

Enhancing School-University Collaborations: The Multifaceted Role of Teacher Educators in Pre-Service Teacher Practicum

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the role performed by teacher educators in a third space when pre-service teachers are placed for teaching practicum. It is imperative that a study on the current roles performed by teachers in a South African context be investigated. This contention emanates from the critiques which lack coherence in strengthening the connection between theory and practice during pre-service teachers teaching practice. Two domains of knowledge, knowledge-for-practice and knowledge-in-practice are conceptualised to understand the role performed by teacher educators in the third space. This qualitative research used case study methodology to gather data through face-to-face interviews that were semi-structured. An inductive thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data obtained from teacher educators, mentor teachers, and pre-service teachers. This study has found that teacher educators perform multifaceted roles in the third space when pre-service teachers undertake teaching practicum in schools. The ramification of multifaceted roles performed by teacher educators are discussed and the recommendations on how teacher educators ought to operate in professional development schools are provided.

Keywords: School-university partnership; third space; teacher educators; pre-service teachers; teaching practicum.

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INTRODUCTION

School-university partnership has been acknowledged as a practical learning experience for pre-service teachers (PSTs) during their teaching practicum. However, school-university partnerships on initial teacher education (ITE) programs face enormous criticism in recent times. Scholars argue that collaboration between schools and universities during teaching practicum remains fragile and often lack effectiveness in preparing (PSTs) for teaching profession demand. One of the continuous matters that plague ITE programs is the lack of coherence between the theoretical knowledge that PSTs acquire at universities and the practical experience developed in schools/classrooms (Baumfield, Bethel, Boyle, Katene Knowler, Koutsouris, & Norwich, 2022; Flores, 2017; O'Neil, 2013; Robinson, 2016). Lack of coherence between theory and practice is exacerbated by a detached ITE program from classroom reality which is often theory-driven and scanty opportunities are afforded to PSTs to engage in the authentic teaching contexts (Gravett, Petersen & Ramsaroop, 2019; Mutemeri & Chetty, 2011). Several recommendations have been provided which prompted Timperley (2013) to recommend that PSTs should “engage in authentic and reflective conversation that draw on shared authentic situations” (Timperley, 2013, p. 11). Much of the critiques of ITE centers within the hegemonic knowledge differentials between university-based personnel and school-based teachers, with the former being more knowledgeable about theoretical foundations of education and the latter the practical aspect of teaching. To dislodge the disparities pervasive in ITE, Zeichner and Bier (2015) argue that a traditional ITE that is university-led needs to transition to a more school based for PSTs to be prepared in an authentic context.

Within the South African context, challenges regarding the quality of ITE programs led to the development of Integrated Strategic Planning Framework for Teacher Education and Development in South Africa (Department of Basic Education & Department of Higher Education and Training, 2011). This framework proposed strengthening coherence between theoretical and practical knowledge by the establishment of teaching schools and professional practice schools during teaching practicum. The challenges experienced in South

Africa, and one underpinned this current study, is to understand the current responsibilities of teacher educators during teaching practicum. This will enable the deconstruction of their roles that could lead to innovative collaboration in ITE programs and strengthen coherence between theory and practice. Teacher educators need to transition to a more pragmatic sort of knowledge in which they collaborate fluidly with mentor-teachers in teaching and professional practice schools during teaching practicum to guarantee that PSTs integrate their understanding of teaching into actual practice. Against this background, little attention has been given to the role that teacher educators perform during PSTs teaching practicum to strengthen theory-practice nexus. This study attempted to fill this gap through investigating the teacher educators' roles from the experiences of teacher educators, mentor teachers, and PSTs.

