The Autonomous Building of Teachers' Identity Through the Use of an Action-Research Diary

Empowering the Teacher to Become a Reflective Practitioner in the Luxembourgian School System

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Abstract

This paper concerns the development of an action-research diary for teachers, responding to their need for a learning a methodology that gives them self-control. This leads to their empowerment as social actors, and consequently enables them to transform themselves as well as their environment. The software is pre-tested and afterwards these users are conducted to assess whether it really matches with their everyday classroom work needs. These findings are used to improve the usability and functionalities of the software, which, in a second phase, will be tested at a larger scale in a 'real world setting' and in the future hopefully shows a significant impact in the daily work and cognitive processes of its users.

General Introduction

Some of the main results of the research project "The place of School in the Luxembourgian society of tomorrow"[1] which revealed that frustration of professionals often results in "burn-out" and more generally that there is a need to redefine the role and tasks of teachers as well as our personal experiences as researchers and teachers respectively lecturers led to the creation of a IT-tool, which is intended to help other teachers and future teachers (students in educational sciences) in their daily work as practitioners engaged in a never-ending process of personal and collective construction of their professional identity as a teacher and on a higher level of their school community identity and even societal identity. More precisely, we initiated a project of developing an action-research diary aimed to respond to the three following professional needs which, to us, are very important in the building of an authentic and balanced teacher identity:

    a) the need of effective and easy data gathering;
    b) the need of traceability and visibility of thinking processes;

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[1] An important scientific study called "The place of School in the Luxembourgian society of tomorrow" ("La place de l'Ecole dans la société luxembourgeoise de demain") and sponsored by the FNR (Fond National de la Recherche) was realized at the University of Luxembourg by the EMACS research unit (Educational Measurement in Applied Cognitive Science) from January 2004 until January 2008. The main results are presented to the Luxembourgian people in charge of education and to a larger public by the organization through a cycle of conferences carried out at the University of Luxembourg and by the release of a book published by the Belgian editor *De Boeck*.

c) the need of learning a methodology enabling individuals to gain self-control, leading to their empowerment as social actors and consequently enabling them to transform themselves as well as their environment. The main aim is to help the user in collecting, storing and treating data in one place.

The Luxembourgian school system and its main problems

Description of the Luxembourgian school system

In Luxembourg, there are five possible types of education for a child: public schools, private subsidized schools, private non-subsidized schools, schools in a neighbouring country (MENFP, 2002) and home schooling (art. 82 of the school law from 1912). Public schools have different levels of education, the pre-school level (pupils aged three years – not obligatory), kindergarten (pupils aged four to six years), primary school (pupils aged six to twelve), secondary school (pupils aged twelve to nineteen – schooling is compulsory until the age of fifteen and after the new school reform scheduled for the end of the year 2007 until the age of sixteen). Secondary school is subdivided into two orders: secondary school and technical secondary school (professional school), which in itself is composed of two levels, general technical secondary school and the preparatory level. Children with learning or psycho-pedagogical problems have to be declared by the teacher to the regional "Commission médico-psycho-pédagogique (CMPP)". The law of March 14th 1973 created institutes and services of "Differentiated Education" or "Special Education" while the law of June 28th 1994 authorized children with different disabilities to participate partially or fully in ordinary classes. The ambulatory work of the Centre of Logopedics, the Institute for defective visuals (IDV), the re-educational ambulatory Service (SREA), the regional centres of consultation of the Child Guidance Service (SGE) also exist (MENFP, 2004). The control of primary schools (19 districts) is ensured by the respective inspector of primary school and the municipal council. Finally, the Superior Council of Education has a consulting role, helping the Minister of Education with taking important decisions.

