

How can exposure to practice in a foreign context enhance the professional development of teacher students? Case study from South Africa.

Sissel Tove Olsen and Anikke Hagen
Oslo and Akershus University College, Oslo, Norway

Abstract

This research paper presents a case study aimed to explore and analyse Norwegian teacher students' professional development through exposure to the concept of Teacher Well-Being in a South African context. We have chosen Wenger's social theory of learning to describe, analyse and discuss students' own perceptions of their learning (Wenger, 2008). The methodological rationale for the qualitative research approach forms part of a search for meaning within the cultural diversity of the schools hosting the students. We argue that the reflection competence of the students is enhanced significantly in ways that will benefit their future position as teachers in Norway.

Key words: Student practice in foreign context, practice communities, teacher well-being, reflection competence

Introduction

In this paper we focus on how an exchange model, implemented by a Norwegian Higher Education Institution (HEI), Oslo and Akershus University College (HiOA) and three South African primary schools linked to the University of the Western Cape (UWC), impact on the professional development of the participating students. The findings presented have emerged from a study conducted over a period of two years.

It is hoped that the assessment of the impact of the exchange and recommendations emerging from the field research will provide useful knowledge to further develop teacher education programmes in Norway. We also trust that the flexibility of the exchange model examined makes provision for it being applicable to other countries and cultures.

1.1 Background

Norwegian teacher education policy states that HEIs must stimulate students' global awareness in a complex world. HEIs should therefore contribute to students acquiring an understanding of how education, pedagogy, and schooling are connected to a country's educational policy and culture. To achieve this understanding the students are encouraged to make meaning of, and identify themselves with the role of teachers in other countries and cultures. HiOA has developed a model for student mobility in the 2nd and 3rd year of the institution's teacher education programmes. The model consists

of a up to three - month placement in a foreign context in which practice is combined with a number of academic assignments such as practice reflection notes, assigned essays linked to the students' specific area of study and BA thesis (the latter applies to the teacher students only).

Annually, since 2012 a total of around 24 Norwegian teacher education students and 10 early childhood education students (from now referred to as teacher students) were placed in three primary schools located in the province of Western Cape, South Africa. The student teachers are observing and practicing teaching in these primary schools that are all associated with the promotion of teacher well-being. The students have received academic training from a lecturer based at the UWC, to strengthen their awareness and capacity around teacher well-being issues in challenging school contexts. The definition of well-being we use is inspired by Seligman (2002) in Collett & Olsen, 2012 and includes both (1) "a sense of gratification" and (2) "a sense of meaning that derives from doing one's job in the service of something of wider significance than oneself". The teachers well – being is challenged by under-resourced practice schools, large classes, and multiple demands linked to diversity and widespread poverty in the schools' communities. The complexity of the schools' context forms part of the preparation courses before they leave Norway, and becomes reinforced through the TWB course offered at UWC upon arrival in South Africa - and followed up by a TWB reflection seminar at a later stage of their practice and study period.

1.2 Exposure to practice in a foreign context

In the South African education, the legacy of apartheid has left many schools under-resourced and unprepared to cope adequately with transformation-related policies regarding, amongst others, new school curriculums, restructuring and re-culturing of the whole education system.

The learners at the practice schools come from impoverished urban and peri-urban settlements (townships). The communities of all schools observed for this paper are characterised by high levels of unemployment, substance abuse, violence, sexual abuse, teenage pregnancies, HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis. Idle, out of school youth who are observed in close proximity to the school added to the health risk embedded in the impoverished circumstances. As summed up by Collett & Olsen, poor home circumstances, poverty, risk behavior and poor nutrition are therefore identified as impacting on children and affecting conditions in the classroom (2012).

The background for the Teacher Well – Being (TWB) project is justified in the context described above which results in the extreme teacher stress and duress that have been recorded over the last few years in South Africa as well as from the attrition rates for teachers that have significantly increased over the same period. South African research studies (Hay, Smith & Paulsen, 2001; Theron, 2009; Xaba, 2003; in Collett & Olsen, 2012) report high levels of stress in the teacher workforce and the need to address teacher support and mental health issues. The TWB project was implemented from 2009 to 2013 through a partnership between the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU), Teacher In-service Project (TIP) at the University of the Western Cape, and the Centre for Education Policy Development (CEPD).

