



# Expanding the traditional role of the adult education teacher – The development of relational competences and actions



Bjarne Wahlgren, Kristina Mariager-Anderson\*, Sia Hovmand Sørensen

Department of Education, Aarhus University, Copenhagen, Denmark

## HIGHLIGHTS

- A training program might have a very specific effect on teachers' actions.
- The effect is greater on the teachers' *actions* than on their *competences*.
- Combined training of teachers and their principals improve this effect.

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## ABSTRACT

The article reports the effect of a competence development programme for adult education teachers. The effect has been assessed using electronic questionnaires completed by the teachers before and after the training programme, and by interviews with the teachers over a period of two years. The study shows that while the teachers' competences and actions develop significantly on some dimensions (e.g. to act upon discovering a student who is not thriving), they remain largely the same on other (e.g. to give appreciative feedback). There is a greater change and development in the teachers' actions than in their competences.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Overview

Teachers' competences are central in determining the extent to which students profit from their studies. The teachers' ability to teach and, not least, their ability to manage the classroom are crucial for creating and maintaining a stimulating learning environment.

This article reports findings from a research project entitled *New roles for the adult education teacher*. The research, designed as an intervention project, aims to develop new relational competences among a group of teachers in the Danish adult educational system. This aim has been pursued by engaging teachers from five adult

colleges in a training programme over a two-year period.

Approximately 100 teachers, 20 from each of the five colleges, participated directly in the training programme which consisted of courses, seminars and coaching sessions. This group of teachers was named *core participants*. The rest of the teaching staff, between 70 and 110 teachers at each college were engaged in knowledge sharing actions led by the *core participants*, as well as in workshops on central aspects of the new teacher role. Furthermore, a vital part of the intervention was a parallel training programme for the principals to ensure that the development process was an integrated part of the pedagogical innovation and development at the colleges.

The overarching questions for the project were whether an effect of the training programmes on the *core participants* could be documented, and whether the dissemination processes would have an effect on the total group of teachers, *other teachers*. The effects of the activities have been measured by comparing the teachers' competences, as well as their relational actions, before and after the training programme.

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [Wahlgren@edu.au.dk](mailto:Wahlgren@edu.au.dk) (B. Wahlgren), [kma@edu.au.dk](mailto:kma@edu.au.dk) (K. Mariager-Anderson), [siah@edu.au.dk](mailto:siah@edu.au.dk) (S.H. Sørensen).

## 1.2. Review of literature

Several studies indicate a positive correlation between in-service training and the development of teachers' knowledge and dispositions to act in a certain way. Based on an experimental study of a teacher training programme, Antoniou and Kyriakides report a positive effect on the teachers' teaching skills as well as on the students' achievement in mathematics (Antoniou & Kyriakides, 2012). Sondergeld, Milner and Rop likewise document a positive impact on the teachers' knowledge and attitudes after participation in an environmental education professional development programme (Sondergeld, Milner, & Rop, 2014). Goldschmidt and Phelps found that, while there was a significant growth in teachers' knowledge during a training programme for language teachers, practical classroom experiences hindered knowledge retention as measured six months later. There was a significant correlation between knowledge growth during the programme and the teachers' previous teaching experiences (Goldschmidt & Phelps, 2009). In another study, nursing teachers were trained to support the students' reflection skills. The training programme included group meetings, practical training including videotaping and individual feedback, and teachers' reflections on practice. The extent to which the students reflected was significantly higher after the programme (Dekker-Groen, Van Der Schaaf, & Stokking, 2013). Wahlgren found that a teacher training programme for adult education teachers in cooperative learning had a positive impact on the teachers' skills and attitudes towards the new teaching method, although the effect could only be documented in the first part of the training programme (Wahlgren, 2011).

