

Professional Teacher Development: A Case Study on a Student Exchange Program

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ABSTRACT The transformation of teacher development by way of an exchange program as an empowerment tool, is a vital development of the student teacher curriculum. This interpretive research project is based on a qualitative element, namely, in-depth interviews with students from Tshwane University of Technology who were involved in an exchange program with students from Windesheim University in the Netherlands. Findings revealed that exchange programs can enrich student teachers immensely with an awakening awareness of other cultures, of events occurring and resources used by other countries for quality teaching. There is a clear need for institutions to introduce and foster international collaboration with institutions abroad to establish enduring relationships that will present students with opportunities to increase their subject knowledge and to comprehend its relevance in the greater context of the world. In the given case, South African students were granted the opportunity to learn and to teach at schools in the Netherlands. They could observe and participate in the machinations of a well organised and effective educational system. They returned with boundless enthusiasm to improve the local systemic dysfunctional structures encountered in the schools where they contributed their efforts during prescribed experiential training.

INTRODUCTION

It is perhaps the most vexing of issues to seek a continuous channel of improvement for professional teacher development. In itself, this constitutes an eternal quest, for rarely will the resolution of a problem with the mechanisms of today also find application tomorrow. Individuals go away and are replaced by others, circumstances change, and the demands of interested parties are amended or require constant adaptation. This will test the flexibility of any program to the extreme.

When this interaction between the Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) and the Internationalisation Program (IP) of Windesheim University in the Netherlands was initiated, several aspects of the program were still cocooned in a cloud of uncertainty. The support and cooperation of external parties and individuals still had to be secured (Steyn 2007). A risk assessment had to be crafted and since the project involved extensive travel, the safety and transport of all involved had to be carefully planned and maintained.

To a large extent, and for purposes of this paper, the issue of knowledge can be translated

into the concept of experience. Experiential training is a recognised element in the training of student teachers and for that reason students are regularly afforded the opportunity to attend schools where their knowledge and skills are honed and tested so as to ensure that knowledge in teaching is not merely ensconced in the theory of pedagogy, but that they actually have the opportunity to practice the relevant practical aspects thereof. In their prescribed training schedules students are obliged to participate in this activity.

This program is somewhat different. Students choose to participate in this program. However, in principle that is about the only aspect where there is a similarity between the groups from TUT and from the Netherlands (IP). Students in the Netherlands may freely choose between several attractive alternatives. They may thus choose to attend a comparative program in America, or in Canada or in other parts of Europe. Students from South Africa (TUT) may apply to be selected and thus allowed onto the program. For the South African students, an impeccable academic record is of paramount importance. They are invited after their application to attend a sitting of a selection committee, and only after

having presented an acceptable academic record worthy of consideration, will they be shortlisted. During the calendar years of 2014 and 2015, two groups were selected in this fashion.

The groups from the Netherlands vary between 16 and 13 students. A fifth group will arrive from IP during May 2016. For purposes of clarity it must be stated that the individual students from the Netherlands finance their own flight tickets as well as their stay in South Africa. The TUT students were sponsored by TUT (the solid support of the Dean of the Faculty of Humanities where the School of Education is accommodated, was and still is indispensable in this context) where the sponsorship included return flight tickets to Europe, the costs of stay at a guest house as well as some pocket money.

In both instances, the plans are forged on the basis that students will stay in the host country for about one week – for purposes of teaching and learning – and then some days might be added for recreation, cultural interaction and sightseeing.

General Context

By living and working amongst and within the cultures of their host countries, exchange students gain a clear understanding and appreciation of the differences and similarities in foreign national cultures and exposure to international education programs (Miller 2007; Mestry et al. 2009). Moreover, past surveys by Jones (2007) and Tamir (2004) indicated that improving the knowledge and understanding of foreign languages was a primary motivation for students in particular.

Clifford et al. (2013) concur with Messer and Wolter (2005) and define a student exchange program as a program in which students from a home university based would study overseas at one of their institution's partner institutions. In principle, student exchange programs may involve international travel, but does not necessarily require the student to study outside his or her home country. The absence of innovative networks with international institutions that are dependent on the quality of teachers and their lack of continuous professional growth is an essential part of improvement in the quality of teaching in schools using exchange programs as a tool (Adams 2007; Steyn 2007).

