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Teachers' perspectives on transforming teacher education curriculum for relevance to basic education for sustainable development

Abstract

The study sought to investigate teachers' perspectives on how the teacher education curriculum could be transformed to be relevant for basic schooling and contribute to sustainable development. The objective was to understand the views of the university lecturers, teachers in schools and teacher trainees on the relevance of the curriculum offered at a university to the school curriculum.

The school curriculum reform from the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) to the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) in South Africa (SA) brought about changes in the pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) and teaching approaches and teachers are obliged to keep up with these changes, understand the PCK and change their teaching approaches to fit the new curriculum. In addition, teacher trainees (university graduates) are expected to teach the same curriculum when allocated to schools for teaching practice. Based on this expectation, I argue that there seems to be an assumption that changes in the school curriculum find their way to the universities and influence the content of teacher education curriculum whereas this may not be the case. The teacher education curriculum does not focus on the content offered in schools but academic content and engages students in theories that would enable them to see the world differently.

A qualitative interpretive approach to generate data through semi-structured interviews from teacher trainees, schoolteachers and university lecturers who were purposively selected was used. The approach was used in order to understand the views of the participants on how the teacher education curriculum could be transformed in order to be relevant to basic schooling. Findings revealed that the teacher education curriculum is not relevant for basic schooling in that teacher trainees are not exposed to the curriculum offered in schools; traditional teaching approaches are still used at the university whereas schools use outcomes-based approaches. As a result, teacher trainees find it difficult to navigate the system. The paper recommends that there is a need to transform the teacher education curriculum so that it becomes relevant and contributes to sustainable development.

Keywords: curriculum, transformation, relevance, schooling, sustainable development

1. Introduction and background

The study field of curriculum is an overall concept that has different meanings. There are different views and definitions of the curriculum, and these are presented below to illustrate the different meanings and at the end, I have put the curriculum in the context of this study. In its simplest form, a curriculum refers to a syllabus that usually guides a teacher on what to do in class while Vorster (2016) elaborates that it is a list of topics to be taught and how they should be taught and assessed. In addition, Bagudela (2012) argues that a curriculum focuses on the planned activities translated by the teacher into syllabuses, schemes of work and lessons to be delivered while Hassan (2013) refers to the curriculum as a body of knowledge, content and/or subjects to be taught or both. It is all the learning that is planned, unplanned, guided or unguided, organised and *experiences* that the school, including the university, offers as part of its educational responsibility. Generally, a curriculum includes a consideration of the purposes of education, the content of teaching, teaching approaches with the focus on product as well as the process and a programme of evaluation of the outcomes (Koo Hok-chun, 2002:56). In sum, curriculum entails assumptions and expressions of knowledge and skills, learning and the learning environment, as well as different work practices. It determines the aims and assessment criteria of learning, which form the bases of the teaching process (Vitikka, Krokfors & Hurmerinta, 2012). Therefore, based on these definitions of the curriculum, for this study, I argue that a curriculum is an officially designed course of study that consists of all planned activities. In this vein, curriculum offered in universities should thus be relevant and responsive to the needs of students and those of learners. This calls for a curriculum that will, in turn, transform learning and engage in critical reflection that will develop learners and contribute to sustainable development for relevance to society. Ogude, Nel and Oosthuizen (2005) argue that curriculum responsiveness has been central to the South African context and higher education is grappling as it rethinks the curriculum.

The Department of Education (2000) in the Norms and Standards for Educators in South Africa laid the foundation for defining competent teachers and appropriate teacher education programmes. It emphasises demonstration of competences across a wide range of teacher roles and further requires higher education institutions to design and implement outcomes-based teacher education programmes to enable novice teachers to demonstrate their competences across a range of teacher roles (Fraser, Kilen & Nieman, 2005). Of the three competences (foundation, practical and reflexive) specified in the Norms and Standards for educators, the practical competence could be seriously considered by higher education institutions involved in teacher training in that it involves observation on the job. The South Africa Qualifications Authority supports the notion of applied competence in higher education as the ability to put into practice in the relevant context the learning outcomes acquired in obtaining the qualification. In the case of teacher training, this is done even before the qualification is completed. This is the period when teacher trainees go for teaching practice. In doing so, I argue that transformation of learning should be considered as this will develop teacher trainees who will in turn develop learners in schools.

