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WHAT DOES THE TEACHER LOOK LIKE NOWADAYS?

Empirical
study

Keywords

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Abstract

The present study discusses the relevance of interpersonal and intrapersonal attributes of teachers for the efficacy of teaching in the context of responding to the challenge of educating students for a society facing ongoing changes at an extreme pace . It offers a qualitative analyses of data obtained from 18 participants' reflective essays drafted at the beginning and the end of their ITE courses. Data was coded and analysed by four independent researchers. The results showed a clear reference to certain personal qualities of teachers. The categories identified are discussed in relation to previous studies on emotional intelligence and empathy, reflexivity and positive expectations in class.

INTRODUCTION

Any educational system was built to respond to the needs of the society that created it. Unfortunately, for too many years now, we came to realize that the education we offer does not meet the needs of the people (adults or children) we have in our classes. One reason for this is the pace of transformations that the development of technology brought along, an advancement that has never been seen in the history of humanity before.

The design of public education, as we know it today, was set in the XIX century Industrial Age, when the demand for skilled people in technical domains was high. This determined a hierarchy of subjects that schools everywhere have been teaching, placing sciences and languages on the top as the most useful and ending with arts as less important for the professional development of the students (Robinson, 2011). As life in general was linear, the trajectory of any child's education was clear. They would specialize in a field and be very likely to work in that field until their retirement. But as society advanced, things have become less clear and linear than before. We face a rate of changes that surpasses our ability to adapt to the new.

Therefore, we started questioning our educational purposes, wandering about the finality of our work. What we should prepare our pupils for, taking into account that they would become independent members of the society on the labour market no earlier than 15 years after having started school. The answer should be simple. We should prepare them for life, as it is today, trying to develop in them skills and competences that would enable them to manage in any situation. This leads us to another question about the skills and competences that would be most important to hold.

METHODOLOGY

As teacher trainers we started looking for an answer in our field, as we consider that the drivers for any change would be the teachers we prepare, who in turn, will deal with the education of children for their life. We started looking at the abilities that our teacher trainees should develop during ITE in order to adapt to the new challenges in their classes. Literature abounds in studies on the types of knowledge that teachers should have (Tugui, 2011). Our intention was not to disregard skills nor knowledge that other studies documented, but rather to identify new competences that would assist teachers nowadays with educating their pupils for a changing future. We decided to investigate on their present opinions on the desirable teacher and their attitudes towards teaching and as their beliefs were formed during their school years and tend to influence their

motivation for learning to become a teacher within ITE. Due to this purpose, it was considered that most relevant data could be revealed when using both quantitative and qualitative instruments. There were 80 participants, teacher trainees in their first undergraduate year. They were asked to write a reflective essay related to the mental picture of the ideal teacher before they came in contact with any speciality course. The purpose was to obtain a list of the most highly regarded qualities of a teacher as responding to the needs of these trainees' generation.

There followed an open-ended questionnaire on decision to select profession and the ITE programme to reach this objective, personal qualities held to become a teacher, expectations of the courses to be attended. The purpose of this instrument was to investigate on the self motivation for study during ITE. Literature abounds in studies showing the direct connection between individuals' motivation for study, as the process of initiating, sustaining and directing activity, and their learning performance. In general, one's affect towards a particular thing, action, situation or experience represents the way that thing, that action, that situation or that experience fits in with one's needs or purposes, and its resulting effect on one's emotions, or affective variables such as motivation and attitude. In the case of ITE, motivation can precede the classroom situation, or it can be engaged by it. The teacher trainee can have strong reasons for wanting to learn before he or she ever comes to the classroom. It became clear for us that teacher trainees are inspired by family models or their former teachers in kindergarten or primary school during the entry interview selection of applicants to the programme. In the course of attending a class strong reasons for continuing to attend and learn can emerge. In other words, learning breeds its own motivation and at the same time previous motivation can lead to success. Learners with positive learning experiences are more willing to engage with future ones, more confident in their chances of succeeding, and more likely to persevere in their efforts.

Other three closed questionnaires on student values, learning and teaching styles were applied during the first term in order to predict on the degree of flexibility, opened-mindedness and acceptance of new theories presented during ITE.

Before concluding their first term courses they were asked to write another reflective essay on how they see themselves in a teacher position after attending their first training with the purpose of investigating self-perceived efficacy of ITE courses. We considered important to understand how student teachers view of themselves as persons and as teachers (Day et al., 2007). It is suggested that a teacher trainee's experiences as a learner and the quality of the relationships experienced in

educational contexts, determine the impact any course might have and further practice (Flores and Day, 2006).