The research design for the TWB project was informed by the comprehensive approach of whole school development, the learning organization and the participatory action research approach. We understand in line with e.g. Dalin, 1998; Fullan, 2004 and

Davidoff & Lazarus, 2002, whole school development and the learning school as approaches to develop effective schools, involving all stakeholders and all elements of the school towards enhancing effective teaching and learning. We have adapted components of the TWB approach in order to explore the students' practice in some of the same schools. The TWB project built participatory processes of reflection on practice in at a school, inter-school and systems level. Teachers were encouraged to access their own agency in addressing issues influencing their well-being on a professional, personal and emotional level through an approach to counselling in work discussion groups.

The students were encouraged to identify and reflect on factors supporting or constraining their well-being during their school practice. Their well-being was monitored through group supervision by UWC and HiOA lecturers as well as by local support provision. We anticipate that the issue of context in which the teachers and teacher students/ research participants live and work could have a significant bearing on their experiences and reflections. Young (2004) and Wenger (2008) argue that experience forms the foundation of all knowledge and for this study we have given ample space to student voices expressing their experiences.

We claim that the TWB project approach and methodology could be adapted to other countries and contexts. The need to address teacher support and mental health issues are reported in several studies worldwide. Some relevant studies have sought to focus on obtaining a measure of well-being related to stress, burnout and job related characteristics. (Kyriacou & Pratt, 1985; Jackson, Rothman & Van der Vijver, 2004; Pienaar & van Wyk, 2006 in Collett & Olsen 2012, p. 2). The teacher in-service participatory process of change used in the TWB approach to school development strengthens its adaptability in addressing identified support needing issues in local contexts.

2. Methodology

A qualitative research approach was adopted for a case study. The rationale for using the qualitative approach is represented by the search for meaning within the context and cultural and structural setting of the three practice schools. The reflexive qualitative research approach was decided upon in order to describe and understand how, and to what extent, the teacher students might benefit from an international teaching practice.

The case study provided us with an opportunity to focus on the learning process of the participants through a continuous reflection on data collected over a period of two years. (Bryman, 2001; Merriam, 1988; Yin, 1993). Crossley and Broadfoot (1992) bring the usefulness of the local case study to a global level and argue that the significance of context at micro level is fundamental in understanding the more direct links to comparative and international research in education.

As the data for our study need to be rich in description, the instruments or techniques chosen for the case study are loosely structured questionnaires and in-depth group interviews of all students (34).

Literature review on social learning theories, school leadership and organisational change are used to provide an analytical framework to explore the impact of the exchange programme on the professional development of the teacher students. Following key concepts are used as analytical tools to understand the context of the students' placement in school: school leaders leading pedagogy of care; schools as learning organisations; collaborative and participatory school cultures (Dalín, 1998; Fullan, 2004; Lave & Wenger, 1999; Wenger, 2008).

In the group interviews we found the students in general to be speaking openly and freely, and they became often very engaged in the topics discussed, and at times these discussions developed their own dynamics, which sometimes needed our guidance to get 'back on track'.

The advantage of group discussions became evident when the discussions took form. The students expressed similarities and differences concerning their opinions and experiences. As Morgan (1997) points out, it became clear that the method of group interview required greater attention to the researcher's role as the moderator, and the method provided less depth and detail about the opinions and experiences of individual participants.

This research study was guided by the general codes of ethics of educational and social research. In words, and indeed, this means that the research process was led by the principle of 'do no harm' to any participant, confidentiality and non-traceability.

3. Theoretical framework

Student practice from schools and kindergartens constitute a fundamental and integral component in the teacher education programmes at HiOA aimed at strengthening students' ability to act and reflect on their learning experiences. In addition to the strengthening professional qualities of 'act and reflect', practical placement in other countries and cultures represents an opportunity for the students to develop a deeper global understanding and knowledge. Students are therefore encouraged to experience the exposure to a foreign context in which they do not find the immediate recognition and familiarity. In this unfamiliar situation, the students are expected to actively observe, take part in all school activities and reflect.

