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Book Chapter

Student Teachers' Perceptions Regarding the Challenges of Leadership

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Teaching is the only profession in which the practitioner themselves has to create the conditions required in order to execute their professional duties. What this means is that teachers themselves have to organise and lead the work so that teaching and learning are made possible. For example, this can be compared with the medical profession, in which several other professional groups are involved in the preparations ahead of the doctor's meeting with the patient. These can include receptionists, nurses and laboratory assistants. The doctor's meeting with the patient is structured in a way that aims to place greater focus on the patient's problem and give them the opportunity to see more patients. Furthermore, professions that deal with adults can expect their patients or clients to remain loyal to the established, profession-specific structure.

Schools are, of course, organised according to a certain structure. However, the fact that there are a large number of pupils, who are young, have varied needs and different attitudes to being forced to be there, requires the teacher to exercise leadership; leadership they often have to master alone. Consequently, student teachers are not required simply to develop their knowledge of the subject, their didactic proficiency and their interpersonal skills, but must also develop a type of leadership that forms the basis of their ability to practice their profession. This study uses interviews to investigate student teacher's perceptions regarding leadership in the classroom – what it encompasses, what is required and which problems they predict will arise in future.

Previous research

Media and political interest in schools often focuses on teachers' failings in terms of creating a calm classroom environment. This can easily lead to simplistic conclusions about what

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constitutes effective leadership and expectations regarding effective techniques for resolving complex circumstances (Cochran-Smith, 2015). The public debate regarding the school system's failings can be assumed to have an impact on student teachers' notions concerning leadership. Brophy (1988) specified two simplistic and common variants with regard to student teachers' notions about what is required of a teacher as a leader. One notion was that leadership consists of discipline and that respect is gained through others being subservient to the teacher's authority. The other notion is characterised by a naive idealism and a romanticised view of human nature, which is why these student teachers underestimated the requirement for leadership. In both cases it is necessary that those who educate teachers repeatedly contribute to ensuring that student teachers' notions of classroom leadership become more nuanced throughout their teacher education.

Jones (2006) conducted a systematic research review concerning student teachers' leadership training. He demonstrated common failings in teacher education programmes. For example, the training led to a much too general and theoretical approach, the students did not develop their ability to manage seriously disruptive behaviour and they were not prepared for teaching in multicultural environments. He also pointed out that the university lecturers who taught student teachers lack practical experience of what is required in terms of leadership in the contemporary classroom. (See also Bru, Stephens & Torsheim, 2002; Colnerud, Karlsson, & Szklarski, 2008).

Teachers' classroom leadership is generally thought to be an area that is neglected in teacher education in many countries. This is in spite of the fact that many studies show that the ability to lead pupils' learning is of vital importance to their well-being, motivation and learning, and to the length of time the teacher remains in the profession (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006; van Tartwijk & Hammerness, 2011; Emmer & Sabornie, 2014). In those cases where the teacher education programme does address the issue of teacher leadership, the training often involves learning from books, supplemented with the odd seminar, but without the opportunity for practical leadership training. For this reason, the journal Teaching Education published a special edition in 2011 on classroom management (CM), which presented current research regarding how teacher education in various different countries addressed CM. Among the articles there were examples of how student teachers can be offered training that provides them with an opportunity to develop integrated leadership (van Tartwijk, Veldman, & Verloop, 2011).

What's more, the same journal also presented research that attempts to differentiate variables of significance to the teacher's leadership and which should therefore be part of the training that the student teacher receives. Wubbels (2011) carried out an extensive review of the relevant research and identified six different approaches to CM. Based on the question "what preparations does a newly qualified teacher need to make", he demonstrates that teachers who succeed best with regard to leadership use actions taken from all of these six approaches. These are of a general nature. He highlights aspects such

as the fact that successful leadership distinguishes itself through a focus on learning rather than a noise-free atmosphere, a personal acceptance of students, a good sense of humour and frequently offering students helpful suggestions (Wubbels, 2011). This is more about the teacher's approach, their attitude, than the techniques employed. Wubbels' conclusion is that student teachers must learn to "use actions appropriate at a particular time in a particular classroom" (p. 128).

