

"Rural" schools and universities: The use of partnerships as a teaching strategy in enhancing a positive response to rurality

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Abstract

This article explores a range of partnership approaches used in a PGCE programme in order to challenge a deficiency framework many teachers have regarding rural contexts and to develop a more positive orientation to the possibility of working in such contexts. This constitutes a response to the national imperative to educate teachers for rural contexts (Pandor states that more than 75% of newly trained teachers move to urban areas) and to challenge the dominant discourses based on a deficiency framework which many preservice teachers exhibit in their interactions with one another in their responses towards contexts viewed as rural and by implication inferior and undesirable. These partnerships include the case of PGCE students making an annual field-trip to a deeply rural, underresourced school; the contribution a rural teacher and her learners have made within the lecturing programme of the students; the development of mentors and the placement of students in these partner rural schools. These approaches have been initiated within a broad understanding of what is meant by rurality, acknowledging that there is no agreement on what constitutes urban and rural contexts.

Keywords: Rural schools; partnerships; active learning; deficiency discourse; service learning

Introduction

Despite the enormous positive changes in South Africa after 1994, it is still a country characterised by great inequalities and high levels of poverty, rooted in the legacy of the past. There has been a proliferation of change at a policy level. However, despite these policy changes, there are still considerable differences in terms of learners' socio-economic backgrounds, school infrastructure and resources; learner-teacher ratios; qualifications of teachers; availability of teachers and shortages in key subjects; school "culture" etc. These inequalities cannot be separated from

our past and from the unequal power relations between urban and rural and within these contexts as well. Despite the visions of democracy embodied in the Constitution, people's attitudes and assumptions are slower to change and a new elitism is beginning to emerge based not so much on race but on class and economic mobility, once again carrying its own assumptions and stereotypes. These assumptions and stereotypes were evident in the responses of many teachers involved in the NRF-supported research project aimed at mapping barriers to basic education in a context of HIV&AIDS (*Perspectives in Education*, 2007). Using Foucault and discourse analysis, we suggested that the dominant discourses reflecting the social and cultural capital of the more powerful becomes difficult to challenge and that many teachers tend to use a deficiency framework as a basis for understanding exclusionary factors in the lives of their learners, families and communities (Muthukrishna, Ramsuran, Pennefather, Naidoo & Jugmohan, 2007).

Drawing from this discourse theory and our research findings, parallels become evident in the University of KwaZulu-Natal PGCE student group, a diverse group in terms of race/gender/age and background. From a teacher education perspective, this diversity in terms of student groups and school contexts constitutes a great challenge. This is particularly evident in the formation of social groupings in the lecture/workshop situations, student voices and student responses to school placements. By extension this means that students from rural contexts often feel disempowered and therefore do not actively engage in workshop interaction and furthermore there is generally a resistance from pre-service teachers to be placed in rural contexts and to envisage a future for themselves as teachers there. A number of the key tenets of the deficiency discourses evident in the data gathered from in-service teachers' accounts of barriers to basic education in an HIV&AIDS context (othering; difference as deficit, homogenising of the subject, and silences) (Mithukrishna *et al.*, 2007) are evident in the PGCE group. Some of their responses to a question on whether they had considered teaching in a rural school revealed many aspects of a deficiency framework, for example:

Hopeless cases, riddled with problems. I didn't feel I could make much of a difference, nor learn much from them.

I felt they were dangerous, inconvenient, uncomfortable to teach in.

Firstly, I am very scared of muthi out there. I have heard a lot of stories about teachers being bewitched by other teachers and people in communities.

We need to ask ourselves what role teacher education has as a change agent in engaging with these deficiency discourses, while also realistically acknowledging the real challenges in these contexts and providing realistic, sustainable support mechanisms to meet some of the challenges. Given the shortage of teachers particularly in rural contexts, teacher education institutions need to consider carefully enabling strategies in their programmes which will challenge the deficiency discourses held by many potential teachers and develop what Morrow (2007) describes as the flexible competences that will enable them to teach no matter how unpromising the contexts and conditions may seem. The key question he poses is, "How can I organise systematic learning in this context and these conditions?" (Morrow, 2007, 105). This article will focus on what Mandela (Nelson Mandela Foundation, 2005) describes as the immense untapped potential of rural communities, which needs to be engaged with. It is this potential that rural contexts have which needs to be engaged with in order to shape a teacher education that is responsive to the development needs of South Africa.

