Teacher Education for Transformative Agency

Critical perspectives
on design, content
and pedagogy

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Practical learning for ethical agency in teaching

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Introduction

Around the world, teacher education programmes expect that their pre-service teachers undertake some practical orientation, usually, but not exclusively, in the form of a placement in a school. This chapter reflects on a module entitled Practical Learning within the one-year Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) at Stellenbosch University. In a country like South Africa, with its high levels of racial, educational and social inequality, there is an imperative to design teacher education within a framework of social justice. Following from this imperative, the immediate aim of this module is to advance student teacher professional learning. More fundamentally, however, the module seeks to embed practical tools for classroom practice within the deeper purposes of situated judgement and ethical agency. Through lectures, school observations and teaching opportunities, student teachers are exposed to teaching and learning methods, and opportunities to promote their own growth, theorise

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practice and become confident, competent teachers. Students are encouraged to recognise the complexity of teaching and to debate key concepts and practices of teaching, thus advancing the notion of a critical and reflective practitioner.

The module is underpinned by the notion of educational virtuosity (Biesta, 2015). Biesta argues that the teaching of knowledge and skills, or socialisation into the community of teachers, may bring about teachers who are competent; however, such teachers “may lack the embodied ability to place their knowledge, skills and ways of doing within the wider context of the question of what is to be done, the question of what is educationally desirable” (Biesta, 2015:19). With this in mind, the module follows principles for fostering teacher agency within an understanding of social forces. This purpose is explicitly communicated to students with a message that the module (and the PGCE programme in general) is intended “to prepare South African teachers for South African schools”. This implies a commitment to working within, and for, the wide diversity of social and educational contexts in the country, with a view to improving the educational (and life) chances of all.

The chapter begins by describing the design of the module. It then focuses on two areas of interest. First, I outline the conceptual and pedagogical considerations that formed the background to the theory lectures. Second, I report on research into students’ experiences of the module, as contained in their reflections during school observation, as well as interviews about the module’s contribution to their preparation for a diversity of contexts. Drawing on the notion of ‘embodiment’ (Ord & Nuttall, 2016), the purpose of the chapter is to consider if and how the lectures and school observation impacted on students’ own sense of agency within the diverse and unequal contexts of South African schools.

The design of the module

The module runs from February to November. It is a compulsory element of the PGCE and forms almost 25% of the programme credits. It consists of five components, namely:

- ◆ two weeks of observation in a school prior to the start of the university academic year,
- ◆ one or two days of observation in local schools,
- ◆ weekly microteaching and lesson analysis of peers,
- ◆ a school-based practicum of ten consecutive weeks in the third term of the year, and
- ◆ eighteen weeks of lectures prior to, and following on from, the school practicum.

The combination of these components, together with the student’s particular curriculum specialisation, is intended to provide an integrated experience of learning from and in practice. This experience is described in South African policy as follows:

Learning from practice includes the study of practice, using discursive resources to analyse different practices across a variety of contexts, drawing from case studies, video records, lesson observations, etc., in order to theorise practice and form a basis for learning in practice. Learning in practice involves teaching in authentic and simulated classroom environments. (DHET, 2015:10)

Figure 2.1 provides a visual representation of the different components and their specific purposes. In 2018, the year in which this research was conducted, there were about 240 students in the class. The student body has become more diverse over the years with a noteworthy mix of gender, age, race, prior work experience and political leanings in the class.

Figure 2.1 Practical learning: learning from, in and for practice

National and institutional policies

The purpose and design of the module links directly to national policy imperatives in teacher education, as well as to institutional frameworks of Stellenbosch University.

‘Situational learning’ is one of the principles underpinning teacher education policy in South Africa, as stated in the revised *Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications* (DHET, 2015). This refers to the need for new teachers to know about varied learning situations, contexts and environments of education and be able to “draw reflexively from integrated and applied knowledge, so as to work flexibly and effectively in a variety of contexts” (DHET, 2015:9).