As is the case with Jones (2006), Wubbels (2011) does not support an instrumentalistic or technical view of how student teachers can develop their leadership skills. Instead, Wubbels suggests that student teachers should be prepared so that they can themselves choose the best action in relation to the situation in question. Thus it seems that he has confidence in the ability of the student teachers to develop professional judgement. Although he does not himself refer to Aristotle, we can trace his reasoning back to the form of intelligence Aristotle (third century BCE/1967) calls *phronesis*, practical wisdom. This intelligence, which can be treated as a virtue, relies on knowledge other than that of *techne* (craftsmanship) or *episteme* (theory) and implies that the practitioner should be able to choose the right action in a given situation. The right action is one that is both successful and morally just.

Forms of knowledge in professional education

As with other professions that serve people, the practice of teaching is based on several forms of knowledge. Three forms of knowledge appear in discussions concerning professional theory: (a) experiential, (b) academic and (c) procedural.

The assumption on which *experiential* knowledge is based is that practical knowledge results from intuition, familiarity and experience. The practitioners dedicate themselves to this subconsciously and spontaneously, without the need for guidance, monitoring or control (Rolf, 2006). *Academic* knowledge consists of theories, patterns and models that are relevant to the role the profession has in society. Application of these academic models constitutes a variant of professional knowledge. *Procedural* knowledge is based on the assumption that that practical knowledge relies on some form of standard that differentiate between better and worse performance, without being prescriptive about the details. Rolf (2006) calls these procedures. These comprise an evaluation of one party's performances – they set an ethical, professional standard. The parties involved do not simply adhere to the procedures, instead they can also change and improve them through reflection and metacognitive analyses.

In professions that are practised in large, open social systems, of which the teaching profession is one example, unpredictable events often occur. A teacher must be able to improvise, remain focused on the most important aspects of their job, revise their plans, try another route and make a new decision. Theory alone cannot stand up to the complexity of professional practice as academic models presuppose a delimitation that ignores the complexity of this matter. Experience alone cannot provide a basis for the

quick decisions the teacher is forced to make as every situation is uniquely complex and a conscious evaluation of the various courses of action available is required. Professionals are accorded the discretion of being free to make these decisions on the basis of their own judgement.

A teacher's leadership is an area of expertise that primarily requires procedural knowledge. It is impossible to use a standardised model to direct all the different possible variations of the events that happen in the classroom. These require a variety of different courses of action that are based on an appraisal, a standard, of what is a good performance in the case in question. Mastery of the procedures involves both cognitive and social elements (Rolf, 2006).

Method

This study is part of a larger research project in which we investigate if, and in what way, different types of computer simulations can help Swedish student teachers develop their leadership skills. In order to study the effect of the simulations we have interviewed student teachers before and after they have tried them out. This part of the larger project focuses on the student teachers' perceptions of their forthcoming leadership role that emerged from the interviews. We make no claims here about the effects of simulation or any other effects. In addition, the student teachers had five weeks of teaching practice between the pre-simulation and post-simulation interviews.

The interviews were semi-structured and were based on a simple interview guide. They lasted 20–30 minutes. The participants are self-selected student teachers at the end of their teacher education programme. In this part of the larger project, they consist of 10 student teachers, which thus contributed 20 interviews; their specialisations covered all school years and subjects in compulsory and upper-secondary school. The interviews were conducted by the authors themselves.

Following transcription, the interviews have been analysed using qualitative content analysis in order to discern the various perceptions of leadership found in the participants' comments. These have then been categorised, through which a pattern of related perceptions emerges.

Results

In this part of the larger project we are looking for the variation in the student teachers' perceptions concerning leadership. In general, every student expressed similar perceptions at the pre and post-simulation interview, except in one case where a student teacher clearly expressed a changed outlook on leadership.

Two knowledge models

The student teachers' responses in the interviews are consistent in some respects and differ in others. Two overarching ways of reasoning, two variants, stand out, which we call the *academic model* and the *dilemma model*. The former has a scientific pattern in the sense that there are academic rules to relate to because they are so certain that these should be complied with in accordance with the concept of evidence-based knowledge. The latter presupposes that the teacher uses their judgement within the scope of their professional discretion in order to decide what is a suitable way to act in the current situation. Accordingly, the student teachers express themselves in terms of striking a balance between the two opposing options in their leadership of the classroom.

