CAN COMPETENCE FRAMEWORKS BE THE PANACEA FOR TEACHERS’ FIRST-YEAR SHOCK?

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Abstract

Teaching is widely perceived as a difficult job, especially by teachers in their first five years into the job. Almost every new teacher encounters what is commonly recognised as a first-year shock, where they feel their preparation at initial teacher education (ITE) is not completely in line with the real requirements of the job. One good explanation for the first-year shock is the on-going theory-practice gap. Meaning, the disparity between what these teachers learn and experience at ITE on one side and the actual teaching practice in schools on the other side. Although many actions and reactions are proposed or already have been implemented over the past decades to tackle this problem, it is still impacting the performance of new teachers, and thus regarded as one of the biggest challenges for teacher education today. In this review, we discuss some of the main underlying causes to the theory-practice gap and promote the use of teacher competence frameworks as a potential approach to solve this pervasive problem.

Keywords: Teacher education, pre-service education, theory-practice gap, teacher competences.

1 INTRODUCTION

It is quite promising, and at the same time reassuring, to see the great efforts which teacher education around the world exerts into improving the quality of teaching and learning at k-12 schools. The challenge is, some of the teaching and learning problems are persistent and are the actual roots for several other sub-problems. Of these problems, novice teachers’ insufficient level of readiness for the job stands out as a major contributor to low-quality school education. Although, it is likely a by-product to two larger problems; the classic theory-practice gap in teaching, and novice teachers’ lack of mastery of core competences (Korthagen et al., 2006; Allen & Turner, 2012). It is puzzling that these old problems are still impeding the development of teaching as a profession, however, a close analysis to the roles of teacher education and the nature of schools may provide some explanation. Therefore, for teacher education to be effective and accommodating to the teaching needs at the present time, it could centre its efforts on what it can actually do, within the specification of its roles and responsibilities.

2 METHODOLOGY

This study was carried out to answer two research questions;

- Why initial teacher education is still struggling to produce graduates who are ready for the job?
- Can the use of teacher competence frameworks contribute to enhancing the readiness for the job?

We used formal search methods to answer these questions. Mainly, we worked through electronic searching in "Web of Science" and "Google Scholar". The methods centred on the use of free-text and reference scanning, searching relevant terms such as; "teacher competences", "teaching issues", and "teacher education role". The scope of relatively recent studies from the year 2005 and onwards was used to limit the selection of the references, except for a few articles. Other selection criteria were used when the research engine returned hundreds of thousands of articles. Mostly, searching for more relevant terms within the article and shortlisting the most cited articles. Once the articles were selected, they were scanned and dissected around the topics of the study. Then, each topic was studied in relation with the other topics to identify possible cause-and-effect relationships or potential trends. The findings are presented and discussed in the sections below.
3 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS:

3.1 From student teaching to teaching: the development of the teaching experience

It may sound reasonable to link good teaching to years of professional teaching experience; the more teachers practice, the better they adapt to different teaching needs (Loewenberg Ball & Forzani, 2009). Though, from a larger perspective, teaching experience might begin before the occurrence of actual teaching, and certain factors can determine the quality of teaching far better than mere years of experience. For many prospective teachers, the encounters experienced and lived as school-level learners with their teachers have greatly shaped their opinion of teaching (Korthagen, Loughran, & Russell, 2006). Also, recent studies have been focusing on the roles and responsibilities of teacher educators, with a trending concept emerging as “modelling”, where teacher educators walk the talk and student teachers learn more from the attitudes and behaviours of their teachers than from their direct and intended teaching (Cochran-Smith, 2005; Darling-Hammond & Hammerness, 2005; Shulman & Shulman, 2004).

In a related study, we proposed that prospective teachers experience is developed in ITE mainly through four characteristics; the curriculum content, the teaching and instructional approach, the practical experiences and the modeling of teaching and learning by teacher educators (Mohamed, Valcke & De Wever, 2016). Building on this idea, we reviewed different phases in teachers’ life that can accumulate their teaching experience, and then outlined the effect of four types of experiences in particular; (a) the past experience as school-level learners, (b) the learning to teach experience as student teachers, (c) the experience of self-reflection on personal teaching practice both during practical experiences and as full-fledge teachers, and finally (d) the general experience of working in schools. Looking closely at these experiences, it appears that teacher education can shape and influence only half of them, and at best in part.

3.2 Why new teachers’ readiness is not readily achieved

Whether it is feasible or appropriate for the ITE to educate prospective teachers towards the mastery of the job before they actually begin their career, it remains an arduous undertaking. Essentially, teacher education has little to no control on many of the multiple factors which influence teaching in k-12 schools, especially when teaching graduates lose linkage with teacher colleges soon after receiving their credentials. A sound example to such factors is schools and the overall school system and environment. The problem is, where teachers in the past had the privilege of growing into professionalism within their first years of teaching, teachers of the current era are almost “commanded” to obtain mastery of the profession from the onset of their career.

