

BLENDING RESEARCH WITH DIDACTICS IN THE BUSINESS STUDIES CURRICULUM IN ONE UNIVERSITY IN SOUTH AFRICA: STUDENT TEACHERS' AND LECTURERS' REFLECTIONS

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ABSTRACT

A research component is integrated into the curriculum of subject specialisation method to equip and skill the student teachers in conducting action research in their future practice as teachers. This inclusion of a research aspect of the didactics module promotes classroom research and teaching methodology that is designed to improve teaching practice and student learning. This study examines the reflections of student teachers and lecturers on blending the research component of Business Studies Didactics curriculum in one university in South Africa. Participatory qualitative observation techniques were used to generate data from one Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) Level 3 class of 2020. Qualitative interviews were further conducted with three student teachers and two lecturers. The study sought to identify and categorise 1) lecturers and pre-service teachers' experiences and reflections in blending research with the curriculum; and 2) interrogating the university's framework on rolling out the research aspect of Business Studies Didactics. The research established that the curricular implementation neglected the practical part of the research within the Business Studies Didactics module. Further, students are disadvantaged by this university omission; and there is no capacity on the part of lecturing staff. There is no internal control system to detect deviation from the course objectives as well as a lack of framework guiding the common implementation of the research-related curriculum. This study recommends that the case university should implement staff needs analysis; reinforce staff development programmes and internal control systems.

Keywords: Business Studies Didactics, Participatory Action Research, Project-Based Learning, Student Learning, Teachers' Practice

INTRODUCTION

This paper reports on a study that explored the reflections of student teachers and lecturers on blending a research component of Business Studies Didactics curriculum in one university in South Africa. The student teachers and lecturers were involved in the teaching of and learning towards a Bachelor of Education programme (B. Ed). The B. Ed programme is an “*initial teaching qualification for candidates to be registered as fully qualified professional educators in schooling system.*” The qualification accredits the development of professional competence informed by sound knowledge and understanding of their area of specialisation and of educational theory. Business Studies Didactics is one module in the

Teacher Education Programme offered by the School of Education. The School of Education offers educational programmes that have a component of didactics that generates a synergy between disciplinary and pedagogical knowledge of the trained teachers. To meet the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications (MRTEQ), the case university introduced a research component in its subject disciplinary speciality and Business Studies Didactics in particular.

The research component is an integrated part of the Business Studies Didactics curriculum that is aimed at equipping and skilling student teachers in conducting action research in their future practice as teachers. Business Studies Didactics Module and other Didactics modules promote the blending of classroom-based action research within the curriculum. Although, the approved B.Ed. programme has integrated the research component in the curriculum for the Didactics subjects, this aspect is neglected. Academics ignore this research component and follow the traditional curriculum that has not infused the research component. This leaves student teachers without subject related research experience and competencies required for their success in teaching and developing novel strategies. Instead, few students get exposed to discipline-related research only when they register for postgraduate programmes. For the majority of students who do not enrol for postgraduate programmes, they are left without and the skills and competence for classroom-based and assessment data to improve their teaching practice and enhance student learning. Research further shows that “*undergraduate research exposure leads to increased recruitment into academia, enhanced employability and improved postgraduate research*” (Murdoch-Eaton et al., 2010).

The teacher programme that denied pre-service teachers the opportunity to engage in action research failed to tap into the many benefits of such teacher engagements. Kizilaslan & Leutwyler (2012) outline such benefits emerging from action research, namely:

1. It creates space for pre-service teachers to critically reflect on their practice; develop their voices and perspectives on teaching;
2. It creates constructive learning space for pre-service teachers; in finding solutions to their questions raised during their teaching services;
3. It offers spaces for being real teachers and contributes to teachers’ professional development; and
4. It provides a platform for lifelong learning to professional teachers.

This integration of the research component in the curriculum has become an international phenomenon. The United States of America initiated this course of action in 1998. The Boyer Commission recommended research in introductory courses that could engage students and increase their interest in the subject (Russell et al., 2015). As a result, in the undergraduate programmes, an integrated course-embedded research experience (ICURE) was initiated to redress this problem. Furthermore, in 2011 a call was made to “*introduce the scientific process to students early, and integrate it into all undergraduate courses.*” In the Gulf Medical University in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) research was integrated in the medical programme. Sreedharan (2012) highlights that, “*the implementation of a research component is more important at a student level as it helps to develop a judicious insight into their academic and clinical practice.*” These studies recommend that the teaching personnel need to possess competency required in the integration of the research component within the curriculum.

This study aims at contributing to debates on the significance of a research component [or action research] into teacher education. Furthermore, the paper contributes to the field of action research in education. The study examined the reflections of student teachers and

lecturers on the blending of a research component of Business Studies Didactics curriculum in one university in South Africa. In order to attain the aims of this study, two research questions were formulated, namely:

1. What are lecturers and pre-service teachers' experiences and reflections in blending research with the curriculum?
2. Does the university have research framework for implementation of this aspect in the didactic module?

