Student teachers’ professional development: early practice and horizontal networks as ways to bridge the theory-practice gap

Katarina Ribaeus, Ann-Britt Enochsson & Annica Löfdahl Hultman

To cite this article: Katarina Ribaeus, Ann-Britt Enochsson & Annica Löfdahl Hultman (2020): Student teachers’ professional development: early practice and horizontal networks as ways to bridge the theory-practice gap, Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education, DOI: 10.1080/10901027.2020.1797956

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/10901027.2020.1797956

© 2020 The Author(s). Published with license by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC.

Published online: 13 Aug 2020.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 345

View related articles

View Crossmark data
Student teachers’ professional development: early practice and horizontal networks as ways to bridge the theory-practice gap

Katarina Ribaeus, Ann-Britt Enochsson, and Annica Löfdahl Hultman

Department of Educational Studies, Karlstad University, Karlstad, Sweden

ABSTRACT
This article focuses on student teachers’ professional development and explores how the students connect theory and practice in these processes. Data consist of 17 talks during weekly seminars with 15 preschool student teachers and a group of researchers both at campus and at the practicum placements during their first term. Initially, the researchers introduced discussions with an aim to challenge the students’ views on general societal issues as well as specific issues related to the preschool practice. Eventually, the seminars changed toward student and researchers being more equal interlocutors. Experiences were discussed and relations between theory and practice were elaborated. Analyses from an ecological perspective of teacher agency show that the student teachers’ agency develops from a naïve to a proactive understanding of the profession. The early practicum period in combination with regular seminars was important for the student teachers’ developing profession. The practicum period provides practical challenges, and the seminar discussions with researchers provides theoretical challenges. Implications for teacher education are discussed, such as offering horizontal teacher networks where students get support to be able to develop their professional agency.

Introduction

In order for the student teachers to develop a professional agency, they need practice but also a solid theoretical education (Androuso̱u & Tsfaos, 2018). In spite of the best intentions this is found to be difficult, and how to combine the two is still a challenge for preschool teacher education (Karlsson Lohmander, 2015). This article focuses on this topic that has been debated in different ways throughout the history of education by researchers and philosophers, namely how to bridge the gap between theory and practice (e.g. Dewey, 1938) in order to enhance professional development.

The study presented is part of a larger four-year research project on how to link a local preschool teacher education program with research and local practicum preschools. The project focus is to develop models to connect an increased scientific ground (theory) and proven experience (practice) concerning issues on democracy education in Early Childhood Education (ECE). In weekly seminars with preschool student teachers and researchers, issues related to different aspects of the preschool teacher profession were discussed. Initially, democracy was chosen as an example of a highlighted content from the Swedish curriculum for preschool (The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018).
The aim is to contribute knowledge on student teachers’ professional development by exploring how the students connect theory and practice in these processes.

**Research overview**

**Two different learning arenas, the remaining gap . . .**

Preschool teacher education – as most teacher education programs – is organized in two learning arenas, that is universities or colleges and practicum preschools/schools. In Sweden, the Higher Education Act (SFS 1992:1434) states that all higher education, and especially vocational education, should rest on the scientific ground as well as proven experience. Research-based and experience-based studies are often seen as two different knowledge domains and not always easy to integrate (Hegender, 2010; Karlsson Lohmander, 2015). Accordingly, when students, as expected, try to integrate the two learning arenas, a gap between them is often experienced (c.f. Cochran-Smith et al., 2015; Ødegaard, 2011). In spite of such gap, students have shown the capability to acquire visions for ideal practices during their studies, but as beginner teachers’ difficulties appear in keeping and carrying out their visions as the gap remains (c.f. Ødegaard, 2011).

