This is the accepted version of a paper presented at *Teachers Matter – But How? October 23-24, 2014, Linnaeus University, Växjö, Sweden*.

Citation for the original published paper:


N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:
http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:uu:diva-315593
Advanced teachers in Swedish schools – proud missionaries with visions of development

Paper for the international research conference Teachers Matter – But How? At Linnaeus University, Växjö, October 23-24, 2014

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Abstract

In today’s schools, teachers’ work and teachers’ professional knowledge are increasingly challenged and questioned, and politicians tend to seek quick solutions to the schools’ so called ‘academic crisis’. One such solution was the reform of career positions for advanced teachers put in place in 2013 to support the careers of individual teachers and contribute to increased goal achievement and local school development in general.

This paper is part of a project aimed at examining how the teacher profession is ‘done’ regarding this ongoing reform and how teacher professionalism can be understood as part of school development. We stress the importance of exploring various conditions that might contribute to the ambitions of the reform and thereby the need of research that takes into consideration the fact that the teacher profession is ‘done’ in local contexts and diverse social geographies (Ball, 2006). As a first step, the purpose of the paper is to shed light on how advanced teachers express the meaning of being an advanced teacher from their own perspective.

The project is based on theories of teacher professionalism, gender and school development, shaping a theoretical model where the theories are used to examine and describe the advanced teachers’ integrated profession and work and to support theoretical and empirical syntheses on the individual, local organizational and system level (Gaskell & Mullen, 2009, Fullan, 2001). The empirical material from this first step consists of interviews from six teachers and a survey with open questions sent to advanced teachers in one municipality a few months after they had begun working as such. The focus in both the interviews and the survey was to spot the opportunities, challenges and expectations related to these teachers’ new mission.

Preliminary analyses from the survey show a considerable lack of clarity about the mission, although one important element is described as ‘getting colleagues on the track’, as colleagues’ attitudes are of great importance. From the interviews, the analysis shows that the teachers consider themselves to be door openers, both figuratively and literally.

Introduction

This paper is part of a project aimed at examining how the teacher profession is ‘done’ regarding an ongoing reform about advanced teachers in the Swedish schools and how teacher professionalism can be understood as part of school development. We stress the importance of exploring various conditions that might contribute to the ambitions of the reform and thereby the need of research that takes into consideration the fact that the teacher profession is ‘done’ in local contexts and diverse social geographies (Ball, 2006). As a first step, the purpose of the paper
is to shed light on how advanced teachers express the meaning of being an advanced teacher from their own perspective.

The knowledge we have today about the teaching profession is complex and partly contradictory. Traditional criteria such as specific knowledge bases, professional ethics, responsibility and control over the development and exercising of the profession, as well as the degree of autonomy involved, are now partly contested. From a gender-theoretical perspective these criteria are seen as based on men’s lives and male work. Criticism has also been directed at these criteria for being mainly retrieved from subject teachers and teachers in secondary school and high school, which largely excludes other substantive qualities of professional teaching work, such as those acquired through working with younger children in early school years.

The guidelines which teachers who qualify for the new mission must meet take up a range of criteria, for example excellent knowledge in their teaching subject and the ability to develop students’ knowledge and improve their results. In addition, advanced teachers are to be interested in school development and orientated towards professional development as well. We believe that it is realistic to assume that these specific skills differ depending on a number of factors, including the school’s social geography and age of the students. In addition, we believe that it is vital to consider teachers’ female dominance in the early school years.

The specific aim of this paper is to shed some light on how the first generation of advanced teachers perceive their mission and what opportunities, challenges and expectations they meet in their new role as advanced teachers. How are their stories and descriptions related to school development and teacher professionalism?

Some words about the reform
The reform of career positions for advanced teachers that came into effect in 2013 (SKOLF 2013:147) means that schools may apply for state funds to establish career positions for teachers in primary and secondary schools. Fully developed, the reform will include 17,000 teachers in 2016/2017. The reform includes a small number of lecturers (holding a Ph.D. degree), but we restrict ourselves in the project to research on the career positions of advanced teachers, as we believe it is among this group of teachers, with normal teaching degrees, that ambiguity about what the teaching profession is and can be, and what affect this has on school development, occurs.

The Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education, U2012/4049/S) lists several purposes behind the reform. One is to focus on the positions of advanced teachers so as to lift up those who contribute to school development and improve the work of the school with their advanced knowledge and basic values. We understand this as a possible career path for the individual teacher, with an emphasis on how they would contribute to their own development and that of other teachers, pupils and the entire school. Not just anyone can become an advanced teacher; as mentioned initially, certain criteria set by the state must be taken into consideration by the school leaders during the recruitment process of their advanced teachers. To these we should add requirements from 1 January 2014 for teacher certification. The Swedish National Agency for Education note in one of their first reports about the reform how, despite the government’s intentions that the advanced teacher should be given a permanent position, 93% of the 3,000 teachers who were appointed in 2013 had temporary employment only.

Municipalities argue that it has been difficult to determine who is suitable for the positions in the short time afforded them, while other municipalities want to target the services to specific schools, special topics, certain ages or specific assignments that can be replaced with other
approaches the year after. We interpret this as an initial uncertainty regarding the general criteria and what is included in a particular advanced teachers’ professional competence.

In addition to having a clear link to the direct teaching practice, local needs might direct the advanced teacher’s mission, such as the development of didactics and colleagues working in the classroom. Mentoring and coaching colleagues, creating venues for educational discussions and supporting student teachers and new teachers during their introductory year are some of the tasks that advanced teachers are expected to work with, which we assume will differ a great deal from one school to another. The municipal level and its conditions and means of control are critical for how the advanced teachers’ mission is formulated and how their work in the educational practice will be expressed, as shown by comparative studies of management structures within the preschool (Styf, 2012) as well as research on the mission of school leaders (Nihlfors, 2003).

Brief research overview in relation to the ambitions of the reform

In recent years we note a trend in which state control of schools is on the rise, for example, by requiring reporting of the work of teachers’ and students’ results and by implementing reforms that steer school activities in a certain direction. The reform of teachers’ career paths is also an example of such a reform whereby the state, through economic incentives, is targeting teachers directly. The individual teacher can get a higher salary, but the school as an organization will not receive greater resources to engage in development efforts. We can also understand the reform surrounding career paths as contradictory in relation to earlier professionalism projects among teachers and trade unions, which aimed at achieving equal treatment, equal pay and control over their daily work (Florin, 1987). Recurring reforms of teacher education since the late 1990s have focussed on teacher professionalism as an important aspect of further development (Sjöberg, 2010); however, these efforts largely embraced traditional profession criteria, and as we mentioned earlier, criticism has been raised from a gender-theoretical perspective regarding the tasks which addressed the social and emotional dimensions of the work. Teachers’ responsibility regarding care of the students’ overall situation (Osgood, 2012) is not a point of consideration in these professionalization efforts.

Several researchers emphasize that the content that has traditionally been associated with female practitioners and abilities has been struggling to compete in the school’s organization (Gaskell & Mullen, 2009; Hjalmarsson, 2009). Osgood (2010) relates this condition to the neoliberal trends that currently can be said to be something of a global phenomenon. She believes that increased marketization does not harmonize with traditional values in the female-dominated teaching profession and thus has a negative impact on teachers’ professionalism. A similar complexity was described at the beginning of the new millennium by Söderberg Forslund (2000) in relation to the school management profession. In the 1990s there was a dramatic increase in women shouldering a school leader assignment, which had traditionally been a male-coded area. This development was contradictory in the sense that while the importance of women and an alleged female leadership was emphasized, what was connected with femininity was disparaged. For a long time now, the formal obstacles for women to pursue school leadership have been overcome, but based on the paradox highlighted by Söderberg Forslund, there is still something of a ‘glass ceiling’, which has been discussed in feminist research (e.g. Morrison, 1987) for several decades now and which has consequences for women who want to move up in the organizational hierarchy. We should also keep in mind that the proportion of women in school management positions increased while the discussion of an assumed crisis of legitimacy for the school grew stronger. We see similarities between what the career opportunities that called for female school leaders meant for women during the last half of the last century and today’s career opportunities surrounding the mission of advanced teachers. Just as the proportion of women in school leadership positions increased, benefitting their opportunities for careers in a time of crisis of legitimacy for the school, the positions as advanced teachers were designed at a time when the
public debate concerned a national crisis among teachers (Jällhagen, 2012; Rudhe, 2012). We assume that the positions as advanced teachers will be applied and appointed mostly to women on the basis of the fact that the teaching profession is a numerically female-dominated profession. The dominance of women is also shown in the first statistics on the reform from the Swedish National Agency for Education.

