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Teacher training and personalised learning

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In 2017-2019 we, as representatives of the school of professional teacher education, participated in a European Erasmus+ project called Personalised Learning. The aim of the project was to find out how teaching and learning processes, especially in secondary education, are personalised in different European countries (England, Poland, the Netherlands). Our task was to look at the role of teacher education. In this article we discuss our findings.

Introduction

Teachers walk into classrooms with an established set of beliefs on how students learn. These beliefs, which have been developed during their teacher training or later through their classroom experience, shape the way they are teaching. However, the nature of the teaching profession is changing and now ever more challenging. Among other things, teachers are expected to embrace student-centred methods, while trying to cope with the impact of globalisation and new technology in their classrooms. In the 2014 published report about teachers' professional development needs (in the Teaching and Learning International Study TALIS) the top three priorities in almost all of the 38 participating countries were how to address classroom diversity, use new technologies and foster 21st century skills. This suggests that teachers are eager to change their teaching and take on these challenges, but might lack the support needed to do so (OECD 2014). We see it as a challenge for the teacher education.

Initial teacher education is an experience that requires student teachers to be both learners and teachers simultaneously – being supported in learning how to teach, and supporting pupils in how to learn. It is extremely demanding as it requires analysing, questioning and reviewing ideas in the context of practice. It involves the whole person – attitudes, beliefs and emotions. The first and foremost resources teachers use are themselves. Teachers' personal characteristics can be catalysts for their own and others' learning, as much as their knowledge and competences. (Caena 2014).

Teachers are seen as a key to personalised learning. In order to teach in a manner consistent with these competencies and new theories of learning teachers require their own extensive learning opportunities (Järvelä 2006). As a participant in an Erasmus+ project "Personalised Learning" our task was to find out if teacher training in the participating countries gives student teachers tools to develop these competencies and especially to embrace personalised learning in their work.

Modern teacher training

In many countries, teacher education is facing major challenges. Teaching profession is not considered very attractive, teachers as professionals are not highly appreciated, and thus the number of applicants to teacher education decreases constantly. Quite often teaching is seen as a controlled activity and teachers are viewed as "doers" who implement curriculum directives. This decreases teachers' motivation and job satisfaction even more (Flores 2016).

Across different cultures and school systems, at least in Europe, there seems to be agreement on some core competence requirements that all teachers need to possess (European Commission 2013a). These competencies are:

1. sound knowledge frameworks (e.g. about school curricula, education theories, assessment), supported by effective knowledge management strategies
2. a deep knowledge of how to teach specific subjects, connected with digital competences and students' learning
3. classroom teaching/management skills and strategies
4. interpersonal, reflective and research skills, for cooperative work in schools as professional communities of practice
5. critical attitudes towards their own professional actions, based on sources of different kinds – students' outcomes, theory and professional dialogue – to engage in innovation
6. positive attitudes to continuous professional development, collaboration, diversity and inclusion
7. the capability of adapting plans and practices to contexts and students' needs. (Caena 2014).

Teacher education curricula in different countries are quite widely researched and compared (lately e.g. Flores 2016). The overall aims of the education seem to be similar: quality teachers are those “equipped with the ability to integrate knowledge, handle complexity, and adapt to the needs of individual learners as well as groups”. Extensive subject knowledge, solid pedagogical knowledge, and the skills and competences necessary to guide and support students' learning and understanding of the social and cultural dimension of education have been identified as core elements in teacher education (Flores 2016). We see that teacher education needs to respond to the increasing uncertainties and complexities of teaching of this century.

We have the opinion that teacher education curricula need to reflect the changing needs of the school system. As Menter et al (2010) say the modern professional role involves “... teaching an increasingly diverse range of learners, values education, literacy and numeracy across the curriculum, using assessment data effectively, engaging in action research and self-review, collaborating in school teams (including inter-agency working) and integrating technology effectively”. This is a challenge for a student teacher but it is also a challenge for the teacher trainer and teacher training curriculum development. Is it possible for the teacher training institutions to give their students experience or a model of a learner-centred and personalised teaching and learning environment? What does the modern teacher training curriculum look like?