What characterize the structural and cultural conditions that the students are experiencing during their practice in a South - African school? How do the students interpret and make meaning of their experiences?

We have chosen Wenger's social theory of learning as a theoretical framework to describe, analyse and discuss students' own perceptions of their learning and professional development. Wenger uses the concept of 'practice community' in order to create a context for the negotiation of meaning of mutual and shared histories of engagement, participation, identification and learning. He claims that the components of learning are interconnected and depending on each other from the beginning (Wenger, 2008).

We make use of Wenger's socio-cultural learning perspective in which he underlines that people learn from experiences by actively participating in the world. He builds his perspective on the following: 1) we are social beings 2) knowledge is a matter of competences with respect to valued enterprises 3) Knowing is a matter of participating

in the pursuit of such enterprises, that is, of active engagement in the world. 4) Meaning – our ability to experiences the world and our engagement with it as meaningful- is ultimately what learning is to produce (Wenger, 2008. p.4).

4. Findings and discussion

4.1 *The role as student teacher in a foreign context*

The introduction to the concept of Teacher Well - Being (TWB) is part of the students' preparation for the practice in South Africa. Among the aims for the course, is to:

- a) Inform the students of the South African post-apartheid education system and policy as well as of the frequent curriculum reforms since 1994.
- b) Give a deeper awareness of the school context in South Africa.

The students express that the preparation courses before they left Norway and the TWB course upon arrival had helped to prepare for some of the realities in the practice school and its community as for example being the 'different one' and the very 'visible' one due to the colour of their skin (White). Furthermore, they found the large classes and multiple demands on teachers being much more challenging than what they imagined based on the theoretical insights and understandings from the preparation courses.

Student A said:

“After the course I felt more prepared I still had a shock when I got here, if we had not had TWB course it would have been more of a shock”.

The students elaborate on how they at first experience frustration and uncertainty with regard to their role as teachers in the South Africa. It seems clear that the students need time to adjust to the foreign contextual conditions in terms of the school's structural and cultural environment. After some time they also seem to manage to make use of both theoretical and practical knowledge developed in their teaching programme at home institution (HiOA) in order to interpret and make meaning and knowledge from their life in the school and community.

The students experience a curriculum and teaching methods that are different from what they know from the Norwegian context. Observing and testing other teaching methods than what they know from Norway have, they claim, inspired them to be more open to a greater variety of teaching methods and therefore to become more creative in their teaching practice. The students observe that a significant number of the learners are not able to follow the teaching taking place. The differences observed and experienced between the Norwegian well-resourced schools and the under resourced practice schools have challenged the students on their own values, contextual conditions for teaching and learning and even to rethink what knowledge they regard as important. Given certain conditions the students seem to indicate that they have achieved a better understanding of why teacher – centered teaching methods are chosen as the dominant approach.

Reflection by student B:

"You do not understand everything, but you get at least a somewhat larger picture of why things are as they are. I think at least, that I became more humble, what we do in Norway or Europe is not always the best way. They do it their way, because that works for them, and we make our way because that works for the best of us".

4.2 A caring school culture?

A challenging task for the students is linked to how to negotiate own values and knowledge when confronted with another reality.

One such 'reality check' is their pre-conception and experience of the importance of teachers being able to 'see' the learner; to give attention and care to and interact with the individual learner. This is supported by international research on school quality which argues that interaction between teacher and learner is the single most effective factor to promote learning (Hattie, 2009).

Research shows that the trust needed for professional sharing of practice is enhanced in all TWB schools (Collett & Olsen, 2012). Collett and Olsen found that the TWB project intervention helped to support the development of the school as a caring and safe environment through developing a culture of caring and support between teachers. Collett and Olsen argue further that the creation of institutional space for staff reflection and critical engagement helped to build a culture and practice of support (2012).

