

Straddling the South African Two-School System During the COVID-19 Pandemic—A Reflective Narrative of How One Student Teacher Traversed the Changing Education Landscape

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Abstract: The South African education system has been aptly described as a “two-school” education system. This description refers to one of the many legacies of apartheid, which resulted in one well-resourced school system that offers high quality education to one sector of the population, with the other under-resourced and generally struggling to achieve the same results. As part of my teacher training, I have worked in both systems. Straddling this dichotomous education system during the COVID-19 pandemic has given me valuable insights and has significantly contributed to how I envisage my career as a teacher. Through this narrative reflection I provide an account of key moments during my teaching practice module that contributed to my altered worldview. Entering the teaching profession during the COVID-19 pandemic proved very challenging, but ironically, it was this disruptive entry that has changed my worldview so that I now feel drawn to working in under-resourced schools.

Keywords: COVID-19, teaching practice, novice teacher, mentoring, under-resourced schools

This work is a critical reflection on my experience as a Foundation Phase student teacher. I (Sars) explain how I prematurely entered the teaching profession during the COVID-19 pandemic and how my initial ineptitude was overcome with the support of experienced teaching professionals in an under-resourced school in South Africa. I also lay bare my initial apprehension to work in an under-resourced school and explain how my experience during the COVID-19 pandemic has shifted my perspective so that I now feel drawn to working in under-resourced schools.

This I do by using the reflection in action model by Killion and Todnem (1991). I have found this model particularly helpful as it facilitates examining past and present actions to generate knowledge that will inform future actions. Reflecting on different moments during my journey as a student teacher I offer the reader detailed vignettes of different moments in my training that shaped my perspective on teaching in under-resourced schools in South Africa.

Where It All Started

My introduction to the teaching profession was as a result of utter frustration in my previous career in the hospitality industry. I was working as a reservationist for a hotel chain but had become increasingly disillusioned when I looked at the image that the hotel chain portrayed and the culture that I, as an employee, experienced. The lack of psychological safety in some industries, including the hospitality industry in South Africa, has been well-documented (Nzozo, 2016), and I reached a point in my career where I seriously considered leaving the industry.

During the same time my maternal uncle (second author, Laloo), who resides in Australia, was visiting our family. As he has a degree in industrial psychology, I confided my unhappiness with my job, and he counseled me on my career. We explored my interests, values, and aspirations through the process of mind mapping. This process involves identifying a central idea—in my case, unhappiness with my position at the time—and identifying different ideas that would allow you to reach your goal—in my case, happiness in my chosen career (Pollitt, 2003). After going through this process I came to realize that I wanted to enter the teaching profession. The following year I enrolled for a Bachelor of Education (Foundation Phase Teaching) degree at the University of the Western Cape.

As a mature student, my study experience was possibly different from those of my contemporaries. I was also the mother of a young child, and balancing my studies with raising a child was of utmost importance to me. Perhaps it was my perception that I was at a disadvantage to the younger students in my class which motivated me to work very hard at balancing my personal and student life. This balancing act certainly stood me in good stead, as after my first year of study, I was awarded the Dean’s Merit List Certificate for Outstanding Performance in the Faculty of Education at the University of the Western Cape. With this validation, I felt I made the right decision to return to academia to fulfill my aspirations to become a teacher.

My First Introduction to the Teaching Profession

The teaching practice module, as part of the teacher training curriculum, provides students with an early glimpse into the teaching profession. In South Africa, because of past discriminatory government practices, public schools range from affluent ones that are well-resourced to schools in disadvantaged communities with very limited resources. This dichotomous education system has been aptly described as “the two-school system” (Spaull, 2013, p. 438). To equalize education is not possible in the short term, and Robinson (2014) argues that student teachers need to be prepared to function in any of the variety of contexts in this dichotomous education system.

During my first and second years of teaching practice, I was placed at two well-resourced schools. I thoroughly enjoyed my teaching practice at these schools. I enjoyed that the schools were well-resourced, had lower student–teacher ratios, and had learners who were generally better equipped (Spaull, 2013). I did not experience the difficulties that my contemporaries, placed on the “other side” of the education divide, were experiencing. I was doing very well as a student and having experienced teaching in well-resourced schools made me aspire to work in this well-resourced subsector of the education system.

