

Entrance of Prospective Teachers to Initial Teacher Education and Stereotypes Around the Teaching Profession: Experiences From Eritrea

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Abstract

The inquiry framed into an action research strategy was initiated in the College of Education (CoE) at the Eritrea Institute of Technology, a major Initial Teacher Education (ITE) center in the country. The paper tried to answer the question: How do prospective-teachers happen to attend in the CoE? The paper also sheds light on the prevailing stereotypes around the teaching profession. The methodological and analytical framework of the research lies in the premise of teaching as a reflective practice. Qualitative data were gathered through focus group discussions (FGD) and in-depth interviews involving 126 participants comprising the leadership, educators and students of the college in the academic year 2012/2013. The FGDs and interviews were audio and video recorded, transcribed and thematically analyzed. The findings reveal that learning process in the CoE is influenced by a myriad of systemic, institutional and attitudinal issues that intersect and further complicate the already problematic nature of teaching. The nature of the admission of the prospective teachers to the CoE and the stereotyped public views toward the CoE vis-à-vis the teaching profession are among the major stumbling block that affect the classroom practice at the college and beyond. As part of the researchers' commitment to follow a collaborative action research cycle, the findings were shared with educators and learner-teachers in ITE institutions. Areas of intervention were identified and the college is engaged in a number of collaborative activities involving its staff, local and international partners in ensuring the provision of quality teacher education in the country.

Keywords: admission process, teaching profession, stereotypes, collaborative action research

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Background

The poor cycles of learning prevalent in much of the developing world is contributing to the creation and perpetuation of social inequality (Akyeampong et al., 2013; Cremin and Nakabugo, 2012). UNESCO's (2004) quality imperative in education called for paying a due attention to the processes of learning in classrooms that happen to be dominated with rote learning (Abd-Kadir and Hardman, 2007) with minimal impact on learners' day-to-day learning and living. The role of ITE programs has been the focus of education scholars in trying to reverse such trends. Much of the outcomes of such interventions, however, have been questioned by academics as being prescriptive and lacking sensitivity to contexts of the teaching process and teachers. Action oriented, participatory methods of inquiry seem to be gaining momentum as both a qualitative and situated nature of teaching processes and capacity development of local educators is needed (Barrett, 2011a; Fean, 2012) to understand and impact the necessary change in a localized manner.

This action research initiative was undertaken in light of such developments in the field of teaching and teacher development. It was initiated in the College of Education (CoE) in the Eritrea Institute of Technology (EIT) by concerned educator researchers who happened to encounter multiple challenges in classroom practice. The educator researchers had difficulty handling big class sizes, unmotivated student teachers and took the challenge of *understanding their roles in such contexts*. An action research was sought to explore alternative actions to make learning in such class contexts meaningful. The researchers shared these concerns in the form of a workshop to colleagues and learners at the college. In the workshop, the dean of the college, local and expatriate educators and learners from many departments participated. The workshop enriched educator researchers' approach to situate the challenge into broader issues and debates on learner centered pedagogy, the significance of initial teacher education (ITE), and educational quality. Following the workshop discussions, the educator researchers learned that the issue of managing class-sizes is multidimensional. The dynamics affecting learning is well beyond the classroom that needs further research to understand the prevalent teaching and learning situation in the CoE. The views generated following the workshop discussions also helped in shaping and elaborating the research questions.

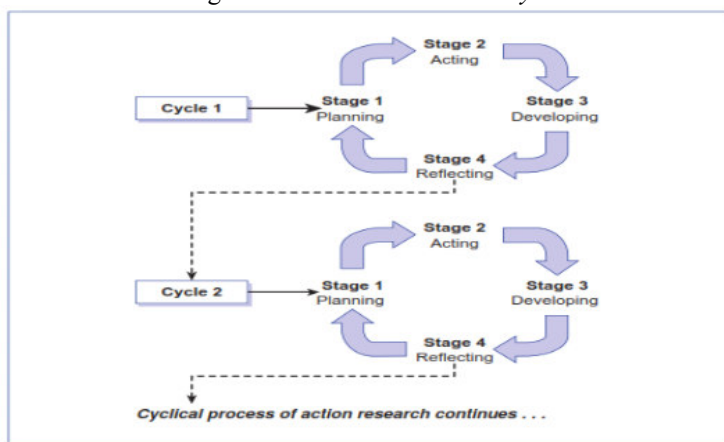
ITE has the most significant and lasting impact on the professional career of a teacher (Akyeampong et al., 2013), hence it is crucial for teacher educators to examine prevalent practices critically and work in collaborative research to give meaning to their practices. The purpose of this inquiry framed in action research strategy is to analyze the processes of learning in the CoE. The paper attempted to synthesize perspectives about learning to

