Entrepreneurial Contexts and Engaged Students

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This paper discusses findings about the relationship, if any, between student teachers’ participation in entrepreneurial educational contexts and their development of classic virtues such as engagement. The overall question of essence is: why do entrepreneurial learning contexts influence classic virtues such as engagement?

For this purpose the phenomenon “entrepreneurship” is defined as a transaction among the individual and its contexts (Spinosa et al., 2007; Bager et al., 2011). Engagement is defined as a relational phenomenon shown as a person’s interaction in the world (Dewey 1916/2008), which is essential for people’s learning abilities and ambitions to keep leaving marks for collective visions (Fernandez-Aráoz, 2014). Engagement is therefore essential for student teachers whose purpose it is to become qualified to lead the learning processes of children and thereby make them responsible citizens. The hypothesis is that participation in entrepreneurial educational contexts in teacher education will have a knock-on effect on the learning processes of the pupils in a school.

The article is divided into two parts: 1) a theoretical analysis of entrepreneurship education as a new pedagogical phenomenon in teacher education. The emphasis in the analysis will be on showing the link between the phenomena engagement and entrepreneurship and to introduce the concepts used for analysis of the empirical data; 2) an empirical analysis of student teachers’ experiences of the impact of engagement which is stimulated by participation in entrepreneurial contexts forming part of and as an add-on to their education. The analysis shows patterns between participation in entrepreneurial contexts and the engagement of student teachers and it will be followed up outlining implications for the teacher education programme.

Motivation
Experience from my life as a lecturer and a researcher at the teacher education at VIA University College Aarhus and VIA entrepreneurship center shows that entrepreneurial contexts seem to encourage engagement in some students beyond the ordinary. The extraordinary engagement of these student teachers is evidenced by their initiative to search for and participate in various, extra-curricular entrepreneurial contexts and to develop and implement new inventions, which brings value to the school or school-related contexts. Their participation also seems to increase their drive to learn. These findings are interesting because the teacher education is challenged by high drop-out rates and lack of engagement and active participation – and because an essential purpose of the teacher education is to educate teachers who can stimulate the learning ability of children.

Topicality
The research conducted contributes to show patterns between participation in entrepreneurial educational contexts and the engagement of student teachers. Engagement is a phenomenon which is underexposed in the research field of entrepreneurship education but it is an essential virtue for entrepreneurship (Spinosa et al., 1997).
Entrepreneurship education is associated with a vision of growth. Since 2013, the Danish educational system from pre-school to Ph.D. has aimed to stimulate, evaluate and test the entrepreneurial competences of students (FIVU, 2012). This poses a new challenge for the pedagogical context of the teacher education and the school system. A central element of this challenge is that entrepreneurship education in the context of the teacher education is in its early infancy, and we do not have any research results demonstrating the impact of entrepreneurship education in this field. However, we do know from general studies of entrepreneurship education in higher education contexts that it has an impact on motivation, participation, creativity and ambitions and it seems to reduce student drop-out rates (Lund et al., 2011; FFE-YE, 2013). Entrepreneurship education is therefore interesting as a method to increase student teachers’ engagement to learn.

The research also reflects the current change of direction within entrepreneurship education from business entrepreneurship, which primarily focuses on creating new business ventures, to a more recent trend within pedagogical entrepreneurship which focuses on an enterprising approach and behaviour and entrepreneurial contexts.

**Pedagogics, business and social entrepreneurship**

Entrepreneurship education is a sort of practice in which the participants are trained to discover, create and realize new value adding opportunities (Sawyer, 2012). It has to produce added value to themselves and to others. The value may include value of a financial, social, cultural and human nature (FFE-YE, 2013). There are two main agendas within entrepreneurship education, both connected to the question of how to create more value/growth in society:

1) Pedagogical entrepreneurship (Lund et al., 2012) is about learning and is based on training an enterprising approach and behaviour in people. Growth is about raising human potential in order to develop personal and social competences to identify, create and act on new opportunities. (Gibb, 2002; Sarasvathy, 2003; Surlemont, 2007; Kirketerp, 2012; QAA, 2012). Inside this agenda two perspectives on opportunity creation can be identified. One which focuses on the capacity of individuals to act on and create new opportunities, where motivation is considered a key factor (Sarasvathy, 2003; Kirketerp, 2012). Another which focuses on opportunity-creation as an intense interaction between individuals and contexts (Hannon, 2006; Spinosa et al., 2007; Korsgaard et al., 2009) – in that light the phenomenon engagement is central.

