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TEACHING PRACTICE - A BRIDGE FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

Abstract:

Finland is one of the few countries where the teacher education is given at the universities. It is a five year education at the end of which the students get the Master's degree, and at the same time the certificate for teaching. Teaching practice is done in the training schools, which are a part of the faculties of education. Since there are two parties - the university supervisors (tutors) and the training school teachers (mentors) - educating the prospective teachers a question has been raised, how well this triad works together? This question can also be understood: how well we can connect the theoretical knowledge taught by the tutors to the teaching practice supervised by the mentors to be optimal to student teachers? The prospective teachers attend four teaching practice periods during their five year preparation. At the end of every training period, the students fill an electronic evaluation questionnaire. At the department of teacher education Rauma unit in the University of Turku, we constructed a new model for the teaching practice. The first training period called Orientation to teaching took place at the fall semester of the first study year 2014. The training consisted of different training sessions. In our presentation, we focus on the session called Guided observation during which every trainee had to attend five lessons with a supervisor who represented different aspects of the theory studies. The authors created an observation sheet the trainees filled during the observation followed by the feedback discussion with the tutor and the mentor.

The study focuses on how student-teachers reflect their learning, and how they evaluate practical work during a lesson. Altogether 73 self-reports were read and analyzed using the grounded theory approach. The trainees had attended the lectures addressed by the first author where they studied the basic theories and concepts of developmental and educational psychology. In this paper, the main goal is to investigate the students' comments to five specific questions: 1) didactical issues e.g. different working habits, learning material, grouping, illustration 2) developmental age e.g. cognitive development, motor development, social development 3) interaction e.g. activity, ethos 4) equality and equity e.g. gender, and 5) the trainees' own reflections of learning. The results show that the trainees liked this new model of observation. Many of them mentioned that the structured observation sheet helped them to concentrate on certain aspects. They also liked the feedback discussions after the observed lessons.

Keywords:

mentors, teacher education, teaching practice, teacher trainees, tutors

1 Introduction

The teacher education, especially for those aiming to be class teachers (primary school), varies in different countries e.g. the Netherlands, the UK, the US, Greece, and Spain (just to mention some countries) as well as the teaching practice. Class teacher preparation has been situated in the schools rather than in the higher education institutions (see more Zanting, Verloop, & Vermunt, 2001). In Finland, the year 1974 was the turning point in teacher education: It became a part of universities and consequently more academic. Starting as a two-year education, it takes five years now. The Finnish class teacher education has been built to consist of two academic degrees; the lower academic degree of 180 credits completed in three years gives a student the Bachelor's degree (BA), and the higher academic degree of 120 credits completed in two years gives him or her the Master's degree (MA). To get the certificate for teaching a student has to attain the MA. The Finnish teacher education moved to this two-tier degree system of the Bologna process in 2005. (Jakku-Sihvonen & Niemi, 2006.)

TABLE 1. The main components of the teacher education programs for primary school teachers

| PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAM | Bachelor's degree 180 ECTS | Master's degree 120 ECTS | TOTAL |
|---|--|---|-------|
| Class teacher's pedagogical studies (as a part of major in education) | 25 (including supervised teaching practice) | 35 (including a minimum of 15 ETCS supervised teaching practice) | 60 |
| Other studies in a major in education | 35 (including a BA Thesis, 6–10) | 45 (including a MA Thesis, 20–40) | 80 |
| Subject matter studies for comprehensive school teachers | 60 | | 60 |
| Academic studies in a different discipline, minor | 25 | 0–35 | 25–60 |
| Language and communication studies including ICT, optional studies | 35 | 5–40 | 40–75 |

1 ETCS = 28 hours of student's work in studies including lessons, contact hours, examinations, and all independent and collaborative activities.

(Niemi & Jakku-Sihvonen, 2006; Niemi, 2012)

At the University of Turku at the Department of Teacher Education in Rauma Unit, we constructed a new model for the teaching practice. The prospective teachers attend to four teaching practice periods during their five-year preparation. The first training period called *Orientation to teaching* took place at the fall semester of the first study year in 2014. It consisted of different training sessions. In this presentation, we focus

on how the student teachers reflected their learning during the guided observation period, and how they evaluated practical work during the lesson they observed.

