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„Who am I to you”

**Teacher identity and roles,
student-teacher relationship and personal connection
based on the self-reflections of a beginning teacher**

educational autoethnography

Thesis of the doctoral dissertation

Doctoral School of Educational Science

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The basis of this research is the self-reflective pedagogical exploration of a beginning teacher, an academic inquiry into the issues that arise in my own teaching. These questions were related to the phenomenon of what I call *personalness*, and my original intention was to explore the teaching potential of the personal student-teacher relationship, the personal teaching roles and identities, and to point out the effectiveness of 'personal pedagogy'.

This research is an autoethnography, which means that I have analysed my own experiences as a teacher, primarily from a social perspective (Ellis, 2004; Mészáros, 2017). Its approach is therefore a social constructivist, narrative and interpretative (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Accordingly, my research questions are not hypotheses to be verified or falsified, but rather propositions that set out the directions of interpretation, which at the beginning of the research were:

- (1) What kind of relationship can a (beginning) teacher develop with his/her students? What role opportunities are open to him/her?
- (2) What factors shape the development of the teacher's mode of attachment and role choice? How are social and institutional patterns, student-teacher interactions and emotions influencing it?
- (3) What motivates and how can a personal relationship between teacher and student be developed?
- (4) What are the pedagogical implications, benefits and relevance of each type of student-teacher relationship and roles?
- (5) What conflicts can arise between the different roles and how can these tensions be resolved?
- (6) What are the pedagogical risks and downsides of a personal relationship (or any role choice)?
- (7) How does role choice affect the power inequality in the student-teacher relationship?
- (8) What methods and techniques can be used to create a harmonic and constructive (role)relationship between teacher and student?
- (9) How can professional reflection on teacher role choices be implemented for continuous professional development?

In exploring these questions, I set out to achieve the following goals:

- (10) The main aim of the research is to analyse the researched processes and phenomena, especially the role of teachers. To explore as broadly as possible the interpretative possibilities and directions of these topics, and to gain a deeper, multi-perspective, reflective understanding of these specific phenomena.
- (11) With the help of the analytical methods used in the research, hidden (educational) effects, phenomena and processes are revealed which enrich and nuance our knowledge of pedagogical processes (especially the personalness, emotional attachment, identification, attraction etc. in student-teacher relationships).
- (12) Questioning is an important part and purpose of these interpretative processes. The aim is not only to question particular educational practices or their interpretation, but also to challenge certain ways of thinking, and thus to encourage openness to alternatives and change. I maintain this intention even towards my own ideas, and it is exactly the way how I wish to achieve results by showing their relativity. (So, I do not aim to establish general truths or laws, since I believe that my results cannot be considered general in the strict sense of the word but can be applied to other educational cases and phenomena by contact and analogy).
- (13) My aim is that the emerging theoretical concepts and ways of thinking will enable a deeper, more detailed analysis of pedagogical processes. The analysis of the student-teacher relationship, the teacher's possibilities of roles, will bring new aspects to the understanding of educational situations, in such a way that the reader can relate the information to other situations (even to his/her own teaching cases).
- (14) In this way, it can provide practical help for (beginning) teachers - and importantly, for myself - to better understand educational situations whose analysis and interpretation is typically

neglected or even taboo. To provide ideas and a basis for the organisation of teacher training courses. It should also serve as a model for teachers' independent, self-reflective professional development.

- (15) Bring the fields of educational science and teaching closer together. Present a teaching practice that is closer to the world of science and extend the scope of the academic writings with a work that reflects the perspective of an active practitioner teacher.
- (16) Represent the potential of auto-ethnographic and self-study methods for the science profession (especially the Hungarian profession) and for the teachers' professional development. In doing so, represent a new direction in (Hungarian) educational research.

My dissertation examines the first six years of my teaching career. For this research, I wrote a self-reflective diary of events, thoughts and feelings I had at school (and outside school) for three and a half years, and added further memories. During the research period, I did several individual and group interviews with my students, as well as processed a lot of textual material spontaneously generated in pedagogical situations (e.g. chat messages, graduation memories, etc.). An additional, novel research material was the dialogic field diary that I wrote together with my supervisor, in which we recorded cases that involved both of us, he as a researcher and I as a teacher.