The gap between the learning arenas has been found in several respects. In efforts to identify different types of teacher knowledge, the concepts knowledge-for-practice and knowledge-in-practice have been used (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). The former represents knowledge generated by researchers, based on a scientific ground, and the latter represents knowledge generated by teachers in their daily work, based on proven experience. Hegender (2010) analyzed the content of follow-up talks when teacher educators discussed the practice with individual students and their mentors at the practicum schools and preschools. He found that the main body of discussions concerned knowledge-in-practice, which means that the knowledge-for-practice is not discussed in relation to the practice, and these discussions are no help for the students to bridge the gap between the two learning arenas (c.f. Karlsson Lohmander, 2015). A similar aspect deals with how course documents from Swedish teacher education institutions have a relatively weak research base (Alvunger & Wahlström, 2017). The preschool teacher program was “by far the most related to a teaching profession discourse” (p. 341). Further, articles from scientific journals were not used in course documents to any great extent but based on secondary sources of research. In contrast to this, the students and teacher educators express that they think the literature in the preschool-teacher program is research based (Alvunger & Wahlström, 2017).

Not only students but also beginning teachers are struggling with the tension between the view of learning in their education and what they meet in their practice (Cochran-Smith et al., 2015; Ødegaard, 2011). In a review partly concerning teachers’ visions of ideal teaching practices, it has been found that it is important that the culture in the school the beginner teachers work in allows and/or honors the teachers’ visions of ideal practice (Cochran-Smith et al., 2017). This is also found by Ødegaard (2011) and Flores (2004), among newly qualified preschool teachers. If the culture does not allow new ideas, there is a great risk the beginner preschool teachers or other teachers will abandon the visions not corresponding to the existing culture. To minimize this risk, an important factor for teacher education programs is to gear toward the contexts in which the candidates will teach, which takes us back to the importance of the practice, not the practice per se, but the relation and connection between theory and practice.
... and how to bridge the gap between theory and practice

Several researchers claim there is a general lack of a strong knowledge base concerning how to prepare preschool teachers and teachers (e.g. Cochran-Smith et al., 2015; Hjort & Pramling, 2014). As mentioned above, several studies highlight the gap between theory and practice as a crucial point, and to bridge this gap is an important step in order to improve teacher education. A stronger connection with the practicum places is mentioned in different ways. One way to do this is to create partnerships with schools in the communities around teacher education (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Flores, 2004). Others advocate to involve the society around schools and suggests an organized communication between different stakeholders (Zeichner, Payne, & Brayko, 2015). This is described in terms of democratization of teacher education, meaning there must be a balance between the impact from the universities, the practice schools and also the communities in which the beginner teachers will serve. As it works usually, the student teachers become mediators between different learning arenas and are expected to make meaning of them themselves (Zeichner et al., 2015). However, the importance of understanding the university supervisor’s viewpoint became apparent in a case study following three pre-service student teachers during yearlong field placements focusing the mentor/mentee partnership (Yoon & Larkin, 2018). The authors found that a disconnect between theory and practice could be a strength, but only if there was relevant guidance. All students mentioned the university supervisor’s role in mediating the student teaching placement. Yoon and Larkin (2018) stress the importance of the program (including faculty) to develop and cultivate the mentor/mentee relationship, as this was found pivotal in the construction of student teachers’ identities and practices.

Different ways of discussing solutions are found in research. For example, Kim and Kim (2017), stress the inseparability between theory and practice from a poststructural perspective, thereby aiming to overcome dominating discourses in ECE, prescriptions of best practice, and other grand narratives. Others plead the solution is not only to connect theory and practice but to do so with a more integrated strategy combined with a conceptual approach (Hammerness, 2006). For example, structured reflections are suggested as a means to overcome the theory-practice gap (e.g. Cochran-Smith et al., 2017; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Hjort & Pramling, 2014). However, there must be a structural as well as a conceptual coherence where coherence is seen as a constant process, steady work and efforts of adjustment, revision and calibration (Hammerness, 2006). Such structured reflections have been found to be more successful for the students’ development of professional agency, when offered in close relationship with partner schools (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Flores (2004) claims that this process is important also during the beginner teachers’ first year, and there has to be an aim to educate teachers who are willing to learn and develop continuously (cf. Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Newman & Mowbray, 2012).

