Practice schools as third spaces? Between hierarchical models and collaborative partnerships in teaching practice in South Africa

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Abstract

Mentoring student teachers is a fundamental approach in teaching practice. Traditionally, teaching-practice models have been based on cognitive apprentice approaches and have been hierarchical in nature. Problems with finding suitable schools for teaching practice and mentoring experiences have been challenging, which has led to the implementation of collaborative partnership approaches. In South Africa, minimal research has been undertaken on the establishment of partnerships to strengthen teaching practice, with work in the third space almost non-existent. The research question under investigation in this paper is as follows: How do we move away from hierarchical models of teaching practice and establish collaborative partnerships between schools and universities? The paper is underpinned by both third space theory and border theory. The aim of the paper is, first, to explore the challenges encountered with the hierarchical models used in teaching practice. Second, we explore what collaborative educational partnerships entail and investigate the various models used internationally to establish partnerships between universities and schools to strengthen teaching practice. This non-empirical paper uses a secondary-source data design that draws on existing texts, research findings, and journal articles. A qualitative research approach has been employed as it allows a narrative description of the data collected. An interpretive approach is employed to interpret and to discuss the findings. The paper concludes by reviewing practice schools as a type of school that allows lecturers, teachers, and students to cross institutional borders and collaborate in the third space.

Keywords: border theory, cognitive apprenticeship, communities of practice, mentoring, partnerships, practice schools, supervision, teaching practice, third spaces, work-integrated learning.

Introduction

Mentoring student teachers from observation to co-teaching and, eventually, to teaching whole sessions without the involvement of a mentor teacher is a fundamental approach used around the world to prepare student teachers for teaching (Ambrosetti, Knight & Dekkers, 2013; DHET, 2011). Orland-Barak (2014) describes mentoring as a process of mediation between persons and content in value-laden contexts of practice. Most definitions assume a hierarchical relationship between the experienced mentor and an inexperienced or less experienced mentee. In this relationship, the mentor provides knowledge and skills that the mentee wants or needs (Ambrosetti & Dekkers, 2010). The arrangement between schools and teacher-education institutions is commonly referred to as a partnership, though, in reality, it is nothing more than a procedure that enables the university[1] to gain entry to schools so that its students can complete their practical sessions.

This paper is an extension of Lemmer's study (2021) which investigated the shortcomings of teaching-practice[2] models in South Africa with a view to making suggestions for improving teaching students' practical preparation. Lemmer made recommendations for improving mentoring and proposed the establishing of formal partnerships between schools and universities to address problems with the placement and mentoring of student teachers. Her findings and recommendations are in line with Graham's (2006) finding that points to mentoring and placement (at the teaching site) as the two most critical factors influencing the success of teaching-practice experience. The aim of this paper is to expand on these factors by highlighting common problems experienced with the placement and mentoring of student teachers in South Africa and to motivate for a necessary shift away from hierarchical apprenticeship models towards collaborative partnership approaches if we are serious about improving the quality of pre-service teacher education. This paper was motivated by the fact that a literature search via Google Scholar and on the Sabinet African Journals (formerly South African Publications) website exploring partnerships between universities and schools between 2010 and 2022 produced results for only three South African studies on establishing partnerships between universities and schools in order to strengthen the teaching practice of

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[1] We recognise that student teachers are trained at different types of institutions, ranging from colleges to universities. For the sake of consistency, in this paper, we use the term "university" to include all the various types of teacher training institutions.

[2] In the literature, we have come across the terms practicum, practicals, and internship to refer to the practical experience of student teachers teaching at schools during their pre-service training. For the sake of consistency, we use the term "teaching practice".

pre-service teachers. Only one of the three articles refers to working in a third space, which refers to a participatory approach to professional practice in which lecturers, mentor teachers, student teachers, and local communities collaborate and co-construct knowledge of teaching (Daza, Gudmundsdottir & Lund, 2021). The rest of the South African research studies over the last decade describe either the mentor or the mentee's mentoring experience or highlight the value of mentoring. This gap prompted us to undertake a literature search for partnership models between universities and schools internationally with the aim of guiding us towards making recommendations to improve the quality of teaching practice in South Africa. This paper thus does not involve fieldwork and may be classified as theoretical research. The research methodology comprises a review of the literature as this allows us to answer our research question. The purpose of the literature review as a research methodology in this theoretical paper is to test the research question against what is already known about the subject. Finally, we offer recommendations that can be used by stakeholders to initiate discussions to call for policy changes.