This caring culture does not, however, seem to encompass the learners in the school to the same extent as for among the teachers. Our findings indicate that the students struggle to interpret and negotiate as 'right' or 'wrong' some of the attitudes and actions they observe among some teachers in the schools. As for the dominant teaching method employed, the students express an understanding in terms of why individual attention and care become much more limited with the teacher/learner ratio of 1/40 as compared to what the students are familiar with from their home country (1/25). In addition, the locations of the schools meant that *all* learners came from an environment troubled with socio-economic challenges; challenges the school and the teachers had to deal with on a daily basis. Dawes makes the point that positive school environments can play a supportive role in learners' lives without going beyond what he describes as teachers' "overstretched schedules" to become therapists to children (2003, p. 8).

Could it be that 'overstretched teachers' in a few cases use corporal and verbal punishment and abuse against learners? Teachers must abide to the professional code of conduct for educators in South Africa that explains issues of discipline and discharge (The Employment of Educators Act 1998). Students from all the schools talk about how some teachers used derogatory descriptions of learners and their parents as well as used corporal punishment in order to achieve discipline in the class. Some of the students did raise their concerns with the teachers in line with advice given in the preparatory courses to try negotiate a non-aggressive behaviour. According to the students' feedback on the issue, the teachers explain their behavior to the need for discipline in order for efficient learning to take place. The teachers in our study also justify the use of corporal punishment as reinforcing what the learners already experience from their parents/guardians whom they claim demand that the teachers use the same strategy. In spite of the discussions with the teachers, the students concluded that there was no change with regard to aggressive behaviour towards the learners.

4.3 *Expectations, action and connection*

Wenger (2008) claims that action and connection are interwoven, depending on each other and a prerequisite for creating meaning. This means that ‘someone’ must act as ‘door –opener’ in terms of inviting into the community – in our context the school community, the students’ contact teachers and host families.

The students were warmly welcomed into all three schools and host families. They even indicate that the teachers in the practice schools demonstrate great confidence in the students’ competence and capability to teach. They seem to some extent to be regarded as extra help and assistance to the teachers as well as the “superior White teacher from the North”. The impression that they are associated with better competence because of the colour of their skin comes as a surprise and in a sense frightening to the students. The psychological legacy of apartheid still seems to be apparent in South Africa and especially in impoverished working class areas as where the practice schools are situated (Olsen, 2013).

The students reflect extensively on how they respond to their experiences related to being the ‘odd one’, different from the majority and therefore to be attributed qualities depending on their country of origin. They believe that the experiences contribute to a stronger sensitivity and awareness of own attitudes, and how they themselves may use stereotypes when describing other ethnic groups in the Norwegian society. Similar findings are reported in other studies and evaluations of student exchange programmes (Hoaas, 2009; Wilson & Flourmoy 2007).

4.4 *Culturally grounded practice*

The students live with teacher families (home-stay) in the school community – they live with the same peer groups as in the class. Wenger’s concept of community practice (2008) coincides with the school and its community in our study: «The concept of practice connotes doing, but not just doing in it and of itself. It is doing in a historical and social context that gives structure and meaning to what to do. In a sense, practice is always social practice» (Wenger 2008, p. 47).

As we anticipated, a main finding in our study indicate that the students have got a deeper (holistic) insight into the children’s living environment and how it impacts on the quality of teaching and learning. Homestay obviously gives time and access to discuss and reflect on issues they have encountered during the school day- both with the host teacher and with each other.

Reflection by student D;

“One thing is to be alone during the day at the school, but when you come home in the afternoon (...) then it is very good to have someone you can talk to, someone who has similar beliefs as you and have undergone the same training, so that one can talk and reflect on the experiences together. Talk through it, and be able to leave it behind”.

As described in section 1.3 the practice schools are located in township with poor home circumstances, poverty, risk behavior and poor nutrition. We argue that the homestay

contribute strongly to the sharp learning curve for the students. The exposure to poverty and poverty-related social challenges in the learners' home environment - combined with the opportunity to discuss their observations and experiences with their host family – provide the students with a deep – rooted understanding of how this negatively impact on the teaching/learning processes in the classroom.

Student E states;

“Never before have had I thought about the importance of contextual conditions for effective teaching. Another experience for me, is how students' home conditions and their access to food, among other things, affect them, I have seen this in a much larger scale than ever in Norway”.

