

Discourses on music in Swedish primary and preschool teacher education

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ABSTRACT

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This study investigates prevailing discourses on music in the field of creative arts in Swedish teacher education for primary school and preschool, following the programme based on the 1999 teacher education reform. The data were collected from 19 focus group interviews with teacher educators and student teachers from ten higher education institutions that offer such teacher education programmes. Theories related to language as action and the consequences of linguistic actions were taken as central to the study. To identify and discuss the discursive formations, analytical tools inspired by discourse psychology and discourse theory were used in the analysis. The analysis demonstrated that an academic discourse focusing on theory, reflection, and textual production has pushed aside skills-based practice. A second discourse, characterized by subjectivity and relativism vis-à-vis the concept of quality, was also found in the material. Finally, a therapeutic discourse was articulated and legitimized based on the idea that student teachers should be emotionally balanced. The constructions may be regarded as strategies that legitimize the creative arts, which no longer have a clear identity in this teacher education context. The discourse on technical skills in music, which previously occupied a hegemonic position in the discursive field, has fallen apart, allowing other discourses to take root.

Keywords: teacher education, music, discourse

Background

Artistic expression in Swedish teacher education for primary school and preschool has been discussed during the whole post-war era. The status of creative arts subjects and their place in teacher education has been repeatedly questioned over the years in Sweden and elsewhere in the West. In recent decades, the creative arts have been increasingly included in professional development programmes for general education teachers; even so, several studies demonstrate that many teachers lack confidence in their ability to use the arts in teaching (Alter, Hays, & O'Hara 2009, Hallam et al. 2009, Heyning 2011, Holden & Button 2006, Oreck 2004). Since earlier research demonstrates that, in Swedish pedagogical school contexts, the arts are ruled by dominant ideas of knowledge (Ericsson 2006, Ericsson & Lindgren 2010, Lindgren 2006), we see a need for increased critical awareness of issues of teaching and learning in this field, including in teacher education.

This article investigates prevalent discourses on music in the field of creative arts and aesthetic learning in Swedish teacher education for preschool and primary school¹. The research topic is to investigate how teacher educators and student teachers construct legitimacy for different ways of pursuing music in courses involving the arts. The research invokes the previous teacher education reform in Sweden (Swedish Government Report 1999:63), which provided arts courses for all teacher categories in the education programs. In this context, this teacher education reform can be interpreted as a discursive break. The reform treats knowledge of the creative arts as a key area for all teachers, regardless of subject specialization and school form. In relation to earlier Swedish education policy documents, and in relation to the recently reformed teacher education, which was initiated last year, this can be seen as a shift towards an expanded target audience, as well as a broader interpretation of the field of arts education.

Previous research

The study on which this paper is based refers to current Swedish research into arts education in primary education, in which the field's development and theoretical understanding are discussed (Asplund Carlsson et al. 2008, Aulin-Gråhamn & Thavenius 2003, Marner & Örtengren 2003, Saar 2005). It also refers to research demonstrating that this operational area is strongly associated with power structures (Ericsson 2006, Ericsson & Lindgren 2007, 2010, Lindgren 2006). How the

concept of the arts in educational settings is controlled by dominant preconceptions that limit the action of both teachers and their pupils emerges from the discursive boundaries set by teachers and school administrators concerning the arts in primary education. These preconceptions are linked mainly to students' social and emotional development rather than to their subject-related knowledge development. Arts activities are represented as prophylactic or therapeutic methods connected to children's needs and based on varying beliefs about what constitutes the "normal" student. Likewise, teachers build their identity in the field primarily on social aspects and position themselves based on a notion of arts education as liberating and facilitative of human personal development. Based on a subject didactic and artistic perspective, there appears to be a need for greater critical awareness of questions of learning and teacher identity in arts education. In this discussion, we regard teacher education as pivotal. Little is known of attitudes to the arts in Swedish education. Unlike teacher education at music academies, courses within the framework of general teacher education are more subject-integrated and are usually oriented towards professional work with younger children in preschool or the early primary years. The directions of the various institutions are not entirely identical in format, though they often have a common focus on children's artistic creativity and cultural expression.

