Competing discourses and the positioning of students in an adult basic education programme

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Abstract

This article presents a case study of the learning processes of students enrolled in an adult basic education programme in the social and health care sector in Denmark. Theoretically the project draws on 'positioning theory', i.e. a poststructuralist approach. The issues being researched are how the students are positioned and position themselves in relation to the discourses mobilised in the programme. A qualitative inquiry, the empirical aspects consist of observations, interviews and studying documents. In addition to suggesting that competition exists between the opposing discourses mobilised in the programme, the preliminary constructions presented in this article point to processes that involve the inclusion and exclusion of students.

Introduction

Due to the demographical development in the western countries there has been an increased focus on elderly care throughout the recent decades. Retrenchment, modernisation and professionalisation are some of the keywords in the discussion (Dahl, 2005) although the focus may vary considerably. A number of recent studies within the research field of elderly care emphasise how embodied care workers perceive care work, e.g. Liveng (2007) and Larsen (2004-2006).Working within the life history tradition Liveng and Larsen are attentive to the participants' feelings and their understanding of the lives they have lived and also, for example to their present working conditions. The psycho-societal perspective is applied in numerous other studies (e.g. Dybbroe, 2008; Hansen, 2008), of which many include analyses of how the status of care work is influenced by the historical embedding of the domestic work of women, linking the research history of care work to feminist research, cf. Wærness (2005).

Other studies on care workers apply a poststructuralist approach i.e. a strict discourse analysis, e.g. Dahl (2005) and Fejes (2008) or a combination of discourse analysis and ethnographical studies, e.g. Lehn-Christiansen (2011) and Somerville (2006). Dahl focuses on the discursive development within the field in order to understand the development of elderly policy; she identifies some discursive threats pointing at a new paradigm within the sector. Dahl concludes that the consequence for the caregivers may imply either de-professionalisation or on the other hand may entail increased professionalisation, depending on the future development. Similar to Dahl, Fejes conducts a discourse analysis; however, he focuses on a particular aspect, 'reflective practices', as part of a governing technology within an in-service programme to prepare healthcare assistants to become Licensed Practice Nurses in the elder care sector. Neither Dahl nor Fejes investigate how the discourses perhaps are taken up by the care workers, an aspect Lehn-Christiansen, in contrast, includes. Focusing exclusively on the health discourse put forward in the theoretical courses of the programme, she analyses how the students take up or resist the intended shaping of their identity. Somerville includes both theoretical courses and traineeships in the Australian context, and points to a conflict between learning in preparatory training and learning in the workplace. Lehn-Christiansen, Fejes and Somerville engage – albeit at different 'levels' – with student identity (development) and so does this article. However, unlike the aforementioned studies, this article highlights governmental technologies, which involve processes of inclusion and exclusion within the first theoretical course of an adult basic education programme in the social and health care sector in Denmark.[1] In order to investigate the students learning processes the article touches upon discourses mobilised in the classrooms, how the discourses interact and how they influence the positioning of the students. Furthermore, the issues dealt with are how the students are positioned by the teachers and other students; how the students position themselves, and how the students perhaps take up the positioning. The article points out that the students in the programme may find themselves caught between competing discourses, with some of the students receiving preferential treatment and others being more or less excluded – before they ever set foot in practice.

The programme being studied is for adults who would like to work in the social and health care sector at a basic level. In January 2010, a group of 56 highly heterogeneous students, aged 17-61 and consisting of 50 women and 6 men, began in two classes. Eleven of the students have a different ethnic origin than Danish. Some of the students have more than 20 years of work experience in the health care sector, while others have none at all; some students have completed another education and some of the young students have only completed a basic course. The teachers also come from a variety of backgrounds and include nurses, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, social workers, school teachers (bachelor's degree) and upper secondary school teachers (master's degree).

The rest of this article is structured as follows. First, there is a section introducing the theoretical framework. Next, the methodological approach and the method are outlined, followed by some preliminary constructions. Finally, the issues looked at in this article are discussed.