Student exchange programs offer students opportunities of short-term stay abroad, usually as part of joint exchange-style experiences where students from one institution experience a period of time in a partner institution overseas, the partner institution arranging the program of exchange in a synchronous or asynchronous manner. This type of program encourages intercultural learning. Bennett (2009) defines intercultural learning as acquiring elevated awareness of subjective cultural context (world view), including one's own, and developing greater ability to interact sensitively and competently across cultural contexts as both an immediate and long-term effect of the exchange. It is hence important that students should take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating their learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning.

International collaborations such as these established enduring relationships and continuously provide students with opportunities to increase their subject knowledge and to understand its relevance in the greater context of the world (Clifford et al. 2013). Participating student teachers develop and share their expertise with colleagues abroad, and schools gain the asset of having a resource with international experience in their communities. Furthermore, Green and Whitsed (2013) and Messer and Wolter (2005) state that student exchange programs enrich their schools and communities with an awareness of foreign cultures and of events occurring in other parts of the world, providing students and citizens with new perspectives about the world in which they live.

South African Context

Students from the respective educational programs of TUT in South Africa and IP in the Netherlands have been fortunate in that a program was initiated between the two institutions during 2013, covering a period of five years. The main aim of this exchange program was to expose local students to the Netherlands, its peoples and the rich variety of cultural norms and values that should serve to improve the capacity for partnering among teachers locally and internationally. During September 2014, and again during the same time in 2015, eight students from TUT were privileged to visit the Netherlands for

purposes of this program. Only students already in their 3rd or 4th year of study were considered due to their experience in teaching practice at schools that form part of their prescribed experiential training.

Successful students thus gained the opportunity to interact, over a period of nine days, with students, teachers and lecturers on various levels. Students had to prepare lessons for presentation at either primary or secondary schools and also attended contact opportunities at Deltion College as well as Windesheim University at Zwolle in the Netherlands. Students were given the opportunity to both teach and observe the teachers at the schools they attended.

Johnson and Johnson (2009) argue that cooperative learning through the use of students exchange programs is relatively unknown and largely ignored by educators and institutions. Thus, this study is underpinned by the theory of cooperative learning. Co-operation is applied to seek a method to work together in order to accomplish shared goals. Within cooperative situations, individuals seek outcomes that are beneficial to themselves and beneficial to all the other members of the group as well as the communities that they will ultimately serve.

The process of learning itself is relative. In this instance the students were privileged to attend the ship-building facility at Bataviastad. The history and industry of ship building was explained by a guide after an introductory video show. This was followed the next day by a visit to the village of Giethoorn where the students could participate in the activity of punting over the Giethoorn Lake. The entire lake is operated as a nature reserve and although it was deemed to be great fun it was also utterly exhausting. To experience this was a steep learning curve for the students. The culture and traditions of another people were experienced first-hand. The impressions and opinions expressed culminated in lively discussions. None of the students were left untouched by the experience. There was also a unanimous view that they would be able to relate their experiences to learners at the schools where they would start their professional careers. They felt they could speak with authority.

Literature Review

Research by Dörfer (2015) and Jones (2007) indicated that student teachers understand and appreciate the similarities and differences be-

tween their national cultures and educational systems when living and working in the cultures of their host countries. Furthermore, teachers can improve their schools and communities with a new awareness of other cultures and of events occurring in different parts of the world, thus providing learners and members of the local communities with new viewpoints about the world in which they live. Messer and Wolter (2005) also indicates that the program should provide participants chosen for their academic merit and leadership potential with the opportunity to study, conduct research, exchange ideas, teach and contribute to finding solutions to shared international concerns.

Clifford et al. (2013) alludes that experience with international exchange programs offer student teachers with the opportunity to have immersive, life-transforming practises. They furthermore mention that international development and exchange programs address persistent educational needs such as professional development, school-community linkages, English language and mother tongue literacy improvement, stakeholder engagement with policymakers, and curriculum reform. Knight (2004) mention that an exchange program approach expands access to quality and inclusive education to support positive sustainable development. For students mobility programs to grow and be justifiable aspects of the educational experience of higher education students, we need to examine our current programs and ask some important questions about what these experiences do, what they could do, and how that can be harnessed to the best effect for individual students and their disciplines and, of course, for the participating institutions themselves.