Previous research into music education in Swedish teacher education has primarily been oriented towards student teachers at music academies, and towards their views of specific arts subjects in relation to their own education and/or future profession (Bladh 2002, Bouij 1998, Brändström & Wiklund 1995, Ericsson 2006, Ferm Thorgersen 2010, Georgii-Hemming & Westvall 2010, Krüger 1998). However, international research focusing on music and generalist teacher education reveals a lot of data. The most important theme that emerges in this research is the music vs. education dilemma. This dilemma is manifested as a generalist vs. specialist dichotomy. In different countries around the world this dichotomy is discussed in terms of necessary musical knowledge for teachers teaching music (Aróstegui 2011). Research also demonstrates that confidence level of classroom teachers teaching music is generally low (Hallam et al., 2009, Hennessy 2000), and student teachers believe there should be more time devoted to music in their teacher education courses (Holden & Button 2006). Another key issue that has emerged in research about primary school teacher's attitudes to teaching music is the integration of music into other subjects. Teachers found it easier to teach music when music was integrated into the curriculum. However, at the same time, integrating music seems to be risky, resulting in a greater focusing on non-musical outcomes (Aróstegui 2011, Hash 2009).

Theoretical and methodological framework

The point of departure for this study is post-structuralism. People are seen as permeated by discourses, which are continuously created and recreated in specific cultural and historical settings, and largely controlled by the power inherent in these discourses. Starting from this perspective, our primary interest in this research project was discourse as social action, in which object and subject are created in interactive linguistic action in specific social practices (Howarth 2000, Mills 2004). Because we regard teacher education as a practice in which language is essential, theories of language as action (Austin 1962) and of the consequences of linguistic actions (Edwards & Potter 1992) are central to the study. With regard to our view of the subject, we refer to the theoretical discussions in Michel Foucault's later works (1984/1990), which treat a subject that is both controlled by discourses and capable of actively resisting them. However, because Foucault's theories lack any deeper interest in the individual subject and its construction, we saw the need to augment this with a micro-sociological perspective, whose clearer subject theory can explain the subject's identity formation and action based on its rhetorical organization of language (Potter & Wetherell 1987).

The data gathering method used was focus group discussions. The participants were active teacher educators and student teachers in ten Swedish teacher education programmes. To obtain the broadest possible empirical material, the composition of the sample was based on the size and geographical placement of the teacher education programmes and the range of arts courses offered. The discussions were held at ten higher education institutions that offer teacher education programmes. Each group was composed of four or five individuals, and there were 19 group discussions, each lasting 60–90 minutes. The point of departure and basis of these loosely structured discussions were the course syllabi for arts courses in each programme. None of the courses was focusing on music only, but in all of them music was included in one way or another. Since the emphasis of the research project was the verbal interaction in focus group discussions about teacher education, we found discourse analysis to be a suitable analytical method. Based on the definition of discourse provided above, we began with an interactionist perspective on discourse, inspired by discourse psychology (Billig 1991, Edwards & Potter 1992, Edwards & Stoke 2004, Wetherell & Potter 1992) and critical discourse psychology (Parker 2002).

We initiated the discourse psychological microanalysis by reading the transcribed interviews several times, paying attention to formulations that legitimized a certain way of positioning oneself relative to the aim of teacher education in the arts. In this phase of the analysis we posed a number of questions to the material: What

constructions of music education can be identified and what is at stake in how they are presented? What rhetorical strategies do actors use to legitimize their views on music in teacher education? What are the functions and effects of various statements made for rhetorical purposes? As several rhetorical constructions with similar messages were identified in the material, a discourse slowly began to emerge, which was further analysed and discussed in light of discourse theory. Here we focused on discursive change and transformation, discussed by analysing the elements of the discourses outlined in the microanalysis.

Findings

Our analysis indicates that an academic construction focusing on theory, reflection, and textual production has pushed aside skills-based practice. Music is represented as something other than singing and playing instruments, practical work in music being arranged under headings such as “communication” and “sound production”. A second construction, a therapeutic discourse, is articulated and legitimized based on an idea that student teachers should be emotionally balanced. Finally, a third construction characterized by subjectivity and relativism vis-à-vis the concept of quality is also found in the material. Contextual and ideological factors, as well as techniques of governance, are other significant aspects, which we will discuss in relation to the constructions.