BACKGROUND

In one study conducted in the University of Wollongong (UoW), attempts were made to build research capacity among medical students, through blending of the teaching of research and critical analysis of work integrated learning (WIL) (Mullan et al., 2014). The study found that the research capability among students was positively influenced by the provision of a research-based integrated curriculum (Mullan et al., 2014). Although one study found that some research capacity approaches failed to fully integrate research evidence into teaching practice, improving student learning and impacting policy (Albert & Mickan, 2003), it remains important that research capacity is built among students, and Business Studies pre-service teachers in particular.

The building of such research capacity has been a topical issue in university programmes; and in particular, Health Sciences for decades (Mullan et al., 2014; Boninger et al., 2010; Brew, 2013; Laskowitz et al., 2010; Albert & Mickan, 2003). This type of the research was first blended in the Duke Curriculum in 1959 with the aim of developing students “*into physician leaders through a rigorous scholarly experience in bio-medically related research*” (Laskowitz et al., 2010).

According to Kizilaslan & Leutwyler (2012) teacher education in different countries realizes the importance of “*the notion of teacher as researcher and producer of knowledge.*” Integration of an action research component is not aimed at changing teachers into researchers; however, action research is “*a tool that enables teachers to constantly improve their teaching practices and make their work more professional*” (Kizilaslan & Leutwyler, 2012; Lamb & Geiger, 2012). The story of Professor David Kember portrays his commitment to developing the teaching profession and teacher competence using action research. After his realization of the importance of action research in improving teaching practice, he “*applied for a cross-institutional grant of HK \$13 million*”, this funded more than fifty Action Learning Project (ALP) in Hong Kong (Kember, 2000). The Kember project achieved its intended outcomes; namely, learning how to conduct AR, developing reflective practice, a student-centred teaching approach, collaboration between peers, changing attitudes, and improved teacher practice (Cortes et al., 2021).

The Norms and Standards for teachers prescribe the role of teachers [including academics] as curriculum designers and implementers. It is known that teachers engage in uncovering the potential of curriculum materials so that these can be reconstructed for particular students and for specific classroom situations (Ben-Peretz, 1990). To engage in this activity, requires practising teachers who are vested in the research processes apart from possessing some deep disciplinary and pedagogical competencies.

When the lectures are blamed for not carrying up this mandate of blending research within the Didactics curriculum, they exhibited challenges of research capacity. Apart from academic and pedagogical competencies, lecturers are required to have high levels of competencies in teaching subject-specific research. These competencies are crucial for successful curriculum design and implementation of this module. Research shows that “*the*

curriculum development or design work done by teachers goes far beyond selecting and redesigning curriculum plans; it involves enacting those plans in the classroom with students” (Remillard, 2005).

PROBLEM STATEMENT

There is scant literature on research in undergraduate teacher education programmers. The main focus of recent research in teacher education has been on work integrated learning (WIL) in the main or workplace-based learning. A study conducted by Phuthi (2012) identifies that workplace-based learning enhances quality academic practices. However, the value of using and analyzing classroom data collected during authentic classroom interaction during WIL for improved teaching practice and improved student learning has been overlooked in this study.

Lack of success in upgrading knowledge and skills of pre-service teachers in undertaking classroom research minimize their future chances of integrating classroom research into curriculum and material design and implementation. Furthermore, failure to teach the fundamentals of research cripples future research capacity in their postgraduate studies.

The rationale for probing this topic and examining the reflections of student teachers and lecturers on the blending of the research within the Business Studies Didactics curriculum in one university in South Africa is to close this gap in teacher education and training.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Curriculum of Business Studies Didactics

The case university rolls out the Category 3- Bachelor of Education programme from 2017; and in 2020, it was in the third year of the roll-out of the new programme. The level 3 Business Studies Didactics content covers the use of pedagogical technologies and strategies; and basic classroom research, reflective practice and action research. The level 3 students are immersed within action research, with the purpose of providing knowledge and skills required for them to conduct action research, and classroom research or teaching experiments.

Action Research

Action research is an approach to research that involves systematic enquiry conducted by practitioners aimed at improving the practice. Action research evaluates and critically reflects evidence gathered during classroom teaching and learning; and subsequent student and teachers’ interviews. Action research in the classroom refers to “*recognized and approved ways of carrying out self-appraisal through evaluating any or all of the activities which make up classroom practice*” (Macintyre, 2012). According to Kizilaslan & Leutwyler (2012) action research is a tool that enables teachers to constantly improve their teaching practices and make their work more professional.

