

# Teacher educators' professional development in Flanders:

## practitioner research as a promising strategy

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### ABSTRACT

The goal of this article is to explore a Flemish intervention designed to support teacher educators' professional development in general, and teacher educators' role as researchers in particular. First, the article briefly describes how teacher educators' professional development in Flanders (Belgium) is currently organised, and elaborates on the relevance of practitioner research to support teacher educators' professional development (conceptualised as the development of a researcherly disposition). Then the results of an explorative qualitative study are presented. In particular, 16 institution-based Flemish teacher educators participated in a six-month intervention on practitioner research specifically designed to support their professional development. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to advance insight into the impact of the intervention. The findings suggest positive changes in teacher educators' practice and professional development; and show the potential of individual practitioner research to the broader knowledge base on teacher education

### INTRODUCTION

In Flanders (the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium), as in many other countries, teacher educators have rarely been prepared for their vital role as educators of (future) teachers. Becoming a teacher educator in Flanders does not require a specific training, induction programme or qualification. Many Flemish teacher educators come into teacher education with a background

as successful teachers or are selected because they are subject specialists (European Commission 2013; Vanassche et al. 2015). When they start to work as teacher educators – and this is an international trend (see Murray & Male 2005; Lunenberg et al. 2014) – 'they experience a role conflict because inherent in their new role they are expected to engage in research, of which they often have little or no experience' (Smith 2015: 43).

### KEYWORDS

TEACHER EDUCATORS

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

PRACTITIONER RESEARCH

RESEARCHERLY DISPOSITION

TEACHER EDUCATOR AS RESEARCHER

FLANDERS (BELGIUM)

As the Flemish government recently stressed, in order to improve teacher education, teacher educators need 'to be able to theoretically underpin their own practice and develop an inquiring stance' (Departement Onderwijs & Vorming 2014: 10; authors' translation). However, most Flemish teacher educators report that, in general, the current offer of professional development initiatives is limited and often does not focus on

teacher educators' own practice (VELOV 2015; Tack et al. in review). Furthermore, they stress that they need long-term professional development initiatives that focus on the development of their role as teacher educators–researchers (VELOV 2015). In this respect, it is important to note that Flanders has a dual system in teacher education, with universities offering a research-based academic teacher training programme, and colleges of higher education and centres for adult education providing professional teacher training programmes. Although colleges of higher education can now start up applied research projects, their core business remains the education of professional teachers, while fundamental research remains the core business of universities. While teacher educators at universities are mostly expected to be active as researchers and publish in academic and professional journals, teacher educators in non-universities (colleges of higher education and centres for adult education) hardly are (Vanassche 2014). The research reported in this article focuses on the latter (and biggest) group: Flemish teacher educators working in professional teacher training programmes, often without research experience.

This article presents the organisation and implementation of an intervention on practitioner research specifically designed to support teacher educators' professional development in general, and teacher educators' role as researchers in particular. First, the theoretical background and the content of the project are briefly presented. Then the findings of an exploratory qualitative study of the development and organisation of the intervention are provided. These findings offer insight into (1) the participants' experiences with the intervention, and (2) the impact of the intervention on teacher educators' practice, on the knowledge base of teacher education and on their professional development as researchers in teacher education.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### PRACTITIONER RESEARCH IN PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

In their recent review study, Lunenberg et al. (2014) present practitioner research – or the systematic and intentional study into one's practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 2009) – as a promising strategy to support teacher educators' professional development. Practitioner research has the twofold goal of (1) improving one's practice and knowledge about teacher education, and (2) contributing to the broader knowledge base on teacher education. Despite its promising character (Loughran 2014), most teacher educators find it difficult to identify themselves with their role as a 'researcher' (Gemmell et al. 2010). Moreover, the 'researcher' role is often new to teacher educators (Lunenberg et al. 2010). Furthermore, a lack of time, information and support are important obstacles for teacher educators wanting to engage in research (Jaruszewicz & Landrus 2005). Conducting practitioner research in professional learning communities – or 'a group of people sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an on-going, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, research-oriented, growth-promoting way operating as a collective enterprise' (Stoll et al. 2006: 223) – can minimise these obstacles. These professional learning communities provide trust, frequent coaching, feedback and advice (Zellenmayer & Margolin 2005). Moreover, several studies suggest that these communities need to be supported by experienced facilitators, who identify additional support and provide resources that teacher educators need for their research activities (Lunenberg et al. 2014; Vanassche & Kelchtermans 2015).