Theoretical framework

The school the case study is based on has posed the question: Why do some students benefit from the programme and others do not? They state that they would like to look

into the students' brains to find out why the students do or do not learn. Using this approach indicates an understanding of learning aspects as being mainly situated within the students, and the research process as a matter of uncovering a hidden truth. In order to understand the meaning of the concept 'learning' within this programme, I pose the question: What are the students supposed to learn? According to the curriculum, the students are expected to acquire theoretical knowledge, practice related competencies and develop specific personal skills. These curriculum goals are captured as the development of a care helper identity, an expression that frequently occurs in the programme setting. Consequently identity is a central element in this research project on student learning processes and means that my conceptual understanding of it is crucial to the focus of the project. Viewing identity as being relatively fixed entails an outset in and a focus on the students' backgrounds, whereas viewing identity as fluid and changeable draws attention to the processes that the students undergo while enrolled in the programme. One's identity is open to transformation, but the individual is also shaped by previous experiences. Basically, I consider identity to be anti-essentialist and discursively constituted and the present reality to be a result of contingent processes (Collin, 2003).[2] Furthermore, within this poststructuralist understanding of identity, all students learn *something*, but not necessarily what the curriculum intends. Thus, seeing research as a truth-uncovering process (the school's understanding) is in my view an illusion and posing a why-question means asking for clarifications for causalities that do not exist. To carry out my research, I then have to challenge the view of research as truth and move from 'why' to 'how' (Bacchi, 2009), stressing that the researcher can only construct certain aspects of what is going on. Using a poststructuralist approach allows me to focus on learning and the care helper identity as ongoing processes and not as determined by the students' backgrounds.

As for identity, the discursive view can be realised in two ways: Identity as a construction in interaction and identity as a historical set of structures with regulatory power upon identity (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). The goal of this project is to deal with dimensions of both ways. Focusing exclusively on interactions between embodied students and teachers in a specific school may in the context of educational research seem of little interest as the research constructions cannot suggest anything about the broader embeddings of the students. On the other hand, omitting the interactions and doing a strict policy analysis may risk over generalising, predictability and, not taking the particular setting and the embodied individuals into account. Applying both approaches may be considered controversial, which is why I further address the topic in the section 'Methodology and method'.

Identity as (also) a construction in interaction
In order to closely examine interdependent processes this project draws on the theoretical framework 'positioning theory' developed by, for example, Australian psychologist Bronwyn Davies (Davies & Harré, 1990; Langenhove & Harré, 1999; Harré & Langenhove, 1999). Positioning theory focuses on the construction of identity between interlocutors and ''Positioning' refers to the process through which speakers adopt, resist and offer 'subject positions' that are made available in discourses or 'master narratives'' (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006, p. 43). Davies, who applies the positioning theory approach in her educational research (e.g. Davies, 1990; Davies, 2000; Laws & Davies, 2000; Davies, 2001; Davies & Gannon 2009) and as a feminist theorist (e.g. Davies, 2007, Davies, Browe, Gannon, Hopkins, McCann & Wihlborg, 2006), has contributed to the discussion of theory and methodology in the poststructuralist field that she positions herself in (e.g. Davies & Davies, 2007; Davies,

Browe, Gannon, Honan, Laws, Mueller-Rockstroh & Petersen, 2004). Davies builds on, for example the works of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler.

According to Davies, 'positioning' is central to understanding how people discursively, interactively and structurally are being assigned to different categories, such as e.g. 'female' or 'male'. Davies states that, 'one takes oneself up in terms of these familiar positionings that become 'inseparable from the subjectivity of that person'' (Davies, 2000, p. 71). Entering a new category entails the acquisition of a new perspective, i.e. a sense of oneself as belonging in the world in a new way. This development involves a series of processes in which the individual, little by little, adopts the new perspective. At first people become aware of the new category and then participate in the various discursive practices through which meaning is allocated to the category. People then imaginatively position themselves as they belong in the new category and finally recognise that they have the traits that locate them as a member of the new category (Davies, 2000; Davies & Harré, 1990). An individual is constituted through multiple discourses but the dominant humanist discourse of a coherent self entails the obligation to take oneself up as a knowable, recognizable identity (Davies, 2000) and forces, as such, the individual to integrate the non-integrable into one unified, non-contradictory rationale self (Davies, 2007). Poststructuralist discourse, in contrast, 'entails a move from the self as a noun to the self as a verb, always in process' (Davies, 2000, p. 137). Davies believes that the subject is always already a discursively constituted subject and that it is constantly in process; it only exists as a process (Ibid.) and, because discourses are contradictory, subjectivity is necessarily contradictory. The process through which one acquires (the non-fixed) subjectivity is "subjectification" (Davies, 2006). In other words, people constitute and are constituted by the discourses of the collectives of which they are a member and subjectivity is the current result of the process. Agency, from this perspective, is never free of discursive constitution and it never means autonomy in the sense of being an individual standing outside social structures and processes. Agency is the possibility of critically examining one's conditions of possibility. Davies explains it as, 'A sense of oneself as one who can go beyond the given meaning in any one discourse and forego something new, through a combination of previously unrelated discourses, (...) or through imagining not what *is,* but what *might be*' (2000, p. 67).

