

Theory Vs Practice: The Case of Primary Teacher Education in Botswana

Thenjiwe Emily Majorⁱ

Department of Educational Foundations, Faculty of Education
University of Botswana
majorte@mopipi.ub.bw

Lebogang Tiroⁱⁱ

Department of Educational Foundations, Faculty of Education
University of Botswana
lebogang.tiro@mopipi.ub.bw

Abstract

This study investigated the perceptions of pre-service or student teachers regarding their teacher education program. Data was collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with 17 pre-service student teachers in one primary college of education in Botswana. In addition, there was an analysis of documents from the Ministry of Education and Skills Development that outlined how the training of pre-service teachers should be run. Participants indicated that they spend too much time learning/exploring theory and less time of hands on experience. Research has also shown that teacher educators overemphasize theory and focus less on practice in the preparation of pre-service teachers. The study results indicated that student teachers are taught too much theory and did less of teaching practice. Pre-service teachers should be given more time to do teaching practice and less time on content, as they need the application skills more than they need the content. Based on the findings in this study, it is recommended that the Tertiary Education Council in Botswana should revise the teacher education training program and to reconsider increasing the amount of time for teaching practice for the pre-service teachers.

Keywords: Teaching practice, theory and practice, pre-service teachers, Botswana, teacher education.

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INTRODUCTION

Teachers in any society play a vital role in the development of the individual child. More importantly primary school teachers have a great responsibility for developing a holistic individual. Primary education lays the basic foundation for all other levels of educational development. It is a pre-requisite for higher education. According to Great Education (2009), "Elementary education should be given the highest priority because this is the children's stepping-stone for them to pursue higher goals. Elementary education will serve as their primary weapon against illiteracy. Elementary education is no doubt of extreme importance, as everything a child learns in these early days is built on as they get older" (p. 3).

The importance of primary education is further supported by the National Commission on Education Botswana (NCE, 1977) that "primary education is the foundation on which further learning is based, and opens up to the young person a range of opportunities for further study and work which are closed to the uneducated" (p. 53). Because primary education is so vital in every person's life, primary school teachers should be well trained to develop the children physically and mentally. Educationists (McLaughlin & O'Donoghue 1996) noted that "Developing countries have recognized the importance of the quality of primary education for economic development and for the later transmission of technical skills. As a consequence of such recognition, support has been given to the argument that the provision of quality primary teachers should be given priority in the development of the educational systems of developing countries" (p. 23).

As it is clear that primary school teachers have a great responsibility; therefore, their preparation should be more on the practical applications of teaching, that is, hands on experience in contrast to preparation that is focused on theory. The benefits of practical application have been observed by other authors like Kiggundu (2007) that it provides the student teachers the opportunity to integrate theory into practice. Furthermore, Kiggundu and Nayimuli (2009) noted that teaching practice does grant the students teachers "experience in the actual teaching and learning environment" (p. 25).

Historical Development of Teacher Education in Botswana

Education in Botswana, like other African countries, did not begin with the introduction of formal schooling by Europeans. Botswana had their own traditional education which was regarded as "informal education" by the West as it was not documented but passed on from one generation to another by the word of mouth or orally. Another form of education that existed in Botswana before colonialism was the initiation ceremonies. Western people regarded this as informal education since it was also not documented. However, Africans view it as 'formal' because it included some characteristics of Western formal education. Mafela and Mgadla (2000) noted that initiation ceremonies "are labeled 'formal' because in their operations they had formal trained instructors, an established time span, place, and content of instruction, which was mostly oral" (p. 2). As the saying in African culture, "It takes a village to raise a child," "It takes a village to educate a child," Botswana was no exception. The education of the child was the responsibility of every member of the society. The siblings, parents, initiation instructors, and neighbors were all teachers. Particularly, young boys learned by imitating their brothers, fathers, uncles, and grandfathers while girls learned by imitating their sisters, mothers' aunts and grandmothers (Mafela & Mgadla, 2000).