At an institutional level, Stellenbosch University has committed to a set of graduate attributes (Stellenbosch University: Strategy for teaching and learning 2017–2021). The purpose and design of the Practical Learning module reflects a number of these intended attributes. These include an enquiring mind, exercising responsibility for learning and using knowledge, an engaged citizen, critical and creative thinking, and being effective in a diverse environment. Such attributes are pursued in the module through creating opportunities for student teachers to recognise the complexity of teaching, debate key concepts and practices of teaching, and develop personal and professional agency. The notion of an engaged citizen resonates further with the commitment expressed by the Faculty of Education to expand students’ insights and experiences, through actively encouraging them to move out of their comfort zones during the school-based components of their programme.

Pedagogical principles

Policy and institutional imperatives can be distilled into a number of pedagogical principles that underpin the design and content of the module. These include:

- ◆ Connecting the theory and practice of teaching.
- ◆ Supporting professional practice and professional becoming.
- ◆ Advancing knowledge, skills and dispositions for teaching.
- ◆ Critical reflection and ethical agency.

The module Practical Learning draws on a number of theoretical categories in its conceptualisation and design. The notion of educational virtuosity (Biesta, 2015) has already been mentioned. Other influences on the approach to the module include the link between emotions, identity and subjectivity

(Zembylas, 2003), practice architecture (Kemmis, 2018), teacher education and social justice (Zeichner, 2009), the soul of teacher education (Green et al., 2017) and situational judgement and moral responsibility (Winch, 2017). In combination, these theorists build a picture of teacher education that seeks to develop novice teachers as ethical, critical and responsible agents, working in grounded ways within particular social and institutional frameworks towards better educational and life chances for all.

Translated into classroom (or, in this instance, lecture hall) practice, the module is characterised by an approach to teaching and learning that foregrounds educational dilemmas, authentic scenarios, a problem-posing rather than a recipe-understanding of the work of the teacher, and active engagement on the part of students (even with a class of over 200 students). Pedagogical approaches are built around linking cognition, affect and agency, connecting concepts and contexts, and promoting a commitment to democracy, diversity and citizenship. Curriculum materials that integrate these approaches in concrete ways include questions to students on, for example, which forms of knowledge for teaching they feel confident (or not confident) about, and how they might address this, as well as structured observation tasks that encourage students to reflect on the relationship between schools and society.

Acknowledging the contested nature of the knowledge base for teaching (Winch, 2017), the nature of the module is such that there is no obvious body of academic content. Topics include Shulman's knowledge for teaching (2004), Productive Pedagogies (Gore et al., 2004), the teacher as a mediator of learning, the use of media, lesson planning, classroom management, reflecting on teaching, professional standards for teaching, and the rights and responsibilities of teaching. As can be seen, the lecture topics work within a combination of different domains of learning to be a teacher. These include 'formal knowledge' (e.g. learning about conceptions of knowledge for teaching), 'everyday' knowledge (exposure to the experiences of teachers), technological skills for teaching (e.g. digital pedagogy), and issues related to socio-epistemic forces and the requirements of professional practice (e.g. school cultures, policy frameworks) (see Hordern, 2018, for a discussion of the relationship between different forms of educational knowledge).

Each of these domains of learning has thrown up its own set of dilemmas for myself as the lecturer in selecting curriculum materials. For example, which 'knowledges for teaching' are most powerful in teaching students in a relatively compressed period to become 'good' teachers? What modes of classroom practice are appropriate in what situations and for what purposes? To what extent should the module engage with students' biographies and values in its

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attempt to promote personal agency? Should new teachers study policy and regulatory frameworks from a perspective of critique, or a perspective that tends towards compliance, and probable successful assimilation into the culture of the school?

The movement across domains of learning becomes particularly noticeable as the module progresses into the third term of the academic year and students ready themselves for the school-based practicum. As students traverse the boundaries of the different activity systems of school and university (Max, 2010), their challenge becomes to bridge these sites of learning in ways that are mutually meaningful for themselves as student teachers, the teachers, and the learners at school.

Many tensions are pertinent here. Students are now expected to move from an emphasis on critical reflection to the demonstration of skills and competences. They are no longer outsiders to the school, but (semi) insiders with all the related expectations. Their approach to learning moves from abstraction of knowledge to action and implementation. Policy critique must become policy compliance if they are to 'market' themselves for a job at that school once they graduate. They are no longer individuals accountable only to themselves, but members of a much bigger community. And, on a very immediate level, they have to face new practical considerations of travel time, punctuality, dress code and – in many instances – anxiety about personal safety in difficult social conditions.

