

Teacher Education as a High-quality Learning Environment

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Abstract: In this paper, we discuss what a high-quality learning environment in teacher education may look like from the perspective of Biesta's three characteristics of good education: the qualification, socialization, and subjectification functions of education. Through critical investigation of our own classroom practices, we identify indicators of high-quality learning environments as well as several areas that could be improved. First, we offer a short outline of what quality education can be. Second, we describe three snapshots of teacher education activities, one from each of the authors. The two first examples are from Japan and the third is from Norway. Finally, we discuss characteristics of these snapshots that can be considered quality learning environments, ways in which these three particular learning environments can be improved, and possible ways forward for teacher education in general.

Key words: teacher education, quality education, qualification, socialization, subjectification

1. Introduction

The issue of quality education is increasingly in focus among politicians, academics, UN organizations, NGOs as well as in schools. "[A] high-level consensus around quality has descended on the world," claims Soudien (2012, p. 102). Although we agree that we should deliver quality education, there is far from consensus on what constitutes quality education. If we do not agree on what quality education is, how can we achieve it in teacher education? A high-quality learning environment is what we profoundly want to provide all children. To enable our future teachers in this endeavor, our teacher education has to be exemplary. In other words, as teacher educators, we also need to provide a high-quality learning environment for our pre-service and in-service teacher students (hereafter 'teacher students').

In this paper, we discuss what a high-quality learning environment in teacher education may look like from the perspective of Biesta's (2009) three characteristics of good education. Through critical investigation of our own classroom practices, we will try to identify indicators of high-quality learning environments, as well as several areas that could be improved. As such, this includes aspects of action research as we reflect on our own practices with the aim of improving the teaching methods and approaches involved (McNiff, 2013). First, we offer a short outline of what quality education can be. Second, we describe three snapshots of teacher education activities, one from each of the authors. The two first examples are from Japan and the third is from Norway. Finally, we discuss characteristics of these snapshots that can be considered quality learning environments, ways in which these three particular learning environments can be improved, and possible ways forward for teacher education in general.

2. An attempt to define quality in education

'Quality' is not a self-evident proposition. In some cases, quality is ascertained by measuring how much the learner knows and to what depth. A description of a standard is developed, making it possible to measure the level of achievement. In other cases, quality is a policy issue where creating an education system that facilitates the realization of the learners' rights to education and development of their capabilities is achieved. Others focus on quality as a deliberately constructed value. Nickel and Lowe (2010) have identified seven dimensions of what should be considered as quality education: Effectiveness, efficiency, equity, responsiveness, relevance, reflexivity, and sustainability. Though this provides us with more clues as to what 'quality' in education is, we tend to agree with Soudien (2012) that too much of the ongoing debate is related to management issues while the quality debate should have pedagogy as its preoccupation. In so doing we move the discussion from management to focus more on the learning taking place in school. When we educate our future teachers, this is after all what we need to qualify them for.

Four pillars for learning are described by Delor (UNESCO, 1996) as: 1) learning to know, 2) learning to do, 3) learning to live together, and 4) learning to be, the two latter being particularly related to quality of education. A narrow emphasis on the two first pillars of learning tends to perceive education in a rather linear input-output model (e.g., UNESCO, 2004, p. 36; see also Tikly, 2011). With a focus on material, resources, teachers and student characteristics, we can measure performance in, for example literacy and numeracy, important skills for children to possess. However, these are not sufficient to keep people secure, healthy, and satisfied in their lives and productive members of society. Although we recognize that there are no simple tools for determining quality in education (Nickel & Lowe, 2010), NGOs like Save the Children has extensive and global experience in developing concrete indicators and measurement of quality education (learn more about their Quality Learning Environment (QLE) Indicator in e.g., Save the Children & Open University, n.d.). Biesta (2009) stresses the difference between learning and education, claiming that the former is an individual process and the latter gives the process content. In discussing what constitutes good education, he points to three functions of education: qualification, socialization and subjectification (2009, p. 39-41). The first function of education entails providing students with knowledge, skills and understanding, preparing them to be part of society's workforce and contributing to the economic development and growth of society. The knowledge and skills are additionally important for the general function of the individual in society. The socialization function of education is to socialize the individual into the existing order, be it social, cultural or political aspects of society. What are considered mainstream or accepted norms and values are transmitted through education. In addition, education functions as a subjectification process, promoting individual growth and supporting each student to become a subject. Biesta describes this process as the opposite of the socialization process since it advances the development of individuality and independence of students, they become subjects that can choose different norms, values and ways of being than what is considered mainstream, including criticizing the existing order of society. Preferably, education encompasses all these functions, yet the subjectification function is not always present. We concur with Biesta that all these three functions of education need to be present in any good education. In our analysis, we critically examine how our own teaching facilitates all three of these functions as one possible measure of quality education.

