

THEORY AND PRACTICE IN TODAY'S TEACHER EDUCATION

Preface to the special issue of TRAMES

Edgar Krull

University of Tartu

1. Teacher education as a field of research

Teacher education and teacher professional development are hallmarks for a huge number of narrower fields of studies. Approximately 1500 research papers dealing with different aspects of teacher education are published and indexed in ERIC (the Educational Resource Information Center) each year¹. These scholarly papers extend from international comparative studies of teacher preparation traditions and qualification requirements in the light of students' achievements (e.g. Dunkin 1998, Losito and Mintrop 2001, Vandervoort, et al 2004, etc) to the studies of teacher personal learning and development of professional characteristics (e.g. Berliner 1994, Bond et al 2000, etc.). For instance, teacher existential attributions alone, as reviewed by van den Berg (2002), have been studied in the light of existential phenomenology and symbolic interactionism, the approach to organizations as emotional arenas, social-psychological theories, concern theory, and via a number of different perspectives on professional identities. Furthermore, the best achievements and outputs of teacher education research are summarized in numerous encyclopaedias and handbooks. On its own, the American Association of Teacher Education has published two comprehensive handbooks of research on teacher education in 1990 and 1996, and it is preparing to publish a third edition of this work in 2006.

In spite of the abundant research on teacher education, especially in the United States, the reality is that the results of these studies have had a minor impact on the practice of teacher education. In his foreword to the second edition of the *Handbook of Research on Teacher Education*, W. Robert Houston (1996) pointed to the fact that most of America's teachers were still being prepared by the same basic framework employed six decade ago. The numerous renewal campaigns'

¹ Searched for the major descriptor "teacher education" for years 1994–2000.

lack of a sound basis for making changes and the short life span of programmes leads, in reality, to the stagnation of teacher education systems. Houston explains:

... the rapid changes without institutionalization lead to the cult of change, but the results are stagnation and lack of change. After brief periods of experimentation, usually externally funded and involving small groups of people (often brought in from the outside to complete the project), programs tend to return to their original states. The famed "double-speak" applies where a word or term is defined one way in the dictionary but is used in selected practice to mean just the opposite. Educators often describe change but do not change (ix).

In reality, the lack of a relationship, or even the gap, between advanced research in the field and everyday practice of teacher education is not characteristic only to America but applies to all countries which aspire to go beyond approaches based only on lore and apprenticeship in teacher education. It is difficult not to agree with Houston's explanation that the short life span of renewal programmes in teacher education is mainly caused by the nonexistent evaluation of the effectiveness of such programmes. However, the evaluation of teacher education programmes as well as other phenomena in education is often not a matter of simple measurement.

First, the evaluation of the effectiveness, if taken in terms of quantitative and qualitative research, would include the classic goal-based form, i.e. measuring the extent to which a programme or intervention has attained clear and specific objectives, goal-free, responsive, connoisseur studies or the utilization-focused form (Patton 1990:115–123). Secondly, the interaction of teacher professional development, as a multifaceted process of personal growth, and that of the teacher education, as an external condition of this development, give birth to infinite variations of outcomes and interpretations. Thirdly, the huge body of the already existing knowledge on teacher professional development and education is often context sensitive and valid only in specific cultural environments (Berliner 2001). Hence, the complexity of issues of teacher professional development and teacher education justifies every single study that promotes the expansion of knowledge in the field despite the already extant huge body of knowledge and research.

2. About this issue

This special issue of TRAMES contains five selected research papers on teacher education presented at the 7th ATEE (Association for Teacher Education in Europe) Spring University held in Tartu, Estonia, from 6th to 8th May 2004 (European ..., 2004). The collection covers five different but interrelated topics of teacher education.

Rain Mikser in his paper *Developing new teacher education curricula: Why should critical rationalists talk louder?* reflects on the evolution of the conceptual traditions of Anglo-American educational psychology and German *Didaktik* in teacher education. These conceptions underlie and structure the content of teacher education courses in many European countries. Unfortunately, it is not infrequent

that educators treat corresponding conceptual frameworks mechanically as two separate approaches to pedagogical phenomena. As a consequence, student teachers, often being unable to see that their lectures use different approaches and models for explaining the same phenomena, feel a casual overlap and confusion in the offered content. This “clash” of these two pedagogical paradigms is especially disastrous in the Eastern and Central European countries, which were isolated for decades from Western educational thought and, now, are promoting their own approaches to teacher education. The appearance and evolution of this conceptual dualism in the case of Estonia is given as an example. In his analysis, Mikser proves that, considering the recent development of the main ideas in educational psychology and didactics, a rapprochement rather than distancing of these conceptual frameworks is already under way as the educators increasingly focus on the advantages of the opposing approaches. The author claims that the critical rationalist epistemology initiated by Popper and Lakatos should be considered as a proper base for a selection between the rival concepts for building up teacher education curricula. The paper is a good attempt to reconcile and to contribute to a mutually enriching conversation between the two opposing concepts determining the content of pedagogical studies in teacher education.

The other paper, *Mentoring as a means for supporting student and beginning teachers' practice-based learning* by Edgar Krull, deals with the aspect of practice-based learning in teacher education. In his review of research literature the author summarises the theoretical underpinnings of mentor support in the light of different approaches to teacher education and analytical models of mentor roles and activities. Also, an attempt is made to outline student and beginning teachers' support needs in the different phases of teaching skills acquisition. To the end of highlighting the existing big variety in the ideology and strategy of the newly qualified teachers' induction programmes, the internship programmes used at the State University of Michigan, University of Hawaii and University of Tartu, Estonia, are comparatively analysed. Proceeding from the student and beginning teachers' supervision and mentoring needs, the paper next addresses the controversial issues of selection and preparation of mentors. Despite a lack of reliable research on the effectiveness of post-selection mentor preparation programmes, the author shares the conviction of many other researchers that being a good teacher of children is not a sufficient condition for being a good mentor and that mentors should be prepared for the implementation of the adopted teacher education ideology.