Enter COVID-19: An Early Teaching Opportunity

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely impacted the resources of many schools (Soudien et al., 2021). As a result of many teachers being infected with the coronavirus, there was suddenly an increase in vacancies at schools, and many principals were willing to employ senior education students to fill the void created by teachers who had succumbed to the coronavirus. This was a difficult time for me, as teaching at universities had also moved to online learning platforms

(van der Merwe, 2021), a shift for which I was unprepared. The pandemic also impacted my financial position negatively, and with the sudden increase in teaching positions and the fact that my university classes had moved online, it became imperative for me to consider gaining employment. By this time the Department of Education had called for students to register their interest in teaching positions. After reconsidering my dire financial situation, the new form of online teaching at my university, and the abundance of teaching opportunities, I registered my interest in a teaching position. Soon after registering my interest, I received an invitation for an interview at an under-resourced school. Compared with the schools that I had been exposed to in the early stages of my studies, I immediately envisaged the challenges that I would experience at this school. With some trepidation, I accepted the invitation to an interview, and later the position.

The impact of COVID-19 on South African schools was swift. The first registered case of COVID-19 in South Africa occurred on March 5th, 2020 (Mahaye, 2020), and by December 2020 I had applied for a vacant position. I started my first teaching position, albeit unqualified, in February of 2021 as a Grade 3 educator. My initial trepidation gradually turned to elation when I realized that I now had my first opportunity as a teacher. I developed an eagerness to apply the knowledge that I had gained over the past three years as a student.

The first month was very challenging. My first response was that the university had not prepared me for the challenges of teaching practice in our poorer communities. The reality was in fact more complicated than this simplistic thinking. The COVID-19 pandemic can be described as the “perfect storm” in education as it affected all aspects of the teaching system, including the training of teachers, the resources at schools, and the teaching and learning of learners. Face-to-face contact at universities came to an abrupt end, classes moved to online platforms, students’ training was severely impacted, and schools were suddenly deprived of experienced teachers that had succumbed to the pandemic. Suddenly there was an abundance of positions, and the allure to enter the teaching profession, albeit as an unqualified teacher, was very big. Upon reflection, I however realize my ineptitude in the classroom was because I had stepped into a position prematurely.

I had to be a teacher and a student simultaneously if I wanted to be successful. My sleep patterns were disrupted as I was up most nights having to prepare lessons and attend to my online studies. Shortly after my appointment, I had a visit from the curriculum advisor. The assessment was very stressful, and in hindsight, I now see that I was indeed ill-prepared for my new profession. I dealt with this situation by rationalizing that this was my first teaching position and that I was not doing too badly. I however realize that this was a result of a confluence of factors brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. I had not mastered all my academic work owing to the pandemic and was ill-prepared to work in schools with fewer resources and higher learner–teacher ratios, and where the learners had a backlog because of the COVID-19 pandemic. I was now working on the “other side” of Spaull’s (2013) two-school system and needed help. I received some constructive feedback from the curriculum advisor and had to work on my shortcomings for the follow-up visit.

An Early Lesson for Me

As I further immersed myself in my teaching practice I started to notice some peculiarities that I did not expect, as in hindsight I realize that I had come to the school with preconceived ideas. While the learners at this school were from a low socio-economic environment, contrary to what I expected, these children were always well-behaved and wore their school uniforms with pride. The children's behavior was not much different from that I had encountered in the well-resourced schools. While my observations of the children's school uniform and behavior may seem superficial, I do believe adhering to the uniform code of the school demonstrates that these children were proud of their school. I also noticed their academic performance. While the school could not be compared with the well-resourced schools I had been exposed to, I noticed that approximately 60 percent of the learners in my care were academically strong and could read and write well for their grade level. I also noticed the high participation rate of parents. Parents were generally very involved in their children's learning and regularly communicated with me. Although this school did not have the advanced distance teaching and learning platforms of the well-resourced schools, parents communicated with me via simple technologies such as WhatsApp or telephone calls. I began to look beyond the façade and noticed the culture of the school and the many positive things that the school did with its limited resources. The school, for instance, had after-school mathematics and reading programs to assist learners who required additional support, and employed a part-time learning support teacher to assist with learning interventions. I began to see the glass as being half full, instead of half empty.

My Final Teaching Practice and a Further Opportunity

Unfortunately, my temporary employment at the school ended abruptly when a qualified teacher became available for the position. I however still needed to complete my final teaching practice module, and again found myself at the crossroads—the crossroads of the two-school education system. This time my decision was not a difficult one, as I was now determined to continue my teaching practice at a similar school—a school on the lower socio-economic scale of South Africa's two-school education system.

Working at the previous school had such a profound impact on me, and I realized that the preconceived ideas I held of these schools were unfounded. I saw first-hand the challenges that these schools had, and I felt compelled to be part of the solution and therefore chose another school in a lower-income community. Working in under-resourced schools has now become a matter of principle for me. While searching for available schools, I noticed an opportunity in the area where I had grown up, a low socio-economic area. I felt driven to this school and was accepted to complete my teaching practice at it.

