

Guided group reflections of first-year pre-service teachers: Moving beyond the rhetoric of “go and reflect”

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In South Africa, pre-service teachers enter education programmes with diverse pre-understandings of the teaching profession. For some, their experiences are often naively divorced from a genuine understanding of how present-day education perpetuates patterns of poverty and privilege. Responding to the pedagogical challenge of framing problems of social injustice in relation to the profession, we designed a school visit project to expose first-year pre-service teachers to school environments that represent the exciting inequities in educational experiences and opportunities. In this article we comment on the written group assignments that followed from the small-group discussions which were held after the school visit. Located within a lifelong learning framework, we proceed from the assumption that discussion in a group with support will afford students the opportunity to position themselves in relation to the grave inequalities embedded in South African education. Data obtained were analysed by means of open and axial coding to comment on the salient issues the students discussed, the issues they wanted further clarification on, and the opportunities they envisaged to engage with and act on. We found that, although the small-group discussions succeeded in setting a critical reflective process into motion, a space was not created for students to uncover and challenge their deep-seated assumptions that stem from a specific historical and cultural context.

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Introduction

As one of the most unequal countries in the world, South Africa's current struggle towards democratic transformation includes an on-going battle for a more equitable education system (Tikly, 2011; SAHRC, 2012). The context of a society in which the majority of South Africans remain disadvantaged not only foregrounds the role of higher education in transforming systems of inequity, but necessitates the imperative of teacher education to enable pre-service teachers to reduce injustices and increase the well-being of all learners in their future classrooms. While the transformative agenda of South African higher education institutions is captured in the recognition of higher education and training "as an agent of socio-economic change and development" (CHE, 2004: 14), the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET, 2011: 6) requires all teacher education programmes to, inter alia, "assist teachers in developing competencies that enable them to deal with diversity and transformation". It can thus be agreed with Walker (2013) that the curriculum and pedagogies that pre-service teachers encounter in institutions of higher education should feed into the acquisition of specific knowledge and skills that will enable them to think critically and compassionately, and to frame problems of social injustice in relation to the profession.

As teacher educators employed by the University of the Free State (UFS), our interest lies with the role of teacher education in enabling pre-service teachers to develop an awareness of, to critically think about, and to position themselves in relation to the grave inequalities embedded in South African education. In South Africa, all pre-service teachers grew up in a society deeply marked by a racialised past and they are, due to the stratified nature of a socio-economic unequal present, positioned on different sides of historical and social divides. As a consequence, pre-service teachers carry with them diverse schooling experiences that could range from prestigious private school environments, to middle-class public school contexts, to poorly resourced and under-performing school backgrounds. Working within the context of teacher education, we often find that, while these diverse experiences constitute most pre-services teachers' perceptions and expectations of the profession, they frequently request to do their teaching practice in school contexts that are similar to their own schooling experience. Thus, unless teacher education creates the opportunity for pre-service teachers to pause and contemplate existing inequalities in our education system, many of them will remain buttressed in a naive understanding of what it means to teach in the South African school context.

Informed by our contention that the extent to which curriculum and pedagogies challenge students' perceptions and expectations will ultimately have an impact on their willingness to effect social change in their future classrooms (Robinson & McMillan, 2006: 328), this article comments on small-group discussions held by first-year pre-service teachers. These discussions followed after the students were exposed to school environments that reflect the socio-economic and racial inequalities of 75% of South African schools being regarded as dysfunctional and only 25% of schools

being regarded as functional (Spaull, 2012). While the school visit served as a critical incident to reflect on the current situation in South African education, we designed this study to help us explore the extent to which the small-group discussions supported the students to delve deeper into their own understanding of current schooling contexts, and to think critically about their own learning.

