Name: Kris Stutchbury

Institution: The Open University

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In pursuit of quality: the challenges and opportunities for teacher education

Kris Stutchbury, Director of Initial Teacher Education

The Open University, UK

Abstract

In response to the Millenium Development Goal of universal primary education, considerable progress has been made, with a greater proportion of children in school in 2014 than at the turn of the century. However, it has been suggested that too many children are emerging from school without the education that they need (Pritchett, 2013). Being at school does not necessarily ensure that learning takes place; a significant challenge for the future is to make sure that more schooling leads to more learning.

This paper will argue that improving the quality of teacher education is fundamental to this endeavour. It will explain why teacher education is important, and will examine the challenges and opportunities facing the profession. The use of ICT, the organisation of practicum and the potential impact of the support at a policy level in many countries for more learner-centred approaches to teaching, will be considered in detail. The paper will draw on examples from educational development projects, run by The Open University, including Teacher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa (TESSA). It will seek to identify some key principles that underpin the development of effective teacher education programmes and some practical steps that would enable the enactment of these principles.

Introduction

In response to the Millenium Development Goal of universal primary education, considerable progress has been made, with a greater proportion of children in school in 2014 than at the turn of the century. However, it has been suggested that too many children are emerging from school without the education that they need (Pritchett, 2013). Being at school does not necessarily ensure that learning takes place; a significant challenge for the future is to make sure that more schooling leads to more learning. The situation is summarised very clearly by Michele Schweisfurth (2013). She suggests that 'the number of children who in school but are learning little, or who are studying a curriculum irrelevant to their current lives and future needs, and who are experiencing school largely as a combination of boredom, fear and wishful thinking' (p1) is a tragedy.

So why is this the case? Reasons commonly suggested include, large classes, a lack of resources, an inappropriate curriculum and high stakes examination systems. However, a shortage of qualified teachers and the working conditions of many teachers are a significant contributing factor (Collins and Gilles, 2008).

This paper will argue that improving the quality of teaching is important and is something that we, as teacher educators have the ability to influence. It will start by explaining why teacher education is important and will then focus on three key issues: information technology, teaching practice and school-based learning, and the move away from traditional approaches to learner-centred pedagogy. In each case, the focus will be on the challenges and opportunities for teacher educators who might be working with pre-service teachers or practising teachers, face-to-face or at a distance. It will argue that significant improvements are needed to current practice in order to achieve a situation in which teachers genuinely value the training and preparation that they receive.

Why is teacher education important?

Teachers can have a profound effect on learners. Everyone can remember a teacher who inspired them or challenged them. Many can also remember teachers who frightened or belittled them; teachers are in a powerful position, and what they actually do in the classroom is important.

What teachers do in the classroom is referred to as 'pedagogy'. Good teachers use a variety of pedagogical approaches that cater for different learning styles. But pedagogy is more than arranging the classroom, formulating questions and developing explanations. What teachers do is underpinned by a set of beliefs about knowledge and about learners. Bob Moon and Jenny Leach (2009) define pedagogy as 'a dynamic process informed by theories, beliefs and dialogue, but only realised in the daily interactions of learners and teaching and real settings' (p6). The implication of this definition is that learning to be a teacher is about

surfacing and examining these beliefs, in the light of evidence about teaching and learning and developing your own 'teaching personality'. It is also about learning how to manage the 'daily interactions' in their own classrooms.

A comprehensive literature review focussing on pedagogy, curriculum, teaching practices and teacher education in developing countries (Westbrook et al, 2013) confirms that the classroom pedagogy used by teachers is a crucial way of improving learning outcomes and communicative strategies are more likely to have a positive impact. Moon and Leach go further than that and suggest that pedagogy can change lives. Teachers are hugely important in helping individuals reach their potential. We need good teachers and we therefore need expert teacher educators. Furthermore, in view of the vast numbers of new teachers needed to meet present demands, all over the world, we need effective teacher education at distance. Without effective teacher education, values and beliefs go unchallenged and student teachers are likely to revert to teaching in the way in which they were taught (Verspoor, 2008). There is a danger that they will arrive in school, without the skills, knowledge and attributes to adapt their pedagogy to the needs of their learners. This paper will consider three key issues facing the profession; choosing appropriate technology, ensuring that students have the opportunity to practise their skills in school, and the global move towards policies that promote leaner-centred approaches.

