

Towards a Winning Approach in Developing Meaningful Pre-service Teaching Practice

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ABSTRACT This article seeks to ignite a debate on the central place of teaching practice in the education and development of teachers. It further argues that, it is only when all aspects of teacher education are appropriately positioned that a country can produce well qualified teachers. Teaching practice provides opportunities to put to test what is expected in the real world of teaching. Qualitative research was conducted among the teaching practice students of the University of South Africa (UNISA) who were placed for teaching practice. The research comprised of one to one interviews and one focus group. With the improvement plan UNISA was granted full accreditation of the PGCE teaching programme and the BED programme still required refinement. Even the fully accredited programme are not completely free of shortcomings hence the need for more consolidated efforts to improve teaching practice. One of the major findings was that Teaching Practice students do not get enough support and lack examples on which to model their practice. Based on the findings recommendations were made to provide more contact and best practices for students to model their practices

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The Higher Education Qualifications Committee (HEQC) is the body that is responsible for the accreditation of qualifications in South African institutions of higher learning. One of the requirements of the HEQC is that teacher education programmes should provide students with adequate teaching practice before they can be accepted as qualified teachers. Among other points of emphasis is the need for contact between the student teachers and their lecturers. This is imperative be it that training is through distance or contact teaching. Qualitative research was conducted among the teaching practice students of the University of South Africa (UNISA) as well as principals of some of the schools where these students are placed for teaching practice. The research comprised one to one interviews and document analysis.

The HEQC documents as well as the structure of the model used at UNISA were studied for any differences between the two documents to plan how well these can be harmonised to produce a programme where students can benefit from both theory and practice. The theoretical framework used is situated learning. With qualitative research it is possible to probe for deeper understanding and through situated learning such an aim may be facilitated. The researcher aims to contribute to the social transformation

of teachers, the schools and society. Data was analysed through triangulation. Triangulation was used in this study to combine different aspects of data collection used. The findings indicate that, in preparing students for teaching practice, all role players need greater clarity on what is expected of students with regard to learning outcomes, assessment criteria and lesson plans. Students need to be placed at schools that will provide constructive learning environments, mentoring teachers should receive training and there should be greater clarity on the *who*, *what* and *how* of the assessment of students during teaching practice.

Availability of teachers is the first step towards resolving problems in education. Teachers have to be suitable for the task of teaching. The old adage that practice makes perfect is used as a point of departure in this article.

A student teacher can be defined as “a college student who is teaching under the supervision of a certified teacher in order to qualify for a degree in education” (Farlex 2008). Thus teaching practice can be described as the time in student teachers’ training when they are exposed to school life under the guidance of a supervisor or a mentor.

Internationally, teaching practice is an issue that has been researched for some time (Robinson 2001). Recently, Landman (2008: 7), Naude (2007: 14) and Van Niekerk (2008: 12) observed

that teaching practice in South Africa is in crisis. Although schools are willing to accommodate students, poor management, non-existent timetables, lack of staff and non-mentoring all impact negatively on the practice, leaving some students demotivated and disillusioned (Cillié 2008: 8). Thus, the restructuring of teaching practice at schools is essential.

Unisa, a distance education (DE) institution, includes student teaching practice in the training of teachers. In support of this, staff design workbooks, visit schools during teaching practice and are available to students to discuss problems. Nevertheless, the lecturers at Unisa were urged by the HEQC to improve students' experience of teaching practice. This made it necessary to investigate students' views on the most important issues in teaching practice (as indicated by the conceptual framework) with the aim of addressing problems appropriately.

This research focused on Unisa students who are doing teaching practice as a requirement to complete their teaching qualification.

The article argues that a well-planned teaching practice approach has the potential to prepare teachers for their prospective positions in the profession as it forms a solid foundation for later years of practice.

In the following paragraphs the background to this research is sketched and an outline of the conceptual framework which guided the research is given.

