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Supporting student teachers' reflection as a paradigm shift process

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HIGHLIGHTS

- University supervisors' and student teachers' perception of support of reflection is explored.
- Successful support of reflection requires an alternative paradigm of teaching.
- Supervisors experience a number of difficulties when trying to support reflection.
- Students learn how to reflect rather than actually reflecting.

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to explore how mentors, in this case university supervisors and student teachers, make sense of their experience with the support of reflection on teaching practice during post-lesson group interviews (reflective seminars). Review of the literature suggests that there is little known specifically about how mentors and students perceive support of reflection. The perspective of seven university supervisors and eight student teachers is presented. One of the principal findings in the in-depth phenomenological analysis is that for trainees to be able to reflect during the seminars, it is necessary first to set up an alternative paradigm of teaching.

1. Introduction

Student teaching is considered to be the "cornerstone of teacher preparation" (Valencia, Martin, Place, & Grossman, 2009, p. 304). It has been shown that one of the essential elements of successful teacher training programmes is extensive clinical experience and reflection on it (e.g. Darling-Hammond, 2006; Korthagen, Kessels, Koster, Lagerwerf, & Wubbels, 2001). The students themselves also regard teaching practice as the most important component of their training (Clarke, Triggs, & Nielson, 2014, p. 1). Over the past 20 years, teacher education has been "in a state of transition from a training model that emphasizes the acquisition of skills and mastering of competencies to a practice-based model that emphasizes participation, engagement, and reflection" (Hoffman et al., 2015, p. 100). Mattesson, Eilerston, and Rorrison (2012) speak in this context of a practicum turn.

Teaching practice is a necessary element of teacher preparation. However, the opportunities for learning to teach from practical experience in itself do not necessarily guarantee that these opportunities will be transformed into insightful and valuable learning. In agreement with other authors (e.g. Day, 1993; Korthagen et al., 2001; Zeichner & Liston, 1996), I consider reflection to be a key tool that allows for this transformation. Reflection can be generally understood as a "thinking process which gives coherence to a situation which is initially incoherent and unclear" (Clara, 2015, p. 263). As Schön (1987, p. 39) notes, it is through reflection in and on practice that practitioners make "sense of uncertain, unique or conflicted situations of practice". Numerous strategies for promoting reflection intentionally have been described in the literature (Hatton & Smith, 1995; Zeichner, 1987). We may distinguish strategies which encourage reflection into two categories: direct (e.g. face-to-face interaction) and indirect (e.g. through diaries or portfolios). Both types have a place in professional development as both autonomy and collaboration are essential ingredients for professional growth (Mann & Walsh, 2013).

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2. Literature review

2.1. Cooperating teacher and university supervisor: mentors with differing roles

A crucial role in the exploitation of opportunities for learning from teaching practice through reflection is played by cooperating teachers (Clarke et al., 2014; Hennissen, Crasborn, Brouwer, Korthagen, & Bergen, 2008; Hoffman et al., 2015; Stegman, 2007). As shown in the survey studies by Clarke et al. (2014), Hennissen et al. (2008), Hobson, Ashby, Malderez, and Tomlinson (2009), Hoffman et al. (2015), Metcalf (1991), a lot of attention has been devoted to research on cooperating teachers. A typical way to encourage students to reflect is through post-lesson interviews. These interviews, however, are not always led by cooperating teachers (i.e. members of the school staff who are mostly working in the classroom as a teacher), but by university supervisors as well (i.e. members of a teacher education institute or university), to whom less research attention has been paid.

From different social positions both of these help students to learn from teaching practice (Hennissen et al., 2008). Based on a variety of experiences and expertise they have distinct but complementary roles – cooperating teachers contribute to student learning at the level of direct and indirect practice and university supervisors at the level of practical principles and disciplinary theory (Furlong, Hirst, Pocklington, & Miles, 1988). Dunne and Bennett (1997) report on the focus of cooperating teachers being mainly on craft knowledge and the focus of supervisors rather on principle-oriented outcomes. They both participate in mentoring students, i.e. carrying out supervisory activities (Hennissen et al., 2008) or activities (Wildman, Magliaro, Niles, & Niles, 1992) that help student teachers learn from their teaching practice. Although the social position of cooperating teachers and university supervisors differs, both of them can be seen as mentors. The notion of mentoring is used in this study in the context of the support of professional development of pre-service teachers. We can also come across the term mentoring in connection with support for in-service beginner teachers (e.g. Harrison, Lawson, & Wortley, 2005a, 2005b) as well as experienced teachers (e.g. Kim & Silver, 2016).

