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Bridging the theory-practice divide: Reflections of school-based student teachers

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Background: Teacher education programmes often prioritise theory over practical experience, leaving students struggling to connect classroom learning with real-world application. Addressing this gap, a proposed model integrates online coursework with mentored practice-based experiences through full-time placements in selected schools.

Aim: The study delves into the experiences of first-year school-based student teachers (SBST) enrolled in a full-time undergraduate online programme aimed at bridging the theory-practice divide.

Setting: First-year student teachers in the 2021 and 2022 cohorts ($N = 30$) placed full time in selected schools participated in the study.

Methods: Using an interpretive qualitative research design, data were collected via focus group interviews with first-year student cohorts. Data was analysed using the cultural-historical activity theory combined with the constant comparative method.

Results: Two primary findings emerged. Firstly, SBSTs faced difficulties balancing academic requirements between the school and the programme. Secondly, the varying degrees of support from stakeholders within both the programme and school environment influenced the quality and meaningfulness of SBSTs' learning experiences.

Conclusion: The convergence of university and school activity systems revealed tensions and contradictions yet also presented opportunities for expanded learning when coursework and classroom practices aligned. Despite criticisms of universities being overly theoretical, the research indicates that SBSTs prioritise practical experience in school settings, potentially overshadowing the significance of theoretical knowledge.

Contribution: This study contributes to knowledge of the challenges faced by student teachers and highlights the need to address these contradictions through open dialogue within teacher education programmes.

Keywords: school-based student teachers; teacher education; theory; practice, cultural-historical activity theory.

Introduction

Background

At the core of effective teacher education programmes lies the integration of theoretical knowledge with immersive practicum experiences, succinctly articulated by Abdal Haqq (1997) as 'theoretical knowledge with coherent, systematic, authentic and comprehensive practicum experiences'. The intentional integration of student teachers' learning across both coursework and fieldwork is significant in nurturing a cohort of educators proficient in inquiry, reflection and the advancement of pedagogical practices (Gravett, Henning & Eiselen 2011; Jenset, Klette & Hammerness 2018). Moreover, Shulman (1988) underscores the reciprocal relationship between theory and practice, arguing that they should mutually inform each other, with theory providing the groundwork for practice and practice subsequently influencing and refining theory iteratively. Such integration not only enhances pre-service student–teacher preparation but also enriches the overall educational landscape by fostering a dynamic interplay between theoretical insights and practical application.

However, many students continue to struggle to translate knowledge from coursework effectively into classroom teaching during fieldwork experiences. Part of the problem is that during fieldwork in many South African classrooms, students observe teachers prioritising curriculum content coverage over learner understanding and progression (Bower 2019). However, teacher education programmes tend to prioritise theoretical instruction at the expense of practical experience,

resulting in a disproportionate emphasis on theory over practical learning (Darling-Hammond 2006). Consequently, many student teachers encounter difficulty in bridging the gap between theoretical learning and classroom application (Botha & Rens 2018). This leads to criticisms that universities fail to prepare student teachers for the complexities of 21st-century classrooms (Sjølie & Østern 2021). Thus, a key challenge lies in aligning coursework with the realities of school settings.

In response, some countries have developed close partnerships between higher education institutions and specialised schools, to enable better pre-service teacher education. For example, in the USA, there are ample examples of 'professional development schools' (Darling-Hammond 2008:9) and in Finland 'practice schools' or 'teacher training schools' (Kansanen 2003:91). In South Africa, there were similar initiatives with the development of the Integrated Strategic Planning Framework for the establishment of 'professional practice schools' and 'teaching schools' (Department of Basic Education Department of Higher Education Training [DBE DHET] 2011). The first teaching school was established at the University of Johannesburg (UJ)'s Soweto campus in 2010 and was designed to establish an integrated practice site for pre-service education (Gravett & Ramsaroop 2015; Ramsaroop, Petersen & Gravett 2020) and to facilitate research on children's learning within the school curriculum (Gravett, Petersen & Petker 2014; Gravett, Petersen & Ramsaroop 2019). As the teaching school's capacity and physical location limited expansion, a research team looked into how this model of teacher education could be adapted to incorporate other such practice sites. Consequently, the team proposed a model in which a teacher education programme was developed, where the coursework would be offered in an online mode of delivery, simultaneously offered with mentored practice-based experiences through full-time placements for student teachers in selected schools. Such schools would be required to formalise a partnership with the UJ. this background, this research set out to understand the experiences of first-year school-based student teachers (SBST) in this programme. In the next section, we delve into pertinent literature concerning partnerships between schools and universities.

