

Rethinking Pedagogical Strategies: Vitalizing life Experience in Teacher Education

Helen M.V. Eikeland¹ & Hans Otto Ringereide²

Summery

The main concern in this article is to investigate how to follow up and assist students, entering teacher training programs, to develop ownership to their process of becoming a teacher. The critical element here is the students' approach to the syllabus and textbooks. This paper argues the relevance of vitalizing students lived experiences as a central part of engaging in their studies to create ownership of their process of becoming a group of diverse and confident teachers. By giving life experiences a position as an active part of the syllabus in teacher education, life experiences will consequently be a relevant part of the content in the study and also be taken into account in any examinations.

A brief outline of the current approach in teacher education

According to the curriculum in traditional Norwegian teacher training, pedagogy includes a variety of different topics ranging from philosophy of education to theories of personality and sociology. The reappears to have been a change in the orientation in teacher education regarding the emphasis on pedagogy with a shift in focus from pedagogy as a central discipline toward more emphasis on didactics related to subjects. Didactics has traditionally had a more limited focus on aims and objectives of education, including the content of education as well as different methods and evaluation related to learning activities. Didactics also include the context in which the activities take place. However, an even more limited focus has emerged in recent years, applying didactics within the narrow framework of subjects. This shift in orientation confines the view of teacher education from a wide pedagogical approach to a more restricted view of education. In addition to this change and the aftermath of these tendencies, an increasing focus on procedures regarding classroom management has emerged. As an alternative, this pedagogical approach has investigated the relevance of students' life experiences as a vital part in their education.

A brief outline of Norwegian teacher training

Norwegian teacher training is divided into three departments. Preschool teacher education (age 0-6) at the bachelor level. Teacher education for primary school (age 6-16) at the master's level. The third level is a one-year course that meets the requirements for working as a teacher at the secondary/high-school level (age 15-19).

Preschool teacher education (age 0-6) is a five-year course at the bachelor level. The content of the course mainly concentrates on different perspectives regarding child development and relevant pedagogic topics. Teacher education for primary school (age 6-16) is a five-year program at the master's level. The content in this course consists partly, on the one hand, of education in various subjects and, on the other hand, different pedagogical subjects. In recent years, the emphasis has changed from a focus mainly on pedagogy as a subject to more emphasis on teaching various subjects. The relative dimensions between subject and pedagogy is hard to estimate precisely, but approximately 20 percent of the content encompasses pedagogy-related elements. The third level is a one-year course that meets the requirements for working as a teacher at the secondary/high-school level (age 15-19).

This requires that the students either have finished a master's program or have a vocational, professional education, supplemented by a minimum of two years of further education at the college level, in addition to at least two years of practical work. Most of these students usually have many years of experience from working in private

¹ University in Agder

² University in Agder

enterprises or in public service. The content of this one-year course is dedicated completely to different parts of pedagogy spreading over a wide variety of topics ranging from practical subject-specific methods of education to pedagogical psychology, philosophy, and so on.

Regardless of the different departments of teacher education, the considerations of what requirements a teacher needs can be divided mainly into two major parts: First, the knowledge about various subjects and, secondly, knowledge about pedagogy. In preschool teacher education, pedagogy and subjects are in some way closely interconnected and integrated. In teacher education for primary and secondary school, the distinctions between pedagogy and different subjects are more clearly exposed. However, the intention of the teacher education program is still to establish a seamless transition between pedagogy and the different subjects. When it comes to the upper level (aged 15-19), teacher education is divided into two different parts. The education in different subjects and pedagogy is given in separate classes, which underpins the separation of the sphere of pedagogy from the subjects. One might argue that the tendency in teacher's education is a narrowing down of pedagogy in higher levels.

Two main strategies for preparing the teacher student for teaching

Teacher training, in general, is in some way or another concerned with preparing teachers for dealing with different subjects. A view that puts the subject as the premise for pedagogical implications gives clear directions for how to prepare and conduct teaching in a given subject. An orientation toward the "nature" of the given subject regardless of the context runs the risk of undermining the complexity of the setting in which learning takes place (Gundem, 2011). This position and strategic approach toward viewing teacher education seem to have an increasing impact and influence on education in general and teacher education in particular.

