Full Length Article

Configuring the three-way relationship among student teachers' competence to work in schools, professional learning and teaching motivation in initial teacher education

Sylvia Y.F. Tang [a], [*], Angel K.Y. Wong [b], May M.H. Cheng [c]

[a] *Department of Education Policy and Leadership, The Education University of Hong Kong, 10 Lo Ping Road, Tai Po, N.T., Hong Kong SAR, China*
[b] *Department of Psychological Studies, The Education University of Hong Kong, 10 Lo Ping Road, Tai Po, N.T., Hong Kong SAR, China*
[c] *Department of Curriculum and Instruction, The Education University of Hong Kong, 10 Lo Ping Road, Tai Po, N.T., Hong Kong SAR, China*

HIGHLIGHTS

- Two major aspects of competence to work in schools emerge from the study.
- Learning in ITE fieldwork and Learning in ITE coursework predict Competence to work in schools.
- Two types of teaching motivation partially mediate the predictive relationship.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This mixed methods study investigated pre-service student teachers' self-perception of competence to work in schools, and its relationship with professional learning and teaching motivation in the context of initial teacher education (ITE). Two major dimensions of competence to work in schools emerged in the study: (1) understanding school organization, and (2) managing growth-fostering relationships with teachers and peers. Learning in ITE fieldwork and Learning in ITE coursework were found to predict this competence, although the predictive relationship was partially mediated by "Intrinsic: interest and efficacy in subject taught" motivation and "Altruistic-intrinsic: multifaceted and stimulating job nature" motivation. Implications for ITE are discussed.

© 2016 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Education systems around the world face the demanding challenge of recruiting and preparing highly motivated and professionally competent teacher education graduates who have received high-quality initial teacher education (ITE). Furlong, Hirst, Pocklington and Miles (1998) acknowledged the importance of student teachers' development of personal competence, classroom competence and wider professional competence. Competence to work in schools, a major facet of this wider professional competence, is important for preparing student teachers to cope with the organizational life in school. Yet, the development of this competence is under-examined in teacher education research. Little is known about what competence to work in schools is, and how this competence may be related to student teachers' motivation to become a teacher and to their ITE learning experiences. The study reported in this article addresses this research gap and contributes to the examination of (a) what constitutes competence to work in schools, and (b) the three-way relationship among this competence, professional learning in ITE and teaching motivation.

1.1. Competence to work in schools as a dimension of student teachers' professional competence

In alignment with recent discussions on professional competence and teacher education (van Dinther, Dochy, Segers, & Braeken, 2013; Furlong et al., 1988; Pantić & Wubbels, 2010;

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: stang@eduhk.hk (S.Y.F. Tang), akywong@eduhk.hk (A.K.Y. Wong), maycheng@eduhk.hk (M.M.H. Cheng).

Struyven & De Meyst, 2010), we view professional competence as a broadly conceived integrated set of knowledge and understanding, skills and abilities, and teachers' beliefs and moral values. Student teachers need to develop various facets of classroom competence and wider professional competence in order to perform professional tasks in authentic situations, and form a view of their own profession and its changing relationship with society's demands.

Rots, Kelchtermans, and Aelterman (2012) believed that learning to teach goes beyond the technical endeavor of acquiring professional knowledge and developing effective teaching skills. It encompasses learning how to deal with social and cultural working conditions in schools. Competence to work in schools is an important dimension of professional competence, although this is often a neglected dimension of teacher development (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002).

Competence to work in schools entails knowledge and understanding of contextual, institutional, and organizational aspects of educational policies, dispositions and the skills of teamwork, collaboration and networking (European Commission, 2013; Finnish Institute for Educational Research, 2009). These researchers' work informs our understanding of two major aspects of this competence: (a) understanding school organization, and (b) managing professional relationships.

Understanding school organization refers to knowledge about "how schools as bureaucratic organizations function and the limits and possibilities this affords those who work in such institutions" (Kuzmic, 1994, p.24) as such knowledge helps student teachers better understand their role, domains of responsibility, the constraints they face, sources of problems, organizational conflicts, and possibilities for meaningful change. It is useful for student teachers to recognize that the teacher is "part of a larger social system that includes the broad educational policy context, a community's vision of education, a school's mission toward realizing it, a curriculum through which to implement it, administrators invested in enforcing it, colleagues who help to establish it, students who have been socialized to participate in it, and other relationships" (Smagorinsky, Cook, Moore, Jackson, & Fry, 2004, p. 9).