According to Foucault (2005a), whose notions Davies builds upon, discourses make subject positions available to individuals and Davies argues that individuals may or may not take up the positions made available to them. In accordance with Foucault, Davies defines discourse as 'an institutionalized use of language and language-like sign systems' (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 45) and states that institutionalisation can occur at the disciplinary, political, cultural and small-group level. The process of subjectification, consists of positioning and of being positioned within various discourses on a daily basis, i.e. through interaction with other people. Conversations can have various positionings, e.g. interactive positioning in which what one person says positions another person and reflexive positioning in which one positions oneself. Furthermore a person can resist being positioned by another person by arguing (ibid.).

Entering a new category and being acknowledged as a legitimate member by others entails a submission to the rules of the category (Davies, 2006; Davies et al., 2006; Claiborne, Cornforth, Davies, Milligan & White, 2009). To be a successful member and be someone who masters the demands of the new category requires an adjustment to the discursive practices of the category in question. Thus, Davies concludes – drawing on Judith Butler – that submission and mastering are simultaneous processes that constitute the subjectification of the individual. In the present project these considerations draw

attention to the struggle students undergo to be acknowledged as (student) care helpers in the programme setting. These considerations also raise questions concerning how the students have been positioned and how the students have positioned themselves throughout their lives up until this point.

Identity as a historical set of structures with regulatory power upon identity
Discourses shape the conditions of what is possible to say (and think), what knowledge and what practices are acknowledged and which ones are dismissed (Foucault, 2001). Consequently, discourses constitute the conditions of possibility, i.e. certain subject positions for – in this case – the students (Foucault, 2005a). Throughout the years and after several reforms, the programme being studied has been shaped into its present form with a specific curriculum and e.g. with a certain combination of theoretical courses and traineeships. Thus, the present form co-constitutes/shapes the students' conditions of possibility. However, the shaping is reciprocal. The programme is constituted by the discourses, and at the same time the programme constitutes the discourses. Discourses in society as such are interconnected, and consequently the programme and the students have and have had impact on discourses regarding e.g. elderly care, youth educational programmes and pedagogical development. The discourses that are mobilised in the specific programme setting circulate in society as a whole, and they are mobilised in other settings.

The acknowledged knowledge established by the discourses is linked to power relations in society as a whole; power is considered to be everywhere and not possessed by anyone (Foucault, 2005b). According to Foucault the exercise of power is to shape the conditions of possibility, e.g. for certain parts of the population and at the same time make individuals into self-governing subjects. The subjects have to internalise a coming-from-the-outside-behaviour in such a way that they feel it as a coming-from-the-inside-behaviour (Foucault, 1994a; Foucault 2006). In the project these theoretical aspects draw attention to *how* the student identity is influenced, i.e. how the identity as care helpers is suggested and shaped by the programme setting. The programme setting is defined as topics that are directly related to the programme, e.g. the curriculum and how it is taught, which again is influenced by wider discourses in society.

The micro and the macro level are considered to be interdependent, influencing one another. One example is that one might expect that the demographic development, the aging population, and the related discourse about how to handle the situation would be mobilised in a programme educating people for elderly care. Another example might be the aim of the Danish government that 95 per cent of a youth cohort should complete a youth education programme by 2015. The different discourses at the interconnected levels of the society – macro level, i.e. society level; meso level, i.e. school, teacher team; and the micro level, i.e. individual teacher (educational background) – can be expected to compete, converge, oppose each other, intersect or be intertwined. In short they may all be interconnected or even dependent on one another, and consequently the distinction between the macro, meso and micro level is mainly to be seen as an analytical distinction applied to facilitate the approach.