On the other hand, an alternative pedagogical approach toward teacher training would accentuate and stress the importance of the context. An emphasis on context underpins the complexity of the central elements related to education and learning, the student, the teacher, and the context (Bernstein, 2003). A broad understanding of context entails the historical, cultural, social, and political environments as well as the participants' personal experiences and lived life (Ivor F. Goodson, 2000). Valuing context and life experience is closely related to a narrative research tradition.

Students participating in teacher education come to the program with various backgrounds, experiences, and personalities, as do university teachers. They differ similarly in background, experiences, and personalities with varying ideals, values, and beliefs regarding pedagogical understanding (Eikeland, 2018). The variation applies to the different learning situations in general as well.

A holistic approach to teacher education

The field of pedagogy is closely connected to people's daily life and situations, and living in a society, both private and public arenas (Ivor F. Goodson, 2005). These various situations potentially bring people in touch with different issues related to pedagogy in some way or another. Throughout people's lives, there will be a wide range of experiences related to the subject of pedagogy. The most obvious example would be students' experiences from schooling as well as from family life and growing up in a community. These experiences could be relevant and, as a potentially vital resource in practical teacher training and education, to relate and connect pedagogical theory to personal experiences. The main purpose would be to support and create pedagogical understanding focused on transforming their role from student to teacher.

By putting forward the significance of a holistic approach to education and teacher training, the concern here is to highlight the shift in orientation in teacher education. By narrowing pedagogical perspectives, one might run the risk of ignoring the complexity in teaching and teacher education. Undermining the complexity and challenges in education will most likely reduce teacher education to become a question of methods regarding how to teach in various subjects, losing a holistic perspective on education and schooling (Britt Ulstrup Engelsen, 2012).

This narrowing from a pedagogical perspective toward a more subject-oriented focus on teaching and education brings up several issues concerning questions related to the quality of teacher education. The complexity appears in different situations and circumstances. Both subject matters, as well as questions regarding interpersonal relationships, collaboration, and teachers' responsibility for the development of a complete school environment, underpin the complexity of schooling.

Students life experiences: As a central part of curriculum

Most commonly, both the curriculum and the syllabus are planned and developed regardless of the student's life experiences attending the different courses. In that sense, students' experiences and former life have little or no impact on the process of developing the curriculum and syllabus. These activities are, more or less, considered the activity of university teachers in coordination with national regulations and isolated from the life world of students.

As mentioned above, every student brings to the various programs a variety of experiences of pedagogical situations and happenings from their life. These experiences represent a wide range of relevant knowledge regarding education and pedagogy. In teacher education, the most common and traditional approach to pedagogical theory seems to aim at connecting pedagogical theory to practical classroom examples, in this way creating relevance to theory. By using a restricted approach to teacher education, by limiting the exemplification of theory with practical examples from life inside schools, lived experience from life outside schools becomes somewhat secondary to theoretical approaches.

The field of experiences and examples is often restricted to life inside schools and class rooms. By expanding the view of experience to incorporate both lives inside *and* outside school enriches the possibilities of making sense of theoretical concepts. In this sense, experiences are reduced to a means to illustrate and explain different theoretical concepts and phenomena. However, on the other hand, by emphasizing and underlining the importance of vitalizing a broader repertoire of experience as a central part of teacher education, all kinds of lived experience might become highly relevant and a main part of the curriculum and syllabus. By giving life experiences a position as an active part of the syllabus in teacher education, life experiences will consequently be a relevant part of the content in the study and also be taken into account in any examinations.

Therefore, these relevant situations could be viewed as representing something more than isolated and more or less random happenings. To pinpoint the importance and relevance of earlier experiences, it might be considered as a highly appropriate part of the curriculum and the syllabus. Students experiences and background knowledge could be used more systematically. Life experience applied in teacher education might be useful in at least three different ways.

