Vignettes as a tool to deal with complex situations in education

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In this paper we focus on the role of vignettes in dealing with professional dilemmas of educators. A vignette is a short description of an educators professional context, with an explanation of the issue that is at stake. Vignettes can be used in different ways. We start with a description of the approach in the PROMISE-project, where we used vignettes firstly as a method for gathering examples in different European countries. Secondly, we describe the way we encourage the use of vignettes in a pedagogical way. Our project website contains several examples of vignettes, which can be used by educators to help them see communalities between their context and that of others who face similar issues. The vignettes on our website can also be used in teacher education, as a means to discuss professional dilemmas and problem solving strategies with student teachers. In this paper, we will address all these options.

Keywords: vignette, Teacher Education, PROMIS-project

Introduction

Not only student teachers, but also experienced teachers do encounter challenges in their daily practice. These challenges range from small incidents where direct decision-making is required to more complex issues that are not easily solved with an intervention. These issues can be referred to as professional dilemmas.

In the Erasmus+ Strategic Partners- project PROMISE (Promoting Inclusion in Society through Inclusion: Professional Dilemmas in Practice), partners from UK, Hungary, Slovenia, Germany and The Netherlands work together on the topic of professional dilemmas of educators in their practice. More specific, we were interested educators' professional dilemmas in delivering 'high quality, inclusive education' (European Union council, 2018). Although educational systems might be different from each other, the teaching practices of educators in different countries might be more alike than different. As a group, we were interested in finding

communalities and differences between educational practices and dilemmas of educators in our countries.

In this paper we focus on the role of vignettes in our project. Vignettes can be used as a research tool to gather information, but vignettes can also be applied as a pedagogical instrument (Anast Seguin & Ambrosius, 2002). In our project, we used both applications. . We start with a description of the use of vignettes in gathering information in the PROMISE-project. After that, we address possibilities to use vignettes of our project in a pedagogical way, namelyfor teacher professional development, as a means to discuss professional dilemmas and problem-solving strategies with (student) teachers.

What are vignettes

A vignette is a short description of a problem or challenge in a specific contextual setting. The information that is given in the description can be understood by professionals who are familiar with that context. Vignettes have been used as a tool in research, modeling and reflection. According to the Jeffries & Maeder, authors 'researchers and educators have found vignettes to be very effective in these contexts for several reasons: vignettes are reletively easy to construct, they provide a useful focus for discussion, they are valuable in adressing difficult to explore and sensitive topics, they can be used with individuals and groups, and they reflect real-life contexts and problems'(Jeffries & Maeder, 2004:17). In pedagogical settings a vignette is defined as 'a written description of a situation created for specific educational purposes, with possible solutions and conclusions omitted. This pedagogy provides an opportunity for students to advance critical thinking as they evaluate various aspects of the situation and pose recommendations' (Anast Seguin & Ambrosio, 2002: 10).

Vignettes as a tool to gather information

In the PROMISE project, we were anxious to find out which questions educators in different countries have, regarding their (inclusive) teaching practice. Partners in the project are all connected to teacher education and/or teacher professional development. Together the partners represent a broad range of career stages in education – from student to experienced educators – and across academic and vocational settings. To gather information about teacher's dilemma's and their solutions in different countries, we decided that each partner would sample 10 written examples of professional dilemmas in their own educational setting. This

lead to a diverse range of examples of dilemmas of student teachers, experienced teachers, school leaders from different settings. A total of 63 examples were gathered. As the examples were sometimes more detailed and sometimes lacked information, the examples were re-written into **vignettes**, making sure each vignette contained the same basic information such as context of the educational setting, indication of level of experience of the contributor, description of the dilemma and solutions that had been tried (Beaton et al, 2021).

The vignettes then were analysed to categorize the dilemma's in order to get an overview of topics that teachers in different countries find challenging. Also the solutions (if there were any) were looked into, in order to get an impression of the problem solving strategies that were applied.

According to our sampling, the professional dilemmas of educators could be defined into seven main categories, namely: classroom management, behaviour, inclusion, psychological problems, ICT, interprofessionalism, didactics. The analysis of the solutions that were mentioned, revealed that in all cases gathering of information was the first step. This could mean ask advice from colleagues, interview students or parents, read about the issue. The information then was used to find a practical solution, for example, try a new approach.

Further use of vignettes as a tool in our projekt

The gathering of the dilemmas already helped us to realise that educators throughout educational settings and career stages share the same kind of issues. In the project, we were anxious to share this understanding. For teachers it might be reassuring that they are not the only ones struggling with dilemmas, it might even help to break down the 'loneliness' or 'isolation' (Bakkenes, De Brabander & Imants, 1999) many teachers experience when they are teaching on their own in a classroom. We thus decided that we wanted to use the input from the vignettes as examples for other teachers, and apply vignettes in a pedagogical way. We therefore developed a website where we could present the vignettes, see https://promise-eu.net.