For the purpose of this article there were used 18 initial and 18 final essays written by the same participants. The decision to use data from the same participants was made for comparison reasons of contrasting analysis that could reveal a hypothetical evolution. The categories for responses identified are presented in Table 1 at the end of this article. Data was coded and analysed by four independent researchers for reasons of validity and reliability.

Due to the research problem formulated in this article the qualitative approach was regarded as the most appropriate. As researchers were interested in improving a specific ITE programme and less in generalizing the findings, it was considered that this qualitative inquiry is context-specific. We emphasize the importance of the subjective experience of individuals and we understand that qualitative research becomes vulnerable to critics because of the multiple connotations of the notion. At the same time, we believe that 'subjectivity' here can be related to the 'contextual', if we consider that experience is shaped in the context and it cannot be understood adequately in isolation. We regarded the period of time between the two essays to be an advantage. This is because the system of values and attitudes toward "being a teacher" was already formed when they enrolled the ITE programme and this gave us the opportunity to put this values system against the first semester assembly of disciplines and to let them experience directly along with their mentors what it is like being a teacher (within the limits of the 1st semester expectations). Another related aspect of the qualitative approach is 'inductive reasoning' which is based on the idea of understanding the general through individual parts, in other words it starts with the formation of a hypotheses that is open and unstructured (Bryman, 2004). Thus, the issues of research design are not predetermined, but open to interpretation and alteration. From this perspective other issues can emerge from the data. The main purpose of this qualitative research is the discovery or uncovering of propositions (Cohen et al., 2004).

FINDINGS

Every year ITE programmes enrol enthusiastic students that dream to become 'their ideal teacher', having in mind the picture of the individuals that inspired them over the school years. It is interesting to notice that these models stand out primarily due to their personal and interpersonal qualities and only the because of their professional competences. In the reflective essay participants to the study were asked to write in their first week in the programme,

student trainees speak about the important role of mentor, guide, model that the TEACHER has in forming life values and attitudes in pupils. A passionate person, enthusiastic about his/her profession, inclined to lifelong learning and self-education. Moreover, the TEACHER has great interpersonal skills, a close and genuine interest in pupils' life and concerns, he/she is positive, generous, kind, patient and caring showing empathy to his/her pupils, showing availability and creativity.

When it comes to the professional competences, the term used is that of 'educated' explained as good pedagogue and psychologist, able to motivate, to inspire and encourage his/her pupils. It is a very interesting perspective that novice to these programmes offer every year on the relevant aspects of the expected/perceived professional outcomes. On the one hand they refer to the personal qualities of teachers as prevailing over others, on the other hand when asked about their expectations of the courses they refer to pedagogical and psychology knowledge and competences that teachers should use in practice. An explanation could be the fact that the emotional factors that impact on students' performance during the school years are more striking and are allocated a greater importance. Moreover, pedagogical strategies and methods are not so easily observable by untrained subjects of these. It is to notice that the descriptions they made were complex and focused more on social competences and human qualities; there is no awareness of methodological or administrative aspects of being a teacher. Moreover, we suspect that it is easier to notice aspects that you were made aware of than looking in the background. Another important aspect is related to the complexity of portraits they described. As there was a limitation to one page for the essays, they tended to condense the information and enumerate categories or aspects of teaching and teacher qualities, as if there was a need to express more. For us as researchers and course tutors this means that that there is more room for introspection and self-analysis. This could be a great foundation for further relevant research.

Once they apply for a training programme they become more aware of that their training would involve, but still they cannot picture the whole process yet. By the end of the first term their understanding of the process starts to deepen. They can affirm they 'can UNDERSTAND the importance of ...', without being able actually to say they 'KNOW how to do/apply in practice...'. It is a process of becoming aware of the roles, responsibilities, implications, knowledge, skills and competences involved in teaching and learning to teach. It can be overwhelming for some as they had considered mostly the personal traits of character and personality that the TEACHER should have.

Now they discover that there is more to it, that the whole training process is more complex and the study effort is higher. It is also true that their willingness to try new things, along with their motivation to learn without being afraid of wrong answers or failure are important ingredients to a successful recipe.