- 1) At the beginning of a course, life experiences, as more biographical stories, might be a helpful way to establish an environment of trust and an atmosphere of sharing. Sharing life experiences and stories from the student's background creates a sense of belonging to the group.
- 2) Usually, life experiences are not regarded as a part of a syllabus or a curriculum. However, by giving value to the sharing of life experiences as an important part of the content of a course, all the individual students' life experiences together constitute a common knowledge base and collaboration of knowledge.
- 3) Life experiences might also be viewed as an approach to bring ownership and relevance to different themes in the curriculum. For example, related to the topic of evaluation, students' experiences with evaluation from various aspects might bring relevance to illuminate the topic of evaluation in the course work.

These various ways of vitalizing and taking into account the student's life experiences have been systematically applied in different levels and forms of teacher training. This theoretical framework has been developed on the basis of these experiences and students' feedback and responses.

Transforming life experiences into relevant pedagogical

As argued, the importance and impact of adding value to students' life experiences, in general, open for the opportunity to establish personal ownership of pedagogical concepts and theory. This intimate connection between the student life experience and theory aims at activating and making experiences relevant in new situations. This might be viewed as vitalizing earlier experiences in a new context. Remembering and associating a given experience and allocating it to a new setting open the possibility to analyze and understand the experience and its potential to contribute to a deeper understanding of theoretical issues. "Vitalizing" in this aspect is an attempt to make a connection between the students' former experiences and lived life to create and add meaning to pedagogical theory. Lived experiences as a knowledge base are thus seen as an important part of making theory meaningful. This means that to arrive at new personal insight requires a process of awareness of lived experiences as the foundation for reflection on pedagogical theory. This connection between earlier experience and theory also enhances ownership of pedagogical knowledge.

The critical point here is that the experiences connected to the pedagogical issues emerge from the students' own life to arrive at pedagogical insights. This generates the possibility of connecting ownership to pedagogical insight and theory. The pedagogical knowledge and insight are thus in some ways elevated to a higher level of practical knowledge and insight. This meeting point somehow creates a symbiosis between experience and theory that might contribute to transforming the students understanding of pedagogical situations to an integrated part of their professional life. By interpreting theory against the background of lived experiences adds both meaning and relevance to the theory and hopefully provides a potential impact of theory. These ideas are closely connected to the works of, for example, Jerome. S. Bruner and John Dewey(Bruner, 1966:Dewey, 1938).

An alternative approach to traditional education and in-service training.

Through the process of vitalizing students experiences as closely connected to pedagogical theory, it might be argued that the students are equipped with a personally owned theory that is connected to experience and the field of practical education. This connection allows for a disavowment of the traditional boundaries between theory and practice. To avoid this distinction, the use of life experience could be helpful for the students to convert pedagogical theories into a relevant basis for action.

The idea of vitalizing life experiences is somewhat different from getting experience from practical in-service training. As mentioned above, revitalizing life experiences gives the opportunity to connect pedagogical theory to a wider range of experiences, both their own experiences with schooling as well as life in general. By acknowledging and bringing into account one's own life experiences as a central part of teacher education gives the opportunity to create a foundation for building self-confidence and entering the new role as a teacher with a stronger sense of assurance.

In the field of education, teachers are challenged by various stakeholders and demanding conditions in a wide range of pedagogical situations that require a self-reliant foundation to meet the external pressures. The shift in education constitutes a move toward a more or less technical understanding of teaching running the risk of neglecting the importance of context. However, understanding of the context is the premise for all educational activities(Bruner, 1966). Losing the perspective of the importance of context implies a fragmentation of understanding complexity and the bigger picture. Let us take an example from PE education where teaching might have a particular focus on how to organize and conduct activities. Restricting the focus to a question about organizing a lesson might run the risk of losing important elements indirectly related to the phenomena of organization, such as social interaction between pupils, the variety of impact on self-esteem, and so on. Another example could be teaching classroom management, with a particular focus on how to reduce disturbances to control pupil activities. The focus on control and regulations might be a side track—and somehow a contradiction—to stimulate creativity and develop internal motivation.