teach and implementing meaningful interventions as a logical extension in the action research cycle to improve teaching practices. This collaborative action research had focused on exploring the quality teaching and learning at the CoE from the perspectives of the admission process of learners joining the college as prospective teachers. The paper tried to answer the question: How do learners happen to attend in the CoE? The paper also sheds light on the prevailing stereotypes around the teaching profession. In addition, it attempts to understand implications for educating prospective teachers in the context of the study, the CoE. Because the quality of teaching teachers at the CoE centers has a multiplier effect in the schools system and other sectors too.

Methodology

The action research cycle shown in Figure 3 illustrates cyclical and evolving nature of action research through the process of action and reflection. It also illustrates that the final phase of the cycle is the beginning of the cycle of research. The findings of carefully monitored action feed into further action. The spirally evolving nature of action research strategy fits this research’s framework in trying to understand the nature of learning to teach in ITE.

Figure 1: *The action research cycle*



Source: Adapted from Mertler (2013)

This further facilitated participation and building up towards collaboration in understanding and addressing the complicated processes of learning in the CoE. Focus group discussions (FGDs) with learner teachers and educators and in-depth interviews with the college leadership were the main means of data collection as ‘it is from the *interaction* of the group that data emerge’ (Cohen et al., 2007: 376, emphasis in original). These data collection techniques were found appropriate as this research sought to ‘empower participants to speak out in their own words and ... providing greater coverage of issues that would be possible in a survey’ (Cohen et al., 2007: 377). During the FGDs, interviews, workshop discussions, personal involvements as educators, sharing views with colleague educators and engaging themselves in further readings, the researchers learned the interconnectedness and deeply qualitative nature of issues involved in the learning process in the CoE.

Participants: The research involved 126 participants comprising of students, faculty members and the leadership of the CoE. Degree and diploma programs from almost all departments and year of study, junior and senior educators and the leadership of the college took part in this research. The tables below display the general profile of the (learner teacher) participants in focus group discussions (FGDs). It is interestingly crucial to note that participant learners come from diverse educational and work experience. More than 20 learner participants had years of teaching experience in schools, including experienced school directors and supervisors. More than 10 learner participants who came from the Ministry of Defense (MoD) also had a teaching experience in their military experience through teaching comrades that were learning in lower grades. The FGDs conducted with such groups truly enriched the findings of this research as it enabled to articulate the process of teaching and learning in the CoE vis-à-vis the challenge of teaching in the real contexts.

Table1. Diploma program learners clustered by area and year of study

Area and year of study	Sex		Age range	Total
	M	F		
Educational Administration II	8	-	31-56	8
Science education II	7	2	20-47	9
Social science education II	5	1	22-38	6
Physical education II	8	-	21-24	8
Total No. of participants	28	3	20-56	31

Learner teachers, prospective school managers and counselors also provided a rich understanding about

their experience and expectations in the CoE. A total of 16 FGDs were conducted with learner teachers and faculty members. However, it must be noted that all the college community were directly or indirectly involved through formal workshops conducted in the college for this research purpose and informal collegial interactions with the researchers. After all, the action research was dealing with issues of equal concern for all the college community and entails the input of all to change the situation at institutional level.

Table 2: Degree program clustered by area and year of study

Area and year of study	Sex		Age range	Total
	M	F		
Educational administration III	6	2	21-57	8
Educational administration IV	2	4	21-29	6
Educational administration III	6	1	39-51	7
English language teaching II	8	1	25-41	9
Geography education II	8	-	31-44	8
Educational Psychology II	2	4	20-22	6
Educational Psychology III	6	2	21-33	8
Educational Psychology IV	2	4	22-25	6
Science education II	9	2	21-35	11
Total no. of participants	49	20	20-57	69

All in all, 16 FGDs were administered, out of which 3 were conducted with the faculty members namely, local educators, expatriate educators and graduate assistants with 6, 6 and 7 FGD participants respectively. Individual in-depth interviews were conducted with the Heads of Departments, the Dean of the CoE and the Vice President of EIT.

