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“We Need to Give the Profession Something that No One Else Can”:

Swedish Student Teachers’ Perceptions and Experiences of their Preschool Teacher Training Programme

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Abstract. Current research points towards preschool and qualitative pedagogical relationships as being determined and formed by a close link between care and teaching. An Early Childhood Education should lead not only towards the acquisition of knowledge within specific areas but should also enhance the personal development of student teachers. New and creative competences need to be developed to cope with increasingly complex, changing and diversified learning environments. The crucial questions are: How well does contemporary Teacher Education prepare student teachers for their future role? Do students feel that their teacher-training programme has sufficiently prepared them for their profession? This study comprises Swedish student teachers’ perceptions and experiences of their Early Childhood Education. Data is based on 181 written evaluations by final year student teachers. Results are discussed using a theoretical framework based on the sociological concept of an “educational contract” comprising three different levels of negotiation: students’ education and their current workforce; students and their teacher training programme; students, teachers and learning in any given educational situation.

Keywords: early childhood education, preschool, student teachers, personal and professional development, teacher training.

Introduction

All formal teacher education is concerned with restructuring the everyday concepts and initial beliefs of the students. It is important to shed light on the crucial role that teacher education has in order to develop awareness and reflection among the students about their own initial beliefs and expectations, since these are the structures towards which the new knowledge and experiences will be understood (von Wright, 1997, p. 259).

General goals for Teacher Education in Sweden include developing capacities for independent and critical assessments, being able to discern, formulate and

solve problems, and preparation for meeting changes in working life. In addition to basic knowledge and skills, students need to develop capacities for seeking and evaluating knowledge on a scientific level, keeping up to date with knowledge development and be able to exchange knowledge even with persons outside their special field of knowledge (Higher Education Act, 1992:1434, 8 §).

According to a recent report (Swedish Research Council, 2015) preschool research is in need of urgent expansion due to the fact that “this field of research has not developed in relation to extensive changes related to high expectations of the preschool as an agency for pro-action and equality” (ibid., p. 26). As Sheridan, Williams, Sandberg and Vuorinen (2011, p. 435) contend: “Preschool competence is constituted in the intersection of values, knowledge and ideologies on different system levels. From a perspective of critical ecology, preschool teachers can thus be viewed as a community of learners and agents of change”.

Further results from the report point towards preschool and qualitative pedagogical relationships as being determined and formed by a close link between care and teaching. This implies that “a new concept of teaching is needed, that moves from formal and adult-directed situations to situations where preschool staff engage the child’s learning through dialogue, which even includes dialogue that is non-verbal” (ibid., p. 27). A recurring implication is the importance of preschool teachers’ knowledge, competences and commitment in conjunction with all children’s participation and inclusion. Furthermore, studies show that pedagogical relationships between preschool staff and children are of crucial importance for the enhancement of children’s learning and socio-emotional development (ibid.).

Ways in which preschool teachers work towards providing suitable conditions for young children’s learning and development is the focus of yet another recent report (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2015). Building on the assumption that capacities such as creativity, the will to co-operate, meticulousness and a sense of responsibility determine how individuals succeed with their education and working life, it is concluded that work done within preschools and during the early years in school in order to enhance these capacities, is of specific importance. Being able to enhance young children’s capacities for learning and development is therefore a quality of crucial and particular importance to all prospective preschool teachers.

For the award of a Degree of Bachelor of Arts in Early Years Education, Swedish student teachers are required to demonstrate knowledge in three main areas: (1) knowledge and understanding; (2) competence and skills; (3) judgement and approach. The latter is of special interest to this study as it is in this area that essential qualities of teaching are expressed, related to personal dispositions, competences and qualities and as such can be difficult to measure or assess. According to The Higher Education Ordinance (1993:100) students need to demonstrate the following knowledge within the area *Judgement and approach*: self-awareness and the capacity for empathy; the capacity to adopt a professional approach to children and their caregivers; the capacity to make assessments in educational processes on the basis of relevant scientific, social and ethical aspects with particular respect for human rights, especially children’s rights according to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and sustainable devel-

opment; the capacity to identify the need for further knowledge and to develop his or her own skills in professional practice.

