STUDENT-TEACHERS’ VIEW OF THEIR ROLE AS MEDIATORS OF LEARNING

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Abstract

Through teacher education programmes, student-teachers not only acquire essential knowledge bases (i.e. knowledge of assessment, pedagogy, content, curriculum, and of students), but also construct a sense of themselves, their identity, as professional teachers [12],[14]. Constructing a sense of self is generally regarded as a complex, multidimensional, dynamic and contextualised process [4]. While the construct of “identity” has been termed in a variety of ways, there seems to be consensus that “professional identity” includes a number of identifying features, namely that it is an ongoing process of interpretation and re-interpretation of experiences; that it implies interactions between person and context; that sub-identities may be formed; as well as the centrality of agency (meaning student-teachers’ active role in the professional development process) [2].

In this paper we report on a study where student teachers’ views were investigated regarding the characteristics and roles of effective teachers. We followed a Participatory Reflection and Action (PRA) approach, a type of Participatory Action Research (PAR), which seeks to understand and improve the practices of the participants, through cyclic series of participation, self-reflection and action [3]. The sample comprised seven hundred and thirteen (n=713) students, comprising of 563 (79%) females and 150 (21%) males, all final-year (fourth-year) undergraduate BEd student-teachers enrolled in the Faculty of Education at a South African university. We further used the principle of Community of Practice (CoP) to explore the perceptions of student-teachers' roles of effective teachers. In this paper we report on one aspect, namely the student-teachers' role as mediator of learning. The student-teachers engaged in a process of collective learning about their practice as prospective teaching and learning experts. In order to elicit their own views and perceptions as a learning community, they examined their beliefs, practices and orientations regarding their roles of mediating the process of learning, implemented proposed actions and reflected on the outcomes of their actions, in order to improve their practice. This was done by using questions on four matrix sets, as explained by [16]. The questions on the matrix sets related to teachers’ roles as mediators of learning. The completed matrices were transcribed, coded, classified and categorised according to emerging themes which were then analysed.

The main findings indicate that student teachers felt strategies such as question and answer techniques; role play and play as strategies; the use of technology, media and models; direct teaching and demonstrations; cooperative learning and group work; inquiry-based learning; as well as problem-based learning posed various challenges to them during teaching practice, irrespective of the fact that methodology lecturers dealt with the content of these strategies as part of their formal tuition. Students often felt themselves poorly equipped to deal with these challenges. They highlighted the importance of mentor lecturers, mentor teachers, peers, parents, the university and the department of education in not only supporting them when experiencing challenges, but also in informing their professional development as teachers.

Keywords: Community of practice; mediator of learning; teacher identity; teaching and learning; participatory action research; participatory reflection and action.

1 INTRODUCTION

It is well established that, through teacher education programmes, student-teachers not only acquire essential knowledge bases (i.e. knowledge of assessment, pedagogy, content, curriculum, and of students), but also develop a sense of their identity as professional teachers [12], [14]. Developing a teacher identity is generally regarded as a complex, multidimensional, dynamic and contextualised process [4]. While the construct of “identity” has been termed in a variety of ways, there seems to be consensus that “professional identity” includes a number of identifying features, namely that it is an ongoing process of interpretation and re-interpretation of experiences; that it implies interactions...
between person and context; that sub-identities may be formed; as well as the centrality of agency (meaning student-teachers’ active role in the professional development process) [2].

Contemporary views on teacher identity emphasises individuals’ roles as active agents, negotiating their professional identity by means of active reflection and interpretation between themselves and their social context. Identity is not an isolated concept, but links with individuals’ professional agency within a community. Thus, identity development involves both individuals’ personal histories (within and beyond teacher education), but also their interaction within sociocultural contexts [1], [15]. While developing an identity typically involves investment in student-teachers’ becoming and being teachers, it furthermore requires investment in their agency, namely their capacity to participate in and take responsibility for their own learning [15]. In this regard, [15] support the notion of “identity-agency”, which implies individual’s agency in developing their professional identity.

