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On the complexities of educating student teachers: teacher educators’ views on contemporary challenges to their profession

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ABSTRACT
Recent research emphasises significant interconnections between teacher educators’ normative beliefs, their relations with student teachers and their teaching methods. In an attempt to better understand how teacher educators perceive of their work task, interviews were conducted with twelve Early Childhood teacher educators at a Swedish University. Four dimensions are in focus: (1) What in your work situation are you most satisfied with? (2) Describe your approach to students. (3) Describe any personal or professional dilemmas you may have experienced. (4) How do you think we can best maintain quality in teacher education? Results of the study show that teacher educators’ professional development is largely determined by intrinsic motivation. Positive aspects relate to feelings of self-esteem, nurturing meaningful relationships, and caring for students; negative aspects relate to concerns about a heavy workload, professional ambiguity and a lack of time for scholarly pursuits. Developing a professional identity involves a conscious choice of pedagogical methods (teaching), self-cultivation and sharing of knowledge through research (scholarship), and administrative responsibilities (service). The complexities and challenges involved in being a teacher educator are many. Understanding how teacher educators’ normative beliefs influence their work and relationships is an essential component for future research on teacher education professionalism.

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Introduction
‘Do we create space for processes?’ a teacher educator wondered during our interview. Processes are essential to building relationships, and as Vanassche & Kelchtermans (2014, p. 118) contend, ‘teacher educators cannot but be in relation with student teachers.’ Furlong, J., Barton, L., Miles, S., Whiting, C. & Whitty, G (2000, 36) emphasise the fact that ‘… what student teachers learn during their initial training is as much influenced by who is responsible for teaching them as it is by the content of the curriculum’. For Smith (2017, 641),

the most important lesson I have learned as a teacher, teacher educator, researcher, and leader is the fact that the quality of our work depends on the relationships we establish with people whether these are students, respondents, or colleagues. It is a question of respect and
trust, empathy, and ethics that are at the heart of the work of educators. When strong relationships have been created, learning opportunities are endless.

Teacher educators can be defined as ‘all those who teach or coach (student) teachers with the aim of supporting their professional development’ (Lunenberg et al. 2014, 6). Within Higher Education, teaching and learning is concerned with the teacher’s ability to help develop students’ capacities to plan, implement and evaluate teaching based on (1) the teacher’s actions (2) a human relationship (3) content (4) the intentions of the teacher (Hansson 2016, 11). At the same time, current literature suggests that ‘while teacher educators perform a multitude of complex roles, they receive minimal preparation or possibilities for professional development to fulfil these roles. As a result, they need to acquire relevant knowledge and skills after taking on the position of teacher educators’ (MacPhail et al. 2018, 1).

According to Czerniawski (2018, 9), ‘Professional identities form a key part of teacher educators’ ways of understanding the world of teacher education as well as the ways in which they enact their beliefs, values and principles through work. The exploration of identity is therefore part of a wider commitment to promoting the understanding and improvement of teacher education in general’. However, as he also stipulates, ‘defining teacher educators as an occupational group and making generalisations about the work they do is challenging, not least because the enterprise of teacher education is often understood differently within and across members of this group locally, nationally and internationally’ (ibid.). At the same time, ‘being a teacher educator is fundamentally an emotional endeavour and subject to the powerful ethics of care that many teacher educators would have brought with them from their former roles as teachers’ (ibid., p. 12).

Alexandersson 2016, 10) believes that an important aspect of teacher identity and of being a good teacher educator is the willingness to continuously improve oneself. More specifically,

an ideal and creative learning environment can be described as one where students interact with knowledgeable teachers who provide them with intellectual stimulation and where teaching is designed with respect to the different needs student teachers have. Teachers convey a passion for their subject and systematically stimulate students’ willingness to learn. Students are given good opportunities to interact with their teachers and are able to engage in research projects early in their education. They are also given relevant feedback based on their efforts and achievements and are examined in stimulating ways towards greater understanding.

