

THE ROLE OF REFLECTION IN UNDERSTANDING TEACHING PRACTICE

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Abstract

This article focuses on the transformation from student to teacher at the critically important point of teaching practice. This is when students develop their practical skills and form a deeper understanding of the teaching profession in initial teacher training. They need experienced support, reflection and feedback to improve their theoretical studies and teaching practice. Students' statements were analyzed during the teaching practice reflection seminar in group interviews. It became evident that the most important experience was about self-perception, understanding cooperative relationships and the teaching environment.

Keywords: *reflection, student teacher, teaching concept, teaching practice.*

Introduction

The connection between theoretical studies and teaching practice is very important in teacher training. During the practice, students act as teachers, whose primary role is to motivate and activate pupils to learn (Jyrhämä, 2006, p.56). At the same time students also act as learners. During the practice students have to 1) see the connections between school reality and knowledge acquired within subject didactics; act and reflect what is experienced at school from the point of view of a teacher, understanding the different (including extra-curricular) tasks of a teacher and to 2) carry out lessons whilst understanding the role of professional knowledge, related skills and value judgments in the development of pupils and also knowing the content of the subject and purposefully applying teaching methods.

Such expectations of students are inseparable from the principle that initial teacher education is one part of life-long learning. Expectations, however, of the professional success of student teachers are already high at the end of this first period.

Applying pedagogical knowledge is dependent on the emotional experiences and knowledge of students and the attitudes proceeding from these, which, in turn, form the emotional environment in the classroom (Zembylas, 2007).

In an activity that is so widely influenced by different factors student teachers need experienced support and feedback throughout the whole period of teaching practice. Another important element is adequate and practical post-practice reflection to improve the organization of studies and teaching practice. The aim of the present study was to analyze the professional experiences of student teachers during a reflection seminar.

The present article describes the results of the study.

Reflection on teaching experiences as a method of study

Teacher trainers seek for solutions to balance theoretical studies and teaching and many methods for the development of meaningful learning have been tried and applied. Reflection is a key concept in teacher education (Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005; Loughran, 2006; Moon, 2004). The debate about reflection is fundamentally bound up with considerations about the role of theory in teacher education (Furlong & Maynard, 1995). Furlong and Maynard pointed out three roughly similar notions on this topic: *theorizing*, *theory as process* and *reflection* (1995, p.38). The last is clearly prevalent probably because it is an unambiguous metaphor for indicating the rather complex process of finding a balance between theory and practice during action in the professional field. Schön (1987) distinguishes intuitive action from two forms of reflection – *reflection in-action* and *reflection on-action*. Furlong & Maynard (1995) describe the process of *reflection on-action* where persons (teachers) are encouraged to bring their acquired knowledge to the level of consciousness and thereby take their (teaching) actions more directly under their own control. This statement provides good reasons for the use of reflection in teacher education

Jennifer Moon (2004) points out that input (theories, knowledge, experience, feelings – so called underlying materials) and output are essential in the practice of reflection. The output of reflection processes could be new knowledge and conceptions, continuous professional development on a personal level, an awareness of learning, new ideas and solutions and the creation of a personal philosophy (Moon, 2004). Hence, as a part of reflection, a student teacher is able to reflect on her own learning experience obtained during teaching practice and to project further steps in becoming a teacher.

Such learning is well visualized in the Saka ring of self-reflection (Eisenschmidt, 2007), created by school and university teachers supervising teaching practice and derived from different approaches to reflections (see Figure 1). Conducting Saka ring reflection with student teachers trainers are able to create connections between practice and theory by asking the question *Why?* and create a personal meaning by answering the question *What did I learn?* In this way a new activity can be planned or a new development plan formed.

