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# **GUIDED OBSERVATION HELPING TEACHER STUDENTS TO UNDERSTAND TEACHER'S WORK**

### **Abstract:**

In the autumn of 2014, the first-year-students at the University of Turku at the Department of Teacher Education in Rauma started their studies according to a new curriculum. Compared with the old curriculum a significant difference could be seen in their first teaching practice period in the teacher training school. Now joint guided observations in the classes are an important part of the period. At the beginning of the period, the groups of 10-11 students observe class teachers' and subject teachers' lessons in grades 1-9 with the teachers from the department of teacher education. After each lesson, the students and their tutors have discussions focusing on one of the five different aspects: 1) the pupils of different ages, 2) the pupils with special needs, 3) bilingual learning, 4) individualized instruction, and 5) the goals of teaching.

The aim of the study described in this paper was to investigate the students' (n = 73) opinions on the guided observations and discussions and what they thought that they had learned from them. The students wrote their comments during the lessons and after the discussions. All the students found the guided observations much more fruitful than the observations they did alone. According to them, it was much easier to focus on one aspect at a time than to observe a lesson as a whole. In addition, they wrote that the discussions after the lessons gave them new ideas about teaching.

When comparing the students' comments during the five different observations, it is obvious that they improved during the period significantly. The comments related to the last observation were much more mature than those given earlier. The students were more skilful at analysing the teachers' and the pupils' behaviour and actions during the lessons. According to their comments, they had learned during the period e.g. that it is important to plan the lessons well, to have a clear goal for the lesson, to understand what is essential, to motivate and activate the pupils, to give explicit instructions of the tasks in hand, to use interesting materials, to trust the pupils and give them opportunities to be creative, and to create an encouraging atmosphere in the class. Furthermore, the students found that pupils' work in pairs and groups is useful in number of ways. The individualising of instruction is necessary in all grades but it is often a demanding task for the teacher.

### **Keywords:**

teacher education, teacher student, teaching practice, guided observations

## Introduction

Teacher educators have long been aware of the difficulties in making their students properly understand the relationship of theoretical knowledge and experience-based knowledge of teaching (Darling-Hammond, 2014). It seems that teacher education does not always give teacher students sufficient skills and motivation to use research in their future work. However, when it succeeds in creating a positive attitude towards research amongst the prospective teachers it is easier for them to be motivated to use the results of research and also conduct research in their practice. (van der Linden, Bakx, Ros, Beijaard, & van den Bergh, 2015.) The groundbreaking changes in today's world bring about the demands of radical changes in the teacher's role. Knowledge is constantly being updated and the environments where the teachers teach are different from those of their own childhood. The pupils are increasingly heterogeneous and they require more and more support. To be able to succeed as a teacher one needs research based knowledge and tools for observing and getting evidence in one's work and to know how to draw conclusions. (Niemi & Nevgi, 2014.)

When student teachers start their education, they already have strong opinions on what it means to be a teacher based on their experiences during their own school years. They enter the teacher education program with the lay theories of teaching and learning that have been shaped by their life histories. Consequently, they view new theories and perspectives through their prior knowledge and beliefs on teaching and being a teacher. (Furlong 2013; Lanas & Kelchtermans 2015.) Therefore, it is important that teacher students are guided to understand teaching in ways that are dissimilar from their own experiences as students. They should learn to think like a teacher and to act like a teacher. In addition, they should become conscious of the complexity of the classroom and respond to it. (Darling-Hammond, 2006.) A challenge for teacher education is to initiate actions that enrich and diversify the educational concepts that teacher students do not usually even understand they have. Teacher educators need to enhance prospect teachers' metacognition in the discipline of teaching. (Martin & Russel, 2009.)

Several studies show that teacher students usually use their prior knowledge, preconceptions, and beliefs when observing learning situations. Consequently, when describing these situations they rely mainly on the affective components of teaching, do not pay attention to the cognitive aspects of the situations, and are inclined to explain them on the basis of their individual memories. They do not believe that some of these episodes may be beyond the teacher's control and thus unavoidable. This tendency may prevent them from learning how to teach. (Eilam & Poyas, 2009.)

The teacher education should support teacher students in acquiring practical skills and knowledge of theory. Their teaching skills cannot develop without the interaction between experience and theory. It is crucial that teaching is embedded in a deep and rich theoretical base. The presentation of theory should focus equally on stimulating

teacher students' awareness of relevant aspects in concrete situations as on presenting the knowledge base for better understanding the realities in the classroom environment. For instance, when the goal is to help the teacher students to become sensitive to their pupils' feelings they need as well theoretical knowledge as ability to recognize this aspect in real classroom situations. (Luneberg & Korthagen, 2009.)

