

6. SITUATED PROFESSIONALISM IN SPECIAL EDUCATION PRACTICE

Educating preservice teachers for special education/inclusive education

This chapter introduces the concept of ‘situated professionalism’, which is developed from field studies of teachers’ professional knowledge and way of knowing in special educational practice. It bridges the dichotomy between theory and practice and puts emphasis on situated and timely judgements of professionals as well as on reflectivity and theorising in practice. Serving as a key concept ‘situated professionalism’ challenges the way teacher education enables future teachers to deal with a range of complicated (and complex) teaching and learning situations in schools. With a focus on the main subject ‘special education theory’ in teacher education, it is argued that ‘situated professionalism’ implies a ‘practicum turn’ and following from this, ‘situated professionalism’ suggests a point of departure in practice (based on data generated from practicum) in the theoretical part of teacher education.

TENDENCIES IN SPECIAL EDUCATION/INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

In the Scandinavian countries we have for decades accepted the idea that our regular schools should include all learners – regardless of the type and degree of their disability. The question, however, is whether this is an ideal or an actual practice, as the practice often seems to fall short of the mark. Scandinavian research literature, at any rate, indicates several problematic experiences for pupils placed in inclusive settings (Emanuelsson, 1998; Dalen, 1999; Tetler, 2000; Nes, 2004; Marinsson, Ohna and Tetler, 2007). Thus, the huge gap between ideology and reality – and the reasons for this gap, seems to be crucial for the outcome of the efforts of inclusion.

Due to an increasing number of pupils being taught in separate settings (i.e. special classes and special schools), the field of special education/inclusive education is central to the political agenda in Denmark. The latest survey indicates 5.6 percent among the pupil population are in separate settings, and still more pupils risk falling outside mainstream educational contexts (Deloitte, 2010). So, Danish teachers seem to lack skills in coping with the increased academic, social and cultural diversity in their classrooms. This also raises questions about the kind of professionalism that practice calls for and the competences future teachers need to acquire in teacher education. The aim of this chapter is to discuss the concept of

‘situated professionalism’ and its potential in the process of integrating theory and practicum in teacher education.

SITUATED PROFESSIONALISM AS A CRUCIAL PRAXIS COMPETENCE

The concept of ‘situated professionalism’ is developed on the basis of findings from three different field studies in Denmark. The first one is a study dealing with the learning experiences of 27 pupils with special needs in their school settings (Tetler, Baltzer, Boye, Hedegaard-Sørensen and Andersen, 2009). 15 pupils were included in mainstream classrooms, while the other 12 pupils were placed in more segregated settings such as special classes and special schools. Analysing the interviews with their teachers, it became clear to us that the teachers experience a need for ‘knowledge related to their practice’ and to the characteristics of learning situations in practice (ibid, p. 215).

This finding is further explored in two subsequent field studies with a focus on teachers’ constructions of teaching and learning processes in their classrooms (Hedegaard-Sørensen, 2010a; Hedegaard-Sørensen, 2010b). The research questions were: In which kind of knowledge is the practice of special education grounded? What role do theories play? The empirical data consisted of initial interviews, observations of learning situations and interviews about these learning situations from 10 settings (both inclusive and segregated settings).

From these three studies, it can be concluded that teachers’ practice is, to a very small extent, generated from theories. The determining element (of the use of theories) is situations that teachers are confronted with on a daily basis in everyday life in classrooms. From this point of departure the concept of ‘situated professionalism’ captures an understanding of professionalism, as it refers to teachers’ ability to make judgements and adjustments in shifting situations in everyday life activities in classrooms (Hedegaard-Sørensen, 2010a; Hedegaard-Sørensen, 2010b). Also, the concept of professionalism includes teachers’ ability to decide on actions and to act while teaching; including the ability to reflect and theorise during and after specific situations. Thus, theories and theorising are a part of situated professionalism. Furthermore, the studies indicated that teachers draw on a multitude of theoretical positions and combine them in complex patterns. Based on these insights, the following section will discuss how ‘situated professionalism’ can be taught and, as a part of that, how practicum can be integrated into the educational practice in teacher education.

Theoretical Perspectives are not about Practice

With an interest in professionalism and the role of theories it is necessary to pay attention to the theories that are taught in teacher education, and that teachers in special education are supposed to draw on. The field of special education has been influenced by psycho-medical approaches, which are pre-occupied with programs, methods and theories outside practice. The line of thought (the understanding of the problem and the required pedagogical solutions) is as follows: The teaching