The role of universities and schools in ITE programs

The discourse pertaining to bridging the theory and practice gap signifies an essential realm which exposes the responsibilities performed by teacher education institutions and schools during teaching practicum (Ferraz, Vidoni, & Boas, 2021). South African tradition of teacher education is a policy directive which emphasize the integration of theoretical knowledge with practical experience particularly during teaching practicum (Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), 2007). The policy explicitly exposes the binary roles in ITE programs because providing theoretical knowledge to PSTs is the prerogative of teacher education institutions underpinned in ITE programs and the practical experience which is primarily the responsibility of school-based teachers. These binary roles performed by teacher education institutions and schools clearly indicate that both institutions are different regarding their structure and functioning. For universities, providing theoretical knowledge entails intensive publishable research that informs the theoretical underpinnings of methodological courses offered in ITE (Gravett, Petersen & Ramsaroop, 2019). This theoretical knowledge also informs how work-integrated learning in ITE needs to be carried out by teacher education institutions, thereby achieving congruence between fieldwork and coursework (Ramsaroop,

Petersen & Gravett, 2020). This contention indicates that teacher education institutions are not merely limited to provisioning theoretical knowledge, the practical aspect of the provided theoretical knowledge remains an essential component of ITE programs. However, regarding the latter, teacher education institutions are passive actors in a school-university partnership in which a joint activity of interconnecting theory and practice is yet to be achieved (Farrel, 2023). Some scholars have proposed the establishment of professional development schools in which teacher education institutions and schools work collaboratively in these schools to provide professional experience for PST (Grau, Calcagni, Preiss, 2017; Gravett, Petersen & Ramsaroop, 2019). Whereas other studies highlighted the integration of professional experience school in their work-integrated learning to interconnect coursework and fieldwork (Clarke & Winslade, 2019).

Regarding schools, a teaching practicum is school-led, and teacher education institutions play a minimal role during teaching practicum in reinforcing and strengthening different forms of knowledge (e.g., content and pedagogical knowledge, and pedagogical content knowledge) in authentic teaching contexts. Mentoring is a common practice employed by mento-teachers during teaching practicum. Mentor teachers are tasked with the responsibility of providing exposure of content, pedagogical and pedagogical content knowledge in authentic teaching contexts (Ndebele, Legg-Jack, 2022; Smit & du Toit, 2021; Hlengiwe & Nzimande, 2023). The pervasive dichotomy in terms of roles suggests that teacher educators are required to consider new and meaningful opportunities for field experiences in the third space (Resch, Schrittmesser & Knapp, 2022). The third space is conceptualized in this study to identify activeness of teacher educators during teaching practicum.

The boundary zone in which schools and universities interact with each other is regarded as the third space. Zeichner (2010) views the third space as a proximal zone in which the interaction of university and school systems converge for the development of PSTs to interconnect teaching knowledge from both epistemological and practical experiences. Jackson and Burch (2019) perceive third space

as a construction site which brings teacher educators and school-based teachers together to generate new meanings of collaboration and explore new forms of practice. The collaborative nature of a school-university partnership premised on the third space helps teacher educators and school-based teachers to reassess their roles and purposes of professional experience in ITE (Williams, White, Forgasz & Grimmatt, 2018). These authors extend that partnership is generative in relation to the structure and organization of the practicum, the pedagogical strategies that PSTs develop as well as the professional relationships that can be established between partners. This suggests that the third space requires teacher educators and mentor-teachers to work together in the designing and delivering of innovative learning experiences for PSTs.

Researchers in ITE programs argue that the programs need to transform drastically if they aspire to prepare PSTs that can work effectively in schools (Cochran-Smith et al. 2016). They advocate that authentic partnerships between teacher educators and mentor-teachers should involve co-construction of curriculum and field experience in a collaborative inquiry (Cochran-Smith *et al.*, 2016; Mason, 2013; Moody, 2009; Rigelman & Ruben, 2012). For example, universities in Finland builds strong partnership between teacher educators and PSTs in which teacher educators can model and develop practices emerging from shared research and learning together (Darling-Hammond, 2010). In New Zealand, teacher educators developed a compulsory course in which teacher educators and mentor-teachers design, develop, and deliver innovative learning experiences for PSTs, coalescing different perspectives, pedagogical theory, research, and practice (Sewell et al., 2018). In this collaborative inquiry, knowledge of and from teaching is generated in the authentic context as suggested by Bolstad and Gilbert (2012). Although literature internationally point towards a positive direction in strengthening the relationship between partners and developing innovative approaches for teacher educators and school-based teachers to work collaboratively, the roles performed by teacher educators in South Africa needs to be investigated.

