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The importance of developing a sense of self as a teacher during the training programmes

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Abstract

This paper discusses the role of the training in shaping teaching philosophies and practices in TE in Romania. Teaching beliefs and attitudes are considered central to effective teaching and learning behaviour, being closely linked to teachers' values, views of the world and conceptions of their place within it. It compares trainees' understanding of 'teaching' and 'being a teacher' throughout ITE and experienced teachers's beliefs and attitudes. It emphasizes the necessity of using reflective methods for teachers and trainees with diverse abilities, experiences and expectations who need to develop a sense of self as a teacher as early as ITE.

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1. Introduction

The present study is part of a larger-scale research which looks at different methods used by teacher training programmes to promote continuous professional development. It is a case study which refers to relevant factors affecting the creation of a professional identity as a teacher. On the one hand, this paper offers insights into trainees' beliefs and perceptions about teaching before trainees start ITE. It also analyses the way courses are organised and delivered as it was hypothesised that the way courses responded to trainees' needs and expectations (in terms of

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content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge and personal qualities) could influence the changes into trainees' perceptions and beliefs about teaching, could contribute to developing a sense of self as a teacher and could facilitate further learning. It is argued that through guided reflection they could bring their beliefs to a conscious level. Articulating and examining their perceptions might contribute to a better understanding of how they view teaching as well as the skills they needed to acquire to become competent teachers. On the other hand, for comparison reasons, it introduces data about beliefs and attitudes towards teaching and more important about what it means to be a teacher in Romania, expressed by experienced teachers that complete a course as part of their continuous education.

ITE in general provide a practicum experience, but it operates under the assumption that novice teachers will transfer what they learn in their courses into effective instructional practices once they enter the classroom (Johnson, 1996, cited in Tinker Sachs et al., 1996). Johnson (ibid.) argues that what novice teachers learn and how it is learned must be situated within contexts in which that knowledge is used and it must resemble the knowledge that is held by those who already participate in those contexts.

The present case study was placed in a Romanian university, which offers initial training to the students who wish to become teachers and specialised courses to experienced teachers who have already entered the profession. All participants to the study hold firm and diverse beliefs about the teaching profession, based on their own schooling experiences, long before they enter the classroom and they persist throughout their teacher preparation and into their early years of teaching. These are believed to prevent them from embracing completely the pedagogical practices that they will need to learn in order to become effective educators. The challenge for the training programme is to respond to the needs of these students who have a diverse background of abilities, experiences and expectations, which influence their mental picture of themselves as teachers and their teaching behaviour.

This case study started from the assumption that through guided reflection the both teachers and trainees could bring their beliefs to a conscious level. Articulating and examining their perceptions may contribute to a better understanding of how they view teaching as well as the skills they needed to acquire to become competent teachers.

Trainees should be encouraged to examine through critical reflection, how the instruction they are receiving embodies what they are learning about teaching (Freeman & Richards, 1996). Thus, teaching the pre-service teachers the capacity to be reflective at earlier points of their teacher development becomes an important issue for teacher training programmes (Pollard, 2002) and influences their ability to respond effectively to changes required by their continuous education. The concept of reflective learning, used here as a means for teacher professional development, is that employed by Dewey (1933) and Schön (1983), a tentative interpretation of given elements which comprises examination, exploration, introspection and analysis of all attainable consideration which will define and clarify the problem in hand (in Pollard, 2002). It refers to any process that encourages in general an attitude of ongoing exploration and enquiry, that encourages awareness of the factors affecting teacher trainees' learning, choices made about the organisation of activities in the classroom, and the use of techniques and materials etc.

This research approached the opportunities of reflection trainee students have during the course as it was considered that reflection outcomes can bring about changes into their perceptions and beliefs about teaching, as stated above. A starting point was the attempt to identify teaching beliefs and attitudes because it is assumed these are central to teaching behaviour. Teachers' beliefs about themselves, about learning and its educational relevance and about learners if consistent with their action are vitally important for effective teaching. Literature brings evidence to support the hypothesis that teachers are influenced by their beliefs which are closely linked to their values, their views of the world and to their conceptions of their place within it. Beliefs determine how individuals organise and define tasks and problems and can be predictors of how teachers behave in the classroom. They influence the way teachers plan their lessons, the kind of decisions they make and their general classroom practice. Teachers hold beliefs about their learners, about learning, about teaching and about themselves as individuals and professionals.