Teaching practice (TP) is considered a critical component and a building block towards preparing the student teacher for a real life setting. Butcher and Sieninsk (2006) point out the dissonance that exists between the culture of a school and that of a university and how this incongruent state of affairs impacts on the student teachers, the teacher educators and the school personnel. Student teachers are placed in unenviable situations before they can be qualified teachers. This places them in an environment where they can experience solitude and their motivation level to learning can be low and can get lost in the maze. They need a considerable amount of support for their studies (Daradeumis and Marques 2009). Support comes in various forms, of which physical interaction ranks high (Mbunyuza-de Heer Menlah and Mays 2010).

In South Africa, as in other parts of the world, the cry for quality teaching is topical. Ssantimu-Namiburi (2010) avers that teacher education is

under public scrutiny like never before, both locally and internationally. It becomes important that teacher education and development should seek to address societal needs in response to societal quests for properly qualified teachers. In responding to this Unisa embarked on various ways to provide teaching practice that will produce the type of teacher who will meet the demands of the ever advancing landscape of education. The missing point in the previous system that was devised is support in the form of direct contact between the student teachers and the teacher educators as prescribed by the Higher Education Qualifications Committee (HESC) which is the body responsible for the accreditation of qualifications in the South African institutions of higher learning.

Conceptual Framework

In teaching practice, the roles of "masters" (for example, mentors) and "apprentices" (for example, student teachers) in a practical learning situation are the point of departure for all learning activities. Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of situated learning is based on two principles, namely that learning takes place as a function of the context, culture and activity in which it occurs, and that learning is a process that occurs in a participatory social context. The participants are the "master teachers" and the "apprentices/learners" are the student teachers. Learners acquire the knowledge and skills they need to perform in the classroom by engaging in the school situation. Thus, they apply the abstract knowledge they acquired through their studies to real-life situations.

Two concepts are important in situated learning theory: "community of practice" and "legitimate peripheral participation". Learners develop and identify with the practices appropriate for a specific community. Wenger identifies three elements that define a community of practice, namely mutual engagement of participants in action, negotiation of a joint enterprise and development of a shared repertoire. Learners are legitimate peripheral participants in the practices of the teaching community during their practical teaching under the guidance of experienced teachers as mentors. Lave and Wenger (1991: 32, 50, 70) view learning as a social process where identity, membership (a need to belong in order to learn) and interpersonal relationships are significant (Beck and Kosnik 2002: 82).

Literature Review

Research into the role of teaching practice in pre-service teacher education is well documented. Teaching practice is an integral part of any successful teacher education programme (Shumba and Shumba 2007; Chireshe and Chireshe 2010). Beck and Kosnick (2002), Morine-Dersheimer and Leighfield (2006) as cited by Ssentamu-Namubiru (2010: 306) opine thus:

“Practicum is an integral and highly valued component of initial teacher training.”

Mulholland and Derald (2005) take the argument further and bring in the view that teaching practice enables students to learn and practise in a real life setting and therefore validate and consolidate professional competence.

This view is endorsed by Du Plessis et al. (2010: 323-341) who identify practice teaching as the beginning point that cannot be escaped by anyone who aspires to be a teacher. This is in line with one of the requirements of the HEQC that education programmes should provide students with adequate teaching practice before they can be accepted as qualified teachers.

Lessons learnt about practice teaching demonstrate that a well-planned placement programme contributes greatly to the success of a pre service programme and leads to a well-equipped teacher who enters the profession with confidence. Mullholland and Derald (2005) concluded that placements can make or break the quality of a pre-service programme. Learning from the view cited above, careful planning should go into the placements of student teachers. This should not be a haphazard and quick plan but rather time should be taken to explore the different angles and communicate properly with all those in the development of a student teacher. Human beings need to communicate to build a good working relationship. Experiences prove that all programmes that are aimed at development gain strength from effective communication and interaction among all those who can make a contribution. Effective communication should involve all affected parties and take their views on equal footing.

