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ABSTRACT

The present study asks what challenges student teachers meet in today's school and how they present, respond to, and reflect on these challenges in an online discussion forum. The study explores these questions by analysing cases written by student teachers in their last practice placement in a one-year post-graduate teacher education programme for secondary school in Norway. The findings show that the cases centre around students and classroom management, and that student teachers take on a role as either participant or observer. The responses are a mix of advice, descriptions of similar experiences, and support. They tend to normalise the situations rather than explore them. Learning from challenging incidents does not happen by itself. Timing is crucial, and so is space for reframing, reflection, and for considering alternative perspectives. This means that there is a need for distance to the situation and a process of interaction with various perspectives.

Introduction

A criticism that is often raised in teacher education is that the education is not relevant to the students' later work as teachers (Korthagen 2011; Kvernbekk 2012; Zeichner 2010). One way to prepare for work as teachers, and for interlinking what happens in schools with the university coursework, is to use case-based teaching (Strangeways and Papatraianou 2016; Ulvik et al. 2020). The current study focuses on written cases collected by student teachers in their last of two practice placements in a one-year post-graduate teacher education programme for secondary school in Norway. The cases, related to challenging incidents, were presented and discussed in an online asynchronous discussion forum. Writing about their own challenges might help student teachers learn from their experiences, work through their feelings about the incidents, and understand the value of reflection (Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, and Shulman 2002; Levin 2002). Furthermore, discussing the cases with others might offer access to alternative points of view and thereby promote change (Penlington 2008; Puri 2020).

The authors of this article are also educators in the current programme. Through analysing the cases as well as the responses to them, we wanted to learn and understand more about what challenges student teachers experience in today's secondary schools and how they respond to and reflect on these challenges. We believe this understanding will equip us to make improvements to our own practices as teacher educators.

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The research questions are:

What challenging incidents do secondary school student teachers experience in practice placements?

How do they present, respond to, and reflect on these challenges in an online discussion forum?

In the following, we first present a theoretical background and previous research focusing on 1) the connection between theory and practice, 2) case-based teaching and challenging incidents, and 3) reflection and learning through dialogue. Thereafter we present and discuss the current study and consider what we as teacher educators can learn from it. Finally, we suggest some implications of the findings.

Theoretical background

Theory and practice

It is not always easy for student teachers to understand the value of theoretical knowledge taught on campus. Practical knowledge is context bound and sensitive to complexity while theoretical knowledge is general and decontextualised (Duguid 2005; Kvernbekk 2012). Some expect theory to describe, illuminate, or even prescribe or guide practice, while others think that theory should provide alternative ways of understanding and critical views of practice (Kvernbekk 2012). On the latter view there needs to be a form of independence and distance between practice and theory.

Professional knowledge is sometimes described as knowledge that draws on both theoretical and practical knowledge (Clarke, Killeavy, and Moloney 2013; Grimen 2008). The two mutually influence each other (Jackson 2015). In work placements, students may experience the complexity and be exposed to the socio-cultural aspects of workplaces (Trede and McEwen 2015). However, the practice they see is always theory laden. Teachers build their practical judgements on views and beliefs that go beyond the observational (Kvernbekk 2012) and have developed their own theories of practice (Handal and Lauvås 1987). Practice is interwoven with social, historical, material, and political knowledge and is built up over time, place, and context (Lloyd 2010; Schatzki 2000). Practice and theory interact and might challenge and complement each other, and they are not always easy to separate.

Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, and Shulman (2002) found, in a study among student teachers, that combining reading theory with writing their own cases and sharing them with their peers helped them connect research and practice. The student teachers made sense of their own experiences, and through a writing process from draft to final outline their ideas evolved from naive generalisations to sophisticated, theory-based explanations. However, the study suggests a 'pedagogy of case writing' (Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, and Shulman 2002, 240). What is critical is the facilitation of the process, and the timing and nature of feedback. The feedback should be specific and concrete, and the student teachers' readiness for the process should be considered.

The work of Vygotsky (1986) provides the theoretical basis for perceiving language as a connection between internal and external processes. The interaction between the two through writing and dialogue might develop the understanding of what happened. Learning as a social process presupposes alternative perspectives and to mediate between own and others' perspective. Without alternatives learning might be reproductive.