Beside structured reflections, critical reflection is an important factor within this area to connect theory and practice (e.g. Cochran-Smith et al., 2017; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Han, Blank, & Berson, 2017; Hjort & Pramling, 2014). To be able to reflect in a critical way, Hjort and Pramling (2014) argue the students need a “meta”-language, which has to be intertwined with everyday language for the development of the profession (Hjort & Pramling, 2014). The critical reflection helps students to connect theory and practice (Darling-Hammond, 2006), but it requires a tight connection between the two. Critical reflection also follows from discussions where students’ life history is acknowledged, since earlier experiences influence current practices
(Cochran-Smith et al., 2017). Cochran-Smith et al. claim that teacher education must move beyond a “one-size-fits-all” model of teacher preparation. Han et al. (2017) argue teacher inquiry aiming to promote a vision of reflective teaching should be part of the teacher education program. Such reflective teaching will make the students transform teaching and learning practices rather than reproduce existing school culture and practices. Similarly, Biesta (2017) pleads for the need to make the practice and practicing of education more thoughtful and that teaching must be seen as something opposite to control (Biesta, 2017). It is important not to make students unreflecting objects, but instead give them the possibility to be, and become, subjects even if, as Biesta puts it, they are not always capable of taking a subject position.

To sum up

Researchers agree that the gap between the two learning arenas has to be bridged. The reason for this is to enable the development of professional agency (Androusou & Tsfaos, 2018). Communication with practicum places is important and so is the possibility for students to reflect on their practical work in relation to the theoretical parts of their education. Hegender (2010) found that teacher educators from the university adopted the knowledge-in-practice when talking to students during practicum periods, and that the tension between two cultures becomes invisible. To bridge the gap, there must be an explicit gap to work with. His suggestion is to clarify the role of the teacher educator in the follow-up talks during practicum periods. Hegender also reflects upon if it would be better if the students instead of meeting teacher educators with only a solid teaching background meet researchers with a theoretical perspective.

Based on the research overview our research question is:

- How do student teachers’ perspectives shift regarding theory and practice in preschool, as reflected through facilitated conversations in horizontal networks over time between students and researchers?

Theoretical framework

The project is grounded in a theoretical understanding of teacher agency (Biesta, Priestly, & Robinson, 2015a) in which temporal dimensions of experiences are central. Inspired from Emirbayer and Mische (1998), teacher agency is seen as socially and historically situated, meaning that the present involves a capacity of learning from the past and also offers the possibility to express ideas and visions for the future. Within this view, both the experiences developed in the past and developing experiences during students’ teacher education are important in the present, and the present is important to enable a vision of how to act in a future situation in their teaching. Including temporal dimensions of experiences mean, in our analyses, we are interested in:

- The **iterational** dimension, e.g. what previous experiences the students bring and make sense of in their teacher education.
- The **practical – evaluative** dimension, e.g. what new or deepened experiences students develop in campus-based education and in practicum-placed education. Also, how this is visible in the students’ talks of possible teaching repertoires.
- The **projective** dimension, e.g. how do students make visible their visions of an ideal preschool practice in their upcoming profession. (Biesta et al., 2015a)
Biesta, Priestly, and Robinson’s (2015b) ecological approach to teacher agency is characterized by agency as being situated, dealing with relationships, structures and cultures, as an important part of teachers’ possibilities to practice and develop their agency. Relationships as a key factor for achieving teacher agency also include teacher networks, and networks that are horizontal not only vertical. “Agency is not seen as a capacity of individuals but as an achievement that is the outcome of the interaction of individual capacity with environing conditions.” (p. 17). This means that, even if the teachers or as in our study, the student teachers, have the skills (practice) and knowledge (theory) that is needed in a certain situation, they may not always have the possibility to accomplish what they intend to do.