In our extensive review to the literature tracking down the components of the “vicious cycle” of teachers’ preparation between teacher education and schools, we identified nine major issues that have to be resolved before we could hope that teacher education can make a real difference. For instance, so long as teaching is perceived as an ambiguous job with unclearly-cut roles and responsibilities, the bar of good teaching will be unreachable. This is because first we need to understand what constitutes good teaching before aiming for becoming good teachers (Loewenberg Ball & Forzani, 2009). Further, we continue to observe novices’ first-year-shock, and a constant increase in teacher attrition rates (Darling-Hammond & Hammerness, 2005; Lunenberg et al., 2007). All of which are related issues, with one leading to the other or caused by it. It is not surprising then that the theory-practice gap is still on-going. After more than one hundred years of highlighting this gap, we only became more aware of it and better understood why it could be the most difficult challenge to tackle before we turn to the other problems of teaching (Zeichner, 2002; Korthagen, 2010). We are yet to determine the right theory and the right practice so that to put together an appropriate bridge across the two for student teachers to cross with acceptable mastery of the job (Liston et al., 2006). Lastly, turning to more practice on the expense of a well-established and studied theory as seen in many teacher colleges is just another problem rather than a solution. The graduates of these colleges were not any more immune to reality-shock than those of other teaching programmes (Korthagen, Loughran, & Russell, 2006).
3.3 Can teacher competence frameworks be part of the answer to the problem?

Teacher education is expected to streamline the accumulated experience of pre-service teachers and rectify the effects of such experiences so that these teachers are better able to connect theory to practice. The intervention of teacher education here is a regulatory task, where it aligns the right theory to the relevant practice, thus minimising the disparity among them. In practical terms, one way teacher education can achieve this, is through the integration of teacher competences frameworks in the teaching and learning of student teachers. Competences are “an integrated set of personal characteristics, knowledge, skills and attitudes that are needed for effective performance in various teaching contexts” (Tigelaar et al., 2004, p. 255).

The rationale for perceiving teacher competences frameworks as a viable approach to tackle teaching issues is pretty simple; the task of teaching today cannot be properly fulfilled if teachers lack the right set of knowledge, skills and attitudes or values. These three elements together form the building blocks for any and every teacher competences framework worldwide (Darling-Hammond, Newton, & Wei, 2010; CEPPE, 2013). Nevertheless, not all teacher competences guarantee effective teaching. The evidence to this is well-documented in different parts of the world as part of the country reports and comparative studies of the OECD and the UNESCO. Fortunately, because it is already a common practice to use teacher competences frameworks - also known as teacher or teaching standards-, studies of these frameworks revealed invaluable insights as to how to construct the most effective ones.

Beginning with the criteria for selecting the competences, we urge to consider some elements in relation to the competences. Generally, the competences must be; (a) effectively linking between theory and practice, (b) attainable, (c) brief, (d) transparent, (e) specific, (f) clear, (g) context-related, and (h) evidently-proven (OECD, 2013; Korthagen, 2004; Mayer et al., 2005; Shulman & Shulman, 2004). Initially, all competence must fall under one of the three labels; knowledge-related competences, skills-related competences, and value or attitude-related competences. This is important, because the three domains comprehend what teachers know, what teachers can do, and how teachers translate their knowledge and skills into practice. Once the competences are selected, they can be classified under six main labels;

- Knowledge and instructional expertise
- Organisation/ management – pedagogical expertise
- Diversity
- Partnership with parents, colleagues and community
- Professional development attitude
- Development of ethical stand

Additionally, there are other advantageous and favourable practices in constructing teacher competences frameworks. Although it is not necessarily crucial to incorporate international competences next to the local thereof, with the current international competition among different nations, especially as seen in international assessments such as PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS, it may be an advantage in so doing. Particularly, to benefit from the international studies in this area that are conducted by leading organisations, particularly, the OECD and the UNESCO. Competences frameworks are not a one-man-job. It would be extremely beneficial to consult educational professionals of related experience, such as teacher educators, school principals, teachers, and student teachers (CEPPE, 2013). Of importance, brevity is desirable not only in the competences but in the frameworks as well. We cannot, for example, expect to see a valid framework of only two competences. Similarly, frameworks with too many competences may be equally counterproductive (CEPPE, 2013).

4 CONCLUSIONS

For several decades, teacher education has been reactive in resolving teaching issues. It is time for teacher education to be proactive and exercise its authority in managing and shaping the teaching profession. Irrespective of old, current and future challenges, if equipped with the right theory and practice, teacher education can make a critical difference to prospective teachers’ experience in schools. What is interesting, is that teacher education do not necessarily need to be exceptionally
innovative in its approaches to preparing new teachers for the job. It can simply revise and amend already-existing methods, that have been sufficiently tested, evaluated and improved. For instance, teacher competence frameworks.

While the idea of teacher competence frameworks may started so as to address the local needs and develop them in accordance to global benchmarks, they also helped mitigate the tension between teacher education and schools. The majority of the frameworks are the result of joint efforts between teacher educators and school leaders where the two parties brought to the table their issues along with what they viewed as possible solutions. This form of collaboration has also affected the "scope of power" of teacher education and schools, where it made it possible for the former to extend its control and guidance over some of the external factors that impact the teaching profession. Although today, such frameworks are mostly used in licensing and recruiting new teachers as well as in the development of professional teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Hayes, 1997; Korthagen, 2010; Mayer, 2009), there is more potential to them in preparing student teachers for the job. If teacher competence frameworks can contribute to the greater task of eliminating the theory-practice gap, the first-year shock may become a thing of the past and the discourse on teachers' retention will surpass that on teachers' attrition.

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REFERENCES