School-university partnerships

In the research literature (Atkinson 2016; Shiohira, Molokwane & Moabelo 2021), school university partnerships such as the one investigated in this study are often referred to as student teacher internships. There are several international examples such as the collaborative full-time teaching internship partnership between K-12 school districts and universities in the USA (Helfeldt et al. 2015) and Germany's block internship model to train vocational school teachers (Turchyn et al. 2022). In South Africa, initiatives such as the Teach South Africa programme and internships facilitated by the Independent Schools Association of Southern Africa

(ISASA) have long offered alternative pathways for aspiring teachers to gain practical experience and mentorship in diverse educational settings (Hofmeyer 2015).

The value of structured internships is multiple. They offer students extended periods to immerse themselves in workplace settings, bridging theoretical knowledge gained in university coursework with practical experiences (Hora, Wolfgram & Thompson 2017). In the realm of teacher education, internships enable student teachers to observe, co-teach and reflect on classroom practices, preparing them for the demands of the teaching profession (Chennat 2014).

Our understanding of how first-year foundation phase SBST experience a teacher education model in which they learn to become teachers in a full-time undergraduate online programme is also shaped by the following important elements from the literature. These include an analysis of how teacher education programmes, both domestically and internationally, enhance school-university partnerships, including internship models, to discern their effectiveness in preparing students for the teaching profession.

School-university partnerships in teacher education programmes play a crucial role in bridging the gap between theory and practice. Traditional programmes often fail to integrate coursework effectively with practical experiences, leading to criticism of inadequately trained novice teachers (Botha & Rens 2018; Ramsaroop & Gravett 2017). Partnerships between universities and schools offer opportunities for student teachers to observe, co-teach and reflect on classroom practices under the guidance of experienced mentor teachers (Van Velzen et al. 2011), who possess both strong content knowledge and pedagogical expertise. At the same time, students can connect these practices immediately with their university coursework. In Finland, for example, universities collaborate closely with schools to integrate coursework with fieldwork, allowing student teachers to learn alongside experienced mentors (Niemi & Jakku-Sihvonen 2011; Ustun & Eryilmaz 2018). Similarly, in the USA, professional development schools (PDS) offer student teachers opportunities to connect theory with practice in authentic classroom settings (Hammerness & Klette 2015). By immersing student teachers in the daily routines of teaching under the guidance of mentor teachers, these partnerships aim to foster coherence and consistency between university coursework and practical experiences. However, the effectiveness of school–university partnerships relies heavily on the congruence between the university coursework and the practice-based experiences of students in the classroom, the ability of teacher educators to create a programme in which students can move seamlessly between the two environments and the quality of mentorship provided to student teachers.

While mentor teachers play a crucial role in guiding and supporting student teachers, challenges such as limited time, inexperience and the type of teaching environment can

impede the effectiveness of mentorship (Hammerness & Klette 2015; Hobson 2002). Mentor teachers need to model relevant teaching practices, provide constructive feedback and align their guidance with the learning objectives of university coursework (Gravett et al. 2019).