Educational processes and outcomes are complex, multi-dimensional and contextual. We can pose questions of the relevance of the curriculum, what forms of pedagogy are used by teachers, what about corporal punishment or the complexity of the language issue in school (Tikly, 2011). If we want teacher education to be a high-quality learning environment, the content of education and how it is conveyed need to be core areas in the teachers' professional development. The environment in which we expect

learning and child development to take place needs to be placed at the center of this professional development.

3. The Guidance Method for Japanese Language I

As a novice teacher educator, I am reflecting on my own experiences when I have tried out a method using elements from Blau's *Literature workshop* (2003) and Lave and Wenger's *Situated Learning* (1991). The aim of the course is to learn about the purpose, content, method, and significance for learning guidance of Japanese Language in primary school based on various theories. In Japan, many primary teachers tend to teach just according to the authorized textbooks and their tutorial manuals. These are important basic skills, but I want future teachers to be able to think critically about teaching Japanese Language, to have a wide vision of teaching methods, and to create new fascinating teaching. In addition, I also emphasize the professional elements such as the skills of designing a teaching plan and the knowledge and usage of *the Course of Study*, Japan's National Curriculum.

In the following, I describe a summary of a course I held in the first semester of 2016. Forty-four teacher students for primary schools at a private university in Hiroshima city attended this course. This course includes fifteen 90-minutes classes in lecture style. A final exam is held at the end of the semester. The venue of those classes is the Active-Learning Room which has Internet access and many electronic devices such as a projector, a screen, and a smartboard. Students' seats are movable colored chair with a table. These classes are conducted with Power Point on a screen. An A3 size paper of class summary is given to each student and they listen to my lecture while writing notes on it. Each 90-minutes class is planned like the one I will now describe, although there are some slight differences between classes.

Each class begins with a mini-session related to the relevant learning area such as reading, writing, discussing and so on (10-minutes). These mini-sessions are an individual work, for example, putting paragraphs from an expository text into the correct order, rewriting four-frame comic strip into a text without any pictures. Next, students listen to my lecture about the theory of the relevant learning area (20-minutes). I aim students to learn the expertise and theoretical background of each area. During this period, they are sometimes asked to recall their learning experiences in their primary school days and to discuss in pair to objectify them.

The central part of a class is the workshop in the middle of the 90-minutes (30-minutes). Students form small groups, share their opinions, and discuss to solve some tasks in each group. A worksheet is handed out to each student to use it in those discussions. I number students' worksheets and made a random group formation which is projected on a smartboard to form small groups in a less time-

consuming and equitable way. Students see the smartboard and looked for their group members. Then, they call out to each other and form small groups. All activities in the workshops are applicable for primary school children. After the activity, students see how children would appear e.g., watching children's writing works projected on the screen and listening to recorded children's group reading aloud when they do the same activity. Then, they reflect on their own behaviors and thinking. The following is an example of workshops and questions for reflection provided to students.

The title of the workshop is "Making a festival stall map" from Kamijo (2004), which takes about 20-minutes. The goal of this activity is to complete a festival stall map like the left figure.

