

Individual Project Report by Dr Hanlie Dippenaar

Work readiness of B Ed (Intermediate phase) beginner teachers of English: are they sufficiently competent?

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Background and aim of the project

The successful employment of new graduates is an important consideration for any higher education institution, worldwide. The Education and Training Monitor 2014 (European Commission, 2014) calls for learners in all European countries to be equipped with the necessary skills to participate successfully in society and the workplace. As stated by the European Commission group on Modernisation of Higher Education in Europe (European Commission, 2013:41):

“Curricula should be developed and monitored through dialogue and partnerships among teaching staff, students, graduates and labour market actors, drawing on new methods of teaching and learning, so that students acquire relevant skills that enhance their employability.”

In South Africa, Winberg *et al.*, (2017) point out that concerns have been expressed about student employability and graduate attributes in terms of the needs of the workplace. Allen (2009) argues that there has been an awareness of the theory-practice gap of beginner teachers but teacher educators have not been able to address this successfully. This is similar to findings by Sayed *et al.*, (2018) on Initial Teacher Training (ITE). According to Taylor (2016) the quality of ITE will only be improved once teacher educators move their practices closer to those of practitioners by being “continuously interrogated by the practitioners themselves”. This implies a need for more collaboration among all university partners involved in education.

This exploratory project is the first stage of a longitudinal study to determine the work readiness of future teachers of English, who have completed a BEd degree (Intermediate phase) at a University of Technology. The specific institution in the study used to work closely with the Department of Education, and was previously categorized as a teacher training college. The new status of being a fully-fledged university, with emphasis on research, might have impacted

on the practical skills of the graduates. The Faculty of Education at this institution is currently going through the implementation phase of a new curriculum. The first cohort will graduate in 2019. The Faculty has been subject to an internal audit in November 2018, with valuable feedback from colleagues and practitioners in the field. One of the challenges that was identified by the reviewers, was the lack of an active advisory board, consisting of partners from schools and the Department of Education.

This study investigates how prepared for the world of work, beginner teachers of English are perceived to be, compared to what departmental officials and schools expect. The overarching objective of the study is to investigate whether beginner teachers of English intermediate phase (grade 4 to 6) are prepared for a ‘changing world’ (Shulman & Shulman 2004: 261), and what interventions to curriculum reform are necessary (if any) to link this knowledge to the relevant skills, attitudes and activities in practice.

The language teacher plays a very important role in education, as language is used in every subject in school, across the whole curriculum. Teachers use language to explain new concepts and content to learners, who then use language to internalise and demonstrate the knowledge that they have acquired (Lucas, 2011, Neeta & Klu, 2013). It is therefore of utmost importance to ensure that teachers, but especially language teachers, are competent and ready for the workplace.

Methodology

The study draws on Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) (Engeström, 2015) to explain any contradictions between the university and the workplace (Engeström, 2015). Engeström’s third generation activity theory (2001) with *interacting* activity systems, illustrate transformation in collective activity systems, such as educational institutions, not only by exploring the current situation and context, but also the historic past and envisioned future. This is mediated through cultural artefacts such as language, tools, and forms of social division of labour and cooperation (Ahonen & Virkunen, 2003). Engeström’s (2001) well-known activity system is a triangular, unified structure that illustrates who is involved in an activity (division of labour), what tools are essential, which rules regulate the activity and what are the perceived outcomes and shared objects of the activity (Ahonen & Virkunen, 2003). Mentz and De Beer (2017), describe CHAT as a ‘powerful research lens’ to explore education in South Africa, with its complex history, diverse culture and challenging socio-economic issues. It illustrates

contradictions between activity systems, and provides a way to describe these as boundary crossings (Engeström, 2001), which is an effective and powerful way to identify and describe a perceived problem.

In the study two activity systems were analysed; one is the teacher education activity system and the other the activity system of the classroom. All the elements were compared to determine synergy and conflict. Data were collected through questionnaires sent to beginner teachers via Google forms (data set 1), interviews with experienced teachers (data set 2), questionnaires sent to final year students via Google forms (data set 3) and reflections of undergraduate students after practice teaching sessions (data set 4). The interviews were transcribed verbatim and then analysed with qualitative thematic analysis to interpret patterns. The results from the Google forms and student reflections were studied to identify information that would answer the research question (*Are beginner teachers of English (Intermediate Phase) sufficiently competent and work ready?*) and dealt with strengths and weaknesses identified in beginner teachers of English.