Jones (2007) maintains that international development programs prepare communities to effectively address critical issues such as poverty and quality, youth participation, educational access and exclusion and government accountability. Research has revealed that these programs attract thousands of talented and passionate individuals from around the world each year. They are designed to expose students to a variety of perspectives and to cultivate invaluable skills, connections, awareness, and knowledge to lead and thrive in a variety of contexts. These programs are rooted in the experiential education learning model and are based on a commitment to social justice and intercultural communication.

Knight (2004) furthermore postulates that the following are the benefits of students exchange programs for teachers:

1. Increased understanding of the host country, its language and academic field;
2. The opportunity for a career-enhancing professional development experience that allows student teachers to gain perspective, to be exposed to new teaching methods, develop new curricula, and to share professional expertise;
3. The opportunity to develop life-long friendships and professional relationships and to become a member of an international community;
4. The additional benefit to accompany family members who get to live or go to school in a different cultural environment.

One of the key reasons for attempting to deepen the knowledge of student teachers, is the need to improve classroom practice. Furthermore, students are given the opportunity to learn a variety of ideologies, religious as well as philosophical that serve as the basis for the pedagogical strategies of other countries. According to the research done by Green and Whitsed (2013), exchange programs has the following advantages for students:

- ♦ Students gain the ability to recognise differences between peoples;
- ♦ They understand the differences between rapacious exploitation vs ethics;
- ♦ Ability to recognise a knowledge gap based on comparative thinking;
- ♦ Capacity for intercultural communication;
- ♦ Ability to know on what terms to compare countries;
- ♦ Possession of knowledge of other countries based on diagnostic skills;
- ♦ Ability to recognise educational trends in other cultures;
- ♦ Understanding and possession of cognitive complexity and cognitive integration.

They also point out that many students are willing to accept a lengthier course of study for the reasons not directly related to curricular subject matter (foreign languages, interaction with foreign cultures, travel) but which nevertheless result in a personal gain and perhaps, at a point in time, a professional benefit.

Student exchange programs or studying at universities in metropolitan centres other than the institution at which the student originally

matriculated is regarded as an important element in a fully rounded academic education (Messer and Wolter 2005). Knight (2004) asserts that educational exchange, especially higher education, is often considered as a form of diplomatic investment for future political and economic relations. For example, scholarships for foreign students who are seen as promising future leaders are considered to be an effective way of developing an understanding of and perhaps affinity for the sponsoring country. This affinity may prove to be beneficial in future years in terms of diplomatic or business relations.

The primary goal of internationalisation, as opposed to the development of international export markets, is essentially to find the balance between income-generating motives and academic benefits (Johnson and Johnson 2009). One of the important factors related to the labour market such as student exchange programs is the identification of companies which are considered essential for new graduates to function in a more international work environment. There are interesting institutional case studies which describe how international activities (such as student/faculty mobility programs, joint research projects or contracts with foreign partners and international students) serve as catalysts for major institutional planning/review exercises, or help with institutional building through the enhancement of the human, technical or management infrastructure systems (Green and Whitsed 2013).

Clifford et al. (2013) cite the example in their research that one of the key questions to be addressed is the determination of what internationalisation might mean at disciplinary level. In other words, what should an engineering, psychology or arts teacher look like if it is to meet the academic needs of the students? There is often not as much guidance at the level of curriculum content as might be expected although clearly much work is currently being done in this area. Cooperative learning is the instructional use of small groups like student exchange groups with other university groups, outside the country, so that students work together to maximise their own and each other's learning. One of the purposes of collaborative learning for students on an exchange program is that students learn to work with all types of people. During small-group interactions, they find many opportunities to reflect upon and reply to the

diverse responses fellow learners suggest to the questions raised. Small groups also allow students to add their perspectives to an issue based on the cultural differences. In addition, working together as exchange students has been shown to increase academic engagement and self-esteem, improve student attitudes towards school, and decrease social segregation and loneliness (Johnson and Johnson 2003).