According to the former Minister of Higher Education and Training, Dr Blade Nzimande, transformation concerns changing society in all areas of life, to serve the interests of all South Africans in a democratic, equitable and prosperous society. Transforming the curriculum, argued Garuba (2015), involves critical thinking that considers knowledge of the marginalised group (in this case, the students) in teaching at all levels. Curriculum transformation in the context of this paper refers to interweaving multiple perspectives and integrates different

(student, teachers and lecturers') voices and knowledge into the learning process. In support of this, Scott (2009) quoted by Vorster (2016) argues that this requires engaging students in learning so that they do not feel alienated from what they are taught. This, according to Akoojee and Nkomo (2007), requires that the ethos that prevailed at higher education institutions (HEIs) in the past needs to be replaced with a new democratic culture directed at actively undoing race-based separation.

Transforming the curriculum became evident during the #FeesMustFall movement in South Africa in 2015, which called for a decolonised curriculum. Garuba (2015) was concerned about conversations and debates on how a decolonised curriculum will look like in Africa and this is still a feature of the current debate. Garuba (ibid) further argued that decolonising and transforming the curriculum does not necessarily mean adding new items to the existing curriculum but rethinking the approach to adopt. Although the #FeesMustfall movement laid more emphasis on decolonising the curriculum, the focus of the current study is on higher education transformation as an aspect of decolonisation.

I argue that in order to transform the teacher education curriculum for relevance to basic education, curriculum offered in teacher education should be relevant to the one offered in schools as doing so would contribute to the development of teacher trainees who, in turn, will develop learners in schools, thus contributing to sustainable development.

The former Minister of Higher Education and Training, Dr Blade Nzimande also observed in *Iekgotla* on curriculum transformation in 2011 that universities still grapple with the issue of curricula that are relevant to the South African context; hence, curriculum transformation is a necessity. Carl (2005) added that universities find themselves in this situation because of the ever-changing curriculum that has become a major feature of teaching in South Africa. The every changing curriculum, argues Coetzee (2012), gives rise to recent teacher education graduates struggling to apply their skills acquired during their teacher education in schools. This is because of the differences in the two systems. There is merit in Coetzee's view because I assessed some teacher trainees and found them struggling to impart the pedagogical content knowledge and they were unable to use the outcomes-based approaches used in schools. This implies that universities offer their graduates a curriculum that is not relevant to the one offered in schools and exposes them to methodology that these students cannot use in schools.

Bertram (2012) cautions that while the national concern of having a curriculum that is relevant to the context is important, it should not be over-emphasised as it may have unintended outcomes/consequences. He advocates for teaching students to engage with theories that will enable them to see the world differently. In support of Bertram's view, I argue that changes in basic education may not be adopted in higher education, and the faculties of education may not necessarily equip their graduates to teach school subjects; rather, they might equip them with the subject content and methodology. In schools, there is emphasis on learner-centred teaching approaches. Bernstein (2001) refers to the limitation of the learner-centred approach as privileging students from good schools and undermining the prospects of those from poor social backgrounds.

It is noteworthy that higher education institutions, including universities, were involved in the process of curriculum development in different ways: as curriculum developers, as members of the committee to review the curriculum and as critics of different curricula before they were introduced. Furthermore, academics who understood the field of education also

played a role as leading members of the working groups established to revise the curriculum. Overall, higher education institutions played an important role in bringing their weight to bear on the shaping of the curriculum. Despite the involvement of academics from higher education institutions, there is little, if any, evidence of aligning the teacher education curriculum to the curriculum offered in schools; hence, the subject of transforming the higher education curriculum was found relevant to investigate.

In addition, although the Higher Education Act of 1997 (No. 101 of 1997) alludes to the establishment of a system of education that responds to human resource, economic and development needs of South Africa (Department of Education, 1997), Motala and Pampalis (2002: 22) assert that little is being done to align the higher education curriculum to that of schools. Jansen and Christie (1999) argue that while outcomes-based education requires a different approach to teaching than the traditional content approach, higher education institutions are still using the traditional approach more than any other approaches. This comment does not mean that higher education institutions do not use other approaches, but the traditional approach may be dominating for varying reasons.

