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Disorienting Dilemmas and Irritations in Professional Development: A Longitudinal Study of Swiss Teacher-Students

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Introduction

Being a teacher presents young professionals with a myriad of challenges: full responsibility for the students' learning and development, communicating with parents, extended lesson planning, and classroom-management, just to name a few. During practical training, teacher-students can start engaging with their new roles[1] within the safe space of only partial responsibility for a predetermined, and limited, period of time before they are fully responsible after their career entry. Engaging with their new roles often causes teacher-students to experience a disorienting dilemma. On the one hand, coping with the dilemmas can trigger (future) teachers to change their pedagogical habits and to experience processes of professionalization (Košinár, in press). On the other

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hand, it can trigger them to develop a more integrated and inclusive perspective and to experience transformative learning processes (Mezirow, 1991). Processes of professionalization as well as transformative learning processes are the two foci of this chapter.

Teacher-trainees at the University of Applied Sciences and Arts, Northwestern Switzerland study for three years for their Bachelor of Arts degree and afterward teach at a primary school as full professional teachers. Field experience plays a major role in the curriculum of teacher education in Switzerland.[2] The outsized importance of field experience led to our longitudinal qualitative research project "Challenges for Future and Beginning Primary Teachers" (PH FHNW 2014–2017). This project aims to identify how primary teacher-students perceive and cope with profession-related crises[3] and challenges during practical training and post career entry. The occupational-biographical perspective that describes teachers' professional development as lifelong experience-based process is used as a theoretical frame to shed light on the structure of the processes of professionalization (Košinár, 2014). For the project, we interviewed teacher-students twice: first at the end of their study and again one-and-a-half years post career entry. By using the Documentary Method, we reconstructed four different types of professionalization (Bohnsack, 2014). Our differentiated analysis of cases from these types hints that some interviewees experience transformative learning processes on their way of becoming teachers (Mezirow, 1991, 2000). As stated by King (2000), life changes, such as starting at a new workplace, can trigger transformative learning processes. Accordingly, our results indicate, that becoming a teacher can accompany transformative learning processes (see Laros & Košinár, 2016). With the following chapter, we would like to shed light on these (possible) transformative learning processes by further looking at individual learning processes.

In our contribution, we will describe our first theoretical focus on professionalization. This is followed by an overview of our project "Challenges for Future and Beginning Primary Teachers". We will then describe our second theoretical focus on transformative learning theory. With Mezirow's ten steps as a heuristic, our findings will be outlined by using three contrasting cases. We will then discuss the

interaction between processes of transformation and processes of professionalization. We will conclude with the next steps of our research.

Professionalization

As mentioned above, our project's theoretical framework is centered on the occupational-biographical approach. In this perspective of teacher professionalization, (future) teachers meet various requirements that they need to cope with in order to develop competencies and identity formation as teacher (Hericks, 2006). The concept of requirements (Keller-Schneider & Hericks, 2011) identifies four developmental tasks for teachers: (1) identity forming role-taking, (2) respectful classroom-management, (3) suitable instruction, and 4. participating cooperation. On the basis of our own studies, we can add a fifth developmental task for teacher-trainees: Being in a training situation (Košinár & Laros, 2018).

But what leads or "forces" (future) teachers to deal with requirements and to search for solutions? According to the theory of experiential learning (Combe, 2015), the starting point is a crisis where subjects experience for example, a limit of autonomy to act or a limit of understanding a problem. This can lead to two different reactions (mostly prereflexive): (1) avoiding the crisis by assessing the situation/the problem as "irrelevant" or—due to a lack of resources—as "unresolvable," (2) engagement with the situation/the problem with the aim to learn from this experience (Dewey, 1994).

From these conceptual perspectives, mastering developmental tasks can be described as an experiential process dependent on the subjective interpretation of the situation and its handling. The assessment of the situation is based on personal conditions like knowledge and resources but depends also on institutional (the concrete school and pupils) and social conditions (the support by the mentor or the colleagues). For the reconstruction of our case studies, the combination of these two concepts turned out to be a helpful structure.

