

Learning through participation. The potential of school-based teacher education for developing a professional identity

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Abstract

This article deals with the potential of school-based teacher education for creating a professional community of learners. Learning to participate in the social and cultural practices with regard to education is assumed to be crucial for developing a professional identity as a teacher. From the perspective of socio-cultural theory, we have made a retrospective analysis of a project for collaborative school-based teacher education. The main research question was whether there was a stimulating context for student teachers to develop their own professional identity. To what extent were students able to function as ‘legitimate peripheral participants’ in the school, and to what extent has a ‘professional community of learners’ been realized? Finally, we reflect on the conditions in which teacher education can be centred on a specific school innovation project.

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1. Introduction

Teacher education is changing at a rapid tempo. One of the most conspicuous changes is known as school-based teacher education. Until recently, institutes of higher education had indisputable control of the training of teachers; this is no longer necessarily the case. The turning point for this change in the Netherlands was the recommendation by the Education Council in 2001 on the educational infrastructure with the meaningful title ‘*At the service of the school*’ (Onderwijsraad, 2001). The Education Council’s starting point for this recommendation was that ‘the school must have control over the preconditions that determine its performance.’ Here ‘preconditions’ is used primarily to

refer to the quality of teachers. Increasing the capacity of schools to manage their own affairs and policy will enable them above all to revitalize their work, making them more attractive to teachers and potential teachers. The reaction of the Ministry of Education, Culture & Science, ‘*The School as focal point*’ (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschappen 2001), emphasized the importance of the school as the starting point for teacher education, in-service training and research. A new teacher education system based on this approach was published recently by the ministry, ‘*The labour market and human resources: a management plan*’ (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschappen, 2002).

The development of a school-based education model for teachers and the realization of ‘partnerships’ is an international development. Western countries like the USA, Australia, Canada and the

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UK are ahead of the Netherlands in this respect (see Edwards, Gilroy, & Hartley, 2002). Only France has gone in the opposite direction. Separate teacher education programmes at institutes of higher education with long, broad professional trajectories have replaced school-based training there (Bonnet, 1996).

Different, partly conflicting approaches to teacher education all fall under the general heading of ‘school-based’. Firstly, in the context of the growing shortage of teachers, the policy of ‘deregulation’ has been deployed on both a national and local level (cf. Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2001). Schools are being made responsible for the training of teachers, preferably quickly, and are now allowed to employ unqualified teachers. In this way, they acquire the financial resources to purchase the support they need from institutes for higher education (see Gilroy, 1992). This development has occurred in the UK, e.g., where consortia of local schools are entitled to conduct a government endorsed training programme leading to formal teacher qualifications (School Centred Initial Teacher Training). Recently in the Netherlands there has also been a clear trend towards breaking the monopoly of the universities with regard to teacher education. In 2000 it was made legally possible for schools themselves, in collaboration with the institutes of higher education, to provide an important part of the training for new entrants to teaching from other professions, who do not have adequate subject knowledge or training at tertiary level. The institutes of higher education still award, however, the final diploma.

Secondly, the issue of how to link theory and practice has resulted in the development of different models of school-based teacher education (see e.g. Porlán Ariza, Martín del Pozo, & Martín Toscano, 2002; Putnam & Borko, 1997). We refer to this approach as *collaborative* school-based teacher education. The leading idea is that an important part of the process of learning to teach should be embedded in experiences in a school setting, thereby stressing the situated nature of knowledge and learning. Collaboration between schools and universities is a prerequisite, if the connection between the improvement of teacher education and school development is to be realized. The work of the Holmes Group in particular has led to the development of professional development schools (PDS) (see Bulloch, 1997). In this article we elaborate on this collaborative approach of school-based teacher education.

In contrast to the UK especially (see Gilroy, 1992), the move towards school-based teacher education in the Netherlands has been fairly quiet. This is primarily due to the fact that this move can stem from a longer tradition of dealing with the gap between theory and practice. The university-based teacher education programmes for secondary education¹ in particular have become very practically oriented since the 1980s (see e.g. Koetsier, Wubbels, & Korthagen, 1997). The content of the curricula is organized around the tasks of teachers: teaching, supervising, research and development, and organization. Psychology, sociology and pedagogy are not separate subjects. Disciplinary knowledge is dealt with in so far as it can contribute to this curriculum based on teachers’ tasks. In addition, there is relatively a lot of time for student teachers to acquire practical experience, enhancing the acquisition of complex practical knowledge. At the moment students spend a substantial part of their teacher education in schools. Greater involvement of the school in teacher education seems to be a natural consequence of this.

The current situation on the labour market with the shortage of qualified teachers, however, does lead to conflicting responses by schools to the development of more collaborative models of school-based teacher education. On the one hand, schools are more inclined than previously to invest in partnerships with universities. This promotes school development, thereby contributing to making the teaching profession more attractive. On the other hand, the growing shortage of teachers puts pressure on the partnerships with schools that have been created. Overloading schools is a serious threat to quality (see also Gilroy, 1998). Education demands time to study, for reflection, to participate in professional networks, etc. And that time is very scarce.

In this article we focus on one of the most fundamental problems of teacher education: the development of a professional identity. To what extent do students succeed in developing a deeper, personalized *meaning* on the teaching profession in the context of school-based teacher education? As stated above, students following university-based teacher education spend a great deal of time at school during their education. Hagger and McIntyre (2000) consider this to be essential. A

¹These programmes are a continuation of a master’s degree in a specific discipline (e.g. Biology or History).

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