The role of intuition in pedagogical tact: Educator views

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Pedagogical tact concerns a teacher’s ability to adequately handle complex classroom situations that require immediate action. As such, pedagogical tact can be viewed as an enactment of teachers’ intuition. While most teachers, teacher educators, educational leaders and scholars readily recognise the importance of pedagogical tact (and by extension, intuition), few pre-service or in-service programmes devote explicit attention to developing this important teacher quality. This study set out to understand why. Specifically, data were collected to investigate how educators perceive intuition, and its role in teacher pedagogical tact. Ten focus group discussions were held with school board members, teacher educators, school principals, in-service teachers and pre-service teachers. Participants recognised two types of intuition commonly described in the literature (local and non-local), and affirmed the importance of intuition for teacher pedagogical tact. These educators also noted that teachers are rarely if ever encouraged to make conscious use of their intuition, let alone develop it. There was consensus that teachers differ in how well they are able to tune into their intuition. Though the scale of the study is small, the findings suggest that more attention should be given to developing teacher intuition and pedagogical tact than is currently the case.

Keywords: pedagogical tact; intuition; teacher development

Introduction

Teaching has become more and more complex, since greater demands are placed on teachers to face the challenges of today’s society and the diversity of expectations of students (Flores, 2017). For many teachers, the biggest challenge is now dealing with pupil problem behaviour, as this is becoming more prevalent, complex and diverse (Goei & Kleijnen, 2009). Research shows that the effects of teacher training initiatives which aim to improve social, emotional and behavioural outcomes of pupils in primary education are limited (Whear \textit{et al.}, 2013). Classroom events are only partially predictable and controllable (Wolff, 2015), and guidelines that adequately prescribe what teachers should do in specific situations do not exist (Bakx, 2015). With this line of reasoning, it is not easy to skilfully use multiple classroom strategies (Heikonen...
et al., 2017), since teaching requires being able to act upon large amounts of factors at once, many times a day.

Education serves the purposes of qualification, subjectification and socialisation (Biesta, 2014), and pedagogical tact is an important quality for serving each of these purposes. Tactful teaching is aimed at leading the learner towards growth (van Manen, 1991). van Manen (1991) relates to qualification and subjectification by stating that pedagogically tactful teachers share what they know, and create conditions in which young people can take their process of becoming into their own hands. The three educational purposes can lead to synergy, but also to conflicts. In particular, teachers constantly need to judge how to adjust the purposes to each other or how to prioritise them (Biesta, 2014). These decisions often have to be made in the moment and manifest in teachers’ pedagogical tact. Pedagogical tact supports teachers’ judgement for weaving these three purposes instantly and adequately into the process of everyday teaching.

However, given that teachers make relatively few conscious decisions while teaching (Korthagen, 2017), what does enable teachers to act instantly in complex classroom situations? Teachers’ ability to sense and act both swiftly and considerately in relation to large amounts of input at once constitutes pedagogical tact. Pedagogical tact enables adequate actions, which are sudden, immediate, situational, improvised (van Manen, 2015) and only indirectly connected with ideas that are consciously derived from theories (Juuso & Laine, 2004). Other scholars (e.g. Winch et al., 2015) have similarly observed that human performance relies on more than technical know-how alone. In this context, several scholars on pedagogical tact (e.g. van Manen, 1991) refer to Aristotle to explain that besides techne (craftsmanship), teaching also requires phronesis (colloquial wisdom). Techne refers to actively using principles, methods and materials productively, while phronesis concerns the virtue to aptly judge what needs to be done (Biesta, 2014). Both are needed to enable praxis, principled action or, in this case, pedagogical tact. Techne enables teachers to envision, predict, explain and mediate the consequences of interventions, while phronesis supports teachers in negotiating the complexity of classroom decision-making in situations where there may be no clear-cut answers (Winch et al., 2015). According to Fuglseth (2017), in its modern form, phronesis is said to be an alternative to behaviouristic, naturalistic, instrumentalist or foundationalist approaches in cultural sciences.

We assert that both techne and phronesis are enriched by intuition. Further, in the case of classroom performance, some scholars note that pedagogical tact correlates highly with a strong intuitive sense of when to respond in what way (Vagle, 2011), and argue that developed intuition is the driving force behind pedagogical tact (Bors & Stevens, 2013). We consider intuition to be crucial for teachers’ pedagogical tact, and describe the theoretical and empirical justifications for this next.