Choosing appropriate technology

During the last ten years, the changes in technology have been considerable and have changed to the ways in which people communicate with each other. The new technologies have the potential to support

teacher development both in structured and unstructured ways (Jakobsdottir et al., 2010). However, variations in accessibility and the lack of ICT infrastructure in some parts of the world mean that there is a danger that differences between the developed and the developing world are likely to become accentuated.

In some parts of the world, teachers and student teachers can access materials on line. At best, those materials are interactive and written for the web; at worst they consist of books or pdf files that are simply read on a screen. Interactive, web-based materials can be cost effective and future-proof by developing text that is relevant to multiple courses and separating 'core' materials from that which might depend on current Government policy (The Open University PGCE, 2013). It is possible that teacher learners are being asked to keep a blog about their experiences or to share resources on a wiki. They will be connected to each other via electronic forums, and to their tutors by video conferencing or Skype. It is also possible that they can access materials on mobile devices and therefore study at their convenience. The greatest change however, is the sheer volume of material and the number of resources available to them via the internet. It is easier for learners to take charge of their own learning; there is more opportunity to develop a critical approach. In fact it is essential to develop criticality.

The new environment creates a number of significant challenges. Electronic networks and the opportunities that they provide for professional learning remain under-researched at present. It has been suggested, for example, (De Lima, 2008) that networks can encourage destructive conflicts and can reduce criticality as people respond rapidly and instinctively, rather than in a measured and thoughtful way.

It is possible for teachers and student teachers to become paralysed by the continual search for resources; 'the agony of choice' (Jakobsdottir et al, 2010) is a significant issue. Another challenge is coping with the speed with which information flows around the system and the proliferation of online groups and networks. These can create distractions and angst, as well as significantly increasing workloads (Jakobsdottir et al, 2010).

The challenge for teacher educators is to embrace what is available and practical in a particular context. To demonstrate what is possible, I will draw on two examples from The Open University.

English in Action is a large scale project in Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, students are taught in English. This is not the language they use at home and many problems arise because the teachers themselves have poor levels of English. The aim of the project is to support teachers in teaching English and in the process, to help them improve their own level of English. Audio-visual materials to support teachers are provided through a low-cost Nokia mobile phone. Resources are pre-loaded on to a memory card which can be inserted into the phone. Workshops and cluster meetings are also part of the programme, and there is evidence that the project is having an impact on English language competence at primary and secondary level, and on teacher attitudes and classroom practices (Power, 2012).

My second example concerns the use of tablet computers in Nigeria. As part of the TESSA programme of activities, a group of teachers educators from institutions in Nigeria and TESSA developed a 'teaching practice supervisor's toolkit'. This is available as an OER on the TESSA website and has been pre-loaded on to cheap tablet computers. Forty teacher educators are using the tablets in their work

with student teachers. They have access to the materials, but can also use the tablet to make notes, to take photographs and to take videos. When in a wireless zone, they are able to communicate with each other via the internet and share experiences. The project is in the early stages, but initial indications are encouraging. The ultimate aim is to improve the support that students receive in school and to therefore improve the professional learning that takes place during practicum.

The second issue that I would like to reflect upon is practicum. The focus is therefore on pre-service teacher education, but I will argue that engaging with pre-service teacher education has the potential to bring wider benefits within a school.

Practicum

Classroom teaching is complicated. A vivid particularly perceptive analysis of classroom teaching comes from Donald McIntyre, (2000). He suggests that classrooms are extremely complex and that teaching is highly intuitive. Teachers have to make many decisions in the course of a lesson. Some will be made intuitively and some explicitly; they will be based on rational thinking, emotions and past experiences and many of them will have important consequences. In order to cope with the complexity, teachers learn to simplify and prioritise. Teacher learning therefore is about 'growing the capacity to make appropriate judgements in the changing and often unique circumstances that occur in many workplaces' (Wilson and Demetriou, 2007).

