Interrogating student and lecturer perspectives of professional knowledge delivery in the initial teacher-education programmes in South Africa within a context of quality

In South Africa, the quality of teachers working in our current education system has been put under a looking glass by the Department of Education (DoE) (2006) since the systemic results, indicating national literacy and numeracy levels in primary schools, were issued. These results place South African literacy and numeracy skills far below those of many countries in the rest of Africa. This has been viewed by the South African school sector as one of the symptoms of the breakdown in the culture of learning in the education system in our country. As a result, the South African school system has been characterised as a ‘high-cost, high-participation, low-quality system’ Taylor (2008). Taylor (2008) concludes from his research that the challenges which undermine effective teaching and learning in South African schools include the quality of teacher knowledge and teaching practices. The relationship between teacher quality and teacher productivity is key to the development of a high-quality educational system. It is argued that teacher quality impacts greatly on student achievement, which, in turn, impacts on the development and transformation of that society. Rowe (2003) and Morrow’s (2007) key findings in their research on educational success indicate that ‘what matters most’ is the quality teacher. The historical and social change in South Africa has pioneered transformation with regard to curriculum change and has redefined the aims of teacher education in this country. Over the last few years we have been faced with a myriad of changes in policy frameworks that are supposed to guide change within the educational system, as well as within teacher education (Guskey, 2002:381-391). This study, therefore, aims to interrogate the missing links between teacher education institutions and pre-service teachers’ experience, while incorporating school and learner needs. Since quality is the critical factor, there is an urgent need to re-conceptualise how we can prepare a generation of teachers equipped to meet the demands of the 21st-century student. The key objective in this study, therefore, is the interrogation of the following components in the initial teacher-training programmes in South Africa: • Professional development and knowledge of teachers. • Delivery of that knowledge from a pedagogical perspective. • Quality of current teacher-training programmes. This research project is geared towards understanding the challenges that face final-year teacher-training students as they prepare themselves to enter the ‘real world of teaching’. The study cross-examines the quality of learning and teaching in higher education institutions, the pedagogy applied and the degree of its success. In order to examine the initial teacher-training programmes there was a need to interrogate: • students’ perceptions of the quality of their training; • lecturers’ responses to the quality of training provided; and • pre-service teachers’ notions of the quality of the ‘product’ they experience in the field during practice teaching and in their experience with newly qualified teachers. The search for an alternative pedagogy, which aims to promote the transformation and reconstruction of education in South Africa, has placed this research project within a conceptual framework of critical pedagogy, which holds the view that learning is self-generated and not just accessible. The theoretical underpinnings were derived from the works of Paulo Freire and Henry Giroux. This project is situated within an interpretivist paradigm and is qualitative in nature. A sample of four faculties of education, nationally, has been used in the project. Semi-structured interviews and focus-group interviews were used to collect data from all the fourth-year BEd students and their lecturers at each of the four universities, as well as from in-service teachers.
who host students during practice teaching sessions. The interview questions were concerned with the delivery of the teacher-training programmes and whether the needs of students were being met with regard to their training. Students commented on the development of the following areas: delivery of knowledge, acquisition of adequate teaching skills, and their readiness to enter the teaching field. The findings of this research indicate that students, lecturers and in-service teachers believe that many components within the current teacher-training programme need to be transformed. This could be attributed to, amongst others, the inadequate pedagogical practices used in knowledge delivery, lack of actual classroom experience, and the ineffective organisation and supervision of teaching practice which results in students feeling ill-equipped to enter the teaching arena. These impact the quality of teachers who are exiting the current system. Suggestions to improve the organisation of teacher experience, the on-going professional development of teacher educators, and mentorship of teachers, as well as the development of recruitment and selection criteria for students wishing to enter teacher education are made.