Methodology and methods

In a poststructuralist frame of reference the methodology and the method are intertwined on an analytical, strategic level (Esmark, Laustsen & Andersen, 2005). How

the researcher conducts the research and constructs the empirical data defines the researcher's position and the research field simultaneously. Choosing one method allows certain aspects and relations to appear at the expense of other aspects/relations. Ideally the construction itself needs to be deconstructed. In the present project the basic assumptions and choices, such as focusing on positioning (processes) and discourses, must entail an empirical approach that focuses on aspects relevant to these concepts within the programme setting. With regard to the following empirical issues my knowledge (constructions) about the interactive and reflective positioning (Davies & Harré, 1990) is based on observations done in the classroom (71 lessons) and at meetings (3) as well on interviews with teachers (3), students (9), a focus group interview with four students and numerous informal talks with students and with teachers. The conditions of possibility created by the programme setting are constructed by consulting documents, attending meetings and conducting interviews and informal talks with school staff.

The combination of a Foucauldian approach (genealogy) and ethnographical research within positioning theory may seem contradictory if ethnography is perceived as traditional ethnography, which is deeply rooted in modernism (Tamboukou & Ball, 2003). Influenced by the postmodern paradigm, however various postmodern ethnographies have emerged (Fontana, 2001, 1994). These ethnographies stress, for example, the status of the researcher and also share some of the same aspects as genealogy in that they:

> ... interrogate the validity and universal authority of scientific knowledge, adopt a context-bound critical perspective, transgress closed theoretical and methodological systems, point to the limits of dominant power/knowledge regimes, recover excluded subjects and silenced voices, highlight the centrality of the body in the sociohistorical analyses, restore the political dimension of research. (Tamboukou & Ball, 2003, pp. 3-4)

Although they point out these similarities, Tamboukou and Ball do not claim that the combination of genealogy and ethnography is indisputable; they characterize it as 'an 'intellectual border crossing' full of dangers' (ibid. p. 3). Within genealogy and traditional ethnography the understanding of power relations and the subject differ in that the former considers power to be everywhere and not possessed by anyone (Foucault, 2005b) and the subject as being constituted by/constituting discourses. The latter, in contrast considers power to be exercised over some individuals by other individuals or groups and it strives to uncover the intents and purposes of social actors that are considered to intervene in the making of history. Postmodern ethnographies may bridge the differences by emphasising Foucault's concept of resistance and e.g. continually interrogate and problematise the stories we are told and those we tell (Tamboukou & Ball, 2003). Thus, similar to other researchers (e.g. Laws & Davies, 2000; Brown, 2003; Middleton, 2003) I take up the challenge of doing border-crossing research – genealogy and postmodern ethnography – arguing that this is exactly a way to challenge the acknowledged knowledge within research, i.e. a way to fight the limitations of the dominant discourses and to create new ways of questioning 'reality', which according to Foucault is the task of academia (Foucault, 1994b).

Doing postmodern ethnography encompasses a persistent consciousness regarding the status of the researcher and the researcher's influence on the researched while doing interviews and observations. The interviews are partly semi-structured and partly narrative (Brinkmann & Tanggaard, 2010; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Staunæs & Søndergaard, 2005; Søndergaard, 2005). This is due to the postmodern perspective implying that the role of the interviewer and the interviewee are blurred and that the two

parties collaborate in constructing the narratives (Fontana, 2001). As a result, I strive to let the interviewee choose (partly) what is important to discuss and some of the questions are phrased as follows: 'Could you tell me about a good experience concerning ...?' Questions of this nature elicit replies containing 'how' or 'what' descriptions rather than the analytical responses why-questions bring out.

For classroom observations (Madsen, 2003; Andersen, 2005; Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2005) I sit in the back of the classroom (in different spots), focus on the interactions taking place and take notes on a laptop. The use of e.g. video or a Dictaphone might be helpful to hear what students and teachers say during lessons, but assistance of this kind would make no difference regarding the co-constructive role I play. The teachers may feel uncomfortable when they are being recorded and their focus on my presence seems to be much stronger. In one instance when I used a Dictaphone, the teacher lowered her voice so much that neither I nor the students could hear what she said. As a researcher I am part of the same discourses (constituted and constituting) as the students, teachers and supervisors, which means that when I do my research I unintentionally reinforce some discourses and suppress others. Furthermore, the knowledge produced by this project has the potential to influence some discourses and will, as such, be related to power relations (cf. Foucault, 2001).