It has been found that teacher students, when viewing other teachers teaching, may first consider how they would teach differently without carefully analysing what is happening in the classroom. Research indicates that shared observation provides a stronger foundation for future pedagogical decisions. (Chung & van Es, 2014.) Teacher students may have developed beliefs that focus their attention on some aspects of teaching at the expense of others. Although they have during their school years observed countless hours of teaching, they have done that as learners, not as teachers. The kind of observing that one does as a learner is typically related to the understanding of the presented material and the observer do not think about the teaching and learning process more generally. Consequently, teacher students do not have well developed skills for observing other teachers' classrooms when they initially begin teacher training. (Star & Strickland, 2008.) While many teacher students, initially, are quite weak in the critical skill of noticing classroom events they benefit from using structured observations. Providing them with tools for analysing teaching it is easier for them to learn to observe teaching and learning systematically. The tools help them to understand the complicated interactions in a classroom and to connect practical experience with theoretical knowledge. (Chung & van Es, 2014.)

## **Method**

In the autumn of 2014, the first-year-students at the University of Turku at the Department of Teacher Education in Rauma started their studies according to a new curriculum. Compared with the old curriculum a significant difference can be seen in their first teaching practice period in the teacher training school. (The training school is a part of the Department of teacher education and is located in the same campus.) In the new curriculum, the joint guided observations in the classes are an important part of the period. In addition, the students observe a great number of lessons by themselves and practise teaching in pairs or small groups.

During the period, the groups of 10–11 students observe five class teachers' and subject teachers' lessons in grades 1–9 with the teachers from the department of teacher education. After each lesson, the students and their tutors have discussions focusing on one of the five different aspects: 1) the pupils of different ages, 2) the pupils with special needs, 3) bilingual learning, 4) individualized instruction, and 5) the goals of teaching. The training school gives good opportunities to observe lessons from all these perspectives. The school has classes from the first to ninth grade; in all

classes part of the teaching is given in English, the main language of instruction being Finnish; and there are in all classes pupils with special needs.

The aim of the study described in this paper was to investigate the student teachers' (n = 73; 22 male and 51 female) opinions on the guided observations and discussions and what they thought that they had learned from them. The student teachers were divided in seven groups with 10–11 students in each group. All groups took part in five guided observations. Immediately after an observation the group had discussions about the lesson they had observed. During the observation and the discussions the students wrote their comments on a paper that helped them to focus on essential aspects related to the theme of the observation. An example of the papers can be seen in Figure 1. For each five different observations there was a different observation form. Moreover, all students filled after the period an electronic questionnaire which aimed to find out their opinions on the first teaching practice period.

FIGURE 1. The observation form for the Observation number 5

<b>Observation 5: The goals of teaching</b>	
Student: _____ Grade: _____ Date: _____ Subject: _____ The goal of the lesson: _____	
<b>THE GOALS OF LEARNING</b> - the central knowledge the pupils should learn - the skills the pupils should learn	<b>THE PUPILS' ACTIVITY</b> - the pupils' ability to use their knowledge and skills in a way the situation requires - the pupils' actions
<b>THE SUCCESS OF THE ACTIVITIES</b> - the pupils' ability to use learning materials and learning aids - the pupils' ability to concentrate on their tasks	<b>INTERACTION</b> - the pupils' teamwork - the questions the pupils made and the discussions they had
What I learned from the guided observation: _____	

## Results

As was mentioned above, the focus in this paper is on the student teachers' opinions on the guided observations and discussions and what they thought that they had learned from them. All students found the guided observations much more fruitful than

the observations they did alone. Many students commented that they would have liked to have more guided observations. According to them, it was much easier to focus on one aspect at a time than to observe a lesson as a whole. When observing the lessons alone, it is often difficult to concentrate on the lesson. In addition, they wrote that the discussions after the lessons gave them new ideas about teaching. The comments below are from the electronic questionnaire and therefore the student numbers and gender of the respondents were not available.

*I would have liked to have more guided observations and less the ones done alone. Especially during the last week of the period, the thoughts often started to wander and I just sat there not knowing what was happening in the class. The guided observations were more useful because we had a clear theme on what to focus. When we discussed the lessons, I often got new ideas from my peers.*

*I wish there would have been more guided observations where we analysed the lessons in a group. When observing a lesson alone, I did not have enough time to analyse the situation and therefore I did not much benefit of the observation.*

When comparing the students' comments during the five different observations, it is obvious that they improved during the period significantly. After the first observations some students did not write anything on the lines after the sentence "What I learned from the guided observation". It seems that they had not noticed anything worth mentioning. However, after the last observation all students had filled the lines. In addition, the comments related to the last observation were much more mature than those given earlier. The student teachers were more skilful at analysing the teachers' and the pupils' behaviour and actions during the lessons. Their comments from the last observation show that they had been able to notice several important aspects of the lessons. As the quotations below show, several teacher students compared the last observation with previous observations. This was mainly due to the fact that the pupils in the last observations were older than in the earlier occasions. The first four observations took place in grades 1–6 and the fifth in grades 7–9.

