PARADOXES IN TEACHING

STAFFAN LARSSON

Department of Education, University of Goteborg, Box 1010, S-431 26 Malmö, Sweden

ABSTRACT

This article presents the findings from an inquiry into teachers' conceptions of teaching. The study focuses on the teachers' descriptions of their conceptions of the meaning of teaching and their reasoning about the possibility of acting according to their views on teaching. The students' conceptions of teaching are perceived as a dominant restriction on the teachers' actions. In an analysis of the teachers' descriptions of that restriction, many teachers were found to regard this as a question of control over the educational process. This can be described as a game about who is going to control the rules for the communication process in the classroom. This control game forms different configurations in the relations between students and teachers. These configurations are described and interpreted as three qualitatively different kinds of relations. Two of these relations have the character of being paradoxical from the control point of view.

Introduction

The history of inquiries into teaching shows how this field has gone through different phases. From its beginnings until the middle of this century it was a field that was based on philosophy and ideas of empirical findings in psychology. Its main characteristic was that it was prescriptive. The main idea was to deduce the "best" systems for teaching from philosophical and psychological conceptions (e.g., the approaches of Dewey, Skinner). This was counterbalanced by the growing empirical educational research into the field of teaching. This "classroom" research had another characteristic – it was descriptive. It put forward the aim of describing what was actually happening in the classroom and used observation as its prime source of data. These researchers wanted to understand or explain teaching behavior in terms of the conditions for teaching rather than exploring the philosophical or psychological conceptions (e.g. Smith, 1963; Lundgren, 1972) as a ground for their inquiries into teaching.

This article represents neither of these two approaches. It is a study into
conceptions not of the prescriptive kind but of those that can be found in the classrooms, i.e., it is a descriptive, empirical study of teachers' conceptions of teaching. The rationale for this can be found in the idea that the actors' conceptions of their world are a basis for the understanding of them and their acts (see e.g., Snyder, 1971; Bussis et al., 1976; Marton, 1981; Säljö, 1982). Marton (1981, p. 178) writes about the distinction between the first- and second-order perspective:

In the first and by far the most commonly adopted perspective we orient ourselves towards the world and make statements about it. In the second perspective we orient ourselves towards peoples' ideas about the world (or their experience of it). Let us call the former the first-order and the latter the second-order perspective.

Teachers' decisions can be understood from their way of interpreting their situation. This idea is not absolute – on the contrary, it is one perspective on teaching complementary to the first order perspective.

In this study an attempt is made to describe the relations of power that are behind the constitution of the chosen form of teaching – from the teachers' perspective. The reason for this interest in the power-relations between students and teachers is the fact that teachers find these important as restrictions on their freedom of action. They recognize other restrictions such as lack of time, etc., but these have been thoroughly investigated by others; here we concentrate on the actors in the classroom.

Method

SUBJECTS

The inquiry is based on empirical material consisting of 29 interviews with teachers in the Swedish adult education system at the secondary level who taught the syllabus of the regular secondary school in at least one of five subjects: physics, chemistry, mathematics, social science or history. The interviews were intensive and informal, aiming at an understanding of the more fundamental conceptions these teachers held of their work. Concepts like knowledge, teaching skill and problems such as what constitutes the real curriculum were investigated in depth.

DESIGN

The study was carried out as a part of the work in a research group in Göteborg led by Professor Marton. Our analysis aims at descriptions from a second-order perspective.