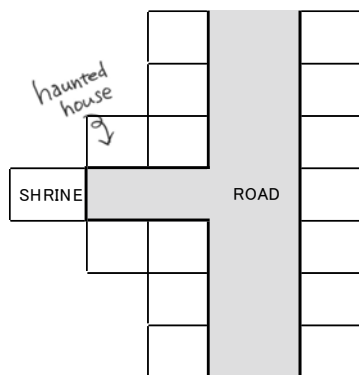


Figure 1 Festival stall map

Students form groups of four-five and divide among each other twenty cards on which a clue per a card is written e.g. "The biggest stall is on the right of the shrine", "The biggest stall is a haunted house", "A stall something to play is in front of a haunted house." To complete the map, student have to piece together the clues, but they cannot show the cards at their hands to other members of the group. Therefore, they can only complete the map by sharing the clue on each card orally with the members. This rule forces them to participate in a discussion, so no one can keep silent during discussion. After all groups completed the map, questions were provided for reflections of their own discussions as follows: "What did you do at the beginning of your discussion?", "When did you say something?", "Did you think or care about anything when you were silent? If yes, what?", "When your discussion stopped or you made an error in making the map, what statement made your discussion to restart?", "If you would make the map laying all the cards on the table, how would your discussion look like?" These questions are posed to promote reflections on their own experiences with the activity, how they contributed in the group activity and the significance of that contribution. In the activity above, I aim to help students to feel responsible for and comfortable with getting involved in a discussion. After each workshop, I talk about my intentions of why I conduct such a workshop (10-minutes).

Then, students move their attention to a teaching plan (15-minutes). I give each student a piece of paper with the teaching plan model I have developed in preparing for this workshop. I include some blank spaces for each class. Students reflect on the workshop content and fill in those blanks referring to the workshop and corresponding page of *the Course of Study*. This activity could connect the workshop activities and the established school education system.

At the end of the class, students return to the sheets of paper they have used at the start of the workshop, now adding reflections on what they have learned through the workshop and possible questions (5-minutes). These papers are collected and I provide comments on those sheets and hand them back to the students at the beginning of the next class. I share the students' questions or important feelings with them in the beginning of the next class or I sometimes share their reflective comments again after reorganizing them.

The end-of the term exam tests the students on the following three points: (1) The baseline knowledge about *the Course of Study*, (2) their understanding of educational theories and their own written reflections on why children should be taught Japanese Language, and (3) their skills to use *the Course of Study* to design a lesson. In this semester, students illustrated their knowledge of *the Course of Study*. Meanwhile, they seemed to struggle with writing down their critical perspectives on teaching Japanese Language.

When analyzing this course in the light of Biesta's three functions of education, the following features and problems appeared: A qualification function is served in that students gain the relevant literature theories, linguistic theories, or language pedagogy theories during the 20-minutes of lecture. They also develop their skills to use *the Course of Study* for Japanese Language and create a teaching plan. In addition, they are expected to acquire knowledge about how and when children may experience difficulties or challenges during Japanese Language lessons through the workshops. However, it seems as if the socialization function is not so prominent in this course. Since I clearly emphasize a learner's perspective, it might be difficult for the students to switch it to a teacher's perspective, being socialized into their roles as future professional teachers. It is needed to provide an opportunity to acquire a professional view as primary teachers. A small indication of the subjectification function is visible in these classes. When I asked the students how they experienced the workshop, a few students wrote alternative ideas of teaching materials or methods in the end of the class. This indicates that the students could take on a critical perspective on traditional teaching methods of Japanese Language through experiencing various new teaching methods.

4. The Field Studies on Outdoor Activities

The purpose of this course⁽¹⁾ is for teacher students to acquire knowledge and skills regarding nature and outdoor activities needed to be a teacher through a variety of hands-on experience in nature. It is an intensive course that is held in collaboration with the National Etajima Youth Outdoor Learning Center (YLC), which is one of the National Institutions for Youth Education, and includes three learning activities in the first semester. The venue of each two days activity is YLC. Since the students at Hiroshima Jogakuin University, one of the private women's universities in Hiroshima, also attend this course, ten to twenty students usually participate in this course. Students who attend this course will also take *Field Studies on Outdoor Education*, another intensive course including three learning activities held in the second semester at YLC. In one of its three activities in November, thirty primary school children come to YLC and students plan and handle an outdoor activity program (camp) for two days. In the following section, I will describe the contents and schedule of this course for 2016. Those courses are planned using the PDCA cycle model and the ADDIE model from Gagnem et al. (2005) and Nakahara (2006).

