

Enabling roles to reclaim teacher agency: Insights from the Advanced Certificate in Teaching (Foundation Phase)

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In developing the Advanced Certificate in Teaching (ACT) as a professional qualification for continuing teacher education for early schooling at the University of KwaZulu-Natal we asked the following: "What are the enabling roles foundation phase teachers need to play in order to reclaim their space as agents who significantly influence their professional practice and how can they be assisted to become fully engaged in these roles?" We believe that this focus is timely and critical given the current effect of the discourse of standards and accountability on teacher agency. In this article we present a framework of enabling roles which create opportunities for teacher-students to experience critical reflection, transformatory learning and the development towards stronger agency. A significant implication of the framework is that teachers gain the experience of being part of a community in dialogue instead of a blunt tool for externally imposed curriculum demands. Space is created for both personal direction and the development of practice from within the foundation phase. We are mindful of the fact that, once the course has been completed and the qualification obtained, the lack of personal commitment and institutional pressure to teach in government-sanctioned ways may create slippage and constrain liberating roles. Nonetheless, we feel that, in introducing the roles in the ACT, developmental opportunities for teacher autonomy and transformative professionalism will be created.

Keywords: teachers, foundation phase, continuing teacher education, agency, performativity, transformation.

Introduction

Currently, 'quality education for all' is the buzz phrase in schooling in South Africa. This emerged from the crisis that was experienced in primary school education and especially in the foundation phase (Fleisch, 2008). Consecutive results from the systemic evaluation scores, which examined how Grade 3 learners performed at the end of the implementation of the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) in the foundation phase, have been disappointing. Equally concerning are the results from international scores in literacy and numeracy. Many South African learners in the foundation phase lack the age-appropriate basic skills and knowledge in literacy and numeracy (Bloch, 2010). This could be partly attributed to the demands made on foundation phase teachers in the context of access to quality training, a lack of resources, teacher stress and change paralysis.

The *Foundations for Learning* project, launched in March 2008, responded to the crisis in performance in the foundation phase. As a strategy for reform, this project proposed that teachers be provided with scripted lessons and assessment frameworks to guide teaching and learning. Although helpful, this response was deemed inadequate to raise the quality of education in early schooling. In 2009 the Ministerial Committee released a review on the implementation of the NCS (Dada, Diphololo, Hoadley, Khembo, Muller & Volmink, 2009). This report highlighted the difficulties and overload that teachers still experienced in implementing the NCS. In July 2010 the Minister of Education released a statement

on curriculum implementation (Motshekgga, 2010), indicating that the design features of outcomes and assessment standards would be repackaged in subject-specific ways to provide greater details on topics and assessment to be covered each term. The Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), which details what teachers must teach and assess for each grade and for each subject, will augment the NCS in the foundation phase in 2012. It is envisaged that the aims, content and assessment requirements will be made more accessible to teachers.

The curriculum reform discussed thus far is located in a performance discourse. This discourse makes provision for salient standards, accountability and marketisation. It is shaped and driven by government and its facilitative agents. In this context both the status and agency of teachers are limited, as teachers would have to perform according to very specific guidelines which, in the view of some critics, will constrain them. Jones and Moore (1993) argue that the tightness, and we would add “high prescription”, from external sources has profound consequences for teachers. Together with institutional pressure it has the capacity to shape their practices and their identities in one-dimensional ways. This could mean more dispassionate and technical teachers. Teachers could also unproblematically use dominant discourses, which narrow possibilities for understanding children and practice with and for them (Ebrahim, 2010). Ideally, teachers need to be enabled to act as agents who pay attention to their sense of self, their identity, their knowledge and contextual influences that have an impact on their teaching.

The present context informed conversations during the development of an ACT for the foundation phase. Taking into account the need for critical reflection, transformatory learning and stronger agency, we framed a question in two parts, namely, “What are the enabling roles foundation phase teachers need to play in order to reclaim their space as agents who significantly influence their professional practice and how can they be assisted to become fully engaged in these roles?” In this article we present insights which emerged from conversations about module design.

The ACT in the foundation phase

The ACT is proposed as a new, professionally focused qualification designed to strengthen and enhance existing specialisation skills in teachers who are already professionally qualified. It is intended to provide a deep and systematic understanding of current thinking, practice, theory and methodology in the foundation phase.

