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Enabling the development of student teacher professional identity through vicarious learning during an educational excursion

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This paper explores the views of student teachers who were provided vicarious learning opportunities during an educational excursion, and how the learning enabled them to develop their teacher professional identity. This qualitative research study, using a social-constructivist lens highlights how vicarious learning influenced student teachers' professional identity. Data were analysed from activity based reflection notes Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) students had written based on their learning and experiences during an excursion. Findings indicated that learning from other practising teachers' experiences enabled them to develop a more positive teacher professional identity in terms of caring, motivation and being a beacon of hope.

Keywords: educational excursion; initial teacher training; reflection; teacher professional identity; vicarious learning

Introduction

The aim of this qualitative study was to contribute to the understanding and knowledge of vicarious learning as an essential practice in teacher education and in enabling the development of student teachers' professional identity. In doing this, our focus was on literature in which vicarious learning in teacher education is described, as well as on worldwide studies explicitly focused on the development of student teacher professional identity using vicarious learning during off-campus educational excursions. Teacher education through teacher education programmes such as the PGCE, have been criticised for its lack of ability to adequately prepare teachers and to adapt to the ever-changing demands of the teaching profession (Gravett, De Beer, Odendaal-Kroon & Merseeth, 2017; Kitchen & Petrarca, 2016; Loughran & Hamilton, 2016). We argue that an off-campus experience, wherein opportunities for engaging collaboratively in vicarious learning activities is presented, may enhance the education of student teachers, as well as enable the development of their teacher professional identity. Development of teacher professional identity is seen as a continuous process of making sense of their beliefs about teaching as well as becoming a teacher. Vicarious learning in teacher education fosters learning by providing opportunities for students to learn from the experiences of others. During our study the following question was addressed: How could vicarious learning by student teachers during an educational excursion enable the development of their teacher professional identity?

In this article, we regard vicarious learning for the development of student teachers' professional identity as learning experiences in an external setting and as a process of using vicarious learning as a tool for enabling teacher professional identity.

Constructivist learning as a theoretical lens guided this article, supported by a review of literature related to learning during educational excursions, and how vicarious learning may be included in student teacher training. An exposition of the theoretical framework as well as the conceptual framework is provided, after which the research methodology and data analysis of the qualitative study and its findings are discussed.

Theoretical Framework

Constructivist learning

This study is grounded in constructivist learning theory (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986), which views learning as linking with and adopting from the socio-cultural context (Bonk & Cunningham, 1998); and the socio-cognitive learning theory of Bandura, with its focus on personal agency (Bandura, 2001). The four main principles of the constructivist theory relevant to this study are: (1) new knowledge is constructed; (2) knowledge is developed socially; (3) learning is a process of making sense of reality and the world; and (4) learning is effective by solving meaningful and challenging problems (Fox, 2001, as cited in Marais, 2016). These principles were evident as student teachers engaged and interacted socially with lecturers and practising teachers during an educational excursion, where we interpreted their experiences and the challenges they had faced at schools during their teaching practice. We argue that by doing this, the student teachers constructed and developed their own knowledge by means of vicarious learning, based on the experiences of others. The conceptual framework for the study will be explained in the ensuing section.

Educational excursion

The excursion is an off-campus learning experience during which PGCE students are grouped in activities as well as living spaces (De Beer & Henning, 2011) to provide opportunities for them to learn more about and from one another. We agree with De Beer and Henning (2011) that excursions have a specific role in providing learning spaces for diverse students in a daily social setting beyond the formal university classroom. Excursions have recently become part of learning outside the classroom (Mannion, Fenwick & Lynch, 2013). Excursions are aimed at sharing experiences by merging knowledge bases of students with different experiences (Jonasson, 2011). Further to this, Jonasson (2011:25) argues that “learning during excursions enables students to invest in an engaged ontological and physical movement,” rewarded by new learning experiences and new ways of being in the world.

