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Approaches to Teaching Practice and their implications for Teacher Education Programmes in Zimbabwe.

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Introduction

Several approaches to teaching practice are possible. Much current discussions on the ways and means of improving teacher education is focused on this practical element of teacher preparation. (Stones and Morris, 1972).

Some approaches to teaching practice will be examined in this paper. The meaning, impact on colleges of education and schools, merits and demerits and the feasibility for Zimbabwe of these approaches to teaching practice will be examined.

It is hoped that the paper will generate discussion among teacher educators and all those interested in teacher education.

Some Approaches to Teaching Practice

1. Elliot (eds) (1993) says that those holding this view believe that good teaching practices consist of consciously applying theory. This means that good educational practice is derived from theoretical understanding of that practice. Teaching methods and learning experiences suggested by the teacher are closely linked to theories of instruction and learning. The belief is: without this theory, the teacher will not be able to produce meaningful plans.

This view is similar to what Stones and Morris (1972) refer to as the master the teaching model approach. The belief is: the student teacher's teaching practical activities should be based on a sound mastery of teaching models. A teaching model consists of guidelines that show how the teacher should behave in given educational circumstances e.g. how to plan effective lessons in different subjects in different topics for different age groups, how to deal with truancy in the classroom etc. These

guidelines are given in colleges of education as college tutors interact with student teachers.

This means that for the colleges of education, there is need to establish a sound theoretical foundation on which to base rationale classroom practices. Classroom activities (teaching practice) would then provide the student teacher with the opportunity to demonstrate an understanding of such theory and show the ability to deduce right courses of educational action from such theoretical understanding.

It is hoped that once the student teacher has mastered sufficient theory he/she should be able to operate successfully with minimum supervision. Believers in this view would then allow a student teacher, who has mastered this basic theory, to man a class on his/her own. The function of the student teacher's supervisor would be to make sure that all educational practices done by the student teacher are based on some theoretical understanding. If asked why he/she did certain things, by a supervisor, a student teacher should be able to explain that practice in terms of some learnt theory.

The problem with this kind of teaching practice approach is that it too prescriptive tending to produce teachers who are narrow minded, stereotyped, blinkered and unwilling (and unable) to move out or try something out of that theoretical perspective (Stones and Morris, 1972).

The above problem need not arise though. Theories or models of teaching and learning need not be seen as recipe books which must be followed tot he letter (Elliot (eds) (1993)). Even with a recipe book, a good cook could substitute certain suggested or prescribed ingredients with others that could result in a similar recipe.. Similarly, good teachers, should use a theory as mere guidelines. This means that student teachers should be innovative and creative in their learners and their peculiar teaching/learning conditions.

It must also be stressed that theories of instruction and learning are not necessarily applicable to all learners, in all subjects and in all learning situations. Bruner (1966: 49) puts on as follows: "There is no sequence for all learners and the optimum in any particular case will depend on a variety of factors including past learning, nature of materials, and individual differences." Each teaching-learning situation must be treated individually, the teacher aiming at studying and understanding, fully, each

situation and then taking the most appropriate action that would ensure the maximum benefit to the majority, if not all, of the pupils.

Stones and Morris (1972) suggest that the student teachers should constantly evaluate teaching models or theories for their validity. The student teacher should constantly observe the learner and modify his/her (the student teacher's) behaviour in light of his observations, creating new teaching models. And so, theories or models learned at teacher's colleges should be tested by the student teachers in the teaching-learning situation and the results evaluated: Depending on the evaluation results, teaching-learning models or theories are adapted or adopted. And so, teaching, over a period of time, is seen as a dynamic, self-correcting, continuously redirecting and interactive. {Strasser (1967) in Stones and Morris (1972)}.

And therefore, it is hoped that, with experience, the student teacher will develop into a rationally autonomous professional capable of suing his/her initial training and experiences to enable him/her to see the prescription from theories of instruction and learning as just one possible way of looking at a teaching-learning situation with a possibility of other ways of looking at the same situation and producing equally desirable results. This boils down to the fact that student teachers should be involved in classroom action research and in reflective teaching not only in order to determine what is best in their peculiar situations but also so that they could generate their own theories which they can try and which can also be used by other. This way, we will produce a truly rationality autonomous, creative professional.

