THE UGLY SIDE OF TEACHING PRACTICE: TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENT TEACHERS' IMMORAL AND UNPROFESSIONAL BEHAVIOUR DURING TEACHING PRACTICE

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Abstract

Teaching practice (TP) is regarded as a crucial component in initial teacher training programmes because it affords student teachers an opportunity to put theory into practice. During TP student teachers (also referred to as pre-service teachers) are afforded the opportunity to explore the different educational contexts in which teaching and learning take place. It is expected of all B.Ed students (from 1st to fourth year, and PGCE students) to undertake TP, and to behave professionally and ethically during their TP period. However, the university often receives negative feedback about students' unethical and unprofessional behaviour from the *teaching community** after TP had been completed. This negative feedback was one of the motivating factors that prompted the writing of this paper. The second motivation was the findings of the portfolio content that students have to submit after TP. Some students' actions were dishonest, for example, they forged mentor teachers' signatures on forms. The purpose of this article was to obtain teachers' perceptions of how pre-service teachers conduct themselves during teaching practice. Individual face-to-face interviews were conducted with twenty-seven teachers and three school principals to collect data. The findings revealed that despite the fact that many students are generally well-behaved and ethical, a significant number of them are entitled, unprofessional, disrespectful and dress inappropriately when they are at the schools. From these findings one can conclude that certain student teachers behave in an undesirable fashion which negatively impacts on their future placements at schools. One of the recommendations is for student teachers to be adequately prepared by teacher education programmes to meet the requirements of teaching in the real classroom environment.

Keywords: Teaching practice, teacher professionalism, behaviour, values, student teachers.

1. Introduction

Teaching practice is a critical aspect of initial teacher education that prepares student teachers to become professional, skilled, ethical and competent teachers after completing their studies (Merc, 2004; Roy, Wieser, Dhlamini, & Thomas, 2016: 17). During TP students are afforded the opportunity to gain practical experience in the actual teaching and learning environment, namely the school. Marais & Meier (2004: 220-221) assert that the term TP represents the range of experiences to which student teachers are exposed when they work in classrooms and schools. It is a form of work-integrated learning that is described as a period of time when students work in the relevant industries to receive specific in-service training in order to apply theory to practice. Ehrich, Kimber, Millwater, & Cranston (2011) assert that teaching is profoundly a moral activity and teachers, whether they are in-service or pre-service, are expected to conduct themselves in moral ways. Values thus play a crucial role in pre-services teachers' path on becoming teachers. The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) decides how long student teachers must spend at schools to undertake their TP. The policy documents (Teaching Practice: Guidelines for Initial Teacher Education Programmes, no date; and the Policy on the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications, 2011) stipulate that B.Ed students must spend twenty weeks at the schools. Students who are registered for the PGCE must spend ten weeks at the schools. This duration is spread over four years.

Teaching community: in this article the teaching community refers to mentor teachers, non-mentor teachers, principals and HODs at the schools. These are the participants that were interviewed and that sometimes contact the universities with their complaints.

2. Problem statement

The process of becoming a teacher is for many students a complex and challenging phenomenon. It is also the subject of multiple interests and ways of exploring its different dimensions, role-players and dynamics (Caires, Almeida, & Viera, 2012). One of the dynamics of becoming a teacher is TP that all prospective teachers have to undergo as part of their training. After completing their TP the student teachers are required to submit portfolios, which contain evidence of what they did at the schools (Taole, & Van Wyk, 2015: 189). The content of the portfolios is among others, attendance registers, mentor teacher feedback forms and lesson presentation forms. Most of these forms are signed (or should be signed) by mentor teachers. However, as was witnessed in the portfolios, some students forge signatures, while some fill in information themselves that was supposed to be completed by mentor teachers. In addition to these dishonest portfolio completion practices, occasionally principals and mentor teachers, and even teachers who are not mentors, contact the university to complain about how some student teachers conduct themselves. The complaints range from student teachers arriving late at schools, they do not dress professionally and appropriately, absenteeism without informing the mentor teachers, they are disrespectful towards teachers (e.g. by back chatting) and lastly, by sometimes not preparing for their lesson presentations. These complaints from the teaching community and falsified documents (and signatures) in the portfolios were what prompted the study. Although student teachers are orientated for TP in some of the courses, some of them disregard what they are taught. Mentor teachers also discuss (or should discuss) what is expected from student teachers at schools.