Other specific concepts related to personal dispositions and self-development that are included in The Higher Education Ordinance can be found under the heading *Knowledge and understanding*: “demonstrate knowledge and understanding of social relationships, conflict management and leadership”; and *Competence and skills*: “display the capacity to benefit from, systematize and reflect critically and autonomously on personal experience, the experience of others and relevant research findings and thereby contribute to his or her own professional development and the formation of knowledge in the field of professional practice”.

According to Olofsson (2013) the concept of an *educational contract* is of general relevance to studies of higher education; especially so in regard to academic professional training where students have expectations related to their studies and aspirations that are primarily connected to their future occupations. He describes important aspects on four different levels: the educational system and society as a whole; students’ education related to the labour market; students and their education (programme, subject, institution, university); students, teachers and learning in any given educational situation.

The last two are incorporated into what Olofsson 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 characterizes 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. Olofsson’s studies demonstrate that: students’ expectations include being given help and support from teachers in order to succeed with their studies; demands made on them are reasonable and realistic; they are treated well, kept well-informed and taken care of; they will get a qualified education that will provide them with a job. At the same time however, all these expectations can come into conflict with the students’ desire for a stimulating as well as stress-free education (*ibid.*, p. 54).

Cross and Hong (2009, p. 278) suggest that professional identity can be understood as “a framework established and maintained through interaction in social situations, and negotiation of roles within the particular context”. Caires et al (2012, p. 172) found that “teaching practice is perceived as a particularly stressful and demanding period, which involves considerable amounts of distress, changes in psycho-physiological patterns and an increasing sense of weariness and ‘vulnerability’ (...) Despite these difficulties, data also reveal student teachers’ positive perceptions regarding their growing knowledge and skilfulness, their increasing sense of efficacy, flexibility and spontaneity in their performance and interactions, as well as the awareness of having achieved reasonable levels of acceptance and recognition amongst the school community”. Accordingly, “it can be claimed that the warmth, acceptance and satisfactory conditions offered to these newcomers may determine not only their growing sense of ‘belonging’ but also (partially) their self-fulfilment regarding the teaching profession or the reasonable sense of professional identity acknowledged by these

student teachers" (ibid.).

Based on newly graduated teachers' evaluations of Teacher Education in Sweden, Åstrand (2012, p. 17) found that "the pattern of priorities in Swedish teacher education that emerges shows that it continues to follow a classic design with the traditional emphasis on and a concentration on preparation for teaching in classrooms and with less focus on the wider teacher work at schools, development work and outreach and collaboration". He also notes that "Teacher education in Sweden has earlier been characterised by two different traditions, the tradition of seminars and the university-based academic tradition. It has been a reform ambition since the 1970s to integrate these two but this survey indicates they they still have a parallel existence" (ibid., p. 18).

There are disturbing signs that Nordic Colleges and Universities are not succeeding when it comes to stimulating students' "self-cultivation" (Bohlin, 2013). Swedish interview studies with teachers and students have shown that the majority experience a general "upper secondary school attitude" in today's colleges, implying that, among other things, independence and the capacity for critical thinking are not sufficiently developed. At the same time, stress over grades and lack of time result in instrumental behaviour whereby students often choose not to attend seminars that are not essential for their grade - but that could have enriched their learning in other ways. The crucial and constantly recurring issue that teacher educators need to address is how they need to teach in order that higher education can truly become an arena for "self-cultivation".

In the Higher Education Act (1992:1434, 4a§) it is stipulated that Universities must work towards promoting students to take an active role in the further development of their own education. It is important that institutions of higher education "should give participating students, and students who have already completed a given course, the opportunity to express their experiences and opinions by means of a course evaluation coordinated by the institution" (Higher Education Ordinance, 1993, 1:14). At the Faculty of Education in this study the overall ambition (according to the student influence policy available on the University website) is that the students encounter and feel included in a coherent and transparent education. Recent research suggests that coherence is a key feature of strong teacher programmes (Klette & Hammerness, 2016).

Student participation in the implementation, evaluation and development of the programme is "decisive to its quality". Incorporating student influence in all its necessary forms is described as being both a significant and complex task. Influence that occurs on a daily basis and in direct communication between the student/educator/other members of staff in a respectful relationship is termed "informal influence". One of the sections describes the specific responsibilities of the student and the educator:

- *Student influence* implies the responsibility of each student to participate in a constructive development of their education. The student should therefore take active part in the possibilities of student influence offered during the programme.
- *Educators* have a particular responsibility for finding good forms for dialogue and to see that each student be heard. The educator's attitude is therefore of great importance for a student to feel included or not towards teaching activi-

ties. Educators alone cannot enhance a positive development, but they should be able to - in concrete teaching situations - create the necessary prerequisites for it.

