On the Way to Phronesis: Delving into Stories of School Based Experiences of Pre-Service Teachers

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Abstract. There exists an on-going debate on the gap between the academic aspect of teacher education and the reality of school life. In response to this issue, many teacher training institutions propose on-job placement or 'School Based Experience'. In Mauritius, trainee teachers are posted in schools with a view to provide them with work-based learning opportunities and expose them to the world of schools. A narrative enquiry has been adopted to investigate ways in which pre-service teachers have lived their school-based practicum in relation to the knowledge acquired during their training. Data was collected from stories narrated during focus group seminars and analysed using Haynes (2007)[1] Key Steps. The study sheds light on ways in which trainee teachers faced the diversity and complexity of the school milieu as an experiential learning space. It also leads to the understanding of their concerns as they negotiate their way along the journey of reconciliation between teacher education and experiences of school life. Key findings relate to both the benefits and setbacks of work based learning. The authors recommend that there is a need to revisit the partnership which exist between the teacher education institution and schools.

Keywords: School Based Experience, experiential learning, work based learning, phronesis.

[1]Haynes, C. 2007, Experiential learning: Learning by doing: 5-step experiential learning cycle definitions.
www.niu.edu/facdev/resources/guide/strategies/**experiential_learning**.pdf

1. **Introduction**
   The novice teacher sat in my office with shoulders drooped and a forlorn face. "Nothing worked…I do not want to go back in that school, maybe I need to change school……" were the first few words she muttered.

As teacher educators we often get to hear such stories when our students are out on field experience. The profession is plagued with a theory–practice gap, which seems to be at the center of this gloominess. It is indeed an uncomfortable 'space' where the student-teachers get engaged in the complex environment of the school and their struggle to bridge the theory and practice. Therefore what becomes fundamental is that 'workplace' need to provide them with experiences that are positive and authentic not only in terms of equipping them with appropriate pedagogical knowledge but also the practical knowledge to cope with everyday school life so that these novice teachers can shape their identities as effective teachers. Research has shown that to be effective, Professional Development Programmes must to be attentive and sensitive to the practice of work-place. Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1999), laid emphasis on the importance of situational and contextual learning and pointed out that learning about practice should be done in practice. Cochran-Smith & Lytle (1999, 2001) reiterated that such knowledge development, include the development of practice for practice (kinds of knowledge teachers need to know), knowledge in practice (knowledge in action), and knowledge of practice (emphasizes the relationship between knowledge and practice and the theoretical aspects of both). While Elmore (2004) emphasised on the need to focus on concrete classroom applications of ideas and expose teachers to actual practice rather than descriptions. There is a need to be attentive to real themes and issues in the day-to-day work of teachers (Berliner, 2001; Korthagen, 2001, Kaminski, 2003).).On job placement thus provide the space for first hand learning to occur. Novice teachers can observe, emulate, discover, and reorganize the ideas that they have formulated about teaching from the experiences gained.

1.2 Experiential learning and Phronosis

Learning through experience is not a new concept. Well known educational psychologists such as John Dewey (1859-1952), Carl Rogers (1902-1987), and David Kolb (1939) have provided the seminal work on learning theories that focus on "learning through experience or "learning by doing." International literature provides us different names for such practical knowledge gained such as craft knowledge, work-place knowledge, wisdom of practice, personal knowledge ,teacher knowledge, teacher practical knowledge, professional

knowledge and phronesis. The common denominator here being that learning takes place as a result of personal involvement in direct experiences which are related to real world problem and situations. What is crucial in experiential learning is "that the phases of experiencing (doing), reflection and applying are present. In addition, the stages of reflection and application are what make experiential learning different and more powerful than the models commonly referred to as "learn-by-doing" or "hands-on-learning" (Kolb & Kolb, 2007).