Outcomes

The following themes were identified:

1. Strengths of beginner teachers
2. Weaknesses of beginner teachers
3. Suggestions for curriculum revision

The results showed that there was a discrepancy between what students teachers thought they were competent in, and what experienced teachers and beginner teachers found. Data showed that teachers' competence and students' success are overlapping but they are not necessarily aligning, because Higher Education (HE) has a strong theoretical bias, with more theorisation than the practical classroom. What is valued by lecturers, is not necessarily what the schools value. Beginner teachers are knowledgeable in content and the use of technology but unprepared for the classroom, setting of assessment tasks and completing administrative tasks. The two systems are not in alignment (see Table 1), although there is a shared object (object 3) which relates to successful learners in schools.

There is a difference between the object, subject and rules as both communities are very different. The division of labour and line of management in the two systems are very different (Table 1), with different expectations and objectives. In HE the object is competent teachers

where in the school system it is competent learners. However, teacher education only exists to supply beginner teachers who can develop competent learners in the schools. That is an expected outcome of the system.

Table 1: Comparison of activity systems of HEIs and schools

Activity system 1	HEIs	Activity system 2	Schools
Mediation	Lecturers, prescribed texts, NGO (<i>Help2Read</i>)	Mediation	Teachers, text books
Subject	Students	Subject	Learners
Object (1)	Professional, competent teachers	Object (2)	Rich and appropriate learning
Object (3)	Proficient and successful learners		
Rules	Academic requirements, curriculum, graduate attributes	Rules	Policies (e.g., CAPS), DBE requirements, benchmark tests.
Community	DHET, SAQA, HODs, advisory boards, partners	Community	DBE, school management, departmental officials, parents
Division of labour	HoDs, Lecturers, partners, students	Division of labour	School managers, departmental officials, teachers, learners

Beginner teachers should be able to develop competent learners. HEIs tend to get caught up in ‘academic drift’, and preparing students for teaching is not practical enough, as it used to be at teaching colleges (Gravett, Henning, & Eiselen, 2011). Teacher preparation in the intermediate phase used to be much more practical. Content knowledge was not as high but the method was seen as more important, not the high level of content. Training colleges used to do much more practical teaching, with micro-teaching labs, which do not exist anymore (Samoff, 2006; Sayed *et al*, 2018)). Students had to reflect constantly on what they had to do, where this is still part of the curriculum, but not as prominent as before.

Higher Education has a strong theoretical foundation. The students feel knowledgeable and competent about theory and content, but are in reality, unprepared for the practicality of the classroom, school context and policy requirements. Practice makes different demands on beginner teachers. Activity Theory has revealed contradictions within and across systems in mediational means (tools), rules, different communities and the difference between the requirements set by the Department for Higher Education (DHET) (South Africa, 2015) versus the requirements of the Department for Basic Education (DBE). The activity systems have a

partially shared object (i.e., proficient and successful learners), BUT the strong academic focus, including ‘rules’ of the HE system, undermines the practical preparation for teaching. The policy-driven environment of the classroom makes creative and innovative language teaching difficult.

It is clear that there is a need for more collaboration and dialogue in this regard. HEIs need to refocus on the partially shared object (proficiency and success of the learners); and need to rethink the curriculum so as to “exceed the boundaries of any single discipline, profession or organization” (Engeström, 2016: 40). Better alignment across the two activity systems is needed and teacher educators have to be “continuously interrogated by the practitioners themselves” (Taylor, 2016).

It is envisaged that this study is the first phase of a longitudinal study to address the gap in the current body of research on work readiness of beginner teachers of English. We need to find a balance between developing a holistic approach to student attributes, while simultaneously addressing the issue of work readiness of our graduates to improve the competency and retention rate of beginner teachers in our schools. As pointed out by Sayed *et al.*, (2018) the delicate balance of theory and practice needs to be explored further to prepare future teachers to transfer with ease into the workplace and to make a substantial impact on the classroom of tomorrow. The identified contradictions can only be resolved through mediation with all role players (teachers, the Department of Education, and HEIs); if the beginner teacher is trained in a balanced curriculum with emphasis on theory x application; competence to teach x motivation and incentive, the contradictions can be eliminated and there will be a balance between competence of graduates x competence of work. The next step in this study would be to bring all stakeholders together in a Change Laboratory to resolve the contradictions as explained by Virkunen and Newnham (2013).

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