In this study, we investigate student-teachers’ professional teacher identity development through teaching practice and action research experiences in the final year of a four-year undergraduate BEd initial teacher education programme. More specifically, we investigate teachers’ sense of themselves as learning mediators as developed through participating as active participant in a community of practice in a school context. We assume that student-teacher identity development is an important component of learning to facilitate learning. In agreement with [15], we argue that participation in a community does not directly determine identity, but that student-teachers are active in utilising agentic experiences in shaping their professional identity. In building upon earlier research, we consider personal factors, but also contextual factors that contributed to their perception of themselves as learning mediators. In our approach, we emphasise the importance of working within an authentic education context in shaping professional competencies as well as identities. We also argue that designing and implementing a PAR project within the community of education practice created the space for student-teachers to function as a community of inquirers, and that their agentic experiences mediated identity-building processes towards a sense of agency as teachers and as mediators of learning. We furthermore hold that that involving student-teachers as researchers in a community of practice may bridge the gap between theory and practice, and contribute towards their professional development as teachers.

2 THE PARADIGMATIC AND PHILOSOPHICAL GROUNDING OF THE STUDY

The study used Community of Practice (CoP) to explore the perceptions of student-teachers’ role as mediators of learning. According to [17], communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly. It is a way of learning from, and with community members in order to understand the complexities and dimensions of a particular subject. In this study, student-teachers engaged in a process of collective learning about their practice as prospective mediators of learning. In order to elicit their own views and perceptions as a learning community, they participated in school-based actions and reflections related to their role as mediators of learning. In this engagement, student-teachers examined their beliefs, practices and orientations regarding their roles of mediating the process of learning, implemented proposed actions and reflected on the outcomes of their actions, in order to improve their practice. The study was, therefore, premised on Participatory Reflection and Action (PRA) action research [5], [6] within a community of practice. PRA is a type of Participatory Action Research (PAR) which seeks to understand and improve the practices and situations of the participants, through cyclic series of participation, self-reflection and action [3]. The study relied heavily on interpretivism [8] as the epistemological lens for understanding the perceptions of student-teachers regarding their mediation role in the process of learning. The student–teachers interpreted their own understanding and view of their role as a mediator of learning. The amalgamation of Community of Practice (CoP), Participatory Reflection Action (PRA) and interpretivism in this study aligns very well with the Activity Theory [7], which frames the study.

3 METHODOLOGY

Participatory Reflection and Action (PRA) research approach was used to collect data for the study. The main tenets of PRA are that; the participants are not experts in the field, local problems need local solutions, and that the actions to be taken in solving the local problems would result in empowerment [9]. The participating student-teachers are novices in the field of education. Further, these participants experience contextual problems which require local solutions, and such solutions are envisaged to enhance the student-teachers’ identity as prospective educators. [9] also regard intervention, activism
and change as the central constituents of PRA. In line with these constituents, the student-teachers executed plans to address the identified challenges, during teaching practice. These interventions engaged the participants with the goal of changing their identities regarding mediation of learning. The tenets of PRA thus align very well with the context of the student-teachers involved in this study.

The notion of changing student-teacher’s identities using PRA is supported by [10] who asserts that we live in a world of negotiated identity and in this world we construct and revise our visions of self. The use of PRA was also guided by [16] observation that it gives people an opportunity to articulate what they feel the problems are, and to generate relevant solutions. With regard to these assertions, the student-teachers who participated in this study were accorded the chance to construct and revise their identity as prospective teachers by identifying envisaged challenges during their teaching career, taking action in an attempt to solve them, and reflecting on the outcome of those actions. In cognisance of the above stated assertions, Participatory Research and Action was perceived as the most appropriate strategy for developing student-teachers’ identities.

