

## Between Academia and School: Habitus Reflexivity as One Way of Dealing with the Theory-Practice Tension in Teacher Education

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Teacher education's primary goal is to train prospective teachers, which differs from study programmes, such as philosophy or mathematics, that do not cater to defined professions. This traditional understanding of the teaching profession becomes apparent when students ask: 'How is this content, topic, method, task, or question relevant to school work?' It is also reflected in the inclusion of practical school training in teacher education curricula. In Austria's teacher training, these practical elements are accompanied by theoretical and methodological teaching foundations. However, students often question the applicability of theoretical knowledge to the teaching profession, which creates tension between the academic and pedagogical orientations. This paper discusses these very theory-practice tensions in teacher education based on findings from the project *Habitus. Power.Education*, which involved student teachers at an Austrian university. We argue that teacher training at universities is neither merely a place for producing a future workforce nor a self-growth space without purpose. Teacher training, rather, combines both (sometimes ambivalent) elements: education in its broadest sense and professional training. Using our empirical material, we show that the theory-praxis gap manifests in the tension between academic and pedagogical orientation. To address and mediate this tension, we propose the concept of *habitus reflexivity*. Promoting such a form of reflexivity among students makes it possible to bridge the gap between the different logics of university and school. Furthermore, it helps to comprehend inequality and power imbalances in the education system and develop agency, which is essential for navigating the ever-changing and complex world of modern schools.

**Keywords:** habitus reflexivity, Austrian teacher education, theory-practice tension, inequality

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## Med akademijo in šolo: refleksija o habitusu kot eden izmed načinov reševanja napetosti med teorijo in prakso v izobraževanju učiteljev

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Glavni cilj izobraževanja učiteljev je usposabljanje bodočih učiteljev, kar se razlikuje od študijskih programov, kot je filozofija ali matematika, ki niso namenjeni enemu določenemu poklicu. To tradicionalno razumevanje učiteljskega poklica se pokaže, ko študentje vprašajo, kako je ta vsebina, tema, metoda, naloga ali vprašanje pomembno za delo v šoli«. To se kaže tudi v vključevanju praktičnega usposabljanja v šolah v programe izobraževanja učiteljev. V avstrijskem izobraževanju učiteljev te praktične elemente spremljajo teoretične in metodološke osnove poučevanja. Študentje se pogosto sprašujejo o uporabnosti teoretičnega znanja v učiteljskem poklicu, kar ustvarja napetost med akademsko in pedagoško usmeritvijo. Ta članek obravnava prav te napetosti med teorijo in prakso v izobraževanju učiteljev na podlagi ugotovitev projekta *Habitus.Power.Education*, v katerem so sodelovali študentje, bodoči učitelji na avstrijski univerzi. Trdimo, da usposabljanje učiteljev na univerzah ni le prostor za pripravo prihodnje delovne sile niti prostor za samorast brez namena. Usposabljanje učiteljev prej združuje oba (včasih ambivalentna) elementa: izobraževanje v najširšem smislu in strokovno usposabljanje. Na podlagi empiričnega gradiva pokažemo, da se razkorak med teorijo in prakso kaže v napetosti med akademsko in pedagoško usmeritvijo. Za obravnavo in posredovanje te napetosti predlagamo koncept refleksije o habitusu. Spodbujanje takšne oblike refleksije med študenti omogoča premostitev vrzeli med različnimi logikami univerze in šole. Poleg tega pomaga razumeti neenakost in neravnovesje moči v izobraževalnem sistemu ter razviti sposobnost samostojnega odločanja, ki je ključno za krmarjenje v nenehno spreminjajočem se in zapletenem svetu sodobnih šol.

**Ključne besede:** refleksija o habitusu, avstrijsko izobraževanje učiteljev, napetost med teorijo in prakso, neenakost

## Introduction

### Theory, Practice and Habitus Reflexivity in Teacher Education in Austria

Since the 1990s, the Bologna Process has promoted a far-reaching transformation of universities into entrepreneurial units (e.g., Hark & Hofbauer, 2018). Consequently, students are increasingly seen as customers who receive a service, namely education and/or professional qualification. In this logic, higher education teachers support students in acquiring competences or applicable subject-specific and methodological knowledge aiming at their ‘employability’. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the dual function of universities – academic education on the one hand and professional qualification for a specific profession on the other – has been debated for some time (e.g., Demirović, 2015, p. 92). Such an ongoing debate has been the case for teacher training, where one of the discussions has centred on the theory-practice relationship (e.g., Weniger, 1957; Bollnow, 1978; Drerup & Terhart, 1990; Korthagen, 2010; Makrinus, 2012; Meseth, 2016; for other fields like pedagogy, see Ermenc et al., 2015).