When the British through the missionaries came to Botswana (then Bechaunaland) in the 19th Century, they introduced 'formal' education which is the Western education. Trained teachers to teach in these newly introduced Western schools were now needed. The British government, which was the colonial power did not intend to spend money in building teacher education institutions. Instead Botswana were taken to the neighboring countries of the Republic South Africa and Zimbabwe (formerly Rhodesia) for training. They trained at Fort Hare College near Cape Town and later, Tiger Kloof College Vryburg, both in the Republic of South Africa. It was in the late 1940's when Botswana's first college for training Primary teachers was established in Kanye. A few years later the college relocated to Lobatse. The college offered a programme leading to one of two types of certificates (i. e. two year for junior certificate holders – leading to Primary Higher (PH); and a three year programme for primary certificate holders, leading to Primary Lower (PL) certificate. PL certificate holders were eligible to teach lower primary standards; while PH holders taught the primary upper standards. In 1963 a second primary teacher training college was established at Serowe village. Later in 1969 another was established at Francistown. Even though these primary teacher colleges were established in Botswana, the British government was still unwilling to assist in terms of the curricula (Abosi & Kandjii-Murangi, 1998).

Abosi and Kandjii-Murangi (1998) stated: "To illustrate how unprepared the Colonial Administration was to offer a viable teacher education program, at first they adopted the Basutoland Teacher Training Curriculum and later turned to South Africa Cape Province syllabus. However progressive these curricula, they were not designed for the needs of Botswana children" (p. 24).

As the author, I feel that the education during the colonial period indeed did not address the need of the Botswana as it emphasized the culture of the colonial power and despised the Tswana culture. According to the National Commission on Education (1977) "Botswana were encouraged to believe that their own cultural inheritance was inferior to that imported by the British" (p. 11).

Primary teacher education was indeed of low quality as the student teachers admitted at these colleges were mostly standard seven leavers and junior certificate (Form 3 and later Form 2) failures. As Botswana gained independence, education became a priority for the newly liberated government. The first National Commission on

Education (1977) noted that, “the quality of teaching is the most important influence of the quality of the education provided in schools” (p. 127). To improve the quality of teacher education, the Commission recommended raising the quality of entrants to the teaching profession from junior certificate failures to those who passed junior certificate. This recommendation was further refined by the 1994 revised National Policy on Education thus: The entry qualifications into primary teacher training should be raised to a minimum COSC “O” level and the period of training should be three years. The pilot Diploma programme should be extended to all the primary teacher training institutions so that all future primary teachers will be trained for the Diploma in Primary Education qualification (p. 45)

This recommendation has been achieved as all the four primary teacher colleges are offering the diploma certificate. In addition, the University of Botswana is also offering a Bachelor’s Degree in Primary Education. Botswana Vision 2016 (1997) has confirmed that Botswana has achieved quantity of educational facilities, but is still lagging behind in quality of education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Teacher education institutions have always been blamed of producing ‘not well trained’ teachers. Rama (n.d) stated that: Teacher education neither addresses the reality that one faces when one begins their career nor presents issues of quality. Most of the programs require the teacher trainees to spend a prescribed number of hours each day on different subjects and to follow text- books in a prescribed sequence-jumping from one chapter to the other within days-in a way that does not really make any sense...overall, our teacher education contributes nothing in developing a good teacher (p. 1).

One may ask what a good teacher education program is. Darling-Hammond (2006) noted that teacher education should consist of a “tight coherence and integration among courses and between course work and clinical work using pedagogies that link theory and practice” (p. 300). This means teacher education should help student teachers apply the theories to teaching practice in classroom settings. According to Darling-Hammond, one of the components that can make a good teacher is to have “extended clinical experiences—at least 30 weeks of supervised practicum and student teaching opportunities in each program” (p. 305). She further noted: “The most powerful programs require students to spend extensive time in the field throughout the entire program, examining and applying the concepts and strategies they are simultaneously learning about in their courses alongside teachers who can show them how to teach in ways that are responsive to learners. Such programs typically require at least a full academic year of student teaching under the direct supervision of one or more teachers who model expert practice with students who have a wide range of learning needs, with the candidate gradually assuming more independent responsibility for teaching. This allows prospective teachers to grow “roots” on their practice, which is especially important if they are going to learn to teach in learner-centered ways that require diagnosis, intensive assessment and planning to adapt to learners’ needs, and a complex repertoire of practices judiciously applied” (p. 307)

According to Gordon and O’Brien (2007), “students must engage in activities that permit them to experience or assimilate the essence of a concept (p. xiii)”. In this view, teaching should promote experiences that require students to become active in their learning process through practical work in classrooms. Winch and Gingell (1999) supported this view thus “educators should enable students to engage fully in the world and find a place there through the pursuit of their own projects which would in most cases involve gaining employment.” (p. 186). There should be adequate practice so that pre-service teachers engage in hands on practice before obtaining employment in the teaching profession.