There is a distinct need to build and improve intercultural understanding and communication between student and teachers through student exchange programs. Furthermore, it is also important to prepare our graduates who have strong knowledge and skills based abilities to advance on the road of intercultural relations and communications and to substantially enrich the drive towards internationalisation through the teaching and learning experience. Knight (2004) alluded to the fact that one of the critical strategies for integrating the international dimension is the program strategy which can be divided into four major categories:

First would be the academic program, the following could serve as examples in this category – student exchange programs, foreign language study, work/study abroad, international post-graduate students. These examples serve merely to illustrate the broad list of alternatives that can be undertaken to integrate an international/intercultural dimension into curriculum content and the teaching/learning process for undergraduate and graduate students.

- ♦ Second is the research and scholarly collaboration. This strategy addresses the substantive nature of research, the research collaborators and the distribution of the research/knowledge. Knight (2004) states that this strategy provides a broad spectrum of ways to integrate an international, intercultural or comparative dimension.
- ♦ Third is the extra-curricular activities which can be an effective way to internationalise the total educational experience of both domestic and international students and help to bring a comparative perspective to the classroom.
- ♦ Set in the last place, is the external relations program which has traditionally been oriented to international development activities and bilateral cooperation agreements between institutions.

METHODOLOGY

The main question in the study was the following:

Whether or not a student teacher exchange program could be rooted for teacher development?

For this purpose, a case study design and qualitative approach were employed to generate data in an investigation of the perceptions of student teachers regarding the current teacher program and teacher development. Eight students teachers (the 2015 group) at TUT in South Africa were the respondents. They were regarded as reliable and were purposely selected based on their experiences during the exchange program in the Netherlands. To protect their identity, student teachers were labelled from Respondent 1 to Respondent 8. After the interviews were conducted, the data was coded for the purpose of trustworthiness. The interpretive design, based on TUT student teachers in South Africa, led to the findings and discussion presented below.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings from this study were summarised and synthesised. The student's responses are presented verbatim and in italics in this section to indicate their views. Four trends emerged as focus issues:

1. The experience students gained from this project;
2. To what extent will this project enhance their leadership skills;
3. How do they perceive their teaching careers after visiting the Netherlands; and
4. What were the most prominent cultural differences between the two countries?

Experience of Students

All the students, the respondents herein, agreed that the exchange program with an international university was very motivating and they were excited and inspired to see what other countries were doing. Compared to their home country, students agreed that they were impressed to observe and experience learners doing practical work during their teaching in the Netherlands. Students felt that the government there was investing more effectively on education because every school was well resourced

with teaching media and every learner had a digital tablet in class. Learners are taught to use technology at primary level with internet access in class. All respondents felt that as compared to South African schools, they are faced with the burden of large numbers of learners in class. Furthermore, students felt that they have learnt to see the world from a different perspective, and they now appreciate what they have.

The following were examples of the remarks from the respondents:

Respondents 5 and 7 stated: *'Even though it was our first time to teach overseas, it was not easy. The friendly teachers and student teachers from the Netherlands made it much easier for us to approach them for assistance.'*

Respondent 8 mentioned that: *'...in South Africa there is a lack of facilities at schools and some of our schools don't even have electricity and no internet access. We still have a long way to go with our education system.'*

Respondent 1 remarked that compared to the Netherlands *'...our classroom situation is too formal and our learners are not relaxed'*.

Respondent 5 was more specific in stating that: *'...our learners wear school uniform and it is still teacher centred approach which leads to learners not being relaxed and hesitant to ask questions.'*

Respondent 3 expressed the following opinion: *'I experienced a situation (in South Africa) where I had to teach 115 learners in one class whereby I could not even walk about in class. It was difficult to attend to individual learners who may need my attention in class.'*

Students also reflected that teachers and students in South Africa need to improve on punctuality and take care of the resources they do have at hand. They also reiterated that parents need to support their children at schools and be involved in their children's education. Student 2 was adamant that *'...parents need to change their attitude and be involved in their children's education like parents in the Netherlands.'*

Enhancement of Leadership Skills

Students indicated that they were inspired and motivated to bring change to the community. Students furthermore alluded that it was important for them to eliminate borders to bring change to schools and to continue to improve the culture of teaching and learning.

Comments from Respondent 6 serve to illustrate this point: *'I am motivated, inspired and feel I should try and eliminate all the wrong things that I experienced at South African schools. I think I am going to bring change to our community schools'*.

