SCHOOL-VISIT BY PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS: AN INSIDER VIEW ON STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES AND STAFF'S PERCEPTIONS

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ABSTRACT

In this article we describe and interpret students' experiences and staff's perceptions of a school-visit project for pre-service teachers. Our developmental intention was to ascertain the worth of the intervention with a view to improve practice. As coordinators of the project, we were well placed to undertake a close-up study by giving a strong role to both fourth-year students and lecturers as evaluators of the teaching and learning context created by the intervention. Drawing on Paulo Freire's conception of naïve consciousness, we explore the gap between students' experiences and staff's perceptions. Using illuminative evaluation, we provide evidence to substantiate, on the one hand, that the students were stimulated to become socially concerned, albeit not critically, by means of a once-off experience of unequal schooling contexts during their first year. Academic staff, on the other hand, indicated merely an awareness of what needs to be done to integrate the students' initial experiences, but they could not produce any examples to show that they had drawn on the project to reinforce these experiences through their classroom pedagogies. We conclude the article by highlighting critical dialogue as a prerequisite for curricular reform.

Keywords: critical transitivity, curricular innovation, critical dialogue, drawing as research methodology, illuminative evaluation, pre-service teachers

INTRODUCTION

All teacher education programmes in South Africa are required to incorporate situational and contextual elements so as to "assist teachers in developing competences that enable them to deal with diversity and transformation" (DHET 2015, Section 2.4). As part of their education, pre-service teachers thus have to learn to apply knowledge in real-life contexts. South African learning contexts cannot, however, be divorced from a reality in which the learners' world of

learning and living remains tainted by the social construction of unequal hierarchies. The grave legacy of apartheid and concomitant racial and structural oppression continue to constitute the learning contexts of pre-service teachers' future classrooms (Spaull 2012). Diverse schooling backgrounds, ranging from prestigious private schools, to middle-class public schools, to under-resourced and underperforming schools continue to inform their understanding of education. Capacitating pre-service teachers to deal with the transformative agenda of reducing injustices and increasing the well-being of all learners should therefore challenge disengagement from a reality of educational inequalities. Curricular interventions that make provision for authentic learning in spaces that unsettle the "naïve stage of transitive consciousness" (cf. Freire 2005, 14) with which many students enter teacher education programmes, provide such a challenge.

The aim of this article is to reflect on a curricular intervention aimed at setting students' transition from a naïve consciousness to a critical consciousness into motion. Framed within the context of curricular reform, we first unpack the scope and content of the intervention project, whereupon we draw on Freire's conception of conscientisation to make sense of the students' experiences of the project. In the second part of the article we consider teacher educators' willingness to integrate the intervention within their individual classroom pedagogies. Impressions of what might constitute improved practice, as they emerged from staff members' pictorial and verbal representation of the project, serve to conclude the article.

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

Various external influences urge institutions of higher education in South Africa to review their curricula (Oliver 2011; DHET 2015). Within the context of teacher education, the Department of Higher Education and Training (2015, Section 2.4) requires "all teacher education programmes to address the critical challenges facing education in South Africa today". One of the *prima facie* justifications for this requirement is that South Africa's school curriculum structure was adopted during the colonial period, almost a century ago. Despite major changes that have occurred since then, social and economic conditions have remained largely unchanged (CHE 2013, 15). Driven by imperatives such as these, the University of the Free State's (UFS) Faculty of Education embarked on a comprehensive curricular review in 2011. A powerful transformative agenda was adopted, departing substantially from the existing curriculum in its philosophical underpinnings, rationale and model for initial teacher education. Informed by a vision to "visibly contribute to the social transformation of the broader society [by enabling] access in ways that overcome the barriers posed by social inequality" (UFS 2011), the building of socially relevant knowledge became both a faculty policy and a pedagogical position.

At the start of the curricular revision process, a pilot project was launched, including a one-day school-visit by pre-service teachers during the second semester of their first academic year. Premised on the understanding that progressive education is aimed at "[taking] part in correcting unfair privilege and unfair deprivation" (Dewey 1944, 119), the project had a dual purpose. First, students would be exposed to disparities in the South African schooling environment. Prompted by students' tendency to do practical teaching at schools similar to their own schooling experience, the intervention was conceptualised to challenge pre-service teachers' pre-conceived ideas of the teaching profession. Students would be able to see how structural inequalities render conditions and opportunities to learn unequal, and to establish, by implication and perhaps unconsciously so, a link between teacher identity and the real world of work. Secondly, the project presented teacher educators with a pedagogical opportunity to promote a move towards individual and social transformation.

