Different Understandings of the Relationship Between Teacher Education and Professional Practice

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Abstract

In the Center for Didactic Methods and Approaches, VIA University College, we have developed a didactic model of reflection for teachers and managers with the purpose of reflecting on education, teaching, and explaining the educators’ educational paradigms. During the work, we found different understandings of the relationship between teacher education and professional practice. We found that this relationship may impact how a teacher or manager actually practices the profession of education, including the methods teachers employ to teach, the methods the student teachers employ to teach, and on the education totality. We also found that a lack of explanation of the educational paradigms to which teachers adhere may influence students’ optimal professional development.

Key words: Educational paradigms, reflection, out-put competences, teacher education

Introduction

For some time, we have worked on developing a didactic model of reflection for teachers and managers who educate teachers. The ideal didactic model of reflection for teachers and managers would systematically and explicitly help educators and managers describing their actions and visions for an education, as well as demonstrate and clarify various educational paradigms both for student teachers for colleagues, and the external environment. In performing this work we established three superior categories for reflection, namely education, relationship between education and professional practice, and reflection on how to understand and include professional practice. Each category contains sub-categories and sub-sub-categories (for further reading about these sub-categories and sub-sub-categories, see Frederiksen et al., 2015), (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Three main categories.
Because a Danish teacher’s education is specifically tailored to the professional teacher who works in a municipal primary and/or lower secondary school, one is not able to understand nor isolate the education from the teacher profession. That means that the category or the understanding of the relationship between education and professional practice is a very important part of understanding the educational paradigm to which educators adhere when they teach. The purpose of this article is to present a theoretical foundation of the main category “relationship between teacher education and professional practice”. This foundation is derived from an understanding of teacher educators’ interpretation of the relationship between teacher education and professional practice and then elaborated using theoretical studies.

Theoretical inspiration

To theorize about argumentations, functions, and relationships to the profession in a teacher training education is nothing new. As early as in the beginning of the 19th century, the German professor in philosophy, Friedrich Herbart, presents systematical reflections on this. Relating to the establishment of a teacher training college, Herbart gives a summary of argumentations and intentions for a teacher training college and itemizes ranges and limitations therein. Herbart argued that a teacher must learn during his practice. In this sense, Herbart expresses an example of an educational paradigm and the relationship between education and professional practice is central to that paradigm (Oettingen, 2001, p.90).

In 1995, Andersen from Sweden identified four different educational paradigms for teacher training (Andersen 1995). Andersen developed these educational paradigms by systematical application and development of different sub-categories. Inspired by Andersen’s work, we developed a model of reflection that captures educators’ educational paradigms.

Method

The work with a Meta model of reflection (of which the category “relationship” is a part) proceeded on the basis of qualitative, individual, semi-structured hour-long interviews of eight teacher educators from two different teacher institutions. The teacher educators were chosen from different backgrounds in subject, experience, and gender. The main questions of the interview were: “How do you understand and carry out good teaching in a teacher education” and “How do you understand and support a good teacher education”? We analyzed the interviews horizontally and vertically, which means that we conducted a detailed analysis of each individual interview as well as the entire group of eight interviews in order to identify themes that could distinguish new didactical categories. The process of the analysis included intensive reading of the interviews, condensation of the content in each interview, and coding the content in the interviews to find important themes. This was followed by the creation of themes that were relevant for a didactic model of reflection in relation to teacher education. We used an inductive, data-driven, bottom-up method (Patton 1990). In this way, we established categories and sub-categories for the theoretical model of reflection by constantly moving back and forth across data, theory, and our own ongoing reflections and discussions about identifying relevant and important categories in relation to the development of a model for operationalizing education paradigms.
During the analysis of the interviews, the themes were elaborated, explored and combined with theoretical studies of common didactic and theory of education. In this process we included our own ongoing reflections and discussions in relation to operationalizing the idea of an educational paradigm and in relation to the elaboration of a didactic model of reflection for teacher education.

Furthermore, the model was validated and elaborated three times with the aid of groups of colleagues and members of the leadership of two teacher education programs. We invited them in groups to present and discuss and to reflect on their teaching, teacher education, and their understanding of educational paradigm on the basis of the model of reflection. The discussions were taped, observed, and analyzed by the following criteria: did the model make it easier to explain and describe educational beliefs, practices, and visions? Did the participants involve new important sub categories or sub-sub-categories?