As argued above, the shift in pedagogy has major implications for life in the classroom. The former focus on the administrative framework and teaching methods put less emphasis on the context and the relevance and importance of students' experiences. The shift demands a different orientation in teacher education putting more emphasis on creating relations and reciprocal interaction between teachers and students.

The current approach toward managing life in the classroom and schools has tended to resolve differences and challenges by developing procedures to help solve difficulties and conflicts. The idea of seeking procedures for complex situations restricts the teacher's role to that of the prosecutor of pre-developed rules and regulations instead of emerging as a visible and confident adult. The position as a visible and confident adult requires that teachers have a strong and well-integrated basis in their values and an ability to act according to their set of values. As an alternative, this emphasis on teacher's pedagogical foundation and resilience offers a broader view on the role of teachers in contrast to succumbing to a belief in the effectiveness of procedures. In many ways, access to procedures and programs might be useful resources for teachers in many situations. The sharing of ideas and methods could be seen as a way to develop and improve teaching. However, the use of ideas and methods has to be closely connected to a given situation in a particular context and at the same time correspond to the teacher's contextual understanding and convictions.

The idea and belief in developing standard procedures to assist teachers in handling complex and challenging issues in everyday life run the risk of elevating procedures over the teachers and in some respects undermining their role and responsibility as teachers. Teachers' professionalism is, to a great extent, connected to planning and organizing education. The use of procedures as regulators and problem-solving methods represent a tendency to reduce the teacher's impact on the situation.

A central aim of teacher education is to develop students' ability to apply a critical perspective on context, methods and one's ability to act. By offering standardized procedures for dealing with complex situations, the critical elements of teachers' professional life are somewhat threatened. From this point of view, teachers' critical approach to the context is essential to professionalism. Therefore, it could be argued that the field of education depends on critical and independent teachers to fulfill their social mandate. From this perspective, life experience might be seen as a foundational part of knowledge and curriculum theory that requires a philosophical underpinning of a new way of approaching teacher education.

Theoretical and pedagogical considerations: Life experiences to connect pedagogical theory to life in school.

Life experiences emerge as narratives in some way or another. Within the field of narrative life experiences and life history approaches have a central position. Regarding narrative as a field of science, there is a wide range of approaches to viewing narratives. In this context, life experiences are not used as a scientific method but as a pragmatic approach to getting in touch with students' experiences, including all kinds of narratives, without any particular connection to a specific part of the field of narratives. Life experiences can be used ranging from short, fragmented stories to longer biographical sequences (Goodson & Gill, 2011).

As argued before, analyzing one's life experiences illuminated by theory, allows for a possibility to understand the link between pedagogical situations and pedagogical theory. The traditional divide between theory and practice is usually described as two different spheres that need somehow to be integrated (Harbo, 1969), (Myhre, 1982), (Djupvik & Haaland, 2017). One of the main topics within the discipline of education has been how to make the integration successfully. John Dewey, among others, was concerned with how education was separated from society and argued for a closer connection and collaboration between school and society. He argued that by bringing practical subjects into school, supported by reflections related to practical actions, the students would get a better understanding of the subject matter and more efficient learning (Dewey, 1960). Dewey describes a learning situation in which action and reflection are closely connected in both time and space. Expanding on his ideas, it is possible to argue that by vitalizing actions from the past that are divided in time and space creates a space for learning in a similar way. Bruner's concept of the spiral participate in teaching, argued for a multiple revisiting of educational topics to promote deeper and more solid learning, supports in some way the idea of vitalizing previous situations in new settings (Bruner, 1966).

