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Approaches to assessing pre-service teachers' learning in authentic and rigorous ways: The case of an inclusive education module

Abstract

Initial teacher education programmes offer inclusive education modules that seek to prepare teachers for teaching diverse learners. While there is growing research on the content and pedagogy of inclusive education modules, relatively less attention has been given to the assessment of these modules. This paper focuses on the challenges of promoting authenticity, academic depth and rigour in inclusive education through assessment tasks. Drawing on Cochran-Smith and Lytle's (1999) concepts of knowledge for-, in- and of- practice in education, we critically reflect on three approaches used to assess an inclusive education course over a number of years. The first approach required pre-service teachers to articulate their understanding of important concepts associated with inclusive education, the second required them to provide evidence of their ability to use inclusive strategies, while the third approach provided opportunities for them to participate in a research project about inclusionary and exclusionary practices in schools. We find that these approaches represent inclusive education knowledge with different degrees of conceptual integrity and provide opportunities for pre-service teachers to participate in authentic academic and professional practices to different extents. We conclude by suggesting how the assessment of inclusive education can be approached so that neither academic rigour nor authenticity is compromised.

Keywords: *Pre-service teacher education, assessment, inclusive education, teacher knowledge, teacher practices*

1. Introduction

Teacher educators are tasked with ensuring that newly qualified teachers develop conceptually informed and contextually responsive teaching practices through the curricula they teach, through the pedagogies they use and through the assessment tasks they design. Similar to other courses in initial teacher education (ITE) programmes, there are challenges in offering university-based education coursework in inclusive education that is academically rigorous and practically relevant. In this paper, we use Cochran-Smith and Lytle's (1999) schema of knowledge for-, in- and of-practice to consider the implication for the assessment of inclusive education modules in ITE

programmes. We present and analyse three assessment tasks given to pre-service teachers[i] in an inclusive education module over the past five years. We demonstrate how each task is representative of one of the ways in which Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) position knowledge and practice in relation to one another. We compare the extent to which these tasks (i) engage pre-service teachers with the knowledge practices of the academy in theoretical bases of inclusive education, (ii) provide authentic assessment for pre-service teachers in the practice-based work within inclusive education and (iii) position inclusive education differently.

2. Teacher education for inclusive education

There is a burgeoning research interest in teacher education for inclusive education, with many teacher educators researching their practice and disseminating their findings. Content and pedagogy are a primary focus, as teacher educators account for content selection and innovative curriculum delivery methods (e.g. Forlin, 2010; Loreman, 2010; Walton & Rusznyak, forthcoming). There is also a surfeit of studies drawn from course evaluations as researchers try to show the effects of courses on pre-service teachers' attitudes to inclusive classrooms and dispositions towards teaching learners with disabilities (Ahsan, Deppeler & Sharma, 2013; Lambe & Bones, 2008). Our previous research considers the potential of undertaking practicum sessions in special school contexts for supporting the pedagogic learning of pre-service teachers (Walton & Rusznyak, 2013). Notably absent in this body of literature is a critical engagement with conceptions of what constitutes appropriate approaches to assessment in inclusive education courses. Our paper seeks to address this gap in the literature.

Since the advent of democracy, South African classrooms have become increasingly diverse and representative of learners with different educational needs. As more ordinary schools become 'full service schools' the number of learners with disabilities in schools should continue to increase (Department of Education [DoE], 2001). Courses in inclusive education are now commonly found in ITE programmes both internationally and in South Africa (Florian, 2012; Stofile & Green, 2007). Policy requires that all graduates of South African ITE programmes should be "knowledgeable about inclusive education and skilled in identifying and addressing barriers to learning" (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 2015: 23, 29). Furthermore, beginner teachers "must understand [learners'] … individual needs and tailor their teaching accordingly" and "must understand diversity in the South African context in order to teach in a manner that includes all learners" (RSA, 2015: 62). Within the context of South African policy, inclusive education is variously positioned as a practical kind of knowledge (as a component of general pedagogical knowledge). It is also positioned as a professional knowledge (as a component of pedagogical content knowledge), as a practical competence (ability to teach in a manner that includes all learners) and there is oblique reference to contextual knowledge ("understand diversity in the South African context"). Furthermore, varying disciplinary backgrounds and ideological commitments of teacher educators will affect the way they understand inclusive education. This will influence the ways in which courses are conceptualised and what knowledge will be selected for pre-service teachers (Walton & Rusznyak, forthcoming). In turn, this would have implications for how the intended learning is best assessed.