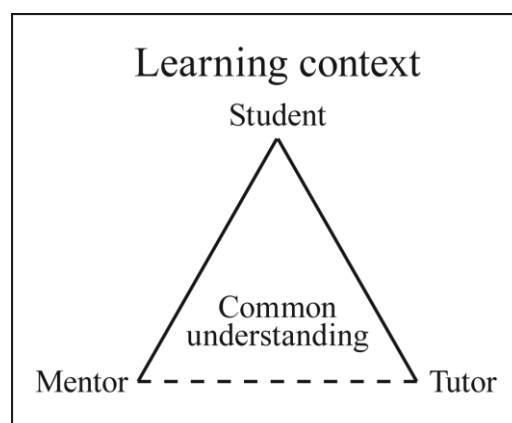
2 Theoretical frameworks

No matter what kind of pre-service teacher education is in question, it has often been criticized for being too theoretical in its approach. Student teachers' opinion is that there is a difference between what is taught at the university courses and what is experienced in the fieldwork. This dilemma is not new; already in Dewey's time the question of 'how theory and practice relate in the context of professional education' was raised (Grossman, Hammerness & McDonald, 2009). Also Darling-Hammond (2014) states:

One of the perennial dilemmas of teacher education is how to integrate theoretically based knowledge that has traditionally been taught in university classrooms with the experience-based knowledge that has traditionally been located in the practice of teachers and the realities of classrooms and schools.
(p. 551)

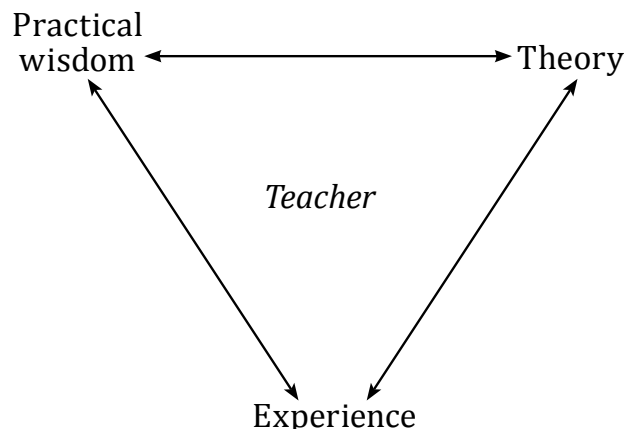
In many countries, the universities where the theory is taught and the schools where the practice takes place are separated on different sites, and the staffs of these two institutions are not co-operating with each other (see Mason, 2013; Ünver 2014). The teacher students should learn to see the importance of theory and its connection to practice. This is a question of motivation as well. Once prospective teachers understand the connection between theory and practice, they start seeing the fieldwork differently. It is often difficult for a teacher trainee to fulfil the demands of the university supervisor (tutor) as well as the training school teacher (mentor). As visualized in Figure 1, there should be a common understanding between the three parties.

FIGURE 1. The connection between the three parties during a teaching practice



There are several good articles available about effective mentors and mentoring strategies. Hudson (2013) states in his article that it is important that the mentor has “a pedagogical knowledge framework and a repertoire of pedagogical knowledge strategies to guide a pre-service teacher’s development”. While Lunenburg and Korthagen (2009) argue that experience is important in developing practical wisdom they also state that it is not enough; theoretical knowledge is necessary as well. They put these three elements together in their Triangle relationship model (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2. The triangular relationship between practical wisdom, theory, and experience



(Lunenburg & Korthagen, 2009, 229)

These three elements are essential in teaching. We have to realize that the teacher is the one who makes them come together (or not) in the day-to-day school practice. As Lunenburg and Korthagen (2009) noted “the three elements find their ‘embodiment’ in the teacher”. The triangle model, though it looks simple, is very complex. According to Lunenburg and Korthagen:

Experience is what one gains from operating in the real world, in practice (in our case the real world of teaching in schools), and encompasses both the environment (e.g., the classroom) and one’s own inner reality while relating to this environment. This inner reality is multi-layered, as it encompasses, for example, good or wrong ways of doing things (know-how), beliefs about practice, as well as a sense of professional identity developed through internal encounters with the ‘I’ that goes through the experiences. The term experience refers to the constantly changing flow of events, and hence one’s experience can never be ‘fully known’. (p. 228)

Theory fulfils our need for order in and verification of phenomena in our experience. It involves logical structuring, such as the formulation of definitions and logically derived propositions. Theory is relatively static and

somewhat detached from the specific situations it has a bearing on. Theory can be written down and more or less fully 'known'. (p. 227)

Practical wisdom is the sensitivity for and awareness of the essentials of a particular practice situation that shape our perception of this situation, and help us to find possible courses of action. Practical wisdom is not something that is just stored in our heads, but it is intrinsically connected to specific phenomena occurring in the here-and-now and it only functions well in relation to these phenomena. Practical wisdom makes use of practical knowledge, but goes beyond it, as it helps the practitioner to perceive the essence of a situation. (p. 227)