It became visible that crises can have the force to irritate students' meaning perspectives (see 4). In the process of accepting and engaging with such deep irritations, transformative learning processes can occur.

This is recognizable in changes of habits and acting. But a transformation of meaning perspectives is not automatically accompanied by professionalization. At the same time, we expect processes of professionalization to go along with a transformation of perspectives. With the following contribution, we decided to further look at potential transformative learning processes.

Project Overview

The project "Challenges for Future and Beginning Primary Teachers" aims at identifying key moments and critical incidents that trigger future and young primary teachers to engage with professional requirements and to consequently experience processes of development that lead to their professionalism.

In our longitudinal qualitative study, at two different points in time, teacher-trainees (t1, n = 25) and two years later young professionals (t2, n = 12) participate in narrative interviews. The selection of the sample is based on highly contrasting characteristics of the interviewees on the one hand and on their decision to start teaching after finishing their studies on the other.

Data were analyzed with the Documentary Method (Bohnsack, 2014; Nohl, 2017). By using this method, the implicit meaning of interviewees' narratives regarding their field of practice, the so-called "frames of orientation," can be reconstructed. The frames of orientation can be described as the inner structure or habits of a person—or what Mezirow (1991) calls frames of reference. With our analysis, we developed four types of professionalization along diverse dimensions that were found in the data (e.g., the handling of requirements, the role of the mentor). They were named: 1. self-fulfillment, 2. development, 3. avoidance, 4. probation.

Due to (work-) life changes (e.g., critical incidents), the frame of orientation can (partly) change. Such changes become obvious when looking at the relational typology in a longitudinal comparison. They give hints that transformative processes have occurred on an individual level. With this contribution, we aim to gain further insights into such possible transformative processes by focusing on case studies.

Transformative Learning

According to Mezirow (1991, 2000), in a transformative learning process, individuals triggered by a crisis (disorienting dilemma) become irritated by their existing meaning perspectives. They find their existing perspectives to be insufficient for interpreting a new experience. This is usually paired with negative emotions, such as guilt or shame. Consequently, individuals start searching for alternative interpretation frames. Within this search, they start an exchange with others and explore and try out new roles, which accompany "new" framings, gathering competence and self-confidence along the way. Eventually, they integrate their new perspective into their worldview. After this integration, individuals tend to internalize the change, and their future action is guided by their new perspective. In other words, transformative learning has occurred.

Mezirow (2000, p. 22) has described an ideal-typical transformative learning process as one that happens within these ten phases:

1. Disorienting dilemma;
2. Self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame;
3. A critical assessment of assumptions;
4. Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared;
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions;
6. Planning a course of action;
7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans;
8. Provisional trying of new roles;
9. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships;
10. A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective.

Later studies that work with Mezirow's model outlined that transformative learning processes do not necessarily include all ten steps and that the steps' logic tend to be circular rather than linear (e.g., Laros, 2015).

In the following, Mezirow's ten steps will be used as a heuristic (Mezirow, 1991) for answering the following questions:

1. Do students or young professionals experience transformative learning processes while they are engaging with their (new) role as teachers?
2. If so, how does the transformative learning start and how much have students progressed one-and-a-half years post career entry?
3. What is hindering and what is facilitating their transformative learning?

Findings—Transformative Learning of Becoming a Teacher—Contrasting Cases

In the following, we will look deeper into these cases and analyze how the theory of transformative learning can further inform the processes on how interviewees learn to become teachers.

During practical training, students make experiences they cannot interpret with their existing assumptions. They experience disorienting dilemmas while working with pupils as well as while collaborating with their mentor or with other teachers. Students handle these crises differently. Students of the type "development" consequently start to cope with crises by trying out their new role authentically—without feeling restricted by the structure of practical training and in full responsibility of their actions. Simultaneously, they are running through various steps of a transformative learning process (case Pia). Others try out their "new" role as teachers only to a limited extent. For the type "probation," the mentor, who is accompanying and evaluating the student-teachers, plays a central role. Being closely oriented to the mentor, leads these students to place their status as interns in the foreground (case Karin). For students of the type "avoidance," a close orientation to the mentor can also lead to a lack of engagement with a transformative learning process. This is the case, when the mentor's evaluation is the student's main concern, which is then determining their course of action (case Natasha).

