



Teacher Training

The cause of [teacher] poor performance, by and large, lies not with teachers but with the teacher education system that produced them.

- ITERP Progress report

1. Introduction

It has been said that teachers are often the yardstick that measures the achievements and dreams of a nation. It is the teacher that is the pivot of an education system, and it is the teacher that can either help it to succeed or cause it to fail. While the teacher may be the pivot, it is the learner that is the end goal in the education system; and it is a well-documented fact that in South Africa the teacher is often the weak link in reaching that end goal.

There are currently more than 12 million learners enrolled in 25 826 schools in South Africa. The Department of Basic Education (DBE) spends over 75% of its budget some 425 000 teachers to ensure that each of these learners' education needs are met¹.

How then does initial teacher training perform when it comes to providing well-trained teachers? This briefing paper is a summary of the discussion at a recent CPLO roundtable on teacher training. The JET Education Services' Dr Nick Taylor and Mr Nic Spaul of ReSEP (Research on Socio-Economic Policy, Stellenbosch University) were the main speakers.

2. Training the Teacher

A recent study by Nic Spaul and Hamsa Venkat² found that 79% of Grade 6 maths teachers had content knowledge levels below Grade 6; in other words, the chances were that they would not pass a Grade 6 maths exam. When these results first

made the headlines, most of the news articles centred on how poor the teachers were at maths, yet there was little analysis as to why they performed so poorly.

The recent report on the Initial Teacher Education Research Project (ITERP), conducted by Jet Education Services, shed some light on how the major higher education institutions (HEI) prepare teachers. The ITERP had four components. The first was to examine the content of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes for teachers specialising in the intermediary phase. The second involved creating case studies of newly qualified teachers (NQTs) in the first two years of their teaching. To achieve this goal, the ITERP would track final year Bachelor of Education (BEd) students in 2013 in their workplaces for at least two years to ascertain how they felt about teaching, whether they felt they had been adequately prepared, and how their attitudes to teaching had changed. The final component was dissemination of the information gained.

Currently, prospective teachers can enrol for a four-year BEd degree that should include one year of supervised practical teaching over the four-year programme. Alternatively, graduates successfully completing an appropriate first degree can then enrol for an Advanced Diploma in Education (ADE), a post-graduate certificate in education (previously called a Post-Graduate Certificate in Education/Higher Diploma in Education).

The ITERP included five institutions in its study, selected according to five criteria: institutional history, demography, location, programme

delivery mode, and the number of graduates produced annually. Collectively, these five HEIs are responsible for producing more than 50% of teachers in South Africa.³ The study found that the curricula and the entrance requirements to the course for specialised maths teachers varied markedly across the five institutions. For example, one of them required a student to have acquired only a minimum 30% for maths literacy in matric, while another only accepted students with a minimum 50% in maths proper (maths literacy was not considered). Furthermore, the study also found that students generally were not required to spend too much time with their specialist subject throughout the four-year course. Similar trends were evident for prospective English teachers. For example, Dr Taylor pointed out that all five institutions gave very little attention to the pedagogy of reading. This, despite the fact that the PIRLS, ANA and SACMEQ⁴ tests all indicate that 'few learners have learned how to read accurately and fluently by the end of Grade 3'.⁵ Dr Taylor argues that the 'inclusion of content on teaching beginner readers how to read, in terms of both decoding and interpreting texts, could be useful in a B Ed curriculum for all intermediate phase teachers'⁶.

This speaks to the lack of content knowledge of the maths teachers in the Nic Spaul study. Not only are maths teachers not adequately exposed to their subject during their studies, but non-maths teachers are often not exposed to maths teaching at all during their studies. This is problematic because there is a tendency in the South African school system (especially in the foundation and intermediate phases) to employ these non-maths teachers to teach the subject.

3. Getting the Content Across

Is content knowledge enough to make a good teacher?

To be able to teach well a teacher needs to know the subject, but must also be able to carry that knowledge across to the learner. The lack of pedagogical knowledge is often the difference between an average teacher and a great teacher.

