
BOOK REVIEW

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***Linking Practice and Theory: The Pedagogy of Realistic
Teacher Education.***

London: Lawrence Erlbaum associates, Publishers, 2001.
312 pp.

The focus of Korthagen's book lies with the singular fundamental problem of teacher education not only in the Netherlands or the Czech Republic but in general: the gap between theory and practice that is apparent in the traditional approach to teacher education. In fact, the authors go so far as to define and offer a new *paradigm* or *pedagogy* of teacher education, one that builds on a few solid and well negotiated principles. The most important of these is *reflection*. Learning to reflect on their behaviour and action in the classroom – first with the help of teacher educators and later independently – is an important step for prospective teachers (and, as a matter of fact, many teacher educators) in the quest to bridge the gap between theory and practice. The authors take great care to explain the theoretical foundations of their approach to teacher education, and at the same time build their conclusions on the findings of empirical and evaluative research carried out by themselves and by others. They also offer examples of concrete techniques that can be used to promote reflection in teacher education programmes.

In the introductory chapters of the book, the topic of the book is presented and some theoretical concepts are introduced that help explain the type of knowledge that the realistic approach to teacher education aims to develop in future teachers. The authors use Plato and Aristotle's distinction between knowledge that builds on understanding abstract concepts and relationships between them – or *episteme* – and the practical wisdom that builds on everyday experience and is rooted in concrete examples – or *phronesis*.

Chapter Three presents the historical developments that led in the Netherlands to the designing of a teacher education programme that was based on the ideas behind the realistic approach. The programme is described in detail in order to provide a clearer idea of how theory and practice were combined. To explain their views on how student teachers process information, the authors present the concept of *gestalt* and explain what role *gestalts* might play in teacher development.

The fundamental building block of the realistic teacher education approach is introduced in depth in Chapter Four. The authors emphasise the importance of

reflection on one's experience in the process of professional learning. They make use of the model of the so-called ALACT cycle of 1) *action*, 2) *looking back on the action*, 3) *awareness of the essential aspects*, 4) *creating alternative methods of action*, and 5) *trial*.

Then the authors focus on the question of how to build a realistic teacher education programme. Three basic principles are summarised that underlie the ideas presented in the book, as follows: 1) A teacher's professional learning will be more effective when directed by an internal need in the learner; 2) A teacher's professional learning will be more effective when rooted in the learner's own experiences; 3) A teacher's professional learning will be more effective when the learner reflects in detail on his or her experiences. The authors then elaborate on the consequences of these principles for the pedagogy of teacher education and offer concrete examples of how these principles are used in practice.

Evaluation studies were carried out that aimed at the realised teacher education programmes building on ideas presented in the book. The findings of these studies are discussed in Chapter Six.

One chapter of the book (Chapter Seven) is devoted to the process of mentoring, or, as it is called in the book, supervision. There is a summary of basic skills of a successful supervisor that are relevant for the individual phases of the supervisory process, as well as those that are not linked to a specific phase. These skills include empathy, genuineness, confrontation, making things explicit, and others.

The next chapter (Chapter Eight) takes the findings of empirical studies presented in Chapter Six and uses them to define characteristics of a reflective teacher. Four attributes of reflective teachers are formulated. As described in Chapter Eight, reflective teachers are capable of structuring situations and problems consciously, and consider it important to do so; they use certain standard questions when structuring experiences; they do not find it difficult to answer questions concerning their learning goals; and they can describe and analyse adequately their own functioning in interpersonal relationships with others. In the second part of the chapter, seven correlates of reflectivity are formulated on the basis of research findings, which include previous experience of structuring problems, a high degree of job satisfaction and better interpersonal relationships with students.

In Chapter Nine, the issue of promoting reflection in groups of teacher students is discussed. A five-step procedure is described for working with groups of students, and four concrete techniques are described that can be used even in large groups of students.

In the key chapter of the book (Chapter Ten), the important topics of the realistic pedagogy of teacher education are revisited and discussed in their complexity. The chapter builds on the previous parts of the book in that it offers a unifying view of the presented approach by defining a three-level model of professional learning. Three levels are distinguished (*the gestalt level, the schema level and the theory level*) and the relevance of the model for the process of teacher development is discussed.

The final chapters of the book focus on some specific aspects of implementing the realistic approach in teacher education. Of these, Chapter 13 is of great

importance, because it concentrates on the issue of preparing teacher *educators* for the implementation of the realistic teacher education programme. It may well be that the taking into account of natural resistance to change on the part of traditionally-minded teacher educators is among the most relevant aspects of the book for a Czech readership.

The book's main merit lies in the fact that it provides a new, clear and theoretically sound framework for dealing with a problem – i.e. the gap between theory and practice – that has been discussed in detail even in Czech professional literature on teacher education. The book does more than offer a discussion of the underlying principles; it also presents a number of very concrete techniques and ideas that have been tried and shown to bring the desired effects.

The new pedagogy of teacher education is approached from a general educationalist perspective, and throughout the book it remains a domain-general model (similarly to the ALACT model as well as the three-level model of professional learning). All these concepts are relevant for teacher education, irrespective of the subject matter and the specific nature of different educational contents. In reality, i.e. when genuinely reflecting on teaching, it is impossible to avoid content as teaching is *never* devoid of field-specific content. Whenever the authors use subject-specific examples, they draw on mathematics teaching and mathematics teacher education. Readers might find themselves wondering about applications in different fields (natural sciences, social sciences, arts and music, languages).

There is no doubt that many aspects of teaching are reflected upon in the same way, i.e. on the pedagogical or psychological level. However, should the reflection aim to deal in some depth with the content of particular fields, such aspects will emerge that cannot be easily abstracted to a meta-field level. From the general pedagogical perspective this may not present itself as a problem. It may be a problem for teachers in schools and for student teachers preparing for the teaching profession who aim to teach *something* to their students. This *something* is always embedded deeply in the content field and can only be abstracted – in order to be reflected upon – within the frame of the particular field (social science, foreign languages).

Bearing in mind specific ways in which teacher education is organised in their country, Czech readers might ask themselves the following questions: Are there any domain-specific aspects of realistic teacher education – e.g., springing from the different nature of educational content in the respective domains? What are the possible ways of furthering empirical research on realistic teacher education with respect to the trans-didactic perspective, i.e. building on teachers' work with the educational content and abstracting to the meta-field level?

The contemplating of answers to such questions in the Czech language may be supported by a Czech translation of the book (*Jak spojit praxi s teorií: didaktika realistického vzdělávání učitelů*), which is scheduled for publication by the Paido Publishing House before the end of 2011.