While studies such as philosophy, sociology, mathematics, or geography do not pursue qualification for a specific profession, teacher training is mainly intended to prepare aspiring teachers and thus aims to produce future workers for a defined professional field. Scheid and Wenzl (2020, p. 5), amongst others, highlight that teacher education has always been under pressure to prepare students for their professional practice. As such, it cannot solely focus on theoretical (subject) knowledge but must also consider the demands of school practice. The tension between academic standards and practical demands is a constant challenge in teacher training, as it aims to meet both expectations. On the one hand, there is the need for education to be useful for professionalisation and the daily work in school. On the other, this education should be based on an academic foundation (e.g., Meseth & Proske, 2018, p. 20f.). This relationship between the scientific foundation and professional practice is also reflected in the design of the curricula of Austrian teacher training programmes. Almost ten years ago, on 1 October 2015, a new curriculum, the so-called Teacher Education NEW,<sup>4</sup> was introduced into the Austrian teacher training programme. Science and research

4 The teacher training in Austria is organised in five groups. Each group is a merger of different universities and university colleges of teacher education. The University of Graz, where we did our research, is part of the “Entwicklungsverbund Süd-Ost (ESVO)”, the merger of four universities (University of Graz, The University of Music and Performing Arts Graz, the University of Technology Graz and the University of Klagenfurt) and four colleges of teacher education (the University College of Teacher Education Styria, the Private University College of Teacher Education Burgenland, the University College of Teacher Education Carinthia and the Private University College of Teacher Education Graz).

were identified as core elements of the new teacher education in the nationwide recommendations of an expert group (Härtel et al., 2010, p. 75). As a result, the current programme includes basic courses in educational science (in German Bildungswissenschaftliche Grundlagen, BWG) in addition to school practice and subject didactics. This means that students now learn the basics of educational and social theory, teaching and learning, school development, methodology, and research practice. Developing critical thinking and (self-)reflection skills and methods for researching one's teaching activities are also essential components of these courses. This part of the curriculum leads to two main questions which we took on and addressed in our research project: How do students perceive and cope with content that cannot be directly translated into school practice? Moreover, how should university lecturers deal with students' questions regarding the relevance of course content to their everyday school work?

### **The Methodology and Theory of Habitus.Power.Education**

Our paper is based on findings from the project Habitus.Power.Education – Transformation through Reflection (in German: Habitus.Macht.Bildung – Transformation durch Reflexion). This project was funded by the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research (BMBWF) via the performance agreement with the University of Graz from mid-2019 to the end of 2021 and was located at the Institute of Education Research and Teacher Education. Our research aim was manifold: first, we were interested in students' experiences and their awareness of social inequality in educational institutions. Second, we also wanted to encourage students to reflect on power relations in pedagogical relationships. Third, we aimed to explore how student experiences of social inequality in educational institutions can be reflexively collected and, fourth, what methodological tools can be used to support habitus-reflexive teaching at schools and universities.

By drawing on our empirical findings, we demonstrate that the theory-practice tension manifests itself between the academic and pedagogical orientations. Thus, we ask whether habitus reflexivity can close the divide between the different logics of university and school. By employing the concept of habitus reflexivity, we are referring, on the one hand, to Bourdieu's understanding of habitus as 'a subjective but not individual system of internalised structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class' (Bourdieu, 1977, p.86). On the other hand, in our theoretical framework, we allude to reflexivity as an attribute and characteristic in distinction to reflection as an activity. Reflexivity, as described by Modaschl (2010, p. 4), entails the

ability to abstain from one's own egocentric perspective, allowing an understanding of alternative vantage points from which a different perspective on the subject may arise. Habitus reflexivity in our understanding, therefore, means not only reflecting one's habitus with regard to social relations of inequality. By reflecting and becoming aware of their habitus, students also develop important skills for their professionalisation. (Future) teachers, in particular, benefit from engaging with their habitus and the associated patterns of perception and acting, two aspects which are unconsciously linked to the assessment of children and adolescents as 'gifted', 'committed', 'untalented', 'lazy', and similar. Such assessments and attributions also influence the support of pupils and students (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1971). Because the habitus is conceptualised as a link between individuals and social structure, habitus reflexivity helps to comprehend inequality and power relations in educational institutions, such as schools and universities, and in society. Its development supports agency, which is essential for navigating the ever-changing and complex world of modern schools.

