



The Digital School and Its Competing Discourses

Mads Bo-Kristensen

Vejle Digital Schools, Education & Learning (Denmark)

Madbo@vejle.dk

Abstract

Over the past three years, the concept of "The Digital School" has been a central focus in Denmark's national and local education policy. This is partly a consequence of the emphasis given to the development of a digital dimension to future primary schools. Educational challenges in post-industrial society and economic restrictions on the Danish welfare state have been emphasized in policy papers and public debates. In 2011 the Municipality of Vejle (Denmark) formulated a strategy, "The Digital School 2011-2015," which focuses in 7 areas: Digital infrastructure, digital materials, methods in digital learning, digital communication & sharing, digital leadership & management, digital skill building, and digital culture. Despite differences, municipal strategies share areas and content in the coming few years. This paper will use the Foucauldian discourse analysis to examine prevalent and other possible discourses and positions in local and national policy papers and debates. This will help clarify essential discourses and examine if some discourses are assigned greater value than others. The Municipal elections in Denmark scheduled in November 2013 will undoubtedly profit from greater transparency in rationales behind "The Digital School". Politicians, municipal administrators, primary school leaders, teachers, parents and other stakeholders will look for input in the debate on the future of primary schools.

1. Introduction

The primary school is under pressure to innovate, to become even more relevant. This is nothing new, but in recent these years, focus has been on the needed change in the primary school, both in terms of pedagogy (learning methodologies) and organizational change. Concerns have been aired by various sectors that pupils do not learn enough in terms of what they should know and be able to in a society characterized by globalization and increasing competition.

Both the educational- and economic or competition-oriented views are often woven together in political and public debates, making it sometimes difficult to comprehend what a particular view is actually addressing. What kind of pedagogy is the view speaking in favor of and what ideas does it have about the school's role and context in society?

This paper reports from an ongoing analysis of national and local policy paper articulations of the Digital School objectives, content and methods. Using the Foucauldian discourse analysis, the analysis examines prevalent and possible other discourses and positions in national and local policy papers. The examples included in this paper are three key national documents that have been crucial to the ways the Digital School has been discussed in Denmark for the past three years. These are:

- ICT and Media Competencies (Executive order from the Danish Ministry of Education) [1]
- New Perspectives on Primary School (Local Government) [2]
- The Digital Path to Future Welfare - eGovernment Strategy 2011-2015 (The Danish Government / Danish Region / Local Government) [3]

The first document is addressed to education professionals, including school ICT supervisors. The other two are aimed at a wider audience, including municipal governments and politicians.

2. Foucauldian Discourse Analysis

People's knowledge, skills and values are embedded in the language. Language is a social construct with meanings that social communities attach to it. Michel Foucault speaks of discourse or a certain "way of speaking" [4]. Foucault is very much interested in digging into the historical genesis of language, its archeology, and examine the meanings that social institutions and structures have attributed to it. In contrast to pure structuralism, Foucault's view is not interested in the framework of institutions and structures, but what they delimit themselves from, what they exclude.



Foucault suggests that through the language, a person chooses something and disregards something else. It is not the individual who makes these choices. The choice is made by the institutional discourses, one subscribes to or involve in the oral and written presentations. One can draw on multiple discourses. Language represents an opportunity for power. [5] Foucault's discourse analysis makes it possible to examine how dominant discourses manifest or embed power. Dominant discourses represent specific valuations of a field, e.g., the Digital School. By examining what these discourses do not say, one has the opportunity to bring it to light, what these positions "position" in the relationship and thus seek to oppress or dominate.

This paper will not - because the full analysis is not yet complete - include this power dimension. However, it is not difficult to imagine how different discourses on The Digital School can "compete" to have the truth about this school's objectives, content and methods.

3. Four Discourses on the Digital School

This study is inspired by Bøje et al (2006) [6] and later Hjort (2010) [7]. Bøje et al. operates with competing discourses in the Danish high school's form in 2005: The authors identified four discourses that the reform ended up being a complex compromise. The four understandings of what is required to meet a renewal of high school, have a general educational character that makes it interesting to involve them in the analysis of this paper. The four discourses are:

- The project discourse
- The canon discourse
- The competencies discourse
- The performance discourse

These four discourses have been involved in the analysis of policy papers on the Digital School.

3.1. The project and canon discourses

The project and canon discourses emphasize both the community, but does it from different positions. The project discourse has roots in reform and experiential pedagogy and regards the school's task to primarily develop students for democracy and cooperation. The canon discourse has roots in a more conservative understanding of the school's primary task, i.e., how can students be imparted with subject content and method. The project discourse posits that the teaching method should be based on the students' problem, and should have group organized work where one also learns the ability to equal dialogue, the conclusion of compromises, etc. For the canon discourse, the teaching method should be to maintain - and sometimes to "restore" - professionalism by strengthening the separate disciplines.