**Literature**

*Pedagogical tact*

The concept of pedagogical tact concerns the artistic ability of teachers to instantly act upon the complexity of classroom situations. Experts who investigate pedagogical
tact mostly build on the work of van Manen (1991), who himself builds on the work of scholars such as Herbart (1887) and Muth (1962). As early as 1802, Herbart stated that handling complex classroom situations requires receiving, apperceiving, feeling and judging, as well as letting go of routines and being freed from the influence of habit. Muth (1962) spoke in this context about the ‘unverfügbarkeit’ of pedagogical tact, which in English can be translated as ‘elusive intangibility’. Muth’s use of the German term stresses the fact that tact cannot be learned and reproduced at will, because it goes beyond skills or tricks. It is therefore not possible to ‘own’ or ‘steer’ tactful behaviour, but one can be prepared and be open for it to happen. Accordingly, Muth claims that teachers express their pedagogical tact during instructional engagement in situational confidence, dramaturgical capability, improvisation and spontaneity. Additionally, Muth suggests that teachers can express pedagogical tact through the binding character of their speech, their naturalness of action, their avoidance of any injury to the child and their maintenance of the distance that is necessary in the pedagogical relation too. Along similar lines, van Manen (1991, p. 146) describes pedagogical tact as a quality of being: ‘To exercise tact means to see a situation calling for sensitivity, to understand the meaning of what is seen, to sense the significance of this situation, to know how and what to do, and to actually do something right’. In later work, van Manen (2015) describes the concept as a kind of empathic sensibility and wisdom about people, which supports instant understanding and therefore pedagogically tactful actions.

Several scholars build on van Manen’s early work (van Manen, 1991) to gain deeper conceptual understanding about pedagogical tact. For instance, according to Juuso and Laine (2004), pedagogical tact is a situation-specific form of action based on sensitivity, which is only remotely connected with ideas that are derived consciously. Similar to this, van der Wolf and van Beukering (2011) write that pedagogical tact is about ‘reading the situation’, and suggest that the professional unconscious provides information about what is important and what should be done. Several scholars relate pedagogical tact to intuitive qualities, including intuitive attunement to students (Vagle, 2011) and acting on developed intuition (Bors & Stevens, 2013). They also note that this is supported by knowing oneself, experiencing the other and remaining sensitive in a given situation (Bors & Stevens, 2013; van Manen, 2015).

**Intuition**

For acting upon complex situations that require immediate actions, intuition has been shown to be indispensable in occupations such as emergency nursing, firefighting, aviation, the military and law enforcement (Langan-Fox & Vranic, 2011). Although teaching is not about life-threatening situations, it does require split-second actions in complex classroom situations many times a day. Because intuition can spontaneously generate ideas, alternatives or solutions (Sadler-Smith, 2004), it predominantly serves decision-making, problem-solving and creativity (Dane & Pratt, 2009). Therefore, intuition seems indispensable for teacher pedagogical tact too.

Conceptualisations of intuition vary greatly, which explains why Sinclair (2011) offers a view of intuition in its broadest sense: as direct knowing without conscious information processing. Its importance is demonstrated by the now commonly
accepted dual-process theory, which explains that humans process information through two independent, but also seamlessly interacting, systems: ratio and intuition. Ratio aligns with the Aristotelian notion of episteme, and concerns the slow, effortful and analytical processes (Stanovich & West, 2000) which seek understanding (e.g. of a problem) by breaking things down into components and then performing logical or mathematical operations on them (Klein, 2004). By contrast, intuition processes effortlessly and associatively, running parallel to ratio. Indeed, research has shown that humans can consciously think about only a few factors at once, whereas intuition weighs and integrates many factors in split seconds (Dijksterhuis, 2007). We are aware that in the field of education, using intuition is often judged as intangible and even somewhat suspicious. However, research suggests that intuition can be more accurate than rationality, particularly in complex situations (Pretz, 2011).

Within the perspective of intuitive information processing, two forms of intuition are commonly distinguished in the literature: inferential and holistic intuition. Inferential intuition relies on automated responses based on quick recognition/matching of memory patterns which are accumulated through experience, not unlike the background information processing of computers (Radin, 2011). By contrast, holistic intuition emerges through the synthesis of otherwise unconnected memory fragments into new information structures (Mintzberg et al., 1998). Pretz (2011) argues that inferential intuition is likely to emerge when problems are relatively simple, and that holistic intuition comes into play to address high-complexity problems. This would suggest that dealing with complex classroom situations requires the use of holistic intuition, but that teachers also rely on inferential intuition for less complex situations.

