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FULL PAPER

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Title of presentation:

**Empowering Student Teachers in Practical Settings**

Abstract:

Educational systems have to respond to the worldwide change to prepare students for the challenging tasks of a complex and uncertain world. Decentralization and school autonomy as well as the accountability for outcomes are answers to local and global needs. School empowerment implies teachers that take responsibility for the improvement of teaching and learning. Accordingly, teacher training is supposed to qualify student teachers to cope with growing charges. The article invites to reflect the empowering of student teachers in practical settings. How may they strengthen through classroom experiences? The paper focuses on the effects of practical settings and invites to discuss an innovative approach.

Target Audience:

Researchers, Practitioners and policy makers (teacher training)

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### **1. Future prospects of teacher training**

The far reaching social and economic changes throughout the whole world are significant challenges for every national education system. Schools are asked to deal with changes evoked by worldwide crises and to make students ready for a labour market that is becoming

more international, competitive and flexibility requiring. Schools have to consider the uncertainty of future, the complexity of lives, the diversity of family backgrounds and the different plans students have for their lives. Students have to learn to deal with challenges that occur with deep going change. Young people have to identify their own resources and to look for innovative solutions to problems on the individual and on the social level. They have to be equipped with the knowledge and the skills to meet challenges in a rapidly changing world. There is a big pressure for innovation on the school systems. Teachers are requested not only to foster school achievement but also to sustain school improvement and to provide student learning support. There are high expectations towards teachers' work.

Decentralisation, school autonomy and the accountability for outcomes on the system level as well as new approaches to teaching and learning on the classroom level are measures to transform educational systems (Pont, Nusche & Moorman, 2008). The autonomy of schools seems the answer to challenges of worldwide change. Schools are considered as capable of giving their own answers to problems that occur. The decentralisation of educational systems implies the responsibility of each school for its outcomes. In this sense decentralisation means school empowerment. Schools are considered as organisations that may improve in a self-directed process. They have to take responsibilities including budgeting and networking with local educational authorities. Schools have to open towards systematic and appropriate innovations that encourage students to learn. Implementing change in schools is based on a broad knowledge of change principles and tools to foster the change process (Hall & Hord, 2006). Undoubtedly this process also needs system leadership (Rahm & Schröck, 2005; Hopkins & Higham, 2007; Penlington, Kington & Day, 2008). Educational research has pointed out that leadership qualities are very important for successful schools but we know also that leadership in learning organisations is a complex task which should be distributed under several experts. Good schools are not only established by one person but by a leadership team (Lewis & Murphy, 2008). An organisation needs the commitment of all members to become a learning organisation (Wenger, 1999). The power of the whole professional community seems the basis of reasonable action in uncertain times.

Teachers need to provide individual student learning support (diagnosis, feedback etc.) and they have to promote school progress. As members of a professional community they act as resources to each other. They should share their visions and new ideas. Teachers are invited to help each other to learn and to take mutual accountability for best practice (Wenger, 1999). Reorganizing the school structure and taking responsibility for school improvement seem challenging goals for a profession that is accustomed to hierarchy and to solitary work. Team playing in professional communities must be learned. Instead of classroom perspectives teachers need to orientate towards the improvement of the whole school. Each and every member of the community should use their strengths to make schools better. This seems a paradigm shift for the teaching profession.

Innovative teacher training concepts must respond to this shift. It should empower future teachers to take accountability for school improvement. It should encourage the members of the professional community to use their capacities and to cooperate with others. Communication skills and the readiness to cooperate are prerequisites to school improvement. Teacher training concepts should accentuate these attitudes and they should provide new teaching practices. Teaching standards indicate ways to increase professionalism even though there is a gap between theory and practice (Oser & Oelkers, 2001). Accordingly student teacher training is also obliged to follow signs of the times. It has to empower the novices. Besides, these practical settings should encourage student teachers to cope with problems. The deficit-orientated approaches in teacher training concepts (criticism of lacking skills) do

not seem appropriate any longer. The first experiences in practical settings should encourage future teachers.