With proper communication dissonance between the schools and the university can be minimised and thus make it easy for the student to function competently between the two organisations. This research shows inadequate communication among the affected parties, namely

between student teachers and lecturers, lecturers and the sites of practice, and also between the schools and the university.

Placements should be done timeously. Some principals of schools have pleaded that placement of students for teaching practice should start early in the year preceding the actual practice. This places a demand on the university as the initiator of the practice teaching to interact with the schools as sites of practice. Du Plessis et al. (2010) and Ngcobo (1989) argue that universities do not place enough emphasis on the issue of interacting with and bringing schools onto the same page in recognising them as inevitable partners in practice teaching.

Teaching practice cannot bear meaning without the commitment of those in practice in conjunction with their institutions. This endorses the need to strengthen interaction between university lecturers and the schools. Du Plessis et al. (2010) classifies students and the personnel of the practicing schools as the important role players in practice teaching. Heed should be taken of the views of those involved together with their aspirations as long as they add value towards the success of teaching practice.

Against the backdrop of the growing concern about the dearth of qualified teachers, efforts between the universities as providers of theory as well as custodians of the qualifications, and schools as partners that provide the practical aspect of education, the value of proper placement of student teachers cannot be over emphasised. Kader (2003) indicates that lecturers, as representatives of universities, and teachers, as representatives of schools, have to work as a team. Placement of students plays a major role in shaping the approach of a given teaching practice model. The study reminisces on the views of those who refer to teaching as a capable facet to make or break the quality of a teacher to be produced. Du Plessis et al. (2010: 328) argue that:

“If professional development initiatives do not have infrastructure to enable them to work, student teaching practice will become an obligation and a burden rather than a learning experience.”

Proper arrangements create a motivating climate for both student teachers and placement schools to contribute towards a successful development programme. All parties look forward to implementing what has been agreed upon. Student teachers, educators and schools act as a united force.

In the context of distance learning, one of the students' critical problems is the feeling of isolation. Virtual learning environments can offer a sense of communication and contact with other students and teaching staff through a community forum, a space for debates and a classroom forum. Against the background of the conceptual framework and the literature review, the following methodology was deemed suitable for investigating the way in which a group of Unisa students experienced teaching practice.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In the light of the Research Methodology using discussions, the following research questions were addressed and these are:

The research questions were: What is the significance of teaching practice to students? Is the relationship between universities and schools promoting the professional development of student teachers? What elements should be included in our programmes to enhance the professional development of student teachers?

The choice was made because the participants were information rich. Six school principals from the province of KwaZulu Natal (KZN) were elected through purposive samplings. The principals were heads of schools that have been used by UNISA for more than once to placing students for Teaching Practice. Six students on Teaching Practice were used as a focus group so that they can gain support from one another in that it provides a natural conversational environment

Data Gathering and Analysis

Interviews and focus group strategies were employed as the main tools in qualitative phenomenological design. This was chosen to allow participants to allow participants to describe their experiences and share their views about a phenomenon in which they are involved. These are experiences that the participants have lived.

Prior to the start of the interviews, the researcher informed the ethical considerations. Amongst the considerations participants were assured that their information would be kept confidentially. The researcher guaranteed that no information will be traced to any particular individual. The interview would be completely anonymous. Participants got involved willingly and voluntarily.

Interviews comprised two sections:

One-to-one Semi-structured Interviews

- (I) Do you think that there is a place for teaching practice during the pre-service stage of teacher development?
- (II) What are your experiences of student teachers or principals during teaching practice?
- (III) Please comment on placement of student teachers in schools as a component of teaching practice?
- (IV) What is your perception of placement of student teachers for teaching practice?
- (V) What suggestions would you make to enhance the quality of teaching practice?

Focus Group Interviews

- (I) Do you think there is a need for teaching practice?
- (II) How did you get placed in this school?
- (III) Comment on your teaching practice experiences.
- (IV) How do you experience supervision during your teaching practice?
- (V) Please make suggestions to improve teaching practice.