One intention of the reform is to contribute to increased achievement on the part of students. School effectiveness research has contributed to knowledge about what characterizes the work of effective schools, that is, schools that in comparison to other schools achieve good results. The starting point of the research has been that there is something to learn from schools that have proved themselves to be successful (Grosin, 2003). When the starting points of school effectiveness research are transferred to the local school practice, it seems essential to similarly identify effective teachers, namely teachers who, compared to others, achieve particularly good results from their students and then work to ensure that their knowledge and ways of teaching will spread through the rest of the school. One way to interpret the reform is to equate the advanced teacher with the effective teacher, who has access to and can transfer knowledge about what brings good results to his or her colleagues. However, we believe that it is not particularly easy to transfer general knowledge and we believe that the reform might as well be interpreted like other approaches to school improvement, which indicates the need of the local context as a basis for development, where the school is seen as a reflective practice (Carlgren, 2009), which emphasizes the understanding of the schools’ capacity to address and adapt the reform to the local needs of the school (Blossing, 2008). Regardless of perspective on school improvement however there seems to be broad consensus among researchers regarding the importance of collegial common learning for school development (Hattie, 2009). We regard this emphasis on the importance of colleagues and school leaders for what is possible to achieve as essential to the outcome of the reform. The criteria in the description of the tasks of the advanced teacher raise some problems. We understand the advanced teacher to be particularly skilled and expected to be a key person in school development, which leads us to relate this assignment to a well-known problem regarding school development, namely the danger of basing change on a few enthusiasts (Fullan, 2001). Researchers who exemplify this problem stress the importance of stability and continuity as necessary cornerstones in making sustainable change possible (e.g. Blossing, Nyen, Söderström and Tønder, 2012).

Several researchers stress the importance of a shared understanding among colleagues of the changing processes in schools as well as the importance of collective production of knowledge in order to carry out successful changes (Rönnerman and Salo, 2012). Similarly, Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) state that the ability to work with other teachers to learn about and reflect on their work is central to the ability to make professional judgments in complex everyday practice. But at the same time, factors that prevent the intended change may involve, for example, difficulties in changing teachers’ fundamental beliefs and perceptions, or when diverse and sometimes conflicting ideas are orchestrated in a school practice (Le Fevre, 2010). Teachers tend to react differently to changes in their practice, reluctantly, selectively or not at all (Terhart, 2013), and several initiatives for professional development go on simultaneously. The reform of career positions is still in its infancy, and from experience we know that the implementation of reforms in the area of the school takes time (Ekholm, 2011, Thullberg, 2013). However, the advanced teacher reform is often described as a long overdue opportunity for teachers to make a career, and there are positive expectations among teachers and school leaders. However we have also heard and seen a rather different picture. Teachers express a reluctance to become advanced teachers because they believe that that would jeopardize a good atmosphere among colleagues, while others testify that the positions are being ridiculed and those who hold them are met with silence or ill-concealed envy about wage supplements and significant positions in the team. A survey presented in a teachers’ union journal (Lagerlof, 2014) did in fact indicate a widespread
distrust of career reform, and Arndt (2013) shows that the advanced teacher reform can give rise to envy among the teaching staff. If the reform does not come together with positive attitudes among teaching colleagues, it might be one of the biggest obstacles to success in the reform intentions surrounding school development and raising the status of the teaching profession.