## Method

In February 2018, we<sup>5</sup> started our project with the aim of encouraging students' critical thinking and enhancing the awareness of social inequality in teacher education. We decided to use a course called 'Introduction to Educational Research' to shed a broader light on the topic of habitus reflexivity and its development. This course is part of the BA programme 'General Secondary Level Teacher Training' and is recommended to be taken during the fourth or the fifth semester (out of eight). It is assigned to the module BWB/Educational Theory and Society, in which students learn to view educational processes from a socio-critical perspective, become familiar with approaches to the theory-practice relationship, learn about its relevance for educational practical fields, and become acquainted with research methods and their potential in pedagogical practice. In addition to the courses, the module also includes internships in schools.

## Participants

One hundred and twenty students, all in the Bachelor programme of Teacher Education at the time, participated in our pilot project between the 2018 summer semester and the 2019 summer semester, during which we mainly generated our empirical material; 59% of the participants were female, which is slightly

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5 Katarina Froebus, Klara Strausz, Veronika Wöhrer and Julia Schubatzky were part of the project team in addition to the authors; Kathrin Otrell-Cass was the project leader.

below the average in the BA programmes<sup>6</sup>. As part of the curriculum, the course 'Introduction to Educational Research' is typically scheduled in the fourth semester of the programme. However, our participants, on average, were in their seventh semester. We did not specifically select participants for our project; instead, we invited all students from the course to participate, which included a total of six rounds over three semesters. All of them agreed to participate and signed a declaration of consent to the collection and use of data in the context of the project.

### Instruments

Our research was not only about generating research material on social inequality and the students' habitus but also about doing research with students by following the paradigm of inquiry-based learning (e.g., Huber, 2014; for research-based learning in teacher education in this journal, see Niemi, 2011; Agud & Ion, 2019). Thereby, we combined qualitative social research methods (Flick et al., 2015) with approaches and methods from participatory research (von Unger, 2014; Bergold & Thomas, 2010).<sup>7</sup>

Specifically, we guided our 120 students to use different qualitative or participatory research methods. Three out of six groups approached the research topic primarily through the appropriation of the collective memory work method<sup>8</sup> (Haug, 1999a; Haug, 1999b; Ortner & Thuswald, 2012). The other three groups used guided interviews<sup>9</sup> (Bock, 1992), group discussions (Bohn-sack et al., 2006) and Photovoice<sup>10</sup> (e.g., Buschi & Hedderich, 2021; Frisch, (n.d.)) to explore social inequality on and off campus. These empirical methods

6 In 2018/2019, the proportion of female students in Bachelor's degree programmes at the University of Graz was around 63% (Unidata, 2023). This ratio remained consistent for the Bachelor's degree in Teacher Education in 2021 (Universität Graz, 2022, p. 22).

7 This combination is less common in the German-speaking area, but quite common in the Anglo-American area, where qualitative methods textbooks repeatedly contain chapters on participatory social research (e.g. Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) or journals on qualitative research includes participatory methods (e.g. Bagnoli, 2009; Darbyshire et al., 2005).

8 The collective memory work, promoted by the Frigga Haug in the 1980s, is a feminist social constructionist method that combines research with learning and reflection by bridging the gap between theory and practice. It allows a group to reflect on a shared topic of interest and write short individual memory scenes, which are used as the core material for subsequent analysis and reflection. The method not only encourages a deeper understanding of the chosen topic but also fosters a collaborative and participatory approach to knowledge creation within the students' group. (see Haug, 1999a).

9 The students had the freedom to select any student from the teacher training programme for their interviews.

10 Photovoice is a qualitative participatory research method that involves students in capturing photographs as a means of self-expression and storytelling on a specific topic (in our case, social inequality in the students' environment). By collaboratively selecting, naming, and reflecting on the images, the awareness and critical reflection of students on a specific topic should be enhanced. Moreover, it allows students to actively contribute to the research process with the aim of initiating change processes (for Photovoice in the context of teacher education see e.g. Farley et al., 2017).

were complemented by methods for self-reflection, such as written reflections on one's position on science and academia or visualisations of one's resources and types of capital (Bourdieu, 1983), which were obligatory for all of our course groups. Overall, our empirical data comprises 120 collective memory work histories, 42 interviews, nine Photovoice stories, four group discussions and more than 400 reflection sheets from different exercises (e.g., graphical and written reflections on the own educational path and the capital, reflections on one's own access to academia and science etc.).

