

## Why become a teacher? Considerations on the initial study phase in teacher training

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### Abstract

This article focuses on the transition from pupil to student. This transitional phase involves the challenge of having to take a decision regarding a career path. For some pupils, this represents perhaps their first major decision they are confronted with since the early school years: What do I want to be? What kind of career suits me? This transition involves more than just a career choice; as part of the transition, a number of biographical issues are activated, which are all aimed at one's life plans as a whole: 'How do I want to live or what is important to me in life?' As such, the individual is also confronted with the question of what still 'fits' with his or her previous orientation, experiences and perspectives, in the light of new plans for the future or experiences in the course of the transition. This involves questions and biographical issues, which relate to growing up in general. Very few are able to easily escape such biographical challenges and tensions. However, the responses or forms of dealing with these issues can vary.

**Keywords:** initial study phase; transformative learning; teacher training; focus group; narrative map

## Выбор профессии учителя: обзор начального этапа подготовки учителей

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### Аннотация

Статья рассматривает стадию перехода ученика школы в статус студента. Этот этап предполагает выбор профессионального направления и для многих учеников, возможно, это – первое осознанное и ответственное решение в жизни и, оно включает ответы на вопросы: «Кем я хочу стать?», «Какая профессия является моим призванием?». Переход из школы в университет включает и другие сомнения: «Как организовать дальнейшую жизнь?», «Что важно для меня?». В это же время имеющийся у человека жизненный опыт, предпочтения должны гармонично вписаться в новый этап. На этот переходный период влияют события, произошедшее в прошлом, условия, в которых развивалась личность. В данном контексте немногие способны легко справиться с проблемами данного периода или избежать их. Этот непростой контекст является причиной разнообразия реакций и способов реагирования на вызовы переходного периода.

**Ключевые слова:** начальный этап, подготовка учителей, целевая группа, трансформационное обучение, дорожная карта

### 1. Introduction: Initial study phase as a 'critical' phase in teacher training

With a view to *research on teacher training*, the transition from pupil to student is particularly important.

Because the biographical decision of the individual

- in favour or against a teaching career,
- in favour or against a particular school level (e.g. in Germany, primary school vs. secondary school or grammar school), or
- in favour of a specific school subject involves a major responsibility facing the teaching profession with regard to promoting the development of the next generation.

From the perspective of training, this leads to considerations of *how* suitable candidates can be attracted to the teaching profession.

Here, we take *suitable* to mean

- suitable to successfully complete a teaching degree
- and to prove capable later on of being a “good teacher” in practice.

Being a good teacher refers both to

- a successful teaching structure in class,
- the resilient handling of one’s own experiences of stress
- as well as to specific personality traits.

Within the concept of teacher personality, traits to be discussed include “intellectual ability, verbal skills, creativity”, among others, but also “motivational characteristics”, such as “interests, attitudes, values” (Mayr & Neuweg, 2006, cited by Nolle, 2014, p. 111).

In more recent research, we refer to a *professional pedagogical attitude* in this connection.

Although the *drop-out* rates in teacher training in Germany are comparatively low (around 10%; cf. Heublein, Schmelzer, & Sommer, 2008, Table 4, p. 8), there is frequent *switching to another subject*, at least for grammar school teacher training (and here, at least in mathematics). Dieter shows a proportion of 37 percent for male teacher training students in the subject of mathematics, and 46 percent for female students, who “broke off this degree course during the first academic year”, “de-registered [...] or [...] changed their degree subject” (Dieter, 2011, p. 4). The initial study phase or the transition from school to university holds particular importance in teacher training research.

Viewing the transition or initial study phase from this perspective, the biographical decision of the individual is thus of particular importance. We shall look more closely at this issue later.

Yet can we really speak of *decisions* in the actual sense of the word when it comes to making career choices?

One can only speak of a decision in the sense of decision theory in cases where a choice can be made between several actually existing action alternatives, or where a person can perceive different action alternatives (cf. Dimbath, 2003, p. 71).