As insiders participating in the conceptualisation and operationalisation of the project, we felt the need to reflect on the project's influence on students' learning after a four-year lapse in time, as well as on the curricular reform process in the Faculty's wider teaching and learning milieu. In the former case, our reflection was prompted by a concern that students may have experienced the school-visit project as a once-off occurrence with no long-term consequences. Given that the project was intended to be part of a journey towards self-development and attitudinal change, we were curious to know whether the influence of the intervention could still be traced in their fourth year of study. Related to staff's participation in the project, we were mindful that interventions aimed at the facilitation of curricular renewal could easily become hollow structures if lecturers were not willing to challenge their traditional ways of teaching by putting new and alternative teaching approaches to the test (Harden and Crosby 2000). We contemplated the possibility that teacher educators might not be capitalising on the project to infuse their own classroom practices with values that address and challenge unfair privilege and oppression. We subsequently aimed to provide a multi-perspectival view by comparing the feedback derived from both senior students and staff.

RESEARCH APPROACH: ILLUMINATION RATHER THAN MEASUREMENT

Monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of curricular innovation are recognised as two of the key responsibilities of academics, forming an integral part of the educational process (Harden and Crosby 2000). As action researchers who were involved in the project from the start, we aligned ourselves with the conventions of action research as a systematic study of attempts to improve educational practice by means of practical actions. Such improved practices, according to Costello (2003), should be coupled with reflection on the effects of those

actions.

Our investigation diverged from an objectivist view of evaluation where the concern is measurement, prediction and managerial decisions about the future of an evaluated programme. Instead, we adhered to the conventions of illuminative evaluation as explained by Van Rensburg (2007, 2). An illuminative investigation, allows one to study a social environment from different angles in order to bring clarity on a variety of aspects concerning the practice milieu, including interrelationships, reciprocal influences, value issues and communication gaps. Illuminative evaluation is credited for revealing the difference between espoused ideals and actual practices. By sharing the viewpoints of various participants among themselves, and presenting a consensus of meaning to a wider community, the illuminative evaluator provides a comprehensive understanding of the complex reality surrounding a project in which he or she is a participant (Van Rensburg 2007).

Arguing from this methodological position, we adopted an emic approach (Jones, Torres and Arminio 2006) to describe, interpret and understand the complex relationship between the theoretical intent and the structure, as well as the practical context of the project. Bearing in mind that information gathered for the purpose of illumination needs to transcend the question "how effective was it?", we were guided by the following questions:

- What pedagogical assumptions informed the project?
- What teaching arrangements supported the project?
- Did we, according to the students, achieve our instructional intentions?
- In the staff's opinion, did the implementation of the project meet the intended project goal?
- What might constitute improvement?

As inside observers, we had to guard against the influence of our personal experiences and presumptions on our observations by balancing our understanding of the setting with our description thereof (cf. Xu and Storr 2012). Our decision to use both students and staff as data sources rested on the assumption that the two sets of data, subjected to different methods of analysis, would enable us to explore the project from different angles. This would not necessarily make the research more trustworthy, but would open up more complex and in-depth understanding of the project's worth.

PEDAGOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS INFORMING THE PROJECT

Because the project was aimed at unsettling the naïve perceptions with which many students enter teacher education programmes, Paulo Freire's (2005) notion of critical transitive consciousness informed its conceptualisation. According to Freire (2005), critical transitivity not only rejects passive positions and the transference of responsibility, but stands in direct contrast to silence and inaction. To become transitive, means to extend one's interests and concerns beyond the self, and to engage in dialogue with others and with the world. Critical transitivity implies an increase in the capacity to make choices, the ability to reject the prescriptions of others, and the acceptance of a legitimately democratic mentality that corresponds with "highly permeable, interrogative, restless and dialogical forms of life" (Freire 2005, 14; 15–16). Central to the notion of becoming transitive, is conscientisation as a process of developing the awakening of consciousness, namely to obtain the power to transform reality through critical dialogue (Nyirenda 1996; also Taylor 1993).

Critical transitivity does not occur naturally; it presupposes an evolutionary process from naïve transitive consciousness toward critical transitivity. In this regard, Freire (2005, 14) identifies naïve transitivity as a state of consciousness characterised *inter alia* by oversimplifying problems, by a lack of interest in investigation and a strong emotional style. To move from naïve transitivity to critical consciousness entails a transition from a state in which one is disengaged from reality and where one reacts emotionally rather than rationally to a democratic mentality that rejects a passive attitude towards social life (Freire 2005; Nyirenda 1996). This process of conscientisation is not a once-off uncovering of social reality, but an ongoing process characterised by the power to transform reality (Taylor 1993, 53; 61).