Maintaining a meaningful balance between students' rights and obligations also implies students' active participation in programmes and course evaluations. This is important to ensure that the best conditions for learning and for the accomplishment of the goals of the programme or course are provided. Evaluations provide students with the opportunity of sharing their experiences and opinions of the course and should therefore be made accessible to all.

Method

The aim of the present study is to provide valuable insight into how individual approaches to lives and work affect student teachers' perceptions and expectations regarding the content and meaning of their pre-school teacher training programme. Overriding questions of significance are: How well does contemporary Teacher Education prepare student teachers for their future role? Do students feel that their teacher-training programme has sufficiently prepared them for their profession?

Among the students who started their teacher training programme at this Department of Early Childhood (the same term as the present study was completed), 75 % were younger than 29 years old and an overwhelming majority were female. Almost half (44 %) combined full-time studies with part-time work. 41 % of the students had one or more children and 19 % did not have Swedish as their home language. 64 % had more than 2 year's previous work experience and 39 % had already studied at a college or University. 25 % were concerned that their studies would be difficult and half of the students expressed a desire to continue with their studies. In answer to the question of what they wished of their coming profession, this group of students answered that it be: Creative (77 %); Intellectually stimulating (62 %); Of relevance to society (48 %); Well paid (21 %); Able to offer opportunities for career advancement (19 %). Of interest is the fact that creativity and intellectual stimulation are ranked so highly and that a good salary and opportunities for career advancement are not their main priorities.

Qualitative data analysis in this study is based on the written evaluations of 181 final year Early Childhood student teachers. Of these, 123 answers were collected from a voluntary and anonymous web questionnaire. Here data collection comprised only the students' answers to the last question, which was open-ended and where they were able to, in their own words, add anything they felt a special need to convey regarding their experiences of the teacher-training programme.

In addition to the data collected via the web questionnaire, two separate groups (a total of 58 students) were asked to first discuss and then answer the following specific questions in writing: (1) In what ways has the teacher-training programme had an impact on your personal development? (2) What in your Teacher Education has influenced you the most? (3) Have you found anything to be lacking in the teacher-training programme? (4) What is your experience of the connection between theory and practice? (5) In what ways has your Teacher

Education prepared you for your future role? These students were part of my supervision group. They discussed the questions in smaller groups, documented their comments and handed in their notes to me. The written answers from the questionnaire as well as from the two groups were transcribed, categorized and analyzed in relation to the aims of the study and the five central questions.

Complementary notes from a student council meeting (attended by two teachers and four students) as well as from a teacher educators' conference (attended by thirty-two lecturers and senior lecturers) were also transcribed, categorized and analysed as supplementary data.

Results

In answer to the question of in what ways the teacher-training programme had impacted on their personal development, one of the students wrote that she had become more profound as a person, her self-confidence had increased and she didn't have as many prejudices as she used to: "It's easier for me now to accept diversity". Another student describes how she has acquired a deeper understanding for what the profession implies and for how "we can help make others understand the way we feel about it". In general, these students describe the ability to reflect and analyse as being a natural and integrated part of the way they work. Among these students, time spent in their practice schools has influenced them the most. As one student concludes: "Everything I've read and interpreted and have been able to apply in practice!" Other positive influences include positive relationships with specific teachers, opportunities for learning to think critically, and discussions in their mentor groups. Most students feel that most of the courses have been relevant and interesting. One student writes: "We've had many group presentations in front of the class. This has made me stronger as a person and given me the wonderful feeling of daring to try!" A negative factor described by one of the students, has been "stress related to our exams."

Many students feel that they lack examples of how to do certain practical things, eg. implementing parent meetings and practicing together on how to conduct performance appraisal meetings with parents. Other things described as lacking include cardiopulmonary rescue, sign-language and practical courses in maths and science. Many students would have liked to learn more about special needs education. Having more mentor group meetings and discussions about course literature was also something these students would have liked more of. Several mention the desire for a more effective schedule, where fewer lectures and more seminars could open up for opportunities for discussion with the teacher and one's classmates. A negative aspect mentioned by many students is related to the lack of communication between different group mentors. One student writes: "They say and do different things, resulting in misunderstandings and different pre-conditions for the students. This has disappointed me the most".

