Student History teachers' personal theories on teaching: Autobiographies and their emerging professional identities

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Abstract

Philosophy of teaching statements are autobiographical reflective statements on teaching and learning. Such statements can therefore be regarded as a window into the professional identities of teachers, and are increasingly called for internationally when promotion and appointments are considered. In this paper the philosophy of teaching statements of final-year History Education student teachers, are used as the units of analysis. Although meaningful themes on their emerging professional identities as prospective History teachers materialised, in the article I argue that their philosophy of teaching statements were burdened by constraints such as a lack of experience and the educational context they found themselves in. In conclusion I contend that although the philosophy of teaching statements provided nothing more than a porthole into the multilayered emerging professional identities of the History student teachers it gave the latter the opportunity to develop a picture of themselves as History teachers.

Keywords: Philosophy of teaching; Professional identities; Teaching autobiographies; History education; Student history teachers; Theories on teaching.

Introduction

A statement of one's philosophy of teaching is a method teachers can use to clarify their goals, to reflect on their practices, to express their commitment to teaching and to grow personally and professionally. A philosophy of teaching statement is also about entails comparing the theoretical self to the actual self (Goodyear & Allchin, 2001). Such a statement usually takes the form of a brief reflective essay that provides an autobiographical insight into how one believes teaching and learning take place.

Over the past decade there has been a growing expectation for teachers internationally, especially at Higher Education Institutions, to produce a philosophy of teaching statement. In many cases it is now one of the norms for promotion. An example of this tendency is provided by Eierman (2008) who cites the *Chemical and Engineering News* in which 40% of advertisements for chemistry lecturers called for a philosophy of teaching statement to serve as part of the review of the "candidate's potential as a teacher". Consequently, the literature is replete with advocacy and how to articles, explaining what philosophy of teaching statements are and why they are important in Higher Education (Haugen, 1998; Goodyear & Allchin, 2001; Montell, 2003).

However, not all teachers at Higher Education Institutions are necessarily convinced of the value of constructing a philosophy of teaching statement, and its usefulness is contested and debated. Pannapacker (in Montell, 2003) views it as a stumbling block rather than a hoop to jump through. He argues that a philosophy of teaching statement espousing alternative ideas to that of the institution might be used against the candidate without observing him/her teach. At the same time, the critics of philosophy of teaching statements claim that in reality it reveals very little about how someone would teach. And according to Huss (2007:74): "It is not uncommon to find a teacher, professing *on paper* to advance decision-making skills, relying on fact-driven commercial worksheets provided by textbook manufacturers." Pratt (2008) forthrightly claims that a philosophy of teaching statement promises more than it delivers for an impasse exists between its articulation, the vagueness of the criteria to be followed and the form it should take. He feels that since a philosophy of teaching statement is written with a certain audience in mind a discrepancy exists between what teachers really believe versus what they think they should believe.

Justification for this argument is provided by Maddin (2002), who in a Masters Degree done at the University of British Colombia, found that many Higher Education Institutions used websites of other universities as guidelines for what a philosophy of teaching statement should entail. This resulted in a convergence of form and substance cloned from different websites on the nature of philosophy of teaching statements. Unsurprisingly some of the end products produced by teachers attached to these institutions were not individualised autobiographical essays but similar sounding philosophy of teaching statements.

The counter argument is that only through self-reflection will teachers develop and improve. For, as Amobi (2003:31) puts it, "educational beliefs and practice are symbiotically connected" It is therefore necessary to reflect on teaching, learning, goals, actions, visions and in doing so grow personally and professionally. The hallmark of any philosophy of teaching statement should therefore be its individuality which must paint a vivid picture of the intentions of the teacher (Chism, 1998). In the words of Menges and Weimar (in Goodyear & Allchin, 2001:1): "Teaching is a scholarly activity when it is purposeful, reflective, documented, and shared in an evaluative forum." Reflective self-knowledge is therefore the foremost outcome of a philosophy of teaching statement for teachers need to articulate their ideas or else self-knowledge would remain undefined and undeveloped and nothing more than "subconscious motivation for various educational decisions" (Breault, 2005:149-150). The philosophy of teaching statement should thus be part of an ongoing individualised professional enquiry and not a final arrived at document to merely satisfy an educational institution or assessor. The purpose of this article is therefore an attempt to establish if philosophy of teaching statements can be used as autobiographies of the emerging professional identities of student History teachers.