Sampling and data collection procedures: The researchers sought a discussion in which ‘participants have something to say and feel comfortable enough to say it’ (Cohen et al., 2007:377). The researchers sampled learner participants through their respective colleague educators. A key criterion in the sampling focus groups was that the ‘group has homogeneity of background in the required area’ (Cohen et al., 2007: 377) thereby enabling a true focus on issues. Putting this into account, participants in the FGDs of this study were organized by their respective departments and year of study. The nature of participants in the groups was also a crucial sampling criterion in the focus groups. Such arrangement facilitated the discussion of multiple issues pertinent to a particular group. Sampling the number of participants in each group was also designed in such a way that participants were not too many to meaningfully interact and discuss issues and they were not too few compromising the richness of the data. The FGD participant members therefore ranged between 6 & 11. The researchers also put the diversity of participants into account by sex, age and background experience - the nature of sampling was purposive to accommodate the desired diversity.

The FGD sessions were conducted in such a way that they had minimal disruptions to participants’ routine class attendance and course assignments. Many group discussions were conducted after 6 p.m. when learner participants had minimal commitments. After brief introduction about the purpose of the study by researchers, participants displayed a very high willingness to share, discuss and debate their views. The fact that the discussions were held in a local language (Tigrinya) in which the majority of the discussants and the researchers were proficient in communicating with deepened quality of the data. Participants easily and unreservedly communicated, discussed and debated issues. All the FGDs and in-depth interviews were audio and video recorded for transcriptions, further reflection and analysis during the writing up of this research report.

The FGDs and in-depth interviews period lasted for over five months in the CoE. The prolongation was due to the fact that the researchers were carrying out the research amidst teaching and related office duties in the CoE. This was to the benefit of this research as it enabled formal and informal reflections among the researchers and colleague educators on focusing and synthesizing the issues raised in this paper. The role of the researchers could be summed up as facilitators, guides, summarizers and raising issues and further probing for deeper understanding during group interactions. The researchers as full time educators working in the CoE (insiders) both facilitated in establishing the rapport with participants and maintaining focus of the issues raised during data collection sessions. By maintaining focus of issues raised, the researchers reiterated to participants ‘the vision of action research as a cyclical process with the quest for perpetual development built into the idea of professionalism... in which the aim is to improve practice through a rolling program of research’ (Descombe, 2007: 124).

The outcomes of the research were also presented to the staff and learners in the CoE and another ITE institute in Eritrea. The presentation was a planned action that sought to highlight the processes of teaching and learning in the CoE and to further facilitate a shared understanding about the nature of the challenge of learning to teach in the CoE with learners, educators and other staff members from the EIT.

Organization and data analysis: Though the researchers were at the forefront of initiating and managing the

research process in a collaborative manner with a strong backing of a ‘critical friend’¹; the high willingness and zeal displayed by participants was the strength and inspiration of this research. Moreover, workshops conducted in the beginning and at the end of the research outcomes greatly complemented the analysis of this research. Workshop participants sharpened the research questions and enabled the appreciation of the nuances of the issues in the CoE as an ITE center.

Transcriptions of all FGDs and in-depth interviews were done by both the researchers separately ensuring the rigor of data analysis. Transcriptions were then combined and coded into themes. The themes were then analyzed by referring into relevant international literatures and national documents. The analysis of the findings followed an ethnographic approach.

Findings

The initial motivation of improving learning in the context of large class sizes in the CoE led the researchers to explore wider and deeper issues that directly influence class interactions. It becomes imperative that one has to question how the background of learner-teachers fosters or hampers meaningful interactions in classrooms and beyond. Figure 2 tries to illustrate such key issues of the research findings. Issues in the admission process directly affected the motivation of learner-teachers in classrooms. This, partly, affected the views on the nature of classroom processes of both learner-teachers and educators.

