

Edu World 2016
7th International Conference

**WHY DO WE MIND THE GAP BETWEEN THEORY AND
PRACTICE IN TE?**

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Abstract

The gap between theory and practice has been addressed in many studies related to teacher education programmes, all proposing different solutions to bring closer the training student teachers receive during courses to the reality of the classroom they face once they start teaching, with a focus on more teaching practice opportunities and changes in the course content. Continuous changes in the last quarter of a century affecting the Romanian educational system in general also influenced the structure and the philosophy of teacher education and changed the focus on human resources as the key of making TE more efficient. There is a general tendency among educational programmes to explore with new learning models that can ensure expert-like competencies before graduation and with the appropriate instruments to be employed by all teachers in order to make them able to adapt to all the changes they face. This paper expands on the influence of external factors such as beliefs, opinions, attitudes, professional models, towards teaching and teachers, on the way training received or delivered is perceived. It draws on previous research I conducted on an interesting manner of accommodating in an individual innovative way, the gap between old incremented beliefs and the new theories and practices presented during the teacher education programme, as an empowering tool for all teachers to use in a variety of educational contexts.

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Keywords: Teacher education; reflective practices; critical and creative thinking; systematic enquiry model.

1. Introduction

Continuous changes in the last quarter of a century affecting the Romanian educational system in general also influenced the structure and the philosophy of teacher education. Human resources became the focus in the effort of making educational processes more efficient. It is argued that training should



respond to the real needs of teachers in schools, that it should be in line with the requirements of the new European educational environment. Moreover, exploring personal beliefs and stories is considered central to an efficient implementation of new concepts into teaching practices. There is a general tendency among educational programmes to explore with new learning models that can ensure expert-like competencies before graduation and with the appropriate instruments to be employed by all teachers in order to make them able to adapt to all the changes resulting from the educational reforms.

Support and guidance are important before and after initial education as they influence the quality of further professional development. Despite ensuring the same training conditions for all student teachers, these carry on differently according to their individual capacities to acquire, understand and integrate the knowledge they come in contact with (Beckett & Hager, 2000; Flores & Day, 2006; Iucu, 2005). In this context it becomes highly important to employ the appropriate means in order to maximize students' capacity to adapt to changes. Various studies mention that an informal learning environment enforced by recreational activities and mobile technologies, by contrast to the academic learning environment, attracts, stimulates and facilitates accelerated learning due to the experiences it offers (Eraut, 2004; Hoekstra et. al., 2007).

Reflexivity, understood as an analytical process for study, comprehension, integration and identification of solutions for learning, can become a powerful instrument in any educational environment. Previous research (Tugui, 2011) show that reflexivity can have positive effects when approaching changes in teacher education. Still, it is used superficially due to lack of teaching experience and of analytical thinking (Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005). There are approaches based on the idea that guidance by means of different instruments can lead to the development of reflective abilities for an individual independent progress in learning (Christie & Kirkwood, 2006).

This paper expands on the influence of external factors such as beliefs, opinions, attitudes, professional models, towards teaching and teachers, on the way training received or delivered is perceived. It draws on previous research I conducted on an interesting manner of accomodating in an individual innovative way, the gap between old incremented beliefs and the new theories and practices presented during the teacher education programme.

2. Theoretical Background and Related Literature

National and international literature offers valuable information on the evolution of the teaching career (Calderhead & Shorrock, 1997; Day et. al., 2007; Iucu, 2005; Potolea & Ciolan, 2003). It is argued that training should respond to the real needs of teachers in schools, that it should be in line with the requirements of the new European educational environment.

We are trying to reform by changing the manner we teach, the form that our classes take, but using the same content. We tend to forget that nowadays not the amount of information we acquire makes the difference in class, but the way teachers know how to apply their knowledge to the teaching situations (Wagner, 2012). Our main problem as teacher trainers is the lack of practical experience that we are able to provide our students with. It is partly the way the curriculum is built and the number of hours allocated to the pedagogical practice, but also the way this time is used by students and the assessment requirements that they need to fulfil. Since our student teachers enter the class without much teaching

experience, all new theories that they have acquired during classes are difficult to be applied automatically to their teaching, since there is no time for reflection, for testing nor for reshaping (Tugui, 2011). They tend to return to old incremented practices they know so well from their school experience as pupils (Richardson, 1996).

Teachers can filter out training interventions, or interpret input so that it fits in with their existing personal theories about teaching and their prior experience (Fosnot, 2005). This tendency to assimilate inputs indicates the need to uncover teacher's implicit theories and beliefs in order to make them available for conscious review (Schulman, 1997). A person's set of beliefs, values, understandings, assumptions – the ways of thinking about the teaching profession, comprise a 'personal theory' (Freeman & Richards, 1996).