Although teacher education is a central element in almost any educational policy discussion, Kelchtermans, Smith, and Vanderlinde (2017, 130) found ‘that surprisingly little attention has been given to the main actors in teacher education – the teacher educators and their professionalism.’ They contend that ‘teacher educators’ work and responsibilities are unique and teacher educators’ professionalism should be acknowledged and conceptualised’ (ibid.). Along the same lines, Livingston (2014, 218) argues that ‘in recognising the importance of teachers in relation to learners it should follow that recognition also needs to be given to the importance of those who support them in learning how to teach’. She writes:

it will remain difficult to recognise and value ‘hidden teacher educators’ without further clarification by them and others of the roles and responsibilities they hold. Openness of all providers of teacher education to making explicit and embracing similarities and differences in teacher educators’ identities may offer greater opportunities for teacher educators, as
a collective group, to have confidence to represent themselves as an occupational group in ways that are trusted, valued and respected (ibid., p. 229).

In most Member States, government policy on the quality requirements for teacher educators, or on their academic and professional development, does not exist or is underdeveloped (European Commission 2013, 7). The Commission (ibid., p 7) recognises the fact that teacher educators ‘play a key role in introducing innovation into schools. And they undertake the key research that develops our understanding of teaching and learning’. Teacher educators are thus key players in supporting teachers in raising student attainment. Furthermore, if ‘teachers are the most important in-school factor influencing the quality of students’ learning, the competences of those who educate and support teachers must be of the highest order’ (ibid., p. 54). Despite this, ‘teacher educators do not always get the support and challenge they need, for example in terms of their education and professional development’ (ibid., p. 4). These are serious issues that need to be addressed and dealt with, both nationally and internationally.

Another important aspect has to do with the fact that teacher educators (unlike members of other professions), have multiple professional identities: ‘they may think of themselves primarily as school teachers, as teachers in higher education, as researchers, or as teachers of teachers – or they may identify with several of these roles simultaneously’ (ibid., p. 8). Consequently, ‘teacher educators can have varying levels of commitment to teacher education’ (ibid.).

The European Commission (2015) presents the following three key principles (among others) that are related to the transformation or modernisation of Initial Teacher Education (ITE): (1) Teachers should be able to develop and maintain a mindset and a practical approach which are based on reflection and inquiry, and focused on ongoing professional development. (2) Initial Teacher Education needs to be considered as a starting point for this ongoing process of professional development. It lays the foundation for this mindset and this approach. (3) School leaders and providers of Continuing Professional Development (including ITE providers) have key roles to play in creating opportunities and environments for practice-oriented and research-based professional development that will strengthen the agency (capacity for action) of teachers for learner-oriented teaching and innovation.

**Teacher educators in international contexts**

Findings from recent research on teacher educators in international contexts show that motivation is predominantly self-initiated, intrinsic and dependent on personal needs. Hindrances such as lack of time and a heavy workload are also common. In an interview study with twenty-five teacher educators from 10 different countries (Van der Klink et al. 2017), one of the main results is that teacher educators seem to have similar concerns, and that their current professional development activities and plans for future development are also quite comparable.

When asked about factors that are encouraging for their own professional development, only ‘a few participants referred to encouraging conditions within their own institute. The vast majority stated that encouragements were strongly related to their own motivation and needs’ (ibid., p. 172). ‘In summary, participants from all countries
mentioned that their professional development was strongly related to their own intrinsic motivation. All participants experienced hindrances relating to lack of time caused by a heavy workload … ’ (ibid., p. 173). The authors conclude that teacher educators from different countries ‘are perhaps more alike than we had expected … ’ (ibid., p. 175).

