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**Summary**





# Summary

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## Introduction

This thesis reports on an interpretative research project about teachers' interpretations of their classroom interactions in terms of their pupils' best interest. The thesis comprises four closely related studies. A total of thirty-seven teachers working at elementary or secondary schools in both regular and special education participated in the research project.

At the heart of this thesis lies the inherent moral significance that is ascribed to teacher-pupil interactions by teachers. Inherent here signifies that the moral significance of classroom interactions is construed as something that permeates the work of teaching. In other words, every classroom interaction, whether intended or unintended, can be interpreted in terms of its moral impact.

## Theoretical framework

In this research project the inherent moral significance of teacher-pupil interactions is related to (1) debates in continental European pedagogy about 'what is' and 'what ought to be', and (2) a value-based understanding of teachers' professionalism. Departing from the inherent moral significance of classroom interactions implies that teachers should not only be concerned with the instrumental aspects of their classroom interactions, but also with the desirability of what their actions bring about; this is a central point of debate in continental European pedagogy. Consequently, teachers are not just considered operators but professionals that have moral ideas about the means they can use in education to try to achieve certain desirable outcomes. This particular outlook on teachers' professional practice is what constitutes a value-based model of teachers' professionalism.

These theoretical standpoints imply that, whether consciously or unconsciously, teachers will have moral ideas about what they consider educationally desirable. These ideas may be consistent or inconsistent and well or crudely articulated. In other words, teachers are likely to have educational values and ideals that underlie their daily classroom interactions.

With regard to the literature that is available on teachers' values and ideals, two observations can be made. The first is that a great part of this literature has a focus that stems from sources external to the practice of teaching, such as moral philosophy and social and political ideology, instead of from teaching itself (cf. Hansen, 1998). The second observation is that a great part of literature that involves teachers' ideals has a strong advisory character and is often not based on comprehensive empirical accounts of classroom practices (cf. Lingard, 2008).

The present research project sets out to give a comprehensive empirical account of (1) teachers' educational values and ideals when interpreting their interactions in terms of pupil's best interest, and (2) how teachers give expression to these legitimisation-types.

## Research questions

The standpoints outlined above lead to the following general research question: *'How do teachers interpret their daily classroom interactions in terms of their pupils best interest?'* This research question was broken down into two sub questions: *'How do teachers legitimise their daily classroom interactions in terms of educational values and ideals?'* (Chapter 4) Researching this sub question led to the conclusion that teachers draw upon six different legitimisation types when interpreting their classroom interactions in terms of their pupils' best interest. A legitimisation type entails a systematic description of a particular pattern of educational values and ideals that teachers draw upon when interpreting their classroom interactions (Van Kan, Ponte & Verloop, 2013a). The second sub question builds upon this conclusion: *'How do teachers give expression to the legitimisation types when interpreting their classroom interactions in terms of their pupils best interest?'* (Chapter 5) For example, are teachers decisive or doubtful when legitimising their classroom interaction; do teachers draw on different legitimisation types or do they draw on one legitimisation type in particular when legitimising their classroom interactions? With regard to the second sub question, differences in ways of giving expression to the legitimisation types between teachers as well as different institutional contexts were taken into account.

Before the general research question could be answered, two methodological problems required attention. The first methodological problem was how to collect empirical data that is suitable for inquiring into teachers' interpretations of their classroom interactions in terms of their pupils' best interest (Chapter 2). The second methodological problem was how to identify teachers' educational values and ideals that underlie these interpretations from the perspective of continental European pedagogy (Chapter 3).

## Results and conclusions

### *First study*

The first study focused on the development of a method to enable teachers to interpret the inherent moral significance of their classroom interactions. The repertory grid application (Kelly, 1955) seemed at first sight an adequate response to this complex assignment; i.e. a method especially designed to explore and understand how people make sense of a particular part of their experience. The study examined the extent to which this application could be considered a fruitful strategy to get teachers to articulate their more or less implicit educational values and ideals when interpreting their classroom interactions. This examination chal-

lenged some important aspects of the standard repertory grid technique. It led to the development of a repertory interview procedure, which can be considered a phenomenological elaboration of the standard repertory grid application. The main conclusion was that the repertory interview enabled the collection of rich data that served the purpose of understanding and describing teachers' interpretations of their classroom interactions in terms of their pupils' best interest.

#### *Second study*

The second methodological problem was addressed in a study that examined how to analyse and describe teachers' interpretations of the inherent moral significance of their classroom interactions from the perspective of continental European pedagogy. A descriptive framework was developed, which served the purpose of mediating between theoretical concepts and the empirical data collected in the study. This framework was based on the central object of research for continental European pedagogy which, according to Imelman, can be summarised as: 'Who should be taught what, when, how, and why?' (1995, p. 60). The different aspects ('who', 'what', 'when', 'how') of this question were used as the components of the descriptive framework. During an iterative process of data analysis, two complementary components emerged from the data: the 'where' and 'for what purpose' components. The 'why aspect' of Imelman's question, which formed an integral part of all six components, fostered a further analysis of the interview data in terms of how teachers substantiated what they considered to be in their pupils' best interest. Taking the match between the components and the interview data into account, we concluded that the descriptive framework enabled an adequate analysis and description of the inherent moral significance of teachers' everyday classroom interactions.

