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Reflecting on English student teachers' critical incidents during teaching practicum

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the English as a Second Language (ESL) student teachers' critical incidents during teaching practicum. Critical incidents are situations that are seen as challenging and that require immediate ratification before effective teaching and learning is restored. By their very nature, critical incidents result from the unpredictable environment in teaching and learning landscapes. However, there is a paucity of studies that focus on describing student teachers' critical incidents as part of their teaching knowledge construction process. Against this background, this study sought to answer the following question: What critical incidents do student teachers encounter during teaching practicum? Theoretically, the study is underpinned by insights from reflective practice, and experiential and transformative learning, and embraced

a qualitative intrinsic case study design within an interpretivist paradigm. I collected data using participants' reflective journals and focused group discussion in which they recorded written descriptions of critical incidents. Purposive sampling was utilised to select 15 student teachers as participants. Using inductive thematic analysis, the following themes emerged: critical incidents in developing professional identity, critical incidents in the context of teaching English Language and critical incidents in teaching Language skills. Based on the findings, a need for guiding student teachers' professional awareness as part of their reflection practices was identified.

Keywords: critical incidents; ESL; reflective practice; student teachers; teacher education; South Africa

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to describe student teachers' critical incidents during teaching practicum. According to **Lampert, Burnett, Comber, Ferguson and Barnes (2018)**, fewer topics have been debated as much as the teacher preparation curriculum model, with the pervading question being, what curriculum does a student teacher require to be an effective classroom practitioner? Everyone it would seem has an answer to this question, from the man in the street to the highest office in the land. **Ulvik, Helleve, Smith (2018)** notes that despite this much attention, the debate on how to prepare student teachers is ongoing. Globally, academics, policy makers and researchers agree that teacher preparation includes knowledge construction from multiple contexts such as "the personal – linked to the reasons they entered teaching; university-based teacher preparation; practicum experiences; [and the] first employment context" (Adoniou, 2013:47). This holistic approach to teacher preparation advocates for the immersion of the student teacher in both the theoretical and the practical nuances of teaching (Polizzi, 2009). This suggests that during preparation the student teacher is equipped with the knowledge, habits, values, skills, experience and dispositions they require to facilitate learning in the classroom (Hollins, 2011). In South Africa, Banoobhai (2012) mentions that teacher education follows a postmodern orientation where teaching skills, values, competencies and dispositions all find meaning in the learning context.

Traditionally, the theory of education was held as an important indication that the student teacher was indeed prepared for the classroom (**Ulvik et al., 2018**) However, researchers such as Lampert (2010) and Grossman *et al.* (2009) refute the notion that theory is supreme in teacher education, instead advocating for a holistic approach. While theory of education is critical, it alone cannot develop the student into the quality professional that is required of the modern teacher (Hollins, 2011). As early as the 19th century, Dewey (1933) recognised that without the integration of theory and practice, teacher education remained abstract and lacking in social and pedagogical experimentation. Current research supports the view that the teacher curriculum should integrate theory into practice in situated contexts (Banoobhai, 2012; Goodell, 2006; Kilgour, Northcote, & Herman, 2015). This means that student teachers who are in the process of professional development use theoretical orientations from their formal preparation to experience the practical aspects of teaching. This process is reflective, experiential and transformative, allowing for the inexperienced teacher to construct a teaching philosophy (Hodson, Smith, & Brown, 2012). In recognition of the unique context in which teaching and learning takes place, teacher education curricula in South Africa also advocate reflection to guide student teachers to construct teaching knowledge (Banoobhai, 2012).

Reflective practice in teacher education

Reflective practice has gained popularity in teacher education from an understanding of learning as the "ability to synthesise, integrate, and apply knowledge from multiple sources" (Hollins, 2011:403). Based on the work of Dewey and popularised by Schön

(1983, 1987), reflection has gained recognition in teacher education. Researchers such as Shulman (1987) argue that student teachers must not be taught how to act but should be guided to reflect on their actions. Reflective practice is premised on the understanding that a professional holds a theory of action made up of both theoretical and practical experiences. As Goodell (2006) opines, reflective practice is the intentional act of inquiring into one's actions and thoughts in light of a perceived problem. During this problem-solving process, the practitioner gains a better understanding of their work and forms a sense of knowing that initiates them into the profession. This view underpins the notion that at the heart of teaching is the interpretive process that provides teachers with the contextual, learning and classroom experiences that they need to make sense of the world. Hence, engaging the student teachers in opportunities where they see that multiple ways of constructing teaching knowledge, skills and values is important for their holistic professional development.