The focus on education for rural development is reflected in the Unesco action themes that are the key drivers for education for sustainable development. The report emphasises the role of education and training as two of the most powerful weapons in the fight against rural poverty, recognising however, that many opportunities for education and sustainable human development are undermined by the lack of tolerance and intercultural understanding. The

report stresses that learning situations need to be created for practising and deepening respect for and understanding of diversity, a perspective which must inform both the content of educational programmes and also characterise relationships between all stakeholders. At a National Education Department level, the Funza Lushaka bursary scheme will give preference to students who come from rural areas as it is felt that once qualified they will be more likely to teach in rural areas. The scheme also gives preference to students who want to train in priority subjects where teachers are in short supply. In February 2007 at a meeting of the ELRC (Education Labour Relations Council), the problem of inequality and underachievement of the remote schools was highlighted. The two most general characteristics of schools, which are finding it difficult to attract qualified teachers, were remoteness and poverty. As a consequence of this an incentives scheme to attract teachers to remote areas, is under discussion. (*On the Horizon*, No 2, February 2007). These measures could have an impact on the numbers of teachers required for rural schools, but whether this will have an impact on prevalent deficiency frameworks remains to be seen.

What role can a teacher education programme play in challenging deficiency frameworks with respect to rurality, shaping a positive orientation to rurality and in the process potentially contributing to meeting the challenge of a shortage of teachers in rural areas?

Strategies used in the PGCE programme as potential Change Agency

Fullan (1993, quoted by Myers & Pickeral (1997), in Erickson & Anderson (1997)) suggests that Teacher Education programmes need to develop students' change capacities. These change capacities include personal vision building, enquiry and collaboration. The field of service learning offers opportunities for students to develop a sense of agency. In a service learning project for student teachers in a Navajo Reservation community, Stachowski *et al.* (2007) found that a new dimension of student teacher learning emerged, with possibilities for professional and personal growth and development. By engaging in community-based service learning students develop connections with individuals and organisations they may not have considered otherwise. These insights enhanced their success in their classrooms, particularly in their understanding of diversity, through the PGCE Field Trip and the School Placements in rural contexts, where pastoral work and community outreach are fundamental components of the whole school experience, these change capacities of vision building, enquiry and collaboration are encouraged.

Internationally there is a strong school-based focus on the initial teacher education programmes, with an increased strengthening of the partnerships between schools and the institution, based on the growing awareness of the need for a closer link between theory and practice (Korthagan *et al.*, 2001). Drawing from the work done at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) in the use of partnerships in contributing to a more realistic teacher education, we have further developed existing informal partnerships with a number of rural schools into more formalised partnerships culminating in school placements. Ramberg and Haugalokken (2005) differentiate between partnership models where the cooperation is controlled by the colleges and universities and the cooperative model, founded on cooperation between equal parts, based on the recognition that student teachers need access to different kinds of knowledge as part of their training. Commenting generally on what a partnership model is, Ramberg and Haugalokken (2005) see it as

based on the recognition that both teaching practice and theory provide valuable, balanced contributions to the education of teachers, and that it is through mutually binding cooperation between various contributors that the education of teachers can become an arena for reflection and rejuvenation (5).

The importance of partnership to the reform process in education in the USA, with the challenges of creating and sustaining these partnerships, is the focus of work done by Richard, Stoddard and Kass (2001), in what they call the School-University Partnership Learning Community. The School University Partnership initiative was designed to answer the question:

How do we create and support partnerships that bring together multiple voices and promote thoughtful deliberation of school practices that lead to the construction of new knowledge and eventually the reform of schools? (140).