At the University of KwaZulu-Natal, the ACT is being conceptualised as a mixed-mode offering, using written interactive materials for self-study combined with a limited number of face-to-face tutorials that are offered at various satellite learning centres in the province. This mode of delivery makes possible the continuing education of practising teachers, particularly those who do not live close to the metropolitan areas. The ACT curriculum aims to increase teachers’ understanding of teaching and learning and their ability to teach creatively and effectively in this phase. The module which is discussed in this article is the final module out of a series of eight semester-long modules. Its focus is the development of teachers’ professional practice through critical reflection on teaching.

Conceptual framework

In examining the concept of teacher identity we found explanations of identity to be fixed and unitary; therefore, unhelpful for our purpose. Studies grounded in the biographical perspectives on teachers’ careers provided helpful insights. These perspectives recognise the self as a complex, multidimensional and dynamic entity of representations and meanings which develop over time and in tandem with interactions between people and the environment (Kelchtermans & Vandenberghe, 1994; Samuel, 1998). We agree with MacLure (1993:312) who suggests that “identity should not be seen as a stable entity – something people *have* – but as something people *use*, to justify, explain and make sense of themselves in relation to other people and to the context in which they operate.”

Teachers of young children construct their identities in ways that are responsive to the developmental stage of children and the phase in which they teach. The classic work of King (1978) in British infant classrooms showed how teachers held specific ideologies about their work. In keeping with their gendered roles teachers saw themselves as substitute mothers, therefore, replicating the mother-child relationship.

King further noted that the identities of infant teachers were characterised by qualities of professional pleasantness and affection. Reconceptualist early childhood scholars, however, argue that we should not uncritically accept the mother substitute role (Benhabib, 1992). Miller (1992) argues that a critical examination of educational roles of teachers through a critical lens foregrounds how teacher identities are influenced by the social, historical and political forces which shape their personal assumptions about teaching. This view is supported by Samuel (2008) in his interrogation of the complexity of forces influencing teacher identities in the South African context. Moyles, Adams and Musgrove (2002:4) believe that pedagogy in the early years “connects a relatively self contained act of teaching and being an early years educator with the personal, cultural and community values, curriculum structures and external influences”. The critical perspective is important to consider in identity work of foundation phase teachers.

Teacher identity affects teacher agency. We use the concept of agency from a socio-cultural perspective, enabling the examination of individual action in a way where priority is given to the social contexts and cultural tools that shape the development of human beliefs, and ways of acting (Wertsch, 1991). How teachers think and act is always shaped by cultural, historical and social structures that are reflected in mediational tools such as the curriculum guidelines and standards set by government. The tools are not static; they continue to evolve as people use them (Vygotsky, 1962) in their professional practice (Tharp & Gillmore, 1988). Teacher agency influences and is influenced by the features of curriculum reform. In this context, teachers will adopt, adapt or ignore the official curriculum and pedagogic mandates. Samuel (2008) argues that the decisions teachers make and the actions they take are simultaneously the consequence of past action and present context. This serves as a condition to further action.

Teachers' actions are related to how they perceive their duties. Therefore, for teachers to function as agents of change they need to be subjected to transformative learning. The latter is associated with Mezirow's views (1977, 1981) and is consistent with the idea of effecting change. Mezirow (1977:157) argues that people's perspectives on reality are transformed as a result of reflection upon disjunctive or “disorienting” experiences; when a “meaning perspective can no longer comfortably deal with anomalies in the next situation, a transformation can occur”. Such transformation amounts to a paradigm shift.

According to transformative learning theory, several conditions and processes result in a paradigm shift or perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1977, 1981, 1991). Firstly, a disorienting dilemma or activating event is needed to expose the limitations of a current approach. Although Mezirow defines such dilemmas as life-changing events, we propose that the experience of critical reflection can have the same effect. Mezirow's (1990:13) conception of critical reflection is “reassessing the way we have posed problems and reassessing our own orientation to perceiving, knowing, believing, feeling and acting”.

Our thinking is also shaped by experiential learning theory, which is central to current thinking about educating adults. Experience is “the subjective awareness of a present situation” (Jarvis, 1995:66), but is influenced by biography, past learning and socio-economic contexts. This module thus begins with an exploration of the wide range of experiences, beliefs, emotions and memories that the teacher-student brings to the learning situation. Teacher identity is a central theme and a tool for analysis throughout the module.

Structure of the learning cycles

The curriculum is organised in a spiral fashion on the basis of the experiential learning cycle originally proposed by Kolb and Fry (1975). This cycle essentially involves learning through critical thinking about a primary or possibly a secondary experience. Thus, each of the four tutorials is structured around an experience of teaching, which is carefully analysed, after which generalisations are made and new action is planned (see diagram).