Leadership according to the academic knowledge model

The academic model is based on the premise that there are ideal leadership strategies and that these are the correct strategies the teacher should use. When the student teachers give expression to this knowledge model, they list, for example, extensive expertise and a large number of desirable skills and abilities that teachers have to develop. Some of these are obvious such as the teacher having the requisite knowledge of their subject. Others cannot be said to be backed up by evidence, but are mentioned as though they should be obvious. Sometimes the list is long.

One student gives expression to the academic knowledge model and refers to empirical research concerning successful leadership.

ST: *Sure, it's the authoritarian leadership style that pretty much everyone thinks you have to aim for /.../ you have to have set rules, issue reasonable sanctions, not just set rules yourself, but let the pupils be involved in the decision-making process.*

I: *Does this encourage compliance with the rules?* ST: *I think so. It seems so, research appears to indicate this, in any case.*

In this case, the student has taken in the research presented in the course literature and reproduced the recommended strategy – with some reservations.

The academic knowledge model involves the student teacher having accepted that research has found certain patterns, strategies or models of how teachers have to act in order to achieve successful leadership in the classroom. There is certainly empirical evidence that certain strategies are successful, but hardly any to suggest that this is always the case. A less certain view of what leadership requires emerges in what we are referring to here as the dilemma model.

Leadership according to the dilemma model

The second knowledge model does not involve there being "a correct" strategy that student teachers must learn to use. Instead, the teacher must find the balance between two

positions. Five dilemmas emerge. These can, for example, involve striking a balance between *closeness and distance* or between *democratic goals and knowledge goals*. The dilemma model presupposed that the teacher has the freedom to find the best course of action under the current circumstances – a professional discretion.

The student teachers give expression to a tension between two possible action strategies that are both justified, but where the balance between them being dependent on the context and the situation itself. In contrast to the academic knowledge model, which is based on the premise that there is academic evidence to support certain viewpoints, the dilemma model allows for the teacher to use their judgement in each individual case.

I. Authority, distance and domination versus being personable

This dilemma involves having control of the class and what is happing in the classroom. Authority, distance and domination are necessary elements, but the teacher will find it easier to get the pupils to follow them if they also display their personable side. However, the distance to the pupils must not be so great that it harms the contact between teacher and pupils.

I normally leave quite a big distance /.../ and I sometimes feel I need to relax a bit more, but it's easier, of course, to gradually offer a little more of yourself.

The pupils' provocations are brought to the fore in this theme. This concerns pupils who question the teacher's right to impose work on them, disruptive pupils and pupils who are passive and do not do their work.

One student teacher discusses the pros and cons of the various courses of action available.

I don't think it's worth getting into a fight /.../you get boxed into a corner if you do as you don't have much to work with /.../ what I try to do is to maintain a good attitude and not take anything too personally, and maybe concentrate instead on the good I'm doing.

Using your authority to control what the pupils are doing is to exercise your power. The student teacher describes their caution in, on the one hand, accepting provocations targeting their role as a teacher and, on the other, stamping their authority on proceedings, since this can jeopardise the good relationships.

II. Creating relationships versus not too deep, not too private

This deals with creating a climate in the classroom that is socially safe for both teacher and pupils. An environment like this reduces the resistance that is often inherent on the part of the pupils, especially when faced with a demanding subject.

After all, you're there for their benefit, not to boss them around. /.../ You have to be able to be yourself with them. You can't be too private, you have to be there as a person, not

just a teacher.

This dilemma, finding the right balance between establishing a close relationship and not being too private, is thought to worry many student teachers. This difficulty is described by one student teacher as follows:

That's what we're trying to work out, how to find the balance. On the one hand, personal leadership appeals to me – getting closer to the kids and being able to help and support them. This is something that appeals to me, at the same time as being able to keep your distance because you may need to distance yourself from them in order to grade or assess them. /.../ if you've opened up to them too much, you can also make yourself very vulnerable.

