

Materiality of School and Memory

Date : April 18, 2008

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The rough asphalt against the knees in the schoolyard, the teacher's golden watch chain replaced with trousers in brown velour, the wooden pen between the fingers, ink dripping everywhere, embarrassingly skipping mummy's sandwiches in the bin. Standing in the sunny schoolyard (maybe on the bench), sitting in the classroom (tables in lines, tables in groups), running along the corridor (painted grey, painted orange), and hiding behind the bicycle shed or in the dark basement.

The changes in the Danish folkeskole [primary and secondary school] after 1945 have been profound. Judging from political visions and pedagogical strategies, there seems to be all the differences in the world between the strictly academic school of the 1950s, the progressive school of the 1970s and the strongly individualised and consumer-oriented school taking its form in the 1990s. But when looking at everyday life and the world (and creation) of the school pupil, what then are the implications of these changes. My Phd-project sets out to explore: What matters when it comes to being (or becoming) a pupil, taking part in the daily life and festive occasions of school? How have political incentives, pedagogical norms and practices, relations of authority, categories of

class, gender etc. been taken up, lived and reframed in individual processes of subjectification? The empirical material of my project is made up of individual life story interviews with 3 generations from a school on the outskirts of Copenhagen. The former pupils went to school in the 50s, the 70s and the 90s, respectively. In addition a number of group interviews have been carried out in the context of the old school. At first the interview material invites to applying a narrative approach, but storying the often non-verbalised memories of childhood schooling tends to be a challenging task. Though, the lingering and the laughter, the tears and regrets tell that school must have mattered – and still matters. Furthermore, when talking about the memory of past school experiences, the informants keep returning to elements of materiality in their struggle for creating coherent narratives. Through objects, places, and through the body wordless memories of schooling are given presence. Materiality seems to be important to the memory of school in a subtle (and unnoticed) way. Looking closer, materiality in its different forms is part of, enables and shapes the memories. In the memories of school, materiality is relevant in relation to collected grade books, school photos, exercise books and worn down school buildings as well as in careful and vivid descriptions of pens, benches, classrooms etc. Taking the embodiment so closely linked to these school memories into account, it might even be possible to say that the experiences of school – of discipline and of experimentations – are also somehow materialised. In this a twofold role of materiality is linked together in the relations between the very processes of schooling and the memory of such. This is not a statement about the past as simply stored either mentally or materially. Rather, recollection is perceived as a reinvention of the past and of the meaning-making processes connected to it. Still, it keeps a link to the past, though, continuously being reworked and not simply repeated or reconstructed.

Through references to materiality pictures of the rooms of everyday life at school in the three periods come into shape. In the stories about the 1950s, the school is ironically named 'the yellow prison' with its high windows, tables in lines and the friendly guards walking the yard. The informants' stories about the 1970s focus on 'the small Christiania' painted in bright colours and experimental workshops provisionally installed in the basement shelter. Finally, the school of the 1990s has no name, is characterised by chaos in a continuously changing organisation of chairs and tables, ceilings kicked down during breaks and care and disputes over pet turtles kept in the class room. Also the materiality of teaching – whether it is ink and pen, tie-and-dye, computers or the various reading books – is part of the pictures. In the memories put forward in the interviews things rarely stand alone. On the contrary, they are constantly linked to personal emotions and the very sensuality of school which might in fact be rather difficult to express in words. It also indicates how memories of school are often non-verbalised and bodily embedded. This shows how memory is not necessarily to be understood as an exclusively mental phenomenon since it also extends out into the world (Middleton & Brown 2005). Moreover, in the school memories processes of subjectification related to school are sketched out and contextualised through the matter of things and surroundings. Also the bodily aspects of subjectification, to which Judith Butler (1993) directs attention, are emphasised in the informants' memories.

The spontaneous concern with things and surroundings when it comes to the process of recollecting school experiences tend to grow over time. On their own initiative the generation from the 1950s is much more occupied with photographs and stored things from their time at school than the younger generations. Also descriptions of the school buildings and teachers' clothes play a central role in their accounts. It is as over time the memory work slides from matters of narrativity to materiality. But it is also like aspects of materiality tend to create an order, which works differently than the self-narrated memories in the individual interviews. Noting the role of materiality when it comes to recollecting school, during the projects unfolding, has led to a more conscious use of the potential of paying attention to materiality. In the development of concrete methodological techniques with a concern for materiality also the younger generations seem evocated. These techniques include group interviews which involve a confrontation with the physicality of the school and some of the former class mates. It also comes to the fore by making room for the objects placed on the table in the interviews, asking into the described objects and places, and posing questions specifically about the things that are linked to the memory of school. If you are working on related issues – material culture and education, now or in the past – I would appreciate to hear from you. Please, contact me on: lisa@dpu.dk

References

Butler, Judith. (1993). *Bodies that Matter*. New York and London: Routledge.

Middleton, David, & Brown, Steven D. (2005). *The Social Psychology of Experience. Studies in Remembering and Forgetting*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.