Study context

Inspired by the commitment of the South African higher education sector to be involved in and assume responsibility for the transformation of South African society (DoE, 1997; CHE, 2004; DHET, 2013), the UFS Faculty of Education adopted the vision to position itself as a faculty that “visibly contributes to the social transformation of the broader society” by enabling “access in ways that overcome the barriers posed by social inequality” (UFS, 2011). This line of thinking, coupled with our concern as to whether our students really grasp the extent to which schooling in our country remains constituted by socio-economic inequalities, provided us with the rationale to design a school visit programme with social justice as the underpinning value in 2011. As part of the practical component of the BEd teacher education programme, we wanted the school visit project to afford all first-year pre-service teachers the opportunity to develop learning competency through a reflective approach.

The programme, which stretched over two days, consisted of a diversity workshop that was aimed at challenging first-year students to question their beliefs and attitudes towards cultural difference, and to consider the implications of discrimination for classroom practice. The diversity workshop was followed by orientation to a rigorous reflection framework. During this session, the purpose and procedure of reflection were explained. The fieldwork, in the form of a one-day long school visit, was aimed at creating an awareness of how historical, social and political circumstances have shaped the reality of schooling in South Africa.

Students were randomly grouped together in small groups and transported by bus to spend the day at a school. Each group was accompanied by an academic staff member who teaches in the BEd programme. It was anticipated that exposing students to a school environment experience that does not fit into their existing frames of reference would create some dissonance that would lead to the questioning of the self and society. An intentional opportunity to compose a piece of individual reflective writing was created by providing a set of scaffolding questions and guidance on how to approach the assignment and deepen individual learning.

In addition to the individual reflective writing assignment, a space was created on the day following the school visit for interpersonal interaction during small-group discussions which held the promise of eliciting more information and ideas to inform the learning experience (box 1). Six academic staff members, chosen from among the cohort of staff that accompanied the students to the schools, facilitated the small-group discussions. This article is specifically focused on the written assignment by

the groups that followed from their small-group discussions. Whereas the written assignments by the groups were summatively assessed, students were informed that the purpose of the small-group discussions was not to earn marks, but merely to make them stop and think about the school-based learning experience.

Box 1: Guidelines for structuring small-group discussions

GUIDELINES FOR STRUCTURING SMALL-GROUP DISCUSSIONS

1. In your files there is a coloured card with a number on it.
2. All number 1s, all number 2s, all number 3s, etc., get together to form a small discussion group – there will be 8 students in each mini-group.
3. Appoint a group leader.
4. Appoint a spokesperson.
5. Appoint a scribe.
6. In round-robin style, give everyone in the group a chance to contribute to the discussion:
 - What were most important learning gains from the school visit?
 - Why does this learning matter or would you see it as significant?
 - What questions do you have?
 - What goals have you set for the future, in accordance with what you have learned, in order to improve your teaching?
7. After 20 minutes the groups report on the essence of their deliberations.

Theoretical framework

While we remained sensitive to a pedagogy of teacher education rooted in a transformative approach, we located this study within a lifelong learning framework which embodies our Faculty of Education’s philosophical belief that newly qualified teachers must, inter alia, “understand the diversity in the South African context in order to teach in a manner that includes all learners [and] ... be able to manage classrooms effectively across diverse contexts in order to ensure a conducive learning environment” (UFS, 2012).

Although the concept of “lifelong learning” has given rise to different definitions and a variety of conflicting interpretations (Barnett, 2010; ELLI, 2008; Walters & Watters, 2001), we regarded it as a comprehensive concept that challenges the very culture and notions of conventional teaching and learning. Underpinned by the values of inclusive education and sustainable development, lifelong learning is often described as the “guiding light,” the “tool box” or the “life blood” of human development and empowerment (Ouane, 2011). Central to the idea of lifelong learning is the belief that learning and living should be integrated – both horizontally

in life-wide contexts across family, cultural and community settings, study, work and leisure; and vertically over the span of an individual's life. The key objective of such learning is subsequently to connect individuals and groups to structures of social, political and economic activity, and to prepare them for democratic citizenship (Aitcheson, 2003).

