

Developing Practice: A Particular Challenge for Teacher Development through Distance Education, Especially in Rural Areas

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ABSTRACT This article attempts to provide a nuanced understanding of the implications of policy requirements set at a national level for a particular student audience – namely teachers based in rural schools and studying through distance mode. Adopting a qualitative, hermeneutic process of enquiry, the article explores the synergy or lack thereof between the policy discourse and the lived experience of teacher students. The apparent disjuncture between decontextualized policy and actual experience suggests the need for an approach that engages and models rather than dictates and imposes. The paper concludes with some suggestions on how such an approach might be conceived.

INTRODUCTION

A recent policy from the Department of Education in South Africa (DoE 2007) calls for ‘more teachers, *better teachers*’ (emphasis added) and a recent national review of teacher education programmes resulted in many being either de-accredited or given conditional accreditation (CHE 2010). At the same time there are numerous reports about the low quality of educational achievement from the schooling system, the poor preparation of many teachers and a crisis in teacher supply and training (Taylor and Vinjevd 1999; Arends and Paterson c.2008; Bloch 2008; DA 2011; Libago 2011). Lewin (2011) notes from a comparative study across several countries that “poor girls” as opposed to “rich boys” are most at risk of dropping out of the schooling system. He argues “There is no good reason why all Africa’s children will not attend and complete basic education successfully. If it does not happen it will be testimony to the failure of one generation of adults to believe in the future of the next.” Education policy in South Africa, as in other parts of the world, has undergone significant change for a wide range of reasons and these policy changes have not always had the intended results (Christie 2008; DoE 2009). Christie notes that the quality of provision remains very uneven and concludes that the changes that have been effected have simply added a level of com-

plexity which has failed to achieve much-needed transformation of the system (Christie 2008).

Whether or not one agrees with this analysis, the South African education system does seem poised for further policy change and this raises fundamental questions about the extent to which policy developed at a national level can adequately provide for differentiated needs and contexts.

Distance education has long overtaken traditional contact-based teaching for the development of teachers in South Africa but is of variable quality (Glennie and Mays 2009). The University of South Africa (Unisa) is South Africa’s dedicated distance education institution and therefore could be expected to provide leadership in the development of appropriate distance education programmes for teacher development. However, Unisa itself has been through a process of transformation from a merger of two, and an incorporation of one, distance education institutions into a single, ODL institution of the 21st Century (Unisa 2008 a, b, c). This has resulted in multiple changes in the ways in which teacher education is conceptualised and implemented which, according to some analysts, had resulted in what could be termed a curriculum malaise resulting in a ‘compliance’ approach with respect to teacher education at Unisa (Herman and Pillay 2009).

In 2011, Unisa established a new College of Education. The new College is currently in a

process of redesigning its teacher education programmes to meet the requirements of the new Higher Education Qualifications Framework (HEQF). It also needs to address the findings of the national review CHE (2010) and the more recent related Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications (RSA 2011). This is thus an opportune time to re-examine aspects of distance education provision of teacher education.

METHODOLOGY

One of the key requirements of new policy is a greater focus on the practice of teaching and a requirement that institutions build meaningful relationships with schools that are sites of practice. Institutions are required to, become actively engaged in the placement process, and provide training and ongoing support to school-based mentors and institutional supervisors. This has had profound implications for distance education practitioners who had come to rely on the use of portfolios of evidence signed off by school principals as a primary means of assessing practice. It has also had a profound impact on students who had grown used to a particular form of distance education delivery and who were frustrated by the challenges associated with the implementation of a new approach. Using convenience sampling, and an open-ended hermeneutic process of enquiry, one of the co-authors of this paper engaged in focus group discussions with Unisa students in the Eastern Cape who raised many interesting questions and issues. All students were assured of anonymity. Students' comments and questions were transcribed and then categorized by emerging themes.

RESULTS

After recording and analysing the questions students asked and the comments they made, it was possible to identify three main recurring themes: concerns about the purpose, the process and the people involved.

