RECONFIGURING TEACHER EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES TO ADDRESS LEARNER BEHAVIOURAL CONDUCTS IN SCHOOLS: CHANGED REALITY

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Abstract

The purpose of the paper is to argue for the need to reconfigure the training of Bachelor of Education Degree student teachers as a strategy to empower them in dealing with the changed reality in secondary schools. The purpose is achieved by looking at the relevancy of the education or training offered to undergraduate teacher trainee students at universities in Eastern Cape Province of South Africa regarding learner behavioural problems being experienced in secondary schools. The paper was guided by a situated learning theory. The paper adopted a qualitative approach and a case study design. The study purposively selected 3 universities, 9 lecturers and 15 teacher trainees as participants. Data were collected through use of interviews and focus group discussions. Thematic frames were used to analyse data that were discussed concurrently with the findings. The study established a mismatch between how the teachers' training and actual reality in schools as a challenge that needs to be addressed. The implication drawn is that failure to move with speed to reconfigure the training of initial teacher education increases frustration and tension between teachers and learners. The paper concludes that the current way of training of teachers lacks reality of how teacher trainees should deal with learner behavioural problems in schools. Universities should redesign an initial teacher education programme that capacitates teacher trainees to handle and speak to the current generation of secondary school learners.

Keywords: Initial teacher, teacher education programme, learner behavioural conduct, school-based experience.

1. Introduction

An analysis or reflection on the state of the training programme offered to Bachelor of Education Degree (B.Ed.) student teachers in South Africa is necessary. Such an analysis should focus on the review of dealing with learners showing symptoms of indiscipline, counselling, infusion of technology into learning and teaching among other things. This would be important to transform the programme and speak to the millennium generation found in present schools and the society that is fast changing. Darling-Hammond, Flook, Cook-Harvey, Barron and Osher (2020) argue that for 21st-century learners to be created, focus must be on teachers' 21st century skills and re-conceptualize how teachers could be evaluated and trained. From the interaction the current researchers of this paper did with some university teacher trainees, we discovered that most teacher trainees were not enthusiastic to go for School Based Experience (also known as Teaching Practice in some corners of the globe) citing their inability and how they struggled to deal with the generation of learners currently found in schools.

Reconfiguring the initial teacher education in universities can be a necessary move to take in response to learner behavioural challenges faced by teachers in secondary schools. Violence is prevalent at some South African schools. Cases such as learners' shootings at school premises, physical violence, beating up of teachers, and in some instances, killings of teachers at schools, drug, and alcohol abuse, (Nhambura, 2020) are common on news headlines in South Africa. In line with the above, Steyn and Mentz (2008) observe that there was a dramatic increase in lack of discipline in schools and classrooms, increase of violence on school grounds, learners and parents with HIV/AIDS, unemployment, poverty and other societal issues that exert pressure on teachers. Based on the above scenario, we argue for the restructuring of the initial university teacher training programme. It is of great importance to ensure that the manner in which teachers are trained suits and meets the demands and the dynamics of the present society. The question to ask is 'are teacher trainees equipped by universities to deal with the social ills that are now common in secondary schools?

2. Objectives

The study objectives were:

To establish lecturers' and student teachers' perceptions regarding the current B.Ed. programme offered in South African universities to trainee teachers in relation to the actual practice in secondary schools.

To identify measures that can used to ensure that Bachelor of Education Degree teacher trainees are prepared to deal with the psychological and social disorder conducts of secondary school learners in Eastern Cape Province of South Africa.

3. Theoretical framework

The study was informed by the Situated Learning Theory (SLT). Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger founded the SLT in the 1980s (David, 2007). The Situated Learning Theory's key feature is its belief that learning should take place within authentic context, culture, and activity (David, 2007). SLT argues that learning happens when students work as a team and are given real life activities to work on. Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that SLT students' ideas and actions are shaped by the environment. The theory was suitable for the study since it provides usable knowledge to real world contexts which also the current study is arguing for.

4. Literature review

The researchers of this paper are aware of the debate on the model that universities can adopt to train student teachers in institutions of higher learning. Van der Walt and Fowler (2006) state that there was an ongoing debate amongst educationists, worldwide, regarding a particular model for teacher education within the context of the attainability, sustainability and effectiveness of the particular model. We are of the view that the suitability of a model is determined by its capacity to address the needs and challenges faced by the audience it is going to service. Currently, the South African universities are using the integrated model to train the prospective teachers (Robinson, 2015). It is the responsibility of the South African Qualification Authority (SAQA) to set the requirements or criteria and register them on National Qualification Framework (NQF) that guide universities offering the teacher training programme. According to the Ministry of Education (2001), the custodian for all teacher education programmes are institutions of higher learning under the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET).