It is generally accepted that learning to teach is highly complex. However, with practice it can be manageable. It is important that pre-service teachers acquire teaching skills to make them competent teachers. Eraut (2000) suggested that skills are part of this knowledge and are closely integrated with propositional knowledge in representations of competence. Acquiring skills mean getting into the classrooms and having a feel of teaching. Expert knowledge is developed “through the processes of reflection and conscious deliberation in which practical knowledge is theorized and theoretical knowledge is interpreted in practice” (Tsui, 2009, p. 437).

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the theme “too much theory and less practice” in the preparation of preservice teachers. This theme emerged from a large qualitative study carried out in one of the primary teacher training colleges in Botswana in 2008. The paper will further discuss the importance of teaching practice to the pre-service student teachers.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This article was a qualitative case study that was implemented in one of the primary teacher education colleges in Botswana. Data was collected through open-ended semi-structured in-depth interviews and classroom observations. In support of the open-ended questions, Drake (1989) believes that one reason why open-ended questions are helpful is that they convey a strong interest in what the other person has to say on the topic . . . use of open-ended questions says to the interviewee, "I care about your ideas. I recognize that what you think is important, and because of that I'm willing to give you the freedom to flash out your thought as you choose" (p. 2).

Participants were able to express themselves very well. The researcher probed for more explanations whenever the ideas/points were not clear. The interviews were 45-75 minutes long and were audio-recorded by the researchers. The researcher also observed two teacher educators teaching. One teacher educator was observed 10 times teaching Social Studies. The other teacher was observed eight times teaching a course called Theory and Practice in Education. The researcher observed the teaching pedagogies employed by the teacher educators and wrote detailed notes on each observation.

For analysis, the researcher transcribed the audio-tapes. Written transcriptions and field notes were then compiled to find emerging themes for analysis. All procedures were completed by the researcher who was the principal investigator. This helped the researcher to have a deep connection with the data. Merriam and Simpson (2000) noted that "in qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis" (p. 98). Having first-hand information from the participants helped the researcher to interpret the data.

For confidentiality, participants were assured that pseudonyms will be used and that the raw data will only be accessed by the researchers, and the audio-tape and transcripts were to be destroyed after the study. The participants were provided with full information about the purpose of the study and that the risks were minimal. The researcher had also obtained permission from all relevant authorities in the Ministry of Education and Skills Development and the research boards.

Population

The population for this study was comprised of third year student teachers at Fellow College of Education (pseudonym). A total of 17 students, seven males and ten females were interviewed. Purposive sampling and snowball sampling techniques were employed to obtain the sample for the study. According to Gay, Mills and Airasian (2006), purposive sampling "Is the process of selecting a sample that is believed to be representative of a given population" (p.113). To Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, Sorensen (2006), qualitative researchers tend to use purposive samples because it is believed "to be sufficient to provide maximum insight and understanding of what they are studying" (p. 472). Since third year students had taken most of the courses in foundations and they were in their final year in the program, their expressions regarding experience and knowledge provided the relevant and meaningful data for the study.