A majority of the students experience the connection between theory and practice as positive. One student writes: "I've been able to identify connections and been able to apply my theoretical knowledge in practice". For another it had felt worthwhile and important, "... but I would have wanted more! The time spent in practice school also gives a welcome break from school, which can be

nice at times. It makes it fun returning to one's studies and discussing one's experiences with the class. When asked in what ways their education has prepared them for their future role, there are only positive remarks. From having learnt to take responsibility for one's own learning and development, to being "an almost full vessel today - which will continue to be filled as long as I continue working in preschool!" One student describes her process: "At the beginning I did things without really understanding why. But after awhile I was able to explain why I did certain things. It is important to be able to stand up for what I do and explain why. Most of all I think it's important as it can contribute towards raising the status of our profession based on the knowledge we possess". Another student concludes: "This has been a wonderful journey in many ways. It's been fun, with lots of challenges and lots of laughs!

After having completed the teacher-training programme, critique from earlier courses is still evident. This includes lack of communication between group mentors, ambiguity, ineffective schedules and too little practice. That which most of the students feel to be lacking is how to plan and implement parent meetings, how to handle performance appraisal meetings and how best to assist children with special needs. These students would also like more rhetorical elements earlier in the program and feel they need more training in being able to give individual presentations (in contrast to the many group presentations required during their training). In regard to personal development, many students feel that they have gained self-confidence, acquired a deeper understanding of the meaning of the profession as a whole as well as having developed capacities for reflection and analysis as a natural part of their work. Several mention the fact that specific teacher educators have made a difference. A majority of the students feel that theory and practice during their teacher training has gone hand in hand, and has been of great benefit to them. In many positive ways they feel that the programme has prepared them for their future role. It seems natural that what these students at this final stage feel to be lacking are often practical elements that they will need in their immediate future.

At a Student Council meeting for Early Childhood Education at the same Department, student teachers from Terms 3 and 7 (the final term) shared experiences of their teacher education regarding content and learning environment. From the transcribed notes of their conversation it is evident that when these student teachers' start their education they have high expectations; they want and expect to make a contribution. This is especially evident during the first term. They consider practice time in preschool as conclusive to being able to connect with themselves and find their identity as teachers. There is soon a growing frustration over what they deem to be too many theoretical work tasks taking time from practical experience and thereby the possibility of self-confirmation in their teacher role. By the third term there is a growing concern over increasing academic challenges; the students have difficulty finding meaning and consistency; there is self-doubt and absenteeism. Statistics from this University also show that it is at this point that many students discontinue their studies.

After the fourth term, 89 % of the students express the need for more clarity and structure in their training programme and better communication between the teachers; 70 % want more and better connections between theory and prac-

tice. During the following terms the student's express dissatisfaction over inefficient schedule planning, low expectations, too much spare time and once again a lack of communication between teachers and students.

During the final year, and in retrospect, the meaning and significance of their teacher education becomes much clearer. Students however want more rhetorical elements included in their different courses as they see this as a necessary and essential communicative competence in relation to working with children, parents, school leaders etc. in their future profession. Although most experience themselves as 'students' during the programme, it is after they have been out in their practice schools for the second time that they start feeling more aware of having a specific professional role. These students also suggest that they be included more actively in different parts of the course; they feel that this may increase a sense of commitment and counteract absenteeism. They also express the wish of sharing the end product - their thesis - in public, to make it a more meaningful experience for them.

At a teacher educators' conference 32 lecturers and senior lecturers at this Department shared their thoughts on the students' evaluations. Ways in which students are introduced to the Academy they feel is important, i.e. addressing the question of what it means to study at a University. Educators need to state their case clearly. What is expected of the students? There has to be clear distinctions between the students' and the educators' sense of responsibility. A dilemma arises based on the uncertainty of younger students: will their uncertainty disappear if they are given too much support too early, or will it instead create a pattern of dependency? The question was raised if it really is a "problem" that group mentors say "different" things, an often recurring criticism from students. Group mentors have different personalities and this should instead be accepted and considered as a resource - as long as examination criteria are adhered to. Students need to be able to distance themselves from upper secondary school; how should students be approached who want to be 'controlled' (need constant confirmation and acknowledgement)? What is "fixed" (learning outcomes, course literature) and what is "open"? Students continually seem to fluctuate between wanting to be 'cared' for, and the uncertainty of relying on themselves. A recurring predicament is how to get the students to feel motivated to engage in all aspects of the training programme, and not only choose to partake of activities that are not examinations. Students need to be encouraged at an early stage to motivate their opinions, in order to enhance critical thinking. The concluding challenge is: "Raise expectations! Students need to be proud of their education!"