The best place to learn to do this is in schools, supported by experts; practicum therefore forms a very important part of pre-service teacher education.

Just being in school, however, does not automatically lead to learning. This was demonstrated by Carol Betram (2013) and colleagues in South Africa. They interviewed 20 part-time PGCE students, all of whom were already teaching, but were working towards a post graduate certificate in education. They had, on average, four and a half years of experience and had signed up for the course in order to get the qualification and the status that goes with it. However, the majority of them reported that despite their years of experience, during the course, they changed their practice. The formal learning focussed on learning theories, assessment, methods of teaching and classroom management strategies. They were not acquiring this knowledge informally working in schools and it was the conscious engagement with theory and its application to their practice that enabled them to become more effective teachers.

Learning to teach by practising in school used to be seen as an 'add-on' but is now considered to be central to teacher learning. However, this creates challenges. In order to learn, student teachers need to be supported by good mentors and good tutors. Mentors need to be experts – not just experienced, but true experts in their field. Expertise develops through a deep understanding of the complexities of the classroom (Wilson and Demetriou, 2007). It requires context-specific knowledge, social knowledge and experience of decision-making and problem-solving in order to make judgements about different approaches. Experts will model reflective and deliberative processes; experienced teachers will not necessarily be experts. In many schools, particularly in Africa, there are insufficient high quality mentors. However, there are actions that we can take as teacher educators in order to ensure that teaching practice leads to genuine learning about teaching. These include:

- The explicit linking of theory and practice through the provision of appropriate resources
- Providing appropriate support for student teachers from a tutor
- Developing partnerships with schools helping them to recreate a school environment that supports teacher learning at all levels.

Linking theory and practice

Student teachers and teachers need help in enacting the theory that they learn in college or on inset courses. One way to tackle this is by undertaking activities in school, specifically designed to highlight particular issues. For example, observing a particular group of students in different classrooms, with different teachers can be hugely helpful for a student teacher, or a young teacher who is trying to develop their own teaching personality. At the Open University these activities are described in a detailed 'school experience guide' which also serves the purpose of ensuring that all students undertake the same activities regardless of the school in which they are placed. In the TESSA project (TESSA, 2010), units of work designed to support teacher learning provide activities for teachers to do with their classes. These activities are designed in such a way that they support the development of approaches that help teachers to take account of prior learning and actively engage their students in learning. The activities are accompanied by case studies which illustrate the approaches and explain why they are important. The TESSA resources are being used in a variety of ways (Thakrar et al, 2009), including supporting pre-service students on teaching practice.

The provision of these sorts of resources for student teachers, also have the potential to provide a form of mentor training by stealth:

the student drives their own learning but requires help from the mentor in setting up opportunities for them to visit classrooms, talk to students or work with specialists. The activities in the school experience guide can form the basis of discussions between the student and the mentor, encouraging the mentor to reflect on their own practice as they support the student. School experience guides and resources such as those produced by the TESSA project, provide the link between theory and practice that the experienced teachers sometimes need in order to become 'expert'.

Tutor support

A feature of pre-service teaching programmes is the teaching practice supervisor. This is the person, based in the university, who visits the student in school in order to assess their teaching and to set appropriate targets for improvement. It is often assumed that observing lessons and making judgements about teachers is something that teacher educators can do, often with very little (if any) training. One of the outputs of the TESSA project is a 'teaching practice supervisors toolkit' which includes guidance on recognising a good lesson, giving feedback and assessing pre-service teachers. The aim of the document is to ensure that pre-service teachers are well-supported and therefore have the opportunity to learn effectively.

Developing school partnerships

In school, Pre-service teachers should be supported by a mentor. Mentoring is demanding. In order to do it properly, teachers need time and support. This can come through a whole-school commitment to teacher education. University-based teacher educators, are in a position to support school leaders through the provision of in-service programmes

that focus on the leading of learning as an explicit endeavour.