The training experiences in the first term come as a confirmation of the right decision they made to choose this profession. Motivation is very important for the way they approach courses. Most of the students apply for the ITE because they like children or working with children- as the entry interviews revealed. The theoretical framework offered during the first courses confirmed by the practice of observation these students do is used to strengthen their study efforts. It determines them to keep their enthusiasm, their endeavour to study, to become the "ideal me" as they confessed in their reflexive essays from the end of the term. Moreover, they add new models to the ones already existing in their individual gallery of teachers they admire, namely teachers from the ITE they start looking up to, this time more for professional skills and competences. This happens possibly because they have at hand new tools for critical analysis in terms of pedagogical knowledge and practical teaching knowledge coming from observation, that they start applying to all teaching situations they witness, including their training courses. In this way they could easily find a link between the academic knowledge and practice.

They discovered a warm enthusiastic context, confirming the choice made and offering the theoretical knowledge that gives meaning to what it is observed in class. For most of them this is a "favourable forecast" for the following three years of the programme. Most of them perceive the activity of observation practice and the courses as a considerable effort but not a difficulty due to their motivation.

It seems that the recipe for success at the beginning of the training consists more of confirmations of personal understanding of teaching and picture of ideal teacher, rather than the selection of courses itself. It's the "chemistry" that is important, the students feeling comfortable in the study context, the intrinsic motivation, the feeling they "follow their dream". The difficulty will consist of changing incremented practices and attitudes towards teaching according to new philosophies of education and teaching strategies and methods that the programme intends to promote.

DISCUSSION

It did not come as a surprise that the most frequently mentioned attributes of a desirable teacher were the personal qualities. (The TEACHER "communicates with children trying to

understand their problems"; "knows how to create and maintain a pleasant and relaxing learning climate"; "knows how to motivate children to learn"; "is capable of self-analysis, is able to make others reflect on their activity"; "builds relationships"; "knows how to communicate with the families"; "makes children like them"; "loves children"; "loves teaching?") Most studies investigating on student opinions on what they appreciate at their teachers show a clear reference to personal qualities. It is again a confirmation that the professionals are regarded through the lenses of their personal attributes, as the ingredients of effective teaching.

In the context of putting together the result of studies on emotional intelligence and empathy practiced in class influencing interrelationships (Seema, 2012), on the effects of positive expectations that influence performance of students by creating a warm comfortable climate for learning or by offering positive feedback and more communication like in the Pygmalion Effect Study (Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1992), on the benefits of reflexivity for teaching and learning (Tugui, 2011), that have informed our present study, we developed a better understanding of the role of teacher personal attributes in effective teaching. It remains to be researched whether by exhibiting and applying in their classrooms such attributes, novice teachers will manage to influence and teach what they "preach".

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ANNEXES

Table No. 1. Categories of answers

Initial essay	Examples	Final essay	Examples
Personal qualities: patient, reliable, empathic, emotional stability, happy, sense of humour, energetic, creative	<i>"Being self-confident"</i> <i>"Communicates with children trying to understand their problems"</i> <i>"Knows how to create and maintain a pleasant and relaxing learning climate"</i>	Personal qualities: calm, creative, open, patient,	<i>"I'm more self-confident"</i> <i>"I need to be calm and flexible"</i>
Professional qualities: capable, prepared, motivated, able to motivate, good pedagogue, good psychologist, self-reflective	<i>"Good the content knowledge"</i> <i>"Knows how to motivate children to learn"</i> <i>"Capable of self-analysis, able to make others reflect on their activity"</i>	Professional qualities	<i>"Observation practice helped me most"</i> <i>"I can control my emotions better to concentrate on tasks"</i>
Untouchable goal	<i>"Teacher learning never ends"</i>	Becoming a teacher	<i>"I understand now the complexity of learning to teach"</i>
Love of profession	<i>"Loves children"</i> <i>"Loves teaching"</i>	Follow my dream	<i>"I have the confirmation now that I made the right choice"</i> <i>"It's like a positive forecast for the next three years"</i>
Communication skills	<i>"Builds relationships"</i> <i>"Knows how to communicate with the families"</i> <i>"Make children like them"</i>	Communication skills	<i>"I need to communicate efficiently with my pupils and their parents"</i>
Development oriented	<i>"Seeks development"</i> <i>"Seeks modernity, innovation"</i>	Development oriented	<i>"There is more to learn"</i> <i>"What I learn now will become reflex through practice"</i>
Model, mentor	<i>"Offers models"</i> <i>"Guides"</i>	Need for models	<i>"I always keep in mind my teachers' model"</i>