Method of research/Research methodology

Literature review

According to the index for "Philosophy of Teaching Statements" developed by Chism (1997-1998) five key areas need to be considered when developing a personal philosophy of teaching statement. These are conceptualisation of learning, conceptualisation of teaching, goals for learners, implementation of the philosophy of teaching and a personal growth plan. Each of the key areas is underpinned by sub-questions which serve to illuminate what is expected of the author of the philosophy of teaching statement. In terms of the conceptualisation of teaching and learning sub-questions relate to the meaning of teaching and learning and how teaching and learning occurs. As far as the goals for learners are concerned the sub-questions speak to what they should gain from the learning process and how this relates to the envisaged goals of the educator. In terms of the implementation of the philosophy the sub-questions deals with the implementation of and the reflection on the philosophy of teaching. The final key area, namely the personal growth plan,

foregrounds goals that were set by the educator and the strategies envisaged to achieve these (Chism, 1997-1998).

In the USA, according to Huss (2007:69): "The task of writing a philosophy of education statement is both standard fare and a rite of passage for nearly all undergraduate students…" Consequently, some teacher education programmes employ interventionist and modelling strategies to ensure that philosophy of teaching statements based on "deeper reflection" in which student teachers are guided on how to explore their own beliefs and the personal implications of their thoughts are produced (Breault, 2005). The same is not necessarily true elsewhere and the philosophy of teaching statements on which this article is based was the first time student teachers in the Faculty of Education of the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), embarked on it.

Empirical study

Sampling and data collection

In this empirical research project the philosophy of teaching statements, written by final-year student History teachers, as part of a portfolio kept in their concluding methodology module, were used as the unit of analysis. Just as an autobiography is a written account of a persons life, the philosophy of teaching statement can be viewed as a personal account of - who am I at this moment and who do I want to become. Philosophy of teaching statements at this level can therefore be regarded as a window into the emerging professional identity of History student teachers.

Working portfolios are used by teachers to document the work and reflect on their teaching. As such it is an archive of a teaching and learning process (Sunstein, 1996). The same can be said of the philosophy of teaching statement which has similar autobiographical qualities (Tierney, Carter & Desai, 1991). These two documents regularly go hand-in-hand with the philosophy of teaching statement usually being the first section of a portfolio. I have, since first teaching the History Education Methodology III module in 2005, expected student teachers to construct working portfolios as I deemed it useful in providing both the students and myself with an understanding of their development as History teachers. At the same time it requires them to think back on their teaching and learning in History Education over the duration of their BEd degree, while as a form of continuous assessment it

offered an alternative to examinations. I have, however, never expected them to include a philosophy of teaching statement.

The afore-mentioned History Education Methodology III module is the final methodology module for student teachers specialising in History Education. The module is offered in the final semester of the four year undergraduate BEd degree. It is an eight credit module allocated ten one-and-a-half hour slots on the timetable. By the time the History student teachers arrive for the Methodology III module they have already completed two eight-credit methodology modules, six sixteen-credit modules in History Education, four one-month long professional practice sessions and all of the other modules required for the BEd degree bar their final semester.