Problem Statement

According to the preceding discussion, school-university partnerships bring together two distinct forms of teaching knowledge that influence PSTs professional development. The binary theory-practice divide in teacher preparation programs lingers a perpetual contest in the professional development of PSTs (Harford & MacRuairc, 2008). Flores (2018) argues that effective school-university partnership explicitly question the binary theory and practice divide to establish effective learning experiences for PSTs. However, la Velle (2019) contends that theory and practice relationship should not be seen as divided but rather as a nexus because pedagogical practice is underpinned by a combination of epistemological knowledge originating from empirical evidence and research arguments. The contention made by la Velle (2019) suggests that teacher educators should not just be theoretical knowledge providers but need to be visible in the third space not to negotiate with mentor teachers but to evaluate and guide PSTs in translating theoretical knowledge into actual practice. This study aims to explore the role that teacher educators perform when PSTs are placed during teaching practicum to reinforce pedagogical practice.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In this study, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) two domains of knowledge (knowledge-for-practice and knowledge-in-practice) are used to conceptualise the role of teacher educators during teaching practicum of PSTs.

The conception of knowledge-for-practice suggests that university experts produce epistemological knowledge that teacher educators use to teach PSTs to develop knowledge about teaching. The domain of knowledge generally includes “content or subject matter knowledge as well as knowledge about the disciplinary foundations of education, human development and learners, classroom organization, pedagogy, assessment, the social and cultural contexts of teaching and schooling, and knowledge of teaching as a profession” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 254). This implies that knowledge-for-practice signifies the theoretical and research findings knowledge that PSTs acquire at universities, and this is a broad body of knowledge about teaching

profession. For PSTs to implement the theoretical knowledge in practice, they are required to learn the basics and dynamics of teaching profession from theoretical epistemology generated and delivered by teacher educators.

The conception of knowledge-in-practice epitomizes teachers’ everyday practical experiences in schools and classrooms while directly interacting with learners. This suggest that the “knowledge is acquired through experience and through considered and deliberative reflection about or inquiry into experience” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 262). Pre-service teachers deepen their teaching knowledge by being in classroom action during the period of teaching practicum. The context and social circumstances within which PSTs find themselves during teaching practicum influence their teaching experiences. At this stage, teacher educators are absent to guide PSTs to translate the theoretical knowledge into practical knowledge as experiential learning is the sole responsibility of mentor teachers in schools. Knowledge-in-practice signifies the third space in teacher preparation programs, which is a boundary zone that brings together teacher educators and mentor teachers to both guide PSTs for professional development. The concept of third space is conceptualized to understand how teacher educators’ cross knowledge boundary zone (Tsui & Law, 2007; Tsui et al. 2009) with the purpose of guiding pre-service teachers about teaching practice, not from a theoretical perspective but rather by blending theoretical and practical knowledge.

The role of teacher educators in the third space warrants for investigation because they need to perform multifaceted functions that promote interconnection between theoretical and practical knowledge in authentic teaching situations (Bolstad & Gilbert, 2012; Greany & Brown, 2015; Miller, 2015; Sewell et al. 2018). Prior research ignores multiple blended roles that teacher educators ought to perform in professional and teaching schools to reinforce theory and practice nexus.

Research Questions

To explore the responsibilities performed by teacher educators in the third space when PSTs are placed for teaching practicum, the following questions will guide the research:

- How do teacher educators participate in the third space to reinforce interconnection between theory and practice during teaching practicum?
- What are the perceptions of PSTs and mentor-teachers regarding teacher educators' role during teaching practicum?

Aim and Objectives

The study aims to investigate the role performed by teacher educators when pre-service teachers are placed for teaching practicum in schools. The study aims to achieve the following objectives:

- Identify multifaceted roles that teacher educators ought to perform in the third space during pre-service teachers' teaching practicum.
- Evaluate the ramifications of the nexus between theoretical and practical knowledge in authentic teaching situations.