In the light of the foregoing and for the purpose of this article, we accepted lifelong learning as a transformative approach to learning that:

focuses on equipping individuals with the competencies they need to face everyday tasks and challenges, and to be not only good and productive workers and employees, but above all critical, creative and responsible citizens – or simply caring and committed individuals who respect their fellow humans and the environment (Ouane, 2011: 35, 38).

As such, we worked with the assumption that lifelong learning has the potential to assist in shaping the future classroom practices of our pre-service teachers by helping them to live together as mutually respectful social beings who do not merely tolerate, but embrace diversity and are always open to new perspectives to bring about social change.

In searching the literature to build a suitable theoretical context for our study, the four-pillar framework for lifelong learning (ELLI, 2008) served as our point of departure. This framework depicts learning as a transformative process resting on four pillars, namely “learning to know” (reacting to the multiplicity of sources of information, including multimedia and indigenous knowledge), “learning to do” (connecting knowledge and skills), “learning to live together” (identity building in a context of multiple belongings) and “learning to be” (spiritual development) (Carneiro, 2011; Delors *et al.*, 1996). However, as pointed out by Ouane (2011), social and economic realities in a fast-changing society demand wider and even more complex competences, including abilities such as thinking critically; interacting with, and learning from others; coping with rapid change; solving problems creatively; acting responsibly; behaving ethically; and reflecting. Such competencies are of particular importance to our pre-service students who have to grapple with and make sense of our society's on-going struggle against grave socio and economic inequalities. The expansion of the four-pillar framework with this fifth meta-pillar, namely “learning to learn,” has the potential to enhance the transformative process of learning as it aims to, *inter alia*, unlock the ability to un-learn (e.g., stereotypical and uninformed beliefs about South African teaching contexts) and to re-learn (e.g., new perspectives on what it means to teach in diverse South African school contexts). The fifth pillar draws strongly on Torres's (2003: 34) argument that “to proactively direct or re-direct change for human well-being and development, remains a critical challenge and the mission of education and learning systems, especially in today's highly inequitable world”.

Purpose of the study

Turning the vision of learning as a lifelong endeavour into reality has profound implications for the content and delivery of teacher education. It involves, first of all, that the status quo in existing teacher education programmes be viewed critically with the aim of moving from the traditional, mostly lecture-based learning, to a blend of taught learning and community engagement (Yang & Valdes-Cotera, 2011: xvii). Secondly, opportunities for constructing useful knowledge need to be created. This can be done by harnessing the power of critical reflection to identify previously unquestioned beliefs about what is acceptable behaviour within a particular cultural group, and to unearth deep-seated assumptions about the social world and students' connection with that world (Fook & Askeland, 2007). As a consequence, we wanted to create a space for our pre-service teachers to critically reflect on how their own learning is becoming connected with the social, political and economic realities of the South African school contexts; with their own un-learning of misconceptions about such realities; and with their re-learning of skills and competencies to work in authentic South African school environments. Thus, by using our theory and selected focus on the small-group discussions, the purpose of this article is to reflect, in general, on how we can improve the school visit project and, in particular, to comment on the extent to which the students were pushed beyond dissonance and a superficial interpretation of complex, socio-political issues, allowing them to reach the level of critical reflection on and engagement with those issues.

Research design

As reflective educators, we ground our work in research, trying to find out what we should know and do in order to enhance our practice. For this reason, the qualitative interpretive methodology that was used for this study was positioned within an action research approach. In this article we align ourselves with Ebbutt's (1985; Costello, 2003; McNiff, 2002) explanation of action research as the systematic study of attempts to improve educational practice. Of particular importance for us as researchers and teacher educators is the understanding that the improvement of education practice can take place by means of practical actions, coupled by the researchers' own reflection upon the effects of such actions. It is the latter, thus our own reflections, that provided us with the reinforcement we need to show if and how we had improved a social situation.