3. Knowledge and practice: Approaches to teacher learning in pre-service teacher education

Since ITE was relocated to higher education in 2000, the sector has grappled with apparent tensions arising from the conceptual rigour demanded by a university-based qualification and an expectation that beginner teachers are competently skilled practitioners from the very start of their careers (Council on Higher Education, 2010). Recent policy developments have attempted to resolve this tension by advocating a knowledge-based approach to ITE that seeks to enable pre-service teachers to develop theoretically informed practices (RSA, 2015). In conceptualising teaching as a professional practice, the academic study of education and professional practices of teaching are not regarded as opposing forces but as internally related to each other, in that "neither can be adequately pursued, understood, learned or appreciated independently of the other" (Morrow, 2007: 79). It is for this reason that during their ITE programmes, pre-service teachers are often required to complete assessment tasks that require them to make links between a conceptual object of study and practice-based contexts (Shalem & Rusznyak, 2013). We will show that courses in inclusive education are no exception.

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) provide an influential account of three approaches in how knowledge and practice can be positioned in relation to one another in pre-service teacher learning. Their typology of knowledge-for-practice, knowledge-in-practice and knowledge-of-practice is useful in examining how professional learning is constructed in ITE programmes in relation to theoretical knowledge and its relationship with teaching practices (Reeves & Robinson, 2014). These three conceptions compete and yet co-exist, and they are "invoked by differently positioned people in order to explain quite different ideas and approaches" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999: 251). It may be that different approaches are foregrounded at different times as pre-service teachers enter and move through ITE programmes. We briefly review each of the three approaches proposed by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) and then move on to literature about assessment in higher education to explore implications for how inclusive education could be assessed within the traditions of each approach.

3.1 Knowledge-for-practice

This approach positions teaching as a theoretically informed, knowledge-based practice. Disciplinary knowledge that informs education is produced outside of classroom contexts by researchers and scholars in universities (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999) who are not necessarily teachers themselves. The disciplines of psychology, philosophy and sociology are particularly important in offering prospective generalisable insights that enable teachers to make conceptually informed choices across diverse contexts. Propositional knowledge is therefore considered crucial in informing what happens within classrooms. Theorists in this tradition (e.g. Hirst, 1965; Morrow, 2007; Winch, 2014; Young & Muller, 2014) emphasise the importance of understanding the precise meanings of conceptual objects (like a theory, a model, an idea) that has been found worthy of study. Through systematic study, students come to understand the complex relationships that exist between these conceptual objects of study and the networked bodies of educational knowledge from which they emerge. This, they argue is a prerequisite for developing the capacity for rational judgement in practice over diverse contexts. Experiential knowledge alone cannot be the basis of a rational and principled judgement because without a theoretical base, professional judgement remains individualistic, context-bound and therefore unreliable (Shalem, 2014). Knowledge-for-practice is essential

in ITE programmes, because subject knowledge with educational propositional knowledge (and not merely accumulated experience) enables rational professional judgement in practice (Shalem & Slonimsky, 2013; Winch, 2014).

Inducting students into ways of "being, knowing and seeing" within particular disciplines provides opportunities for students to work systematically with a body of knowledge (Sambell, Mcdowell & Montgommery, 2013: 12). Coursework that has academic depth and rigour provides opportunities for students to formulate rational arguments, use evidence or reason to justify claims, engage with established knowledge, prove or defend a position and to undertake systematic analysis or investigations (Slonimsky & Shalem, 2006). The assessment of university-based coursework thus commonly requires pre-service teachers to complete assessment tasks that work simultaneously with conceptual objects of study and the prevailing contextual realities in which the practices of teaching exist (Shalem & Rusznyak, 2013). Their ability to develop theoretically informed practices is logically dependent on a prior understanding of a conceptual object of study in its own right. In doing coursework to establish a foundation for conceptual clarity of thought, the pre-service teachers must first become a student of educational theory.

