



An approach of change through systematic reflective enquiry within teacher training programmes

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Abstract

Adapting to ongoing change in a fast developing society has become an impetuous for many fields. Teachers as major stakeholders in education are not making any exception. The process of adapting to change requires not only adaptating to new situations, but also understanding, accepting and implementing into practice new ideas, concepts or approaches to teaching. Therefore developing such abilities in people in general and in teachers in particular, becomes highly relevant on long term for teacher education.

This paper discusses the importance of teaching pre-service teachers the capacity to be reflective at earlier points of their teacher development, so that they can be more receptive to change throughout their career.

It presents the case study of 14 teacher trainees and their awareness level of reflective processes in relation to their understanding of professional identity and growth. It is argued that in order to embrace the pedagogical practices that they need to learn in order to become competent teachers, they have to bring their beliefs about teaching to a conscious level and accommodate them with new knowledge acquired during the training. By means of answering questions on particular issues, they can articulate and examine their beliefs which may contribute to a better understanding of the phenomena involved and the solutions they seek for.

This approach of change in a systematic manner represents a method of helping adults to identify needs and adapt to change by means of certain sequences of questions. The study argues that a systematic approach to enquiry can facilitate in-depth reflection and lead to an autonomous learner that can make sense of the way old beliefs interfere with new theories and that is able to make the right decisions for changing teaching practice.

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 discusses the importance of teaching the capacity to be reflective at earlier points of the professional development, so that individuals can be more receptive to change. Adapting to change requires not only adaptating to new situations, but also understanding, accepting and implementing into practice of new ideas, concepts or approaches. This study started from the assumption that through guided reflection the trainees could become autonomous learners that can make sense of the way old beliefs interfere with new theories and make the right decisions for changing professional practice throughout their career. It advocates approaching change in a systematic manner, starting from in-depth analysis on one's personal beliefs and actions.



Research focus

There were considered two issues of change at professional level that the training programmes need to address. First, the fact that students hold firm and diverse beliefs about the teaching profession, based on their own schooling experiences, long before they enter the programmes. These beliefs persist throughout their teacher preparation and into their early years of teaching. They prevent trainees from embracing completely the pedagogical practices that they will need to learn in order to become effective educators. Literature argues that in order to embrace the new practices, trainees have to bring their beliefs about teaching to a conscious level and accommodate them with new knowledge acquired during the training. Second, the fact that professionals in general, and teachers in particular, need to be able to develop through their careers, to respond to challenges posed not only by the society in which they live or work, but also by new requirements of changing learning needs. In the face of such challenges it was considered that reflection, understood as a process of thinking of certain issues for the purpose of analysis, understanding, internalising and finding solutions for better practice, could become a powerful tool for development.

Therefore, for the purpose of this study, the research focused first on how trainees could bring their beliefs to a conscious level, as it was considered that articulating and examining them may contribute to a better understanding of how they view teaching as well as the skills they needed to acquire to become competent teachers. Then, it considered a method of helping adults to identify needs and adapt to change by means of questions asked in a particular sequence, as teachers should become used to continuously examine through critical reflection new encounters with concepts, theories or methods to be applied to their practice [1].

Conceptual framework

The goals of teacher training also include setting desired trainees' attitudes towards teaching. At the same time the attitude of trainees toward the profession, the learning situation and the roles they 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 [2]. Attitude is related to motivation. Learners' motivation may be determined by their attitude toward teaching and learning environment [3].

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. This study considered also the teaching or learning opportunities for reflection trainees had during the course as it was considered that reflection outcomes could bring about changes into their perceptions and beliefs about teaching, as stated above.

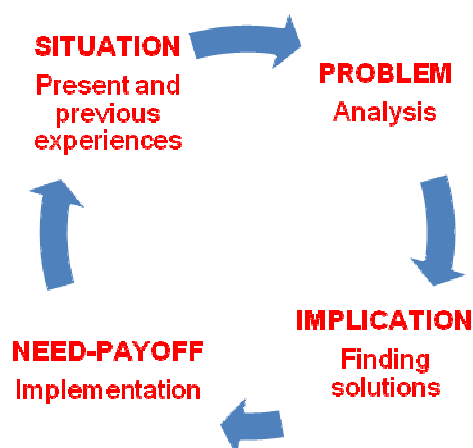
The concepts of reflective teaching and learning employed in this study were referred to as facilitators for teacher professional development. The concept of reflective teaching comprises any process that encourages in general an attitude of ongoing exploration and enquiry, that encourages awareness 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. The concept of reflective learning adopted here 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 [4].

Approaching change in a systematic manner became relevant for the outcomes envisaged for trainees when discussing the issue of continuous teacher professional development. In the context of globalisation as a social, economic and cultural process, also affecting school as an organisation and its stakeholders, adapting to ongoing change in a fast developing society becomes an impetuous for teachers. Therefore, being able to develop the capacity to be reflective and analyze, understand and adapt easily to new conditions could help teachers show readiness for change.