In addition to interviews a study and analysis of documents was conducted. The researcher studied the students' plans as well as the evaluation form. Teacher educators from the university use a structured form for the once off evaluation of teachers. This form was evaluated by studying the topics that direct their classroom visits. Some topics bear no meaning to the process at hand, namely developing a teacher, and others cannot be fathomed within the 45-minute period of the lecturer's stay in the classroom.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Against the backdrop of the growing concern about the dearth of qualified teachers, efforts between the universities as providers of theory as well as custodians of the qualifications, and schools as partners that provide the practical aspect of education the value of proper placement of student teachers cannot be overestimated. Kader (2003) indicates that lecturers, as representatives of universities and teachers, as representatives of schools, have to work as a team.

Placement of students plays a major role in shaping the approach of a given teaching practice model. The study reminisces on the views of those who refer to teaching as a capable facet to make or break the quality of a teacher to be produced. Du Plessis et al. (2010: 328) argue that:

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Proper arrangements create a motivating climate for both student teachers and placement schools to contribute towards a successful development programme. All parties look forward to implement what has been agreed upon. Student teachers, educators and schools act as a united force.

In the context of distance learning, one of the students' critical problems is the feeling of isolation. Virtual learning environment can offer a sense of lack communication and lack contact with other students and teaching staff through community forum, a space for debates and a classroom forum. Howell et al. (2004: 43) express concern after observing the skewed emphasis of distance training towards technology. From the observation they recommend provision of hands on experience to go hand in hand with the use of technology and other means to make distance education a reality. They argue that:

"Institutions should ensure that distance education training and support for faculty include course redesigns support, training in the use and application of distance education technologies."

Observations made from these point towards the important role of teaching practice. Meaningful practise avails the student teachers opportunities to rehearse for real action. There is general consensus among different players in teaching practice who participated in this study. The common view is that there is a need for the placement of student teachers to compliment the education and development programme with the practical element—an imperative block in preparing a teacher. One participant in the focus group had this to say:

"Yes, there is a need for us to be placed in schools so that educators (meaning student teachers) can be able to share teaching skills, knowledge and experience with qualified educators."

A principal from one of the schools expressed positive views about the placement of student teachers in schools and she says:

"This thing of having the students who are still in training is like osmosis. I mean they bring new ideas about methods and things – you know, sometimes I write them, especially these older ones, to discuss with me the stuff that is in their pamphlets and tutorial letters – and we learn a lot as staff. They also see things for real in the school and my mentor teachers show them actual things in a real Mlazi (a township in Durban) school."

Another school principal says:

"Our school is always willing to assist these young 'chappies' become teachers."

This is a contribution we can make to society. Some of them were in our school here for their matric and we are pleased to help them further till they take their places in society."

Principal B says:

"I find it difficult to run two programmes my schools – we plan as staff at the end of the year for the next year. Now your students come at the beginning of the year."

Of course we feel bound to take them on board – quite difficult – we don't know what you expect of this – then the student comes, 'my lecturer is coming to crit me' – 'within an hour the lecturer is gone. But...ee...but, I have seen them participating in school activities – maybe you and us need to talk more."

The statements documented above show the willingness of schools to have teachers placed in their schools and also the importance attached by students themselves in being placed in schools. It is up to the university to ensure that the motivation and interest that are already inherent are cultivated and nurtured. Both student teachers and the schools attest to the invaluable exchange that occurs during the placement period and above all both parties find this a must to be included in teacher preparation.

Both students and schools agree that teaching cannot be read from the theory that is captured in books and pamphlets only. Borko et al. (2009) say: "Teaching is a wicked process ..."

Maynard (2001: 39) argues fervently that:

"It is beyond dispute that students' school placements are at the apex of professional development."

