

What Counts as Best Practice Teaching for Teacher Educators: Theory and Practice

Aurelia Atukwase

Oslo Metropolitan University in Affiliation with Kyambogo University, Faculty of Vocational Studies,
P.O. Box 1, Kyambogo, Kampala- Uganda, aureatukwase@gmail.com +256 (0) 757 794 904

Abstract

The aim of this essay is to operationalize best practice in teaching, what it is, what it constitutes and the kind of knowledge teacher educators need in order to become best practitioners. This is because some authors often use the phrase 'best practices' whenever debating about what teachers should portray in view of preparing teacher trainees for the teaching profession. What always occupies my mind, however, is not only the exploit of the phrase, but also the way different educational researchers even go ahead to suggest the benefits of best practices in teacher education without unpacking the phrase itself. My argument here is that not until teachers as practitioners re-define the scope of teaching in view of best practice, it might continue posing challenges for novice teachers to know the kind of knowledge they need to possess if they are to showcase best practices in teaching.

Key words: Teaching, Best Practice, Teacher Educators, Teacher Education

1. Introduction

“Indeed, many educational leaders now believe that good practice or what is referred to commonly as ‘best practice’ has the capacity to overcome the impact of factors and forces outside school, including social policies, poverty and racism as well as a system of schooling in which low expectations and outcomes for certain groups and sub-groups of students are endemic”

(Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 1)

This essay does not intend to assess the credibility of the above statement; however the assertion put forth by Cochran-Smith and Lytle serves as an entry point. Much as Cochran-Smith and Lytle are quick to use the phrase ‘best practice’, they do not explicitly break it down. At the outset one may question; what is ‘good’ or ‘best practice’? In the context of this essay, best practice in teaching is used to address the ability of teachers to employ pedagogies (collaborative, activity-based, project-based and workshop learning) that trigger learners to relate and contextualize the shared knowledge to their individual situations within communities, cultures and countries. This means that as a best practice, teacher educators are expected to not only ably connect theory and practice while handling various topics, but also be in position to identify theories that inform their practices (Flores, 2016; Korthagen, 2010). Best practice teaching also includes the teacher educators’ capacity to do and guide learners to conduct educational research in lieu of improving teaching practices.

To articulate what underlies the notion of best practice in teaching and the kind of knowledge teachers need to become best practitioners, Shulman's (1986; 1987) concept of pedagogical reasoning and action offers a platform for further discussion. Shulman, in this essay, is featured as one of the distinguished scholars whose work on conceptions of teacher knowledge since 1986 has become a benchmark for most teacher education researchers as they theorize their practices in teaching and research. For instance, Gudmundsdottir and Shulman (1987) used a model of pedagogical reasoning and action proposed by Shulman in 1986, to study the role of teachers' pedagogical content knowledge in social studies and made a comparison between expert and novice teachers. Ball, Thames and Phelps (2008) in an attempt to develop a practice-based theory of content knowledge for teaching mathematics, built on Shulman's (1986) idea of pedagogical content knowledge. This essay uses the work of Shulman to articulate the kind of knowledge teacher educators need to become best practitioners not only in a Ugandan context, but also across different educational contexts.

It is argued that over the years, good teachers have been consistently characterized as wise consumers of products and selectors of research-based strategies to boost student achievement (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006). Today, however, the world is moving towards a trend whereby teachers are seen as practitioners who can effect educational change through research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Loughran, 2014; Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). In this sense, this essay urges teacher educators to always engage in research for purposes of finding out problems that often deter them from becoming best practitioners. The essay further stresses that not until teachers as practitioners re-focus their goals of teaching beyond the rhetoric of learners' performance as indicated by test scores, it then remains impossible to guard against other factors outside the classroom that affect learning. This means that teachers need to focus on teaching that is close to a democratic ideal, deliberation, debate and challenge (Rizvi, 2011; Baily, Stribling, & McGowan, 2014). To achieve this, teacher educators, may need to re-define their scope of teaching in view of best practices. The discourses put forth thus revolve on two questions: i) What should contain best practice teaching? ii) What kind of knowledge do teacher educators need to become best practitioners? This is because teachers are critical in determining the nature of pedagogies that are essential for teaching and what to teach in view of other factors that surround teaching.