Personalised learning approach

In this chapter we discuss the requirements set to a learning processes that can be said to be personalised. We see personalised learning to be something more than just personally chosen place or pace for learning. As a basis we use the work of David Miliband (2006) and a later research by Tolmie (2016). However, first we present the definition of personalised learning that was defined and agreed by the participants of the Personalised Learning project:

The student is the owner of the process choosing time, place, level and available tools for learning. The teacher provides the framework, guidance and support throughout the learning process. Together they set goals, the student gradually taking more responsibility. Researchers suggest that there are some components that have to be fulfilled before learning can be called personalised:

1. Teachers need to know the strengths and weaknesses of every student. Each student's individual needs must be found and diagnosed. The assessment for learning provides structured feedback to students and helps them to set individual learning targets and thus helps also the teacher to plan lessons according to individual needs (Miliband 2006). Thus, a shift in focus from the curriculum to the learner is needed (Flores 2016). Quite many (subject) teachers view themselves as providers of information although the starting point should be the student and his or her needs. A change from teacher-centred to student-centred curriculum is required. Teachers need to shift from a deficit-type of thinking where the student was the problem for their education failures, to a strengths-based thinking where the system is being forced to see why it is failing students and rethinking teaching (Tolmie 2016).

2. Teachers need to support their students to develop learning strategies that build on individual needs. It means strategies that actively engage the students and extend the learning opportunities accommodating different paces and styles of learning. This requires also new teaching strategies of the teachers (Miliband 2006). Like we have emphasised in several occasions, personalised learning is viewed as students being in control of their own learning. Understanding and accepting this view, raises student engagement due to students feeling ownership and pride in their learning. Naturally, giving more control to students themselves changes the teacher's role to a facilitator, an adviser and a coach (Tolmie 2016).

3. Curriculum choice engages and respects students. This means that every student has a possibility to enjoy curriculum choice according to his or her own personal relevance. A good curriculum offers a wide range of academic and vocational courses and a choice of movement to students even across participating institutions. (Miliband 2006). Personalised learning is sometimes described as supporting every student to reach his/her full potential rather than having everybody to aim for the same goal. The students should be given opportunities and experiences to make choices about what and how they learn (Tolmie 2016).

4. Personalised learning demands a radical approach to school organisation. It means that classes are organised according to the student progress. Thus there are opportunities for in-depth and intensive teaching and learning combined with flexible deployment of support staff. The real professionalism of teachers can best be developed when they have other adults working at their direction to meet the diverse students' needs (Miliband 2006). Teachers should not be left alone to meet the challenges of the changing pedagogy. Implementing personalised learning requires collaboration and leaders' skilful change management. It should be led together with the teachers so that they can understand the importance of the changes. New skills are needed to cope with the change both from the leaders as well as from the teachers (Tolmie 2016).

5. Schools cannot operate alone but they need the support from the local institutions, labour market and social services and the whole community, parents included,

naturally, to promote the progress in the classrooms (Miliband, 2006). Modern curricula emphasise the utilisation of the outdoor facilities. Libraries, sports, art and environmental centres, museums and many other partners offer diverse learning environments crucial to personalised learning (Finnish National Core Curriculum 2014).

In the definition agreed by the project participants we can find all the elements of personalised learning expected by the researchers. However, in the project definition we do not emphasise the collaboration of teachers as clearly as the researchers do. Also knowing your own students is so essential although it is not mentioned explicitly in our definition. When we talk about personalised learning environment (place) we see it as a whole with physical, psychical, social, pedagogical and digital dimension. They are all present in a learning situation and it is the teacher's duty to reflect how (s)he can promote the construction and development of all these dimensions. A student teacher's own learning environment consists of the fellow students, educational organisations, world of work and the guidance and online environments offered by the teacher training organisation.