Against this background, the task of the teacher educator becomes particularly complex. Unlike many other university-based degrees, a professional programme like teacher education goes beyond teaching concepts 'for the mind'. Rather, it must teach others to enter the world of practice within frames of professional competence and a set of values. The module must move beyond the (usually futile) attempt to bridge theory and practice, and rather find ways of building knowledge for teaching that is "integrated and embodied, rather than in consciously cognitive terms" (Ord & Nuttall, 2016:355).

This challenge leads me to the second part of the chapter. Having conceptualised the Practical Learning module against a set of principles, questions arose around curriculum implementation. Here again, a set of dilemmas arise for the lecturer: What is the conceptual and practical 'toolbox' for ethical agency? How to make concepts and practices part of student teachers' own repertoire of thinking and classroom practice? How to combine knowledge, skills and dispositions towards a democratic purpose? How to combine the cognitive

and affective domains of teaching in order to remain motivated and committed to good teaching? Questions like these led to a decision to explore aspects of students' own experiences of the module.

Exploring student teachers' perspectives

In this second part of the chapter, I report on a research project which set out to investigate how student teachers articulated their experiences of the module's aim to embed tools for classroom practice within the deeper purpose of ethical agency.

The research approach can be located within design-based research. Amongst other purposes, design-based research looks to explore possibilities for new learning and teaching environments and to develop theories of learning and instruction that are contextually-based (Herrington & Reeves, 2011). Having identified a 'problem' in my teaching (How best to connect purpose and pedagogy in teacher education?), I set out to research students' experiences of these pedagogical principles, with a view to improving the module and identifying further principles around teacher education for ethical agency. Methods of data gathering were:

- ◀ tracking the schools student teachers choose for their observations and school placements, and their reasons for choosing these schools. Analysis focused on the extent to which these schools differed from students' own educational backgrounds;
- ◀ guided reflection tasks from the first school observation;
- ◀ focus group interviews to explore which concepts, theories or approaches in the module or programme influenced students' thinking or teaching.

The chapter reports only on the findings of the last two points, as this is where the most robust evidence was obtained.

The first school observation reports were constructed as guided questions, aimed at leading students to work in authentic settings (the classroom) to identify examples of practice that illustrated Productive Pedagogies, prior to them being exposed to any theory. Thus, rather than asking students to identify the concepts of intellectual quality, supportive environment, recognition of difference, and connectedness (Gore et al., 2014), they were asked to describe their observations of, for example, confirmation that learners understood the content of the lesson, or classroom management that supports learning.

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In line with the goal of learning to work flexibly in a variety of contexts, the school observation included the following instruction to students: “Students are strongly encouraged to select a school that is different from the school they attended as a learner. Examples of differences could be: socio-economic, racial, cultural or religious background of the learners, language of instruction, urban/rural, etc.”

The focus group interviews were arranged later in the year. In October 2018 an invitation was extended to the whole class to be part of a discussion “to explore if and how the PGCE programme, in particular the module Practical Learning, has influenced students’ thinking about being a teacher in the diversity of schooling and social contexts in South Africa.” Fourteen students responded positively; they were divided into four focus groups of three to four students each and interviewed by a research assistant using a set of questions for about an hour per group.

The nature of the sampling process meant that the demographic backgrounds of the interviewees were not fully reflective of the class composition as a whole, although the group was diverse in many ways. Table 2.1 provides a summary of the student teachers who were interviewed. Ethical procedures included institutional permission to conduct the research, signed informed consent forms by all students and the assurance that all identifying information would be kept confidential.

Table 2.1 Overview of the pre-service teachers interviewed for this study

Gender	Male - 2				Female - 12			
Race	African	2	Coloured	1	White	9	Not indicated	2
Home language	Afrikaans	5	English	8	Setswana	1	Sesotho	1
Teaching subjects	English, Life Orientation, Accounting, Mathematical Literacy, Life Sciences, Business Studies, Afrikaans, Geography, History, Mathematics, isiXhosa							

Findings from the school observation reports

The responses analysed here were given as answers to the following question in the observation reports: What did I learn about schooling in South Africa? Students were asked to describe briefly (1–2 paragraphs each) examples observed in terms of:

- ◀ Impact of socio-economic factors on teaching and learning.
- ◀ Positive approaches to managing diversity (e.g. language, race, gender, religion, ability, etc.).
- ◀ How a school can contribute to building a democratic society.

