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Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 178 (2015) 212 – 216

Procedia
Social and Behavioral Sciences

15th International Conference of the Spanish Association of Language and Literature Education,
15th International Conference SEDLL, 19-21 November 2014, Valencia, Spain

Developing professional knowledge and skilled practice through literary conversations in various didactic contexts

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Abstract

The paper presents a project of literary conversations in a college course for teachers and in elementary schools. The project was conducted in a part time continuing education course (30 ECTS credits) as a cooperation between lecturers in Norwegian language and literature and the course participants who are all teachers working in primary and lower secondary schools. In this study, we explore how the knowledge and experiences related to literary conversations learned in the course were transferred to practices in the teachers' own classes. The results revealed several challenges that will be discussed in the further developing of the courses.

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Peer-review under responsibility of the Universidad Politécnica de Valencia, Departamento de Lingüística Aplicada.

Keywords: Literature didactics; Elementary school; Teacher education; Professional development.

1. Introduction

Educational work with literature in the classroom, both in higher education and in elementary school, has in the last two decades been taking arguments and methods from various approaches. The perspectives have changed from the most text-centered to the extreme student-centered approaches. Today, many educators and literature scholars claim that fiction is valuable both as an aesthetic object and as an educational foundation for the development of reading and writing skills (Aase, 2010; Skaftun, 2009; Langer 2011; Frey & Fisher, 2011). The curriculum for

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teacher education in Norway emphasizes that teacher education must be both practice-oriented and value-oriented regarding formation.

In this study, we explore how the knowledge and experiences related to literary conversations in a part-time college course for teachers were transferred to practices in primary and lower secondary schools. Our aim is twofold: firstly, we want to illustrate how the course may help to develop teachers' literary competence, and to examine how this knowledge is transferred to the teachers' own teaching. Secondly, the results shall lead to further development of the course for teachers.

Literary conversations in the subject Norwegian in school and in teacher education are closely related to the dimension of self-formation or “Bildung” (Klafki, 2001), and represent an approach that emphasizes dialogue. Transactional theory (Rosenblatt, 1994), personal responses (Chambers, 1985; Daniels, 2002), didactics of developing reflectivity (Gee, 2004), and the importance of dialogue (Bahktin, 1982), are core concepts in the project.

The topic of the study is expressed through the following question: *How may literary conversations contribute to professional reflection and skill learning in various didactic contexts?*

2. Material and method

Teachers participating in the part-time course are working at different levels in elementary schools, from the 1st to the 10th grade. The material forming the basis for a descriptive analysis in this study is obtained through the academic year 2013-2014. It is mainly based on written reports where teachers (in all 80) present and reflect on the work of literary conversations in their own classes in primary schools.

“Literary conversations” are discussions of fiction texts in small groups according to certain principles, structures and conversation rules (Hennig, 2012). Literary conversations give students the opportunity to share their reading experiences with each other so that they can achieve a deeper understanding and reflect on what they read in a community of interpretation in which they are in control of the conversation. As work processes, literary conversations are closely related to transaction-oriented approaches (Rosenblatt, 1994; Fish, 1980).

As support for the structure of the project and as an analytical tool in the study, we have looked to W. Sullivan's three “apprenticeships” for professional education (Sullivan, 2008). Here the term “communities” is used to highlight the importance of cooperation:

- Communities around intellectual and cognitive knowledge: Students learn analytical reflection, arguments and research that constitute the knowledge base of the field.
- Communities around practical skills: Students learn professional skills through participating in imaginary and practical situations.
- Communities around values and attitudes: Students share the profession's core values through learning about them and practicing them.

In the project, this means that the teachers' acquisition of professional and academic knowledge in the literary field, and their participation in literary conversations in the course at HiOA, provide the basis for the teachers' own practice in school. The knowledge base is formed by textbooks, research articles, lectures at campus and written assignments. In their own schools the teachers tried out (and further developed) literary conversations adapted to the curricula and the level of their classes. Experiences learned here were discussed and further developed in course lectures and in written assignments. In retrospect, the teachers reflect on whether they have sufficient subject knowledge, whether the practical situation allows such work, and if the working methods and course content are aligned with their beliefs and values as professional teachers. Experiences and reflections about literary conversations as part of the education and formation work in school are expressed through the teachers' written reports.