When the educational excursion was first introduced, it formed part of the first-year B.Ed curriculum (De Beer, Petersen & Dunbar-Krige, 2012). Later, the PGCE students were included in the first-year excursion. Reflections emanating from the excursion at the time indicated that the PGCE students would benefit from an excursion aimed at their specific and unique educational needs, which were not always aligned with those of the first-year group. This included learning about and from practice in a very limited time, in order to narrow the theory/practice divide, as the formal classroom time for PGCE students to learn how to become a teacher is very limited.

The two-day excursion is held annually at the end of the PGCE students’ work-integrated-learning period at an off campus conference venue with the main purpose of engaging learners in debriefing based on their experiences in schools. Specific debriefing sessions, some including practicing teachers, were scheduled as learning activities during the excursion. The excursion forms an integral part of the PGCE programme at the University of Johannesburg (UJ).

Vicarious learning

Vicarious learning has gained recognition as a widespread practice in student teacher training through peer involvement in higher education teaching courses such as the PGCE (McMahon, Barrett & O’Neill, 2007). According to Roberts (2010) a growing body of literature claims that students learn vicariously from the experiences of others. During a debriefing session, each student may share his/her stories and experiences with the group, whilst the other students have the opportunity to listen attentively and reflect on what they have heard, thus the students are afforded the opportunity to learn and think together (Roberts, 2010).

Cox, Mckendree, Tobin, Lee and Mayes (1999) argue that students need to be attuned to the others’ discourse by acknowledging that their experiences are worth listening to and thus useful material from which to learn. As most students were experiencing similar challenges in schools it formed part of their reality (Roberts, 2010) and they found the discourse interesting to engage in and reflect upon. Thus, as Roberts (2010) argues, experiences are shared through reflection on practice and relating these experiences in dialogue to fellow students, as was the case in the debriefing session.

Teacher professional identity

Teacher professional identity consists of principal personal characteristics as well as the qualities members of specific groups assign to a teacher (Francis & Le Roux, 2011; Newman, 1997:20). Similarly, teacher professional identity as well as its development is seen as an ongoing process of clarifying what one believes about teaching and learning, and particularly about oneself as a teacher, to establish a discrete sense of what one’s roles and purposes are, and what one values as a professional teacher (Hong, 2010; Hsieh, 2016).

The development of a professional teacher identity by student teachers is a process of negotiating a number of meanings and understandings these students have acquired through their personal schooling experiences, their observations of teacher behaviour and their experiences during study and practical teaching practice, allowing them to become aware of their capabilities to teach, confidence as subject knowledge expert and ability to manage classroom learning activities (Smit & Du Toit, 2016; Yüksel, 2014). It is thus acknowledged that teachers’ emergent professional identity is closely related to classroom practices, teacher knowledge, beliefs and attitudes (Bukor, 2015:306; Lortie, 1975). Facilitating the development of student teachers’ emerging professional identity is paramount in their eventual expertise.

Studies on teacher professional identity have focused on describing the development of the professional identity, on identifying and elucidating particular characteristics that may be associated with teacher professional identity, and on teachers’ narratives of identity (Beijaard, Meijer & Verloop, 2004; Timoštšuk & Ugaste, 2012). Fundamental to views of teacher professional identity, development is the notion that a number of different contexts, such as social, cultural and historical contexts influence development; that all identities develop through interactional relationships and include emotions; that identity is always changing and adapting, thus continually constructed and re-constructed; and that multiple identities exist at any given time (Rodgers & Scott, 2008; Timoštšuk & Ugaste, 2012). In essence, learning about and developing teacher professional identity is thus

situated. What and how we learn and develop a teacher professional identity is the product of our participation in what exists in our social and cultural settings every day. Learning is conceptualised through social participation and is thus "... the process of being active participants in social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities" (Wenger, 1998, cited in Timošćuk & Ugaste, 2012:1565). This implies that during the training of student teachers, meaningful experience of the teaching profession through practice and action, through belonging to a community in which the experiences and actions are meaningful, through the contribution of a variety of roles played in the interaction, and through opportunities to understand their own becoming as a teacher are of vital importance (Graven, 2002, cited in Nel, 2012). The ever-changing, dynamic nature of the teaching profession demands adaptability and continual reflection. We therefore argue that the ability to reflect and learn about the self, the profession and the demands of classroom teaching is crucial in the development of a teacher professional identity and should be a central concern in pre-service teacher training.