In the country, there is a relatively better access² to institutes of higher learning and post-secondary vocational schools. However, the processes and nature of enrollment and learning in these institutes of learning have hardly been addressed through research. The findings of this research indicate that the processes of admission greatly influenced the quality of classroom interactions in the CoE. To zoom in and discuss how the general process of admissions to Institutes of Higher Education (IHE) in the country affect the selection process to the CoE, the National Commission for Higher Education (NCHE) admission guidelines are used as frames for analysis.

Learners’ Grade Point Average (GPA): Generally, learners are assigned as per their grades rather than their interest. Top scorers overwhelmingly join medical and engineering fields even if their inclinations are different. According to some of the research participants, this practice at times contradicts with the psychometric tests learners used to undergo³ before they join the colleges. One participant shared his experience about these tests and explained that though his inclinations were shown to be in medicine, he ended up in the CoE ‘because of the policy of grades.’

Learner participants were also critical about the ‘positive discrimination’ for girls⁴ in the admission process as having unintended consequences. As many female candidates are observed to consciously limit their standards to the minimum requirement, the intended empowerment of women through lowering GPA for admission may indirectly limit female candidates’ ambitions and capabilities.

Subject inclinations: Subject inclinations are used as a proxy to assess candidates’ placement in a particular field. For example, a candidate’s Eritrean Secondary Education Certificate Examination (ESECE) results in physics or mathematics (inclination subjects) is used to predict the candidate’s placement in the field of engineering, provided s/he has the required, ‘competitive’, GPA. Likewise, a candidate’s GPA in geography or history is referred to decide his/her admission to social science fields. ‘The grades earned in the subject inclinations are used to modify the GPA and the MGPA⁵ is used to place learners in programs competitively’ (NCHE: 6); the main criteria in admitting a candidate being his/her GPA.

Alignment of procedures: One of the major issues discussed by learner participants was the discrepancy of admission procedures observed before and after joining the IHE. There were more than 10 fields of choice (in the social science and science streams) and learners are advised to choose fields as per their interest and inclination though the GPA is the deciding factor. But many instances of fluctuations happen after the first year in the IHE from the original choice and orientations. Apart from grades, which supposedly determine one’s fate in the admission process, there seem to be other complications within the IHE procedures. A second year educational psychology FGD participant explained how they were first denied admission to the department after they were ‘misplaced’ with science stream learners. Such instances call for a much more enhanced alignment of admission procedures among the national examination bodies and the IHE.

Nature of orientation: Another, seemingly pressing issue, has to do with the nature of the orientations about the departments in IHE give to candidates. Each department from the IHE offers an orientation to the potential candidates after the matriculation exams to familiarize them with the departments and let them know the possible

¹A crucial tip in conducting action research is having a ‘critical friend’, someone who can help you focus without giving you answers of his/her own.

²After 2004, with the expansion of institutes of higher education (IHE) throughout the country access to IHE generally increased

³ This practice has stopped during the period of the study

⁴1.80 GPA minimum requirement for admission in a degree program

⁵Modified Grade Point Average

options. Orientations about colleges/departments and admission criteria are given before learners join the IHE by respective college deans. This practice seems inadequate in properly orienting learners about IHE for two reasons: first, the orientation sessions are brief and are given to a large population of learners at the same time. Many learner participants saw the orientation program as short and rushed. Before this orientations, many candidates had no clue about the nature of the colleges/departments they are about to choose. According to some participants, the orientations should have begun in the earlier year (s) of high school so that learners get better prepared for their field of choice. Second, information about colleges is crammed in a limited period of time with no prior preparation or orientation. In retrospect, participants assess the quality of the orientations given before joining the CoE as being insufficient and at times misleading. In-depth information on the nature of the departments was not given as many learner participants saw a mismatch between expectations and the reality of the departments.

Available vacancies: vacancies are determined by the departments in respective IHE for every academic year. However, it does not mean departments will get the number of learners they have requested; usually the numbers are higher than requested. In the academic year of 2010/2011 for instance more quotas were available in Science Education and Mathematics Education Diploma programs, and many learners which may have been admitted in their field of choice were 'made' to join the CoE to fill the quotas. This instance indicates that departments' vacancies for each year were not as transparent for learners from the beginning of the process of admission.

