforehand (see Table 1). Or as stated there: 'Focus on responsibility and efficacy in preparing the students for an active participation in society with a reference to differentiated and contextualised long-term effects'. Hilmar often refers to the future of his students when he reports for instance:

We must mirror society, the demands made by society; and the expectations it has of human beings as regards interpersonal relationships, and work. If you don't work on these issues it doesn't matter how good test results the students get in academic subjects; if they don't have these skills when they are out of school, they are really not going to make it, regarding everything, such as work and social skills. [How do you mean?] Well, I mean, who wants to employ a bossy loudmouth? Who wants to marry an egoist and start a family with a more or less depraved egoist?

Hilmar stresses how important it is for the school to be connected to students' lives. His aims regarding students' social skills and their responsibility are related to possible situations which his students are likely to face sooner or later.

Figure 2: An overview of aims, teaching strategies and work within the classroom

aims	strategies / Hilmar wants to use	strategies / Hilmar uses
Self-perception: Confidence and personal strength	Inquiry learning Groupwork Individual work	Inquiry learning Groupwork
Responsibility	Inquiry learning Groupwork Making the rules together Giving students a role to play	Inquiry learning Groupwork Role as an assistant teacher
Social skills	Discussion on social issues Problems solved in the class	Open discussion in the class about social issues

Hilmar's reflections on his own teaching strategies

How Hilmar intends to fulfil his aims becomes clear from the teaching strategies he claims are important and those he is using, for example, in the subject life-skills:

[Life-skills] is built up as inquiry learning and projects ... The student... deals with problems that are close at hand, or are his own. These problems are societal, social or educational ... and then the student tries to solve them under the guidance of the teacher and the group, and through this becomes stronger. Maybe it is the opposite of traditional teaching, [which is] to give the student a plate full of food which he then is only supposed to shovel into his mouth ... At best we show him where the raw material is and then he has to do the cooking himself ... In this way ... we try to enhance his feeling of responsibility, his insight, his own potential, and his courage, so to speak.

To Hilmar dealing with the problems and solving them strengthens and promotes courage, competence, and insight. Hilmar also maintains that it is important to use various teaching strategies. He reports that in inquiry learning he often uses lectures, discussion, theme-work, brainstorming, round-table-discussions and artistic expression. In fact Hilmar rejects what he calls 'traditional teaching', which in his opinion largely consists of feeding the students. He chooses inquiry learning method as a main method in his teaching and uses various strategies to this end. Rakel, Hilmar's colleague, also seeks to

vary her teaching. She wants the students to work independently in groups and individually, she uses lectures and discussions but all the same she says:

I don't know if it is only myself that can't cope with it well enough, or if there are external causes, but ... with some groups nothing just works other than me spoon-feeding them on everything ... It may also be that you are running out of time and you have to get through the curriculum and then it is of course the fastest way if I dish it all up for them.

Obviously Rakel feels it is often difficult to use a variety of teaching methods while Hilmar seems to be more eager to try various methods.

Hilmar reports that discussions in the classroom give the teacher the opportunity to work with the student's ideas. The students can present their own points of view and as a result there is a better agreement on decisions and solutions. Such strategies should promote students' social skills. He also maintains that groupwork is a feasible strategy when the aim is to strengthen the feeling of responsibility amongst the students. In groupwork, Hilmar reports, the students learn to be responsible for their own contribution, or else they will let down other members of the group. In Hilmar's opinion clear rules will set certain standards in the interaction between the students and society. If a student succeeds in following the rules and demands of the environment with a positive attitude, the student is at the same time taking a positive stand to his or her environment.

In short, Hilmar's pedagogical vision aims first and foremost at the students' personal and social development. Hilmar's choice of teaching strategies and how he wants to use them is related to his vision to promote students' feeling of responsibility, their social skills and self confidence. Now let us have a look at Hilmar's teaching in the classroom.

