

A discourse analysis on preschool class teachers' talk about assessment in mathematics

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This presentation describes a discourse analysis on Swedish preschool class teachers' talk about assessment in mathematics. Since 2019, a mandatory assessment material (Find the Mathematics) has been available for assessing six-year-old students in Sweden. In this study, four focus group interviews were conducted with altogether 12 preschool class teachers. The results show four discourses with diverse meanings ascribed to equity: equity meaning students do the same thing; equity meaning students have different needs; equity at risk because of unsatisfactory conditions; and equity at risk because of limited resources.

Research aim

The Nordic countries have long been upheld as a model for universal schooling – A School for All. This Nordic model emphasizes equity (likvärdighet) since it provides everyone with the same education and minimizes social differences (Blossing et al., 2013). Since the 1970s, the Nordic school system has been subject to both transformation and development (Telhaug et al., 2004). In Sweden, differences between low- and high-performing students and between schools has increased, as has the significance of students' socio-economic backgrounds in terms of their educational outcomes (National Agency for Education, 2010).

In 2019, a mandatory assessment material (Find the Mathematics) was introduced into Sweden. Used to assess all six-year-olds at the start of their school career, the material is intended to contribute to the school's compensatory mission and to improve equity (National Agency for Education, 2019). There are many different definitions of equity and equality in the field of mathematics education. Espinoza (2007) describes the concept of equity as educational justice, where both individual circumstances and differences related to individual needs and requirements are taken into consideration. In contrast, he describes the concept of equality as based on the idea of sameness in treatment (Espinoza, 2007).

This paper focuses on Swedish preschool class teachers' talk about the mandatory assessment material (National Agency for Education, 2019). The aim of this study is to investigate different meanings ascribed to equity in Swedish preschool class teachers' talk about early assessment and the way in which the mandatory assessment material may affect equity in the preschool class.

Method & Theoretical Framework

For this study, four focus group interviews were conducted. In these interviews, it was important to give teachers the freedom to express themselves in their own words (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). The questions were not designed to explicitly ask the teachers about equity, but instead to ask them about assessment in general and the mandatory assessment material specifically.

In this study, discourse analysis is used as both a theory and an analytical tool (Gee, 2014). Gee makes a distinction between small discourses and big Discourses. Through small discourses, stretches of language, the relationship between words and sentences are described, while big Discourses provide a larger context for the analysis (Gee, 2014). Gee (2014) offers a toolkit for discourse analysis, and these tools were used in an iterative process to pose different questions and to identify small discourses in terms of the teachers' talk about the assessment material.

Results

Based on the teachers' talk about the assessment material, four small discourses relating to equity were identified: equity meaning students do the same thing; equity meaning students have different needs; equity at risk because of unsatisfactory conditions; and equity at risk because of limited resources. The identified discourses show a contrasting image in the teachers' talk – where equity means different things depending on the object the teachers are talking about.

References

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