Using chat as a theoretical framework

The study adopts cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) as a theoretical framework to investigate the experiences of SBSTs in a teacher education programme built on a school-university partnership model. The CHAT emphasises how individuals' meanings and realities are shaped by contextual factors and histories, viewing individuals as representing the social, contextual and historical entities to which they belong (Ogawa et al. 2008). This framework rejects the notion of meaning as individually constructed, instead highlighting its collaborative and culturally mediated nature (Vygotsky & Cole 1978). By investigating the experiences of SBSTs and their interactions with tutors, lecturers and mentor teachers, the study aims to construct a nuanced understanding of social and contextual elements hereof.

The unit of analysis in this study is thus the collaborative action of the actors within the two activity systems of which they are a part. The SBSTs operate within and between the activity systems of the Teaching Experience Practice Schools (TEPS) and the Teacher Education Institution (TEI). These systems have different rules, divisions of labour and tools but share a common object, leading to potential tensions and clashes. Engeström's (1987) activity system model, consisting of six components – subject, object, mediating artifacts, rules, community and division of labour – provides a framework for analysing the interplay between different elements in the SBSTs' experiences. In the context of this study, Engeström's (2001) third-generation activity theory enables a consolidation of multiple perspectives and networks of interacting activity systems to construct meaning.

The principle of object-orientation highlights the collective, artifact-mediated and object-oriented nature of activity systems. In this study, we anticipated that the different objects of the TEI, focused on improving student teachers' learning and TEPS to strengthen children's learning, would be something that the SBSTs would need to navigate – there were bound to be clashes and tensions between the two systems. Contradictions, conflicts and tensions do not necessarily signify negative outcomes, as the research literature in education highlights how they serve as sources of change and development, as drivers of innovation (Kim 2020) and as opportunities for learning and growth (Engeström & Sannino 2017).

Research methods and design

This research employed a generic qualitative design, focusing on how individual meaning is constructed by participants through interactions (Caelli, Ray & Mill 2003), recognising that the subjective nature of reality is influenced by context and circumstances (Jahja, Ramalu & Razimi 2021).

Purposive sampling was employed to gather data on SBSTs' experiences, allowing the intentional selection of participants (N = 30) possessing qualities relevant to the study's aim (Etikan, Musa & Alkassim 2016). In terms of the SBSTs themselves, we gathered data from two cohorts in their first year of study in 2021 and 2022. Data collection occurred over a 2-year period, utilising focus group interviews to gather information (DeMarrais 2004). Focus group interviews helped us to structure discussions among small groups of participants (Rikard, Knight & Beacham 1996), with similar qualities or common 'knowledge of the topic' (Merriam & Tisdell 2016:114) to draw on their understandings and experiences to answer questions posed to them. While focus group interviews have the potential to overlook individual perspectives and subtle nuances, we mitigated this limitation by ensuring that every participant had an equal opportunity to contribute and respond during the discussions.

Credibility was achieved through data triangulation, as elucidated by Merriam (1998). This process facilitated the rigorous examination of the trustworthiness and validity of participants' responses. Over a span of 2 years, multiple focus group interviews were conducted to compare, contrast and validate consistencies and patterns within the dataset (Anney 2014). Triangulation occurred at three distinct junctures: firstly, through the repetition of focus group interviews within the same year; secondly, by comparing different focus groups within the same year and thirdly, by juxtaposing focus groups across the 2-year period.

Employing qualitative content analysis (Merriam 1998), we examined patterns over the period, delving into the perspectives of SBSTs, with a particular emphasis on their encounters in schools and coursework. Applying components of the constant comparative method (Maykut & Morehouse 1994) assisted us in comparing the data to identify similar and divergent trends.

Ethical considerations, guided by principles of respect for persons, beneficence and justice, ensured participants' autonomy, protection from harm and fair treatment throughout the research process (Vanclay, Baines & Taylor 2013). The subsequent section will first present the findings, followed by a discussion, using the lens of CHAT.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of Johannesburg Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee (No. Sem 1-2021-105).