**Materials and methods**

In Sweden, the preschool teacher education is part of the higher education system. Teacher educators as a whole are supposed to cover both theoretical and up-to-date practical knowledge. According to teacher education practice, it is preferred that at least half of them should have a doctoral degree anchored in ECE practice. Recruiting teacher educators to fulfil this goal is difficult due to the lack of preschool teacher educators with a doctoral degree. The preschool teacher education in our study is no exception. Such staff-related factors, alongside other structural factors (beyond the scope of this article), reduce the possibilities to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Built on the results from the research overview and the context described above, we identify aspects that bridge the gap between theory and practice. We have designed our project to meet such needs, summarized as arenas where the students can be guided and challenged and where they are offered guided reflection. Our project design also builds on the understanding of horizontal network as important for integrating theory and practice and thus further develop teacher agency. The participating researchers all have
experiences as teachers in ECE, compulsory school and as teacher educators. Three out of four have a doctoral degree and the fourth is a doctoral student. This made it possible to challenge the students for example by problematizing and theorizing practice, and to contributing to a more complex understanding of the preschool teacher profession. To be able to create a horizontal network it was important that none of us researchers were involved in assessing this group of students in any course during the project and also that the students from the beginning were seen as co-creators of the seminars including both form and content.

Therefore, 1-hour weekly seminars were organized offering discussions between the students and us as a group of researchers. Initially, we as researchers introduced democracy as a topic for discussions with an aim to challenge their views on general societal issues as well as specific issues related to the preschool practice. Eventually, our roles in the seminars changed toward more equal interlocutors. However, we are aware of the power asymmetry and that our academic positions may have affected the discussions. These seminars took place during their first term both at the university and at the student teachers’ practicum placements, September 2017 to January 2018, and highlighted issues about for example democracy education and the way it is intertwined in everyday topics in ECE. The students were assigned to their practicum placements at municipal Swedish preschools (for children aged one to 5 years) for 5-weeks full-time work in the middle of their first term. The aim of the practicum period is to let the students examine and transform acquired knowledge into teaching practice. During their practicum, they should participate in different pedagogical activities such as planning, teaching, and follow-up.

The participants were 15 students in their first (of totally seven) terms of preschool teacher education. The participants were between 20 and 35 years old and represent different background experiences, including working experiences, where some have previous preschool work experience in Sweden and in Norway, and some lack such experiences. Some entered the preschool teacher education directly from upper secondary school while others have working experiences from other areas than education. A few students have preschool-aged children of their own. Reflecting the unequal balance between men and women in preschools, we have only two male students in our group of participants. The mix of profiles in the small group, also when it comes to age and working experience, reflects well the students in the program.

The researchers verbally informed the students about the project during their first week as students. The students volunteered for the project by sending an agreement by e-mail and were thereby informed both verbally and in writing about the meaning of being a participant in the study. They were informed about their rights to withdraw and the way we intend to analyze and store the empirical material and personal data in accordance with the European General Data Protection Regulations. All participating students gave their informed consent in writing.

The data, from a total of 17 seminars, analyzed in this article consist of field notes taken by the researchers, one at a time, at the seminars at campus and sound recordings from the practicum placements seminars. Data were verbatim transcribed into text documents. The researchers also took notes during informal talks with field supervisors and students in their practicum preschools as well as conducted observations of the ecological context. The observations were unstructured (Bryman, 2012) and these data served only as a contextual understanding.
Content analysis was inspired by condensation of meaning from Brinkmann and Kvale (2014) in order to find categories of meaning and formulate themes of the students’ talks during the seminars. It was conducted manually by one of the authors searching for utterances holding aspects of professional development – in the results presented as the naïve, the reactive and the proactive approaches. Later on, this was confirmed through discussions with the other authors. Data were then interpreted by the three authors from the theoretical framework on teacher agency (Biesta et al., 2015a), in order to identify how and what experiences preschool teacher students make use of during their first term, and how it changed when new theoretical and practical experiences became part of the past – when temporal dimensions changed. In addition to this, we analyzed how they connected their experiences to their theoretical studies in order to close the gap. We also interpreted this process as part of the development of their teacher agency. The preliminary results were presented to the students at the seminars in order to conduct respondent validation (Bryman, 2012) and to insure trustworthiness of our findings.