Three of the main Luxembourgian school system problems

The management of school population heterogeneity to be re-examined

As it relates to managing the school population heterogeneity, the Ministry of National Education already showed the willingness to deal with it by promoting an intercultural education and by better taking into account the school population resulting from immigration, in its publication entitled *"Demain l'école"*, back in 1991. However, a few years later, the results of the PISA studies indicate that this still remains a "large construction area". Thus, these international studies have shown that the performance variations between the various teaching orders (secondary school education, technical secondary school education and professional school education) are considerable and that the influence of the socio-economic background on the pupils' performances is more pronounced than in any other OECD countries. Our school system proved to be one of the most inequitable systems of all the OECD countries. We should also note that civil society still perceives the Luxembourgian school as a closed-off entity, a protective island against society rather than a place of learning and living in society. In addition to

the school's insulation problem, "there is no basic discussion on the objectives of teaching" and "the school's educational mission, i.e. forming competences, is unrecognized" (LYCOPA booklet, March 2000). High class repetition rates for non-Luxembourgish pupils on primary as well as secondary levels, the almost exclusive support of special needs pupils in specialized institutions, as well as the lack of remediation possibilities for pupils with learning difficulties represent only a few of the elements in need of a reexamination for the sake of the children and the actors concerned.

Unsuitable learning methods for the new societal situation of Luxembourg

In terms of applied learning methods, the Ministry of National Education notes in 1991 that school needs to develop methods and create learning, evaluation and orientation conditions that take into account the various differences between those who learn. In order for learning to become possible, one has to privilege a formative evaluation that allows the pupil, advised by his instructor, to learn to evaluate himself and to determine his personal project of orientation. More generally speaking, the Ministry of National Education wants to distance itself from traditional school, whose programmes are primarily defined in terms of knowledge to transmit. However, contrary to the lead given in the prospective discussion paper, we note that when it comes to evaluation, the system is still exclusively based on grades, whether it's on a primary or secondary education level. As it relates to competences to be developed, new report cards in primary education, written in the form of competences, have led to pupils being even more evaluated in a certificated sort of way. Moreover, the introduction of this report card has not led to any changes in educational practices, neither for teachers nor for pupils. We do indeed notice that the studies programme, ex-cathedra teaching as well as memorization and reproduction are still at the centre of our understanding of how the school system works.

The role of the teaching staff to be redefined

As it relates to the teachers' role in the Luxembourgian school system, the Ministry of National Education notes in 1991 that this role needs to be redefined so that the teacher becomes capable of working in a team, as well as constantly innovating his/her practices, staying informed about current problems, investing him/herself in a collective and individual educational project (e.g. within the framework of a school project), following the evolution of the students that were entrusted to him/her. This is why initial training has to insist more on project pedagogy, teamwork, initiation to new information technologies. It also has to take the differentiation techniques and the strategies for multicultural teaching into account, in a broader sense. Likewise, the teacher needs to be more familiarized with the problems of unadjusted children and see him/herself less as "the teacher" but rather as a manager and counsellor/advisor, but also as a specialist in education. In the current Luxembourgian school system, s/he still seems like a "solitary combatant", a "master" in his/her class. The teacher or the programme respectively is still at the centre of the school system instead of the learner or in learning. Too seldom, new, more cooperative and participatory pedagogical methods that allow the pupils to really invest themselves in personal or collective projects, to socially construct their reality and to construct themselves at the same time, are used. Questions

of interaction on the level of pupils and teachers, of interdisciplinarity and of the search for direction are not really put in practice in the Luxembourgian school system.

A plea for a paradigmatic change

By reading the statements/comments of the non-profit organizations GLEN and LYCOPA, we can observe that they are pleading for a paradigm change, more precisely for switching from a teaching paradigm to a learning paradigm. The learner, confronted with a more and more complex and unstable world, needs to find himself at the centre of interest of the Luxembourgian school system, where learning becomes a social construction of reality shared by all the actors within the system and where the right to be wrong, or the mistake itself, is seen as a chance to learn and not, as is the case in the current Luxembourgian school system, as a means to sanction leading to failure, to class repetition and to orientation towards failure.

We would like to simply add that, in our eyes, these two associations raise the fundamental question of knowing whether or not the functioning of the Luxembourgian school system is still adjusted to the complex Luxembourgian context or if one has to switch to a new paradigm. Their answer is clearly affirmative. However, what would this educational model be, and of course, what underlying socio-political model should be adopted for Luxembourg? That is the big question that the Grand-Duchy will have to confront in the coming years.