Lecture 1 (May): A lecture is given from YLC on social education and volunteer activity⁽²⁾. Another lecture is given about youth education and educational importance of outdoor activities. In addition, students learn first aid from its instructors through first aid practice. Other than the above, they practice outdoor cooking with the center's staff. Finally, they reflect on their learning through group discussions.

Lecture 2 (June): The aim of the lesson is students improve their understanding about the history, feature and safe control of camp through a lecture and an exercise. Then they learn about different types of teaching content and methods for camp life and how to use camping equipment. Additionally, the instructors and center's staff give some environmental activities, a cutter boat training, and practical training of campfire. Students acquire knowledge and skills about outdoor activities through them.

Lecture 3 (June): Students plan and formulate the outdoor activity program that will be held with thirty primary school children in November. From this stage, students play a central role in working on it using the knowledge and skills they have acquired from previous lectures, exercises, and practices. The role of center's staff and university teachers are present to provide advice and support.

First, students discuss using the Concept maps and clarify the theme, concept, purpose, and a vision of children who will participate in the outdoor activity program. Next, they do brainstorming in small groups of four-five people and identify what is necessary to make the program succeed. Moreover, they decide on the whole schedule of the program and the division of roles between members. After that, students plan and formulate the program they have developed in each group. For example, in the group of outdoor cooking program, they consider the schedule, activity contents,



Figure 2 Group discussion for deciding the program theme

budget, and risk management of the outdoor cooking. In the group of general affairs, they consider the entire schedule, communication and coordination between groups, orientation meeting, and reflection meeting. In addition to this, they learn how to run an outdoor activity program through the exercise of environmental activities, e.g. observing marine life, with the center's staff and instructors from a local museum of science. At the end, they reflect on those activities and share the goal for *Field Studies on Outdoor Education* held in the second semester.

In the following, I discuss how this course can be understood as a high-quality learning environment. Firstly, this course promotes collaboration among universities and social education institutions. To acquire knowledge and skills needed for outdoor activities for teacher students, it is impossible for the university on its own to teach because there are limited professional and institutional knowledge and equipment such as first aid instructor, cutter boat instructors, and campfire fields in our university. Through a collaboration with social education institutions, students are exposed to various specialists on outdoor learning activities, such as the center's staffs, instructors from the Camping Association, and first aid instructors. Secondly, this course makes use of facilities outside the university. Since this course is held at YLC, which is one of social education institutions, we can offer a hands-on program including outdoor cooking, environmental activities, cutter boat training, or campfire using its facility, equipment, or natural environment. Thirdly, to promote students' independent and cooperative learning, this course blends three styles of teaching: lecture style, exercise style, and practice style. Students could deepen their knowledge from the lectures through trying them out in authentic learning situations. Moreover, from Lesson 3, students plan and formulate the outdoor activity in groups using what they learnt in Lesson 1 and 2. In this way, we can promote their independent and cooperative learning based on the knowledge and skills through those lectures, exercises, and practices. In addition, they can actually practice the outdoor program which they plan and formulate in *Field Studies on Outdoor Education* with primary school children in the second semester. This system improves their enthusiasm for learning and promotes their independent learning. In Japanese school sites, the hands-on practices and group overnight trips are considered important. Therefore, primary school teachers are expected to acquire the knowledge and skills needed for teaching outdoor activities. This means this course has an educational significance.

This course serves the three functions of good education outlined by Biesta (2009) as follows: As a qualifying function, it offers professional knowledge and skills needed for teaching outdoor activities through the hands-on experience such as outdoor cooking, cutter boat practice, or campfire with the various instructors. As a socialization function, this course provides an opportunity for students to switch their learner's perspective to a teacher's one having a consciousness of teaching children as teachers through considering a whole concept of teaching outdoor activities and planning the actual hands-on programs. Regarding a subjectification function, it stopped short of offering little opportunity to think critically toward new teaching ways.