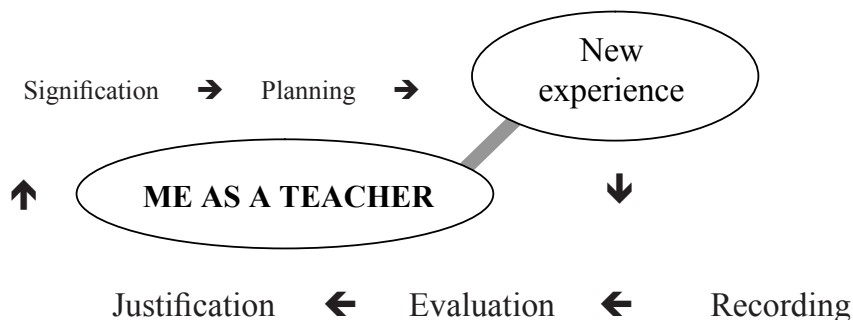


Figure 1. Saka ring of self-reflection.

Many researchers of teacher education focus primarily on teaching practice. Examples of the analysis of the reflection process of students and the formation of their teaching concept can be found in Calderhead & Shorrock, 1997; Korthagen, 2001; Bullough & Gitlin, 2001; Verloop & Vermunt, 1999, etc. The present study focuses on analyzing the most significant aspects of professional experience according to students in the process of reflection.

Methodology of Research

We used a structured interview based on E. Wenger's theory of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998).

We conducted group interviews based on the methods of S.Hirsjärvi and H.Hurme (2001) and exploratory interviews, were carried out in spring 2007 with 45 students. The interviewees were divided into groups of six and the interview with each group lasted for 90 minutes. The questions were divided into categories:

1. Teaching experience
2. Perceptions of belonging to a teaching community (based on the people you were involved with during teaching practice)
3. Learning path – why and how did you become a student teacher

The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The data obtained were processed with a qualitative data analysis program NVivo7. During the first stage the text was encoded, creating free characteristics for students' statements. Analyzing the free characteristics, categories of statements were formed, which were the basis for the second stage. In the second stage the statements were classified into three categories:

1. Self-perception (feelings, judgments, attitudes, role)
2. Perception of others (relations in small groups and between individuals)
3. Perception of the teaching environment (bigger social groups, institutions and other social factors influencing education).

Results of Research

Professional concepts associated with self-perception

Teaching practice is a complex experience and generates both positive and negative emotions for the students. Positive feelings are mainly connected with pupils and supervisors, as well as with experiencing success. Sometimes, however, such positive opinions reflect a fear of failure, e.g., students said ... *I was happy to see such inquisitive and receptive pupils; I was really surprised that the children and teachers accepted me so quickly ...*

Students' negative feelings mainly reflect fright and disappointment, but sometimes also fear.

At first my supervisor was really critical, it really frightened me. Later the same mistakes were not criticized so severely, because the supervisor could see positive things as well; I would prefer sending the teacher out of the classroom when a trainee comes to give a lesson...; ... actually it's really upsetting when you are in front of the class giving a lesson and the teacher starts commenting about you; in one case my teacher was in front of the class and started to ask questions, I felt as if a was not giving a lesson but answering one; ... in my opinion teachers sometimes take advantage of their power.

Frightening and disappointing occasions interfere in forming an atmosphere promoting learning and cooperation. At the same time students' attitudes to teaching practice clearly reflect the desire to rise to a challenge, attest their sense of responsibility and show their understanding of the importance of the experience. For example: *first of all I'm responsible for the pupils, going to a class unprepared is a waste of their time ... you have to know for yourself what you are doing and that is important, but without teaching practice you do not get that experience; ... during teaching practice I understood what it feels like to be a teacher, what depends on him/her.*

Students learn to see their strengths and weaknesses and are able to set goals for further development. During the interviews students said that ... *since I have more knowledge I believe I have developed as a teacher and I try to be a better teacher; I think that a person will never again feel that s/he knows everything, at least I won't...; I wish I was already at the point where I could pass on my knowledge to others, to become a mentor for young teachers, to be a professional teacher who could speak about his/her experience; ... one thing I want to learn is time management ... I don't find planning your time is very easy ...; I certainly would like*

to learn more didactic skills and get more knowledge on methodological things – these keep changing ...