In this sense, teacher education needs to recognize that each student teacher has a different way of seeing, and thus feedback in the initial education setting should focus on the thinking and the perceptions of individual students as well as on their actions (Steffe & Gale, 1995). As for the curriculum (Richardson, 1996) it should include ways of developing self-awareness and also of exploring each student teacher's interpretations of input and their classroom experience. It should be considered that student teachers' learning emerges from a complex of social and individual influences such as their experience as a pupil, the development of craft knowledge through teaching experience, personality preferences or public educational theories acquired from training or from reading (Richard & Lockhart, 1994).

One could argue that the gap between theory and practice will always be there because there is need for time to experience, to form opinions, beliefs and attitudes that we can transfer/apply into practice. And irrespectively of our opinions, beliefs and attitudes, we constantly need to adapt to our students, to their needs as individuals and professionals. Therefore, any teacher education programme has to be flexible and adaptive, in permanent contact with the school realities and teachers' needs. At the same time, it needs to have a higher understanding of the pupils' needs nowadays in order to guide the student teachers on how to respond to them.

Teacher education should encourage teachers to reflect on their personal theories and make them explicit (as statements, metaphors, diagrams, hypotheses, plans), to compare them with those of their colleagues and the 'public theory', to relate them to their practice and as a consequence, to develop new theories (Eraut, 2004; James, 2001). This is important for their learning because, according to James (2001) it:

- *Raises teachers' existing knowledge into consciousness*
- *Helps teachers examine and question their assumptions about education, teaching and learning*
- *Helps teachers in the long-term task of organising and clarifying their personal theories, and assimilating new information*
- *Develops teachers' critical awareness*
- *Allows access to and understanding of individual teachers' theories*

For these reasons, I suggest it was relevant to this study to also explore the issue of teacher beliefs in relation to learning to teach. A psychologist perspective on learning development recognises as crucial in the success of learning anything that learners themselves bring to the learning situation. Learning

becomes a matter of how learners interact with what it is learned in a particular situation (Bullough, 2001).

3. Methodology

The SPIN Model represents an instrument that can assist problem identification and adaptation to change by means of individual questions asked in a particular order. The model is the result of an extensive research study which concluded that change can be approached efficiently through understanding all aspects related to an issue. Any change situation involves awareness of past and current experiences, their critical analyses which leads to acceptance and facilitates implementation of new ideas in practice. It approaches change in four steps: Situation, Problem, Implication, Need-Payoff. Because most of the time needs are implicit, the questions of the model are aiming at making them explicit at different levels before being able to find solutions to respond to these needs.



Fig. 1. Modelul SPIN (Rackham, 1996)

This model has been applied within a teacher education programme as an approach method of any theoretical or practical issue emerging during the courses and as a criterion in the evaluation of student's work (reflective essays and research projects). It was used as an independent instrument employed during existing courses and aims at determining changes in students' performance, through the development of reflective thinking skills. There are 60 students enrolled on this teacher education programme, whose performance has been monitored for four semesters during their undergraduate studies and will be watched for two more semesters in their senior year.

The following table shows evolution of different categories of responses from more general and descriptive to more focused on problem solving, as collected from the initial and final essays.

Table 1.

| Initial essay | Examples | Final essay | Examples |
|--|--|---|--|
| Key characteristics of teachers: personal qualities, patience, reliability, empathy, control of emotions, positive attitude, sense of humour, enthusiasm, creativity | <p>"High self-confidence"</p> <p>"Teachers need to communicate with children in order to understand their needs"</p> <p>"Teachers know how important</p> | Personal characteristics: well prepared in terms of subject content, creative, open to listen, patient, emotional intelligent | <p>"Now I can say that I am more self-confident"</p> <p>"I realize I need to be calmer and more flexible."</p> |

| | | | |
|--|---|---|--|
| | <i>it is to have a good learning climate</i> | | |
| Professional characteristics of teachers refer capability, preparation motivation and ability to motivate. | <i>"They have content knowledge"</i> <i>"Knows how to motivate children to learn"</i> <i>"</i> | Professional qualities good pedagogue, good psychologist, self-reflective | <i>"What helped me most was the observation practice"</i> <i>"If I am able to manage my emotions, I can concentrate on tasks better"</i> <i>"Can use self-analysis, encourage colleagues to analyse their activity"</i> |
| Unreachable goal | <i>"Teacher need to continue learning"</i> | To become a teacher | <i>"I realize now that learning to teach is a very complex process"</i> |
| Passion for profession | <i>"Teachers need to love working with children"</i> <i>"Teachers love the profession"</i> | Making the right decision for a career | <i>"I know now that I made the right decision"</i> <i>"It's like a positive promise for the undergraduate years"</i> |
| Ability to interrelate | <i>"Teachers know how to establish relationships with pupils"</i> <i>"Teachers also communicate efficiently with pupils' families"</i> | Ability to communicate | <i>"I understand that it is important to relate efficiently to my pupils and their families"</i> |
| Focused on development | <i>"Tries to develop continuously"</i> <i>"Seeks to innovate"</i> | Focused on development | <i>"I need to learn more"</i> <i>"The knowledge I acquire now will require practice to become reflex"</i> |
| An example for others | <i>"Sets examples"</i> <i>"Offers guidance"</i> | Necessity of examples | <i>"My teacher was a model for me"</i> |