From the above, it is clear that the teacher education curriculum is not relevant to schools and there are gaps between these two systems whereas the curriculum should be responsive to the learning needs of students (Moll, 2004). The objective of this study was to look into the teachers' perspectives on how the teacher education curriculum could be transformed for relevance to basic education for sustainable development. There are different understandings of sustainable development but in the context of this paper, it refers to ways of responding to curriculum issues in schools and how the university curriculum could be transformed to be relevant to that offered in schools.

2. Theoretical framework

The current study was underpinned by a democratic theory of education. Emphasising the need for the practice of democracy in schools, Carter, Harber and Serf (2003) suggest that some values, such as democracy, tolerance and responsibility, grow only with experience of them. Therefore, the schools (I argue, universities) need to practise what they seek to promote. Bastian *et al.* (1986) and Wood (1992) maintain that democratic schools (universities) and democracy itself in the American case do not develop by chance, but they result from explicit attempts by educators, and thus schools (universities), to put in place arrangements and opportunities that will bring democracy to life. Therefore, a democratic school (university) is one that allows all stakeholders in a school to participate in deliberations to do with institutional governance, in which stakeholders are prepared to abide by democratic principles through the acquisition of suitable knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours.

Beane and Apple (1999) contend that at a democratic school (university), all of those who are directly involved in the school (university) have the right to participate in the process of decision-making. In the context of this paper, democratic participation refers to the engagement of all stakeholders in transforming the curriculum. Doing so would make the curriculum responsive and contribute to sustainable development; hence, the democratic theory of education is appropriate for this study. This, in turn, requires critical thinking. Kymlicka (2002: 304) contends that, "schools" (universities) must teach children how to engage in the kind of critical reasoning and moral perspective that defines public reasonableness...

(and) promoting these sorts of virtues is one of the fundamental justifications for mandatory education. In this way, there is potential for quality education to be achieved.

In order to achieve quality education, everyone involved should participate in decision making democratically. Having everybody's voice in the curriculum offered in the school system and the universities will lead to learning in a transformative way and thus contribute to sustainable development in the system of education.

3. Research methodology

To achieve the objective of the study, a qualitative interpretive research method was used in order to build a holistic understanding of the complex problem concerning the alignment of the curriculum offered for teacher education and its relevance to that offered in schools in order to narrow the gap by transforming the teacher education curriculum. The interpretivist approach was chosen, as it would provide the participants an opportunity to attach meaning to their real life, in this case being the relevance of the curriculum.

A semi-structured interview schedule, based on the aim of research, was used for generating data because of the flexibility it gives the interviewer as well as the interviewee (De Vos *et al.*, 2005; Ary, Jacobs & Razavieh, 1985). This method is advantageous in the sense that questions can be repeated and their meanings, where unclear, explained until they are understood by the interviewees. Although the interviews were semi-structured, there was some degree of structure as the interview schedule, which guided the process of interviewing, was prepared in advance. According to De Vos *et al.* (2005), the schedule provides a set of predetermined questions that might be used. The interview contained open-ended questions, directed and focused, with the aim of allowing participants to express themselves freely.

The target population consisted of students registered for Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE), lecturers teaching content and methodology from a comprehensive university in the Eastern Cape, South Africa and teacher mentors from schools where PGCE students were allocated for school-based experience (SBE). Participants were purposively selected, ten PGCE students, four lecturers (2 offering content and the other 2 curriculum studies) and 8 school mentors from four schools. This gave a total of 22 participants as I believed that they could offer insights into teachers' perspectives on transforming Teacher Education curriculum for relevance to Basic Education for sustainable development and suggest how the existing gaps between the basic and teacher education curriculum could be closed.

Before the interviews, the purpose of the interview was clearly explained and all participants were assured that all information would be treated confidentially and used only for the research. Permission was sought from the interviewees to record the conversation, the advantage being that the responses were recorded verbatim along with the added advantage of freeing the interviewer to participate in the dialogue rather than concentrating on taking notes. Participants were interviewed in their places of work as this helped to keep the interviewees relaxed and comfortable.