Where theory has been recruited to enable pre-service teachers to build inclusive education knowledge for practice, it has mainly come from the discipline of psychology and from the fields of special education and medicine (Slee, 2011). With respect to the marginalising and exclusionary practices that operate within schooling and society, a reminder has been given of "the importance of the sociology of education to the emergence of inclusive education as an explanatory framework" (Slee, 2010: 99). While we are cognisant of the contestations of the disciplinary base/s of inclusive education, in the tradition of knowledge-for-practice, inclusive education could be considered as a body of applied theoretical knowledge that has the potential to inform the pedagogic responsiveness of teachers to learner diversities in the classes they teach.

3.2 Knowledge-in-practice

Knowledge-in-practice is most often associated with a conception of teaching as a craft best learnt through apprenticeship (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). Practitioners' experiences and their rigorous reflections on classroom action give rise to this type of knowledge. The "exemplary practice of experienced teachers" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999: 263) is considered where the knowledge of good teaching practices reside. This approach to ITE emerges from those who advocate for teachers to become reflective practitioners, who are able to harness and articulate the wisdom inherent in their craft knowledge (Carr, 2006; Schön, 1987). The complexity of each classroom moment and interaction is assumed so idiosyncratic that teaching is initially a spontaneous response to uncertainty. Therefore, while knowledge-for-practice is context independent, a knowledge-in-practice approach to teacher learning makes the context highly significant. Learning to teach involves learning what might constitute "wise action in the midst of uncertain and unchanging situations" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999: 256). This second approach to teacher learning therefore takes a more inductive approach to the relationship between theory and practice. Pre-service teachers learn from emulating the most effective teaching practices of experts and are prompted to construct their own personal theories from their observations and teaching experiences. There is thus an emphasis on developing personal and shared practical knowledge through experience, reflection and apprenticeship. The preparation of pre-service teachers requires that they turn

to practice-based contexts and explore problems of practice or cases that arise in situ (see for example Gravett, Merseth and De Beer, 2013). Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999: 272) say that the point of engaging with cases

> *...is to provide the social and intellectual contexts in which prospective … teachers can probe the knowledge embedded in the wise teaching decisions of others and/or can deepen their own knowledge and their own abilities to make wise decisions in the classroom.*

A knowledge-in-practice approach to inclusive education has implications for what constitutes authentic teacher learning in this field and how this learning should be assessed. Texts abound with the provision of a variety of strategies that could be implemented in inclusive classrooms to support learners with various needs (see for example Loreman, Deppeler & Harvey, 2011). University-based coursework in inclusive education in this tradition would seek to introduce pre-service teachers to the craft knowledge of expert teachers who have shown a sustained commitment to inclusive education and who use inclusive pedagogy to teach learners with diverse learning needs (Black-Hawkins & Florian, 2012). In the tradition of knowledge-in-practice, there has also been a significant body of literature produced to support inclusive education as a 'practical' knowledge derived from the experiences of teachers (Walton, 2016). In order to develop their knowledge-in-practice, university-based coursework should provide pre-service teachers with opportunities to act as prospective practitioners in training. For assessment tasks, it would be regarded as particularly important that pre-service teachers demonstrate their knowledge and skills in actual or simulated classroom-based contexts.