These perspectives on intuition are commonly accepted, but a more controversial one also bears mention which goes beyond cognitive information processing. In her framework, Sinclair (2011) positions inferential and holistic intuition together and refers to them both as forms of local intuition, because they both build on prior knowledge and experiences. At the same time, she posits the existence of a nonlocal dimension to intuition, the basis of which is not understood, but does not appear to be the same as for holistic or inferential intuition. Nonlocal intuition has been defined as ‘the knowledge or sense of something that cannot be explained by past or forgotten knowledge or environmental signals’ (McCray & Zayas, 2014, p. 58). While many scholars would endorse the basic notion of nonlocal intuition, there is no consensus on precisely what it is. For instance, Dane (2010) writes about radical intuiting, which departs dramatically from existing knowledge patterns. Radin (2011) writes about noetic intuition, which refers to ways of knowing based on inner wisdom, direct understanding or impressions that transcend rational analysis.

While debates continue over the precise nature and causes of nonlocal intuition, increasing empirical evidence suggests that nonlocal intuition is a real and measurable phenomenon (McCray & Zayas, 2014). For instance, Bradley (2011) shows empirical evidence that people are able to accurately perceive information from distant or future sources, and McCray and Childre (2014) found that human brains and hearts receive pre-stimulus information 4–5 seconds before any known emotional stimulus. Evidence like this requires entirely new ways of understanding (Radin, 2011), and experts have argued that this type of ‘sixth sense’ is not a special gift which is only
available to a limited group, but is actually a quality of every human being (e.g. Tomasino, 2011). Moreover, enhancing one’s nonlocal intuitive capacities is said to lead to more effective communication, smooth social interactions and positive relations (McCraty & Zayas, 2014), which are important aspects of teacher pedagogical tact. Intuition, in this sense, is not only instant cognitive information processing based on prior knowledge and experiences, but also—as Anthony (2006, p. 28) puts it—‘can transcend the confines of the individual mind and the limits of the sensory organs’. We submit that research on local and nonlocal forms of intuition opens up possibilities for understanding and possibly even developing teachers’ intuition.

**Intuitive pedagogical tact**

In this study, we define pedagogical tact as a teacher’s ability to instantly and adequately act upon the complexity of classroom situations. Particularly for actions that emerge in the moment, intuition is crucial. In this study, we define intuition as a personal quality for reaching insights or conclusions instantly without conscious reasoning. In line with the previous discussion on intuition, our view on teacher pedagogical tact explicitly acknowledges that local and nonlocal forms of intuition are indispensable. This is why we use the term *intuitive* pedagogical tact—to stress the conviction that intuition is crucial for pedagogical tact. (Note: We do not view the converse to be true—tact is not essential for intuition.)

**Limited research on intuition in teaching**

Several researchers have endorsed the integration of intuition in education for enhancing learning processes (e.g. Anthony, 2006; Kuhnle, 2011), but only a few have focused on teaching skills. Exceptions are Johansson and Kroksmark (2004), who argue that teachers who use intuition are aware of the uniqueness in situations. Moreover, Kennedy (2002) argues that intuition helps teachers to be aware of environmental cues and to sense what happens in their classrooms. And studies of teacher pedagogical performance have suggested that intuition plays an important role. For example, in her study on ‘with-it-ness’, Wolff (2015) argues that the ability to maintain an ongoing awareness of what is happening in the classroom is a crucial variable for effective classroom management. Iannello *et al.* (2011) argue that intuition is useful to bolster the teaching process, since intuition leads to the possibility of overcoming the limitations of analytical thinking.

The effectiveness of intuition depends on the extent to which one is able to access and utilise the non-conscious mind (Strick & Dijksterhuis, 2011), and some experts argue that this can be enhanced (e.g. Tomasino, 2011). For local intuition, this can be accomplished through practice, reflection and personal development, focusing on the quality of interactions between teachers and pupils (Valle, 2017). Further, becoming aware of intuitions requires automating routines and practices (Kennedy, 2002). For enhancing nonlocal intuition, exercises related to mindfulness might be helpful, as one’s intuitive perception is more sensitive when one is relaxed (e.g. Claxton, 2011).
We are aware that intuition is not the answer for all educational challenges. Winch et al. (2015) point to the importance of technical know-how and critical reflection, alongside intuitive knowledge, as aspects of teachers’ professional knowledge. On the one hand, they note that none of these aspects on its own proves sufficient, but on the other hand they argue that good teaching draws on a body of theory and reflection. They warn of the dangers of relying on intuitive knowledge and propose research for enriching teachers’ professional knowledge and practice. Indeed, there is a wealth of research showing the importance of rational decision-making for teaching in general (e.g. Rata, 2017), but also for swift, in-the-moment decision-making in particular (e.g. Levin & Nolan, 2014). Therefore, we conjecture that both rationality and intuition facilitate teachers’ pedagogical tact, and note that the role of rationality is much better understood than that of intuition.

