

The Importance of Developing Personal Competences for Trainee Teachers in the Field of Special Educational Needs

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Abstract: It is of fundamental importance that prospective teachers in special needs education acquire professional competencies that equip them to cope with the high job demands and support their psychological and physiological health. Therefore in the current longitudinal study a sample of 60 trainee teachers for learning disabilities from the Ludwig-Maximilians-University of Munich (Germany) was examined using a mixed method approach which included quantitative questionnaires and qualitative interviews. The sample was divided into a treatment (the prevention and intervention program “AGIL” against teacher burnout) and a control group.

Results showed that about 40% of these prospective special needs teachers have non-healthy coping-styles concerning their workload and future tasks. Consequently these student teachers may need additional intensive and individual training elements regarding not only to their subjects and methods, but especially to their personal competences and self-development, e.g., self-regulation/-reflection, dealing with conflicts or stress and biographical work.

Key words: teaching profession, personal competences, inclusion, mixed method approach, longitudinal study, self-/other perception, stress, coping, prevention/intervention

1. Introduction

According to German health insurance reports (e.g., DAK, 2016, p. 16) psychological/psychosomatic and physical problems are the main reasons why people — and especially teachers (Schmid, 2003; Schaarschmidt, 2005, 2006) — are sick leave. Even students and trainee teachers are absent at the universities because of this phenomenon (Deutsches Studentenwerk, 2013, p. 450; Schmid, 2015). Therefore further research of (trainee) teacher's professionalization and health are very important to ensure long term wellbeing and employability. But which standards should (future) teachers fulfill and which competences are they obliged to possess?

Referring to the professionalization theory the general definition of the term competence focuses on the available and learnable cognitive abilities and skills of individuals to solve certain problems and therefore obliged motivational, volitional and social readiness and abilities to use these problem solving strategies in variable situations successfully and responsibly (Weinert, 2002, p. 27). There can be a difference between competence (abilities/dispositions) and performance (shown achievement) (Chomsky, 1968).

2. Competences and Teaching Standards in Special Needs Education

The following eight theoretical models of competences and six teaching standards provide the theoretical foundation of this study due to their empirical evidence and/or practical distribution/application, e.g. through worldwide authorities and laws, and to illustrate the demands of (trainee) teachers:

- (1) Competence model for professional performance as a teacher according to the study COACTIV (Kraus et al., 2004),
- (2) Expert Teaching (Sternberg/Horvarth, 1995),
- (3) Teachers as competent producers of learning opportunities (Bromme, 1997),
- (4) Acquisition of general competences in academic learning settings (Gonzales & Wagenaar, 2003),
- (5) Teaching competences for a lasting development (Rauch, Steiner & Stressler, 2007),
- (6) Work-related behavior- and experience-patterns (Schaarschmidt, 2006),
- (7) Job demands for teachers according to the study MT21 (Blömeke, Felbrich & Müller, 2008),
- (8) Hierarchical structural model of competent performing (Frey, 2008).

While the previous models focus on competences, the following six teaching standards emphasize decision-making and responsibility (performance):

- (1) Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC, 1992),
- (2) National Board for Professional Teaching Standards: NBPTS-Standards (NBPTS, 2002),
- (3) Standards of teacher-training according to Oser (Oser, 2001),
- (4) Standards of teacher-training according to Terhart (Terhart, 2002),
- (5) Standards of teacher-training according to the Conference of the German Education Ministers (Kultusministerkonferenz: KMK, 2004),
- (6) Ten professional standards of the Pädagogische Hochschule Zentralschweiz (PHZ, 2007).

Frey and Jung (2011) integrated these competence models and teaching standards into one overarching framework of inclusive learning environments. This encompasses four fields of competences (subject, method, social and personal competences) and four fields of activities/performance (teaching method, classroom management, diagnostics and support/special needs education, school development and environment). The problem in the professionalization of teachers for inclusion and special needs education consists of a shortage of empirical studies and surveys (Melzer & Hillenbrand, 2013). There is a high demand for further teacher-training which includes a multilevel school development on the following five levels:

- (1) children and adolescents with individual needs,
- (2) inclusion-oriented class/education,
- (3) multiprofessional team,
- (4) inclusive school-concept/-life,
- (5) external support systems (Heimlich, Kahlert, Lelgemann & Fischer, 2016).