The qualitative empirical material was analysed using the intersectional multilevel analysis (Winker & Degele, 2009). This methodological approach, on the one hand, enables us to examine the interconnections between various categories of inequality, including social background, gender, migration background, age, family status and so on. On the other hand, the use of intersectional multi-level analysis allows us to investigate the levels at which students reflect on social inequality, whether it is the level of identity construction, symbolic representation and/or social structure (see Winker & Degele, 2011). Our hypothesis, confirmed during the analysis, was that students tend to reflect social inequality at the individual level, often overlooking its connection to the symbolic and structural level.

## Research Design

Our project started with the collection of empirical data between the 2018 summer semester and the 2019 summer semester; this marked the first phase of our project. The empirical material generated by the students themselves was accompanied by written reflections of the course leaders. We discussed initial empirical findings and emerging hypotheses within our research group and with the students in class. This improved the quality of our research process and led to further development of (new) exercises aimed at fostering students' habitus reflexivity. In the second phase of our project, we continued the analysis of empirical data and created Open Educational Resources (OER),<sup>11</sup> which contain both theory cards (in which complex theoretical content is described briefly, in simple language and with empirical examples) and cards with concrete practical exercises<sup>12</sup>, which encourage the habitus reflexivity of students or other persons.

In order to ensure quality criteria in the qualitative research process (Steinke, 2000, p. 186), we documented the whole research process from data

11 Our Open Educational Resources are available at <https://lehrkompetenz.uni-graz.at/de/forschung/habitus.macht.bildung/>.

12 These exercises were also practiced and reflected with students in seminars.

collection, our explicit and implicit expectations to our group interpretations (inter-subject comprehensibility), connected the theory and analysis with empirical examples (empirical foundation), tested the limits of our research (limitation) and reflected our role as researchers and course leaders (reflected subjectivity).

As explained in detail in the next chapter, our analysis confirmed the previously still unsystematic assumption of a theory-practice tension, which was based on the students' repeated questioning of the benefits of theory for practice. Based on the following explanations, we want to explore the question of how students perceive and cope with content that cannot be directly translated into school/teaching practice.

## Results

Scientific knowledge claims to be timeless and universally valid, while practice aims to solve concrete, instant, practical problems. Science and practice thereby look at reality from different perspectives: the former with the aim of gaining generalisable knowledge, the latter with the aim of shaping and mastering specific situations and challenges. Moreover, in science, complexity is intentionally increased, whereas in practice, it is reduced for the purpose of applicability (Rothland, 2020, p. 136.). While student teachers often desire specific, clear answers to questions regarding practical schoolwork, science generates questions and diverse, uncertain, empirical findings.

### Text and theory work and the lack of relevance for the teaching practice

Students in teacher training tend to perceive the educational science basics, such as quality management and education, social conditions in educational processes and pedagogical research, as the theoretical side of their studies. This often leads to resistance and a lack of understanding, particularly if they see no direct relevance for their future work as teachers, as the following student quotes indicate:

*The redundancy of much of the teaching content (thematic overlaps, idle time, irrelevance, etc.) urgently needs to be revised; possibly also less theory-based training for what is, after all, a very practical profession. (UK, summer semester 2018, Reflective Writing<sup>13</sup>)*

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<sup>13</sup> The literal quotations have been translated into English by us and are structured according to the following scheme: Anonymised abbreviation, course term, name of the method or exercise.



*I now perceive science as an excess of theories that often lack practical implementation. (Bizzl, winter semester 2018/19, Me and Academia)*

Resistance to theory not only refers to the critical questioning of prevailing patterns of thought, perception, and action in educational institutions. It primarily refers to the fact that theoretical knowledge does not appear to be directly transferable into school practice. What follows is disappointment with the teacher training programme, as the following quotes show:

*But theory and practice are still two different things. And when I am in school, theory often doesn't help me at all. And if I've never had much practice, then I think I'll have an insane problem later in [school] life. (Alex, summer semester 2019, Group Discussion 3).*

*She<sup>14</sup> had expected more from the teacher training, at least a better preparation for practice. Everything she had learned so far was theoretical and not very suitable for teaching. How can a philosophical theory help her if a student is not enthusiastic about her teaching? (Cat, summer semester 2019, Collective Memory Work 'When I was afraid of not being professionally competent enough')*

*But the question is: With what literature do you deal, and how meaningfully is it related to my studies? That is a difference. If I have to deal with literature that doesn't really matter for my later career, or even for my courses later in my studies, then it's actually pointless in my eyes. (Charlie, summer semester 2018, Group Discussion 2)*

As these statements make clear, teacher students are strongly focused on their (future) work as teachers and, therefore, consequently demand content that prepares them for this very task. They continuously question any exercise, content, theoretical concept and similar regarding its usability for school. While anything with clear, practical relevance is preferred and demanded, theory courses with no clearly visible connection to practice are considered pointless and useless. This often leads to doubts among students, particularly during the first semesters, as they initially (thought to) have chosen a programme that prepares them for a specific profession.