Background to and rationale for the study

As mentioned above, most teacher-education institutions use supervision and mentoring to ensure that student teachers learn about, in, and from practice. In the South African context, the "Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications" (DHET, 2011) states that teaching practice, or work-integrated learning, should:

- be spread out across the academic programme and should take place in blocks of varying duration throughout the programme,

- where a more extended period is envisaged, such as a component of a final year of study or within a structured mentorship programme, involve a guarantee of proper supervision, suitable school placement, and formal assessment, and

- in the form of work-integrated learning, take place in functional schools.

These points emphasise that there should be mentoring and supervision and that teaching practice must take place in well-functioning schools. The problem is that the South African schooling system is one of the worse-performing in the world (Howie et al., 2017; Juan, Reddy & Arends, 2019), and research reports confirm that a staggering 80% of schools are dysfunctional (Equal Education Law Centre, 2022). What this means is that poorly trained teachers (Dlengezele, 2020; Gravett & Ramsaroop, 2015; Robinson & Taylor, 2019; Spaull, 2013) are becoming mentors for student teachers in dysfunctional schools (Lynch & Smith,

2013). In South Africa, there is no criterion for qualifying as a mentor teacher other than years of experience – no formal training is required (Dlengezele, 2020; Maphalala, 2013; Smith, Moletsane & Small, 2014).

Another problem, which seems to be a global one, is that relationships between the university and schools are not as collaborative as they should be. Due to a power imbalance and a separation of responsibilities, it seems that the school's function is to merely provide a place for pre-service teachers to practice what they are taught at university (Knight, Turner & Dekkers, 2013). With no to minimal contact between university lecturers and mentor teachers, each function separately, with no shared vision or common goals (Smith et al., 2014). Most of the power lies with the university, while schools are passive recipients of student teachers. There is no agreement between the two sectors on each other's expectations and roles (Lemmer, 2021).

During teaching practice, student teachers are preoccupied with delivering lesson plans and mastering the experience, rather than with paying attention to the learners and what they are learning. These lessons are often seen as an add-on and as being disconnected from the educational life of schools (Helgevold, Næsheim-Bjørvik & Østrem, 2015; Lynch & Smith, 2013). South African teachers are provided with scripted lessons by their respective provincial education administrations, and mentors expect student teachers to present these scripted lessons during teaching practice, rather than what is prescribed by the university (Lemmer, 2021). These scripted lessons generate minimal evidence of reflective practices occurring in schools.

In the context of student teachers entering schools for teaching practice, mentoring reflects the view that every teacher has their own approaches to teaching, and there is little evidence of peer and group mentoring to facilitate co-operative learning. This situation often leads to problems such as personality clashes, power struggles, and threatening or distancing behaviour (Lemmer, 2021), issues which are commonly associated with hierarchical models of mentoring. This is because universities do not play a supportive role in preparation for the kinds of mentorship they require (Smith et al., 2014).

Furthermore, it seems that mentoring has become intertwined with supervision as it is increasingly being used as a substitute for supervision. Increasingly, teacher education institutions rely on mentor teachers to assess the practical performance of students. This exacerbates confusion about the nature of mentoring and the role the mentor plays. Assigning a grade needs to be considered strictly a supervisor's function as the mentor teachers are not

held accountable for the new teacher's capacity to teach (Lynch & Smith, 2013). There should be a clear distinction between the role of the supervisor and that of the mentor teacher.

If teaching practice in South Africa is considered a partnership, schools certainly do not benefit much from such a partnership as an important feature of a partnership is knowledge-sharing, which is largely absent from the process. Furthermore, partnerships should allow institutions to frequently engage in communication and to find ways to understand one another. In this way, a common vision and shared goals are established. This would enable both institutions to reflect on the process and to develop critical thinking as they interact; little evidence for any of this was found in the South African research studies.

The research focus

As a quote attributed to Albert Einstein has it, it is certainly insanity to keep on doing the same thing and to expect different results. As the challenges involving placement and mentoring is not unfamiliar to us, the question is: How do we implement changes that will improve placement and mentoring in teaching practice? How do we move away from hierarchical models of teaching practice and establish collaborative partnerships between schools and universities?

The aim of the paper

The aim of this paper is, first, to explore the challenges associated with the use of hierarchical models in teaching practice. Second, we explore what collaborative educational partnerships entail and investigate a variety of models used internationally to establish partnerships between universities and schools in order to strengthen teaching practice.

