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Sustaining evolving teaching practicum models in higher education: A conversational ethnodrama between South African teacher educators

Abstract

This article explores the evolving trajectory of the Teaching Practicum (TP) models within a selected South African teacher education institution (TEI) to accommodate the localised challenges of shifting from face-to-face support of professional learning towards online modes of delivery during Covid-19 times. Over time, even before the onset of Covid-19, the specific institution was characterised by increasing diversification of its student body and increased enrolment of student teachers resonating with similar patterns across other TEIs nationally. The study draws on the ethnographic tradition of celebrating participants' lived experiences within the field of teacher education by capturing how a teaching practicum coordinator attempted to deal with complex and multiple challenges to enact and sustain a re-imagined TP programme. The pattern of responsiveness continues even as the pandemic (potentially) wanes. A reconstructed dialogue represents the responses of the internal coordinator within the institution (foregrounding changing operational concerns) and a senior teacher educator external to the institution (foregrounding shifting theoretical and policy considerations). Drawing from ethnodrama traditions, this dialogical conversation acknowledges the lived experiences of everyday designing, delivering and using TP models. It includes the hesitance of school mentors, student teachers and teacher educator supervisors to adopt alternative practices to conventionalised rituals of TP. The conversation questions the academic rationale of the various models of TP in their bolstering of student teachers' professional learning. The study's findings indicate that the successful implementation of a meaningful and contextualised revised TP curriculum necessitates re-imagining the roles of the various partners involved in the TP endeavour: who are co-responsible for conceptualising and ensuring transformative professional growth and development.

Keywords: teaching practicum models, under-served teacher education institution, transformation, conversational ethnodrama analysis and representation.

1. About resistance, recurring resilience and dialogue

The arrival of the Coronavirus on South African shores created another major challenge in the country's history. The malaise of an ill society and the morbidity levels infiltrated insidiously, creating turbulence at all levels of society: at macrolevels in the broader global society, within institutional settings in higher education generically and in specific, localised departmental and curricular spaces. The pandemic has exacerbated social and economic challenges and increased mental health risks in South Africa as varied practitioners attempt to cope with rapid changes. It has once again tested South Africans' resilience in a society that has become associated with repeated contestations to realise greater transformation beyond historical inequities (Mthiyane, Naidoo & Bertram, 2019).

Resilience to cope with repeated waves of contagion reverberated, not only nationally, but across the globe. Before the global spread of the pandemic of 2019, in his examination of the challenges of the 21st century, historian philosopher Harari (2018) suggests that we are entering an era of perpetual revolutions. Harari suggests that the influence of technological and bio-algorithmic research and practice infuse our everyday worlds. He argues that higher education as a sacred space would also become contested as the primary source of knowledge-making and development. This calls for higher education practitioners to re-examine their dispositions to the perpetual pandemic envisaged for the future, to re-examine with whom we are dialoguing to find solutions to broader social and systemic challenges (Samuel, 2021).

An example of such periodic episodes of disruption is the student protests of 2015. The #RhodesMustFall and 2016 #FeesMustFall student movements groundbreakingly questioned the epistemological and operational funding of the university systems. Higher education institutions were barefacedly intimidated by student intellectuals for the sake of a "decolonised curriculum". Jansen (2017) critically questions the underpinning source of the student movements, suggesting that a reading of disruptions should move beyond surface manifestations of the agenda brought to the negotiation tables within higher education spaces. The protests are opportunities for a re-examination of the deeper rationales underpinning disquiet. He suggests that whilst students might be held accountable for the destructive violence unleashed, the more symbolic violence relates to the state's failure to provide structural and political support to higher education systems and the sustained impoverished sectors of society. The lessons here are about learning from our contested and recurring resilience-testing spaces, awash with multiple theoretical and pragmatic interpretations. How do we hear the voices around us, and whom do we choose to dialogue with to find a future, more equitable, humanitarian, holistic and sustainable response?

Aligned with the above macrosystemic forces confronting higher education institutional and curriculum reformulations, this article continues the tradition of finding spaces for dialogue and questioning our theories and practices within teacher education as one of the specific spheres of higher education. This article foregrounds the need to develop resilience at all levels, included within teacher education, which is tasked with producing the next generation of prospective teachers. How did the pandemic usher in new demands and challenges for teacher education providers? How can professional teacher learning be sustained in an environment that disrupted the schooling sector, the laboratories where our student teachers engage their professional craft? In particular, how was the Teaching Practicum (TP) component

of initial teacher education (ITE) affected? What options were employed to react resiliently to the challenges of the new pandemic? These are the questions this article aims to address.

We argue that the current Covid-19 crisis of designing and managing TP continues the search for relevance and worthwhileness in professional learning curriculum design. The article outlines three phases of exploring an evolving trajectory within a selected teacher education institution as symbolic of the kinds of effort involved in choosing a sustainable direction for the development of quality teachers. We present the phase *before* the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic (the TP curriculum 2019), *during* the pandemic (2020–2021) and *'post'* the pandemic (as it hopefully wanes) (2022). We examine how inspiration was drawn from international and local initiatives designed for the TP curriculum, reflecting a growing attempt to develop sustainable new directions for faculties. We question the motives underpinning these initiatives and reflect on whether the transformative goals of social justice are likely to be activated within the evolving curriculum designs.

