

The role of lecturers as mentors in the assessment of student teachers

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Abstract

Student teaching practice and the assessment of their learning during this time play a significant role in preparing student teachers for the teaching profession. The study on which this article reports focussed on the challenges associated with the assessment of open and distance learning (ODL) student teachers during teaching practice. A previous investigation indicated that student teachers experience assessment as problematic. The specific aim of the study, therefore, was to further investigate all aspects of assessment of the current model of student teachers teaching practice at one higher education institution and to make recommendations for the improvement thereof. Students enrolled for the B.Ed. Early Childhood Development (ECD) and Foundation Phase were purposely sampled. Data were collected by means of document analysis and semi-structured interviews. Socio-constructivist and situated learning theories were used as theoretical framework to evaluate learning and assessment by lecturers, mentor teachers, peers and the students themselves. The findings are significant to improve tutorial matter, provide guidelines for assessment

and coordinate a platform for partnerships between the different role players regarding this issue.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Several studies in teacher education at a distance have revealed that the organisation of teaching practice for student teachers presents both logistical and educational difficulties (Aldridge, Fraser and Ntuli 2009, 147). The underlying principle of open and distance learning (ODL) is that all relevant systems need to be integrated in order to support the academic endeavour and the students' learning. One of the biggest challenges for ODL, particularly in the context of a developing country, is overcoming transactional distance. A transactional gap exists between students, on the one hand, and the institution, lecturers, mentor teachers, courseware and other students, on the other hand. There is a cognitive space between learning, peers, teachers and content in a distance education setting (Moore 1993).

The University of South Africa (Unisa) as an ODL institution offers various undergraduate educational degrees to prospective teachers. Teaching practice is an important and integral component of all these degrees. According to situated learning theories (e.g., Wenger 1998) it forms a legitimate peripheral participation opportunity for the students to deal with the realities of the classroom situation.

The lecturers involved with training student teachers are continuously striving to improve their teaching approach to teaching practice. A previous research project (under review), investigated various aspects of teaching practice at schools and identified assessment as an aspect which needed further investigation. This was indicated by the fact that the participants identified a number of negative aspects they thought needed improvement. These related to the staggering of assignments; *who* the assessors should be during teaching practice; *what* the assessment should focus on; and *how* assessment should take place.

Huba and Freed define higher education assessment as follows:

Assessment is the process of gathering and discussing information from multiple and diverse sources in order to develop a deep understanding of what students know, understand, and can do with their knowledge as a result of their educational experiences; the process culminates when assessment results are used to improve subsequent learning. (2000, 8)

Currently, Unisa strives to assess student teachers' level of development according to trustworthy, valid and objective criteria which evaluate both the learning process and the outcomes. Student teachers are required to complete different workbooks while doing their teaching practice at schools. These

workbooks are submitted to lecturers for final assessment. The relevant lecturers also consider the marks allocated by the mentor teachers. Various assessment methods are included such as rubrics, quantitative assessments on a five-point scale, descriptive records, participation charts, personal reports, portfolios, checklists, and lecturers' observation of the student teachers during school visits. From these, a final mark is allocated to every workbook.

In light of the above, this research project aims to throw further light on problematic aspects of assessment for improvement. For the purpose of this article the assessment component of teaching practice of the B.Ed. Early Childhood Development (ECD) and Foundation Phase degree is scrutinised. The article addresses the following: the conceptual framework of the study; a literature review of assessment practices (by lecturers, mentor teachers and student teachers); the research design of the investigation; the findings; and the conclusions.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Two learning theories are important for this research, namely, constructivist and situated learning theories. Constructivist theories were formulated by Piaget, Vygotsky (1978) and gestalt psychologists (e.g., Barlett, Bruner and Dewey). Of special importance are socio-constructivist theories which emphasise that all knowledge is socially constructed. Relationships between teachers, student teachers and the community are the central issues that influence learning. Collaboration to understand diverse viewpoints is encouraged (Gergen 1997, 16). Students are active thinkers, explainers, interpreters and questioners (Marshall 1992). This approach is in favour of student-centred teaching and learning and puts the student teachers' own efforts to understand at the centre of educational events (Woolfolk 2007, 481). Accordingly, Driscoll (2005, 57), points out five conditions for successful learning. The instructor should