*There were not only highs during my studies. Rather, most of my university career so far has been characterised by self-doubt. It happened that I simply had the feeling that I was too stupid for my studies. These doubts were also the cause of my numerous considerations to give up my studies and take up an apprenticeship instead. (FZ, summer semester 2018, Reflective Writing)*

14 By doing collective memory work, memory stories are formulated in the third form.

*Regarding our teacher training programme, I think we have far too little practice. Later, we must teach children, and we only have six internships in our degree programme. And when are we really supposed to learn it? If not now, when? We can't stand there in front of a class and not get along with them at all. I think, especially in teacher training, it would be important for us to have more practice.* (Alex, summer semester 2019, Group Discussion 3)

At the same time, however, our empirical material indicates that the rejection of theoretical content and the demand for practical content is not equally desired by all students. Thus, there seem to be two groups of students. The first group of students has a strong practical orientation and feels that theory work is pointless or a waste of time. Conversely, the second group agrees that theory is important. Three students belonging to the latter group describe it as the following:

*I would see it differently. Because when you read books, and you put it in your own words, and you deal with literature, it gives you a lot. Because you deal with a topic from different angles. It's more of a question of how useful it is if I stubbornly learn everything by heart for a two-week period.* (Sascha, summer semester 2018, Group Discussion 2)

*Knowledge and theory give me support; they somehow create stability and security, and knowing that you know something is reassuring.* (XY, summer semester 19, Me and Academia)

*Theory is not useful right at the beginning [of the schoolwork]. I can acquire practical skills in practice. And only later, when I am familiar with the practice, does theory come into play. And that's how I would see it for the teacher training programme. Therefore, I'm more of an opponent of an excessive practical orientation in the teaching programme.* (Toni, summer semester 2018, Group Discussion 2)

Another student formulates it even more strongly when speaking about theory as the practice of university and expressing his conception of universities as theoretical places. At the same time, he establishes an opposition between academia and the working class by connecting practice with people from the 'non-academic milieu' who, in his opinion, have a stronger need for practical knowledge. This already indicates that the theory-practice dualism has an inherent classicist element, as demonstrated in the following quote:

*In my personal opinion, practice is not the measure of all things at university. Maybe that's the case in teacher training because you study to be active in practice. But the university is supposed to be a theoretical place where I do science, and, in research, I have practice, sometimes more, sometimes less.*

*But actually, the practice of university is theory. And I think the stereotype simply comes from the fact that people who are not in the academic milieu are very application oriented. That's obvious. Their everyday life is limited. They get up in the morning, go to work, come home in the evening, watch ORF<sup>15</sup> for a while, then go to sleep and get up again. They wouldn't have the time to deal with the theoretical aspects of the world. Instead, when they read something, it might be a cookbook because it is simply application oriented. Or they read some guidebook because it is application oriented. But they certainly don't read Kleist to broaden their minds. That's what I think. So, there's actually nothing to say against theory at university; that's why I'm actually there. (Luca, summer semester 2019, Group Discussion 3)*

### Theory versus practice: a question of the field of study

The dualistic relationship between theory and practice is not only created by students when referring to the contents of their teacher training programme but also when contrasting teacher training with other fields of study. While the comments in the previous part indicate that teacher training is often perceived as too theoretical, this perception changes when looking at different fields of study. In direct comparison with other fields, teacher training seems to be more practice oriented.

*I think that the teacher training programme is perhaps one of the studies that has the most practical relevance. I think we are a bit privileged ... I think that we are the ones who have the most [practice]. Or quite a lot. Compared to other degree programmes. (Lea, summer semester 2019, Group Discussion 3)*

Theoretical content, therefore, seems to be the reason that prior studies were terminated or that the teacher training programme is preferred over others, as shown in the following quotes:

*But as it then turned out, environmental systems science has exactly nothing to do with environmental engineering. It didn't appeal to me at all. It was very, very theoretical, very technical, very experiment based. It quickly became clear that it was nothing for me. (PH1, summer semester 2019, Interview)*

*Well, I've always been a musician and liked to make music myself. My study in musicology is just a lot of theory and talking about music, but not 'doing it yourself'. And that has always bothered me somehow. (Egi, summer semester 2018, Interview)*