The website offers teachers a ranges of vignettes, categorized along the seven main topics we found. Each vignette is an example of a professional dilemma, see the example text below.

After a few months of my teaching in the first year of secondary education, a new student, who was transferred from another school, joined our class. He had behavioural problems and while being in our school, he showed no interest in acquiring any concrete knowledge. The student caused problems with disturbing comments and passive learning attitude, which encouraged other students to follow his example. In certain situations, he was unpredictable. The instructions in this class have become awful and stressful for me, since I had to deal with psychological and pedagogical approaches, of which I was not entirely capable. I have noticed that sometimes he responds whenever I punish his behaviour (send him out from my class).

Next to the description (see example above), also the dilemma itself is elaborated. In the example above this dilemma is *'I am not fond of punishing because I don't believe that in the long run that will solve the problem. What other approaches might work?'*. Each vignette is completed with some 'choices' that were helpful in the search for a solution of the problem. The choices do not offer a readymade solution, they are merely suggestions for further exploration that may contribute to finding ways to deal with the situation. In the example from above, the 'choices' were: consult relevant literature about punishment; discuss the situation with colleagues; discuss the situation with parents and consult an expert on emotional and behavioural issues.

In our website, we want to stress that complex issues can not be solved by simple solutions. Each situation is different, so a context-specific exploration is needed in order to find a context specific way to handle the situation. Teachers can rely on routine expertise which exists of a set of skills and routines that have proved to work. But this routine is not enough, teachers also need to be innovative when necessary, rethinking their practice and values when confronted with nonroutine situations. This is called adaptive expertise (Anthony, Hunter & Hunter, 2015). As teachers are constantly confronted with 'nonroutine' situations, developing adaptive expertise is important, both for student teachers and for teachers with a considerable amount of teaching experience. Finding a solution for a nonroutine situation is the task of the adaptive teacher. On the way towards that solution educators need curiosity, an inquiry stance and interest in their students. With our website, we are offering suggestions for steps to take and sources to use, but it is up to educators to build these into a pathway towards a solution that works for them and their pupils.

Possibilities to work with the vignettes of the PROMISE website

In this section of the paper, we explain how vignettes can be used as a tool in teacher education, for example to enhance the development of adaptive expertise. We distinguish three ways to work with vignettes: 1) write their own vignettes and discuss them in professional conversations; 2) use of ready-made vignettes in professional conversations and 3) use of vignettes in a simulation situationof problem solving strategies.

In the following three sections we present these options of using vignettes in teacher education – based on our experiences in the PROMISE projekt.

Writing own vignettes

The first application of vignettes is using them in a pedagogical way as suggested by Anast Sequin & Ambrosio (2004). This pedagogy contributes to critical thinking and reviewing own choices by discussing a situation. Student teachers are sharing their experiences about teaching, pupils and reflect on them in a group setting. In order to share experiences, students are invited to elaborate a specific situation from their teaching practice for which they seek consultation. The situation itself is presented by the student in the form of a vignette, either verbal or in a written version. For examples of vignettes, they can take a look at the website of the PROMISE-project.

The process during a meeting is as follows. One student teacher starts to present his or her vignette. After the presentation, the other students may ask clarifying questions or better understanding of the situation. After that, the other students ask probing questions, to further elaborate the issue and to make the student reflect and become aware of alternative visions. Thereafter, the peer-students have a few minutes to give advice about what they would do if it was their teaching practice. The student teacher whose vignette is being advised upon, holds his/her silence during this step, he or she just listens. The final step in the procedure is for the student teacher whose vignette was at stake. He or she gets 1 minute to reflect on everything that has been said and to define a next step. The procedure then is repeated for the next student and so on.

In this first application, the vignette is a means to help the student to define the dilemma or the issue he or she wants to talk about. The construction of the vignette itself is already a deliberate task, since it forces the student to explain the context, setting, own role and roles of other persons involved. This is not always

easy because situations sometimes are a consequence of previous events. Being compelled to write a vignette helps the student to analyse the situation and to view it from a different angle. Having a conversation about their vignette with others broadens their view and add new perspectives (Stappers & Koster, 2016). Next to that, engaging in the conversation on the vignettes of other students adds to broadening perspectives as well (Stappers & Koster, 2016).

Discussing vignettes
The second application of vignettes is the use of readymade vignettes (of our website) as a tool in teacher education.

The procedure and its benefits (Stappers & Koster, 2016; Anast Seguin & Ambrosio, 2004) are similar to the procedure described above, where student teachers bring their own vignettes. The difference in this situation is that the vignettes are not 'owned' by any of the group members, the vignettes are from an outsider who is not present in the meeting. Discussing an 'outsider' vignette has the advantage that there are no personal emotions involved. All student teachers can participate without being emotionally or personally involved. They can talk freely about the vignette and they can discuss options and explore the problem at stake without offending one of them personally.