"Social situation" in the context of this study refers to our efforts to cultivate the skill of critical reflection in our first-year pre-service teachers. Following Johns (1995), who maintains that reflecting in a group with support is more beneficial than individual reflection, small-group discussions were arranged to afford students an opportunity to use reasoning to make sense of their real-life learning experience. In the spirit of critical reflection, which values multiple perspectives and appreciates different viewpoints, the assignment to reflect thus went beyond the rhetoric of "go

and reflect”. While the students were invited to first use and express their individual standpoints in writing, they had to discuss the following day, in the company of fellow students, the learning they had gained from the visit. The inclusion of a “why” question (Why does this learning matter or is it significant?) allowed us to assume that the discussions would elicit reflection, not only on what they had learned, but also on what had made them feel perplexed, anxious, disillusioned or enthusiastic.

The question that remained with us as the project leaders was whether the sharing of observations, ideas, feelings and reactions regarding the school visit did indeed help our students to delve deeper into their own understanding of current schooling contexts. If, on the contrary, the climate in these discussions created a feeling of blame or made students feel restricted by their past histories, we had to know in order to maximise opportunities for our students to be open to new and different perspectives.

Participants and data collection

A total of 528 students participated in the 2011 school visit project. The student composition included 315 white, 154 African, 57 coloured and 2 Indian students¹ who were randomly allocated to schools in the Motheo district of the Mangaung metropolitan area. These schools included 23 all-African townships schools; 10 multiracial urban schools; four schools comprising coloured and African learners; one all-African farm school; and two special needs schools comprising predominantly African learners.

To ensure the integrity of the research, we sought permission from students, in writing, to analyse their work for research purposes, thus modelling how a reflective educator goes about refinement of practice to avoid repeating mistakes (Sagor, 2000). For the purpose of the small-group discussions, groups comprising five to eight students were formed so as to maximize participation. Compilation of the written accounts and summarised feedback received from the group leaders resulted in 102 sets of data, representing (a) the most important issues that were discussed, and (b) the questions the students felt warranted feedback.

Data analysis

Content analysis, a method commonly used for analysing visual, verbal or written messages, was used to search for patterns in the data. The aim of content analysis is to give a condensed, but broad description of a phenomenon. According to Patton (2002: 453), content analysis is “a qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings”. Translated into action research terms, the aim of content analysis can be framed as finding answers to the following questions: “What story does the data tell us?” and “How can we explain the story that we hear?” (McNiff & Whitehead, 2009).

A three-phase inductive approach consisting of preparing, organising and reporting was followed to analyse the data (Elo & Kyngäs, 2007). Preparation consisted of a decision to use words and sentences as the unit of analysis. The next step of the analytic process was to make sense of the data by reading through the material several times. The organising phase started with open coding, which means that conceptual categories were generated freely by making marginal notes to reflect all the nuances in the data. Thereafter, the lists of subcategories were grouped under higher-order headings to form generic categories. A process of abstraction, also referred to as axial coding, allowed general themes to emerge for the purpose of reporting findings intelligibly (Elo & Kyngäs, 2007). Tables 1 to 4 in the next section depict the categorisation and abstraction process. As can be seen in these tables, categories are not mutually exclusive or exhaustive and the analytic process was an iterative one. Content validation consisted of seeking agreement on the categories and themes by means of a dialogue between the researchers.

Results and discussion

Throughout life, human beings have to accommodate change and learn to solve problems. In recent times of rapid change where this universal truth is of particular relevance for the South African context, the work of Dewey (1944) and Mezirow (2000) on critical reflection is increasingly relied upon for assisting students to reflect on the content and processes of their learning so as to help solve problems. However, although critical reflection can be regarded as an activity that could generate hope, it is almost always distorted by the social context and personal history of the reflector (Brookfield, 1995). Our students consequently needed guidance to learn how to distinguish between past and present rationalities, to challenge their beliefs, values and behaviour, and to discover views contrary to their own that might be justified (Mezirow, 2000).