1. embed learning in complex, realistic and relevant learning environments;
2. provide for social negotiation and shared responsibility among groups of learners as a part of learning;
3. support multiple perspectives and use multiple representations of content;
4. nurture self-awareness and an understanding that knowledge is constructed, not passively absorbed;
5. encourage student ownership of learning.

The implication of the abovementioned theory for the assessment of student teachers during teaching practice is that the interactive nature of learning is extended to the process of assessment. Thus, assessment is not carried out by one person (e.g., the lecturer or the teacher), but is a two-way interaction between the learner and the assessor. The assessor needs to enter into dialogue with the student teacher to determine what their current level of performance is on any task and share with the student teacher possible ways of improving their performance on following occasions. Thus, assessment and learning are viewed as linked and not as separate processes (Holt and Willard-Holt 2000). This confirms the abovementioned, namely, that learning is not receiving knowledge passively; but rather, that student teachers build their knowledge from their own contributions, as well as from the input of the mentor teacher/lecturer as co-participant who guides and facilitates learning by listening to socially constructed conceptions. Together they co-construct different interpretations of knowledge and apply it to real-life classroom situations (Woolfolk 2007, 365).

Rich Environments for Active Learning (REAL) evolved from and are consistent with constructivist theories. REAL reflects the assumption that the process of knowledge acquisition is ‘firmly embedded in the social and emotional context in which learning takes place’ (Grabinger and Dunlap 1996, 1, 7–8). The main attributes of REAL include the following:

- Student teachers are responsible for initiating their own learning;
- Student teachers cannot construct their own learning without generating something through active involvement. Generative learning requires that student teachers become investigators and problem solvers;
- Learning takes place in authentic contexts where student teachers are confronted with realistic problems;
- There is an emphasis on cooperative learning;
- Assessment strategies are authentic. Conventional pen-and-paper tests are seen as poor indicators of how student teachers will perform in real life. Thus, according to Wiggins (in Grabinger and Dunlap 1996, 16), authentic assessment practices include the following: evaluation tasks must reflect contextualised problems; grading should include multi-faceted criteria that are reliable across multiple scorers and explained to students; and assessment should consider multiple intelligences.

Another learning theory that frames this research is situated learning theory (Lave and Wenger 1991). Two concepts that are important are ‘community of

practice’ and ‘legitimate peripheral participation’. Lave and Wenger (1991, 54–58) define a community of practice as a mutual engagement of participants in action where there is a negotiation of a joint enterprise as well as a development of shared repertoire. Student teachers (or learners or apprentices), under the guidance of mentor teachers (or masters), are legitimate peripheral participants in the practices of their communities during their practical teaching experiences at schools.

The proper context for learning to take place is situated in the social engagements of the participators, namely, the expert, ‘master’ or mentor teacher and the learner, ‘apprentice’ or student teacher (Lave and Wenger 1991, 14). In this situated learning process, the student teacher (learner) acquires the knowledge and skills to perform by engaging and interacting with the elements of the ‘situation’ (the classroom) under the guidance of the expert or mentor teacher (master). Thus, the abstract knowledge that was acquired in textbooks is made meaningful for further application in real-life situations. This empowers the student teacher to become an experienced teacher.

To take a decentred view of master apprentice relations, leads to an understanding that mastery resides not in the master but in the organisation of the community of practice of which the master is part. The master as the focus of authority (in several senses) is, after all, as much a product of the conventional, centred theory of learning as is the individual learner. Similarly, a decentred view of the master (mentor teacher) as pedagogue moves the focus of analysis away from teaching and onto the intricate structuring of a community’s learning resources (Lave and Wenger 1991, 94).