During analysis, we focused on the group as a unit rather than on individuals. The group level was chosen as we consider the development of teacher agency to become visible and strengthened when different experiences were expressed and discussed in the seminars. It has been important to keep data confidential, and since there were not more than 15 participants, we have mostly chosen to call them “student” in this article. However, in a few examples, still representing the group level, quotations from one particular student are highlighted. When an individual student is named, we have used an alias. Nevertheless, such quotations still represent the group rather than the individual student.

Results

In the findings, we refer to how students are bridging the gap between theory and practice – and how this process proceeds from being naïve to a re-active and finally a pro-active student.

During our weekly meetings, we became aware of how teacher students use their own and others’ experiences of being a pre-school child, being teachers or parents in discussions on how to act in different hypothetical or real situations. When transforming their experiences into a didactic agenda we have noticed both novice moralizing and more advanced teaching visions and how these developed during the term.

We found that at two times, the students’ reflections on their professional role changed; when they entered their practicum placements, and when coming back to their studies at the university after the practicum period. These are seen as different temporal dimensions. Therefore, the results are structured in three parts; before, during and after the practicum period, reflecting the students’ changing approaches.

The very first seminars – the naïve student

When we first met the students in September 2017 they were excited to join the group, expecting and wanting to be challenged by both researchers and fellow students. They had some expectations that the regular education as well as our seminars would provide them with answers of what is the right or wrong thing to do in their future profession. After
a few lectures on democracy and participation in their regular education, one student said:

The more you read the less you understand ... What should you do? What should you say?

The students drew attention to the importance of perspective and they reflected on the concept of “the competent child” that they had met in the literature and through the lectures. The students also reflected upon how they themselves would like to be treated and they discussed at length aspects of participation and perspective with their fellow students. “Even if we talk about taking a child’s perspective, it matters what child’s perspective you choose.” The students also noted that there are certain norms, for example that the child is considered competent. They say that they want to think that children are competent, but that depends on what we put into the word competent. They think that a competent child is a child who is offered opportunities.

At our seminars, students and researchers have been discussing a lot of different subjects, both related to the students’ regular studies and examples from the surrounding society. The examples could concern children escaping from a preschool or other aspects directly connected to children, but we also discussed for example a Nazi demonstration that took place in the Swedish city Gothenburg during the fall. What do the students think about that? Should they discuss that incident with the children? Is there anything a preschool teacher cannot or should not discuss with children? The students had contrasting opinions about that. Some students thought that you can discuss the right to demonstrate and then let the children demonstrate about something that they feel is wrong at the preschool. There were also ideas about the teacher’s neutrality – can you be neutral in relation to the values of the curriculum? The students believe that you have to be honest, but at the same time, you have to consider the age of the children and not scare the children with “awful” things.

In this initial phase of their education, we notice how the students’ reasoning is quite naïve in relation to their future teacher profession, not meaning that they are seen as naïve as students. We use the term naïve in the meaning of being related to sparse working experiences or to a lack of proven experiences from preschools, but built on their own experiences as children or parents, which is the iterational dimension. Eventually, the students also built on the theoretical content discussed in lectures. The latter seems to have a great impact initially as it did not take long before the students expressed their transformation during the first weeks as students at the preschool teacher program. At this time, this was their practical-evaluative dimension, which later became the iterational dimension. One of the students described that she was expecting that the studies would transform her in some way but she did not expect it to happen so fast and in such a profound way, or as she puts it:

Cool, I didn’t think it could happen that fast ... and change me so deeply.