15 ORF is an Austrian public TV station.

*In principle, I started studying mathematics for a bachelor's degree and not for a teaching degree. I liked it in the beginning, but it was very demanding. At the end of the first semester, I reached the first point where I thought, this is not for me, because it's just too demanding, too much at once. Just mathematics, just headaches, that was quite a lot (Theo, winter semester 2018/19, Interview)*

Therefore, the conception of the role of theory seems to understandably vary not only between different fields of study but also within the teacher training itself. In the following quote, a student who is studying to become a teacher in music and history talks about the different emphasis on theory and practice, comparing the subject didactics in the music and history programmes:

*The music studies programme is simply very practice oriented. History studies are very literature oriented, although, of course, both music and history are humanities. You have a really high scientific focus in history; that's not the case in the teacher training with a focus on music education. Because, as I said, there is a lot of practice and also in the courses, for example, in music history or in subject didactics, a lot is taught about the subject itself and less about what is going on in the academic environment and what the state of research is. So, there is less of a scientific focus, which was very important in history studies: understanding debates in the field and reading and knowing certain authors and standard books. Studying history was certainly more complex on a purely cognitive level than studying music. (Anna, summer semester 2018, interview)*

### **Encouragement through (school) practice**

While for most students in our project (though, as shown, not for all), theory appears burdensome and contributes to self-doubt, practice is understood as something that helps to alleviate doubts and asserts students in their choice of studies. Thus, practical training experience within the bachelor's degree programme is often seen as a litmus test for the choice of study or career. The experience is used to put aside any uncertainties about the choice of study that arise due to the supposedly pointless, laborious, and repetitive theory- and research-based courses at university.

*I never doubted history. In German, however, I did, but the PPS<sup>16</sup> encouraged me to continue with it. (JR, summer semester 2018, Reflective Writing)*

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<sup>16</sup> PPS is the abbreviation for pedagogical practical studies (Pädagogisch-Praktische Studien), the practical school training part of the curriculum.

*After the first internships, I knew I was up to the challenge.* (SU, summer semester 2019, Reflective Writing)

*Every time I do an internship, I remember why I'm studying [teacher education], and it motivates me all over again.* (Alice, summer semester 2018, Reflective Writing)

Furthermore, teaching-related employment also proves to be useful for one's later career because of important and much-needed practical experience for professionalisation:

*A part-time job is useful for my future profession. For example, when we, as students in teacher training, give someone private tuition, it is certainly not bad, because you're already gaining practice. Or also coaching lessons for us sport students, for example, swimming lessons.* (AO27, summer semester 2018, Group Discussion 1)

When comparing the different explanations of the relationship between theory and practice in teacher training, it becomes clear that students are referring to or constructing a hierarchical relationship between the two. In university studies, the teaching of theories and scientific methods is central and considered as the starting point of learning a subject. However, the perception of students in teacher training is different. As demonstrated by our empirical material, most teacher students reject theoretical content, not least because it makes them doubt their choice of study and profession.

In contrast, practice appears to be the component that is given preference and is considered more important because it is perceived to serve the pedagogical orientation of teacher training. The question that remains is how to deal with this tense relationship between theory and practice or academic and pedagogical orientation. How can lecturers in teacher training support students in dealing with this tension? Finally, for which students does this tension prove to be seemingly irresolvable, while others navigate through it with apparent ease?

## Discussion

Our project's motivation was to make social inequality in educational institutions a central topic. By reflecting on one's habitus and grasping the connection between habitus and experiences in the educational system, we wanted students to understand the power relations in pedagogical institutions and relationships. One of the central power relations that emerged is the relationship between theory and practice. While we originally thought that reflecting on

the habitus could only help to identify social inequalities, the analysis of our empirical material shows that habitus reflexivity can also support students in dealing with the different logics of academic and pedagogical orientation or, in other words, the ones of university and school.

Our empirical data indicates that negative feelings, for example, about the amount of theory or how to deal with theory, occur not only, but above all, at the beginning of studies and especially when the university is an unfamiliar environment. Depending on the fit between one's habitus and the requirements and structures of the university, students succeed to varying degrees in dealing with the tense relationship between theory and practice. As an explanation for unpleasant feelings towards and experiences with theory, we draw on Lars Schmitt's (2015) concept of habitus-structure conflict, which also explains emotions regarding studying in general. This concept describes that 'if we are "free" to choose, we are more likely to choose such situations, people, environments that fit what we have already internalised. [...] Stick to your knitting – otherwise you will get a habitus-structure conflict [...]' (p. 201). Due to the habitus-structure conflict, some of the students participating in our project felt more uncomfortable and out of place than others. It seems that students who describe themselves as the first in their family to attend a university, in particular, struggle more with this theory-practice tension. Some even withdraw and avoid contact with other students and teachers or consider alternative options within or outside the university, as our empirical analysis has shown. Bourdieu (2001) refers to this phenomenon as self-selection. The overload, the fear of not knowing enough, and consequently also self-selection is evident in the following statement made by a student:

*The student was very uncomfortable with her [lack of] prior knowledge and did not dare to inquire more closely because she was ashamed to embarrass herself. She did not know if other students felt the same way as she did, since no one asked questions. She felt completely alone in her situation. ... Unfortunately, her fear of not being competent enough dragged on, and thus, she changed studies and chose a subject in which she felt more confident. (Ivy, summer semester 2019, Collective Memory Work 'When I was afraid of not being professionally competent enough')*

The quote makes clear that the 'fit of habitus and position,' as El-Mafaalani (2012, p. 84) explains, can act in a negative sense 'as an invisible barrier, as a social closure mechanism, also in the form of self-discrimination, that is, as a process of self-exclusion.' The fit between habitus and position seems to be easier for those students who are more familiar with the structures and requirements of science and university. Conversely, students who lack this knowledge,

or especially first-generation students, seem to struggle more with it, as the following statements indicate:

*It's often the case that if you have a text, you don't know certain words because you don't use all this academic language.* (SU3\_2, summer semester 2019, Interview)

*He has attended many seminars in the last two years. In the beginning, he always sat in them with beads of sweat all over his body, afraid of breaking from the demands made.* (Geri, summer semester 2019, Collective Memory Work 'When I was afraid of not being professionally competent enough')

*Sometimes, when I am sitting in the lecture, and things are mentioned that should be comprehensible to everyone by now, but I have no idea about it, I feel inferior.* (Kat, winter semester 2018/19, Me and Academia)

How can the tension between the different logics of theory and practice, university and school, and the doubts and the danger of self-exclusion be addressed? Habitus reflexivity may help to tackle these challenges. By examining one's habitus, habitus reflexivity aims to understand one's position in combination with the structures, power relations and mechanisms that characterise educational institutions such as schools or universities. Additionally, it helps in preparing for and dealing with conflicts that can arise from the different expectations that students have, as well as the expectations placed on them by academic lecturers. Referring to Kergel and Heidekamp (2019, p. VI), habitus-sensitive reflections enable questioning the milieu-specific implications of the educational space as well as one's milieu-specific understanding of the profession. Promoting habitus reflexivity among students enables them to develop an awareness of their own habitus and reflection of questions like: Why do I favour certain learning contents while having an aversion to others? Why does theory sometimes seem foreign, complex, boring, and dispensable? What kind of knowledge and values are reflected in certain theories, and who is formulating them from which point of view? Why is practice seen as the most important thing in teacher education? And how is this linked to social relations like the neoliberal university that privileges employability? Where do I come from, and why do I have such a hard/easy time fitting in at university? How is this linked to my social background and to the often invisible functioning of power in university?

As the habitus is seen as a link between individual and social structure, habitus reflexivity allows for a deeper understanding of power imbalances and social inequality in society and education systems. Therefore, it also aids in thinking about classist relations in educational institutions such as universities. At the

same time, habitus reflexivity can motivate not only students but also lecturers at universities to reflect on the tense relationship between theory and practice and classist relations. It is useful to understand why theoretical content is often given preference in teacher training as well as in university teaching in general and why it seems to be superior and more important than practical content.

## Conclusion

Based on the findings in the project *Habitus.Power.Education*, we discussed the tension between theory and practice and between academia and school in Austrian teacher education. Despite repeated student requests to establish a direct practical relevance of theoretical contents, we argue that teacher training is neither just a place where future teachers are educated/trained nor is it a space in which theory is conveyed without purpose. As we have shown in our analysis of empirical data, teacher training in Austria combines both elements and, therefore, follows academic as well as pedagogical orientations. Both students and lecturers need to learn to deal with these tensions and actively work on certain contradictions within teacher education. Consequently, the concept of habitus reflexivity can be helpful in overcoming a hierarchical understanding of both theory and practice and becoming more aware of the important links between them. One student reflects on the theory-practice relationship as follows: ‘It is often very nice to see how the theory of my subjects is implemented in “real” life’ (CPT. Bacon, summer semester 2019, Reflective Writing). Another, answering the question of what students take away from the course, wrote: ‘...theory is important for the understanding of diverse pedagogical actions (Bourdieu)’ (Z, winter semester 2018/19, Evaluation).

