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Re-imagining teacher education: Connecting the spaces between vision, context and curriculum

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Abstract

This article discusses the process of re-conceptualising and re-designing the B Ed curriculum for future primary school teachers at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology. It outlines the context of policy change in which the curriculum re-design took place, the underpinning vision to build the capacity of new teachers for ongoing learning in a changing world and the shared principles of curriculum design. These design principles included the notions of less is more, connectedness and transformation, as well as particular clusters of graduate attributes. The article outlines the dilemmas of context, design and change experienced during this process, as well as the growth path of those involved. It further illustrates how teacher educators' professional identities and commitments allowed them to rise above constraining contextual factors and, through a process of scholarly inquiry and participatory action research to engage deeply with curriculum challenges.

Key words: teacher education, curriculum reform, curriculum design, participatory action research, conceptions of learning, graduate attributes

Introduction

The importance of quality education for all has been forcibly argued from a global perspective (see for example UNESCO, 2008). Yet, while such influential forums offer powerful vision statements for education, it is in the enactment of such visions that the greatest challenges can be identified. Even where policy statements offer a clear direction and vision for educational reform, the actual spaces in which practitioners act may be defined more by local capacities and priorities, and particular contextual conditions.

In this article we focus on one example of such a locally - defined space. We discuss the journey of a group of teacher educators who were involved in a far-reaching curriculum reform process at a university in South Africa. Working in a changing policy context, these teacher educators set out, via a process of scholarly inquiry and participatory action research, to revise the curriculum of the B Ed Foundation Phase and Intermediate/Senior Phase at their institution, within a particular vision of professional practice. In documenting this journey, the article builds on an emerging body of work on the challenges of curriculum reform in initial teacher education in the early period of South African democracy (see for example Carl, 2008; Kruss, 2009; Pournara, 2009; Samuel, 2009; Samuel, 2010).

The article begins by outlining the context for the curriculum revision. It describes the motivation for revising the B Ed curriculum, the reasoning behind the scholarly and collaborative approach to curriculum re-design, as well as the conceptual underpinnings and design principles of the new curriculum. In outlining the dilemmas confronted, as well as the growth path of those involved in the process, we illustrate how, through an active process of individual and collaborative staff development, this group of teacher educators sought to provide links between vision, context and curriculum in ways that they hoped would promote coherence and synergy in the process of teacher learning.

The context

The curriculum revision described here took place within the Faculty of Education at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) in Cape Town, South Africa. The university came into being in 2005, due to a merger between the former Cape Technikon and Peninsula Technikon. In 2001 Cape Technikon had already incorporated the Cape Town and Boland Colleges of Education, themselves a combination of about 15 former colleges, all of which had merged over the previous 15 years. By 2006, the Faculty was physically located on three campuses, two in different urban areas (Mowbray and Bellville), and one in a rural town (Wellington). The distance from Mowbray to Wellington was about 70 kilometres, with Bellville falling about half way between the two. This history of mergers and incorporations meant that the Faculty was characterised by complex administrative and managerial arrangements, as well as differing ideological histories. The profile of the Faculty was very diverse, as it attracted students from across a range of socio-economic and racial groups, and served primary and high schools in urban, peri-urban and rural areas of the province.

The curriculum revision took place against the backdrop of intense policy change in teacher education in South Africa. The challenges associated with these new policy demands have been outlined in a number of studies (Carl, 2008; Kruss, 2008; 2009; Robinson & Christie, 2008). In the case of the CPUT, the institutional mergers and incorporation of colleges meant that programmes that had formerly been offered by different institutions needed to be aligned within the offerings of a single Faculty. At a practical level this needed to take place across a multi-campus institution, located on different sites and with different histories, philosophies and language mediums.

In addition to the challenges of numerous mergers, the Faculty had to work with a new qualifications structure for teacher education, the *Norms and Standards for Educators* (Republic of South Africa, 2000), the upgrading of the primary school teacher qualification from a three-year diploma to a four-year degree, quality assurance reviews from the Council on Higher Education, and a new national curriculum for schools (Revised National Curriculum Statement). It is worth noting that by the end of 2011 both the higher education qualifications framework and the school curriculum had again been revised, which meant that the Faculty would again have to consider curriculum responses to these policy changes.