The study EGIS-L (Eignung und Gesundheit im Studium der Lernbehindertenpädagogik: aptitude and health for the studies of learning disabilities) analyses the development especially of personal competences of trainee teachers which are often neglected in comparison to subject or method competences.

3. Methodology

The EGIS-L-study was concerned with the coping of psychological and physiological stress of teacher trainees for special needs education (learning disabilities) and their competences and preconditions for the occupational aptitude in the end of their university studies in comparison to the beginning (focusing on the personal competences): In which ways and to what extent can changes in coping and experiencing stressful situations be evaluated? The acronym EGIS-L signifies the occupational aptitude (suitability/qualification) and health for the university (academic) studies of learning disabilities.

In this longitudinal study a sample of 60 teacher trainees for learning disabilities from Ludwig-Maximilians-University of Munich (Germany) was examined using a mixed method approach which included quantitative questionnaires and qualitative interviews. There have been two measuring times: at the beginning of the first semester (winter 2007/2008) and by the end of the sixth semester (Summer, 2010). The sample was divided into a treatment (the prevention- and intervention-program “AGIL” against teacher burnout in the fifth and sixth semester (Hillert et al., 2012) and a control group (Schmid, 2015). Furthermore the self-other-perception was evaluated (students – lecturers – teachers of the intensive internship). The response rate of the questionnaires was 90% (54 sheets), the proportion of women 76% (13 male, 40 female) and the average age could be found as 21 years (SD: 2.181; min./ max.: 19/ 30).

The quantitative research contains the following questionnaires (Schaarschmidt, 2005; Schaarschmidt & Fischer, 2006; Herlt & Schaarschmidt, 2007):

- (1) Work-related behavior- and experience-patterns “AVEM” (Arbeitsbezogenes Verhaltens- und Erlebensmuster),
- (2) rating of occupational aims and motives,
- (3) reasons for the choice of the program,
- (4) questionnaire of self- and other-perceptions with the following categories: psychological stability, activation/motivation, ability for self-motivation, competences, basic abilities and skills and
- (5) personal data.

The three core dimensions of AVEM are:

- (1) Work-related engagement (1–5): subjective importance of work, occupational ambition, readiness to invest, striving for perfection, ability to keep distance,
- (2) resilience against occupational stress (6–8): tendency to give up, offensive solving of problems, inner calmness and balance,
- (3) emotions (9–11): experience of occupational success, life satisfaction, experience of social support.

As a result AVEM suggests four different kinds of individual coping styles. The first is profile G (healthy-ambitious) with a high occupational engagement and resilience against occupational stress and a positive attitude towards life. The second pattern is called S (unambitious) with a distinct protection against occupational demands and low occupational ambitions, the third A (severe strain) with excessive ambition which has not an equivalent in ones' life satisfaction and reduced resilience against (occupational) stress. Last but not least the fourth coping style is B (burnout) with low occupational ambition, reduced resilience and a negative attitude towards life.

4. Results

The sample was from southern Germany and most of these teacher trainees moved out from their parent's home during their years of study (in the majority of cases into flat shares). Their sick days were relatively low (less than 5 days per year), the stated leisure time increased during the years of study and positive activities seemed to be often related to their studies.

As a main discomfort *ruminating*, *fatigue*, *nervousness* and *pressure pain* were reported. In the sixth semester — when the exam was getting closer — *forgetfulness* and *ravenous appetite* were added as main complaints. The primary aims and motives were *achieving acceptance/ appreciation and respect of the students*, being able to *act self-reliantly* (-contained/-dependent) and *responsibly*, a *secure employment/workplace*, improving/elaborating didactic skills and the appreciation and support from the colleagues. At the end of the sixth semester the order changed: Having a secure workplace switched on the first place before the aim of achieving appreciation and respect of the pupils.