One's affect towards a particular thing, action, situation or experience represents the way that thing, that action, that situation or that experience fits in with one's needs or purposes, and its resulting effect on one's emotions, or affective variables such as motivation or attitude (Stevick, 1999, cited in Arnold, 1999; Young, 1999; Le Doux, 1996, cited in Young, 1999).

The goals of teacher training also include changing trainees' attitudes towards teaching. At the same time the attitude toward the profession, the learning situation and the roles teachers are expected to play in the classroom have an important effect on the learning process. Attitudes are not innate, but culturally and socially acquired. Although they can be modified by experience and reflection, they tend to be deep-rooted and persistent (Coleman, 1996). Attitude is related to motivation. Learners' motivation may be determined by their attitude toward teaching and learning environment (Nunan & Lamb, 1996).

2. Methodology

The research had an entirely qualitative approach. It first focused on the case study of 14 students who were introduced to general principles of teaching. The larger-scale study used open ended questionnaires before, during and after the training, for both theoretical and practical components, individual interviews and observation reports. The part of the study presented in this paper was informed by a questionnaire delivered at the beginning of the teaching methodology course, by a follow-up questionnaire at the end of the same course, and by individual interviews. By means of open-ended questions, the first questionnaire intended to elicit information about trainees' expectations of the course and their opinions on the types of knowledge and skills important for their professional development. The second questionnaire focused on trainees opinions about the course attended in relation with their understanding of 'teaching' and their further professional development and their personal involvement with reflective processes. The interviews aimed at clarifying and complementing data from questionnaires.

In the second part, the research investigated by means of open questionnaires and focus group interviews the attitudes and beliefs of 30 experienced teachers that attended ITE and CTE courses within the same university department. They described their image of themselves as teachers after a couple of years of teaching experience and what it meant for them to be a teacher in nowadays Romania.

Data from questionnaires and interviews were prepared and coded for analysis. There was an inter-reliability test done by a second researcher. Quantitative information was considered to have less relevance for the purpose of this study and is not present.

3. Findings

For the purpose of this paper, the study investigated the trainees' understanding of 'teaching' and professional development and their awareness of reflective processes in relation to their understanding of professional identity and growth. Data was compared to answers received from experienced teachers.

Trainees' reasons for enrolling on the course referred to the acquisition of skills necessary for a good teaching practice. They wanted to become efficient teachers, being driven by an intrinsic motivation. Others considered the training they would receive during the course as part of their future development as individuals, not necessarily related to teaching. An opposite attitude had the trainees who chose teaching as a career option in the future. They did not consider themselves committed professionals, but regarded teaching as a temporary solution if having no other options after graduation. A very interesting set of answers focused on the low status of the teacher in the Romanian society.

The trainees' statements about their expectations came to complement their reasons for enrolling on the course. They revealed the aspects of their learning that they would like to improve or develop. They expected to be taught about strategies and methods of teaching that they could apply when entering the classroom. The idea of getting 'recipes' or 'tips' for teaching in different contexts was recurrent. Other trainees were hoping that by attending this course they would understand their preference for teaching, their own teaching or other teaching styles that they had experienced. They also expected that the course would offer them the confidence they needed in order to perform well in front of their students.

The trainees' answers about the characteristics of a good teacher offered more insights into trainees' understanding of professional development. They resulted in a complex portrait of a professional who needed to combine knowledge of the language he/she teaches and pedagogical content knowledge. Personal qualities such as patience and the ability to adapt to and understand any situation were regarded as a necessity when working with

individuals at different ages. The most important of all was generally considered to be the enthusiasm and the passion a teacher brings into the profession without which he/she cannot enter the classroom. This characteristic was labelled as indispensable for a good teacher. It was interesting to notice the recurrent reference to some of the teachers they had in school whose lack of interest in teaching was negatively characterized. A good teacher would also need to have management skills in order to organize the lessons, handle the students and keep them engaged, manage the time and the resources.

The trainees' answers about the types of knowledge they considered important for their future professional development were meant to reveal their awareness and their beliefs on the matter before any contact with teaching as trainees. Content knowledge was considered the most important for a teacher. Pedagogical knowledge was seen as a compulsory requirement for all teachers who need to transfer the content knowledge to their students. Pedagogical-content knowledge was considered very important for the decisions made by teachers regarding the methods and strategies to be employed in the classroom when teaching a foreign language. Knowledge of psychology was mentioned as important for two main reasons. First a teacher should adapt his/her teaching to the level of understanding of his/her students. Second, a good teacher would always be responsive and understanding to his/her students' needs.