2. Ethnography, ethnodrama and dialogical conversation: A methodological choice of data production and analysis

2.1 Ethnography and ethnodrama as data presentation

As a branch of interpretivism foregrounding the meaning-making perspectives of those who are researched, ethnographic research accentuates the value of participants' lived experiences (Atkinson, 2007). Personal readings of the world are not sanitised from the research process, as is the practice adopted in conventional empiricist/positivistic work. As a form of affirmation (Nussbaum, 2015; Walker & Wilson-Strydom, 2017), the voices of both the researcher and the researched as co-constructors are celebrated to provide multiple vantage points on a selected phenomenon. This present article works within this interpretivist paradigmatic framework, as similarly did Appadoo-Ramsamy (2022). As a researcher of teacher professional development activity, she demonstrates how the principles of ethnography invoke a set of entangled interpretations that resist linear cause-effect relationships. The ethnographic tradition blurs the boundaries between methodologies and analysis as the act of data production itself is considered an analytical engagement and interpretation within the field. Appadoo-Ramsamy (2022) argues that this entanglement (Barad, 2010; 2014) should extend not only to the sources of data evoked in fieldwork but also to the strategies for reporting and representing the data. She chose an ethnodrama representation (Saldaña, 2022) to depict the shifting temporal, spatial and contextual factors impinging on the phenomenon that she explored. Her final representation of the fieldwork is in the form of a dramatic script presented in various acts to reflect multiple interlocutors across multiple times, contexts and spaces as they engage with the phenomenon of her study. The ethnodrama created represents the teachers' responses to the national curriculum reform initiatives led largely by a governmental-directed professional development strategy methodologically, analytically and representationally.

The approach in ethnographic research extends research possibilities to develop theoretical insights from the fieldwork (data-driven analysis). It is not restricted to only an application of the existing literature/theoretical frameworks for hypothesis testing within fieldwork (theory-driven analysis). Ethnographic study embraces activating and generating hypotheses from the fieldwork as a form of celebration of voices from the field. The authors have chosen to acknowledge the ethnographic approach coherently throughout the article (Hammersley, 2018).

As co-authors, we explore our search methodologically and representationally throughout the article for responsiveness to the unique context of students, academic staff, mentor-teachers and school managers as they simultaneously negotiate the recurring challenges of their workspaces. The chosen dialogical representational form presented below constitutes a co-construction of our academic journeys as co-authors. Inspired by the tradition of ethnographic research, which examines how people live and experience their lives, we have chosen to represent this article in the form of a dialogue between the two authors as interacting participants. This follows the kind of ethnographic shadowing of one another's worlds originally introduced seminally by Wolcott (1973), but further exemplified by Iszatt-White *et al.* (2004). The ethnographic tradition celebrates robust, interactive immersion into the world of others. However, what we present in this article is not an empirically led shadowing of the persons as they enact their routine practice (Wolcott, 1973). Instead, the article methodologically foregrounds a repeated probing based on the overarching questions about the reading of our wor(l)ds that we painted in the opening section of this article. We wanted to know how we are making sense of the pandemic and how it affects decision-making around curriculum practices. Whose voices are we choosing to listen to and why?

The data were produced in response to the first author (Author 1) choosing to design a doctoral study project as part of a cohort, seminar-based approach to constructing research studies. This communal approach entails doctoral students repeatedly presenting to the cohort oral draft works in progress about their evolving topics. Author 1 chose to examine how his institution was responding to the challenges of addressing diversity within a transformative teacher education agenda. During the course of over a year, Author 1 presented various drafts of his study design, showing his mutating interpretations of the contextual landscape of his institution and the responsiveness of multiple stakeholders' involvement in the TP sessions. Moreover, during the period of 2020–2021, the Covid-19 pandemic realities led to further adjusting of earlier research proposal drafts to embrace evolving TP models and responses. Author 2 was part of the supervisory facilitators who regularly interacted with Author 1 about his emerging documentation. The data generated from the interaction during the cohort and responses to the multiple written proposal drafts constitute the raw data that were reconstructed representationally and intentionally into a dialogical script as presented below.

Author 1 is the designated coordinator of the work-integrated learning (WIL)¹ course of the selected Faculty of Education under review. He is simultaneously a doctoral student, lecturer, author, researcher and colleague of those academic lecturers about whom we reflect. As a doctoral student, his studies document the lived experience of student teachers when they are placed in contexts that are unlike their own previous school learning contexts. As an author, the researcher was primarily interested in understanding how student teachers interpret and manage the context of crises and discomfort.