The term experiential learning is a broad term, generally used by educators to describe a series of pragmatic activities sequenced in such a way so

as to enhance the educational experience for the student learner (Moon, 2004). Experiential learning experiences help to complete students' preparation for their chosen careers by bridging the gap between theory (course content) and practice. Students learn through experiences by doing, discovering, reflecting and applying. Such kind of interactions with the social world help students to develop an 'internal knowledge' help improve their communication skills, gain self-confidence and strengthen decision-making skills by responding to and solving real world problems and processes (Korthagen, 2001).

Much has been written about the different types of Knowledge an educator needs to acquire. Shulman (1987) advocated three different types of such knowledge namely content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge and curricular knowledge. While Aristotle (1941) distinguished several types of knowledge: techne (craft knowledge), *episteme* (propositional knowledge) and *phronesis* (practical wisdom) amongst others. Practical wisdom according to Aristotle differs from theoretical wisdom by an insistence on action. Practical wisdom includes judgment, understanding, and insight that leads to appropriate action which take into account the context and situation. Proponents of teacher's practical knowledge/wisdom advocate that such knowledge stems from the tacit personal reflection based on experience, context, and motivated by practice which is connected to the educator's subject area. Therefore, what student teachers need to acquire is practical wisdom (*phronesis*) is the ability to act in the most effective and proper way in every particular situation.

Teacher Education (TE) programme round the world includes a component of practical experience that allows the students to reflect about their actions and learn from the experience gained. Aristotle's theory of Phronesis (practical wisdom) turns up more and more often in TE programs. Practical knowledge relates to

one's actions and behaviours, and answers the question, "what must I do?" The answer to this question should cause a person to act. This study claim that if we want to create better teachers with knowledge relevant to their profession the TE programme proposed should provide scope for the 'practical wisdom' to emerge.

2. Background

Mauritius being no exception has included in its Teacher Education Programme, component of school-based education .This is commonly known as SBE- **School Based Experience** which has been introduced in an attempt to overcome the criticism that teacher education is not at par with the practices in schools. To this end, placing trainee educators in schools so that they become familiar with the work has become a common feature in all the teacher education programmes. The SBE consists of three phases. The first phase is the immersion, where trainees are expected to get familiar with the school setting. The second phase is the observation phase, a well-planned schedule is worked out for trainees to observe different classes. The third

phase is when trainees are called to teach in classes. Mentors are identified to guide trainees in schools. There are specific tasks that trainees need to complete for each phase and trainees are expected to submit a portfolio at their end of the SBE. The compilation of the SBE Portfolio is a professional development process through which trainees document their progress, accomplishments as well as reflections on their learning. During each SBE period, three **Sharing Experience Seminars (**SES) are conducted for the three phases. The Sharing Experience Seminars (SES) complement the SBE. These are scheduled at regular intervals after each phase of SBE where trainees discuss, narrate, and share their lived experiences in schools with their tutors. This present article originated from the stories that the pre-service student teachers shared with us during the seminars.

2.1 The Reasons for Conducting the Study

There are three main reasons for venturing in this study. Firstly it is our personal interest. We have been involved in School based experience since the past seven years. At first there was the assumption that there is a whole drama which is staged when tutors go for school visits. After the SES sessions we realised that there are more to this staged drama and what we tutors see is only the tip of the iceberg.

Our second motivation was to showcase the stories from the trainees which would provide insight on the type of landscapes prevailing at schools in relation to what is learnt at the university. We had the assumption that after following the education as well as the subject didactics, students should be able to teach without much difficulty. Here we were struck at the layers of complexities involved as there was no linear equation and instead a lot of voids and swampy lands.

Finally there is a genuine belief that researching these stories will contribute to the scholarship about work based experience and help both mentors and tutors to better understand the predicament of novice trainee educators joining the profession.

The objectives of this study are:

- to present the challenges and tensions that trainee educators face during their school based practicum.
- to gain insight on how theory and practice reconciliation is negotiated during school based experiences.