For example, a group of Headteachers in Ghana have been working with a team from Cambridge to develop leadership within their schools ((Jull et al, 2012; MacBeath et al, 2005). Five 'principles for practice' are embedded in the Ghana Services Headteacher Handbook. These principles are (LfL Principles and Framework):

- maintaining a focus on learning;
- creating conditions favourable to learning;
- creating a dialogue about leadership for learning;
- practising shared leadership
- encouraging a shared sense of accountability.

They are based on the premises that leadership and learning are linked, that they represent a shared rather than an individual enterprise and that in a school, leadership should be distributed at all levels. At a practical level, the application of these principles encourages Headteachers to move out of their offices and to become actively involved in the promotion of learning. This can include building a culture of classroom observation, promoting dialogue across the school about teaching and learning, and developing a systematic approach to self-evaluation with accountability being shared across the institution. In this sort of environment, mentoring is just one of the activities that benefits from the dialogue and discourse within the school.

A second example comes from Kenya, where TESSA Secondary Science OERs are being used by teachers working in partnership with Egerton University. Teachers and teacher educators work together in workshops in the University; teacher educators and pre-service

teachers then visit schools and see the resources in use. In this way, pre-service teachers are being encouraged, with support, to develop approaches different from those that they experienced at school.

Learner-centred approaches

The policy rhetoric in many countries promotes learner-centred approaches to teaching, in which the teacher is seen as a facilitator, with 'learners taking responsibility for their own learning, motivated by constant feedback and affirmation of their worth' (South Africa, Department of Education, 1997, 6-7). For many teachers this represents paradigm shift and is hugely difficult to achieve. All over the world, there is a disjoint between policy and practice (Schweisfurth, 2013).

In my experience of working with teacher educators in the UK, Africa and India, they are very knowledgeable about the theory underpinning learner-centred education, including constructivism and dialogic learning. The same applies to pre-service teachers and young teachers, who have recently been through four year rigorous training programmes. However, a disconnect remains between theory and practice and this should be a priority for those of us involved in designing teacher education programmes. Teacher education is rarely learner-centred and can perpetuate models of authoritarianism.

For face-to-face providers of pre-service teacher education, programmes need to be designed that give a high priority to practicum and learner –centred approaches need to be modelled, reinforcing what it means to construct knowledge through social interaction. What is the point of a lecture on group work? Student teachers need to experience what it feels like to learn in a group and to understand

how to organise learning in this way. For those of involved in distance learning, the opportunities to model the approaches that we are trying to promote are limited to periodic meetings at teachers' centres, but can be achieved with well-written materials such as those from the TESSA project. An independent evaluation carried out in 2012 (Harely et al, 2012) found evidence of impact of TESSA in a range of in different contexts, face-to-face and at a distance. The reasons for this impact are being investigated at present in various projects, but one reason for the impact is undoubtedly the quality of the resources and their accessibility for teachers. The evidence for this comes from Mauritius, not part of the original consortium. Teacher educators in Mauritius found the resources on the internet and have integrated them into courses, without the benefits of the workshops attended by the main team.

learner-centred approaches appropriate to their own context. It has been argued that there are three key strands to the work of teacher educators, using ICT, supporting teaching practice and learning in school and modelling learner-centered approaches, whether it be through face-to-face sessions of through the use of materials to support teachers. Attention to these three areas could bring about changes in the quality of teacher education and ultimately in the quality of teaching in schools.

Conclusion

It has been argued that improved teacher education is one way of raising educational achievement, through empowering teachers. In many parts of the world, teacher educators do not have very much teaching experience themselves and are trying to support teachers in developing practices that they themselves have not experienced. They are often very well-qualified academically, but lack practical experience: the challenge for teacher educators is to help teachers to convert theory in to practice. Teacher education is multi-layered and this paper has tried to unpick the layers. There is a danger that educational theory - particularly the theory underpinning leaner-centred approaches – is presented as fact. A key challenge is to find ways of challenging teachers and student teachers to really examine their own beliefs and to develop

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