3.1 Sampling

The sample of the study consisted of all final-year (fourth-year) undergraduate BEd student-teachers enrolled in the Faculty of Education at a South African university. Seven hundred and thirteen (n=713) students, comprising of 563 (79%) females and 150 (21%) males participated in the study. The sample included students enrolled for the Foundation Phase (grades R to 3), the Intermediate Phase (grades 4 to 6), the Senior Phase (grades 7 to 9) and Further Education and Training Phase (grades 10 to 12) programmes. All these student-teachers participated in compulsory teaching-practice as part of their training. Purposive sampling was therefore used to select the study participants. These participants were involved in teaching practice for the first time during their programme. The majority of them were consequently uncertain about what to expect prior to the teaching practice experience and were of the perception that it was going to be extremely challenging. The unit of analysis for the study was teaching practice in the work place (school). This unit of analysis constituted a Community of Practice (CoP) comprising student-teachers, who constructed, acted and reflected on their opinions regarding their role as mediators of learning.

3.2 Research process

Participating student-teachers were divided into two approximately equal groups, namely Block A and Block B. This was necessary for logistic reasons. Each student was allocated to a mentor lecturer from the Faculty of Education, and a mentor teacher from the school where they did their teaching practice. During the second quarter of the year, block A students were visited and assessed by both the mentor lecturers and mentor teachers once or twice during teaching practice, while block B students were visited and assessed by mentor teachers only. About one month into teaching practice, Block A student-teachers attended an initial three-hour workshop on campus, where they worked in groups of 5 to 10 students according to their phase specialisation. The student-teachers remained in these groups throughout the research process. The purpose of this first workshop was to enable the student-teachers to gain insight into an understanding of their role as mediators of learning, and for them to plan intervention activities. The students were required to discuss, reflect and answer several questions on three matrix sets, as explained by [16]. The questions on the matrix sets related to teachers’ roles as mediators of learning, and were organised as follows:

**Matrix 1:** Mapping Teacher Expert Roles: Group members were asked to discuss and reflect on the kind of teacher they would like to be regarding mediation of learning.

**Matrix 2:** Mapping Resources: Each group was required to describe the sources that informed their suggested roles, and also to explain the contribution of each source in the development of the identified role. This exercise was guided by [10] notion that “students use a rich array of resources and contexts to navigate student teaching experience”.

**Matrix 3:** Mapping Shortcomings: Members from each group were required to list their perceived shortcomings in performing the discussed role, and to propose one or two activities (interventions) for addressing the listed shortcomings during teaching practice.

After the first workshop, the participants continued working in the same groups to implement their action plans in respective schools during teaching practice. At the end of the second quarter (about two months of implementing the actions), participants met again on campus for the second workshop.
During this workshop, the groups reported and reflected on their experiences during the implementation of the action plans, by answering questions set out on the fourth matrix.

**Matrix 4: Reporting on Implemented Action Plans:** Group members were required to provide feedback and to reflect on the outcomes of the implemented activities.

During the third quarter of the academic year, the two blocks of students swapped, where block B students were visited and assessed by both mentor lecturers and teachers while block A students were only assessed by mentor teachers. During this quarter, block B students carried out the same activities performed by block A students during the second quarter. The completed matrices (1 to 4) from both block A and block B students were transcribed, coded, classified and categorised according to emerging themes which were then analysed.

### 4 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The 72 groups who gave feedback on the matrices indicated appropriate planning and preparation as a critical to being effective mediators of learning. They considered it important to plan the teaching activities very carefully and to prepare learners to become independent practitioners who would be able to function with minimum teacher support. They thought reflection needed to be a strong component of their everyday tasks in order to expose areas of concern and to improve on them. Many of them saw ongoing reflection as a never-ending activity, claiming that it sustains life-long growth and development. Groups further acknowledged the importance of including parents in learners’ work and building a sound relationship with parents. The teacher needs to be able to tell parents exactly what the status of their children is, as well as what can be expected in her classroom. The aspects that were ranked highest in developing their teacher identities as mediators of learning are discussed below.