In the case university, Business Studies Didactics curriculum submits that action research should be undertaken for improved teaching practice and student learning. And

classroom research or teaching experiments methodology is one of action research strategies promoted. The teacher programme of this institution complies with the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualification Policy and global movement as expounded by David Kemper (2012) through the use of action research in solving school-related aspects. The aim of developing pre-service teacher's research skills is to prepare them to become research teachers in their different disciplines and to tackle any challenges from any aspect of the school. On this background, we define action research as systematic inquiry aimed at finding the best solution for school leadership, teacher professionalism and practice, teacher development, learner behaviour and discipline, classroom teaching, and student learning.

Teaching Experimental Methodology and Classroom Research

Teaching experiment methodology is the classroom action research that takes place during teaching and learning interactions, with the purpose of establishing students' understanding of concepts and learning processes. The primary purpose of the teaching experiment methodology is for researchers to experience firsthand students' content understanding and reasoning (Steffe et al., 2000). Through teaching experiments, researchers and practitioners strive to understand how students assimilate and use new concepts and procedures in Business Studies; and how students' concepts change as they are influenced by various instructional methods (Engelhardt et al., 2004). Research data is collected from several teaching and learning episodes; with set objectives and research questions; accompanied by students' and teachers' interviews.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study is both conceptual and empirical. The study was premised within a constructivist interpretivist paradigm. The interpretivist and constructivist paradigm and qualitative research were used in this study because of their connectedness in establishing deep meanings arising from an exploration of a specific research conundrum. The study sought to get in-depth knowledge from natural settings, by extracting data from classroom contexts and by conducting semi-structured interviews with practitioners. Interpretivism and qualitative research approaches allowed a space for in-depth interviews and document analysis.

This paradigm and approach allow the researchers to use three episodes of class teaching and interview techniques for collection of data from B. Ed. Level 3 class of 2020. Qualitative interviews were further conducted with five pre-service students and two lecturers.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Data was coded, categorized and themes were formulated using thematic analysis. Narrative analysis was used to complement data from thematic analysis.

The research participants' names were concealed as required by anonymity in research ethics; instead, pseudonyms were used. Pseudonyms used for students are Karabo, Kgaugelo & Malesela; and lecturers are Selogadi & Hlabirwa. Five research themes, through

which the research findings are organized, emerged. These are, the curricular implementation neglected and ignored the practical part of the research within Business Studies Didactics module; students are disadvantaged by this omission in curriculum implementation; and there is apparently no capacity on the part of lecturing staff.

Neglecting the Practical Part of Research within Business Studies Didactics Module

This theme, as well as the other three, emerges from the research question, “*what are lecturers and pre-service teachers’ experiences and reflections on blending research with the curriculum*”? The findings indicate the practical component of the research within Business Studies Didactics module is ignored and neglected by lecturers in the university in question. It was found that the theory part is at least dealt with, even if it does not make sense if it is not followed by planned practical sessions. Karabo explains:

“The research module is not taught as prescribed. Instead, the lecturers focus on the introduction of research like in other generic modules. In my level 3, I was not engaged with research, to the level that I will be able to address issues related to teaching and learning, and the associated classroom challenges”.

This submission by a third year student resonates with Murdoch-Eaton et al. (2010) which found that “*undergraduates require training to recognize the skills required for research and enhanced transparency in potential project outcomes*”. This vignette offers substantive evidence that pre-service teachers are denied this opportunity for a sure-footed orientation in action research.

Students are Disadvantaged by University’s Omission

It was further found that the omission or neglect of the practical research part disadvantages students in attaining the prescripts of the module. The effective teaching and learning of this module is set to provide pre-service teachers with knowledge and skills required for them to conduct action research, and classroom research or teaching experiments. This omission seriously disadvantages the students; and fails them in its mission to research capacity building. Kgaugelo highlights:

“My future plans to embark on Business Studies Education research topic are shattered. When I first read about it in my course outline, I was very thrilled, and knew that this module would lay a good foundation for my future postgraduate studies. My plans in furthering my studies in Bachelor of Education, Business Studies Honours are made futile, without my research topic in Business Studies”.

The students’ ambitions for future research are shattered when the university fails to deliver the research curriculum adequately. This study confirms Alsuhaibani et al. (2019) findings that identified students’ discontent with research skills gained through their academic life when the blending of research within the undergraduate programme leaves this component neglected and omitted by the university.

Lack of Interest and Capacity on the Part of Lecturing Staff

The study found that the lecturing staffs lacks interest and capacity to handle the research component of the Didactics curriculum. Lecturing staff echoed the same sentiments that they needed training or just a workshop to take them through this module and the other related Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) module.

Malesela emphasises that:

I think my lecturers require training on how to roll-out the research aspect of the curriculum.”

Kgaugelo highlights:

“I think lecturers are not willing to teach research with subsequent research projects, because research activities require a lot of time, when they are already over-burdened by [challenging] workloads.”