The trainees considered that lesson planning and preparation skills allow the teacher to structure the information to be delivered to students in order to reach their objectives efficiently. Lesson presentation skills were important in the trainees' opinion as teachers should present the information clearly and coherently to their students, adapting it to their level of understanding. They believed that language acquisition also depended on the way the information is structured and presented. Materials design and selection skills became very important in the context of the great amount of information that needs to be filtered and adapted to the lesson aims by individual teachers. Additional materials brought to the classroom were regarded as beneficial for the learning. Opinions on testing and evaluation skills were also expressed. They were among of the most important skills that a teacher should have. Teachers must evaluate properly their students' level of knowledge acquisition in a way that it's not perceived by the latter as stressful. This information could assist teachers in structuring their teaching according to their students' needs.

The second questionnaire revealed the trainees' understanding of 'teaching' and their professional development after attending the theoretical module of the course. Trainees considered that the course responded to their expectations. They considered it useful for the teaching practice as they learned how to plan a lesson and how to make a lesson successful (by being offered examples / suggestions of what to apply in practice, what methods/strategies to use), they got classroom management information, they discussed about the factors that affect teaching. Only few trainees thought that the information provided was too general and that the practice of teaching was different from the theory of teaching. The course also responded to their needs in terms of the knowledge provided. Pedagogical knowledge, pedagogical-content knowledge and knowledge of psychology of different age groups were previously mentioned by trainees as important for their professional development and key elements in 'good.

During the interviews trainees revealed that they started reflecting on past school experiences, trying to put themselves in their teachers' shoes, observing them during the courses and making judgement about their teaching applying the knowledge they acquired. At the same time they tried to understand vocation and the skills and knowledge involved into teaching, the difficulties of being a professional and the administrative issues related to teaching.

Trainees considered that reflection helps them to understand the complexity of the teaching making them aware of the weak points and assisting them in finding ways of improvement by continuous exploration and enquiry, to understand other teacher's actions and their students' actions, to make the right decision regarding their teaching and adapt to different contexts. Unfortunately, the opportunities of reflection during the courses were limited to peer group discussions on a specific topic and to discussions in larger groups on teaching/ teaching experience. They also mentioned critical and productive conversations with a friend, colleague, family member etc. concerning the information received and the way it can be applied into practice.

By comparison to trainees, more experienced teachers focused almost exclusively on personal qualities that they considered important they had when entering the profession and the *know how* of teaching or the pedagogical content knowledge they perceived as highly important for an effective teaching. They mentioned these two sets of qualities or competences, both personal and professional are the motivating drivers for any 'good teacher' in

nowadays Romanian educational system, despite the perceived low social status and poor payment. The sense of belonging to a community of practice is something they have developed after entering a team in a school, but this did not help them get the support they felt they needed to accommodate to their new position and role. Learning to teach was still perceived as an individual pursuit based on personal abilities to acquire, adapt, accommodate, analyse or filter the information received from training courses or classroom experience. Reflection was done scarcely and was not guided in any way.

4. Conclusions

It emerges from the literature that teachers hold firm and diverse beliefs about the teaching profession, based on their own schooling experiences, long before they enter the classroom and they persist throughout their teacher preparation and into their early years of teaching. These prevent them from embracing completely the pedagogical practices that they will need to learn in order to become effective educators (Kagan, 1992; Fajet et al., 2005). The challenge for a training programme would be to respond to the needs of these students who have a diverse background of abilities, experiences and expectations, which influence their teaching behaviour.

The present study showed that the course provided relevant knowledge that responded to trainees' needs within familiar contexts. Trainees recognized them and could report to them critically. But engaging in reflection about teaching or learning required that each of the trainees rendered as problematic what they had been taking for granted about what was happening in the classrooms, the origins of the schooling activities, and their consequences upon children and the society both in the immediate and longer-range future (Woodward, 1992).

Guided reflection was scarce. Though, the depth of the reflective processes they were engaged in depended on a practice of reflection they were not familiar with. The training programme failed in this respect to offer the trainee students guidance for effective introspection, therefore failed to affect in depth their initial beliefs about teaching and develop a defined self as a teacher. This was also evident in the data gathered from more experienced teachers that attended the same ITE courses before and failed to show more independence and a much clearer image of themselves as teachers after entering the profession. In the context of nowadays competitive learning teaching environments (James, 2001), for teachers who have a diverse background of abilities, experiences and expectations, I affirm the necessity of a curriculum for teacher education that introduces reflective methods to all components of the training that could influence their further professional development.

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