FINDINGS

From the data collected, student teachers believed that practical training was the most effective way to acquire (practical) knowledge. From the interviews, participants described how they spend too much time in the teacher preparation classrooms learning the theories and less time practicing those theories. One of the students, Seabelo, noted that, "we should be more at the field and not in the classes like it is happening now. We should spend more time at the field practicing to be teachers." He was supported by another student "Refilwe" who stated that:

We should spend more time being on the field than being in the classroom. We are given more time in the classroom doing theory and less time in the field. If we could be given more time in the field we can develop better attitudes of how to be a better teacher since we will be learning by doing since you know that people learn more when they are doing than when they learn and do nothing on it. Since we were in the class we were focusing on the theory Part Two to teach, how to prepare for lessons, how to . . . how to . . . how to . . . conduct classroom management. And also in our second year we were given only three months for our Teaching Practice (TP). I

think 3 months is not enough looking for us who have no teaching experience. We cannot master everything for one to be a teacher just in three months. If may be given the whole year doing TP. Maybe first year one term, second year another term and final year another term. That could have been better because what you have learned in first year you will add on in second year, and you may correct your mistakes in year two and in third year now you know what is expected of you as a teacher (sic).

Neo concurred with Refilwe by stating that our program is more academic than practical. We spend most of the time here doing the academic work but we . . . we are expected to do practical work when we graduate. Academic work is vital but the material that we are doing you find that is a repetition of what was done at senior secondary school or even at junior secondary school. Instead they should teach us how to manage our pupils in the classroom by giving us more time to do the practical part. I believe I should do more of practical work. It is my wish that one day they should change the system for training teachers. There should be more of practical work than academic work (sic).

In addition, Kabelo affirmed that, "TP is not enough, looking at the fact that most of the content that we are doing, we have been taught at junior and senior schools, so we should do more of the practicum so that we have that knowledge, skills, and confidence to stand in front of the children and be able to teach very well." Similarly Hamotho indicated that inservice teachers should not go on teaching practice as they had been teaching for fifteen to twenty years; instead pre-service teachers should be the ones spending more time in the field doing teaching practice and less of theory.

In addition to what the participants stated in the interviews, the researcher observed that most of the content that student teachers were being taught was exactly what the Junior Certificate and Cambridge "O" level syllabus covered. The repetition of the content seemed to be boring to most learners, as they did not actively participate in the teaching/learning environment.

DISCUSSION

For one to understand the idea of too much theory content and less practice that was raised by the participants, it is important to first give a brief outline of how these novice teachers are trained at the colleges of education. According to the Management Manual for the colleges of education Botswana (2000), the diploma for primary teacher educators is a three year program for pre-service teachers. In these three years, the first year is spent on doing course work only. During year two the student teachers spend only six weeks of the term doing their first teaching practice. In year three they have six weeks in term one (January-April), and another six weeks in term three (September-November). Based on the program outline from the primary teacher education manual novice teachers spend most of their time doing theory in the classrooms rather than applying the theories in real classroom situations.

The Value of Combining Theory and Practice

There is a disproportionate between theory and practice in pre-service teacher education in Botswana. To ameliorate this imbalance, student teachers should be given ample time to practice the teaching theories that they have learned in their respective classrooms. They are expected to put theories into practice, as Marais and Meier (2004) noted that "teaching practical is an integral part of teacher training (p. 220).

Research has shown that most teacher education programs emphasize more theory and less focus on practice. Dunkin (2008) observed "In England in 1992, when, partly on the grounds that the content of teacher education was too theoretical, Kenneth Clarke, the then Secretary of State for Education, announced that 80 percent of programs in secondary teacher education should be "school-based." In North America, Bruce Joyce and Beverly Showers, among others, called for a more central role of the school in teacher education. A somewhat similar complaint about the excess of theory in the curriculum of teacher education programs was reported in 1991 by Andrea B. Rugh and colleagues with reference to Pakistan, and in 1986 by Linda A. Dove regarding Papua New Guinea" (p. 45).

One can conclude from the interviews and literature that many teacher education programs tend to give student teachers a lot of theory and overlook the importance of practicing the theories. Teaching practice gives the student teachers the experience that cannot be found in a non-school setting (Marais & Meier (2004). Student teachers learn to assess their strengths and weaknesses and further find ways on how to improve to be competent teachers.

Amedeker (2005) noted that "a longer duration of teaching practice has been seen by some educators as a concrete sign for the society to appreciate the professionalism of teaching" (p. 100). The longer the time the student teachers spend on the field, the more they get exposed to the realities of teaching. Some student teachers may exhibit negative attitudes

towards teaching while others may develop positive attitudes as they are exposed to the actual teaching environment that they will encounter when they graduate. Amedeker further argued that teaching practice helps “boost the confidence of the teacher-trainee” (p. 101). A student teacher who has confidence in her work tends to perform better and improve in his/her teaching.