The development of teacher professional identity presupposes the ability to reflect deeply and critically on one's own practice (Frick, Carl & Beets, 2010). In the case of student teachers, deep reflection on their 'experienced practice' is presupposed. 'Experienced practice' refers to work-integrated learning experiences as well as interactions during formal lecture meetings, and particularly in situated and activity-based learning opportunities afforded by the excursion with reference to this paper. Deep reflection on learning experiences in practice are abilities expected of 'reflective practitioners' and 'practitioner researchers' and paramount in the development of a teacher's professional identity (Schön, 1983, Stenhouse, 1993 and Zeichner, 2010b, as cited in Pereira, Lopes & Marta, 2015).

Avalos and De los Rios (2013, cited in Beltman, Glass, Dinham, Chalk & Nguyen, 2015:226) view the development of teacher professional identity as 'a co-construction' between the student teachers and significant other role players. Student teachers are expected to develop their teacher professional identity given the 'potentially conflicting' realities of their own expectations of the profession and the reality of teaching practice (Friedman, 2004, cited in Beltman et al., 2015).

Teacher professional identity development thus, in essence, relies on interactive 'meaning-making' by the student teacher in different social and professional situations in which specific behaviours are negotiated, established and maintained (Hong, 2010). The relation quality of an emerging teacher professional identity thus aligns with symbolic interactionist perspectives, which

assert that meaning is created and interpreted by the individual through interactional and social experiences with others (Mead & Morris, 1934, as cited in Hong, 2010; Smit & Fritz, 2008).

Hong (2010) further states that a student teachers' professional identity may be influenced by psychological factors such as value, self-efficacy, commitment, emotions, knowledge, beliefs and micro-politics, and may eventually also influence their decision-making with regard to their career trajectories, or with regard to leaving the profession.

Qualitative Research Methodology

Our research focused on how students learnt how this learning enabled them to develop their teacher professional identity. In doing so, it was imperative to establish whether and how vicarious learning contributed to the development of teacher professional identity, by interpreting the "meaning it had for them" (Merriam & Associates, 2002:4). A qualitative research approach is most appropriate for making meaning as well as for studying inherently subjective experiences, perceptions and aspirations (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004:68). We focused on making meaning from narratives and descriptions of students' experiences, thus exploring the multiple of realities that existed in their perceptions of the world (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006:253). We are of the view that reality is a personal, subjective and often socially constructed phenomenon (Freebody, 2003:56).

Data was collected during the excursion by means of activity based students' reflections. Ethical procedures included informed consent, assurance of confidentiality, and voluntary participation and withdrawal were discussed before any collection of data proceeded. On day two of the excursion students were requested to reflect on their learning and indicate what had surprised them about their learning and experiences since arriving at the excursion. Each student was provided with a sheet of paper with the heading 'WHAT SURPRISED ME' They had to complete the sentence by relating activities during the excursion during which their expectations were exceeded and/or their emotions were stimulated. This resulted in 137 individual reflection notes which was used as qualitative data.

In addition to the individual reflection notes, students were requested on day two, in group format (14 groups), to plan and prepare a newspaper headline reflecting the highlight of the previous day. The groups prepared their headlines on posters and these posters was captured as qualitative data.

All 225 UJ PGCE students were invited to attend the excursion, but not all students were able to attend, due to various reasons. The PGCE students who attended the excursion (137) were requested to complete activity based reflection notes and participate in the group activity for the headlines. All

of them (137) did participate and thus formed a convenient sample, namely all the PGCE students who attended the excursion.

