

Institutionen för didaktik och pedagogisk profession

Pedagogisk takt i betygssamtal
En fenomenologisk hermeneutisk studie av
gymnasielärares och elevers förståelse av betyg

av

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Abstract

Title: The tact of teaching in grade conferences. A phenomenological hermeneutical study of upper secondary school teachers' and students' understanding of grades

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This thesis aims to explore how grades are explained and understood in grade conferences between teachers and students in Swedish upper secondary schools. The empirical material is based on 149 video-recorded conferences of nine teachers and their students and was collected during spring semester of 2007.

The theoretical frame of the study is phenomenology and hermeneutics, which means that grades are understood as lived. The analysis focuses on existential aspects of teachers' and students' interaction according to van Manen's (1991) description of the tact of teaching. Two intertwined dimensions of teachers' work are considered in analysis: curriculum-based and ethical. The results are presented in two parts: the first part consists of general descriptions of characteristics of the conferences. By means of a hermeneutic process of interpretation, two themes were revealed: conferences that end in agreement between the teacher and the student, and conferences that end in disagreement. Dissatisfaction with the teacher's grading was showed by students in only seven of 149 conferences. This division between agreement and disagreement forms the basis for the second part of the thesis. It is divided into two sections. In the first section five themes are defined: grades as taken for granted, grades as responding to students' presumed wishes, grades as encouragement, grades as "borderline", MVG as a starting point for grading. In the second section three themes are analysed in relation to grade conferences that end in disappointment: teachers try to avoid disappointing students, teachers handle disappointment, teachers respond to criticism. The analysis of conferences that do not end in agreement shows that students can not affect teachers' decisions about grading unless teachers let them. The results show several existential aspects of grading. A common starting point for grading among teachers is to assume that students should get the highest grade, which is not always the case among students. A central aspect of grade conferences is teachers' benevolence towards students. This aspect indicates that grading includes dimensions that are not expressed in the policy documents. Grading is, in a broader sense, a human-existential action where student's emotions, in particular, are taken into consideration by the teacher. Grades can be given with the purpose of encouraging students and teachers seem to try to avoid disappointing their students by giving a lower grade than students expect.

The results give rise to several questions. Why do teachers act as they do? Why do they seem so concerned about making sure that students are satisfied with their grades? One possible explanation can be seen in the relational aspects of the profession, another in the intimacy of the conference, where teachers and students meet face to face. In such a situation teachers attempt to avoid ending up in an awkward position where they disappoint their students. Teachers can also be pressurized by their principals or students' parents into giving high grades, which can be explained by the increased influence of economic factors in schools and growing competition among schools.

This study provides an understanding of the complexity of grading, that grading is not such an unequivocal action as is suggested by politicians and policy makers. Further research about the aspects of teachers' work related to existential aspects of grading is therefore suggested.