In a study comprising sixty-one teacher educators from six different European countries (MacPhail et al. 2018, 5), it was ‘consistently clear across all countries that teacher educators’ professional development was predominantly self-initiated. Independent of background, enacting teacher education was different to what individuals had experienced before, with a level of vagueness and ambiguity on what was expected from them.’ Based on the conception of teacher educators’ roles as emerging from three major components (teaching/pedagogy, research/scholarship, administrative/service), results show that although ‘some teacher educators expressed joy for having such a multifaceted job’, the ‘majority of teacher educators we interviewed felt that the three components interfered with each other and that the end result was work overload and lack of time for participation in professional development activities’ (MacPhail et al., ibid., p. 11). This is confirmed by Czerniawski et al.(2017,8) who write that ‘ … time is consistently noted as one of the most important professional learning needs for teacher educators. The tasks most frequently identified as requiring more time were related to engaging in scholarly activity such as reading research, conducting research, academic writing and thinking’.

Maaranen et al. (2019, 9) identified eight themes in their study comprising fifteen Finnish teacher educators. In order of significance these are: students; research and research-based education; my subject or specialisation; community and collaboration; important work; values; interaction and enthusiasm. At the same time, given ‘the challenges of being too busy in one’s work, having too heavy a workload, having too many demands and unclear job descriptions, it is highly understandable that some professionals were not precisely clear about what was expected of them, especially at an early stage of their career, nor was it completely apparent how they fitted into the bigger picture’ (ibid., p. 14).

Referring to a Pan-European study of 1158 teacher educators, Czerniawski, Guberman, and MacPhail (2017) found indications that there is a strong desire by teacher educators to be exposed to alternative ways of educating teachers, to learn about national and international developments in teacher education policy and to contribute to teacher education research literature. Thus, and in line with recent research, ‘teacher educators’ personal goals and commitments are ‘central to any conceptualisation of teacher educator professionalism (and development)’, (Vanassche and Kelchtermans 2016, 366).

**Theoretical considerations**

Aspects regarding students, teachers and learning in any given educational situation are incorporated into what Olofsson (2013) calls ‘a teaching contract’. This is described as being a mutual, presupposed and relatively stable agreement between students and teachers on the aims and content of the teaching programme. In other words, a system of partly taken for granted and partly contradictory conceptions, expectations and norms for what characterises a good education. Of interest is not primarily the situation as such but also the process whereby such reciprocity is established and emerges. In sum it is the
interplay between expectations, approaches, negotiations and a fixed institutional form that are central to the concept (see Malm 2017).

Murray’s findings (2014, p. 19) indicate that ‘teacher educators’ constructions of professionalism are relational; they are not simply responsive to the shifts at the macro level of the field, neither are they determined solely by the institutional setting, nor subject only to individual biographies and practices. Rather, professionalism is influenced by the complex interrelationships between these entities, formed through a complex web of relationships among the educators as individuals, their workplaces, and the national context.’ Or, as described by Sachs (2016, 423), ‘… professionalism is a practice and concept that is plastic, emotive and is constantly being challenged and changed as a result of internal and external pressures.’

According to Vanassche and Kelchtermans (2014, 118), relationships (processes) ‘are always embedded in the context of a particular teacher training institute, that is characterised by particular structural (e.g. the available resources, organisational structure, student teacher population) and cultural (shared assumptions about good teacher education) working conditions.’ This process involves an interplay between the teacher educator’s personal views (beliefs, convictions, self-image) and professional role (expectations from the environment).

Professional role is defined by Lunenberg et al (2014, 6) as ‘a personal interpretation of a position based on expectations from the environment and on a systematically organised and transferable knowledge base’ and professional behaviour as ‘behaviour based on a systematically organised and transferable knowledge base expressing the values and norms of the professional community’ (ibid.).

Professional identity can thus be understood as ‘negotiated in a mutually constitutive relationship between the individual actor and the social context. This negotiation is a dynamic process, one that intertwines external suggestions coming from the social context with individuals’ internal experiences as they seek to make sense of themselves and their work’ (Hökkä, Eteläpelto, and Rasku-Puttonen 2012, 84). Doing a good job, i.e. the balance between one’s self-image (‘what I am doing?) and task perception (‘what ought I be doing?’) – constitutes a professional interest (Kelchtermans and Ballet 2002). And, according to Vanassche and Kelchtermans (2016, 357), educators will engage in micropolitical actions (e.g. forms of resistance) when the specific conditions of their work no longer match their ideas.