The comments and questions raised, reflected the importance of a careful orientation to the purpose of changes in curriculum practices for all stakeholders and suggests that if teaching practice is to be valued by students it needs to be an integral part of the programme, and obviously so.

In attempting to meet the re-accreditation requirements, Unisa's Department of Teacher Education established a teaching practice office that progressively evolved systems and processes for teacher placement, mentoring and supervision. Questions raised by students about the process reflect the challenges of a model of distance education delivery premised on print-based resources, postal systems and telephonic support for large student numbers.

The questions raised and the comments made by students reflected the challenges in seeking to provide large scale distance education on a national scale. It is time-consuming and costly to establish and maintain meaningful relationships with widely scattered schools and students. Print-based postal systems, telephone lines staffed only during office hours and a centralised management and administration approach militate against being responsive to the needs and timeframes of individual students and schools.

Frustration with new approaches and processes can impact negatively on student-staff relations more generally. Many students expressed doubts about whether university-based lecturers were well-placed to evaluate and model practices appropriate for under-resourced and overcrowded rural contexts.

DISCUSSION

Novice teachers are often expected to engage in practices which have not been modelled in their own experiences as learners; and experienced teachers often find that "new" practices being encouraged contradict and undermine their assumptions and values about the nature of teaching. This can lead to paralysis and even a decline in performance. Changing practice takes time and is influenced by both the explicit and implicit experiences afforded by the curriculum (James et al. 2006).

Teaching and learning approaches may be changing quite dramatically, but teachers' subject knowledge remains important in all curriculum approaches. Buckingham (2005) and Woolfolk (2006) point to US research which suggests that the only significant predictors of teacher quality are strength of subject matter knowledge (especially for secondary teachers) and teachers' own level of literacy.

Teachers' own mastery of their discipline is then considered essential. However, an exten-

sive study in South Africa (Taylor and Vinjevod 1999) which involved observation of many teachers in many different classrooms, discovered that many teachers were making basic errors in the curriculum they were required to teach. Often these were teachers who had passed subject-content modules in a teacher development programme at a much higher level than that of the classroom curriculum they were required to mediate. How can we address this disparity?

In concluding a detailed study of an in-service programme in an evaluation process that required detailed and multiple observations and interviews that explored both theoretical knowledge and classroom practice, Adler et al. (2002:149) suggest ‘that the task that lies ahead is to characterise and articulate “subject knowledge for teaching” and to clarify how its acquisition by teachers lies in the co-ordination of subject, pedagogic and conceptual knowledge – or what can be renamed teachers’ conceptual knowledge-in-practice’ (Adler et al. 2002:151).

As Adler et al. (2002) propose, this means getting teacher–students to engage with carefully scaffolded problem-based activities. Activities like this which focus on the expected practice in the classroom help to revise teacher–students’ own subject-specific conceptual understanding in ways that make a logical and integrated link with both methodology and understandings of learners and learning. This models the meaningful integration of theory and practice as opposed to the atomistic, decontextualised learning that characterises many teacher development programmes.

The growing emphasis on a classroom-based approach to influence practice (Dladla and Moon 2002), not only acknowledges the diverse contexts in which people work, but also that what actually happens in the classroom is influenced by the teacher’s underlying beliefs about what constitutes good practice, and his/her personal value system. Prabhu (1990 in Bertram et al. 2000:311-312) suggests that this internalised set of assumptions, beliefs and values built up over a period of time through classroom experience, training and other factors, including experiences of being a learner in a classroom, contributes to the development of the teacher’s ‘sense of plausibility’ about what amounts to good or bad practice. When faced with a new approach, method or activity, the

educator will have a sense of whether or not this will work for him/her in his/her context, without necessarily being able to articulate or justify this position. Forced to implement the new approach, without the opportunity to try to understand the rationale for it and to reflect on his/her underlying assumptions, beliefs and values, the educator is likely to implement in an unmotivated and ill-thought-through way. This is likely to result in a negative experience and a self-fulfilling prophecy that will militate against any further attempts at innovation.