As opportunities for understanding the degree to which a person’s contributions are evident in practice, legitimate participation of a peripheral kind provides an immediate ground for self-evaluation (assessment). The scarcity of tests, praise, or blame typical of apprenticeship follows from the apprentice’s (student teacher’s) legitimacy as a participant (Lave and Wenger 1991, 111). Assessment of situated learning can include a number of evaluation measures such as portfolios, diagnosis, or reflection and self-assessment. Thus, thought should be given to designing authentic assessment practices (Herrington and Oliver 1993, 7, online). A literature review is presented next. The focus is on assessment practices of student teachers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Assessment by lecturers

According to Geysers (2006, 90), assessment in higher education by lecturers should be planned and conducted according to a constructive assessment approach that aims to enhance learning during teaching practice. Assessment is accepted as an integral part of learning and should be planned and conducted in a constructive way and not as an add-on to teaching and learning. This is in accordance with assessment in situated learning, as indicated.

Assessment in higher education, with special reference to teaching practice, focuses on performance-based activities which are connected with reflection (Kilfoil in Dreyer 2008, 108). Gibbs (2006, 18) argues that when assessing students, the totality of a student's learning experience is vital and assessment feedback should be coherent and not confusing. Four fundamental elements of student-centred assessment that are imbedded in performance-based activities are highlighted by Huba and Freed (2000, 9–10), namely: (i) formulating statements of intended learning outcomes; (ii) developing or selecting assessment measures; (iii) creating relevant experiences leading to the desired outcomes; and (iv) discussing and using assessment results to improve learning.

First, formulating statements of intended learning outcomes describes what student teachers should know, understand, and be able to do with the knowledge they obtain in learning situations. Second, developing or selecting assessment measures is important to assess whether or not the intended learning outcomes have been achieved. The meaning of the intended learning outcomes is influenced by the assessment measures that have been designed. Assessment measures should involve direct measures (e.g., projects, portfolios, interviews and oral examinations) as well as indirect assessment procedures (self-report measures) of student teachers. This could provide accurate and useful information for making decisions about learning. Third, creating relevant experiences leading to the desired outcomes is very important. For student teachers to achieve the intended outcomes, opportunities to learn/know what they need to learn/know, should be provided by designing a curriculum with experiences that include independent studies, internships and teaching practice. The curriculum should include activities and experiences that will help student teachers to acquire the knowledge, skills and understanding required by each of the learning outcomes. Lastly, discussing and using assessment results to improve learning also play a crucial role when assessing students at universities. Discussions between lecturers and student teachers are in accordance with social constructivist learning. The dialogue helps lecturers to gain an insight into the learning of student teachers and to be able to

make informed decisions about module and programme changes. Questions can be raised about the design of the curriculum or about the teaching strategies used. The abovementioned four fundamental elements of student-centred assessment are interwoven with principles of good assessment practice. Huba and Freed (2000, 68–86) identify the following eight principles of high-quality assessment practices by lecturers:

- *Assessment should lead to improvement.* Legislatures and accredited teacher training departments of universities urge schools to engage in assessing the learning of the student teachers. Research done by the American Association of Higher Education (AAHE) Assessment Forum (1992) states that assessment works best when it seeks to improve abilities and have clear explicitly stated purposes (Huba and Freed 2000, 68–86).
- *Assessment should be part of a larger set of conditions that promote change.* Effective assessment should take into account existing processes such as planning and reviewing existing teacher training programmes. Research done by Huba and Freed (2000, 68) points out that assessment should not only focus on strengths but also on areas in need of change.
- *Assessment should focus on using data to address questions that lecturers in the programme and at the institution really care about.* These questions will help to keep the assessment process moving towards its ultimate goal, which is to utilise experience and knowledge in order to improve teaching and learning.
- *Assessment by universities should be guided by relevant questions* such as the following: What do we want to know about student teachers' learning and teaching abilities during teaching practice? How can we verify what we think we know and use the information gained to address teaching practice changes?
- *Assessment during teaching practice experiences should flow from the institution's mission and reflect the university's educational values.*
- *Educational programmes should have clear, explicitly stated purposes that can guide assessment in the programme.* Lecturers should not commence with their assessment by trying to determine what measures they will use to assess learning, but they should rather ask themselves what they want student teachers to learn. Wehlburg (1999, 7–9) found that without clear, explicitly stated purposes, vague outcomes are measured.