In searching the data that emanated from the small-group discussions, we engaged the four lenses proposed by Brookfield (1988; 1995) to uncover the assumptions entertained by the students. According to Brookfield (1988; 1995), critical reflection entails being open about and explicitly challenge the basic assumptions that one, as well as the community within which one works, entertains. This process commonly proceeds through four stages, namely an assumption analysis, contextual awareness, imaginative speculation and reflective scepticism. Assumptions, as the taken-for-granted beliefs about the world and our place within it, harbours the danger of trapping people into false reasoning if they are unaware of the existence of such assumptions. Contextual awareness embodies the realisation that assumptions are socially and personally created in a specific historical and cultural context. Imaginative speculation, in turn, occurs when a person starts thinking about new ways of interpreting phenomena in order to improve the way in which things are being done. Ultimately, reflective scepticism is the ability to temporarily reject or even suspend assumptions that have been taken for granted in order to establish the truth or viability of a given situation.

The ten generic categories listed in table 1 represent what one could term a fairly predictable discursive agenda after having been exposed to a real-world teaching context. The sub-categories provide perspective on the level of the conversation in that they point towards obligations that different parties owe one another, but mostly to shortcomings and stumbling blocks that were observed. This outcome was interpreted as evidence that students had entered the first stage of transformative learning, namely contextual “border crossing”, as described by Kiely (2005). While contextual border crossing involves the stepping out of one’s comfort zone, it simultaneously introduces a first step towards contextual awareness; thus an initial awareness of a reality which is different from one’s own frame of reference. The prominence given to issues such as a lack of commitment, laziness, ill health, poverty, racism, vandalism and language barriers indicates that many of the students had encountered a reality which, in many instances, is different from their pre-existing cognitive structures and expectations.

The themes portrayed in table 1 provide a summary of prescriptive assumptions that surfaced. Prescriptive assumptions, according to Brookfield (1988), are conceptions of what we think ought to be occurring in a particular situation. Albeit rudimentary and in some instances even naive, the themes demonstrate how the students think teachers, learners, parents, the community, the government and the individual should behave in order to establish a good education system. Thus, in addition to moving beyond the known – out of their comfort zones – many students entered the next stage of transformative learning, namely *dissonance*. Themes such as role-modelling, inclusivity, community engagement and poverty eradication carry the seeds of a drive towards making sense of the situation through adjustment of expectations and restoring of balance.

Table 1: Most important issues discussed: Categories and themes condensed from the written feedback

<i>Sub-categories</i>	<i>Generic category</i>	<i>Theme/prescriptive assumption</i>
Commitment/lack of commitment Laziness Manage despite obstacles Not trained for subjects Poor discipline/self-discipline Relationship with learners Have to play dual roles: teacher and parent	Teachers	The qualifications and attitude of teachers should affect the quality of education

<p>Passion Love Determination Selflessness Adapt to any circumstances Prepared to go the extra mile Teachers make a difference, regardless of circumstances Must meet the seven roles of a teacher</p>	<p>Teacher behaviour/ professionalism</p>	<p>Teachers should be role-models</p>
<p>Poverty Ill-health Hygiene Variety of backgrounds Different capabilities Disability Sexuality Need for special attention Lack of support</p>	<p>Learners</p>	<p>Education should be inclusive</p>
<p>Disinterested/show interest Not involved Do not give enough love and support</p>	<p>Parents</p>	<p>Community engagement should benefit education</p>
<p>Poor infrastructure Setup is unorganised No transport Too little equipment Lack of learning materials Not enough sport facilities No feeding schemes Too many learners per class Too few teachers</p>	<p>Resources and infra-structure</p>	<p>Sufficient government support should create a physical environment conducive to education</p>
<p>Starvation Lack of funds/poverty Use of drugs No care for orphans after school School is used as a shelter</p>	<p>Socio-economic circumstances</p>	<p>The eradication of poverty should be imperative for quality education</p>