Due to the volume of data contained in over 200 school observation reports, as well as the richness of the responses, it was decided to focus the analysis on the first and third questions only.

Impact of socio-economic factors on teaching and learning

Even within the short two-week period that they were in schools, and prior to any exposure to an education qualification, PGCE students were well able to identify how socio-economic factors impact on teaching and learning. The data showed two main areas in which this was observed: at the school itself, and from the perspective of the community in which the school was located.

At the level of the school, students identified clear differences in facilities and opportunities available to learners in different socio-economic circumstances. They noted that at better resourced schools and in more affluent communities, learners had access to more subject choices (thus greater career options), more extramural opportunities (thus more opportunity for well-rounded development), more regular exposure to the Internet and better resources for teaching and learning (thus easier access to information), more excursions (thus greater opportunity for expanded experiences), and the more likely presence of school-based support units, like a school psychologist. Quotes from two students give a taste of their observation of the impact of socio-economic factors on teaching and learning:

Many of the learners struggle to afford the books that are required by subjects [...] In terms of learning, it inhibits the choices some learners can make with regards to subjects, and also causes them to lag behind with classwork and homework. This affects the classroom, as the teacher must attempt to distribute books between every pair in order to allow for work to continue.

Many learners experience a lack of access to educational resources at home, such as books and the Internet. This increases the amount of learning that must happen in the classroom, and often teachers must put more effort into assisting learners.

Wealthier parents could pay for additional teachers so that classes were smaller, and they had greater capacity for fundraising for additional equipment and resources. This advantage played out in academic achievement where success rates were higher and access to further studies (and better career options) more likely. In contrast, as one student explained:

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Because of the high rate of failure in the Grade 10 class the classes of the Grade 10s are extremely full. There is almost no place for the learners to sit. This causes a challenge for learners to learn. The teacher also finds it difficult to teach in such a cramped-up class because there is always a group disrupting the class.

From a community perspective, there were again observations about the differences and inequalities of opportunity for young learners. Parental involvement in the school was more present with more socially mobile families, as was additional learning support in the form of private tutors and extra lessons. Even where poorer schools offered extra lessons, learners were hampered in attending. As one student noted: “There are teachers that offer extra classes on Saturdays but due to lack of transport most of the students that do need help cannot make it.”

Social factors such as crime in the community and gang violence stood out as impacting greatly on learners’ capacities for effective study. The poor and unreliable state of public transport was a particular negative influence:

Due to cable theft, trains are therefore delayed or cancelled. Busses and taxis are jam-packed due to the high influx of commuters using these modes of transport. This has a negative impact on teaching and learning. Classes start at 8.00 a.m. Learners arrive at 9.00 a.m., missing an hour of the lesson (if it is a double period) which also impacts on learners being on time delaying the progress of the lesson, i.e. the educator needs to update learners who are late.

In the midst of these difficulties, students noted the resilience of many schools as they worked to address the challenges:

I have been so moved at the compassion, empathy and enthusiasm of the school, at how they are constantly thinking of new ways as to how they can contribute to society and the needy, when there are even people attending the school who also are in need of financial assistance themselves.

A number of students commented on the feeding schemes at many schools, the clothing banks, and even monthly donations from teachers to provide food for learners from low income households.

How a school can contribute to a democratic society

Again, within the short space of time that they were at the schools, student teachers could identify a range of ways in which schools could – and did – contribute to building a democratic society. They saw numerous examples of interventions within the structure and culture of the schools. These included classroom and school rules based on democratic participation, values and principles aimed at promoting a culture of respect, and codes of conduct based on accountability and responsibility. As one example:

Firstly, the school has a complete transparency approach. Nothing is done in secret. Anything the learners want to know they have access to, and can ask about, for example, award criteria, or sports team selection. This encourages learners to understand how democracy works, in that things are supposed to be transparent and only for the good of the people.