The analytical strategy concerning the ethnographical part – relevant to the present article – focuses on how specific subjectivities are reinforced or emerge as well as on how they are being constituted and constituting themselves throughout positioning. This implies a focus on e.g. acknowledged and dismissed statements, student resistance and, regarding the organisation of the lesson, how the students are given or take up the positions made available to them. Specifically I look for regularities, binaries, established categories and ruptures. Then, based on the regularities, I suggest that various discourses are mobilised. However, referring to the above considerations concerning the status of the researcher, the process is constantly shadowed by the question: Who exactly is creating e.g. the binaries?

Preliminary issues: Competing discourses and the positioning of the students

Statements are frequently made concerning the self-understanding of the school involving 'we', and a certain vocabulary is recurrent. These statements are of a pedagogical nature. Throughout the years, several pedagogical development studies have been carried out at the school and according to the staff the results have been implemented in the organisation of the programme. The school has implemented several initiatives that support students, e.g. a mentor programme, and the focus on the pedagogical aspect is constant. Outlining the position of the social and health care schools within the system of vocational education, the director of the school states that the schools hold a politically neglected position even though they educate a much greater number of students than the other programmes in the vocational system. In doing so, the schools carry out a 'remarkable amount of pedagogical work', especially since many of the students enrolled have personal problems; come from a weak social background etc. The teachers interviewed also emphasised the pedagogical aspect. One teacher, Vivienne, explains:

> I think that as a school we succeed in meeting the students with an open mind; we are a
> school that takes in bilingual students [ethnic minorities] and students from a variety of
> cultural backgrounds from within the country (...) I think we succeed in making everyone

> feel that they can attend with their 'I', that they can be given the support they need to succeed – after all, the theoretical level within a single class varies greatly (...).

When they characterise the school, the director and the teachers never mention the topic elderly care; they all communicate within a pedagogical open-mindedness discourse instead. Given that the majority of the teachers have a background in the health care sector, this is unexpected. Similarly, when the teachers explain what they take into consideration when planning lessons, they focus on the pedagogical and individual aspects. Vivienne states, for example,

> When I plan the lessons I constantly try to have the present class in mind so I can ask myself 'what kind of a class is this? Do they like to debate? Do I have to discipline them? Are they able to work seriously on the topic or?' I try to focus on who they are and what's special about them (...).

Another set of statements that frequently recurs involves the dropout rate. The government discourse regarding the aim of 95 per cent of a youth cohort finishing a youth education is apparently mobilised within the school. Like the proceeding discourse, the anti-dropout discourse is mobilised at the school level, but contrary to the open-mindedness discourse, this discourse is obviously connected to a discourse also heavily mobilised within society.[3] The 95 per cent aim is reinforced by the way the school is financed in that funding is based directly on the number of students completing the programme. Moreover, if students drop out in the beginning of the course, they have to be replaced. If this is not possible, the number of students in subsequent classes must be higher. The head of the school focuses on retaining the students, obligating teacher teams to work to prevent students from dropping out. The pedagogical aspect and the anti-drop out aspect are not directly mixed by the staff and thus appear to be separate discourses. Nevertheless, being able to handle such a heterogeneous group of students is a prerequisite for reducing the dropout rate and means the discourses are interconnected. Underlining the pedagogical aspect separately can be perceived as making a virtue of necessity. At the school level, the discourses on open-mindedness and the dropout-rate are strongly mobilised, but classroom observations suggest that other discourses are also mobilised.

The observation period involved observing student behaviour in the classroom, including the degree to which they took an active part in the learning activities initiated by the teachers or the degree to which they paid attention to other activities such as Facebook. Furthermore, I observed student attitudes towards fellow students, observing whether they were including or excluding, for example when independently forming groups. Based on these observations I created the following *analytical* categories: active and excluding students; active and including students; quiet students and less or non-successful students. In line with the theoretical framework of this project, these categories must not be perceived as an assessment of the students' inner disposition. They serve as analytical tools to study student positioning. Choosing behaviour in class as the defining criteria for the categories avoided the use of ordinary categories such as *young students, students of ethnic origin* etc. Categories of the latter kind imply a level of homogeneity non-existent within the groups. The category 'quiet' in the following analysis only refers to in-class behaviour. In addition, a student can appear quiet *and* be excluding.

