



Learning to teach: Effects of classroom observation, assignment of appropriate lesson preparation templates and stage focused feedback



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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on improving the instructional quality of student teachers in elementary education. We developed a coaching approach involving classroom observation and appropriate lesson preparation and feedback templates. Using an untreated control group design with pre-test and posttest ($n = 198$), we answered the question ‘whether student teachers who learned to teach with the new coaching approach achieved a higher level of pedagogical and didactical teaching skills compared to student teachers who did not receive this approach’. The effect variable used was the observation instrument ICALT. We compared the average scores of the control group and the experimental group on the posttest (ANCOVA). The differences found on the posttest, after controlling for the confounding variables, were significant on all ICALT scales. These effect sizes are medium on the scales; ‘Safe climate’, and ‘Clear instruction’, and large on the scales; ‘Classroom management’, ‘Activating pupils’, ‘Adaptive teaching’, and ‘Teaching learning strategies’.

1. Introduction

Results of international comparative studies in pupil results in the Netherlands show a slightly downward tendency (Meelissen & Punter, 2016; Mullis, Martin, Foy, & Drucker, 2012). Against this background, the policy of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science is focused on increasing pupil achievement. Meta-analysis of the efficacy of the educational system shows that policies affecting the primary processes of learning and instruction are the most successful. The quality of teaching staff, and especially the quality of their instruction turns out to be an important factor in increasing levels of pupils’ achievement (OECD, 2011). As a result, the quality of teacher training colleges is placed high on the national policy agenda (Min. OCW, 2013). In the meantime, several arrangements have already been made to improve the quality of teacher training colleges in the Netherlands. One of them is the development of uniform standards for the teaching profession (10voordeleeraar, 2018; Meijerink, 2012).

In practice, learning to teach takes place within the schools where the student teachers are doing their internship. Elementary school teachers (functioning as mentors) observe their lessons and provide student teachers with feedback. The main guidance instrument during internship is a standard lesson preparation template in which two learning cycles are interwoven: the learning cycle of the children that are being taught and the learning cycle of the student who learns to

teach. Student teachers of all Dutch teacher training colleges have to prepare their lessons on such a mandatory template, and mentors give feedback on the basis of the lesson preparation template and the lesson realization. In the 70 s the so-called DA model ‘didactic analysis model’ (Van Gelder, Oudkerk Pool, Peters, & Sixma, 1971) was introduced in all Dutch teacher training colleges. The model consisted of a didactical cycle from formulating ‘the lesson goal’, ‘the educational needs’ and ‘the actual lesson description’, to the evaluation of the lesson goal’. Van Gelder translated the model into a single template with corresponding observation criteria for the lesson preparation as well as the lesson realization.

In the 80 s and 90 s there was a shift in lesson preparation from the acquisition of teaching skills to reflection skills. The templates based on the ‘didactic analysis model’ did remain practically unchanged, although the corresponding observation criteria were no longer in use and replaced by the student’s own learning goals and (self-) reflection. Up until now, the templates are rarely updated on the basis of recent research on effective teaching skills and effective feedback.

In general the teacher training colleges use one single template during the four training years. These templates do not take the professional development of student teachers into account. Furthermore, the mentors are neither provided with a standardized observation instrument to evaluate the instruction skills of the student teachers, nor with guidelines concerning what kind of feedback would be most

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helpful for the learning process of the student teacher. As a result, the lesson preparation templates do not support the acquisition of teaching skills and the teacher training colleges lack objective data on the teaching skills of their students.

A possible way to address this issue is to improve the quality of the lesson preparation template and to develop a procedure in which the teacher training college and schools work together in collecting objective data on student teaching skills and in which guidelines for feedback are given.

2. Theoretical and empirical framework

For the development of a coaching approach that supports the acquisition of teaching skills of student teachers, we made use of theories on professional development of (student) teachers, the knowledge base on effective teaching behavior, and research on effective feedback.

2.1. Stages in the professional development of student teachers: theory and evidence

In theories on the professional development of teachers, nonlinear as well as linear models are proposed. In the nonlinear models, psychological, sociological and environmental factors are considered major influences on the professional development of teachers (Day & Gu, 2010; Day & Qing, 2007; Fessler & Rice, 2010; Goncalves, 2009; Huberman, 1989; Woods & Lynn, 2001). As a result, the professional development of teachers is supposed to follow a nonlinear path. Since the developmental theories underlying these models start at the induction phase of the teacher, these nonlinear models are less suitable for our purpose.

