



# 'It will make me a real teacher': Learning experiences of part time PGCE students in South Africa

Carol Bertram\*, Nonhlanhla Mthiyane, Tabitha Mukeredzi

School of Education, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Private Bag X01, Scottsville, 3201 Pietermaritzburg, South Africa

## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Formal teacher education  
Unqualified teachers  
Teacher knowledge  
Confidence

## ABSTRACT

The province of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa has a recent estimate of 8000 unqualified and under-qualified teachers. Some of these teachers have an undergraduate degree, but do not have a professional qualification. In order to become professionally qualified, teachers with a degree must complete a Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE), which is traditionally a programme offered to fulltime 'pre-service' student teachers. However, part-time students have already been teaching in schools for some years and thus are in fact 'in-service' teachers. They have already gained professional practical knowledge through learning on-the-job. The study aimed to investigate what kind of knowledge they had learnt through experience and how this knowledge changes as a result of their formal learning on the PGCE. The study interviewed twenty part time PGCE students who are already practicing teachers about the kind of professional knowledge they acquired through the formal programme and their perceptions of how their practice changed as a result of this learning. Most of the respondents said that they had changed their teaching practice as a result of studying for the PGCE and that pedagogical knowledge about assessment, classroom management and lesson structuring strategies were deemed to be most important. More than half reported that the programme had developed their confidence as a result of both developing personal competence and through becoming a 'real' teacher by dint of achieving professional status. This points to the importance of offering teachers with a degree the opportunity to become professionally qualified through a flexibly offered programme.

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## 1. Introduction

Most developing countries experience the challenges of shortages of teachers, and South Africa is no exception (Lewin, 2002; Mukeredzi, 2009). The statistics regarding the supply and demand of teachers in South Africa are debated, but it is clear that many schools, particularly in rural areas experience difficulty in finding suitably qualified teachers. The KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education recently stated that there are nearly 8000 unqualified or under-qualified teachers in the province (Jansen, 2012). This leads to the practice of recruiting teachers who are professionally unqualified, although they may have an undergraduate degree. In order to become professionally qualified they need to have a Post-graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE). Since 2006, the School of Education at the University of KwaZulu-Natal has offered the PGCE programme on a part-time basis to teachers who are already teaching in schools.

Part time students are different to traditional full-time students, because they are already teaching in schools, and thus

are not traditional 'pre-service' student teachers. These teachers bring with them extensive practical and professional knowledge of teaching because they are already teaching, and have a number of years of experience. We wanted to investigate what kind of knowledge they had learnt through on-the-job experience and how this knowledge develops or changes (or does not change) as a result of their formal learning on the PGCE. The purpose of this study is thus to explore the experiences and perceptions of a sample of part time PGCE students in terms of their learning and acquisition of professional knowledge, through the formal PGCE programme. The key question that this paper answers is: what kind of professional knowledge do part time PGCE students (who are already practicing teachers) say they acquire through the university-based programme and to what extent do they say that this impacts on their practice?

### 1.1. Teacher qualifications in South Africa

The field of teacher qualifications in South Africa is convoluted due to our apartheid history, where teachers of different races received teacher education that differed both in terms of quality and of the number of years that were required (Welch, 2002). Currently the official definition of a qualified teacher is a three year

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +27 33 260 5349; fax: +27 33 260 5080.  
E-mail address: [BertramC@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:BertramC@ukzn.ac.za) (C. Bertram).

post-school qualification that includes appropriate professional training as a teacher, which is a Relative Education Qualification Value (REQV) of 13 (Department of Education, 2007). While teachers who have an undergraduate degree do have three years of post-school education, they are not considered professionally qualified as they do not have professional training. The minimum requirement for qualified teachers will become REQV level 14 (at a time not yet specified by the Department of Education), and new teachers are now required to do either a four-year bachelor of education, or a three-year undergraduate degree plus a one-year post-graduate professional diploma.

The standardization of qualifications and raising of the number of years of study required to become a teacher is a sign of the professionalization of the teaching profession in South Africa (Reeves and Robinson, 2010). However this move is in tension with the shortage of teachers in the country. The country's higher education institutes are not producing the number of teachers that are required by the system. Rural schools in particular find it difficult to attract qualified teachers, and thus there is a situation where unqualified teachers are in classrooms (Hugo et al., 2010).

### 1.2. Conceptual framework of the study

The broad field of the study is teacher education, and the concepts of teacher knowledge and teacher learning inform the study. The study was interested in the kind of knowledge that teachers report they learn through the formal PGCE programme, since they have been teaching for some years and thus would have already learned some aspects of professional practice 'on the job'. The study wanted to explore the kinds of knowledge that teachers say they learn on a formal teacher education programme that they had not already learned in their schools through experience.

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) describe three main conceptions of teacher learning that inform initial and continuing teacher education programmes. The first of these conceptions is knowledge-for-practice which they understand to mean formal and propositional knowledge of content knowledge, educational knowledge and pedagogic knowledge. The assumption is that there is a knowledge base for teaching that new teachers must learn and then use in their practice. The second conception of teacher learning focuses on knowledge-in-practice, which is the teacher knowledge that is constructed by teachers in their everyday practice. Their third conception is called knowledge-of-practice which constructs teachers as agents where teacher knowledge is connected to larger political and social agendas.

Most initial teacher education programmes are premised on a conception of teacher learning that embraces knowledge-for-practice. The assumption is that student teachers will learn a range of propositional knowledge during university-based lectures, and then will apply this knowledge during their school-based teaching practice, and will thus develop theory-informed practice. The question of exactly what types of knowledge teachers need has been a growing field of research over the past 30 years. Shulman (1986) was the first researcher to clearly describe a knowledge base for teachers or to answer the question: what is it that teachers need to know? Since then, a number of researchers have developed, expanded, reduced and critiqued Shulman's typology, and there are a range of models which aim to define teacher knowledge (Grossman, 1990; Zeidler, 2002; Banks et al., 2005; Wilson and Demetriou, 2007).

There does seem to be some consensus amongst researchers that four key domains are content knowledge (the knowledge of the subject content that needs to be taught); general pedagogical knowledge (knowledge of different teaching strategies, classroom management strategies, assessment strategies etc.); context knowledge (knowing about the background of the learners,

knowing the organizational culture of the school, etc.) and pedagogical content knowledge (PCK, which is content-specific pedagogy that addresses how teachers make their specific subject content accessible to learners) (Grossman, 1990; Jones and Straker, 2006; Reed, 2009).

In terms of subject matter or content knowledge, the PGCE curriculum assumes that prospective teachers come to the programme with content knowledge already in place, since they have an undergraduate degree. Thus the general aspects of the programme focus on developing student teachers' general pedagogical knowledge, and context knowledge. Since the students on the part time PGCE are already teachers, they probably already have knowledge of context which includes the expectations, opportunities and constraints posed by the district, knowledge of the school 'culture' and the contextual factors which impact on teaching such as the students' backgrounds, families, particular strengths, weaknesses and interests (Grossman, 1990). The subject specialization modules focus on developing PCK. Although PCK is a contested term, there is general agreement that teachers do need more than just a deep knowledge of their discipline, whatever this is labeled. Adler et al. (2002) argue that teachers' broad and deep knowledge of the subject is necessary but not sufficient. This knowledge needs to be transformed into 'sequenced, graded and developmental/progressive tasks for learners, learning and assessment' (p. 139). They describe this integration of disciplinary and pedagogical knowledge as 'conceptual knowledge-in-practice'. This knowledge-in-practice is clearly linked to the teaching of a specific subject, and should not be construed as a generic activity (Rusznayak, 2010).

Another way of distinguishing different kinds of knowledge is to make a distinction between teacher knowledge that is 'codified and generalisable' and knowledge that is 'event-structured and personal' (Webb, 2007). The first type is also described as *declarative, propositional or higher-order* knowledge, which includes facts, abstract knowledge of ideas and principles and is mainly about sense-making and meaning. The latter type is also described as *procedural or practical* knowledge which comprises both behavioral and cognitive skills, and can also be known as context-specific knowledge (Knight, 2002; Wilson and Demetriou, 2007; Stuart et al., 2009). This kind of knowledge is difficult to make explicit or to represent in a textual form because it is largely acquired informally through participation in social activities. Codified, propositional, epistemic (Loughran, 2006) knowledge is usually learned formally through a combination of 'knowledge transfer' and then knowledge application through the teaching practicum. Practical, personal or craft (Kennedy, 2002) knowledge is created informally, in the context of practice.

The case of the part-time PGCE is interesting in that it is a programme designed for initial teacher education, but in this situation is being offered to teachers who are already in classrooms.

Before enrolling on the part time PGCE, the teachers in this study have not had the opportunity to engage with codified educational knowledge in a formal way. Thus the study sheds light on how they talk about the impact of learning codified educational knowledge (knowledge-for-practice) in a formal programme.

### 1.3. The PGCE curriculum

The PGCE is a certificate which offers either a one year full time or a two-year part-time professional qualification to students who already have a Bachelor's degree. The assumption underpinning this model of teacher education is that potential teachers already have the subject content knowledge of their discipline from their undergraduate studies. It is a professional qualification that equips student teachers with the knowledge and competences that they

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