Learner's choice: This is the last criteria in deciding the candidate's field of study, though many participants saw it should have been the main criteria, instead of GPA. Allocating learners overlooking their choice has immediate and far reaching consequences. Learners' academic failures like dismissals and dropouts are partly attributed to this process of admissions and this problem is starkly visible in the CoE. When the candidates somehow graduate for service they may not be as motivated as graduates who have chosen to study in a particular field of study.

Generally, interest of learners who are getting enrolled in IHE should have been emphasized as a criterion for admission. The current practice is that low performing learners or learners who are failing to compete in other streams (as low as GPA of 1.2 -1.6¹) are joining the CoE to learn to teach the next generation. This could be attributed to the current low status of the teaching profession and of teachers. The other contributing factor, which is equally significant, is failure in recognizing one's inclination in early stages (e.g. in high school). Often, learners tend to 'go with the flow' during the hectic period of exams and the early college years. It seems that institutionalizing the identification of candidates' areas of interest in early grades is a vital pre-requisite in allocating learners to IHE.

Admissions to the CoE - 'We will all be teachers anyway': Though graduates from almost all fields including engineering and accounting are currently being assigned as teachers in high schools, for reasons beyond the scope of this research, students do not choose teaching as a career. According to most FGD participants, the CoE is 'the least preferred college; it is like a dumping site' for students with less academic performance. Such comments were reiterated in the discussions with participants on how learners end up in the CoE. Generally, candidates systematically tend to choose fields that are potentially 'non-teaching'. In all the FGDs and in-depth interviews with learners and educators, there seems to be consensus that (voluntarily) choosing fields² in the CoE is not 'practical'. In addition, despite the huge demand of professional input to the educational system, learners who get enrolled in the departments of educational administration and educational psychology seem to expect a high probability of serving as regular teachers in light of the high demand of teachers in schools throughout the country.

The fact that the CoE is receiving least performing learners is fueling a bad attitude in the society and among all the learners about education in general and the teaching profession in particular. A prospective teacher is frequently seen as someone who failed to compete or cope in other professions. If the CoE is vested with an authority of educating teachers who will be responsible for producing effective citizens and other professionals, why is there not a fairly proportional placement of learners with excellent performance? A participant from the department of English language teaching explains:

Almost all of us did not put CoE as our first choice for obvious reasons. The reality is no one wants to be a teacher. The current condition is not favorable for the teaching profession. My wish is just to have a college experience and improve my English. I am not eager to learn teaching skills. In my teaching practice experience³ I knew how demanding the job is. I knew I will totally be immersed in the profession where I will not have time for other jobs to survive, and the teaching profession does not guarantee any security in the society nowadays. (FGD participant)

¹On a 4 points scale

²The departments of educational administration and psychology may be exceptions for many learners tend choose them.

³This group was advanced standing enrolled in Degree program; previously they completed their Diploma program and had a teaching practice experience.

The uniquely demanding nature of the teaching profession is not preferred for apparently realistic reasons: the professional identity seems not to be respected on the ground and it is not materially rewarding even to sustain one's basic living. Probably both factors are fueling each other in stigmatizing the teaching profession in the society, the learners and the faculty within the IHE.

Stereotyping the College of Education: The findings in this study indicate that stigmatizing the field of education in general and teaching in particular is not only from the outside (in the society); it is also from the inside. Among other fields in the IHE, the field of education is frequently being associated with low standard of learning. This is another disincentive for high performing and competent candidates, as one learner participant stated *'why would a high scoring candidate study with learners who have below 2.00 GPA' on a 4 points scale.* Learners with such poor academic performance are further demoralized as they are placed in the stereotypically infamous CoE. This could be enough disincentives even for learners who have interest in teaching. The common style of teaching in the CoE which is more of formalistic learning does not help in attracting promising candidates. Moreover, the practice of placing transfer learners who were dismissed from other fields to the CoE is demeaning the value of college and of teaching. On the performance of diploma learner-teachers in the academic year of 2012/2013, an adult¹ participant comments:

I have a reservation on the qualification of our group as potential teachers. Example; many learner-teachers are not confident to come out and talk in front of the audience. There are some learners who speak English well (may be because they attended private schools). But generally, our group is not articulate, they can't express their point and feelings well. (FGD participant)

Another experienced teacher from the advanced standing batch with years of experience in teaching² observed that the academic performance of many young learner-teachers who graduated from secondary school tends to decline. 'I meet some learner- teachers whom I taught at junior level, they used to be bright... I think their performance declined in their secondary school experience, now I see them weak and uncompetitive academically' (FGD participant).