2) Business entrepreneurship where growth is about creating small and medium enterprises. The students have to learn how to create new ventures (entrepreneurship) or how to create new ventures on the edge of existing ventures (intrapreneurship) (Schumpeter, 1934; Blenker et al., 2011). The methods of this direction will often train the students to have an intellectual, logical and rational approach to their surroundings or the general market.

An entrepreneurial approach and behaviour of humans is a condition for business entrepreneurship and it can be learnt and trained through entrepreneurship education (Blenker et al., 2011). Growth is a conceptual up-metaphor for the impact of entrepreneurship education and signals that something grows, raises and increases (Greve, 2011). The research conducted in this connection focuses on human growth, specifically raising the virtue engagement.

**Engagement**

Engagement is a relational and social phenomenon and is connected with a person’s active interaction with the surrounding world (Dewey 1916/2008; Lave & Wenge, 2004; Fernández-
Aráoz, 2014). From everyday practice it is my experience that engagement is confused with motivation. Motivation is an individual psychological phenomenon and describes why people act as they do. It is intrinsically and extrinsically driven (Ryan et al., 2002), and the phenomenon self-efficacy is often being highlighted as a key factor for entrepreneurship (Sarasvathy, 2003; Kirketerp, 2012). Motivation is a quality for entrepreneurship; my research demonstrates, however, that it is valuable to explore the phenomenon engagement which is a knack for connecting with people and the world – and leaving marks inspired by collective goals and visions.

Engagement is a quality for entrepreneurship and it is shown by everyday practice where people use their potential to disclose something to the surroundings: "The life of skilful disclosing, conversely, is a life of intense engagement. The best way to explore disharmonies, in other words, is not by detached deliberation but by involved experimentation” (Spinoza et al., 1997).

The quote shows that engagement arises by an explorative practice of involvement and experimentation. Engagement takes place in specific contexts – and is based on the exploration of real needs and directed against creating innovation in society. In this perspective, the entrepreneurial task is not to create something radically new but transform existing knowledge, practices and concepts into new and better combinations. Therefore, entrepreneurship is a phenomenon which arises in dynamic social interaction between individual competences and potentials and contexts (Korsgaard et al., 2009). The process is connected to sensitivity and creativity. Creativity typically arises from necessity (Tanggaard et al., 2009) and from collaborative processes where accumulation and sampling of human competences take place (Tanggaard et al., 2012). Sensitivity arises in a disclosing process where people explore disharmonies and anomalies in a context (Spinoza et al., 1999).

According to the interim findings of the theoretical analysis, entrepreneurship and engagement constitute a social learning process where human potential and visions are released in collaboration with others. This statement resonates in pragmatic and social learning philosophies appreciating learning by doing situated in collaborative and co-creating communities (Dewey 1916/2006, Barab et al., 2002; Lave & Wenge, 2004). The following empirical analysis is founded on this philosophy and shares selected key elements in entrepreneurship education that student teachers talk about as being particular and significant to their engagement. The concept key element embraces the fact that all students on different ways point this out as being central to their engagement.

Research method
The research involves a qualitative case study of six student teachers (Yin, 2003) and as such is a phenomenological study of everyday life (Brinkmann, 2012). This kind of research will never leave the world as it was – and it affects the world as it happens. I decided to make a note of this and used narrative co-creative group coaching as my method. It is a type of dialogue based on the coach’s approach to sensitivity, wondering and curiosity and a method to ask circular questions (Tomm, 1992) – and where knowledge is co-created in a collaborative process of dialogue among the participants (Stelter, 2011, Stelter 2012). The research method is at the same time a feed forward tool for the learning process of the participating student teachers. This reflects my philosophical resonance which is pragmatism and hermeneutics. I wanted the interactions to be useable to the students and to the contexts of the schools – while researching. I believe that it is a good track for research practice at the University Colleges in Denmark, which is in its early stages.
The strength of this qualitative research method is that it makes it possible to be close to the student teachers’ experiences and construction of meaning. The weakness is that it implies the researchers’ participation in the processes. This calls for the ethical imperative of the research to balance between empathic proximity and critical distance. A dilemma that is emphasized by the fact that implementation of the research implies a tension between two value-based ideals, research and innovation.