Students are self-critical and self-justifying in claiming that ... *as a learner I am quite behind - I know my results would be better if I didn't have to work while studying or ... switching from one subject to another takes time and it's straining, say, for instance if I was a physics teacher with geography as a minor. It was presumed that teaching practice would be easier, but actually it became obvious that: teaching practice is more work than I thought it would ... I thought it would be easier and that I would be able to inspire pupils, but actually it needs a lot of preparatory work.*

Although students act as teachers during teaching practice they also feel themselves learners. The role of a learner is certainly stronger than that of a teacher. At the same time the role descriptions signal that students have understood the most important aspects of their professional work – the teacher as a leader of learning, initiator and leader of cooperation, mediator of knowledge. It was said that ... *teaching is actually a learning experience, not simply passing on knowledge but acquiring it, I had no idea what teaching was, I practically learned with the children; ... every year, the more subjects I pass at university, the more I want to keep learning ... I have this urge to learn.*

Certainly the role image of a teacher is not idealistic after teaching practice, but there is a great deal of knowledge based on personal experience: *The wall that crop up between a pupil and a teacher can be rather strong and can be caused instantly by one single word ... you have to be extremely attentive all the time not to insult pupils ... or not to get offended by something because pupils can be very cruel and arrogant, even heartless at times ... I am fully aware that a teacher may easily feel negative emotions. It is important to look realistically at the situation and keep the faith in teaching.*

Professional concepts involving perception of others

Formulating and reflecting on the personal experience of relationships with fellow students and supervisors is essential. Formation of self-assessment is highly dependent on social relationships. Students describe their relationships with other people in the context of professional experience. In addition to relationships with fellow students and supervisors, students also regard relationships with pupils very important.

Student descriptions of their relationships are described as both supportive and aggravating: *university supervisors and school teachers have been very helpful: ... I had the closest cooperation with subject teachers, because they gave advice when I had a question, if I didn't know how to explain an idea or didn't understand it myself, or if I needed help in finding extra material. The closest person was the subject teacher ... but in the preceding stage it is the trainer who supervises and guides and sets the rules.*

Students also commented: ... *a person from the university who is actually not connected with training was sent to monitor and listen to us and assess our performance... I think this is very bad practice and that teachers who monitor, listen and analyze should be teacher trainers. From the lectures I can't imagine some of the teachers being able to teach the subject, as a good teacher should. I really have doubts about how will s/he come to analyze my lessons; my supervisor's behavior was not that of a professional pedagogue. The main reason why many young teachers give up their jobs in the first few years is that children nowadays are really badly behaved.*

Professional concepts involving perception of teaching environment

Beside the influence of close associates, the broader social background plays an important role – the bigger social groups (class, group of students, faculty), the organization (school, university) and the prevailing economic and educational background.

In the interviews the necessity for paid employment while studying was pointed out as an influential factor: *during Master's studies everybody works and this causes poorer quality ...*

undoubtedly results would be better if it was possible to focus on one thing only.

Excessive paperwork was pointed out as a negative aspect both in the university and at school. However, students feel that their opinions are taken into consideration:

our opinion is matters and is taken into consideration ... even this feedback questionnaire that we fill in after each course either electronically or on paper ... shows that our opinion matters; if you make a proposition to a teacher personally this is often considered.

Students noted that *one could do a lot within school and all depends on the activeness of the teacher ... where s/he wants to be professionally; ... there are a lot of teaches, who whine and wail but have done nothing to improve things.*

Conclusion

Analyzing students' conceptions of professionalism, it is evident that, in all the three categories, the negative aspects appear to dominate. Positive circumstances only emerge in longer and more thorough interviews. Answers, it was noted, were in some respects influenced by the speciality - art, mathematics, and primary education – of the students.

Many modern authors stress (Beck, 2005; Van Dijk, 2005) the importance of social capital but it is obvious that negative conditions prevent students from learning. Our study shows that positive experiences are supportive and it can be concluded that a supportive social environment in teacher education needs to be developed. Developing and operating a network of relationships between different stages is critical, it should not be confined to just a few occasional cases. This development should be tackled systematically. The reflection seminar described above is one example of practical and supportive cooperation, which enabled the analysis of connections between theory and practice. During the analysis the experiences obtained while carrying out teaching practice were described and evaluated by the students. It was clear that as a result of such a discussion students obtained a clearer conception of both their profession and their professional future.

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