



Teacher educators' professionalism in practice: Positioning theory and personal interpretative framework



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HIGHLIGHTS

- The relation between teacher educators' positioning and their practices.
- Professionalism manifests itself in teacher educators' actions and behaviors.
- A close examination of teacher educators' normative beliefs is essential.

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ABSTRACT

This study connects to the international call for research on teacher educator professionalism. Combining positioning theory with the personal interpretative framework, we examined the relationship between teacher educators' positioning and their teacher education practices. The interpretative analysis of qualitative data from twelve experienced Flemish teacher educators revealed three teacher educator positionings: a teacher educator of 'pedagogues', a teacher educator of reflective teachers, and a teacher educator of subject teachers. Each positioning constitutes a coherent pattern of normative beliefs about good teaching and teacher education, the preferred relationships with student teachers, and valuable methods and strategies to enact these beliefs.

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1. Introduction

The need for a competent teaching force as a warrant for high quality education remains a central concern in many countries (e.g., Commission of the European Communities, 2007; Darling-Hammond, 2010). Critical discussions of teachers and their education can be found in the media, policy documents, and educational literature. However, empirical research focusing directly on the professional lives and needs of teacher educators—those who teach teachers—remains scarce (a.o., Bates, Swennen, & Jones, 2011; Ben-Peretz, Kleeman, Reichenberg, & Shimoni, 2011; Davey, 2013; Edmond & Hayler, 2013; Grossman, 2005; Swennen, Jones, & Volman, 2010). In a special issue of the *Journal of Education for Teaching* the unanswered questions needing immediate attention were highlighted:

who are they, why do they work in teacher education, what career pathways have led them to teacher education, what are key aspects of their knowledge and practice as teacher educators, and what are the critical issues faced by those working in teacher education. (Mayer, Mitchell, Santoro, & White, 2011, p. 247).

This paradox between the recognition of teacher educators' importance on the one hand but the limited research attention on the other hand can be partly explained by the implicit assumption that a teacher educator is someone who teaches (his/her subject) to students in higher education instead of to pupils in elementary or secondary education. In other words, the assumption is that "educating teachers is something that does not require any additional preparation and that if one is a good teacher of elementary or secondary students, this expertise will automatically carry over to one's work with novice teachers" (Zeichner, 2005, p. 118). As a consequence, little research attention is paid to the nature of teacher educators' professionalism in terms of how they define their professional task as a teacher educator and how they

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construct the knowledge and skills for the enactment of this task. This study contributes to this issue.

2. A combined theoretical framework

This study was based on a concept of *practice-based* (Kelchtermans, 2013) or *enacted professionalism* (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Evans, 2008; Frelin, 2013; Grossman & McDonald, 2008; Munby, Russell, & Martin, 2001). A practice-based approach starts from and gives center stage to actual teacher education practices in conceptualizing and studying teacher educator professionalism.¹ In other words, professionalism is conceived of as manifesting itself in teacher educators' actions and behaviors in practice. It is reflected in four questions: 'what happens?'; 'why is this happening?'; 'what do we think of this and why?'; and 'should we try to change this practice and why would this change be an improvement?'. The judgment (or evaluation) of a practice is postponed: it is not until the third question that teacher educators' particular normative stances are made explicit (including the goals they strive for, the assumptions about good teaching and teaching about teaching, and the beliefs about the instruments or interventions that may result in the desired outcomes).

Studying enacted professionalism, with its emphasis on actual practices, implies that one acknowledges the contextualized character of teacher education, as well as its intrinsic relational character (a.o., Biesta, 2004; Frelin, 2013; Grossman & McDonald, 2008). "Education has indeed a relational character, that it doesn't exist in any other sense than as a relation and 'in relation'" (Biesta, 2004, p. 21). Teacher educators cannot but be in relation with student teachers. Furthermore these relationships do not operate in a vacuum, but are always embedded in the context of a particular teacher training institute, that is characterized by particular structural (e.g., the available resources, organizational structure, student teacher population) and cultural (shared assumptions about good teacher education) working conditions.