They based their model of change on the idea that reform could be initiated and sustained through a problem-centred process of enquiry. They report on the potential for partnerships to dislodge preconceptions and open up understandings of the work and intentions of others, and also on the changed perceptions of self and the changed roles in practice of the people involved in the partnerships. Built into the partnership activities of the UKZN/ PGCE programme is the experiential learning that comes from the students working with the schools and with one another in a number of ways. Using Constructivism as a model of learning, we have attempted to move towards inquiry based learning where the role of the teacher/lecturer is to create the opportunities for a guided inquiry which can help students to formulate questions. Paolo Freire (1972) in writing about Transformational pedagogy, comments on how teachers can lead students to a deeper understanding and knowledge through guided enquiry. In our partnership approach the collaborative aspect of the learning of the students when they encounter new ideas and experiences and have to work with others to grapple with the challenges and reflect on them is a vital aspect in the process of challenge to the deficiency frameworks. Our challenge is to facilitate the opportunities for this deficiency framework to be challenged through a process of guided enquiry. A critical concern is that deficit representation can contribute to the resistance of students/teachers to work /be placed in rural contexts. This is reinforced by their real fears of violence and crime in remote areas. Wenge (1998), in his writing on the development of communities of practice, comments on learning as/through social participation. Four components which are highlighted and become useful when designing learning opportunities are:

Community: "Learning as belonging"

Practice: "Learning as doing"

Meaning: "Learning as experiencing"

Identity: "Learning as becoming"

By involving students in active learning in rural contexts where new knowledge is constructed in collaboration with others; where students live together in a community while on a School Placement; where they travel daily in a vehicle, where they grapple together with the challenges of context, where with the teachers, learners and parents of a school community they come to a better understanding of what constitutes context and its impact upon schooling, we will be moving from a performance model of teaching (Morrow, 2007) to more active learning approaches, with a focus on learning as social participation. Chrissie Boughey in her opening address to the UKZN Teaching and Learning Conference (2007), drawing from Gibbons (Mode 1 and Mode 2 Knowledge debates) urges lecturers/teachers to interrogate the disciplinary knowledge silos (Mode 1), produced in universities, and to examine a more transdisciplinary approach, where there are different sites of knowledge production. The implications for South Africa, with its diversity, would be to encourage problem-based learning, group-based tasks and to draw from the field of service learning, examining the relationship of universities to communities, the state and to society. Our work on the development of partnerships with rural schools is an attempt at enhancing the quality of Teacher Education in order to make it more responsive to the challenges of diversity.

Context and methodology

Since 2003 as part of their core programme, student teachers from the PGCE programme at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, have experienced the development of a partnership with two deeply rural schools. This has involved collecting resources for both teachers and learners, spending time at the schools interacting with teachers, learners and members of the SGB and more recently being placed at these schools for teaching practice. As a lack of resources in the schools posed a problem for the student teachers, a further development in the support of the students this year is the engagement with alternative resources for teaching, including experiential work with the concept of the Outdoor Classroom. Morrow's (2007) question: "How can I organise systematic learning in this context and these conditions?" (105) could find responses when students are able to see the environment in which they are teaching as a potential source of many resources.

Student reflective journals, mentor reports, questionnaires and focus group meetings were used to capture student and teacher voices.

The school partnership this year has been expanded to include two more deeply rural schools with students being resident in accommodation in the vicinity of the schools.

Partnership strategies used

Rural school field trip

Early in the year, a field trip is arranged to a particular deeply rural school. The school faces many challenges: exodus of qualified teachers, extreme rural poverty, lack of parental support, high levels of illiteracy, long distances to school for teachers and learners, limited resources, high levels of HIV&AIDS, teenage pregnancy, drugs (marijuana) etc. Despite these problems, it also displays many of the indices of resilience – being able to perform in the face of hardship. PGCE students spend time with the teachers, the principal, key people in the community – members of the governing body, and learners in order to come to some understanding of barriers to learning, but more particularly through practice to gain insight into what can be done when teachers, communities and learners are motivated and have a commitment to an organisational culture that supports hard work, expected achievement and acknowledged success (Christie; Butler & Potterton, 2008). Students prepare lessons which they teach to the large classes – they experience the language challenges, the challenge of doing group work with class sizes of 60 plus. Aspects of the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) School Adoption model as a form of teaching practice are drawn on. While teachers are away from the school on curriculum development workshops, the students work with their classes. The date for the fieldtrip is arranged to meet these needs. The theoretical foundation of the NTNU model draws from the work of Lave and Wenger (1991, 1999). Haugalokken and Ramberg (2005) highlighting the situated perspective on learning, say

it is based on the assumption that learning is conditional on participation in a community of learning. This means that both cognition and learning are regarded as social phenomena, and that learning cannot be understood in isolation from the social practice of which the students form a part (7).