Given the importance of intuition in professional practice, it seems odd that the literature on teaching gives it so little attention. One explanation is that intuition is not valued or cultivated in educational organisations, which has been considered a prerequisite for intuition to flourish (Burke & Miller, 1999). In the intuition literature, it is frequently mentioned that education focuses on rationality too much (e.g. Anthony, 2006; Iannello et al., 2011). In fact, according to van Manen (2015, p. 88): ‘contemporary policy perspectives tend to be result driven, evidence based, and accountability oriented’, yet these orientations, discourses and perspectives do not necessarily or adequately reflect how teachers experience their daily practice. It therefore seems prudent to investigate: how educators view the role of intuition for teaching and especially pedagogical tact; factors that might promote or prevent teachers’ use of it; and their perspectives on developing it.

Methods
To understand the perspectives of educators regarding intuition and pedagogical tact, we sought answers to three research questions.

Q1: How do educators perceive the role of intuition in teachers’ pedagogical tact?
Q2: What helps or hinders teachers from using their intuitive pedagogical tact?
Q3: What are educators’ views about strengthening teachers’ intuitive pedagogical tact?

A qualitative approach was used because this has been deemed appropriate for new topics and also helps to stay close to the stakeholders (de Boer & Smaling, 2011). Specifically, focus group discussions were used to explore how the educational professionals perceive and give meaning to the role of intuition in teaching. Focus group discussions were selected since they are appropriate for generating ideas when no personal interests are at stake, and have the advantage that the reactions of some participants can evoke new ideas in others (Baarda et al., 2013).

Participants
Ten focus group discussions were conducted with a total of 55 professionals in primary education (18 men and 37 women, aged 21–63 years). Participants were affiliated with three school districts and one teacher training college in the Netherlands.
Educators with differing roles were purposefully sampled. In this way, we hoped to enable all relevant stakeholders to tell their story (Boog, 2011). All participation was voluntary. The 10 focus groups consisted of: one group of managers of the participating organisations \((n = 5)\); two groups of teacher educators \((n = 21)\); three groups of school principals \((n = 16)\); three groups of teachers \((n = 11)\); and one group of teacher trainees \((n = 3)\). The number of participants per focus group discussion ranged from 2 to 12. In the invitations to participate, it was emphasised that opposing voices were welcome, given our expectation that research about intuition in education would likely meet some resistance.

**Procedure**

The focus group discussions lasted 72 minutes on average, ranging from 56 to 87 minutes. Each group discussion started with an introduction of the persons present, an overview of the research (focus, aim, design) and an explanation of the procedures (including data management, anonymity and the option to discontinue participation). The intangibility of the concept of pedagogical tact was introduced by placing cards on the table referring to features of the concept as described previously: quality of being, sensitivity, intuitive sensibility (van Manen, 1991), reading the situation, professional unconsciousness (van der Wolf & van Beukering, 2011), knowing yourself, experiencing others from within, full attention for the moment and solutions emerge spontaneously (Bors & Stevens, 2013). Then the participants were invited to react to three open questions, one in relation to each main research question:

1. To what extent do you recognise intangible processes as part of teachers’ pedagogical tact?
2. What conditions in practice support or undermine the use of these intangible processes?
3. What interventions or approaches are already in use for enhancing these intangible processes?

Deliberately, the questions used the term ‘intangible’ instead of ‘intuitive’ [in Dutch, the word used was ‘ongrijpbaar’, which is in line with Muth’s (1962) ‘unverfügbarkeit’ and means that the concept is difficult to grasp]. This term was chosen because it is typically perceived to be quite broad, to open up a discussion that does not depend on the specific term ‘intuition’. Doing so was a form of using the language of the educational professionals whose perspectives were being studied, as advocated in the research literature (e.g. McKenney & Reeves, 2012).