Analysis of the results

Connecting theory with practice is one of the long-standing challenges of preparing new teachers (Klette and Hammerness (2016, p. 44).

A constant and recurring theme throughout the teacher training programme has been the wish for more practice time. One student refers to the University as a "bubble" and practice schools as "reality". Von Wright (1997, p. 263) believes

that the gap between theory and practice in teacher education “is created when theories about development stages or class differences remain distant from practice and do not become tools for the student teachers’ personal theories.” She concludes that:

Self-reflection and awareness of one’s own beliefs, choices and strategies do not come by themselves, but they have to be acquired and practised. In order to have a fruitful encounter between teacher education and the students’ development into professional teachers, it is important that the students themselves are confronted with their own initial beliefs and get opportunities to challenge and problematize them, to co-ordinate them and possibly alter them (ibid., p. 265).

Prospective teachers’ existing knowledge and beliefs have been found to play a crucial role in how they experience and/or envision their professional role (Bukor, 2015). As far back as 1975, Lortie emphasized the intuitive, imitative and personal aspects of teaching: “Students are undoubtedly impressed by some teachers’ actions and not by others, but one would not expect them to view the difference in a pedagogical, explanatory way. What students learn about teaching then, is intuitive and imitative rather than explicit and analytical, it is based on individual personalities rather than pedagogical principles” (ibid., p. 62). As Saunders (2012, p. 306) contends: “Exploring individuals’ emotions as constructs which are separate from the environment and their social relationships denies the complex and inherently social nature of teaching.” As noted by Caires et al (2012, p. 166):

Assuming that teaching practice is a period of intense search and exploration of *self*, others and new scenarios, it is believed that it is most relevant to analyse the lived experiences of those who are learning to teach. This involves not only the scientific, procedural and pedagogical components of this process but also the individual as a whole. It is, thus, important to focus on the cognitions, emotions and meanings that emerge, to listen to the dilemmas, doubts and fears of the student teachers regarding their teaching practice, as well as their drives, beliefs and expectations about the profession

In a study by Nilsson Lindström (2012) beginner student teachers were found to be very career oriented; that which attracted them most at the outset was the prospect of study and learning in practice schools. There was a predominant desire for helping children with special needs and teaching was to a large extent experienced as a social profession. The practical element (working in a practice school) was essential in order to be able “to identify myself as a teacher”. Becoming a teacher was described as an inner journey of discovery in order to find out whether or not the profession was the right choice. In this study too, the student’s express frustration over the fact that the time spent in practice schools is too short. They feel that too much time is taken up by theoretical work at the expense of practical experience, limiting opportunities for self-affirmation that practicing their teacher role gives them. That which at the outset is experienced as the students’ individual approach to their profession is later modified after their practice time - when they are able to appreciate the advantages of teamwork and the help and support this contributes to in their daily work.

In a study by Kuisma and Sandberg (2011) on how Swedish students and preschool teachers regard professionalism today, results show that for both categories “professionalism” is based on the possession of a shared knowledge base. The concept of professionalism was considered in two ways: as the ability for knowledge gained at a scientific level (teacher qualification) and as the ability for knowledge gained through practical activities with others (children, colleagues, parents, social services in the community). In Kuisma and Sandberg’s survey, “the students were more aware than the preschool teachers of the comprehensive picture of the ethical attitude and the holistic pedagogical contents” (ibid., p. 62). Preschool teachers’ views on children were often expressed and understood using psychological theory and developmental stages whereas the students viewed the child as a “construction”, using perspectives derived from postmodern theory.