Relating the life experience approach to central theories of learning

Educationalists point out that learning is inextricably connected to experience, from behaviorists to psychoanalysts, but the differences would vary on the importance of the time between experience and learning. Jean Piaget described learning as a kind of gaining stability between the state of mind and the external world. Learning is thus described as a modification of the previous mental schemes. This supports the idea of vitalizing (earlier) experiences as a foundation for learning (Piaget, 1959). These ideas find support in the works of Vygotsky, Bruner, and many others.

Vitalizing life experiences could be argued as having an impact on students in various ways. One of the most obvious aspects of such an approach is to enhance the student's self-confidence, by exposing the individual student's experiences as both relevant and important. However, vitalizing students' lived experiences is not only an individual process of revisiting previous experiences and a reflection on their sense of integrity; this also provides a basis for students as a group to reflect on the meaning of diversity in teaching. In the context of a multicultural society, schooling demands teachers who reflect that diversity and can approach the context of schooling in a critical and independent way.

Adding perspectives – due to democracy

In addition to building the individual student's confidence, the collaborative life experiences represent a kind of "library" constructing a vital part of the syllabus in teacher education. Valuing the individual student's experiences as equally important to written text underpins this kind of knowledge as a relevant source to arrive at pedagogical understanding. The claim is that working collaboratively on students' lived experiences might create a foundation for change in the way students interact with each other and develop personal ownership of their future work as teachers.

The added value of using such an approach, is students' possibility to gain experience of drawing on each other's perspectives and ideas as a basis for school development. Referring back to the traditional understanding of learning in teacher education as a relationship between the student and the written syllabus underpinning the individuality of learning. On the other hand, it could be argued that the process of learning emerges in the collective interaction between students and their sharing of life experiences.

In modern society and in changing circumstances and multicultural classrooms, teaching requires, more than ever, a sense of integrity and critical thinking. A sense of integrity and critical thinking develops over time and needs exposure to various situations. By putting emphasis on students' life experiences gives students a possibility to articulate and test the relevance of their previous understanding. To take shortcuts between situations and procedures without the professional competence of the teacher might be a risky endeavor.

References:

- Bernstein, B. (2003). *Class, codes and control: Vol. 2: Applied studies towards a sociology of language* ([New ed.]). London: Routledge.
- Britt Ulstrup Engelsen. (2012). Metodeorientering og læreplanlojalitet – fagdidaktikk i læreplaner for lærerutdanningen. *Norskpedagogisktidsskrift*, 96(04), 258–268.
- Bruner, J. S. (1966). *Toward a theory of instruction* (Bd. 59). Harvard University Press.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. New York: Kappa Delta Pi/Touchstone.
- Dewey, J. (1960). *Common Faith*. Yale University Press.
- Djupvik, A. E., & Haaland, G. (2017). *Veileder- og instruktørhåndboka 2017*. Oslo: Pedlex.
- Eikeland, H. (2018). *The lifeworld of Nepalese teachers: Ideals, beliefs and agency*. Doctoral dissertations at University of Agder.
- Goodson, I., & Gill, S. (2011). *Narrative pedagogy: Life history and learning* (Bd. 386). Peter Lang.
- Gundem, B. B. (2011). *Europeisk didaktikk: tenkning og viten*. Oslo: Universitetsforl.
- Harbo, T. (1969). *Teori og praksis i den pedagogiske utdanning: studier i norsk pedagogikk 1818-1922*. Hentet fra http://urn.nb.no/URN:NBN:no-nb_digibok_2007080304010
- Ivor F. Goodson. (2000). *Livshistorier: kilde til forståelse av utdanning*. Hentet fra http://urn.nb.no/URN:NBN:no-nb_digibok_2012092406074
- Ivor F. Goodson. (2005). *Learning, curriculum and life politics: the selected works of Ivor F. Goodson*. London: Routledge.
- Myhre, R. (1982). *Hva er pedagogikk?: en elementær innføring*. Hentet fra http://urn.nb.no/URN:NBN:no-nb_digibok_2007070900036
- Piaget, J. (1959). *The language and thought of the child* (3rd ed., revised and enlarged). London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.