- *Assessment should be based on a conceptual framework (e.g., constructivist or situated learning theories as explained in this article), that indicates relationships among teaching, the curriculum, learning and assessment at the institution.* Eight specific abilities students should develop are distinguished by Huba and Freed (2000, 70), namely, communication, analysis, problem solving, valuing in decision making, social interaction, global perspectives, effective citizenship and aesthetic responsiveness.
- *A university should have a sense of ownership and responsibility for assessment.* Conversations should take place that could lead to a better understanding of ownership and responsibility. Research findings of Bryan and Clegg (2006, 2) indicate that feedback on assessment is pointless unless it is intended to improve students' work.
- *Assessment should be cost-effective and based on data gathered from multiple measures.* Student teachers should learn what universities intend them to learn. Multiple methods of assessment should contain direct and indirect measures. Direct measures, such as projects, products, papers, exhibitions and interviews, directly gauge the knowledge and skills that student teachers have acquired during their teaching practice. Indirect measures are self-report surveys, interviews, alumni surveys and school principal surveys, which provide suggestions about student teachers' learning.
- *Assessment should be ongoing rather than episodic.* Assessment of student teachers during teaching practice has to be monitored continuously. Both mentor teacher and student teacher have to determine whether the outcomes have been achieved. Assessment strategies, such as lecturer and mentor teacher assessment, self-assessment and peer assessment, can contribute towards the success of ongoing assessment.

Assessment by mentor teachers

Clark and Marker explain the importance of mentoring as follows: 'If, as the research indicates, practice teaching is the 'single most powerful intervention in teachers' professional preparation; then supervision [mentoring] is the single most powerful process in such intervention'(in Kader 2003, 10). Lecturers and mentor teachers, therefore, have to work as a team in order to ensure coordinated efforts for the enhancement of mentorship in schools, which includes assessment. Mentor teachers should concentrate on building strong relationships of trust and goodwill with student teachers and higher education institutions (Mohono-Mahlatsi and Van Tonder 2006, 394–395).

There is no prescription for an ideal mentoring or assessment model. There is no one single way of seeing this very distinctive mode of relationship; and mentoring is not the kind of skill that can be broken down into clear components and steps. In fact, mentoring depends on craft knowledge that is accumulated through experience and practice. Its central distinctive quality is that, like teaching, mentoring is a very subtle and sophisticated kind of knowledge which is enacted and performed, but which cannot be 'transmitted' as a concrete and clear guide for action (Windsor 1995, 117–118).

Assessment by a mentor teacher needs to help student teachers to analyse and reflect systematically, not only after a teaching session or series of sessions, but also during the teaching itself (in other words, while they are close to the action). Student teachers need help not only to monitor, but also to explore, interpret and explain the how and why of what went on. This is in line with constructivist methods of assessment. This assessment leads naturally into the next phase of the teaching cycle, namely, the (re-)planning of the next piece of teaching (Husbands 1995, 31; Tomlinson 1995, 44).

According to Laker, Laker and Lea (2008, 131), the mentor teachers in schools are a major influence on the pre-service teachers' professional development. The comments about the support received from mentors constitute three categories: first, the practical and immediate knowledge that mentor teachers are able to offer; second, the relationship that forms over the course of the school experience; and third, the issue of assessment. The mentor teacher works with the student teachers on a daily basis and the student teachers are able to use their suggestions (assessment feedback) immediately, in context and in lessons. Thus, the student teachers reframe their knowledge to match their practical/situational experiences and this becomes increasingly important to them (Russel and Munby in Laker et al. 2008, 132).