Alongside their career entry, young professionals face many requirements and consequently experience disorienting dilemmas and crises. Those who are far into experiencing transformative learning processes seem more advanced and are able to not only try out the new role but also build competencies and self-confidence in the new role (Pia). Others experience first steps of transformative learning processes but ostensibly stagnate at an early stage—stopping short of critically examining their existing beliefs (cases Karin, Natasha). Why this happens appears to fall into one of two categories: sometimes teachers overburden themselves which results in them quickly feeling demoralized. As a result, it is difficult for them to try out and find themselves in their new role. Alternately, young teachers sometimes seem to question whether they fit into their profession, effectively stunting their orientation with categories relevant to professionalization (case Natasha).

In the following, we will outline students' possible courses of transformative development by using three contrasting cases. Each case will be analyzed from a longitudinal perspective, using data from t1 and t2.

Pia

During her internship, Pia begins to intensively and authentically try out her new role as a teacher and continues this learning process post career entry. Her narration gives hints that she has made much progress in her transformative learning process already during practical training. The first steps of a transformative learning process become obvious in the following excerpt, when her mentor obliges her to sing a song with the pupil. Since Pia, according to her own statement, "cannot sing well," this duty becomes a disorienting dilemma. She engages herself with this requirement and accepts the crisis. She does not persist in her assumption that she "cannot sing well" but starts exploring courses of actions that enable her to overcome the crisis.

> **Pia**: I did not choose music during my studies, I cannot sing well, singing does not make me feel comfortable. I was preparing at home and recorded my singing with my phone and I had to laugh, it was very special, and I was

not sure how to do it in class. I then chose a song that was more a rap, and it went great. I managed to be self-confident in front of the class. But I was not as comfortable as usual.

Pia feels the limitations of her course of action and starts to work on them. She puts across to pupils that she is a learner as well, even though she is teaching them. The structures of her practical training (the mentor evaluates her and is present in the class) do not limit her actions. She takes full responsibility for herself already during her practical training.

Pia: I thought I do not want to seem insecure in front of the kids. But I told them frankly that I'm not the most talented singer but together we can surely sing a great song. They took it positively cause the kids like it when the teacher sometimes does not know how to do something…and I looked at my mentor and had to smile.

The excerpts outline that Pia is starting to experience first steps of a transformative learning process during her practical training. By viewing herself as learner and exploring new courses of action (choosing a rap song), she starts reinterpreting two assumptions: 1. that music education always includes the introduction of songs that are sung and 2. that she cannot sing and eventually gains new self-confidence.

Post career entry, Pia at first experiences being a teacher as being "thrown into cold water"—a metaphor she repeats several times. She starts coping with this crisis and further continues the transformative process of learning her new role as teacher. She progresses by actively engaging with new requirements. Pia emphasizes that she is now the one responsible for decision-making.

While (transformative) learning her role, Pia is reflecting about new courses of action that she has tried out so far. In doing so, she is balancing out her high self-expectations on the one hand and challenges she has to cope with on a daily basis on the other hand.

Pia: How did I solve new requirements? Just do it. There is no recipe. I profit from my experiences; I check out what others are doing; this is what I do—there is no recipe. The curriculum does not tell you how to do it.

Alongside, Pia pays attention to her well-being and manages to avoid feeling overburdened. Even though she calls her career entry a "strict time," she seems to have made sure that she is "never doing bad."

It becomes obvious that Pia's transformative learning process of becoming a teacher has already started during her practical training. At this early stage, she starts to intensively engage with and tries out her new role as a teacher—before she even has her teaching diploma. During her following career entry, new requirements seem to overwhelm her at first and she experiences a crisis ("cold water"), but she faces it head-on and starts to cope. One-and-half years after her career entry, she seems to have progressed in her transformative process. She continues to explore and try out her new role, plans courses of action, acquires new knowledge and continuously tries out and critically examines her experiences and builds competence (steps 5–9 of Mezirow's model).