Apartheid Racism Stereotypes Equal treatment for all Mutual respect Acceptance of different backgrounds	Socio-political context	Diversity should be a strength if handled correctly
Theft Vandalism Gates are left open Children leave premises during break	Risks	Safety should be a priority
Different language groups in one class Teacher and learners speak different languages	Language	Breaching language barriers should limit the communication breakdown between teachers and learners
Not the way “we” were raised Lack of discipline and respect Having plenty of resources not a guarantee for good teaching Corporal punishment does not solve problems Schools must use what they have optimally Classes not decorated creatively Most schools are very religious Children are eager to learn, despite circumstances Should appreciate what you have – others are less fortunate We take things for granted Poverty is not an excuse for poor circumstances	Personal bias, guilt and blame	Education should benefit from mutual tolerance, the understanding of differences and the taking of responsibility

Although the school visit experience might have created perplexity and perhaps anxiety for some – as is evident from the topics of discussion – dissonance in itself is a constructive force for instigating learning, which should be considered as a positive outcome that feeds into initial contextual awareness. Table 2 gives more examples of dissonance that harbour the potential for critical questioning of the self and society, as well as opportunities to engage critically with issues of power, privilege, quality of life in general and human rights. Aligned to the view that data are mediated through the researcher as a “human instrument” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003), the assumptions

listed below are examples of the researchers' nuanced interpretation of students' feedback. They derive from our personal experiences and assumptions in congruence with the philosophical underpinnings of the research.

Table 2: Most important issues discussed: Examples of dissonance condensed from the written feedback

<i>Observation</i>	<i>Assumption</i>
Not all children wear school clothes/shoes	Distinctive school apparel is the hallmark of "belonging" to a school
Parents are not involved sufficiently; do not give enough love and support	All children have parents
Some schools are very religious	Religion is a prerequisite for good schooling / Religion has no place in the school

The next level of analysis focused on extracting examples of students' imaginative speculation related, in particular, to issues of disadvantage and their initial thinking about new ways to improve challenging school circumstances (table 3). Although border crossing presents an opportunity to critically examine issues of power, privilege and marginalisation, and while dissonance has the potential to unshackle intense emotions because of socio-economic inequalities, the small-group discussions did not cater for the naming of structural and institutional oppression, the confronting of power differentials and the framing of privileged positionality. Thus, as the students were not guided to a level where they could start to challenge and reject deep-seated assumed truths about entrenched inequities and historical injustices within the South African school context, i.e. critical reflection, no instances of reflective scepticism could be traced in the data.

Table 3: Most important issues discussed: Examples of imaginative speculation and underpinning values condensed from the written feedback

<i>Verbatim quote</i>	<i>Element of imaginative speculation</i>	<i>Underpinning value</i>
"Colour is not an issue – all of us can work together and love each other"	Intercultural harmony	Tolerance
"Learners can do sport at other schools" "Mobile classrooms"	Improvement of circumstances	Sharing
"We must start with community projects, e.g. plant trees, sponsor books for a library"	Community engagement	Initiative/agency
"Just work hard and you will overcome problems"	Industriousness	Hope

In addition to the prescriptive assumptions discussed above, Brookfield (1988; Silverman & Casazza, 2000) also highlights two other types of assumptions that should be made explicit and challenged in order to deconstruct long-held habits of behaviour, i.e. causal and paradigmatic assumptions. The questions that students wanted feedback on (table 4) bear testimony of the causal and paradigmatic assumptions prevailing in their minds. Causal assumptions are assumptions about how things work and under which conditions they could be changed. Paradigmatic assumptions, on the other hand, are the deeply embedded assumptions that people use to order the world into fundamental categories (Brookfield, 1988; 1995).