Results

We focus on two findings in this article, the challenges SBSTs experienced balancing their academic coursework with their

school commitments and how the level of support in the teacher education programme and school settings influenced the quality of SBSTs' learning experiences.

School-based student teachers caught between two competing environments

School-based student teachers appear to have encountered difficulties in reconciling the requirements of their teacher education programme with their school responsibilities. A predominant factor was the extensive school commitments within the school, which limited attention to coursework. For most, the school day commenced at 07:00; this meant that students had to leave home 2 h–3 h earlier[1] to get to school on time:

'I have to get here at seven a.m. I have to wake up at four a.m.' (Interview 1, Focus group 1, Year 2022)

Then, upon their arrival at school SBSTs are tasked with a range of responsibilities such as morning meetings and assemblies and reviewing 'home books' for parental-school communication (Interview 2, Focus group 2, Year 2022), teaching (Interview 1, Focus Group 3, Year 2022), as well as 'preparing and evaluating assessments' (Interview 2, Focus group 3, Year 2022). Some SBSTs are also tasked with substituting for absent teachers. After the conclusion of the school day at around 14:30, SBSTs are also required to contribute to 'aftercare and other extramural activities' (Interview 1, Focus group 3, Year 2022). This meant that SBSTs' ability to 'go back home and check all the content that was uploaded' (Interview 1, Focus group 2, Year 2021) and managing exhaustion from sports activities (Interview 2, Focus Group 2, Year 2021) were real problems. The duration of the afternoon commute also often clashed with afternoon university lectures (Interview 1, Focus group 1, Year 2022).

The SBSTs also observed how their household responsibilities impacted their studies. Many are parents (Interview 1, Focus group 3, Year 2022) or are raising siblings and extended family members and must juggle housework with online lectures (Interview 2, Focus group 3, Year 2022). Consequently, coursework often gets postponed to late evening hours when exhaustion impedes effective engagement (Interview 1, Focus group 2, Year 2021), resulting in some SBSTs expressing feelings of inadequacy in managing their workload (Interview 1, Focus group 2, Year 2022). The data further indicate that coursework tends to be neglected and perceived as an add-on (Interview 2, Focus group 2, Year 2021). Consequently, SBSTs identified most as being school interns, negatively impacting the students' sense of identity and belonging as university students. Coming on the tail end of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) measures, the inability to visit campus, a lack of access to university student cards and inability to meet their lecturers in person created a sense of alienation and marginalisation, leading one student to say:

'You really don't feel like a UJ student.' (Interview 1, Focus group 1, Year 2022)

1. Most students use public transport, which in South Africa is notoriously unreliable.

There was one school that was an exception. In the second year of the programme, the school coordinator allocated time for SBSTs to complete coursework during school hours, accommodating their academic responsibilities. Students appreciated this support, as evidenced by remarks such as:

'My timetable has been adapted to accommodate my coursework. I get at least two hours during the school day to attend to my coursework.' (Interview 1, Focus group 3, Year 2022)

Correlation between the levels of support and the quality of students' learning

The data highlight the relationship between varying levels of support students received and their learning. Peer support emerged as crucial, with one SBST remarking:

'I got help from the second years that I know.' (Interview 2, Focus group 2, Year 2022)

School-based student teachers also commended some lecturers, commenting on their efforts as follows:

'UJ lectures are really organised, in terms of uploading content, they are really organized [*and*] they're really supportive towards us having to be separate from campus-based students.' (Interview 1, Focus group 2, Year 2021)

They also appreciated the accessibility of some lecturers through platforms such as WhatsApp and email, enabling them to seek clarification and support when needed:

'The communication is really great, and you email or you WhatsApp and there is that back and forth, which is great.' (Interview 1, Focus group 1, Year 2022)

On the other hand, poor communication from staff compromises their learning:

'Sometimes, there's no information that's given about how we can approach the assessment. So, it's also like guessing in terms of how you can approach it.' (Interview 2, Focus group 1, Year 2021)