Lewin (2004), in his overview of a multi-site study of six countries’ pre-service training, highlights the well-developed images trainees have of good primary teachers. These often resonate with essentially transmission-based modes of teaching, hierarchical learning of knowledge and conventional teacher-centred classroom organization. He observes that ‘these images can be contrasted with those found in recent curriculum literature which promotes more reflective and child-centred (rather than knowledge-centred) methods of teaching’.

As Tabulawa (1997) notes, educators are unlikely to be prepared to engage with changes in practice that ‘would have a destabilising effect on their taken-for-granted classroom world, possibly leading to deskilling and cognitive dissonance ...’ (in Bertram et al. 2000:297-309). Thus if the intention is to prepare teachers adequately to embrace and implement changed practices in their classrooms, then it is necessary to help them explore not only their own underlying values and beliefs, but also those of their learners and the community and society of which the school forms a part. In short, as Tabulawa (ibid) says: teaching is not just a technical activity whose solutions require technical solutions. A teacher development programme also needs to speak to the educators’ beliefs and values and these are likely to reflect those of the broader society of which the teacher is a part (Mattson 2004: 33-37).

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that in order to address the need for more and better teachers, especially in rural areas, there is need to think more creatively about the ways in which teacher education curricula are designed and delivered.

RECOMMENDATIONS

If we wish students to find value in the teaching practice component of a teacher qualification, it must be integral to the design of the curriculum – students need to be able to see clear links between knowledge and competences developed on one domain and the ways in which these come together holistically in particular contexts of practice, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1 sets out a model that is based on the design of teacher education programmes by the former Standards Generating Body and as reflected in the *Norms and Standards* policy document (RSA 2000) but modified in line with revised policy (RSA 2007).

The model sees the starting point of the initial professional education and training (IPET) of teachers (including those undertaking an IPET qualification while in-service), **Component 1**, to be the start of a conversation about what it means to ‘become a teacher’. It involves reflection on experiences as learners and as student teachers observing practice and how this understanding is continually challenged and nuanced throughout the IPET experience. In this component of the programme, therefore, a dialogue is begun that will continue throughout the programme. The way in which this is done will need to provide opportunities for student teachers to develop the academic literacy, numeracy, metacognitive and critical thinking skills that they will need to be successful in the programme

as well as to begin exploring the nature of learners and learning.

Building from this beginning, the four components of the programme build upon each other in the sequence in which student-teachers tend to have questions – starting from personal experience and then thinking about WHAT to teach (Component 2), HOW to teach (Component 3) and WHY to (continue) to teach (Component 4) as reflected in a study by Karaman (2009) and the growing autonomy of practice of the student-teacher.

In **Component 2**, the previous discussion suggests that the engagement should begin with both the assumptions made about student-teachers’ subject competences on entry and with the curriculum they will actually be required to teach.

Component 3 recognises that many teaching competences are transferable across subject boundaries. As one of the compilers of the current discussion notes, he has at various times been a ‘teacher’ of English, mathematics, physical science, primary school teachers across all eight learning areas, education management, curriculum, assessment, educational philosophy and ODL.

The link between components two and three would be a focus on pedagogic content knowledge.

As student-teachers become more familiar with the content and practice of teaching, and spend more extended periods in schools, they