**Empirical research contexts**

The selected student teachers were “traditional” students at the teacher education offered by VIA University College Aarhus. They demonstrated a level of engagement out of the ordinary by repeatedly participating in extra-curricular entrepreneurial programmes at the VIA entrepreneurship center. The programmes were all based on a combination of clear framework and autonomy and designed from basic principles: entrepreneurship is acquired *through*1 entrepreneurship, real-life settings and co-creation while learning. Student teachers and school teachers have been collaborating and co-creating on REAL NEEDS for change in the specific contexts experienced by the participating teachers from school. In the co-creating processes the participants’ competences, ideas and visions were brought into play in their joint efforts to create new and useful inventions. The requirement was that the inventions should be realizable at actual schools.

The student teachers were asked about key factors for their engagement. In the transcription of the coaching dialogue I have been looking for condensations which say something about the recurring patterns that are important for their engagement. In the following sections I will share selected patterns and point out implications for future practices at the teacher education programme.

**Ambitions**

Generally, people learn about ambition as a phenomenon through educational culture and practice, it is linked to the individual’s inner measure of and motivation for satisfactory performance. In different ways the student teachers expressed the desire to free themselves from the majority culture as a key element of their engagement. They wanted something “more” than what is written in the curricula and expected from lecturers in “as is” reports, which simulate real life. They link this separation to the phenomenon ambition which is possible to display in entrepreneurial learning contexts:

“It was great to experience a training area where the Law of Jante2 does not exist – and it is very much like this in entrepreneurial learning contexts. The other students say that you cannot just ... But I will make room for me to move according to the possibilities that I see. It is as if culture says that if you are searching for more you are weird. You just have to do what the curriculum says. And you should never do more than what the teachers ask you to do. Exam culture is also such that it is about what professionally matters – not that you should be creative and acting.”

The quote shows that the entrepreneurial learning context was conceived as a training area which differs from the formal teacher education programme. This context gives the students an opportunity to raise self-efficacy, improve performance and exhibit ambition. “To do something with the competences I have” – it gives the impression that the student sees himself/herself as an

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1 Entrepreneurship education can be either about, through and for entrepreneurship (Hannon, 2006).

2 Typically for the Nordic countries, a sociological term used to describe a condescending attitude towards individuality and success. A common Nordic notion that emphasis should be on the collective, while discouraging those who stand out as achiever.
individual with a potential which can come into play in entrepreneurial learning processes. I suppose that these experiences also contribute to how they do their teaching. In that light entrepreneurial learning contexts both differ from and contribute to the “traditional” contexts of teacher education. It led to the conclusion that the possibility to participate in entrepreneurial contexts as an “add on” to the formal teacher education has a positive impact on student teachers’ ambitions and performances because their learning process is not limited by the objectives laid down in the curriculum but instead formed by insights, competences and potentials within the group.

Responsibility and relationships
The student teachers are driven by ambitions to do something new and really useful for others while learning. “The others” is not an abstract entity but very specific others whose life-world exists as a framework for the student teachers’ inventions. They talk about the opportunity to take individual responsibility in order to influence and act in their life-world as a key element of their engagement:

“It is in this type of courses you have the best chance of meeting the right people who are the kind of people who are needed ...... in the traditional educational framework. I’m frustrated that I do not get to be responsible for making things happen ... I want to work with a major project and an actual project where you use your professionalism to carry it out.”

