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Rehearsing individual teacher–student conversations

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As part of the practicum period at our school, the PSTs are assigned a task by the teacher education institution to conduct an individual teacher–student conversation (‘elevsamtale’ in Norwegian). As a practicum teacher, I challenged one of the PSTs to practise teacher–student conversations in 8th grade, following the stages of the ReTPro rehearsing cycle. This cycle involves modelling, rehearsing on campus, enacting a real conversation at the practicum school, and, in the final stage, reflection between the PST and the practicum teacher.

As this was in the middle of the practicum period and I had good access to various student cohorts, I opted for a slightly different approach. First, I modelled a conversation which the PST observed. Then the PST conducted a real student conversation, followed by a reflection session with me. In the final stage, the PST carried out a second conversation and concluded with a final reflective conversation. The cycle we carried out thus deviated somewhat from the ReTPro rehearsal cycle but was based on the same principles.

Prior to the practicum period, the PST had proposed a structure for the teacher–student conversation. The goal was to build relationships, and to get acquainted with the student, as well as to explore the student’s experiences of different conditions at the school. The questions were organised in a sequence, with a focus on the student’s experience of motivation, self-effort, and mastery, both academically and socially.

At the teacher education institution, the PSTs had also been introduced to conversation methodologies and techniques, more specifically talk moves teachers can use to encourage students to speak more openly and deeply. In this case, the PST had received feedback from the practicum teacher to allow for more ‘thinking time’, and to seize ‘golden opportunities’ during the lessons. Thus, the PST chose to place particular emphasis on these aspects.

In the first phase, I modelled and conducted a teacher–student conversation with a randomly selected 8th-grade student. I chose to use my own conversation template, as I typically would. I drew a cross on a piece of paper and marked the centre. I explained that the centre point represented where the student was standing. In the four quadrants created by the cross, I placed the topics of conversation. In this case, the goal was not only to get acquainted with the student, but also to assess how they were doing at school. I selected four thematic areas: subject, leisure, friends, and teachers as the starting points.

From my experience, students tend to speak more openly when the focus is on ‘what do you like, what do you not like, what are you confident

about, what are you not confident about?’ I believe it is easier for students to respond to these questions compared to more direct queries like ‘How is your effort in mathematics?’. This type of questioning may trigger feelings of shame or guilt and might prompt students to answer based on what they think is expected of them.

I began by asking about subjects, and the student ranked them based on preference. The subjects the student liked most were placed closest to the centre, while those liked least were positioned further out. I repeated the process with the other topics. Throughout the conversation, the student was able to clearly express his or her preferences, and as the student spoke, I wrote the answers in the four boxes of the cross. Certain answers stood out. For example, one particular peer was placed far away from the centre of the cross, which indicated some difficulty between the student and this peer. I recognised this as a ‘golden opportunity’ to learn more about the student’s feelings and decided to further explore the matter with follow-up questions. The student then elaborated, explaining that they had recently experienced a challenging conflict with this particular peer.

The PST then conducted his first teacher–student conversation, while I observed. Throughout the conversation, it was not unusual for the PST to give the student very little time to respond. The PST quickly provided suggestions for answers. For example, he asked: ‘What do you do in your spare time? Do your mum and dad take you out for activities?’ The student began with ‘So ...’. But instead of waiting for the student’s full response, the PST followed up with suggestions: ‘Do they take you somewhere? A walk, or the cinema, or...?’ The student replied: ‘When I’m at my mum’s, it’s just the two of us, and we relax on the sofa. We do a lot of exciting things. When I’m at my dad’s, there are a lot of people, lots of kids, so it’s not really the same focus on me.’

Hearing this, I became curious about how the student experiences the differences between the two homes. However, the PST did not pursue this line of thought. Was this perhaps a missed opportunity the PST could have used to encourage the student to further open up?

Following the conversation, the PST and I reflected. He mentioned that he had felt nervous and tense during the teacher–student conversation. He said he liked the conversation template, as it allowed for a real discussion, rather than feeling like a formal interview guide. The open structure of this type of conversation provides an opportunity to explore the student’s views and expe-

periences from their own perspective. The student's responses become the basis for the next question, rather than being restricted by a rigid structure. The PST also appreciated the ability to take notes without feeling confined to writing.