3. Results and discussion

The reports show that the testing of literary conversations in the teachers' own classes revealed several challenges. Firstly, teachers emphasize academic and didactic content and practice. Secondly, the time aspect is

crucial, both when it comes to being confident in practicing the method and when it comes to allowing the students to choose books. We will present the results and discuss these issues, associating them with the three apprenticeships or communities (Sullivan, 2008).

3.1. Communities around intellectual and cognitive knowledge

An important principle in the method of literary conversations in the project was that the students should lead the book talk themselves. Especially in secondary schools, some teachers raised objections towards the "lack of control" in the literary conversations. A fuzzy specification of the field of scientific knowledge base in the course may have made the purpose of literary conversations blurred. Literary conversations are presented in the literature as a method, but also as a concretization of the theory of transaction (Rosenblatt, 1995; Chambers, 1985; Calkins, 2001). Providing insight into other relevant approaches to literature and a discussion of academic choices should to a greater extent have been integrated in the course.

In addition to professional knowledge, teachers need to make didactic considerations. This may be one of the biggest challenges in the teaching profession. Teachers must be both student-centered and learning-centered in their thinking. Wolfgang Klafki defines "didactics" as an overarching term for scientific educational research, theory and concept formation with respect to all forms of purposeful, systematic and thoughtful teaching (Klafki, 2001, p. 110). Didactics may thus be seen as the relationship between teaching and learning and the level of reflection that characterizes teaching. His point is that "material" and "formal" education must work together. Teaching should neither be only oriented towards transferring knowledge from teacher to student, nor restricted to instruction that exclusively emphasizes training in thinking and skills without having students work with important academic content. Klafki emphasizes that students should experience examples of situations in the classroom that are engaging in themselves, but such situations should also have transfer value to other fields of knowledge (exemplary teaching). A discussion in the course about how Klafki's principles can be applied to literary conversations could have challenged the teachers to deeper reflection and thus given them a better basis for didactic decisions.

We see from the reports that the question concerning who should be choosing texts to read, the students or the teacher, is a key challenge. Most of the teachers in lower secondary school believe that the students should select the texts themselves, but in practice teachers often make the choice, due to time constraints. However, if the students choose the texts without the teacher's guidance, it may result in "uncommitted reading with obvious plot and little resistance", as one teacher argues.

The Norwegian researcher Sylvi Penne warns against the practice of not challenging students academically and intellectually moving into secondary discourses (Penne, 2010, p. 81). Penne believes that the democratic idea of students' free choice in reality may seem undemocratic, because students are influenced by sociocultural conditions as gender, age and different ideas about what literature is or should be in school. Chambers (1985) support this position, pointing at the teacher's responsibility for selecting literature for the students that he or she, being the skilled reader and literature provider "consider most worth their time and attention" (p. 11). According to Chambers, however, students are able to make independent choices among the texts that the teacher has found valuable enough to present to the class.

While several researchers emphasize literacy and the cognitive in their approach to literature, the Norwegian literary scholar Per Thomas Andersen argues that literature teaching also should emphasize emotions as a basis for people's beliefs and life practices, and that imaginative ability is a basis for social community. As humans we must develop empathy with others in a global perspective without losing our local standpoint out of sight, and the ability to feel other people's emotions (empathy) is the basis for a functioning democratic society (Andersen, 2011, p. 190). A challenge in the teaching of literature is to balance between reading experiences and text interpretation: Students' reactions to and feelings for texts will diverge, but they will all strictly be legitimate.

3.2. *Communities around practical skills*

One of the principles of literary conversations in the project is that the students shall lead the talk in the group themselves. This demands good modeling, time to practice, reflection and communication about how to share thoughts and manage the book talk. The need of strengthening the “conversation rules” is mentioned by many of the teachers, such as “letting one by one talk and learning to listen when classmates are talking”. A conversation culture should be learned and practiced, and some of the teachers point out that this also applies to the teacher. One of the teachers has experienced that “it is easier to initiate a conversation that has stalled, than to know when to stop a digression”. The urge to help is strong, and teachers experience that giving up control is a major challenge.