Implantation of an action-research diary in the Luxembourgian school context to help the autonomous building of teachers' identity

Some of the main results of the "The place of School in the Luxembourgian society of tomorrow"

In a synthetic form, we can note that there are several problems under the axis of managing pupils' heterogeneity, in particular concerning the integration of foreign pupils and the mastery of the languages learned and used in teaching. Moreover, these factors play a large part in the homogenization process, which, in the Luxembourg school system is done through the orientation and the selection. Finally, it is shown that the pupil's rights are not respected, whether they are those of participation, becoming autonomous, or critical thinking and development of one's own ideas. With regard to the redefinition of the role and task of the teaching staff, it is underlined that ex-cathedra teaching still constitutes the main method that teaching staff use as a means to transmit knowledge in Luxembourgian school teaching, which in itself remains founded on a studies programme to follow strictly. Another major element that was pointed out is that many teachers still are solitary combatants. Lastly, the inequality and the inefficiency of the Luxembourgian school system is underlined.

Teacher stress and burn out phenomenon

Most teachers agree today that teaching is a stressful profession with a growing number of teachers leaving it within their first 5 years (Wilhelm et al, 2000). Most of the research done on teacher stress and burn-out are based on job-related variables

(organizational variables) which are assumed to explain the burnout phenomenon better than personal variables (Pines, 2002). From the sources of teacher stress cited by Wilhem et al (2000) and Pines (2002) we retain the following ones:

- difficulties in managing student misbehaviour;
- relations with staff, children and parents;
- the attitude of students toward learning;
- work conditions (class size, student-teacher ratio);
- role ambiguity;
- role conflict, incompetent administrators;
- lack of administrative support in dealing with discipline problems;
- lack of feedback from colleagues and administration;
- lack of voice in organizational decision-making;
- lack of job mobility;
- public pressure.

Pines (2002) reviewed and identified three theoretical models and perspectives that attempt to explain teacher burn-out : 1) Self-efficacy (Friedman, 2000), 2) Social exchange model (Schaufeli, 1998) and 3) critical theory (Saharov & Farber, 1993) ; and Pines offers a existentialist perspective based more on personal variables. In sum, she assumes "that the root of burnout lies in people's need to believe that their life is meaningful, the things they do, and consequently they themselves are important and significant" (Pines, 2002, p. 123). Wilhelm et al (2000) conclude in their study that job-related variables were not as significant as first presumed and explained this that high self-esteem, and high job satisfaction played a major role in people's ability to tolerate stress.

Main concepts behind construction process of the action-research diary

Some general ideas on identity building, professional knowledge, action and narratives

Throughout the literature about identity building many authors are congruent on the fact that identity is constructed, fluid and opposed to a stable "core", in other words it equates to the notion of a "reflexive project" (Watson, 2006 ; Elisabeth, 2006). This implies that "identity is necessary rational, to do with recognition of sameness and difference between ourselves and others" (Watson, 2006, p. 509) and is therefore a continual process of identification. In other words, identity is constantly actualized by events, reflections and emotions, which we are able to construct through narratives, constructing thus life stories.

The professional identity has to be seen in relationship to professional knowledge and action. Watson (2006) points out that we might become what we do and we do what we think that we are. This relationship is complex and not easy to analyze. But, through the means of narratives, we can have access to identity building processes. Job identities, here teacher identities, are "ontological narratives", which are "stories we tell in an effort to make sense of how we experience ourselves and how we would like to he understood in order to bring structure to our personal lives. We use these narratives both to construct and to negotiate individual identity (Lieblich et al, 1998 cited in Elisabeth, 2006)". Institutions produce possibilities for such a narrative constructions of

job identities for their members and for the institution as well. This contributes to the construction of an institutional identity, e.g., schools: the way they are organized and the values they promote through its members construct a specific school and job identity.