The constructions presented in the following suggest that these groups are positioned differently by teachers and that they respond differently to the positioning of the teachers. The teachers' positioning of the students appears to be related to a

mobilised 'health professionals' discourse. The health studies teachers in the two classes stress repeatedly that the students will have to be professional in their future jobs. One teacher, Dora, defines professional as:

> You must be able to "hide" the sad feelings [that stem from the poor situation the elderly are in] – you almost have to be actors; you have to get rid of your emotions by talking to your colleagues. We must be able to distinguish between professional and general care – how do we do that? (...) Professional care is contracted, general care is done out of sympathy.

And she also stresses the importance of being objective, for example by saying this to a student, 'Now you've started being subjective, stick to the objective comments''. This example suggests that in the process of becoming a professional, students must distance themselves from their personal experiences with caring and – in the event that they have work experience from the health sector – distance themselves from previous work experiences, which are not regarded as professional'. The latter comprises aspects of a mobilised discourse of 'development' (Dahl, 2005) embedded in the health discourse. During the theoretical course, the topic frequently comes up of how to motivate the elderly people and how to have a motivating conversation with them. Future care helpers must be aware of letting the people help themselves as much as possible in order for them to live as independently as possible:[4] Vivienne tells students that,

> Throughout your traineeship you must focus on people's resources (...) if you give their hard disk a day off, it won't function afterwards (...) As a care helper you work in an activating way, this is how you differ from temporary workers.

Thus, the discourse put forward by the teachers stresses the importance of being professional in a developmentally focused way that emphasises distancing oneself privately. This discourse entails a different positioning of the students.

Positioning of the students
Among the students, there is an ambitious, hard working group that is active in the classroom in an appropriate way, has little or no work experience and talks and answers questions within the same discourse as the teachers. Following the rules, they position themselves as 'competent students' (Laws & Davies, 2000; Davies, 2006; Claiborne et al., 2009). This group reads and refers to the educational materials and repeats during lessons what teachers have said in other lessons. Their answers are acknowledged by all of the teachers and their position as bright students is underscored when teachers ask other students to raise their hands. Dora requests, for example, 'Can someone else raise their hand?', and Vivienne says: 'Won't anybody else answer? I keep asking the same three students over and over again'. Thus, this group significantly positions itself and is positioned as excellent students, while this group simultaneously positions the teachers as experts (cf. Davies, 2001). These positionings, the interactive and the self-positioning, are constantly ongoing and the latter reoccurs in the student interviews. One student explains, 'I'm a perfectionist; I get up at five in the morning to study. I come here at 7:30 and when the others go home [2:10] I stay until 3-3:30'.

Another group of students who are older and have extensive work experience speak partly within the teachers' health discourse partly in opposition to it. Qua their experience, they possess a large amount of factual knowledge and they are familiar with the caring system itself. Their experiences, however do not always fit the reality the

teachers describe; sometimes they bring in their views and sometimes they retain their divergent opinions. When interviewed about this, two students explain:

> We are told that when you are a care helper you have to do this and that and – well, we will do that, but the actual work differs from theory (...) I'll bring the acquired knowledge with me, but I also know that I will have to sort out some things (...) We agree that motivating conversations are fine, but you might find yourself with someone who is of another opinion (...) and I'm not sure that when I'm 83 I'll want to listen to a care helper who tells me to go to an activity because I need to exercise etc. Maybe I want to be left in peace and I want others to accept that (...).

When commenting on how to phrase their answers during course, the students say, 'In real life we use general concepts, but here we have to use more specific vocabulary and we have discovered that this is what you do in a theoretical course, so that is what we do (...)'. These examples indicate a submission to the rules (Davies, 2006; Davies et al., 2006). In order to be recognised as a suitable care helper, students comply with course expectations.

When the teacher uses the term temporary workers she positions the workers as non-professionals; this positioning implies that their experience is regarded as unreliable. The teacher uses the word temporary even though, as is the case with one student, workers can have been employed in the sector for over twenty-five years. The general attitude appears to be that temporary workers have not gained professional insight and that you cannot expect them to have carried out their role as a care helper in the 'right way'. This positioning is sometimes challenged by the group and indicates a reciprocal positioning between the students with work experience and the teachers. The students, positioned as non-professionals, position the teachers as teachers who lack authentic hands-on knowledge. This power struggle can work to impede a fruitful relationship between the different types of knowledge.