Table 4: Questions the students wanted feedback on: Assumption analysis

Question	Causal assumption	Paradigmatic assumption
Why are some schools treated differently?	All schools should be treated equally	All people are entitled to equal treatment in a democracy
Why does the government not reduce poverty?	It is in government’s power to eradicate poverty	Decent living is a basic need
How can learners be disciplined without physical punishment?	Physical punishment will help to address ill-discipline	Discipline creates order
Why is there not security?	Better security will bring order	Schools are supposed to be safe, orderly places
Why can’t children be educated in their mother tongue? Why do some have the privilege to learn in their own language?	Mother-tongue instruction will yield better results	Mother-tongue language is a prerequisite to function optimally
Is it fair that schools be judged by their surroundings whether they deserve feeding schemes?	Schools should not be judged by their surroundings	A poor physical environment is indicative of need
Why are there so many learners and so few teachers?	The teacher : learner ratio should be improved	Too many learners in one class are not conducive to good education
How can we collect money for a feeding scheme?	Better nutrition will improve performance	Hunger obstructs learning
Do the unions protect the rights of teachers?	Teachers’ should not be treated unfairly	Fair treatment is a basic right

Why do some schools receive more money than others?	Equal financing of all schools will eradicate differences in standards	Sufficient finances are equivalent to high standards
Why do they not appoint qualified teachers?	Only qualified teachers should be appointed	Suitable qualifications imply teacher competence
Is the money that the government is supplying being put to the correct use?	Government funds should be spent wisely	Corruption is a present-day, common phenomenon
Why do doctors get paid more than teachers?	Better remuneration will enhance motivational levels	The teaching profession is not held in high regard
Why do we have to do practical teaching in the 1 st , 2 nd and 3 rd year, each and every year?	Practical experience in all three years is excessive/ unnecessary	Qualified teachers know instinctively how to teach
What is the purpose of the diversity workshop? Is it necessary that we always discuss the issue of inequality?	A workshop on diversity is unnecessary	Inequality is not important enough for on-going discussions in teacher education

As paradigmatic assumptions are often not recognised as assumptions, but regarded as objectively valid interpretations of reality; they are fairly difficult to uncover (Brookfield, 1995). Given the diverse schooling experiences of our pre-service teachers and bearing in mind a society that positions them on different sides of historical and social divides, we accept that our students’ paradigmatic assumptions stem from, inter alia, intergenerational social advantage and disadvantage. To assume that inequality is not important enough to be included in on-going discussions on teacher education, or to work with the assumption that qualified teachers know instinctively how to teach, clearly stems from privilege positionality, i.e., a position whereby the right to education was not limited by socio-economic realities operating at grassroots level (Nieuwenhuis, 2010).

By uncovering the prescriptive assumptions that inform the way in which students talk about, characterise and understand school realities (table 1 and 2), we were able to indicate that, while the school visit offered a critical moment for contemplation about such realities, the small-group discussions created the space for the communication and sharing of dissonance with the current situation in schools. In addition, the data analysis helped to detect some of the causal assumptions the students use to make sense of how schools work and to indicate under which conditions such perceived inequalities can be changed (table 4). However, both causal and predictive assumptions are deeply embedded in paradigmatic assumptions (Brookfield, 1995). Thus, in order for our students to really move beyond dissonance – beyond a mere and initial contextual awareness – they have to uncover how their own understanding of educational inequalities is informed by their taken-for-granted

assumptions that stem from a specific historical and cultural context. While the data revealed that the school project succeeded in setting a critical reflective process into motion, the small-group discussions did not create a space for students to uncover and challenge their deep-seated paradigmatic assumptions.

Evidence of students’ moving out of their comfort zones, experiences of dissonance and elements of imaginative speculation consequently served as initial, imperative steps of transformative learning. In a few instances, some students did enter the processing stage of transformative learning (Kiely, 2005) when they expressed deeper meaning in the experience and started searching for solutions by making personal commitments: “Will the UFS be prepared to transport willing students on a weekly basis to disadvantaged schools to give extra classes?” and “Where and how can we as students become involved in the education system?”

