

Reaction to Thomas S. Popkewitz's Whose Heaven and Whose Redemption?

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In my discussion of Thomas' paper, I will relate what he said to the educational system in Denmark especially primary and lower secondary school. After this I will come up with some questions to what could be the consequences of his analysis seen from a teacher's point of view.

When politicians make decisions about changing something in the educational system, they probably believe that by doing this or that they will ensure that children will learn. Sometimes one could be tempted to say: Politicians have not seen the "light" yet. Of course there are many other reasons for what politicians do, but that is not in focus now.

Reading Thomas' paper I came to think about a teacher who was attending one of my in-service education courses. She said: "Now I have taught my 5th grade class about parallel and perpendicular lines for about three weeks; and then I gave them a test. They couldn't do it; they didn't remember anything. It is as if they had not listened and learned." I perceived that she had realised that something in her classroom didn't work. After telling me the story she asked me the question: What is it you want us to do? She had not seen the "light" yet.

When thinking about myself as a teacher in primary and lower secondary school, I did most of what Thomas is referring to (e.g., those things that the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) in the USA recommends). Today as a teacher educator I still do some of the same things, and I do them because I don't know any better.

Looking back in history one will realise that teachers have been exercising power as long as there has been schooling. Teachers did it in one way in the past and they do it in another way today. But at the same time I think that most teachers have always wanted their students to learn as much as possible. They have been teaching in the way they have considered to be the best. Each historical period had its own teaching styles. These styles might have changed when new ideas have come up, although these new ideas could have had many different backgrounds and hidden purposes. What I want to point out by this is that teachers at a given time in history have been teaching the way they found most fruitful, because they didn't have any alternatives yet. They hadn't seen any new "light".

Now I want to relate what Thomas has written to the educational system in Denmark. But sometimes people from abroad get surprised when they hear about how our schooling is organised. Therefore I will very briefly tell about this:

- We have a comprehensive school for children from 7 to about 16 years old. This is what we call the “folkeskole” (people’s school).
- After that, students can choose a practical education or they can choose to go to high-school for a more academic line of studies.
- Children have no exams until the end of 9th grade, when they are around 15 years old. At that time they take a “test” which is not an exam, because they cannot fail. In fact, in Danish this is called a “prøve” (a try “test”).
- They are about 14 years old before they get any marks at all.
- The school is free, and very few children go to private schools. Private schools are supported by the State. Parents have to pay a tuition fee that is not more expensive than what most people in Denmark could afford.
- School teachers are educated to teach the same subject (e.g., mathematics) from 1st to 10th grades.
- Everybody is taught the same curriculum and it is the teacher’s responsibility to provide an appropriate level of challenge to all students in the class so that everybody can learn in his or her own way.

So in Denmark we do everything to give the pupils the same possibilities and we are not creating losers in the school. Nevertheless having said this I want to have a critical close look at what we are really doing in schools in connection with what Thomas said.

1. Do we, for example, try to form our children in order to make them the “right” future citizens?

In this aspect it is interesting to see that the national curriculum says that we have to teach the children mathematics in a way so they can become responsible citizens and become critical of the application of mathematics in society. It is my impression that many Danish teachers try to follow this, not only because we have to, but also because we believe that this is the right thing to do.

2. Are we influenced by psychological theories?

Yes, of course we are. Over years new ideas about teaching and learning mathematics have come up. They represent current research. They are very often based on psychology, which Paola Valero and Ole Skovsmose pointed out in their plenary lecture, and which is clearly shown in the paper by Dimitris Chassapis in this volume. Teaching is a difficult task, and I think that most teachers are always looking for ways of improving their practises. It is very natural to take into account these new ideas in order to improve our teaching style.

3. How do we relate to differences?

We try very hard to make those children, who are not interested in learning mathematics, interested in learning it, and we have lots of good arguments for doing so (e.g., their future opportunities in the educational system, their future job and income and so on). Behind this is the opinion that everybody should learn the same and especially the same mathematics. Thomas referred to a student teacher saying about an urban child: “He is not like my brother”. This could have been said in Denmark too. But again, all that I have mentioned we do is being done with the best of intentions.

What should be in the “light” here? I think that it is important to be aware of the fact that what we consider to be the best may have consequences that we have not foreseen. This leads us to a new question: How to handle those consequences? What could be done? What could be changed in our way of schooling? Let us take an example. Should we in Denmark reconsider if it is the best that everybody has to learn the same? Because by doing this we are still not giving the children the same opportunities. We are doing this in theory, but we don’t take into account that children are in fact different. For some students the content of the mathematics curriculum doesn’t make sense at all while for some others it is too much or perhaps too little.

If we then categorise children and teach different curricula, we may make mistakes from the very beginning by putting some in the wrong categories. As a consequence of our actions they will have very different opportunities when leaving school.

Some questions

Could one consequence of taking Thomas’ points seriously be that we should reconsider or put into question the need to teach school subjects at all? Especially, can we question whether we need to teach mathematics? And if we choose anyway to teach mathematics, then: To whom? To everybody? Is it possible for Thomas, from his analysis and his point of view, to say something about the directions that the mathematics curriculum should then take?

How to teach in a different way so that we “lessen” the effects of our power that Thomas reveals? To this question, I don’t even have a proposal. Being a teacher or a teacher educator also means to exercise power. It is well known that you cannot engage in a teacher-students relationship without doing that. It means that I do it, even though I don’t intend to. But I have no alternative to what I am doing now. I am in this moment of history, with the tools belonging to this period, and I don’t know any other tools. Taking Thomas’ points seriously, I am left in a dilemma and I don’t know the next step into the future. I have not seen the “light” yet. In a way I feel like asking Thomas the same question as mentioned earlier on: What is it you want me to do? I mean, what could be the consequences of your analysis for the kind of work I am doing now, teaching pre-service and in-service teachers?