The distribution of the AVEM profiles and coherences showed the following ranking:

- (1) profile G: 30.61% (N = 15),
- (2) profile S: 28.57% (N = 14),
- (3) profile B: 26.53% (N = 13) and
- (4) profile A: 14.29% (N = 7).

Thus about 40% of the students had (health) risk profiles (both patterns A and B) at the beginning of their university studies and the proportion even rised up to over 60% if mixed profiles are considered. Towards the end of the university studies the percentage of the risk profiles reduced to 27%. Generally the more discomfort of a person was due to stress, the “worse” the related profile.

The development of the profiles during three years of studies can be described like this: Most of the students with profile G stayed there and the S-patterns split up in G, S and B. Most of the risk profiles A were constant, the rest was spread all over the other three patterns. A very small percentage of the risk profiles B remained unchanged while most of them changed to coping style S. Altogether the higher the risk level of the AVEM profile, the more the students ruminated (at the beginning of the first semester: corr. coeff. of contingency: 0.45, in the end of the sixth semester: corr. coeff. of contingency: 0.64).

The self-perception of the students in the sixth semester had a better rating in all the four categories (psychological stability, activation/ motivation, ability for self-motivation, competences, basic abilities and skills) than in the first semester. In particular, a high rise in motivation could be found. According to the self- and other-perception, the lecturers rated their teacher trainees not as good as the rated themselves in any of the four categories (kappa: 0.089, diag.: 0.444). The rating of the students was not as good as that of the teachers responsible for the interns (excluding motivation) (kappa: 0.210, diag.: 0.553). The lecturers rated their students significantly worse in all of the four categories (kappa: 0.011, diag.: 0.543).

In contrast to the first semester, less of the students of the intervention group (N = 14) belonged to the risk profiles (first semester: corr. coeff. of contingency: 0.11; sixth semester: corr. coeff. of contingency: 0.25). Comparing the other-perception of the intervention and control group there was nearly no difference in the evaluation (e.g., basic abilities and skills: corr. coeff. of contingency: 0.14). In contrast to this result there was a big difference in the rating of the social competences: The students of the intervention group were rated far “worse” than those of the control group. How can these results be interpreted?

5. Discussion

The importance of developing *personal competences* can be discussed as an often neglected task in the field of (inclusive) teacher-training. Therefore student teachers need additional intense and individualized training elements regarding not only their subjects and methods, but in particular their personal competences and self-development, e.g., self-regulation/-reflection, dealing with conflicts or stress and biographical work.

Considering the requirements of an inclusive school improvement idealistic appraisals illustrate the need of this continuing developmental task (Schmid, 2003; 2015; Kiel, Weiß & Braune, 2012). The professional ethics in special needs education can have the effect of a resource as well as an excessive demand (see guided interviews). As the study has shown spirituality may be a topic of interest for further research.

Sex/gender differences need to be picked out as a central theme for further research (e.g., the risk profile A could not be allocated to male students in the EGIS-L study).

High differences relating to the self and other perception of persons appear to be common; conflicts are frequently rated as a threat per se (see the different self and other-perception in the study EGIS-L: lecturers < students < teachers for the interns).

6. Future Outlook

As a consequence of this discussion the curricula of teacher trainings should be modified and include programs to support and focus on personal competences (in addition to subject, method and social competences). In the long run this means a prevention of unhealthy coping-styles, stress and burnout. If you improve, e.g., the self-regulation-skills of (future) teachers, their teaching quality will also rise. Concerning learning disabilities and special needs which are not directly visible, a holistic view with an ethical, spiritual and appreciated attitude is stated to be fundamental, too. Weiß et al. (2014) described this positive attitude and humanistic view as a *sine qua non* professional ethos. Especially in the field of inclusive learning settings the teacher profession is based on relationships, where counseling, communication and conflict management are meant to be basic skills. So further research in an optimal way with a mixed method approach and longitudinal studies can clearly be identified as necessary.

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