The classroom positioning for quieter students (in the classroom) who do not raise their hands to answer questions is relatively negative merely because they are the polar opposite of the bright students. Nevertheless, according to the remarks quiet students make during interviews, they are quiet for a variety of reasons. Their lack of participation can stem e.g. from not paying attention because they are doing other things or from needing more time to think and respond. One woman who does not have Danish as her native tongue explains, 'I need more time to formulate an answer; while I am still thinking, they have moved on to the next question'. In an interview this same woman positions herself as competent and ambitious in any other ways. One quiet student explains in an interview that in the past she was demeaned, i.e. negatively positioned, for an extended period, which is why she does not raise her hand, '... when I'm in class and I want to say something, it's as if those [degrading] words come into my head and then and I cannot say anything'. Like the non-attentive students, these two women are positioned as not-so-bright students. Their examples also highlight how students are shaped by the past; how prior positioning is embedded in the current positions; and how students are already constituted as subjects.

Another significant positioning takes place for the quiet students when all of the students have to independently form small working groups. Sometimes the teachers make up the groups, but they generally leave it up to the students as the course goes on. The following example indicates how certain students are positioned in the negotiations about who should be in a group. The example also points out the excluding/including behaviour of different groups.

The teacher asks the students to form groups themselves but nobody answers. After repeating the question, the ambitious group that speaks using the teacher's discourse quickly forms a group on their own. The teacher then points at this group of students and at five other students of ethnic origin and says, 'Here are two groups'. From an observer's perspective this remark is off the mark because the students of ethnic origin did not signal that they wanted to form a group. The ambitious students then leave the class and the teacher also leaves to photocopy some papers.

A student from the older group with extensive work experience points at the students of ethnic origin and says, 'We'd like one of the girls to join us'. Two students of ethnic origin also join another group, leaving two students of ethnic origin alone to form their own group while all of the other groups consist of four or five people. Several times after all of the groups begin working, one of the students of ethnic origin who joined another group turns to the two people who were left out and asks them if she should join their group, an offer they refuse. After a while, the teacher returns and talks to each group one by one. The following conversation takes place when she talks to the group of two:

> Teacher: How come you are in such a small group?

> The students: The others formed groups.

> Teacher: And you didn't hang on to a group? You have to learn to do that. Don't just wait until somebody invites you into a group.

> The students: Next time.

This example indicates that some students take responsibility for including others and that other students simply form the strongest group possible. However, the overt idea of taking care of somebody, works to position 'the caring' as well as 'the cared for'. The caring students consolidate their position as strong and including, while the cared for are positioned as helpless students. In the group of students of ethnic origin, the same positioning takes place. Unlike the strong and including students, however, the caring student is not in a position to offer inclusion.

The process of handling how groups are formed can be called taking independent responsibility. This approach mobilises a pedagogical discourse that emphasises processes and derives from the pedagogy: Reform pedagogy (Hermann, 2007). This teaching approach stresses, for example that students must take responsibility for themselves. The personal competencies of independence and responsibility that students must develop (cf. the curriculum) also reflect this educational discourse which is strong in Denmark. Due to the empirical focus of this article on interactions, this aspect will not be explored further, but was briefly touched upon to point out assumed embeddings of interactions. By allowing students to independently handle the process of forming groups, the teacher sustains the students' established positions and ignores their previous positioning.

About the group forming processes varying opinions are revealed in the interviews: The ambitious group that speaks using the teacher's discourse definitely prefers to form its own groups: 'We [four students] like to be together; we are ambitious – it is about ambition – we write and we compare the notes. We don't want to frighten the others. We have formed a group; we are comfortable around each other (...)'.

The group of students with extensive work experience changes its attitude during the course. In the beginning they include students who are not attractive because of their

language difficulties or who have difficulties understanding the theoretical content. The teachers' decision to mix them with these students meets with their approval. By the end of the course, however, they prefer to form groups on their own that primarily include themselves. They think they have been exploited; they are frustrated, and state that from now on they will concentrate on their own learning process. The interviews indicate that at the end of the course all of the successful students – successful according to the teachers/their marks – prefer to form groups on their own. The less successful and the non-successful students prefer the teachers to be in charge. At the end of the theoretical course, two of the three non-successful students are told that they cannot continue and the third one is asked to start all over again. An additional four students have decided to drop out or to do the course again. The teachers see this as a normal situation. Vivienne explains, 'Well, I have to keep the students, but sometimes I think that we should not allow all of them to finish the programme'.