Other studies find only a modest and sometimes unexpected effect of teacher training programmes. One study, focusing on teachers' ability to rate videos of student behaviour, found that the most intensive level of training did not improve the teachers' ability as much as a less intensive training (Lebel, Kilgus, Briesch, & Chafouleas, 2010). Likewise, a randomised controlled study concluded that, overall, teaching quality was rated significantly higher by students with untrained teachers than those with trained teachers, and students taught by untrained teachers generally performed better than students with trained teachers (Breckwold, Svensson, Lingemann, & Gruber, 2014). Another study found that in-service professional development had little or no effect on the ability of teachers to improve student achievement, while practical and less standardised experiences had a positive impact (Harris & Sass, 2010, pp. 810–811). 19 recent studies on in-service training in the social sector show that there is limited evidence of the impact of training in terms of changing practice. It is concluded 'that without a focus on the transfer of training, the contribution of training to quality of care outcomes will remain illusory' (Clarke, 2013, p. 15).

In a survey of teachers' professional development over a decade it is concluded that prolonged interventions are more effective than shorter ones, and that combinations of tools for learning and reflective experiences better serve the purpose of professional development. The power of teacher co-learning in professional learning communities emerges very strongly from the studies reviewed. 'The road starts with informal exchanges in school cultures that facilitate the process, continues in networking and is strengthened in formalized experiences such as courses and workshops that introduce peer coaching or support collaboration and joint projects' (Avalos, 2011, pp. 17–18).

A review of 21 studies on teacher training in relation to adult education concludes that these training programmes typically

consist of in-service training. The review also concludes that there is a lack of research into the measurement of the effects of teacher training in the adult education sector (Larsen & Wahlgren, 2010).

A study on teachers' motivation revealed that *autonomous* motivation predicted teachers' participation in relevant training and subsequent implementation innovation, while *controlled* motivation did not (Goroizidis & Papaioannou, 2013). Another study showed that student teachers preferred a supervision or collaborative approach rather than a directive approach to supervision in a teacher education programme (Ibrahim, 2013).

A review, based on an analysis of 16 articles on the impact of professional development, concludes that the most important factor is the culture of professional development in which learning is embedded in ongoing, day-to-day processes, and that practitioners collaborate in continuous learning for the improvement of practice and for the sake of adult learners (Kerka, 2003).

One study investigated how adult education teachers changed after participating in one of three different professional development models (multisession workshop, mentor teacher group, or practitioner research group), all on the same topic of learner persistence. Participation in a *practitioner research group* was the most efficient and *multisession workshop* the least. However, the most important professional development factors were the amount and the 'quality' of the training. Individual factors related positively to change were motivation to attend professional development and years of experience in the field (Smith, Hofer, Gillespie, Solomon, & Rowe, 2003).

Sustained professional learning programmes that are collaborative and classroom-embedded are more supportive of effective professional learning than isolated workshops or professional learning programmes that are disconnected from the classroom environment (Bruce, Esmonde, Ross, Dookie, & Beatty, 2010, p. 1605).

A job-embedded professional development programme increased the teachers' general and personal efficacy in teaching mathematics, and the teachers' general efficacy was found to have a direct impact on student achievement (Althausen, 2015).

A study focusing on transfer of training as a way of improving the effect of professional development concludes that the teachers should have the opportunity to practise what they have learned in the training programme, and that this practising must be an integrated part of professional development (McDonald, 2011). A similar conclusion is reached in another study likewise focused on transfer of teaching techniques: 'The professional development of teachers must be embedded in a comprehensive school-improvement program' (Kuijpers, Houtveen, & Wubbels, 2010).

On the basis of a professional training programme, Batt concludes that workshops were effective in the learning process but resulted in a disappointing level of implementation when not supported by a coaching phase. She found that a cognitive coaching phase adds substantial value to traditional training actions (Batt, 2010).

Professional development programmes are effective when sustained and intensive – rather than short-term, 'one shot' workshops. The programmes tend to be more efficient when they provide teachers with opportunities for hands-on, active learning, and when they entail collaborative and collegial learning environments. However, it is important to be aware that teachers within different subjects and teaching at different levels differ in their attitudes to professional development (Torff & Byrnes, 2011).

Research on the effect of teacher in-service training programmes suggests that, in general, an effect of such programmes

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