

New criteria needed for student teachers

Analysis

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FOR some student teachers, the compulsory practical period they spend in a school before qualifying is the highlight of their degree.

During this practicum period, which accounts for about 25% of student teachers' time during their degree, they observe practising teachers and teach their own lessons.

They get involved in school life. They experience the joys and tribulations of working with young people.

It can also be a stressful and negative time.

Student teachers may receive inadequate mentoring and support or see other teachers acting as less-than-positive role models. These student teachers can become demoralised and even give up on the profession entirely.

Enrolments into teacher education programmes have significantly increased in recent years. But research suggests that teacher shortages are still looming in some school phases and disciplines. How can the practicum period become such a universally positive experience that the profession doesn't lose teachers where they are needed most?

Creating new criteria

Schools in South Africa operate in hugely varied socioeconomic and educational conditions. Teacher education must prepare student teachers for all of these contexts. Many student teachers use their placement time to market themselves for a future post.

Placements in different kinds of schools will ensure that young, enthusiastic teachers apply for positions across the social and geographical spectrum.

But the reality is that not all schools can offer the same quality of teaching and learning to their own pupils, nor the same quality of mentoring to student teachers. It becomes necessary, then, to identify criteria that universities can use for student teacher placements.

Research by the Department of Higher Education and Training has outlined what these criteria might be. The researchers interviewed school authorities, university academics and provincial departments of education in five of the country's nine provinces to create this list of criteria.

1) **Leadership and vision** – includes char-



TEACHER SHORTAGES LOOMING: Student teachers seldom get the support and mentorship they need. PICTURE: GETTY IMAGES

acteristics like a positive ethos, a culture of teaching and learning and a caring, welcoming environment

2) **Professionalism** – this manifests in teachers who share knowledge and skills and are willing to learn

3) **Functionality** – includes a good work ethic and ethos, good internal and external channels of communication and an infrastructure, which ensures that teaching can actually happen

4) **Good teaching and learning** – knowledge of the curriculum, positive learning outcomes and practices and processes that support learning and

5) **Resilience** – the ability to prepare student teachers for different contexts and most importantly, a commitment to ongoing teacher, pupil and student teacher growth.

This list offers a good starting point for selecting schools where student teachers can be placed.

But the promotion of positive and diverse school experiences for student teachers also depends on factors beyond the school gates.

Room for improvement

Many schools complain that university education faculties don't sufficiently communicate their expectations about student teachers' responsibilities. They also don't always explain what is required from the teachers who will act as mentors.

Where communication does exist, it very rarely offers opportunities for genuine and sustained dialogue between teachers and university lecturers. They have no chance to discuss things like the purpose and design of the teacher education programme or how to judge the professional competence of a novice teacher. This minimises the chance for teacher education to combine insights from theory and practice in mutually productive ways.

Schools and universities have a strong, impressive history of being willing to support student teaching. But a range of broader policies and strategies could facilitate even more positive relationships between schools and universities. This will ultimately help to promote diverse experiences for student teachers.

These policies could include norms and standards for proper school infrastructure and interventions designed to improve the levels of

Key points

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safety and security in all communities.

Time must be set aside in the crowded school timetable for mentor teachers to meet with student teachers rather than the often rushed way in which such engagements happen.

Designated funding for transport and student accommodation would also enable students to travel beyond the comfort zones of their own neighbourhoods, or the neighbourhood of the – usually urban – university.

We need novice teachers to feel supported and enthusiastic about the professional path they have chosen.

They have to appreciate the complexity of teaching and understand what it takes to be a teacher in urban, rural, rich or poor contexts.

By building the capacity of schools and universities across the spectrum to engage actively and positively in teacher preparation, we will be making an essential contribution to a quality education system for all in our country.

Author's note: This article is based on research commissioned by the Department of Higher Education and Training as part of a national strategy to improve the quality of education in the country. The full report – Teaching and learning together: the establishment of Professional Practice schools in South Africa can be obtained from Ms Abigail Nkoe on Nkoe.A@dhet.gov.za

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