

PRE - SERVICE TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF IMPORTANT TEACHER ATTRIBUTES

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Abstract

This paper discusses pre-service teachers' perceptions of teacher attributes important in teaching. It identifies those qualities the students believe teachers should have in order to be effective at their jobs. A mixed method of the qualitative and quantitative design was used. The quantitative aspect of the study used simple numbers and percentages to describe the responses which were further explained qualitatively. The study also employed the use of the review of documents pertaining to teacher development and attributes. Semi-structured open-ended questionnaires were administered to get information from sixty (60) out of sixty-seven (67) new intakes of pre-service teachers just before the commencement of their Post Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) training in language education. The PGDE students were students who have already obtained their bachelor degrees (B. A.) in the humanities in their major/content areas and need to do a further one –year course in the methodology of teaching in their major areas, as well as in educational foundation courses including teaching practice. This will enable the students to earn the PGDE certificate and qualify them to teach at the junior and senior secondary levels in their content areas (languages) in Botswana schools. It was discovered that apart from subject matter competency, issues of personal disposition were regarded as very important teacher attributes. This has implications for bridging the gap between the competency based and the humanistic based teacher education debate and the important role of disposition in teacher education/development.

Keywords: Pre-service teachers, teacher competencies, teacher attributes, disposition, teacher education programmes.

Introduction

After Botswana's independence in 1966 from British protection, efforts were made to make the curriculum of schools more responsive to the needs of the society. This culminated in the development of policy documents such as the National Policy on Education (NPE) in 1977 and the Revised National Policy on Education (RNPE) of 1994. The policies have informed the basic education policy for all citizens of Botswana as enunciated in the Curriculum Blueprint (Republic of Botswana, 1996; 2002). A part of the basic education philosophy reads:

Quality basic education is a fundamental human right. It promotes the all- round development of the individual; fosters intellectual growth and creativity; enables every citizen to achieve his/her full potential; develops moral, ethical and social values, cultural identity, self-esteem and good citizenship; prepares citizens to participate actively to further develop our democracy and prepare citizens for life in the 21st Century (Republic of Botswana, 2002:2).

It is believed that teachers are important in the implementation of educational policies and implementing curricula. Also, teachers are responsible for raising individuals that shape the future of a country and as a result of their roles, they are expected to have certain attributes/qualities in their character as well as development that would help them perform their roles effectively as teachers (Kokstad, 2013). This is in keeping with (Koksal, 2013:270):

Teachers are the key elements of maximizing the quality of education, improving schools and successfully implementing curricula. In addition, teachers are the people who raise individuals that shape the future of a country.

The implications of the above is that in order to produce quality citizens, there is the need to have quality teachers with reflective ability, professional attitudes, practices, values and attributes who would be in the best position to implement the government's basic education programme. Teachers with the right skills, knowledge, attitudes, dispositions and qualifications would help in achieving the basic education objectives of Botswana as well as any other country. In consideration of the basic educational goals of a country, it is important that the training of teachers reflect the development of quality teachers with the right dispositions.

Background

Recently, there has been an increase in professional standards to guide teacher education programmes for secondary and higher education. Berliner (1984) notes that professional standards are developed as assumptions that define what students should know and be able to do. Delandshere and Arens (2001) cited in Koksai, 2013 define the concept as the general knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to effectively and efficiently fulfill the requirements of the teaching profession. For example in the USA, national professional standards are treated as universal standards and implemented in diverse settings regardless of local knowledge, culture and social problems (Delandshere and Petrosky, 2004). In England, teacher competencies were revised in 1997 by the Teacher Education Agency by referring to the concept of standards (Bleach, 2000). These standards are usually divided into different parts such as, professional characteristics, professional knowledge and professional skills. For example, Zammit, Sinclair, Cole, Singh, Costley, Brown and Rushton (2007) divided the standards into three domains in the Australian context. These domains are: the attributes and capabilities of quality teachers, the professional practices undertaken by quality teachers, and the contextual factors which influence quality teaching.