A number of practices were also seen as examples of building democracy in action. For example:

All pupils are given responsibilities in matric (Grade 12, the final year of basic education in South Africa). Each learner must take part in one or more school club or group. Matrics must organise and lead assembly meetings. All school learners were involved in neighbouring welfare organisations and helping nearby poor communities.

Bodies like the School Governing Body, Representative Council of Learners and prefects were seen as structures for the active participation of different constituencies, through discussion, planning and voting. Examples were observed of how certain teachers' practices modelled the building of democracy by promoting dialogues around contemporary issues and encouraging critical and intellectual engagement with subject content. School newspapers and discussion groups created forums for engagement and debate, a particularly impressive example being:

Senior learners formed a student unity committee and organised meetings where they could discuss issues relating to race, gender or sexual orientation. All learners were encouraged to attend, as well as participate. It was a safe space where the purpose was to encourage sharing views that were not often heard or understood. This allowed the learners to take part in discussions on their own terms which would lead to better understanding of important social issues. It empowered learners to voice their views, opinions or concerns. It gave their peers an opportunity to understand, discuss or rebut these views and opinions.

While none of these findings are surprising, the significance of the observations lies in the way in which students were able to develop a mindset around the relationship between schools and society, and their potential place within this, prior to beginning their formal studies. Writing about a similar intervention at a different university in South Africa some years ago, Amin and Ramrathan (2009) refer to this as reframing memory, disrupting experience, destabilising learning and reconstructing uncertainty. Such processes, in combination, offer a way into self-reflection and sensitivity to context, essential elements of being a teacher in any setting. In the longer term, habits of reflection and inquiry about schools in context may contribute to professional communities that engage with educational issues in the interests of social justice (see Cochran-Smith, 2004).

Findings from the focus group interviews

This section of the chapter reports on responses in the focus group interviews to the following questions:

- ◀ Which school did you select for your first observation/school practicum? Is this school different from the high school/s you yourself attended? In what way? Why did you select this school?
- ◀ Many South African schools include a diversity of learners (race, language, religion, ability, etc). Do you think your PGCE has prepared you for teaching in a classroom characterised by diversity? Why do you say this? Which modules/topics/theories/ approaches (if any) in the PGCE/Practical Learning module have been valuable in this regard? Why do you say this?
- ◀ South African schools are characterised by a diversity of social and educational contexts (socio-economic conditions, urban, rural etc.). Do you think your PGCE has prepared you to teach in a range of schooling contexts? Why do you say this? Which modules/topics/theories/approaches (if any) in the PGCE/ Practical Learning module have been valuable in this regard? Why do you say this?

Selection of schools for first observation and practicum

Students in the focus groups indicated a relatively even divide between those who chose schools that were different from the one they had attended, and those that were similar. For those who chose schools similar to their own, reasons were in every case due to convenience: “It was practical for me – we only have one school in our town and my sister teaches there so I went there”. Transport costs played a big role too, with students not being able to travel easily beyond their own homes. This practical issue has been found in other cases to serve as a significant barrier when trying to expose students to different social contexts (Robinson, 2014). Poor public transport, heavy morning traffic and no student stipends, sadly and invariably seem to preclude the potential for students to experience the life of a community outside of their own neighbourhoods. This systemic challenge starkly illustrates the intertwining of educational and social factors, and the complexity of meeting the policy goal of situational and contextual learning.

It was interesting to note the conception of ‘difference’ for those who chose schools different from the one they had attended. While I had expected these differences to be understood primarily in racial or socio-economic terms, students were less focused on race and class, and added a wider range of features of ‘difference’: gender (single sex or co-educational), size of the school, religion, availability of particular school subjects and nature of school (e.g. an

agricultural school, a school for orphans, a school with private sponsors or rural location). In all cases they explained their motivation as an opportunity for growth and challenge. Some wanted to expand their own experiences of South African society: “You hear all these prejudices. [I] thought it couldn’t be that bad.” “I wanted to go where I could have exposure to isiXhosa.” Others focused on personal development: “I wanted something completely different – who wants to go back to where you went before?” One student saw this as a moment to challenge herself professionally:

I went around in the area where I stay. I wanted the worst school that I can (find). I wanted a ghetto school; a school where there was gangsterism. I thought if I can survive in that type of school I can survive anywhere.