**Theoretical and analytical grounds**

The project’s theoretical basis consists of what we call three knowledge domains with the common assumption that teacher professionalism and school development are not static and given, but something that is ‘done’ in the practices in which teachers work. This involves how different ‘social geographies’ (Ball, 2006), such as school-contextual differences, the cultural and economic conditions of teachers’ work and various demands on the school (from parents, school leaders, colleagues, politicians and authorities), interact with each other.

The first and most prominent of these knowledge domains consists of theories on the teacher profession linked to educational policy. The reform of career positions is probably one of the largest reforms ever directed towards teachers in Swedish schools and is assumed to have implications for the whole school, students, colleagues and the organization alike. As we have indicated, this is a reform that evokes feelings of various kinds, not unexpectedly both positive and negative reactions among teachers (Wrigley, Thomson & Lingard, 2012). From these assumptions, we see the reform as a policy requirement that not only ‘is done to people’, but as something which ‘pose problems to their subjects, problems that must be solved in context’ (Ball, 2006, p. 21). With this approach, we consider all actors in the school to be active in shaping the advanced teachers’ assignments and work, whether this involves government demands on students’ improved performance and school development, the school leaders’ requirements or colleagues’ and students’ expectations (Ball, Maguire & Braun, 2012). Within this knowledge domain we assumed that teachers of today face pressure from the Government’s interest in how the teaching is reported and students are assessed, as well as pressure from parents and colleagues where classroom situations and meetings with children and colleagues are essential (Apple, 2006). This leads to what Ball (2006) calls an ontological insecurity, instability and insecurity in teachers’ work which they have to deal with in their everyday practice. In this project, we can assume that the government has a special interest in following up the reform in a number of different ways and that the importance of visibility is significant. We assume these performative requirements to influence the possibilities of all teachers in developing their professionalism.

The second knowledge domain consists of gender-theoretical perspectives on teacher professionalism. Criticism from this perspective deals with the criteria (Nihlfors, 2012) often used to determine vocational professional status, as these are based on men and male-coded work. According to the Swedish National Agency for Education the advanced teacher hitherto is most often a woman, both in primary and secondary schools, so there is reason to take into particular account a gender perspective that can illuminate care-oriented professional skills in relation and in contrast to traditional management knowledge (Osgood, 2012). What women’s majority position means for the advanced teacher profession and what will happen to the profession when women, as in the case of advanced teachers, are expected to have a coaching position (Gaskell & Mullen, 2009) are issues that are expected to arise during the course of this project. A range of further issues that might be illuminated by gender theories includes teachers’ expectations of girls and boys (Liu, 2009), notions of female and male teachers’ traits and abilities (Hjalmarsson, 2009; Thornton & Bricheno, 2006), as well as how gender is produced in school policy documents (Hedlin, 2009).

The third knowledge domain consists of theories in the field of school development which are expected to help us interpret and understand the advanced teachers’ contribution to school development. These theories take into account the school’s professional actors and everyday
practice as the basis for development (Berg, 2003; Blossing, 2008; Scherp, 2003) in which school leaders, teachers and students alike produce knowledge that is important for improvements in the local school context. Rather than looking for the most effective method that can be implemented in any school at any time, this knowledge domain derives from perspectives on school development which, with social geography (Ball, 2006) in the foreground, can help to illuminate different views of the advanced teacher’s profession and the importance of collaborative colleagues (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012) as well as the importance of leadership (Scherp, 2003). We believe that the advanced teacher’s profession is shaped in documents, talk, and (state and local) texts about his or her tasks and responsibilities within the overall education system.