According to Mohono-Mahlatsi and Van Tonder (2006), a mentor teacher's assessment indicates what a student teacher needs to know in order to grow professionally. Research conducted by these two researchers revealed that the following problems were experienced by student teachers regarding assessment by mentor teachers:

- Classroom observations were not executed often and repeatedly, yet these observations were used for assessment outcomes.
- There were not enough guidelines and memoranda for assessing their presentations.
- Assessment criteria appeared to be inconsistent.

- Assessment confused the student teachers as some of them received higher marks at times for conducting the same activities as previously without remarks or explanations from mentor teachers.
- Assessment was sometimes followed by late feedback from mentor teachers.
- Some assignments were left without any comments, or if comments were supplied, they were not detailed.
- Students believed that they were viewed negatively most of the time, as mentor teachers over-emphasised assessment as opposed to other roles of the mentor teacher, for example guiding, advising, counselling and supporting the student teacher in general (Ngcobo 1989, 20).

According to mentor teachers, the abovementioned occurs because of a lack of information on administrative issues and academic changes in time and work schedules at schools. Furthermore, there are many factors that could influence the process of assessment by the mentor teacher, some of which are beyond the control of individuals. These factors include: the complexity of school contexts; the intensity of the teacher's professional life, the scarcity of time during teaching hours for reflection and dialogue; and the sheer complexity of teaching practice (Ngcobo 1989, 20).

Although the mentor teacher and lecturer have the responsibility to lead the assessment activities during the teaching practice, the student teacher, as the one being assessed, could also contribute to make this a meaningful activity through peer and self-assessment. Due to the fact that only one participant responded on peer and self-assessment a broader literature review was not included in this research.

Peer and self-assessment

Peer and self-assessment may be realistic forms of assessment as they are processes by which people learn more about themselves and how to better their performance (The Riley Guide 2010). Peer and self-assessment affords the student teachers the opportunity to observe, reflect on, analyse and judge their performance on the basis of a certain set of criteria and to determine how they can improve it or change the way they work (Marcy 2010).

The lecturer and mentor teacher still have the responsibility, in most of the peer and self-assessment activities, to control the fairness of the marks that the student teachers award themselves. This overcomes problems of self-assessment, that is, inflating, exaggerating, underestimating or misrepresenting their own strengths or weaknesses. When self-assessment is used in combination with teacher and peer

assessment, the learning process is also enhanced as student teachers learn from their own mistakes. At the same time, student self-assessment keeps the lecturer and mentor teacher informed about the student teachers' thoughts regarding their progress and module content and instruction. This is in line with the two-way interaction of social constructivist learning as indicated in the conceptual framework.

Against this background, the specific aim of the study is to investigate the method of assessment currently applicable to the teaching practice of student teachers enrolled for the B.Ed. ECD and Foundation Phase degree. Students enrolled for this degree are required to complete five weeks of teaching practice in schools for each of the four teaching practice modules. This particular degree was selected to support the reflective practice of the lecturers who are responsible for this module. The research design and data collection are explained next.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research employed a qualitative research approach using a phenomenological research design to obtain an understanding of the views of students regarding the assessment by lecturers, mentor teachers, peers and self (McMillan and Schumacher 2006, 26). Purposeful sampling was used to select 16 information-rich participants. All the participants were from South Africa and enrolled for the B.Ed. ECD and Foundation Phase degree. The sample provided a maximum variation in that student teachers from a wide range of ages (26 to 61 years old) were included. Moreover, student teachers completed their practice in a wide variety of school contexts ranging from those that were rich in human and other resources to those that lacked them. Different cultural groups were also involved. The sample was identified from a list of names from students who were enrolled for the fourth year teaching practice module. The reason for choosing this group was because they had been exposed to the assessment process of three previous years' teaching practice experiences.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted. The interviews were carried out in a conversational manner, using an interview guide (McMillan and Schumacher 2006, 205). Each interview began with an explanation of the purpose of the interview, a promise of confidentiality, and a reassurance that there was no right or wrong answers. The same questions were posed to all participants in the same sequence. Participants were asked what their views were on how they were assessed by their lecturers, mentor teachers, peers and themselves during their teaching practice at schools. For each of these main questions, they were also asked what worked well, what did not work well, and what they could