To get prepared for organizational life, student teachers need to learn to be socially and emotionally responsive in professional relationships (Johnson et al., 2014). Fox and Wilson (2015) examined relationship building in school placement as a process of social capital building for student teachers' access to cognitive and affective support through networking with school mentors, other teachers and peers. Le Cornu (2009) applied the notion of relational resilience, and found that growth-fostering connections with mentors, teachers and peers in school placements are characterized by mutuality, empowerment and the development of courage. In Struyven and De Meyst's (2010) study of professional competence in the Belgian Flanders teacher education context, competence as a member of a teaching team and a sense of collaboration were highlighted as being part of a teacher's responsibility to the school and the educational community.

Admiraal and Berry (2016) acknowledged the importance of relational competencies that pertain to colleagues and the community, although they viewed that "student teachers usually gain only limited experience with these competencies during their teacher education programme" (p.3). Some studies have proposed practices to foster student teachers' competence to work in schools, including linking ITE course content to the organizational dimension of educational practices, discussion of cases from the research literature and student teachers' experiences before and after ITE fieldwork, enhancing mentors' awareness of the micro-political aspect of mentoring, organizing ongoing forums for site-based discussion of student teachers' experiences of the external and institutional political forces at work in schools, etc. (Curry, Jaxon, Russell, Callahan, & Bicais, 2008; Ehrich and Millwater, 2011; Gallant & Mayer, 2012; Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002; Roberts & Graham, 2008).

1.2. Relating professional competence to professional learning in ITE and teaching motivation

Student teachers' professional competence can be related to personal variables (e.g., teaching motivation) and teacher education experiences (i.e., professional learning in ITE). Researchers' work informs our understanding of the three constructs "professional competence", "professional learning in ITE" and "teaching motivation", and general patterns of the pair relationships between them. This section examines these pairs of relationships.

1.2.1. Professional competence and professional learning in ITE

Tang, Wong and Cheng (2012) identified student teachers' professional learning experiences with various aspects of ITE, including the formal curriculum (or ITE coursework), ITE fieldwork, non-local learning experience (e.g., immersion, student exchange programmes), and informal and hidden curricula (e.g., student teachers' participation in co-curricular activities, interaction with faculty, school mentors and peers, etc.). In the teacher education field, there is a commonly identified tendency that student teachers prioritize practice over theory (Evans, 2010; Hobson et al., 2008; Tang et al., 2012). They place greater value on learning in fieldwork compared to learning in coursework, which usually includes subject-matter studies, foundation of education studies, and methods studies.

For the examination of how professional competence may be related to professional learning in ITE, studies on student teachers' efficacy are relevant because teaching efficacy reflects, at least to some extent, perceived professional competence. Faculty's intensive supervision, mentor's support and opportunities to practise were found to be possible factors contributing to student teachers' sense of efficacy (Moulding, Stewart, & Dunmeyer, 2014; O'Neill & Stephenson, 2012; Rots, Aelterman, Vlerick, & Vermeulen, 2007). Whereas these studies have placed focus on student teachers' classroom competence, our earlier study with One-year Postgraduate Diploma of Education (PGDE) student teachers in Hong Kong examined the relationships among various facets of professional competence and different aspects of professional learning. We found positive correlations between student teachers' "Engagement with Practical Aspects of ITE" and "Competence in Classroom Teaching", as well as between student teachers' "Engagement with Conceptual Aspects of ITE" and different facets of professional competence (Tang, Wong, & Cheng, 2016).

1.2.2. Professional competence and teaching motivation

Student teachers have multiple (rather than single) motivations to become teachers (Sinclair, 2008). A key focus of the research on teaching motivation is identifying the different types of motivation. Intrinsic, extrinsic and altruistic goals are the most common classification schemes in teaching motivation (Klassen, Al-Dhafri, Hannok, & Betts, 2011; Kyriacou & Kunc, 2007; Roness, 2011; Thomson, Turner, & Nietfeld, 2012). Apart from these three major types of teaching motivation, "socialization influences", "self-perceptions" and "fallback career" have been identified in the "FIT-Choice" (Factors Influencing Teaching Choice) scale, a validated and widely used measure of teaching motivation in different countries (Lin, Shi, Wang, Zhang, & Hui, 2012; Richardson & Watt, 2006; Watt & Richardson, 2012).

Empirical research on the relationship between student teachers' teaching motivation and professional competence has mainly focused on classroom competence. Intrinsic motivation,