Students felt that they wanted to involve parents in their children's education and to give individual attention to learners who need support. Students were convinced that working together as exchange students inspired them to seek better academic engagement and it has improved their self-esteem. The respondents felt that being involved in the exchange programs gave them an opportunity to develop life-long friendships and professional relationships with people outside their country and they felt they were going to maintain the relationships.

For purposes of clarity it must be mentioned that it is not a matter of impudence to claim these relationships. The South African students selected to participate in the project, will form the first part of what has become known as the 'buddy-buddy' system. Upon arrival in South Africa the Dutch students are welcomed by their local 'buddies'. They will accompany them to the schools where they will deliver their lessons and will act as guides in literally all aspects of the visit to South Africa. This favour is then returned once the TUT students arrive in the Netherlands. The students are thus well acquainted with each other once they return from overseas.

Respondent 2 had a clear idea of the way forward: *'I have learnt that as a teacher I need to have parental relationships and actively involve parents in their learner's education.'*

Respondent 5 focused on the cooperation in the group: *'I feel that working together as a group is important and this helped me a lot to improve my self-esteem.'*

Respondent 4 identified the need for new technology: *'I am going to encourage parents to buy their learners tablets so that learners can use them to do research in class. This will improve the performance of learners.'*

Perceptions of their Teaching Careers

The proverbial 'comfort zone' of the students was thoroughly shaken by the experience. From the complacent position where they could merely drift along with the different activities of the group, to realising that they themselves had

to take the lead in changing what they deemed to be wrong, took but a moment.

All the students were regarded as academically good students who had to complete their studies in the normal run of things. That entire concept was blown away by this experience. The sudden awareness that they had to initiate change in fundamental issues was an explosive if not frightening realisation. The safety of the consciousness of the group granted some respite, but all had become sensitive to their individual roles in addressing the perceived wrongs.

Besides the formal and functional education system, many other elements surfaced during the visit to the Netherlands. The universal acceptance of punctuality as a non-negotiable issue was a new experience. Schools started on time. Teachers set the example in this respect and learners adopted it as a way of life. Time has value and to waste time is an unforgiveable sin. Students felt that the obvious passion, commitment, dedication and devotion to their careers set the teachers there apart from what they have observed in South Africa. The ability to build, to strengthen, and to nurture the blossoming talents of the children in their care was an absolute privilege. As a teacher you could destroy a learners' self-confidence, or you could reinforce it to the point of best possible performance.

The academic freedom observed in the Netherlands was also an opposite when compared with local experiences. The allegation was made that in the local rural schools, learners were only allowed to choose subjects from a pre-set list without any consideration for the intended careers of the learners. It was also obvious that if a learner should intend to embark on a more technical career, very few, if any, of the schools could provide the required tuition. Students felt that the disturbingly large percentage of drop-outs can at least be partially attributed to this tendency.

It was also obvious that the training of student teachers was on a different level. Instead of using student teachers to cover all different subjects as is currently the case in South Africa, there student teachers could seek to find a balance between the practical aspects of a particular subject and the theoretical pedagogics thereof. They could consequently immerse themselves in the intricacies of a specific subject rather than find themselves floundering about between several subjects where only superficial knowledge could be imparted.

Respondent 2 stated that the Netherlands was deemed to invest many times more in education than South Africa. The schools are well sourced and teachers and learners take care of the resources they do have. Here resources, even if in short supply, were not taken care of. The respondent stated: *'Here you will find a library but all the books are torn and full of dust. Even the learners do not respect the resources. They climb on top of chairs and tables and break them. They even steal from each other. The classrooms are dirty, papers are thrown on the floor despite dustbins being provided.'*

This respondent also made observations on the factual non-involvement of parents in the education of their children. In the Netherlands there was a distinct and obvious participation by parents. This relieved the immense burden on the shoulders of the teachers.