Already at the end of these first months, the students were being challenged by the researchers but also by their fellow students. The research project group formed a kind of relational teacher network in an ecological system where the students started to form, not yet teacher agency, but what we would like to refer to as student agency. For example, the students suggested an online discussion group to keep the discussion going:

Each discussion contributes deeper thought about oneself and one’s professional development.
During the practicum period – the reactive student

The students’ expectations before they started their practicum were that they felt a bit nervous, but they were looking forward to meeting the children, to observing them, and the activities in preschool. Students with some previous experiences from preschool were especially excited to be there as student teachers and not as unqualified staff. During their first practicum period, through our analysis, we could see that what they foregrounded changed from focusing the children, as they did during the first months of the term; to the preschool teacher role. A quotation from a student during a seminar discussion on their experiences from participating at the practicum placement shows how the students react negatively on less interacting atmospheres between teachers at some preschools:

Good learning environments are dependent on the teachers’ approaches towards children and colleagues.

The utterance is a common example of how the students focus on the teachers’ actions rather than what the children do. We interpret this change as a temporal change from iterational dimension, based on previous experiences toward the practical evaluative dimension.

The students describe the effects of being a student teacher in terms of seeing things with new eyes, regardless of whether they had previous experience or not. They described the value of just sitting down and observing. The observing position was encouraged by their supervisors, but sometimes other members of staff viewed the student differently, as a resource that could be given tasks such as cutting fruit and wiping tables. The supervisors were described as not only encouraging but also challenging the students and asking questions.

Already during the first week of practicum, the students started to analyze what they saw and heard. One topic they have been talking about during their first months was the competent child and during the group talks at their designated preschools, the idea of the competent child was also highlighted. A majority of the teachers seem to be good at letting the children be involved and have some influence in their everyday life at the preschool. Teachers usually support the children in dealing with things themselves, creating conditions which enable the children to participate and have some influence here and now by, for example, presenting material that the children can choose from. The students also emphasize that teachers encourage children to learn and explore. But we also have the opposite situations described to us as one student reflected on situations at her practicum preschool:

They claim children are competent [–] but they still do not let the children dress themselves.

The student could see that the teachers often are stressed and how, for example, when they dress to go out it is just expected to happen and it has to be done quickly. In this situation, the preschool teachers don’t let the children try to dress themselves. The student gave an example of what she tried to do instead, like helping the children so they can pull the zippers up without help from an adult. The student identified a gap between theory and practice, and found a way to bridge it.

One aspect that we want to highlight as an example of the reactive student is what several students have reported on, namely the way teachers talk over the children’s heads. To make this explicit we use one of our students, alias Ruth, and let her voice exemplify students’
views. Already during the first week of practicum, Ruth told the researchers and her fellow students about the situation at her preschool:

I think about how many times they talk over the heads of the children, for example speaking English [in a Swedish speaking setting, author’s note]. Even if the children are in the room they talk about a specific child … yes, but he is like that, so you know … Maybe they should talk about that some other time?

We discussed the situation and the other students agreed with her that issues about the children that should not be discussed in that manner. They were concerned that the children might hear the teachers’ conversation and they think about how understanding the content of the conversation potentially could affect the children. Both Ruth and the other students talked about difficulties in knowing how they should and could act as students in this situation. Ruth continues:

It was like today when we were eating. Then there’s a girl who is quite lively and headstrong that one of the staff started to talk to me about at the table, when we were sitting there with the children, saying that this girl, she might have such and such a situation at home, that she has no rules there and so on. And this has happened several times. I don’t know what to do, it’s a pretty tough situation.