Taken together the three knowledge domains form an intermediate theoretical model in which the theories are used to illuminate the advanced teachers’ work and profession from the respective knowledge domain that has been integrated. The idea of a model is to allow for a theoretical and empirical synthesis of different levels: the individual level (advanced teachers, colleagues, school leaders), the local organization level (the school’s social geography) and the system level (state policy formulations, gender order and profession status).

In analogy with these theoretical presuppositions and in order to integrate all levels analytically and empirically, we use an analytical model of institutional narratives by Linde (2009), whose specific contribution is to understand the meaning of the local context when activities and actors are performed. According to Linde, there are constant processes within the institutions to correct and create the most appropriate stories to show, and how this also creates a common identity which in our project can be understood as both an ongoing change in the teaching profession and an ongoing development of the local school organization and educational practice. Similarly, the central document might be understood as expressions of a story in which political ambitions take shape. Furthermore, the theory offers the opportunity to search for various silences in a material, that are never or rarely said, and noisy silences such as those that can be understood as taboo, which may be particularly important in order to interpret any distrust of the reform. Analyses will be carried out consistently in relation to the theoretical model and will be presented as wholes rather than fractions of each knowledge domain.

A pilot study – our first step in the project

The empirical material from this first step consists of a survey with open questions sent to advanced teachers in one municipality six months after they had begun their work and interviews with six teachers (one man and five women) in several municipalities one year after the reform. The focus in both the interviews and the survey was to spot the opportunities, challenges and expectations related to these teachers’ new mission.

The survey

Analyses from the survey show that the advanced teachers after six months perceived a considerable lack of clarity about the mission, although an important part is described as ‘getting colleagues on the track’, as colleagues’ attitudes are of great importance for their opportunities to perform their tasks.

Lack of clarity

All together, the advanced teachers have high expectations of themselves and their mission, but the survey shows that descriptions of their mission are quite extensive, vague or non-existent. In cases where the mission is described, it is a matter of very extensive work expected to be implemented in little or no specific time.
The quotation below is a representative example of how the advanced teachers’ mission might be described:

In our work we are expected to place different ‘problem areas’ under the microscope at the school, regarding subjects and regarding more general values of the school. Further on, to share our experiences, keep us updated on what is happening in educational research, in our discipline and school research in general, to initiate interactions between colleagues about important topics. The goal is to increase the effectiveness and increase the contribution of collaborative learning on school. There are a number of goals for the mission given to us /…/ [that] we have to narrow down.

Some descriptions are vague, like ‘to take the lead and show the way’ which opens up for the teachers to make their own descriptions:

My thoughts are that I can contribute through my experience and my way of thinking about development and my thoughts on how we can achieve high goals among our students. I think that I can be an ‘additional impetus’ in this work; for example, lead discussions in small groups, trying to broaden our discussions and perspectives.

There are a few teachers who answer that they have no explicit description, but in some cases this is expressed as difficulties:

The position as advanced teacher is still a bit fuzzy, which makes all teachers unsure of what it really means. As long as this is the case it will be a difficulty at work.

Because my mission is not yet specified the job feels somewhat diffuse.

Lack of time

Most of the answers from the survey show that the mission as advanced teacher suffers from lack of time to fulfil their tasks. Many teachers testify that there has not been any significant change in their scheduled time, while others testify to about one or a few hours every week devoted for this mission.

Three teachers from different schools answers like this, which we consider to be a common way of describing the lack of time:

The work as advanced teacher is in addition to my other work, or integrated with the rest when possible. There is no time set aside for the work…. There is no difference compared to before; there is no time to meet with colleagues and then our ‘collegial chatter’ will drop…. There have been no changes in my schedule to create additional conditions for the mission.

Some teachers feel they are free to design the mission and the time needed in their own way, e.g.: ‘it’s up to me to do what I believe in and to take part in good examples from other schools”, but, for most of the advanced teachers, the mission means extra unpaid working time.

I do most of the work in my spare time, I wish there were financial possibilities for us advanced teachers to take part in specific further education…

As there is no way to for me take time away from something else, this means that the work goes slowly. I cannot always do things when they need to be done but must postpone the tasks until there is time.

