Interrogating the Role of Teacher Educators in the Reduction of Inequalities in Education

Purpose

The purpose of our study is to explore the role of teacher educators in the reduction or perpetuation of inequality and exclusion mechanisms in the Flemish educational system. Teacher educators are defined by the European Commission (2013) as “all those who actively facilitate the (formal) learning of student teachers and teachers” (p.8). By preparing the next generation of teachers, teacher educators might (in)directly impact the improvement of educational systems (Cochran-Smith et al., 2016). Moreover, teacher educators’ responsibility in making education more suitable for the societal diversity of people, is increasingly acknowledged in (inter)national policy (e.g., UNESCO, 2017). In particular in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, improvements in this direction are needed. Currently, Flemish compulsory education is characterized by high social inequality. PISA data reflects this persistently (OECD, 2016). A high ethnic and socio-enomic school segregation is present as well, resulting in so-called ‘concentration schools’ (Agirdag, 2019) that keep low-SES and ethnic minoritized students excluded from access to cultures of power. Furthermore, the Flemish teacher workforce is rather homogeneous: white, able-bodied, high-SES, cisgender people of which most are female (SERV, 2020). Within teacher education programmes, the student body is luckily becoming more heterogeneous every year. However, drop-out rates of students from minoritized groups are high (VIVES, 2021), indicating the existence of hidden exclusion mechanisms. In this study, we concur with scholars who believe that teacher educators can play a crucial role in combating the described inequalities (Cochran-Smith, 2004). More specifically, we assume that teacher educators’ ways of talking about (dealing with) diversity could strengthen the implicit preparation of diversity responsive teachers, and, as such, potentially foster social change in education at large. Therefore, we aim to examine the discourses informing teacher educators’ stance on (dealing with) diversity and to uncover if and how these discourses contribute to reducing inequality and exclusion mechanisms in the Flemish educational system.

Theoretical perspectives

Teacher educators represent a broad professional group (Tack et al., 2018). School mentors, trainers in professional development initiatives for in-service teachers, lecturers in teacher education institutions, and supervisors of practicum, are all teacher educators (White, 2018). In our research, we focus on higher education-based teacher educators who prepare future teachers via teacher education programmes. This particular group of teacher educators can take on various roles; ‘teacher of teachers’ and ‘researcher’ are described the most in the literature (e.g., Lunenberg et al., 2014). It is through these roles, we believe teacher educators can have the most impact on the development of student teachers, and thus, indirectly, on the improvement of educational systems (Murray et al., 2021). As teacher of teachers, teacher educators are in a unique position. Since their students are becoming teachers themselves, not only what teacher educators teach, but also how they teach is of great importance. Russell (1997) described this notion as ‘How I teach is the message’. The pedagogy of teacher educators is therefore inherently a second order pedagogy (Murray & Male, 2005): while teaching any topic, inevitably teacher educators engage in ‘modeling’ (Loughran & Berry, 2005). With regard to their researcher role, teacher educators are able to investigate educational issues relevant to the field, as well as to disseminate research results that might advance the way professionals think and talk about education (Cochran-Smith et al., 2016).
Since social inequality perpetuates deeply in some educational contexts like Flanders (OECD, 2016), responding to this injustice is currently a highly relevant educational issue. We concur with educational professionals who state that responding to diversity happens all the time and is never neutral (e.g., Banks et al., 2007; hooks, 1994). Therefore we choose for a specific conceptualisation of dealing with diversity in education within our research, that is responsivity to diversity:

*Responsivity to diversity in education is twofold: it is taking into account differences between people in order to create qualitative learning environments for everyone, as well as responding to discriminatory injustices that exist in society and (in)directly impact education, in order to create a more equitable world. (Ponet et al., 2021)*

We deliberately incorporated a social justice perspective: significant societal change is required if professionals truly wish to provide all learners with the best opportunities in life (e.g., Sleeter & McLaren, 1995). As such, structures of power and oppression need to be questioned and tackled (e.g., Giroux, 2020). While there is an extensive tradition in the US for teacher educators to take a critical pedagogy stance to dealing with diversity (e.g., Cochran-Smith, 2004), this stance seems to be far less present, or at least rarely documented, in Flanders. However, we currently do note new collaborations of (teacher) educators who are fed up with the status quo (Pullinx et al., 2021). New strings of research have appeared, focusing for instance on the sense of belonging of student teachers (Morreel et al., 2021), collaborating with compulsory education (Vantieghem & Van de Putte, 2019), or the professional development of higher education staff (Ponet et al., 2021). At the same time, these and other studies related to diversity issues often shy away from explicitly incorporating a clear stance on the matter. A possible explanation might be found in the neoliberal climate in which the Flemish teacher education programmes are grounded (Pullinx et al., 2021). Currently, national policy makers are mainly interested in evidence-based research of what works best, potentially reducing teaching to a technical implementation. In such discourse, critical research that tries to dislocate systems of power, is given little value (Biesta, 2014). Nonetheless, a string of scholars assumes that teacher educators still have the opportunity to be responsive to diversity via their daily professional activities (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). In our prior research we have confirmed this assumption and discovered that teacher educators employ multiple practices to do so: (1) creating inclusive learning environments, (2) challenging student teachers’ frames of reference, (3) explicit modeling of diversity responsive practices, (4) challenging one’s own frames of reference, and (5) raising societal responsivity to diversity (Ponet et al., 2021; Ponet et al., under review). Simultaneously, the findings also suggested that teacher educators vary greatly in the consistency and intensity with which they engage in diversity responsive practices. Those who were more consistent in their stance on (dealing with) diversity, also seemed more prone to intensify their diversity responsive practices (Ponet et al., under review). As such, we assume that competing discourses inform the ways teacher educators’ talk about (dealing with) diversity, complicating consistent professional stances on (dealing with) diversity. More insight into these discourses might help teacher educators become aware of the (in)consistencies in their current stances. Additionally, we are curious to see if such stances can be linked to responsivity to diversity.