3.3 Knowledge-of-practice

A conception of teacher learning as knowledge-of-practice involves teachers "actively initiating and carrying out research in their own schools and classrooms" to "make teacher learning more critical, including strategies that prompt prospective teachers to investigate their own autobiographies" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999: 283). Classrooms and schools become sites of intentional investigation, where interrogation (not just reflection) and systematic inquiry prompts teachers to confront and challenge their perceptions and assumptions about teaching and learning. The conception of teacher learning as 'knowledge-of-practice', places the teacher researcher as an agent of change whose aim is to bring about increased educational justice, not only within the classroom and school but also within the wider social and political context. In order for pre-service teachers to interrogate the nature of current practices, they should adopt the role as novice researchers whose classrooms and schools become the site for practice-based inquiry. Waitoller and Kozleski (2010) have described learning about inclusive education in a knowledge-for-practice approach in their account of inclusive professional learning schools. These authors lament the absence of 'critical lenses' in many teacher education programmes and argue for the development of "critical sensibilities that question what is being done, for the benefit of whom" (Waitoller & Kozleski, 2010: 66). In the professional learning schools described by these authors, pre-service teachers are encouraged to take an "inquiry stance" (*ibid*: 68) in a school community. This enables them to make informed instructional decisions and to challenge their traditional assumptions about learner difference and about teaching. Of interest to the work reported in this paper, Waitoller and Kozleski (2010: 72) comment on the assessment of pre-service teachers in professional learning schools, noting, "it is almost impossible to work with students without assessing". While they report on various school-based assessment tasks, we now focus on university coursework assessment tasks in inclusive education courses.

4. Assessment in university-based teacher education programmes

It is widely accepted that assessment tasks in higher education should present students with intellectually demanding activities that have intrinsic meaning beyond obtaining a quantifiable measure for promotion purposes (Frey, Schmitt, & Allen, 2012). The work of Biggs (1999) on the constructive alignment between instruction, learning and assessment has been most influential in understanding the role of assessment in directing student learning. Using the "backwash effect of assessment" (Biggs, 1999: 141), he explains how student learning is largely directed by assessment tasks and less so by the intended curriculum. Assessment tasks indicate to students what is important in a course and therefore assessment tasks lie at the heart of students' learning experiences (Gibbs, 1999). In order to interrogate the trade-offs inherent in various assessment tasks, we first need to consider carefully what is entailed in assessing knowledge practices of the academy and practice-based tasks of the classroom.

4.1 Inducting pre-service teachers into the knowledge-based practices of the academy

Teachers are ultimately responsible for introducing learners to systematised bodies of networked knowledge in the form of the school subjects they teach (MacIntyre, 1981; Morrow, 2007; Winch, 2014). The practice of teaching requires that content knowledge, created by disciplinary experts is organised systematically into school curricula and then recontextualised into teaching and learning materials and sequences of lessons (Bernstein, 2000). Winch (2013, 2014) elaborates what it takes to claim to 'know' a subject. To know a subject entails knowing the central concepts in that body of knowledge and the relationship between propositions, the ability to make inferences from that knowledge, an ability to understand how knowledge is created and verified and an ability to navigate the field. If we are convinced that teachers should have a deep understanding of education and the subjects they teach, then the work of Winch suggests that academic depth is not merely important to the preparation of teachers as university students, it is crucial for the knowledge work they do as leaders in the education system and in their classroom-based work with learners. Enabling pre-service teachers to understand how knowledge is created, disseminated and contested in the academy is an extension of the knowledge-based work they will do when they induct learners into the subjects they teach. Academic practices create possibilities for constructing of principled knowledge, undertaking systematic inquiry and developing new insights or ways of being.

Slonimsky and Shalem (2006) identify four strands of activities that combine to constitute the knowledge-based practices upon which formal learning is based. The conceptual tools used in the pursuit of knowledge-based practices include

> *rational argument (or at least some partitioning of the form and the content of assertions), the justification of claims, engagement with established knowledge (i.e. to refute it, extend it etc.), proof or defence of a position, principled and systematic analysis or investigation, validity and/or reliability claims, peer review and specialised forms of communications which can transcend temporal and spatial boundaries (Slonimsky & Shalem, 2006: 39).*

The first strand, which Slonimsky and Shalem (2006) call *distantiation*, involves separating students from a common sense understanding of a concept or actual object that has some

distinct properties of "otherness" that makes it worthy of study (Bernstein, 2000)[1]. This is important for prospective teachers in learning the subjects they will teach and questioning their taken-for-granted assumptions about schooling and teaching more generally. With respect to inclusive education, particularly pre-service teachers have attended schools during a time where learners (especially those with disabilities) have been excluded from the ordinary public schooling system. Pre-service teachers would need to distantiate themselves from their lived experiences of schooling in order to understand inclusion as a principle that informs pedagogical practices. As they become familiar with the existing state of inclusive knowledge, pre-service teachers should be better able to see the unintended consequences of exclusionary practices that they had previously taken for granted (Slee, 2011). Theoretical gazes thus enable ways of understanding that are more sophisticated.