Relational aspects and emotional dimensions

The personal interpretative framework ‘refers to the set of cognitions and beliefs that operates as a lens through which teacher educators perceive their job situations, give meaning to, and act in them. It can be seen as the always temporary mental sediment of the learning and development processes that span one’s career and result from the socially meaningful interactions between the teacher educator and his/her professional working context’ (Vanassche and Kelchtermans 2014, 118).

Kelchtermans distinguishes between two interrelated domains in the content of the personal interpretative framework: ‘on the one hand the representations of oneself as a teacher educator (professional self-understanding) and on the other hand the personal system of knowledge and beliefs about teaching (subjective educational theory).
Professional self-understanding is composed of five components: self-image, self-esteem, task perception, job motivation, and future perspective’ (ibid.). According to Kelchtermans (2009, 262), self-esteem (as the evaluative component) has to be understood as intertwined with the normative component of self-understanding: task perception. The task perception reflects the fact that teaching and being a teacher is not a neutral endeavour. It implies value-laden choices, moral considerations’ (ibid.). Similarly, the task perception ‘encompasses deeply held beliefs about what constitutes good education, about one’s moral duties and responsibilities in order to do justice to the students. When these deeply held beliefs are questioned (…) teachers feel that they themselves as a person are called into question’ (ibid.).

Kelchtermans (2009, 265) contends that teaching is fundamentally characterised and constituted by vulnerability which he refers to as a pedagogical quality. Vulnerability ‘is not so much to be understood as an emotional state or experience (although the experience of being vulnerable triggers intense emotions), but as a structural characteristic of the profession’. Teacher educators face the same vulnerability as has been identified with teachers. In brief, three elements make up vulnerability in teaching: (1) Teachers working conditions are to a large extent imposed on them (2) All teachers realise that student outcomes are only partially determined by their teaching (3) Even when justification for teachers’ decisions can be explicitly stated, that judgement and decision can always be challenged or questioned. At the same time, ‘it is this capacity to judge, to act and to take responsibility for one’s actions which constitutes a key part of teachers’ professionalism. There is no escape: the particular scholarship of teaching (professionality) demands that one endures this vulnerability’ (ibid., p. 266). Consequently, ‘professional development initiatives should acknowledge this vulnerability as a structural condition of the profession from which there is no escape and include ways for educators to productively cope with this vulnerability’ (Vanassche and Kelchtermans 2016, 365). At the same time as ‘educators’ moral commitment functions as an internal emotional support structure helping them to sustain professional autonomy when confronted with vulnerability’ it also ‘induces internal pressure contributing to the intensification of their work’ (ibid., p. 364).

According to Zembylas (2005), emotion functions as a discursive practice in which emotional expression is productive – that is, it makes individuals into socially and culturally specific persons engaged in complex webs of power relations. Kelchtermans (2009, 269) contends that emotions ‘have to be acknowledged as part of educational practices, driven by moral commitment and care for others for whom one feels responsible. They reflect teachers’ experience of their job situation and commitment and as such constitute one dimension of teachers’ professionalism’. The meaning of emotions ‘is to a large extent relational, socially constructed and reflecting cultural norms as well as power structures’ (Kelchtermans and Deketelaere 2016, 431). They contend that: (1) The emotional is linked to the fundamental relational nature of teaching and therefore of learning to teach. (2) The emotional dimension of becoming a teacher is deeply entwined with the moral, the political as well as the technical (or instrumental) dimensions that characterise teaching and schooling. (3) The emotional dimension in becoming a teacher is closely related to the fact that this learning process also involves one’s self-understanding (sense of ‘self’ or ‘identity’) (ibid., pp. 452). Research on emotions in teacher education would therefore ‘not only contribute to further theory development, but also to the practical agenda of designing and implementing powerful learning opportunities for
student teachers (as well as teacher educators or cooperating teachers’), Kelchtermans and Deketelaere (ibid., p. 455).