Challenges
This described lack of clarity and lack of time will lead to challenges that foremost involve difficulties in getting colleagues on the track, whatever the topic or content. Another challenge is the feeling of not being updated or having enough time to take part in news and research in order to be at the forefront. One teacher describes it like this:

*Another challenge is how to reach out to my colleagues with things I read and find interesting. It is difficult during daily working hours to get time to read interesting articles or take part in lectures on the web. I have to do it at home, in the evenings.*

Colleagues and their attitudes are of great importance if the advanced teachers are to reach success in their mission. Some teachers describe a sort of fear in that their colleagues will perceive their work as a threat to friendship and fellowship at the school. The responsibility for avoiding this is added to the school leader.

*It is the school leaders' responsibility to show all staff why we are the advanced teachers and what our positions and mandates are. We ourselves cannot take on certain tasks. If we try to do it that way, our ability to influence and change would radically be reduced.*

Finally, we note some answers that can be related to colleague envy. Of particular interest is the female teacher who speaks of the ‘talk behind her back’ from male colleagues, but who also carefully stresses that ‘this was just in the beginning and was not related to me, but to the reform as a whole’.

*Some glimpses into the content of the work of the advanced teachers*

Many teachers respond with pride that the work they now perform is the same they already did before, which they are and have proven to be good at but which they now receive a mandate to perform and maybe even appreciation from the school management. This content is about subject development, leading conversations and coaching new colleagues but also about meeting the individual needs of collegial support in their work.

It is specifically interesting to show how the advanced teachers describe how they have become part of the school management, with possibilities to work close to the school leader, and thereby can free them from parts of their duties.

*... I can take care of practical issues in order to free my school leader from such tasks.*

Simultaneously, some of these advanced teachers are eager to tell about how they continue to work with students and classes the way they always have done, all in accordance with the intentions of the reform.

*The interviews*

From the interviews, just as from the results of the survey, the overall analyses show a picture of advanced teachers who are proud of their work and have a clear vision about their contribution to the implementation of the reform of career positions.

*The mission to open doors*

During a group interview with two female teachers with 10-15 years of experience each, it was clear that they consider themselves to be door openers, both literally and figuratively.

These teachers talked a lot about helping colleagues by opening doors in the school, which can be understood literally as the classrooms and other public premises being more open and all students having access to good facilities and good teachers, a school where no teacher sits inside their own classroom and teaches in their own way.
We can also understand their visions as door openers in a figurative way. This concerns school development that bring changes and creates possibilities for teachers: ‘… in the future, school development will lead to no teacher having to work alone’. They talk about their work as coaches, which means:

To just be there and lead the way, being someone who knows a little bit more about research and can bring such knowledge into the classroom, or about caring about the general aspect, not developing the subject but caring for the students/children. Believing in collaboration, that’s the whole thing!

We interpret this quotation as a vision that will become real if the advanced teachers can continue their mission.

**Leading vs. teaching**

One challenge in this mission is to balance between being an ordinary teacher and an advanced teacher. It seems to be the rule rather than the exception that advanced teachers become part of the school management or in other ways work very close with the school leaders. To be part of the school management is stimulating, ‘… you feel important, our work is considered vital’. However, as shown in the survey, teachers stress the importance of continue to work as a class teacher, keeping up the usual teaching tasks.

*It is in the classroom I feel useful. It is not about leaving teaching and becoming another kind of teacher. If I can’t continue to work in the classroom, I’ll quit!* 

**More of the same vs. new tasks**

From another interview, a female teacher expresses another result of the survey, namely that much of what she does as an advanced teacher, she did before she received the appointment: with the difference that ‘… now I think I have strengthened my attention to what is new and what kind of information might be important to convey to my colleagues’. She feels satisfied that her efforts of many years have finally been noticed.