Several linear models can be distinguished, such as the concern theory (Fuller & Bown, 1975), a five-stage model of the acquisition of expertise (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986), and the life cycle of the career teacher model (Steffy & Wolfe, 2001), where (student) teachers go through developmental phases in a linear process. In the life cycle of the career teacher, the emphasis is on the developmental stages of the teacher after the teacher college training. The stage model of the acquisition of expertise requires as a starting point of the learning process a rather context-free learning environment, which is, in the existing internship conditions at the teacher training college in Utrecht, not practically feasible. Thus, for this study both linear models are also less suitable.

Fuller and Bown's concern theory is the most cited and empirically underpinned theory (Broad & Evans, 2006; Richardson & Placier, 2001). According to the concern theory, student teachers go through three stages during their education. Each stage consists of dominant student concerns – 'something the student thinks about frequently and would like to do something about personally'. In the self-phase, the student teachers have 'concerns' about surviving the classroom. In this stage, students become affected by feelings of inadequacy and dependency. In the following phase, the 'task (of teaching situation) concerns,' ambivalence regarding materials, methods and instruction are of prime importance. Students are able to reproduce the subject matter they have learned, but may be incapable of teaching it. Answering pupils' questions or providing examples remain highly challenging endeavors, and the learning process of the children is yet to become their focus. Nevertheless, in the 'impact phase' ('concerns about pupils'), students demonstrate a greater understanding of their children's learning needs. The time required for a student teacher to progress to a higher stage varies depending on personal characteristics and wider context, and regression to the 'self-stage' remains possible (Fuller & Bown, 1975).

Research conducted with the Teacher Concern Checklist (TCC) shows divergent results regarding a hierarchical sequence of the concerns. Using this TCC, Boz (2008) examines differences in concerns among 339 Turkish students. He observed mainly task concerns, but

witnesses significantly fewer self-related concerns in student teachers' last training year than in the second and third years.

Reeves and Kzelskis (1985) score the concerns of inexperienced students ($n = 128$), compared with those of experienced teachers ($n = 90$) on the TCC. They found no difference in the number of task concerns between the groups; moreover, in both groups, 'impact concerns' were higher than 'self-' and 'task concerns'.

In a number of studies, 'self-' and 'task concerns' have decreased as the students accrued more experience, but 'impact concerns' were occurring from the start.

Pigge and Marso (1997) used the TCC to follow 60 students from the beginning of their education until five years after their appointment. 'Task concerns' developed after 'self-concerns,' also 'impact concerns' occurred, akin to Reeves and Kazelskis' study, from the start. The researchers found that concern changes in the teachers' professional development related to their grade average (students with lower teacher education grades expressed fewer impact concerns) and gender (female students expressed more impact concerns).

Smith and Sanche (1992) found that 'self-concerns' predominated amongst 112 students at the start of an internship above task and impact concerns. By the middle of the internship, task and impact concerns exceeded 'self-concerns'. It is important to note that 'task concerns' started at a high level and remained fairly constant. Such a pattern of overlap of different concerns is corroborated by other researchers.

Watzke (2003, 2007) observed 'impact concerns' in his longitudinal research in first- and second-year student teachers. Seeking possible explanations for the deviations in the linear structure of Fuller's concerns in previous experiences of the students and the specific nature of the studied course, Watzke (2007) argued that the impact phases represented a continuous, holistic concern process amongst beginning teachers, recurring over time.

Ghaith and Shaaban (1999) studied the level of experienced 'self-efficacy' and the concerns of experienced teachers. 'Self-concerns' appeared to decrease with increased teacher experience. Nevertheless, after 15 years of experience, the three categories (including 'impact concerns') had declined. The researchers hypothesized that the internship context (for example, teaching in kindergarten or special education classes, or teaching classes to pupils with behavioral problems) helped to explain the prevalence of certain concerns.

A different kind of criticism led to the discussion, whether the concern theory focus on the person occurs at the expense of the training of professional standards (Buchmann, 1987; Zeichner & Teitelbaum, 1982).

Despite of the criticism above on the hierarchical order of the concern stages, there is enough evidence of the existence of these concerns. The consideration that the concerns may not follow in a hierarchical order does not impact our study. By adding a standardized observation instrument to the templates in construction, we can easily diagnose the accurate professional developmental stage of the student teacher and assign the corresponding lesson template. We therefore decide to develop successive lesson preparation and feedback templates which support the professional development of student teachers, based on this theory.

2.2. Effective Teacher behavior

In addition to theories of stages in the professional development of (student) teachers, we can use research on effective teacher behavior. That effective teaching skills are important factors in achieving pupils' learning gain, is generally acknowledged after more than 50 years of research on this topic (for reviews and research see: Ellis & Worthington, 1994; Hanushek, 2011; Hattie, 2009; Levine & Lezotte, 1990; Levine & Lezotte, 1995; Marzano, 2003; Muijs & Reynolds, 2010; Scheerens, 2015; Scheerens & Bosker, 1997).

For this research, observational teacher behavior, i.e. the behavior

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