In the light of the research problem posed in this article it was considered appropriate to use a qualitative approach. The researcher was interested in improving a specific teacher education programme and less in generalizing the findings, therefore this qualitative inquiry can be considered context-specific. I emphasize the importance of the subjective experience of individuals and I believe that *subjectivity* here can be related to the *contextual*, if we consider that experience is shaped in the context and it cannot be understood adequately in isolation (Bryman, 2004). In this respect, the research design was flexible, permitting interpretation and alteration. Thus, data could generate other aspects of the problematic to investigate. The main purpose of this qualitative research is the discovery or uncovering of propositions (Cohen et al., 2004).

4. Results and Discussion

One of the aspects under investigation was student teachers' view of themselves as persons and as teachers (Day et al., 2007), since a student teacher's experiences as a learner and the quality of the relationships experienced in educational contexts, was considered to determine the impact any course might have and further practice (Flores & Day, 2006).

When conducting this study, it was relevant to understand what student teachers bring to the teaching-learning relationship and I explored the individual perceptions of learning to teach in a particular educational context. It was hypothesized that trainees will have internalized teaching models which they had observed before and during their training. According to James (2001) these personal theories of students are very resistant to change. A possible explanation for this is that these theories are based on common sense or personal experiences, and have been present for a long time.

Emerging data from the reflective essays showed that most of the students applied for the initial teacher education because they liked children or working with children. For many years, initial teacher education programmes enrolled already motivated and determined individuals, young people that believed they had a vocation for the teaching profession. In the same way, the participants to this study were intrinsically motivated to study to become best professional, holding a mental picture of the ideal teacher they wanted to become.

At the same time, there was a degree of uncertainty as they were looking for a confirmation of their career choices, for a warmer and more flexible education form that shares the same values and attitude towards teaching. The ideal teacher, as resulting from the essays, was endowed with numerous personal qualities such as empathy, warmth, openness, goodness, justness. This idea might have its roots in a real need of the student for a teacher more prepared for interpersonal relationships.

It became obvious towards the end of the first year of study that it was not enough any longer to offer them pedagogical theories, but also to help them develop a set of skills that would allow them to manage a wider range of problems in class. It was also noticed that the style of the initial essays was quite descriptive and ideal, lacking reflective analytical depth.

Through the course of the first year participants to the study were required to approach both their reflective writing and academic tasks according to the steps of the SPIN model: to analyse their past and current experiences, to find answers to the problems arising from the analysis, to take them into account when considering others (there was no opportunity to test them in practice since there is no teaching practice in the first year of study).

Data from further essays showed students' writing became more analytical, as they started admiring teachers from the initial teacher education programme more for their professional skills and competences rather than personal attributes. This was linked to the new tools for critical analysis they had at hand, namely the pedagogical knowledge and practical teaching knowledge they acquired through structured observation. They applied them to the teaching situations they were part of, including their preparation courses. This offered the means to link the academic knowledge and practice.

Other data revealed that they encountered a favourable learning context that could confirm the choice for the profession and offered the theoretical knowledge which gave meaning to what it was observed in class. For most of them this was a "positive promise" for the initial teacher education programme. The majority regarded the observation practice and the theoretical courses as an effort worth making because of the new meanings they were able to find to define/describe the pedagogical actions, the arguments they were able to build.

The novelty this research brings is the approach to the arising issues during an initial teacher education programme. As teacher educators we came to realise that changing issues are most of the time context related, quite particular many times. Therefore, there was an urge to develop in our teacher students a pattern approach that would ensure an effective critical analysis for further learning.

5. Conclusions

The present study proposes a new approach in educational change management and effective learning for teaching, as a means of erasing the gap between theory and practice through structured

reflective methods. It combines principles and concepts employed in andragogy, psychology, sociology, anthropology and business in order to create efficient tool for the teacher education environment and more.

Business research uses successfully models based on psychological and sociological theories in training adult professionals. The transfer of such pragmatic models in teacher education can only lead towards the creation of customised models, adapted to the requirements for the teaching profession nowadays. Moreover, the two working environments, business and education, offer the opportunity of exploring another theme, that of the independent learner, from a new perspective.

The results presented above are part of a larger ongoing study which seeks to improve learning skills of student teachers at the level of their initial education in order to ensure life long learning for their future teaching careers, and it represents only a first stage in our research.

Acknowledgements

Research project is currently being funded through the Young Researchers Grants, 2016 - Project financed by the Research Institute of the University of Bucharest (ICUB).

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