**Method**

Interviews lasting between sixty to ninety minutes each were held with twelve Swedish university lecturers and senior lecturers (eight women, four men) working in an Early Childhood Institution. They all work within the same department and their teaching experiences range from one and a half to twenty-one years. Each lecturer was contacted personally, informed about the aims of the study and then asked if he/she wished to participate. All twelve teacher educators consented and the interviews took place in a room at the department. To protect the respondent’s identity no individual names are used in the study (anonymity) and only I as researcher have access to the data (confidentiality).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted, allowing room for extended discussions on questions the lecturers felt to be of particular interest. The initial interview questions were divided into two main categories, those pertaining to the self (teacher educators’ experiences of their work situation), and those pertaining to the students (teacher educators’ interpretations of students’ evaluations and experiences). In this article, the following four questions have been selected in order to shed light on ways in which teacher educators perceive of their work task: (1) What in your work situation are you most satisfied with? (2) Describe your approach to students. (3) Describe any personal or professional dilemmas you may have experienced. (4) How do you think we can best maintain quality in teacher education?

Interviews were transcribed and qualitative data analysis conducted. Recurrent themes and specific characteristics pertaining to answers given in response to each question were coded and categorised. Building on content, attitudes, ideas and experiences, thematic frameworks were identified within which individual and group patterns (key events) emerged. Description of the data is presented in the next section, where the lecturers’ answers to the four questions are accounted for.

**Results**

**What in your work situation are you most satisfied with?**

For most of these lecturers, their greatest satisfaction comes from the daily authentic meetings with students and colleagues: ‘collaboration with my colleagues’; meetings with students, identifying and attending to their needs’. Having a sense of autonomy is also important: ‘when I can influence and plan my own time’; and ‘when I can connect my writing to my teaching, questions that are of interest to me and of relevance to students’.

For one lecturer it is important ‘to follow students all the way through their practice’. Another enjoys the challenge of ‘involving students in unpredictable discussions, not just as a teacher, when relationships enhance wonder’. Building a professional relationship is described by one as ‘using my own competences as a teacher through lecturing, teaching, practice and meetings with students’. Another lecturer enjoys being ‘a leader, directing and controlling, teaching and influencing’.
Describe your approach to students

Maintaining good relationships with the students are essential to enhancing these teacher educators’ sense of self-satisfaction and meaningful job fulfilment. One lecturer says: ‘I try to get students to relax; anxiety and worry are counterproductive to teaching and one’s self-image. I dare to be myself, with my faults and shortcomings. I have humour and try to encourage students to think for themselves. It’s important that students have confidence in me.’ Another describes being a role-model and a partner in discussions. ‘I feel close to students; I listen to them; they should be able to influence’. However, ‘if we always think of students as competent, there’s a risk that we overrate their abilities, competences and educational level. I want to challenge as well as include students. They need to dare to challenge themselves as well’.

Another stresses the importance of being respected and creating a good atmosphere with room for dialogue: ‘I am pleasant but not too personal’. We need to’ speak in a language that students understand and not sit on high horses. Go deeper into theories. Provide tools for them to be able to read the literature. Break down into entities that which they find difficult. Encourage a sense of wonder, so that all can be included’.

One lecturer stresses the importance of being clear from the outset: ‘I don’t think the students understand what a university education implies. They just want a job. We have to be clearer from the beginning. They haven’t reflected over the concept of professionalism. Courses are often based on what students think is fun and what we think they want’.