The UKZN PGCE students bring with them researched information on career guidance/ bursaries, the writing of CVs based on the requests which learners have already communicated to them. Students also gather teaching resources which could include exemplar exam papers in relevant subjects, worksheets, textbooks etc. In compiling resource packs for other teachers, the students themselves are also developing their own teacher roles and competences as well as developing a deepened understanding of context and agency. It is an opportunity for theory and practice to

come together in what Korthagan (2001) describes as realistic teacher education. Learning becomes a social interactive practice. He sees teacher education needing to aid learning at the gestaltic, schematic and theoretical levels. The Field Trip experience is arranged near the beginning of the year and its benefits are felt powerfully throughout the year. There are a number of interesting outcomes: a negotiation of cultural challenges – the dominant discourses held by the more powerful students based on race/ class/ urban context are challenged and students begin to ask deeper and more nuanced questions raising issues of social justice. For those students who themselves have come from rural schools, there is the opportunity to ask questions about agency and the possibility for change. An experience like this challenges the stereotypical notion of excellence and rather raises a reflectiveness about issues of resilience. Interestingly, those students who come from poor rural contexts are able to help in the process of guided inquiry. They are the ones who understand this context and now have the confidence to share experiences, take leading roles in the facilitation of group discussions as language is a challenge. Richard, Stoddard and Kass (2001) comment on the effect of partnering, dislodging preconceptions and suggest that through working together on challenging situations, new shared understandings are developed. An additional aspect reported on in their research is the sense of renewal and inspiration which comes from working with people whose experiences are at once both similar and different.

Comments from students after the field trip:

It teaches one not to rely on resources to teach pupils, but to develop one's own personal knowledge and strengths.

It was an eye-opening experience – it made me ask deeper questions about the challenges. Some challenges which became clearer: the policy/practice gap – the policies seem to be well thought out and adequate for some schools.

The field trip helped me to define why I want to become a teacher, what inspires me. Despite my more privileged background, I wanted to make a difference there. I felt I could learn from being there.

In many cases student perceptions of the context and of themselves and their roles as teachers appear to be challenged. Richard, Stoddard and Cass (2001) comment on "teachers beginning to situate themselves differently within the system once they've interacted with partnerships" (152).

The principal of the rural school summarises the impact of the partnership between the school and the university as follows:

- The school has an educational partner, which is motivating and has potential benefits.
- The school is positively contributing to the mentorship of future educators; thereby obtaining a sense of its professional responsibility and in the process learning from the students.
- The school provides a platform for the contextual realities of the future educators.
- UKZN receives direct experience and feedback of the schooling environment – authentic learning.
- It will help to close the gap between theoretical teaching and the practice.

The perception by the school of its role in teacher education supports the cooperative model of partnership where it is viewed as a collaborative enterprise between the parties, where both professional and theoretical skills are evaluated (Ramberg & Haugalokken, 2005). It also offers exciting possibilities for the realistic development of teacher professional identities through the development of partnerships as teachers/schools recognise that value is placed on their roles in the development of effective teacher education.