For others, there was a longer-term goal of personal growth:

Before entering PGCE you don’t know the value of going somewhere different, of entering unfamiliar terrain. You think, oh well, just go with the easiest, stay in the comfort zone. But during the PGCE the lecturers make you aware that you grow as a person when you enter unfamiliar terrain and when you are exposed to situations that you are not used to.

Even though students were strongly encouraged to go to different kinds of schools for their observation and their practicum, it was interesting to note that those who chose the same school, did so thoughtfully and deliberately: “I wanted to see how the learners had developed, how things had changed from the beginning of the year”; “I was more aware of things when I went back”; “The principal is inspirational”.

Preparation to teach a diversity of learners and in a range of social contexts

Due to the overlap in responses, the two interview questions around a diversity of learners and a range of social contexts have been combined here.

The interviews rendered many positive examples of where students felt the PGCE had prepared them to teach a diverse range of learners and in a range of social contexts. The subjects History, Sociology, Philosophy and Psychology were indicated as most significant here. Relevant topics mentioned included inclusive education, difference and diversity, links between children’s home and school lives, language across the curriculum, bias, psychological safety and self-esteem.

Pedagogically, they felt that a number of subjects in the PGCE encouraged debates and critical discussion, and showed them that teaching is “not a set formula that you can be provided with.” In the Practical Learning module

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itself, the videos in the series “*Schools that Work*” (<https://bit.ly/3paiChI>) were overwhelmingly named as most significant. These videos show schools that are succeeding against the odds. As one student put it: “The videos showed that the area is very rural and the schools can still function and the kids are doing well. Makes you think – even if you have the worst you can still do well.” This perspective was echoed by another student:

[The videos] taught me that no matter how many students you have, if you approach education with a positive mindset, you can still teach them. Being able to see this in practice in the videos ... Children were sitting on the floor, but I could see that they still received a good education because the teacher had a passion for teaching.

A surprising addition here was the topic of digital learning, with one student linking this to the presence of different language groups in a school: “[Digital pedagogy] bridged the diversity in the class as I could visually show the learners the topics, bridge language gaps.” For another student teacher, the PGCE as a whole provided an integrated experience in preparing him for a diversity of situations:

Life Sciences taught me to teach in a context where learners have no resources – to use objects from daily life. (This) really helped me to realise what I have and what I don’t have, and to find an alternative. It helped me to adapt my lessons to a different environment. Life Orientation – you learn to know your children, regardless of any economic environment; know what the child is going through, the child has the potential to grow. It’s not about physical resources, but how you approach teaching. Education Management and Leadership – it is knowing where you are responsible for the children, emotional responsibility. (I learnt) a little bit through every module. Practical Learning integrated everything.

Many responses were, however, less positive. School placements for the practicum received some criticism, with students noting a bias towards placement in more privileged schools:

In theory it has given us the foundation, the knowledge that there is diversity in classrooms, you need to acknowledge [...] Unfortunately, being in Stellenbosch, many of the students went to schools that are still in the bubble of more privileged schools. It does not prepare us for the reality of what is going on in the education system. Too many of the students were placed in those schools.

Similarly:

To a certain extent I feel like the PGCE aimed to do that (prepare for diverse contexts). I don’t feel like it succeeded in all aspects to be honest. Because I only attended privileged schools. It would be nice to have more exposure to schools where kids have other things to worry about than being on their cellphones.

Rather than criticising the programme, one student acknowledged the responsibility that he too might have had in selecting a particular school for his placement:

In theory it has given us an understanding of what to do, an understanding of why certain learners have certain knowledge and understanding. In theory it has shown us that you have urban and rural schools and communities. In practice it hasn't necessarily shown all of us. Unless you made a decision to be placed in a different socio-economic context (many students stayed in their comfort zones). It has to do with personal attitude and your take on moving out of your own comfort zone.

Rural schooling was also seen to be neglected: “[The PGCE] did not prepare us for the *platteland* [rural areas] and their communities. It focused a lot on local schools: don't think about over the mountain. I don't want to live in the city.” “A lot of our classes focus on digital learning, which is good. But they did not give us the tools on how to teach in a rural school where [there] could be no technology.”