The focus of this paper is on the reconfiguring of the Bachelor of Education Degree's nature, content and expected outcomes for the different qualifications for teacher education. The Department of Education (DoE) (2007) indicates that the nature, content and attributes for the qualifications for teacher education are articulated in the Norms and Standards of the Department of Education (DoE 2000). The SAQA indicates that the B.Ed. programme bears 480 credits. The nature of the programme is that it covers the area of specialisation and the professional component. The Departments of Basic Education and Higher Education and Training (2011) specifies the roles or responsibilities that should form part of the programme in terms of content to be covered. The roles are: (1) a learning mediator (2) an interpreter and designer of learning programmes and materials (3) a leader, administrator and manager (4) a scholar, researcher and lifelong learner (5) responsible for a community, citizenship and pastoral role (6) an assessor and (7) a learning subject specialist (DoHE & DHET, 2011). From the above integrated model mostly followed by South African universities offering teaching degree programmes shows that the emphasis is on subject-content knowledge and pedagogy (Steyn & Mentz, 2008).

The paper is arguing for a change in the approach and nature of the curriculum for Bachelor of Education degree to speak to the changed reality in societies. From literature discussed above, there is little emphasis if any for the curriculum to focus on understanding of the sophisticated changing social character of schools. The student teacher might have the knowledge, yes, but is s/he equipped to manage learners diverse classrooms who are influenced by the societies they are coming from (Mugyenyi, 2021). Such learners might have a tendency of displaying behaviours that are difficult (Nhambura, 2020; South African Human Rights Commission, 2008) for teacher trainee or newly qualified teachers. This might result in cultural shock and likely to find the teacher or learners missing in action, hence the need for this current study. It is also crucial to train and equip student teachers with the skills necessary to deal with the current generation of secondary school learners. Darling-Hammond (2006) sums it all up by stating that it required teachers to have a deeper knowledge of how to address a diverse array of learners and more refined diagnostic abilities to inform their decisions. In a similar view, Levy and Murnane (2004) posit that the ability to communicate in complex environment requires constant information flow and adjustment.

5. Methodology

The paper adopted a qualitative approach and a case study design given that the aim of the study was to argue for the need to reconfigure the curriculum of Bachelor of Education Degree offered to student teachers. Three universities, 9 lecturers and 15 teacher trainees were purposively chosen to participate in the study. Purposive sampling technique was used since it allows researchers to select participants deliberately and purposefully with rich information (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) suitable for the study. Data were collected through use of interviews and focus group discussions that permitted room for probing to get clarity (Mncube, 2012). The interviews and focus group discussions were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. Thematic frames and verbatim quotations were used to analyse data that were discussed concurrently with the findings.

6. Ethical considerations

Permission to conduct research was sought and granted by the three universities that participated in the study. Permission to use names of the universities and participants was not granted hence use of codes. Participants were assured of anonymity, confidentiality, privacy and their rights to be observed. Consent forms to participate in the study and to be audio recorded were signed by the participants. We explained the purpose of the research to the participants and assured them that they could withdraw from participating in the study without being victimised.

7. Findings and discussion

In relation to the B.Ed. programme offered in South African universities, the following challenges were identified from the responses given by both students and lecturers. We noticed that the participants' perceptions of the programme were characterised more with challenges associated with the programme as shall be explained below. All interviews and focus group discussions focused on a question that solicited the participants' views related to the B.Ed. programme: 'What are your perceptions regarding the nature of the B.Ed. programme being offered to undergraduate secondary school teacher trainees?' Follow-up questions included 'What experiences have you had of the programme?' and 'What changes would you like to see in the programme?' We asked empirical questions and probed for clarity.

The common critical issues that emerged from the study and recorded were:

a) Expected outcomes

- *The courses offered by universities do not match the lived reality in secondary schools.*
- *Inadequate teaching practice time for student teachers.*
- *Too much focus on theory and content*
- *Heavy workload for lecturers and has a bearing on supervision of students on SBE TP*
- *Need for more learning time, semester is too short due to late starting of lectures or tutorial*
- *Student teachers not well trained to face the pressures faced in societies that are reflected in secondary schools.*
- *Programme taught by some staff who do not have a teaching or professional qualification*

