Teaching in the postmodern era: The cultivation of teachers’ critical reflexivity in teacher education

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Abstract
This research paper suggests that there is a continuous need in teacher education to extend the dialogues about teaching, and to review existing teaching practices. Traditional views of knowledge and teaching practices have been challenged with the rise of postmodernism. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to present an approach based on social constructionism (SC) as a different way of educating students. In Gergen's extensive scholarly work on SC, the overarching theme is the priority of relationships and relatedness, which is contrary to the western individualistic tradition. According to Gergen (2000, 2007, 2008, 2009a), a social genesis occurs for what we take to be rational, factual, objective, real, or valuable. SC has inevitably led us to ask new questions such as whether we as teacher educators are providing our student teachers with enough opportunities to reflect on the experiences they encounter in their studies and in society more generally as ‘truth’ and ‘real’. SC invites us to be more inquiring about alternative framings of reality. A study module based on SC is described in the paper. The study module promoted the critical reflexivity of the students. In the study, critical reflexivity is seen as a quality that will help prospective teachers take their places in the field of education. The results of a small-scale inquiry using a SC study module have shown that it is possible to promote qualities that help teachers to meet the challenges they inevitably encounter in the postmodern era.

Keywords: teacher education; postmodernism; social constructionism; social epistemology; critical reflexivity.

Introduction
The subject of this research paper is the teaching provided in teacher education in the postmodern era. In this study the question posed was how can one best promote qualities that will help teachers to meet the challenges they will inevitably encounter in the postmodern era. Among scholars the concept postmodern has been the subject of debate for decades. However, it is quite reasonable to ask to what extent the findings of these debates have entered the practices of teacher education. Being inspired by this question, the aim of this paper is to present an approach based on social constructionism (SC) as a different way of educating student teachers in the postmodern era. SC invites us to be more inquiring about alternative framings of reality. It directs our attention to epistemological issues. Many researchers see postmodernism and social constructionism as interconnected. For instance, for Burr (1998, p. 12) postmodernism is “the cultural and intellectual “backcloth” against which social constructionism has taken shape.” However, as both postmodernism and SC are polysemous concepts, one should first elaborate on these concepts. In addition to this theoretical overview which also includes a chapter that covers the potential
of SC for pedagogical practice, the presentation and analysis of the practical experiment of this study is introduced.

1. Postmodernism and Social constructionism

There are many interpretations of both postmodernism and social constructionism. Slattery (2013), for instance, offers 11 different perspectives from which the concept of postmodernism can be understood. According to Weinberg (2008, p. 31) “postmodernists hold that there is value in distinguishing the present historical moment, or at least certain features of it, from the modern era.” Evidently, there are distinct echoes of Lyotard in Weinberg’s statement. Lyotard (1985) defines postmodernism as incredulity towards metanarratives. Indeed, for many researchers postmodernism represents a challenge to metanarratives or values that originated in the Enlightenment, and experienced a revival with modernism. For Kenneth J. Gergen (2009a), whose scholarly work on SC has inspired the empirical part of this study, postmodernism represents a challenge to reason, objectivity, scientific truth, order, prediction, and control. Social constructionism, like postmodernism, is also an ambiguous concept. The history of this thought is multifaceted (Weinberg, 2008). However, it was Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) book *The Social Construction of Reality* that brought extensive attention to the term (Best, 2008). There is an array of constructionist enterprises nowadays. Yet, the fundamental idea of constructionism has always been “that the world we live in and our place in it are not simply and evidently “there” for participants. Rather, participants actively construct the world of everyday life and its constituent elements.” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008, p. 3.) Sometimes the term constructivism is used interchangeably with constructionism. However, unlike social construction, early scholars tended to outline constructivism in terms of cognitive processes within the mind. Nowadays constructivists increasingly find mental practices to be reflections of social process. (Gergen & Gergen, 2008.)

Recently, constructionism as a concept has been applied quite carelessly. All too often the epistemological, ontological, methodological, and practical foundations that distinguish constructionism from other approaches have been disregarded. (Berbrier, 2008.) SC, the way Gergen (1997, 2009b) sees it, is ontologically mute. “Whatever exists, simply exists. However, in the process of co-action whatever there is takes shape as something for us.” (Gergen, 2009b, p. 37) suggests. SC clearly opposes traditional empiricist and rationalist epistemologies where the individual is at the centre of knowledge. Instead, for Gergen, constructionist thought is equivalent to social epistemology. However, somewhat paradoxically, at the same time it serves as an anti-epistemology. As Gergen (2008) clarifies, SC “mounts proposals for the social genesis of what we take to be factual, objective, real, valuable, or rational, and in that sense you could look at it as a social epistemology. But, simultaneously, it applies this same scepticism to its own assertions. It purposely offers premises without foundations. In this way it is an anti-epistemology.”