Case-based teaching and challenging incidents

Cases from classrooms make it possible to investigate practical challenges; they exemplify real situations and stimulate reflection (Merseth 1996). Student teachers have observed teachers for years from a student's perspective (Loughran 2014). An outcome of working with cases in teacher education is that student teachers adopt the teacher perspective (Gravett et al. 2017). They may learn to identify a problem and become aware of different perspectives that are crucial for teachers' critical thinking (Harrington 1995).

Cases, here understood as vignettes or narratives from classrooms and schools, might capture some of the complexity of practice (Florez 2011). The basic feature of cases is that they arise from everyday life in classrooms during practice placements. There is a body of research that invoke

> the role of narrative in enabling specific communicative affordances. These include the imaginative and affective presentation of self as grounded in specific spatiotemporal realities and the ability to invoke other worlds, real or possible, to bear on the here-and-now of the narrating act, but also to position self over time and across places (Georgakopoulou 2016, p. 267 in online version)

This means that narratives in the studied material for this article can be seen as embedding, in particular, two spatiotemporal realities, namely the situation in the classroom that is described as challenging, and the fact that this is an online assignment where the challenging situations are supposed to become learning points in the student teachers' own professional development. The classroom incidents experienced were first problems to be solved there; then, through describing the situations in an assignment as cases, they were re-performed as language acts, with embedded meanings pointing out of the time-space of the classroom. However, they also point out of the time-space of the cases as narratives, into the future lives of the students as teachers.

Working with their own cases might provide strong motivation and help student teachers develop a particularly deep understanding of the issues at play (Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, and Shulman 2002). Reflecting on how and why an incident happens makes it possible for those involved to reflect on their internalised values (Molla and Nolan 2020). Furthermore, according to Loughran (2006), frustrations matter if student teachers are to move beyond being comfortable with tips and tricks alone. Talking about frustrations allows the storyteller to understand, interpret what happened, and develop reflective and interpretative thinking (Schatz-Oppenheimer and Dvir 2014). Through writing about challenges – a process that allows for re-examination, change, and adjustment – student teachers can move from the specific to the general (Leshem 2006; Schatz-Oppenheimer and Dvir 2014), and their knowledge might thus achieve transfer value to similar situations. Working through feelings and reflecting on experiences, case writing is both educative and therapeutic. By discussing the cases, the student teachers' own perspectives might be expanded (Levin 2002). When it comes to content, previous studies

find that student teachers' challenging cases centre around relationships, students' attitudes and learning, and classroom management, not around content or curriculum issues (Levin 2002; Nilsson 2009).

Reflection and dialogue

Reflecting on challenging incidents enables practitioners to develop a greater level of self-awareness about the nature and impact of their performance (Yu 2018). However, there can be different kinds of reflection, and there are factors that affect the quality of reflection. Yu (2018) mentions factors such as standing back from the event, self-questioning, and considering others' views. Nerland (2006), on her side, presents three types of reflection: reflection as imagination, as self-reflection, or as epistemic reflectivity. Reflection as imagination involves imagining a way forwards, self-reflection is a matter of reflecting on what has already happened, and epistemic reflectivity is reflecting on conditions beyond the current situation. 'Reflection is described as a systematic, rigorous, and disciplined way of thinking with its roots in systematic inquiry' (Yu 2018, 765). Reflective practice starts with asking questions, and Cochran-Smith et al. (2009) argue that student teachers should develop an inquiry stance. Thereby they can become professionals that learn about teaching in an ongoing way.

In this study, the student teachers were encouraged to comment on each other's cases and to discuss the topics that were brought up in the online forum. The forum offered an additional space for critical reflection. By talking with others, teachers become better able to access beliefs, emotions, and personal theories that underpin and shape their practice. Reasoning is not something people develop alone but something they first need to test out in dialogue with others. At a later stage, the reasoning becomes internalised and personal (Vygotsky 1986). Through language, it is possible to step back and objectify ourselves (Penlington 2008) to create a distance to an event. Dialogue requires considering more than one perspective, and things taken for granted may be questioned. The best conditions for reflective dialogue are met when people feel free to speak and to question ideas. Then one needs to move beyond reporting teaching activities to also considering how they work (Penlington 2008). However, dialogues do not always generate new learning. Junge (2012) found, in a study among Norwegian teachers, that their dialogues were more descriptive than analytic: the teachers rarely challenged each other but were supportive or presented advice. The conversations were not explorative, and the learning could be characterised as repro-ductive. The narratives arising from freer daily conversations between teachers about challenging situations tend to work as 'illustrations, and responses to problematic incidents to a larger degree tend to normalise the situation rather than explore it' (Junge 2012, 127, our translation from Norwegian).