#### *Third study*

The third study reports on the first sub question of the central research question, i.e. 'How do teachers legitimise their daily classroom interactions in terms of educational values and ideals?' The results show that teachers used different legitimisation types when interpreting their classroom interactions. A legitimisation type was defined in this study as a systematic description of a particular pattern of educational values and ideals that teachers draw upon when they interpret their classroom interactions in terms of their pupils' best interest. Six legitimisation types could be distinguished. (1) The *caring* legitimisation type signifies that pupils need to be seen as vulnerable and very dependent on grownups to survive in a demanding world. (2) The *personal* legitimisation type signifies that pupils need to be understood as unique social beings that have a personal relationship with teachers. (3) The *contextual* legitimisation type signifies that pupils' living conditions, life histories and practical lives need to be taken into account in teaching situations. (4) The *critical* legitimisation type signifies that pupils need to be freed from constraining ideas about themselves and living conditions that imprint these ideas. (5) The *functional* legitimisation type signifies that pupils need to be raised towards adulthood along the lines of preconceived favourable outcomes. Finally, (6) the *psychological* legitimisation type signifies that pupils' conduct

needs to be labelled in mental or emotional terms in order for adequate teaching and learning to take place.

#### *Fourth study*

The final study explored the second sub question of the central research question, i.e. 'How do teachers give expression to the legitimisation types when interpreting their classroom interactions in terms of their pupils best interest?' Differences in ways of giving expression to the legitimisation types between teachers as well as different institutional contexts were taken into account. Four themes upon which teachers differed from each other in their way of giving expression to the legitimisation types when interpreting their classroom interactions were found: (1) extensiveness, (2) substantiveness, (3) deliberateness, and (4) answerableness. *Extensiveness* related to the range of components and legitimisation types that teachers used when interpreting their classroom interactions. The most significant finding within this theme was that the majority of teachers included a small range of components and legitimisation types in their interpretations. *Substantiveness* related to the substantive focus of the components and legitimisation types that teachers included in their interpretations of their classroom interactions. The results indicate that most teachers tended to have a rather instrumental 'here and now' focus in their interpretations. *Thoughtfulness* related to the manner in which teachers weighed and assessed conceivable ways of legitimising types when interpreting their classroom interactions in terms of their pupils' best interest. The majority of teachers showed in their interpretations of their classroom interactions that they had a closed way of considering different educational outlooks. *Answerableness* addressed the grounds on which teachers legitimise their classroom interactions when interpreting their classroom interactions. The results show that most teachers answered for their teaching conduct in terms of what they personally felt responsible for, rather than what others expected them to do.

Furthermore, the results indicate that teachers in special secondary education: (1) included a broader range of components and legitimisation types; (2) were more perceptive towards pupils' extended social contexts; and (3) had a more open way of deliberating when interpreting their classroom interactions, than the teachers in the other institutional contexts. Finally, the findings indicate that teachers working within the same institutional context tended to have similar ways of expressing the legitimisation types in terms of the presented themes.

## **Discussion**

In the discussion section it is argued that the legitimisation types could contribute to bringing educational questions back into discussions about what constitutes good education. This is a response to the claim that the teaching profession has become uncomfortable about using a vocabulary that addresses educational questions (e.g. Mahony, 2009). The legitimisation types provide a practical language that can be used to address questions about what serves pupils' best interest in educational practice. This is not to say that the typology of legitimisations is a

prescriptive moral framework, indicating how teachers should legitimise their classroom interactions. After all, no prescriptive framework can relieve teachers of the responsibility to exercise judgement about what is morally good or bad, right or wrong for a particular pupil in a particular situation.

A second point of discussion is connected to the finding that only a relatively small group of teachers in this study had an open way of deliberating when interpreting their classroom interactions in terms of their pupils' best interest. It is argued that an open mind, not hampered with rigid ideas about what serves the pupils' best interest, might be conditional for really taking pupils' best interest into account, at particular moments, in particular situations. The challenge for teachers is, on the one hand, not to leave pupils to their own devices and, on the other hand, not to have unyielding educational outlooks that constrain continuous inquiry into how pupils can be understood.

A third point of discussion is that educational values and ideals, that come into play when inquiring into what, according to teachers, serves pupils' best interest, will not immediately lead to general agreement. Consequently, collegial and public deliberation about interpretations with regard to what is educationally desirable is required. This not only requires procedural conditions, such as reflection cycles or dialogical structures, but also requires substance; teachers need to articulate their educational values and ideals and subject them to collegial and public deliberation.

Drawing on the three points of discussion, three questions can be formulated that could help shape teacher education as a place where substantive issues are welcomed. The first point of consideration is for teacher education to acknowledge the importance of putting questions of content and direction back on its agenda: *a matter of priority*. The second point of consideration is how student teachers can learn to inquire into their classroom interaction in terms of their own educational outlooks: *a matter of teachability*. The final point of consideration is directed at initiating student teachers into on-going educational debates and supporting them in justifying their own positions in these debates: *a matter of responsibility*.

Future research could help explore whether the legitimisation types and the way teachers give expression to the legitimisation types prove to be a meaningful framework for understanding teachers' interpretations of their classroom interactions in contexts other than those researched in this study. Teachers that work in other educational settings, such as vocational education, might develop different outlooks on what they consider to be educationally desirable. Moreover, teachers in other cultural, religious or ethnic contexts will have other frames of reference, which might lead to other ways of interpreting the inherent moral significance of teaching. Another direction for future research would be to explore our assumption that the legitimisation-types can help teachers to connect empirically the inherent moral significance of their classroom interactions to grand theories, such as the strands in continental European pedagogy.