Assuming that in changing times the relation between teacher education and teacher acting (understandings, beliefs, attitudes and knowledge) is tight, there is a necessity to prepare teachers at university adequately (Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2008). Young teachers must be empowered to face diversity and feel strong to push innovations into school systems. They must take charge for change (Stoll & Sammons, 2007). Student teachers should be prepared to deal with change in learning organisations. Accordingly, the professionalization of student teachers focuses the adequate individual development of knowledge and skills in a changing world.

What are the main assumptions about teachers' thinking and learning in educational research? And how may we define the relation between knowledge and action? Answering to these questions means giving answers to challenges of teacher training.

## **2. Teacher knowledge and teacher action**

In educational research the relation between knowledge and action has been a central aspect in the discussion. The leading classification concerning knowledge of teachers derives from Shulman's academic work. Professional knowledge can be specified as regards domains, as well as regards forms of knowledge (Shulman, 1986).

As to domains Shulman's (1986) diversification between different categories of knowledge has become widely accepted (Baumert & Kunter, 2006, p. 482). In his suggestions regarding a topology of the domains of knowledge he differentiates between content knowledge (CK), pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) and pedagogical knowledge (PK). Some authors make further distinctions between these core components of professional teacher knowledge, or rather define the domains of knowledge in their own ways. The PCK, for instance, is conceptualized inconsistently by different authors (Park & Oliver, 2008). Thus, Clandinin describes PCK as "knowledge that went beyond subject matter content to embody aspects of content relevant to its teachability" (Clandinin, 2010, p. 862).

Various forms of knowledge can be differentiated between. Shulman names these representations forms of knowledge. All categories of teacher knowledge can be organized in different forms. Shulman differs between three levels of teacher knowledge:

- (1) propositional knowledge as the knowledge of principles, maxims or norms
- (2) case knowledge, as the knowledge of particular cases that can represent a larger class
- (3) practical knowledge (also: strategic knowledge) as the knowledge to apply certain rules to certain cases.

How knowledge and action, or rather the professional knowledge and the professional action of teachers interact is still disputed. Considering that in practical settings teacher knowledge can be transformed in teacher action Neuweg (2004) distinguishes 'integration concepts' from 'difference concepts' in teacher education.

In 'integration concepts' there is a tight relation between teacher knowledge and practical skills. In 'difference concepts', knowledge and action are more separate. Nevertheless, even if both areas have their own dignity, there are exchanges. In 'difference concepts' there is an interrelation between practice and reflection that provokes the formation of an analytical habitus, like in action research (Rahm & Schratz, 2004).

Academic teacher training can primarily contribute to qualitatively good teaching via the acquisition of knowledge and cognitive control (Arnold et al., 2011).

Therefore, the academic teacher training should provide practical settings that allow students realistic and demanding classroom experience in order to close the unsettling gap between theory and practice. Sustaining professional learning can be reached by offering a learning environment that encourages student teachers to deal with these tensions, to relate theoretical knowledge to practical experience.

### **3. Reflecting on classroom observations**

Student teachers experience classroom teaching in practical settings. Making experiences seems one of the most important approaches to seize the world. We appreciate objects of the world and we try to classify them. Noticing objects or observing them seem different activities. We often notice what is going on without being aware of it. Observation on the other hand seems an activity on purpose. There is a difference between observations of scientific intention or every-day observations. You may observe people or actions carefully, but without scientific background. Doing research means methodically controlled observation and description of processes, events or systems (Fisseni, 2004). Scientific observation seems an important method to recognize the world in a scientific way. There are very little opportunities to distort reality.