### TEACHER EDUCATORS' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AS DEVELOPING A RESEARCHERLY DISPOSITION

Taking into account the persistent demands of developing one's role as a teacher educator–researcher, several authors have started to conceptualise teacher educators' professional development as developing an 'inquiry as stance' (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 2009), 'an investigative attitude' (Vanassche 2014) or a 'researcherly disposition' (Tack & Vanderlinde 2014, 2016a). Tack & Vanderlinde (2014) define teacher educators' researcherly disposition as 'teacher educators' habit of mind to engage with research – as both consumers and producers of research – to improve their practice and contribute to the knowledge base on teacher education' (p.301). Explaining its three interrelated dimensions further specifies this definition:

1. an affective dimension referring to the extent to which a teacher educator values a research-oriented approach towards his/her daily practices and, as such, recognises his/her role as a researcher
2. a cognitive dimension referring to a teacher educator's actual ability to conduct research and to contribute to the knowledge base on teacher education
3. a behavioural dimension referring to a teacher educator's sensitivity or alertness to research opportunities in his/her daily practice.

## THE INTERVENTION

The context for this intervention was a publicly funded collaborative project of three teacher education programmes (one higher education college, one centre for adult education and one university-based teacher education programme) in Flanders (Belgium). The project spanned three academic years from September 2013 to September 2016. The central

thread running through this project was a commitment to develop, implement and study an evidence-based intervention to support teacher educators' professional development through practitioner research. The first edition of the intervention started in January 2014. Individual intake interviews were conducted with each of the participants who volunteered to study their own practice for six months (see Table 1). After the intake, the participants were distributed into two professional learning communities and were expected to engage in seven group meetings, involving the different steps of practitioner research (Table 1). Two facilitators supported each professional learning community; these facilitators were teacher educators with expertise in conducting and supporting practitioner research. Face-to-face or online individual support was available between the sessions, and a digital forum provided all the necessary resources and information. Elsewhere, we have reported in detail on the design principles of the intervention (Tack & Vanderlinde 2016b, submitted), the experiences of the facilitators (Hurtekant & Pauwels 2016), and the experiences of the involved heads of department (Meysman & Mathieu 2016).

## METHODOLOGY

### RESEARCH GOAL AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research goal of this exploratory

study is to qualitatively advance insight into the development of an intervention designed to support teacher educators' professional development. The research questions tackled in this contribution are:

- How do participants evaluate their participation in the intervention?
- What is the impact of the intervention on teacher educators' practice, on teacher educators' professional development, and on the public knowledge base in teacher education?

### PARTICIPANTS

Sixteen institution-based teacher educators volunteered to participate in the intervention. The mean age of the participants is 35 years; seven of the participants are men. A majority of them have a master's degree (n=14) and all participants have a teaching certificate. The participants' experience as teacher educators varies in duration from three months to 20 years. All participants teach in teacher education. The participants have varying work profiles. Eight have taught in compulsory education. Six others started their careers as teacher educators; two others first worked as university researchers. Two of the participants have conducted practitioner research before.

### DATA COLLECTION

Several methods of data collection were used: audio recordings and observations of all the group sessions; and interviews

with all the participants. The participants were interviewed before (n=16), immediately after (n=16) and six months after participation in the intervention (n=9). The goal of the semi-structured interviews was to advance insight into participants' learning process and to give thought to critical phases during the project (based on Lunenberg et al. 2010; Tack & Vanderlinde 2014). Each interview lasted about 45 minutes.

### DATA ANALYSIS

With the participants' permission, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed before analysis. The transcriptions were read several times, then all reports were segmented and coded. The text fragments were labelled with descriptive and interpretative codes based on the theoretical framework. The analysis was carried out in two phases. First, a vertical analysis was conducted (Miles & Huberman 1994) and each individual teacher educator served as a unit of analysis. Sixteen systematic summarising reports were thus written, presenting the analysis for each participant in a structured form. Next, these reports were compared during the horizontal analysis (Miles & Huberman 1994). The audio recordings of the group sessions and the observations provided additional information to further refine our findings.