The combination of these policy changes meant that there was a need and an opportunity for the newly-established Faculty to establish a shared professional purpose, to build a clear identity, to nurture a culture of scholarly enquiry and to raise levels of cognitive demand within the B Ed degree. All of this needed to be addressed in a context where staff members are charged with high teaching loads, and many daily demands of assessment, administration, student support, professional engagement and staff members' further studies.

The curriculum process was aimed at the four year undergraduate Bachelor of Education degree for the general education and training (GET) band, which trained teachers for the Reception Year (Grade R) to Grade 7 in two phase specialisations: Foundation Phase (Reception Year – Grade 3) and Intermediate/Senior Phase (Grade 4 – 9). These two B Ed programmes were offered at two of the three campuses of the

Faculty (Mowbray and Wellington) to about 1 500 of the nearly 4 000 students in the Faculty in 2010 and were taught by a staff complement of nearly fifty lecturers.

The origins of the curriculum review

The curriculum review was preceded by the identification of a number of problems in the curriculum of the B Ed GET that had been introduced in 2002. The original design process had taken place during the incorporation of the colleges of education into the Cape Technikon and had been very rushed. The constraints of time had dictated that the structure of the B Ed GET be “fitted into” the structure of the B Ed Further Education and Training (FET) offered by the Technikons at the time, with no opportunity to consider if this was an appropriate structure for primary school teacher education. The stresses of staff rationalisation at the time had exacerbated the difficulty of engaging with academic or professional principles of curriculum design. While the *Norms and Standards for Educators* provided some policy direction, through its identification of seven required roles of new teachers, it did not directly address the problems of curriculum design and implementation, such as fragmentation and subject overload. In fact, the policy itself contributed to content overload in the B Ed programme, as lecturers attempted to be true to all seven suggested roles of the teacher in their curricula.

Further problems were encountered in seeking to prepare teachers adequately for the revised national curriculum in schools, particularly for the intermediate phase, with its eight learning areas. Time limitations in the B Ed degree did not allow for sufficient exposure to such a range of content, a problem compounded by the poor foundational knowledge of many entering students. An additional concern was the awareness that students needed time to develop academic reading and writing skills. For Foundation Phase students, literacy, numeracy and life skills formed the core of their curriculum. Life skills in the school curriculum comprised a wide range of components, including the arts and sciences, and were being taught in the B Ed curriculum as separate subjects, thus adding to curriculum overload.

Student and staff experienced severe timetable cramming. Staff members were concerned that the learning experience of students was characterised by an inability to connect their different subjects, and a tendency to remain at the level of surface learning. Such learning is described by Loughran (2010) as storing new facts as isolated, unconnected items, relying on rote learning, receiving information passively and failing to distinguish principles from examples. Even though lecturers constantly referred to students’ inability to transfer what they had learnt to the classroom, at a conceptual level the B Ed curriculum most closely resembled an “applied science” model of teacher education (Department of Education, 2005), characterised by an expectation that the student first learns theory and then applies this theory in practice. At a more practical level, students complained that they did not have time to visit the library or the computer laboratories during the day as classes often ran from 8:30 to 16:30, resembling a school rather than a university day. Assessment requirements tended to absorb most of the students’ time not spent in lectures.

Arising from these concerns, a plan of action for a revised B Ed (GET) curriculum was tabled during 2008. Resources were made available through the institution’s “curriculum officer” project, whereby three staff members could be provided with teaching relief and a limited budget in order to support curriculum renewal. The process was driven by a small group of five academics that included the course coordinators of the B Ed Foundation Phase and the Intermediate/ Senior Phase on the two campuses (two of whom were also curriculum officers), as well as one additional curriculum officer. At an early stage it was agreed that the process should be viewed as an academic exploration. A visiting professor acted as an academic adviser, and a study visit was undertaken by the coordinating group to five other South African universities offering equivalent B Ed programmes to compare the purpose and structure of their B Ed. It is noteworthy that, although each university approached its challenges in its own way,

content coverage for a school curriculum with its many different subjects posed a problem for all who were trying to design a B Ed degree, based on specialisation and depth.

As the process evolved from identifying design principles to underpinning theoretical principles to a framework for action, so the participants expanded to include lecturers from a variety of subject groupings. The most prominent were those lecturers responsible for the generic subjects Education and Professional Practice. Education provides the theoretical underpinning to the B Ed curriculum, focusing on the development of learning theories within social, psychological and historical frameworks. Professional Practice functions as a bridge between theoretical learning and the practical application in the classroom, providing opportunities to look at the challenges of context. Various faculty-wide workshops and meetings were held, to report on the study visit, to present student and staff evaluations of the “old” curriculum, to share emerging principles, to learn from other institutions, to debate topics, such as brain-based learning and character transformation, and to share views on the social and educational challenges facing teacher educators in South Africa. Finally, the “new” curriculum was introduced to the first year of the B Ed in 2009.