In a learning school environment observations may lead to professional action. Acting and reflecting are two activities that may lead to better practice. Educational action research has got a long tradition (Elliot, 1991; Posch, 2001). Data collecting, reflecting on the results and changing practice promise a betterment of classroom practice. The reflective practitioner is able to reflect his own classroom practice and to improve it. Reflection and action follow each other (Schön, 1983). The reflective practitioner takes advantage of the gap between theory and practice. Practice is reflected on a theoretical basis so that better practice may be invented in a reasonable way. Reflection competencies are useful for planning classroom teaching, for teaching and for reflecting the teaching process. After all, a reflective attitude is the attitude of the researcher. The researcher tries to find out scientific truth; the reflective practitioner acts in the same modus. This seems an important finding for an academic teacher training that creates a learning environment for student teachers. It is a complex approach in teacher training concepts that focuses research competencies of novices. Controlled observations clarify what is going on in the classroom. The observation results may explain classroom interactions and learning behaviour. They may contribute to a deeper understanding of complex situations. Classroom observations may make future teachers able to reflect on their own activities and to analyse teaching processes (Posch, 2001; Rahm & Schratz, 2004).

Classroom observations have got a long tradition in the educational sector. They are the basis for an analysis of students' behaviour and the source of well-founded intervention. Planning and analyzing classroom teaching, diagnosis, assessment and promotion of students need reliable and valid observations. Teacher training may offer opportunities to acquire observation competencies. Student teachers have to observe a certain detail in classroom teaching. For example they have to notice doing gender actions in the classroom. Or they look carefully at activities of certain students. These kinds of observations may provide an informative basis for diagnostics and evaluation in the classroom (Rahm & Lunkenbein, 2008).

Practical settings in teacher training offer opportunities to learn. Student teachers may learn by experiencing classroom teaching in an appropriate environment. This may lead to

reflection on action and make them activate theoretical knowledge to understand. Teacher experts may coach this process (Hackl & Neuweg, 2004).

Even though there is a long tradition in offering practical settings to student teachers, assuming that theory and practice may complement one another, we know little about the effects of such settings.

#### **4. Efficiency of practical settings**

Over and above we still lack basic empirical findings about the general efficiency of teacher education. In the course of analysing empirical research Blömeke (2004, p. 63) states that surveys which portray reality on low levels (surveys concerning the own behaviour as a teacher) prevail, whereas observations and tests in real situations are hard to find (see also Corbin & Strauss, 2007, p. 29).

Similar to teacher education in general, the practicum lacks empirical evidence. If student teachers and mentoring teachers are questioned about their perspectives, student teachers assess practical training as important. However this does not necessarily mean that there is a correlation to the effects of practicums. Nevertheless, changes through practical experiences can in fact be found (Dick, 1996, p. 152), especially regarding the improvement of technical skills. At the same time practicum phases also evoke an alienation from theories (Dick, 1996, p. 152). To what extent these shifts can be attributed to the practicum itself has however not yet been explained adequately. The specific high complexity of the teaching profession and of learning the teaching profession still appears as restricting factor (Hascher, 2006, p. 131). The realm of educational research largely lacks results concerning the real merit of the practicum.

All papers dealing with academic teacher education agree that student teachers consider the insufficient pre-service learning context as major weakness of their academic education (Flagmeyer & Hoppe-Graf, 2006, p. 66).

Current research adds to that. Thus, Hascher (2006) succeeds in qualifying the students' beliefs concerning the practicum in a subsequent survey of the University of Bern. The results reveal that students evaluate their success more critically in retrospect and that consequently the efficiency of the practical training should be interpreted more cautiously. This applies to the areas of pedagogical attitude, learning and acquiring competence. Apart from a "demystification" of the practical training one can also state a "deidealization" of mentoring teachers as the time span after the practical training increases. It remains however open whether the student teachers overestimate their success directly after the practical training or if they underestimate it in retrospect. There are hardly any differences between the different levels of practicum and if they exist they are unsystematic. Consequently these results suggest the conclusion that in teacher training major aspects of a professional development are left to chance (Hascher, 2006, p. 145).

Furthermore student teachers often criticize the lack of practice in their academic studies. The connection of practical experiences with theoretical knowledge is on the other hand seldom claimed (Sacher, 1988; see also Zeichner, 2010, p. 91). Frequently, preconditions for effective first contacts with practical settings are missing, like for example mentoring of the student teachers, cooperation between university courses and schools, theoretical preparation for practical settings or the links of the practicums among each other (common training concept) (Hascher, 2006).