It is common for teacher educators to assume or dictate what pre-service teachers should know which include the attributes/characteristics, professional knowledge that go with the subject areas and professional skills pertaining to the methodology of imparting the knowledge. These standards are still relevant in teacher development programmes, however, the area of the attributes needed to be developed has the tendency to be subjective and more objectivity is needed in an attempt to identify those attributes and let the beneficiaries have a contribution/say in their own development. Korthagen (2004) notes that that many attempts are being made to describe these qualities by means of lists of competencies. However, many have raised questions about the validity, reliability and practicability of such lists (Barnett, 1994; Hyland, 1994). Some researchers are therefore, beginning, to question whether it is possible to describe the qualities/attributes of good teachers in terms of competencies.

In this discussion, the self-regulated theory (Zimmerman, Bonner, and Kocher, 1996) is applied to the discussion of the subject. This theory is explained as self-generated thoughts, feelings and behaviours that are oriented to attaining goals. This implies that people learn better when they are guided by goals they set themselves. They can self-reflect on their increasing effectiveness and monitor their behavior in terms of their own goals. This attitude engenders self-satisfaction and motivation to continue to improve and thereby learning is enhanced. This means that student teachers should not be regarded as empty vessels that need to be filled with information or taught a long list of competencies. Student teachers should be actively involved in their own learning and take responsibility for their learning as well.

The above is so because it has been the practice for teacher trainers to teach what they deem necessary for teacher education and development especially in developing countries. This paper is therefore an attempt to factor in the view /contributions of pre-service teachers in the equation especially in the area of those qualities/attributes that are important to them to know and develop from their own vantage points. Their input as a result of their own experiences, background, and perceptions of what they consider as desired attributes in their encounters with teachers that have helped or hindered their learning achievements, and which they themselves would like to develop in their chosen career needs to be investigated. I believe that what comes out of the experience would enrich rather than take away from teacher education strategies. Presently, we seem to be forcing down the throat of our students what we think is important to teach them on the subject and ignoring their own input or what they bring to their own development of skills and competencies.

Aim of Study

This study investigated pre-service teachers' views/perceptions about the attributes they consider important for effective teaching. An attempt was made to explore the views/perceptions of the student teachers about those qualities they think are most important. They did this considering their own experiences of schooling, and the teachers they have had in the process. This is in line with the principles of the self-regulation theory (Zimmerman, et al, 1996) which enables students to examine their own thoughts, feelings and behaviours towards the attainment of their own set goals; that is what qualities they think they should work at to become effective/quality teachers. In order to achieve the aim of the study, the following research objectives were used. The findings were then used to make

recommendations for pre-service teacher education in Botswana and elsewhere with similar teacher education issues.

Objectives of the Study:

The objectives of this study are:

1. Review literature on important teacher attributes
2. Investigate pre-service teachers' perceptions of important teacher attributes
3. Make recommendations for pre-service teacher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A number of key issues related to the topic under investigation are reviewed under the sub-titles that follow, but not exhaustive.

Teacher Competencies

Apart from possessing content knowledge, pre-service teachers are required to have skills and certain dispositions to become effective teachers in an increasingly global society. Saunders and Crawford (2007) claim that they want their students to engage, reflect, and collaborate so that they would be successful in the classroom. They also say that their student –teachers should have the basic knowledge, skills and dispositions which will affect their future students' achievement. Grant and Gillette (2006) also observe that instead of focusing on classroom knowledge, skills and dispositions, we must train our teachers to, 'understand the larger social context in which they are working' if they are to be effective (p.293). In Holland, a standard set of improvement efforts was initiated based on teacher competencies including communication, social and ethical values, instruction, methods and organization skills (Storey, 2006; cited in Pantic and Wubbles, 2010). All these are efforts to describe the general competencies to enhance the quality of the teaching profession as well as the personal development of the teachers concerned.