The logic of the curriculum is to move through learning cycles which sees the teacher-student playing three roles that reflect different degrees of teacher agency: the roles of the deliverer, the adaptor and the creator. The teacher-student plays these roles within the overarching role of the searcher for the self and is able to move from one role to another through disruption and reflection. The transformative learning process could result in increased teacher agency as the teacher-student critically reflects on the

inappropriateness of one-size-fits-all lessons, together with other teachers, and plans and implements new and increasingly creative strategies. It is our intention to encourage staged movement through the deliverer, adaptor and creator roles in the belief that, where curriculum change is concerned, quantum leaps in teachers' perspectives are often unsustainable.

Discussion of roles

Self in context

In South Africa teachers come from a variety of contexts that have an impact on their experiences of being a teacher. In order to help teacher-students locate themselves as professionals, it is important for them to explore the self in context. We propose that the first learning cycle begins with opportunities for teacher-students to think about and share different dimensions of their biographies. In order to explore social biographies teacher-students will be invited to reflect on the impact of the family, geographical location, race, ethnicity and gender on their access to educational and social opportunities. In their personal biographies they will create narratives of their own schooling experience and they will trace the critical events that have shaped their socialisation as foundation phase teachers.

We envisage the above to be a catalyst for discussions on belief systems about teaching and learning and the manner in which practice in the foundation phase is constructed. This exercise has the potential to illuminate teachers' conceptions of practice, how they shape their actions and the kind of teacher identity they construct. For example, Brownlee (2001, 2003) notes that teachers with the belief that knowledge is actively and personally constructed, conceive teaching as facilitating rather than the transmission of knowledge. Olsen and Bruner (cited in Daniels & Shumow, 2003) examined how teachers understood children's learning and how this knowledge impacted their teaching practices. They found that teachers who believed that the focus of teaching should be on children's behaviour instead of on their thinking regarded learning as a reproduction of knowledge and teaching as transmission. On the other hand, teachers who saw children as competent thinkers, regarded children's learning as a meaning-making process and teaching as a co-construction of meaning. Although the studies cited related to novice teachers, these findings do have a bearing on practising teachers in the foundation phase, especially those who are non-specialists and those who are un- and underqualified.

In the first learning cycle teacher-students will be encouraged to write narratives of their experience and to trace critical events through timelines. For these purposes, the reflective journal will be used, as this tool has been noted as valuable to help teacher-students keep in touch with the self-development process, foster creative interaction between peers, and provide a record of significant learning experiences (Bailey, 1990).

We envisage that the exploration of the self in context would provide teacher-students with sufficient data to make agentic moves to define themselves, their beliefs and practices to themselves and for sharing with others. The inductive approach would serve as a tool for generalisations and critical reflection on teacher identity, beliefs and practice.

Deliverer

When teachers play the role of deliverers of the curriculum they do not participate in its development. According to Kavanoz (2006), the teacher as deliverer is viewed as the executor and implementer of innovations that were devised by others. Teachers are expected to teach scripted lessons and implement standardised assessment in accordance with the intentions and prescriptions of the developers as much as possible. As a result, what counts as teacher knowledge is linked to the power of external constituencies. Studies have shown that a prescriptive approach is doomed to fail if teachers' cognition including their beliefs, intentions and attitudes are not taken into account. Nonetheless, this role is important in the present curriculum reform context. Weaver and Resnick (1979) contend that, for teachers to be good

deliverers of the curriculum, they must become familiar with basic concepts in the subjects they offer and be able to perform in a structured and relatively non-dynamic environment.

In the newly designed ACT, teacher-students will not only be afforded the opportunity to experience their role as deliverers of a prescribed curriculum, but they will also subject it to critical analysis. This is crucial for all teacher-students even though they may not be positioned as deliverers of curriculum in their current practice. The experience of playing this role will assist them in creating critical awareness of the strengths, the gaps and the innovations that are possible from the vantage point of being a deliverer of the curriculum.

At the outset teacher-students will be required to study the official scripted lesson plans and select one that is sequentially relevant. They will then teach a scripted lesson to their learners and record their experiences. During tutorial sessions teacher-students will discuss and reflect on the value and limitations of delivering scripted lessons in their context. Group discussions will be structured to provide opportunities to explain and reflect on methodologies, practice and teacher identities. Plenary sessions will be directed towards developing generalisations on these aspects. This experience will assist in identifying aspects that need modification for the next learning cycle.