There is a problematic coexistence of university based education and school based education: "Numerous studies have demonstrated for many years the obstacles to student teacher learning that are associated with the traditional loosely planned and monitored model of field experiences (...)" (Zeichner, 2010, p. 91).

### 5. Findings of the GLANZ-Project

The GLANZ-Project is an example of changing the thinking about the role of practical settings in teacher education (cf. Cochran-Smith & Lytle 2009, cited in Zeichner 2010).

The intervention study GLANZ (GRUNDSCHULLEHRERAUSBILDUNG-NEUKONZEPTION; teacher education for primary teachers – new conception) creates an innovative learning environment for student teachers. It investigates among other things the effects of observation orientated conditions in practical trainings. Effects of the observation practicum and reflection practicum are evaluated on the basis of views of student teachers. The intention of this reform measure is the development of a reflective attitude on the part of the student teachers.

The reform project includes the following measures as intervention in the subarea practicum:

- Extensive mentoring of the students during the SCHULPAEDAGOGISCHES BLOCKPRAKTIKUM (the first school practicum in the academic teacher education with a length of three weeks)
- Revision of the SCHULPAEDAGOGISCHES BLOCKPRAKTIKUM
- Modification of the course "Introduction to the practicum"

In the context of these measures students absolved, in addition to the obligatory realization of a test lesson, the following assignments within the three week practical training:

1. Sociogram and written comment.
2. Structured observation of the handraising of two schoolchildren and written comment.
3. Observation task to the topic heterogeneity (achievement/ multiculturalism/gender or another focus). Production of a dense, comparing description of two children over at least one schoolday. Reflection of results, preferably with reference to given research literature.

In order to examine the effects of these measures, a quantitative as well as a qualitative study were conducted.

#### Results of the quantitative survey

The quantitative data collection about the effects of the SCHULPAEDAGOGISCHES BLOCKPRAKTIKUM (practicum) was carried out at several dates. We measured the effects of the intervention after the practical training, in the fourth semester and compared it with data from the control group (graduates).

The effects of the practical training are compared between the students who were questioned afterwards, the students in the fourth semester of teacher education and the graduates who had not yet taken part in the reform measure.

"What experiences did you make in the practicum (SCHULPÄDAGOGISCHES BLOCKPRAKTIKUM)?" (in %)

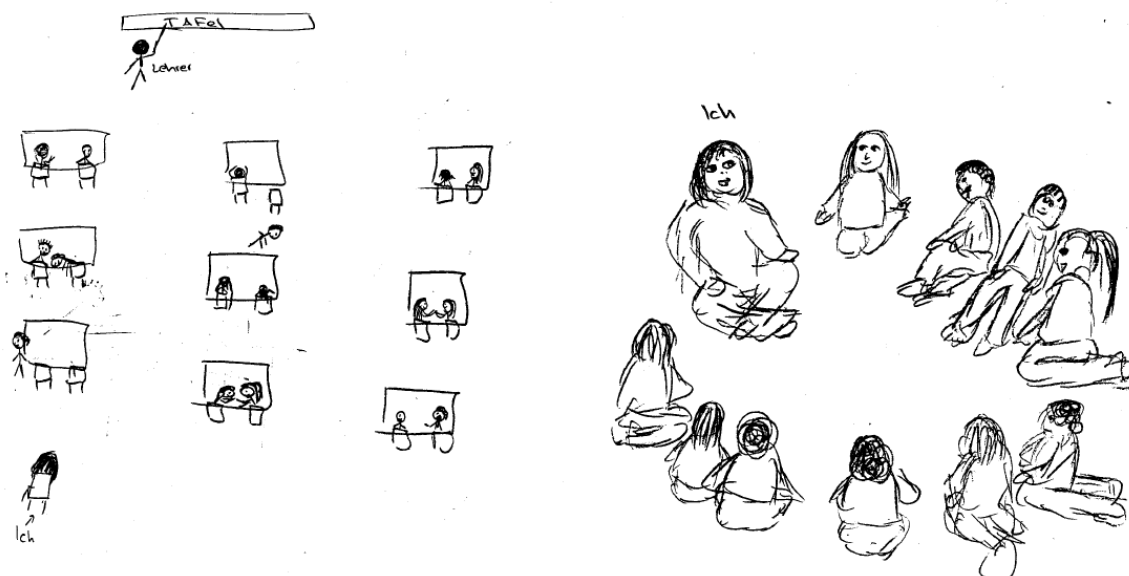
	student teachers after practicum (n = 53)		fourth-semester students (n = 119)		graduates (n = 83)	
	does not apply	applies	does not apply	applies	does not apply	applies
Found an interest in classroom research	50,9	49,1	44,5	55,5	61,0	39,0
Theoretical knowledge important for practice	34,0	66,0	28,6	71,4	54,9	45,1