In my doctoral dissertation, I analyse 230 diary and interview data related to what I call the student-teacher personalness using the concepts of self (*Elliott, 2013*), identity and role, according to several different theoretical frameworks. In my research, I define personalness as when an important aspect of the relationship and interactions are the (affective) openness to each other, the attraction, attachment and need to engage with the other person. I do not use personalness as a precisely defined concept, but rather as a term, by which I also refer to effects, consequences, phenomena, conditions and practices.

In analysing and interpreting the research experiences, I have used the following theoretical frameworks to reflect on and point out the interpretative possibilities they offer.

- (17) The understanding of the student-teacher relationship as a symbolic interaction (*Mead, 1934/1973; Blumer, 1969/1986*), the view of student-teacher interaction as a dialogical formation of intersubjective roles, and the explanatory power of the basic terms of the identity theory (*Burke & Stets, 2009*).
- (18) The performative conception of teachers' roles (*Goffman, 1978; Butler, 1993/2005*), the relativity and perspectivity of roles, the importance of space and embodiment in the construction and meaning of roles.
- (19) The liminality (*Turner, 1969/2002*) in the student-teacher relationship, the role of the experience of *communitas* and the ritualisation in the shaping of the relationship. The role of play and humour.
- (20) An outline of the question of agency in relation to identity (*Lasky, 2005*): how and to what extent does the role and identity in student-teacher interactions depend on the teacher?
- (21) The relation and separability of the professional and personal relationship and their relation to the different teaching professions (*Hargreaves, 2000*).
- (22) Application of the concept of affectivity (*Deleuze & Guattari, 2008*) in the understanding of educational situations and the role and impact of emotions in the student-teacher relationship.
- (23) Connections between the student-teacher relationship, student-teacher roles and gender roles, hidden sexuality in the student-teacher relationship (*Trethewey, 2004*).
- (24) The relationship between power and personalness, the emergence of symbolic capitals (*Bourdieu, 1978*) in the student-teacher relationship, the position of teacher and student in power structures, the possibilities of rebellion and authentic, creative existence (*Foucault, 1988*).
- (25) The researcher-teacher duality, ethical issues, and transformative impact of autoethnographic research (*Starr, 2010; Chatham-Carpenter, 2010*).

However, the deepening into the phenomena of the research and their interpretation did not so much result in answers to the questions formulated at the beginning (1)-(9), but rather in their deconstruction, in the questioning of the foundations of the identity and role of the teacher, of the essence of personalness. Rather than answering, then, there was a shift in perspectives. The horizon of the phenomena being researched changed as I progressed in my own teaching and research narrative. In the process of developing and writing down this teacher-researcher story, questions and problems were thus illuminated in new ways. These insights and interpretations are summarised in the following theses:

- (26) Roles and identities are not absolute categories, but constructions (often liminal) of parallels, re-enactments, interpretations and re-frames, so the teacher's roles are not so much the result of choices but rather constructions in an almost inextricable discursive space.
- (27) Affectivity plays an important role in the student-teacher relationship, and a rich emotional dynamic can emerge. Among others: self-esteem, shame, feelings of uncertainty, liberation, disappointment, anger, etc., shape the student-teacher relationship in a hidden way. However, this affectivity is not to be understood necessarily as a disturbance, but rather as a fertilizing effect in pedagogy.
- (28) An important stage in the exploration of roles and the student-teacher relationship is to separate the different effects of power relations and personalness - the concepts of partnership, personalness and caring - and to analyse the teaching phenomena according to these separate aspects.
- (29) The formation of a personal relationship can be motivated and influenced by a number of effects (e.g. the experience of mutuality; the feeling of safety and freedom; social patterns; the aim of breaking the system, rebellion; different desires and emotions). And while there may be (conscious) support for (explicit) pedagogical goals behind the personalness, it is important to be vigilant to recognise that we often attribute pedagogical goals to our behaviour only in retrospect.
- (30) Behind the implementation of personal teacher roles, there may also be factors that are highly questionable according to the critical approach, e.g. the teacher's selfishness, self-interest, manipulative intentions, (even unconscious) power goals. (But the same can be raised against the student in some cases.)
- (31) The practical benefits and results of personal pedagogy can be: increased motivation to learn, facilitating lessons and community organisation; students experience school and learning in a safe and free environment; but they can also ask for and receive help with other, more intimate issues. Especially notable are the following positive educational outcomes: openness to working in partnership, democratic attitudes, critical attitude towards authority.
- (32) But personal contact and role choice also has its risks. The downsides of personalness arise partly from the almost irresolvable contradictions between the typical hierarchical nature of the school and student-teacher relationship (i.e. the existing social systems and norms) and the behavioural patterns of the personal student-teacher relationship. Therefore, personalness (and partnership) is not a relevant choice in all aspects and especially not in all circumstances. The conflicts and contradictions between different norms and roles can lead to confusion, anxiety and unclear situations.
- (33) There are further problems in dealing with questions of power of personalness. Although, on the one hand, personalness can reduce the vulnerability and subordination of the student and can contribute to reciprocity and partnership. However, on the other hand, personalness hides the irresolvable power difference between teacher and student, thus their relationship can be also interpreted as a deepened, manipulative relationship of submission and domination.
- (34) An important insight is that personalness is not a set of tools or methods - but a constant condition that is (also) inherent to educational situations. It is not optional if personalness is part of the pedagogical relationship or not - because in some way it definitely is. Furthermore,

it cannot be tested if personalness is effective or not - because it is too complex. And finally (for all these reasons, but not only) it cannot be clearly judged whether it is good or bad, should be followed or avoided.

- (35) The popular concept of "boundary work" in relation to personalness is misleading. On the one hand, the perception of personalness depends on the actual situation, the participants and their interpretation of it (which may even differ among the individuals). On the other hand, there is no personalness that is only positive, and there is no personalness that is only negative. Hence, teacher's personalness requires continuous reflection and a succession of decisions.
- (36) The fact that personalness is not a technical-methodological issue does not mean that there are no techniques of personal pedagogy at all. It is important to develop habits and rituals that are coherent with the roles played in activities and time spent with the students; frequent self-reflection and even group reflection with the students; discussion and defining of the frames and goals, and in doing so, interpreting and clarifying the roles. Self-reflection is also important in exposing ourselves and avoiding clearly self-serving, oppressive or harmful practices and roles.
- (37) Writing an autoethnography is a time- and energy-consuming, yet very rewarding opportunity for professional development, as it serves the professional aim of continuous self-reflection, as stated above. At the same time, there are a number of ethical problems associated with educational autoethnography. Firstly, we must be vigilant that our teaching decisions do not serve the purpose of getting into exciting research situations. Furthermore, the researcher must also act ethically towards him/herself, which is threatened by the 'publicity' of his/her professional (and even personal) life, and by the fact that the research may 'take over' the researcher's life, partly consuming it, through the merging of professional, private and research life.

I believe that I have, for the most part, fulfilled the main aims (10)-(16) of the research stated above by applying and comparing the different interpretations (17)-(25) and by drawing the above listed conclusions (26)-(37), as follows:

- (38) Applying the autoethnographic methodology, which is yet a novelty in the Hungarian context (and illustrating its possibilities), I pointed out the interpretative potential of several theoretical frameworks in the subject of student-teacher relations; I nuanced and extended the approach to certain educational phenomena; I attempted to debunk, deconstruct and reconstruct certain interpretations.
- (39) I brought the fields of practice and theory closer together, on the one hand through research, in a way that research and my teaching work were closely linked, so that the research was, I suppose, transformative and fruitful not only in my own practice but also in the wider social and school context.
- (40) On the other hand, the convergence between practice and theory is also intended to provide support and guidance for practitioner teachers (especially beginning teachers) in a wider context. While this will be achieved to some extent by making this dissertation public, I hope that in the forthcoming years I will have the opportunity to disseminate my research to a wider audience of practitioners and, if possible, to use the results in training, mentoring, etc.

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