The discussion on reflection above suggests that it should be modelled in the student teachers' own learning. Although reflection is undeniably a cognitive skill that student teachers ought to have, Goodell (2006) cautions that the structured nature of most teacher education curricula denies the student an opportunity to acquire this skill. In addition, where the reflective process is upheld, the student teacher is challenged by 'incidents' that compound their ability to create an effective teaching and learning environment. In fact, Kilgour *et al.* (2015:2) state that

... they enter a transition phase between the bounds of university learning contexts and the unbounded workplace. Some experience this period as moving from a certain to an uncertain context. It is typically a time of looking backward (reflecting on their tertiary learning) and looking forward (positioning themselves in future employment). Recognising the connections between past recollections and future plans can be initiated by considering critical incidents or bumpy moments.

As encapsulated by the quotation above, there are critical incidents that student teachers describe when reflecting on their teaching practices. Although these incidents result from uncertainty and problematic situations, they are still necessary for ushering the inexperienced teacher into professional practice. In fact, Tripp (2011: xiii) mentions that the importance of critical incidents is that "we seldom forget the occurrence of strong emotions, almost all of the critical incidents people recall have been regularly, deeply and extensively reflected upon, frequently in an entirely unsystematic fashion". The teaching practice journey is one that is littered with emotional challenges emanating from an attempt by the student teacher to convincingly teach the subject matter and show organisational and classroom management abilities (Kilgour *et al.*, 2015).

Critical incidents in teacher education

The term 'critical incidents' was popularised in education by Tripp's (1993) pedagogical theory. Tripp's (1993) theory is based on the work of the early pioneer critical incidents theorist Flanagan (1954), who developed it to comprehend the mistakes that pilots

made while learning how to fly. Tripp (1993) based his work self-reflection because he recognises the inherent educative opportunity offered by uncertain, bumpy and unpredictable incidents in the teaching practice. Tripp (1993: 24–25) explains **critical incidents** as follows:

The vast majority of critical incidents, however, are not at all dramatic or obvious: they are straightforward accounts of very commonplace events that occur in routine professional practice which are critical in the rather different sense that they are indicative of underlying trends, motives and structures. These incidents appear to be ‘typical’ rather than ‘critical’ at first sight, but are rendered critical through analysis.

In addition, Ramano (2006) states that critical incidents are situations that are appraised by the student teacher as causing negative emotional reactions and disruptions to the teaching and learning environment. On the other hand, Goodell (2006) maintains that critical incidents are everyday events that teachers encounter in practising their profession which make them question and reflect on the decisions they take. This suggests that reflecting on critical incidents involves two important aspects. First, the description of the incident, which has to be critical as it impacts on the teaching and learning environment. Secondly, reflecting on possible routes to take in order to minimise the problem and restore learning.

In introducing his study, Loughran (2002:33) notes that “reflective practice has an allure that is seductive in nature because it rings true for most people as something useful and informing”. Although I hold Loughran’s (2002) assertion as important, my contention is that without reflecting on critical incidents during their practical courses, student teachers are merely mimicking the mentor teacher, which does not develop the former in any way (Hodson *et al.*, 2012). **Thus, this study reflects on student teachers’ critical incidents during teaching practicum, specifically, this study answers the following question: What critical incidents do student teachers encounter during teaching practicum?**

Context

This study reports the teaching practice of the first cohort of ESL third-year students at a University in South Africa. The university which is part of this study opened its doors post-apartheid era. The apartheid era was a period in South Africa when access to her resources was determined by race (Suransky & Van der Merwe, 2016). During this period, blacks, coloureds, Indians and whites had a segregated economic, social, economic and education system based on the pigmentation of their skin. For teacher education, this period meant that there were different preparation paths depending on one’s skin pigmentation (Banoobhai, 2012). During the apartheid era, teacher preparation was characterized by “classroom practices [that] were submissive, non-critical, non-reflective and nonprogressive” (Banoobhai, 2012:175). In 1994, with Nelson Mandela

as a symbol of unity, South Africa held the first democratic elections. To address the aspirations of the new political dispensation, a postmodernist approach was heralded in teacher education. According to Banoobhai (2012), this approach is meant to promote and prepare for contextually relevant subject knowledge. To achieve these ideal, initial teacher education institutions developed curricula that integrated skills, values, competencies, dispositions and reflection practice.