The study also researched a method of helping trainees to identify needs and adapt to change by means of questions. The SPIN model was developed from an extensive research study on effective sale skills, whose findings lead to the conclusion that successful change in opinion was made by asking smart questions in a particular sequence. This method used previously in the business field was now applied to teacher education, as there were considered similarities in challenges faced by professionals in any situation of change. The latter normally involves awareness of existing and previous experiences, their analysis that leads to the understanding and acceptance of the new situation/concept/process, that later make their implementation easier. The model is based on the conceptualisation of change situations in four stages: Situation, Problem, Implication, Need-Payoff. Each stage corresponds to a set of questions which focus at different levels on identifying needs/problems and ways to meet/solve them. In the SITUATION stage questions may refer to facts or explore the trainees's present situation and tend to be open questions. In the PROBLEM stage questions refer to problems or difficulties that the trainee experiences with the existing situation. The questions asked in the IMPLICATION stage refer to the consequences of a trainee's experienced problems. The NEED-PAYOFF questions explore the effects of the solutions found. In other words by answering these questions one can explain how the solution they found could help them solve their problems. These types of questions are considered the most helpful and constructive. They are not about convincing trainees on the rightness or incorrectness of different methods, strategies or concepts, but about creating the right conditions to allow them to convince themselves of what works best for them.

Fig. 1. The SPIN Model [5].



The rationale for using a systematic approach to questioning trainees is based on the assumption that in order to embrace the pedagogical practices that they need to learn in order to become competent teachers, they have to bring their beliefs about teaching to a conscious level and accommodate them with new knowledge acquired during the training. Reflection processes are based on the same type of reasoning where the analysis phase that any subject goes through would comprise Awareness > Acceptance> Action, therefore the association in this context.

Methodology

The research had a qualitative approach. It focused on the case study of 14 trainees who were introduced to general principles of teaching a foreign language (English or German) in their 5th semester of undergraduate studies and their trainers and co-trainers.

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 on the one hand, and verify whether a systematic approach to enquiry could facilitate in-depth reflection and help teachers understand, accommodate and employ new knowledge easier.

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.

Findings

Trainees enrolled on the course having different expectations about the knowledge and skills that both the theoretical course and the practicum could provide for an effective teaching [6]. The interactions with more experienced teachers (trainers/co-trainers) and their peers, their exchanges of ideas and feedback, determined a process of 'introspection' that they considered contributed to their better understanding of their ways of learning to teach and their approach to teaching. Trainers and co-trainers also regarded their professional development as a process based on reflections on one's teaching and learning which lead to informed decision-making [7].

Reflection, understood as a process of thinking of certain issues for the purpose of analysis, understanding, internalising and finding solutions for better practice, became the means for development. Both trainers and co-trainers considered discussions triggering reflection as very effective for positive change and evolution of teaching practice. They believed that trainees have to find their own resources to adapt to school environment and the teaching situations encountered, and they could be guided to reaching that stage through self-development.

Reflection was regarded as having positive effects for one's learning to teach [8]. Trainers and co-trainers regarded it as personal endeavour, a habit of thinking critically about their performance, but which could also be deliberate through deliberate strategies for triggering reflection [9] [10]. All stakeholders considered reflection a means of improving performance, by constant analysis, revision and adaptation to the classroom situations. Trainees believed that any teacher should be able to reflect on his/her own performance and on what is happening in the classroom. They regarded reflection as part of the job 'requirements', in the same way enthusiasm represented a must. One of the mentors went further stating reflection was a duty as she needed to analyse not only her teaching but also the others' performance. Trainees perceived it as an unconscious action, a habit or a reflex that could also be trained. Trainers and co-trainers believed that reflection could be guided by means of enquiring into problematic issues, which could help teachers later on articulate their practice, their mistakes or ways to improve so that the latter could find the appropriate solutions themselves.

It was interesting to notice that discussions were the preferred tool for reflection every time trainees encountered new teaching situations. Trainees found them very efficient as trainers and co-trainers were leading them by means of questions. Asking the right questions in the right order for reaching one's own conclusions was used as a strategy in dealing with change during the interviews. Trainees were going through a series of changes that required not only adaptation to new situations, but also understanding, acceptance and implementation into practice of new ideas, concepts or approaches to teaching. Their answers and comments showed a more clear and coherent reasoning about teaching, training or course of professional development.

Conclusions

As the research showed, all groups of participants in the study were characterised by readiness for reflection, although opportunities offered were scarce. The interview sessions revealed that a systematic approach to enquiry could facilitate a more in-depth reflection. If trainees were taught to apply the same method to themselves when facing a change situation of some kind and get into the habit of using it for their further learning, the training programmes could create the premisses for an



autonomous learner that makes sense of the way previous beliefs interfere with new theories and that enables decision making for best teaching practice.

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