Framed within Freire's conception of critical transitive consciousness, the project was premised on two assumptions. Firstly, it was assumed that due to the persistence of structural inequalities and diverse schooling experiences, *all* pre-service teachers could benefit from the process of conscientisation. The contention was that if students are not moved from their varying levels of consciousness to a critical consciousness in the Freirean sense, they might oversimplify the problems of inequality in education, or even worse, disengage themselves from such problems. In the South African context, a critical consciousness would in the first instance entail an understanding that the legacy of apartheid continues to shape, and account for the performance of school children; that the hiatus between the performance of rich and white children and that of poor and black children "is a product of the country's history" (Soudien 2007, 183). However, conscientisation goes beyond a mere understanding of the *why* of education inequalities. Its inherent power to transform reality (cf. Taylor 1993) requires conscentisation to be coupled with critical dialogue whereby students search together for ways

to work against various forms of marginalisation. Thus, without conscientatisation the possibility of critical dialogue will diminish along with students' chances of becoming agents of change. In the second instance, we drew on the assumption that teacher educators have a pedagogical opportunity to create the transitional space in which students can move towards a critical consciousness. This could be achieved by initiating students "into practices that enable them to strive to overcome practices and forms of life that unreasonably constrain individual and collective self-development, self-expression and self-determination" (Kemmis 2011, 12).

TEACHING ARRANGEMENTS SUPPORTING THE PROJECT

In 2011, the then dean of the UFS Faculty of Education contracted a non-governmental organisation to conduct a workshop with the first-year students on the crucial role of teachers in inspiring young people to become responsible citizens. The stratified nature of the South African society not only positions students on different sides of historical and social divides, but continues to do so in school classrooms. Issues of discrimination and marginalisation on the basis of social identities such as race, gender and sexual orientation were foregrounded during the workshop. Drawing on the assumption that students' preconceived ideas about the teaching profession might be unsettled when they are confronted with real-life school environments, a one-day school-visit was organised to supplement the workshop.

A team of five academic staff members, including the authors, were assigned by the then dean to devise materials and established the logistic processes that would facilitate the implementation of the initiative. Instructional arrangements, involving all academic staff across disciplinary borders, consisted of various activities aimed at supporting students' experiential learning and sensitising staff to the involvement of the whole Faculty in curricular change. A presentation on reflection as a tool for learning followed directly after the workshop. Thereafter, 528 first-year students (315 white, 154 African, 57 Coloured and 2 Indian students) were divided into small groups for collaboration in what was anticipated to be a culturally and linguistically diverse setting. These groups were randomly allocated to schools ranging from well-resourced, urban schools to less privileged, township schools in the Mangaung metropolitan area. After the school-visit, students had to complete an individual reflective writing assignment and participate in small group discussions facilitated by academic staff.

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF PROJECT EFFICACY

In an attempt to illuminate the viewpoints of the first cohort who participated in the project, final-year students enrolled in the Intermediate and Further Education and Training phases of the BEd curriculum were invited to complete an online questionnaire on the Blackboard

learning management system. Although students enrolled for the Foundation phase and the Post-graduate Certificate in Education were included in the initial project, they were, due to time tabling arrangements and the cessation of studies respectively, excluded from the survey. A total of 101 students responded in an open-ended manner to three questions:

- What do you remember of the school-visit?
- Would you say that the school-visit had had any influence on your own thinking about the teaching profession, and on your perception of yourself as a future teacher?
- Do you think that the delivery of modules comprising the whole of your four-year curriculum capitalised on the school-visit experiences?

Informed consent was obtained by means of a fourth question requesting permission to use their responses anonymously. The responses of 98 students were analysed and coded with the use of the Neuman (2011) coding system. In the first phase of coding, the data were scanned and words and phrases highlighted to locate initial themes. Thereafter, three core themes namely (a) unsettling preconceived perceptions, (b) disorientation as an instigator of learning, and (c) curricular reinforcement of the school-visit, were collectively linked to the aim of the study. In the second phase of the analysis, the focus was on finding exemplary excerpts that would bring these themes to life.

Unsettling preconceived perceptions

One of the most striking aspects of the feedback relate to students' recollections of how the school-visit served as an "eye opener", for example

> "it [the school-visit] opened a world to me that I never knew existed. I was living with this idea that all school[s] were perfect and that I myself would never be exposed to any elements that were not 'ideal'." (S3).