METHODOLOGY

Research Context

This study investigated a teacher education program in one of the South African universities. The focus of this study was to investigate the relationship between teacher educators and mentor teachers during pre-service teachers' teaching practicum. A teacher education program offered by one South African university provided a research context to understand how teacher educators and mentor teachers participate in the third space to strengthen coherence between theory and practice.

Research Methods

This study fits the description of qualitative research that used relatively unstructured data as described by Hammersley (2013). A qualitative case study methodology was used because this study aims to gather rich description of participants' experiences in a third space when PSTs undergo teaching practice in schools. Couched within real life situations, the current case study provided a rich and inclusive account of the intricate and unfolding interactions of events and people within a third space. The sampling technique in this study was

purposive in that the research included teacher educators that offer PSTs coursework (n=6), mentor-teachers (n=4) and PSTs (n=5) to strengthen research rigor.

Prior to the collection of data, a detailed information session was held with PSTs to explain the purpose of the research to enable them to answer questions in an informed manner, thereby reducing their prejudice as suggested by Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2018). The data collection method for all the participants was through semi-structured interviews that were transcribed from audio recordings. However, the questions were open-ended, and the wording sequence was tailored to each individual interviewee and their individual response with prompts and probes (Cohen et al. 2018).

Data Analysis

The data was analysed by making use of the thematic analysis of the data collected from teacher educators, mentor-teachers, and PSTs. In this approach, the researcher referred to Cohen et al. (2018) who describes thematic analysis as identifying categories and themes that enable the study to answer stated research questions. Cohen et al. (2018) argue that raw data from participants needs to be reduced to develop a comprehensive meaning of what the data entails by identifying categories or themes. Participants' transcripts were transcribed from audio recordings, codes and emerging themes derived from the audio recordings were categorized based on similar themes. An inductive analysis approach was employed in this study to coalesce the data obtained from teacher educators, mentor-teachers, and pre-service teachers to juxtapose the role that teacher educators perform during teaching practicum of pre-service teachers. Therefore, validity and dependability in relation to data analysis was achieved by triangulation of data from multiple sources (e.g., PSTs, teacher educators, and mentor-teachers) (Patton, 1999).

FINDINGS

The role performed by teacher educators during teaching practicum was discussed by PSTs, mentor teachers, and teacher educators. Their perspectives highlight multifaceted roles of teacher educators as evaluators, communicators and mediators, and reflective practitioners. Participants' perspectives delineate the

relationship between teacher educators and mentor teachers, and the ramification of the nexus between theoretical and practical knowledge in authentic teaching situations.

Multifaceted roles performed by teacher educators.

Teacher educators operate as evaluators of students' progress during teaching practice

Participants described the role of teacher educators as evaluators of student's progress which in essence is to evaluate if student teachers can enact complex teaching practice and connect theoretical with practical knowledge. Participants shared

They [teacher educators] come to evaluate student teachers if they can put a connection between the content that they were taught and the real-life situation. So, you have abstract and reality, the idea is that we are bridging the gap (MT1)

They say you are going to evaluate in these schools and evaluate like this, and they give you the form and that's it (TE1)

The view expressed by participants seems to suggest that teacher educators conduct school visits to evaluate the progress made by student teachers in enacting teaching practice in authentic teaching situation. The evaluation is centered on assessing the ability of student teachers to integrate theory with practice in this authentic teaching situation.

Teacher educators act as communicators and mediators

Within the interviews, teacher educators and mentor teachers identified the role of teacher educators as mediators and communicators in which they inquire with mentor teachers about students' progress. This was highlighted in these views

My interaction with the mentor teacher is just to ask how the student is doing. Usually, how is the student doing and just wanting to know when the student (TE1)

Normally they would ask about how is the student teacher doing in terms of content knowledge, teaching strategies, and classroom management skills (MT2)

Teacher educators perform a boundary broker role by inquiring about the progress that the student has made during teaching practice from mentor teacher perspective. Teacher educators inquire about student teachers' progress to identify teaching areas that student teachers need professional development to augment their existing broader teaching knowledge.