For narratives to become learning points rather than confirmations of the status quo, the challenging situations need to be subject to analyses that can lift experiences from the personal sphere and connect them to pedagogical concepts and theories. The time needed for this to happen might be limited in schools. In our study, the students got a distance to the event that allowed for reflection. Describing challenging situations through a written case gave space for re-examining what happened and for considering different perspectives (Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, and Shulman 2002).

The narration of challenging incidents from practice placements in the form of a case is typically based on exactly that: an incident. The narrative structure of cases can be seen as what Georgakopoulou (2016) calls 'small stories', defined as fragmented, open-ended, and 'invariably heavily co-constructed, rendering the sole teller's story ownership problematic' (p. 267 in online version). The narratives that emerge from our material must therefore be considered as stories that are told with an embedded anticipation of a response, and where the response is part of the emerging narrative. Furthermore, they are, according to Georgakopoulou, context dependent, and in our material, the context is an asynchronous online assignment. Those two aspects of the material cannot be disregarded in the analytical process if we are aiming to understand what is critical or challenging in the emerging narratives.

There is, however, another aspect to take into consideration in the analysis of this case material. Garrison and Vaughan (2008) talk about the need to establish a community of inquiry, to facilitate blended learning processes in higher education. Fostering a sense of community goes far beyond the simple adoption of assignments from offline to online. The basic element in creating an online community is that students feel free, trusting, and secure enough to project emotions as well as academic reasoning and the pursuing of learning goals. As Garrison and Vaughan (2008) describe it, '[s]tudents may well feel secure and feel free to comment but may still need to establish the cohesiveness for the community to begin to work collaboratively' (p. 20). To move away from the feeling of sharing 'small stories' in social media chat rooms, or from the notion of merely handing in a written online assignment, requires an online teaching presence that holds together the social and cognitive elements of this community. A purposeful teaching presence gives direction to the learning process.

The study

Context and method

The study was carried out at the end of the one-year postgraduate teacher education programme in the subject pedagogy. The student teachers had completed master's degrees in a range of different subjects. They were about 25 years old, and they were 24 female and 31 male students in the cohort. The majority had no teaching experiences before teacher education. Each semester starts with a four-week theory period, then seven weeks in practice placements, divided into two parts by one week at campus. The theory periods consist of voluntary, plenary lectures and compulsory seminars. For the present year, the cohort of 55 students was divided into three interdisciplinary seminar groups that met regularly during the theory periods throughout the two semesters. Each group was led by a teacher educator, the three authors of this article.

When the pandemic situation began in spring 2020, the students were halfway through their placement period and had to continue their field practice as online teachers. Moreover, the last theory period had to be replaced by online meetings and activities. Normally, student teachers share and discuss cases from practice in the first four-hour long seminar after the placement. They are divided into smaller groups – often with four students in each group. The conversations use to be lively, and the student teachers seem to enjoy meeting their peers and sharing experiences from different schools and classes.

The current semester we decided to replace this first seminar after the practice placement with a Zoom meeting followed up by an asynchronous discussion of cases from the practice field. The reason for making the discussion asynchronous was pragmatic: it made the discussion flexible and thereby easier for student teachers to attend. Some had for example small children to look after when schools and kindergartens were closed. In the Zoom meeting, we discussed experiences from being online teachers. Thereafter the students were asked to present a challenge from practice that they wanted to discuss with their peers in a discussion forum on the university's learning platform. The structure of this forum has a likeness to what is found in social media, albeit not with the same flexibility when it comes to for example re-sending a popular case or give likes. All in all, 40 out of 55 students presented a case. They were also encouraged to respond to each other's cases, and they seemed to take responsibility for sharing the responses approximately equally, as each case on average got two responses.