> "it was an eye opener. Although I have never been aware of this, I think I have grown up in a bubble when it comes to exposure to poverty and other cultural groups. It was valuable to learn from this experience." (S55).

This eye opening experience not only foregrounds the naïve consciousness with which many students enter teacher education programmes, but underscores how the stratified nature of the South African society positions students on different sides of historical and social divides. Whilst human beings are *in* the world and in relationships *with* others, a naïve consciousness

alludes to a limited sphere of perception informed by a vague and uncommitted awareness of being *with* the world and *with* others (Freire 2000). The data revealed how some students were so oblivious of the extent to which their own educational experiences and opportunities were informed by privilege that they discovered a reality they "ha[d] never been aware of". It is due to being *in* a world of privilege and an uncommitted awareness of being *with* a world of social and economic inequalities that many students experienced a mismatch between their naïve expectations and what they actually experienced during the school-visit:

> "I remember that most of the students were hesitant when they heard we [were] visiting a school in the location [township], but when we got there and spent time at the school, they soon realised that even if a school is underprivileged, the principal as well as the teachers did their best to make learning possible." (S25).

The unsettling of some students' naïve perceptions of education was also accompanied by strong emotional responses, resonating notably with Freire's (2005, 14) characterisation of naïve consciousness as "a strongly emotional style". After four years, many students were still able to recall the intense feelings related to the school-visit and descriptors such as "shocked", "guilty", "scary" and "traumatising" were used to articulate their feelings. Emotions such as the following were prevalent in the feedback:

> "When I saw what was precisely going on at the school I visited, my eyes almost popped out. For me coming from a relative affluent school, it was shocking to see how many other schools function." (S24).

What cannot be dismissed is that in instances where students from disadvantaged schooling backgrounds encounter privileged environments, they too react emotionally. One student recalls visiting

> "a school that is situated in town which had everything from a good building and class, good and enough resources for the learners and the teachers that were there to assist with everything that one needed help of. It was a bit scary at first ...." (S27).

Disorientation as an instigator of learning

Responses to the question regarding the influence of the intervention on their own thinking of the teaching profession ranged from "to a certain extent", to "yes" and to "yes, most definitely". In particular, the agency of many teachers, despite their difficult circumstances, was perceived to be inspiring and as a confirmation of the type of teachers many of the students would like to be:

"It really opened my eyes for what is going on in our education system. There was one specific teacher who had to teach grade one to three Maths in one class, at the same time!! Yet, she was extremely positive ... It [was] then when I realised what type of teacher I would like to be." (S10).

Another student recalls the school-visit as

"that moment of truth whereby one had to really see how the daily activities of the school were handled. At that moment I knew I had made the right decision of becoming a teacher. I saw how dedicated the teachers were and enthusiastic about making a difference in those learners' lives." (S86).

The influence of the school-visit on the students' understanding of teaching affirmed Mezirow's (2000) assertion that a disorientating experience can be a powerful instigator of learning. This can be seen in a comment that teaching is about "more than just standing in front of the class"; that one needs to "have passion and be dedicated, to care for the learners as if they are one's family or children" (S27). Others reflected on the teacher's role "to give every learner an opportunity to perform to his fullest ability" (S84), thus to acknowledge that "every child has their own way of acquiring knowledge and own potential that needs to be exposed in the variety of ways" (S40). The following two quotes encapsulate how students had to rethink their own pre-conceived understanding of the teaching profession:

"I now know that some of the things that society attaches to teaching as a profession or the way in which my own teachers taught me was just a scrap in the deep ocean of the idea behind being an educator." (S40).

"I came to the University thinking that my duty as a teacher is to help learners to pass and that is where it ends, but after this workshop I realised that there is more to teaching than I thought." (S84).

From the many responses depicting an interplay between an awareness of a privileged past and future responsibility, it may be deduced that students buttressed in the comfort of privilege gained the most from this intervention. The following quote supports this point:

"It was interesting as a first year to be able to experience teaching and learning from the other side of the structure – not only seeing, as in school, my right to Education, but the huge responsibility placed on the shoulders of all educators to create an inclusive environment." (S90).

It cannot be assumed, however, that students who attended less privileged schools and are not naïve about their being *in* and *with* a society of inequalities did not learn from this intervention.