Lecturer Selogadi explains:

“I struggled dismally in facilitating this module for Level 3; and I did not do justice at all. It was even worse, to offer a fully-fledged Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) module, for students who were admitted on one subject speciality.”

Lecturer Hlabirwa stresses:

“This is the new module in a new programme, and should be perceived as such. My problem was further augmented by the fact that I never taught any research module before. It has come to my notice that I lacked a subject-specific research competencies required to facilitate the module of this nature. This is the new programme, with new things. The management cannot just expect to roll-out without the necessary workshops and development programmes.”

Lack of interest and capacity by academic staff in rolling-out this research component of the undergraduate programme was found to be a similar problem in Health Sciences. In one study by Noorelahi et al. (2015), these researchers found a predictor of not adequately rolling out the research module of the programme as lack of interest and capacity among academic staff. Another study by Nevenglosky (2018) identified pillars to successful educational programme such as teacher education programme, namely, professional development (PD), peer-collaboration, and access to curriculum resources. However, these factors were found to be lacking amongst lecturing staff, in the delivery of classes under the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown.

From this finding, the research participants further stressed a lack of responsive staff development in the School of Education. The responsive staff development should have undertaken academic staff needs analysis to establish the areas in the new programme that could have met the lecturers' needs development.

Lack of Internal Control System to Detect Deviations from Some Set Objectives

The research finding indicates a lack of internal control system to detect deviations from some set objectives. The internal control system was not successful in detecting variations and a lack of competency. This failure to implement the project and to attain set objectives led to dismal failure of the implementation of the practical part of the research component.

Hlabirwa explains:

“I was lost for almost two months; until I consulted with one lecturer from the School of Education; and have common grounds on what we are doing. I am not sure what other lecturers are doing out there. The problem was [complicated] by the COVID-19 pandemic because I should be walking into other lecturers’ offices to find out how they handle this aspect. However, I want to raise this issue in the next School Board Meeting.”

In other universities, internal control systems are used *“to provide assurance and advisory services that are independent, objective and risk-based ...to improve its operations”* (Adam, 2017). This observation from the literature shows that the case university is not using internal control systems as it should. This process would serve as a quality assurance mechanism to improve the university operations, and the successful implementation of research component of Business Studies Didactics in particular.

Lack of a Framework in Guiding Common Implementation of the Research-Related Curriculum

The findings identified a lack of a framework that should guide the implementation of the research-related curriculum of Business Studies Didactics module. This theme emerges from the research question, ‘does the university have research framework for implementation of this aspect in the didactic module?’ In further interrogation of the availability of the framework, it was found that every lecturer does as they please.

Hlabirwa stresses that:

“I asked my Head of Department on how to implement the research practical part, and the answer I got is that ‘use teacher’s (lecturer’s) autonomy’ when I will be presenting this issue at the meantime the issue is presented to the Director of the School and the Management Team.”

On the other hand, Selogadi explains:

“The University has no common guidelines, or framework to inform Subject Didactics lecturers of teaching and engaging with the research component. Everyone does as it suits the circumstances. I am not sure whether what I am doing is correct or not. Maybe, programme review processes will unveil this challenge, and come to our rescue”.

Selogadi like Hlabirwa echoed their sentiments on not having common grounds on how to implement the research component of Business Studies Didactics curriculum. This study confirms Nevenglosky, (2018) study that recommends that *“teachers required additional information before the expected implementations occur and an understanding of demands on their personal time”*.

DISCUSSION

The findings identified neglect and omission of the practical component of research as having far reaching implications for the future of students as researchers of their own practice. A non-committal attitude to research component has the negative possibility of affecting pre-service teacher’s in future post-graduate studies that has research as central component of such programmers. A lack of interest on the part of academics is tantamount to a lack of capacity; an instance of dereliction in carrying one’s mandate; and resistance to

change. Furthermore, failure to detect such deviation is linked to a lack of a framework for implementation of the action research component. This raises questions over management practice and lack of vision on their leadership without focus. The blending of a research component requires joint decision-making in developing a framework; and school leaders having mechanisms in place to monitor and evaluate the level of implementation.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study aimed at examining the reflections of student teachers and lecturers on the blending of the research component of Business Studies Didactics curriculum in one university in South Africa. The research found that the curricular implementation the practical part of the research within Business Studies Didactics module; students are disadvantaged by this university omission; and there is no capacity on the part of lecturing staff; including a lack of internal control system to detect deviation from some set objectives. There was evidence of a lack of a framework in guiding common implementation of the research-related curriculum. This study recommends that staff needs analysis processes ought to be undertaken every time the new programme is implemented because this could help in identifying staff development needs. The study further recommends that the case university needs to reinforce staff development programmes and internal control systems in as much as there is reason to curb future deviations from the norm in the implementation of the current programme.

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