The third paper of this special issue, *Reconstructing teacher's professional identity in a research discourse: A professional development opportunity in an informal setting* by Elena Jurasaitė-Harbinson, approaches issues of teacher professional development from a more specific point of view in comparison with the two previous studies. However, this study reflects an important aspect of teacher education capable of replacing direct interventions, which usually take place in the framework of teacher in-service training, with an approach emphasising the self-reflective construction of a teacher's professional identity. More specifically,

Jurasaitė-Harbinson, using ethnographic tools, studies how an elementary teacher (Eleonor) reconstructs her core identity (as defined by Gee) as a learner in her interaction with the researcher by analysing the language used by the interviewee. The ultimate purpose of this study is to uncover the relationship between changes in teacher reflection and her classroom behaviour. A three-level procedure was used for analysing teachers' interviews held over a three-week period, consisting of transcribing recordings, highlighting themes reflecting core identities and analysing the content of relevant excerpts in detail. On the basis of content analysis of five interviews and a written essay, the researcher concluded that this kind of interaction with a researcher causes a teacher to take an inquiry stance in approaching teaching problems and reflective metaprocessing of school practice, and, consequently, is a powerful method for promoting teacher professionalism.

The fourth paper, *Estonian teachers' beliefs on teacher efficacy and influencing factors* by Merle Taimalu and Olivia Õim, studies teachers' professional identity in the light of their personal beliefs and convictions. Many previous studies have shown that teachers' beliefs in their personal efficacy typically increase together with the growing teaching experience and as beliefs in the impact of teachers as a professional group decrease. Numerous other teacher characteristics correlating with efficacy beliefs have been identified, too. The authors of this study used a widely known teacher efficacy scale (TES) developed by Gibson and Dembo for gauging student and practicing teachers' personal and general efficacy beliefs in Estonia. The research sample involved 193 practicing and 62 student teachers. The analysis of ratings given to the questionnaire scales revealed that in many aspects the Estonian teachers' average efficacy beliefs are similar to their colleagues' attitudes in other countries, but that there are differences as well. So, the analysis of variance of distributions of replies by different teacher groups confirmed that both the personal and general efficacy beliefs of Estonian teachers are dependent on the school level of teaching, speciality, and the extent of teaching experience, but, in comparison with other studies, an inverse relationship between teachers' preparation level and personal efficacy beliefs was found. Identification of the mean values of personal and general teacher efficacy beliefs typical to certain school experience groups and categories of teachers in a specific cultural context leads to a better understanding of the real problems of teachers' professional development and to the adjustment of teacher in-service programmes to these problems.

Finally, the paper *Developing child's thinking skills by using semantic mapping strategies* by Saule Raiziene and Bronislava Grigaite is less directly related to teacher education. However, it provides school teaching with new opportunities for promoting children's learning of higher order cognitive operations, i.e. with teaching strategies that could be the subject of teacher education in the nearest future. The present paper introduces the basic notions of semantic mapping strategies and then proceeds to an investigation of strategies for developing general skills of classification and seriation in six-year-old preschool children. The reported research design follows a classical pattern of empirical studies. The level

of classification and seriation skills and general intelligence indices were assessed in the control and experimental groups of children before the experimental intervention that lasted four months. The training of 28 children belonging to the experimental group mainly consisted of developing the ability of graphic representation of relationships between objects. The results of the study revealed that systematic training of logical operations by means of semantic mapping had a positive effect on the children's classification capabilities and seriation performance. The positive outcomes of this study suggest that promoting the semantic mapping strategies of children would become an inherent component of the content of preschool teacher education in the nearest future.

It is the guest editor's dream, and hopefully the authors' dream as well, that this special issue of TRAMES is not simply looked upon as a statistic of five papers among the 1500 published each year, but rather that the ideas and knowledge reflected in these articles and the expertise developed by the authors will garner the attention of other teacher educators, at least in the authors' own countries, and will promote the improvement of everyday practice of teacher education.

Acknowledgements

The idea of publishing a collection of papers on teacher education was primarily generated by the members of Academic Committee of the 7th ATEE Spring University. Supported and encouraged by the Editor in Chief Dr Urmas Sutrop and Editor Professor Jüri Allik of TRAMES, this idea materialised and the first steps undertaken for its implementation in May 2004. In all, 18 experts from 6 countries were involved in the blind review used to select the papers that qualified for publication. I am grateful to these individuals for their courtesy and readiness to sacrifice their precious holiday time to undertake this mission. I also want to thank Arvo Martin Marits for correcting the English of those authors whose language skills called for some further perfection. Of course, my greatest thanks go to the authors of the papers, for their dedication to the field of teacher education and for their selfless patience to go through the multiple and sometimes boring procedures of editing the papers. Finally, I wish to thank Dr Urmas Sutrop and the managing editor of TRAMES, Tiina Randviir, for their encouragement, assistance and help.

Address:

Edgar Krull
Department of General Education
University of Tartu
Ülikooli 18
50090 Tartu, Estonia

Tel.: +372 7375 156

E-mail: ekrull@ut.ee

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