Two events encouraged me to add a philosophy of teaching statement to the working portfolio task. Firstly, I had to write one for my own promotion and found it both discomforting and worthwhile as I was forced to reflect critically on my own practice. I therefore thought that exposing my final year History Education students to the process of writing a teaching of philosophy statement would constitute a meaningful exercise on several levels. It would firstly allow me and the students to Janus-like reflect on the teaching and learning that happened in History Education over a period of four years. In addition it would provide me with some insights into the emerging professional identities of the students I had taught for four years. On the other hand, for the student teachers involved, it could act as a reflective autobiographical statement on how they viewed teaching and learning in History as well as a porthole into their own personal and professional development. The second event happened in 2006 when one of my History Education students was asked to produce a philosophy of teaching statement when he went for a job interview at a prestigious private boys' school. He could not. Consequently, for pragmatic reasons, I thought it would be a good idea for my History Education students to construct a philosophy of teaching statement so as to ensure that they were prepared when it was called for.

Whilst all of the students, during the initial explanation of the working portfolio task, knew what this entailed – they had already compiled various working portfolios both at school and university – it was the first time they had heard of a philosophy of teaching statement. Understandably a fair amount of trepidation was expressed. Resultantly the nature and purpose of philosophy of teaching statements, as well as the major debates surrounding philosophy of teaching statement construction, (Chism 1997-1998; Haugen,

1998; Goodyear & Allchin, 2001; Montell, 2003; Breault, 2005; Huss, 2007) were workshopped. Throughout emphasis was placed on the need for their honest autobiographically reflections on how they viewed themselves as prospective History teachers, and the pedagogical beliefs they held on History teaching and learning. The student teachers were therefore encouraged to view the philosophy of teaching statement as a tool to create a statement of personal belief. For that reason I urged them to explore their individual perspectives on how History should be taught and learnt, while at the same time resisting the temptation to, like Breault (2005), engineer by intervention more contextualised and sophisticated philosophy of teaching statements. To assist the History student teachers to achieve the above I allowed statements of up to ten pages and not the two pages promoted by the literature (Chism, 1997-1998; Goodyear & Allchin, 2001). My reasoning was two fold. Firstly, this was their first time in constructing a philosophy of teaching statement; and secondly, since it was not part of an application for a position, but an academic task, their thinking was not be constrained by page limitations. The students had three months to complete their statements which were to take the form of a reflective essay. At regular intervals, during lecture time, I enquired about their progress, dealt with questions and provided formative feedback.

As framework for the philosophy of teaching statement construction I provided the History student teachers with the often cited (Haugen, 1998; Goodyear & Allchin, 2001; Montell, 2003; Breault, 2005; Huss, 2007) index developed by Chism (1997-1998). The index was adapted by adding sub-questions to clarify the key areas and to address the concern expressed by Pratt (2008) that a structure is needed for a philosophy of teaching statement to be of worth. The decision to use this index was based on the fact that it is an internationally regarded guide for philosophy of teaching statement development that provides an easy to use format while asking key autobiographical questions. As such it provided a framework for a thorough interrogation of the educational beliefs of the History student teachers.

One of the key areas of concern voiced by the student teachers was related to the assessment of this task, especially since it seemed somewhat paradoxical to assess a philosophy of teaching statement for marks. To neutralise their concern, it was emphasised that they should not echo back to me my own bias and not view Chism's index as a series of questions to be answered sequentially and systematically, but to rather use it as a criterion to guide them in the

writing of a reflective philosophy of teaching statements. In an attempt to move the student teachers beyond the notion of "please and pass", to ease the fears of mark-conscious individuals and to emphasise the developmental nature of the task, I undertook to reward reflective philosophy of teaching statements which had explored Chism's index and were submitted on time with an A symbol.

Results

The final products varied significantly in both format and quality. Some History student teachers stuck diligently to Chism's broad index treating it as a set of questions to be answered, while others challenged these boundaries in constructing their philosophy of teaching statements. While several philosophy of teaching statements were clearly rushed efforts others bore the hallmark of meticulous planning and reflection.