Our main assumption is that our writing and reflecting tool helps in clarifying, uncovering and reflecting upon the events in which the author is an actor thus contributing in the creation of the "whole story", in building his identity. Thus, writing becomes another self-narrative practice in which the narrative constructs its author and the author emerges through the narrative process.

Using a journal as a learning and reflection tool

The intra-personal level
Using a journal necessitates some writing and language skills. Even though, the novice diary writer isn't proficient at the beginning, the regular use of a writing tool contributes to enhance these skills. Bain (2002) has shown that the effectiveness of the use of a journal, as a reflection tool was dependent on the feedback the users received from their writing. Though, as a user of a diary, in the initial stages of learning it would be beneficial if the users could write and narrate in a learning community with peers' feedback. As a consequence, the diary becomes more than a mere "simple record of events" (Bain, 2002). Therefore, the tool we designed incorporates reflection steps, which helps ignition of a reflection process. One has to say that there is little research on how reflection improves learning and has not been tested and lack of clarity with regard to the definition of reflection (Scanlan, 1997). On a conceptual level, reflection has been related to other mental processes such as pondering, examining, scrutinizing and ruminating (Kompf & Bond, 1995 in Scanlan, 1997). It can be viewed as a mental process and is believed to be an aspect of the critical thinking process (Scanlan, 1997). One of the most important stages of the reflective process, and with what we totally agree, is awareness. As the authors cited by Scanlan (Atkins & Murphy) suggest, "awareness is a response to uncomfortable feelings or thoughts." We agree with Scanlan (1997) that without awareness there will be no reflection process. Though, the active and conscientious act of reflecting will stimulate not always pleasant thoughts and emotions but unpleasant and disturbing ones and by consequence this act will have as a response rising awareness. "Awareness through reflection comes in many forms, at many times, and at various stages of one's professional development" (Trent, 2003). As Baldwin (2006) states "For in writing we live life twice: once in the experience, and again in recording and reflecting upon our experience."

The inter-personal level
On a professional and collaborative level, teachers have to continually be involved in a reflective process about their practice by consciously examining theories and classroom interactions. This process constantly demands of them to confront their professional knowledge with their existing beliefs and ideas in order to define successive steps of action. (Kent, 2003). Through this process of "deliberation" (Dewey, 1992; Schwab, 1978; McCutcheon, 1995 in Trent, 2003), teachers can adjust or modify their practical theories of action and enhance the decision-making process before and in the teaching actions (Trent, 2003). Reflection on practice happens after the sessions in order to optimize the next educational interventions. Action research promotes and provides its

adherents with tools to consciously formalize this deliberative process for the purpose of improving practice. Trent states : "Action research helps identifying a problematic situation, or a situation worthy of "problematization", and decides to pursue intense study of this "problem" in order to improve upon the existing situation and subsequently share the resultant understandings." (McKernan, 1996 *in* Trent, 2003, p. 296). While Schon's concept is about reflection-in-action, the reflective journal practice and post-teaching sessions demand a reflection-on-practice approach. Further studies may be needed to study the effectiveness on the reflective process after sessions on reflective practitioners' performances.

The institutional level

This interpersonal level involves also the individually and collectively teacher implication at an institutional level. In the process of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, the teacher as to examine critically how he locates and positions himself in the class-, school and societal context. In this sense, the teacher has to think about his multiple social identities in these specific social contexts and about the roles, positionalities and standpoints he develops in and through his actions (Soreide, 2006). As to Soreide (2006) talking about the use of a journal, "ontological narratives are the stories we tell in an effort to make sense of how we experience ourselves and how we would like to be understood in order to bring structure to our personal lives. We use these narratives both to construct and to negotiate individual identity (Lieblich et al, 1998). In other words, when we tell and interpret ontological narratives we also construct one or several narrative identities. Job identity is also a narrative and a discursive construction" (p. 529).