## FINDINGS

### EVALUATION OF THE INTERVENTION

Of the 16 participants, 10 successfully completed the intervention. As the teacher educators' own practice was the subject of study, participation resulted in eight different practitioner research studies, varying from subject-specific topics (eg evaluation in the subject 'Languages') to questions related to the teacher educator profession itself (eg teacher educators' professional identity). Different reasons were enumerated by the teacher educators who decided to prematurely quit the intervention (n=6): (1) a lack of time (n=2), health issues (n=1), a new job (n=1), job insecurity

**TABLE 1 OVERVIEW OF THE GROUP SESSIONS**

Session	Content of the group session	Timing
1	Orientation: what is practitioner research?	January
2	Problem statement + research questions	February
3	Research plan + research method exploration	March
4	Data collection	April
5	Data analysis	May
6	Conclusion	June
7	Presentation/sharing	August

(n=1) or the format of the sessions (n=1).

All participants were generally very positive about their participation in the intervention. At the same time, they all emphasised its intensive nature. One of the participants argued:

*'It was one of the best and most personalised professional development activities I ever engaged in, actually my favourite one. However, it was also the most intensive one...'*

Inherently linked to this, all participants indicated that the lack of structural time to participate in the intervention was an important obstacle:

*'Despite its clear added value, and due to fully loaded teaching timetables, it [the intervention] was often one of the last things on my to do list.'*

As a consequence, support – situated on different levels – was often noted as very important. On the level of the intervention, teacher educators often described the other participants as their 'allies':

*'We can share our experiences, learn from each other, express uncertainties and problems....After each group session, I was inspired again and found the courage to continue my practitioner research.'*

Additionally – and also essentially – there was the emotional and methodological support from the facilitators:

*'Without them (the facilitators), I would have quit. Their flexibility, their immediate answers to all of my questions, their phone calls "just" to check how I was doing, really meant a lot.'*

Moreover, the support from colleagues and critical friends within the participants' own teacher education institution was appreciated:

*'Conducting practitioner research is not easy. For me, recognition for my efforts from the Head of Department was crucial. Moreover, I really enjoyed the pat on the back from colleagues every now and then.'*

A critical comment on this need for recognition is that teacher educators themselves also need to promote a solid support base for research in their own teacher education institution. Furthermore, the need to establish a research culture in the participant's own institution and a clearly communicated view on research on the part of the head of department were also stressed. Finally, related to research infrastructure, the (non-)availability of scientific databases was often a discussion point during the interviews:

*'Web of Science... Should be available... If we do not get full access to scientific databases, how can they expect us to engage in research?'*

## IMPACT OF THE INTERVENTION

The impact of the intervention is situated on three different levels: (1) the impact on teacher educators' practice, (2) the impact on the public knowledge base in teacher education, and (3) the impact on teacher educators' professional development (conceptualised as the development of a researcherly disposition).

### IMPACT ON TEACHER EDUCATORS' PRACTICE

The returns on participatory investment in the intervention on teacher educators' practice are multiple. The intervention, for instance, has led to curriculum development:

*'We used the results of our practitioner research to thoroughly revise the course "English", and the students' reader was updated based on our new insights.'*

Besides curriculum changes, students were also informed about the practitioner research cycle:

*'I explained them the different steps of practitioner research and they were really involved in my practitioner research.'*

The intervention also affected teacher educators' actual teaching practice:

*'During the intervention I realised that my students should reflect more. Moreover, the intervention encouraged me to use new strategies of assessment.'*

Finally, all participants agreed that – due to their own experiences with practitioner research – their supervision of bachelor's theses has improved in quality.

### IMPACT ON THE PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE BASE IN TEACHER EDUCATION

The impact on the public knowledge base in teacher education is related to sharing research results with colleagues and, thus, contributing to the knowledge base on teacher education. All participants have shared the results of their practitioner research; each of them presented their results in an internal symposium concluding the intervention. Moreover, results were shared during meetings with fellow-participants in the teacher education programme. However, when sharing their results, participants were often worried 'if their results were important enough to share with others' and wondered 'if others would even care about the results of their practitioner research'.