The Platonic or Rationalistic View of teacher education has far reaching implications for both the educational system in general and teacher education in particular. Besides producing highly educated and qualified student teachers both the education system in general and the teacher education system in particular should produce student who are highly critical, innovative, creative and with a lot of self confidence because only such student teachers can become truly autonomous. It is not easy to produce such a student teacher for it also means that the college tutors and the teachers in the school system should be highly educated and qualified, critical, innovative, creative, full of self confidence, tolerant and accommodative of new ideas themselves. At this point, it seems pertinent to ask the question (even qualified teachers) who become truly rationally autonomous professionals?

2. The Hermeneutic View

Elliot (eds) (1993) says that those who believe in this approach to teacher education argue that good practice is not a matter of reproducing preprogrammed response but responding intelligently and wisely to a teaching-learning situation as it unfolds. This is a rather extreme view of teacher education that sees little value in a prerequisite theoretical base. The belief is that because teaching-learning situations are controlled by many factors, each situation being unique from the rest, teaching situations are complex, ambiguous, dynamic and unpredictable. What works in situation A may not work in Situation B. Teaching-learning situation can differ in many ways as the social and cultural backgrounds of both the teachers and the pupils; the expectations, interests, aspirations and needs of the learners in relation to the curriculum to be learned. All these differences would mean difference in approaches to teaching.

Because of all this, it is argued that intelligent prescriptions on how to handle different teaching-learning situations cannot be made in advance. The teachers has to study each situation in an effort to come up with the most appropriate and effective teaching.

The role of the teachers' colleges and the schools would be to encourage the development of the student teacher's ability to analyse each situation or context properly and accurately in order to make wise judgements and intelligent decisions on the educational situation. The college must stress the importance of increasing the student teacher's awareness of the causes and consequences of their actions through on their educational situations. {Carr and Kammis (1986), Calderhead and Gates (1993).

Needless to say that such an approach to teaching practice would require even more highly educated and qualified creative, innovative students teachers than those that started off with some theory to fall back when the need arises.

3. The Social Market View

This view lies, somewhat, in between the two views already discussed. According to Elliot (eds) (1993) this view emphasizes the importance of practical experiences and modelling and imitating as the source of practical teaching skills. This perspective of teacher education is relatively theory free. This is on the job teacher preparation programme. Student teachers learn good teaching practices by observing and imitating senior, experienced teachers. This is what is often referred to as "sitting with Nellie", a concept borrowed from industry where Nellie is the factory worker who has been doing the job for years and to whom new recruits are attached so that they can learn the job from Nellie.

This view of teacher education is what Stoluro (1965) in Stones and Morris (1972) called model the master teacher approach. Teaching practice is viewed as some form of craft apprenticeship where there is a master teacher, qualified, experienced and able on one and an apprentice, the student teacher on the other hand. The master teacher's skills, performance, personality and attitudes are acquired by the student teacher through observation, imitation and practice. The master teacher tells the student teacher what to do, shows the student teacher how to do it and the student teacher imitates teacher. The belief is: If you want to become an effective teacher, do what the effective teacher does.

Colleges of education would have to identify and induct student teachers to the minimum, basic, survival competence skills. The schools would have to identify these model teachers who would demonstrate the expected teaching and professional skills, attitudes and values.

The current practice pattern in Zimbabwe where a student is attached to a class teacher, mentor, has some qualities of the social market view or model the master teacher approach. The mentor is the master teacher while the student teacher is the apprentice.

Where this view is taken to the extreme it can have some problems. New curricula being constantly introduced into schools mean new teaching skills and techniques, which the master teacher may not have, are needed. For example, only recently, in Zimbabwe, as the result of the introduction of Family Life Education (Aids Education) in schools, we have a great thrust towards interactive, participatory methods of teaching where the prime function of the teacher is to facilitate discussion among the pupils. This puts into question the expertise of the master teacher.