3. Methodology

Bearing in mind the purpose of this research, which is to gain insight on pre-service teachers' lived experiences of their school-based practicum in relation to the knowledge acquired during their training, the narrative method has been adopted. As expressed by Clandinin & Connelly, (2000) "Experience happens narratively … Therefore, educational experience should be studied narratively", (p. 19) .They further stated that "Narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experience. It is a collaboration between researcher and

participants over time---Simply stated…narrative inquiry is stories lived and told" (p. 20). Narrative has also been defined as having first and second levels (Carr 1997). The first level is where the individual tells the stories of themselves and the second level narrative is the researchers' account of the stories .In this study the first level of narrative provided a chance for students to reveal their thoughts, feelings, and intentions during the phase three of their SBE. The second level help the researchers to understand the phenomenon. Therefore narrative inquiry relate to both the research method and the phenomenon (Pinnegar and Daynes 2006) or the phenomenon and the process (Connelly and Clandinin 1990).

Three trainees were purposively chosen. Patton (2002) describe purposive sampling as a form of non-probability sampling where the researcher hand picks the cases, because they are considered typical or particularly interesting in relation to the research topic. As such three trainees who had joined the university without prior teaching experience were selected. Their first encounter with the schools as a teacher was during the SBE. The small sample of the present study ($N = 3$) allowed for depth of study (Patton, 2002) of the phenomenon as trainees recount their stories of their journey in schools. This is in line with Morse (1989) who claimed that 'a good information source is someone who has undergone or is undergoing the experience and is able to reflect on and provide detailed experiential information about the phenomenon' (p. 121). The informed consent principles were adopted. Participants were briefed about the research project and were given assurance on anonymity and confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms (PST 1 –preservice teacher 1 and so on).Their consent for the recording of their stories were also negotiated.

4. Data collection

Trainee telling their stories were the data collection method used. Stories are presumed to provide a holistic context that allows individuals to reflect and reconstruct their personal, professional and social experiences (Gill, 2001). Capturing these 'untold' stories and analysing them will lead to a better organisational understanding and yield a far deeper insight into the complexity of life within the organisation. Initiating trainees to such community of sharing stories from the field give them a platform to reflect upon how field experience connects training with practice. The stories were tape recorded during the SES sessions. The stories were about the experiences that trainees had encountered in their respective schools. Trainees were encouraged to add on or reflect on the stories. Stories were collected during the sharing experience seminars. Each seminar lasted for two hours and was led by both tutors, namely one from the Subject Area and one from the Education Department. A total of six hours of seminars was held.

5. Analysis of data and the Theoretical Framework for the Study

People tell stories, but narratives come from the analysis of stories (Frank, 2000). As Frank states that, "the researcher's role is to interpret the stories in order to analyze the underlying narrative that the storytellers may not be able

to give voice to themselves" (p. 4). Therefore in order to illuminate how the stories about school experiences relate to or are in dissonance with the theories we had to opt for a framework so as to present a coherent picture. We decided to use Haynes (2007) Key Steps. This framework which has its roots in Schon (1983) work will allowed for reflections, self-reflections and applications.

The stories were transcribed. Data were coded using the axial coding system under themes pertaining to the research objectives and analysed using Haynes (2007) Key Steps. Learning content is important, learning from
the *process* is at the heart of experiential learning. During each step students will engage with their experiences following the Haynes (2007) key steps : Experiencing/Exploring "Doing" , Sharing/Reflecting "What Happened?", Processing/Analyzing "What's Important?", Generalizing "So What?", Application "Now What?" .The first two steps (Experiencing/Exploring "Doing" , Sharing/Reflecting "What Happened?) were used to encourage Preservice teachers to tell/share their stories and to self-reflect as well as get feedback from peer reflection .The third and fourth steps (Processing/Analyzing "What's Important?", Generalizing "So What?") were used to analysed what they have learned and to relate these to future learning experiences. Students were also encouraged to discuss how specific problems or issues were addressed. The last step (Application "Now What?") aimed at helping to make connection with what they learned in the School Based Experience and the knowledge gained at University .Students were encouraged to discuss how issues raised can be useful in future situations and how more effective future behaviors can be established from what they have learnt.