A content analysis of the collected data was done in order to systematically describe the written data. Content analysis is generally used to construe meaning from collected data in naturalistic settings, generally in the form of textual data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) and can range from “impressionistic, intuitive, interpretive analyses to systematic, strict textual analyses and focuses on the content and contextual meaning of the text” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005:1277). Content analysis presumes the existence of multiple realities and thus involves interpretation of the collected data by the researcher (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). In this study, inductive content analysis of collected data was undertaken, which included open coding, creation of categories, and abstraction (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Data used in the content analysis consisted of the written reflection data provided by students’ experiences of specific activities in the programme, focusing particularly on the content and the contextual meaning of the written data. The analysis protocol included reading all data repeatedly to engage with it and gain a holistic view of it. Thereafter, specific words or phrases relevant to the aim of the study were captured. After this initial analysis, notes were made of relevant impressions and thoughts. Making use of condensing and abstracting, specific meaning units were decided on to arrive at labels of meaning units (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). These meaning units were clustered to form categories of meaning based on similarity, linkage and relatedness of the units (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Morse & Field, 1995; Tesch, 1990).

Findings: Vicarious Learning Experiences Enabling Teacher Professional Identity

The findings indicated that students’ vicarious learning experiences during the debriefing activities at the educational excursion assisted them in developing a sense of teacher professional identity that reflects optimism and agency. We noted from the student reflections that the majority of the students indicated that the practising teachers and other speakers seemed to have influenced their perception of the teaching profession. Data from individual reflections include: “I did not initially want to be a teacher, but you can actually become an excellent teacher” (Participant 28). “It made me have a different perspective on teaching or becoming a teacher. I have started to be serious about it ...” (Participant 34). “My whole perspective has changed regarding education as a career and how positive my outlook has become” (Participant 37). In addition, the data from the 14 posters indicated that most groups were of the opinion that the practising teachers and the way they

viewed education had been the highlight of that day. Examples of this is evident from headlines that read: “Teaching is not a profession to be in for the income – but rather for the outcome” (Group 6); “Dedication brings the best” (Group 11) and “We are igniting care and distinguishing order in the classroom” (Group 2), which reflected specific messages from the practising teachers.

The analysis of the data collected from the students indicated the motivational and inspirational qualities of the vicarious learning opportunities provided by particularly motivational speakers and practising teachers. Three focal findings related to teacher professional identity namely becoming future caring professionals, becoming motivated and inspirational teachers, and becoming change agents will be reported on next. An additional finding crystallised, indicating a shift from apparent negative student views to seemingly a more optimistic and affirmative views of particularly the profession and of their own teacher professional identity as future teachers.

Student Teachers as Future Caring Professionals

The student teachers highlighted caring as one of the categories which influenced the development of their teacher professional identity. “Igniting care and distinguishing order in the classroom” involve a set basis for learning and teaching that is fair and unprejudiced within the safe confines of the classroom setting for all learners to participate in (Petersen & Osman, 2010). Teaching is often seen in the ‘virtue sense’ as a profession which cares for the learners in the classrooms at a number of levels, as unique individuals from diverse backgrounds who need to be respected and ‘looked after’ (Noddings, 2005), as seen in Participant’s 34 response: “... I started to be serious about changing the classroom situation [...] change it into a positive one by engaging learners ...”

Noddings (2005) further proposes an extension of caring as a relational concept in which the experience and recognition of the one being cared for, in this case the learners, is acknowledged through teachers’ commitment to being attentive and receptive to learners’ needs and motives, and recognised as such by learners. We therefore argue that ‘professional caring’ should espouse this relational sense.

The student teachers in this study viewed caring as a way of being in the classroom environment that involves how student teachers teach their learners about issues that affect their lives and teach learners to value their subject content as evidenced by the following reflection: “... how one would make teaching more meaningful ...” (Participant 80). Student teachers reported that by igniting care, they felt that they would be able to establish order in their classrooms when needed. According to Petersen and Osman (2010) teachers

who aim to bring about change in educational contexts and communities aim to improve equity and justice within a democratic society. Thus, the concept of care in education extends beyond a basic human personality trait of teachers being supportive, nurturing, kind, tolerant and acceptable, to becoming caring professionals and positive role models within educational settings, aiming to promote care beyond their classroom contexts.

Becoming Motivated and Inspired Teachers

Teachers' motivation towards the profession is distinguishable as having either intrinsic, extrinsic or altruistic explanations (Kyriacou & Coulthard, 2000 and Moran, Kilpatrick, Abbott, Dallat & McClune, 2001, cited in Roness, 2011). Intrinsic explanations of teachers' choice to teach relate to a great extent to the teaching activities in a classroom, as the 'teaching interaction itself' in the classroom appears to be the mainspring for their decisions. Teachers who explain their career choice extrinsically are more concerned with external motivators such as salary, holiday and related rewards.