Another lecturer tries to be ‘as open and honest as I can. I don’t want to fool them into thinking that we have an equal relationship; but no power-play. When I fail them, it is not to go against, but to help, to get them to understand. To assist, give advice. I prefer discussions in smaller groups.’ There are differences in supervision because it is relational; ‘some students need upbringing’. ‘I am clear, but not negotiable. I try not to judge, but try to see the whole person’. In contrast, another lecturer feels that there should be room for negotiation: ‘Every mentor group creates its own climate. I would prefer to follow the same students throughout their education. I try to be a role-model, creating and encouraging relationships. Seeing every individual and taking them through different perspectives. There is no fixed framework. There should be space for negotiation’. However, in trying to be responsive and humble, ‘sometimes I want too much good for the students, so that it almost backfires at me!’

Describe any personal or professional dilemmas you may have experienced

For almost every lecturer in this group assessing grades is described as being a real ordeal. The fact that examination texts increase all the time results in too many texts to read and too much administration. Different interpretations create dilemmas mostly when students are dissatisfied with their grades. ‘We need to communicate if there are disagreements, I don’t want to feel myself taken advantage of. I’m not perfect and have to be able to motivate my decisions’.

Another lecturer describes feeling insufficient at the outset, ‘trying to cultivate my naïve humanism. Today I feel great freedom in my meetings with students and limited loyalty to my colleagues.’ There is a tendency towards instrumentalism; ‘sometimes I feel I am fooling the students.’ Problems are also experienced when practice mentors and
students don’t get along: ‘I try to be fair to both parties, which is often frustrating’. ‘Negotiating is problematic; I try to get them to understand their own responsibility’. ‘Some students exert themselves but it isn’t enough’. Another lecturer experiences frustration when there is resistance from students due to the fact that they are very ‘examination-fixed’.

One lecturer exclaims: ‘Assessment really stresses me! I don’t have the energy to keep on controlling, and have felt exhausted – even panic. What is required of me?’ The fact that students are often in large groups and seldom in smaller seminars hampers communication and is considered by one of the lecturers to be a serious general drawback in teacher education. Another lecturer feels it to be problematic with ‘students who I do not think are suitable to be preschool teachers. Not only in regard to knowledge, but also personality-wise’. Student evaluations are another source of frustration: ‘they are only here a few hours a week, but still they criticise’. Another lecturer describes tensions and discrepancies that exist between academia and school, and how we tend to speak about different things. In general, the lecturer feels that there seems to be a lack of confidence in teachers’ competences.

**How do you think we can best maintain quality in teacher education?**

When asked this question, the majority of the lectures choose to raise issues they feel to be a hinder in being able to maintain what they consider to be quality in teacher education. That is, issues they feel stand in the way of their being able to realise their intentions in satisfactory ways.

It is apparent that there are tensions between the two teacher categories (lecturers and senior lecturers). One lecturer describes the situation as one where ‘we are completely divided’, adding: ‘we can have similar competences and qualities even without a degree. I feel underutilised’. There is also bitterness in that ‘what I do in the courses will not continue when I stop working. I’m not a writer, I’m a doer’.

Another complains of lack of communication and the need for continuous, on-going dialogue. ‘We need to have a common idea of what we consider to be of central importance.’ Another feels that there is a general lack of teacher support and that too much time is spent on administration. There are too many bad compromises: ‘it doesn’t feel as if there’s a natural progression; instead there are lots of repetitions.’ There is also reference to the fact that ‘there are teachers here that do not know how things operate in practice. We need to invite practitioners to come and speak to the students. Some students don’t know what it means to be professional; they haven’t understood the connection between theory and professionalism’.

As formulated by another lecturer: ‘The students love the practical. That’s reality. Not all are capable of seeing and understanding the connections. They are unable to examine the self. They have their opinions, their pride, and feel that they have been educated. Many are certain they will succeed’. These same sentiments are described by another lecturer: ‘Students don’t understand the benefits of the theoretical parts; practice school is the world they live in. Two parallel tracks. They have received a little bit of many things during their education. I think they feel quite prepared; they just need to assemble experiences.’
A lecturer wonders: ‘How do we recognise individual contributions? Too many students glide through. We mustn’t be too kind’. There is also the realisation that although students are driven by their own motivations, the ‘significance of context is perhaps not understood until the course is over’. Another lecturer feels that ‘one needs to find something positive in each student, something good, that one can like. Relationships are important in order to develop as a teacher. But there is no time to build up a climate for learning if one changes student groups in every course’.