An action research methodology

While the impetus for the curriculum change arose from a concern with overload and fragmentation, the decision was made to base “solutions” on a conceptual analysis of the issues, rather than on just a pragmatic adaptation of time and credit allocation. Working within the framework of a scholarship of teaching, where “faculty frame and systematically investigate questions related to student learning” (Paulsen 2001 p. 21), an action research approach was adopted, so that questions and dilemmas of practice could be discussed and improved against the backdrop of international thinking on teacher education. This approach meant that assumptions could be made explicit, links could be established between research and teaching, and data was central to the investigation and revisions (Hughes, 2007).

The curriculum development process combined literature reviews, the study of key policy documents, interviews with groups of lecturers at the universities visited, analysis of the course outlines of the B Ed programmes at these other universities, questionnaires to staff, an open-ended questionnaire to eight key lecturers who were centrally involved in the process, reflective reports of curriculum officers, staff presentations and departmental discussions. As a qualitative study, the data attempted to capture the “voices” of the participants accurately. Data gathering took place alongside course development, so that action and reflection were inextricably linked.

The issues highlighted in this paper were distilled from these very sources of information, although student evaluations are not reported on here, as this forms part of a different focus. Recurring, as well as contrasting trends were identified and issues were “fed back” to staff for validity checks and to gather further insights.

Roy et al. (2007) argue that to be sustainable, curriculum change must be based on departmental consensus, so that people work in teams, understand the rationale for change and are able to state their own role in the process. The participatory process of action, reflection and curriculum design attempted to be inclusive, build capacity and establish professional learning communities. The motivation for this approach arose in part out of the nature of the curriculum change itself, as the coherence, connectedness and synergy of the new curriculum would by definition require coordination and collaboration among colleagues. In addition, due to the different histories and contexts of the two campuses, extra effort had to be made to ensure ongoing dialogue and sharing of views. Finally, with the need to move fairly quickly from conception to execution, the practicalities of implementation (timetables, staffing, assessment, etc) demanded careful planning for the following year.

The vision

From the beginning, the group driving the process was united in a commitment to academic depth, while maintaining a strong practical component. The need to reduce fragmentation in the curriculum was a major concern that had been articulated in feedback from both staff and students over a period of time. A deeper dimension to the vision of the curriculum arose from questions about whom the curriculum was for and what knowledge, skills, competences and values graduates needed to develop to meet the needs of a rapidly changing society. Against the background of wanting to address the educational crisis in South Africa, and to contribute to nation-building, it was decided that the vision needed to be a long-term one, rather than be based on short-term interventions.

The process of redesign was inspired by contemporary thinking around the dynamic nature of knowledge, where learning should be preparing young people to be active social agents in a constantly changing world. A key example here was the report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the twenty-first century (Delors et al. 1996), which argues that the underpinning pillars of modern education are learning to know, learning to do, learning to be, and learning to live together. While the first two pillars would be conventionally incorporated into teacher education, it was the last two that inspired imagination. “Learning to be” encompasses the development of core values of autonomy and personal responsibility, while “learning to live together” refers to the development of democratic citizenship and an appreciation of the ecological, economic and social interdependence of individuals, communities and nations (UNESCO, 2003). Both pillars spoke directly to the historical location of the CPUT student teachers, as they prepared to take their place in an education system still suffering the effects of decades of entrenched racism, poverty and youth alienation, within a constitution that asserted the importance of human rights and values, and a national school curriculum that incorporated critical and developmental learning outcomes. This vision resonates with McWilliam (2008, p. 264), who asserts that teaching should provide “a disposition to learning that maps directly on to the “unfixed” social world for which young people will be learning” and Barnard et al. (1997, p. 894) who question how pre-service teachers can “transcend the limitations and constraints of the histories and biographies that have shaped them”.