Social constructionism has been called relativist, nihilist, anti-rational, anti-scientific, and morally bankrupt (Gergen 2009a). There are few scholars as vocal and eloquent as Gergen in explaining and defending constructionism, according to Cisneros-Puebla (2007). Unarguably, Gergen (1982; 1997; 2000; 2009a) has
carefully studied theoreticians who have contributed to dismantling the assumption of value-free or ideology-free knowledge (e.g. Marx, Foucault, and Habermas) removing the foundations of progress in empirical knowledge (e.g. Mannheim, Kuhn, and Feyerabend), and illustrating the fragility of rationality (e.g. Saussure, Wittgenstein, and Derrida). Moreover, throughout his scholarly work he has maintained a reverent discussion with those who disagree. SC grew out of critique, but the balance has shifted from critique to bringing forth new and more promising ways of life. So, there has been a turn from the deconstruction phase to that of reconstruction. (Gergen, 1997; 2007; 2009a; Hosking, 2008.) Undoubtedly, these ideas have a significant impact on the pedagogical practices of teacher education.

2. The potential of SC for pedagogical practice

In education there are many phenomena that would yield to constructionist interpretation. There has been a variety of constructionist researches focusing on how different objects, such as social identities or social stratification are constructed in educational settings (Wortham & Jackson, 2008). As for me, I (Hakala, 2011) have studied how the various stakeholders of schools construct the idea of a school. I was also interested in what kind of prospects (if any) SC, as a “form of intelligibility” (Gergen, 1997, p. 78), opens up with regard to educational policy. Similarly, in this study the focus is on SC, and on the prospects that a SC view of knowledge opens up for the pedagogical practices of teacher education. Undoubtedly, there is also room for alteration. Some earlier icons, such as the Tyler rationale, that were convincingly challenged decades ago still have a tenacious hold on education (Autio, 2003). Disparate concepts of knowledge will lend themselves to divergent views of the educational process (Gergen & Wortham, 2007; Schiro, 2013). Therefore, we should discuss the weak spots of two traditional orientations to knowledge dear to the western tradition and education in order to understand the potential of SC for pedagogical practice.

There are various concepts of knowledge which not only draw on divergent ontological beliefs, but also differ in their understanding of the way in which knowledge is achieved, and in their approach towards values and action. According to Gergen and Wortham (2007), it is particularly important to explore two longstanding traditions concerning knowledge in education: the exogenic and the endogenic, traditions. The former can be traced to empiricist philosophies of knowledge, and the latter to their rationalist counterparts. Unlike the SC orientation, both the exogenic and the endogenic orientation lend support to a mind/world duality, and emphasise value neutrality (Gergen, 1982; Gergen & Wortham, 2007). These two positivist traditions persistently inform pedagogical practices even today. As Slattery (2013) reminds us, modern educational structures created in the spirit of Taylor’s scientific management, Tyler’s curriculum rationale, Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, Bloom’s domain of learning, Skinner’s behaviorism, and Bruner’s early work in cognitive structures still dominate our rhetoric and practice on all levels of schooling.

From the exogenic viewpoint knowledge is achieved when the inner states of the individual accurately represent the existing states of the external world. A strong emphasis is placed on observation. The endogenecists emphasize the
powers of reason in the acquisition of knowledge. For an exogenecist teacher the continuous moulding of a student’s mind seems understandable while her/his endogenecist associate concentrates on the inherent capacities and development of the student’s mind. Consequently, from the exogenic perspective the student is seen as an empty vessel that has to be filled with the essential features of the world. In evaluation the emphasis is placed on assessing levels of individual knowledge, like standardized tests. The endogenic perspective accentuates the rational capacities of the student. When evaluating a student, essay exams and term papers are favoured. (Gergen, 1982; Gergen & Wortham, 2007.) The two orientations have encountered extensive criticism. Gergen and Wortham (2007) still find it important to highlight the unjustified celebration of individualism that is included in these positions. They tend to favour a narcissistic disposition toward life, but also allocate others, including the physical environment, an instrumental role. This surely poses a threat to human well-being (Gergen & Wortham, 2007.)

SC opposes epistemologies where the individual is at the centre of knowledge. As Gergen (1997, p. 49) argues “the terms and forms by which we achieve understanding of the world and ourselves are social artifacts, products of historically and culturally situated interchanges among people.” SC highlights the interdependency between people, and consequently, invites us to appreciate joint-responsibility and dialogue. It undermines the foundation of any truth claims, and consequently, invites us to reflect on experiences encountered in education and in society more generally as ‘truth’ and ‘real’. It defends the equality of voices (Gergen & Wortham, 2007), and invites us to be more conscious regarding our own views. To sum up, SC celebrates critical reflexivity (Gergen, 2009a). In the following practical experiment the emphasis is on critical reflexivity. Learning critical reflexivity, in the spirit of SC, is seen here as a medium that both empowers students, and gives them tools to engage in the continuous discussion on the unarguably complex phenomena of education.

3. A study module based on the premises of SC

This process was conducted in the academic year 2012-13 in a study module “Physical Education (PE), Society and Health”. There were official aims for the module. However, as the teacher responsible for the study unit I had set parallel objectives that served as a backcloth for the execution of the module, too. The emphasis in the study module was on promoting the critical reflexivity of the students. Consequently, the objectives of the module were as follows: There will be opportunities for joint-responsibility and discussion. There will be opportunities to identify discourses in the field, and to challenge them. There will be opportunities to question one’s own premises in a safe learning environment.