National policy papers tend to emphasize that the Digital School must maintain the teaching method - and sometimes to "restore" - professionalism by strengthening the separate disciplines. A case in point is the Common Public Digitisation Strategy, which emphasizes the Digital School to leverage that "opportunities to use learning objectives for students to ensure that the use of ICT and digital learning materials helps raise students' academic level, should be examined." [8]. In the political debate on school, this discourse is seen evident in statements such as: "Students should know more - they need to know more about what that subjects can offer".

The project discourse have a formal perspective on the formation students must undergo at school -- the way they work, to develop their ability to manage knowledge, skills and values. This discourse is evident in the Education Ministry's "IT and media skills" policy: Students must acquire project work (and "knowledge society") four competencies with a view to formal education: 1) Information retrieval and - collection 2) production and dissemination, 3) analysis and 4) communication, knowledge sharing and collaboration. In the political debate on school, this discourse is evident in statements such as "Students must not only know more. They are not just 'filling in'. They must also learn to acquire this knowledge. They must learn to teach and assess and collaborate on their learning what is important and not important to them and their communities can develop in a positive direction. "

3.2. The Competence and Performance Discourses

Competence and performance discourses emphasize both the individual, but also from different positions. They are both concerned with how students can become future players in a (global) labor



market. Like the previous two discourses, they emphasize the laws of a methodical (formal) and a substantive (material) approach to what students should learn.

The Competence discourse is supported by a knowledge-economic perspective on globalization issue. The school must ensure that students develop skills that can be applied to a knowledge-based, globalized market, where creativity and innovation are strong. Methodical achieved this through interdisciplinary / knowledge sharing, team skills and ability to manage the participation in "productive" network. This discourse is seen in the Ministry of Education Position Paper "ICT and Media Competencies".

The competence discourse is also found in both New Perspectives on Primary school and the Joint Public Digitalization Strategy with an emphasis on especially the knowledge-based and globalized society. There is less emphasis on the competence discourse's method to achieve this.

The performance discourse is concerned about the results students achieve and how they, for example, ranked in national and international comparisons, including PISA. According to this position, one not so much driven by the need for self-expression as economic incentives.

The "New perspectives on primary school" emphasizes that students must do more as a result of increasing competition. Its preface says:

"Denmark has one of the world's most expensive schools, but it is not reflected in the results of the children's learning. The Danish economy is under pressure, and the Danish welfare state is facing major challenges which call for reform and change." [9]

In other words, the emphasis is on the country's competitiveness and the need for Denmark as a nation to do better globally - and the students in the Digital School should likewise do so.

The National public digitization strategy intends for the schools to be one of several service areas to become more effective:

"The public sector has, in recent years, focused on welfare technology, and gained experience which means that we can now exploit IT and new technology more intensively to modernize and streamline the public service as our primary schools, elder care and health care" [10]

The Primary school is part of the project to make the public sector be more efficient. They are presented as "new ways" to make school representing resource savings and - it is also underlined - "better" education.

4. Preliminary conclusions

This paper reports from a part of an ongoing analysis of national and local policy papers articulations of the Digital School objectives, content and methods. The analysis is not yet complete, but it indicates that there are at least four discourses, which here are true: 1) Project discourse 2) Canon discourse 3) Competence discourse 4) Performance discourse.

It is too early to conclude about how far and how the four discourses competing for "power" in presentations and discussions. It seems interesting that the project discourse is virtually not represented in the national policy papers. The project discourses are influenced by a reformist educational tradition that considers the school's role as primarily to develop students for democracy and cooperation.

The aim of the total analysis is to clarify essential discourses and to examine if some discourses are assigned greater value than others. The November 2013 Municipal elections in Denmark will undoubtedly profit from greater transparency in rationales behind "The Digital School". Politicians, municipal administrators, primary school leaders, teachers, parents and others will looking for input in the debates on the future of primary schools.

References

- [1] Danish Ministry of Education (2010) It og mediekompetencer [ICT and Media Competencies] (Faghæfte 48 [Position Paper 48])
- [2] Local Government (2010) Nysyn på folkeskolen [New Perspectives on Primary School]. Copenhagen
- [3] The Danish Government/Danish Regions/Local Government (2011). The Digital Path to Future Welfare - eGovernment Strategy 2011-2015. Copenhagen: Denmark (August 2011)



- [4] Foucault, M. (1972) [1969]. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Tr. A. M. Sheridan Smith. London: Tavistock, p. 193.
- [5] Foucault, M. (1980) *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*. N.Y.: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group
- [6] Bøje, J. et al (2006) Hvad er problemet – Fire konkurrerende diskurser om Gymnasiereformen, In: *Gymnasieskolen*.
- [7] Hjort, K. (2010) Non Sense: A discourse analyses of the Danish Upper Secondary School Reform 2005. / Hjort, Katrin . In: *International Journal of Educational Sciences* , Vol. 2, Nr. 1, 01.2010.
- [8] The Danish Government/Danish Regions/Local Government. Op cit. (Annex 3.3., p. 1).
- [9] Local Government. Op cit., p. 2.
- [10] The Danish Government/Danish Regions/Local Government. Op cit., p. 3.