The principle of educating teachers rather than simply training them was adopted, thereby acknowledging the need for an approach that incorporated critical thinking and reflective practice. The challenge was to go beyond changing the superficial or outer aspects of the curriculum and to address deeper levels of learning. The process became one of reconceptualisation rather than reconstruction, and the architecture began to resemble the kaleidoscopic phenomenon of curriculum development in the postmodern era, consisting of interrelated ideas, texts, personalities, structures and narratives (Briggs, in Slattery, 2006).

Underpinning principles

The four pillars underpinning education for the 21st century as identified by the Delors et al. (1996) report provided a useful foundation. In addition, three principles, less is more, connectedness and transformation were finally selected to underpin the vision and guide the design. These principles emanated from debates informed by national and international literature focusing on the educational needs of the target group in relation to the context.

The principle of “less is more” was the first to be selected. It was argued that spending time “filling a space with data” and the thoughts of the lecturer, should translate into “opening a space where students can have a conversation with the subject and with each other” (Palmer 1998, p. 123). McWilliam (2008, p. 266) calls this “value creation rather than knowledge transmission”. In a teacher education programme, bounded by a timetable and defined years of study, the question was: “What is the optimum use of the

brief time my students and I share in the space called the classroom?" (Palmer 1998, p. 124). Nearly 30 years earlier Ryle (1971, pp. 223–225) had already distinguished between what he called a "museum possession" of knowledge and a "workshop possession" of knowledge, warning against an assumption that "knowledge-how" can be built up by the accumulation of pieces of "knowledge-that". This implies that student teachers cannot be expected to simply translate vast quantities of theoretical knowledge into classroom applications when they face a classroom reality.

The challenge inherent to the argument of "less is more" then becomes an issue of identifying core concepts in each subject, rather than trying to cover it all. Palmer (1998, p.125) refers to the "laser act of teaching", while Pournara (2009, p. 299) talks of "exemplarity", where "one can come to appreciate and understand the complexity of a phenomenon or problem by engaging deeply with a smaller part of it". According to Sizer (1996), curricula and textbooks usually call for sweeping coverage rather than serious mastery of topics. For him, "less is more" is about "doing carefully limited, crucially important things exceedingly well" (1996, p. 87). Christie (2008, p. 212) draws on Sizer to argue that "education needs to develop habits of mind (and heart) that strive for intellectual rigour".

The principle of "connectedness" derived from the fragmentation of learning mentioned earlier; where, seen from the students' perspective, the academic day consisted of a number of unrelated and disconnected knowledge worlds. This, according to Hammerness (2006), seems to be a central concern in the field of teacher education. The challenge goes beyond effecting coherence between the theoretical and the practical, to creating "patterns of meaningful connection" (Palmer 1998, p. 130), through carefully constructing and integrating learning experiences, while being informed by a cohesive vision of teaching and learning.

The third principle was that of "transformation" understood as preparing teachers to create learning opportunities in an ever-changing world (Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2005, p.6). In accordance with the view that teachers "are entrusted with the care of producing the next generation of thinkers, doers and shapers of all our future" (Samuel 2009, p. 756), the CPUT group of curriculum designers embraced the notion of designing for a "reform environment" (Shulman & Shulman 2004, p. 265) where the combined community of student teachers and teacher educators could actively and interactively engage with the educational challenges facing them.

It was felt that the challenges awaiting novice teachers in South African schools necessitated a teacher education curriculum that would address student teachers' levels of competency to understand and work with the vastly different social realities of learners in South African schools. This meant for the student teachers an exploration of their personal qualities and beliefs, as well as of how they defined themselves as teachers. Such an approach, it was hoped, would encourage them to become active participants in their world, reflecting upon it, reconsidering and revising their understanding of it, seeing themselves and their learners as potential agents of change. Shulman and Shulman (2004, p. 263) call this the "heart of teaching – a capacity for intelligent and adaptive action". Pienaar and Lombard (2010) refer to the need for student teachers and lecturers to develop an educational set of values that acknowledges the social and political context in which teaching and learning have been located.

Thus the process of curriculum revision was not only focused on engaging students in deep learning, but also on assisting them in actively mapping their own understandings (Rogers, 1997), maintaining a balance between a focus on the self and the other (Korthagen, 2004), expanding personal boundaries and enlarging a sense of community (Palmer, 1998) and linking cognition with emotion and affect (Lovat et al, 2009).

Graduate attributes

The next challenge was the identification of a set of graduate attributes, to be developed in student

teachers through the four years of the B Ed. The specification of these attributes was inspired by the Delors et al. (1996) report and other contemporary authors on transformation through education (for example Campbell, 2008; Christie, 2008; Slamet, 2009; Waghid, 2003), all of whom emphasize the moral, cultural, imaginative and compassionate dimensions of education.