Ries terms this the “multivalence” of real decision situations (Ries, 1970, pp. 122f).

However, decisions are not only based on (the perception of) action alternatives. Beyond this, as with the assumption in Rational Choice Theory, they also require a more or less conscious reflective process of weighing up these alternatives. (For different decision-theory models see Maschke & Stecher, 2012.)

From the perspective of rational choice theory, the individual decision-making *possibilities* and *abilities* are emphasized.

This stands in contrast to the view, expressed pointedly by Bourdieu for example, that there is no such thing as a choice, for example with regard to a career or a degree course, which represents a ‘voluntary decision’, no “theoretical choice between theoretical options constituted as such” (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 176; see similarly von Isenberg & Santos-Dodt, 2000; Knauf & Oechsle, 2007, p. 146). Such a decision, argues Bourdieu, would have to be preceded by two “mental operations”:

- “first, a comprehensive listing of all decision alternatives;
- second, the identification and comparative evaluation of the different strategies with regard to their consequences.” (2001, p. 177).

Bourdieu refers to this as a “completely unrealistic notion of normal behaviour” (ibid.).

The question of the subjective decision-making possibility or ability is answered by Bourdieu that, on the one hand, individual subjects structure their actions freely and

creatively on the basis of their habitual disposition, but at the same time, specific limits are imposed on the habitus during the process of socialisation, which are difficult or impossible to transcend. Thus, according to Bourdieu, decisions are subject to habitual limitations.

These socialisation experiences refer not only to the course of individual lives, but also reflect shared life circumstances for particular social groups (Bourdieu, 1993). As a result, “collective experience contexts and social reference groups” (Schittenhelm, 2005, p. 12) come to the fore with regard to their importance for career choices, beyond the individual biographical perspectives.

The basic idea we shall pursue here, on the basis of the work by Bourdieu and Maschke (2013), is that a career orientation follows a specific life plan, which – like the decision to undertake teacher training itself – is linked to *prior (socialisation) experiences* and thus manifests itself in *different social backgrounds, habitus and life plans* when it comes to the actual decision to undertake teacher training and the choice of subjects.

## 2. Assertive and defensive – two basic decision-making strategies

As part of a qualitative study with teacher training students in the first semester (Maschke, 2013), two fundamental *strategy types* were analysed, which refer to the *process of decision making* (decision strategies):

The first describes a *passive-defensive* approach; a choice is made for whatever is ‘left over’ after applying specific exclusion criteria and/or which is known and familiar.

The second is an *active-assertive* approach, which decides in terms of a ‘positive selection’ on the basis of the ‘suitable’ individual fit between professional aspirations and the career choice.

In regard to the aforementioned question of teacher training, only the second instance shows a reflexive and confident decision strategy for teacher training and a specific subject.

We assume that students who have assertive habitual decision strategies will thus be more successful in their studies, will be less likely to drop out, and will later identify more strongly with the teaching profession. This is an assumption that is plausible, but which as yet requires empirical investigation.

We would like to illustrate the strategies using two examples.

*Active-assertive decision making – reflection on individual fit, or “what I’m good at”*

Example **Lisa**: „then I thought, no, just a minute, you **want** this, so, I’d like to impart knowledge somehow and I **want** (...) **to teach**. [...] **precisely** because I hit puberty late myself, I feel, well at least now still. [...] because I feel I **understand** them. [...] And I’m also really glad. [...] so I think I’ve made the right decision. Well, everything seems right at the moment. And it’s the orientation internship is coming up soon. And I’m really looking forward to it. And ( ) yeah.”

Passive-defensive decision making – decision by process of exclusion, or “what I’m not good at”

Example Lothar: “and ( ) no idea, till it got to the point where I just said, **my god**, then I’ll become a teacher.”