The discussion continued, and Ruth was trying to find different options as to how she could approach this problem and act on it. One of her fellow students gave her the advice that she could ask the teacher afterward why she discussed the child at lunchtime and to suggest that it would be better if they had that discussion afterward. Ruth also tells us that the staff have had discussions on this subject, talking over children’s heads, and that they should not do that – and then they do it anyway. After our first seminar during practicum, Ruth raised the issue at her preschool, which has led to renewed discussions among the staff members. We interpret this as an example of how students’ actions already during their first practicum period can affect the preschool staff and how they work. It is also an example of student agency as she was able to affect the discussions among the staff at the practicum placement.

The ecological relations in the research project-group, from fellow students and from researchers, worked as a horizontal supporting network around which Ruth chose to act in a way that made a difference. She was able to discuss how to react and how to resist the staff’s actions toward the children, for example she used the group talk and the collective experiences expressed there to develop her own experiences and new professional repertoire. All in all, not yet a teacher herself, she took advantage of her position as a student while letting a more experienced teacher resume the conversation on the topic among the staff.

Now we return to the group level again and note that the students met a lot of different discourses, where they described some of them as “built into the walls.” Some of these discourses they accepted and others they did not. It might be possible for students to develop their teaching skills by just walking along the path without questioning anything. However, our group of students did not act passively. Rather, we found them taking their first steps as re-acting and even resisting the situations they met. We do not know how these students would have acted had they not participated in our project, but we know for sure that being part of a group continuously discussing dilemmas related to issues of democracy in ECE contributed to their developing professional agency, and the horizontal relations in
the group supported them to challenge new situations and to make use of professional repertoires previously not familiar to them, which is a way to bridge the gap. We have described this as “the reactive student” as they mostly react on events in preschool, which means they do not take the initiatives to act on their own.

**Back from practicum – the proactive student**

When we met the students at the university, in one sum up-seminar after their practicum period our talks focused on the challenges of the profession. Examples continued and were followed up from their practicum experiences, such as differing child perspectives and the previously highlighted “talking over the children’s heads” that had been experienced as especially difficult situations to deal with.

New aspects and topics in the students’ discussions are descriptions of having discovered different approaches to being a preschool teacher even for the students with previous experiences:

I had been working as a supply teacher a couple of years before I became a student at the preschool teacher programme. My initial thought was “Will the practicum be meaningful to me? I already know how it works”. However, it turned out to be wrong.

The *iterational* dimension is somewhat updated in the sense that the student teachers have new experiences to build on. For example, the student teachers described how newly educated (mostly described as younger) preschool teachers dared more than those who have worked for many years (mostly described as older) and how the student teachers saw the newly educated teachers as role models. The focus was not always on the teacher’s age, but often.

What we also noticed was how the students turned their reasoning toward the profession and elaborated with professional issues in a more proactive way. They identified potential problems and how to prevent them in what we interpret as *projective* dimension of experiences. We might say their professional repertoire was extended and they expressed how they, in their future practicum or as upcoming teachers, want to act – or do not want to act. During their practicum, the students have started to shape their own teacher identities through encounters with, and sharing ideas about, different structures and cultures in preschool settings. Our sum-up seminar enabled them to take a stand and further develop from student agency toward teacher agency. To end this section, we want to share a quotation that vividly expresses one of the students’ proactive position and, as we interpret it, showing a wish to develop continuously, expressed with a glimpse in her eye when she uttered: “I don’t want to become a dinosaur!”

**Concluding remarks**

By the use of teacher agency as theoretical framework, we have been able to discern how the preschool teacher students made use of theory and practice when developing their teacher profession. In the light of previous naïve experiences (the *iterational* dimension) the students developed new experiences and based on these they were able to react on situations of discomfort, actions that we interpret as *practical – evaluative* dimensions. Finally, we have been able to show how they were able to direct their experiences in a proactive way
from an ongoing education toward an ideal vision of how to act – or not to act – in a future teacher profession, the projective dimension. We have shown how three related parts of these student teachers’ education have been integrated in a successful way thus far. Campus-based theoretical content has been elaborated, discussed, and related to practice in seminars between students and researchers. Experiences from practicum periods have been brought back to the campus studies, discussed, and related to theories and research-based knowledge on issues of democracy in ECE as well as teacher professionalism and teacher agency, and thus bridges the gap.