recommend. Interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes and were tape recorded. The data were thereafter appropriately categorised during analysis.

All necessary ethical measures were adhered to. Regarding trustworthiness, various tactics were used as ways to guard against biases. These included mechanically recording interviews and transcribing them verbatim, and using multiple researchers.

The findings are presented in the next section.

FINDINGS

Assessment by lecturers: Positive aspects

The student teachers, in general, were very positive about the assessments that were done by the Unisa lecturers. Amongst others, they commented positively about fairness and good marks that were given. One participant said: 'Unisa lecturers evaluate honestly because they are "outsiders" – they don't know you'. In the same vein, another participant attested to the fact that '... lecturers evaluated fairly and awarded good marks ... they are unbiased and objective'. This is in line with of the principles of REAL, namely, that authentic assessment should be fair.

Furthermore participants indicated that the lecturers supplied emotional support by recognising the efforts that student teachers put in, among others – this type of encouragement is underpinned by socio-constructivism. One participant said that lecturers 'actually write comments ... they comment on excellent work and they also recognise our efforts through constructive criticism or commentary, i.e. "good job!" or "I can see you tried"'. This kind of comment is indicative of the appreciation lecturers should show toward the student teachers' efforts – another characteristic of socio-constructivism.

The student teachers also indicated that their knowledge expanded in the sense that they understood how to improve their practices. For example, one said that the lecturers 'gave marks in such a way that the students knew in which areas they did well so that they understood in which sections they needed to improve'. Accordingly, another participant remarked that she now realised that she had to expand on her lesson theme by adding more learning content. This confirms the value of cooperative learning, where both parties contribute to the authentic learning-teaching situation. Student teachers had mixed reactions on how well the study material contributed towards the assessment process. Positive aspects that were mentioned include remarks such as a marking scale of one to five that worked very well. This was used by mentor teachers who, due to time constraints, could not write too much information.

Assessment by lecturers: Negative aspects

In contrast to the above, some participants indicated that apart from the one to five marking scale, the assessment section of the study material should provide more space for remarks. In the light of constructivist learning, it is important for student teachers to receive detailed feedback to enable them to construct knowledge efficiently. As mentioned, student teachers complained about this issue. One participant stated that ‘lecturers do not give enough comments – they mark the work, give a mark. I would really appreciate more feedback.’ Student teachers also stated that they did not get feedback after every lesson.

There were also complaints about the marks given. One participant complained that some lecturers ‘are negatively influenced by poor marks given by the mentor teacher, or there is a discrepancy between the lecturer’s mark and that of the teacher’. Another participant said: ‘The teacher gave me 70% for each lesson and then the lecturer gave me a mark of 50%. I would like to know how the lecturer came up with a 50 and not a higher mark’. Moreover, one participant stated that it was unsatisfactory to obtain a mark of three (on the five point assessment scale provided) and that she wanted a justification added on the mark that she obtained. She said: ‘I’d like to know what I can do to improve it, make it perfect’. This is supported by Mohono-Mahlatsi and Van Tonder (2006) who state that the assessors confuse student teachers by not being consistent in the allocation of marks.

With regard to the contribution of study material, some of the negative aspects that were mentioned include the following: The study material was dated in the sense that student teachers were still doing the same activities as students did 10 years ago, according to this participant’s mentor teacher. Another participant stressed that there were too many assessment activities in one specific workbook from a third year module. Another remark referred to the layout of assessment in the study material; the student teacher emphasised that the workbooks did not prepare them well for assessment because the layout did not make provision for enough space to carry out a high quality assessment.

