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Views from below: Students' perceptions of teaching practice evaluations and stakeholder roles

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Interest in teaching practice as an essential component of teacher education is growing. In spite of this, there is a dearth of research investigating students' perceptions of teaching practice evaluations from them as beneficiaries. This qualitative study examines students' perceptions of teaching practice evaluations administered by means of observations and criteria-based forms from a systems theory approach, with a view to establishing how effectively all aspects of support, structure and teaching practice evaluation interact and contribute to the development of new teachers. The sample was drawn from one of three campuses that offer the teacher education programme. Data was gathered from 12 focus groups of 57 students using in-depth, semi-structured, open-ended interviews. Results revealed that, although students generally found teaching practice evaluations meaningful, several systemic factors mitigated against their growth and development. Recommendations included strengthening partnerships between schools and university and among all stakeholders; development of a teaching practice theoretical framework and alignment of teaching practice in the campuses that offer the teacher education programme, and developing teaching practice frameworks and structures that could offer students meaningful learning experiences while they are in the schools.

Keywords: teacher education, teaching practice, collaboration, stakeholders, support, evaluations

Introduction

Teaching practice (TP) constitutes the core of teacher education programmes (TEPs) (Maphosa, Shumba & Shumba, 2007). Leshem and Bar-Hama (2008: 258) describe TP as "the application of the practical pedagogical knowledge acquired during the didactic lessons and workshops". Subedi (2009) believes that TP provides student teachers with an opportunity to integrate theory with classroom practice and to equip them with the requisite skills for the world of teaching.

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There is abundant research on TP and its evaluation, as well as on the importance of collaborations between university and school within which TP exists. However, few studies report research results on these issues, using student teachers' voices as assumed beneficiaries. This study is designed to investigate student teachers' (hereafter students') perceptions of TP evaluations administered by means of observations and criteria-based forms from a systems theory approach, to determine how effectively all aspects of stakeholder support, structure and TP evaluation interact and contribute to the development of new teachers. The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- What are students' perceptions of observations and criteria-based evaluations as part of a TP evaluation system?
- What do students perceive as the roles of evaluators and mentors during TP evaluations?

It is hoped that the results will enlighten teacher educators about the effects TP evaluations have on students' performance and development. In addition, the results might add new insight into how teacher education policymakers, teacher educators, evaluators and mentors could better support students, while managing TP and its evaluation process. The results might further engender dialogue and debate concerning TP evaluations among teacher educators globally.

'Evaluation' instead of 'assessment' was adopted, because the TP evaluation process is broader than assessment and focuses on different teacher quality dimensions such as, for example, effectiveness, competence and performance (Dunkin, 1997) that are observed over time. Evaluation is ongoing and uses a range of instruments, criteria and standards administered by different evaluators for professional improvement.

Context of current teaching practice

This section presents a synopsis of how TP is managed and how evaluations are administered in a four-year Further Education and Training (FET) teacher education programme (TEP). FET students qualify to teach at high school. This TEP is offered on three campuses at the level of Bachelor of Education degree in the Faculty of Education, located within a South African University of Technology. This study was conducted on one of these campuses. TP is a core component of this TEP. It is facilitated by a TP coordinator who oversees TP-related processes. In this TEP, students and staff draw a distinction between university-based 'evaluators' and school-based 'mentors', which could suggest a perception of mentor core roles as providing support and coaching, and of evaluators as evaluating teaching performance.

Placement of students in schools

First- to third-year students select schools in which they wish to be placed from three options. Fourth-year students select any school of their preference. Host schools are allocated according to relevance of students' specialisations to the schools and

according to subject specialisations which have to match those of the mentors. Second- to fourth-year students are evaluated during TP, but first-year students only observe mentors teaching.

Second- and third-year students are randomly distributed according to the number of FET educators and part-time evaluators, irrespective of the subjects in which they specialise. School-based mentors are selected depending on availability and their teaching subjects. Fourth-year students are evaluated by experts who teach related content knowledge (CK) and pedagogical knowledge (PK) (in this instance, subject didactics (SD)), to ensure accurate evaluation of students' expertise in CK and PK prior to graduation. Unfortunately, no standardised instrument to measure this accuracy exists and there is no guarantee that teaching experts are evaluation experts.

Expectations

The TP coordinator's responsibility is to liaise with schools about students' placements, mentoring and evaluations. Because students from five higher education institutions offering teacher education are placed at approximately the same time period, there is always the potential for overcrowding in schools. Collaboration with stakeholders is weak, as there are no formal meetings between TP coordinator, mentors, evaluators and students. Neither is a training workshop provided for evaluators and mentors. When students go out for TP, they take documents to schools explaining the roles of stakeholders regarding the support and guidance students need during TP. Teacher educators in this Faculty are expected to formulate a common TP theoretical framework and to align TP across all TEPs and campuses. However, attempts to do so have not materialised.

Formative and summative evaluations

During TP, only evaluators and mentors evaluate students' teaching performance by means of observations and criteria-based forms. These forms consist of nine evaluation criteria, including complex performance indicators. Students' final scores accrue from these evaluations and from TP portfolios in which they document reflections on field experiences, with the former constituting 150 out of 250 scores (60%) and the latter only 100 out of 250 scores (40%). This signals the weight, value and significance assigned to criteria-based evaluations.

Literature on formative evaluations suggests that they provide opportunities for identifying gaps and helping to improve students' teaching performance (Mathers, Oliva & Laine, 2008; Taras, 2005). In this TEP, evaluators and mentors are expected to use them to diagnose strengths and weaknesses in students' performance and to provide scaffolding.

When scores from both evaluation sources mentioned earlier are combined, they constitute summative evaluations conducted at the end of the course to make a

final judgement on the success or failure of a teacher candidate in the TP (Chudleigh & Gates, 2010; Mathers *et al*., 2008).

Theoretical framework

Social systems theory informs this study. Donald, Lazarus and Lolwana (2007) hold that this theory views different levels and groups of people as interactive systems where the functioning of the whole is dependent on the interaction between all the parts. Theoretically, mentor teacher and university supervisor are perceived as key people who have to work toward a common vision of TP and its evaluation (Chudleigh & Gates, 2010). Practically, TP constitutes a complex social system involving a wide range of stakeholders (teacher education policymakers, principals, TP coordinators, mentors, university-based evaluators, learners, and so on) who should communicate and collaborate toward a common vision of developing student teachers (Zeichner, 2010; Valencia, Martin, Place & Grossman, 2009).

During TP, stakeholders play a critical supportive role towards the students' growth. Darling-Hammond (2010) claims that mentors' TP evaluations are important predictors of beginning teachers' current and subsequent effectiveness. Besides evaluating, mentors also play supportive roles. Mohono-Mahlatsi and Van Tonder (2006: 386) state that mentors "pass their experience onto less experienced people". They can also act as guide, supervisor, counsellor, overseer, coach, and so on (Kiggundu & Nayimuli, 2009; Maphosa *et al.,* 2007). These roles represent groups of people functioning at different levels as a social system, each group interacting and being interdependent on each other.

Conversely, stakeholders can impose conflicting expectations and demands on students; this can adversely impact students' TP performance. Rhodes, Phillips, Tomlinson and Reems (2006) highlight conflicting expectations and requirements of university supervisors and mentors on students. Samuel (2008: 10) states that mentors can stifle students' growth and development if they ask them to "abandon what [they] learnt at university" instead of nurturing and supporting the knowledge and skills they bring to TP. Bullough (2005: 150) notes potential conflicts between expectations of teachers, mentors, peers and interns, concluding that "affiliations and identifications may clash" in mentoring. If not addressed, conflicts may affect the functioning of the subsystem and ultimately destroy the entire system.

Conflicts can also develop when mentors and evaluators simultaneously act as advisors during formative evaluations and as evaluators or judges during summative evaluations (Reddy, Menkveld & Bitzer, 2008). Unaddressed, these tensions may undermine the work of mentors and evaluators and create conflicts of interest. My view is that evaluators and mentors should focus primarily on diagnosing gaps in students' performance and then scaffold the students; evaluations should be secondary.

Social systems theory was specifically selected due to the multiplicity of stakeholders who should interact as organisms in a TP system (Bausch, 2001).

Literature review

In this section, I draw attention to the contexts and relationships between different stakeholders, which are indispensable in supporting students' growth and development during TP evaluations. Grossman (1990) maintains that novice teachers have the potential to acquire teacher knowledge, provided they obtain the right kind of support.

Students learn to teach in the context of a community of practice, which is supposed to provide them with the skills of transforming content knowledge (CK) into pedagogically sound representations, or pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) (Shulman, 1987). Shulman (1987: 9-10) argues that, if a teacher has to "know the territory" of teaching, s/he must familiarise him-/herself with the "landscape of materials, institutions, organizations, and mechanisms", because they constitute "both the tools of the trade and the contextual conditions that will facilitate or inhibit teaching efforts". This also applies to students. If they are to prosper as teachers, they should establish strong bonds with communities of practice.

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999: 262) state that knowledge-in-practice or professional knowledge develops from the profession in which it is embedded "through experience and through considered and deliberative reflection about or inquiry into experience". Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, Bransford, Berliner and others (2005) claim that this knowledge is highly situated in experiential contexts. Therefore, the role of universities and schools should be to develop students' critical thinking and reflection skills if they are to master this knowledge.

However, literature suggests that in TP students receive the short end of the stick (Feiman-Nemser, 2001a). Bullough (2005) associates this weakness with disconnection between school and university contexts and suggests collaboration and interaction among all stakeholders. Feiman-Nemser (2001a: 1021) stresses the need for a shared vision and expertise between university supervisors and mentors "informed by an explicit and thoughtful mission and conceptual framework".

Structure and opportunities are vital. Feiman-Nemser (2001a: 1020) advocates that TP programmes should structure meaningful frameworks or experiences that allow students to "link theory and practice, develop skills and strategies, [and] cultivate habits of analysis and reflection through focused observation". Teacher educators and mentors should play a prominent role in this respect.

Methodology

This research used the qualitative method (Cresswell, 2007). It was conducted in one of the three campuses that offer FET TEP, as explained in the study context. The

sample was purposive (only participants who could offer meaningful perspectives on the topic were included) and convenient, as I teach in the FET TEP from which the sample was selected. Participants were selected from second-, third- and fourth-year FET student cohorts, as I believed they could offer deep insights since they had spent at least one year in the TEP. First-year students were excluded, as they only observe during TP.

Data was collected using in-depth semi-structured interviews with four focus groups of between four and five students from each of the three year cohorts, altogether totalling 12 focus groups of 57 participants. Of these, 27 were males and 30 females, 21 were of mixed race and 36 were Black. This sample size was reasonable, as the FET is the smallest of all TEPs on this campus. The small focus group size allowed all participants to contribute, and facilitated probing. Each group was homogeneous regarding the phase (FET) and study levels (second, third or fourth levels), but heterogeneous as regards gender, race, and major subjects, so as to comply with equity.Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed *verbatim*. Interview transcripts were analysed, using the highlighting approach (Cohen, Manion, Morrison & Morrison, 2007), in order to uncover thematic aspects. Phrases which stood out in the text were colour-coded, classified and condensed into three themes, as shown in the results. To avoid bias, my research assistant collected data, transcribed it and conducted preliminary analysis, while a colleague (not employed in the same faculty) conducted final data analysis. The validity of data was checked by analysing 67 students' portfolios randomly selected from second- to fourth-year FET students on the same campus, but who had not undergone interviews.Participants were informed about the confidentiality of information gathered and their voluntary participation. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education from which participants were drawn. Member checking was used to validate the inferences from the data by asking a student and TP lecturer from each level to read raw and analysed data, as well as this article, prior to submission.

Results

For the purpose of meeting equity, students were categorised according to factors of race, gender and level of study. However, findings were aggregated and not reported according to these categories. Three emergent themes are discussed below.

Diverse philosophical standpoints and personalities

Students' accounts suggested that the evaluators' philosophical standpoints conflicted with one another. They were of the opinion that these differences influenced evaluators' interpretations of evaluation criteria, as expressed by Thembi:

> *Each evaluator has her own way of interpreting criteria and evaluating the lesson depending on how they describe good teaching.*

Students acknowledged the uniqueness of evaluators' perspectives, although they believed that these led to subjective evaluations which negatively affected their TP scores, as in Mbulawa's statement:

> *Of course evaluators do not see things the same way but they should interpret the form the same way and not give marks as they feel because this lowers our marks.*

There could be other explanations accounting for students' low marks other than evaluators' subjectivity. However, perceptions of subjectivity in TP evaluations were not unique to these students, as in a previous study the then TP coordinator in the same faculty articulated the same sentiment that "[TP] assessments are subjective and therefore vary considerably" (Gordon, 2009: 123). Leshem and Bar-Hama (2008) also note subjectivity in observation-based TP evaluations, as they are based on an observer's individual teaching approach.

Other students were of the opinion that evaluators' varying ideologies led them to have low expectations of students, as stated by Tiro: "They also gauge how well we can teach compared to them as professionals." Christiansen (2008) acknowledges ideological distortions emanating from asymmetrical power relations between educators and learners.

Other students articulated discomfort with evaluators who purportedly imposed their teaching styles on them, arguing that such practice limited their creativity and individuality, as in Mabel's assertion:

> *All of them want you to be 'mini me' which mirrors their teaching style and personality. Then you wonder about your own creativity and innovation.*

These students might not like imitating their educators, but they do so, because they believe that it is expected of them. Ezati, Ocheng, Ssentamu and Sikoyo (2010) mention the role theory which illustrates that the behaviour of actors within a social system is highly influenced by the expectations of the significant others. Nonetheless, cognitive apprenticeship (Liu, 2005), alluded to by the student above, is a viable model that allows student teachers to observe how experts solve problems in authentic teaching situations. When teaching students to learn to teach, it may be a good idea to guide them and allow some room for their creativity to flourish. In Feiman-Nemser's (2001b: 20) study of mentor identity development, the mentor negotiated between imposing his teaching style on students and sharing ideas of good practice with them.

The students also voiced their concerns about the disjuncture between pedagogical strategies taught by SD educators and those supported by mentors and part-time evaluators, as indicated by Bulelwa:

> *When we try out methods such as cooperative teaching, mentors become irritated and feel it's a waste of time. Part-time evaluators suggest methods that contradict what we learnt in class.*

This situation could emanate from lack of communication between evaluators and mentors. Tapera suggested that:

> *The university should meet with mentors and part-time evaluators and explain to them step-by-step the skills and methods we have acquired in class to be evaluated on.*

Liteboho, meanwhile, proposed that:

> *Our SD lecturers should evaluate us because they know what they taught us in class.*

Rather than using PK educators as evaluators, as suggested above, Little (1990: 316 in Feiman-Nemser, 2001b: 18) proposes that experienced teachers (mentors) should be assigned to beginning teachers as they have "accumulated knowledge that can serve as the basis of sensitive observation, astute commentary, sound advice". Nonetheless, not all experienced teachers meet this criterion.

Students described some evaluators' personalities as having positively influenced their performance, as reflected in Moegamat's statement:

> *It's very encouraging when an evaluator praises you for doing well. Hearing the words 'well done' makes you feel good inside and motivates you to do even better the next time around.*

In her study, Feiman-Nemser (2001b) observed that the mentor regularly complimented students on specific aspects of their teaching, which he referred to as 'noticing signs of growth', thus responding to the students' needs for reassurance.

> *Lizelle supported Moegamat, saying: Some supervisors really help and point out what worked well and where there are flaws. They are not too harsh and also give great tips for future.*

Diverse contexts and limited resources

Morrow (2007) distinguishes between material elements of teaching (which include conditions, context, environments and resources), and formal teaching elements (which include skills that enable teachers to organise learning systematically so that they can function in any context). He contends that TEPs emphasise material elements which "erroneously raises the expectation … that, unless these material conditions are present, teaching cannot take place" (Samuel, 2008: 10). Students echoed Morrow's thoughts. Their perceptions of how TP environments and human resources impacted on their TP evaluations are presented below.

Students' believed that evaluators dealt inequitably with different school contexts and that the availability or lack of resources impacted profoundly on their teaching performance. Students placed in affluent schools articulated satisfaction with infrastructure, facilities and new technologies available to them, as Caylin described:

> *The school I was at had good facilities and staff was supportive. One colleague offered to teach me how to use interactive white board. When I had crits [evaluations], the mentor helped me to develop materials.*

However, students placed in impoverished schools differed, as Xolani explained:

> *If you use a whiteboard and PowerPoint you get higher marks than a person who uses chalkboard and textbook. They don't care to ask why you chose the chalkboard and whether a whiteboard is available or not.*

Analysis of students' reflections in the TP portfolios confirmed that resources played a role in their performance during TP evaluations.

Regarding human resources, students expressed their appreciation for guidance, support, modelling and valuable teaching behaviours acquired from mentors. Others complained that some mentors were unwilling to be subjected to student observation. Lorraine remarked:

> *Some mentors are exemplary and teach us invaluable lessons on classroom management, but not all teachers can be mentor teachers. Most of them have no idea of what is expected of them.*

In their portfolios, students documented positive and negative encounters with mentors, which confirmed Lorraine's remark. Their statements mainly revealed their preference for mentors who spent more time coaching them, rather than for university-based evaluators. Nevertheless, Lorraine's statement is in sharp contrast to what is expected of mentors, namely modelling and providing "educative mentoring" to students (Feiman-Nemser, 2001b: 18).

Students also recognised the SD lecturers' significant role in equipping them with theoretical knowledge, as indicated by Naseema:

> *In my first year I did not see the relevance of theories in teaching but, with the help of our subject didactics lecturer, I can now make these links.*

Others claimed that they still needed help with these skills. Analysis of portfolios confirmed that students rarely mentioned support regarding linking theory and classroom practice.

Technical issues on the evaluation process

Students raised issues concerning the evaluation process, which they believed were critical to their growth and development. Mawethu expressed his concern as follows:

> *Personally I want to know why we don't have one lesson plan for all TEPs and campuses, because the other lesson plans are easier to use than ours.*

They also remarked that marks allocated to the same evaluation criteria were disproportionate across TEPs and campuses. Both scenarios could point to the lack of TP alignment mentioned earlier. Liston, Whitcomb and Borko (2006) recommend common evaluation frameworks for evaluating students' teaching performance.

Regarding the evaluation forms, students communicated dissatisfaction with broad criteria and complex performance indicators on the forms.

These supposedly confused them and impeded their optimal performance during TP evaluations, as Lionel described:

> *I don't think evaluators know which aspects on the form to assess. With so many performance indicators, how do they know which are important? For us it's even more difficult as we hardly know which ones to stress when we prepare and teach our lessons.*

In addition, students articulated their discontent with evaluators who merely made checks on the forms without providing detailed feedback or who purportedly made inaccurate comments. Tiana elaborated:

> *Some evaluators simply brush over the lesson plan and give you low marks and vague, unhelpful comments, or no comments at all. Sometimes it looks like they're just guessing comments, relying on memory and filling in marks.*

If this situation prevails, it could signal a lack of evaluator accountability. If students are to develop into effective teachers, evaluators should be held accountable for providing them with constructive feedback.

Discussion

Students' statements revealed that learning to teach is complex and involves a myriad of stakeholder forces that push and pull them in all directions (Samuel, 2008). This complexity highlights the significance of student support during TP evaluations, and of a clear structure of how they can be developed into teachers. In this study, students described TP evaluations as fundamental to their development, albeit with some conditions that may have impacted negatively on their teaching performance. Their statements about evaluators' and mentors' conflicting ideologies raise concerns which, if not addressed, can potentially impede learning and development. Nonetheless, students should acknowledge and perceive varying perspectives as strengths that can enrich them and provide them with opportunities to think creatively.

As indicated earlier, students' concerns about evaluators' subjectivity negatively affecting their marks are questionable. However, a TP evaluation rubric is recommended to minimise subjectivity that may exist. It should specify students' expected behaviours and evaluation criteria. Darling-Hammond (2010) suggests creating more consistency in TP evaluations.

The effectiveness of TP evaluations depends, to a large extent, on the behaviours of evaluators, mentors and all stakeholders. Students highlighted productive and unproductive evaluator and mentor behaviours. If not addressed, unproductive behaviours could hamper students' success and growth. Students also acknowledged the quality of mentor support, which could point to their unmet expectations of university evaluators and raise questions about "where knowledge for teaching comes from and how it can be learned" (Feiman-Nemser, 2001b: 18). To curb unproductive behaviours, accountability measures such as e-mail communication, telephone calls, written reports and face-to-face meetings between TP coordinator,

evaluators, mentors and students should be developed. These measures can also help to keep the organisms of the TP social system interacting regularly. Liston *et al.* (2006: 13) recommend "establishing virtual networks that allow program candidates … to stay connected to one another and to teacher education faculty".

Students' comments about the inability to link theory and practice signal a problem to which Feiman-Nemser (2001a) and Buchmann (cited in Valencia *et al.*, 2009: 304) refer as "two-worlds pitfall". Feiman-Nemser (2001a: 1020) states that

> *cooperating teachers often feel the need to protect student teachers from 'impractical' ideas promoted by education professors who are out of touch with classroom realities.*

Such mentor attitudes may result in students failing to see the importance of theory but rather emphasising practice, which could be detrimental to their profession. Darling-Hammond (2010) recommends a direct alignment between university-taught methods and those used by mentors in schools, while Zeichner (2010) advocates a shared space through which teachers and university staff could share and exchange roles in developing prospective teachers. These recommendations confirm the importance of a social systems approach to TP evaluations, in which stakeholder roles are exchanged and shared.

Students also highlighted broad evaluation criteria and discrepancies in evaluation forms and mark allocation. This situation reflects the absence of a TP conceptual framework and alignment, alluded to earlier. Feiman-Nemser (2001a: 1023) argues that a framework "is the 'cornerstone' of a coherent program". Therefore, to streamline these aspects, a TP conceptual framework and alignment should be prioritised. Students' emphasis on resources, conditions and contexts could suggest that this TEP overemphasises material teaching elements or that it is failing to equip them with formal teaching elements which enable them to function effectively without relying on conditions or resources. Amin and Ramrathan (2009: 76) argue that "contexts are important for preparing new teachers to teach in the complicated contextual landscape of South African schools". The recommendation is that this TEP begins to balance its focus on both teaching elements, as they are equally important.

Conclusion

This research presented students' perceptions of TP evaluations administered by means of observations and criteria-based forms, with the aim of determining how effectively all aspects of stakeholder support, structure and TP evaluation interact and contribute to their development as new teachers. One can conclude that stakeholders in the TP system do not yet work collaboratively to support students to reach their full potential. According to social systems theory, effective interaction, interconnectedness and communication among subsystems are vital for effective learning and development, as these may enhance students' performance and growth during TP evaluations. A set of recommendations for improvements were made earlier. The research points to a need for a robust discussion on TP evaluations which should

address structures/frameworks, opportunities and support systems, so that students can gather meaningful teaching experiences in the field. This discussion should also address problematic relationships which seemingly exist between university and schools. Furthermore, it should include collaborations among universities offering TEPs on how they can contribute meaningfully toward the development of effective TP evaluation structures, systems and theoretical frameworks. TP involves a social system of stakeholders who should work in tandem toward a shared vision of developing students.

Although the sample size of this study was small, the extent of concern raised by students suggests that this topic is worthy of research and should be investigated in the context of other institutions. Doing so will determine whether similar concerns exist and whether systematic change is needed throughout the teacher education system locally and nationally.

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