We can’t look closer at these cases and other findings here (for full details, see Maschke, 2013) but we can summarise as:

Lisa is applying an *active-assertive strategy* to the problem of the transition or study decision. Well-known patterns, a prior ‘just carry on like this’ attitude, and new experiences come up against one another. It becomes clear further on in the interview

with Lisa (as with other subjects of the active-assertive type) that she feels a 'tension' in the transition. This refers to a tension-filled (process) dynamic, which creates spaces for educational processes and thus the basis for reflective perspectives on one's self and one's worldview. She utilises this tension to make a considered decision.

This is in contrast to the *passive-defensive strategy* of Lothar. He avoids tension, and the new or unfamiliar. In this context an active and reflective decision regarding a career is absent. The experiences and processes that are reconstructed in this connection, as shown further in the interview, point to a narrowing and strengthening of the (initial) disposition.

In an earlier representative quantitative study (Maschke et al. 2013), we were able to show that the habitus strategies do not, or hardly, correlate with age and gender – in this case for adolescents – but that they are correlated with socio-economic status or social class: young people who are assigned to a lower social class show a more pronounced passive-defensive strategy than their age-related peers of a higher social class. Analogously, the active-assertive strategy is more strongly pronounced the higher the social class.

Another interesting finding, which can only be reported briefly here, is that both strategy dimensions are linked to a wide range of perceptions of and ideas about life. In adolescence, the development of body image, self-satisfaction in identity formation, play an important role. It can be seen that low levels of these notions go hand-in-hand with a relatively pronounced passive-defensive strategy. This even corresponds to grades in mathematics or German, or school friends (the more pronounced the passive-defensive strategy, the worse the average grade or the less pronounced the friendships).

This similarly applies to the state of health; the worse this is rated, the more pronounced the passive-defensive attitude.

With regard to a view of the future, a pessimistic view of one's own future, and of the future of society as a whole, is related to a more strongly pronounced passive-defensive strategy.

In our view, these findings show that fundamental subjective dispositions, convictions, perceptions and orientations are reflected in the two strategies, which describe a general habitual understanding of life, from self-satisfaction to an outlook to the future – and that at the same time, in the sense of educational theory, the relationship between the self and the world is manifested.

### **What does this mean for teacher training?**

If we assume that a reflected and biographically secure decision to become a teacher and to teach a specific subject is the prerequisite for successful studies and a successful career, the question arises as to how the habitual limitations of a passive-defensive decision strategy can be overcome in the initial study phase, and how the student's decision making (or the pupil's decision making prior to the actual transition decision) can be 'unlocked'.

The counselling of students or prospective students often involves the use of psychological self-assessment tools. These are designed to help determine the suitability for a particular degree course and, if applicable, to provide indications for alternative – more suitable – degree courses.

These tools are important. In our view, however, they fall short for three reasons.

Although they are able to stimulate thought processes, they often fail to capture the decision-making process in its biographical complexity.

They do little to question or challenge the fundamental habitual dispositions of decision making – to the extent that they represent the mentioned habitus strategies, and they suggest the notion that a biographical (career) decision is subject only to the

model of rational choice and a rational decision-making process (see Bourdieu above for a critique).

Irrespective of whether we consider these counselling tools to be important, we propose in the following an approach to decision making in the initial study phase that is based on educational theory, which also takes into account the *manner* of decision making and its anchoring in the individual's *biography*.

In order to make such an approach productive for research on the initial phase in teacher training, it is necessary to first take a brief look at the basic concept of habitus.

### 3. The habitus – between limitation and change

The habitus as a structuring structure or generative praxis schema (Bourdieu) ensures the processing of current action requirements via the recourse to earlier experiences. The development of the habitus can be seen as a process of experiential layering, which rests on the habitus selecting new experiences based on “initial experiences” (cf. Michel, 2006, p. 119). Preference is given to self-strengthening experiences, with which the habitus attempts to “secure its continued existence and to steel itself against change.” (Ibid.) With this ‘pre-adjustment’, the habitus wants to “protect itself from crises and critical questioning” (Bourdieu, 1993, cited in Michel, 2006, p. 119; cf. Koller, 2009, p. 26). This process results in a more or less closed “system of disposition” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1996, cited in Michel, 2006, p. 119). Based on this principle of a closed system, the habitus can be defined as an effective structure of boundaries (Bourdieu 1993), which makes particular behaviours or responses probable, and particular other behaviours and responses less probable. The habitus is thus a system of persistence that appears difficult to change.