Assessment by lecturers: Recommendations

Student teachers recommended the following to improve the Unisa assessment:

- Lecturers should consider the marks of mentor teachers since these teachers work more closely with student teachers on a daily basis. This is in line with assessment practices recommended by situated learning theory;
- More specific feedback should be provided and this should be given after each lesson. This will enable student teachers to improve their competencies.

Such systematic and corrective feedback on a regular basis also allows for the construction and application of knowledge in accordance with constructivist learning. This also enables student teachers to move from legitimate peripheral participation in the teaching situation to more central participation. Thus, this is an important recommendation;

- Positive and negative feedback should be given separately. The layout of the workbooks should allow for this.

Assessment by the mentor teacher: Positive aspects

Assessment by the mentor teachers was generally experienced very positively. The mentor teachers were mostly viewed as very supportive, honest, encouraging and fair. Student teachers declared that they gave important information on lesson preparation and presentation readily. Some of the remarks were the following: ‘You learn a lot because they [the teachers] have many years of experience and you can learn a lot if you are open to other opinions and ways of teaching’. The participant believed that this teacher’s constructive criticism aided her professional development. Another participant testified that the mentor teacher ‘easily spotted important mistakes and pointed out clearly what should be done. For example, that I should pay attention to my language use and expand my vocabulary’. This aspect points to authentic assessment practices that aid the construction of knowledge. In line with Wenger (1998), who refers to a negotiation of a joint enterprise and the development of a shared repertoire, one very young, inexperienced student teacher of 23 years narrated how she and her mentor teacher planned the lessons together and how this method contributed to her experiencing her mentor teacher as extremely supportive.

Assessment by the mentor teacher: Negative aspects

Unfair assessment was an issue mentioned by a number of student teachers. One participant reported that she experienced inter-cultural problems and difficulties. She felt she was being discriminated against and stated: ‘It appeared that she [the mentor teacher] did not like me and gave me low marks’. Another participant blamed the mentor teacher of unfair assessment. She remarked that sometimes teachers were experienced as harsh and did not consider the fact that the student teachers were still learning and therefore inexperienced. If such a teacher would give a poor mark, this would influence Unisa lecturers negatively to also award a poor mark. Another participant confirmed this and believed that the mentor teacher did not evaluate her fairly. She was very disappointed with the mark given. Even though she put in a lot of effort and the learners enjoyed her lesson, the teacher was only willing to award her 50 per cent. The issue of unfair

assessment was also mentioned by another participant who stated that if she obtained a relatively low mark in the beginning, the marks that followed were also poor, even though she tried her best to improve her lesson. This indicates the importance of dialogue during assessment, as pointed out in the conceptual framework of the study.

With regard to the contribution of the study material towards assessment, one participant stated that the workbook layout was not in a format that teachers regularly and easily used at school. She stated that the older teachers at the school were set in their ways on how they wanted lessons to be presented. In consideration of the theoretical framework, the above shows not enough variety in assessment techniques, such as peer and self-assessment.

Assessment by the mentor teacher: Recommendations

To improve assessment by mentor teachers, participants recommended that the following:

- Student teachers should be given assessment reports by mentor teachers at the end of teaching practice in order to be able to assess their own development and to indicate both positive and negative aspects.
- Student teachers need to be provided with a justification for the marks that they obtained after each lesson. This would help them to construct knowledge.
- Student teachers should be provided with letters of reference from mentor teachers after having completed their teaching practice at a school.
- The layout of the Unisa workbook of lesson plans that the student teachers must complete, should be similar to that which is being used by mentor teachers in the various schools.