Several teachers experienced that literary conversations led to increased reading pleasure among students in the lower secondary school. One of the teachers point out that the literary conversations in small groups led to involvement: “The day after the literature lesson, students tell me that they have thought about the content of the conversation, and they express a wish to continue the group conversation.”

Many of the primary school teachers report that the reading aloud and the talk led by the teacher in the class seemed to arouse students' interest in reading in general. They report that many of the children want to borrow the book they have talked about afterwards. Both primary and secondary school teachers put emphasis on the importance of solid frames, clear structure and modeling, for example through joint literary conversation in the beginning. Some of the teachers rely on a process model with four stages: to say something for oneself, to say something for others, to say something together, and to say something new (Hennig, 2012, p. 63).

Several of the teachers at both levels in primary school claim that work with literary conversations is a continuous process that should persist over time. To make the students confident, crucial elements are time to practice and ability to use their own ideas, experiences, creativity and imagination to interpret and reflect on literary texts. However, lack of time is mentioned in many reports. Time frames do not permit extensive use of literary conversations in secondary schools where teachers feel bound by the curriculum and knowledge requirements. They must conform to a system that includes testing, grades and exams where extended literary work competes with more current knowledge goals. In primary school teachers have more opportunity to spend several hours over a period of time, since they often teach multiple subjects.

The time aspect is also important when it comes to developing the teachers professional skills. Research on teacher learning has revealed characteristics of projects or activities that facilitate learning for teachers (Munthe & Postholm, 2012, p. 140-141). Among other aspects, the time to develop, discuss and practice new knowledge is emphasized as crucial when it comes to support teachers' learning processes.

3.3. *Communities around the values and attitudes*

To be seen and appreciated is important both for teachers and for students. This is related to values and attitudes, and appreciative dialogue is central to an educational perspective (Loevlie Schibbye, 2002). Many of the teachers point out that learner-controlled discussion increases the ability to listen, to absorb new perspectives and to develop reflectivity. Statements such as “the conversation took place on the student's premises and the students' level” and “the students' opinions was valued, they did not just say things to please the teacher”, show that teachers emphasize the formation perspective.

According to some teachers, the literary conversations have had an impact on the social environment in class. Students flourish in small literary discussion groups. Strong learners interpret and discuss vehemently about events in the books. The usually silent students may contribute more in discussions because they feel more confident, and it is easier to take the floor in a small group than in the whole class. This also applies to the poor readers in the class. The students are very interested in each other's thoughts. Through discussions, they achieve insight into several possible interpretations, and they may see the text with new eyes. Student's statements like “to hear what others think, made me think for myself” and “the best of literary conversations is that one gets to know what the others are thinking”, indicate that the literary conversation gives deeper understanding of the text and that students learn from each other. However, the student-controlled talks may lead someone to reveal information from their personal situation. The teacher must sometimes intervene and get the conversation back on track.

Teachers do not change teaching practices if it goes against their beliefs (Munthe & Postholm, 2012, p.140). If teachers shall implement new methods, these must be perceived relevant and meaningful to the teacher. The teachers in our study wanted to build on the positive experiences and continue the work of literary conversations. However, if such values and attitudes are to be maintained in the everyday school life, the professional identity of the teacher must not be in conflict with external factors that the teacher has little influence on, for example, the school's emphasis on measurable results, the division of the school day in various disciplines, and the conflict between the curriculum's overall goals and the actual activities of the school.

4. Conclusion

In the study we wanted to examine whether literary conversations contribute to professional reflection and skill learning in various didactic contexts. So far we may conclude that literary conversations engage teachers, both in the college course for teachers and used as a work method in the teachers' own classes. Literary conversations provide many opportunities for professional and academic development, and it seems that the nature of the literary conversations is deeply rooted in many teachers' values and attitudes concerning the work in school.

However, through our study we have seen the need to put more emphasis on the academic knowledge base and give more room for analytical reflection and discussion in the community of practice in the college course. Practical difficulties concerning the implementation of the method in school may be overcome through a good academic and practical basis. On the other hand, outer limits may restrict a practical implementation of literary conversations in school. The latter affects important aspects of professional values and attitudes, namely the extent to which teachers' professional identity conflicts with external influence factors. Here, the professional teacher often feels that he / she is coming up short.

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