Reflective practitioners

According to the participants, teacher educators are reflective practitioners in which they provide constructive feedback crucial in strengthening the connection between theory and practice. Both mentor teachers and teacher educators gave constructive criticism, according to student teachers' accounts.

I was given feedback in the presence of the university lecturer and my mentor teacher. They both gave me feedback. The lecturer gave me feedback and constructively criticized me (ST1)

No, I just evaluate, and they [mentor teachers] don't give any feedback..... My criticism is more constructive, and you know leaving a space okay you don't want to be too critical, but you do provide.

PSTs regards one of the responsibilities of teacher educators as reflective practitioners who seemed to have the authority to determine whether PSTs teaching aligns with the certain standards. Teacher educators strengthen PSTs teaching expertise from a wider perspective by providing constructive criticism after they have evaluated PSTs. Teacher educators recognize that student teachers are in the process of developing their teaching skills and need to be provided with helpful feedback without being overly critical in order for student teachers to have an optimistic view about teaching.

Ramification of relationship between teacher educators and mentor teachers

Participants' reflections during the interviews indicate that the school-university partnership remains fragile because the roles of mentor teachers and teacher educators are not explicitly negotiated, and no definitive agreement has been reached on the roles of each stakeholder during teaching practice. This is described by participants

The university doesn't have anything tangible that the teacher who is evaluated should do with the mentor teacher (TE1)

But the question is, did the university explicitly tell the school not to do that (MT2)

The above quotations show that there is no clear relationship between mentor teachers and teacher educators regarding how they should collaborate to professionally develop student teachers during teaching practice. As a teacher training institution, universities lack guidelines that regulate how each stakeholder should participate in a collaborative teacher preparation programme.

Participants are of the view that it is essential for teacher educators to visit student teachers more than once during teaching practice. They perceive single visitation during teaching practicum as inadequate for teacher educators to extensively evaluate the ability of PSTs to connect theory with practice. Mentor teacher shared

Well, obviously one cannot make a single visit during teaching practice and assume that student teachers have developed the necessary skills to become teachers. Even though lecturers come to schools not only for one student but for multiple students, it is important for them to visit student teachers more than once during their teaching practice (MT1).

Participant suggests that during teaching practice, teacher educators' single visitation to evaluate student teachers' progress in connecting teaching theory and practice is an ineffective approach. Mentor teachers' notion implies that student teachers cannot develop the required teaching skills and that multiple visitations can strengthen and enhance necessary teaching skills.

A one-sided communication inevitably excludes mentor teachers. A mentor teacher expressed this perplexing notion

I would ask myself that question, who do I report the student teachers to? There were days she would be absent particularly on Mondays and Fridays, days moving towards the weekend. I would ask what happens when student

teachers are absent. From the school they say I should report it at the University, you just have to tell the lecturer. But why should I call the lecturer because the lecturer never really communicated with me that I have to admit this person [student teacher], what do I begin with when I call the lecturer (MT2)

A lack of two-way communication has caused misunderstanding, especially when mentor teachers are required to report on student progress in relation to their daily teaching practice repertoires. A mentor teacher believes that it should be the responsibility of a designated teacher educator to ensure constant communication between mentor teachers and student teachers. Due to a lack of communication from the beginning of teaching practice, mentor teachers are uncertain as to who they should report a case of student teacher absenteeism.

Teacher educators' role as communicators was assumed by mentor teachers to be merely limited as communication is only between teacher educators and student teachers. One mentor teacher shared the following

Quite frankly, there is no communication between the schools, let me be just specific and say teachers, in general, anyone from the school, there is no one talking to the university (MT2)

The role of teacher educators as communicators seems to be one-sided. Mentor teachers are of the view that university has prioritized communication between them and their students and have neglected mentor teachers in the process. Restricted communication does not only exclude mentor teachers, data from mentor teachers implies that the school management team is also not being informed. Data also suggests that schools lack mitigation strategies to communicate with university or teacher educators.