The concept of teacher competencies has been evolving over the years and gained momentum in the 1960s and 1970s (Struyven and De Meyst, 2010). For example in the 1990s, many professional standards were developed for teachers. In the USA and UK, professional standards were established to improve the quality of the teaching profession (Koksal, 2013). In the USA, professional standards are treated as universal standards and implemented in diverse settings regardless of local knowledge, culture and social problems (Delandshere and Petrosky, 2004). In England, teacher competencies were revised in 1997 (Bleach, 2000). Revised for the last time in 2007, these standards have three main parts: professional characteristics, professional knowledge and professional skills which were yardsticks that pre-service teachers have to consider to identify their strengths and weaknesses for when they become professionals (Koksal, 2013).

Theoretical Basis of Qualities/Attributes of a Good Teacher

In modern contexts, it is common to attempt to describe essential teacher qualities/attributes by means of a list of competencies (Barnett, 1994; Hyland, 1994). This perspective supports the thinking that concrete and observable behavioural criteria could serve as a basis for the training of novices and that they should be acquired by teachers (Korthagen, 2003). However, this view was criticized because it appears that a good teacher cannot be described solely in terms of isolated competencies that can be learned in a number of teaching sessions. Others see the competency based model as rigid and pedagogically wrong (Hyland, 1994).

In the 1970's another view of the way teachers should be educated emerged, known as the Humanistic Based Teacher Education (HBTE), in which the emphasis shifted to the person of the teacher (Rogers, 1969). In this view of education, a central role is reserved for personal growth (Maslow, 1968). Joyce (1975) observes that the idea of HBTE cannot be reconciled with the laying down of standardized teaching competencies. Even though HBTE failed to get a broad support, the fact that it focused attention on the person of the teacher is of importance in further development in teacher education. This is evidenced in the fact that contemporary teacher education gravitates between a competency-based view and an emphasis on the teacher's self. Concerning this view, Tickle (1999) notes

that policy makers generally focus on the importance of outcomes in terms of competencies, while many researchers emphasise the more personal characteristics of teachers such as enthusiasm, flexibility, or love of children.

In producing highly qualified teachers, many researchers have come up with the identification of the different roles of highly qualified teachers such as the role of reflection in teaching, the role of professional development, the role of teacher as researcher, the role of creating an equitable and democratic environment for learning to occur and so on (Wubbels and Korthagen, 1990; Levin and Rock, 2003; Garmon, 2004 and Taspinar, 2006). Grant and Gillette (2006) also argue that because teacher educators have not been proactive in their definitions of what is needed to prepare beginning teachers, it is easy for other people to see a highly qualified teacher as one with only content knowledge. This type of perception informs the need for teacher educators to research and prepare teacher candidates to teach all children regardless of academic ability, ethnicity, socio-economic status, family structure and ability to speak English (Grant and Gillette, 2006). The aforementioned ideals is believed, should form part of or the basis for most teacher education programmes.

Quality Teacher Attributes

Zammit et al, (2007) found that - - - - the work of quality teachers occur in three broad domains of attributes and capabilities or competencies. They believe that quality teachers on the personal level are reflective, enthusiastic, creative, committed and passionate about their work and are also good communicators among other attributes. They also argue that among the attributes of quality teachers are the ability to use a broad based repertoire of approaches and strategies to fit the varying needs of the diverse groups of students in their classrooms. It is also believed that quality teachers are able to establish supportive and inclusive relationships with their students in addition to other personal and professional attributes and skills. They conclude that the ability of the teacher to maneuver within these complex domains to achieve the desired outcomes, form the hallmarks of quality teachers.

From the above discussion, it can be concluded that there are various levels at which the attributes of a good or effective teacher can be measured/assessed. The levels can be observed in terms of competencies, personal attributes, and capabilities/skills in using a repertoire of approaches and strategies, as well as an understanding of the working environment and a consideration of social and ethical values among other attributes.