The comment also shows that their feelings of responsibility are closely connected to relationships and influence through their realization of the inventions. Engagement is stimulated by involvement and experimentation with real needs which pushes the student through the education with a feeling of being valuable. Relationships and responsibility for making things happen also make it possible for student teachers to form their own career paths and make them employable in the labour market in a much broader sense than the “traditional” teacher education does:

“I have been contacted by XX from the Science Museum – you know the ones we created a product for in our pedagogy course. They would like me to create a teaching programme that they can use. And they would also like to offer me a salary. I can see that I can come up with heavier tasks if I do something. And we create relationships.”

The quote shows that the entrepreneurial contexts open the student teachers’ minds enabling them to create new possibilities based on their insights and competences in learning related contexts other than the school. It shows that relationships strengthen their own career paths and employability. In other words, the student teachers express that as a key element of their engagement. It led to the conclusion that the abstract “as so rapports” where student teachers imagines life-world in school has to be supplemented or even replaced by projects/programmes where student teachers collaborate and co-create with professionals about real and current challenges in the school or other learning contexts.

Being in motion and spotting oneself
Exploring one’s own means and potentials is a key element of the engagement of the student teachers:

“I’ve been really motivated and engaged. I have come closer to what is important to me. What makes me tick. I think it’s because I’ve been allowed to examine myself ... If you can’t see yourself and if you do not realize what you can do and how you can contribute, and if you can’t see the
need, then we will not have lived a full life. We may say that you have not lived a full life if you do not become aware of yourself. “

The quote shows that entrepreneurial contexts stimulate the student teachers’ subjectivity, passion and even quality of life. It is essential to understand that experiencing oneself is not without context. It is about seeing one’s own insight, competences and potential in relation to a concrete possibility, the desire to create and act in the world. Furthermore, it nourishes the feeling of being in motion, which the student teachers consider a key element of their engagement:

“I will definitely not stand still – I want to see the opportunities. With that attitude, you can do anything. It also gives me even more options. And I get a new spark. “-“...I will not notice whether it is my personal or my professional life, and these courses help me to be in motion. I am afraid to become restricted. This may well be a good thing also but it can also be a limiting thing.”

The quote shows that limits are barriers to student teachers’ engagement. In various ways they express that the “traditional” curriculum-based and goal-oriented contexts constitute a huge barrier to learning ambitions. The question is whether a barrier to an objective can lead to lack of motivation, participation and drop-out? Judging from the student teachers’ statements, it seems like it. In an attempt to increase participation and reduce drop-out in the teacher education, the programme has just implemented a study activity model which is in effect structural planning of the activities of the students. From what the student teachers said, their engagement does not increase with additional system planning but with the possibility of being in motion and spotting oneself while learning, creating and realizing. It has implication for new approaches, methods and organizational settings in the teacher education.

**Conclusion**
Research has demonstrated that educational contexts raise the engagement of student teachers when they can choose to be involved in changing concrete practices in school or school related contexts. It led to the conclusion that student teachers are practitioners who like to be actively involved in creating history in practice, who like to leave marks on the world. The engagement is stimulated by working with the real needs of others – in collaboration with them. It means that the student teachers are not motivated by selfish goals but by collective goals of creating a better practice in school. This reflects a deep humility on the part of the student teachers which I suppose has a spill-over effect on the pupils they are to teach in school. The motivation for creating “a better world” is a condition for citizenship, but it has to be followed up by the social phenomenon engagement which is connected with a person’ interaction with the surrounding world. In my point of view engagement is crucial for being a good student or citizen – and recent research shows that engagement is a virtue possessed by talents (Fernandez-Aráoz, 2014), which is a set of functional relational relation distributed across person and contexts (Barab et al, 2002. It leads to the reflection that entrepreneurship education seems to stimulate talent.

In a period when the educational system in Denmark is experiencing difficulties with the motivation, participation and drop-out rates of student teachers it is interesting to note that entrepreneurship education helps create greater ambitions and responsibilities – and strengthen the feeling of being valuable while learning. The students even connect it with quality of life.
My research shows that entrepreneurship education is one way of raising student teachers’ engagement in their own learning process and in the surrounding world – and forming a human character who is exhibiting true engagement.

**References**