The process was carried out in a way that can be described in terms of a chain with seven rings. At the beginning of the process (ring 1) we discussed the aims of the module. As an orientation we played a game in which each participant had to take a stance on a particular topic and either defend or oppose it. There were claims such as “A child is always incomplete in PE, and that is just the way it is.” The point of this exercise was to demonstrate that even among us were various ways of looking at things. The second ring was that of deconstruction. At first I inducted the students into the history of Finnish PE.
Through this historical review, the hypothetical neutrality of PE was gradually deconstructed. The subject of PE, evidently, has always represented the values that have been celebrated at that time. Simultaneously, PE has participated, and still does, in a process whereby the ideal citizen is constructed. Consequently, if there is an ideal citizen that can be identified in official documents, in gyms, or in discourses on PE more generally, then presumably there are also those who do not live up to these expectations, and are thus marginalized. The third ring was that of confusion. Provoked by what we had learned, but also by an experience shared by Sykes (2011), we ended up discussing the adequate and inadequate body in the context of PE. “Gym taught me that my body was deficient”, as one informant of Sykes’s (2011, p. 22) haplessly stated. Accordingly, we immersed ourselves in themes like “body image”, “body size discrepancy”, “fat phobia”, and “human rights”, among others. We shared our own experiences, too. The forth ring was that of reconstruction. The idea was to explore not only how we could create PE lessons that are inclusive rather than exclusive, but also how we can counteract all kinds of dogmatism and certainty in our work. Through the movie “Babies”, directed by Thomas Balmès, we had another chance to discuss epistemological issues. The fifth ring was that of sharing our expertise. It involved an inquiry process that was conducted independently in groups of two or three. There were topics for students to choose from like “PE and equity”, and “The socio-economic status of the family and a healthy lifestyle”. At first the students enlarged upon each topic by reading the course material. After that they contacted some experts in the field in order to acquire some grass-root-level knowledge on the topic they were studying. So, one group, for instance, interviewed the coordinator of a free-of-charge sports activity that the city of Helsinki organizes for children under 13 years of age. Another group followed some extra-curricular activities for children with learning disabilities. The students also consulted scholarly articles. In conclusion, each group jointly wrote a paper on their topic. The sixth ring was about student expertise and sharing. Each group delivered a 45-minutes teaching session in which they shared their conclusions about the process. In the end, the groups were evaluated both by the students and the teacher of the unit, as had been agreed earlier.

The seventh ring was that of feedback. The students received a questionnaire after the study module. Thirteen out of a total of 16 questionnaires sent out were returned. Students were asked, among other things, to give grades from one to five (five was the best grade) to nine claims concerning the objectives of the study module. The best grades were given to the following claims: “We were encouraged to discuss and to express our thoughts in the study module” (4.9/5); “I learned to explore things from different perspectives” (4.3/5); “I learned to question my own beliefs” (4.2/5); and “I learned to be more critical towards things that seem obvious” (4.2/5). When asked to describe the study module freely in three words, 11 students out of 13 mentioned either the phrase “thought-provoking” or “thought-expanding”, or both. Through the study module and the questionnaire it became clear that students had found the study module interesting and useful for their future work as teachers. The results of this small-scale questionnaire show that through a SC study module, it is possible to
promote qualities that help teachers to meet the challenges they will inevitably face in the postmodern era.

Conclusion

There were two prime considerations behind this study, the presupposition that the offerings of the postmodern debate had not been extended satisfactorily to the practices of teacher education, and, associated with this, an interest in how best to promote qualities that will help teachers to meet the challenges they will face in the postmodern era. Obviously, with the rise of postmodernism, the assumption that truth is verified by nature has been replaced by the idea that truth is created in community (Gergen & Wortham, 2007). In this study it is proposed that this epistemological shift has to be acknowledged and taken seriously in teacher education. Accordingly, an approach issuing from SC is presented as a different way of educating student teachers. SC undermines the foundation of any truth claims, and thus invites us to be more inquiring about alternative framings of reality. Consequently, critical reflexivity (Gergen, 2009a) can be seen as a necessary quality for a teacher, today. It can also be promoted, as the results of this small scale inquiry showed. Moreover, it can be suggested that a SC study module can empower prospective teachers. Eleven respondents out of 13 found the study module “thought-provoking” or “thought-expanding”, or both. So, if teacher educators have too often colluded in preparing teachers to accept their positions of gracious submission in the school, as Pinar (2012) suggests, the student teachers themselves are definitely ready for more. So is SC. In educational policy and pedagogical practice, a SC view of knowledge argues among other things for “greater democracy in negotiating what counts for educational practice, the local embedding of curricula, the breaking of disciplinary boundaries, the lodgement of disciplinary discourses in societally relevant practices, educational practice in societal issues and a shift from subject and child centred modes of education to a focus on relationships.” (Gergen & Wortham 2007, p. 136.)

References


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