**Analysis**

The teacher educators in this study attain their greatest satisfaction through authentic meetings with students i.e. nurturing meaningful relationships (see Malm 2004, 2008, 2009, 2011, 2018). In line with Vanassche and Kelchtermans (2014, 121), the ‘relationship these teacher educators sought to establish with their student teachers resembled the envisaged qualities of the relationship between the student teachers and their future students; not just professionals to train, but persons to support in their full development as human beings. For the teacher educators of “pedagogues”, the personal and professional self were seen as intertwining. Furthermore, the attention to the “whole person” expressed a concern for student teachers’ emotional well-being’. These teacher educators derived a strong sense of positive self-esteem and personal meaningfulness from caring for their student teachers. In other words, the personal and appreciative relationship they strived for was at the same time also personally rewarding in terms of job satisfaction (ibid.).

For the teacher educators in this study, satisfaction is also linked to experiencing a certain amount of autonomy, as well as being able to connect writing to teaching, i.e. combining personal and academic interests through scholarly pursuits. Loughran (2011, 288) believes that developing a scholarly identity ‘is important in shaping understandings of the value and place of teacher educators and their work in the academy. It situates teacher educators as more than just users of others’ knowledge, it establishes them as sophisticated producers of knowledge in ways that recast how that knowledge is conceived and used in teaching about teaching, and that influence how the work of teacher educators might be conceived in the future’. A conceptualisation of teaching, he asserts, ‘must go way beyond doing teaching and begin to embrace the world of ideas, theories, research and practice that matter in shaping a pedagogy of teacher education’ (ibid., p. 284). He concludes that being a scholar of teacher education ‘is something to be actively sought and developed by teachers of teaching, it offers a way of moving beyond naïve conceptions of teaching as telling and learning as listening so that teacher preparation is seen and experienced as an educative experience, not a training programme’ (ibid., p. 289).

In their approach to students, these teacher educators all mention the importance of maintaining good relationships. Respect, clarity, striving to be a role-model and demonstrating good leadership qualities are also emphasised. It is also evident that methods of supervision vary due to relational aspects, e.g. one lecturer is ‘clear, but not negotiable’; another feels that ‘there should be room for negotiation’.

For the majority of teacher educators in this group, assessing grades is an ordeal, resulting in feelings of stress, frustration and insufficiency: ‘What is required of me?’ The predominance of large student groups is considered by one of the lecturers to hamper
communication and is seen as a serious drawback to teacher education as a whole. Other dilemmas faced include negative student evaluations (often felt to be unfair criticism) as well as how to handle students one considers to be ‘unsuitable’ for the profession. Tensions between academia and school are also mentioned as being difficult to cope with; one of the lecturer’s remarks that there seems to be an overriding public lack of confidence for teachers’ competences.

As Vanassche and Kelchtermans (2016, 363) contend, ‘teacher educators need the strength of their self-esteem and a strong belief in their professional competence to productively manage vulnerability as an opportunity for professional development. However, positive self-esteem remains fragile, fluctuates over time, and needs to be re-established time and again. Social recognition (or the lack thereof) from significant others (including students and leadership) is a vital resource explaining why teacher educators at times show a strong desire to explore new approaches and investigate beliefs, while seeking to make themselves invulnerable, immune to the possibility of critique, at other times.’

In answer to the question ‘How do you think we can best maintain quality in education?’ almost every lecturer raises issues they feel stand in the way of this attainment. Tensions between teacher categories (lecturers and senior lecturers) are experienced as a barrier to effective collaboration. Other difficulties experienced include a general lack of teacher support, teacher educators that are ‘out of date’ and a heavy administrative workload. Too much repetition hampers natural progression, when it comes to course content for student teachers.