With teaching practice taking central stage in the education of teachers, the major role play-

ers should work hand in hand. McIntyre (1997) as cited by Mudavashu and Zezekwa (2009) share experiences of a working internship programme where the university and the schools each had to contribute according to their strength. We should understand that the relationship between the university and the schools is dialectic. The university has to make every effort to assist the student teachers to join the school community with ease. Additionally, the university should be visible throughout the period of practice giving support and guidance both to their students and the schools. This would go a long way to ameliorate any possible tension that there may be between the student teachers and the school. Uncertainty can be quelled.

There is a dearth of commitment from universities to bring schools in during organisation and preparation for teaching practice. A participant from the students' focus group has this to say:

"I was feeling very bad when I told my principal that my lecturer was going to visit me at school and she told me that I can use the class but she cannot wait for people who do not even recognise them."

Responses from the principals also portray a lack of involvement of schools and the staff in the whole programme. They also show that they, as representatives of schools, are never sure as to whether the type of guidance they give to the student is in line with the latest developments of the university. One principal confessed that he allows the student to be in the school and he never gets involved until the day the student reports that the period has ended. He said:

"I see them one day and meet them just along the corridors."

Then I see them when they report their departure; if we are lucky."

Some just leave at the end of time. That way I maintain peace."

This shows exclusion of schools in the scheme of things. With the status quo there can be no healthy and developmental discussions between the schools and the university. This allows loss of valuable opportunities that, if well captured, could be a great contribution in the training of teachers.

Lack of interaction with parties involved in teaching practice is experienced even by the students. Person two of the focus group came across strongly saying:

"Please improve your communication with your students by constantly updating your contact details on the teaching practice tutorial letter."

Students also complained that even if they take the initiative to contact the university, they never got to talk to the lecturers because telephones are either engaged or they ring continuously without response. To them trying to reach their lecturers is an exercise that yields no fruit in most cases so they resort to their own devices. Members of the focus group supported one another in the view that lecturers should show them the ropes of the game. They finish one another's sentences in their bid to emphasise the void that results from non-visibility of lecturers during their teaching practise period. They believe that lecturers should show them how to present a lesson and relate to the learners (children) in a classroom. They expressed that theory should be put into practice before the placement of student teachers in schools so that they will know what is expected of them, for example lesson presentation, making a project, class activity or controlled tests using rubric are some of the points they felt strongly about.

The view of the focus group was endorsed by a principal at a different setting altogether when she requested that lecturers should visit the schools and know the environment well before the day they supervise students. She stated that she could create space for lecturers to present lessons to the learners for the student teachers to learn from best practices, and the staff members to learn new developments and realign their practices to the newly researched ways of practice. Mudavashu and Zezekwa (2009) reported that student teachers were prepared to learn from those ahead of them in the profession. As observed by Ssentamu-Namibiru (2010), support given by universities is minimal and it can achieve very little in helping student teachers to reach the aspired goal of holistic professional growth. The assessment form is scanty and it falls way below the level of interpreting the shortfalls that may be inherent in the students' practice and does not go any closer towards creating pointers to the making of a qualified teacher.

School principals feel that the universities do not recognise them as important participants who have a potential to contribute to the success of the programme. One principal from an affluent school had the following to say:

"But a... You see maan, when the university does not work with us (throat clearing) like a partnership...eee, it becomes difficult."

The other school principal finds that the university runs a programme parallel to their schools' and explains that he does not feel obliged to support activities that he has not been invited into from the beginning.

While there is goodwill and willingness to support the students, principals find themselves alienated and even undermined by the universities and they thus tread with caution lest they do not do what ought to be done. Others develop some resentment for they find themselves unrecognised in their own terrain. There is also a contributory factor, namely inferiority complex, because of their academic standing as against that of lecturers and the level of university as compared with the school in the social hierarchy.

Problems lamented by Dzvimbo (1994) about poor management of teaching practice in the distance education programme model of Zimbabwe are evident in the views of student teachers who were interviewed for this study. It is documented that in the cited model student teachers struggled to get study materials for various resources. This is bemoaned by the members of the focus group and participant four of the focus group came out strongly saying:

"I only received my books and these TP exercises for your TP assignment only after Easter. Four months was gone and I had gone back to the school and request to be accommodated again. I mean doc... you can't do that."