Author 2 has been involved with designing national and institutional policy within another institutional space different from the first author's. We chose not to examine both institutional contexts comparatively. Instead, we foreground the choice-making that underpins the first author's world of a Faculty of Education within a University of Technology. The second author's experiences of coordinating, managing and designing TP experience at his institution provide

1 This Work Integrated Learning (WIL) label is more commonly used within universities of technology. Traditional universities tend to use the term 'Teaching Practicum' (TP) to refer to this component of the initial teacher education curriculum. Both WIL and TP agendas aim to intersect the world of academia and the world of work.

a set of reflective questions to ask about the first institution. The latter author's primary interest as an experienced supervisor was the reasons underpinning the curriculum choices being made by the institution of Author 1. The questions he posed concerned policy compliance and/or adherence to theoretical conceptions of professional learning in ITE. We recognise the embedded hierarchies of power that could potentially exist in these collaborating individual positionalities. Thus the authors consciously adopted a methodology of friendship (discussed below) to represent divergent voices more equitably. This strategy of representation of the data is a form of shadowing as decisions being made by the first author are filtered through the lens of the second and dialogically re-imagined to examine the evolving trajectory of TP models in the selected institution.

2.2 Friendship as method

The voice of a critical friend (*émigré*) troubling the assumptions of the unfolding data analysis is a recognised qualitative ethnographic analytical strategy (see Oojarah, 2018). This methodological approach avoids casting individuals as insiders or outsiders in the research process. Such dichotomies create essentialised categories that are suspicious of personal vantage and interrelated co-construction (McNess, Lore & Crossley, 2015). Rather than sanitising our positionalities, this collaborative ethnographic dialogue is a form of recognition of partnerships and friendships which co-produce knowledge. Friendship is a resourceful manifestation of a dialogical world of meaning-making resonant with the way we live everyday practice (Tillman-Healy, 2003). We endorse Oojarah's (2018) celebration of friendship as a method:

The fundamentals of friendship as a method are the interpretivist ideas that reality is multiple and constructed through language and action. We have, through our words and action, spun a web of significance around the phenomenon under the research lenses ... Hence, we are not seeking to control the phenomenon but to understand it (Oojarah, 2018: 144).

We believe that the representation of the dialogical friendship interaction about choices for a TP model simultaneously infuses method, theory and analysis. Therefore, we have not demarcated separate sections for these dimensions in our representation for this article. Our conversational ethnomethodology (see below) embeds these three elements permeably.

The article is structured to reflect on the original TP 2019 curriculum and explore the possibilities of an international TP model of lesson co-designing partnerships and the nationally endorsed departmental initiative of Teachers' Choices in Action (the TCIA model 2020–2021). Key thematic strands from the dialogical interaction are aggregated as lessons from the field in a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2018) and as an analysis of the narratives constructed (McAdams, 2012). The article concludes by examining further 'disruptions' triggered by an unexpectedly large intake of new students at the selected teacher education institution during the current 2022 academic year. Recurring challenges of the pandemic emerged to refashion new choices for TP. The closing section of this article will align the context, the phenomenon (with reconceptualised TP models, vision and mission for TP), the methodological approach (ethnography), and methods of presentation and analysis (ethnodrama).

3. Voices from the field: An ethnodrama representation

3.1 About analytical approaches

This article was driven by its ethnographic interests to accent the contextual, situated decision-making within a specific institution with its unique, multiple and diverse actors. It paradigmatically challenges the notion that hypothesis-testing approaches should only direct research. Our research aims not to reduce our interpretations to a single truth, but to complexify our understanding of the phenomenon of TP curriculum design and development. We counteract the theory-led research design, which draws its rationale from natural sciences paradigmatic approaches, elevating the world of theorists. Instead, the article adopts a situated, practice-led stance to explore and promote how context can influence and enhance theory. As part of the social sciences, the representational analytical approach draws its data from social contexts, generating hypotheses about our complex world from the field. Field-led data characteristically represent the multi-layered, contradictory and complementary elements of intersecting macro-, meso- and micro-spatialities. Mariaye and Samuel (2021) argue that such an analytical approach is “not a-theoretical but positions the theoretical lens *a posteriori*. The experience is lived, described and subsequently theoretically interpreted in the closing section” (Mariaye & Samuel, 2021: 218).

3.2 About representational analysis

Within the creative potential of qualitative research inquiry, the article expands the resources of social science researchers who argue that we should also explore how we represent research fieldwork explorations. It is suggested that detached, clinical, objectivist, neutral reporting, and feigning and masking anonymity of participants and the researchers deny the fullness of our humanity. Numerous traditions of finding alternative forms of representation of research have been established, including the drama representations and theatre performances of the fieldwork from which this article draws its inspiration (Gallagher, 2007; Mattingly, 2007; Appadoo-Ramsamy, 2022).

Here, we intend to expand our audiences who see themselves represented in understandable authentic ways in academic research reports (Dallas, 2016 Kerrigan & Batty, 2016). Similarly, a cadre of South African doctoral researchers has contributed to the fluid boundaries and relationships between epistemology, methodology and representation (Dhunpath & Samuel, 2009). The act of drama scriptwriting itself is considered to form of analysis and affirming of co-constructors of research knowledge (Davis, 2018). The representational structure of the ethnodrama script represents research participants' multiple divergent interactions that morph according to dramatic moments in various times and settings (Appadoo-Ramsamy, 2022). This underscores Clandinin's (2013) recommendation, which argues that as qualitative researchers, we aim not to establish forensic truths; instead, we aim to show how we live storied lives intersected within interpretations and readings of the world within which we live and help shape.