Our student teachers must attend at least 80% of the seminars. The online discussion was considered part of a compulsory seminar, but most students had already attended the necessary number of seminars, and we assume that some of them chose to concentrate on their upcoming exams instead of presenting and discussing cases. We were not in a position to demand further attendance, or in any way to add to their workload.

Cases are a crucial part of the current programme. They are used in plenary lectures, either as illustrations or for discussion in summary report groups, and they are discussed in seminars (see Ulvik et al. 2020). Furthermore, the students' exam the first semester consists of presenting a case from the first placement and analyse it with the help of theory. Interlinking theory and teaching experiences, the students are provided with guidelines that recommend that they first identify a problem, then analyse the situation and map possible solutions considering theoretical perspectives. Working with cases, their own and others', and discussing them with their peers, is thus a familiar approach for the student teachers. We took for granted that they knew how to work with cases and did not provide them with instructions for the work.

The written cases and responses are the data in this study. Our focus was to explore what cases the students chose to present; how they presented, responded to, and reflected on these cases; and to reflect on what we could learn from the online process. The fact that the discussions were written gave us a unique insight into student teachers' challenges and reflections.

Analysis

The approach in the study can be characterised as abductive (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2018); i.e. the analysis was data driven but did not reject our theoretical preconceptions connected to case-based teaching. The research process alternated between theory and empirical data in a hermeneutic way in which both can be reinterpreted in light of each other (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2018). Abduction is thereby an alternative to an inductive or deductive approach. Furthermore, the analysis was thematic (Braun and Clarke 2006). Reading and rereading the data, we first made a descriptive analysis where we identified what themes the students presented in the cases, then through ad hoc categories how they presented and responded to these incidents. Thereafter we conducted an interpretative analysis, which is described as the researchers' best effort to make meaning of the data (Hatch 2002). In this process, we interpreted the data more intuitively, moving

between parts and the whole in a hermeneutic way. Following Hatch (2002), the descriptive analysis helped us anchor our interpretation in the data. At each step, we worked with the material first individually, then collectively in a moderation process.

Furthermore, the double role as teacher educators and researchers influenced the way we read the texts, because as teacher educators we especially look for reflections that can lead to learning something of value to the professional development of these becoming teachers, and not only descriptions of challenging situations.

Findings

Even if form and content are intertwined, we will in the findings section first highlight the content in the cases, and then how this content is presented and responded to online.

Content in the cases

The cases centred around what happens in a classroom and in relationships with students, which is in line with previous studies (Levin 2002; Nilsson 2009). Half of the cases (19 of 40) were connected to classroom management, either to behavioural issues or to how to facilitate learning. The two approaches are illustrated below

> In one of my classes, there is a lot of disturbance caused by some students. [. . .] When you remind them in a polite way of what they are supposed to do, they just look at you and start smiling. Then I understood that it does not always work to be friendly in the classroom. What would you have done in a similar situation? (20[1])

> A challenge I experienced more often in this practicum (in lower secondary school) than in the previous one (in upper secondary school) was how detailed instructions I had to give [. . .]. However, I wonder if the effect of spoon-feeding students is that they become less responsible and more passive than they would with self-directed learning, or if it is unrealistic to expect them to be that responsible in lower secondary school. (33)

In both cases the student teachers ask what to do, and they implicitly refer to some kind of standards that seem not to work in a classroom – in the first case that a teacher should always be friendly, and in the second that students in secondary school should be expected to be responsible for their own learning.

The rest of the cases were divided among a range of topics like adapted teaching (four of 40), assessment (three of 40), special needs education (one of 40), relationships (one of 40), and bullying (one of 40). Only one case was related to content issues, and, interestingly, given the current situation, no cases were related to online teaching. It seems to be the face-to-face meetings that gave the students the challenges they preferred to reflect upon in this assignment – or that they thought we might expect them to write about.

How the cases are presented and responded to

In 15 of 40 cases the student teachers position themselves as observers, while in the other cases they are participants. As observers to their mentors' teaching, the perspective is rather critical, and there seems to be a discrepancy between their own and their mentors' perspectives – often connected to values. As participants, the student teachers in many cases express their insecurity and feelings.