The second strand of knowledge-based practices, *appropriation* involves integrating the existing knowledge into one's existing ways of seeing, thinking, doing and being. This involves "ordering and integrating conceptual resources derived from a broader body of work into one's own areas of concern, of understanding them in relation to what one already knows and making them one's own" (Slonimsky & Shalem, 2006). In appropriating new knowledge about inclusive education, pre-service teachers might think about specific existing contextual problems (such as marginalising practices at schools) in ways that enable new insights, perspectives or solutions. The third strand, *research*, involves undertaking an intentional and systematic study into an object of study. In order to participate in research, the object of inquiry needs to be clearly demarcated and appropriate concepts for collecting and analysing data need to be selected. Research then requires the development of instruments for collecting data and formulating principled propositions based on the analysis of the data. By justifying the methods of inquiry in terms of the purpose of the research, the findings increase their validity. Engaging in research reveals to students the on-going ways in which existing knowledge is contested and new knowledge is created and validated. Understanding how knowledge is created and verified is, according to Winch (2013), essential if one is to claim any degree of subject expertise. The fourth strand, *articulation,* involves communicating research findings so that new knowledge can be disseminated and opened up to scrutiny by others in the field. It is the process of scrutiny that verifies the extent to which knowledge is considered reliable by others in the field and contributes to the state of the best-known knowledge thus far.

4.2 Engaging pre-service teachers in practice-based activities of the classroom

Since 1990, numerous attempts have been made to develop criteria for what characterises an 'authentic assessment' (Ashford-Rowe, Herrington & Brown, 2014; Frey *et al.*, 2012; Gulikers, Bastiaens & Kirschner, 2004). There is broad consensus that 'authentic assessment' tasks should provide opportunities for students to rehearse the intellectually challenging tasks that they will need to perform as professionals. Students are expected to engage in activities that help them construct personal meaning, reflect on their action (or the action of practitioners), justify and defend the decisions they make and in so doing address real-world problems that arise in practice-based contexts (Ashford-Rowe *et al.*, 2014). It would therefore be expected that an 'authentic' assessment task for pre-service teachers be recognised by practising teachers as typical of the work they do in enabling the learning of diverse

1 Following Shalem and Rusznyak (2013), we refer to the concept, model or theory interest as a conceptual object of study.

learners. In authentic assessments, artefacts from practice or case studies describing critical incidents can be used to provide pre-service teachers with a simulated context (with reduced complexity) for developing and integrating the knowledge, skills and attitudes that they would normally encounter in practice (Darling-Hammond & Snyder, 2000; Grossman *et al.*, 2009). The performance of the task under similar conditions to which practitioners work increases the fidelity of the assessment and so students should ideally be provided with similar kinds of resources, collaboration demands and time constraints to what would normally be available to practitioners undertaking that task (Gulikers *et al.*, 2004).

5. Methodology

This study is based on an analysis of assignment tasks given to groups of pre-service teachers in an inclusive education module, at different points in time over the past five years. Having obtained ethical clearance, institutional consent and the explicit consent of the lecturers involved in setting these assessment tasks, we analysed how the three assessment tasks potentially develop the academic and classroom-based practices of pre-service teachers. Each of the three tasks we analyse (reproduced in the appendix) represents a different approach to an inclusive education module in terms of the Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) typology. For each assessment task, we identify the existence of conceptual object/s of study and practice-based context/s. We consider how clearly demarcated each one is (if present) and how they are positioned in relation to one another. We then analyse the extent to which the three assessment tasks position pre-service teachers as students of inclusive education (in the tradition of knowledge-for-practice), as prospective teachers (in the tradition of knowledge-in-practice) or as novice researchers (in the tradition of knowledge-of-practice). Our approach is conceptual and reflective as we then analyse how the three assessment tasks required pre-service teachers to engage to different extents with the strands of knowledge practices in the academy (distantiation, appropriation, research and dissemination) and the teaching practices of inclusive classrooms (based on criteria for authentic assessment).