The authors ask themselves: “What happens when these two different views meet during common activities, where the students encounter the preschool teachers in their practical study periods? Will the preschool teachers’ viewpoints act as a model for the students, or will the preschool teachers become influenced by the new theory presented by students, thus supporting their point of view and subsequent endeavours?” Kuisma and Sandberg presuppose a positive reaction where “synthesizing different ideas may lead to reflection. If the teacher has to reframe her/his existing thoughts, strength in new knowledge can be cultivated” (ibid.). Developing professionalism through thinking and reframing however requires necessary time for reflection. It also requires a meaningful synthesis between the theoretical and practical elements within Teacher Education. As concluded by Korthagen, Loughran and Russell (2006, p. 1038), “telling new teachers what research shows about good teaching and sending them off to practice has failed to change, in any major way, what happens in our schools and universities”. They suggest “reconstructing teacher education from within” (ibid., p. 1039).

Teacher students however can have very different thoughts about what a profession implies. In the present study one student writes: “I hadn’t given any thought to my future occupation in those terms”. Another has similar thoughts: “I had no previous knowledge about this and had never heard the term ‘professional theory’ before the course started. It was a completely new way of thinking”. Another student argues: “My view of the concept of profession implies taking everyone’s competences in the work team into consideration, regardless of occupational background. This diversity is what motivates development, regardless of whether you are a day-care attendant or a preschool teacher. Although one comes from similar or different backgrounds one can interpret the same situation in different ways; it’s important to take advantage of the fact that we have different competences”. Her conclusion is:

We who work in preschool need to feel proud of what we do and I believe that by calling our occupation for a profession we can feel more ‘special’ and more proud of our work. This is especially important today when so many change careers; we need to give the profession something that no one else can. No one should be able to come from outside and be able to do our work as well or better without an education. Then something is wrong. The course is extremely rele-

vant in order to show that we can actually accomplish things within our 'occupation' and are able to show what this is.

Several of the conclusions presented in a recent survey (The National Union of Teachers in Sweden, 2016) coincide with the results of the present study. Regarding content and quality in teacher education as well as preparation for their professional role, the survey summarizes the student teachers' perceptions as follows (ibid., pp. 5):

- General satisfaction with the quality of their education, despite some discontent.
- Good preparation for their future profession, despite flaws.
- Too few teacher-led lessons.
- The programme is not especially demanding.
- Satisfaction with the teacher educators' pedagogical competences and relevant connections to research.
- Satisfaction with their engagement in practice schools, although the majority complain of insufficient time.
- A majority of the students feel that they have acquired too little knowledge in important areas (assessment, special needs, technology and teaching newly arrived students), as well as lacking sufficient knowledge of didactics, teaching and methodology.

In view of this and in addition to the issues raised in the present study, the findings should be able to provide a base for wider discussions on the nature of the challenges facing future teachers and the necessity for teacher training programmes to recognize, support and incorporate an education of the whole person.

Concluding remarks

This article has addressed issues within Teacher Education that have dealt with student teachers perceptions of their education in relation to their future profession, to the meaning and content of their teacher-training programme and to teachers and learning in specific educational contexts (see Olofsson 2013). Of general relevance has been student teachers' expectations and aspirations connected to their future profession. Of specific relevance has been student teachers' perceptions and thoughts on what Olofsson (ibid.) describes as being a mutual, presupposed and relatively stable agreement between students and teachers on the aims and content of the teaching programme. These situations and processes are determined by the constant interplay between expectations, approaches, negotiations and a fixed institutional form.

Quoting Brennan (2008, p. 385), Kehm (2015) describes a further dimension as being "the increasing social embeddedness of higher education institutions within a multitude of communities that make their own particular demands" (ibid., p. 72). According to Kehm this "has led to new relationships between higher education institutions and their external communities at local, national and international levels that have sometimes been analysed as needing and leading to a new social contract between higher education institutions and society

(...) This is to some extent reminiscent of Gibbons (1998) demand for quality, relevance and internationalization in higher education if institutions are to survive in the modern globalized knowledge economies" (ibid.). As Sheridan, Williams, Sandberg and Vuorinen (2011, p. 435) contend: "... preschool teaching is a profession in change. Preschool competence is constituted in the intersection of values, knowledge and ideologies on different system levels".