For some, the experience was a confirmation of what their future responsibility would entail:

> "My time at the workshop [school] did change my perception of becoming a teacher. ... I know about the social problems that my community is faced with. I want to help the youth of my community realize that the social problems that they are challenged with do not limit them to succeed in life. I believe young, passionate and well trained teachers can change their communities." (S61).

Among the many positive comments offered by the majority of respondents, only two comments suggest that the project was not beneficial. One student expressed difficulty with the language that was used. Another student's comment revealed an attitude that may be termed as denial of change and an unwillingness to confront own prejudices:

> "For me the [project] did not really have [any] benefit ... I understand that we must think about these topics, but in South Africa this idea will not work. Not even after 20 years of democracy, because nobody will want to change in the sense that you will give up your cultural identity, because you are what you are." (S14).

In general, the data revealed that the school-visit succeeded in unsettling many students' naïve understandings of what it means to teach in the SA context. As indicated, many students enter the teacher education programme with a consciousness that is not integrated in reality; a consciousness that superimposes itself on reality (cf. Freire 2005, 9). Responses indicating that the school-visit had opened a world that some students never were aware of, not only depict naïve consciousness, but underscore the view that naïve consciousness is a logical consequence of a society in which the legacy of apartheid continues to position students in accordance to a social construction of unequal hierarchies.

The unsettling of naïve understandings contributed to the awakening of a naïve transitivity. Referring to the potential of not simply being *in* the world, but also being *with* the world, naïve transitivity as the initial stage of transitive consciousness, signals the possibility of replacing disengagement from existence with engagement (Freire 2005, 14; Taylor 1993). This kind of awakening can be seen in comments such as: "I remember feeling out of my comfort zone" (S19); "[most of] us have been privileged to attend schools that are well resourced and had great facilities for us to prosper as students" (S79); "I was exposed to a new environment that I had not previously dealt with" (S40).

Curricular reinforcement of the school-visit experience

Related to the original intended outcome, namely that various components of the curriculum would build on the real-world school-visit experience, there was a perception among the

majority of students that sufficient learning experiences in the BEd curriculum had reinforced the growth and development resulting from the school-visit. Eighty-seven responses to this question were received of which 55 (63%) were positive, 31 (36%) were neutral and 15 (17%) respondents were outright negative.

The students were able to make a connection, albeit fairly broad, between the school-visit and the modules included in their teacher education programme. Comments included a range of references to modules that dealt with matters from the "culture in the school environment" (S17), to "diversity in schools, the multicultural education and inclusivity in education and schools" (S24), to how to "handle learners with learning barriers" (S15); and "how we can use different perspectives and learning theories to approach learning" (S21). Whilst many students listed specific module codes as examples of modules that have a connection with the school-visit, these varied extensively. It was concluded that such a connection was of the students' own doing rather than the consequence of a clear connection informed by a curriculum in which modules meaningfully cohere in addressing "the critical challenges facing education in South Africa today" (DHET 2015, Section 2.4). This lack of coherence is supported by students who were not convinced by such a connection and could not see the relevance thereof for their work as future teachers. Two comments illustrate the point:

> "No – there was elements covered, but no clear links were drawn." (S97).

> "I do not think the modules or training took what we saw and experienced [during the school-visit] into account. Therefore I also think that my training did not prepare me to go and work at any school." (S10).

Another student claimed absence of a connection:

> "I honestly do not think it did. I cannot remember all the content in the modules, because it mostly taught us about theories that most of us forgot about." (S61).

Although the findings of the survey showed that, in general, students' experience of the school-visit was lasting and essentially positive, there is no indication that the awakening of a naïve transitivity progressed to a critical transitive consciousness. Confrontation with inequalities in South African education elicited a strong emotional style among many students. Whilst Freire (2005, 14) links a strong emotional style with a naïve transitivity, he also maintains that the latter oversimplifies problems and shows a lack of interest in investigation. Aligned to this understanding, the majority of students seemed to be more concerned with the practical aspects of *how* to deal with diversity than with the causal relationship between the unequal educational context and its *actual* transformation (cf. Taylor 1993, 61). They were able to recall how the

modules in their teacher education programme "contributed to me having the necessary knowledge to better understand learners and to handle situations regarding leaners" (S48), "equipped us more and more with knowledge on how to deal with different races and cultures" (S59), and taught us "various methods and techniques for teaching which [should] be useful in diverse circumstances" (S81). The students' reflections did not show, however, that they were able to make causal links between a society riddled with systemic social and economic inequalities, and an education system that reinforces inequalities. The urgent need to transform post-apartheid education into a fair and socially just system (Spaull 2012) seems to have evaded them. For Freire (2000, 40), "*[c]onsciousness of* and *action upon* reality are ... inseparable constituents of the transforming act". A mere awareness of inequalities in education will not bring about actual change. Whilst the majority of students' reflections indicated the unsettling of their naïve consciousness, it is their apparent inability to move beyond a vague and uncommitted awareness that makes a direct appeal to teacher education.