Hilmar in the classroom

In the observed lessons the students were working at different projects in groups. They were participating in group discussions, surfing the internet and listening to Hilmar's lectures (see Table 2). Of course we were (the researcher is) not able to observe how Hilmar carried everything out, unless we were to attend every single lesson. When discussing the class work supervised by Hilmar we shall here focus on two observations. During the first observation a group discussion took place in the class. In the second, the students were working on a special project in groups of three to five.

In the first observation Hilmar was leading the students in a discussion about the pros and cons of education on one hand and of taking a job immediately on the other. The aim was to get students' opinion following a visit by a school counsellor. Hilmar asked the students to give examples of jobs that they would be able to take immediately, as unskilled workers. What characterises these jobs and what makes a certain job attractive in general? Hilmar kept asking the students open questions, such as: 'What do you do when you go to a job-interview? If you go out, what jobs can you expect to be available for you? What do these jobs have in common? What makes a job desirable?' The conclusion soon reached was that what you desire most in a job will not be fulfilled if you go directly out on the labour market without further education. In the second lesson Hilmar held a sort of lecture on learning, work, life fulfilment and wages. He put questions to the class, such as: 'Is getting well-paid the foundation for what you want to do for the rest of your life?' Hilmar took examples from his own life and others' looking at the relation between high wages and quality of life, compared to the quality of life of those who through education

get an opportunity to ‘form their environment’. Last but not least Hilmar pointed out to the students in an interesting way, what the real purpose of education is. Let us have a peek into Hilmar’s lesson:

To get educated is to become more what you are like as a human being. It doesn’t always matter most what exactly you study, but that you are schooling yourself. To take on any task and solve it. That you are able to solve one problem tells you that you might be able to solve many others.

In these lessons the students were activated in the discussions right from the beginning so that they were better motivated to understand and pay attention to what followed. It was a pleasure to see how appreciative the students were of what Hilmar had to offer.

In the second observation the students were working in groups. They discussed their neighbourhood with regard to social realities such as housing conditions, access to service and the eventual educational level of the population. The project was put on the internet in Icelandic as well as English. What characterises Hilmar’s teaching was his excellent overview, his discipline and determination. At the beginning and the end of the lessons Hilmar summed up, with the aid of the students, the status of the project as a whole. During the lesson Hilmar appointed assistant teachers from each discussion group, clearly defined their field of responsibility and referred to that responsibility in the lesson. Clear instructions on the progress of the project were given. The students were reminded regularly and resolutely to keep on working. Hilmar praised his students to encourage them, for example, by telling them how good progress they were making in their work with the project. He put himself in the shoes of his students, among other things by telling them that he understood how difficult it was for them to do this type of work.

We consider Hilmar’s methods of teaching as sorting well under dimension three, as shown in the model for teachers’ pedagogical vision. There it says (see Figure 1): ‘Focus on various teaching strategies and activities to promote students’ social growth and life skills but not contextualised’. Hilmar both discusses and uses many teaching strategies as a means to strengthen these factors. He refers to his students as a group with its own distinctive features, and needs and wants to choose and use teaching methods that suit the group well. During our observations in the classroom we did not clearly see if Hilmar took into account the individual ability of the students (cf. dimension 4). That does not, however, mean that he does not emphasise this in his work with his students.

Conclusion

In our opinion Hilmar is an example of a reflective teacher with a broad pedagogical vision. He is conscious of his aims and the teaching strategies he thinks are vital to fulfil these aims. He aims at preparing the students for an active participation in the society. At the same time he thinks it is important that his relations to the students are positive and constructive. We think we are able to see a connection between his aims and the work he stands for in the classroom. He is alert, active and eager to improve: ‘... in your work, you are always new ... I suppose I can greatly improve my teaching’.

We argue how essential it is to find ways to support teachers in the promotion of their students’ social and personal growth. Throughout the outline of our theoretical analysis of the actual reflection of teachers and their work with the students in the classroom,

we hope to be able to help researchers, teacher-educators, and teachers to analyse teacher's professional development. In so doing we expect to be better able to support teachers in their search for responsible and effective teaching in this challenging area of fostering students' social and personal growth.

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