Peer and self-assessment: Positive aspects

In general, student teachers did not experience peer assessment because the Unisa students are widely distributed across the country and some schools may have only one student teacher at a time. However, the one participant who experienced peer assessment commented positively on it. She stated that it helped her to solve her problems. Peer assessment also determined whether she was on the same standard as the other student teachers. This is in line with the theoretical framework of constructivism that recommends peer assessment strategies – multiple scorers are also recommended by REAL.

Regarding self-assessment, most of the participants commented positively on self-assessment as required by some of the workbooks. Reasons mentioned included the fact that this required student teachers to reflect on their practices. Student teachers were able to identify aspects of their teaching that they could improve. It also enabled them to recognise those activities that they presented to learners during their lessons which did not work very well. Both REAL (Grabinger and Dunlap 1996) and situated learning (Lave and Wenger 1991) support the above as it enables student teachers to take ownership of their learning and become partners in the teaching-learning process while practicing peer and self-assessment.

Peer and self-assessment: Negative aspects

Participants pointed out that often there was not enough space provided in the student teacher workbooks for peer and self-assessment. One participant also observed that she could not see the use of self-assessment. Reasons for this included the following: student teachers did not receive any guidelines or criteria on how to assess themselves; individuals were not objective about themselves and therefore self-assessment was not valid; and it was also a very time-consuming exercise.

Another participant's answer indicated a lack of emotional strength to recognise and report on her own weaknesses. She stated the following:

You cannot always say any negative things about yourself because you feel positive about what you have done. Students are not necessarily honest in their self-assessments. They sometimes lack the courage to give themselves good marks and fear that this would make them seem overconfident.

In consideration of the theoretical framework, the above indicates a lack of understanding of the usefulness of reflective practice for efficient learning.

Peer and self-assessment: Recommendations

Participants recommended the following:

- Peers should attend lessons and provide additional assessment on that of lecturers and teachers.
- Workbooks should make provision for peer assessment if peers are available at schools during teaching practice.
- Peer and self-assessment criteria or guidelines should be provided.
- A general report could include peer and self-assessment views on the quality of the lessons that were conducted by a student teacher; the nature of the class

discipline; and what could be changed about the content and presentation of lessons.

CONCLUSIONS

A fundamental point of departure was the challenge facing ODL, namely, that all role players in the school practice system should make a concerted effort to support the assessment process of the student teacher during teaching practice. In this research the authors analysed one of the basic principals in teacher training programmes, namely, how assessment contributes towards constructive teaching and learning during the teaching practice period at schools. The main object was to investigate various aspects of assessment of the current model of student teachers teaching practice at an ODL institution and to make recommendations for the improvement thereof.

With the above in mind and in line with constructivist learning and situated learning theories, assessment should be student centred and embedded in performance based activities. Assessment should never be an add-on. The findings of the research suggests that lecturers should carefully reflect on: (i) formulating statements of intended learning outcomes; (ii) developing or selecting assessment measures; (iii) creating relevant experiences leading to the desired outcomes; and (iv) discussing and using assessment results to improve learning. Performance based activities need to address the totality of student teachers' learning experiences. It is vital to assess student teachers in a variety of situations and by means of a variety of assessment methods.

A limitation of the research is the fact that the sample selection included only female student teachers from Gauteng doing the B.Ed. ECD and Foundation Phase degree. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalised. However, the research succeeded in determining a number of ways in which assessment in ODL still needs to be improved. These include

- more systematic and corrective feedback after each lesson to enable student teachers to improve their competencies;
- justification for marks student teachers obtained after lessons;
- an indication of both positive and negative aspects of student teachers' teaching practice;
- more space in workbooks for peer and self-assessment with clear instructions and assessment criteria.

What many lecturers in ODL and mentor teachers in schools seem to be missing is to develop a deep understanding of what student teachers know and how the construction of their knowledge during teaching practice may be synchronised. This research also identified the need for further investigation of how peer and self-assessment strategies for teaching practice can be improved.

The way forward will be to focus on the abovementioned aspects in follow-up research projects with special reference to ODL institutions.

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