# INTERROGATING THE CURRENT IMAGINATION OF EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHER EDUCATION THROUGH DIALOGICAL PROCESSES

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## ABSTRACT

*In order to reconceptualise and redesign initial teacher education programmes it is imperative to critically examine what exists. The aim of this article is to shed light on the dialogical processes a team of early childhood teacher educators undertook to make explicit their current understandings of teacher education in an undergraduate Bachelor of Education qualification. The sensitising concepts of dialogue, communication, transformatory learning and reflection informed the study. A qualitative approach enabled through documentary analysis, conversations amongst teacher educators and their narratives were used to produce the evidence. The findings of the study show that dialogical processes unfolded as action-oriented strategies towards achieving a particular goal (i.e., change in teacher education) have the potential to allow teacher educators to reflect on, participate in and trouble existing frames of reference and develop sensitivity to new framings.*
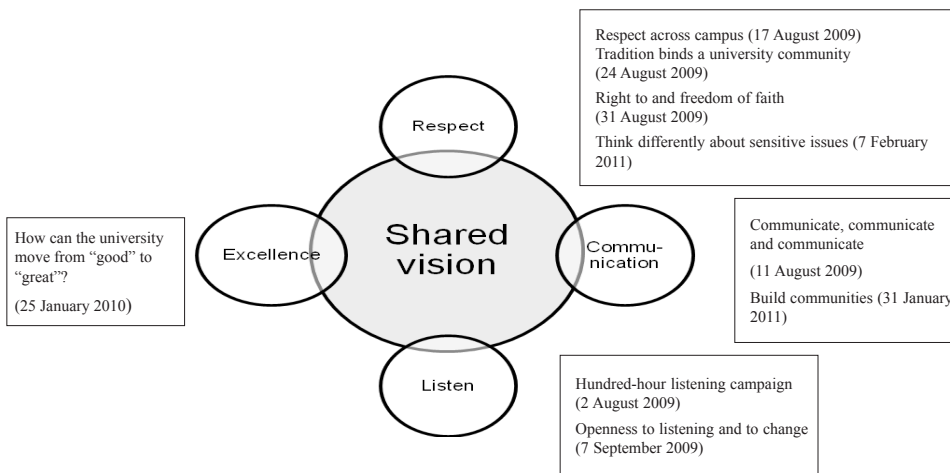
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## INTRODUCTION

Since the advent of democracy in South Africa the redesigning of initial teacher education programmes for early childhood (preschool and foundation phase) became part of the logic to transform the field. It is important to understand the transformatory forces as they have a bearing on the understanding of teacher education for the early years in schooling. In the early days of democracy, the shift of teacher education from colleges of education to universities led to attempts to balance the focus on practical skills with sufficient disciplinary content depth (Ebrahim & Phatudi 2005). This was approached in the context of the changing regulatory framework, namely the Norms and Standards for Educators (Department of Education 2000), which outlined the roles and competences of teachers. At present, the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications (Department of Higher Education 2011) is the latest driver guiding change in teacher education for the early years. This is supported by a massive European Union grant allocated to most South African universities offering teacher education for the early years (specifically the foundation phase).

The power of institutional vision-building has a direct influence on how initial teacher education (for the early years) will be shaped. The University of the Free State (UFS), where the authors are teacher educators, is an example of an institution seeking to build a transformatory vision. The Reitz incident in 2008 highlighted how racism, discrimination and prejudice can disrupt efforts to promote social cohesion in South African society (*South African Journal of Science* 2009: 162). The appointment of the current Vice-Chancellor and Rector of the University of the Free State, Prof. Jonathan Jansen, and his approach to truth and reconciliation further served as a significant catalyst for institutional change. In particular, it proved important to examine the nature of society and how institutions prepare people for professional effectiveness and social cohesion in democracy. Figure 1 shows how an institutional force can create a platform for a bottom-up approach to change. Respect, communication, listening, dialogue, collaboration and driving excellence are part of the process to mobilise change through engagement of communities of practice at the UFS.

**FIGURE 1: CREATING A CULTURE OF ACCEPTANCE**



(Jansen 2009; 2010; 2011)

This article is inspired by the myriad of forces described thus far. These forces impinge on the need for deconstructing and reconstructing teacher education aimed at preparing teachers who educate young children in diverse South African realities. This is especially significant taking into account that the Reception Year is now part of the compulsory schooling system and the developments for supportive understanding of birth to four years which is moving towards universal access. Any teacher education department seeking to bring about change must critically examine its present practice to understand its foundations and the impact of broader changes in relation to the nature of its work.