The university that is the research site of this study is one of the first universities in South Africa to implement the postmodernist revised requirements for the teacher education programmes. Accordingly, the curriculum at this University covers four interconnected sources of teacher knowledge, namely, pedagogy, content, pedagogical content knowledge and practical teaching. The emphasis is on constructivist, experiential and transformative learning which results from the integration of theory and practice (DHET, 2008). In achieving these objectives, and accounting for the reflection-in-action (Dewey, 1933) aspect, in the first and second-year teaching practicum the student teacher observes an experienced teacher in the practice of teaching. In their first two years, the student teachers build both their theory of education (pedagogy) and content knowledge, and also observe mentor teachers in selected high schools in the act of teaching. Using open-ended questions, student teachers are guided to reflect on their experiences in the classroom.

Rooted in Shulman's (1987) pedagogical content knowledge, in their third and fourth years, the student teachers focus on developing knowledge of teaching their major subjects in micro teaching session and in placement high schools. In the module Practice Teaching, the student teachers begin their actual teaching under the tutelage of an experienced mentor teaching in schools near the university. The glue that holds this academic project together is reflective practice. Reflection is a critical cognitive tool used by this University to monitor the professional growth of the student teachers. This guided reflection uses questions that direct the student teachers to pay attention to critical aspects that they ought to develop in their teaching practice. The guided reflection includes an area where student teachers reflect on unpredictable situations that are not covered by the questions in the guided reflection. This section formed the focus of this study where ESL student teachers reported on unpredictable situations (critical incidents is used in this study) and events that created a sense of inadequacy when dealing with teaching and learning, and how they resolved these situations using personalised and contextualised solutions.

Theoretical framework

To frame the argument, this paper is underpinned by two theoretical orientations, namely, experiential and transformative learning. The theoretical framework in this study is used as a "...foundation from which all knowledge is constructed (metaphorically and literally) for a research study. It serves as the structure and support for the rationale for the study, the problem statement, the purpose, the significance, and the research questions. The

theoretical framework provides a grounding base, or an anchor, for the literature review, and most importantly, the methods and analysis” (Grant & Osanloo, 2014:12). Aptly put, the theoretical insights derived from experiential and transformative learning frame my research trajectory in terms of the motivation, significance, methodological choices made in this study.

Experiential learning is particularly suitable for this study as it focuses on learning approached from problem and inquiry perspectives (Marlow & McLain, 2011). The roots of experiential learning are found in the works of Dewey, Piaget, Vygotsky and Korb, which means that as a theory it focuses on reflecting on lived experiences and the knowledge that is constructed thereof (Girvan, Conneely, & Tangney, 2016). Hence, at the core of learning is the ability to reflect on experiences as a way of shifting, confirming, creating and rejecting previously held assumptions (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, & Norman, 2010). In support, Girvan et al. (2016:30) state that experiential learning facilitates professional development as it is an approach that “can motivate teachers to try new practices and make desired changes to the curriculum a practical reality”. This means proponents of experiential learning see it as a transformative strategy where the student teacher reflects on classroom-based experiences to construct teaching knowledge that is in tandem with their personal and contextual nuances (Marlow & McLain, 2011).

Transformative learning is another theoretical orientation that is similar to experiential learning in that it underscores that professional development grows from experiences that allow the student teacher to “practice ... question, analyse and [accept] criticism” (Darling-Hammond, 2008:95). This suggests that transformative learning encompasses constructing knowledge from problematic situations by construing, formulating and revising the prior assumptions of meaning. Aptly defined, transformative learning is “the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our presuppositions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; of reformulating these assumptions to permit a more inclusive, discriminating, permeable and integrative perspective; and of making decisions or otherwise acting on these new understandings” (Mezirow, 2003:14). As this quotation points out, transformative learning is rooted in the constructivist epistemology, which holds that problems are solved by increasing one’s access to multiple ways of resolution rooted in the context of the occurrence. This means that transformative learning happens when there is a structural, deep and conscious shift that occurs when one is faced with alternative interpretations of the world against previously held truths (Palmer & Bowman, 2014). The process of transformation is both sudden and incremental (Mezirow, 2003). According to Polizzi (2009), in teaching practice it is important to resolve critical incidents immediately to direct meaningful learning. However, the combination of all the critical incidents that a student teacher encounters has an incremental influence on their professional development. Thus, in this study I held that true transformation happens when the student teacher constructs teaching knowledge from experiences that result from their participation in the classroom.

