
Student voice in a practicum proposal: students as co-creators of curricula

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General description of the context

The paper presented here summarizes the main results of a training proposal for student teachers where they are set up as co-creators of the curricula content of the training initiative. This proposal takes part of a wider research that constitutes a PhD thesis funded publicly in the framework of a Spanish Teacher Training Programme (NReg. 7208636035 YoSC000121).

Proposals for higher education students to participate in the curricula or in the pedagogical planning are not new (Dewey, 1916), although in Spain there have not been many examples of such experiences. One possible explanation for this could be that the structural conditions of university teaching, together with the tradition of teacher training, which is exces-

sively massive and based on a model of transmissive teaching, have hindered the implementation of student voice experiences in the university. Based on this context, and taking advantage of the reforms that the Spanish University system is going through during the process of convergence with the European Higher Education Area, we develop this experience with the purpose of explore ways for student teachers to become full participants in the design of teaching approaches, courses and curricula (Bovill, Cook-Sather and Felten, 2011). Thus, practicum is a particularly interesting area for developing training proposals grounded in this co-production of curricula and to rethink the relationships between teachers and students towards more horizontal formats: the groups that orients each university supervisor are small (5-7 students) and the content is more open than the one from other subjects of the syllabus.

In summary, this paper presents a practicum training proposal for future teachers developed at the University of Cantabria which is articulated as a collaborative and systematic inquiry on the experience of teaching carried out by the students in their school placement. This initiative starts with the individual identification of a situation or a “pedagogical concern” that is chosen by each student and become the curriculum content which will lead the rest of the training initiative. The ultimate goal of these experiences is the development of university contexts that are more inclusive (Ainscow, 2001) and democratic (Apple & Beane, 2000), moving away from “traditional hierarchical models of expertise” (Bovill, Cook-Sather and Felten, 2011, p. 1) and placing student teachers as agents

and as “authorised voices” for teacher training improvement (Rudduck & Flutter, 2007; Susinos, 2009).

Activities and instruments description

The proposal was developed with a group of five final year students from the Infant and Primary Education Teaching degree in the Faculty of Education at the University of Cantabria (Spain). The practicum took place over sixteen weeks from February to May 2014, during these students’ final semester at university.

As said, this training initiative begins with the individual identification by participants of a pedagogic situation which has been central to their teaching practice. We understand that identifying a pedagogical concern in their teaching practice firstly permits them to critically examine teaching as a constant seeking of improvement. Furthermore, it allows the students to reflect upon pedagogical matters of relevance based on their own reality a connection that is not always present in the work carried out in university classrooms or at least not with the depth that many students would like. Subsequently, using this initial identification of a pedagogical concern as a reference, the training programme is developed consisting of two distinct spaces for reflection:

1. A first space for individual reflection, developed between the trainer and each participant, seeks to facilitate the first reflective approach to the chosen pedagogical concern. To this

end, the university supervisor carries out a semi-structured interview with each participant. Its value should be epistemic and biographical (Brinkmann, 2007), that is, with the main function of beginning to reflect together and jointly explore the dilemma, as well as the relation between the concern identified and the personal and professional biography of each student. We believe students should be aware of what underlies the way in which they articulate their own educational concerns (how their identification of the problem is connected to their priorities, their values and, in general, their view of the world) in order to be able to refocus their practices and improve. Another strategy for individual reflection we have proposed is the teacher diary, given that writing is a powerful method for finding out about oneself and personal and professional concerns. Keeping a diary is regarded as a narrative space where information, thoughts, impressions and reflections on the pedagogical concern chosen by each student are registered systematically.

2. Proposals for curricula co-construction transcend individual frameworks and need spaces for university teachers and student teachers to work collaboratively (Brockbank y McGill, 2002). Thus, a second level of reflection of the practicum proposal is based on a space for collective reflection or “learning in relation” and is structured in different Training Seminars. For this reflective period each student must carry out a personal inquiry (based on readings, observations, information obtained from tutors or experts, participation in forums etc.) which allows them to develop a broader understanding of the

chosen pedagogical concern. This inquiry process is then shared with the group who, as far as possible, generate feedback and try to guide the process through their contributions.

Results achieved, materials developed

This training and research project is also recognised in some proposals from the student voice movement (Fielding and Bragg, 2003; Susinos, 2009). We advocate the need for training processes to be designed to allow greater student participation, where they are placed as active and responsible agents in their own teaching-learning processes. Our work revalues the voice of students and their experiences as a necessary knowledge in training processes, provided that the listening carried out by supervisors is sincere and not superficial or demagogic (Calvo y Susinos, 2010)

Thus, we have seen how selecting one pedagogical concern on which to base their project of reflection enabled a process of understanding and in-depth analysis of a teaching situation relevant to the students. Moreover, basing this on their pedagogical interests served as an essential motivating factor which facilitated their involvement during the process. It could be said that restricting the reflective process developed in the practicum to a single topic meant avoiding reflection on other pedagogical situations which were also interesting and relevant. However, it is important to highlight that the strategies of collaboration implemented enabled a systematic and thorough analysis not just of one but five educational topics.

In addition, during each reflective process other contents which we have been addressing emerged (attention to diversity, teaching conditions, school culture and inaction by schools, social-political factors in teaching etc.) which have also contributed to understanding the complex nature of education and the infinitude of issues which pervade it. This leads us to think that, independently of what the main focus of the students is, there are certain transversal issues in almost any content which must be addressed in a reflective training proposal. Therefore, it is the work of the university tutor to identify the link between these dimensions of education and each of the topics researched by their students.

For its part, the work of the university tutor or supervisor is consequently transformed in such a way that they adopt a more horizontal position. It can be said the practicum presented as a process of collaborative inquiry is an example in action of what Fielding (2012) called radical collegiality, offering a new model of relations between teachers and students.

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