All focus group discussions were facilitated by the first author of this article. During group discussions, the researcher emphatically invited the participants to share opinions. All participants were welcome to email any changes or additions to what they had shared in the sessions, to obviate the negative effects of peer pressure, but none did so. Reflection on the findings and research process took place regularly through peer debriefing sessions, in lieu of joint coding or intercoder reliability tests (Evers, 2015). In the first two group discussions, it became clear that the participants perceive differences between teachers in their ability to tune into their intuitive pedagogical tact, and it was therefore decided to also discuss this theme in all groups.
Data analysis

After completing all focus group discussions, the recordings were transcribed. The 10 verbatim transcripts (ranging from 9,037 to 13,419 words) were analysed separately through an inductive approach, which is appropriate when a research topic is new (Evers, 2015). Meaningful words and sentences were selected and coded with the aid of Atlas.ti software (version 7) (Friese, 2015). Saturation (meaning that new data do not lead to new insights) seemed to be reached after group discussion eight, as no new patterns, themes or findings emerged. Still the last two group discussions that were already scheduled were conducted, which confirmed saturation.

The themes that emerged within individual groups by categorising the codes were processed into reports. The reports were member-checked with the participants of that group, to guard both validity and reliability (Santiago-Delefosse et al., 2015). The member-checks did not lead to new information and therefore it was possible to analyse the group reports comparatively for similarities and differences in order to let overarching themes emerge. Due to length restrictions, the full codebook is not presented here. However, Table 1 shows the subthemes that emerged within the theme ‘value of intuition in education’.

Results

How do educators perceive the role of intuition in teachers’ pedagogical tact?

The educational professionals argued that, due to societal changes, using intuition is becoming increasingly important for teachers’ pedagogical tact. Their descriptions aligned with local as well as nonlocal forms of intuition, and they attributed positive

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emerging themes (# discussions in which mentioned)</th>
<th>Example quote</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intangible/intuitive processes are part of the educational process (10)</td>
<td>This has become more crucial because we want to do justice to differences in the classroom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intangible/intuitive processes are the essence of teaching (4)</td>
<td>I think we’ve agreed, in different words, that these intangible processes are the heart of our job.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Many pedagogical actions occur intuitively, as there is no time to consider consciously what to do (3)</td>
<td>You often have to act so quickly that you just act from yourself, from your gut.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Both educational professionals and pupils feel whether a teacher uses intangible/intuitive processes or not (2)</td>
<td>In those classes you sense a relaxed, safe atmosphere in which pupils feel that they are heard.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Without the ability to use intangible/intuitive processes, teachers cannot succeed (2)</td>
<td>(A) You say everybody has ‘it’? (B) I think otherwise you would have been sifted out, somewhere in the process.</td>
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qualities to teachers who are able to use their intuition. Further, they emphasised risks when teachers are non-intuitive or less intuitive.

A prominent finding of this study is that all educational professionals who participated in the focus group discussions acknowledge intuition as important for acting instantly upon complex classroom situations. As one participant (manager) mentioned: ‘I think we’ve agreed, in different words, that these intangible processes are the heart of our job’. In two groups of principals, participants even argued that teachers will not stay in education if they are not intuitive: (group A) ‘You say everybody has “it”?; (group B) ‘I think otherwise you would have been sifted out, somewhere in the process’. The participants seem to refer to local forms of intuition: (teacher) ‘You immediately turn over to intuition, you start up the automatic pilot and you react. It is not really an automatic pilot, but you do recognise certain situations. Situations don’t just fall out of the sky, so you build on prior knowledge’. In addition, nonlocal forms of intuition can also be recognised in their talk: (teacher educator) ‘Yes, trust plays a big role, a trust to tap into the nourishing field and to feel what moves you’; (teacher trainee) ‘I would rather say that you act from your soul’.

The educational professionals argued that teaching requires being intuitive, as teachers do not have time to deliberate how to act upon the complexity of classroom situations: (teacher trainee) ‘You often have to act so quickly that you just act from yourself, from your gut’. In particular, the educational leaders argued that intuition is becoming increasingly important due to societal changes: (principal) ‘Due to the complexity of the current society, the need for intuitive qualities that have always existed come more to the fore, since the job of a teacher is becoming more and more complex’. An important aspect of this increasing complexity is: (teacher) ‘a growing diversity of pupils in my classroom’. Education’s growing focus on differentiation seems to raise awareness that intuition is becoming more and more important: (manager) ‘This has become more crucial because we want to do justice to differences in the classroom’.