Research comparing the influence of cooperating teachers and university supervisors indicates that both positions are influential, although not always (Hoffman et al., 2015). This also applies specifically to instigating reflection in these interviews. Akcan and Tatar (2010), for example, found that compared to cooperating teachers, university supervisors are more likely to instigate reflection and to lead students to evaluate their lessons more critically. Similar results are reported by Dunne and Bennett (1997). This stems both from the analysis of the actual behaviour of both types of mentors and the resultant effect on students' conceptions of teaching and learning. Conversely, Stegman (2007, p. 77) showed that "cooperating teachers were essential in guiding the student teachers in the process of reflecting on their practice. Their guidance, probing, and advice stimulated deeper levels of consideration and more thoughtful reflection on practice." In contrast to all of the above, Valencia et al. (2009) pointed out in their research that, more often than not, neither cooperating teachers nor university supervisors supported inquiry-oriented practice nor did they pursue a community of reflective practitioners and learners. Most research confirms, however, that cooperating teachers tended not to encourage reflection (see review study by Hennissen et al., 2008; Hoffman et al., 2015). One reason may be that university supervisors are more likely to emphasize reflection in and on practice than their school-based counterparts who provide other sorts of support (e.g. modelling of practice, providing feedback on practice, etc.) (Clarke et al., 2014). A search of the literature suggests that there is not any generalized information about the extent to which university supervisors lead students to reflect.

2.2. Mentors' actions which lead, or not, to student reflection

Generally, a mentor post-lesson interview includes a variety of strategies: mentoring repertoires (Tang, 2012), basic supervisory skills (Crasborn, Hennissen, Brouwer, Korthagen, & Bergen, 2008), supervisory styles (Harrison et al., 2005a; Hennissen et al., 2008), and ways of participating in Teacher Education (Clarke et al., 2014). However, in order to prompt reflection within the context of the post-lesson interview, it is necessary to conduct the conversation in a specific way. In other words, not all strategies used in a mentoring context lead to reflection. Kim and Silver (2016) write in this context about the specific features of interactions, Schaub-de Jong (2012) writes about specific teacher competencies, and Crasborn et al. (2008) on specific supervisory skills. These methods of engagement with the student have the same goal but are sometimes known by different names – provoking (Kim & Silver, 2016), encouraging (Hennissen et al., 2008) or supporting (Clarke et al., 2014) reflection.

All approaches to supervision can be placed on a continuum from a more traditional models in which the supervisor perceives his/her role as an authority figure and source of expertise to be shared to more reflective models where the supervisor co-constructs with the student teacher aspect central to good teaching practice (Akcan & Tatar, 2010, p. 154). In this context Crasborn et al. (2008, p. 501) distinguish two basic roles of a mentor: "the role of advisor and instructor" and "the role of encourager of reflection". The first role emphasizes situational adjustment, technical advice and emotional support and is complemented by the following supervisory skills: asking for something new, giving information, giving opinions/assessing and giving advice/instruction. The second role consists of empowering the mentee to learn from their own practice and to give direction to their own learning. These authors define fifteen specific supervisory skills that stimulate student reflection, for example: summarizing feeling (showing empathy), showing genuineness or helping to make things explicit (giving feedback, summarizing inconsistencies, utilizing the here and now). Similarly, Hennissen et al. (2008, p. 175) distinguish between more directive approaches to supervision, in which they include for example assessing, instructing or offering strategies, compared to more non-directive supervisory approaches, which might be implemented through the activities such as asking questions, reacting empathetically or listening actively. As well as directiveness, these authors also distinguish between active and reactive ways of inserting content (input) into the conversation. Based on the extent of directiveness and the method of inserting input into a conversation they define four different roles that a mentor can take during an interview. Importantly for this paper, the role of encourager is central to student reflection. In this role, there is a dialogue "based on the concerns of the prospective teacher and the mentor reacts to the input of the prospective teacher and induces him or her to reflect on his or her performance in the classroom" (Hennissen et al., 2008, p. 179).

The fact that a mentor's more non-directive approach and reactivity helps reflection is confirmed and developed in the research by Kim and Silver (2016) who, based on conversation analysis, showed how minutiae of interaction can influence whether or not reflection is supported. If the mentee introduces the topic of the interview and identifies incoherence as a starting point for discussion it is more likely that reflection will occur. If the mentor introduces the topic with a question, there is a danger that the mentee's answer will become more of a mind-reading process (i.e. where the mentor's expectations prefigure the student's