Teacher educators, specifically in the field of early childhood education, are the focus of this article as this group is under-researched in South Africa. In the light of the new education policy, these teacher educators' understandings and actions cannot be ignored. A focus on teacher educators is also important taking into account the criticism that, in South Africa, the state has confused the regulatory and the pedagogic task of improving teacher education (Robinson 2003). Furthermore, the culture of promoting good practice is in the hands of teacher educators. Their starting points are an essential element in any change process. Bearing this in mind, this article poses the question, "What are the dialogical processes that are helpful to make explicit teacher educators' current understandings related to initial teacher education for early childhood?"

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The key concepts that inform understanding of the dialogical processes are dialogue, communication, transformatory learning, and reflection. Dialogue is an inherent part of a participatory process and a necessary posture that humans adopt as critical communicative beings who aim at illuminating realities. It is, according to Shor and Freire (1987: 13), "a moment when humans meet to reflect on their reality as they make and remake it". It is through dialogue and reflecting together as a group that understanding is reached on what people know and what they do not know. The knowing becomes more than just knowing; it becomes a tool to change reality.

When dialogue becomes a tool for learning, the process of learning is situated in thought, aspirations and conditions of participants (Shor & Freire 1987). When dialogue is rooted in personal locations, it has the potential to enable transformation in social relations, raise awareness and recreate knowledge. The ordinary context and its routine scripts can be re-experienced.

Communication is an integral part of dialogue. It is not merely verbalism with an exchange of words and gestures (Shor & Freire 1987); the exchange of meanings by people and the social relational processes are crucial. According to McQuail (1983: 97), this perspective of communication values "multiplicity, smallness of scale, locality, de-institionalisation, interchange of sender-receiver roles (and) horizontality of communication".

When interrogating existing practices with a view to transform it is helpful to pay attention to people's frames of reference as the exchange of meanings take place. According to Mezirow (1997: 5), transformatory learning "is a process of effecting change in a *frame of reference*". The latter results from experience that people gain from their life-world. Therefore, it is important for people to articulate their associations, concepts, values, feelings and conditioned responses through dialogic encounters. These expressions bring to the fore their existing frames of reference which, in turn, influence actions. The transforming of frames of reference takes place when there are opportunities for critical reflection on interpretations, beliefs and habitual ways of thinking.

Reflection plays a significant part in personal transformations and the development of a shared vision. It pertains to examining the ways in which an individual responds to a given situation (Schon 1983) and includes an exploration of the negative and positive emotions triggered by the situation and the underlying beliefs or assumptions that might affect one's response (Mezirow 1991). Stein (1995) defines critical reflection as the process by which adults identify the assumptions governing their actions, locate the historical and

cultural origins of the assumptions, question the meanings of the assumptions and develop alternative ways of acting.

Learning to transform a frame of reference occurs when an existing point of view is expanded, when new points of view are established, when a habitual way of thinking is transformed and when one becomes aware and critically reflective of biased assumptions and behaviour (Mezirow 1997). In this process, imagining of alternatives, group deliberations and group problem-solving are undertaken. These platforms allow transformation in learning to occur.

## METHODOLOGY

The Bachelor of Education specialisation for early childhood at the UFS was earmarked for a review process. In light of broader transformation at the UFS, the new leadership decided to adopt a research approach to interrogate the current understandings of the specialisation. This process began with the appointment of the new Discipline Coordinator for the phase in 2011. This article reports on a part of the study that involved ten teacher educators who participated in a year-long study. A qualitative approach was best suited to the study as this approach allows for "the research process to be fuelled by the raw materials of the physical and social settings and the unique set of personalities, perspectives, aspirations for those investigating and inhabiting the fluid landscape being explored" (Tewksbury & Gagne 2001: 72).

Data for the study was produced by conversations, module self-evaluations, group meetings, blogs and workshops specifically held as platforms to allow teacher educators to enter into dialogue, reflect on understandings and develop shared ideas. It was also necessary to conduct a documentary analysis. Documents such as the *Audit Report of University of Free State* (Council of Higher Education 2008) and the *Improvement Plan for the Bachelor of Education – Preschool and Foundation Phase* (UFS 2007) were studied to gain perspectives on the conceptualisations.

Data analysis was informed by an adaptation of Miles and Huberman's (1984) approach. The data was read several times to ascertain the dialogical processes and how they contributed to answering the research question. Units of meaning related to the research question were then scrutinised for their relevance and their recurrent appearance in the data, which was discussed with the participants. Data that best supported the research question was included.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The themes in this section all begin with action words – *creating, developing* and *setting* – with the aim to reinforce the idea of dialogue serving as a catalyst to unfold processes of action.