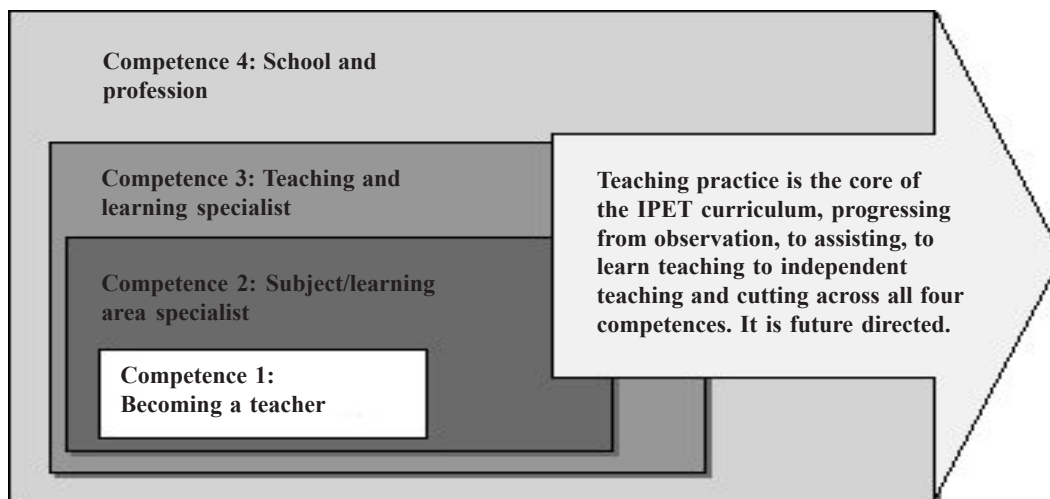


Fig. 1. TP at the heart of the curriculum

naturally become more aware of the context outside their own classroom. Thus **Component 4** of the IPET curriculum needs to explore the wider school and professional implications of becoming a teacher.

The golden thread that holds an IPET programme together is the discussion begun in component 1 about what it means to become a teacher and how the student-teacher's awareness and understandings change as they spend more and more time in the classroom on **teaching practice**. It is assumed that student-teachers will spend more and more time in classrooms and schools as they work through the IPET curriculum and will naturally work through a sequence of structured engagements on their journey towards autonomy – from guided observation, to reflexive practice assisting qualified and experienced teachers, then on to co- and team-teaching and eventually the practice of independent teaching. The teaching practice component is forward looking, constantly anticipating the challenges that may arise and helping student-teachers to understand teaching as a process of lifelong learning that continues beyond graduation. Student-teachers should be encouraged to keep a professional journal and to develop and maintain a portfolio of professional practice (increasingly digital in nature) to help them chart and reflect upon their growth as teachers. School-based mentors are critical in this process. However, they need to be trained, supported and monitored to ensure they live up to the professional expectations of their role as mentors to a new generation of teachers and do not simply exploit the student-teachers in their care (Maphosa et al. 2007).

The National Teacher Institute in Nigeria (NTI 2009: 31-4) identifies the following characteristic learning outcomes of the teaching practice component of an IPET programme.

Teaching practice is expected to enable you attain the following objectives:

- (i) gain general experience: academic, professional, social, physical, and curricula related to teaching as a profession;
- (ii) acquire a wealth of practical experiences from all staff you are likely to be in contact with and by your active participation in the school's assigned responsibilities;
- (iii) gain valuable insights for use as needed, through school and classroom observation and analysis;
- (iv) bring you into direct contact with such significant issues as the functions and responsibilities of various categories of school staff, academic and non-academic;
- (v) observe, at first hand, the different features of the school curriculum at work, that is, the core curriculum, the co-curriculum, and the extra-curriculum, and how each contributes to learning;
- (vi) become familiar with all statutory school records and the complex set of rules, regulations and records of all kinds that all teachers should know;
- (vii) learning to work in close collaboration with an experienced cooperating class teacher who is willing to share experiences with a beginner;
- (viii) develop competence in proper lesson preparation, delivery, and assessment;
- (ix) acquire those valuable personality attributes associated with outstanding teachers, for example, warmth, empathy, tolerance etc.
- (x) pass the teaching practice requirement in order to qualify as a teacher.

In order to achieve the above, student-teachers need a sound mastery of their subject specialization, and principles and practice of education, which all professional teachers should know, educational psychology especially as it relates to young persons, the methods and techniques of imparting their special subjects, and commitment to teaching in general. An understanding of the teaching-learning environment and a deep sense of mission are also critical factors. More specifically, the teaching practice exercise is intended to enable the student-teacher:

- (i) teach any given subject matter with the competence and zeal it deserves;
- (ii) prepare and present lessons according to a specified and approved format;
- (iii) manage the classroom effectively through diverse questioning techniques, especially a child-centred, interactive, and activity-based approach;
- (iv) learn from and share ideas with as many professionally qualified teachers as possible during the exercise;
- (v) evaluate lessons and self during and after teaching sessions;
- (vi) acquire and demonstrate attributes of a good teacher, which include concern for

- pupils, tolerance, warmth, and sensitivity to professional ethics;
- (vii) lay the foundation of an attitude of continual self-development academically and in teaching skills, human relations relevant to the profession, and leadership abilities;
 - (viii) obtain the required grade level expected in order to fulfil the graduation requirement for the programme enrolled in by the students.