Afterwards we had the opportunity that three of our newly hired colleges agreed to use the model in their practice. The topic for their planning was a minor course aimed to support and initiate the students beginning work with their final assignment: the bachelor-project. We introduced the model to our colleagues and invited them freely to use parts or aspects of the model they considered relevant or interesting. The colleagues taped their discussions concerning the objectives, content and methods related to the course. Subsequently, we made an interview individual with them all concerning their experiences and reflections on the use of the model in practice.

The following analysis concerns the main category relationship including ways of understanding output competencies.

Results

Three different kinds of content in the category “relationship”

In a Danish teacher education program, we have identified three different kinds of content in the relationship between the pre-service practice and practice all of which are active.

The first type of content in the category “relationship” is focused on output competencies of the education. These output competencies are the qualifications that the teacher obtained during his/her education and how the teacher uses those qualifications while actually teaching.

The second type of content in the category “relationship” concerns what occurs during the study to become a teacher namely, the relationship between pre-service practices and studies in practice, and other studies during the education process. This type of content is described very precisely in teacher education curricula.

The final type of content in the category “relationship” is concerned with how the teacher education institution establishes cooperation with municipalities, teacher trade unions, headmasters of schools, and other education professionals. Within this type of relationship, aspects concerning how the institution is able to inspire and challenge different aspects of the professional practice of teaching, such as research and development can be determined. Professional practice may also be inspired and challenged through actual teacher education.

In this article, we primarily describe the content concerning output competencies because the educator’s understanding of these competencies affects how they think about content, methods, and approaches in their teaching in the specific subject.
Output competencies- distant transfer

The type of relationship that focuses on output competencies of education can be characterized as a situation with distant transfer. Distant transfer refers to situations where what has been learned can be used in new contexts and situations that are different from the situation(s) from which the competencies were obtained (Henningsen and Mogensen, 2013).

In the teaching practice, the new qualified teacher has new and unknown physical and social frames, and there will be a shift in the aspect of time. This shift in time, or continuum, is between when the student teacher in the education acquired the competencies and when he/she as graduated teacher is going to use these competencies in the school. In other words, it is a situation of distant transfer.

Three continua for understanding output competencies.

In our studies with the category “relationship”, we have identified three different continua from which output competencies can be understood and substantiated in relation to different places in these continua: A the continuum: Individual \(\leftrightarrow\) in the situation, B the continuum: Adaption \(\leftrightarrow\) critical views, and C the continuum: To be a teacher \(\leftrightarrow\) to become a teacher.

Continuum A: Individual \(\leftrightarrow\) in the situation

The first continuum has to do with the nature of a professional teacher competency as a phenomenon and how to use that competency in a context other than the one in which it was acquired.

At one end of this continuum, the individual perspective, the competencies the student teachers acquire in the teacher education are seen as competencies that the graduated teacher can use in practice \textit{whatever} context and the teacher’s relation to this context.

At the other end of this continuum, \textit{the context and the situated perspective are emphasized}. In this pole, the practice where the competencies in the future as graduated teacher in the teaching profession (Continuum A), are regarded differently than the practice where the student teacher has acquired the competencies (Continuum B). Therefore, from this point of view, the importance of teaching the student teacher in \textit{transforming} the competencies to new situations and new contexts is emphasized (Henningsen & Mogensen, 2013).

An example could be teaching in classroom management. In one pole of the continua it could be thought that one has to teach or learn (personal) competencies about classroom management, that can be used universally as a teacher, \textit{regardless of} classes, pupils, school, culture, etc..

In the other pole of the continua, you would think that the student teachers also have to acquire categories or principles and Meta theory for interpretation and understanding the pupils and the class culture related to personal values as a basis for doing the right classroom management or for transforming the competencies to optimal classroom management in the situation.

As an illustration of the above, a student teacher answered the question: “What do you think you have to learn in teacher education?...At first: How to manage conflicts, how to manage mixed ability grouping, how you handle, if the teaching plan erodes” (Beck et al., 2013, p. 31).
The quote indicates an understanding toward the individual pole, but the student teacher continued:

And I know that you can’t teach us in this, but you can give us some tools or knowledge to understand it, if you are standing in the situation. And this I think has been important and is important (Beck, et al., 2013, p. 31).