6. Discussion following excerpts from the stories

In the Experiencing/Exploring "Doing", Sharing/Reflecting "What Happened?" phase, the student teacher had many anecdotes to share. Some of them were stories of success where a class went well and they were able to answer students queries .It was also about being able to participate in school activities and when they felt they were part of the 'school family'. During this phase they also advised one another by sharing what has worked and how they tackled problem. There were also stories of distress where they related their frustration and fears.

PST1- *I can still remember the first day at school. Everybody was busy with their own thing. The Rector was not available and I was told that my Mentor was on sick leave. I was on my own. I stayed in the lobby and after sometimes I went in the library .I had prepared for this day for so long. I was at a loss. I had not slept on the eve.*
PST2: *I was introduced as a trainee teacher to the class. I think the students are aware that I am here to learn and as such do not take my class seriously. They kept talking and disturbing the lesson. This annoyed me and I complained to my mentor. Instead of listening to me, the mentor was not helpful at all, she told me that they were very good students and that I needed to change the way I did things. I do not what I how I am going do when my tutor will come to visit me.*
PST3: *I am completely shattered. So far I thought I was doing well. I had my lessons well planned, I used different teaching strategies. After a class test, my mentor called me*

and asked me to explain why there are so many failures. I could not understand, why is she was blaming me of students' performance. I had done only 2 lessons with them.

During this stage student teachers were encouraged to help each other by proposing alternatives and solutions to problems. What emanated from these sessions is the way each of them were able to demonstrate empathy. We tutors could only admire the burgeoning of a community of practice among the pre-service teachers. They were actively reflecting and encouraging their colleagues. There was no one way of dealing with these experiences and we tutors did not have answers for their queries. Our courses are mostly focused on empowering trainees with content and pedagogical knowledge and theories which clearly fall short when one has to deal with the routine of school life. How do we boost teacher's morale and self-confidence? How do we sustain this community of practice? What is the role of the teacher educator? There stories raised questions for our own practice and propelled us to reflect on what kind of teacher education we need to impart.

During the phase of Processing/Analyzing "What's Important? and Generalizing, there were stories where the novice teacher was trying to reconcile the knowledge gained at the University with what was happening in the real context of schooling.

PST2: *I was scoffed by the senior teachers who told me that lesson plans are not needed here and what is needed is to learn the survival techniques. I was preparing my lessons and had my things on the table. In fact the school where I am posted most of the teachers did not have their lesson plans*
PST1: *I noticed that teachers were mostly using the chalk and talk methods…even my mentor. When I asked her if we could try the socio-constructivist's methods, she just smiled and told me that these should be done at University and not in schools (same scenario for narrator 2 and 3).And my struggle is to use as many student–centered strategy ….even the students are so used with the traditional method of teaching that I am faced with a lot of resistance when I try using strategies like group work, roleplay …..What will I do when my tutors will come for teaching practice?*
PST3: *I find the introductory part of the lessons most difficult. Gaining students' attention and sustaining it was most difficult. Sometimes I asked questions and I did not get the answers as expected and then I am at a loss. I am worried what if I do not finish on time. I need to complete what I had planned to do.*

What was obvious from the stories was that the pre-service teachers were confronted with the proverbial clash between theory and practice at a very early stage of their SBE. 'You will learn theory during lectures and will then apply it in practice' simply does not work. Throughout their stories it became clear to us that the knowledge acquired in teacher training did not help them to handle the uncertainty, the complexity and the instability of actual situations prevailing in practice. Over the last few years a number of researchers have brought up the problem of the relationship between theory and practice. Many solutions has been proposed to overcome

these notably: making Teacher Education Programme more 'practical' ,coursework based and richer conceptions of teaching practice .However, linking theory to practice remain an elusive concept .

Application phase-the way forward;
The struggle of the novice teachers to succeed in their profession is evident in their stories.