But it is exactly the habitual changes we wish to bring about – towards an active-assertive decision-making strategy – and to change or ‘unlock’ the habitus in this sense. How can a transformation of the habitus succeed? Here, we take up the theory of “transformative learning processes”, as formulated for example by Nohl, Rosenberg & Thomsen (2015), Koller (2010), Marotzki (1990), Koller, Marotzki & Sanders (2007).

(For international links, see the concept of transformative learning, e.g. Kasworm & Bowles (2012).)

#### Habitus under pressure

The concept of “transformative learning processes” (Koller, 2009, p. 19) assumes (under specific conditions) a fundamental ability of the habitus to change and develop; here, the transformation of the habitus comes about through education(al processes). In this sense, Koller views education as a “process of transformation of fundamental figures of the relationship with the world and oneself” (ibid., p. 20). As such, education is “not a harmonious, natural maturity process” (Koller, 2007, p. 71), but instead requires an impulse from the outside (cf. Koller, 2007, p. 71). The trigger of learning processes is, according to Koller, a “confrontation [of the habitus] with problems [...], for which the previous figures of the relationship with the world and oneself no longer suffice.” (2010, S. 289) This confrontation represents a challenge that can confuse an individual with regard to his or her self-assurance and orientations – putting the habitus, as Maschke (2013) termed it, “under pressure”. The focus then turns towards learning triggers with a particular dynamic: delayed, compacting moments of coherence and synchronisation of cognitive and physical-corporeal aspects, of thinking and acting. They have a reflexive effect on knowledge, motivation and practical action and at the same time offer the opportunity to integrate the new (Maschke, 2013). In positive cases, these pressures can trigger “processes of habitus transformation” (Rieger-Ladich, 2005, p. 291).

#### 4. The teaching unit DECISIONref

In order to initiate the transformation processes mentioned, we developed the teaching unit DECISIONref. It is used as part of the Neuen Gießener teacher training in the initial phase (the first two study semesters) and in a newly-conceived 'pre-semester', which is offered to pupils with a view to their decision making regarding a teaching degree (von Aufschnaiter, Stecher & Wissinger, 2014). Here is a brief description:

Teaching concepts regarding the conviction change of teacher training students have been presented by Schlx (2016), among others. On the basis of our education-theoretical considerations, we go further than existing concepts however. We assume that the change processes of habitualised dispositions must be initiated simultaneously on several levels of personality as well as through a strong biographical intervention impulse. Following Nentwig-Gesemann, Fröhlich-Gildhoff and Pietsch (2011), we want to use the teaching unit DECISIONref to work on and make reflexively available those "action-guiding orientations, values and attitudes" that form the basis of decision making regarding a suitable degree course. The aim is to promote an active-assertive decision-making strategy. Nentwig-Gesemann, Fröhlich-Gildhoff and Pietsch (2011) differentiate between five levels of reflexivity: "1) Situation perception and description; 2) Situation analysis and interpretation; 3) Planning and justification of possible educational-professional action; 4) Self-reflexion; 5) Continuation, development of perspectives." (2011, p. 6)

The configuration of the respective characteristics of a teacher on these five levels, which are captured empirically and evaluated by Nentwig-Gesemann, Fröhlich-Gildhoff and Pietsch (2011) using the adequate solution to practical dilemmas, are interpreted by the authors as *competence levels*. With regard to situation perception, for example, on the lowest competence level (Level 1), "only the actions of some actors are perceived/described" by the subjects, there is "no multi-perspectivity" in the description of the situation. By contrast, on the highest, fifth, level, "different perspectives – different actors – are perceived/described" (2011, p. 6). The five levels serve as our evaluation grid for the following procedure.