DISCUSSION

The study has identified multifaceted roles that teacher educators perform in the third space during PSTs teaching practicum. Data reveals that teacher educators step out of their confined context, that is university, and conduct school visits with the purpose of evaluating PSTs progress, competence, and active participation

in teaching and learning activities. Practical experience in schools become productive if subjected to evaluation process that constructively critique PSTs' performance in terms of enacting teaching practice in real-life situations.

The data has revealed that the role of communicators performed by teacher educators is quite troubling as it is restricted to PSTs and teacher educators. The study conducted by Allen and Wright (2014) indicates that PSTs expressed the need for teacher educators and mentor teachers to have a transparent communication in a quest to improve their relationship. Similarly, Lemon and co classify a school-university partnership as a complex and layered inquiry that requires open and continuous communication from all stakeholders involved (Lemon, Wilson, Oxworth, Zavros-Orr, & Wood, 2018). Dialogue between teacher educators and mentor teachers is a boundary broker role which is not dedicated to either stakeholder, but it is rather a shared responsibility that each partner needs to collaboratively exercise for professional development of PSTs (Green, Tindall-Ford & Eady, 2020; Wang & Wong, 2019). However, there are ramifications associated with the roles performed by teacher educators. Contradicting views from participants implies that ITE lacks guidelines on how mentor teachers and teacher educators should collaboratively work in the third space. Teacher educators and mentor teachers in the professional development school should dislodge binary roles, thereby creating equal and dialectic nexus to support PSTs practical experience (Mutemeri & Cherry, 2011, Cochran-Smith et al. 2016). Equal and dialectic nexus implies that co-construction of field experience between teacher educators and mentor teachers should form an integral part of ITE.

The data suggests that teacher educators evaluate PSTs classroom enactment and subsequently have a reflective discussion with PSTs regarding enacted lesson. Wang and Wong (2019) argue that theoretical conceptions and pedagogical ideas provided by teacher educators during reflection session serves as a guide and a standard for PSTs to reassess their previous practice. Reflective sessions are transformative as they provide PSTs with an alternative to their initial lesson plan and implementation, it provides different

instructional strategies that could be adopted to make a lesson meaningful and adhere to the learning needs of learners in classrooms. The benefit of teaching practicum is that analysis of teaching practice and reflection are blended and form an integral part of the learning process. Blended or hybrid roles performed by teacher education when working in schools provoke recognition of teacher educators' professional identities, either they regard themselves as theoretical knowledge providers or agents of change that integrate different forms of knowledge, expertise, skills for professional development of PSTs during teaching practicum.

CONCLUSION

This study has provided the role of teacher educators during teaching practicum and how teacher educators participate in the third space to reinforce coursework and fieldwork in authentic teaching contexts. South African higher education has established a relationship between teacher educators and school-based teachers as envisaged in Integrated Strategic Planning Framework for Teacher Education and Development in South Africa (DBE & DHET, 2011) but has not strengthened their relationship. This creates conflicting roles particularly regarding how the relationship should be carried out because no policy or agreement has been devised on how teacher educators ought to participate in schools during teaching practicum. Although some teacher education institutions in a South African context have become innovative in integrating novel approaches that bridge the coursework and fieldwork in ITE programs (Gravett et al. 2019), some institutions are still lagging in this endeavor. The disparities in South African ITE programs seem to be exacerbated by the autonomy of teacher education institutions particularly regarding the ITE curriculum, structure, duration of teaching practicum, evaluation of PSTs and constructive critique of the presented lesson to name a few. Botha and Beets (2015) argue that each institution commonly adopts distinct beliefs regarding the preparation of ITE students. This study recommends that the establishment of professional development school or practicing school in South Africa needs to reconsider the structure of ITE and duration of teaching practicum while not interfering with ITE

curriculum for teacher education institutions to maintain their autonomy.

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