With this ending of the sentence, the student teacher is showing an understanding that a teacher education also must have content focusing the situated perspective. The student teacher also wants knowledge, enabling her to transform competencies into new situations and new contexts.

Continuum B: Adaptation ↔ Critical views/visions of changes

The second continua we identified ranges from adaptation to critical views/visions of changes.

On the adaptation end of this continuum, the teacher’s education serves to preserve the status quo in the schools. The student teachers strictly develop competencies to handle actual concrete teacher tasks and challenges in the perspective how you precisely just now understand teaching, schools, roles of teachers, roles of pupils. In Danish teacher education, you often see this way of understanding by student teachers.

A student teacher said e.g. in an interview about good education:

Then I sit and think: How can I use it? Can I use it at all if I am going to teach in (a) second class? I think that you all the time must be able to see parallels (transfer) so that you can see that you can use what you learn. (Beck et al., 2013, p. 31).

On the other end of this continuum is the idea that it is very important that the student teachers learn to transform teaching, teacher roles, methods and approaches to teaching, and even the teaching profession and teacher identity. That includes learning to reflect on and to be critical of the school and developing visions for future teaching, schools, teacher roles, and pupil roles. That is, student teachers obtain competencies that go against the current way of thinking with the intention of developing ever-changing practices.

A teacher educator demonstrated this kind of understanding when he said the following in one of our interviews:

It is not just about being socialized in to a present practice. What I am doing is exercising the students to be able to criticize knowledge and practice, to be able to combine professional visions and theory in practice … to educate them to be professional teachers with a high confidence to their own abilities, to be able to state their view, to position themselves and to think independently.

Continuum C: To be a teacher ↔ To become a teacher.

The last continuum ranges between to be finalized, (see below) educated, and becoming a teacher.

In the pole concerning to be a finalized teacher, the understanding is that a graduated teacher from day one is able to act (and ought to act) as an experienced in service teacher. That means that the education including preservice teaching practice have to be exactly as in real life so that the student teachers can get real and specific experience (cf. Aristoteles’ idea about fronesis [e.g., in Saugstad, 2004]). This kind of approach to and understanding of the task of the teacher education a newly qualified teacher from the teacher education in Aarhus in Denmark: expresses in an investigation of newly qualified teachers, she says:
Big changes must happen in the teacher education, so that the teacher education prepare the student teacher much more to the teaching professions (...) so the in service teaching practice much more fits the teaching profession you meet when you are graduated. E.g., it seems very strange, that you in teaching practice only have 13 lessons together with you student teacher group a week in teaching practice, when you as graduated new qualified teacher have to teach 24 lessons in week alone as I do now. (Frederiksen & Lund, 2011, p. 19).

The teacher above wants the pre-service practice to be exactly like in real-life so the student teachers in the teacher education can learn to handle almost all teaching situations after finished teacher education.

On the other end of this continuum, the newly qualified teachers are considered fundamentally inexperienced when they have just graduated. Graduating, they are going to ‘become teachers’, because personal experiences and good role models in real specific situations are necessary for ‘becoming a teacher’. Experiences that can only be had once one is a professional teacher. The thought here is that after completing one’s education, a teacher will develop his/her competencies, knowledge, and professional identity (Heggen, 2008) in interaction with the school context. One’s professional identity develops gradually over time. Becoming a teacher, you need personal experiences, excellent role models in concrete situations over time in practice.

A student expressed this way of thinking in an interview:

My old grand pap, when I got a driver license he said to me: Now you have to learn to drive the car, and I think it is quite the same when you are talking about teaching. Now after the education then you seriously are going to learn to be teacher. And you never finish. (Frederiksen & Lund, 2011, p. 24).

To illustrate the different ends of this continuum, you may say that an educator thinking education in the pole ‘to be a teacher’ e.g. could think, that it is important in the teaching to play classes, pupils in the school etc. Here a teacher with the emphasis on ‘to be a teacher’ in the subject music e.g. would give the student teachers concrete examples of songs exactly as the curriculum refers to and teach the student exactly how to introduce the songs for a concrete class level. In the other pole of this continuum, the educator e.g. could introduce the student teachers in superior principles or themes for choosing songs and approaches for different class levels. This way of practice could be based on knowledge or beliefs about good teaching also depends on contexts, personal experiences, professional identity (and passions).