Karin

Karin also starts to engage with her new role during practical training. But, in contrast to Pia, only to a limited extent because her status of being an intern stops her from moving toward a profound learning process. The following excerpt is an example on how she begins engaging with her new role during practical training by acquiring new knowledge through experienced teachers. Her status as novice who needs to be led by experts seems to be central for her.

> **Karin**: It was great that I was well accepted by the mentors in every practical training. I could ask them anything concerning school and they gave me answers. I was allowed to try out things and they encouraged me and that was great.

On the other hand, the hierarchy in a practical training (the mentor is evaluating and present) seems to limit Karin's ownership over her new role. She tries to act in a manner that she thinks her mentors are expecting from her.

> **Karin**: That is difficult. In every practical training, you do it the way the mentor wants it. Of course, sometimes you are trying, a little bit, things out but you are taking over the mentor's structures. Now I know things I would not do the same way or do differently.

Post career entry, Karin seems to feel overwhelmed by the disorienting dilemma that goes along with taking on the new role. She seems to overuse her resources in a way that inhibits her from finding herself in her new role. This is underlined by her use of the terminology "being shot into cold water," which harkens back to Pia's expression. But, when facing the crisis, she starts to critically examine her assumptions. Consequently, she does not succeed in balancing her high self-expectation with her limited available resources. As a result, she does not cope with her disorienting dilemma in a way that advances a transformative learning process. This is exemplified in the following excerpt: feeling overburdened leads her to externalize her crisis—she starts to question the profession and her choice of profession.

> **Karin**: I would like to… reflect on how I could didactically do a great lesson but there is not enough time somehow. Maybe the profession needs to be changed. Or I don't know what. An additional person would be needed who has this time. I don't know.

During her practical training, Karin started to tackle her role as a burgeoning teacher. However, her beginning transformative learning process, which seemed to be triggered during her career entry, seems to stagnate at the early stage of the critical assessment of her own assumptions (step 3): Karin's high self-expectation along with her high use of resources keep her away from exploring options for new roles (step 4) and progressing in finding herself within her new role.

Natasha

Within her practical training, Natasha does not authentically try out her new role as a teacher—she rather seems to feel distanced from the teaching profession. Her mentors' evaluation is central for Natasha. This seems

to be the reason why Natasha aims at rather creating a positive image of herself as a teacher (in front of her mentor) instead of authentically trying out the role of a teacher.

> **Natasha**: Yes, sometimes you feel like a master of ceremonies. During practical training, you would like to show how awesome you are, and this is a challenge.

Natasha seems not to identify herself with the teaching profession—that might be another reason why it is challenging for her to really try out her new role. Her distance becomes obvious in the way she downgrades standards of her profession as unnecessary "details."

> **Natasha**: I think when something goes really wrong, feedback is needed and reflections are needed. But because of every single detail like "you haven't used the red pen but an orange one." Such things. This is not my world, but I figured holding onto such details is this primary schooling level.

Post career entry, it seems to be challenging for her to start exploring new roles and actions concerning her "attitude" as a teacher as well as concerning her question whether or not she can find a fit in the profession. The following excerpt highlights her difficulties in identifying with the profession.

> **Natasha**: My attitude towards the profession, in general, is challenging because you do not have a reputation in front of society, you do not have a reputation in front of the parents and the only thing that you can say and that I am convinced by is that school is needed because it is obligatory.

Natasha seems to be aware of her non-conformist attitude. Furthermore, she starts critically assessing her "attitude." She recognizes a need for change and, therefore, seems to be standing at the beginning of a transformative learning process. Her learning stage becomes obvious when she is reflecting about her participation in team meetings.

> **Natasha**: Team meetings within our internal formation are interesting, but I am flying pretty fast into my previous role of being a pupil, that makes

> me start thinking "Oh, this is bullshit."… I would like to be more constructive concerning co-working or other themes and prove my new attitude.