In order to achieve professional effectiveness, student teachers go through a series of educational courses that are theoretical and practical in nature. The practical component of the teacher education develops the student through field experiences situated in the classroom. The situated, experiential and transformative learning that naturally results from a holistic approach is ideal for providing the student teacher with practicum experiences that guide the quality of their teaching. In fact, as Helfrich and Bean (2011) claim, when student teachers practise their profession an ideological and pedagogical transformation occurs which enhances their professional identity. In the practical component of teaching, the student teachers experience teaching based on the theoretical paradigms from their theory of education course (Kilgour *et al.*, 2015).

A synthesis of experiential and transformative learning perspectives provides a worldview for engaging with professional development as a process and results from the student teachers reflecting on the direct experiences emanating from critical incidents. I acknowledge that student teachers, in encountering unpredictable and problematic areas, construct personalised and contextualised knowledge when reflecting on multiple solutions (Ambrose *et al.*, 2010). Consequently, transformation results naturally from the dialogue that the student teacher engages with in resolving class-based critical incidents (Darling-Hammond, 2008; Palmer & Bowman, 2014; Polizzi, 2009).

Research design

Regarding the paradigmatic orientation, an interpretivist worldview was embraced to describe how student teachers reflect on critical incidents to enhance their professional practice. In the context of this study, an incident is defined in line with Brookfield (1990: 84) cited in **Farrell (2018:44)**, who states that it is “any unplanned and unanticipated event that occurs during class, outside class or during a teacher’s career but is vividly remembered”. As an interpretivist study, this paper highlights the reality of the student teachers according to their subjective experiences in their placement classrooms. Following the interpretivist tradition, the study used a qualitative approach, since I explicate how student teachers experience critical incidents as informing their teaching practice (Creswell, 2013). By using a qualitative approach I derived meaning from the student teachers’ own description of the phenomena. This emic and idiographic approach provided a guide for capturing the meaning that student teachers attach to their lived experience – their teaching practice. **An intrinsic case study design is employed since I sought to understand the student teachers’ critical incidents from their reflections.** By using the intrinsic case study design, I underscored the importance of individuals in describing and reflecting on the phenomenon as they are involved in it (Creswell, 2013). **In following this design, I asked the student teachers in this study to describe the critical incidents they encountered in their teaching practicum and, thus, I uncovered the embedded meanings in their narratives.**

Participants

The population of this study consisted of third-year ESL students on teaching practicum. The sample was purposively drawn from students studying toward a Bachelor of Education. The criteria for their selection were: third-year Bachelor of Education student (prepared to teach ESL SP & FET), who had successfully completed the first and second-year modules (courses) of Teaching Practice and had attended all the planned teaching sessions at the placement school. The Further Education and Training (FET) is the final phase of the South African high school education system and is aimed at learners in the 16 to 18-year age group. FET is generally referred to as Grades 10 to 12. The Senior Phase, on the other hand, is a junior level education stage for learners between the ages of 13 and 15 years. Hence, the student teachers who formed part of this study were training to be FET and SP school teachers.

On applying these sample criteria all 15 student teachers out of the possible 17 were included in the study. I excluded two third-year student teachers because they had only spent a few hours on micro-teaching which prepares them for the school-based practicum. The micro-teaching classes prepared the student teachers for school-based practicum. **Of the fifteen (15) participants, nine (9) identified as females, five (5) as males and one (1) is non binary. Ten (10) of the participants identify themselves as coloureds and five (5) as blacks. All the participants are South Africans with their age groups ranging from 20-25. Nine (9) of the participants recognized themselves as natives of the city where the university is located. Seven (7) of the participants attended former model C schools, five (5) attended schools in the townships and three (3) matriculated from schools located in the farms.**