The data for this article consisted of six philosophy of teaching statements selected from the History student teachers who completed the History Education Methodology III module at the end of 2007. In constructing this convenience sample (Macmillan, 2007) I consciously attempted to maintain a representative demographic sample of the students that had enrolled for the module. In doing so I hoped to draw on the views of a cross-section of History students in attempting to establish if philosophy of teaching statements can be used as autobiographies of the emerging professional identities of History student teachers.

As I focussed on six different philosophy of teaching statements, this study can be called a collective case study (Stake, 1995; Creswell, 1998). Using a case study approach enables the investigation of a phenomenon in its natural environment. Since the philosophy of teaching statements used in this research study was not specifically created for research purposes, but as a natural part of the History Education Methodology III module, it fits this description.

The selected philosophy of teaching statements not only proved to be a rich source of data but also emerged as an assortment of ideas and words which I had to disentangle. According to Cole and Knowles (2001) there are no recipes or prescription for the analysis of (auto)biographies. Plummer (1983) speaks of brooding and reflecting until it makes sense and feels right and the key ideas and themes starts to emerge.

The first step was therefore to rework the six selected philosophies of teaching statements into a different kind of text for it to be analysed. This was done by using the adapted version of Chism's index for philosophy of teaching statements (Figure 1). In the process of recasting the philosophy of teaching statements, features which did not seem appropriate were excluded, while I teased out common and meaningful themes, key ideas, and significant components that were seen as significant in how they had responded to Chism's index. These were retained and synthesised in accordance with a case study approach (Johnson, 1992). As a result, I was the interpreter which turned the six autobiographical philosophy of teaching statements into a first layer of accounts.

The second step was to make sense of the accounts created. I opted to deal with "what was said". The examination consisted of an interpretation of the philosophy of teaching statements in what Polkinghorne (1995) calls the "analysis of narratives" as I wanted to use the philosophy of teaching statements to produce meaningful and significant themes from the six accounts. This was followed by a cross-case analysis so as to be able to theorise from the philosophy of teaching statements. Throughout this part of the analysis process I had to guard against losing the essence of each of the reworked philosophy of teaching statements. This was particularly a concern since opting for the form of analysis as described "me" identities were sacrificed in favour of "we" identities (Brewer, 2001:116).

The methodology, as explained, allowed me to identify several significant themes on what the student teachers thought about teaching and learning History, as well as about their own emerging professional identities as future History teachers. The first theme to be identified was that teaching and learning in History must be for promoting democracy and strengthening the South African constitution. The learning environment should therefore be one where all voices and abilities are to be included. One philosophy of teaching statement encapsulated the frame of mind of the student teachers – teaching and learning in History "is to build the capacity of people to make informed choices in order to contribute constructively to society and to advance democracy." The relationship between History Education and democracy was furthermore linked by a range of associated statements such as that tolerance and respect for opinions and racial difference must be fostered, that all must be treated fairly and equally and that all rights must be recognised. At the same time the analysed philosophies of teaching were in

consensus that teaching History for democracy must happen in a classroom where teachers must have the ability to mediate controversial topics.

Strong sentiments were expressed in all the analysed statements that one of the goals of History teaching and learning should be for transformation or, "social transformation as per the NCS" as one student teacher explained. This vision was supported by referring to aspects of History Education that need transforming. One such aspect, illuminated by all six student teachers, was the depiction and representation of women in History teaching and learning. Almost predictably, using History to teach and learn about the past for racial equality, was likewise foregrounded. Under the broad canopy of social transformation, teaching and learning History was viewed as having immense power as it could learners help to deal with vague notions such as "societal identity crisis", "personal empowerment", "moral regeneration" and "to build values, morals, norms". The student teachers had some clear ideas on how they would implement their thinking on social transformation. These included teaching in poor areas, to be agents of change by teaching with care and enthusiasm, to embrace diversity and to teach a meaningful and relevant History. The goals of teaching and learning History was furthermore viewed as going beyond the knowledge of the subject in order for it to act as a vehicle that would propel democracy, citizenship and societal transformation forward.