In the theoretical framework of our study, we tried to do justice to the enacted (practice-based), relational and contextualized character of teacher educator professionalism. On the one hand, we build on our former work on professional development, and more in particular the concept of the personal interpretative framework (Kelchtermans, 1993, 2009; Kelchtermans & Hamilton, 2004). On the other hand, we conceptually enriched our theoretical lens with insights from positioning theory (a.o., Adams & Harré, 2001; Davies & Harré, 1990, 1999; Harré & van Langenhove, 1991).

2.1. The personal interpretative framework

The *personal interpretative framework*—as defined by Kelchtermans (1993, 2009)—refers to the set of cognitions and beliefs that operates as a lens through which teacher educators perceive their job situations, give meaning to, and act in them. It can be seen as the always temporary mental sediment of the learning and development processes that span one's career and result from the socially meaningful interactions between the

teacher educator and his/her professional working context. Kelchtermans distinguished between two interrelated domains in the content of the personal interpretative framework: on the one hand the representations of oneself as a teacher educator (*professional self-understanding*) and on the other hand the personal system of knowledge and beliefs about teaching (*subjective educational theory*). Professional self-understanding is composed of five components: self-image, self-esteem, task perception, job motivation, and future perspective.

The *self-image* refers to the ways teacher educators typify themselves (descriptive). It is largely based on self-perception, but also reflects what others mirror back to teacher educators (e.g., comments from student teachers, colleagues, department heads).

The self-image has to be understood as closely related to the evaluative component of the self-understanding. *Self-esteem* refers to the way teacher educators evaluate their actual teacher educator behavior ('how well am I doing?').

Teacher educators' personal conceptions of their professional task and responsibilities constitutes the third component, the *task perception*. This normative component of the self-understanding encompasses teacher educators' personal answer to questions such as: 'what are the tasks I have to perform in order to have the justified feeling that I am doing well?'; 'what do I consider as legitimate duties I have to perform and what do I refuse to accept as part of 'my job' (and why)?'. The task perception highlights the fact that teacher education is not a neutral endeavor, but always implies value-laden considerations and choices. It encompasses deeply held beliefs about what constitutes good education, about one's moral responsibilities and duties toward student teachers.

The *job motivation* is the conative component and refers to the motives or drives that make teacher educators choose to become a teacher educator, to stay in the profession, or to change careers. Again, it is rather easy to understand that the task perception, as well as the working conditions that allow or impede educators to act according to their personal normative program, are crucial determinants for their job motivation.

Finally, self-understanding includes a prospective component, the *future perspective*, revealing teacher educators' expectations about their future in the job. These expectations highlight the dynamic character of the self-understanding. It is not a static, or fixed essence, but the result of the ongoing meaningful interactions of teacher educators with their working contexts. This needs to be understood in relation to human temporality: people's actions are embedded in their personal histories. Teacher educators' actions and sense-making in the present are influenced by meaningful experiences in the past, as well as their expectations toward the future.

The second domain within the personal interpretative framework is the *subjective educational theory*. It encompasses the personal system of knowledge and beliefs on teaching and teacher education and how to enact these. It contains teacher educators' technical know-how, the basis on which they ground their decisions for actions in particular situations. It reflects their personal answer to the questions: 'how can I effectively deal with this particular situation?' and 'why would this work that way?'.¹

2.2. Positioning theory

While the concept personal interpretative framework acknowledges that its content (professional self-understanding and subjective educational theory) results from the meaningful interactions with the working context, it primarily refers to an (always temporary) product 'in' the person of the teacher educator. In order to acknowledge the relational and situated process of teacher educator professionalism, we combined this line of work with insights from *positioning theory* (a.o., Adams & Harré, 2001; Davies &

¹ Conceiving of professionalism in terms of its manifestations in practice opposes a *blueprint approach* (Kelchtermans, 2013) or a concept of *demanded professionalism* (Evans, 2008) in which professionalism is conceived of in general and context-independent terms, listing and prescribing the knowledge, skills, and attitudes deemed critical for professional behavior. The standards for teacher educators (e.g., Association of Teacher Educators, 2002; Koster & Dengerink, 2008) or the knowledgebase for teacher education (e.g., Murray, 1998) are examples of this approach: these function as a blueprint or a presumably exhaustive list of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that individual teacher educators need to master or strive for in order to legitimately consider themselves as professional teacher educators.

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