The participants were asked to answer the following question at the end of their teaching practice, *Write a description of an incident(s) that happened during your teaching practice that made you deeply reflect on what it really means to teach and learn English Language.* **The student teachers answered the question in their reflective journals as individuals and as a group during the focus group discussion.**

Procedure

I collected data from the third-year ESL student teachers' reflective journals and a focus group discussion. Reflective journals are defined as "an individual activity in that teachers commit ideas, thoughts, reflections and feelings to paper in various contexts" (Maarof, 2007: 207). Furthermore, there is a general consensus among researchers that reflective journals are a door to exploring and understanding how individual teacher's experiences lead them to discover their own practice, skills, values, habits, dispositions and identity as a professional (Farrell, 2011; Maarof, 2007). In the context of this study, reflective journals were used because of our understanding that they are a way in which student teachers record their teaching journey by reflecting on classroom experiences. Farrell's (2011: 82) framework, adapted from McCabe (2002), was adopted in this study. Following this framework, the third-year ESL student teachers were asked to provide

details of a situation that arose during their practicum that was considered to be critical, including what happened, when it happened and to whom it happened (Farrell, 2008). Secondly, I used the focus group discussion as it is a qualitative tool that allows for the student teachers to discuss experiences in explaining and illuminating (Akpabio, Asuzu, Fajemilehin, Bola, 2007) their narratives as individuals and as a group that shares common familiarities. I conducted the focused group discussion when at the end of the second semester (in September 2018). I held a one two-hour long discussion with the student teachers who were part of the study.

The permission to use the students' reflective journals was obtained from the Head of the School of Education. Although the reflective journals are part of their school practicum experiences, I also asked and received consent from the student teachers who were part of this study. I also assured all the participants of full anonymity by using pseudonyms when reporting my results.

Data analysis

The student teachers' reflective journals were analysed using inductive thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is used when the purpose of the study is to explore a phenomenon through participants own lived experiences (Denscombe, 2010). According to Braun and Clark (2006:86), inductive thematic analysis as an approach "means the themes identified are strongly linked to the data themselves". Since the study took an interpretative intrinsic case study approach, inductive thematic analysis was appropriate as it was in line with the theoretical, epistemological and methodological positions (Braun & Clark, 2006). The data analysis steps explained by Creswell (2009) were followed in this study. The first step was to read the reflective journals and the focus group discussion transcript to comprehend the participants' experiences. The second step was to code the data by grouping similar ideas and noting outliers. Thereafter, I continued to group the data into categories, sub-themes and themes. Lastly, I interpreted the themes in line with available literature by highlighting similarities and areas of new knowledge in teaching practice.

Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness, quality principles, namely, credibility, confirmability, transferability and dependability were attended to in this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). **To attend to credibility, I used member checking. Using member checking, I asked the participants to confirm my transcripts of the focus group discussion. I also ensured credibility by prolonging my engagement with participants. The participant took the whole academic year (February to October 2018) to complete their reflective journals and a two hour focused group discussion was held until saturation was reached. Confirmability is safeguarded in this study using reflexivity and field notes. As a qualitative researcher, I am the main research instrument which makes me susceptible to subjectivity. Using my field notes, I constantly reflected on**

how my values and beliefs influenced my study as a strategy of minimising my biases. To ensure transferability, I provide an in-depth and thick description of the research site and participants to orient the readers to the study's process. Audit trail is used in this study to guarantee dependability. Comprehensive documents such as transcripts, audio recordings, copies of reflective journals are used to provide a trustworthy trail for the research's process. In addition, a comprehensive literature review was undertaken to interpret the findings of the study and incorporate them in the large body of knowledge on teacher education that is focused on reflecting on critical incidents as a professional development tool.

Research findings

This section reports on critical incidents in form of three themes, which were extracted from the analysis of the student teachers' critical incidents during their third school-based practicum. The themes are grouped into three broad themes, namely, teaching professional critical incidents; context in teaching English Language; and Language skills teaching. The themes are broadly related to teaching environment but in this study are understood within the language classroom. For example, understanding how classroom discipline inhibits achieving lesson outcomes in a discipline where learners need to communicate to indicate lesson success. Significant responses from selected direct quotations obtained from both the participants' reflective journals and the focus group discussion are used in the thematic discussion below and integrated and interpreted in terms of existing literature. I highlight correlations and discrepancies between the findings of this study and those reflected in existing literature.