The use of quality criteria of credibility, transferability and conformability were applicable to this study (Koul, 2008). According to Bryman (2004: 275), the credibility of the findings entails ensuring that the research is carried out according to the canons of good practice. The transferability criterion refers to the orientation of the results to the contextual uniqueness and

significance of the aspect of the social world being studied. Conformability refers to the degree to which others could confirm the results. It is a measure of how well the inquiry's findings are supported by the data collected (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Data (interview transcripts) were given to a colleague (another researcher) who served as a peer reviewer to confirm whether the findings were supported by the data.

In analysing the data, interviews were transcribed verbatim, data organised into manageable units, patterns searched in order to discover what was important to be learnt. Words or phrases that appeared to be similar were grouped into the same categories and themes that emerged were grouped together. The following are the themes that emerged:

- Relevance of university curriculum to the school curriculum
- Use of teaching approaches/methodology
- Transforming the university curriculum

4. Presentation and discussion of findings

In this section, I present findings on the teachers' perspectives on the extent to which there are gaps between basic and teacher education curriculum and how the teacher education curriculum could be transformed in order to be relevant to the basic education curriculum. In presenting the findings, I have extracted some verbatim statements to illustrate the views of the participants. When referring to verbatim statements, school mentors are referred to as *M Interviewee*, university lecturers as *L Interviewee* while teacher trainees are simply labelled as *Interviewee*. The findings are presented in the themes that are listed in the methodology section.

5. Relevance of university curriculum to the school curriculum

The majority of participants agreed that there are noticeable gaps between the curriculum content offered in schools and the one offered in universities. Six out of eight school mentors claimed that when teacher trainees visit their schools for SBE, they lacked the understanding of the content offered in schools. They further stated that the lack of content knowledge was worse with teacher trainees who were full time PGCE students while those doing PGCE part-time were better off because of their exposure to the school curriculum as they were already teachers in schools. Arguable, the forgoing statement may be true because the part-time teacher trainees were already teaching the CAPS curriculum in schools.

Five of the eight school mentors expressed concern that there was no link between a school and university curriculum. The four lecturers who argued that keeping up with the basic school curriculum would create problems for higher education because a change in ministry comes with new changes, which would mean that the faculties of education would keep changing whenever there is a new development, did not support this view.

We were still struggling with convincing everybody to understand NCS and make all possible attempts to align with it but now we are faced with new developments of CAPS. This creates problems for us and widens the gap in the curricula (L Interviewee 4).

Although teacher trainees acknowledged the gap between basic education and the university curriculum, they also felt that the university should not delve deep into the school curriculum in neglect of the university curriculum. Lecturers further argued that it could not be

easy for the university to keep pace with the school curriculum changes as they might not be budgeted for by the university, and therefore, such changes should not affect the university. Carl (2005), who refers to the ever-changing curriculum in South Africa, corroborates this view.

Interviews with all ten teacher trainees registered for PGCE revealed that they understood that there were differences in the curriculum offered in schools and that offered in the university. In the light of that, they saw themselves as victims of the situation when they got to schools as they were caught between what is offered in the university and what they had to teach in schools during their SBE.

In schools, teachers follow CAPS whereas here at the university we do something different. As I attend in two faculties, in Education, some lecturers discuss with us the curriculum change but in the other faculty there is no mention of the curriculum changes at all (Interviewee 9).

When asked about the relevance of the content taught in the university to that offered in schools, eight out of ten teacher trainees did not see any relevance and that when in schools they had to adjust to the level of the learners since, according to Moll (2004), the curriculum should be responsive to the learning needs of students.

For me, what we are taught at the university is not relevant and does not help us. I do not understand why we are taught what does not develop us as future teachers so that we can develop learners in schools (Interviewee 6)

Teacher trainees also highlighted some areas in which they saw a gap between basic education and university curriculum. They referred to the work schedule that was used in schools whereas they were not exposed to that at the university while teachers in schools expected them to prepare according to the work schedule and they struggled in doing that. Reference was also made to the difference in literature, especially in IsiXhosa.

When participants were asked to suggest what they would like to see happen, the majority suggested that there should be a link between the basic school and university curriculum. Lecturers should communicate with schools and get work schedules to prepare teacher trainees accordingly. They should also get material used in schools and know what is being done in schools in order to spend some time exposing teacher trainees to what is offered in schools as illustrated in the material received from schools.