### Creating a safe space to enable acting

Taking a critical look at existing practices is a process that most people regard as being highly risky. Mezirow (1997) alerts us to how conditioned responses and cultural assimilation make it difficult to question habits of mind. For teacher education in South Africa, Pendlebury (1998) notes how the institutional space creates specific conditions that enable and constrain people to bring about change.

In order to enhance teacher educators' agency in the department, a safe space for dialogue needed to be created. The Discipline Coordinator (the first author of this article) was appointed at the level of Associate Professor for early childhood. Both the coordinating and academic role meant dealing with power relations and the creation of a leadership style that would earn the trust of the teacher educators.

A thoughtful response was particularly important in order to counteract the leadership style that existed for development and change, especially in relation to curriculum in the faculty. In previous curriculum change exercises, the Programme Director, together with the Discipline Coordinator for the phase, would take on the expert roles for designing the curriculum to meet the university and Higher Education requirements. Curriculum change became associated with top-down processes, meeting technical requirements and adopting a compliance mode of operation. Teacher educators for the early years had little scope for engaging in change and development processes. Ownership of processes was minimal.

Bearing in mind the context above, the Discipline Coordinator had to adopt a style of leadership that shifted from the traditional authoritarian role of planning, organising and controlling. In order to create fertile ground for dialogical encounters, leadership was approached as a relationship. Kouzes and Posner (2007) argue that this type of leadership pays attention to the quality of actions of those who aspire to lead and those who choose to follow. The relationship is characterised by mutual respect, empathy and confidence-building and the focus is on dialogue in the form of conversations. This helps to build capacity and sustain human relationships which enable people to act differently to get things done in extraordinary ways on a regular basis (Kouzes & Posner 2007).

The building of relationships began with the Discipline Coordinator having conversations with teacher educators over a period of two months. These conversations created a space for the mutual sharing of information, both of a personal and professional nature. Conversations took place in the offices, tea rooms, corridors and en route to an early childhood conference. The richness of the conversations allowed for both the building of trust and a relational approach to leadership. For example, the Discipline Coordinator shared her fears about and the challenges of leaving her birth place, culture and traditions and the adjustments to her new home and professional role. Two members of staff shared similar experiences. The conversations helped to connect similar experiences, vulnerabilities and coping mechanisms. Another example related to how staff members' aspirational goals, hopes, dreams and fears were shaping their identities as teacher educators. These conversations made demands on the Discipline Coordinator's role as a facilitator. As such, she had to empathise, connect with the experiences and explore possibilities in the context of a transforming institution.

In summary, the creation of a safe space for exploration as a first step to enable a dialogical process in the study proved valuable in several ways. It helped to disable the power relations inherent in the roles of coordinator and academic leader. The Discipline Coordinator was able to ease herself into the role of team player and facilitator. The commitment to a relational style of leadership, the multiple spaces to enable conversations and the sharing of experiences created fertile ground for all members to feel part of a team in which to interrogate their thinking and actions about teacher education in the early childhood phase.

## Developing insights and shared understandings

Once the team members began to gel as a group, it was easier to set up forums where the sharing of ideas and the development of shared understanding could take place. Tools such as documentary analysis, module self-evaluations and blogs played a key role in helping teacher educators to interrogate their practices.

Upon analysis of the *Audit Report* (Council of Higher Education 2008) and the *Improvement Plan for the Bachelor of Education – Preschool and Foundation Phase* (UFS 2007) several insights came to the fore. The dialogue on the curriculum for the specialisation revealed the absence of a shared vision and a conceptual framework driving the curriculum. The curriculum was closely aligned to fulfilling policy requirements without closer attention to other drivers such as the changing institutional vision and the realities of teaching in South Africa. Progression, pacing and sequencing of the curriculum was also noted as a concern.

The reports further stimulated dialogue on pedagogy (teaching and learning). Discussions revealed that there was a need to cultivate students' critical awareness and to introduce them to critical enquiry discourse and approaches. Teacher educators felt that students should not be limited to these frames of references but rather be exposed to a wide variety of schools of thought. This was particularly important since the report revealed the impact of a narrow approach premised largely on outcomes-based education. Furthermore, the reflexive competence of students was noted as weak and assessment tasks were grounded in the recall of knowledge. Teacher educators agreed that there was a lack of intellectual stretch as the theoretical depth of the modules did not meet the demands of the exit level outcomes for the specialisation (UFS 2007).