Theme1: Critical incidents in developing professional identity

The student teachers in this study highlighted critical incidents with regard to their teaching. These incidents resulted from situations in which student teachers were puzzled about how to discipline, how to motivate their learners as well as aspects of professional grooming, as shown in these descriptions:

- *I taught 38 Grade 10 learners who continuously chatted in class. They were not interested in any of the activities that I had planned for the class. Most of the times, I will have to ask the mentor teacher to ask them to keep quiet. I tried using the skills I had learnt from the University classes with little success. I dread going to that class. In the 4th week in of my TP (teaching practice), the mentor teacher fell ill. I had to teach the Grade 10 class on my own. As usual, the learners were making noise which made it difficult for me to teach. After 10 minutes into my 40 minutes class, I walked out of the classroom. As I closed the door, all the learners become quiet. I waited for 5 minutes and went back to the class. The first thing I said to the class was "I want to teach you, please allow me to do that." I could hear my voice cracking as I said these words. What really shocked me was how emotionally I reacted. At that moment, I realised that all I wanted to do was to be an effective teacher (Teacher 1: FET).*

- *Dr X (University's Teaching Practice Unit Leader) always emphasised on professional dressing during teaching practice but I had never really considered it as a critical aspect of my work. The first weeks of my teaching practice I wanted to dress fashionably to relate with my learners. But I soon realised that my learners were more respectful of my colleague who dressed more conservatively than I. I decided to dress as formal as I could possibly do. I soon realised a change in my learners interaction with me as they used ma'am when addressing me which they had not previously done. This made me realise how important dressing is for my learners to acknowledge me as a teacher (Teacher 9: SP & FET).*
- *The learners were too many in my class. They were 51 learners. Some could write and communicate well in English but the rest need a lot of assistance. Both myself and the mentor teacher tried to assist but it was difficult (Teacher 2: FET).*
- *I dressed formal for class. All my teachers in high school came to class looking formal. I also wanted to be part of that group. I soon realised that my Grade 9 learners tended to be more formal in addressing me when in class and dressed formal then when dressed for sports. I wondering, do I become a different person from my dressing? (Teacher 13: FET).*

All the student teachers who formed part of this study expressed challenges in maintaining discipline in the classroom. In support, Macías (2017:153) indicates that “despite the vast amount of research on classroom management from a general education perspective, the particular impact of foreign language instruction on classroom management issues appears to be rather scarce” Although most of the English Language student teachers identified classroom management and discipline **as a critical incident, they struggled to explain why.** Interestingly, Teacher 3 who is a FET teacher explained that the reason for ill-discipline in his classroom was that the learners were over crowded and had mixed abilities. The English Language student teachers in this study suffered what Dicke, Elling, Schmeck and Leutner (2015:1) call “reality shock or “praxis shock” as there was no congruency between the classroom management strategies that they had learnt from the university and the realities of the classroom. What this suggests is that the student teachers lacked the professional noticing of learners’ contextual issues as they focused more on completing the lesson. What resulted from this mismatch of curriculum knowledge and contextual nuances was a challenge classroom management. Moreover, the student teachers describe what the learners did without noticing what they were doing instructionally to illicit such a reaction from their learners. The student teachers in this study did not account for learning by noticing how their instructional approaches, methods and strategies enhanced or inhibited the achievement of an effective instructional environment.

Twelve of the 15 student teachers reported on how they individually improved their professional conduct in the context of the school in which they were based. Unlike discipline-oriented critical incidents where the student teachers were hesitant to state their role in the instructional act, when it came to professional dressing they were accountable. The student teachers were able to describe how they used to dress, why

they modified their wardrobe and what they had come to learn about it. Akin to Alsubaie's (2015) findings on hidden expectations, the student teachers described dressing as an indicator that their learners used to assign them the qualities of credible professionals. It seems that student teachers who dressed more conservatively were seen as credible and had a formal relationship with their learners (learners addressed them as Sir or Ma'am). An interesting retrospection is from Teacher 13, who experienced situations where she interacted with learners dressed both formally and informally and her learners related to her according to how she was dressed. **It seems that the participants equated how their learners reacted to their dressing as a way of being confirmed as credible as English teachers. English learning as a discipline is communicative. This means that the discipline content and the individual who get to facilitate that knowledge is a critical factor in adding the learners' disciplinary knowledge construction.** Although the student teachers in this study did not explicitly refer to it, their professional identity as English language teachers was being shaped through their interactions with others, including learners and colleagues, as well as their dress code. Similar to Helfrich and Bean's findings (2011), in the interactions described, the student teachers' skills, values, dispositions and competencies are shaped when others assign meaning to their actions by acknowledging them as credible teachers.