For the sake of this journal article, we have chosen the milder form of a *conversational ethnodrama* (rather than a full-blown drama script), exploring the fluid interaction between the two authors of this article as they discussed choices concerning the evolving TP design. The emphasis shifts over different times and opens up explorations of new possibilities, concerns and hopes as our contextual landscapes change recurrently. The conversation below represents this fluidity of continuity and change.

3.3 The conversation

CB = Author 1

MAS = Author 2

3.3.1 Before the pandemic: The first phase of developing a TP curriculum (TP 2019)

CB: It's my eighth year as an appointed academic at this institution, and I still do not think our TP curriculum model has changed much, or achieved what I expected. Is it the same as when I was a student here? Faces have changed, but I think the TP model has not. We seem to be following a ritual each year of trying to find willing schools that will accommodate our student teachers during their teaching practicum. Schools, I believe, are just too busy to deal deeply with their responsibility of providing an in-school professional experience for our students. Their hearts are not in it. TP is a necessary blip on the school calendar for most mentor-teachers and school managers. I feel that they are perpetually trying to find ways of opting out. I suppose the Department's instruction that schools are obliged to support the professional development responsibility has added more evidence to launch resistance to yet another directive from above.

TP has become a kind of assessment routine that student teachers need to undertake. It seems as if the main purpose is merely to establish a grade assigned to students' teaching performance. We should rely more on mentor-teachers to provide detailed feedback to students on lesson planning, their professional conduct, their management of the classroom. And also about students as professionals: being a member of a school community. But I think mentors are perhaps put off by the attitude of the student teachers too.

The student teachers do not seem to really want to become professional teachers. Yes, some want to make a difference, but many students are simply dealing with the teaching practicum field experience to fulfil the requirements of the ITE curriculum. They do not want to be disturbed in any way. They just want to get their lessons done and have a mark assigned to them.

I wonder if our academic lecturers also contribute to this ritualistic charade that happens during TP. Lecturer supervisors seem to lord it over the worlds of their assigned student teachers. They arrive at school in a flurry, rushing to complete one of the many assessments of students to complete their daily TP assessment schedule. Then they rush back to campus to lecture some other year group in the face-to-face lecture sessions. In schools, students escort lecturers into the pre-arranged classrooms about which the lecturer comments. I do not know if students even listen to the superficial administrative reporting in the post-lesson observation discussions. Students only want to hear good news. *"But sir, what mark will I get for my TP? I am concerned that last year I got a distinction for my TP and I want to graduate cum laude so that I can secure a job next year."* (CB throwing his hands in the air)

What have I done wrong in the orientation programmes for our students before they go out to TP? I had emphasised how important it is for students to conduct themselves professionally. I had oriented my mentor-teachers in detailed memos sent to the schools about how to assess the student in a more holistic way. What are we doing wrong? TP is all just a performance, and I am not sure that we are guiding the student towards developing the policy expectations of MR TEQ (the minimum requirements for the graduating professional teacher).²

² The official policy guidelines regulating TP (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2011).

MAS: Do you formally teach students about the MR TEQ requirements? How is this done? By the way, what does the policy say about the role of mentors in professional learning?

CB: This orientation to MR TEQ is a compulsory component of TP preparation before the students go out to schools. But students just seem to see it as another set of notes that they need to have on file. I do not see that they develop a full and deep understanding of how this will affect them as professional teachers.

MAS: Have you had any discussion with your lecturing colleagues about their understanding of how one learns to become a professional teacher?

CB: I think that the majority of the lecturers believe that there is a clear separation between their responsibilities and the responsibilities of the schools. The university is seen to provide the theoretical backdrop, and the school is the space where the applications of that theory are tested. Schools are about practice; universities are about developing abstract knowledge. This is how it was for them when they were student teachers, so it's good enough for the present group. This is how it all was in 2019. It seems like an era long gone by.

But we seem to be still missing out on deeply shaping the student teachers' views about professionalism. I am not sure if the students are indeed being adequately prepared for the in-depth knowledge about the curriculum content of the subjects they will be teaching. Yes, we cover the demands of the official CAPS curriculum document in the subject methodology classes at university, but schools still complain that our teachers do not have in-depth basic practical know-how: *"They don't know how to teach; they don't know the subject matter of the formal curriculum; they don't know how to organise lesson structures. They can't do what is expected of us practically every day. Universities need to get off their high horses."*

But we teach about the CAPS document in our university curriculum. At least I do in my course. I hope others do too.

MAS: How do you interact with mentor-teachers? How are they involved in the design of this TP curriculum?

CB: Well, we are now this year, 2022, establishing an Advisory Forum to bring schools and the university together. It consists of departmental officials, school managers and some mentor-teachers, and representatives of the Faculty of Education. But it is still early days. We are still learning how to develop a working relationship.