#### Procedure

The starting point of the teaching concept is that students are confronted with decision situations using so-called case vignettes (standardised video examples). These contain different, complex and challenging 'decision situations' intended to 'put pressure' on the unquestioned self-assurances and orientations, as well as a largely uncritical daily practice – the habitus. The case vignettes deal with choosing or deciding on a degree course; later on, case vignettes are also used as stimuli aimed at the development of an educational-professional attitude. Decision and solution options are developed in group work.

*Methods.* A range of different methods and stimuli are used; a central feature is the method of focus group interviewing in the context of the Documentary Method (cf. Bohnsack 2003, inter alia).

In the context of our concept, the focus group interview does not merely represent a procedure for capturing and evaluating (collective) orientations, but also an educational method: the focus metaphors are analysed externally and reflected back to the group, in order to raise awareness for the action practice and the underlying action-guiding orientations. The focus of the group interview is on capturing the collective. A productive, self-propelled discussion can come about particularly in groups who share a joint and collective experience foundation (Loos & Schäffer 2001, p. 44), in real groups. In our case, these are groups of students. The collective patterns of meaning are expressed in the dramaturgical consolidation, in the reciprocal intensification of discourse – in the so-

called focus metaphor. This refers to key issues of shared experiences and common prior experiences in the group.

For the analysis, we selected focus metaphors from the interview and discussion respectively, which bring into view or document the (professional) self-concept in terms of the issue of “decision making”. The focus metaphors are analysed by experts and then reflected back to the group. The aim is to trigger or strengthen interactive negotiations and thus reflexive educational processes. (This is somewhat similar to the procedure of the “Model of Critical Thinking” (Cartmel, Macfarlane, Casley & Smith 2015), which arrives at “thinking otherwise” via the steps “deconstruct”, “confront” and “theorise”.) In the interplay of subject and group, these can, according to the argument, strengthen and secure (pedagogic) insights. The analysis is performed in a similar way to the analysis strategy of the Documentary Method (formulating and reflective interpretation). The collective orientations and action-guiding knowledge on the professional processing/handling of situations are carved out in following five levels of reflexivity of Nentwig-Gesemann, Fröhlich-Gildhoff and Pietsch (2011) – “1) Situation perception and description; 2) Situation analysis and interpretation; 3) Planning and justification of possible educational-professional action; 4) Self-reflexion; 5) Continuation, development of perspectives.”

The group is not (initially) able to expound on this itself, as it is “anchored in the habitualised, routine action practice” (Bohnsack, 2003), and is thus first made aware of it by the experts.

The focus metaphors from the different focus groups provide the opportunity – from a comparative perspective, which the documentary procedure is generally geared towards – to carve out variations and contrasts, and also to reflect these back to the members of the group discussions and to encourage further discussion. The aim is to increase the reflection and action ability of the individual (on the basis of negotiations within the group).

Another method is the narrative map also in the context of the Documentary Method (Maschke & Hentschke, in preparation). The access of the narrative map is more individual and autobiographical; the narrative map triangulates a narrative verbal part with drawings or sketches; both verbal and visual expressions, which document the self-concept in terms of the issue of the individual life planning and “decision making”.

The focus group and the narrative map are also educational methods: The individual and collective patterns of meaning are analysed externally and reflected back to the individuals and groups, in order to raise awareness for the action practice and the underlying action-guiding orientations. The aim is to trigger or strengthen interactive negotiations and thus reflexive educational processes (Cartmel, Macfarlane, Casley & Smith, 2015).

## 5. Conclusion

In our view, the success of teacher training should not be measured by the number of university graduates, but rather by the number of graduates who are confident about having chosen a career for life by choosing teaching. Such a conviction or decision is surely not only a matter of rational choice, but requires an approach oriented towards educational theory. The teaching concept DECISIONref can offer such an approach.

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