3. Aim of the research

The aim of the study was to obtain teachers' (mentor teachers, non-mentor teachers and school principals) perceptions of the questionable immoral and unprofessional behaviour of some student teachers during teaching practice. This behaviour was evident in teaching practice portfolios that student teachers have to submit, and through the complaints the university receives from the teaching community.

4. Significance of the study

Exploring the teaching community's views of student teachers' behaviour has the potential for improving the quality and effectiveness of teaching practice, and for improving student teachers' behaviour and conduct during teaching practice. It is important for student teachers to put their best food foward because the way teachers behave has a direct impact on their interaction with learners, parents and their colleagues (Van Nuland, 2009). The way student teachers behave during TP can also be a deciding factor on whether or not they could be employed at the schools where they undertook their TP.

5. Literature review

5.1. Teacher professionalism

Student teachers are placed at schools mainly to observe lessons, co-teach and teach independently. During this period, they should conduct themselves professionally and ethically. Teacher professionalism is defined as 'a combination of training, knowledge, experience, attitudes and moral behaviour that defines the role of a teacher (Roy et al., 2016). It also refers to one's attitude towards one's work and how you approach your work. Becoming a professional teacher thus begins with initial teacher training. Unprofessional behaviour is any type of behaviour that creates difficulties in the workplace with the people you work with (Malan, 2015: 293). Although pre-service teachers are not employed in their respective schools and are not professional teachers yet, they are expected to model behaviour that is professional. Promoting professionalism of all teachers in South Africa is the vision of the South African Council for Educators (SACE). SACE is a statutory council which promotes and monitors professional conduct of teachers and manages continuous professional teacher development in South Africa. In addition, it must uphold ethical practices by teachers (SACE, 2002; Drake, Jackson, & Sotuku, 2016: 58). However, it is often difficult to decide whether actions and behaviours can be deemed as professional or unprofessional, and ethical or unethical. In this regard SACE's 'Code of Professional Ethics' is a guide that stipulates how teachers should conduct themselves. Policy documents such as the Employment of Educators Act 76 of 1998 (C-9) stipulate that misconduct refers, amongst others, to a breakdown in the employment relationship and an educator commits misconduct if he or she:
- falsifies documents or any other records;
- displays disrespect towards others in the workplace (no examples are given of disrespectful actions);
- commits an act of dishonesty (no examples are given of which acts are dishonest).

The code outlines principles of action and standards of behaviour. But professional conduct is not only about how people act – it is also about appearance. When student teachers dress smartly and appropriately, they convey a message that they take their TP seriously.

5.2. Values and their role in teaching

5.2.1. What are values? Values can be perceived as ideals or beliefs that guide our interaction with others in terms of what is good, beneficial, important, useful etc (De Witt, 2021: 424). Malan (2015: 291) states that values or ethics are a set of rules that regulates our lives and the decisions we make. They are passed down from parents to their children. They are a person's opinion of what is good or bad, acceptable or unacceptable – an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct is preferable. Teachers are supposed to act morally and professionally while they are at work, and unprofessional behaviour is usually unacceptable at schools. Professional behaviour and actions rely on moral principles and these moral principles are helpful in guiding student teachers on how to behave morally during TP. The challenge is that moral principles are often relative to cultures or communities. Different cultures (and therefore different people) have a particular system of norms and values which influence their behaviour towards others (De Witt, 2021: 246). Values influence many activities at school as well as interaction among teachers and interaction among learners and teachers. The question is thus: if values are relative and play such an important role in school activities, which values should guide student teachers' conduct at schools, and even outside of the schools?

6. Methods

6.1. The participants

The convenience sample (also referred to as availability sampling or opportunity sampling) consisted of thirty participants: twenty-seven of these were teachers at the schools where student teachers were placed for teaching practice. Three of the participants were principals of schools where student teachers conducted their teaching practice. This method of sampling was selected because the teachers and principals were available and willing to participate in the study.