The first day at the new school was a very significant day for me. On my way to the school, I had to drive past my late grandmother's house. As I drove past the house, the house where myself and second author Laloo had spent some of our formative years, I was filled with emotion. I have driven past this house on many occasions, but on this day the house had a deeper meaning for me. I felt like the house was a symbol of my family's struggle to escape poverty. While my background has always been part of my consciousness, for the first time I

truly realized that I too could have been one of these children. At that moment, I knew I had made the right decision to do my teaching practice at this school. I wanted to work in the less privileged side of the “two-school” education system. My teaching practice has now become part of a bigger narrative, as I felt that through my studies and placement at these schools, I was doing a form of philanthropy where I contributed to the development of children in an area that I, through education, was able to escape.

My mentor teacher was very welcoming, and from the start, I felt I was benefiting from her vast experience and insights into teaching practice. She often joked and said that I was teaching her some things too. I really appreciated her collegial approach. COVID-19 had also impacted my mentor teacher, as her sister had succumbed to the disease two weeks before my mentoring program had begun. Although this must have been a very difficult time for her, she was very professional and I could not fault her mentoring. She gave me every opportunity to succeed, and during this time I felt more like her colleague and not like a student teacher. I would assist her with daily screening of learners on arrival and departure and even attend planning meetings with the other Grade 3 teachers.

The backlog that schools were experiencing as a result of the pandemic (Ramrathan, 2020) was palpable in my classroom as well. To overcome this backlog, my mentor teacher guided me to assess learners, conduct diagnostic tests, and teach lessons. This hands-on experience accelerated my learning.

During this time, however, I noticed a contrast between the two schools where I had worked. At this school, more children were struggling with reading and mathematics, compared with the previous school. I thought this was because the school was in an even more impoverished area, but like at the previous school, the staff at this school were simply getting on with the job at hand. For example, the school participated in the National School Nutrition Programme, and although the school had an average learner–teacher ratio of 37:1, all staff members contributed equally to the distribution of meals to the learners. I admired the staff’s passion to make a difference in the lives of these children. Despite the problems these teachers encountered, their great team spirit made it so easy to work with them. I continued to see the glass as half full, and not half empty.

The New Normal in Teaching

Many scholars have offered suggestions on how education authorities should respond to the impact of COVID-19. At the beginning of the pandemic, these responses ranged from scrapping the academic year, promoting all learners to the next level, or only focusing on the core knowledge that learners needed (Jansen, 2020). Other authors have suggested that the pandemic presents less of a challenge, as learners spend 12 years at school and that the shortfalls could be covered during subsequent years (Ramrathan, 2020). I felt the learners for whom I was responsible did not have the luxury of waiting to catch up in subsequent years. They were already at a disadvantage, and we needed to do what we could despite our limited resources. I now felt committed to the course.

To control the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools have introduced different aspects of social distancing and disease control. These include improved hygiene, wearing of masks, monitoring playgrounds, and so forth. While these do not adversely affect teaching and learning, one form of disease control that does impact learners is the introduction of alternate school days. Spaul (2013) underscores that there are many inequalities in the South African primary school system. This author argues that higher numbers of learners per class in lower socio-economic schools contribute to the inequality in our school system. At our school this is certainly the case, but continuing to teach a class with high numbers of students during a highly contagious pandemic would be adding the proverbial fuel to the fire and would certainly contribute to the spread of the disease. Introducing this practice at our school was therefore very important. As a novice teacher, I however realize that this measure comes at a cost, disadvantaging our learners even further. Learners now attend school every other day. This shortened school week created considerable pressure on both teachers and learners.

In class, I could see the impact of this curtailed school week in an environment where blended learning was not possible, as learners had no access to technology. The limited teaching time also tested the skills of teachers, as they had to find strategies to recover work lost because of the alternate school day system. These pressures also influenced educators, who, for instance, now had very little time for revision before assessments. While much of the focus during the pandemic was on the heroic work of frontline medical workers, I felt our teachers were also deserving of recognition for their efforts as they continued to provide teaching to our learners and guidance to novice teachers, like myself, amidst the pandemic (Padmanabhanunni & Pretorius, 2021). More importantly, there was stress on the learners, already at a disadvantage.

As part of my training, I attended several workshops with the education department where we were constantly advised that there would be a three-year gap in the education of learners owing to the COVID-19 pandemic (South African Broadcasting Corporation, 2020). I however thought that this would not hold true for the well-resourced schools in our education system. Because of their access to technology, their much lower learner–teacher ratios, and so forth, many affluent schools will possibly not experience this backlog. Their resources are such that they are more likely able to practice social distancing and teaching and return to normal. However, schools in poorer areas are not able to do this. Returning to the full class complement will breach social distancing protocols, and the school could become a super spreader of COVID-19. I began to understand the enormous challenges that poor schools in the “two-school” education system experienced and how COVID-19 exacerbated the problem. My resolve to continue teaching in lower socio-economic schools did not abate.