If we are to aspire towards lifelong, transformative learning in educational settings, we need to acknowledge the significance that relationships, dialogues and personal dispositions have for the personal and professional development of prospective teachers. As Eyler (2009, p. 30) contends: "The crucial factor for achieving powerful learning outcomes from experiential-learning programmes is the inclusion of opportunities for feedback and reflection. Challenging, continuous, context-appropriate reflection turns work experience into learning experience". The contents of teacher training programmes need to be developed so that they correspond more fully with the needs that newly-qualified teachers have. This mainly involves the skills that form part of social competence but also knowledge of the problems that children have and the ability to deal with them professionally. According to Kristjansson (2000, p. 12), "the sad fact is that most teacher-training programs fail to prepare teachers for work on moral and interpersonal issues; as a consequence of which teachers frequently express insecurity about how to address such issues in the classroom".

An Early Childhood Education should lead not only towards the acquisition of knowledge within specific areas but should also enhance the personal development of student teachers. As stipulated by Clark and Byrnes (2015, p. 393), "more time spent discussing expectations, beliefs, and attitudes can help teacher educators create more personal and meaningful learning experiences for students". Of importance is also that "the questions and experiences that pre-service teachers have should be the starting point for their own learning and engagement" (ibid., p. 381).

If we are to construct a teacher education that contributes to developing students' capacities for critical thinking and which fosters a complex understanding of the world and its citizens while at the same time cultivating the students' capacity for empathy, we need to adopt a holistic perspective to personal and professional development (Malm, 2011). Hansen (2007, p. 3) proposes that teacher training should try to operate along two tracks: a professional and evidence-based track (what works?) and an existential and normative track (how teachers understand themselves in what they are saying and doing). The former is concerned with pragmatic and instrumental questions in a functional problem-solving and critical attitude. According to Hansen (ibid., p. 15), the challenge in teacher training lies in finding a balance between "the instrumental track of *competence* and the existential track of *Bildung*". "Bildung" is often referred to as a process of both personal and cultural maturation, i.e. "self-cultivation" (see Bohlin, 2013).

In a report from the Swedish National Agency for Education (2009:24 R) the main question raised is: What is the role of the concept of "bildning" in practice, i.e. in the planning and implementation of Higher Education? "Bildning" is here defined as "a perspective on knowledge where the awareness of the values from which knowledge emanates and its content go hand in hand" (ibid., pp. 24, my

translation). “What is implied is in-depth knowledge that is integrated in the learner and in the learner’s value system. In order for education to be permeated by ‘bildung’ it needs to be conveyed in a context that is characterized by critical thinking, reflection, ethics and communication. Developing the students’ capacities for independent judgement within their area becomes central” (ibid., my translation).

Fundamental to any attempt at initiating “bildungning” (self-cultivation) in education is the teacher’s knowledge and ability, i.e. the capacity to be able to reach the students and hold their attention while at the same time leaving them free to pursue their own way through the subject (ibid., p. 18). Various examples of how to achieve this, in regard to didactic approaches, are suggested: writing, discussions, teachers who are able to inspire knowledge for the subject, exercises where students are able to use their knowledge and apply their judgement in order to handle or solve problems of an unknown nature or with unknown consequences, interaction between the role-model (the teacher, the research topic, the knowledge base) and the one who learns, seminars, dialogue with others and collaboration with the local community.

To a much greater extent than is the case today, Swedish teacher training programmes need to acknowledge as well as emphasize the cognitive as well as moral and emotional perspectives of learning to teach as essential and interrelated dimensions of career development (Malm, 2009). In striving towards educational sustainability, we need to engage in the complexities of continuous improvement consistent with deep values of human purpose (Fullan, 2005).

Teacher education needs to focus more on the personal processes involved in becoming a professional teacher, by helping students develop deeper understandings of themselves as well as of the contexts of teaching. Although focus in this study has been limited to a group of 123 final year student teachers in Sweden, results have shown that they have been able to give voice to several long-standing challenges that still persist and need to be confronted in our teacher training programmes, on both national and international arenas.

How the processes described in this study manifest themselves at any given time can in part be rendered visible through student evaluations, course reports, discussions between educators, etc. As these processes are in continuous flux due to new students, new teachers, revised course syllabi etc., so too are the ways in which the contracts premises are established, conveyed and shared between different parties. Through continual, integral and complex interplay, Teacher Education is characterized by its own unique dynamics where new challenges are constantly being formed and transformed over time.

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