Some participants argued that it is becoming increasingly necessary to acknowledge intuition in education: (manager) ‘Pupils are more demanding, their needs have changed. I think that teachers—to prevent collective burnouts because of what they need to deal with—really need to learn this, much more than in former times’. Intuition, for instance, might help to act instantly and effortlessly: (teacher) ‘Then solutions just emerge naturally. There is also no fear about what to do’. Intuition also seems to enable teachers to sense pupils’ educational needs: (manager) ‘Each pupil has something to trigger, touch or hurt them, to be able to sense this’ and to prevent conflicts: (principal) ‘Those teachers do not get into crises, they see things grow and react in advance’. Due to teachers’ intuitive capacities, a positive pedagogical climate seems to emerge: (teacher educator) ‘In those classes you sense a relaxed and safe atmosphere in which pupils feel that they are heard’.

At the same time, the educational professionals shared the consequences of when teachers are not able or are less able to react intuitively to classroom situations: (teacher educator) ‘I think that what we are talking about is the fundament of education. If teachers don’t have it—when they’ve only got skills to keep order—then they need power and force’. These teachers were also described as less flexible: (teacher) ‘This teacher sticks close to the class rules. It’s difficult to explain what I mean when we talk about intuition’. Lacking this intuitive capacity seems to interfere with the pedagogical relation
between teachers and pupils: (principal) ‘The harmony isn’t there, this click that “yes we do understand each other”’.

What helps or hinders teachers to use their intuitive pedagogical tact?

According to the educational professionals in this study, teachers are becoming less and less intuitive. They suggest that the fields of education, as well as educational research, somehow inhibit use of intuition. They note that adequate language for discussing this is lacking.

In contrast with all the positive features attributed to intuition, participants in all groups except the teacher trainees argued that teachers nowadays are becoming less intuitive: (teacher educator) ‘In the past years I have seen teachers losing this more and more due to the madness of the day’. Teachers who are open about using intuition seem to meet resistance: (principal) ‘When people constantly tell you, what you are talking about is nonsense, you’re acting stupid. After a while, you start believing that it really is stupid’. This critical stance towards intuition seems a result of education’s increasing focus on evidence-based actions and results: (principal) ‘We ignore what we can’t measure. This side, this sensing, remains invisible’. The managers and principals attribute this trend to science: (principal) ‘According to science this doesn’t exist, large parts of science deny it altogether’.

The data also illustrate how much the participants struggle to discuss intangible concepts such as intuition: (manager) ‘Yes it all sounds so incredibly vague. It makes me feel like a hippie’. Some participants postulated that their knowledge is insufficient to discuss intuition: (teacher) ‘I actually do not have enough knowledge about what it is’. Intuition seems too intangible to grasp: (teacher educator) ‘For some teachers this is really like abracadabra’ and not practically applicable enough: (teacher educator) ‘Some people think this is too esoteric, not at all important, or… uhm, yes, not hands-on’. The participants seem to meet a great deal of judgement regarding intuition in their daily practice: (teacher) ‘Some people, if I may be blunt, will say “what a load of crap this is”’.

The participants deal in different ways with the difficulty of finding words to express themselves with regard to intuition. Many participants referred to intuition using pronouns such as ‘it’, ‘this’, ‘that’, or searched for language that opposes or differentiates from intuition such as quick thinking, routines, automatisms and repertoire: (teacher educator) ‘What we are talking about is situations in which, based on our repertoire, we don’t know what to do; and intuitively, we do something’. The participants also used other abstract language to express themselves, such as ‘feeling, sensing, tuning in, reading/seeing the child, connecting’, and so on. However, despite a lack of language and knowledge, one seems to sense intuitively that intuition is part of teaching: (teacher) ‘When you talk about this with colleagues, everybody senses what you mean’. Finally, the data suggest that it is difficult to pinpoint intuitive actions, since intuitive actions are often small and unconscious: (teacher) ‘You often act unconsciously, and somehow things turn out nice. It is in the small things, a glance or something like that. It’s not just one thing that works’.
What are educator perceptions about strengthening teachers’ intuitive pedagogical tact?

The educational professionals perceived differences between intuitive capacities of teachers and questioned whether or not it is possible to enhance teachers’ intuitive pedagogical tact. They argued that the need to learn about consciously enhancing teachers’ intuitive capacities is high, as interventions or approaches for this seem to be lacking.