My Final Evaluation as a Learner Teacher

For my supervised lesson I was evaluated by a retired school principal. By now I had lost the ineptitude I experienced during my first assessment. I had been guided by experienced and skilled teachers and felt very confident about being assessed. My experience in teaching during a pandemic also made me more resourceful. Knowing that these learners were struggling, I combined my mathematics supervised lesson with a cha-cha-cha song to draw learners’ attention and to integrate direction in mathematics. I taught the learners decomposing and integrated

adding three-digit numbers. The learners found the lesson very interesting, and I could see they truly enjoyed it.

I then gave them flash cards to make numbers in hundreds, tens, and units. Then we moved from the known to the unknown. I gave them one example of how to add numbers by units, tens, and hundreds, and asked them to do a few sums in their workbooks. The learners interacted well, and I felt in control of my lesson. My learning had now come full circle and I felt that I was ready to manage a class independently. The supervisor as well as my mentor teacher gave me positive feedback, and my first supervised lesson was a resounding success. I had a baptism of fire entering the profession under the difficult circumstances caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, but thanks to the support of the teaching professionals that mentored and guided me I was on my way to becoming a qualified teacher.

Soon after this, I had to be assessed on a second lesson. This time I had to present a phonics English Home Language lesson with “ey-sounds.” The success of my first supervised lesson gave me the courage to be even more resourceful, and I started the lesson with a well-known song, “Circle of Life” from *The Lion King* (1994). I instructed the learners to listen to the words carefully and told them that this was one of my childhood favorite songs. I then flashed sight words with which learners were familiar and asked random learners to answer and build sentences with the words. Then I read a short story and asked the learners which sound they thought we were discussing. I then showed the learners pictures of certain words like “hockey,” “chutney,” and “monkey,” and asked them to match the picture with the word. I ended the lesson by asking the learners to fill in the missing words so they could identify them in a sentence. I had lost the ineptitude I had experienced six months previously and felt quietly optimistic that I could now hold my own in this school environment of which I was part.

A Validation of My Teaching Practice

During the last week of my teaching practice the principal offered me a further short-term placement to teach in the Intermediate Phase for four months. I felt conflicted. Although I was very happy to have been asked, I was concerned that he had asked me to teach a higher grade. The principal however reassured me that he had the utmost faith in my abilities and that he was confident that I would be able to do the task. He told me that I had now learned the principles of teaching and that I would be able to apply these in other grades as well. Although the work content would be different, the principles that I had learned during my teaching practice module would ensure that I would be able to teach the higher grade. He told me that owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, these learners still needed considerable revision and assistance with bridging the gap between the Foundation Phase and Intermediate Phase.

I was very nervous but preferred to view the fact that the principal had asked me to assist with teaching at the school as a validation of my teaching abilities. He would surely not have asked me if he did not think I was able to do the job. I felt honored to have been asked, and so I agreed to take my second teaching position, albeit for only four months. I have had to find ways to balance my workload with the remaining study period at the university. My balancing act seems to work, and I have grown used to the idea of attending to my university studies in the late hours

of the night, something that is now possible owing to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although not an ideal start, my teaching career has begun.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted many aspects of our society, including our education system. As a result of the impact of the pandemic on primary schools, I was afforded an opportunity to work as an unqualified teacher. I was however ill-prepared, and the premature entry into the profession at two under-resourced schools was indeed very challenging for me. Ironically it was these very challenging circumstances that contributed to my changed worldview. A worldview where I am now drawn to working in under-resourced schools.

During my Foundation Phase teaching module, I found myself working in the community where I was born and raised, and reflecting on my childhood, I found that I was now highly motivated to contribute to the development of the children in my care. The Teaching Practice is the final stage in the training of teachers, as it allows students to enter the classroom under the guidance of an experienced teacher and subject advisers. My experience occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, and although at times very stressful, my overall experience was very positive, as I was guided by highly skilled professionals who are passionate about their vocation. I was given the opportunity to contribute, and from an early stage in my interaction with my mentor teacher, the principal, and other teachers at the school, I felt that I was given every opportunity to succeed in this module, which paved the way for my entry into the profession. I am honored to have had the opportunity to conduct my Teaching Practice module on the “other side” of Spaul’s (2013) two-school system and overcome the challenges of a pandemic to boot.

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