Rural teacher/learners input in the programme

Each year Mrs Twala, from a rural secondary school, brings her Grade 10 learners to the university and facilitates a workshop on Action Research and Community Problem Solving, based on actual community-based action research projects which she initiates with her classes. In effect she is practising service learning in her teaching, where service to the community and learning are blended so that both occur and are enriched by the other (Anderson, Swick & Yff, 2001). Through demonstrating the real projects she and her learners are involved in, she is able to illustrate to the students what the theory of action research can translate into in a school curriculum and at the same time contribute to community problem-solving. She demonstrates the rationale of service learning as an effective pedagogy for teaching and learning and she challenges the concept of resources. This is supported by Dewey's (1933, 1938) work on experiential learning. Others (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Astin & Sax, 1998; Meyers & Pickeral, 1997) also write about the role of service learning in the development of problem-solving and critical thinking skills. The *Schools That Work* Report 2008 (DOE) reinforces the important role that human agency can play in shaping circumstances, but it also warns of the unfair responsibility of schools having to bear the responsibility of attempting to succeed against the odds. The important issue is that student teachers are exposed to examples of teachers and schools that are not overdetermined by their contexts of rural poverty. These examples of determination, commitment and creativity may just provide the impetus for new recruits into the teaching profession to contemplate a teaching post in a rural underresourced school, even if this is for a limited period of time. Interesting possibilities for shorter periods of time are suggested in the UK Ofsted Report (2008) which looks at the *Teach First* initial teacher training programme. This is a partnership programme between a university and a number of schools and it offers a unique route to gaining qualified teacher status, by attracting highly qualified graduates who would not otherwise enter teaching, and by placing them in challenging school contexts. By recruiting highly motivated graduates who were keen to help address educational disadvantage, schools were able to benefit from these placements, despite the fact that these recruits would probably move on into other fields.

Examples of Human Agency like the work of Mrs Twala have the potential to counter the deficiency discourses strongly evident in both pre- and in-service teachers towards rurality. Students' comments are revealing:

I am teaching in one of the rural schools and I have always wanted to implement programmes that would benefit learners and the community at large, but I didn't know how, till I listened to Mrs Twala and her learners. From now on I am going to work with her in linking theory to practice – for theory to become a reality.

I can see the importance of putting theory into practice in that it can make teachers think beyond what they are doing and inspire them to improve the work they are doing and the circumstances around them. It will keep teachers linked to a bigger picture and avoid feelings of isolation and helplessness. It encourages the notion of lifting learning to greater heights and meaningful ends.

School placements and partnerships

More recently the concept of partnerships between the university and schools has been strengthened by a partnership project funded by the Teacher Education Programme South-North between the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) and UKZN. (Project Title: *Enhancing quality in teacher education through school-university partnerships*). The main purpose is to develop a model for university-school partnerships which will

accommodate the escalating demand in South Africa for well prepared, appropriately supported trainee teachers. A major focus is to encourage the professional growth of school-based mentors. Our teacher education programmes have always relied on local schools to host the students for the school-based component of their programmes. This model has relied heavily on the goodwill of the schools with very little emphasis on the partnership aspect of the relationship. Mentor training is held regularly, but it has been recognised that the concept of partnership has needed strengthening. The role of the liaison mentor in leading the process at schools and helping to facilitate the links between schools and between the university and schools has been strengthened through lessons learnt from the NTNU partnership model, with its focus on the professional development of the mentors. In South Africa with its range of schools and the support which student teachers will require in challenging contexts, the role of the mentors becomes particularly significant. In this project therefore the focus is on the School Experience/School Placement, but the emphasis shifts from well functioning collaborations with separate schools towards a more systematic approach with a focus on quality assurance through the development of effective mentoring and sustainable collaborations between the university and schools. The development of sustainable collaborations implies that partnerships between schools and the university need to be seen to have mutual benefits in a formalised way. Bainer (1997) identifies certain features which characterise effective school-university partnerships. One of these features is equality or parity. Generally, however, studies indicate that both partners see universities as the stronger partner with schools benefiting from the partnership (van Marion, 2007), emphasising the importance of mutual benefit. For the teacher training institution, he says that this primarily implies the improvement of the quality of the students' teaching practice and the teacher education programme as a whole, particularly through creating a closer link between theory and practice. The close contact between the school and the institution also provides current knowledge of what actually happens in schools, whereas in the case of schools the cooperation offers opportunities for school development in many ways.

A key feature of the project is the inclusion of the two rural schools mentioned previously in the Pietermaritzburg cluster of six schools. This means that many of the students in a cluster will have the experience of working in a deeply rural school.

Challenges of a placement in a rural school

The wide variety of schools forms a great challenge in terms of quality during the school practice. Lack of resources can be challenging to experienced teachers, so for trainee teachers it can be particularly daunting.