3.3.2 During Covid (TP 2020–2021)

MAS: So how did you manage TP during the Covid pandemic?

CB: Whew. It was a nightmare of all proportions. Our students in this institution largely come from working-class backgrounds. All the fancy possibilities of activating a remote teaching and learning programme simply did not take account of the fact that many of our students do not have access to even electricity in their homes; let alone that some of them do not even have laptops. But teaching online was what everyone was expected to do. And we did it.

Students soon seized the opportunity to challenge the patterns of provisioning of online teaching and learning from a social justice point of view. "No student left behind" became a wonderful excuse for many individuals to hide behind the problems they were experiencing ...

MAS: What problems ...

CB: Well, Prof. ...

MAS: Michael will do.

CB: Well, Prof. Michael, I had many remote teaching and learning classes (which I got to enjoy, by the way), but the student attendance as such was not very good. I miss my lecture hall classroom. There I could connect with students, read their body language, provoke them into participation. Now I find myself repeating, *"Themba, your microphone is muted. Please unmute yourself ... Nosipho, are you with us? We can see you are online, but ..."* I am a policeman of online participation.

MAS: I suppose this is no different to how a relatively small proportion of students chose not to attend or participate in classes when we had in face-to-face teaching?

CB: Class attendance in a professional degree is 100% important. We need to learn how to engage, critique, interact, and communicate. Professionalism is about communication. *"But Sir, my microphone is not working. I can't switch my camera on because there are too many people in my house now and there is a lot of noise in the background."*

"Sir, I cannot hand in my assignment because I don't have enough data on my cellphone." (CB holding his hands over his head)

"Communication, communication and more communication. Via Blackboard, via Teams, via WhatsApp, via e-mail, via mobile phone ... And yes, there were some students who were supposedly physically present in the online classes, but when asked to speak, simply just froze." An amusing incident happened once. A parent switched on the child's computer microphone in our Teams classroom in response to my provocative invitation, and she reported that her son had just gone out, and that she (the parent) was attending on his behalf! *Sies tog!* (Afrikaans expression of dismay)

There was no end to my working hours, which seemed to stretch into the wee hours of the morning. We dealt with a range of matters: preparation of online materials, Google forms, lesson interactive pedagogies online, including trauma counselling and bereavement counselling. Deadlines for students seemed to stretch endlessly, but our academic administrative targets remained firmly fixed. We were cast as the architects who leave students behind and were made to feel guilty for not being sensitive to students' inability to fully participate. I have not looked at the statistics of how many students dropped out of university during these years, but I am sure I would not be surprised. (pausing) Lecturers may have remained on the job, despite their burnout simply because they could read the writing on the wall that their jobs were at stake in an economic downturn. From where could we muster our commitment to the professional learning enterprise?

The repeated fabrications of why student participation was being hindered troubled me. Sometimes I questioned how many times the same grandmother had died, especially just before an assignment was due. Did I believe all these trumped-up excuses of the student challenges? Or was this indeed an issue of their lack of a professional commitment?

And what about the challenges of administrative professional services support staff? The traditional face-to-face meetings with them had previously allowed me to exercise some kind of management of their activities, like setting up of placements of students in schools. But, how they struggled with offering the technical support all on their own. (another pause) Yes, and we must remember that schools too were going through their own challenges. So I suppose administrators had a hard time communicating with schools.

Our theories of professional learning perhaps got thrown out of the window. We were surviving to stay afloat.

In the early stages of lockdown, we simply could not access the school site. Schools just refused to accept additional outsiders within their workplace. And they were justified because across all public spaces, the number of people legally admitted was being monitored as a matter of health and safety precautions against the spread of the virus. So where and how were our student teachers expected to learn the craft of becoming a professional teacher? The strategy adopted by the university system was that only our final-year students (whose graduation completion rates admitted them as prospective teacher employees) would be expected to undertake school placements. Was this the university assuring their state subsidy for graduation completion, or a strategy to assist potential employment in an uncertain economy? Whose economic interests were being sustained here?

So the net effect is that over the two years of lockdown (2020 and 2021) first- and second-year students have not had any exposure to being within a school site as a student teacher. The third-year students have had only one year of exposure in their foundation year across their ITE curriculum. TP was now being conducted in a simulated university-classroom controlled environment, and these “practicums” were being managed in online pedagogical modes of delivery. Becoming a professional was a remote affair. We were learning about teaching practice, but not involved by learning in and through practice. What kind of reflective teacher are we likely to unleash into the future?

MAS: Do you think this new strategy under Covid shifted the model of TP that was being used? Was there more reliance on the university lecturers/tutors to oversee the TP curriculum programme? How did they cope?

CB: Well, I think we took a step backwards from the gains we were making to challenge students to reflect on their practices during the school-based models of TP. The new Covid TP curriculum was something that needed to be ‘covered’, dispensed with ... done. The students needed to be accommodated, because schools could not accept them. Deep reflective professional learning lurked silently in the background.