Teaching practice is among the most popular study modules in teacher education. Teaching may at first seem to be very easy. At the beginning of their education, the teacher students reflect teaching often based on their previous education. In Finland, the education starts in the year when children turn seven years old. They spend at school 12 to 13 years, at least. During these years, they observe the work of their teachers and might form deeply grounded beliefs and attitudes about teaching (see Karavas & Drossou, 2009). A challenge for the teacher education is how to supervise the teacher students to start to construct teacher selves of their own kind. This is not an easy task. As Martin and Russell (2009) point out quoting Larabee we should not only teach our students what teachers do but also why they do it. This was one reason why we consider it important that in the teaching practice the student teachers reflect their teaching after the lesson together with their mentors. We teacher educators have to remember the words of Martin and Russell (2009): *Teaching cannot be told*.

In Finland, it is hard to enter the teacher education and most of the students have attended several times the entrance exams. Consequently, some of them have teaching experience gained by serving either as a school aid or a substitute teacher. This is a challenge to the teacher education. In this article, we will concentrate on the teaching practise of the class teachers for the comprehensive school (grades 1 – 6, 6 / 7 – 13 year-olds and grades 7 – 9, 13 – 16 year-olds).

3 Teaching practice in Rauma, Finland

Teaching practice takes place in most of the cases at the training schools which are connected to the universities. In smaller locations, these schools are situated at the same campus as the teacher education department. This means that the staffs of both institutions have the possibility to work together.

To achieve the qualification to teach prospective teachers have to attend four training periods; two during three first study years and two during last two study years. The

curriculum of the teaching practice at the Department of Teacher Education, Rauma Unit, in the University of Turku, Finland, was renewed and became active in the fall semester 2014. In this article, we focus on the first training period called *Orientation to teaching* that took place in November 2014. The learning goals for the first training are that a trainee

- can describe the tasks of a class teacher and a subject teacher as a part of the functions of the school
- knows how to make pedagogically important observations of the behaviour of the pupils in different situations, and recognizes the importance of the teacher's knowledge of his or her pupils
- knows how to reflect his or her own concepts of human, knowledge, and learning, and based on these, is able to make important observations about education and teaching
- knows how to set learning goals based on the curriculum, plan a lesson, and follow his or her plan when teaching.

The contents of the first training period are:

- 2h orientation lectures (university teacher)
- 10h orientation lectures (training school teacher/s)
- 2h portfolio lectures (university teacher)
- 4h group guidance (training school teacher)
- 10h guided observation (university teachers)
- 26h individual observation
- 10h teaching
- 6h other school work
- 20h planning
- 15h pedagogical diary and portfolio
- 2h evaluation seminar and training feedback (university teachers).

The focus in this article is on the guided observations which the student teachers did with the guidance of three university teachers related to five different themes.

4 The aim and research questions of the study

There has been lively debate over the years about what is the most efficient way of linking theory and practice in teacher education. Especially this question has been raised related to the studies in educational science which is the major subject in teacher education. The main aim of our study is to investigate how the new training model works. The research questions are: how the trainees find the guided observation, how does the co-operation between university teachers (tutors), training school teachers (mentors), and trainees work, and what the trainees learnt from the lessons they observed?

5 The research instrument and the data

Altogether 73 (22 males and 51 females) first year teacher students attended the first training in November 2014. In our presentation, we focus on the session called Guided observation during which every trainee had to attend five lessons with supervisors who represented different aspects of the theory studies. The authors constructed an observation sheet the trainees filled during the observation followed and the feedback discussion with the tutor and the mentor. The trainees had attended the lectures by the first author where they studied the basic theories and concepts of developmental and educational psychology. In this paper, the main goal is to investigate the students' comments on five specific themes: 1) didactical issues e.g. different working habits, learning material, grouping, illustration 2) pupils' developmental age e.g. cognitive development, motor development, social development 3) interaction e.g. activity, ethos 4) equality and equity e.g. gender, and 5) the trainees' own reflections of learning. The observation form used in the first author's groups is in Figure 3.