Discussion

Several discourses seem to be mobilised at different levels in the programme setting and some of them seem to compete with each other, while others seem to be intertwined. The open-mindedness and the anti-dropout discourses work together and emphasise the number of students who finish the programme. The former discourse seems to be part of the positioning of the school among other schools, while the latter one part of a financial discourse. At the class level, however these discourses seem to be opposed, in part, by the mobilised health professionals and the independent responsibility discourses. This mobilisation indicates that some teachers, who themselves are professionals in the health care sector, position the heterogeneous group of students being studied in such a way that an alliance comprised of the most resourceful students is established and sustained throughout the course. My preliminary constructions indicate that how the teachers position students at the micro level does not compensate for the differences between the students at the outset. Furthermore, a specific view of elderly care seems to be in play in the programme setting. Teaching within the health professional discourse, some teachers construe the care helper as activating and motivating helpers, while the elderly are simultaneously construed as objects for activation. The elderly are looked upon as a homogeneous group that must be activated and the teachers do not appear to be especially open to including the experiences students have from working. As a result the experienced students are positioned in a somewhat non-positive way, which is reflected in the group's feeling of not being appreciated. To conclude: Throughout the theoretical course some students catch and adopt the teachers´ discourse, and these students are appreciated by the teachers. The experienced students disagree with the teachers, however they understand how to comply with the course expectations, and consequently, they too, appear successful. In the organisation of the lessons, the group of students with quiet behaviour are not receiving the support they need in order to position themselves as competent students. Consequently, some students cannot hang on and they are told that they cannot continue, or they choose themselves to drop out. The students´ conditions of possibility are influenced throughout the theoretical course; student identity is shaped through appreciation of participation in the desired discourse and on the other hand through neglect of some students´ needs. I.e. governmental technologies, which involve processes of inclusion and exclusion, are at play in the programme. Considering the limitations of this article one can point to the fact that the

teachers are embedded in discourses and master narratives, just as the students are; this article does not examine this aspect.

Approaching the programme setting applying the theoretical and empirical framework outlined above creates the possibility of focusing on the students' (required) acquisition of a care helper identity. By taking on a positioning theory perspective that highlights the discursive embeddings of the students and the programme, this project contributes with a process perspective to the field of research related to care workers. The project considers identity to be socially constructed, which is also the case for e.g. the psycho-societal perspective, but the latter focuses on the individual. In contrast, the influence of discourses/master narratives on individuals is a central aspect of the present project. By combining this with a postmodern ethnographical approach, it is possible to question the otherwise seemingly naturalness that saturates the agency of the individuals and be 'sensitive to the missed agendas and categories that are hidden behind the centrality of the subjects of history' (Tamboukou & Ball, 2003, p. 10) without turning to inner psychological elements.

The constructions of the embedded discourses at play in the programme being studied open up for taking into consideration not only opposite or intersecting knowledge but also possibly knowledge that is silenced or dismissed. The aforementioned considerations may elicit reflections on the curriculum of the programme and the organisation of the lessons as well as the positioning of students. As the construction of student identities is closely linked to the construction of elderly identities, this project may also draw attention to and further question this aspect. The latter aspect, as well as how students are positioned in the traineeship, remains to be analysed and may be the subject of a future article.

Notes

[1] The article presents preliminary constructions, which are part of an ongoing PhD project. The entire project focuses on the development of students´ identity throughout a whole education programme, Social and Health Care Helper. The programme is part of the system of vocational education and training, and the course and training activities alternate between theory and on-the-job training. Begun in June 2009 and projected to conclude in May 2012, the case study used in the project includes two classes, and the empirical phase covers a full programme, 14 months.
[2] 'Contingent' meaning irregular, unpredictable but not arbitrary.
[3] e.g. the Danish Ministry of Education (2010) and the National Association of Municipalities (2010).
[4] This discourse is undoubtedly related to the goal of minimising the financial costs incurred by the increasing number of elderly in society, a topic that will not be discussed further in this paper.

Acknowledgements

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