

# Continuing Professional Development – a Threat to Teacher Professionalism

## **ABSTRACT**

*This paper asks following burning question: Where is a critical know-why perspective on education, in teachers' continuing professional development (CPD)? Point of departure is the first result of an ongoing (2020-2023) government funded research project in Sweden. A follow-the-money approach was used to collect data. 1000 invoices, from three Swedish municipalities, were inductively analyzed and categorized. The results exposed how ethical issues, climate crises, and social (in)justice are almost absent in the CPD-content as is critical know-why professional knowledge. Framed by the notion of professionalism, we here further explore one of the municipalities and discuss fast policies imprint on local sites, the lack of cultivating know-why knowledge, and how CPD might be a threat to teachers' professionalism.*

## Introduction and purpose of the paper

Teachers' continuing professional development is of growing interest internationally. The increased attention is partly subsequent to changes in delivery and monitoring formats following global competitions (i.e. PISA, PIRLS, TIMSS), where countries are competing on a global knowledge market. To meet downward student performance, there seems to be an un-problematized conviction that if only teachers' professional skills and knowledge are enhanced the students will perform better (Kennedy, 2014; Langelotz, 2017). Hence, the market for continuing professional development is growing. In Sweden as an example, there has been a flood of both governmental and different private initiatives offering various forms of CPD for teachers (e.g. Forsberg & Wermke, 2012). There is quite an international body of knowledge about the CPD area in general (e.g. Cordingley, 2015) as well as the potential problems with a marketized CPD field (e.g. Beach, 2010; Kennedy, 2014). However, less is known on what the current transformation and situation of the CPD field in Sweden do to educators' professionalism, and how this is played out in different municipalities and schools.

In an ongoing, four-year-long Swedish Research Council Project, financed by the Educational Sciences Committee of the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Board, we explore teachers' CPD in three municipalities in Sweden

(2020-2023). The project started with a 'following the money'- approach; 1000 invoices from 73 schools (elementary school – high school), were collected to explore what kind of CPD is paid for and offered to teachers, in an era of decentralized market governance and a CPD field wide open to commercial actors.

The aim of this paper is to present the first content analysis of the CPD paid for and offered to teachers in one of the municipalities. The selected municipality represents a middle-sized 'typical community' in Sweden. Typical in the sense of socio-economic and cultural composition of the 115 000 inhabitants, and the local political governance in the city tends to reflect the overall result of the General Elections in Sweden etc. In addition, the purpose is to discuss the results' possible implications on teacher *professionalism*.

### Theoretical framework

The phenomenon that stakeholders, with different power and interests, are involved and struggle to have impact and get hold of time (and money) is commonly referred to as a policy phenomenon. This fact underpins our theoretical and methodological decision to turn to policy ethnography (and network ethnography) inspired by Ball (2016), in the overall project. Its ontological view of networked practices implies that it is necessary not only to follow people but also things and events as subjects rather than passive objects or outcomes of investigation. The necessity is reflected in the overarching practice-ecological lens we have adopted from the theory of practice architectures (TPA) (Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008). As within policy network analysis, CPD is here understood as a practice, affecting other practices. In this respect the theory provides an ontological, methodological and analytical tool that makes it possible to analyze the enabling and constraining arrangements around for example teacher learning and professionalism. In other words it uncovers the relations between the practices of CPD and the material-economic, social-political and cultural-discursive arrangements that hold the practices in place (Kemmis, et al., 2014; Mahon, et al., 2017). Thus, the theory secures a dynamic view on policy practices and their connections as policy phenomena. Previous research

within the field has combined the theory of practice architectures with additional theories and conceptual frameworks (see Hopwood, 2017; Langelotz, 2019; Norlund & Strömberg, 2019).

## Method

This paper is conceptually framed by the notion of *teacher professionalism*. The concept is, however, contested and also contextually sensitive (Godwin, 2020). Point of departure here is that professionalism is intertwined with the concept professionalization, as the latter concerns professions' autonomy and ownership of knowledge, knowledge development and what counts as quality within the professional field. Hence, the CPD stakeholders as well as the CPD content are crucial to scrutinize to understand what is at stake when different actors and economic contracting via private tender begin to influence decisions regarding the needs, content, delivery and assessment of practices of CPD. Furthermore, teachers' professionalism is entangled with the moral and ethical quality dimensions in teaching (Englund & Solbrekke, 2015; Hoyle, 1980). We lean against a research tradition where teaching and teachers are seen as working 'for the public good' (Parsons, 1951, 1968), and where 'critical professionalism' (Barnett, 1997), and 'civic professionalism' (Sullivan, 2005), are crucial. In the content analyses of the CPD invoices, we explored if and in what ways the CPD content might enhance teachers' critical perspectives as for example in possibilities to develop enhanced 'know-why' knowledge and whether the CPD content have a societal perspective or not. We acknowledge that the information gathered so far is mainly limited to written material (invoices, webpages etc.). As this is an ongoing study, we will follow up the first content analyses with further interviews with teachers and principals combined with school visiting during 2021/2022 (when the society opens up again after the restrictions due to the pandemic).