Class sizes can be overwhelming, ± 60 , challenging the implementation of newly learnt pedagogies.

Huge emphasis on the pastoral role of teachers given the contexts of poverty with its huge problem of HIV&AIDS – are student teachers ready to deal with these emotional demands?

Use of traditional transmission teaching methods and outdated methods of discipline – often in direct conflict with policy, for example, the use of corporal punishment – student teachers with new ideas can come into conflict with these inflexible approaches.

Underqualified teachers with poor subject knowledge base – how does this impact on the quality of mentoring? How does it impact upon the Mentor-mentee relationships?

High rate of violence in South Africa and an increasing incidence of school-based violence – are there greater risks to student teachers under poor socio-economic conditions?

Low morale of many teachers particularly in the face of policy overload and the difficulty of implementing new policies in underresourced areas – particular challenge of the new curriculum has led many teachers to mimic policy (Mattson & Harley, 2003). What are the consequences for new teachers who themselves need help in particular with the new curriculum?

Impact of HIV&AIDS on learners and on teachers – high degree of absenteeism, illness at school – consequences for student teachers who often have to fill the gaps, rather than on having the time to prepare, teach, observe and reflect, etc.

School placement at the two rural schools

Extensive professional development of the mentors based at the schools was done in preparation for the school placement. The role and development of the liaison mentor was a key aspect in the enhancement of mentorship and in facilitating the communication channels within the partnership. This is particularly important when placing students in more isolated contexts. The impact of the professional development focus in the role of mentorship was highlighted in a comment from one of the mentors from a rural school. Despite being reluctant to come to the workshop, he said, "I really feel as though I am part of the bigger picture of education and development in this country now. I feel excited by my role as a teacher educator. I have been so bogged down in simply trying to survive in my classroom."

This was corroborated by many of the other mentors.

This impetus has the potential to be sustained by the new Framework for Teacher Development. A mentorship role potentially could become a key career path recognised through formal structures and contributing to the life-long learning of teachers as they verbalise their professional knowledge in interaction with their mentees.

Experience of the student teachers in the rural schools

Getting there/living there

The experience of students spending extended time with each other, living near the schools, helped to challenge racial and cultural stereotype, encouraged mutual problem-solving of issues faced in the day, and raised challenges regarding language etc. The deficiency frameworks which many student teachers used in their understanding of rural contexts were painfully challenged at times. Using Wenger's (1998) theory of "Communities of Practice", as a framework for analysing what was happening in terms of student teacher learning, it became clear that by being active participants in the practices of social communities, their identities were being constructed and shaped in relation to these communities. The fact that the schools were at a distance from the university also meant that the university tutors (part of the mentor support group of the students) also had to spend extended periods of time at the schools. The community of practice extended to include the university tutors/mentors/students and other members of the school community (in this case the governing body was very involved in the welcome given to students). Instead of university tutors coming in briefly to watch a lesson and leaving, reinforcing a sense of schools serving universities, they also became part of this community of practice, contributing to a perception of the mutual benefits of the partnership. University tutors provide a support base for students engaging with challenges already outlined and a link with the outside world.

Student development

The deficiency frameworks held by many of the student teachers are captured in their responses in their reflective journals.

One student in particular was horrified by the idea of teaching in a rural school:

I would be lying if I said that I wasn't apprehensive about coming here. I had many expectations and conceptions of what to expect. Some have turned out to be true and some an illusion. When told I was going to a rural school all eyes in my group turned to

me. Me? Never! I can't go to a school where teachers get stabbed to death, where I'll teach under a tree and not be able to understand anything anyone says. But here I am and was I ever so wrong! The teachers and learners are absolutely welcoming and accepting, these children are thirsty for knowledge and so long as you are willing to offer them what they need – the critical foundational skills of the subject – then they are appreciative and grateful.