PST 1: *The school I am posted for SBE is a co-educational institution. I feel really at a loss as I had been to a girls' school and I do not really know how to cope with the boys. I feel very uncomfortable and they never listen to me. I am trying to cope with the situation by asking help from senior teachers who talk to the boys before I*
start my lesson. I am happy that they are helping me out, but I do feel embarrassed. The different teaching strategies learnt at the university are helping to keep the boys engaged. I am also reading on how to teach in boys schools.
PST2: *Students are so used working individually, when I put them in groups there are many problems…such as the grouping itself, classroom management issues and they did not like group work , they want me to give notes and tips for the test. However I was determined to make them learn how to work in groups. So I decided to bargain and negotiate with them…'you know kind of if you do this for me I will give you some tips'…this sounded unethical …but it worked..*
PST3: *Another issue is the administrative part of the job. I never knew that I had to be very careful of students' attendance. what to do if someone is sick in the class, how to cope with situation of lateness, cheating, indiscipline, fights, bullying …This is too much as I had a lot to do with the SBE itself…I remember one day I was summoned in the Rectors office. One of the students who was supposed to be in my class was caught at the bus-stop. Now I know that to be a good teacher is not only doing lesson plans and reflecting on how to improve, but it is also knowing my students, their lives, what is troubling them….*

The above extracts clearly showed that students were able to demonstrate a practical wisdom which had emerged through reflections. Frank (2004) work revealed that such kind of practical wisdom developed during reflections cannot be fully 'articulated but is the guiding force' (p.57). Such unanswered dilemmas and uncertainties has been often referred as an inherent characteristic of the work in professional practice. The novice teachers were trapped in a theory–practice gap, which shows their restlessness. Kemmis, (2005) referred to this as a "negative space"—"a longing for something else" that is not currently present (p. 157). To some extent the SES provided a positive space that could address this void, however to be able to sustain such community of sharing is yet another debate.

7. Conclusion and what next?

In Teacher Education Programmes, preservice teachers take internship, called School Based Experience to prepare them for teaching and they are also exposed to various aspects of the profession under the guidance of both the supervisor from the University as well as and the mentor in school. Prior to their internship in schools, the preservice teachers gain experience in planning

and teaching lessons during Peer/micro teaching module where their main task is to identify their weaknesses and strengths in a simulation class. The sharing experience seminars sessions after their on-job placement provide a very rich space where students come and share their lived experiences and build a community of practice.

However from the study it is clear that most of the preservice teachers do not receive much feedback and support from their mentors. It was noted that when they tried to discuss issues with their mentors, the latter often took a defensive stance saying that they were novice teachers and they should know that what is true for the university is not necessarily applicable to real life situation. Experienced teachers routinise much of their practice, making it customary, programmed and ritualised (Eraut 2000; Oliveira, (2005).). This can be detrimental to novice teachers who need to learn from their practice and be engaged with their workplace (Abadzi, 2006).

All stakeholders in pre-service teacher education need to work together to ensure that student-teachers successfully adapt and cope with the demands of school life. The role of the mentors in coaching the student is pivotal in the process. Directing students in how to apply their college-based learning in the school and the classroom are important aspects of mentoring. Mentors should help support and encourage students to move away from the periphery and join the community of practice of the school. Mentors should act as the bridge between university (theory) and workplace (practice). The authors therefore recommend that there is an urgent need to revisit the partnership which exist between the teacher education institution and the schools/mentors.

The study has shed light on various 'idiosyncrasies' of school life which should not be ignored as these are the concerns and realities of the pre-service teachers. It is important to empower trainees to create their own practical knowledge (phronesis), knowledge that will have meaning for them and will help them to act successfully in confusing and perhaps ambiguous situations. Meetings with school mentors and rectors is crucial to help novice teacher's deal with workplace situations. These would give students the confidence and security to try out ideas, to ask questions and to seek answers and elicit their support. The scope of future research on workplace learning should be widened by investigating further how workplace learning (practice) relates to teacher education (theory) or else we teacher educators, become mere accomplices in the system and therefore help promote the 'staged drama' when we go to visit our trainees for their teaching practice sessions.

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