From teacher education to primary school
a grounded phenomenographic analysis of newly employed and newly educated primary school teachers and their experiences with teacher work
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Summary

English summary

This dissertation examines new teachers and their experiences with teacher work the first year in school. The dissertation is entitled “From teacher education to school – a grounded phenomenographic analysis of newly employed and newly educated primary school teachers and their experiences with teacher work”. This title signals the methodological ground on which the dissertation has been based upon. Grounded theory, which originates from Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss is being discussed thoroughly as is various positions since the early discovery of grounded theory such as Kathy Charmaz and later works by Strauss and Glaser. Phenomenography forms the other methodological part of the dissertation. Phenomenography is defined here as “… research which aims at description, analysis, and understanding of experiences; that is, research which is directed towards experimental description”. This definition originates from Ference Marton and stresses the fact that phenomenography is preoccupied with describing the experiences of human beings regarding specific social phenomena and it is furthermore interested in pointing out variations in these phenomena. Phenomenography is focusing on the descriptions of experiences and not the experiences in itself. I have in the dissertation carried out a series of phenomenographic interviews with new teachers within their first year.

The empirical material in the dissertation originates from several places and persons and was been collected over a longer period of time. It involves phenomenographic interviews with 13 new teachers, interviews with 4 school leaders, observations and field notes. I have followed a municipal course for new teachers in a municipality in Zealand from where I discussed everyday teacher problems with new teachers.

This dissertation has been written and constructed around two research questions. The first research question asked the following: How does new teachers experience being new? How do they experience possibilities and barriers when trying to carry
out their intentions as teachers? The other question examined was this: “How is access possible to the everyday practice of schools and how can this everyday practice be understood”? Throughout the dissertation both questions has been examined both theoretically and empirically.

The first research question deals with the aspects of professions and teacher work in a perspective of experience. On the issue of access, I labelled the school an ‘open-closedness’ organization and discussed access on two levels. Both the actual, physical access to a school, when you enter and wander around to see what happens. I show that most of the time nothing happens – you are allowed to wander around. Unless you make yourself known. To give an example I am on a visit at school to interview a new teacher and while waiting I get the idea of taking a picture of a door (chapter 5). This proves to be quite a delicate matter involving most of the schools administrative staff – before I was allowed to take the picture. Access has also been discussed as gaining access to do empirical work in a school.

Through a grounded analysis of the empirical material, I end up with a set of categories or descriptions, which proved to be essential in the work of trying to describe the experiences of new teachers. These were:

- The road to experience (how to get or gain experience)
- Histories and relations to colleagues
- Teaching and learning
- Happiness and burned-out feelings
- “We’re having a supply teacher today”! – New teachers views of themselves
- Who am i? Where am I?

The road to experience and the relations to colleagues showed that new teachers are developing strategies for ‘sucking up’ experience. This could be done by assisting or observing more experienced colleagues. Or it could be done by structured collecting of teaching material from colleagues you trust to be good teachers – and spending time with them both during breaks and after school for social activities.

The categories for teaching and learning examined how new teachers understood the concept of teaching and students’ learning. In this dissertation it is shown that new teachers view teaching as a fence for noise. Good teaching has well-behaved students as its result. Poor teaching makes the students
noisy. It also shows that it is unclear for new teachers what makes a session good or poor. Teaching is being viewed as a potential battlefield to success and failure at the same time.

A metaphor derived from the empirical material portrayed the students as small lamps that light up when something interesting is going on in the class – and then dim down when it becomes less interesting. A light-up lamp is the student learning or having learned something that he/she finds interesting.

This leads us to the category of happiness and feeling burned out. Analysis of the empirical material showed that interactions in the classroom with the students are the primary source of feelings of fulfillment for new teachers. On the other hand it also shows that these classroom interactions is a main source for feeling burned out, frustrated and wanting to give up teaching as a profession. Teaching therefore can be understood as a complex business, but also very ambivalent. New teachers appreciate successful situations with their students – and are doing so knowing that this is also dangerous grounds to walk.

Furthermore these findings show that new teachers evaluate the success of their teaching by the student’s immediate responses – often in the forms of an ‘like/don’t like’. It also showed that new teachers are uncertain about what makes a teaching session a success or not.

During the interviews, I asked the teachers what would happen if they fell sick for a day and a longer period. What would happen? I did so not to examine the structures and regulations but to gain knowledge of how new teachers understood their own role. It came clear that new teachers has a purpose with their teaching. It is not fun – and it is too important just to be handed over to various adults who come and go. It showed various kinds of planning but just handing over the class to a supply teacher for a fortnight would take a lot of planning from the sickbed. Some things had to be followed through to completion and other thing had to be started up – and this could not wait for the new teacher to get back – so this had to be orchestrated in a more or less detailed manner.

The category who am I where am I? deals with new teachers thoughts about being in or leaving teaching as a profession. Some research shows that many new teachers are considering leaving. None of the teachers interviewed had these thoughts. But that didn’t mean that they experience successful moments all
the time. In the interactions of everyday life in school with the pupils they were learning about their boundaries, sense of humour and what can be done and not at a certain age.

Derived from my work in obtaining the phenomenographical interviews I also chose to present two empirical inlets, as I call them. These were presented under the headlines “accidental empirical” and “new teachers as students”.

Empirical situations which can be labelled as accidental was used as a term for Empirical situations that balanced on the edge of what could be regarded as legitimate for researchers to be using. It refers to situations that occurs when you are there for another purpose – and they just appear in front of you. Like waiting for a teacher in the teachers’ lounge and overhearing various conversations between teachers regarding students’ behavior. These situations is a part of the dissertation because they contribute to the investigations of the school as a certain type of organization.

The teachers as students includes my following of a municipality course for new teachers the first year in school. In this study it is shown that new teachers has a great need for rooms for talking to teachers from other schools in similar situations about their everyday worries. At the same time, it showed that putting new teachers who just finished teacher education back ‘on the bench’ proved to be unsuccessful. They did not want to be viewed as students again. Students working in groups with teacher-constructed questions based on a text as they were used to during teacher education. They had a real need to discuss everyday problems instead.

Teacher work is complex work, and this dissertation shows that there are various ways of being a new teacher. They experience different problems and similar problems – not in the same order and not at the same time. The first year – so it was explained to me by several of the new teachers I interviewed – is something you has to ‘live through’. When you come out ‘on the other side’ (which for some teachers does not have to take a whole year and for others it will probably take more than a year), you come out stronger and wiser. Analysis based on my empirical material supports that the first year at school for new teachers is ‘a period of survival but also one of discovery’ as Michal Hubermann puts it.