Reflection, communication, verbal and textual production

In this construction, music is related to reflection, communication, written language, and text production. Musical activities, such as singing or playing an instrument, in a subject such as music have been replaced by talk about the creative arts and a search for new or alternative kinds of knowledge. Elements such as mediation, interpretation, forms of communication, sound production, reflection, and portfolios are central to this discourse. At one institution, a teacher expressed disappointment at his/her colleagues’ narrow view of arts subjects, because they wanted songs and live music included in the courses. One teacher educator remarked: “It is not about playing the guitar well, or being able to draw a fire truck”. At another institution, the student teachers agreed that music and art do not represent practical knowledge, but

rather “a tool, a form for encounters or discussions”. In the group discussions, concepts and language were generally articulated as utterly essential. It was considered important that future teachers gain an “understanding of concepts and the ability to formulate and justify arts education in the schools”. For example, preschool education students at one institution must demonstrate in reports and examinations that they have processed and assimilated the creative arts as a concept by means of “sound productions” or “visual productions”. At this institution, the transformation of music into new concepts is seen as a radicalization of the creative arts traditionally linked to teaching practice.

Personal strength and confidence

The premise of this discourse is that teachers must be secure in themselves if they are to be capable of working in a preschool or school. Fostering such security is presented as a primary goal of teacher education that must be attained before such education can focus on children and their learning. The discourse is centred on elements such as teacher education as a “personal journey”; the focus is on “personal development”, and students must “find their own identity” and have “faith in their ability”. Several statements in the empirical material may be regarded as rhetorical, emphasizing the needs of student teachers in music and articulating a significant therapeutic dimension: “Music is so very much connected to yourself and we have so many beliefs about what music is about ... but it is very much about growing and making them [i.e., the students] confident in themselves ... that they can handle this ... so it is very much about working personally with themselves”. Such rhetoric naturally serves a purpose, and one assumption is that discrete contextual circumstances are highly significant when constructing legitimacy for music in teacher education.

Relativizing the concept of quality

A third way of constructing music in teacher education has a great deal in common with the preceding description. There is a therapeutic dimension to this construction because a prominent element is that teachers who know themselves will be well aware of their inadequate ability to express themselves artistically but still have the courage to do so. This ability can be presumed to have been generated in activities with distinct

therapeutic elements. Its construction is articulated via statements such as: “Everyone can sing, even if we all sound different”; “We learned in the course that there is no wrong way of doing things”; “Anything goes as long as it’s fun”; “Because how they saw it was like ... the teacher is learning too”; “I tell them I am not very talented at music”; and “You don’t always have to be the one who is teaching”. The relativization of the concept of quality is a prominent element of the construction. Through this kind of rhetoric, scope is created for the teacher to take a subject position in which there are no criteria for what is right or wrong or good or bad in music expression. This also creates legitimacy for teachers who lack traditional subject knowledge.

Contextual factors

One key question in this context is what prerequisites are necessary to construct legitimacy in connection with creative arts subjects, since the construction of legitimacy must rely on what can actually be done under the prevailing circumstances. Resources are one such circumstance. Often the intention is not to provide teaching qualifications in creative arts subjects, but rather that these subjects should serve to complement other teaching. This naturally affects both the entire perspective on arts education and the allocation of resources, which may be presumed too limited to enable construction of legitimacy in connection with the fact that student teachers are acquiring the skills and knowledge necessary to provide high-quality teaching. The other side of the coin is that many students have absolutely no pre-existing knowledge, which would be unthinkable for students at academies of music. The various institutions offer a wide selection of courses, ranging from elective courses concentrating on forms of expression in the creative arts to general education courses, and fragmentary elements of courses whose main content is not oriented towards the arts. Based on these factors, it seems entirely plausible that some students may feel both unmotivated and insecure in the face of various forms of arts education.