Research Methodology

This investigation adopted the use of both quantitative and qualitative approaches. A simple purposive sampling qualitative strategy involving the use of open ended questionnaires and simple quantitative design expressed in numbers and percentages were used to emphasise the explorative nature of the study. A review of the concept of teacher competencies/attributes/characteristics and associated issues and ideas was done. Pre-service language education students were asked to respond to semi-structured open-ended questionnaires on their views/opinion of important teacher attributes necessary for effective teaching. This was done on their first day of a language teaching methodology class to avoid elements of bias as a result of prior teaching on the topic and the potential subjectivity that may creep into their responses. This strategy ensured that the participants did not have prior exposure to any discussions on the subject. In this way, they could rely on their own experiences and true feelings/judgments on the topic.

Sample and Population of the study

The study involved a group of sixty-seven pre- service language education students doing Post Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) in the languages (Setswana, English and French). These were students who already have the subject content in language (graduates of languages from the Humanities) and wanted to acquire the post graduate teaching diploma (PGDE) in order to be able to teach at the secondary school level in Botswana. It is believed that the purposively sampled male and female students of language would be able to give the required information that could be generalized for the group of pre service teachers. On the whole, only sixty (60) out of the sixty-seven (67) initial sample participated in the study.

Data Collection and Analysis

After collecting the questionnaires, the responses were codified and categorized in order of frequencies/patterns which were further expressed in numbers and percentages. These were used to discuss the findings using the similarities and differences from existing views/assumptions from the literature review from which conclusions were drawn and recommendations made.

Findings

As explained above, the study involved a group of sixty seven pre- service language education students doing Post Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) in the languages, Setswana (the local language), English and French. Sixty (60) out of the sixty-seven (67) students in the group responded. The findings in order of the frequency of choice, the number of respondents and percentages were as follows:

Competence-Based Attributes	No. of Respondents	%	Personal – Attributes	No. of Respondents	%			
A good knowledge of the subject matter.	42	70	Should be a good listener and confidante.	40	67			
			Should be patient and understanding.	36	60			
			Should be caring and compassionate.	30	50			
			Should be confident.	22	37			
			Should be a disciplined person.	18	30			
			Should be open- minded and willing to learn.	16	27			
			Should be professional in their dealings with students.	12	20	Should be trustworthy.	16	27
						Should be devoted.	14	23
						Should interact well with students/pupils.	13	22
						Should have good inter-personal skills.	13	22
						Should be tolerant.	12	20
						Should be passionate and enthusiastic about the job.	12	20
Should be fair by treating everybody equally	10	17						
Should be a good leader.	10	17						
Should be a good role model.	10	17						
Should be well organized.	10	17						
Should be motivational	9	15						
Should have a positive attitude	8	13						
Should be punctual	6	13						
Should have a good sense of humour	6	10						
Be accommodative of all learners	6	10						

The above list includes aspects of competence and personal based qualities/attributes. The analysis indicates that students consider content based competence of utmost importance as well as personal qualities or dispositions. Forty two (42) out of sixty (60) which translates to seventy per cent (70%) of the students consider content knowledge as very important. Forty (40) out of sixty (60) students, that is sixty-seven per cent (67%) feel that an effective teacher should be a good listener and confidante. Next on the list in descending order is the need for an effective teacher to be patient and understanding. Half of the respondents which translates to fifty per cent (50%) or thirty (30) out of sixty (60) respondents feel that being caring and compassionate is important in teachers. As can be deduced from the above table, many of the respondents believe that a teacher should possess certain personal dispositions/qualities to be effective as a teacher. Some of these qualities require teachers to be humane in their dealings with their students to a great extent. These include the ability of the teacher to be a good listener and confidant, have empathy and be someone they can confide in (a sort of counselor). An effective teacher should also be patient and understanding, be caring, compassionate and be confident (ability to be able to take control), neither be too soft or too hard. It is interesting to

note that the ability of the teacher to be professional only rank at a further twenty per cent (20%) down the list. Considering that a lot of time and effort is spent in teacher education teaching and encouraging professional competency, students did not rate it high in the list. Most importantly, it is evident that the training of teachers should not ignore the role of disposition among other attributes. The list above highlights many of the personal traits which should be nurtured in teacher education. From all these, it can be argued that it takes certain kinds of people to be effective/quality teachers aside from the issue of content knowledge.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER COMPETENCY AND TRAINING