Research methodology

As this is a theoretical or non-empirical paper, the research design used here is a secondary-source data design (Babbie & Mouton, 2006) which draws from existing texts – research findings and journal articles. A qualitative research approach has been employed as it allows for a narrative description of the data collected. An interpretive approach, as is employed here, is viewed as a method of argumentation and interpretation of specific occurrences and repetitive patterns in data which can then be used to make generalisations and to apply principles.

A review of the literature

A range of international studies found via Google Scholar and the online database Epscohost for the years between 2010 and 2022 confirm the conflicting agendas of campus-based learning (the theory) and school teaching (the practice). Many of these studies propose educational partnerships to address the challenges associated with hierarchical models of teaching practice. Daza et al. (2021), caution that balancing school-based (practice) and university-based (theory) knowledge about teaching and learning is a challenge to the sustainability and effectiveness of partnerships, which is something that is important to keep in mind for researchers and policy-makers. In the next section, we discuss what the literature says about educational partnerships and present models found in the literature.

Educational partnerships, according to Lillejord and Børte (2016), are complex relationships that require the cross-cultural sharing of resources, infrastructure, and knowledge to truly support professional learning. They also emphasise that the design, implementation, and replication of partnerships in teacher education is never linear but is rather layered and requires open and constant dialogue among all participants in the partnership. Barnett, Hall, Berg and Camarena (2010) note that it is difficult for any partnership model to portray all that a partnership encompasses. They describe partnership development in three parts. The first details the level of involvement of the partners in the process and activities. The level of involvement starts with simple support, and then moves to the next level, which is cooperation that is characterised by shared decision-making to achieve the goals of the partnership. If the partnership is strengthened and sustained, it reaches the final level of involvement, which is more complex. This last level of involvement is identified as true collaboration between the partners. The second facet of partnership involves its structure, which also begins simply and then proceeds to a moderately complex structuring; in the final stage, the structure of the partnership can become complex and entangled. The last facet of partnership development refers to the impact of the partnership in terms of the achievement of its goals and objectives. This impact is conceptualised as a hierarchy that proceeds from easily obtainable results to changes in management and leadership procedures, and then, lastly, to systemic educational improvement and new policy development.

Barnett et al. (2010) encourage educational agencies to evaluate the level of interdependence that is required to achieve the goals of a partnership. These can be achieved by evaluating the following three levels: cooperation, coordination, and collaboration. The first

level proposed by Barnett et al. (2010) is the vendor model, which occurs when a school or school system contracts with an organisation for a specific service or form of education. This level of engagement usually reflects a short-term relationship. The most complex level proposed by Barnett et al. (2010) is the collaborative model, which involves intensive and sustained mutual exchange and benefit. The goal of the collaborative model is more complex than the first two levels, and the partners become intertwined in the process. The linking agents in the partnership must establish credibility and trust within their own organisation because they are often asked to make commitments that must be honoured for the duration of the partnership.

Barnett et al. (2010) make use of Griggs' (2015) six primary elements that foster partnership success and sustainability and infuse them into their conceptual framework for educational partnerships, namely purposeful planning and flexibility in implementation; shared values and common goals; open and regular communication; and commitment, trust, and leadership.

This conceptual framework is illustrated in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Continuum of interagency efforts (1992) reprinted in Barnett et al. (2010), and adapted by Lemmer and Le Roux

Cooperation: Organisational trust characterises this level of partnership: because the organisations are known and trusted, the participants are willing to trust one another. This type of partnership often has the approval of the leaders of the institution but lacks their involvement.

Collaboration: Trust between the organisations develops from trust in each organisation to trust among the individuals. The employees believe in the vision of the partnership and become personally committed. Leaders emerge at all levels of this partnership. The leaders are committed to a successful outcome of the partnership because its goals are important to the organisation as a whole.

Coordination: At this level of partnership, new participants are incorporated as being a priori trustworthy because they belong to the organisation, and they quickly move to establish individual trust. At all levels, the leaders are active participants in the partnership endeavour.

By making use of this framework, institutions and schools can better assess their understanding of an educational partnership and of the level of partnership they have employed for teaching practice. In many countries, the time periods stipulated for teaching practice are prescribed by the qualification-accreditation authorities. Rather than meeting prescribed requirements such as timeframes, frameworks such as the one presented above should be used to evaluate the quality of the partnership outcomes.

Theoretical framework

Theoretical frameworks serve as a lens to help interpret the knowledge that is presented in a study. The foundational review of existing theories serves as a roadmap for developing the arguments used in a study. This paper is underpinned by three theories. First, we consider social constructivist theories of learning in order to understand how these have shaped teaching practice over the years. Then we investigate third-space theory to understand the concepts of hybridity and binaries and how these apply to teaching practice. Lastly, we draw from border theory to understand the challenges involved in crossing institutional borders.

Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky advocated apprenticeship learning in terms of which the more knowledgeable scaffold activities within the zone of proximal development of the novice learner (Vygotsky, 1978). For Vygotsky, cultural context and social interaction are fundamental for making meaning and for learning. For Gessler (2009), the "cognitive apprenticeship" learning arrangement is an approach to designing situated-learning environments. Among other focuses of cognitive apprenticeship, the development of problem-

solving skills in the context of real-life situations is encouraged. The novice thereby obtains an understanding of how experts cope with complex problems and tasks and of how to select cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies to solve problems, as demonstrated by the expert. Progressively, according to the level of skill and knowledge of the mentee, mentoring and support are gradually reduced until mentees can cope with the learning situations by themselves. Situated learning theory, located within the cognitive apprenticeship theory, also holds that the acquisition of knowledge is contextually tied to the learning situation; however, Lave (1988) adds another line of theory, namely, establishing a community of practice which strengthens the collaborative nature of learning.

While these principles remain valid and underpin learning in and from practice, the hierarchical relationships associated with cognitive apprenticeship have led to research studies that explore other ways to address the abovementioned challenges commonly associated with teaching practice.

Since learning to teach is a dynamic, non-linear endeavour that occurs across multiple spaces, relying separately upon either the university or the school has proven to be ineffective. In order to establish less hierarchical spaces where the university and the schools can strengthen their partnerships, the third space has recently become a focus in research. It involves creating hybrid spaces where the expertise of all participants is welcomed equally. The third space refers to a participatory approach to professional practice in which lecturers, mentor teachers, student teachers, and local communities collaborate and co-construct knowledge of teaching (Daza et al., 2021). Working in the third space implies a crossing of institutional boundaries, in which identities are constantly negotiated.

The concept of the third space originates with post-colonial academic Homi Bhabha (1994). In his work, *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha challenges us to think of our identities as being flexible rather than fixed. For Bhabha, our identities are hybrid because we derive our ideas and knowledge from the different cultures and spaces in which we move and work. Consequently, we are all between cultures, and our identities are therefore hybrid because they demonstrate characteristics of all the cultures and spaces with which we are familiar. The third space is thus an analogy that critically challenges binaries, such as that of coloniser and colonised or, as is the case with teaching practice, of the university (the theory) and the school (the practice). Binaries are terms typically situated in opposition to each other. Rather than bridging two extremes or compromising between two opposing camps, third-space theory redefines, recreates, and/or replaces a binary relationship. This is achieved by imagining a new

space in which innovative and creative ideas can emerge. This hybridity thus presents an alternative to the two terms locked within the binary. In teaching practice, this means that students learn in familiar yet overlapping contexts; however, to do so, they need to cross the institutional boundaries of the university and the school and combine their total lived experience in what is referred to as the third space.

The university is usefully regarded as the first space and the school as the second. As noted by Moje et al. (2004), the naming of these spaces as primary and secondary is less important than how they are constructed and reconstructed to form a third space. Zeichner's (2010) view of the third space as a metaphor to indicate the merging point where schools and universities come together for the purpose of teaching practice is illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2: The merging point, the third space, between two institutions in teaching practice
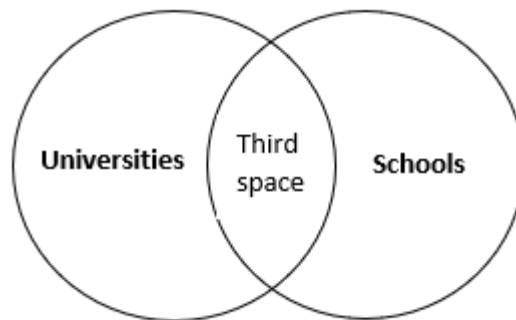
Working in the third space has the potential to transform inter-institutional relationships and to build stronger collaborative practices for the benefit of pre-service teacher education. However, Anzaldúa (1998) and Bhabha (1994) have warned that the third space is not an easy one in which to exist. It requires deconstruction and an examination of the binaries and of identity as it relates to power and oppression, processes which are difficult to actualise but necessary in order to create change.