These findings, reinforced by an indirect indictment included in a student's comment that "the curriculum focuses on schools that are already equipped with all the resources that learners need to achieve the outcomes of the curriculum" (S41), were cross-checked when we took account of academic staff's perceptions on the intervention within the wider context of the BEd programme.

STAFF PERCEPTIONS OF PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

The approach we followed to gather data from the staff was to engage them over a period spanning two semesters in deliberative conversations framed within the bigger context of curricular reform. Three facilitated seminars on the graduate attributes that newly qualified teachers should be able to demonstrate, stimulated reflection on issues concerning prevailing teaching practices. After the third seminar, we decided to map the challenges regarding the school-visit as an instance of curricular renewal. Subsequently, the fourth seminar was devoted to evaluating the academic staff's perceptions of the school-visit as an educational experience through the use of drawings.

Drawing is recognised as a valuable source of evaluative information (Thomas and Beauchamp 2011). According to Sfard, cited by McLean, Henson and Hiles (2003, 897), "the mere act of putting a personal metaphor down on paper involves some reflection, introspection and progress of self-understanding on the part of the participant". This view is echoed by Weber and Mitchell (1996, 304) who point out that drawings "express that which is not easily put into words: the ineffable, the elusive, the not-yet-thought-through, the subconscious ... revealing unexplored ambiguities, contradictions and connections". We were interested in the space that

drawing creates to engage participants collaboratively in making meaning of what they had drawn. Meaning-making through the arts is a complex skill and to enhance the trustworthiness of the data, the drawings were supplemented with oral accounts (Theron et al. 2011, 5; 21). By explaining what they had drawn, the participants became co-analysts, helping to shape the final interpretation of the visual data (Theron 2012, 384).

Participants in the drawing seminar were selected by means of a purposive sampling frame informed by a simple inclusion criterion: the staff member should have been involved in the project during the course of the past four years by either having accompanied students to the schools, facilitated the small-group discussions afterwards or marked the reflective writing assignments. Twenty-four staff members assembled themselves into four groups and pictorially represented their impressions of the project. The following reflective prompts directed the discussion and the production of a group-generated symbolic drawing:

- What comes to mind when you hear the words "school-visit"?

- What has happened to you as a direct or indirect result of your participation in the school-visit project?

- Has it contributed to you changing your pedagogy?

On completion of the drawings, each group's spokesperson had to verbally describe what their drawing was depicting. With their consent, the participants' interpretations and prompts from the floor were audio-recorded and transcribed. To get as close as possible to the intended meaning, a substantial amount of time was spent on analysis and interpretation of the data.

First-level interpretation

In searching for categories to describe the staff's conceptions in a reproducible manner, analysis of the data proceeded through several stages which allowed increasing levels of abstraction. Drawing on Theron et al.'s (2011, 169) account of thematic analysis in arts-based methodologies, we embarked on a first-level interpretation of the drawings (Table 1). From this initial meaning-making, the staff's orientation to the intervention was categorised into three main themes, namely (a) a distinct difference among schools, (b) project aim not achieved sufficiently, and (c) project inherently flawed. The transcripts of each group's verbal explanations were independently reviewed by the authors to search for constructs related to these themes. Once we had agreed on the constructs, we re-examined each drawing and classified the groups' response according to the incidence of metaphors that were compatible with the identified constructs.

Table 1: Drawings, participant comments and first-level meaning-making

Group	Drawing	Staff's comment	First-level interpretation
Group 1		"Students are moved from Space A (comfort zones) to Space B (disorientation), but need to move to a 'third space' where boundaries and borders are less distinctive".	We only disrupt, but do not take students further
Group 2		"But we are in progress with our own development as we become aware of our own stereotypes ... pieces of the puzzle are relatively falling into place".	Something is happening, but we are most probably not doing enough
Group 3		"The school-visit project was not constructed with lecturers in mind – we were not in the picture; it should not be seen only in terms of the students, but also in terms of what we teach".	The school-visit is flawed on several accounts
Group 4		"The 1st year school-visit should not be seen as a separate entity – must empower students to become good teachers".	Students notice only the difference between well-resourced and under-resourced schools – there is still a lot to be done

Three perceptions emerged from the first-level analysis. First, staff indicated that the students had experienced "a stark difference between well-resourced schools and under-resourced

schools". Another perception was that despite the difference between organised and disorganised schools that was experienced by students, "the school-visit project [did] not sufficiently achieve its aim of having a profound impact on pre-service teachers". The third perception was that the inherent flaws of the project compromised its potential impact. In this regard, the staff indicated that "more should be done" and they voiced particular perceptions of "what should be done".