Student teachers in this study reported becoming aware of practising teachers' "extreme passion for and dedication to teaching" and being highly motivated and 'touched' by it (Participant 10). Experiencing presentations by teachers who had received acknowledgement through national awards was a "privilege," a realisation of "exceptional teachers out there," "made (them) love the profession even more," and inspired them "to become a super duper teacher" (Participants 17; 21; 26; 42). These comments appear to indicate a more altruistic motivation for entering the career. A service-oriented perspective is also evident in students' views that the presentations endorsed their decision to become a teacher (Participant 41) and also created the motivation to "stay in teaching forever" (Participant 69). The presentations also provided them with intense motivation and a sense of clarity as "I wasn't sure about this career path I was taking" (Participant 77) and "changed my mind-set becoming a teacher [...] requires me to become a super teacher and take charge and be the change" (Participant 83). Students also reported not being able to wait to "go back to the class and be a super teacher" (Participant 63) and to "brag about being a teacher" (Participant 88). Participant 116 commented "I had no passion before and after I listened to them [the presenters] I got inspired and I really wanna do this and become a super teacher."

Research cited in England and Wales suggests that intrinsic and altruistic motivations appear to be the most dominant explanations for entering the teaching profession (Spear, Gould & Lee, 2000, cited in Roness, 2011). Findings from an Australian perspective submitted realisations related to making a meaningful difference in learners' lives,

allowing meaningful engagement in the teaching of their subjects, as well as personal fulfilment as the main explanations for their career choice (Manuel & Brindley, 2005 and Manuel & Hughes, 2006, cited in Roness, 2011). Criticism of the broad nature of these explanations has been levelled by Watt and Richardson, who suggest the most prevalent reasons to be student self-belief in their ability to teach, and their aspiration to make a contribution in shaping the future of the learners, whilst Anthony and Ord add a pragmatic motivation to enter teaching (Rones, 2011).

Student Teachers as Beacons of Hope

Teachers who choose a teaching career from an altruistic, service-oriented career are generally more concerned with facilitating social change and social capital development, and view the teaching career as an important and meaningful one. Teachers are viewed as sources of hope, as society anticipates that teachers will demonstrate to learners that their lives can be different (November, 2010). Students reported "taking from that how much fun teaching can be regardless of whatever encounters one may come across, there is still hope in the future of teaching as a practice and success for our learners"; becoming aware of the ability to "become an excellent teacher"; "developing your own teaching style that fits your personality"; using different "activities to engage learners"; and "responsibility to protect" the learners against injustices such as "suspected abuse" (Participants 28; 40).

In order for teachers to be beacons of hope in society, teachers need to rethink traditional ways of teaching and learning (November, 2010). Student teachers also mentioned that the group activities and panel discussion enabled them to realise that they had the "capability of being creative" (Participant 80) in dealing with these challenges and that they were able to "change the education system in our country"; "change the world"; "change society" and that the solutions lay "within us as young professionals" (Participants 107; 108; 136).

General Optimism and Affirmation

As stated, students' views of the profession and of their own teacher professional identity as future teachers showed a definite correction from them being rather despondent and demotivated, with apparent negative views about their profession of choice during their work-integrated-learning, to more optimistic and affirmative views after experiencing the vicarious learning opportunities with the practicing teachers.

Students reported a definite change in perspective of the teaching profession as being worthwhile and inspiring. They also reported that the vicarious learning experiences inspired them to adopt "a different perspective on teaching or becoming a teacher" (Participant 34). Participant 37

reported realising “how [...] whole perspective[s] ... changed regarding education as a career and how positive my outlook has become”; while another student mentioned “(I) could actually stay in teaching forever, after ... presentation” (Participant 68).