*It was interesting to notice how different it is to teach the eighth graders than the young pupils. While the young children often need teacher's help the older ones are able to work independently. (32M)*

*In this lesson, the pupils worked in pairs. They sought information from different sources and after that taught each other what they had found out. The ninth graders proved to be capable of taking responsibility of their learning and of teaching other pupils. (34F)*

Most of the teacher students understood that it is important to make a good plan for the lesson. They wrote that it takes time and is a demanding task, especially for a novice teacher. When the teacher takes into account the pupils age, interests, and

skills when planning the lesson it is easier to motivate them to learn. The good structure of the lesson is also important. However, the teacher has to be flexible and change the plan when needed.

*With careful planning, the lesson becomes well structured and then the goal of the lesson is easier to achieve. It is important for the teacher to think how he or she can create a good atmosphere in the class because it enables every pupil to be active. (68F)*

*A good plan for the lesson, the teachers' clear instructions for the exercises and support when a pupil needs it, and interesting tasks contribute to pupils' active learning. (58F)*

Most of the student teachers understood that it is important to think carefully what the goal of the lesson is already before planning what to do. After the teacher has decided what kind of knowledge and skills the pupils should learn he or she is able to plan the lesson based on that. Furthermore, a good plan helps to achieve the goals. When children work in groups, it is especially important to think how they can all achieve the learning goals. All pupils in the group should be active during the lesson. They should be aware of the goals and get clear instructions for their work. The teacher should consider what kind of instructions are needed for the pupils of different ages and skills. This is important especially when the children are taught in a foreign language.

*Teaching in English succeeded very well because the teacher spoke clearly and clarified her speech with gestures and pictures. It seemed that all pupils understood the contents of the teaching and the questions she asked. (63F)*

*The teacher should think carefully how it is possible that every pupil can achieve the learning goals when the pupils work in groups. (31F)*

The teacher students also saw that all students cannot achieve the same goals. In addition, they learn in different ways. When planning the lesson, the teacher considers what materials and tasks are the best for each pupil. It is important that all pupils – those with very good skills as well as those whose skills are below average – learn something and get the experiences of success. Individualised exercises help the pupils to be motivated to work and complete their tasks. As some teacher students commented the teacher should also give the pupils individualised homework. Today the learning groups are getting more and more heterogeneous and therefore it is often a very demanding task for the teacher to provide each student with the best possible ways to learn.

*Individualised learning materials and tasks give all pupils a possibility to develop. (16F)*

*The teacher should use during a lesson various teaching methods and pay attention to learners of different levels. Each lesson should include a visual, oral, and written element. (50M)*

Several teacher students admired the experienced teachers' skills to motivate children to learn and become interested in the theme of the lesson. They found several good methods that the teachers used for this purpose. The beginning of the lesson is the most important. If the teacher approaches the topic in a way that is related to the pupils' own life, they become motivated. For instance, in the literature lesson, the new genre of fiction was presented to eight graders with clips from films. In ninth grade the topic was consumer protection. The teacher started the lesson asking the pupils of their own experiences with phones and electronic devices. The teacher students wrote that the use of timely materials and topics that interest the pupils' age group motivates them to learn and seek new information. They stressed the importance of approaching the contents that the pupils should learn linked to today's world.

*The use of the ninth graders' own experiences and previous knowledge as a basis of conversation stimulated their interest in the topic and got them to work actively. (7M)*

*Timely learning materials interested the pupils and inspired them to work. (13M)*

The teacher students reflected how the teacher affects the atmosphere in the class. His or her encouraging and inspiring behaviour and positive attitudes towards the pupils stimulate children to be active. When the teacher is relaxed and gives positive feedback to all pupils, they work peacefully. Even when the pupils were at the beginning of the lesson restless they calmed down quickly and started to work. There was no need for the teacher to raise her voice.

*The teacher can with her calm behaviour regulate the pupils' behaviour. It was great to notice that she kept the situation in hand without raising her voice. (56F)*

In most classes, the pupils worked in pairs or groups. The teacher students found that the pupils' working together was advantageous in number of ways. The pupils were usually motivated to do it. The discussions they had helped them to learn things better and getting a deeper understanding about the topic in hand. When the pupils worked in pairs and taught each other what they had found out, they both learned. The one who was teaching learned the new content especially well while teaching. To be able to teach someone one has to understand what one is teaching. However, the teacher students noticed that when the pupils are working in groups it is possible that all pupils are not really working. Some pupils tend to let the others work and take a free rider's role. Therefore, it is important that the teacher plans the lesson well and tries to find means to activate all pupils. Good, clear instructions and motivating tasks can inspire all pupils to work. In addition, the teacher has to plan how the results of the group

works are presented. Also the reluctant pupils have to consider it worthwhile to apply themselves in the task.