I asked whether he felt he had seized any 'golden opportunities'. The PST admitted that he had probably missed something the student had said, something that seemed important, and he expressed a desire to follow up on it in a later conversation. I also asked if he felt he had given the student enough time to respond. He thought he had. I then chose to be honest with the PST and say that I noticed that he asked a lot of leading questions, and that he could have waited longer, to give the student the opportunity to speak freely. I explained that it is an art to tolerate silence, and students often need time to formulate their answers. The PST understood, and we agreed to focus on specific areas for the next conversation. He wanted to work on allowing more time for the student to respond and giving the student the opportunity to answer without offering suggestions. I also advised him to try to share curiosity with the student and be open to their input.

In the next teacher-student conversation, it was clear that the PST allowed the student more time to think and respond. For instance, the student mentioned that arts and crafts is a difficult and demotivating subject. This contrasted with the other subjects, which the student enjoyed and excelled in. When the student shared this, the PST paused and focused intently on the student. He then reiterated what the student had said, using the talk move 'repeat' to confirm the student's statement: 'So you think arts and crafts is difficult and demotivating?' Again, the PST waited, maintaining his attention on the student. After some time to reflect, the student replied: 'I have a low opinion of myself and compare myself to others. It's not very motivating when they're better than me.' The PST nodded noticeably and kept his focus on the student, waiting to see if there was more to share. When there was not, he confirmed what the student had said, offered some encouraging words, and then moved on.

Towards the end of the conversation, the student brought up arts and crafts again, stating that it is difficult to concentrate in this subject. The PST did not follow up on this.

In the subsequent reflection, the PST remarked that he felt less nervous and more relaxed during this last conversation. He took his time and did not rush, even when there were moments of silence. The PST observed

that when he allowed the student time to think, the student would make follow-up comments on own initiative. Regarding the ReTPro cycle, he found the modelling phase particularly useful, primarily for demonstrating a genuine teacher–student conversation. Similarly, he believed that this template fostered a more authentic form of dialogue, allowing for free expression, rather than a rigid question–answer–response format. He also noted that the two trials provided him with an opportunity to test new approaches in the second conversation. Engaging with students to uncover and map their experiences requires knowledge and practice, a competence which is developed over time. The PST appreciated the opportunity to hold a teacher–student conversation and then select a few focus areas to practise in the next conversation. He believed that the reflection and mentoring between the exercises were crucial for determining the areas of focus.

The first phase of the rehearsing cycle is modelling. In this project, the PST noted several times that he found this phase to be educational and useful. He described the conversation as genuine and dialogical, rather than simply an interview. He appreciated the structure I employed, considering it a solid starting point for documenting and visualising what the student had conveyed. The outcomes of the conversation were written down directly in the cross, providing a strong foundation for follow-up conversations in the future. If teachers later wonder why the student placed a particular subject or teacher far from him- or herself, they can reference the description and express their curiosity. According to the PST, these were crucial insights that he might not have recognised had he not seen them modelled.

Phase two involved the PST’s first teacher–student conversation. From a learning perspective, this served as a starting point for identifying the PST’s zone of proximal development. What does the PST already know, and what areas should they focus on for their professional development?

In the reflection following the teacher–student conversation, we initially examined the dialogue on a more superficial level. Following the supervision method of *situation analysis*, we focused on events from the teacher–student conversation. I began with what the PST had handled well, such as introducing the teacher–student conversation, and creating a safe and supportive environment. The PST demonstrated a natural ability to show affirmation towards the student by repeating what he said, and by nodding to show understanding. This technique of repetition or retelling was not something the PST had

initially focused on, but I chose to emphasise it in our reflective conversation to reinforce this skill.

The third phase of the rehearsing cycle involved conducting a new trial to practise areas in which the PST needed improvement. In this instance, the PST had struggled to effectively utilise the talk move ‘wait time’, as well as ‘explain/say more’. The PST expressed a desire to focus more on these aspects during the next teacher–student conversation.

The impact of the enactment–reflection–new enactment cycle was evident throughout this conversation. While the PST in the first teacher–student conversation seemed primarily concerned with his questions and input, he focused much more on the student in the second conversation. The PST was mindful of allowing the student time to think, and of asking follow-up questions. Overall, the PST was more attentive, making the conversation more dynamic and dialogical. The PST’s concluding remarks summarise this reflection:

It was useful to observe a real conversation and a conversation template. I was nervous in the first conversation, but not in the second. Reflecting after each enactment is valuable because it has a greater impact than thinking things through alone. Reflecting together leads to a more comprehensive understanding of what has been accomplished. One becomes better at reflecting overall. The cycle of modelling, enactment, reflection and re-enactment was beneficial.