Theoretical knowledge useful for dealing with pupils	25,0	75,0	19,3	80,7	54,9	45,1
Recognized topics from university courses	44,2	55,8	31,1	68,9	58,8	41,2
Realized how important systematic research in school is	60,4	39,6	48,7	51,3	63,4	36,6

Table: Experiences in the first academic practicum (Faust, 2010, p. 39)

In comparison to the graduates, who had not participated in the GLANZ-Project, it seems evident that student teachers of the 'treatment' appreciate academic education. Examining the single items comparatively, a lot of appreciation of theoretical knowledge in educational sciences can be found. Doing research in school, on the other hand, is not regarded as particularly important. However, topics from university courses were recognized via classroom observations and their reflection. Furthermore it can be stated that the data of the survey demonstrate increasing acceptance of the systematic observation in the practicum. These results are also reflected in the guideline orientated interviews in the qualitative survey (Abel, Lunkenbein & Rahm 2008, p. 44).

### Results of the qualitative survey



This symbolization of the student teachers themselves already shows that teaching and observing make a big difference. On the one hand, distanced and not involved sitting and perceiving, on the other hand the friendly inclusion into the children's group. The student draws herself integrated in a "class family" (the drawings are made at the end of the practical training).

We interviewed student teachers about their experiences regarding the reform project. In some students' statements the above drawing is resumed:

*As a teacher, well I liked it very, very much. This is one thing. Thus, the smiling mouth. It was more fun for me than the observations. (IN25, 21)*

Nevertheless, students assume that teaching is part of their equipment as well as observing, and that they consequently need both:

*Well, actually I found that none of both was more important. Well, I thought that both was important, because well, not only teaching belongs to a teacher but also observing. So I must say, it was, ehm, none should be left out. That should be retained. (IN31, 133)*

As expected there are however students who take more pleasure in teaching and like it more than observations.

*Well, I liked it more, when I could take part in something. Well, yes, I liked it simply more because,.. ok, yes, why? I simply think it is nicer to interact with the children. This is just the nice thing, actually. (IN35, 51)*

Altogether, the statements demonstrate a big importance of the observation tasks for the students. They provoke a differentiated view on scholar reality. The students' critiques don't put this in question, advocate however a big importance of own experiences with lessons. Thus it is disputed how much distance must be endured. The interviewed admit the beneficial effects of sound observations, but are sceptical towards an alleged alienation from pedagogic acting through observations (Abel, Lunkenbein & Rahm, 2007 & 2008). The settings in this learning environment make student teachers feel empowered (insight through observation results) and helpless (lack of options for actions) at the same time. This ambiguity seems a challenge for innovative teacher training concepts.