Ghani (1990) also noted that teaching practice “provides the opportunity for the students to observe and practice the skills for which they have been trained. It is also seen as the opportunity for the students to translate into practice what they have learned in theory” (p. 46). As Vygostky the social constructivist theorist noted “Just as you cannot learn how to swim by standing at the shore to learn how to swim you have to, out of necessity, plunge right into the water even though you still don’t know how to swim, so the only way to learn something, say, how to acquire knowledge, is by doing so, in other words, by acquiring knowledge” (Vygostky in Daniels, 2001, p. 35).

It is difficult to assume that mastering skills in the classroom implies that the student teachers can apply them effectively when they complete their teacher education program. It is, therefore, important for the student teachers to practice the skills while still at the teacher training institutions. Therefore, there is the need for more teaching practice by student teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Tang, 2010). The most powerful (teacher) programs require students spend extensive time in the field throughout the entire program, examining and applying concepts and strategies they are simultaneously learning about in their courses alongside teachers who can show them how to teach in ways that are responsive to learners. Such programs typically require at least a full academic year of student teaching under the direct supervision of one or more teachers who model expert practice with students who have a wide range of learning needs, with the candidate gradually assuming more independent responsibility for teaching. This allows prospective teachers to grow ‘roots’ on their practice which is especially important if they are going to learn to teach in learner-centered ways that require diagnosis, intensive assessment and planning to adapt to learners’ needs, and a complex repertoire of practices judiciously applied (Darling-Hammond, 2006).

In addition, during teaching practice, student teachers are also involved with the community as they attend parents’ teachers’ meetings and other activities held in the community. This helps student teachers to build a sound relationship with all school stake holders. Student teachers learn the roles and responsibilities that they have to undertake with parents and other teachers. From various researches regarding teacher education programs, it is apparent that if pre-service student teachers are given more time for teaching practice, they might be better qualified teachers when they graduate from college. These novice teachers would have gained more experience on classroom management, and of working with different pupils from different backgrounds and cultures.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research, and the findings in this study, it appears that most teacher education programs over-emphasize theory at the expense of classroom practice. Most pre-service student teachers in the study expressed their dissatisfaction on the little time that they were given to practice the theories into real life situation. Even though the participants noted the importance of having enough content, they still felt that hands-on experience would make them better teachers when they graduate from the program. Participants indicated that teaching practice exposes them to real classroom experience that they will encounter as teachers.

It is important to note that the mastery of theories in the classroom does not guarantee that the student teachers are able to apply those theories in real classroom settings. Student teachers should be given more time during their training to apply the theories and to develop a better sense of what it is to be a classroom teacher. As it is said, to know and not to use is not yet to know. Hand-on is the best exposure needed by the pre-service teachers. Pre-service teachers may learn about theories related to management, discipline, assessment, diversity, learner-centered strategies, however, experience in the classroom applying these theories and strategies may help novice teachers become more confident when they graduate from their training.

By going to the schools for practice, incorporating it with the teaching from their lecturers can be useful. During teaching practice, student teachers learn the skills and attitudes of the teaching profession. They also learn the difficulties of teaching, therefore, when given ample time to practice, they can be confident to face teaching challenges and thus become competent teachers when they graduate from their teacher education program.

Recommendations

The study recommends that the Tertiary Education Council in Botswana should modify the teacher education training program and to reconsider increasing the amount of time for teaching practice for the pre-service teachers.

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¹ Dr. Thenjiwe E. Major is a lecturer of Integrated Foundations (Philosophy and History of Education) in the Department of Educational Foundations at University of Botswana. Her research interests include teacher education, (teacher quality), mathematics education, and HIV/AIDS among Botswana adolescents.

ⁱⁱ Mrs. Lebogang Tiro is a doctoral student in the Department of Educational Foundations, at the University of Botswana majoring in Counseling and Human Services. Her research interests include issues relating to counseling people with disabilities and education in primary schools.