Notions for organising teacher training

The traditional teacher training model has been so called "theory to practice" approach. It is characterised as a model where the university provides the theory, methods and skills and the school provides the setting where that knowledge is practiced. The main instructional method of the university teaching is lecturing. (Korthagen 2016.) In order for a teacher to be able to personalise his/her teaching and thus the learning of the students, he/she needs to receive personalised learning experiences himself/herself. We see that modern teacher training curricula need to respond to these challenges.

The first step is to change the curricula to competence based. One feature of this kind of curriculum is that it recognises and acknowledges all prior learning and competences no matter how they are acquired, through formal education or informal or non-formal channels. The Finnish National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (2014) says that learning takes place in interaction with other students, the teachers, other people, and various communities and learning environments. This applies to adult students, student teachers, as well.

Learning involves doing things alone and together. Learning is both individual and collective process (Flores 2016). Collaboration is an essential element of learning and thus also of teacher education. Teachers, at least in Finland, have traditionally had a very extensive autonomy: they have been solely in charge of what happens inside the classroom and they or their work have not been monitored in any way. The new teacher role requires collaboration and it also means opening the classroom doors for outsiders. However, it does not mean the loss of autonomy but sharing your ideas and concepts of learning and teaching with colleagues and other significant people.

Teachers and student teachers as well are regularly assessed or evaluated. Competence-based approach to learning is focused on skills, knowledge, attitudes, and experience. This creates a problem of how to develop reliable assessment procedures (Korthagen 2016).

In the School of Professional Teacher Education in JAMK University of Applied Sciences, Jyväskylä student teachers' assessment of learning process takes place in relation to the set aims of different courses. Assessment decisions are criterion-referenced; assessment decisions (pass/failed) are made from the basis of criteria of required competence which is described in the context of each course. Passing a course requires that the criteria of competence is fulfilled. Assessment is based on assignments, observations, discussions and other qualitative data, not on tests or exams, and thus, it is qualitative (JAMK study guide, 2018.)

The aims set for each competence area also form the basis of facilitating the learning process. Tutoring during the learning process, different types of feedback and other assessment methods are based on both the defined aims of each competence area and learning goals **set by trainee teachers themselves**. Thereby, the aim of assessment is to be constructive. Student teachers' self-assessment has an important role at all stages of the studies. A self-assessment task is included in each assignment.

Conclusion

In the modern world we can see major trends that affect the characteristics of teachers' work, the required competencies and the way teachers' initial and further training are organised. Good teachers and good teaching are considered central factors in the development of modern economies. Similarly, constant development of teacher training is seen as a safeguard of general well-being in a society. The changed views about learning and teaching challenge education in all levels. Nowadays teaching is seen more and more as students' personalised guidance and support of which teachers are responsible. In addition to all this, learning environments vary a lot and students are very diverse (Husu & Toom 2016).

Numerous studies have shown that the impact of teacher education on the actual teaching in schools has been rather limited. Teachers pass through an attitude shift during the first years of teaching and as soon as they enter the schools, they quickly abandon theories that they have learned. There is a saying "Teachers teach as they are taught and not as they are taught to teach". This proves the important exemplary role of the teacher educator, "teach as you preach" (Korthagen 2016).

There is no one correct way of organising teacher training. It is essential that it is in line with the wanted competences. It is important that teacher training gives means to work as a teacher through the entire career. Teacher training cannot be organised according to the current challenges, educational structures or current curriculum. Instead, it should be organised keeping in mind what it means to study to become a teacher and what kind of processes it is about (Husu & Toomi 2016). When students' achievements were measured with standardized tests the results varied a lot regardless of the way teachers were trained (traditional/academic vs. alternative/practice-orientated). Instead of paying attention to the structures it should be important to focus on the way teachers can apply the skills and knowledge they learned during the training. Communication skills that support learning proved to be essential for teachers' professional development (Husu & Toomi 2016).

However, we, as a project partners, need to keep in mind that we are in no position to change national policies. As Czerniawski and Ulvik (2014, 51) say "A European agenda for improving the quality of teacher education is, for a variety of reasons, problematic

when considering the variety of ways in which teachers in different European countries are trained, educated and inducted into the profession.” What we can do is to keep the discussion alive and share our own views on the them.

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