Both academics and students felt that the B.Ed. offered had some gaps that needed an urgent attention. There was a consensus that the programme was focusing too much on the specialized knowledge at the expense of other factors like preparing and equipping the student teachers with information on how to deal with divergent learners. The participants shared similar sentiments that the programme was divorced or detached from reality of what was happening in schools. Student teachers or newly trained teachers often found themselves struggling to deliver the content they would have learnt at university because of the challenges they encounter in class. Academic A from university B indicates, '*Universities need to rethink about the B.Ed. programme. The way we are teaching and preparing student teachers is not enough. They struggle when they go to schools that are these days marked by violence, theft, abuse, learners with conduct disorders, harsh societies, poverty, diseases and so forth. How will the student teacher deal with such behaviours?*' Academic AA from university C shared a similar view, '*there should be a curriculum change and development that is constructed by university curriculum developers, student teachers and school management for the universities' teaching to mirror reality of what is happening in societies. Our students are not adequately trained to deal with reality hence advocating for a curriculum reform*'. In addition to the above views, Academic AAA from university A expressed concern on the issue of staff who were teaching student teachers without them having a teaching professional qualification. AAA thus said, '*I feel that the whole system needs a revamp and reconsider the criteria that can be used to recruit lecturers in the faculty of education. How is it possible that someone without a teaching qualification trains a teacher?*'

The responses that were collected through students' focus group discussions corroborated the data collected from academics through interviews. What this implies is that the B.Ed. programme being currently offered in these 3 universities is at stuck and an urgent attention to address the issue is needed. A student from university A's focus group voiced the issue of time which they felt was not enough. The student thus said, *'We need more time, the time we spend on school based experience is too short for us to be grounded in the actual practice. Moreso, our lecturers always complain about huge workloads and this result in them not assisting us adequately during our teaching practice. They only visit us once while on teaching practice, so, we lack proper guidance. Sometimes we are even attached to inexperienced mentors in schools after being taught again by some inexperienced lecturers'*. From university B's focus group, students were concerned about the shocks they get when they go to schools for observation and school based experience. The group through one student thus said, *'Our experience at university and experience in schools is like we are in two separate worlds or planets. How we are prepared at university and what is expected of us when we go to schools is totally different. Schools expect us to mark and balance registers but at university we don't do that. Sometimes we feel discouraged and embarrassed to go on teaching practice because you feel that I am not ready to stand and face the pressure in schools. Some learners' conduct behaviours are difficult to handle'*. The other focus group from university C also raised more or less similar views to the ones raised by the other two groups. The general consensus was that the participants were not happy about how the current programme is being offered in terms of its nature, content and timeframes.

b) Actual Experiences

- *Shortage of skilled and experienced lecturers*
- *Struggling to infuse community engagement activities*
- *Lack of proper ICT infrastructure for teaching and learning*
- *Lecturers and students lack basic computer skills for teaching*

Both academics and students who participated in the study expressed concern that the B.Ed. programme had to ensure that student teachers were exposed to use of technologies to keep pace with the wonders of the twenty-first century. Some student teachers expressed that they did not have confidence to use information and communication technologies since they were not prepared for that by their lecturers. Some of the lecturers were also struggling to use those technologies. A student from university C's focus group said, *'How is it possible that in this age of technology, universities are still producing teachers who cannot go into schools and use technologies when the learners they will be teaching are a techno savvy generation?'* The implication for this question is that student teachers are not adequately capacitated to use ICTs and when they go to schools they feel lost. It also shows that their lecturers lack or have limited skills to use ICTs. This finding is in line with the finding that was established by Marongwe, Munienge and Chisango (2019) that some university lecturers were not infusing technologies in their teaching and learning. It also emerged from the study that some universities that participated in the study had no adequate ICT infrastructure, hence, lack of enthusiasm to use ICTs. The ICT infrastructure only improved amid the COVID19 pandemic that pushed universities to switch to online. The above issues affect directly how the universities prepare the student teachers. It can be drawn that universities will produce teachers who are not technologically orientated. When such teachers go to schools that use ICTs, they found themselves being incompetent to meaningfully use the ICTs in their teaching. This can cause learners who are being taught to misbehave in class because the teacher will not be using the means that appeal to them as techno-savvy learners

c) Mitigation Strategies

- *Reforming the programme by making it more practical than theoretical (hands-on)*
- *Content structure to be balanced and focus also on techniques and skills to deal with the changing societies*
- *A must teach with technology for all student teachers*

The study participants envisaged a B.Ed. programme that matches and speaks to what is happening in schools. Interesting proposals were submitted by both student teachers and their lecturers. There was a consensus that a curriculum reform in terms of the programme structure, content, approach and use of technology need not to be re-emphasised. The programme should be more practical and authentic to avoid a mismatch between how student teachers are trained and how things are done in schools.

8. Recommendation

The universities under study should relook at the programme they are offering. This will help to produce graduate teachers who are relevant and who can stand the societal pressures.

9. Conclusion

The paper concludes that the B.Ed. programme currently offered at universities that participated in the study has some gaps that impact negatively on the performance of student teachers when they are placed for school based experience. Some classroom realities are not addressed, and students are shocked when in class struggling to deal with reality. Use of ICTs should be infused into the training of student teachers. To sum up it all, the current B.Ed. programme being offered should be reconfigured to match the changed reality in schools and speak to the current societal pressures. The student teachers are not adequately prepared to deal with changed reality in schools.

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