Adaptor

The next step is to support the teacher-student to move into the role of a conscious adaptor as a result of critical reflection on the delivery of scripted lessons. Research suggests that effective teachers are knowledgeable, flexible, responsive and adaptive (Gambrell, Malloy & Mazzoni, 2007; Hoffman & Pearson, 2000; International Reading Association, 2003) and are able to think metacognitively about the adaptations they make (Lin, Schwartz & Hatano, 2005).

Cole, Horvath, Chapman, Deschenes, Ebeling and Sprague (2000) identify nine types of adapting and modifying of curriculum and instruction:

- Input (the way instruction is delivered)
- Output (the way the learner is expected to respond)
- Size (the number of items expected to be completed)
- Time (the time allotted to learning, task completion or assessing)
- Difficulty (the skill level, problem type or rules for completing/approaching the work)
- Level of support (the amount of assistance)
- Degree of participation (the extent to which the learner is actively involved)
- Alternate/modified goals (the goals or outcome expectations while using the same material)

Most teachers adapt their lesson plans in the process of delivery in some or all of these ways in response to their particular teaching contexts, although this is not always done in a well-considered manner (Parsons, Davis, Scales, Williams & Kear, 2010). In this module, we hope to facilitate both conscious reflection on the reasons for “heat-of-the-moment” adaptations of lesson plans, as well as pre-delivery adaptation of scripted lesson plans to better suit the learning styles and needs of particular teacher-students and learners in the classroom. Consciousness of the reasons for making such adaptations is crucial in enabling teachers in the foundation phase to anticipate adaptations which should be made to scripted lessons.

Informed by our model of experiential learning, teacher-students continue to use reflective journals as a tool for thinking about the adaptations they make to their planned lessons. We view the facilitated discussion of these changes in tutorial groups as the key to professional development. It is through these discussions that teacher-students are provided with opportunities to generalise the effect of delivering adapted lessons on teacher identity, practice and learning.

Creator

This role enables teacher-students to enter a creative space where they exercise their professional judgments. We view creativity as synonymous with innovation and invention. In this context there should be a strong element of curiosity and imaginative thinking. This requires teacher-students to go beyond their comfort zones, taking risks and working outside what is safe. In order to foster creativity teachers must experience pedagogic autonomy and professional agency; only then will they come to believe that the power and control to shape the curriculum lie with them. In order to let the creative juices flow teacher-students continue to work collaboratively. White and Watson (2006) state that collaborative work to enhance creativity brings about high levels of trust and greater collegiality, allowing for increased risk-taking and experimentation.

Having reflected on the effects of delivering adapted lessons, we believe that the teacher-student will be ready to reflect on the experience of creating and delivering new lesson plans. Within these mini-communities of practice (possibly grade-wise) teacher-students will be required to interrogate their lesson plans and explain the rationale for their choices. This interrogation has the potential to allow them to closely relate practice to the needs of the context in which they work. They plan and deliver a lesson from scratch and reflect on this process in their journals. In the tutorial, guided group reflection focuses attention on process in relation to power and control, identity, agency, effect, difficulties and plans for further action.

Conclusion

In this article we attempted to construct an account of the roles that foundation phase teachers can play in order to reclaim their space as agents who influence their professional practice and alter their identities. The framework presents opportunities for teacher-students to explore their own learning and teaching through critical reflection which, in our view, will serve as a valuable tool to create awareness of what they do, why they do it, the effect of what they do and the links with their identity. Through generalisations we hope to invite an exposition of traditions and practices in the foundation phase.

We believe that a significant implication of our framework is that practising teachers in the foundation phase will gain the experience of being part of a community in dialogue instead of merely being blunt tools for the NCS, CAPS and whatever may follow these. In the context of externally imposed demands and prescription, we view our framework as an important stimulus for both personal direction and development from within the foundation phase. Through opportunities to work with and debate with peers, watching and learning from each other and asking questions about practice, meaning, voice and style could gain precedence.

We are mindful, however, that once a teacher-student has completed the course and obtained the qualification, a lack of personal commitment, teaching large numbers, measuring and testing learners, meeting standards, lengthy reporting procedures and institutional pressure to teach in prescribed ways may limit liberating roles. Nonetheless, we feel that the introduction of the roles as proposed in the ACT will create exciting possibilities for greater teacher agency and a fertile ground for transformative professionalism.

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