We experienced that exactly the category relationship, including different understandings of output competencies, were indeed important. Many of the participants had never thought about this. They realized that their practices were different to each other’s. They also realized that because of these differences, it was very important to explain their way of understanding output competencies for the student teachers.

In addition, the newly hired colleagues had their focus on the category Relationship and especially focus on continuum B Adaption ≥ critical views. They discussed the model in relation to the course recording to the bachelor project. They used the category and the continuum in developing tasks that could help the students to consider their approach and fundamental value in relation to teacher identity. They used them both explicit in the teaching and implicit in their preparation of the course. They all estimated the importance to be aware of the three continua both as didactical discussions among colleagues, preparation of courses and for explication the aim of the teaching and educational
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paradigms with the student teachers. A colleague say e.g.” We seek for these kinds of conversations- it helps us to stop and investigate: What are we up to?”

Discussion

During the colleague-tests of our model, we experienced that many of the teacher educators we interviewed had never considered that the student teachers during the study met different understandings of output competencies. In addition, another study concerning student teachers’ understanding of good teacher education shows that student teachers are confused exactly because of the lack of description of the understanding of these output competencies (Beck et al., 2013).

We also experienced that exactly the category relationship including different understandings of output competencies were important to be aware of because in many ways, it steers the teaching practice. Methods, approaches, and content relied on these understandings.

In the interviews we conducted, we located different understandings of output-competencies (the basis for developing the three continua as sub-categories), that must have consequences for the teaching-sessions. This in itself is not wrong. We are sure, that there are good reasons. The reflection model is created not to develop a kind of normativity, but to develop a tool that facilitates a bigger awareness of didactical choices, express them in words, explain, argue, and give explanations defending choices for colleagues and especially for the student teachers. To make such explanations explicit may perhaps help the student teacher to not be confused about expectations, which are very different from subject to subject or from educator to educator. In its precision, it can also open opportunity for discussion. This is important because if the diversity in methods and approaches is too big or too small it can lead to ambiguity.

Conclusion

VIA University College Center for Didactic Methods and Approaches researchers (Beck et al., 2013; Frederiksen & Lund, 2011; Frederiksen & Troelsen, 2013) documented the need to make the educator’s educational paradigms clear. A clarification of educational paradigms is important not only for further development of education and the teaching practice in that education but also for minimizing the student teachers’ frustrations concerning teacher education (cf. Beck et al., 2013).

This study has confirmed, through research and thorough validation, that an awareness of the aforementioned three continua from an educator’s perspective will result in thinking and especially talking more precisely about the teacher education and an educator’s understanding of the relationship between education and the teaching profession. We also believe that these reflections and clarifications of ways of understanding relationships between education and professional practice will bring further discussions and investigations of the professional practice of teaching in a teacher education. Such discussions may, in the best scenario, also contribute to insight into which kind of differences in educational beliefs the student teachers experience in their education and in relation to this, open up for discussion whether these differences are positive and facilitate or combat optimal professional development of the student teachers.

Furthermore, we think that an intensified awareness of the understanding of the relationship between the profession and the educators could help educators when
justifying didactical choices for the students. Many students, when they enter in a Danish teacher education, think and want to learn concrete rules, instructions for action, application, or knowledge, that doesn’t need any kind of transformation (Frederiksen, 2013; in Beck et al., 2013).

We have experienced, in our research, that many student teachers in Danish teacher education do not get this explanation and therefore leave them with frustrations and insecurity that can influence the optimization of their professional development (jc. Beck et al., 2013). For some teacher candidates, we think that an explanation of understanding the relationship between teaching/ educating and the teaching profession as a basis for arguments for didactical plans and frameworks can help to minimize their frustrations.

Questions inviting discussion in the category ´relation´

If you want to discuss understandings and beliefs concerning the category “relationship” or to clarify your educational beliefs concerning the relationship between education and the teaching profession, the following questions may help:

What kind of relationships are present in your own teaching?

What kind of relationships do you wish were present? What is desirable?

How would you set your understanding of output competencies in relation to the three continua? What are the arguments? What consequences does it have for your teaching (choice of content, ways of working, methods, interaction between practice and education, theory and practice)?

How do you think the relationships between the practice and studies in practices and other studies in the teacher education (in the theoretical arena) are in relation to your understanding of output competencies?

References