Another theme to be identified in the analysis was the importance of the concepts of critical thinking and enquiry in the teaching and learning of History – incidentally learning outcome 1 of the History National Curriculum Statement (Department of Education 2003). Without exception the analysed philosophy of teaching statements contained beliefs which stated that the ability to question, to think freely and critically, to enquire and challenge, to develop own views and perspectives and to have opinions would be what the students would collectively expect of History learners. One student went as far as to claim that her "class will be the best class to be in, in the whole school, because it will be a thinking class and learners would be able to make their own decisions and not be gullible which is a unique skill in life…" However, none of the History student teachers provided an indication of how they were hoping to achieve these ideals related to critical enquiry and thinking.

A further theme that evolved from the analysis of the data was that the History student teachers wanted the learners to have "fun" while learning History. Almost all of the authors expressed the idea that the experience of

the History learner must be a pleasurable and learner-centered one in which they enjoy the classroom environment, and that the learning activities should be fun-filled, almost a form of edutainment with methodologies such as games and simulations predominating. All this "fun" must take place in a learner-centered and not in a teacher-centered or rote-learning manner. The latter was a related theme that emerged from the data. In fact, some of the History student teachers were quite scathing in their assessment of teacher-centeredness as a possible educational option and tended to exclude all other forms of teaching and learning in favour of learner-centredness which had permeated all the analysed philosophy of teaching statements. To achieve this single dominant philosophy of learner-centredness the History student teachers put forward a variety of methods, approaches and activities, such as for example, simulations that they would use for getting learners to "Do History" rather than "Know History."

Discussion

The analysed philosophy of teaching statements, however, failed to readily explore ideas related to learner-centredness such as facilitation and groupwork. Simultaneously, hardly any reference was made to the driving forces of the current South African schooling system, i.e. OBE, the NCS and CASS. Thus what emerged was an uncritical acceptance and preoccupation with learner-centredness as a teaching strategy while larger ideological and theoretical issues were left unchallenged.

What the philosophy statements were not silent on was what the student teachers regarded as necessary for teaching and learning in History to take place in a learner-centred manner. Well qualified, dedicated and people-orientated teachers with a sound knowledge of History and teaching methodologies and good planning and management skills who could act as role models were the dominant professional identity aspects identified by the History student teachers.

Another point of view that materialised across the analysed philosophy of teaching statements was the passion the student teachers expressed for History. They clearly viewed their emerging professional identity as being that of History teachers. However, none of the authors attempted to, in an in-depth manner, examine how this passion should translate into professional practice but rather chose to point out the value learners could gain from

studying, it such as understanding the world at various levels. At the same time strong concerns were expressed about the current status of History, the fact that unmotivated and unqualified teachers were teaching the subject, and that school managements were favouring the hard sciences rather than History.

In stating their personal objectives, the final category of Chism's index, all the students wanted to become History teachers – be it in different contexts, ranging from a university lecturer to a managerial position in a school. All bar one also wanted to further their studies, in History, which hints at ambition and life-long learning. Coupled with this, aspirations such as wanting "to be the best History teacher for my learners" were expressed. However, only one student viewed the philosophy of teaching statement as "the start of a journey", during which reflection could take place on weaknesses that needed to be improved upon so as to achieve personal objectives. In contrast the other authors presented their statements as a fait accompli. As a result, throughout the process of analysis, I struggled to distinguish between the genuine and the contrived and the sophisticated and the naïve. I found this to be the case since the philosophy of teaching statements were first and foremost written as part of a continuous assessment task with an audience in mind – me as the lecturer and assessor.

Moreover, according to Amobi (2003: 31), "As we teach pre-service and in-service teachers to reflect in action, on action and for action, it behoves us to model these processes and nuances of reflection to our students." As a result, I had to come to terms with the fact that the student History teachers were subjected to a similar university like context, teaching methods, practices and habits over four-years and could therefore unknowingly regurgitating what they had been exposed to and in the process not fully exploring their own thinking on teaching and learning in History.