The combination of admitting low performing learners and transfer learners³ from other fields seem to have exasperated the stereotypes on the CoE both within and outside the EIT. As a result, a prevalent stereotype concerning the role and effectiveness of the CoE is not helping in attracting competent candidates. The explicit favoritism for natural sciences and engineering fields among educators and authorities of faculties within the IHE could be a 'hidden curriculum' that facilitates candidates' aversion to the CoE as top scoring candidates consistently and overwhelmingly join the fields of other sciences and engineering. A participant's comment on this issue raises a simple question whose answers could partly be explained in relation to some external dynamics like socioeconomic situations and globalization:

Generally the CoE is "the last stop of a bus ride. There is a negative bias on teaching and teacher education. One should ask why people are evading education fields, though its contribution in the society is admittedly immense. (FGD participant).

The housing of the CoE within an institute of technology that presupposes excellence in natural sciences and technology somehow seems to affect the institutional capacity and attractiveness of the CoE. Indeed, participant educators and department heads associate the troubling issues in the admission process to the CoE as a direct result of the dependence of the college in many critical aspects, for example in its role in selecting its candidates. Moreover, the specialization of the institute in sciences and engineering affects the possibility of attracting potential promising candidates into the CoE. Participants were of the view that the CoE need to confront this by displaying leadership roles that live up to the importance of the college by establishing visionary recruitment and education programs and through practicing innovative research-based approaches of teaching.

Given the complex nature of educating potential teachers in a changing world (Ben-Peretz, 2001), prospective candidates to the CoE, in principle, need to be all rounded: having an excellent (academic) knowledge base and skillful in many other crucial aspects, e.g., in communication skills. Ben-Peretz (2001:51) further stated:

In addition to subject matter knowledge, pedagogic knowledge, and understanding of the broader social and cultural context, it is important to include in what we think of as knowledge for teaching the following: teachers' understanding and commitment to professional behavior, interpersonal and communication skills, and networking and team-working skills.

Alas, the fact that the CoE is receiving least performing learners is creating a bad attitude in the society and the learners. The attitude of the society is not welcoming for teaching and teacher education and the CoE as a result. 'It is a great challenge to educate and a paradox to expect a 'D' or 'F' scoring learner to teach an 'A' scoring learner in schools' (Participant). These contractions have to be explicit for stakeholders and the society

¹An experienced teacher who joined the CoE to improve qualification to Diploma level

²Some of their classmates in the CoE were their learners at junior level

³A number of students from other fields (Science and Engineering) who failed to perform well in their respective fields are transferred to the CoE, usually in the Diploma program

in a forceful manner.

Focus for action: Enrolling motivated and inspired candidates to teach is the square one of the long journey of teacher preparation at the CoE. The practice of admitting prospective teachers who frequently view the CoE as a ‘damping site’ seem to contradict with the aspirations of producing productive citizens both for the learner teachers now and their future learners in the schools. Education is about shaping future citizens and professionals. Teachers produce professionals like teachers, engineers, scientists and doctors, and such an image has to be properly reflected. The CoE tasked with this challenging and exciting duty needs to embark on strategic plan(s) on reforming its program and practice and on deciding the nature and quantity of its prospective learners. Hence, the findings of this research suggest the following areas of action regarding learner admissions:

- Low performing learners should NOT be admitted: the CoE should unequivocally and strongly object to the practice of admitting least competent learners. For example, the minimum required GPA should be stated as 2.00 points.
- Attracting competent candidates: The CoE needs to strive towards excellence in its practices enticing promising candidates.

Confronting the stereotype: The CoE also needs to address the unconstructive stereotype that seems to be misleading prospective candidates and other faculties. The field of teacher education and professional development can be appreciated if staff members in the CoE embark in research, team works and peer learning about the interdisciplinary nature of teacher quality, access, equity and social justice issues. These initiatives to mesmerize education and development for the benefit of societies must be aligned to the ideals of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and education and peace building, etc.

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