However, although we can conclude that the small-group discussions did provide support for the students to reflect on their own learning, they were, on average, only able to initiate a fairly artificial or perhaps a shallow positioning of themselves in relation to the complex, socio-political issues that constitute our inequitable education system. We attribute the absence of *reflective scepticism* to the nature, organisation and short duration of the small-group discussions. The small-group discussions provided a safe space for the sharing of ideas, but were not sufficiently supportive to permit critical self-awareness to the point where students could unpack and challenge the basic structuring axioms they use to make sense of their own learning experience about the socio-economic inequalities of the South African school reality. Thus, within the context of the school visit programme, the small-group discussions mainly rested on the one pillar of the transformative process of lifelong learning, namely an initial “learning to know”.

Taking informed action

Urging us to think carefully and systematically about educative experiences, Dewey (1944: 119) wrote: “It is the aim of progressive education to take part in correcting unfair privilege and unfair deprivation, not to perpetuate them”. Opportunities to raise awareness about issues that concern our pre-service teachers, such as small-group discussions, provide an ideal opportunity for supporting students to move towards individual and social transformation. By encouraging our first-year pre-service teachers to reflect on what, in many instances, could have been a disorienting experience, we have made a deliberate attempt to shape the educational environment into a democratic space of knowledge exchange (Brookfield, 1995). By getting students to confront their own pre-understanding of South African school realities, even though on the level of causal assumptions, and by allowing them to articulately express the essence of their learning by means of group reflections, we might have assisted in opening the door to potentially powerful new perspectives.

Our own understanding of how to promote students' understanding of the relationship between contemporary cultures in schools and the social, economic and political circumstances in the country has evolved as a result of this study. By carefully analysing the students' feedback, we learned that, if we want our students to ultimately contribute toward the overcoming of injustices in their future classrooms, we have to raise the reflective exercise to a level where they can grapple with the realisation of how their own assumptions are personally and socially created in a specific historical and cultural context. This goal amounts to affording students an opportunity of not only becoming connected to South African school realities, but of starting to challenge and unlearn their own misconceptions; of re-learning what is required to work as an agent of change in authentic South African school environments. Given the inequitable nature of our education system, we simply cannot run the risk of our pre-service teachers entering the profession with a naive and unchallenged understanding of how the education system reinforces patterns of poverty and privilege.

In addition, we have learned to distinguish which of our students' concerns we can address, and which ones are beyond our influence. The latter, for example, included matters that are decided on and implemented at provincial and national level of government. Furthermore, we do acknowledge that, whenever a single source of data is used, the potential for bias is always present. The findings of this study thus need to be supplemented by feedback from the lecturers who accompanied the students on the school visit, the ones who facilitated the small-group discussions, principals and teachers of the schools that were visited, and also from the support staff who were responsible for the logistics of the project.

As reflecting educators ourselves, we now realise, more than ever, the value of teaching our students reflection and not simply assigning them to "go and reflect". It is, however, the last step in an action research process, namely the taking of action, that liberates action researchers from repeating past mistakes. The educational concerns articulated by our pre-service teachers not only point towards the need for more enhanced community engagement, but foreground the importance of creating such opportunities throughout our four-year teacher education programme. Facility-wide involvement in, and commitment to the project must be encouraged at both programmatic and institutional levels: Academic staff's unconditional involvement is needed to provide students with answers, options and perspectives; the institution's Faculty of Education, in turn, needs to provide the funding and infrastructure that will bring sustainability to the project. If we fail to build and capitalise on the critical reflectiveness achieved as a result of the school visit project, we might find ourselves lulled to sleep by romantic rhetoric that we are educating teachers who will actively contribute to the social well-being of all. Most importantly, if we want to remain true to the transformative agenda of lifelong learning, we need to urgently find ways of getting our students to a point where they no longer linger on the discovery of their

causal assumptions, but to an advanced stage of uncovering and challenging their more deeply embedded paradigmatic assumptions.

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(Endnotes)

Racial categorisation originating from the apartheid era, but currently still used by the South African government to fulfil goals of redress and equity in terms of the Employment Equity Act of 1998.