The original need for change required a pathway that could look beyond short-term solutions. The vision would have to incorporate both the “being” and the “becoming” of both students and lecturers, as Ruth Mansur (2009) advocated so passionately in her paper “Being and becoming: living the curriculum of teacher education”. The vision needed to adopt a generative agenda rather than a purely prescriptive one, by viewing teachers not only as “those who know or “can do”, but as embodying “a way of being” as well – a third space between theory and practice.

Shulman and Shulman’s (2004) clusters of attributes were felt to be most appropriate, since they encompassed both the epistemological and the ontological elements of teacher education. These attributes were analysed with regard to the specific context of the faculty and the core design principles, a process which resulted in the selection of specific applications for each of the attributes. Each cluster of attributes is briefly described here:

Firstly, the *cognitive cluster* incorporates—for example, the ability to develop a deeper understanding of connections between things, and how they function within a systemic relationship.

The *dispositional cluster* describes, amongst others, an ethical course of action, continuously questioning and adjusting enterprise and thought in relation to the common good of society.

The third is a *motivational cluster* that refers to, for example, the capacity to stay focused and committed to best practice.

The fourth is a *performance cluster*, which includes the ability to demonstrate effective reading and writing skills in different contexts, allowing for fluent, appropriate and accurate communication.

The *reflective cluster* refers to standing back and reflecting on one’s own and others’ thinking processes in order to articulate, monitor and evaluate these processes. This is not necessarily an individual task, and is, in fact, an example of joint reflection allowing for diverse opinions and experiences can generate shifts within a community of learning so necessary for transformation. The overall conceptualisation of the vision is summarised in Figure 1.

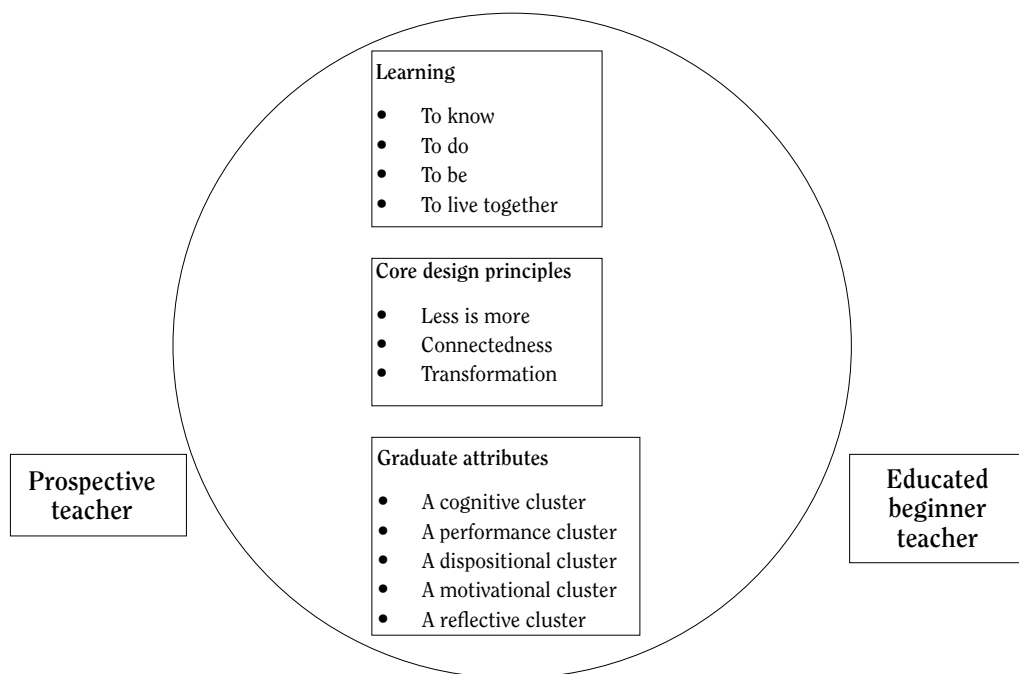


Figure 1. Preparing teachers for a changing world

The curriculum design

In this section we look in more concrete terms at what this vision meant for curriculum design of different components of the B Ed programme.