There is a possibility that, through the use of the action-research diary (as a sort of narrative journal and learning tool) which makes the teacher - among other things - conscious of the reproduction mechanisms of the Luxembourgian school system through homogenizing the pupils' population, he will be able and maybe willing to challenge the status quo situation and the actual power dynamics in Luxembourg. In other words, there can be a tension and negotiation between the officially desired identity by the Ministry of National education as well as the Luxembourgian society on one hand (a ready-made national homogenous identity to be socially reproduced at different school and training levels) and a step by step consciousness of a personal and collective alternative conception of identity building which could be a dynamic, complex and critical identification with the teacher profession on the other hand. With the terms of Soreide (2006), "to understand identity construction as a process of narrative positioning is useful, because it opens up an understanding of teachers as active agents in their own lives and the construction of teacher identity as a dynamic and changing activity (Davies & Harré, 2001). Elementary school teachers, with the same access to the same narrative resources, might, therefore, construct several and different narrative job identities" (p. 529). These processes could lead to a self-empowerment as well as a mutually empowerment of the school community sharing knowledge and power instead of reproducing the traditional hierarchical positioning set up and defended consciously as well as non consciously for decades.

The software's conceptual framework

The information and communication technologies (ICT) in teaching and the praxeology[2] are the underlying fundaments of the software. The software is intended to be for the teachers a cognitive tool that helps to process data collected in complex classroom situations thus facilitating the possible articulation of theory and practice. Based on the concepts of action research, its use facilitates rising awareness of the processes inherent to the problem/obstacles present in actions. Thus, after clarification of the parameters of the difficult situation or the obstacle, the definition of strategies of educational interventions is largely facilitated.

The action researchers use a multitude of tools: diaries, posters, discussions between colleagues, video, audio, questionnaires, diagrams, and observations by thirds, RICO-clusters… These methods and techniques help to objectify the situation, to change one's perspective in order to produce new tracks, assumptions, insights, common aims… These ideas mainly influenced the software's conceptual framework. *Thus, the software is built on the 3 following concepts*:
  a. *the model of action research according to McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead (1996) [in Karsenti, Savoy-Zacj (2000)]*
  b. *the teacher's diary according to Altrichter, H. Posch,P.(1998)*
  c. *the portfolio*

On the one hand, the tool provides help in the daily work of the reflective practitioner; on the other hand, it has the ambition to become a learning tool. It is also intended for the training of the novice teachers. It is especially on that level that the learning to work with and to analyze the results, which follow from its use, will have the most impact. At the final stage of its development, the tool will possibly be introduced in the teacher training programmes of the University of Luxembourg.

Documentation provision and the analysis/interpretation of the data collected by the practitioner prove to be processes requiring a certain discipline and a good structuring. The software will facilitate this task, thus reducing practitioner's working time ("Time Management") and saving time for the essential. The essential means being able to concentrate on the collection of the data, to exploit them, analyze them and store them in one place. By a simple click, all the data will be available in order to quickly consult its content.

Some actions the tool offers :
- ***Data****:* data acquisition, analysis and interpretation of raw data, transformation of the data into specific actions
- ***Reflective approach***: formulation of assumptions, reflective steps vis-à-vis a problematic situation/an obstacle, problem solving, rising awareness of internal reflective processes, structuring thinking
- ***Competences***: transformation of the environment, becoming an innovating and empowered social actor, self-construction of action steps, strategies
- ***Communication***: becoming able to structure communications (parents' meetings,

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[2] epistemological position which articulates theory (*logos*) and practice (*praxis*)

inspectors, child help services, specialized school commissions, colleagues…)
- ***Personal development***: self-management, co-operation, networks of exchanges, time management

Conclusion : The IT-Tool as a multi-dimensional connector

As stated above, the practise of writing and maintaining a reflection journal largely contributes to the professional identity building process. Through narratives we construct, the life stories we build through keeping track of major events, reflections, thoughts and understandings, a diary seems to be the "ideal" companion. The deliberative process which action research offers raises awareness and restarts the reflective process. The nature of the tool is it to facilitate the input, its storage and its analysis. This information and the reflective process initiate a reflective project in which the individual has to confront his beliefs and knowledge with events, problematic situations and has to create innovative strategies of actions in order to transform or enhance himself and his current environment.

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