All groups mentioned that the intuitive capacities of teachers differ. Our data analysis distinguished three main characterisations of teacher intuitive capacity. The first characterisation concerns teachers who are able to tune into intuition naturally: (manager) ‘Some people are good at this from day one, they just see the pupil. They feel that they have an overview of the class and maintain a relation with pupils without effort, naturally’. The second characterisation is of teachers who are unable or less able to tune into intuition: (principal) ‘It will be difficult for both teachers as well as their pupils if they can’t learn this. I guess they will also have difficulties in their team’. The third characterisation concerns teachers who have difficulties regulating their intuitions: ‘One can be too sensitive. They are able to connect incredibly with their pupils, but have difficulties to distinguish between themselves and others’. According to the educational professionals, one just knows intuitively whether a teacher is more or less intuitive: (teacher) ‘You can sense whether it’s there or not in the atmosphere of the classroom’.

In each group discussion, the question was raised as to whether or not it is possible to enhance teachers’ intuition: (teacher) ‘I wonder if this can be trained; and if so, how?’. They argued that teacher education does not pay any attention to training intuition: (principal) ‘Teachers do not get educated in this’. All groups wished to learn about consciously enhancing teachers’ intuitive capacities to act instantly: (principal) ‘More and more teachers come to me that they are not able to deal with their pupils. Many teachers are in search for tools, something to develop teachers’ intuitive capacities would be golden’. In 9 of the 10 groups, participants pointed out that learning to consciously use intuition benefits education: (principal) ‘This would benefit wellbeing of both pupils as well as teachers’. Acknowledging intuition in education might open up new possibilities: (principal) ‘This can add a deeper dimension to education and help to reach pupils more deeply; I think this is needed in contemporary society’.

Discussion

Conclusions

This study investigated educator perceptions concerning the role of intuition in pedagogical tact. Across diverse roles, educators acknowledged the intuitive dimension of pedagogical tact, and deemed it a crucial asset. The participants interpreted the concept of intuition differently, and these differences aligned with both the local as well as nonlocal forms of intuition that have been described in the literature. Further, intuition was viewed to help teachers to sense pupils’ needs, engage more easily and effortlessly with pupils, and prevent conflicts. Participants described differences between teacher abilities to tune into their intuition, noting that some come to it naturally, while others have difficulties getting in touch with it and still others may struggle
to regulate their intuitions. Finally, participants felt that developing teacher intuitive capacities should be prioritised and described the lack of interventions for this as problematic.

**Limitations and future research**

Several limitations bear mention. First, it has to be noted that the results of our study are based solely on focus group opinions. Moreover, it is possible that we have missed perspectives on the role of intuition in pedagogical tact. We invited opposing voices to join the focus group discussions and the results show that the participants in the discussions do have colleagues who are sceptical about intuition. However, it seemed that these opposing voices were not present, which may have yielded biased results. At the same time it was not difficult to obtain voluntary participation by professionals in varying roles, which aligns with the fact that more and more scholars (e.g. Kennedy, 2002; Johansson & Kroksmark, 2004) underline the importance of researching intuition’s role in teaching. Alongside scientists who note that teaching goes beyond technical know-how (e.g. Biesta, 2014), we consider our study as an alert that attention to this area is needed. Future research could explicitly aim to portray and position differing views on intuition in pedagogical tact, which would require the use of representative or purposeful sampling.

Second, our choice to use the term ‘intangible processes’ instead of ‘intuition’ may have compromised the findings, to some extent. We purposefully chose this term to open up a broad discussion and to learn about the language of educational professionals regarding the concept of intuition. But this might have been problematic for two reasons: it might have introduced unnecessary digressions; and it might have undermined clarity of communication. For the researcher, it was rather challenging to keep focus in the group discussions, although having features of pedagogical tact as printed cards on the table helped with this. Despite the possible confounds, we do consider that this approach allowed us to portray how educators view the role of intuition in pedagogical tact.