There was consensus among the participants that creating a safe space for learners in which to develop was critical to being effective as a mediator of learning. Many referred to the fact that they had to deal with diverse learners and that no one child learns in the same way. They pointed to the importance of being approachable and supportive to learners, that learners trusted them and could talk to them. Most of the participants mentioned the importance of building strong relationships with their learners. Many groups argued that teachers should show an interest in the learners’ lives, treat their learners equally with dignity and respect, and show compassion, empathy and sympathy towards learners when they experience emotional turmoil. Their reflections confirmed that teachers have to create warm, safe and caring environments for their learners. They took their role as substitute parent very seriously and claimed that getting to know their learners as soon as possible, allowed for this to happen.

To become a mediator of learning, participants reiterated the importance of their personal attitude and professionalism towards their learners as well as their profession. To them it was important to display a clear set of values so as to be an example to their learners Many participants indicated that they wanted to grow and develop as a teacher, but more so they wanted to master the skills to remain professional and set examples inside and outside the school. Their role outside the classroom was also very important to them and they claimed that their professional status also applies after hours. As part of their role as mediator of learning, they felt they would only have credibility in the classroom if they displayed professionalism. Many claimed that they were in the classroom in the first place to be teachers and took the responsibility of being a teacher very seriously. They could also relate their professional behaviour to the effective and successful application and implementation of classroom policy and rules.

Participants all acknowledged the importance of parental involvement to strengthen their roles as mediators of learning. However, some reported that a lack of parental involvement negatively impacted teaching and learning. They could not identify specific reasons for the lack of parental involvement in the school, but did feel more onus should have been placed on the principal and school to promote stronger parental involvement.

What was disturbing, however, was that most of the participants admitted to struggling with implementing effective teaching and learning strategies in a practical manner, such as questioning techniques, role play, cooperative learning, and technology or e-learning. Moreover, they were unsure as to how to incorporate constructivist and inquiry-based learning into their instructional design. Findings indicate that the theoretical knowledge they had of these learning theories and paradigms remained just that; theoretical. The practical application and implementation thereof remained a
challenge and they found themselves reverting back to traditional methods of teaching and learning, knowing full well it was not what they were taught at university.

Even though the above mentioned aspects were held as important to the participants in theory, when it came to devising action plans for their needs and requirements, they struggled and reverted back to the more obvious aspects of being a mediator of learning, namely subject specialization and planning. This is to be understood as it captures their prime teaching-related tasks and functions. To many of the participants the idealistic aspects of being a reflective practitioner became overwhelming, leaving little space to focus on specific tasks and the possible impact such tasks might have on teaching and learning. One, therefore, understands and supports the claim made by [13] that student teachers with little teaching practice would find it difficult to benefit from reflections in general. Their repertoire of experience can't support their exposure to the realities of the teaching-learning environment. Meaningful deductions might therefore not be possible as part of the knowledge required to manipulate their environment. In this regard the role of mentor lecturers and mentor teachers cannot be stressed enough.

In conclusion, we found Participatory Reflection and Action as a sound strategy to manage student teachers' engagement and interaction during the course of teaching practice. It reminds of the model proposed by [10] with its call for a multi-faceted support system, yet is unique in the sense that cohorts of student teachers can explore their own concerns, limitations and restrictions as they work towards discovering their own strengths and identities. It is also compatible to the ideas of [11] who stressed the importance and effectiveness of a so-called ALACT model to teacher education, and the work done by [13] on the value of guided reflection in the development of practical knowledge. One could accept it as a given that reflections before, in, on and after action have become inseparable from quality teacher education programmes. It is also obvious that there is no guarantee that extended periods of teaching practice will automatically lead to impacting reflections and interventions and that good mentorship programmes need to drive the learning experience.

It is essential for teacher preparation programmes to consider how they prepare student-teachers for teaching in diverse classrooms. Student-teachers need to be offered a variety of experiences in different contexts and at different points in their teacher preparation programmes so as to help shape their perceptions of their role as mediators of learning and ultimately develop their teacher identities. The nature of teacher identity is dynamic and multi-faceted [4], and therefore requires structuring of learning experiences that will allow student-teachers to explore their identities.

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