An observing student teacher describes

> The student was excepted from following the general rules of the classroom, could play with his mobile phone, and there were no expectations regarding his performance in the subject. (9)

What the student teacher wants to discuss with fellow students is how much pressure you can put on a student and if you, as a teacher, can give up on students and not expect anything from them. The student teacher seems to experience a conflict between own ethical standards and the mentor teacher's standards. However, at the same time, the student teacher tries to understand the mentor's perspective and ends the case with the following comment: 'As the mentor pointed out, the fact that this student turned up for school could be an important victory'. (9)

One of the cases where the student teacher positions herself as participant, describes a situation with a minority language-speaking student:

> It turned out that the student did not understand the question at all. I tried to explain it, but the student still did not understand. Thereafter, I suggested that the seatmate could work with the student and explain the question. I left the situation with a feeling that I had not followed up the student and provided the necessary individual adaptation. How could I have offered what the student needed in a better way? (2)

Here the student teacher feels vulnerable and inadequate and asks for advice. Other students in vulnerable situations also ask for similar experiences.

When it comes to responses, we find that they are a mix of similar experiences, support, and, most of all, advice. The responses are quite solution-oriented or supportive, as illustrated in the following examples:

> This is interesting to read [. . .] I will make a note of it for the future. (answer to 3)

> I think it was a wise decision to change the focus from lecturing to more student-active lessons. (answer to 7)

> It seems like you handled the situation in a good way. (answer to 11)

> This is interesting and thought-provoking. Thank you for sharing. (answer to 12)

Sharing similar experiences might work as support and normalise the situation, as in the following example:

> My experience, too, is that when students could work in group study rooms or other places outside the classroom, they did not always get much work done. (answer to 5)

Posting cases in an asynchronous discussion forum that allows thinking time, might invite longer discussions, and offer an opportunity for presenting alternative perspectives. However, only in a few cases do we find longer conversation threads than two responses (six cases got three responses, three got four and only one got five). Common experiences and demanding challenges seem to trigger more comments. Furthermore, as expected, those who posted their cases first, tend to get more responses. There are only two examples of students challenging each other. In one of these cases (15), the only one that got five responses, a student teacher wants to put some pressure on three students with anxiety. The students do not want to do an oral assignment, even if the three of them can leave the classroom and do the assignment in a group study room. The student teacher refers to a teacher's mandate that includes supporting human development. The

class teacher did not want to put pressure on the students, but the student teacher, on her side, asks whether it could be beneficial for students to feel a little bit of pressure. She immediately receives three very supportive answers. Then a fourth student responds in a more provocative way:

> Hi, I have some comments for those of you who meet students with anxiety/anxiety symptoms with or without a diagnosis. Firstly, it could be that the solution to go into a group study room was not optimal. I agree. BUT, that is something we as student teachers do not know much about since we do not have all the information. I think it is important to be a little humble here – and in all situations. An arrogant teacher who believes he can cure anxiety can destroy a lot in these young peoples' lives.

Then follows a discussion in which some of the previous answers are modified:

> I agree with a lot of what you write, xx. One should of course be careful not to take a wrong step, get to know the student, gain information, and not think that as a teacher you should cure anxiety. All the same, I disagree that pushing does not work.

The one who posted the case also participated in the discussion:

> Good to see multiple perspectives. I totally agree that I do not have the competence to cure, and I absolutely see the importance of being patient, warm, and kind.

And finally, the one who disagreed posted a last response:

> I think you handled it in a good way, and I do not think it is wrong to suggest that the three work together. I would just like to emphasise that if the teacher who knows them better sent them to the group study room, then there might possibly be a reason behind that choice.

The challenging answer seems to promote further reflection, more nuanced answers, and a more explorative approach.

We notice that explicit theory is almost absent in the cases as well as in the responses. We find reflections and alternative solutions, and in a few cases also some clarifying or reflective questions to the one who shares the case. However, in cases where student teachers are critical towards either their mentor or themselves, they seem to have a kind of standard to relate to, a standard that might have been influenced by the campus courses.

Discussion

What student teachers find challenging in our study is in alignment with previous studies (Levin 2002; Nilsson 2009). Cases centred around students and classroom management are in the forefront. Even during the corona crisis, when teaching in schools happened online, the face-to-face meetings before the lockdown seem to be what occupied our student teachers. As practitioners themselves, they present cases that involve feelings, values, and situations that do not have simple solutions. As observers, they make their own judgements and are sometimes critical towards what they see in the classrooms.