While Natasha was avoiding teachers' requirements during practical training, she is starting to critically engage with her "attitude" post career entry. But it seems to be impossible for her to go beyond a critical assessment (step 3).

Discussion and Outlook

Looking at the whole learning processes from the end of students' studies up until one-and-half years post career entry, it becomes obvious that the students experience disorienting dilemmas in the process of becoming teachers. As we could show along the case of Pia, some of them are progressing pretty far into their transformative learning processes as they take on their new role, by running through various steps of Mezirow's ideal-typical learning process. Others seem to start a transformation but stagnate at the early stage of critically assessing their assumptions. They seem to be incapable of going beyond this stage—even though they start to recognize that their existing assumptions are insufficient when they are trying to frame their new roles as teachers. In the following, we discuss whether the outlined (potential) transformative learning processes lead to the development of professionalism.

From the beginning of her study, Pia is engaging in new requirements and reflecting about new courses of action that she has tried out so far. The example proves that she is willing to take risks in trying out new courses of action, but simultaneously she is seeking a suitable way for her pupils to follow her instructions. At the same time, she defines her role as a learner and as a teacher. Post career entry, the necessity of dealing with requirements, duties and expectations leads her to her limits. In engaging with requirements, she seems to be oriented toward categories relevant for professionalization. The example with the rap song first proves her awareness of the necessity of building up a working relationship with the pupils, which is a substantial part of the quality of teaching (developmental task: suitable instruction). Secondly, Pia continuously shows a highly

developed reflexivity and a sensible use of her own resources (developmental task: identity forming role-taking). Thus, processes of transformation and of professionalization seem to occur simultaneously.

Also, Karin is oriented on categories relevant for professionalization. In her critical search for an authentic way to decide and act in class, a reflective attitude emerges. According to Helsper (2018), this is the basis for the development of a professional habitus. Karin seems to have the potential of being a teacher with high professional standards, but she does not succeed in progressing through further steps of a transformative learning process when her high self-expectations collide with the real conditions during career entry. This experience leads her to an "avoidance" (Košinár, 2014) of any further dealing with challenges. Here, her behavior has to be interpreted as a kind of self-protection, a (temporary) state in which any professional progress stagnates.

In the case of Natasha, a first concern with the developmental task "identity forming role-taking" can be identified in her critical self-assessment one-and-a-half years post career entry. But in this state, taking into account her (subjective) lack of fitting into this profession, it is unpredictable whether any further professional development can be expected.

Resuming the findings out of the present cases, the stagnation of a transformative learning process can be located on a spectrum: Due to high standards and despite an engagement in professional requirements, the feeling of being overburdened can hinder young professionals from truly arriving in the new role (Karin). On the other hand, the experience of a lack of fitting into the teaching profession can hinder one from exploring ways of finding their footing. This is what keeps one at a distance from the new role (Natasha).

However, those who have progressed very far in their transformative learning processes are those who authentically cope with the disorienting dilemmas they experienced at an early stage of professional development. This early engagement seems to work as a "setting the stage" (Laros, 2015) for the following transformative process (Pia). Others, whose transformative processes do not go beyond a critical assessment of assumptions, have not been engaged during practical training in the same way (Natasha) or only in a limited scope with the structure of the practical training in the foreground (Karin).

Further analysis will clarify how the transformative elements that were outlined by looking at individual cases could further inform our types of professionalization that were reconstructed in our longitudinal study for t1 and t2.

Notes

1. The terminology "learning a role" is used according to Mezirow in a rather unspecific way and focuses on how a change of perspectives accompanies interviewees' processes of mentally arriving in their profession. From a profession-theoretical viewpoint, learning the role of a teacher focuses on engaging with (profession-related) requirements in one's profession-biographical process.
2. The teacher-students fulfill four phases of practical training during their studies (in sum 16 weeks, partly in the form of day placements over a year). During each of these placements, two students work with an experienced teacher in their class as "assistant teachers."
3. The terminology "crisis/crises" and what Mezirow calls "disorienting dilemma" is being used synonymously.

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