A two-day workshop that included module self-evaluation by teacher educators deepened the dialogue on the kind of teacher being prepared through the specialisation. Most modules aimed at preparing teachers were practically grounded in the school curriculum. The methodologies rooted in the *what* and the *how* of practice proved to be strong, whereas *why* aspects were either weak or absent. Tips for teachers also featured as part of the content and some promising evidence of preparing compassionate, caring and critically reflective teachers emerged.

The increasing evidence on the nature of the current specialisation furthermore created the need for teacher educators to examine their philosophies of teaching and learning. Once they had mastered the technical aspects of creating a blog, they wrote their philosophies of teaching and learning and shared this with the group. The blog served as a tool to stimulate debate. In order to establish their current teaching philosophies it was evident that teacher educators found it necessary to trace the roots of their philosophies. For example, Teacher Educator A stated that her philosophy had roots in apartheid education. This had shaped her notions of teaching, learning, status of knowledge, aims and interactions. Teacher Educator B noted that her philosophy was based on the Bible. She thus perceived concepts such as trust, respect, empowerment and understanding to be principles for all relationships. Teacher Educator C indicated that the role models in her life as a student, teacher and psychologist influenced her conceptions of teaching and learning.

Teacher educators also shared their current conceptions of teaching and learning. As with the above, there were multiple constructions. For example, Teacher Educator E used the model of a good teacher educator to shape her notions of teaching and learning. She stated that being knowledgeable and reflexive, and planning and creating a conducive learning environment were important. She also noted that students learnt best by doing. Teacher Educator C used Race's (2001) model of learning as ripples of wanting, needing, doing, feedback and

digesting to create active learning experiences. She saw her role as that of a co-constructor and a facilitator of learning. Teacher Educator D explained the influence of critical constructivism on the way in which she viewed teaching and learning. As a facilitator of learning she used active learning techniques, dialogue, learning in authentic contexts, reflection and collaboration to engage her students in the learning experience.

In summary, dialogue occurs when people appreciate that they are participating in a mutual quest for understanding and insight. A dialogue is essentially a conversation between equals (Bohm *et al.* 1991). The developing of insights and shared understandings resulted from the coming together of equals towards establishing a commonality of purpose. Dialogue created sensitivity to examine the curriculum, pedagogy and philosophies. In the process it was evident that self-awakening and connection to the object under study began to surface in a stronger way.

## Setting the transformatory agenda

Through the dialogical processes described above, the team became aware of the critical areas that required attention. The team agreed that an agenda needs to be set for action within a transformatory position. MacNaughton's (2003) ideas of the latter in relation to early childhood provided guidance. She defined the act of transforming as bringing about fundamental change in existing practices, rules, traditions and understandings with the aim to achieve social justice, equity and, we would argue, high relevance to education of young children in the South African context.

In setting the transformatory agenda, the team acknowledged that, whilst we had evidence of good practice in the current offerings, there were fundamental flaws in the way teachers were being prepared for the early years. This was a difficult revelation for the team but nonetheless crucial to acknowledge. The team agreed that engagement with new theoretical positions would offer ideas on thinking and acting for change.

A three-day workshop towards the end of the year was dedicated towards setting a transformatory agenda. At the outset the team acknowledged the importance of vision-building, which began during the course of the year and was tested with the early childhood community of practice during a seminar week. Kouzes and Posner (2007) argue that compelling visions need to be created in order to set us apart from everyone else. In other words, the early childhood team needed to create a vision aligned with the university and faculty but with a defining message related to the specialisation. There were discussions about creating a compelling picture about who we are, what we are about and what we would like

to do. The need was also expressed to use symbolic language to communicate a shared identity. After much deliberation the following was adopted:

**FIGURE 2:  VISION OF EARLY CHILDHOOD SPECIALISATION AT THE UFS**



The words and pictures in Figure 2 were specifically chosen to enable the team to picture their work, to hear it, sense it and recognise it. The image of children as babies, toddlers and young children is used to send a key message about early childhood. The lines between the children are intended to not only show growth, but also indicate the possible disruptions in the growth and development process. The linkage to education shows the synergy of children's growth and development with early learning. The message "Shaping strong foundations for young children" is definitive of the work of teacher educators, pre-service and practising teachers dedicated to developing the full potential of young children. It serves as a word picture – more image than words. The team considered the animation of the vision to be important to create a shared identity and to influence the mind's eye.