It is also interesting to notice what cases the student teachers do not mention, such as cases related to the school as an organisation, to content, to parents, or to cooperation with colleagues. These are issues we know challenge newly qualified teachers and could therefore be something teacher education should help student teachers discover (Smith, Ulvik, and Helleve 2019).

While the cases in practicum are about problems to be solved, writing about cases in retrospect creates a distance to the event (Yu 2018). Standing back from situations, without an obligation to act immediately and be assessed, might make it easier to discuss and reflect on these situations more freely and to consider alternative solutions and varied theoretical perspectives. It can therefore be beneficial to discuss cases from practice on campus. However, looking back on something finished, might impact the students' engagement negatively.

Even if theory was not explicitly included in the cases and responses, we noticed that when the student teachers were occasionally critical towards both mentors and their own ways of dealing with challenging situations, they implicitly drew on the course literature. Thus, theory in a way provided them with a critical view of practice (Kvernbekk 2012). However, if they are not aware of the theoretical perspective, the transfer value of their critical view might be reduced. Furthermore, in the cases as well as in the responses, they seem to base their judgements on their own views and beliefs (Kvernbekk 2012) and theories of practice (Handal and Lauvås 1987). To move forwards and develop professionally one cannot walk in circles but need insights beyond own perspectives (Penlington 2008). However, in the assignment the student teachers were only asked to present a case and to comment on each other's presentations, not to give reasons for their judgements. The process we saw had similarities with the process Junge (2012) describes when teachers' responses to colleagues' challenging incidents tend to normalise the situation rather than explore it.

Through their narratives, the student teachers illustrated a range of challenging experiences in today's school. Our ambition was that the challenging situations should become learning points in the student teachers' own professional development. We saw that they, in the narratives, were able to identify a problem (Harrington 1995). They were also interested in responses from their peers and asked for advice or similar experiences. The assignment created an interaction between thought and language (Vygotsky 1986). We therefore assume that the written cases might lead to learning outcomes for both the writers and their readers, in the incident and as reflections over it, as well as re-performing it in a written case. However, the responses were in most cases short. They were not explorative and did not include explicit theory. This, together with the fact that 15 out of 55 students chose not to participate, might indicate that the student teachers saw the assignment more as a compulsory exercise than as an important and meaningful learning opportunity.

Working with cases is not automatically beneficial for connecting the theoretical and practical parts of teacher education (Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, and Shulman 2002), not even among our student teachers who already had worked with cases in structured ways throughout their one-year teacher education. What went wrong? In retrospect we see that we could have improved our 'pedagogy of case-writing' (Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, and Shulman 2002). The timing of the assignment was not ideal, and neither were the student teachers' readiness for the task. They had recently finished their last placement, and their exams, which were not connected to cases this semester, were next in line. Describing frustrations and reflecting on what happened might be useful (Nerland 2006) and therapeutic (Levin 2002); however, it could have been even more useful if they got the responses during practice placement when they also needed to act and imagine a way forward. More would be at stake, something

that also could influence the responses. Now, most responses were not explorative, nor did they offer alternative perspectives; rather, they were mainly supportive and thereby confirmed the storyteller's thoughts and emotions.

To learn from experiences and give them transfer value to new situations, they need to be lifted from the personal sphere and connected to pedagogical concepts and theories; one needs to move from the specific to the general (Leshem 2006; Schatz-Oppenheimer and Dvir 2014). In the assignment we gave, there were no obligations related to the quality of the process, and no incentives to use time to explore the situations. The assignment was a replacement for a seminar and a pragmatic solution to a sudden incident, but still something we could learn from. The work with cases was a single event and not something the student teachers needed to use as a basis for further work. As a consequence, the process and the nature of the feedback were insufficient.

In a previous study we found that providing student teachers with guidelines and time improved the quality of their work with cases (Ulvik et al. 2020). This time we did not present any expectations for the work but assumed that the student teachers understood our implicit expectations based on their previous work with cases, albeit in a different context. Reflections require time, and by doing the discussion asynchronously, the student teachers were allowed to choose how much time they wanted to use on the assignment. However, they did not have to prioritise it, and they did not have to consider the responses or develop their narratives further.