Humanistic Based Teacher Education (HBTE) Debate

The findings from this study indicate that there should be a fusion of the competency based and the Humanistic Based Teacher Education (HBTE) models. This is because a cursory look at the attributes considered important to teaching in this study suggests a high level of competency in the subject matter. At the same time, the humanistic angles such as being compassionate, being a good listener, being a confidante, being patient and understanding and a whole lot of humanistic values and attributes are equally emphasized. Teacher education in recent times emphasizes professionalism, lifelong learning and multiculturalism, and the teaching environment. When students see the need for fair play by teachers in their dealings with their students, and feel that teachers should be accommodative of all learners and so on, it speaks volumes about their experiences and the prevailing quality of teachers and teaching circumstances. Also in this, we recognize the need for teachers to develop awareness/sensitivity to multicultural and the social environment in which they operate. The importance of the mastery of content and a disposition for teaching must be emphasized. This calls for a review of the intellectual quality of students to be admitted for teacher education. Low level competent teachers translate to low quality students. Any country that is serious about the education of its citizens should care about the quality of teacher candidates in all the subject areas, whether in the sciences or humanities. Great minds in the sciences as well as the humanities, with the right incitement and disposition would produce great scholars. Many of the respondents emphasized personal traits that they may have found lacking in their own experience. These attributes may be worth recognizing and nurturing by teacher educators as well.

The prevailing situation where everybody irrespective of their academic standing and temperament feel they can fit into teaching should be reviewed. Not only do we need academically sound individuals in the teaching profession, there is also the humanistic angle of temperament/disposition. One can only imagine the result, when you have a bunch of ill motivated, ill tempered, dissatisfied, frustrated and unenthusiastic teachers in a class of helpless/terrified learners who have to contend with the teachers' mood swings or temperament and hope that the teacher would be in a good mood for their lessons. This situation has implications for policy makers to improve the working conditions of the teaching force. Where teachers are made to feel less important or that they could easily be replaced or that their role in the society is inconsequential, demoralization can set in and result in frustration and lack luster performance.

The need for students' input in their own learning: There is a need for students' input in their own education. Peculiar local input as to what is important for learners to know in order to be effective in their own peculiar context/environment may be important as well. Apart from focusing on the training of teachers to perform in a global context, there are certain local/environmental considerations that should be infused in teacher training/development. What may be taken for granted in certain situations may be important in other settings. Multicultural issues, issues of current situations, minority/gender issues, the humorous teacher fit into this category for a truly compassionate teacher among other qualities.

Further research area: Another area of interest emanating from this study may focus on ways of measuring/assessing/evaluating or figuring out the right people with the right temperament for teaching.

Conclusion

Critics of the competency based model see it as rigid and appearing to assume that coming up with a long list of skills and qualities that can be taught is all that is needed to train a good teacher. On

the other hand, the HBTE model is directing more attention towards the person of the teacher. There is the promise of a fusion in this scenario. This study indicates that apart from competence issues (being knowledgeable about the subject matter), there is a more personal aspect of teacher education that needs to be nurtured. More often than not, teacher educators emphasize the competency based teacher education, concentrating on teaching what students should be able to do or know (Koksal, 2013). The issue of disposition in teacher education is dominant and recurring as can be seen from this study. The emerging picture is that disposition in teacher education is worth recognizing/emphasizing and nurturing in pre-service teacher education.

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