Drawing on these findings, it can be concluded that at least four moments of interconnectedness between theory and practice must be pointed out for teacher education: First, pedagogical professionalism requires that teachers not only behave in a respected manner in pedagogical settings but they also have to be able to theoretically justify their actions and understand why they do what they do (Oevermann, 1996). Second, theory can help to create distance of and reflection on pedagogical practice, which are both components of teacher professionalism (Schratz et al., 2010; Cramer, 2014), and are equally important for criticism and learning at university. Third, the theory contains a ‘speculative moment’ (Pongratz, 2010, p. 10) that points beyond the status quo and enables other possibilities for thinking and acting. Finally, practice is a necessary point of reference in pedagogical theory (Helsper, 2016). Practice thus helps to illustrate theoretical concepts and models, to reveal their weaknesses



and ambiguities, and to make knowledge applicable. We, therefore, argue for the dissolution of this dualistic relationship between theory and practice and instead plead for a coexistence of theory and practice, because '[...] there is nothing so practical as a good theory' (Lewin, 1951, p. 169).

To demonstrate the importance of both theory and practice and to illustrate the practical applications of theories and statistical data on social inequality and habitus to students, we created teaching/learning material<sup>17</sup> in the form of theory cards<sup>18</sup> and exercise cards.<sup>19</sup> Thus, we attempted to bridge the gap between theory and practice and enable the analysis of social inequality in education within the framework of courses, workshops, and other training formats, in order to support the development of participants' habitus reflexivity. With the help of our material, students, teachers, and university lecturers should be encouraged to reflect on their involvement in social power relations and their reproduction in school practice. They should become aware of their patterns of perception and interpretation and their own social position when answering the following questions:

- Why do some students have an easier time at school and university than others? Why does some teaching and learning content suit some students more and others less?
- What should teaching/learning material look like in order to appeal not only to those who have the advantage of a large cultural capital?
- Who attends which type of school, who makes it to university, and which forms of capital prove to be helpful or hindering?
- What goals are associated with education – does education serve practical application or is it more aimed at distinction?
- Which students or teachers do I prefer, and why? Which students do I find hardworking/lazy, good/bad, un/gifted?
- What norms and values are expressed in the ideas of achievement, success, educational advancement, etc.?

With reference to Vogel (2019, p. 3323), teachers without the ability to reflect their habitus are unable to understand the social position of their students

<sup>17</sup> The materials are available as OER on the website [habitusmachtbildung.uni-graz.at](https://habitusmachtbildung.uni-graz.at).

<sup>18</sup> In the theory cards, (scientific) debates around Bourdieu, social inequality, habitus reflexivity, learning space design, knowledge, and power and much more are presented in a linguistically comprehensible way.

<sup>19</sup> The exercises include various reflection exercises, writing exercises, participatory research methods such as photovoice as well as social science research methods such as interviews and group discussions. They all aim to reflect on social inequality from different angles (something like pictures, memes, words, songs, games, discussions, etc.) in order to stimulate the development of habitus reflexivity.

and its associated implications. They are not aware of their own involvement in social relations (reproduction) and the patterns of thinking, perceiving, judging, and acting that relate to it. This lack of awareness can promote the pressure of sanctions and selection, as well as the symbolic violence (e.g., Bourdieu, 1997; Schmitt, 2006) associated with it, especially among students from non-academic backgrounds. One student highlights the importance of habitus reflexivity referring to heterogeneous school classes with children having different social backgrounds as the following:

*An important point is that children in school experience different levels of support from home. They are given different resources or values. Some get no support from home at all, and some get a lot. And I think as a teacher, you have to support the children who don't get any support at home even more.* (Dattel, summer semester 2019, Group Discussion 3)

In addition, by emphasising the importance of theory and practice and strengthening habitus reflexivity in teacher training, we are also reacting to changed framework conditions in schools, influenced by educational policy. We contribute, for example, to meeting the new ministerial guidelines on school quality. In the Austrian Quality Framework for Schools, the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research (BMBWF, 2021, p. 11ff.) highlights that teachers and other pedagogical staff should be able to:

- *reflect on their own attitudes, behaviour, and preconceptions towards learners with the aim of better recognising and activating their potential;*
- *enable learners to reflect on their own attitudes, behaviour, and preconceptions;*
- *act as reflective practitioners, ensuring and developing the quality of their teaching on an ongoing basis.*

Thus, habitus reflexivity in teacher education aids in perceiving and understanding inequality and power imbalances in the education system, responding to changing (educational policy) conditions and developing agency, which is essential for navigating the ever-changing and complex world of modern schools.

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