*The work in pairs is a good method of learning new things. The pupils discuss things together and that helps them to understand the topic better. When a pupil teaches another she or he learns at the same time. This is a good method but it requires a lot of practice. (1F)*

*Group work is inspiring and makes the pupils reflect the theme more profoundly. (60F)*

*The pupils like working in groups but some pupils seem to take a free rider's role. (21F)*

When we observed a seventh grade's art lesson, the pupils were planning ginger bread houses. The plans were made during art lessons and the houses would be built during home economics lessons. Consequently, it was a rather long project and both the art teacher and the home economics teacher were involved in it. It was evident that the pupils were eager to take part in this kind of common project. Similarly, the teacher students thought that the cooperation between two teachers was a positive thing.

The town where the pupils live is full of beautiful old wooden houses. The pupils had been walking around the old town and photographing those houses they liked most. During the previous art lesson, they had looked at the pictures and talked about architecture and how the houses had been built. On this lesson, they started to plan their own houses in small groups. The teacher students listened to their conversations about various solutions. They noticed that the discussions in the groups were lively and that little by little all pupils took part in in. The art teacher walked around the class and encouraged the pupils to be creative and answered their questions about practical solutions. They wanted to know if it was possible to have some details in a gingerbread house. Gradually, the pupils started to draw the houses. The teacher students learned that when the teacher trusts the pupils and encourages them to be creative, the results are good. The houses the groups planned, were at the same time imaginative and such that it was possible to build them of gingerbread dough. In addition, the houses were all different. Several teacher students mentioned that group work seemed to be a good method in this kind of project. All pupils within the groups were actively involved in the project and all their ideas were valued in the conversations.

*It was great that it was possible to combine art and home economics lessons in this project. In addition, it was good that the pupils were offered a possibility to take part in a longitudinal project of this kind. The teacher allowed them to be creative and believed in their abilities. (55F)*

*The teacher showed the pupils examples of imaginative gingerbread houses and helped them to get started. However, it did not hinder the pupils' own creativity. The results showed that the groups had planned houses that differed greatly from the ones the teacher had showed them. A good teacher trusts his or her pupils and gives them the responsibility of the work. (57F)*

## **Conclusion**

As was mentioned above, all teacher students found the guided observations more fruitful than the observations they did alone. They wrote that it was much easier to focus on one aspect at a time than to observe a lesson as a whole. It seems that the guided observations improved their observation skills. During the last observation, all teacher students were able to detect something that was important for a prospective teacher. Also Chung and van Es (2014) found that shared observations could provide a stronger foundation for teacher students' professional decisions. When they view other teachers teaching by themselves, they do not carefully analyse what is happening in the classroom. Similarly, Star and Strickland (2008) state that teacher students do not have well developed observation skills at the beginning of their studies. Therefore, it is as Martin and Russel (2009) point out, important that teacher educators enhance their metacognition in the discipline of teaching.

The observations proved to have been able to help the first year teacher students to start analysing the experienced teachers' work in a way that helps them in their own teaching practice. They found several important aspects that they should bear in mind when planning their lessons. For instance, it is important to plan the lessons well, to have a clear goal for the lesson, and to understand what is essential. The teacher should motivate and activate all pupils by using interesting materials and create an encouraging atmosphere in the class. He or she should give explicit instructions, trust the pupils, and give them opportunities to be creative. Furthermore, the teacher students found that pupils' work in pairs and groups is useful in number of ways. However, it has to be carefully planned so that all pupils are active and nobody takes the role of a free rider. The individualising of instruction is necessary in all grades but it is often a demanding task for the teacher.

As teacher educators, we conclude that the observations related to the first year teaching practice period gave us valuable knowledge that helps us to link our lectures more closely to practice. It was interesting to view the lessons through the eyes of our students and help them to focus on important features related to the teacher's work. The five observations focused on different aspects. This caused some practical difficulties. All teachers had not understood what the focus of our observation in their lessons was and consequently it was sometimes difficult for the teacher students to fill the observation form. For instance, when we went to observe how the bilingual

learning is put in practise, English was not used during that particular lesson at all. Luckily, the teacher students had all seen bilingual learning during some other lesson. We could base our discussions on that and on the knowledge of the teaching method the first author's lecture had given them.

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