As well as sharing their results within the professional learning community of the intervention and their own teacher education programmes, most participants also presented their results at (inter)national conferences, including the VELON/VELOV conference and the EAPRIL conference. Moreover, some participants presented at international conferences that were related to the topic of their practitioner research. For instance, two participants presented at the IATEFL conference, a conference with a specific focus on foreign language education. Finally, three participants published their practitioner research in *Tijdschrift voor Lerarenopleiders*, a Dutch scientific journal for teacher educators (see Strybol & Janssens 2016; Vyncke 2016).

## IMPACT ON TEACHER EDUCATORS' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The impact of the intervention on teacher educators' professional development was analysed based on the three different dimensions of teacher educators' researcherly disposition: (a) the affective dimension, (b) the cognitive dimension and (c) the behavioural dimension (see Tack & Vanderlinde 2014).

Regarding the affective dimension, all teacher educators started the intervention with a positive stance towards research. All had at least a positive curiosity towards practitioner research, and the participants were enthusiastic about the opportunity to collaborate with colleagues from other teacher education programmes. After participation in the intervention, it was, however, striking that participants identified themselves explicitly as 'teacher educators', while at the beginning of the intervention they described themselves more as 'teachers in higher education'. As an example, a participant's answers to the question '*Why do you believe that research is important?*' before and after the intervention were compared:

*'As teachers in higher education we have three responsibilities [education, research and public services]. Research is one of these responsibilities.'* (intake interview)

*'I am convinced that research is the best strategy to intentionally study and legitimate my choices in practice. As a model of future teachers, it is inconceivable nor should it be allowed that you can just rely on your own guts...'* (exit interview)

A beginning teacher educator also argued that participation in the intervention was very meaningful to her orientation in the teacher education programme:

It is a thrown in the deep. Because of the Masterclass [name of the intervention], I was able to get to know the teacher education programme and my colleagues really quick. Moreover, I was able to immediately study and critically question

my own practice as a beginning teacher educator [research on professional identity as a teacher educator].

The cognitive dimension of teacher educators' researcherly disposition also changed during participation in the intervention. Participants indicated that their 'knowledge about research methods was refreshed', that they 'were provided some new guidance to search for adequate research literature' and that their 'research skills were refined'. It appeared from the exit interviews that teacher educators did not participate earlier in practitioner research due to 'insecurity about their own capacities':

I do not think that I was not able to conduct practitioner research before, but I was afraid. Research has always been something from the universities. Why would we meddle in? Due to the Masterclass I am more confident about my own skills. I know how to conduct research in teacher education and I also know I am able to do it.

The increased confidence to conduct research also affected the behavioural dimension of teacher educators' researcherly disposition. All participants that successfully finished the intervention indicated that they read more research literature and use more research while preparing their lessons. Moreover, different participants referred to an extended network to share and discuss experiences with (inter)national colleagues. Related to conducting research, some differences between the participants were noted. Most participants indicated that they were willing to engage further with research, but stressed the need for further structural support and resources. A minority of the participants have submitted a proposal for competitive funding (to further support their research activities), or have recently started their own research project, linked to their practice as a teacher educator.

## CONCLUSIONS

The results of this exploratory study suggest that practitioner research, conducted in professional learning communities, supported by facilitators is a promising strategy to support teacher educators' professional development. In this respect, practitioner research not only seems to improve Flemish teacher educators' practice, but also informs the development of a public knowledge base of teacher education in Flanders. Moreover, teacher educators who participated in the intervention express a stronger confidence towards conducting research, absorb more research into their own practice, and value the relevance of their role as a 'researcher' to improving their role as a 'teacher educator'. Given these positive results, we want to encourage the structural support of – currently often external-funding-dependent, local and small-scale – initiatives like these, focusing on teacher educators' professional development, in Flanders and beyond. Only then, when teacher educators' professional development is taken more seriously, do we expect an actual improvement in the teacher education profession. Finally, we hope this article offers a source of inspiration, action, critical discussion, and reflection. ■



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