Third, discussing intuition was challenging. The participants experienced a lack of language as they searched for words, and many of them acknowledged that it was difficult to express their thoughts. This is in line with the literature (e.g. Sadler-Smith & Shefy, 2004), which mentions that we lack the language to capture intuition. This showed in the focus group discussions, as the words that were used by the participants tended to remain vague (e.g. ‘feeling’, ‘sensing’, ‘connecting’, etc.). The researcher had to ask repeatedly what the participants meant by words such as ‘it’, ‘this’, ‘that’, and so on. In addition, the participants interpreted the concept of intuition differently, though in ways that aligned with the different forms of intuition that we found in the literature. Moreover, participants felt that the concept of intuition is related to, but also overlapping with, other concepts such as ‘quick thinking’, ‘repertoire’ and ‘routines’. Further, the results show that participants lack the knowledge and language to help describe intuition. While this study sought to obtain participants’ views without influencing them, future research may benefit from presenting specific models or theories of intuition to participants first, to provide conceptual and linguistic handholds that might support clarity during discussions.
Discussion

The participating educational professionals recognised intuition as a crucial asset for teachers’ pedagogical tact. They agreed that intuition seems to help teachers sense pupils’ needs, engage more easily and effortlessly with them, and prevent conflicts. Sensing pupil needs requires awareness for sensing situations in general (Johansson & Kroksmark, 2004). However, research suggests that people often struggle to attend to their gut feelings (Hofmann & Wilson, 2010), which might explain the differences between the three groups of teachers that are distinguished in the results: those who come to intuition naturally, those who have difficulties getting in touch with it, and those who struggle to regulate their intuitions. Still, for all three groups it might be beneficial to become more consciously aware of the role intuition plays in being able to react with pedagogical tact in complex classroom situations.

In their own words, participants recognised the differentiation between local and nonlocal intuition. According to them, both forms of intuition seem important for teachers’ abilities to handle complex classroom situations. We consider the distinction noteworthy, in particular because enhancing these two forms of intuition might require different approaches. Developing local intuition seems to require personal development, as prejudices, fears and wishful thinking can negatively influence good intuitive judgement (Sadler-Smith, 2010). By contrast, nonlocal intuition seems to require ‘becoming aware’ of intuitive signals, because these intuitions emerge subtly (Sadler-Smith, 2010). Meditative exercises and mindfulness, when done frequently, can help in this regard (Dane, 2011).

The importance of intuition in professional practice is apparent, for example, in the fact that Dutch medical tribunals have mentioned it (under the term ‘gut feelings’) in documentation of formal judgements (Stolper et al., 2010). This has broader implications, since these judgements set precedents for medical professional standards. For example, doctors are frequently taught to listen explicitly to their gut feelings (alongside their observations and analytical reasoning), since these intuitions can prompt analytical reflection and improve diagnostic reasoning (Stolper et al., 2015). Similarly, the role of intuition has become increasingly recognised in decision-making in undefined, people-related and/or time-pressured situations in business management; and several techniques have been developed for business management education to enhance students’ intuitive awareness and skills (Burke & Sadler-Smith, 2011). This includes, for instance, learning from experience (Hogarth, 2001) as well as building knowledge and understanding of intuition’s distinctive features and improving self-awareness (Sadler-Smith & Shefy, 2010).

Unfortunately, it does not seem that teachers receive similar advice. In fact, educational research has widely neglected the relevance of intuition for teaching (Harteis & Gruber, 2008). In this respect, even though experts have argued that developing intuitive action should be emphasised more in teacher education (Valle, 2017), education and training have been deficient (Sadler-Smith, 2008). While some experts focus on local intuition (e.g. Iannello et al., 2011), others emphasise the importance of integrating nonlocal forms of intuition in education (e.g. Anthony, 2006). It is clear that this area warrants attention. It remains challenging to grasp intuition empirically.
(Harteis, 2014), but this should not prevent the scientific field from developing new approaches to investigate this important area.

Closing remarks

For good reason, the last 15 years have witnessed increased attention for (supporting) teachers to build their daily classroom practice on both scientific evidence as well as practical wisdom (e.g. Mejlgaaard et al., 2019), with good results (e.g. Marzano, 2003). At the same time, the literature suggests that both rational and intuitive processes are needed (e.g. Kennedy, 2002; Johansson & Kroksmark, 2004). This study showed that educators wholeheartedly agree. Specifically, this study found that educational practitioners view intuition as crucial for teachers’ pedagogical tact. They are concerned that rational processes overshadow intuitive ones in unproductive ways, and are eager to pursue a healthy balance. Doing so requires deliberate support for developing (the use of) intuition, which is currently not common in education. Further research should endeavour to portray and measure the role of intuition in teachers’ pedagogical tact, and understand how to develop it. Such work would contribute to the quality of instruction and classroom climate, thereby directly serving learners. It is time to take a closer look at the use of intuition in education; we owe this to both our teachers as well as their pupils.

References