Figure 3. An example of an observation form

| Observation 2: Different learners | |
|---|---|
| Student: _____ | |
| Grade: _____ | Date: _____ Subject: _____ |
| The goal of the lesson: _____ | |
| <p>DIDACTICAL ISSUES - different working habits - learning material - grouping - illustration</p> | <p>DEVELOPMENTAL AGE - cognitive development - motor development - social development</p> |
| <p>INTERACTION - pupils' activity - ethos</p> | <p>EQUALITY AND EQUITY - e.g. gender</p> |
| <p><i>What I learned from the guided observation:</i></p> <p>_____</p> | |

The authors of this article are university teachers who were in charge of guided observations with another colleague. The first year teacher trainees (n=73) who attended the first training were divided into seven groups. Each group observed

lessons in five classes. These observations had different themes. Every observation was followed by a group discussion with the tutor and the mentor, if the latter was able to attend.

As an example of observations done with the first author we present the following:

- The first group (n=8; 3 males, 5 females) attended the math lesson of the sixth graders. There were six girls and 13 boys taught by the class teacher.
- The second group (n=10; 3 males, 7 females) attended the music lesson of the first graders. In this class there were five girls and 10 boys taught by the class teacher.
- The third group (n=11; 2 males, 9 females) attended the mother tongue (Finnish) lesson of the fourth grade. There were 10 girls and eight boys in this class. The teachers were two fellow first year trainees.
- The fourth group of 11 trainees (4 males, 7 females) attended a music lesson in the first grade. There were 11 girls and only one boy in that class taught by the class teacher.
- The fifth group (n=7; 2 males, 5 females) attended an English lesson in the fourth grade (10 girls, 9 boys) taught by the class teacher specialized in English.
- The sixth group (n=9; 4 males, 5 females) attended a lesson of mother tongue (Finnish) in the second grade (10 girls, 4 boys) taught by the class teacher.
- The seventh group of 11 trainees (3 male, 8 female) attended the third graders' (6 girls, 7 boys) visual art lesson taught by six fellow first year trainees.

6 Results

According to the electronic questionnaire, 62.86 % of the students found the guided observation very positive, but 15.71 % reported that the guided observation did not meet the objectives. One fifth (21.43 %) of the students were not able to give their opinion. When looking at these results, we have to keep in mind that the mean value 3.67 represents all five themes of the guided observation. After reading the comments about the first training, we can summarize that many students reported that they wished there were more guided observations instead of individual observations. *They found guided observations useful because they were structured in a way that it was easy to concentrate on a certain topic. Also the group discussions after the lessons provided useful peer learning, as one of the trainees stated.*

Next, we present a description of each lesson the student teachers observed using the observation form shown above.

First group: 6th grade mathematic lesson

The boys at this lesson were more active than the girls, but all the pupils were treated equally. The atmosphere in the classroom was very pleasant and open. The pupils worked actively. All eight teacher students observed the interaction between pupils in a similar way. While most of the teacher students were able to make comments about

the pupils' cognitive development, there were only a few comments about the pupils' motor and social development. This was due to the lack of knowledge, since the lectures they were attending were on the brake and continued after the training, and these topics were taught during the last lectures. One of the male trainees commented to the first author: *I could not make any comments since I did not have enough knowledge of the motor or social development.* The student teachers found differences in the pupils' development as one of the female trainees (F2) wrote: *There are differences in the pupils' cognitive skills (some worked individually and some needed help all the time).* One of the student teachers commented that *the lesson was very teacher-oriented/behaviouristic, only at the end of the lesson the pupils were allowed to work individually.* (F2) The other student saw the male teacher as a good authority who gave clear instructions to the pupils. Because the training school is a CLIL (Content and language integrated learning) school, English language can be seen in the learning environment and it is used in teaching. Also the instructions and concepts related to different school subjects were in English on the walls of the classroom.

Second group: 1st grade music lesson

The trainees had great difficulties in finding the differences in the developmental stage of the pupils. They reported the methods the teacher used during the lesson full of activities well. Some trainees pointed out that *one activity like singing the same song should not last too long.* All the pupils were acting together and the atmosphere in the classroom was pleasant. At the end of the lesson, the atmosphere got a little restless. The reason for this might have been that after the lesson the pupils left home. Though the pupils had been attending the school only three months, they were able to understand and use English words surprisingly well.

Third group: 4th grade mother tongue lesson

In this class, the pupils were very active and enthusiastic. The atmosphere was peaceful and positive. The female teachers (two teacher trainees) were *good authorities – at the same time relaxed but strict.* (F25) The teachers used multiple teaching methods. Using songs as a teaching method was mentioned in all 11 observation forms. This seemed to impress the observers. It was interesting and positive to notice that the trainees who were teaching this class had adopted the method while observing the music lesson of another class. The students reported also that in spite of the equality in the class when forming the pairs, the pupils could choose the pairs themselves, they chose the same gender, and no mixed pairs were formed.