Furthermore, by dint of the fact that the History student teachers had only four-months of teaching experience in schools, spread out over a four-year period, a certain disconnectedness between what is learnt in the university classroom and what is the stark reality of History teaching and learning in schools existed. Consequently, the participants were for the biggest part building their philosophies around the safe and idealistic setting of a university classroom and a History Education Methodology module vacuum in which concepts such as "Doing History", "Critical Inquiry" and "Social Transformation" is foregrounded. At the same time, lack of experience meant

that they used their university History Education modules as the benchmarks to create professional identities. Therefore, I would argue that the prospective History teachers struggled to distinguish between what they will do in schools and what they are exposed to in the History Education modules.

It is thus not surprising that Ball (in Montell, 2003: no page numbers) insists that beginner teachers do not have the capacity to write a philosophy of teaching statements claiming: "As a veteran elementary teacher, I would have to work hard to try to represent what I think and try to do..." Breault, on the other hand, does not dispute the fact that student teachers can write a philosophy of teaching statement, but feels that their efforts are often "relatively superficial statements filled with well-intentioned truisms" that often relies on platitude and not careful deliberation (2005:149). As a result he argues that it provides little clarification about teaching, learning and future professional growth. Huss (2007:69) feels even stronger and concludes that many student teachers philosophy of teaching statements are "torturous expositions and almost humorous examples of false advertising on practices of which they have a superficial allegiance and superficial understanding."

However, the thinking that experience is paramount when compiling a philosophy of teaching statements is flawed, for the arguments proposed by Ball, Breault and Huss are possibly equally true of all teachers and not only student teachers. No guarantee exists that philosophy of teaching statements compiled by experienced teachers are more truthful and reflective about professional practice and identity than those of student teachers. In addition, all teachers, including student teachers, can produce a philosophy of teaching statements for they have all been in school and university and have attended classes and done teaching and learning and must therefore have opinions about teaching and learning. The question is therefore not if student teachers can produce philosophy of teaching statements but what it reveals – in the case of this article about their emerging professional identities as History student teachers.

Beijaard, Meijer and Verloop (2004), in their survey of international research on teachers' professional identities shed ample light on the complexity of it all. Citing from the studies surveyed, the ongoing interplay between the personal and professional sides of becoming and being a teacher are emphasized. They argue that the professional identities of teachers are complex and multifaceted and take on various guises depending on the social setting and the relationship involved. Likewise, Seetal, in his work on identity

conceptualisation by History teachers in post-apartheid South Africa has found it to be "in movement, displaying discontinuities, contradictions and compliances" making it difficult to truly know them (Seetal, 2005: 209).

The same can also be said when using the philosophy of teaching statements of History student teachers to determine their emerging professional identities. At best, it allowed them to clarify their goals, to reflect on how they viewed teaching and learning in History and to express their commitment to education. And it provided a porthole into the multiple multilayered identities of History student teachers. It is therefore virtually impossible to use the philosophy of teaching statements as a yardstick to come to hard and fast conclusions or to make central claims on the professional identities of the History student teachers.

Conclusion

The conclusion that I came to was that the youthful and idealistic student teachers saw the teaching and learning of History as a means to change or uplift the lives of their learners and empower them to deal with society.

Within the context of this study it can therefore be concluded that the autobiographical philosophy of teaching statements must be seen for what they are – the efforts of History student teachers to construct their professional identities within a determined structure and context. This allowed the History student teachers to, as active agents, engage in their own professional identity construction by reflecting, integrating old and new ideas, associating with their ideas and by presenting it in an autobiographical essay. These were important steps in developing an intellectual picture of who they are, what they want to become as teachers and what beliefs they held about History teaching and learning and themselves as History teachers.

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