Distinct difference between schools

Various excerpts illustrate the perception that the students had experienced a distinct difference between so-called functional and dysfunctional schools. In this regard, Group 4 indicated that "students are sad when witnessing the difference between organised and chaotic schools". Group 2 drew a clear distinction between well-resourced and under-resourced schools in their art work, and acknowledged that "we go to schools with stereotypes". The latter implies that due to the unequal state of education, both staff and students have certain pre-conceived ideas about the conditions of schools in certain areas. Group 1 alluded to this distinction when they referred to Space A as the space "where students come from ... their comfort zones" and Space B as the schools where they go during the school-visit when "we try to take them out of their comfort zones".

These perceptions are in line with the students' experience. As indicated, the majority of students did not only experience an eye-opening when confronted with the reality of an unequal education system, but they also had to deal with their own emotions when realising not all enjoy the same educational privileges.

The aim of the project was not sufficiently achieved

Despite the perception that the school-visit afforded students an opportunity to realise a marked distinction between schools' contexts, the staff seemed to share the opinion that the project did not have a profound impact. A member of Group 3 noted that "students do not learn if they go to schools that are similar than the ones that they come from", whilst Group 4 noticed that the "school-visit is done in a mode that resembles taking students to the zoo – they see things and then come back and nothing has changed". It was also mentioned that "lecturers are ... happy when they see that students can take over from them for a while; sad because they [the students] see the visit as a nuisance" (Group 4). The latter observation was also stressed by a staff member from Group 2 who indicated that "students say they are sick and tired to be taken to schools". The perception that students do not learn enough from the school-visit was also highlighted by a question posed by Group 2: "Are we really preparing our students for these realities?"

Alluding to their drawing of Space A and Space B, Group 1 felt that "we should move them [the students] to a 3rd space", implying that such movement had thus far not taken place as "disruption (space B) is not enough".

In this respect, students' reflection on their experience seemed to be in direct contrast to the staff's opinion. Staff perceptions that students saw the school-visit as a nuisance and did not learn anything did not correspond with the students' experience. Not only were students able to recall their experience of the intervention after four years, but they were able to reflect on the influence it had on their own perceptions of teaching. Even though the experience did not succeed in moving them from a mere *thinking about* the South African educational reality to a critical *reflection upon* it (cf. Freire 2000, 41), the experience had a long-lasting influence on the students.

The project is inherently flawed

In the description accompanying the minimalistic drawing produced by Group 3, it was indicated that the project was "flawed by design". This group regretted the fact that staff members had not been consulted when the project was conceptualised. They claimed that the project had been approached from a perspective that drew mainly on the colour of biology (race) as a social construct. By implication, this group related the potential success of such a project to more consultation with all staff involved in teaching and a different approach to diversity. For this group, an "awareness of diversity had to be incorporated in all modules before and after the school-visit"; the point of reference should rather have been "that we are all human beings".

Group 1 depicted the intervention as a once-off event with little impact. Their suggestion that "more should be done" alluded to the perceived failure of the project to conscientise students to envision themselves as agents of change in their future classrooms. This group's opinion that "disruption is not enough" was strengthened by their statement that "a once-off school-visit is not enough". Whilst a group member noticed that diversity should be infused into all modules and be made part of assessment, the group itself advocated for lecturers to be more reflective in their lectures. It was emphasised that teacher education should not only challenge students' comfort zones and the group's hope was placed on the newly-designed BEd curriculum to move students beyond disruption into a "new space".