2. What Should Contain Best Practice Teaching?

Despite the emerging notions on best practices in teacher education (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005), what exactly pertains to the idea of best practice teaching is a debatable question. Eminent scholars who have directed their research in the field of teacher education have recognized the importance of best practices in teaching but have not unpacked the idea of best practice teaching. This is evident with how Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) used the term best practice and proceeded to explain what it is likely to offer in view of transforming teacher education. Shulman (1987) also simply stated that "if portrayals of 'good practice' are to serve as sufficient guides to the designing of better education then emphasis has to be directed to teachers' expertise in the management of the classroom as well as ideas within classroom discourse" (p.1). Higgs as cited in McEwen and Trede (2014) also pointed to the fact that

“academics are expected to be self-regulatory, responsible for monitoring the professions’ knowledge and practices to determine, preserve, and enhance what is good practice and to remediate, replace or discard what is not good practice” (p. 148). Whether the term ‘good or best practice teaching’ is being used consciously or unconsciously, there is no lucid demarcation so far. However, what remains important for this essay is to articulate what exactly underlies the idea of best practice teaching in view of teacher education. Given that the existing body of knowledge seldomly defines the scope of best practices in teaching, teacher educators can consider the following suggestions.

2.1 Knowledge creation

Knowledge is not something that is out there ready to be gathered, but rather constructed for and by ourselves as we learn (Bransford et. al, 2005). Moreover learning from fellow teachers as to what inspires them to teach, how they relate with their students and how they create learning environments are critical in teacher education (Loughran, 2014). As a best practice, it is important for teacher educators to challenge and come up with new assumptions about teaching (Baily et. al, 2014). This means that as practicing teachers there is need to re-define the scope of teaching by questioning common assumptions about teaching (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). This has implication for teacher educators to make explicit their own theories and assumptions about best practices in teaching. In Uganda for instance, it has always been assumed that a good education system offers knowledge and skills to the learners and this has over years been proven through the ability of the learners to progress academically (Lugujjo, 2003; MoES, 2014). Yet the question that remains is: Whether teacher educators in their teaching processes create new knowledge, rely on existing knowledge or both? This is because neither process nor interpretive studies on teaching recognise teachers’ roles in the generation of knowledge (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). In view of best practice teaching, it is important for teacher educators to not only focus on equipping learners with knowledge and skills for service (MoES, 2011) but also do research as a way of contributing to the body of knowledge as well as improving their practices.

2.2 Expertise

This essay advances that expertise is a pre-requisite for best practice teaching in teacher training programmes. For instance teacher educators’ expertise should include management of classroom. This is because in most cases beginning teachers lack the ability to manage students especially when dealing with big classes. This does not mean that novice teachers should not be given an opportunity to teach but rather be guided by expert teachers on how best to create a favorable environment for learning (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Teachers’ expertise should also include their capacity to address other factors outside the classroom environment that often affect learning. This means that students ability or inability to excel in academics and life as a whole should not be judged by grades acquired after sitting a test or an examination (Cochran-smith & Lytle, 2009). This is because today accountability movements both in the south and the north (Terhart, 2004; Mjelde, 2006; MoES, 2014) focus on what students are able to score in standardized tests. Yet the environment in which teacher trainees and educators operate is pluralistic and increasingly diverse (DeMulder, Ndura-Ouedraogo& Stribling, 2009). This does not mean that this essay is advocating for extermination of an education system whereby learners are subjected to different modes of assessment.

The essay however, emphasizes the need for teacher educators to find out why some students are excelling and others are not with the aim of according one on one guidance to weak performers (Wang, Odell, & Schwille, 2008; Ingersoll, & Strong, 2011). This is because everyone has the potential to excel, but at times external factors within our surroundings deter or interfere with students' inner abilities to perform well. This implies that teacher educators need to possess some level of expertise, if they are to adequately prepare teacher trainees for the teaching profession (Toom & Husu, 2012). Bringing you back to Uganda's situation, research shows that even with the realisation that teachers' expertise has a direct influence on students' performance, in most vocational training institutions, teachers still lack the necessary pedagogical training (MoES, 2014; Nasaza, 2016). Moreover "experts notice features of problems and situations that may escape the attention of novices" (see de Groot as cited in Bransford, Derry, Berliner & Hammerness, 2005, p.42).