Furthermore, discussing practical challenges in which student teachers might feel vulnerable and insecure might be challenging in an asynchronous online forum with up to twenty participants. Conversations work best in a safe environment (Penlington 2008). The quality of the conversation is closely tied to the context in which it takes place, something that we did not consider when we transferred the planned face-to-face discussions in smaller groups to an online platform where the student teachers only received written responses to their cases. It might be easier to challenge each other and provide explorative comments face to face than in writing. The online forum, which took on the character of a semi-social media form, may have influenced the content of the conversations as well as the process among the student teachers. The forum was part of the university's learning platform and may as such have been experienced as more formal and less accessible than social media. With the benefit of hindsight, we should have used the forums' possibility for smaller groups. We could also, on a later occasion, explore the possibilities of building an online community that supports the students' social and cognitive presence, and not believe that an offline community is automatically transferred to an online platform without any facilitation (Garrison and Vaughan 2008).

Meeting each other face to face after many weeks in practice placements might give rise to a context that is very different for student teachers, compared to presenting and responding to cases in an online asynchronous forum. A better solution could be to get the assignment during the placement when the focus is on how to deal with practice. Furthermore, we could have presented our expectations and reminded the students of the guidelines they already knew, and we could have divided them into smaller and more binding groups. However, an important aspect that we need to explore further is how the student teachers experienced this kind of assignment and its outcome.

To improve our practice, we need a deeper awareness of the fact that offline assignments cannot seamlessly be transposed to online platforms without instructions based on what we expect the students to do, how to write, and how we expect them to interact. A further reflection takes us into the awareness of differences between handing in assignments to an online platform and creating an online community for reflection and inquiry. The latter is a challenge to us as teacher educators, that we strengthen our presence online instead of abandoning this potential dialogic space (Garrison and Vaughan 2008). On the other hand, we as teacher educators could become more aware of the value of small stories in online forums and social media (Georgakopolou, 2015). Furthermore, the value of exchanging the traditional communication model of sender–medium–receiver for a model that sees stories, narratives, and cases as continuous processes where all parties, including readers, responders, teacher educators included, are co-narrators, would be beneficial for all (Georgakopoulou 2015). This depends, among other things, on the quality of the platform used and on whether it facilitates a conversation-in-flux and not only a traditional static communication that follows the schema narrator as sender-response-response etc. However, the re-configuration of the assignment from offline to online in the first wave of the corona pandemic situation was not planned. Further preparation for – and development of – online cases that facilitate more reflection would have to be based on an improved communication model built into both the platform and the assignment. This, in addition to a more optimal timing, would possibly have led to a better learning outcome for all parties – teacher educators and student teachers.

Concluding comment

Student teachers experience challenges and frustrations in their practice placements. However, to learn from these experiences and to give them transfer value, student teachers need space for reframing, for reflection, for considering alternative perspectives in interplay with peers, and consequently for processes. This kind of dialogic space is limited in placements and should be offered in the campus education, whether it is online or in face-to-face educational situations. This will provide a required distance to the concrete situations, which will promote pedagogical reflections on the challenging incidents. However, the on-line space the student teachers were offered, and our minimal facilitation of the process did not promote explorative conversations, rather perspectives were confirmed. Without our facilitation of the process, and our presence, the discussion in the online forum moved in the traditional sender-response schema. Our learning as teacher educators, derived from reflections over the results of this study, is that we cannot expect students to arrive at reflection-based and multifaceted dialogue and learning from challenging incidents without the presence and guidance of teacher educators. In our face-to-face seminars in the pre-covid-education, this is what we provided. In the rush of lockdown and onset of purely online teaching, we failed to bring our own tacit knowledge about how to work with students' cases on challenging incidents with us to the online forum.

Working with cases in the future, we have now learned that we cannot leave what happens to chance whether the education takes place online or face-to-face. We need to provide student teachers with some guidelines. We also need to consider the timing and

the form, and how our own presence as teacher educators can influence and facilitate the space of reflections for the student teachers. Furthermore, we need to be aware of the students' learning needs and their outcome from working with cases in the way we prepare for. We have argued that it is important to discuss challenging incidents from practice with time for reflection. However, we need to learn more about *when* and *how* from student teachers.

Note

1. The presented cases were numbered, and the illustrating quotes include these numbers in brackets.

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