Framed in the context of Freire's (2005) notion of transitivity, the teacher educators seemed to understand that many students carry a naïve consciousness about schooling. In so doing, they not only recognised the contribution of the school-visit to stressing the realities of contrast in South African schools, but also acknowledged the imperative of teacher education to unsettle students' comfort zones and move them beyond disruption. However, overall, the

school-visit was depicted by the staff to be a once-off event with little influence on students. Also, little support emerged from the collective meaning-making to indicate that the staff were reinforcing students' experiences of the school-visit in their classroom pedagogies so as to encourage critical transitivity and subsequent conscientisation to transform reality. By articulating the inability of the project to achieve its aim and by suggesting what should have been done, they failed to reflect on the possible absence of their own agency to make the most of a potentially evolutionary process. With the exception of one group that claimed to have drawn on examples from the school-visit in their classrooms, the staff did not reflect on how to implement their own suggestions that "we should be more reflective in our lectures" and that "we should bring students in to share their experiences with others". The rather broad connections that the students made between the school-visit and the rest of the teacher education programme correlate with this observation.

WHAT MIGHT CONSTITUTE IMPROVEMENT?

In a context where dialogue is understood as the "encounter in which the united reflection and action of the dialoguers are addressed to the world which is to be transformed and humanized" (Freire 1996, 69–70), our interpretation of the perceived failure of the project, as seen from the staff's angle, hinged on the absence of critical dialogue amongst staff members. Despite the intention to infuse curricular renewal with social justice, the top-down manner in which the school-visit project was approached resulted in a lack of dialogue. Staff members did not deliberate sufficiently to clarify their own roles within the intervention and subsequently did not take ownership of the project. Instead, they had difficulty in conceptualising the project within their individual pedagogies and the changing teaching and learning context of the Faculty. In addition, we realised that the project had been conceptualised, but never actively discussed as an instance of curricular renewal. There was no deliberation of how the project could serve as an experiential opportunity to increase students' capacity to make choices, to develop their ability to reject the prescriptions of others, and to adopt a legitimate democratic mentality (Freire 2005, 14–16). Although the Faculty embarked on a comprehensive curriculum review in 2011, there were no critical discussions with academic staff working with students at grassroot level, on the positioning of the project as a pilot run within the broader context of curricular reform.

The lack of critical dialogue which could account for the staff's perception that the project has failed feeds the notion that the school-visit was not used as a springboard to trigger the evolutionary process required to move students to critical consciousness. Freire (2005, 42) places a high premium on the role of dialogue in overcoming a "naïve understanding and ...

develop[ing] an increasingly critical understanding". In the Freirean sense, the transformative agenda of dialogue resides in the dialogical moment where "humans meet to reflect on their reality as they make and remake it" (Freire and Shor 1987, 98). It can thus be assumed that if teacher educators want to move their students towards a critical understanding of their responsibility to bring about change in their future classrooms, they must create a dialogical space for students not only to reflect on a learning experience such as the school-visit, but to develop a "consciousness *of* and action *upon*" the South African educational reality. As constituents of transformation, "consciousness of" and "action upon" presuppose a teacher education programme infused with critical dialogue. Engagement in critical dialogue thus constitutes the potential for the improvement of educational practice.

The implication for practice that "more should be done" seems to point towards engagement in critical dialogue more than anything else. Harden and Crosby's (2000) warning about curricular interventions becoming hollow structures holds some truth for the school-visit project. The staff's apparent lack of willingness to put new ideas to the test in relation to the project did not necessarily stem from an inability to recognise the project as an opportunity to challenge their traditional ways of teaching, but rather from their perception of the intervention as a loose-hanging entity with little bearing on curricular renewal. Subsequently, the project was perceived as a once-off uncovering of educational reality and was not used as a starting point to set the process of conscientisation into motion.

RETROSPECTIVE END-OBSERVATIONS

Feedback from the students confirmed the insight that a brief, disruptive experience early in their study careers could help to unsettle their naïve perceptions about education. However, when we narrowed the scope of the investigation to focus on staff perceptions, an important mismatch between the instructional goal of the project and the actual learning milieu became visible. As noted by Fullan (1991), it is not uncommon for academics to struggle with the goals and objectives that are set by those "higher up". The gap between students' experiences and staff's perceptions amplified the message to decision-makers that any form of curricular innovation should ideally start with lecturers who will eventually implement curricular changes. In fact, they are the ones who may gather valuable insights with regard to any defects in the practice milieu – such as the practical feasibility of the intervention or the impact of certain changes. As such, one should take note of Oliver's (2011, 10; 13) emphasis on the positive role and contribution of a shared vision, a shared sense of community and connectedness among those involved in the design and implementation of a new curriculum. The idea that dialogue remains a prerequisite for curricular reform should be heeded. The latter is of particular

importance when a curriculum is aimed at moving students, through critical dialogue, to become allies in addressing "the critical challenges facing education in South Africa today" (DHET 2015, Section 2.4).

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