2.3 Equity

The existing body of knowledge provides a spectrum of examples where there has been distinctive commitment to issues of equity in teacher education (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Rizvi, 2011). For instance teacher education researchers have focused their research on gender equity in education (DeMulder, Ndura-Ouedraogo, & Stribling, 2009). This is because as a best practice teacher educators are expected to engage their students in more meaningful dialogue and action on issues related to social injustice in schools (Baily et. al, 2014). Reflecting on Uganda's situation, research shows that despite the commitment to promoting equity in education, inequalities within and among various teacher education programmes still exist. For instance whereas some trades such as carpentry, electrical and woodwork has remained male dominated, catering, nursing and secretarial continue to be known as courses for females (UNDP, 2017). The ideal here is that as a best practice, teacher educators should play a critical role in addressing gender disparities through and by engaging learners in research (Loughran, 2014; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006). This also has implications to not only teacher educators but also parents, policy makers as well as the communities of practice in view of supporting research initiatives (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

2.4 Critical reflection

This essay further observes that as a best practice, teacher educators not only harness learners' ability to think critically but also engage in critical reflection about their teaching practices (Shulman, 1987). For instance through critical reflections, teacher trainees are able to transfer what they had learned from various readings and apply such knowledge in their teaching practices (Baily et. al, 2014). This implies that as practicing teacher educators, they need to employ pedagogies that trigger learners to be critical (Fleming & Murphy, 2010) of what they receive and not just accept everything as the gospel truth. Teacher educators should instead create a learning environment that enables trainees to engage in constructive guided discussions (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). This means that a person in the teaching position should avoid giving learners already made answers. Moreover through critical reflection teacher educators not only adopt an analytical approach towards teaching but also appreciate the

social and political contexts in which they work (Kessels & Korthagen, 2001); hence changing their own practice.

3. What kind of knowledge do teacher educators need to become best practitioners?

It is fundamentally relevant to acknowledge that a lot has been documented about teachers and how to better their teaching as professionals (Baily, Stribling & McGowan, 2014; Loughran, 2014). All the same, Baily et al and Loughran hardly articulate the kind of knowledge teacher educators need in order to become best practitioners. It is important to note that unlike being a mere teacher, teacher education is rather complex since it includes, curriculum, teaching and research (Loughran, 2014). In this essay however specific attention is on teaching in view of best practices in teaching and the nature of knowledge teacher educators need to possess.

3.1 Relational Knowledge

To start with, teachers need relational knowledge in order to help learners relate and contextualize subject content to their individual situations (Baily, Stribling, & McGowan, 2014). In view of relational knowledge the essay advances the notion that possession of curriculum knowledge and at times pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1987) is not sufficient, if teacher educators cannot trigger learners to relate the taught content to real life situations. The learners can even excel when subjected to standardized tests at the end of the course, but such knowledge is likely to remain in books once not put to use at an individual level (Toom & Husu, 2012). This is true with Uganda's education system whereby even with good grades registered at primary, secondary and tertiary levels, the general graduate unemployment is still associated with lack of employable skills (Lugujjo, 2003; MoES, 2014). Yet through training learners are expected to acquire self-reliant skills (MoES, 2011). This implies that the one in the teaching position has to harness learners' ability to develop competences in relating classroom activities with the reality on ground and how they can use such knowledge to improve or change their situations. Again pointing to Uganda's situation as far as teacher education is concerned, there is limited substantial data which attests to the fact that our teacher educators are well grounded on how and when to use relational knowledge.