6.2. Data collection method

Face-to-face individual interviews were conducted with the participants. A combination of semi-structured and open-ended questions was asked. This method of interviewing was selected because it is more flexible and allows for the interviewees to also ask questions. Some key questions were formulated in advance (Nieuwenhuis, 2007: 87; Dakwa, 2015: 299).

6.3. Findings and analysis

Below are some of the questions the participants were asked, and the responses they gave.

> Q1: We received complaints from some teachers about the worrisome behaviour of students during teaching practice. Can you give examples of how some students behaved?

P1: *The ones from University x are really problematic.*
P2: *We had students from two universities at my school last semester. Generally the ones from University z are well-behaved. But the ones from University x!*

> Q2: Problematic how? (This was a follow-up question to P1's response).

P1: Let me start with the way some of them dress. The other one was wearing jeans so tight she could not even climb the stairs. I mean really. And some come late and want to leave early. They don't want to do extra-murals. And this other one gave me an incomplete lesson plan. I did not mark nor sign it. (The interviewee was shaking her head).

> Q3: What about their ethical or moral behaviour? Because some teachers say the students can be disrespectful.

P3: One came to school drunk one day. We could smell the alcohol from the gate. That's disrespectful and unprofessional. No respect for other teachers, their work and for the rules.
And we brief them about the rules and the code of conduct for teachers.
The other one lied about the lesson plan. But some are cute and work hard.
And have good manners.

P4: And they speak to teachers as if we are their friends. They're not even teachers yet! And some of them – the forms I had to fill in and sign ……so untidy! They have no respect for me or their work. No pride! And some are so scared to work.

P5 (who is a principal): I don't want students from University x at my school anymore. They're so rude some of them. They must go to other schools. I will phone University x and tell them to place their students at other schools.

> Q4: What do you think the university can do to change this behaviour?

P6: Don't the lecturers prepare the students? You must coach them. Give them a contract to sign. A contract that says they must abide by the teacher code of conduct.

P7: There are certain things that are not allowed at the schools. Life has rules. Schools have rules. The values of the code of conduct need to be respected.

P8: The way some of them behave……if I were the principal I will never employ them. Some are just plain lazy. They do not know the value of hard work. And they don't know the meaning of please. No manners.

Content analysis was employed to analyse the data. The content or responses were categorized into two main themes namely: unprofessional behaviour and unethical conduct of students. From the responses it is evident that the participants are of the opinion that some student teachers are entitled, have no respect and have no pride in their work ethic. Seemingly most of the complaints came from students from University x. Usually student teachers from different institutions are placed at the schools simultaneously, which makes it easy for the teaching community to compare students from different institutions.

7. Conclusion

Teaching practice is a period when student teachers are placed at schools to gain teaching experience, knowledge and skills. While at the schools they have to fulfil certain roles such as teaching, sometimes attend meetings and they often have to take part in extra-curricular activities. During this period student teachers are expected to adhere to the principles of professionalism as stipulated in SACE and adhere to the rules of the schools. Although many students do behave professionally and ethically, the findings indicate there are those that behave in unacceptable ways. Some examples that were cited by participants include late coming, laziness and dishonesty. Some of the portfolios were also suspicious – for example, different handwriting was used where one teacher was supposed to complete one form. This speaks to cheating and dishonesty.

8. Recommendations

There are various ways of improving student teachers' behaviour during practice. Student teachers should be adequately prepared and orientated by tertiary institutions for teaching practice. They should be trained about their responsibilities and conduct during teaching practice. The SACE ethical code of conduct should form part of teacher training programmes (and the teaching practice curriculum) from the 1st year of study. A partnership between schools and universities can be mutually enriching and beneficial for student teachers, universities and teaching communities. This partnership must be based on a common understanding of how student teachers should conduct themselves. Schools need to make clear what student teachers' expectations are – this should ideally be communicated to universities before the students are placed at the schools. Student teachers should be informed of conduct that is rude, disrespectful, dishonest etc. Examples of unacceptable and punishable behaviour (e.g forgery, stealing, arriving at school intoxicated etc.) should be communicated. Student teachers should be informed about the consequences of any misconduct during TP. Lastly, Dreyer (2015: 6) gives this important recommendation: student teachers must realise that they are guests in schools during their TP period and must abide by all rules and regulations of the school.

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