In addition, SBSTs expressed that some UJ lecturers provided constructive feedback on marked assessment tasks within reasonable timeframes:

'You have an assessment this weekend, next week your marks are out, or two weeks later your marks are out with feedback… … They highlight, and tell you next time do this, focus on this, don't write this … It kind of guides you in a way.' (Interview 1, Focus group 1, Year 2021)

On the other extreme, not receiving feedback on time adds to student anxiety:

'You write assignment one, you only get a mark. No feedback. Assignment two is a continuation from one. But you already failed that one. See? You can't even do two.' (Interview 1, Focus group 1, Year 2022)

A second level of support was from peer tutors. Provision is made for both subject-specific tutors in all courses, and in 2021, coming out of COVID-19, a large emphasis was placed on the provision of a first-year student (FYS) tutor, whose role

encompassed both academic guidance and support for emotional well-being. Reflecting on this, one student remarked:

> 'She's very helpful because sometimes you have that thing of wondering who do you ask help from, and sometimes we vent. We say everything and we tell her that we don't like this, and this is what's happening, and she listens and she gets back to us.' (Interview 1, Focus group 2, Year 2021)

In contrast, an FYE tutor was not provided to the 2022 SBSTs, resulting in a gap in personalised support compared to the previous cohort. However, the more general subject-specific tutors made efforts to foster a supportive learning environment, with one student commenting:

> 'I think the communication through the tutors is actually great because I talk to them more than I do with my lecturers from some subjects.' (Interview 1, Focus group 3, Year 2022)

In addition, mentor teachers at respective TEPS played a vital role in supporting SBSTs, providing both emotional support and academic guidance. The data showed how SBSTs needed the former as much as the latter. Describing the relationship with their mentor teacher, students from the 2021 and 2022 cohort expressed the following view:

> 'I had problems like coming from my family and honestly, I felt like there's no one else to talk to, and then I told her everything, she consoled me, and she gave me advice of how to deal with the situation.' (Interview 1, Focus group 2, Year 2021)

These mentor teachers played a crucial role in nurturing SBSTs, utilising their experience to provide guidance and encouragement, ultimately contributing to the development of subject matter and practical skills. Furthermore, their feedback and reflection practices facilitated constructive feedback, enhancing the relevance of coursework to classroom experiences:

> 'I teach two subjects a day, and she teaches the other two and I observe. Then the following day, she would reflect on the things I did, … where I went wrong, what I was supposed to do … on things I can improve.' (Interview 1, Focus group 3, Year 2022)

Discussion of findings

Within the context of the UJ SBST programme, student feedback revealed that despite the structure expressed in a particular type of school–university partnership, this did not necessarily result in the kind of student learning experience we envisaged and gave rise to several contradictions and tensions (Tsui 2005). The school(s) and the university, while espousing the shared goal, largely tended to operate as two distinct activity systems, with conflicting objectives.

Firstly, one of the most concerning aspects was the challenges SBST experienced balancing their academic coursework with their school commitments. This was in part ascribed to the partner schools not providing sufficient time during the school week for the SBSTs to work on their university coursework. It seemed as if the activities valuable to the activity system of the school assumed greater precedence than the students' academic studies. Consequently, the

students were left overwhelmed, forcing them to choose or prioritise one over the other.

Secondly, despite being first-year teachers, these students' immersion in practical experiences under the guidance of mentor teachers could be said to place them in legitimate peripheral participation, gradually transitioning towards assuming full responsibilities in the classroom (Lave & Wenger 1991). However, the extensive division of labour within the school setting, which saw SBSTs being utilised as substitute teachers for whole days not only moved away from the understanding that the SBSTs receive supervision and guidance from mentor teachers during their interactions with learners but also may have exceeded the capabilities of first-year SBSTs, who did not possess the requisite subject matter knowledge, understanding of the curriculum or pedagogical skills (Shulman 1988) to respond appropriately in such situations. Thus, while acknowledging that SBSTs reported learning much about the role of a teacher from experiential learning opportunities such as the daily operations and routines of a school especially for cultivating effective classroom management skills (Franklin & Harrington 2019), it is imperative that SBSTs grasp the underlying rationale behind these activities to prevent their learning from becoming overly mechanistic. From the student feedback, we are unclear whether SBSTs could discern this important element of performing these tasks. Therefore, this misalignment between the expectations of the university and those of the schools may have led to superficial learning, focusing solely on the mechanics of teaching without delving into the underlying principles and rationale behind instructional practices (Korthagen 2016) and other teacher choices.