3.2 Knowledge of conducting research

It is also imperative to underscore that as a best practice, teacher educator's need knowledge of research (Pendlebury & Enslin, 2001). As practicing teacher educators, they not only need to know how to read, evaluate, critique and use research in their work but also have expertise in conducting research about their own practices and programmes (Loughran, 2014). In addition, teachers in practice also need to extend their research to cover learning theories and their importance in teaching (Bransford, Derry, Berliner & Hammerness, 2005). As Hernes a Former Norwegian Minister of Education was comfortable stating that 'nothing is so practical as a good theory', without going into what this means (Mjelde, 2006, p. 24). This essay, however, in relation to what Hernes once voiced out, advances that practicing teachers need to theorize their practice as part of practice itself. This means that in the process of conducting research,

teacher educators need to find out theories informing their research approaches, methods of data collection and analysis. Whereas in Uganda, most teacher training institutions hinge their teaching processes on constructivist theories (Lave & Wenger, 1991); existing literature shows that most teachers are still theoretical in their practices (Nasaza, 2016). Further still, as part of research teacher educators need to gain knowledge of educational contexts (Shulman, 1987) since they prepare learners for a diverse learning environment (Rizvi, 2011; Baily, Stribling, & McGowan, 2014). This means that through educational research, factors outside school which affect teaching can be researched on (McEwen & Trede, 2014). This again implies that as teachers in practice it is their role to come up with pedagogies that enable teacher trainees to not only learn the importance of research but instead be able to conduct research about their own practices.

3.3 Expert knowledge

Teacher educators who want to emerge as best practitioners need expert knowledge in order to classify and frame what learners should pay attention to (Bernstein, 1972). However, it is important to note that experts' knowledge should be connected and organised around important ideas of their disciplines (Bransford et. al, 2005). This means that a person in the teaching position needs to explore new ways of organizing subject content in a teachable manner. To note also is that expert knowledge should be reflected in a way teacher educators evaluate the teaching-learning processes (Bernstein, 1972; Shulman, 1987). According to Shulman (1987), evaluation not only focuses on the learners but rather on one's own teaching practices. In Uganda for instance, based on my learning experiences during the two years training in masters of vocational pedagogy at Kyambogo University, evaluation was part and partial of the teaching-learning processes. At the beginning of every academic year, as students, we would be required to evaluate previous semesters work by filling evaluation forms. Feedback from evaluation would be used to improve teaching and learning activities within the masters' programme. This essay thus asserts that there is need for teacher educators to evaluate their teaching practices by getting feedback from learners as this is likely to help them improve their practice.

3.4 Commonsense knowledge

Since commonsense no longer seems to be common, there is need for teacher educators to possess commonsense knowledge (Carr & Kemmis, 1986) or knowledge of comprehension (Shulman, 1987) about the practice of teaching. In fact such knowledge is not examinable but yet important as a best practice. For instance, it is commonsense for teacher educators to know that learners whether young or adults need to be reminded of what to do. It is also commonsense to know that adult learners approach learning with clear goals in mind as opposed to pupils (Hunzicker, 2011). Further still, it is commonsense to know that learners at times nickname or re-baptize their teachers depending on what they do in class. A good example is of students at secondary and undergraduate levels. They tend to be very stubborn to the extent of even nicknaming their teachers and if one in the teaching position lacks some degree of commonsense can always find teaching such a group of learners burdensome. Though some scholars still emphasize the need of not overlooking emotional issues as a natural part of the process of learning, teaching and being a

teacher” (Flores, 2017), this essay urges teacher educators to be rational especially dealing with learners from different social and political backgrounds if they are to become best practitioner.

1.4 Conclusion

Though I drew the concept of best practice from Cochran-Smith and Lytle’s (2009) book: “Inquiry as a Stance: Practitioner Research for the Next Generation”, I did not discuss the notion of best practice teaching in view of ‘practitioner research’. It is easy to note that practitioner research or what is commonly known as action research is instead in this essay seen as a component of best practice teaching in teacher education. A teacher educator who is keen at improving his or her own practice can indulge in practitioner research by engaging learners, school administration, community, policy makers and sometimes parents. The essay also points out that it would be necessary for teacher educators to re-define the scope of teaching in order to improve their practices and the teaching profession as a whole. This is because it is clear that world-wide everyone is beginning to recognise that teachers as practitioners are cardinal in effecting educational changes. Despite, the recognition of the role of teachers in causing significant changes in educational systems, literature is not clear on what kind of knowledge teacher educators need to become best practitioners. Therefore this essay bridges the knowledge gap by suggesting what is labeled “a must know” for all teacher educators in order to become best practitioners.

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