It is necessary to make provision for an orientation to the programme generally and to the teaching practice component in particular: scheduling this for school holidays would enable in-service teachers to attend. (In South Africa there are many students taking initial teacher qualifications who are already in the classroom.)

For teaching practice to be valued by students it needs to contribute to the overall assessment of the student and feedback should be provided immediately so that it can be discussed in context. This suggests the need for a clear rubric explained and modelled well in advance.

Students should be exposed to good practice through demonstration lessons, micro teaching lessons and other approaches such as lesson study. These contact sessions of various kinds should be presented by appropriately trained and experienced master teachers. This implies a more focused and decentralized model of recruitment and support. Working with provincial departments and circuit offices would make it possible to recruit students in viable clusters and to build ongoing relationships with schools and students while encouraging peer support groups between contact sessions and school visits. Such an arrangement would make it possible to access provincial skills development levy funds to provide bursaries on the condition of continuing service.

A further refinement of this approach, addressed specifically to the needs of students and schools in rural areas, would be to develop and implement a school-based model of initial pro-

fessional education and training as illustrated in Figure 2 (Mays 2010).

In the model proposed in Table 2, initial student-teachers receive a bursary to engage in a first year/level of study in education that includes pre-service orientation linked to guided observations in multiple schools.

In the second year/level of study, student teachers are employed as teacher assistants earning both a small stipend as well as continuing to receive a bursary. They work with experienced teachers and may take responsibility for particular activities under guidance. By the end of this level, student-teachers should have mastered the content of the curriculum they are actually required to teach. The emphasis of content modules at higher levels is more on personal development than relating directly to the classroom curriculum.

By the third year of study, student-teachers are able to offer some lessons largely independently, once lesson plans have been approved and subject to regular observation and support from an experienced teacher. An increased stipend reflects the greater responsibility of the student-teacher and a bursary continues to cover study fees, although student-teachers might be expected to finance repeated modules themselves.

In the fourth year/ level, student teachers could be expected to engage as a semi-autonomous teacher but should continue to receive in-school mentoring and support from an experienced teacher. Again, an increased stipend reflects the greater responsibility of the student-teacher and a bursary continues to cover study fees, although student-teachers might reasonably be expected to finance repeated modules themselves.

On successful completion of the qualification, the teacher needs to be employed as a probationary teacher at the appropriate entry level salary and be required to continue to work at the school, or another in the cluster, for another two years. They should also become a mentor for a new student-teacher. Successful graduates

Table 2: A possible school-based model for IPET

<i>NQF level</i>	<i>Role</i>
7	Semi-autonomous teacher receiving in-school mentoring
6/7	Guided teaching, receiving in-school mentoring with internal and external supervision (PDoE and HEI)
6	Teacher assistant
5/6	Pre-service orientation and observation

unwilling to do this could reasonably be expected to repay the costs of their training according to not unreasonable conditions set out in an initial contract.

No student should present a lesson for evaluation during the first year of attachment but the local supervisor should maintain very close and hopefully cordial links with both the placement schools and the students from the first year.

Tying up with point one, there should be block periods for the students where they meet supervisors away from the classroom for at least five consecutive days and possibly longer. It is often easier to experiment with new approaches within a non-threatening community of liked-minded practitioners before taking new activities back into the classroom. A decentralized form of support and recruitment based on school clusters would make this more economically viable than one requiring the flying in of lecturing staff from the centre.

Related to the above, there is need for devolved responsibility for teaching practice support to provinces and regions and for all these decentralised sites to be linked into a common digital management information system which can continuously track student placements and assessment.

More use needs to be made of sms- and other forms of mobile technology to manage and communicate these processes – for rural areas in particular print-based correspondence is simply too slow and unreliable.

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