Moreover, the role of mentor teachers, although appreciated by SBSTs for providing emotional support and alleviating workload pressures, may not always align with the objectives of the university–school partnership. While mentor teachers facilitate learning through practical experiences and reflections, the data revealed a lack of explicit engagement with the theoretical underpinnings of teaching practices (Brown 2006). We are unsure of whether this is attributable to the inability of first-year students to articulate this aspect of their learning with the mentor teachers during the interviews. The success of this type of university–school partnership is largely because of the ability of mentors to create the conditions for students to enter a cognitive apprenticeship (Collins, Brown & Holum 1991) with them, in which they make the thinking and reasoning behind their actions visible to SBSTs. In this way, students can integrate theory with practical experiences (Walton & Rusznyak 2020).

A third issue was the teacher educators. The lack of experience of some academic staff (or their unwillingness) to adapt to the specific circumstances of the SBSTs also contributed greatly to the stresses experienced by the SBSTs. Staff default positioning was the contact-based students, with the expectation that the same sets of activities, rules and tools would work with SBSTs. The data point to an

inability (or unwillingness) of some staff to adjust their pedagogical approaches and communication for the differing circumstances of the SBSTs. We are comforted that this was not the case with all teacher educators and that the peers and tutors often made up for the shortcomings in the kind of academic support SBSTs expected. In addition, despite 3 years of advance notice of the implementation of the SBST programme, several administrative processes were not tested for end-user compatibility.

In this pilot study of a programme, founded on school-university cooperation, the tension between the demands of the school and university systems resulted in SBSTs experiencing heightened anxiety because of time constraints, impacting their engagement with coursework and compromising the depth of their learning experiences (Tsui 2005). However, these contradictions have also fostered opportunities for expansive learning. The SBSTs demonstrated the ability to integrate university content knowledge into their practice, develop reflexivity and form communities of practice with their peers to cope (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López & Tejeda 1999). Some of these tensions have also resulted in opportunities for expanded learning for all involved in the partnership, for the SBSTs and especially for the school and university partners who addressed their learnings and shortcomings through constructive dialogue and negotiation (Edwards, Tsui & Stimpon 2009), via seminars and consultative forums during the first 2 years.

Conclusion

The University of Johannesburg adopts a unique approach to teacher internships by closely integrating coursework with practical experiences and fostering collaborative partnerships between the university and schools to enrich student learning and professional development. Through deliberate engagement with mentor teachers and regular reflection, the UJ SBST model aims to enhance teacher preparation by bridging the gap between theory and practice. In this article, we reported on the experiences of first-year SBSTs.

Despite common criticisms of universities for being overly theoretical, the findings of this study suggest that as a university, we failed to capitalise on many aspects to integrate the practice-theory divide; measures we assumed to be in place went awry. As a university and as the driver of the partnership, we should have been more attuned to this, and we should have followed up more regularly to ensure that we understood the impediments students were facing in the schools and addressed this timeously.

Moving forward, addressing these tensions requires the creation of a collective space where boundaries are transcended through open communication and dialogue. Negotiations between stakeholders of both activity systems – the school and the university are something we continue to work on. Viewing contradictions as catalysts for change and innovation creates the potential for transformative learning experiences within activity systems to ensure optimal learning experiences for SBSTs in both school and university contexts.

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