You must know that alternative models for managing a more interactive dialogical model of online pedagogies for TP were mooted and supported by the national systems. But our institution chose not to be involved in this roll-out. Was this choice even explored? Did we debate this choice sufficiently within our institution? Was lecturing staff adequately informed about the options and values of the Teacher Choices in Action (TCIA) model that many other national institutions chose to experiment with? I do not think so.

This leads me to question whether our present mechanised version of Covid TP routines is a comfortable, safe adopted strategy that many lecturers silently endorsed. It was seemingly less work than what an alternative model would require. I came to know the extent of the TCIA approach later when I examined the TCIA project in more depth. I learnt more when I came to converse with other institutions who had chosen the TCIA initiative. My attendance at a national TP workshop exposed me to the range of possible options that my institution had not yet embraced. (*CB remains silent as he reflects*)

3.3.3 Exploring possibilities from Japan (TP 2021)

MAS: I noticed that you have chosen to look at how TP is being managed in different contexts. I see you have been writing about the possibilities of drawing from a Japanese model³ of online pedagogies and strategies for TP?

3 Doig and Groves (2011).

CB: You see, we had to design a strategy for my 195 first-year students who could not go into schools in 2021. I searched the internet to see how we could still use a reflective approach to developing TP. I wanted students to develop deeper reflective thinking about what informs lesson planning. The study I read was about how the institution provides multiple opportunities for students to present draft lesson plans. First, the students presented an initial idea about what the lesson goals were going to be, then they developed a PowerPoint description of how they would approach the teaching of the lesson. Lecturers reviewed their oral online presentation of their plan and added suggestions about how it could be improved. A week or so later, the students were asked to teach the revised lesson in a mock-simulated classroom with their university peers. The lecturer offered feedback commentary for the presenter and the whole class of student teachers assembled in the online space.

I arranged for all our students to meet on one dedicated day in clustered groups with assigned lecturers. The lecturers were expected to provide feedback on the 'students' initial design of a written lesson plan, with a further follow-up session on the second delivery of the lesson. The details of the programme were shared on the Blackboard learning platform. However, not all first-year students pitched up at the event, which was announced as the examination for TP1. Some of the students failed because they did not pitch up. This was even after reminders to them about the importance of the event. Another problem was that because of the number of students in the programme, we could not go through all students' second presentations. We had to rely on a review of the written submissions of their PPT slides based on the principles discussed in the first online session. Again, our scale of operations and students' lack of access to online technologies made this plan challenging to implement. The marks show a relatively poor throughput rate for this innovation. I hope we do not have a boycott from students who demand that they should pass and not be left behind. I wonder if academic staff will support the same programme again.

MAS: At least you managed to get some students to design and talk about their plans. And there was some degree of feedback about the general principles informing good lesson planning. But I predict that if students succeed in getting their non-attendance condoned because of the high failure rate, this will have a knock-on effect to disregard any future innovative strategies you might design.

CB: Yes, but there is much more we should be doing. How do we indeed tackle matters of social justice and transformation in our university teacher education programme? I am not sure we are preparing students deeply to tackle these matters. (*CB's mind wanders off in silence*)

3.3.4 The TCIA initiative (no TP 2020–2021, but 2022?)

MAS: I believe you want to tell me something about the TCIA initiative that was developed nationally. Your institution did not use this in 2020–2021. Do you think that your institution will adopt the model in the future? I suppose because it is a programme that the national Department of Education has endorsed and because the national report⁴ suggests that it was highly successful in producing good TP pass rates, that your institution will adopt it too?

CB: I think we will be coerced to make this choice sooner or later. Just last week, we were expected to indicate to the organisers of the TCIA programme whether our institution will be aligning ourselves to this project. I don't think that we as an institution have provided the official response as yet. I suppose this may be a budget issue.

4 Rusznyak and Bertram (2021).

I am not so much concerned about the content of the programme of TCIA. It seems to argue for a range of personal and professional reflective building exercises. It's about responding to how and why one chooses to become and be a teacher; how one develops exercises to think about the quality of one's influence within the classroom with specific learners, within the broader school environment. This is what we should be addressing in our TP curriculum.

I am concerned that our administrative and academic staff will need to be much more thoroughly inducted into what is needed in this new form of interactivity between students, the lecturing staff, and the mentor-teachers. This is very much a hands-on interactive project that requires the stakeholders' commitment: mentor-teachers, lecturers, administrative support staff, and the student teachers themselves. I am not sure we have yet developed this level of commitment to TP as a pivotal agenda of ITE and professional learning. We must develop our hearts and minds to follow our actions.

Moreover, I am concerned that the model presumes that students have continued access to data for the internet and are prepared to devote many hours to reflection on their emerging professional learning. My discussions with colleagues from other institutions suggest that students quickly learnt how to bypass the goals of this online deeper agenda. There are hints of students acting as collective groups to establish strategies to submit their online assignments. This raises new debates around authentic assessment and plagiarism across online pedagogical spaces. I am suspicious that students' pass rate has suddenly increased so dramatically using the new TCIA strategy. Have students suddenly developed greater commitment to professional learning? I have not yet resolved in my mind how we will tackle these kinds of challenges at my institution.

My earlier comments remain about whether these new technologically rich projects are for the privileged in middle-class homes. I am still concerned about whether this is just a fashionable strategy that looks progressive but will perhaps not tackle deep professional learning for all.

MAS: It seems that TCIA could be said to address some of the challenges of deep professional teacher learning that you were commenting on earlier? What are your views now about the TCIA project?

CB: Well, I think I have come a long way in just a short period over the last few years. I am eager to rethink how TP is designed, managed, resourced and assessed. I think we need a faculty-wide plan to re-imagine our TP programme's specific goals. What works for our context, our students? What kinds of capacity-building will be needed to activate our whole curriculum of the ITE programme? But we must assess how to secure human, physical and financial resources to activate the national policy goals for education and align this with our view of a new society, a new institution.

3.3.5 Mass enrolment (TP 2022)

CB: I want to tell you how we had to rethink TP curriculum design again in 2022. This year we are faced with a major glitch in our enrolment administration. For some reason or other, our Faculty had admitted 244 students when the target was 150 new first-year intake. We could barely cope with the online programme for 2021 with 190 students. How are we going to manage with 244 students? This is a serious concern, especially since the university is unlikely to provide us with additional staffing or financial resources to tackle what is really a problem we created internally. Who is going to teach this large group of first-year students? Will our Japanese model be implemented? (... *silence*)

MAS: I also note that your second-, third- and fourth-year students will be conducting their TP *in situ* within a school now that Covid restrictions have been lifted.

CB: (... *silence*). I am glad that they will be exposed to the reality of schools. I suggest that all students should be placed at schools at the same time in a 'block period'. This will allow our academic staff to concentrate on only TP during this 'TP block'. Maybe we need to employ different staff to tackle the on-campus first-year programme. We also have to place first-year students at schools at the end of the year, but maybe this should not be a programme assessed by university staff. We don't have the staffing resources to do so. First-year students should select their own schools, and mentors can give us their reports about the students' involvement. (*CB's mind races in many directions*)

The challenge is that schools have been accustomed to hosting students throughout the year at different periods. They may object to all students of different year groups being placed at the school at the same time. Maybe we need to think about whether schools should be obliged to host a team of several students clustered around specific subjects/phases. How many schools do we need for all of this? I think we need to have a special permanent School Placement officer in the Faculty to manage the partnerships for TP.

At the moment, the senior students choose the schools they would like to be placed at. Perhaps we need to develop a more controlled arrangement in which we (the TP officers) select the schools that are prepared to host a specific number of students; we develop the number of places that students can choose. This will mean that we can place students in a variety of schooling contexts to expose them to a variety of different models and types of schooling. Many students have never been to a school other than the kind they themselves went to. This will be an opportunity to broaden their vision about alternative possibilities. But will schools be willing to participate with us? This is my future area of focus. (*CB start writing notes furiously*)

4. Analytical reflections on the conversational ethnodrama

We acknowledge that the narrative dialogue is itself an analytical process showing the complexities of issues when managing and designing the TP curriculum over the selected review period. The models of TP adopted by the chosen institution did not follow an evolving linear trajectory drawn from the designers of the curriculum alone; the past, present and the future of many stakeholders' interests coincided in the production of the curriculum space. The reflection shows that issues related to TP design are simultaneously engaging several complementary agendas of historical, sociological, political, economic, cultural, managerial and theoretical/academic concerns about professional learning. At the forefront of these reflections is an understanding that national teacher education policy mandates teacher education institutions with a range of deep professional learning responsibilities. However, whilst not focused on by this TP coordinator, government subsidies to manage the scale of TP operations are simply under-estimated, compromising the quality of student teachers' professional learning that can be enacted at this institution.

The challenges confronting the institution's TP design involve the confluence of theoretical, practical, managerial, financial and administrative decision-making. The institutional contextual space involves established partnerships between individuals and appropriate sectors, as Mort and Sayed (2021) advocate. However, these partnerships do not connect profoundly around the nature and quality of professional learning. What results is a superficial administrative unfolding of rituals around the placement of students in learning sites. There is relatively under-developed attention to issues concerning the quality of professional learning.

The TP coordinator in this study (Author 1) shows concerns about extending the scope of what TP could involve. He critiques the mechanistic model of TP, which supports an

Applied-Science (theory-practice) conception of teacher professional learning. This dated model dominates many TEIs curricula nationally. It separates the world of academia and the world of work. It suggests that schools are merely sites for the execution of practices professed theoretically at the academic institutions rather than in the realities of everyday schooling contexts (Swart, 2013). Author 1 embraces the possibility of infusing a *Reflective practitioner model*, which provokes students to ask questions about what informs their pedagogical choices within teaching/learning practices. This TP model has evolved from its original focus on only the individual teacher as an agent of change (Schön, 1987) to examine the systemic underpinnings of broader social injustices which impede a transformative teacher education enactment (America, Edwards. & Robinson, 2021). The search for models of TP, both nationally and internationally, reflects the quest to identify modes of professional learning that are appropriate and feasible within the context of the *specific institution, its students*, and its *particular relationships* with the schooling context. The situated approach to TP modelling acknowledges the affordances and challenges unique to the particular human, physical and financial resource context of the TEI (Sayed *et al.*, 2018).

This article has shown that challenging the rituals of TP causes a backlash, since the academic and administrative staff do not fully acknowledge that epistemological and pragmatic changes in curriculum need to dovetail. The overall institutional climate of student challenges and resistance to assert their voices is an undercurrent that threatens to destabilise an agenda towards quality professional education. Students hold the curriculum hostage to what they want for their convenience, and curriculum designers could arguably be considered spectators of students' power. The TP coordinator in this study suggests that his power to move towards quality professional learning is being curtailed as the administrative, academic and pragmatic realities of an iniquitous society infiltrate his world. At first glance, online technological modes appear to be an appropriate solution. Still, the pragmatic use in practice, within the context of the massified teacher education system, remains an elusive hope.

5. Learning from the field: Towards a synthesis of possibilities for the way forward

The post-fieldwork ethnographic analysis suggests a need to align the focus on the TP models (the phenomenon of this study) to evolving contextual, situated realities of the institution and its specific historical, social, and political landscape. This landscape is imbued with a conflicting set of practices: consciously designed by curriculum developers (such as the TP coordinator of this study) in one direction, but which is thwarted by divergent alternative agendas. For example, the agendas of students and some lecturing staff are more concerned with models of TP that produce an expedient completion of assessment requirements towards final certification and throughput of the student teachers. Additionally, some lecturers are more comfortable adhering to ritualistic practices rather than questioning the deep-seated implications of professional learning enacted during the TP programme.

The conversational ethnodrama has highlighted the interactive dialogical engagement depicting the contested, conflicting interpretations of the role of the TP in a changing wider societal and institutional context. The dialogue between the two teacher educators (Author 1 and Author 2) becomes symbolic of the broader critical conversations that could be produced when examining the search for appropriate models of TP. This dialogue should ideally occur across divergent stakeholders co-responsible for TP, underpinned by quality professional teaching and learning goals. It should include the specific challenges of a world divided by

those who have or do not have access to the technological resources to participate in the pandemic and potential post-pandemic education spaces.

In our representation of the specificities of the contextual ethnographic space, we have highlighted the changing teacher education institution as it grappled with social, political and contextual realities relevant to the South African context. The article captures the particularities and nuances affecting this kind of context. A preference for including relevant South African literature sources exploring teacher education and TP models related to similar transformative agendas has been adopted as possible resources for further reflection. The ethnographic analytical representation allows the authors to clarify the complexities of sustaining a coherent and meaningful TP and teacher education curriculum.

This article has argued that redesigning models for TP for initial teacher education is a process of choosing ever-expanding sets of influence. Such decision-making is likely to be a recurring phenomenon, since we have not exhausted all the possibilities in an ever-changing context of ongoing challenges. Among the primary difficulties is expanding student enrolment, which questions the efficacy and efficiency of current TP and professional learning practices. Administrative and managerial responses dominate the discourses that influence contemporary TP design. However, a broader theoretical notion of professional learning is being established as discourses shift from training models to embracing collaborative partnerships between mentor-teachers, school managers, and teacher education institutions. An evolving model of collaborative lesson planning between student teachers, mentor teachers, and lecturer supervisors could potentially infuse new partnerships between schools and universities.

However, the nationally endorsed pragmatic option of an online technological mode of delivery will trump these collaborative localised avenues. On the one hand, the theoretical professional rationale underpinning new national initiatives has activated focused attention on TP. It has focused on a scholarship of TP as a pivotal component of the ITE curriculum. On the other hand, the pragmatics and the cost of implementing and activating this technologically reliant model amongst student populations with limited access and connectivity in their homes and TP school workplaces pose a severe threat to its possible effective roll-out within contexts such as the institution under review. This suggests that the newer models would likely reinforce the pattern of teacher preparation that has characterised many decades of iniquitous provisioning in South Africa: one for those who have access to human, financial and physical resources (the privileged) and another for those who do not have these baseline luxuries (the under-served). A theoretical model of a transformative social justice imperative underpinning TP curriculum design is yet to be infused within these evolving models. This is despite the theoretical mantras chanted by ideological actors who profess a discourse of transformation yet perpetuate by their actions, routines of colonised patriarchy and hierarchy in their preference for an agenda of self-promotion.

The new challenges of increased enrolment and unplanned coordination of managed enrolment patterns within the institution under study are likely to exacerbate the situation for the new intake and endure until they graduate. The choice of an under-developed practicum experience for these students will also likely be perpetuated. Dialogue about these options has opened the realisation that alternatives have to be consciously planned, drawing on the resources of multiple partners. Teaching practicum cannot simply be the management and administration of placement of students at schools. It must embed conscious collaborative theoretical, conceptual and pragmatic planning, with all stakeholders involved in nurturing the

professional capital that student teachers should possess. Anything less would be tantamount to reinforcing the past. Rather than preparing students for absolute certainties, our TP curricula should prepare them to manage and negotiate the multiple recurring uncertainties they are likely to face as prospective teachers.

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