One student teacher who was very sure of their attitude with regard to the balance between distance and close relationship in the pre-simulation interview made it clear in the post- simulation interview that she had re-evaluated her position. In the pre-simulation interview, she was certain that she would keep her distance from the pupils "I am not a psychologist or counsellor". In the post-simulation interview, which takes place following a period of teaching practice, she says, without being asked: "I have really changed my opinion there, a lot actually". She explains:

When I noticed (paid attention to, author's note) the pupils, I actually got quite a lot back in return as well /.../ you see through their body language and expressions when they're upset and it helped to simply ask them how they were feeling, and she started to cry and we had never talked to each other and it was enough to say 'yes, but you don't need to do so much today' and then I felt that she listened to me next time we met, because I'd noticed her before.

This student teacher changed the balancing point between distance and closeness in her contact with the pupil.

Student teachers consider the value of getting close to the pupils, but they weight this up against the risk of this closeness creating problems when they have to exercise their authority, especially when allocating grades.

III. Regarding all pupils as individuals versus leading a collective

The ambition that all pupils feel the teacher treats them as an individual is emphasised in many comments. At the same time, the teacher has to lead a collective and keep the class together as a group. These two qualities appear to be somewhat incompatible. A focus on the group is hard to combine with a simultaneous focus on an individual pupil. Nevertheless, this is what student teachers would like to be able to achieve.

You must be able to switch your attention from the group to the individual, which is quite

hard, I think.

Another student describes the competition between the needs of individual pupils and the rest of the class in terms of getting the teacher's attention. It is risky to shift the focus away from the class and, furthermore, it can be to the detriment of the learning of the majority. At the same time, certain pupils must be given individual help in order to progress. Student teachers have realised that this is a choice they must make in the moment, and something that crops up again and again.

IV. Well-prepared versus flexible

Another dilemma that requires balance is that between well-prepared, structured and clear leadership and flexible leadership that involves the teacher being prepared to react to the unexpected and change their teaching accordingly.

The ability to read the situation, to be prepared and also present in the moment, to be well-prepared but able to improvise.

Many students stress the necessity of having a plan, being clear and being goal-oriented. A confused teacher who appears unsure of what the lesson is about, and who doesn't have their papers in order worries the pupils and does not instil confidence in their leadership. At the same time, the majority of student teachers realised that they cannot adhere to rigidly to their plans. Their reasoning can be interpreted as expressing how they want to have a well thought- out plan, but also be prepared to adapt to unforeseen events or serious changes to the climate in the classroom.

V. Knowledge goals versus democratic goals

One dilemma mentioned concerns the choice between knowledge goals and democratic goals. One of them comments:

Being there to achieve something and at the same time /.../ to mould them into good people.

The manner in which the student teachers discuss the dilemma between knowledge and having an impact on values suggests that they are not sure what importance they are to place on democratic values relative to the knowledge goals.

In conclusion we would like to point out that the five dilemmas that emerged from our analysis of 20 interviews with the student teachers can be considered as an initial stage of an ongoing study which will involve interviews with a further 20 student teachers.

Discussion

The student teachers who participated in this study have much more nuance and

developed perceptions of their future leadership role than those described by Brophy (1988). The two dichotomous categories that he formulated are simplistic in comparison to these student teachers currently involved in (Swedish) teacher education programmes.

The student teachers who give expression to the dilemma model do not appear to be looking for an academic knowledge model; an evidence-based method for classroom leadership. Their reasoning can instead be interpreted as their attempt to strike a balance between different qualities, with the unique situation determining which alternative they choose.

These student teachers are prepared for the complexity of a teacher's leadership role and are clear that they will be making important decisions on their own, sometimes without much time for reflection. Consequently they need to use their own judgement, which is consistent with Wubbels' (2011) conclusion that they "use actions appropriate at a particular time in a particular classroom". The discretion afforded to their profession gives them the necessary leeway (Rolf, 2006). Consequently, these student teachers are embarking on their future profession with an *identified insecurity* that is already in place.

The few student teachers who give expression to an academic knowledge model in which certain ideal strategies take priority over others are in danger of discovering the limitation of these recommendations. This is especially the case when they are faced with complicated situations in which they are immediately forced to improvise.

In the light of the results of this study, it appears that a contemporary teacher education programme should contribute by providing a language and a terminology for analysing a broad repertoire of dilemmas, rather than with methods that convey an *imaginary security* with regard to leadership in the classroom.

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