Currently there is a greater emphasis, in educational circles, of the need to produce experimental, creative, innovative, and critical thinkers rather than passive recipients of information. If this current thrust in educational circles is promoted and accepted, then it should be difficult for the student teachers to be willing to submit to a master teacher's authority and to follow his techniques question.

The model the master teacher approach does not allow the student teacher to go beyond the teaching that is observed. (Stones and Morris, 1972). This observed teaching may be excellent but it cannot be exhaustively excellent. There will be certain

areas of teaching excellence that cannot be illustrated by any one master teacher and there may be other, more appropriate ways of doing things that those the master teacher employs. In other words, a mentor, a master teacher, however good and versatile, experienced and skilled, can offer the student teacher only a limited set of skills, attitudes and useful personality traits. The question is: From where does the student learn the rest?

Related to the above problem is the fact that the selection of skills and techniques to be learnt is done by the master teacher, reflecting the master teacher's values, experiences and personality will be marginalised. In other words, this approach could easily deny the individuality of the student teacher as it tells the student teacher to adopt another person's teachings style resulting in a tendency to comfortably, conservatism and traditionalism and operating against experiment and innovation.

Finally, Stones and Morris (1972) raise a very fundamental question whether we are agreed on what an effective teacher should do. Further, even if we were able to identify a mentor with all the required qualities, the master teacher, would we be able to identify enough of these effective teachers in the right places to service all the student teachers?

The issue of mentoring need not be as gloomy as painted above if certain considerations are made and if certain prerequisites are met.

Mulligan (1988:3) defines mentors as "... advisors who help to guide you through the maze of your career." McIntyre and Haggart (1994:2) define mentoring as "... a school based actively undertaken by practising teachers to provide some mentors are experienced teachers who advise, guide and support teachers. This definition does not portray the mentor as a role model to be blindly copied by student teachers. There is room for this student teacher's initiative and personal professional growth. It seems reasonable to suggest that where a student teacher is attached to a mentor, the student teacher must do his/her observations with a critical open mind that will not accept everything that it sees or hears as the gospel truth but in mind that questions the validity of what it experiences. The mentor should realise that, no matter how experienced and good he/she is (or thinks is) there is still a lot still to learn and that one of the sources of that learning could well be the student teacher himself/herself under the mentor's care.

The relationship between the mentor and the student teacher as described above does

not develop overnight. The selection of mentors must be carefully done so that in addition to experience and expertise mentors should be highly committed and interested in the programme, seeing it as a challenge and a source for further personal professional growth. Once the right crop of mentors has been identified they will need to be trained if they are to do their job well. This training could include areas such as: the meaning of effective teaching, effective classroom management and organisation; how to guide, support and advise a student teacher; developing sound professional relationships with the student teacher based on mutual trust and respect for each other etc. Workshops, seminars and in-service courses involving school heads, college tutors, mentors and student teachers should be held at various levels. The major aim of these workshops would be to explain the whole concept of mentoring in order to avoid conflicts or expectations among the key players in the system. Naturally all these will require a lot of material and human resources. It is shown that incentives to mentors such as financial allowances, promotion prospects, enhanced chances of staff development, etc motivate the mentors to do their work more willingly and effectively than these incentives must be put in place.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed three possible approaches to teaching practice which although not exclusive of each other have their own peculiarities. The possibilities and constraints for Zimbabwe to implement each of these approaches were examined. The message that seem to come through the whole discussion in this paper is that if meaningful teaching practice has to take place in our schools there is need for some drastic changes in our education system and teacher education programmes. Colleges of education must cultivate and produce a student teacher who is not only an effective classroom practitioner but one who is capable and willing to initiate changes in the way teaching is done. College tutors, school teachers, school heads and all those interacting with student teachers must appreciate the need for and encourage creativity, experimentation, classroom based action research and reflective teaching among student teachers. Only this way can we hope to produce a truly self reliant autonomous professional out of the student teacher.

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