Chapter 5
Teachers’ Professional Learning and the Workplace Curriculum

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Introduction

Every year, a new set of Danish teachers graduate and begin work in a school, hereby embarking upon a career trajectory teaching various classes and subjects and meeting new colleagues, pupils, parents and the school management. This often represents a considerable challenge; indeed, so great are the challenges faced by new teachers that a number of them soon begin considering changing careers and leaving the profession. Among Danish teachers who graduated in 1997, almost one in four (23%) had left teaching by 2007 (FTF, 2007). Over time, those who remain develop career strategies, partly based on the various career opportunities and pathways which can be identified within the profession, partly based on their individual circumstances. In this chapter, we present the results of a case study which, by describing and analysing the teaching and collegial relations of two male teachers during their first 8 years in the profession, shows two very different career trajectories and career strategies. In other words, the two teachers trod two different pathways among the multitude of possible career trajectories open to teachers. The objective of this study was to shed light on teachers’ professional learning and the relationship between their career strategies and career trajectories.

Teachers’ career trajectories have been described and analysed by Sikes (1985), Fessler and Christensen (1992), Huberman (1993, 1997) and Day et al. (2007) among others. In studies of teachers’ career trajectories, changes have usually been outlined in the form of a number of phases from entering the profession to retirement. Career trajectories are understood, as is the case here, as changes in relation to teachers’ formal and informal positions within the school system, and in relation to their handling and perception of teaching, collegial relations and their role as teachers. Teachers’ career trajectories and career strategies are, however, not universal, but rather situated within a particular context, influenced by a complex web of social, historical and institutional factors. The closer one studies the individual teacher’s career trajectory, the more it appears almost unique. In this chapter, we attempt to strike a balance, primarily focusing upon the internal relationships between schools, teaching, colleagues and teachers’ professional learning, career trajectories and career strategies.
To this end, the chapter makes use of the concept workplace curriculum (Bayer & Brinkkjær, 2005), understood as a post hoc curriculum which, more or less implicitly, prescribes certain elements in the content of teachers’ professional learning. As such, professional learning is interpreted in this chapter as the establishment of a professional repertoire in the sense of a symbolic and practical way of managing the school’s workplace curriculum. Our aim in describing and analysing professional learning as a gradual mastery of a workplace curriculum is to add a situated learning perspective to studies of teachers’ career trajectories.

A workplace curriculum comprises a set of expectations to teachers’ ways of practising the profession and learning how to do so. It partly concerns expectations relating to teachers’ teaching, and partly relating to their collegial relations. These expectations are established on the basis of what we, inspired by Basil Bernstein (2000), refer to as a segmental pedagogy (Bayer & Brinkkjær, 2005), i.e. a number of, often highly contradictory, situated and tacit demands from pupils, colleagues, school management and parents to how teachers perceive and conduct their teaching and collegial relations. If teachers are able to manage the school’s workplace curriculum, they gain access to the profession and can gradually begin to establish the necessary conditions for pursuing a career, that is to say moving between various formal or informal positions within the school, with their associated benefits and privileges.

The term workplace curriculum thereby refers in this chapter to a number of expectations which teachers meet on entering the profession, as stipulated by pupils, their parents, colleagues and school management, as we have been able to reconstruct them through our analysis of the data. This analysis shows that the workplace curriculum, in a Danish context, becomes particularly apparent on the basis of a segmental pedagogy. It should be underlined that the term workplace curriculum does not refer to a formal or explicit description of the expectations facing newly qualified teachers; there is no official workplace curriculum applicable to the Danish school system.

Methods

The case study was part of an extensive research council–funded project titled ‘Teachers’ and Pre-school Teachers’ Professional Learning and Career Trajectories in Practice’. The project followed a group of teachers and a group of pre-school teachers, using questionnaires, from their graduation in 1998 over the following 2 years, then again in 2006, that is to say 8 years after entering the profession. The case study consisted of a series of classroom observations and interviews conducted with four teachers and four pre-school teachers over the same period. As mentioned, in this chapter we present selected results from this case study, following two male teachers from entering the profession in 1998 until 2006. The case study considers the following research questions: