Re-envisioning teaching practice: Student teacher learning in a cohort model of practicum in a rural South African context

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on the learning and professional development of 15 Bachelor of Education student teachers and the kinds of knowledge they gained through a cohort model of teaching practice during a four week residential practicum in a rural South African school. Drawing on concepts around socio-constructivism and teacher knowledge, data were collected from the student teachers' reflective journals and audio-taped collaborative reflection sessions. Content analysis indicates that these pre-service teachers gained general pedagogic knowledge and, pedagogic content knowledge from, subject specialization collaborations, collaborative reflections and personal reflections and journaling. Reflections on their observations and participation in school activities, offered them knowledge of context. The paper illustrates that a cohort approach to student teaching practice, promotes learning and professional development and, adds value to their practicum.

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1. Introduction

The paper draws on data from a large Rural Teacher Education Project (RTEP). It reports on the learning and professional development of 15 University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) student teachers (herein called students) in a cohort model of residential practicum in a rural South African school. Teaching practice (TP) is a critical component of becoming a certified teacher which exposes trainees to 'live' teaching in a real classroom. However, regardless of the educational setting, the process is often loaded with complexities which may considerably shape students' ability to derive maximum benefits from the practicum and indeed, from pre-service training. The Multi-Site Teacher Education Research Project (2003) acknowledges that lecturers find it exhausting and time consuming, institutions regard it as expensive and complex to organize and, schools, unsure of their roles seldom organize time to benefit both the pre-service teacher and the school. In developing countries like South Africa, TP challenges are often more severe, particularly in rural areas where limited in-school support minimizes its effectiveness. Heeralal and Bayaga (2011) discovered that TP efficacy within rural South Africa was reduced by isolation, low and uneven levels of teacher expertise and support.

Recent debates fore-ground TP quality as a universal concern within teacher education (Heeralal and Bayaga, 2011). However, the current South African teacher education culture apparently still has a long way to go regarding students' TP support in rural schools. Students in such contexts find this period stressful, lonely and demanding (Prince et al., 2010). Grisham et al. (2004) lament the traumatic and threatening situations that arise when students are placed in classrooms without support. The RTEP adopted a cohort model where a group of students are placed in one rural school for residential practicum to provide a layer of support to enhance achievement of the desired outcomes from TP.

Literature is available on mentor/mentee collaborations during practicum (see for e.g., Bloomfield, 2010; Hyland and Lo, 2006; Kiggundu and Nayimuli, 2009; Johnston, 2010; Koerner, 1992). Significant work has also been undertaken around student pair collaborations and support during TP (e.g., Le Cornu, 2005; Ongo'ndo and Jwan, 2009; Smith et al., 2012). However, there seems to be a paucity of research on student cohort collaborations during practicum in rural contexts. This paper attempts to contribute to knowledge on that aspect. It addresses two questions: (1) How do students learn and professionally develop through a cohort model during residential practicum in a rural school? (2) What kinds of knowledge do they gain through this approach to TP? Studying how students learn and the knowledge they gain may point to some benefits of this approach which may assist higher education institutions in reviewing student TP to enhance realization of more positive outcomes from this process.

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1.1. The rural teacher education project

The RTEP is a rural school–university teacher development partnership project that arose from a need to address rural education, community development and teacher preparation (Islam, 2010; Islam et al., 2011). The project was undertaken by the UKZN faculty of Education's Center for visual methodologies, in conjunction with rural schools in Vulindlela district of KwaZulu-Natal Province of South Africa. RTEP focuses on rural education by combining research, intervention and, teacher development strategies (Balfour, 2012) and investigates ways of making teaching/learning meaningful and, professionally developmental by injecting student cohorts to work with in-service teachers in rural schools (Islam et al., 2011). By taking groups of students for practicum in rural schools, the project tries to address rural school issues; fostering the development of safe and productive teacher preparation environments to encourage students, mentors and school leaders to act as agents for change in rural school and community issues (Balfour, 2012).

The RTEP was piloted in 2007 and has annually been taking student cohorts to do their practicum in rural schools to provide them with an opportunity to: "contribute to educational development in a rural school; learn from experienced teachers and community members about life and work in rural contexts and, participate in an innovative teaching-learning partnership between the university and the school community" (Centre for Visual Methodologies, 2011, p.14). The project is widely publicized in the School of Education and students formally apply. It often attracts competition among students as it is heavily subsidized (accommodation, meals, travel paid for) and, is led by a team of prominent national and international academics.

For selection, students must: express interest in teaching in rural schools or community engagement; be in 2nd, 3rd or 4th year of study; in Senior Phase[1] or Further Education and Training; and specializing in one or two of the following subjects: technology, management studies, english, computer studies, mathematics and science. Participants enrolled in Foundation Phase and able to communicate in isiZulu[2] are also considered.

The project team requires on-site leadership for effective in-field coordination and usually two advisors are appointed. Typically one of them should have a PhD in Teacher education. That is how I became involved with the RTEP in 2011. I was then a resident post-doctorate with a Ph.D. in Teacher Education and originally from Zimbabwe. This study is based on the 2012 RTEP cohort. In this advisor capacity, I viewed myself as both "insider" and "outsider" regarding my relationships with various groups within the project. These identities were flexible and the degree to which I was part of or separated from the groups fluctuated by activity or day. Sometimes, I was "in between" these roles. I was not from South Africa nor was I part of the team that conceptualized the RTEP. I arrived as an add-on to the research activities. As student advisor, I was accommodated with them at a guesthouse close to the school, drove them to and from school and, typically remained at the school to provide immediate support and help keep them focussed on their professional dimensions. Every evening, I led students through debriefing and reflection sessions. While I was an authority figure in this respect, I often felt vulnerable. This was a unique year where I had to work alone and,

understand the complexities of a rural school context that I was expected to help students traverse. The situation was compounded by the fact that I did not speak the local language, isiZulu.

1.2. Rurality and teacher education in South Africa

While this study is located within a South African context, rural schools the world over seemingly experience similar obstacles to improved student learning: poor funding and limited resources requiring schools to do more with less; issues of "hard to staff, harder to stay"; schools remotely located and serving high poverty communities; limited economic opportunities and a paucity of family social and cultural amenities; low population density, family isolation and community remoteness; daily life patterns shaped by rural geographies; and, lowly educated communities (Emerging Voices, 2005; Kline et al., 2013; Lowe, 2006; McEwan, 1999; Redding and Walberg, 2012). Rurality in this study, signifies community owned portions and commercial farms in the former white areas of South Africa and, former "homeland" areas (Emerging Voices, 2005). Under apartheid, policies like the Land Act Group Areas' Act of 1953 and Separate Development Act forced native Black South Africans to live in rural or "homeland" areas (Wedekind, 2005). These former homelands are characterized by poor infrastructure, inadequate services and facilities and, either considerably dense homesteads or village-style sparse settlements. Currently the poorest and least developed South African communities are in the former homelands of Eastern Cape, Limpopo and KwaZulu-Natal provinces where conditions of poverty and underdevelopment manifest in the poor quality education available there (Gardiner, 2008). These deficiencies filter into schools, consequently most South African rural schools lack material and infrastructural resources, basic services and facilities and, within the context of global pressures like Education for All experience increased class sizes, multi-grade teaching and pressures of performativity regarding students' achievement (Mukeredzi, 2009). Schools do not have toilets on site and, more than 50 learners use one toilet, there is no source of electricity or water source near or on location, thus, schools rely on borehole or rainwater harvesting (Hugo et al., 2010).

With regard to government policy and rurality, Johnson and Strange (2009) point out that nowhere is this more apparent than in the way public policies relate, often as if by afterthought, to rural schools. Until recently, the South African government policy did not foreground rural education (Directorate for Rural Education, 2009). While rural education is currently acknowledged as priority in government, Moletsane (2012) laments that regardless of the many policy initiatives undertaken, rural South Africa schools remain plagued by substantial challenges. Mukeredzi and Mandrona (2013) attribute this to issues of implementation and, the connections between rural realities and government response that remain unresolved. This is notwithstanding the large numbers of school-age children residing in rural contexts. The World Bank (2012) estimates rural inhabitants to 40% of the South African population and Gardiner (2008) reveals that KwaZulu-Natal province has about 3000 rural schools with over 1000 000 learners. Thus, affording accessible, quality education to these communities contributes to the development of a democratic society (Mukeredzi and Mandrona, 2013).

Teacher development is pivotal to transforming the South African education system (Islam, 2010). However, Buthelezi (2004) laments that many gaps in teacher education partly contribute to rural school shortcomings as programs do not address teachers' contextual issues. There is strong international awareness that institutions and schools involved in teacher education should foster strong partnerships for more effective pre-service teacher training and support (Haugalokken and Ramberg, 2007; Multi-Site

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[1] The South African Education system categorizes learning stages into phases. Foundation Phase refers to Grade R–Grade 3, Intermediate Phase Grade 4–Grade 6, Senior Phase Grade 7–Grade 9 and, further education training (FET) Phase Grade 10–Grade 12.

[2] IsiZulu is the local home language and the language of learning and teaching at Foundation Phase level in Vulindela District and most rural districts in KwaZulu-Natal province.