The overwhelming numbers of learners in a class was also seen as a local scourge. Respondent 3 had 115 learners in a class. The respondent complained: *'I could not even move amongst the learners....'*

Respondent 3 had a more holistic approach. Everything was seen as contributing to the experience and from visits to the cultural assets to educational visits to institutions such as Deltion College was experienced as constructive. The experience was seen as an honour and an overwhelming experience. This respondent also observed: *'...the Netherlands invest more in education. The teachers and learners look after the resources they have.'*

The one lament shared by all students were the lack of parental involvement or participation in schools in South Africa. In this instance too, Respondent 3 stated: *'My observation in the Netherlands is that parents are more involved and it helps because the teacher is not the only one with the duty of education...'*

Cultural Differences

Green and Whitsed (2013) emphasize internationalising the curriculum which involves providing students with global perspectives relevant to their discipline and giving them a broader knowledge base for their future careers. They furthermore state that these programs can also help to provide students with a set of values and skills to operate in diverse cultural environments. Skills are here defined as 'intercultural

competencies' or 'cross-cultural capabilities'. Student teachers felt that students were given opportunities to learn a variety of educational ideologies, religious as well as pedagogical strategies from their visit to the Netherlands. The respondents also remarked that it is important that schools should work towards entering into partnerships with parents and that government should invest more money into education. The following was noted by the respondents:

Respondent 1: *'As a person, I have noticed several changes. Apart from being responsible and punctual in school, I want to introduce my experience of punctuality to my learners and this should be our daily habit from now on.'*

Respondents 6 and 3 had a joint opinion: *'In our country we have lots of cars in the streets and during peak hours we have a convoy situation. Government should introduce the use of bicycles for our community. Students feel that there is a lack of resources at schools and that some schools do not have electricity. We also do not take care of the resources that we do have'. In the Netherlands people respect time. Everyone is punctual with whatever he or she is doing. Lack of responsibility need to be corrected to assist learners to achieve goals. I feel I am going to change the environment when I start teaching and try to instil the culture of responsibility with our learners.'*

Strategies need to be formulated by positive values from teachers who derive their focus and strengths from the foundation upon which a new and unique culture will be built. There is a need to change the perception of teachers and the community as a whole in order to change the culture.

CONCLUSION

This section of the study draws conclusion based on the research questions posed, findings from the empirical investigation as well as the theories underpinning the research. The respondents involved with this project thoroughly enjoyed their attendance at the various schools as well as the indirect community service connected therewith. They were able to make friends and to experience radically different circumstances in literally every aspect of life. They could participate in social events and observe a completely different cultural value system in action. There is from their part no hesita-

tion to point out that the need for institutions to initiate and introduce international collaboration with other similar institutions is vitally important. This will allow students to foster enduring relationships that will also provide students with opportunities to increase their subject knowledge and to understand its relevance in a greater context. Although some schools do not have resources at local level, and this is largely due to lack of support from both government and parents, there is a perceived need for teachers to become active and to take it upon themselves to encourage parents to become involved with the education of their children.

It is evident from this study that the exchange program did inspire and motivate student teachers to reassess critical issues such as poverty and quality education, youth participation, educational access and exclusion and government accountability. It can thus be safely inferred that students acknowledge a change in their personal and environmental consciousness, realising that they have matured and become responsible for their own daily activities. This study confirms that in South Africa there is a desperate lack of resources and support by both parents and the government. Evidence emerged both theoretically and empirically that with exchange programs teachers can enrich their schools and communities with a new awareness of other cultures, of events occurring and the manner and effective application of resources by other countries to achieve quality education. This study revealed that introducing students exchange programs to institutions can result in a distinct improvement in classroom practice and grant students an opportunity to observe and learn from a variety of ideologies and pedagogical strategies practiced in other countries.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As our world becomes more globally conscious, institutions for professional teacher development may pursue greater numbers of exchange programs. It is expensive but the return on investment is incredible. Not only do we have individuals who have been exposed to highly functional and effective educational systems, but they can take the lead, they can assume the leadership, of the future of education in South Africa.

Patently further research is needed to identify and eliminate the factors or issues that make professional school activities difficult for student teachers. It is not so in the Netherlands. It must be determined why this fundamental difference is shored up by the local authorities rather than being dismantled. The critical result in this study is that student exchange programs do indeed have a great and positive impact on student teachers and can clearly serve to enhance teacher development.

It is accordingly recommended that exchange programs be implemented at all institutions so that some of the experiences and different realities 'lived' abroad by students can have an impact on the academic and personal lives of exchange students in education.

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