According to these lecturers, many student teachers do not understand what ‘professionalism’ implies; they are unable to understand the connections between practice and theory and are unable ‘to examine the self’. As emphasised by Smith (2011, 347): ‘Without diminishing the need for ensuring that all teachers-to-be are knowledgeable and can perform adequately in the classroom, there is so much in teaching that needs to be handled with practical wisdom. The context and situation determine what decisions should be made and what actions ought to be taken.’

There is a concern that too many students are allowed to ‘glide through’ their education: ‘How do we recognise individual contributions?’ When student groups are continually changing there is little time for building relationships. On the whole, most of these lecturers believe that the students themselves feel quite prepared and are satisfied with their education, although the ‘significance of context is perhaps not understood until the course is over’.

**Concluding remarks**

The impact that personal dispositions has on the professional development and practice of teacher educators and ways in which normative beliefs influence and affect their relations with student teachers, cannot be underrated. Studies clearly demonstrate that teacher educators’ professional development is strongly related to their own intrinsic motivation. In this article, positive dimensions have included issues related to self-esteem, meaningfulness and caring; negative dimensions have included issues related to a heavy workload, lack of time and professional ambiguity. Significantly, results from recent research show that teacher educators seem to have similar concerns, and that current
professional development activities are also quite comparable, even in international contexts. Overall, and in alignment with previous research, results from this study demonstrate that:

- Teacher educators’ professional development is strongly related to their own intrinsic motivation.
- Teacher educators derive a strong sense of positive self-esteem and personal meaningfulness from caring for their student teachers.
- Teacher educators have a heavy workload and often experience ambiguity in regard to what is expected of them.
- Teacher educators have insufficient time in which to engage in scholarly activities (reading, researching, academic thinking and writing).

According to Vanassche and Kelchtermans (2014, 125), a close examination of teacher educators’ normative beliefs is essential to future research; this is ‘because ‘teacher educators’ reflexive positioning of themselves is a crucial factor in understanding the rationale of their practices, as well as their understanding of student teachers’ learning about teaching. The ways in which teacher educators perceive their task determine how they approach the relation with their student teachers and the specific pedagogies chosen to teach them.’

If Initial Teacher Training is to be considered a starting point for an ongoing process of professional development based on reflection and inquiry (The European Commission 2015), and given the fact that teacher educators’ personal goals and commitments are central to any conceptualisation of teacher educator professionalism, it follows that the professional development of teacher educators ‘demands an attitude and self-positioning in the tradition of the “reflective practitioner.”’ As Kelchtermans argues:

… without deep reflection, one’s personal scholarship cannot be developed, nor the scholarship of teaching in general (as a publicly reviewed set of knowledge to build on). In order to achieve this, teacher education as well as in-service training need to provide spaces to engage in discomforting dialogues. Perhaps the most fundamental contribution of the narrative and biographical perspective to this lies in the fact that it provides a different language that allows for the non-technical dimensions of teaching and being a teacher to be conceptualised, talked about, shared and critically challenged. Moral dilemmas, emotional experiences and political struggles can find a place there and thus be acknowledged as fundamental to the experience of teaching and to the scholarship of teaching (2009, 270).

This article highlights the significance that meaningful interactions has for professional development. At the same time, results indicate that teacher educators also struggle with professional ambiguity. Teacher education professionalism involves personal insight and a conscious choice of pedagogical methods (teaching), self-cultivation and sharing of knowledge through research (scholarship), and administrative responsibilities (service). The complexities and challenges are many. We need to understand much more about the reflexive positioning and normative beliefs of teacher educators. Ways in which teacher educators perceive of, and manage their work tasks determine the quality of our teacher training programmes. As so aptly described by Kreber (2010, 172): ‘The question of interest is not only whether I can create a unique identity as teacher from within myself (rather than in response to other people’s, or external, expectations), but also whether
there might be a way of being a teacher that is uniquely my own while at the same time linked, and committed, to something significant that lies beyond my self.

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**References**


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