In focus group meetings, when students discussed their expectations regarding teaching in a rural school, most of them indicated that they were not surprised by the lack of resources, poor infrastructure etc. but that their assumptions regarding the learners and teachers were challenged. Many of them were surprised by the effort teachers put into their work, despite the lack of resources. A number of them had assumed that learners were lazy and lacked motivation. This assumption was challenged by an increasing understanding of the context and the barriers to learning which learners and teachers face. Students commented on "how deep they have to dig to teach." Concepts like scaffolding and mediation of learning moved from the realm of theory to practical engagement. Policy issues were engaged with – particularly those relating to school governance and the role of parents in poor communities with their high levels of illiteracy. Students all commented on discipline challenges and the lack of alternative approaches to corporal punishment. They voiced the need for departmental support for schools on issues like this. Traumatic social issues had to be met. When a learner committed suicide, the student teacher concerned had to inform the class and then try to counsel them. All of the students went to the home to pay their respects and to engage with the cultural practices associated with a death. This meant sitting in a darkened hut on the floor next to the coffin, singing and praying. For some of the students unfamiliar with these cultural practices, it was a very powerful experience and very much appreciated by the community. What Wenger describes as "learning as belonging"; "learning as doing"; "learning as experience" and "learning as becoming", at times was painfully evident in the student learning. Students were seen as resources for the school. Counselling involved helping learners have a sense of a future as the students were seen as role models who had access to the outside world. Although students commented on a number of the teachers being underqualified and perhaps lacking in subject knowledge, they all commented on the pedagogical and pastoral skills which they could draw on.

Instead of oversimplifying the context and seeing teachers as lazy or incompetent they began to understand the challenges teachers face. One of the students commented on the stigma attached to teachers who teach in rural areas, associated with a perception that "you only teach in a rural context if you have no qualifications and can't teach". Regular disruptions to the timetable meant that student teachers very quickly had to learn to adapt, strategise and become adept at flexible problem-solving. Language was a challenge to some of the students, but they became adept at using each other's strengths and even began to risk code switching themselves, with the support of their colleagues.

Generally, the experience of living together, travelling together and working in a context so different from what they were used to, challenged the dominant discourses of deficiency and reductionism. This is powerfully captured in the response of one of the students:

Although one spent a great deal of time on oneself, there was nevertheless a common goal, to become qualified teachers in a challenging context. Being in the house with the other student teachers developed and enhanced my teamworking skills. As student teachers we all worked together towards a single objective to explore, develop and improve our teaching skills. As student teachers who had never really mixed before with different cultural backgrounds, we learnt to interact well together and therefore constantly encounter each other's difficulties. We learnt to depend on and help each other. There were times when different cultural and social backgrounds became apparent, but we tried

not to let them get in the way through deeper understandings of ourselves and what it takes to work together. During the evenings and when we had just finished supper, we always sat together and reflected on what had happened and what we had done at school and what strategies we could use.

In authentic situations of problem-solving, students' reflective practice had to develop: Students commented:

I think that the teachers I observed need to first establish what prior knowledge the learners have and where the gaps are, because from prior knowledge teachers can plan to build on a solid foundation.

My experience here about teaching and learning is that it is not enough to present information as many teachers do, but to develop strategies which will support and respond to students learning. The learner's role is not just to absorb information but to actively make sense and construct meaning. The opposite happens for many teachers in this school. Teachers encourage rote learning rather than understanding mainly because they are frequently inadequately trained. Teachers should learn to see the children as building blocks, to build on what they already knew. (This came from a student who had attended a rural school himself.)

What became clear in the observation and comments of these students, was that despite it being a demanding/challenging experience they personally and as a group wrestled with the challenges and in the process closed the theory/practice gap. They drew on their theories, challenged them and made them work in this context.

As a consequence of the rural school placement a number of partnership/development initiatives have arisen, initiated by students. One example is that of a student who led a team to Mrs Twala's school, to officially launch the Golden Key partnership with the school. The aim of the partnership is to help the school with resources, in particular the development of a school garden. "A few of us were sent to the school as part of the Norwegian Partnership for students to teach in a variety of contexts. When I saw the school I had to help" (*The Witness*, 2007).

Mutual benefits of the partnership

How the university benefits

By being responsive to the national imperative to train teachers for rural contexts, we are potentially making a difference to education and development in the country. Teacher education becomes more realistic and it prepares student teachers for all schools.