Less is more

The importance of academic depth and quality education remained non-negotiable. This first principle could not simply be translated into “achieving more with less time”. Technically the timetable did cut back on contact time, but increasingly the staff also realized that trying to cover extensive content in each of the disciplines, was just not a realistic option. Each designer/subject specialist needed to find the “internal logic” (Palmer 1998, p. 125) of the discipline – that critical part of the discipline that relates to the greater whole and will allow learners to understand the role it plays within a dynamic system.

This principle meant re-looking at the structure of the course, modes of delivery, selection of content as well as forms of assessment. At a special workshop, lecturers teaching various subjects were asked to elaborate on how they understood and worked with the concept of “less is more”. They talked about the need to have fewer topics, so as to ensure that these have meaning and relevance (History), while being able to identify big mathematical ideas and open up new ways of thinking about something (Mathematics). Reasons for selecting particular content included focusing on topics that were not covered by the school (e.g., History) curriculum, basing teaching on research and theories of Mathematics teaching, and understanding the nature of the student body (Art). Lecturers indicated that they linked to the overarching principles of learning to know, to do, to be and to live together through identifying, for

example, with the “ordinary” people of History, building mathematical confidence, getting students thinking and embracing challenge.

Connectedness

Having identified the critical core or internal logic deemed necessary to represent the essence (depth) and vastness (breadth) of the particular field, the scope for exploring the connectedness between different disciplines and their role within the greater whole became more obvious.

Such an approach encourages prospective teachers to look beyond the here and now, and to use a pedagogy that scaffolds the crossing of boundaries. Through an emphasis on connectedness, it was hoped that student teachers would learn to engage actively with their subject matter, acknowledging not only the connections between domains of knowledge, but also the role of their own autobiographical experiences in the meaning-making process. Methodologies, such as portfolios and reflective journals, provided the tools to inquire about and probe the interconnectedness of past, present and future experiences. Such methodologies encourage analysis, discussion, critical examination of beliefs about teaching and the development of personal theories (Korthagen, 2008), all relevant to the goals of the B Ed programme.

Transformation

The principle of transformation was interpreted as learning to better understand the self and the “other” and developing student agency. The subject Professional Practice encapsulated the principles of connectedness and transformation. The subject began with the autobiographical in order to work towards ethical responsibility and dialogic consciousness. One of the modules in this subject was called “Constructing your identity as a teacher”, explained by the lecturer as follows:

We chose a dialogical approach, with each lecture based on a series of probing, thought-provoking questions. Key content was provided as the students became receptive. Their own voices formed much of the discussion, and their opinions were given value and credence. They were encouraged to argue, using strong communication skills, and in an atmosphere of trust and shared purpose, they were free to challenge their own, each other's, and the presenter's assumptions. Practical tasks, like presenting an argument wearing de Bono's different coloured hats, or giving value to their own life journeys by drawing their symbolic pathways, were added, and group work was an important part of the process.

As part of giving shape to the principle of transformation, the Teaching Practice period in the third year of the B Ed required of students to spend 4–8 weeks in a school that was different from the one that they themselves had attended. The underlying question in designing this experience was to explore the kinds of experiences that would be needed for student teachers to transcend the limitations and constraints of the histories and biographies that had shaped them (Barnard et al., 1997). Student commentaries revealed the value of this experience, with students articulating how they had discovered strengths they did not know they had and how they realized they still had much to learn (Ekron et al, 2010).

Dilemmas and challenges

Having outlined the vision and design of the revised curriculum, we move to a discussion of some of the dilemmas and challenges of enactment. Where possible, we highlight ways in which we tried to address these tensions.

The dilemmas of context

The shifting policy environment of both the school curriculum and the qualifications framework for teacher education was seen as a concern as lecturers were initially reluctant to spend time on curriculum re-design in a context of impending policy change. The extent to which policy parameters should shape the design was a point of debate, with some arguing for stronger levels of policy compliance than others. In the end, there was agreement that one could not hold back on the required curriculum renewal and that ongoing policy changes should not stifle professional initiative. Policy thus formed the backdrop rather than the foreground of the exercise, with the emphasis being placed on scholarly inquiry as the driver for curriculum change. Some lingering questions remained however, for example, whether a curriculum requirement of more time for particular subjects at school level implied that student teachers should spend more time on explicit instruction in that subject.

Interestingly, the contextual conditions of the institution did not impact as significantly on the curriculum revision process as one might have expected, despite limited resources for curriculum development, the pressures of having to work across different campuses, and a university incentive scheme that rewarded individual research rather than participatory curriculum development. Lecturers spoke with enthusiasm about the collective professional practice that was established during the process, the greater academic depth that had been developed in many subjects and the value of engaging with current research in their subject. Time was the main constraint, with high teaching loads and the distance between the two campuses impinging on lecturers' opportunities for collaborative reflection and planning.

Staff comments revealed that the "new" curriculum was not a panacea that would solve existing contextual challenges in initial teacher education, like student recruitment and selection, or reliance on part-time lecturers due to staff shortages in certain subjects. Furthermore, the views of tutor teachers with whom the students worked during Teaching Practice might not correspond with the principles underpinning the B Ed curriculum, with many schools preferring that student teachers just shadow the practice of the teachers. As one lecturer cautioned:

I'm not sure how one should go about making teachers aware of the new curriculum, or even if one should, but I do know that the students do not know how to "defend" their preparation. Here and there students were told "in my days ..." But this would possibly always be the case.

The dilemmas of design

The challenge of implementation was multifaceted. A central dilemma derived from the shared assumption in the faculty that quality education is dependent on teachers' competence in their respective disciplines. Lecturers expressed concern about whether they would have the time to expose students to "enough" knowledge during the year, particularly since students spent about seven weeks per year in schools, thus outside of the lecture rooms. There were those lecturers who felt that the overall vision of "less is more" had not given sufficient regard to the "voice of the specialists" who did not want to relinquish teaching time in their subject. The tension of time for content knowledge was particularly a matter of concern where students came to the B Ed with levels of under-preparedness in certain subjects. Challenges were noted with respect to working with large classes characterised by students of different ability, with different home languages and varied experiences of learning.

These dilemmas were addressed in part, by establishing links between subjects, and working conceptually instead of allowing the school curriculum to dictate the content. Through more demanding assignments, students were exposed to the core competences of learning to analyse, reflect and apply knowledge, rather than only content coverage. Attempts were increasingly made to create learning opportunities around the various graduate attributes, thereby paying attention to motivation and disposition on the

part of student teachers, as well as to their cognitive development.

The overall design of the B Ed had moved conceptually from a predominantly applied science model (where it was expected that theory would be applied in practice) towards models that are more overtly focused on reflective practice and the development of a teacher identity (Department of Education, 2005; Carl, 2008; Samuel, 2010). Student teachers were now expected to draw more consciously on their own, as well as theoretical, resources to consider situated problems and to develop conscious strategies for action. Furthermore, as a way of developing personal agency, some of the core modules in the B Ed were specifically designed to enable students to connect to, and appreciate, their personal values and biographies.

Reflections by lecturers revealed how the re-design process had opened up questions related to their own pedagogy of teacher education as “re-imagining the curriculum enforced a re-imagining of content and style of delivery, as well as assessment”. In the words of one lecturer, “What is the link between the way we teach and what we expect students to become?” Questions included how “good teaching” could be modelled for student teachers, both by lecturing staff and at schools, how student teachers might (or might not) “transfer” the knowledge gained as novice teachers to school settings, the relationship between cognitive and affective learning, and whether students were using the spaces that had been opened for them on the timetable productively. Strong appreciation was expressed for the opportunity to re-look at teaching in the light of shared theoretical principles and research, as well as for the emphasis that the curriculum placed on personal motivation and ethical considerations.

The dilemmas of change

A significant challenge was balancing the requirement to prepare teachers both for the “here and now” and for the future. The teacher education curriculum needed to be rooted in the local context and prepare teachers for the national school curriculum, but had to be flexible enough to consider global trends in education, thinking and the world of work. Emphasising an applied science model of teacher education, some staff members argued that student teachers needed to be trained in ways that they could directly apply their knowledge in the school. Others were more inclined to a view of teacher education as educating student teachers to become agents of change in society. There was a general sense that the new approach created space for a more critical interrogation of curriculum and a more overt awareness of different contexts. This, it was felt, would stand students in good stead as they were likely to encounter various curricula during their professional careers. Furthermore, as one lecturer put it: “No two contexts are the same and a mere “recipe-style” training can in no way prepare student teachers for the reality of the classroom.”

Another dilemma of change related to advancing the scholarship of practice. For a significant number of the lecturers engaged in this process research was seen as unfamiliar or even threatening (for similar findings, see Robinson & McMillan, 2006; Chetty & Lubben, 2010). Yet the combination of research and teaching in this process inspired a number of colleagues to embrace the role of research. In the words of one of the lecturers who was centrally involved: “The interest comes from the fact that research is not for its own sake. We can see how research can make a difference. We have an opportunity to intervene in how we prepare our teachers and to make a contribution to quality teacher education”.

The first cohort of students in the revised B Ed would only graduate in 2012, and sustained improvement in teaching and learning was thus difficult to ascertain. Nevertheless, based on experiences up to 2010, lecturers were asked what they felt had contributed to the perceived success of the B Ed curriculum. The realistic time frame for implementation was noted, as it was spread over a period of four years. The action research approach was praised as it allowed for talking, planning, reading and developing new thinking,

“forcing lecturers to really understand what the new curriculum means for their own subjects”. It was, however, acknowledged that this was an uneven process, particularly when it came to implementation of the approach in individual subjects. In some instances, it was felt that changes in course outlines might only be “cosmetic”, with nothing having really changed in the classroom. The important role of the people in the process was highlighted, including: support from management; curriculum officers who were at the forefront of ideas; staff who were fully aware of the demands of the teaching profession and the links to practice; an ethos that encompassed a strong work ethic and dedication to education; and a shared vision in the faculty of the importance of teacher education.

Conclusion

The journey of a group of teacher educators embarking on a far-reaching curriculum reform process has been outlined. What, from this experience, can we conclude about the links between vision, context and curriculum in supporting new forms of teacher learning?

In an overt way, there is no doubt that contextual factors impacted on the curriculum reform. Potentially constraining factors included student teachers’ own school experiences, limited resources for curriculum development, staff members’ working conditions, research capacity, institutional amalgamations, the distance between teaching sites, as well as the fluidity in teacher education and school curriculum policies at the time.

This experience has revealed, however, that these potentially constraining factors need not be as significant as one might expect and that professional identities and commitments are able to rise above such overt constraints, through the “willingness to bring about change” (Le Roux, 2011 p. 303). Thus, despite the ambitious nature of the process described here, the small steps made by individuals, groups of staff, whole staff and increasingly, student teachers, showed evidence of a developing sense of common purpose, the emergence of professional learning communities and a sense of excitement about contributing to the discourse on teacher education in South Africa and internationally. In the words of one of the drivers of the curriculum process: “a certain vitality has crept into the academic discussions of staff around “what could be” rather than “what is” and day to day operational challenges are slowly but surely being balanced by a scholarly approach of inquiry, in order to give shape to re-imagined teacher learning”.

In a more implicit way, it also became evident that individual staff members’ own personal and professional conceptions of teacher education play as powerful a role in curriculum design as a vision of teacher education articulated through a process of scholarly inquiry. Although the principles of “connectedness” and “less is more” were initially motivated by a shared need to counter a fragmented knowledge world and an over-full timetable, as the process unfolded, these design principles became linked in different degrees to the concern for educational reform and the deeper transformation of both students and staff. Individual staff members, in their own practice, drew more or less consciously on a vision of teacher education that emphasised teaching for a changing world and particular graduate attributes.

Similarly, there appeared to be an uneven engagement with the design principles as well as differing interpretations of the implications of these principles for the pedagogy of teacher education. Thus the coherence between the overall vision, the principles of design and teaching practices became as much a process of capacity building at staff level, both individually and collectively, as a process of curriculum design. The path of action research and scholarly engagement facilitated this engagement, as it provided a discursive space within which to discuss and debate outside of the immediate challenges of the here-and-now.

One can conclude by comparing the nature of this curriculum journey to that of a chess game: with

every move, new possibilities opened up although it remained an intentional design guided by a specific conceptual framework. With impending changes to the teacher education qualifications framework, it was felt that this conceptual framework offered a shared set of tools to discuss policy beyond its instrumental and regulatory requirements. We sum up both the passion and the learning experience of the curriculum re-design by once again quoting one of the drivers of the process: "By adopting a generative agenda, we had embarked on a journey without a fixed end and no guarantees of success. What we envisage, is a curriculum responsive to the needs of a body of students characterized by their diversity. In addition to that, we want to address the needs of primary education in a developing country, reeling under the demands of both local and global challenges at many levels. Against such a complex background, we realised from the outset that successful implementation will depend on a collective energy of staff and students converging into a cohesive vision of a community of teaching and learning".

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