Theme 2: Critical incidents in the context of teaching English Language

The student teachers described the critical incidents they encountered in contextualising English Language teaching and learning. Contextual issues such as infusing theoretical insights to enhance language learning and processes are discussed under this theme.

- *I did well in the test that we wrote before our school-based teaching practice on theories of language learning. I remember writing about Krashen's input hypothesis and explaining how listening and reading were the input of the process of understanding language while speaking and writing are the output. I knew about this theory but I did not know how to apply this knowledge in the classroom. As I was thinking about this one day, I realised that my learners will not be able to reproduce the language structures and vocabulary in essay writing if I have not taught them. In that moment it made sense what Dr X always said, "You cannot require learners to produce what they have not learnt" (Teacher 10: FET).*
- *I was always a motivated student during my time at high school. The school had limited resources but we were always encouraged to work hard ... I guess I came into teaching with that mentality. I thought their environment will also influence my learners to be serious about their school work. But I found that I had to continuously encourage the learners to take the school work seriously (Teacher 6: SP & FET).*

All the student teachers describe a lack of congruence between the theory of language teaching and learning they have learnt, and the practical instructional and personal realities. They describe their attempts to implement the knowledge of the theoretical aspects learnt at the university as underdeveloped and limited. **For example, prior**

to the practicum, the student teachers are taken through approaches such as communicative, process based; product based, content language learning etc that require learners to effectively participate in content knowledge construction. Similar to findings from Ulvik et al (2018), armed with this theoretical knowledge and inattentive to context, the student teachers in this study, attempted and had challenges in managing their language classrooms. Without a doubt, the ability of the teacher to coordinate space, resources and manage learners' behaviour is key to achieving success in an English Language class but this knowledge should be embedded in contextual practice and the student teachers' reflection of practice (Ulvik et al (2018)).

These findings are not novel; researchers such as Cheng, Tang, and Cheng (2012) and Banoobhai (2012) indicate that teachers experience instructional dissonance when navigating their theoretical knowledge in different classroom contexts. In fact, Borg (2003: 98) mentions that this situation is a result of using findings to approach teacher preparation that are not representative of unique ESL contexts. Given this anomaly, reflective practice is incorporated in most ESL teacher education curriculums. Although this understanding is, in practice, included at University, the student teachers find implementation to be problematic. This suggests that the intuitive and instinctive understanding of the craft of English teaching and learning is an ongoing and life-long process of "practicalising" theoretical insights in context that student teachers could not achieve in one academic year (Cheng *et al.*, 2012). By describing these critical incidents, the student teachers in this study confirmed Cheng et al.'s (2012) findings in relation to the need to engage student teachers in practical experiences when constructing their teaching knowledge to promote their future instructional practices.

Theme 3: Critical incidents in teaching Language skills

The student teachers recounted significant incidents regarding the actual teaching of fundamental language skills in the English classroom. For example, the student teachers gained important insights about teaching various language skills while marking and providing remedial opportunities for learners:

- *My mentor teacher asked me to help her mark the Grade 10 end of term essays. I had no idea what to mark. My mentor teacher assigned me to mark the descriptive essays. I know that a descriptive essay must provide a vivid description of an experience or an accident. I had a memorandum for grading but I was failing to interpret it. For example, what language structures must learners use to reflect this? What things was I supposed to penalise learners on? In thinking about this marking assignment, I observed that I was trying to assess languages skills in a fragmented manner. To describe, the learners required knowledge of different language structures. Writing and presenting was actually their output where reading and listening were their input. Marking the essays with this knowledge, I was able to identify the learners' faulty language structures and conventions knowledge which I pointed out to my mentor teacher (Teacher 11: SP& FET).*

- *I had no idea how to teach my Grade 9 learners who could not read, how to read. I thought all learners in this good school could read. I had two learners who could not read. I had to ask a friend of mine who teaches Grade 5 to help me develop a remedial plan for these learners (Teacher 3: SP& FET).*