So, what do our results mean?

To start with preschool-teacher education, we want to stress the importance of an early practicum period. Letting students have an early practicum period, thereby meeting with the real profession at an early stage, is of great importance to develop other experiences in addition to their naïve preconceived ideas of the profession and previous life experiences. They need to get an image of what it means to be a preschool teacher in order to develop and elaborate their visions of an ideal future practice and profession in relation to their theoretical studies. And most importantly, their need to challenge their research-based knowledge in meeting with children and preschool teachers in their everyday lives in real settings must be met. Several researchers have reached the same conclusions (e.g. Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Hegender, 2010; Hjort & Pramling, 2014), but this article presents an example of how a horizontal network can facilitate the integration of theory and practice. The new implications for teacher education include considering the continuous seminars with students and researchers as a mediating arena enabling aspects of scientific ground and proven experience to be integrated and challenged in discussions without grading the students’ contributions (e.g. Hegender, 2010; Zeichner et al., 2015). In this respect, the project served as a nonhierarchical arena for the students and created a supportive sphere where naïve experiences were allowed to be expressed and where questions or utterances were flowing among the group (Biesta, Priestly & Robinson, 2015b). This mediating arena seemed to be vital for the students in order to be able to react on certain issues during their practicum periods and to create prerequisites for developing collective experiences and professional repertoires for their future profession, i.e. their teacher agency.

For the students, our results show the need for having access to an arena where the gap between theory and practice can be visualized and discussed (cf. Yoon & Larkin, 2018). The seminars function as an arena where experiences and preconceived ideas of the profession can be elaborated on with fellow students before practicum, where practical-evaluative experiences can be developed during practicum periods and where projective experiences can take shape. As an example, theories surrounding the image of the competent child were elaborated on by students in seminars with researchers and challenged by proven experiences among the students. The students expressed that the early practicum has made them see other things and also that the discussions with us as researchers and with each other have helped them to develop their teacher profession and their teacher agency. Whether the discussions have helped the students to bridge the gap between their two learning arenas or not is difficult for them to see. As experienced teacher educators, although not being their teachers, we think this group has progressed quickly from being naïve – which we think most students are at the beginning of their first
term – to being able to problematize both theories and practices. We believe that the students have developed an analytical ability in this relatively short time of 5 months. In line with findings from Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, and Hökkä (2015), who consider collaboration and support as crucial for novice teachers to develop their teacher agency, we found our weekly seminars to have the same function. Theoretically, the seminar discussions between the researchers and the students can be regarded as their horizontal teacher network where they get support to be able to integrate theory and practice and through that become reactive, and proactive, students.

As a newcomer – in any area – it can be difficult to argue against something you think is not the right thing to do. We argue our project has contributed to students’ critical reflection. New students or teachers may not even notice the “dinosaurs” without getting help from the discussions in a horizontal network. In our results, students who were new in the preschool area and who, from the beginning, were unsure whether what they experienced was something acceptable or not, gained strength and confidence to react through the students’ common discussions.

There are of course limitations in our study. The students participated voluntarily, and we do not know if they would have acted as they did without our common discussions and how much of an impact our academic positions affected the discussions. However, our impression is that the student teachers have taken a big step forward toward their professional development, from looking for the right answers to becoming an evaluative upcoming professional. We draw on our long experience as teacher educators to determine that the project design has played an important role, and we notice that what has happened in this group is not very common in such a short period of time. Our results show a need to further develop research on student teacher’s professional development, both from longitudinal and large-scale studies, international comparative studies and from different perspectives, involving teacher educators and a higher education organizational perspective.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

ORCID

Katarina Ribaeus http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7905-0822
Ann-Britt Enochsson http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7214-1716
Annica Löfdahl Hultman http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8510-5546

References