Ideological factors

Music, and the whole creative arts field, is legitimized by its capacity to develop students’ personal strength and confidence, and by the relativization of the concept of quality, and may be rooted in a discourse centred on “the free creative child”, a

discourse that has appeared in various forms throughout the modern era (Bendroth Karlsson 1996, Lindgren 2006). This discourse, or educational ideology, has focused on younger students, since the basic assumption is that the development of a harmonic, confident, creative, and emancipated individual must start early in life. There are clear indications in the empirical material that the interviewed student teachers disapprove of an elitist approach to creative arts, so the rhetoric has to be based on something other than developing subject-based competence. As a result, the student assessments have to focus on the students' personal development, and the basis for these assessments is often reflection on the students' developmental processes. The ideological point of departure is that school, through its instrumental forms of teaching, hinders children's creativity and imagination.

Techniques of governance

Various kinds of governance are embedded in creative arts practice in teacher education. In addition to teacher training regulations, for example, laws and the curriculum, there are more or less visible techniques for governance, not always perceived by those involved. It could be a technique that, over the years, has become so established and self-evident that it appears objective (Laclau & Mouffe 1985). Several techniques identified in the material are recognized in primary education. Beliefs about people's fears of music and the possibility of liberation through creative activities can be seen as a technique of governance (Foucault 1978/1991). The intention is to protect people's freedom, but in terms of certain norms and reasons (Dean 1999). Another similarity is the categorization of the learning subject. As well as schoolchildren being described as having various social or intellectual problems, the student teachers are described as having difficulties in theoretical subjects and therefore needing to be integrated in teacher education through various courses connected to the creative arts.

Another technique of governance is the construction of reflective practitioners. The student teachers have to, at all costs, analyse and control their own learning process using various personal portfolios and logbooks. The call for the subject to take responsibility for his/her own learning and personal development can be seen as part of a self-management principle to which confession is central (Foucault 1984/1990).

Conclusion and discussion

Some parts of the music education discourses in teacher education can be said to be identical to those of the primary school system. Music education as a set of therapeutic methods based on notions of student teachers' lack of secure and stable identities as teachers corresponds here to the primary school system's construction of the non-free and non-evolved student's need for a teacher of art liberation (Ericsson 2006, Lindgren 2006). Against the backdrop of the research field's questions about which ideals should dominate—those of art or those of the individual—it becomes clear that the value of music is marginalized in this discourse. The development of student teachers' personalities, social skills, and leadership abilities is articulated as the primary concern of teacher education. Notions of people's fear of music and musical practice and the possibility of liberation via such practice can be seen as a control technique (Foucault 1978/1991). The intention is to look after people's freedom and needs, albeit based on certain norms and specific reasons (Dean 1999).

However, the construction of music as reflection, communication, verbal and textual production is a construction not identical to discourses of the primary school system. Here music is transformed into written or spoken language to ensure that it fits into a politically correct teacher education discourse in terms of educational policy. Teacher educators in music and other arts subjects position themselves within the framework of an academic discourse that are more oriented toward general education and can thus be given a mandate to work within the confines of the discourse. It can be mentioned that at certain institutes there is also strong antagonism toward this academic discourse. The concern here is that teaching has become increasingly oriented toward teaching in relation to theoretical arguments about learning and teaching at the expense of practical teaching methods.

What then is at stake in generalist teacher education when it comes to music? What specific reasons underlie the control? We can consider that it is not mainly a struggle concerning how knowledge of the arts is gained or how pedagogical approaches are crafted (Bresler, DeStefano, Feldman & Garg 2000). What is at stake is rather the existence or non-existence of music education in primary and preschool teacher education. The constructions discussed above may be regarded as strategies that legitimize activities that no longer have a clear identity in this specific context. Halverson Rosenfeld (2013) claims that "the arts in education have suffered from a lack of definitional clarity and, as a result, a lack of credibility as serious academic disciplines" (2013:123). The historical tension between liberal goals (which include feeling, creativity and self-expression) and utilitarian goals (which focus on form and technique) is perhaps one reason. Another reason could be that institutional learning

contexts have, during the last decades, lost much of their legitimacy (Ericsson 2002, 2006, Ericsson & Lindgren 2010, Ziehe 1986). Societal changes seem to have caused some problematic situations. Musical learning is not localised to institutional settings to the same extent as before and the teacher as a transmitter of knowledge is challenged by new communication technologies. Out-of-school organizations have embraced digital production as a discipline that affords both liberal and utilitarian goals for arts education (Sheridan 2010). We think this is the most important challenge for teacher education in the late modern age.

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Notes

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