Student teachers also expressed their disappointment on the inaccessibility of teaching practice officers at the university. They reported that the phones are engaged from morning to close of day. One student took the trouble to visit the university after several attempts to access the office for teaching practice had come to naught and was disappointed to find the phone off the hook. He said that he was wondering if this was the reason why the phones are continuously engaged every day, all the time.

Dzvimbo (1994) found it a clear indication of lack of planning to assign lecturers in charge of teaching practice other tasks outside the programme and the same can be said of the work allocation in universities today. Teaching practice should be accorded the value of a pillar in teacher education and development.

In response to the findings, most of the students experienced the schools as being very

supportive, felt part of the school and felt great about being involved in practical teaching. Participation is a way of learning which allows the learning curriculum to unfold in opportunities for engagement in practice, in accordance with situated learning theory (Lave and Wenger 1991). The social context at the schools therefore encouraged collaborative learning by means of groups that included students and staff members. Such social interaction addressed the students' differing needs by taking into account their social and cultural backgrounds (Woolfolk 2007: 346). The social process at schools is significant in respect of identity, membership and inter-personal relations. Close relationships provide an opportunity to clarify expectations, and allow for empowering actions and whole school involvement, which are all very important. This gives prominence to the role of peers in the above social contexts.

The student teachers need to participate actively in the school contexts for learning to take place. However, it is not always easy to operationalise "participation" (Hodkinson and Hodkinson 2003, 2008). These authors point out that "practice" is merely an activity whereas "participation" is a meaningful activity. The importance of actively *doing* in the relevant context was pointed out by Jonassen and Rohrer-Murphy (1999: 61). This view is supported by Borke et al. (2009) as they opine that students do not learn to learn to teach in towers but in trenches.

CONCLUSION

Teacher education and its precursory facets emphasise both practical and theory as equally invaluable in shaping a student into a fully-fledged teacher. Schools should be accorded equal status to that of universities. Students do not learn to teach in towers, but in trenches. The observations made above point towards the important role of teaching practice. Meaningful practise avails the student teachers opportunities to rehearse for real life participation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Support is essential in any developmental process. Teaching is in its nature a difficult job. Even for well trained teachers, teaching is often a difficult job that places a strain on the individual. Support to teachers should take the form of not just professional development, but also

psycho-social support . Support cannot only occur through learning materials but it also calls for human interaction. There is a dearth of physical presence of university lecturers and this translates to inadequate support of student teachers.

Students should be exposed to best practice through demonstration lessons. Demonstrations should be presented by TP lecturers at central places just like discussion classes. Tying up with the above point, there should be block periods for the students where they meet TP lecturers for at least five consecutive days. It can be longer but never shorter.

Once off demonstration lessons have no significance in assisting student teachers in their development process. This view emphasises the need for continuous support through a number of demonstration lessons and other means of best practice expository means that are slotted strategically into the teaching practice programme.

It has been alluded to earlier in this study that teaching practise is the core of teacher education and development. Taking this assertion into consideration points to a need for an independent teaching practise unit in any institution that is involved in teacher education. The unit should be manned with staff who are passionate about teaching practise and are themselves trained as school teachers. Given the circumstances like the infrastructure and distances between the university and schools where open distant learning (ODL) institutions are placed, the staff from the teacher practise unit should be ready to devote their time to actual physical interactions with the students. This is a daunting task and needs devotion and passion from those involved. It is therefore imperative that the staff concerned should buy into the idea of physical interaction with the student teachers so that their level of motivation may undermine any impediments that may stand in the way of attaining their objective.

Closely tied to this is the need for a proper evaluation instrument which realistically targets improvement that will contribute meaningfully to the making of a teacher. Lecturers have to be part of the process of making the instrument.

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