Fourth group: 1st grade music lesson

In this class there was only one boy, but he seemed to be in an equal position with the girls in spite of being a little bossy himself; for instance, he pointed out to the girls that they should pay attention to what the teacher said. One male teacher student (M40) made a comment: *There is only one boy in the class but he is not 'walked over' but he*

should have a boy company. Another male student (M37) wrote that *the boy sits at the back of the classroom a little by himself.* The pupils in this class were very active, sometimes they forgot to wait until they were given their turn to answer, which made occasionally a little restless feeling into the classroom. In spite of this, the pupils concentrated in learning since the teacher *had a clear structure for the lesson.* (M37) The teacher students could see differences in the development of the children, as one female student (F30) wrote: *Social skills are just developing, they don't understand, yet, that they may make the other one sad with inappropriate comments.* The students also noticed that in the class there was a girl who was very self-centered.

Fifth group: 4th grade English lesson

This class was very active, from time to time even restless because it was the last lesson of the day. This was the case especially at the end of the lesson. The pupils sat their back bags already on and they had hard time to pay attention to teaching. At the beginning of the lesson, after the teacher had given the instructions the girls started to work immediately but the boys needed extra help. The teacher used different methods (e.g. drama and memory game) in her teaching. The pupils told openly about their problems concerning their homework, for instance one of the pupils commented: *I read, but I can't remember what I have read.*

Sixth group: 2nd grade mother tongue lesson

The lesson was very well structured. The teacher had written on the black board the structure of the lesson that the pupils could follow. After the instructions, the pupils were free to move in the classroom. The pupils used iPads as a tool for learning to read and write. The teacher students found differences in the pupils' learning, writing, and social skills. The atmosphere in the classroom was good. The pupils asked help from the teacher, not from their peers. At the end of the lesson, the pupils made an evaluation how well they had succeeded during the lesson.

Seventh group: 3rd grade visual arts lesson

In spite of the fact that there were six trainees teaching in this class, the atmosphere was very pleasant. The boys and girls worked side by side. The task the pupils were working with was to make a finger puppet, which needed different motor skills. The student teachers noticed that, for instance, in the ability to make stitches there were differences, *some work really carefully and the others don't care what kind of stitches they make* (F63). Since the lesson was close to Christmas time, the Christmas carols were played in the classroom: *The pupils were very enthusiastic to do the task, the Christmas carols made good atmosphere in the classroom.* (M64)

At the end of each observation form, the trainees were asked to write: *What I learnt from the guided observation.* About the first observation (with the first author) the trainees learnt that one should pay attention to all the pupils, also to the quietest ones. The student teachers noted that a teacher's personality has its own role in teaching. The trainees acknowledged the use of the English language in mathematics; how to

present difficult formulas and terms. They also learnt how different the sixth graders could be in their skills. Only two male trainees reported that they had not learned anything. The second and fourth groups observed the first graders' music lessons taught by different teachers. However, the comments and the things that they had learned were very similar in these two groups. They had learned that with young pupils the teaching should be illustrative and the instructions clear and structured. Also the different teaching methods used with young pupils were mentioned. The third and the fifth group observed the lessons in the fourth grade; the first group in the mother tongue lesson and the second in the English lesson. The age group of the pupils being the same, the comments about the development of the pupils were very similar. During both lessons, the trainees learnt different teaching methods and how to motivate pupils. They also learnt how the pupils may act if the lesson is the last one of the day. The things that the teacher students had learned during the last two observations seemed to be very similar to those during the previous ones. The remarks made only by the sixth group were related to the use of iPad in teaching and learning. In the last observed lesson, the student teachers learnt among other things how to use the document camera in visualization.

6 Conclusion

The teacher trainees found the guided observations very useful. The most often mentioned reason was that they had a possibility to discuss with the tutor with whom they had been following the lesson and the fellow trainees. The teacher who was responsible for the teaching during the lesson was also invited to join this discussion, but all of them did not have time to attend due to many reasons, for instance they had the next lesson to teach.

There is still much to be improved in teaching practice though the objectives of the training period were gained. We have to improve co-operation between the tutors, the mentors and the student teachers. The timing of the observed lessons should be improved in order to make them to meet the objectives of different themes of guided observation. It is also important that the trainees at first observe the experienced teachers not the fellow students. This happened now in some of the classes we observed.

Also the structured observation forms seemed to serve the trainees well. Many of them reported that they got out of a lesson much more by using the form than when they did the observation by themselves without any instructions what they should follow during the lesson.

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