On the contrary, the male teacher in our empirical material said this about his tasks: ‘… these are new tasks that I haven’t done before. I don’t see the need of big changes, but I think this new appointment must mean something new’. None the less he also stresses the need of being appreciated for what you already do.

**Envy among colleagues**

We asked the advanced teachers about reactions from colleagues. Their immediate response is that most colleagues appreciate the reform and support them in their new appointments. The male teacher we interviewed reported negative comments about the reform *per se*, but not the way the local school management handled it. However, we received several testimonies from the female teachers about taunts and envious comments. Some of these were related to the appointment, such as:

*Are we going to have ranking titles now?*

*Will this make me some kind of second-rate teacher or old-style teacher at the bottom of the heap?*

*Does this mean all your students will get top grades?*

An important part of the reform is a higher salary, so some comments were directed to that:
All of the interviewed teachers agreed on and emphasized the importance of the responsibility of the school leader in seeing to it that the mission was discussed among colleagues to avoid this kind of comment.

**Discussions and further questions**

What can we say about the advanced teachers’ work from these brief analyses and results? Our initial interest was to shed some light on how the first generation of advanced teachers perceives their mission. Through open questions in the survey and through deeper descriptions in the interviews about opportunities, challenges and expectation we got some glimpses into what this new mission is about. We are aware of the small and even biased sample, as the survey comes from one single municipality, yet our results are interesting as they both confirm and raise new questions related to previous knowledge within the field of school development and teacher professionalism.

The most significant results are the lack of clarity in the mission as described by several participants. When related to our theoretical framework we can assume that difficulties in development work will appear, as described for example by Rönnerman and Salo (2012) and Hargreaves and Fullan (2012), who stress the importance of a shared understanding of the ongoing processes.

This institutional narrative about the lack of clarity is repeated by many of the teachers, but not by all. Through this, the local context appears to be different and of great significance for the ability to perform the work. Hints from teachers that the organization is not ready to take care of advanced teachers, for example with no financial resources to the school but only to the individual teacher, make it necessary for those teachers to continue their work at home in their spare time. Our data may also be interpreted as an institutional narrative about a school without the readiness to address the reform, leaving it to the individual teacher to manage, where a shared collegial discussion is missing and possible developmental effects are likely to be small-scale and short-lived. These findings raise questions about how clearly the missions of the advanced teacher should be formulated and what responsibilities the school leaders have in informing the entire staff about them. Henceforth the project points towards studying the advanced teachers’ specific descriptions in different social geographies and asking questions about how this is implemented locally.

In relation to this issue, we can also add reported envy among colleagues which could also hamper efforts to bring about a positive shared understanding of how school development should be performed. We might ask if there are grounds to suggest differences related to gender. What does it mean that women report envy comments and even describe them as directed by male colleagues? And what does it really mean that the women relate doing the same tasks as before, while the man in our data reported still having many of the same tasks but lay emphasis on the new tasks related to this mission? From a gender-theoretical perspective we interpret this as being a gendered institutional narrative, as described by Acker (1983) as many as 30 years ago in terms of how women relate ‘commitment’ to personal engagement as a means of raising the quality of their practical work with children, rather than a means of creating routes to positions of...
higher status in the school organization. Acker argues that the discussion of female teachers’ alleged disinterest in commitment often conceals aspects of gender order. Maybe the female advanced teachers downplay the new status enhanced by the mission despite having applied for and received these higher career positions? Another way of looking at this is to ask if the female teachers’ ‘more of the same’ will contribute to a school that does not take the local context or change seriously, a perspective that is usually ascribed to looking for the most effective method (Grossin, 2003) and criticized by scholars who emphasize the importance of the social geography.

Finally, despite these potential obstacles regarding poor conditions and fuzzy descriptions, an institutional narrative appears about the professional advanced teachers, who proudly present their visions of a possible better school for students and for the professional development of all teachers. It is about teachers who trust their ability to make a difference and who are prepared to try to fulfil their aspirations, even though this will sometimes impinge on their spare time.

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