5. The Learning Café

Educational theories are one of several essential elements in teacher education, in Norwegian and Japanese teacher education alike. In Norwegian teacher education, such theories are taught in the subject Pedagogy. Knowledge about theory supports teachers in their choice of learning activities to stimulate children's knowledge and competence acquisition. Quite a few teacher students find theory challenging or even tedious. It is also possible to hear them claiming that this is of limited relevance to their future professional lives. In an attempt to address all these concerns and to facilitate a high quality learning environment, I run an activity which I call The Learning Café. This method is applicable in any classroom, from Grade 1 through higher education, and possible to use on a wide

variety of topics and subjects. In other words, the method is intended to become a part of the teacher students' pedagogical toolbox, i.e. repertoire of teaching methods to facilitate the different needs of learners and learning styles in each classroom.

Having used this method in teacher education for some years, in my classes the objective is to understand two complex education theories. The session described here was conducted in February 2016 and dealt with Berger and Luckmann's book *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (1991: section II & III) and Biesta's book *Beyond Learning: Democratic Education for a Human Future* (2006). These texts are in English and constitute approximately 320 pages. The authors' present theories on, among other things, how knowledge is constructed and how it is possible to understand the role of education. The students were informed three months in advance about the requirement to read the texts prior to The Learning Café. It must be noted that the students are in their first year of teacher education and only two of them with English as their first language. This particular teacher education program, International Teacher Education for Primary Schools (ITEPS), is conducted in English. Operating in a language they do not master completely and being faced with theories that can be problematic to understand, undoubtedly present challenges for the students.

Timewise the session goes on for four hours. The students are divided into five groups, each group given chapters from the pre-read texts. The titles of the café tables are based on these chapters. The first hour is used to prepare The Learning Café in which they are to present the text they are made responsible for. Guiding questions and comments are "What are you going to present?", "How are you going to present it?", "Please feel free to focus on things you found difficult and/or did not understand". The following instructions are given as to how presentations are expected to take place:

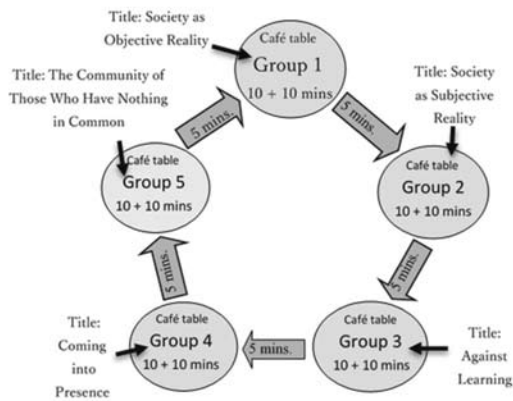


Figure 3 Instructions for The Learning Café

"The presentations will take place according to a café model: Each group creates a presentation together, but only one group member is the host at the café table at a time, presenting the group work (plan a presentation of maximum 10 minutes). The host of the café heads a discussion (max. 10 minutes) with the attendees (members of another group) on how the theory is relevant for and can influence our understanding of teaching and learning practices in school. Make it relevant for teaching in Grade 1-7 [primary school]. The group members decide jointly on the format of the presentation (with a poster, orally, use of technology?) and how to facilitate the subsequent discussion around the café table. When you are a host, the rest of your group members attend another table. You need to set up a roster/rotating list. A group member should only be the host once. When you are not the host, you join the rest of your group attending another table (see figure on the left)."

The second and third hour of this session were used for conducting The Learning Café. In my role as teacher educator, my task during this part was mainly to keep time. In addition, I walked around in the room, listening to and watching presentations and discussions. The last hour of the session had a dual purpose: 1) to evaluate the activities in the past three hours jointly with the students, and 2) to provide a lecture on the main concepts and ideas in the texts the students had engaged with.