## Data and analyses

In the main project, 1000 invoices were collected from three municipalities in Sweden and coded into a SPSS program with 60 variables that we inductively (Miles & Huberman, 1994) worked out. The first variables/characteristics, such as costs, CPD providers, dates, numbers of attendees paid for etc. were

easy to code directly from the invoices. However, we also searched on the Internet for more information like (academic) background of the presenters/educators (CPD providers), descriptions of the practices of CPD and the content delivered/offered, the stakeholders etc. Furthermore, sometimes we had to call/e-mail the schools to find out additional information about the costs, the CPD-content and the profession of the attendees (for example the school librarian or school nurse were sometimes registered on the same invoices as the teachers, other professions' costs were excluded from the data).

In this paper we further explore, as previously mentioned, the invoices (391 pcs.) in one of the municipalities, which with its 115000 inhabitants represent a rather common, middle-sized city in Sweden. The invoices are from 40 elementary schools with approx. 1000 teachers and 14000 pupils ranging in age from six to fifteen. The data collection and the first analyses were conducted as follows:

1. Collecting 391 invoices (from year 2018-2019)
2. Enter information in SPSS program
3. Information searching/gathering stakeholders' websites
4. Information gathering from schools via websites, e-mail, phone calls (which sometimes ended up in conversations with principals regarding teachers' CPD)

Calibration between the three involved researchers' coding was recurrent over the first year. The next step in the analyses was carried out as collaborative content analyses framed by the notion of *teacher professionalism* (e.g. Englund & Solbrekke, 2015).

## Conclusions

Teacher professionalism is at stake. The CPD content offered to teachers in one municipality in Sweden during the period of 2018-2019 show fast policies imprint on local sites and the absent of teachers' possibilities to enhance knowledge about societal challenges like systemic racism, economic crisis and climate crisis. Furthermore, the lack of cultivating know-why knowledge is crucial. The local CPD practices seem to be part of a broader reskilling of the

teacher workforce where private stakeholders offer simplified solutions on complex problems. As Brint (1994) already pointed out last century, teachers' understanding of their professional needs and the complexity of teaching are pushed away by cognitive and technical dimensions where an individual-oriented focus is dominating. The CPD-content offered to teachers in this study (see fig. 1), focus mainly on how to assist teachers on how to:

- Identify, include and teach pupils with special educational needs, primarily children with diagnoses like ADHD and mathematics, reading and language disabilities;
- Develop teaching through collegial learning and lead classroom activities that ensure the delivery and assessment of subject matter knowledge, mainly literacy and mathematics;
- Promote health and physical activity among pupils inside and outside school to improve well-being and academic performances;
- Manage conflicts, deal with disruptive pupil behavior and maintain classroom discipline; and
- Use ICT for different teaching and learning activities, including the ones listed above, and in line with the GDPR key principles.

These contents (mainly practical skills development) are accompanied with activities such as kick-offs, joint trips, team building exercises, staff parties, closing dinners, comic shows, wellness activities and sports, which in most cases (90% of the invoices in The Staff Activities category) appear to be disconnected from teacher professional learning. There seems to be a clear negative side to the patterns we have identified. One of them is that (seen from the outside through invoice data), CPD programs and courses purchased at municipal level do not seem to address the professional needs of the teacher collective. Professional development does only to little extent address teachers in this way, as collectively professional responsible thinkers, designers, and co-developers of education who need an abstract, powerful, theoretical knowledge base for the realization of a national school project in the national interest (Nilsson-Lindström & Beach, 2015). Instead they tend to become reconstituted and addressed as 'doers' responsible only for communicating official school knowledge and assessing pupil performances in

relation to a narrow range of outcomes. Literacy and Mathematics are by far the two largest categories among the invoices that concern content knowledge. The patterns we have identified within teacher CPD in the studied municipality may risk undermining the foundations for professional judgement (cf. Player-Koro, 2012) and indeed teacher professionalism (cf. Englund & Solbrekke, 2015).