The student teachers, in reference to their pedagogical content knowledge, described subject-specific critical incidents. These incidents happened when student teachers interpreted and transformed English knowledge in context to promote effective learning. Tasks such as assessment and remedial actions challenged the student teachers to create English instructional opportunities that are integrated as opposed to fragmented practices. **They had an emotional reaction to their failure to perform “quality” recognisable tasks such as marking and facilitating learning of English Language content and skills.** The student teachers in this study as discussed in the methodology section are ‘young’ individuals whose point of teaching experience is apprenticeship of observation from years of observing teaching and learning as learners (Borg 2004; Lortie 1978). However, due to the technical rational approach to their teaching they “neglect[s] the critical ethical significance of the uniqueness of the... human relationality in education” (Lampert et al (2018:3). That is, teaching is not an “arrival” profession rather, it is an ongoing process that is embedded in the actions of practice and interaction (Dewey 1933; Schön 1987). In addition Borg (2004:274) highlights that “people entering other professions are more likely to be aware of the limitations of their knowledge, student teachers may fail to realize that the aspects of teaching which they perceived as students represented only a partial view of the teacher’s job.” That is, the theoretical knowledge of teaching is only a part of becoming an English Language teacher. The other half of knowing how to teacher is a life-long, complex and dynamic process that intricately woven into the socio-cultural milieu.

Discussion

The critical incidents that the student teachers describe indicate that they gained a better self- awareness of their identity as English Language teachers. It is important to note that the student teachers were able to identify critical incidents that hindered or enhanced their teaching. Largely, the external forces such as students, communities and resources are identified as causing the critical incidents in the English Language classroom. In accordance with Tripp’s (1994) findings, the student teachers attached meaning to particular situations which shaped their professional practices and judgements. Also, in line with Day and Gu (2012), the student teachers noted institutional landscapes as influencing the way they identified themselves as teachers in terms of dress, values, skills and dispositions The student teachers own contribution to the critical incidents are implicit. This might have been a result of the student teachers lacking reflective skills to analyse critical incidents as turning points in their teaching knowledge development.

What is common in the student teachers' accounts of their critical incidents is that the experiences that shape their comprehension of teaching and learning include heightened professional and emotional distress. A significant point in describing these situations is that all the student teachers did not describe them as either positive or negative but rather as having a pedagogic and emotional dissonance which caused them to act, respond and reflect in order to maintain quality teaching. This distinction is important as evidence of the way reflecting on what student teachers consider critical incidents can help them reframe, rephrase, reshape and ultimately transform their pedagogic practices to reflect both context and diversity in English Language teaching. By not recognising their experiences or disjointed descriptions as either positive or negative, the student teachers underscored a transformative approach to their professional development, as they account for every interaction as a process by which they come to develop as better practitioners (Helfrich & Bean, 2011).

Implication for initial teacher preparation

However, it is worth noting that the third years who were part of this study lacked the ability to notice crucial elements embedded in the described incidents. In fact, Banoobhai (2012: 176) notes that a typical classroom anywhere in the world probably contains “diversities including race, culture, ethnicity, socio-political, socio-economic, and intellectual diversity” due to globalisation. Pre-service teachers therefore need to be prepared to cope and adapt to challenges that are likely to emerge”. In addition, I found in analysing the incidents that the student teachers had a simplistic way of reflecting and inferring from actions that underpinned their instructional practices. For example, the student teachers were able to identify, describe and infer important lessons from a critical incident but were not aware of their contribution to situations they consider as critical. Although this is to be expected from third-year student teachers, it implies that both the school and the university mentors, owing to the diverse teaching and learning landscapes, need to guide them to a deeper reflection on practice that involves professional noticing. Professional noticing is “a collection of techniques for (a) pre-paring to notice in the moment ... and (b) post-paring by reflecting on the recent past to select what you want to notice or be sensitized to” (Mason, 2011:37). The guided reflection that the student teachers used prepared them to notice the teaching and learning landscapes and account for them in retrospection. Furthermore, this experiential and transformative engagement could be further enhanced by teaching the student teachers to be sensitive to what they notice. This would guide the student teachers to be accountable to the learning outcomes and environment that result from their pedagogical practices, dispositions, skills, values and competencies.

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