The findings confirm that all participants were faced with a serious challenge of the ever-changing curriculum, which widens the gap between the school and university curriculum. This shows that there is no link between the school and the university curriculum, which is evident through the noticeable gaps between the school curriculum and that offered in the university. This confirms the study by Nyaumwe and Mtetwa (2011) who stated that some student teachers used in their study attested to the fact that theory covered at university is not applicable to their practices in schools.

Although the challenges were evident, I want to believe that teacher trainees could not struggle with the content knowledge as it is of a lower level than the one offered at the university. I argue that they might have been lazy to read what was offered in schools in order to understand the curriculum content and prepare accordingly.

6. Use of teaching approaches/methodology

The findings pertaining to the use of teaching approaches used by lecturers at the university and teachers in schools revealed different views of the participants. The approaches used by lecturers influenced the way teacher trainees taught in schools.

All four lecturers alluded to the difficulty they experienced in equipping teacher trainees for using an outcomes-based approach (OBE) in schools. They themselves could not use OBE because the university context was not the same as that of schools; lecture halls have fixed furniture arrangement and as a result they could not move around and use group work because of the infrastructural arrangement whereas when teacher trainees got to schools they were expected to use OBE. The view of the difficulty in using outcomes-based approaches to teaching confirms the statement by Motala and Pampalis (2002: 22) that little is done to align higher education curriculum to that of schools. In addition, Jansen and Christie (1999) assert that while an outcomes-based approach requires a different approach to teaching from a traditional content approach, the higher education institutions are still in favour of a traditional approach. Based on this, I argue that lecturers did not equip students with methods relevant for their development.

The two curriculum studies lecturers further alluded to the problems experienced in applying competences. According to them, although the applied competence of teachers' subject and teaching knowledge is important, it became difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of this competence during SBE. They claimed that it became difficult and at times impossible for them to see each student more than three times during the entire SBE session because the schools were scattered and that they had other lectures to conduct on campus. Based on this, they could not confirm if the teacher trainees' applied competences were developed. This, according to my view, is one of the areas that need to be transformed. In addition, the level of supervision of teacher trainees on SBE was questionable. Subject teachers who should act as mentors in schools were accused of rarely going to class with student teachers and that the university curriculum studies lecturers did not visit them more often. Whether or not SBE contributes to the development of a particular student's competence is usually uncertain and unknown (Fraser *et al.*, 2005).

All ten teacher trainees stated that at the university they were taught different methods of teaching but most of the methods used in the university were not applicable to the school classroom. They also alluded to the fact that each lecturer used their own methods as they saw fit while the lecturers added that the methods they used related to the type of classroom arrangement and the lesson of the day. At the university, lecturers argued that the teacher trainees still used the telling method more than other methods. The telling method is teacher-centred and yet when teacher trainees went out to schools for SBE, teachers in schools used the learner-centred strategies and expected them to use outcomes-based methods of teaching that were learner-centred. Bernstein (2001) cautions of the limitations of the learner-centred approach as privileging students from good schools while at the same time undermines the development prospects of those from poor social backgrounds. It also transpired that although full-time PGCE teacher trainees were exposed to different methods at the university, these were not necessarily outcomes-based. I argue that all they needed was to adapt these methods to be relevant in schools for their development and that of the learners in schools. Failure to adapt the methods to be relevant confirms Coetzee's (2012) view that the graduates struggle to apply skills acquired from universities during their training.

On the contrary, school mentors stated that teacher trainees understood the methods of teaching although they found it difficult to use OBE. One teacher had the following to say:

There is no problem with methodology because we both discuss what needs to be done and how although they struggle in doing that. What worries me most is the content. These teacher trainees are not equipped to teach CAPS (T interviewee 4).

The above does not only pertain to South Africa. Adeosun *et al.* (2009: 123) argued that for Nigeria, while the lecturers agreed that adequate preparation is always given to teacher trainees before and during teaching practice, the teacher trainees showed that there is the need for improvement in lesson preparation, use of instructional materials, selection of instructional strategies, classroom organisation and management as well as the various disciplines. The findings showed that although the content and coverage of the curriculum is adequate, the teaching strategies needed plenty of improvements.