There are a handful of invoices categorized as Social Justice (4% of all invoices and 2% of all costs, see figures 1), which could be regarded as such professional 'know-why' knowledge that enhances professionalism due to its moral and ethical imperative. However, only half of the invoices in this category explicitly address issues regarding democracy and equity and the role of education in tackling structural injustices. The rest of the invoices in this domain have also been categorized in Special Needs Education (see fig. 1 for clarification), and concern mainly activities that draw on neuroscience psychology aimed at developing teachers' capacity to educate pupils with different neurodevelopmental disabilities (NDD: s). These particular CPD activities seem to be aligned with an approach that addresses social injustices on an intra-individual level, and not teachers' ability to grasp and counter structural injustices in Sweden's school, or the political and ideological forces surrounding them (cf. Bagley & Beach, 2013, 2015).

## Contribution

The marginalization of critically and theoretically informed professional knowledge in teacher CPD is identified in this study as an overall pattern following from the different reforms and state programs launched over the past decade in Sweden (cf. Hardy et al. 2019). However, the drift away from vertical "know-why" knowledge, towards horizontal 'know-how' knowledge is neither restricted to teacher CPD nor to a Swedish phenomenon. It has also been identified as a result of neoliberal reform processes in teacher education in Sweden and in many other Western countries (Apple, 2001; Beach & Bagley, 2012; Levinsson, Norlund & Beach, 2020; Sleeter, 2008; Zeichner, 2010). For example, the latest reform in Swedish teacher education has

moved the curriculum (back) towards a teacher-training paradigm that emphasizes practical behavioral skills and subject matter knowledge (Player-Koro, 2012). Yet, the invoices examined in this study reveal that a similar pattern is being reproduced in teacher professional learning at the municipal level: the CPD content domains illustrated above almost perfectly match the composition of the professional knowledge component (Swedish: *Utbildningsvetenskapliga kärna, UVK*) in the current teacher education programme in Sweden (cf. Hardy et al., 2019). In this paper we are not arguing that the CPD found in the explored invoices is poor (or good). Education cannot be measured if you don't know the aim of it (cf. Biesta, 2007). To develop teacher professionalism we argue that CPD has to stimulate more than technical know-what and know-how development (e.g. Englund & Solbrekke, 2015). Teaching and teacher professionalism are way more complex.

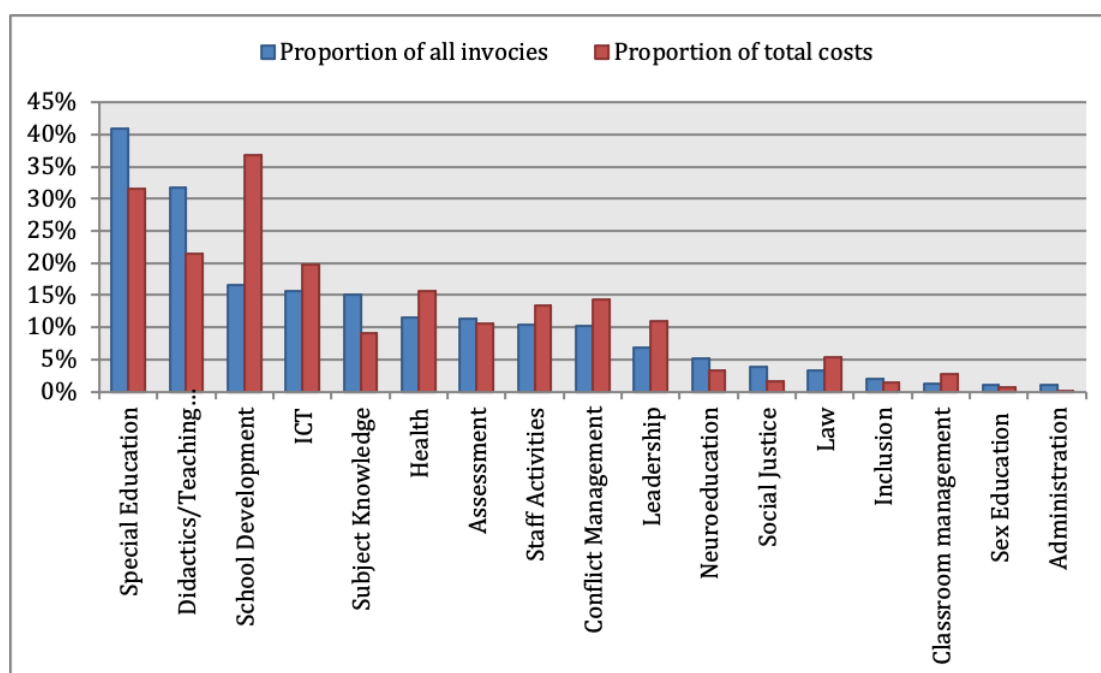


Figure 1. Proportion of CPD invoices and costs distributed over CPD content domains. Invoices that concern two or more separate contents have been categorised into different CPD content domains. This means that the sum of the relative frequencies in the figure extends 100%.

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