The readymade vignette can consist of a short video of a teacher in a classroom, which is paused at a certain moment with the question 'what would you do?'. The vignette can also be a written vignette, that is discussed in-depth. In both cases, Student teachers are invited to read the vignette and unravel the situation at stake. What do they think is happening, what would they advise the owner of the vignette to do, what suggestions do they have from theory or from their own practice?

Use vignettes in a game on inquiry stance
The third option for the use of vignettes is to use readymade vignettes as a starting point to explain the importance of an inquiry stance. As mentioned before, developing an inquiry stance is considered an important part of the teaching profession in our institute. The vision towards teacher inquiry relies on the work of Fichtman-Dana (2015). According to her, 'teacher inquiry is a continual cycle that all educators spiral through throughout their professional lifetimes a professional positioning or stance, owned by the teacher, where questioning,

systematically studying, and subsequently improving one's own practice becomes a necessary and natural part of a teacher's work' (Fichtman-Dana, 2015, p 163-164.). According to Bolhuis (2012) teacher inquiry is a professional learning strategy, since inquiry of their own teaching practice helps teachers to evaluate, innovate and improve their work. Kelchtermans (2019) stresses the fact that the best way to prepare future teachers for the inevitable changes in their future teaching practice is to develop their ability for critical thinking and inquiry as stance. The critical analysis of their insecurity, uneasiness and practical discomfort offers powerful possibilities to develop their professionalism. Therefore, in our Teacher Education Institute, we want to prepare our student teachers for their future careers not only by equipping them with subject knowledge and pedagogical skills, but also by equipping them with an inquiry stance.

In order to explain the how and what of the inquiry stance to (student) teachers, a game was developed to engage (student) teachers in a simulation of the inquiry process. The game is developed for the PROMISE-project and is also available on the website of the project (https://promise-eu.ne). In the game both 'vignettes' and 'tools' from the PROMSE-project are used. The purposes of the game are 1) to experience an inquiry stance in a nutshell; 2) to practice writing down a storyline of the process followed; 3) to reflect on the process and 4) to apply this strategy in other situations in professional settings.

In the game, 3 different vignettes (A, B and C) and matching tools are prepared beforehand. To play the game, students form groups from 2 or 3. They choose which vignette (A, B of C) they want to use in the game. Each vignette is a short description of a context and a professional dilemma. Next to description of the vignette, also a list of available 'tools' is given. Tools can be a piece of an handbook, a set of reflection questions, written down interviews with pupils, etc.

After having read the vignette and the list of 'tools', the students take their first step: they need to decide which tool they are going to explore to start with. They need to write down their decision and the underpinning for this choice, as well as their expectations of the 'tool' in a storyline. In the next step, they get access to the tool of their choice. After having looked at its contents, they decide on the usefulness of the tool and write down their experiences in their storyline. Then they may decide to use another tool. The steps of decision making, underpinning and taking notes is repeated until all the tools have been used, or until

the time for the game is up (in online setting 40 minutes is enough, in physical setting 2 hours may be required).

The next step in the game is the presentation of the storylines of the different groups of students, in which the students tell about the choices they made and the way the information in the tools helped them (or not). If several groups chose the same vignette, this is even more interesting, since they might have made different choices in the order to use the tools.

In the final conversation about the game, the teacher educator draws conclusions on the approaches of the student teachers. It is important to stress the fact that every approach in the use of the tools is justified. Furthermore, it is important to stress that the game is just a simulation, and in real life, even more tools (sources) are available.

Conclusion

In this contribution we have described several possible applications for the use of. Firstly, we addressed vignettes as a means of data gathering in our project. The input from the vignettes showed us the communalities between educators throughout careers stages, educational settings and countries concerning professional dilemmas they encounter in their teaching practice.

The second application for vignettes that we described in this paper is the pedagogical use in teacher education or in other professional development settings. Writing a vignette about ones' own practice helps to elaborate the issue at stake and to view the issues from a different angle. Using ready-made vignettes offer the possibility to reflect on a situation that is similar to one's own experiences, and invite to discuss possible solutions with others. Vignettes are a powerful instrument as a starting point for a professional conversation.

In this paper, we wrote about vignettes as a tool to deal with complex situations in education. After having read our contribution, it will be clear that not the vignettes itself will solve complex settings, they only serve as a tool. Furthermore, it is good to realise that a written text (in a vignette) only provides limited information and details must be filled in (Hughes & Huby, 2001). Despite these limitations, vignettes do offer a starting point for a professional conversation, in which several perspectives can be taken into account. We hope that our website with the diversity of vignettes will serve that goal.

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Website

https://promise-eu.net