Every time I use this method, some reactions from the students are expected. One such reaction is frustration and anger. Some students come to the class without having read the texts. Other students have tried to read, but found the texts challenging. They feel insecure when they now are expected to present unfamiliar or/and difficult topics to fellow students. Sometimes these emotions are manifested through anger. This particular group of students are first year students. Although few of them come directly from senior high school, they may never have had to face theory without having a teacher explaining first. Yet others find the activities invigorating. The joint oral evaluation process allows the students to vent some of their frustrations, one being that they would prefer to have had a lecture on the texts prior to their presentations in order to be familiar with the text. This situation also allows for meta-reflections on classroom behavior. They ascribe the physical and mental discomfort some of them experience to the fact that they do not master the topics, regardless of the reasons why. Then we discuss to what extent behavior in a primary school classroom also can be rooted in similar feelings of discomfort, how it is possible to create a caring learning environment including cognitive challenges (Hermandsen, 2003). The very fact that they have experienced this as teacher students provides them with more in-depth understanding of what kind of discomfort some children experience all through their school years, empowering the teacher students to create an empathic and safe learning environment for all children. Through the evaluation process, I provide the rationale for all the different activities based on educational theories, and thus acting as a role model in how to make use of theories when preparing educational undertakings in everyday school life. Expectations of teacher students' preparations and participation in all the activities in the session are also used as examples on how they as teachers should have high expectations towards their own future students as this tend to improve academic achievements. After the evaluation process, I provide a short lecture on key concepts and ideas from the two texts.

Through The Learning Café I try to create a space addressing all the three functions of good education as outlined by Biesta (2009). The session serves a qualifying function in that it conveys particular knowledge about relevant educational theories and develop skills in facilitating learning activities for primary schools. In addition, the session is socializing into the role as future teachers since professional expectations are clearly articulated, such as preparing for their lectures, facilitating relevant learning activities, and taking on responsibilities in professional development in their peer group. The subjectification function of education is to some extent visible in the session as the teacher students are encouraged to present their critical perspectives on the session, suggest other ways of organizing the activities, and engaging in critical meta-reflections. As I was the main organizer of the session, the latter function of education may have appeared limited. Learning can be described as social practices where knowledge, skills and meaning are constructed, developed and re-developed (Bloomer & Hodkinson, 2000). To have a high-quality learning environment in teacher education requires that I in the future include the teacher students to a larger extent in these social processes.

6. Closing Discussion

In this paper, we considered the possible ways toward a high-quality teacher education through analyzing our own practices. Biesta describes that good education needs to include all three functions of education: qualification, socialization, and subjectification. However, our considerations showed our

difficulties in succeeding with including all three functions and rooms for improvements are plenty. The first practice has a potential for strengthening of the socialization function of education. Asking student why those workshops could be considered as important tools in facilitating good learning environments, it is possible that the students would consider how the activities they worked on are not from existing textbooks and different from traditional teaching materials. This may serve as a trigger to critical reflections about existing textbooks and teaching methods, which could enhance a socialization function and put subjectification function into play. In the second practice, there are a space to improve the subjectification function, while qualification function and the socialization function are clearly present. For example, it is possible to ask students at the end of the course “What kind of outdoor teaching do you plan when you do it with other children from other grades?”, “What could be the effects of outdoor activities on the children?”, “What kind of teaching do you plan if you apply outdoor activities in other subjects?” Such questions will provide an opportunity for students to critically engage with stereotypical perspectives on subject teaching. The third practice consciously tried to include all Biesta’s three functions. However, there are room for further improvements in the qualification function of the educational activity. One way of doing this could be to ensure the students’ degree of understanding on how the respective educational theories relate to primary school teaching at the end of the lesson.

Each learning environment described above holds potential for improvement in the different functions of education. However, using the example of the first class, although the socialization function could be strengthened, it is a likelihood of other classes and subjects to have covered this function. During the process of writing this paper, we have gained insight into each other’s strengths and possibilities for improvement, and our overlapping competencies and skills. In addition, it becomes clear the importance of collaboration among teacher educators, both within and across subjects and across the four years teacher education program, to ensure the desired outcome of our endeavors: education of new professional teachers enabled to provide high-quality learning environments for all children in primary schools. How can we as teacher educators collaborate with each other to realize a high-quality teacher education? This is a challenge for further discussions.

Notes

- (1) This course operates at the same time as a training course for instructors of outdoor education of YLC.
- (2) The center’s staff has educational experiences at public schools and has run outdoor activity programs and group overnight activities as school events.

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