

REFLECTION AND DISCOURSE: Sharing knowledge and skills

“How did you cope with 3b?“, subject coordinator Lisa N asks her colleague Bernhard K upon entering the staff room. “Well, I’m not quite sure what to say. Basically I feel I’m in charge, but the pupils’ efforts at the board were really bad. Are they always this weak?“ “What do you mean, weak?“, Lisa N asks. Bernhard K, though, was unable to answer this question satisfactorily – not even for himself. With this question in mind, in the following lessons he began to try to find out the cause of such “weaknesses” in the performance of his pupils. Thus, the journey began – and together with Lisa N he embarked on a trip of discovery, exchanging practical experiences and discussing aspects taken from educational literature.

Not only do socially competent teachers pay closer attention to the teaching of others, they are also more perceptive of their own teaching. They have the ability to take a critical distance from their own actions, and in so doing are able to judge their own teaching. It is this ability to take a step back from their own practice that enables them to develop self-observation strategies. Having distanced themselves from their own practice, they are able to engage in reflection, a skill which makes it possible to recognise both the specific nature of a situation (an exception to the rule) and the general truths lying behind the case in point (potential generalisations). Teaching focussed on learning outcomes is based on the *reflection* of the respective processes and products. New knowledge and understandings are gained which inform future practice. Reflecting upon experiences and drawing conclusions from them leads to forward-thinking for the next situation with the goal of having a larger repertoire of choices.

Alternatives for future practice are, however, not only the result of self-reflection. Often we realise that we only perceive things in a new way or think of good ideas if we talk over a situation, the phenomenon or the problem with a colleague. This necessary verbalisation here is healing, because it forces us to concentrate on a thought in order to articulate it and through articulation we gain greater clarity. To engage in such processes of reflection and learning over the long term, “teacher talk” (discourse) of this kind necessitates a common language which is shared collectively and enables differentiated discussion.

The ability to regard oneself and one’s environment from a critical distance, to develop self-criticism and to engage in and create discourse are thus the characteristics of a professionalism in the teaching profession. Discourse ability as a development factor of pedagogical professionalism emerges from a highly developed professional language, which is the prerequisite for a differentiated understanding of the complexities of professional issues and challenges. Discourse ability is required of teachers on several levels: when communicating with the learners as knowledge participants; when discussing with colleagues as part of a professional learning community (across disciplines), when making use of supervision options in discussions with superiors or school authorities, when consulting with parents or guardians, and – as members of the entire profession – when engaging in public discourse.

The professionalism of teachers can also be seen in the way teachers manage to justify their work, in their own eyes and also in the eyes of colleagues, pupils, parents, as well as the public. (Self-)critical reflection that is based on one's own experience as well as on scientific findings, and the exchange of ideas in professional discourse – along with the other dimensions – form the basis of pedagogical professionalism.

Masthead:

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