Students also developed a sense of confidence in their own practice as future teachers. They reported that although they had not initially wanted to become teachers, they believed they could “actually become an excellent teacher, develop your own teaching style that fits your personality” (Participant 28) “after listening to the presentations about how teaching requires me to become a super teacher and take charge and be the change” (Participant 83). Students also reported that the learning experiences had allowed them to be more confident in the classroom, as voiced by Participant 63: “my level of confidence has risen while my fear of being in front of a class and speaking has gone down.”

Students furthermore showed greater passion and commitment to the profession as is evident in students mentioning that teaching was an “exciting career, and I got more motivated by it today” (Participant 90). Students further reported the realisation that “teachers are actually important, and [they were] not only entering this field for income but for the love and the change that you can bring about” (Participant 108); as well as becoming highly motivated, as expressed by Participant 127: “I had no passion before, but after I listened to them, I got inspired and I really wanna do this and become a super teacher.”

Discussion

The analysis of the data of the vicarious learning experiences of student teachers in this study indicated that the activities had enabled them to start clarifying their beliefs and values about teaching and learning, about what they regarded as their main roles and to reflect on their existing practice and knowledge. Students indicated the value of the planned and vicarious learning experiences offered during the interactions with practising teachers, academic staff and fellow students as conducive to developing their emergent identities. These emergent identities form an imperative part of teacher education, specifically in a country where student teachers are expected to teach in various contexts comprising a variety of traditions, cultures, backgrounds, languages and economic situations. The vicarious learning opportunities provided student teachers access to many different interpretations and experiences from various contexts.

The data indicated that students were at the time developing a teacher professional identity and experienced changes in the professional identities they had constructed. The analysis also highlighted

the multiplicity of professional identities as well as the reconstructive power of the vicarious learning activities offered at the excursion. Professional identities aligning with the more altruistic, service-oriented perspectives were affirmed, along with an understanding of the more practical realities and challenges the profession would bring to their ability to teach well, manage learning, and control learner behaviour.

Students reported that spending time in schools during the work-integrated learning period assisted them in developing a teacher professional identity, but it became increasingly apparent from the data analysis that vicarious learning experiences such as the group interaction and the open discussion with practising teachers enabled them to reflect more deeply on their previous experiences and to crystallise their emerging identities.

It is also apparent that the excursion and the related activities allowed a sense of community, of being in solidarity and of coming to terms with the reality of teaching in schools to develop; particularly through the communal sharing of work-integrated learning experiences, of finding commonality with practising teachers on the panel, and in collaborative group activities.

Listening to expert teachers and to a panel of teacher practitioners emerged as an apparent enabler of developing teacher professional identity during the excursion. The opportunity to interact with and reflect on the views expressed by these significant persons potentially enabled students to clarify their personal motivation for the profession and to partially eliminate the views of potential conflicting and constraining experiences they had had during their work-integrated learning experiences.

Their new learning experiences through co-producing realities shaped both the professional teacher identity and learning of the student teachers during the excursion. Students’ thinking about becoming a teacher was also influenced, thereby enabling them to further develop their teacher professional identity.

In an attempt to contribute to students’ learning and thinking about becoming a teacher, a number of practising teachers were invited to share their teaching experiences with the students. Two award-winning teachers discussed their individual teaching philosophies, while emphasising the importance of the teaching profession. Thereafter, a panel of practising teachers invited questions and discussions from the students related to what they had experienced in schools. Initially, the discussions took on a relatively negative slant and a negative view of teaching as a profession was evident. However, as the panel responded to students’ problems and challenges by providing their own insights, views and experiences, the discourse gradually became more positive, as students learnt

more strategies, and were given practical examples of how to deal with the issues at hand. This move toward a more positive view of education and teaching as a profession, thus a more positive teacher professional identity, was enabled through students' vicarious learning.

An ongoing concern nationally and internationally is that teacher education programmes do not address the complexities of the teaching profession, is removed from practice and slow to adapt to the demands of the profession (Korthagen, 2010). In response to this concern, collaborative engagement in vicarious learning activities by way of off-campus educational excursions appear to hold the promise of developing caring dispositions, motivation and passion towards the profession, and intention to transform classroom interaction as main drivers of teacher professional identity.

Note

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