Central to third-space theory is border theory, which explains how borders, as lines of demarcation and differentiation, divide countries, spaces, and institutions. Borders may be physical and visible, such as the walls surrounding a school or institution, or invisible and metaphorical (social, cultural, or political). Spaces verging on either side of a border are defined as borderlands and are seen to be socially constructed sites. When individuals cross a border into another space, they may experience conflict that must be carefully negotiated (Anzaldúa, 1987; Chan, 2019). Border theory is important because it gives a voice to groups or individuals who have experienced tension, oppression, or conflict as a result of their moving between spaces (Anzaldúa, 1987). According to border theory, hybridity (as explained in the discussion

on third-space theory, above) makes it possible for individuals or groups to mediate the tensions between two domains by mixing cultures (Anzaldúa, 1987). In teaching practice, institutional borders are those lines of demarcation that divide the university and school domains. Such a conceptualisation of borders explains the tension experienced by students when they go to schools for teaching practice, as there are few measures in place to manage the transition between the university and the school.

Discussion

Practical teacher training in schools is influenced by many personal, interpersonal, institutional, social, and historical factors. As a result of all that is involved in this process, Toohey (2013) cautions that mentoring relationships do not merely occur of their own accord. They need a clearly defined partnership structure, starting with the identification of suitable schools for placement. As schools and universities play a dual role, and we need a shared vision of how best to shape teaching-practice experiences, it is, in the final analysis, important to explore the role of teaching schools in creating opportunities for moving between institutional borders.

Some countries, such as the USA, the UK, Canada, Finland, Denmark, and Norway use teaching schools as a vehicle to establish collaboration between universities and specific schools, which are known as practice schools, and also sometimes referred to as education schools, teaching schools, lab schools, or professional development schools (Henning, Petker & Petersen, 2015). In Norway, it seems that a practice school refers to one identified as such in the common practice of finding regular schools for teachers to visit for their teaching practice. Practice schools, in the sense in which they are referred to in this paper, are what Norwegians refer to as university schools (Smith, 2016). Figure 3, below, highlights the division of responsibilities between the school and the university, as is common practice, as opposed to what occurs in university schools, which have the same status as university hospitals. For this paper, university schools are what we refer to as teaching schools.

Figure 3: School-university relationships (Smith, 2016)
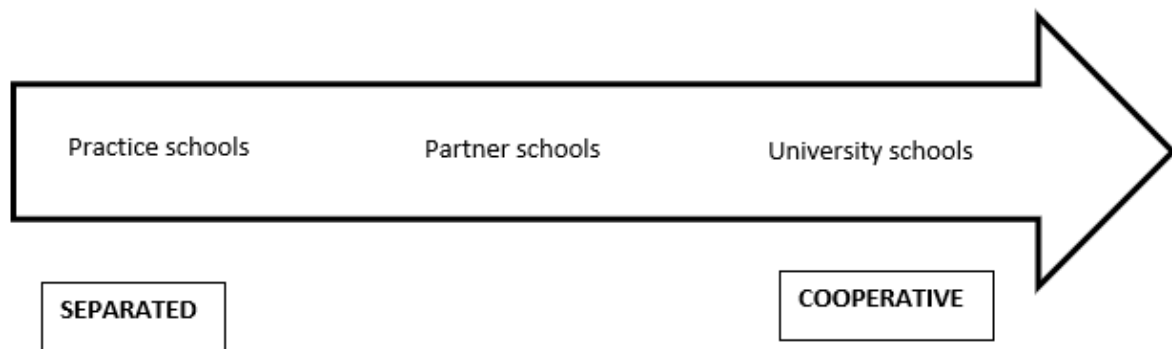
Historically, university schools (in the Norwegian context), or teaching schools, as we refer to them in this paper, served as sites of practice learning for student teachers and, at the same time, as research sites. The idea is that such schools are affiliated with universities in the same way that teaching hospitals, where health practitioners are educated, are affiliated to universities. In the education sector, these schools are places where student teachers can learn from best practice in well-functioning schools. In these somewhat protected environments, student teachers can safely test their pedagogy under the watchful eye of carefully trained mentor teachers and university lecturers. At the same time, such a scenario allows lecturers to undertake research that will improve practice. Drawing from third-space theory, teaching-practice schools create the space where university lecturers, teachers, and students journey beyond their own organisational and professional territories to combine their respective skills, knowledge, and expertise in creative ways. Furthermore, within this space, all participants can contribute to much-needed critical reflective action, which is currently missing from most teaching-practice experiences in South Africa. Furthermore, Gravett and Ramsaroop (2015) caution that, for this to be the case, teacher education programmes would need to be redesigned so that both the university and the teaching school serve as sites for the intentional investigation of practice.

A word of caution

As highlighted briefly above, creating and working in the third space is a challenging process. As confirmed by Gravett et al. (2014), it may not be easy to achieve the harmonious third space desired to bring together theory and practice in teacher education. Tensions in the third space are likely to occur between individuals, within and across groups and institutions, and in the practical construction of the space. The collaborative nature of the third space necessarily

implies the existence of a challenging web of relationships. According to Daza et al. (2021), relational tensions include power struggles and the tensions related to defining whose knowledge has greater value. Tensions relating to crossing institutional and personal boundaries, shifting identities, and power differentials are also mentioned in research. Tensions relating to development and sustainability concern the practical difficulties of developing, applying, and sustaining the third space in teacher education.

In 2012, the Department of Basic Education and Higher Education and Training (2011) presented "The Integrated Strategic Planning Framework for Teacher Education and Development in South Africa". This framework was conceptualised with the aim of strengthening the teaching-practice component of teacher-education programmes through the development of teaching schools and professional practice schools. It was envisaged that such schools would have different yet complementary roles in the pre-service education of student teachers and that mentors would be adequately developed.

Even before the framework document was released, the Faculty of Education at the University of Johannesburg (UJ), in partnership with the Gauteng Department of Education, had established a public school on its Soweto campus in 2010. The intention here was to develop an integrated practice site for student teachers (Gravett & Ramsaroop, 2015; Henning et al., 2015). Based on the work that UJ had already undertaken at its school, the Department of Higher Education and Training supported by European Union funding, commissioned researchers to conduct research on the viability of establishing teaching schools in South Africa.

Unfortunately, it seems that the framework has remained merely a good idea on paper, and the UJ practice school remains the only teaching school whose activities may shape our experience of teaching schools in the South African context. The first obstacle highlighted by Gravett et al. (2014) is the legal status of practice schools. The current education legislation framework allows only for ordinary public schools, public schools for learners with special educational needs, public schools that provide education with a specialised focus on talent (such as art schools), and private schools. Second, Gravett et al. (2014) highlight the fact that the university has no say in teacher appointments, which means that the university has little capacity to intervene if teachers do not adequately fulfil their role as teacher educators. Third, the teacher educators in their study reported feeling caught between the Gauteng Department of Education, their employer, and the university. The study further highlights issues of teacher autonomy. Teacher educators expressed their frustration of not having the freedom to

experiment with new ideas and the initiatives expected of them because of extreme levels of control and monitoring by department officials. Even the timetable arrangements prevented teacher educators from meetings with students to discuss their observations. Lastly, Gravett et al. (2014) caution against making the assumption that university resources such as lesson plan templates will successfully make the transition to the teaching school context while maintaining their integrity as tools for the facilitation of student teacher learning. They highlight the need for teaching school staff and academic staff to co-create a shared epistemological space in which the binaries can be bridged. They further caution against assuming that teachers will magically transform into teacher educators. Teaching experience alone is insufficient and, importantly, they emphasise that teacher educators need to be prepared to make a shift in order to properly inhabit their new role. As advocated by Myllyviita (2013), this problematic calls for the planning and implementation of a coherent programme for teaching schools to develop staff as teacher educators. According to Gravett et al. (2014) these challenges may seem immense, but they are by no means insurmountable.

Overcoming the challenges raised in Gravett et al.'s (2014) study will require high levels of engagement and collaboration between the Department of Higher Education and the Department of Basic Education in order to create an enabling policy environment that will allow for the existence of teaching schools.

Conclusion

In the face of the glaring problems in the South African education system, it appears that there is no desire or capacity to transform our approaches to teacher education in South Africa. This may be due to a lack of reflection on accreditation-body requirements and the lack of accountability for ensuring quality and effectiveness in the industry. For now, it seems as though our focus remains directed by Sustainable Development Goal 4, that of putting access before quality. The system lacks both incentives and criteria for universities and schools to change the outcome (Lynch & Smith, 2013). Globally, the concept of the third space has moved beyond the status of theoretical conceptualisation into policy and practice. For South Africa, it seems this is yet a bridge too far to cross.

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