## **6. Empowerment through practical settings**

Empowerment is a concept that is often used in educational and psychological communities. Even if the meaning seems diffuse, it is an orientating construct in the scientific discourse. "Empowerment is a construct that links individual strengths and competencies, natural helping systems, and proactive behavior to social policy and social change (Rappaport, 1981, 1984)" (Perkins, Zimmermann, 1995, p.569; see Arnold et al., 2011). Empowerment means a process of gaining influence. "Empowerment is easy to define in its absence; powerlessness, real or imagined; learned helplessness; alienation; loss of sense of control over one's own life. It is more difficult to define positively only because it takes on a different form in different people and contexts" (Rappaport, 1984, p.3). As the empowerment essentially seems individual, it is heterogeneous and depends on the way a person gains control over events, outcomes or important situations. Empowerment focuses the self-determination of people. It is the result of interactive processes between a person and their environment (Arnold et al., 2011). Sustaining empowerment means "...to find the ways to strengthen the individuals' power-from-within and then to assist them to organize collectively to exercise their power-over the influences on their lives and health" (Laverack, 2004, p. 137f). Empowerment seems a non-invasive but a responsive sustainment in the self-dependent development process of an individual or a group.

The empowerment process not only concerns the outcomes but also the process. Being empowered means becoming strong on an individual and on a societal level. Empowerment is deeply linked to change: "Empowerment assumes to invoke change, to attribute change, and to realise change, by acting upon existing power relations, by changing power, by giving power to the people." (Masschelein, Quaghebeur, 2006, p.311; see Arnold et al., 2011). It betters the personal identity and enhances self-awareness and self-development.

Consequently empowerment is a concept that goes with school improvement and the professionalization of teachers. The decentralisation of school systems and the autonomy of schools make the professionals take their own decisions in a professional community. They create their school, they take an interest in common goals and visions, and they share leadership and take accountability for the increase of school outcomes. Empowering teachers



means empowering experts to enhance students' learning. Clark et al. (1996) stress seven main topics concerning empowerment (Arnold et al., 2011, p. 130f).

1. from power to empowerment - personal, professional, and knowledge based (self-efficacy and a positive self-image are important for the acquisition of competencies of individuals and communities.)
2. empowerment through knowledge, inquiry, and reflection (reflection seems the basis of problem solving.)
3. empowerment as collective autonomy – power with rather than power over (solitary work and individualism weaken the school community whereas cooperation and participation foster school improvement.)
4. empowerment as research and inquiry (teacher research is an appropriate instrument to reflect practice and to implement reforms in classroom teaching.)
5. empowerment through collaborative inquiry (collaboration of teachers in the context of action research breeds to best practice and accountability of the professionals.)
6. empowerment through participation and teacher leadership (teacher leadership and the participation in school improvement offer opportunities to learn and to lead.)
7. empowerment and the creation of empowering contexts (the school organisation, the roles of the school members, the school climate and the dialogue between the school members are the fundament of teachers' accountability.)

Why is the concept of empowering so important in teacher training concepts? The main topics show that striving for empowerment means striving for quality enhancement in schools and in classroom teaching. Empowered teachers feel accountable for the outcomes and they struggle for understanding practice and enhance it. Empowerment and professionalization of teachers are interrelated approaches. They respond to the needs of teachers who find contentment in collaboration and accountability for performance in the classroom.

Our study shows that research and inquiry make student teachers only feel empowered, if they also get options for actions. They try to find answers to problems that occur in classroom teaching. They may propose learning support for certain students. They may teach in an innovative way to sustain students' learning. They may cooperate with other student teachers and they may implement reforms in classroom teaching.

Student teachers should not only reflect what is going on in the classroom. They should not only feel observers of the situation. Observation without pedagogical perspective does not seem useful. Sure the observation tasks give academic support to future teachers. But they do not feel confident with their knowledge. They would like to act; they would like to feel part of the game. If not, the knowledge is not helpful. It makes future teachers feel lonely observers. Student teachers may feel more self-efficient if they get the opportunity to change or propose change. Furthermore they feel more self-determined if they can choose the task they want to cope with.

Like reflective practitioners they are indeed the future reformers of classroom teaching. They have to feel accountable for best practice in a learning school. Mentoring practical settings means helping student teachers to improve classroom teaching by reflecting it. To empower student teachers, observation results should always lead to action or at least proposals for future changes. If not, observation tasks are only academic exercises.

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