Lecturers' own distance from the experience of schooling was also noted as an obstacle to grappling with contemporary issues: “Most lecturers have been out of the class for a very long time and things have changed, and it is almost as if the theories they have are based on old observations.” Those who had authentic cases to draw on were valued: “He would give us scenarios and he would tell us what he did and how he approached it, and that would help.”

The overall message was an acknowledgement that the content and the pedagogy of the PGCE classes had been oriented towards preparing students for a diversity of contexts, and that students were definitely aware and sensitive to the issues. However, despite this movement in the direction of “ethical commitment and personal development ... as part of their occupational make-up” (Winch, 2017:15), students indicated that they did not feel prepared in a practical sense. One student summarised this as follows:

There was an attempt – subjects taught us the theory to understand disadvantage. But I say the theory, because I don't think it practically prepared me to teach in those contexts. I am talking about my teaching subjects, e.g. I asked my lecturer about teaching where there were no resources. She sent an email with a few examples of resources. She didn't even know how to help us.

Overall findings

Attempting to design a module linked to Biesta's “educational virtuosity” (2015:19), the findings of the study demonstrate the many factors that can undermine or at least challenge such efforts. From the interviews in particular, it became clear that the module Practical Learning was but one relatively

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small element of the overall student experience, with a number of aspects of the PGCE curriculum contributing to students' sense of ethical agency. These aspects included immersion and guided observation in different contexts to penetrate barriers of discomfort and stereotype. Academic subjects like Sociology or Philosophy provided conceptual categories that helped to organise students' thinking about the links between school and society. Exposure to those who were succeeding against the odds challenged preconceptions and offered powerful and authentic role models that could inspire hope and motivation in the student teachers. Debates and discussions gave opportunity for the pre-service teachers to consider alternative viewpoints, and led them to a realisation of the complexity of teaching. For some, there was an acknowledgement that content and pedagogy could only provide a spark in the direction of agency, and that personal responsibility was also a key factor in the development of students' commitment and values.

Gaps in the programme with respect to preparation for a diversity of contexts included the need for greater exposure outside of a 'bubble' of privilege, stronger relationships with non-urban environments, lecturers who were more closely connected to the contemporary challenges of schooling in South Africa, and – most often mentioned – the need and desire for more confidence with practical classroom strategies.

Conclusion

This chapter aimed to explore ways to develop the deeper purposes of situated judgement and ethical agency in a single programme, the PGCE at Stellenbosch University. I explored how the purpose and design of the Practical Learning module of the PGCE linked to the ways in which the module was presented. To move beyond an intended curriculum and better understand the implemented curriculum, the second part of the chapter reported on which (if any) concepts, theories or approaches students found meaningful in their own preparation for a diversity of contexts. Such an account provides a small example of an attempt to teach for educational virtuosity, "trying to see how it functions, how it is embodied, where it is done explicitly, where it is held back" (Biesta, 2015:21).

Tentative conclusions from students' observation reports and interviews indicated that students had an acute awareness of the link between education and society. Overwhelmingly – at least for those who were interviewed – they saw the PGCE as providing an opportunity for growth and challenge within the South African context, even though certain limitations of the programme

in this regard were clearly articulated. Linking back to the notion of ethical agency, one could say that students had a strong ethical orientation, but a hesitant sense of agency, the latter due to doubts about their competence in practical classroom strategies to deal with diverse learners and contexts.

Design-based research sets out to implement and research an intervention, and to draw out principles for further improvement of that intervention. In line with this, the chapter ends with suggesting a set of curriculum principles that might be considered in support of the goals of the module. Drawing on the findings of this small study, I would argue that the development of ethical agency for teaching is an intertwining of awareness, responsibility, immersion and action. This resonates strongly with the concept of ‘embodiment’ as an alternative to trying to bridge the so-called gap between theory and practice in learning to teach. Rather, it would seem to be the experience of the different interlinked aspects of becoming a teacher that makes the difference, where: “knowledge [for teaching] is understood as existing in a dynamic relationship between social, psychological, material and embodied realities” (Ord & Nuttall, 2016:357). In other words, and to put it simply, good or virtuous teaching must be learnt, must be experienced, and must be felt. And at the level of the classroom, one can see that every aspect of teaching and learning matters: academic content, pedagogy, experience, observation, as well as student histories and aspirations.

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