**Methods and data sources**

In a prior study, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 14 Flemish teacher educators. A combination of convenience and snowball sampling was used to find a group of participants, corresponding with the heterogenous profession of higher education-based TEIs (Tack et al., 2018). The participants worked in three different institutions (two teacher colleges and one university), in three different main teaching assignments (subject specific-oriented, general pedagogy-oriented, and
practicum-oriented), and in four different teacher education programmes (kindergarten, primary, lower secondary, and higher secondary education). The interviews aimed to identify perceptions on diversity and dealing with diversity, as well as practices teacher educators engage in with regard to dealing with diversity. After we made verbatim transcriptions of the interviews, a constant comparative analysis was conducted to find commonalities and differences in the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). After writing down the conclusions from this first analysis, our research team decided that the data allowed for an additional analysis. More in particular, to elicit the discourses informing teacher educators, we conducted a critical discourse analysis (CDA) on the interview data. Drawing upon a social constructionist perspective, CDA is described as “a popular methodological option to consider when a study is set up around social issues or questions of power/exclusion and ideology, driven by a critical stance on behalf of the researcher” (Joyce & Maessele, 2022). CDA is a systematic investigation of semiotic data, like interview data, aimed at deconstructing “ideology and power relations that are articulated by means of a (socially shared) group of statements, ideas, images, etc., regarding a specific topic” (Joyce & Maessele, 2022). More in particular, the analysis was operationalised via Fairclough’s (1995) model, encompassing three dimensions of analysis: text, discursive practices, and social practices. Respecting the dialectical nature of the model, we made a recursive movement between in-text and social analysis. Clear documentation and subsequent discussions within our research team about emerging insights from the data assured the quality of the research process. Moreover, the first author engaged in constant reflection while coding the data by keeping reflective memos.

**Findings**

The findings indicate the presence of two main competing discourses: (1) a power challenging discourse and (2) a power affirming discourse. First, the power challenging discourse compels all teacher educators to take responsibility and engage in actions to reduce inequalities. As such, this discourse has ties with our conceptualisation of responsivity to diversity. It was manifested in statements in which participants aligned themselves with pleas of international policy organizations to make education more just for all. Especially, when teacher educators could give many concrete examples of diversity responsive practices, it was clear that their ways of talking were informed by a coherent discourse. Second and in contrast, the power affirming discourse undermines the beliefs in teacher educators’ agency and responsibility with regard to social justice. It resonates with the dominant neoliberal voices in Flemish national policy who claim that teaching is perceived as a neutral, non-political endeavor (Biesta, 2014). This discourse mainly seeped through when some teacher educators talked about the translation of international pleas -on which they agreed- to their own practices: “I can’t do something about this as an individual”, “This is not part of the subject I teach, but it sure is important”, and “When there is time, I can address it”. In addition, derogatory statements about minoritized people, for example, also insinuated the presence of a discourse that has little acknowledgement of how the educational system is underserving many students. Most teacher educators seemed to be informed by both discourses. Only few stances could be consistently inscribed with our idea of responsivity to diversity. Consequently, (1) teacher educators will contribute in varying degrees to the reduction of inequalities; and (2) student teachers will receive many contestating implicit messages about how they should deal with diversity. The latter might leave student teachers confused and unprepared to set up their own diversity responsive practices.

**Significance**
In conclusion, this study adds to the literature on a theoretical and practical level. Theoretically, it provides insight into the two main discourses informing teacher educators’ dealing with diversity: a power challenging discourse and a power affirming discourse. It highlights how teacher educators contribute to the reduction of inequalities in varying degrees, depending on their consistent alignment with the respective discourses. On a practical level, this study cautiously insinuates how these variations between teacher educators might convey confusing messages to student teachers about how they should deal with diversity. Raising teacher educators’ awareness of these implicit messages could prove powerful in combating inequalities in education. Therefore, we make two recommendations to policy makers of teacher education programmes: (1) to raise incentives for participation in evidence-informed professional development initiatives regarding dealing with diversity; (2) and to facilitate collective discussion about teacher educators’ understanding of diversity and dealing with diversity in order to reach more alignment.

References

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