By immersing students in a range of contexts we contribute to challenging the dominant discourses rooted in the past and in this way contribute to building a society based on principles of social justice. South Africa is committed to principles of human rights and social justice and education is central to the achievement of equality.

Teacher education becomes more school-based and there is a stronger link between theory and practice in the teacher training programme. Through being immersed in authentic learning experiences, students actively engage with the challenges of the implementation of policy and they themselves in the future may contribute realistically as policy maker themselves or as teachers having to implement policy.

Improved mentoring quality impacts upon the student teacher's school practice as a whole.

How partner schools develop

By being a key partner in teacher education, the school is offered new challenges that allow it to develop and reach a higher professional status.

Teachers become aware that their knowledge and experience represent a valuable input in the training of student teachers. Teachers and students have the potential to engage in mutual learning, thereby highlighting the concept of lifelong learning. Teachers in remote schools through the students have access to different teaching materials/ methodologies/latest curriculum debates etc. Students can play a key role in training teachers in technology. In our case students trained many of the teachers in the use of the laptop which partner schools had received.

Learners in remote schools, through the students, begin to have a sense of a world out there and the possibilities that could exist for them. The principal of one of the rural schools describes it as a "Vision for the Future". A comment was made by one of the students:

Learners can be encouraged to set goals and work hard for the future, for example when they see a past student such as Vuka Kheswa who is from the community – having gone so far and achieved so much. Their own lives and dreams for the future may be inspired by our voices.

Partner schools have access to university resources, school development projects, new qualifications, information etc. (A significant number of teachers from the partner schools have now enrolled with UKZN for BEd Hons degrees and ACE'S).

Schools within a cluster can begin to work closely with one another, particularly where one of the schools is well resourced. This has already begun to happen with the rural schools and one of the well resourced state schools in the cluster.

A new pool of teachers with a positive orientation to the challenges and potential of teaching in rural contexts is developed. This was commented on by the schools as well as by the student teachers.

Conclusion

We need to move from what Morrow (2007) describes as performance models of teaching to a transformational pedagogy based on active learning approaches. Those students, through the partnerships established with the rural schools and placed there, can emerge challenged, perhaps changed but with a greater understanding of teaching and learning in context, asking the question, "How can I organise systematic learning in this context and in these conditions?" (Morrow, 2007, 105). The challenge for the sustainability of meaningful partnerships and the potential they hold for enhancing the quality of Teacher Education, are the increasingly restricted budgets of universities and the consequent definitions of what constitutes university work. The role of the Department of Education and SACE in recognising and supporting these partnership initiatives is also vital in terms of long-term sustainability. The Ministerial committee report, *Schools That Work* (2008), emphasises the recruitment and retention of quality teachers and the role of good pre-service and in-service teacher development to build teacher capacity. It recommends that teacher education programmes need to be focused on the actual conditions in mainstream schools, including Language of Teaching and Learning. Skills in second language teaching need to be developed for all subject teachers.

The importance of a positive teacher orientation towards teaching in rural contexts needs to be developed at a pre-service level and supported at an in-service level. Student teachers need to be prepared for the actual conditions of rural schools, including their challenges (language, resources, social dynamics etc.). The area of partnerships provides a potentially viable way for resources to be shared in a socially responsible way and in the process enhancing the quality of education. Recommendations 6 and 7 from the Ministerial Report (2008) suggest that schools be encouraged in initiatives to build networks of support as it is the sense of inner agency and mustering resources to solve problems that should be viewed as a strength in schools. In developing and supporting partnerships with schools, teacher education programmes

can only become more authentic and potentially more responsive to the education needs of the country.

The Minister of Education in KwaZulu-Natal, focused on the theme of "Ready to Excel" in her Budget Speech for 2007-2008. Quoting an anonymous writer, she said:

Excellence can be obtained if you:

- Care more than others think is wise.
- Risk more than others think is safe.
- Dream more than others think is practical.
- Expect more than others think is possible.

Boughey concluded an opening address to the UKZN Teaching and Learning Conference (2007), by saying that we as teachers needed to move from a focus on the teacher to a focus on the learning space. By exploring the use of partnership models in teacher education, we will be expanding the diversity of the learning spaces for ourselves, our students, our schools and communities.

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