In order to help the team redefine their existing frames of reference, the Discipline Coordinator and some members of the team made a selection of readings. These readings, which related to curriculum theory, practice and graduate qualities, were specifically chosen to stimulate debate and discussion. In this way, the team was exposed to the ideas of curriculum as product, process and praxis, each of which allowed team members to engage with values, concepts, as well as conditioned and new responses to curriculum.

It was agreed that current practices were heavily geared towards curriculum as a product (Tyler 1949). This was supported by a strong top-down management system. The control elements for curriculum from faculty management as a driver of policy featured very strongly. There was little room to think about broader issues related to the realities of teaching young children in the South African context. The team acknowledged that, whilst policy alignment was critical, it had been interpreted in a very technical and narrow way. The absence of a clear vision and conceptual framework linked to the kind of early childhood teacher who was being prepared supported a technical response.

The team agreed that, whilst students were required to have specific, standardised information, the product view of the curriculum perpetuated "a one size fits all" response (Tyler 1949; Bobbit 1928). Taking into account the limitations of the curriculum as product, the team explored curriculum as process (Stenhouse 1975). The appeal of this position lies in its focus on an interaction between the teacher, student and knowledge. The idea of interaction provided impetus to thoughts on how curriculum does not have to exist as a physical thing. The human element of interaction frames curriculum as the actual happenings.

The ideas that emerged from the discussion on curriculum as process invited debate on how uncertainty and experimentation feature in our realities in preparing teachers for the early years. We began to understand that our plan does not have to be a package of materials to be covered. Drawing from Stenhouse's (1975) ideas the team came to some understanding of how the study guide (the dominant tool used by the university to communicate the study plan to students) could function without an absolute sense of finality. Some members noted how it could serve as a tool to invite the critical testing of ideas and experimentation *in* and *on* action rather than acceptance. This led to deeper engagement with the idea of the early years teacher being prepared for a context of uncertainty, diversity and complexity. There was also engagement with the tools necessary for a teacher who is going to function in this kind of context.

Curriculum as praxis stimulated debate on the kind of teacher we were preparing and the behaviours that needed to be foregrounded in our programme. The team moved closer to accepting the idea that we need to develop critically reflective teachers in order to engage with diverse and complex realities of teaching in the South African context. The notion of a change agent also featured in the discussion. Students needed to be provided with opportunities to be critical thinkers through adopting a questioning attitude, searching for reasons and using evidence to support action. In order to build reflexivity students should be able to consciously look at and think about their experience, actions, feelings and responses (Schon 1993). The team further articulated a set of behaviours that would be helpful for students to engage with. These were noted as follows: active

participation, personal responsibility, challenging of the self, empowerment through engagement with effective practice in a diverse context and integration of ideas (including theoretical insights) at the moment of practice.

In summary, the transformatory agenda was developed through the growing consciousness of teacher educators' sensitivities to the need for change. The dialogic encounters and the tools that enabled the dialogue served as catalyst to reframe references and to learn about new perspectives. It could be argued that the disruptions of habitual ways of thinking occurred through discussions where diverse points of view came to the fore and awareness-raising took place. The experience of engaging with ideas from unfamiliar curriculum positions provided opportunities to seek alternatives.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this article we sought to find answers to the critical question, "What are the dialogical processes that are helpful to make explicit teacher educators' current understandings related to teacher education for early childhood?" The findings of the study show that the dialogical processes, when unfolded as action-oriented strategies to a particular goal (i.e., change in teacher education), have the potential to allow teacher educators to reflect on, participate in and trouble existing frames of reference and develop sensitivity to new framings.

It is important for the process to begin with a safe space for exploration supported by a relational style of leadership. The latter should be aimed at disabling power relations and encouraging team player behaviours, which will create a conducive environment for the emergence of shared insights and understandings. As team members, teacher educators develop sensitivities to their positioning and are able to contribute to conversations and discussions. A transformatory agenda becomes possible through dialogic encounters where tools are available to disrupt habitual ways of thinking and to seek alternatives. These tools include (but are not limited to) workshops, shared vision-building, interrogation of curriculum development theory and developing a critical awareness of one's social reality – what Paulo Freire (1990) refers to as "conscientization".

The bottom-up processes rooted in the idea of dialogue and the commitment to transformatory learning through key people such as teacher educators is supportive of the larger institutional thrust towards creating a culture of respect. The teacher educators play a key part in shaping the type of professional effectiveness that the institution is seeking to develop. In order for teacher educators to continue their professional effectiveness they would have to show commitment to functioning as a community of practice. This team approach allows for the necessary support to enable and examine the challenges and

opportunities that arise from educating teachers for the early years in the context of diverse realities.

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