Educationists and critics have argued that the curricula of South African universities are not ideally suited to practically prepare teachers for the classroom. It has been suggested that the closing of teacher training colleges during the 90s contributed to the large number of ill-prepared

teachers. However, the counter argument is that the pre-1994 teacher training colleges were based on highly unequal system that trained teachers for the 19 different education systems. White student teachers received a far superior practical exposure to the teaching environment, but black teaching colleges were criticised for using teaching education curricula "that were perceived as little more than a repetition of the high school syllabus wrapped in an authoritarian pedagogy."⁷ In tune with global trends, the post-apartheid government reduced the 19 departments into one higher education structure and colleges were either incorporated into universities or entirely closed down. The curricula for teacher training were also redesigned to respond to the revised norms and standards for teachers.

Re-opening or recreating the teacher training colleges has been an ongoing debate. There are those who argue that it will help with the teacher shortages, especially in the foundation phase, allow the reduction of class sizes, and better prepare teachers. However, as Linda Chisholm argues, the colleges were never entirely closed because the better ones were incorporated into the universities, others became FETs (with a different mandate) and only the weaker ones were closed⁸. Furthermore, she points out that improving the quality of teaching has less to do with just re-opening colleges, and more to do with fixing the weaknesses in the current provisioning of teachers.

4. Location, Location, Location

It is not only South Africa that struggles with recruiting, training and retaining good teachers with the requisite content and pedagogical knowledge, but also first world countries like the United States of America.

South Africa, with its Apartheid legacy is, however, different. South Africa has a dual schooling system – one that caters for the well-heeled 25% of the population; and one that caters for the poorer 75%. The wealthiest 25% of schools operate very differently from the poorest 75%, since they are often stocked with better teachers.⁹ Nic Spaul argues that the more poorly-prepared teachers often teach at the poorer schools (quintile 1 to 4), while the former model C schools (quintile 5) and independent schools get the better-trained teachers. The study by Spaul and Venkat also found that teachers' maths content knowledge varies in the in the different quintiles. For

example, 90% of the Grade 6 teachers in the poorer quintile 1-2 schools scored well below 50% on their content knowledge, which means that they are not equipped to teach maths at Grade 6 level.

This feeds into the vicious cycle that the majority of South Africans find themselves in – destined to be impoverished by a lack of quality education.

5. Conclusion

If the teacher is the pivot of an education system it makes absolute sense that he or she should be provided with the requisite tools. We cannot expect teachers to perform at a level above that of their training, and then lay the blame for our schooling system squarely on their shoulders. As the studies of both Nic Spaull and the ITERP have

shown, the gaps in the training of teachers need to be seriously and urgently addressed.

The importance of training teachers properly is best summed up by Richard Elmore in his book *School reform from the inside out: Policy, practice and performance*¹⁰:

“For every increment of performance I demand from you, I have an equal responsibility to provide you with the capacity to meet that expectation. Likewise, for every investment you make in my skill and knowledge, I have a reciprocal responsibility to demonstrate some new increment in performance.”

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¹ Recently the Department of Basic Education hosted its ‘Operation Phakisa’ (The Big Fast Result Methodology) workshops to prioritise the challenges for the sector. Teacher retention, training, recruitment & development were identified as some of the challenges. The workshop presentations and discussion documents can be accessed on www.education.gov.za

² Nicholas Spaull & Hamsa Venkat (2014): *What do we know about primary teachers’ mathematical content knowledge in South Africa? An analysis of SACMEQ 2007*. Stellenbosch Working Paper 13/14. Available online: <http://www.ekon.sun.ac.za/wpapers/2014/wp132014>

³ The Initial Teacher Education Research Project: *An examination of aspects of initial teacher education curricula at five higher education institutions*. Progress Report 2014

⁴ PIRLS: Progress in International Reading Literacy Study; ANA: Annual National Assessment; SACMEQ: The Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality.

⁵ Nick Taylor: *Presentation at the CPLO roundtable on teacher training*. October 2014

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ Fiona Lewis: *Re-thinking teacher education and development – Can other models provide a solution for improving teacher training programmes?* Reflections on the Human Capital Development Strategy (HCDS): the third series of conceptual papers supporting the implementation of the HCDS. August 2008

⁸ Lind Chisholm: *The debate about re-opening teacher education colleges*. February 2010

⁹ Nicholas Spaull (2014): *Presentation at the CPLO roundtable on teacher training*. October 2014

¹⁰ Quoted in Nicholas Spaull’s presentation at the CPLO roundtable