4.5 Students reflection on how the practice placement will influence their future profession

“I think that this whole experience has made me become more aware of my own behavior. And I think we all have become much more reflective. Not necessarily that we makes things better, but that we certainly think and reflect more on why you do things” (Student A).

A main finding is that a significant number of the students express increased confidence personally and professionally. Analysing the many examples they share to explain their increased confidence in teaching, e.g. independence of technology such as a classroom ‘smartboard’, we argue that the many encounters with the unfamiliar made the students more confident in new and unforeseen situations. Feelings of frustration and even in some cases fear that they could feel in the beginning gradually merged to feelings of strength as they managed increasingly more challenging tasks in the school. We argue that the opportunities provided for reflective practice together with the teachers – both in the school and at home – seems to have enhanced the students' cultural insight, respect and understanding significantly.

These encounters with the unfamiliar combined with reflection indicate that the students' capacity to work in diverse contexts in Norway is substantially strengthened. The students claim that the cultural insight and communication skills acquired from being the ‘different one’ have given them more knowledge about how to communicate with children and families with minority background in Norwegian schools and kindergartens. They have encountered communication challenges - language problems - and learned ways to prevent, avoid or minimize miscommunication and misinterpretations.

Furthermore, we find that the students emphasise that the impressions and the experiences they had during their stay have touched them in such a way that it can be considered to have an on-going impact at both a personal and professional level. As underlined by many researchers, e.g. Wenger (2008) learning is a continuous process when negotiating meaning based on engagement with the world takes place.

Wenger elaborate this by using the concept of identity: Wenger argues that “Building an identity consist of negotiating the meaning of our experiences of membership in social communities (Wenger 2008, p.145). The interplay between the community of practice and the person is essential to the process. How the students reflect on personal and professional development, how they interpret their position and how they act and

reflect, are neither simply individual choices nor the result of participation in the community. They are mutually enhancing each other.

Student F represents all when s/he says:

“I’ve become a better teacher and person, more reflective, humble and grateful. Puts things into perspective and have become more appreciative of what we have at home. I think all students would have benefited from this practice abroad”

Wenger (2008) explains life as a constant process of negotiating meaning in which we expand our knowledge, interpret and re-interpret, modify and confirm or dismiss knowledge. He emphasizes that engagement in practice entail interaction between knowing and understanding reifications and participation. We found that the students’ participation in a new and foreign practice community demand increased effort and critical engagement in order to interpret and negotiate meaning of their experiences. As pointed out by Wenger participation is to be understood as “a process of taking part and also to the relation with others that reflect the process” (2008, p. 55).

Based on our findings we claim that by encountering a different curriculum and contextual conditions, the students seem to become more aware of how pedagogical approaches are adapted to different contextual realities. The students acquire an in-depth insight into the structural conditions influencing their own teaching and that of their contact teachers. Participating and engaging in the school and kindergarten practice within the teacher well - being supportive framework and on-going reflection, the students develop a significant understanding on how to manage the foreign context; that is to act accordingly and adequately to the structural and cultural conditions in the school. Wenger (2008), claiming that the duality between participation and reifications is fundamentally to negotiation of meaning, supports our argument.

5. Conclusive summary: Practice abroad to become better at home?

This paper has described and analysed how a student teacher exchange involving practical placements and academic fieldwork in schools focusing on the well-being of teachers enables a successful approach to students’ professional development. Drawing on the findings from three South African primary schools situated in a working class urban area characterised by diversity, we argue that through addressing the well-being needs of the student teachers using a participatory action research approach, the students develop a deeper understanding of how a supportive, safe and caring school culture can influence effective teaching and learning. Key findings show how the students both benefit from and help to support a strengthened capacity at an individual, school and cultural level. We argue that the reflection competence regarding the students’ own perspectives and learning approaches is enhanced in ways that will benefit their future position as teachers in Norway. These findings both endorse and add to existing research in the areas of social theory, school development and educational change. The focus on the teacher well-being during their practice using components of the action research methodology provides a new and innovative approach to enhance their professional ability within a whole school development approach.

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