7. Transforming the university curriculum

All the lecturers (content and curriculum studies) acknowledged the curriculum transformation that is taking place but confessed that they were not clear about it. They argued that the content they offered did not only cater for schools as their main concern was to see teacher trainees attaining postgraduate qualifications in their relevant fields and as a result might be seen as not transforming the curriculum. They further argued that as long as teacher trainees registered for PGCE and did subject disciplines in other faculties, it could not be possible to focus only on the school curriculum. The statement below shows that the lecturers could not keep pace with the school curriculum developments:

Don't you think offering school curriculum only would disadvantage those teacher trainees who want to pursue their studies? I am saying this because if we focus on school curriculum only there is no way that the school content can be offered for three years, and these teacher trainees would not qualify to register for an Honours degree. To me, this is a limitation because one cannot do anything else either than being a teacher. What if one wants to change a career in future? (L Interviewee 1).

The two lecturers involved with curriculum studies argued that they found themselves in a difficult situation as they saw their role as two-fold, first to consider the gaps they identified in the content offered in other faculties and secondly, to prepare teacher trainees to teach in schools while at the same time focussing on the applied competences. These lecturers also understood that teacher trainees taught in other faculties might not be exposed to the school curriculum at all, and although they accept this, they saw it as a serious challenge in the university's Faculty of Education.

Until such time that our faculty offers content in-house, we will always experience problems because we do not have control of what is happening in other faculties. It is high time that teacher trainees registered in the education understand that they have to stay with their decision of having chosen to be a teacher (L Interviewee 3).

Despite the lecturers' view of offering a relevant curriculum, Bertram (2012) was against this as he argued that a relevant curriculum might have unintended outcomes.

The fact that the university does not offer the school curriculum to teacher trainees is problematic because it makes it difficult to keep up with the developments in the various curricula. Despite the department's envisaged improvement, the faculties of education do not

seem to be making strides in this regard. Although the former Minister of Higher Education and Training, Dr Blade Nzimande, in his keynote address to the Stakeholder Summit on Higher Education Transformation in 2011 called on all universities to adapt the curriculum and teaching strategies that suit the student population, universities do not seem to have headed to the call by the former Minister. Doing this would need a change of the mind-set of academics in universities towards including the school curriculum in the training of teachers.

8. Conclusion

The study looked at teachers' perspectives on transforming the teacher education curriculum so that it becomes relevant to basic education for sustainable development. It became evident from all the participants that there are noticeable gaps between the curriculum offered in schools and the one offered in universities and as a result, the teacher education curriculum should be transformed. This study has also revealed that faculties of education cannot keep up with all the curriculum changes taking place in the department of education as doing so would lead to some instability in the universities because the changes by the department take place without informing or involving the universities in advance. It is for this reason that universities should not jump into changing their curriculum whenever the department does. It was also clear that teacher education graduates struggle to apply the skills acquired in their teacher training in schools as they find that the pedagogical content knowledge and teaching methodologies exposed to in teacher training were not relevant for basic schooling. However, it is noteworthy that the curriculum has to be transformed for sustainable development.

In conclusion, if South Africa is to improve the quality of its education gradually through teacher education, then there is a need for curriculum realignment in the schools and universities as this would contribute to sustainable development.

9. Recommendations

Based on the findings, I wish to suggest the following recommendations for the transformation of the teacher education curriculum so that it becomes relevant to basic education for sustainable development.

- Mounting the post-grade 12 academic year in order to bridge the ever-widening gap between the school and university curriculum. This would prepare learners for university learning while at the same assist school teachers and lecturers understand how they could ensure relevance at both levels.
- While teacher trainees are prepared for SBE, university lecturers should expose them to the relevant CAPS documents so that they understand the pedagogical content knowledge offered in schools.
- Microteaching sessions in which teacher trainees are exposed to a classroom situation should be conducted before teacher trainees go out for SBE. This will be an opportunity for constructive feedback from lecturers and their classmates.
- Everyone should be involved in curriculum transformation as Scott (2009) quoted by Vorster (2016) suggests that transforming the curriculum requires engaging students so that they do not feel alienated.

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