6. Findings and discussion

We begin the presentation of our findings with a brief discussion of each task (actual tasks are included in the appendix). We identify the conceptual object/s of study and practice-based contexts (where these exist). We give a brief account of why we regard them as representative exemplars of assessment tasks that emerge from knowledge-for, -in and -of-practice approaches to inclusive education in ITE.

Task A is comprised of two stand-alone parts. The demands of the task require that pre-service teachers articulate their understanding of a conceptual object of study: disability in education in the first part and cooperative learning in the second. Neither question introduces a practice-based context at all. In the tradition of knowledge-for-practice, a clear understanding of concepts then enable pre-service teachers to see distinctions that they would not have been aware of from their common-sense understanding of these concepts. In the first question, pre-service teachers' attention is drawn to the contestations about the way that disability in education is constructed from competing frameworks. In the second, pre-service teachers become familiar with a notion that pedagogies that are more inclusive of learner difference (like cooperative learning) have their origins in disciplinary knowledge and not merely in an accumulation of the personal craft knowledge of practitioners. In both questions in task A,

aspects of inclusive education are portrayed as belonging to a theoretical body of knowledge that needs to be understood outside a classroom setting. Theoretical ideas are portrayed as having a deductive relationship with practice and pre-service teachers need to have clarity on the theoretical foundations of inclusive education in its own right before they become effective practitioners.

Task B is also structured in two parts. Neither has a visible conceptual object of study, although the examples provided are implicitly based on the ideas of differentiated instruction and learner support. A conceptually informed response would require that pre-service teachers are able to select and apply these concepts in their response. The practice-based context is highly visible. In the first part, pre-service teachers are required to revise their own previous practice-based work in light of theoretical learning. In the second part, a visible practice-based context is provided. In the tradition of knowledge-in-practice, task B simulates practice-based problems that prospective teachers are likely to encounter. The simulated context is somewhat simplified but the question requires that assumes the role of a practitioner who firstly justifies the necessary revisions to their lesson plans and in the second instance, devises appropriate support for staff in implementing inclusive education.

The third task, task C, inducts pre-service teachers into a community of practice-based inquirers who interrogate the taken-for-granted assumptions that underpin prevailing practices. An assignment set within this conception required pre-service teachers to interrogate "their own assumptions, their own teaching and curriculum development, and the policies and practices of their own schools and communities" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999: 279). The task has explicitly demarcated conceptual objects of study to be included in the literature review (e.g. formal and epistemological access and exclusionary, marginalising and inclusive practices) and a practice-based contextual reality. The questionnaire for data collection provided pre-service teachers with a list of strongly demarcated contextually embedded practices regarding the provision of learner support and recognition of achievement. In the tradition of knowledge-of-practice, pre-service teachers undertake the role as novice researchers. They are required to undertake a review of specified literature, use a provided questionnaire to investigate a teacher's perceptions of the various learner support practices used in that school context and then use their literature review as a framework to draw conclusions about the inclusionary and exclusionary nature of the prevalent practices.

6.1 Engaging pre-service teachers with the knowledge practices of the academy in relation to inclusive education

In order to *distantiate* pre-service teachers from their everyday understanding of inclusive education, it is necessary for them to engage with texts and become acquainted with theories and concepts relevant to the field. Tasks A and C set up possibilities for distantiation as they require pre-service teachers to engage with existing literature and articulate their understanding of important concepts in the field of inclusive education, as objects of study in their own right. Task B, however, does not. Although pre-service teachers may have turned to the literature in order to inform their judgements in practice, this was not an explicit requirement. It was possible for pre-service teachers to complete the assessment task based on their understandings gleaned from lectures or their tacit sense of what feels intuitive based on a common sense understanding.

In the first question in task A, pre-service teachers are asked to articulate how the concept of disability in education is understood from three competing theoretical perspectives. In doing so, pre-service teachers must bring gazes beyond their common-sense understanding to bear on understanding disability in education. Their discussion of the relative merits of each conception facilitates their development of a specialist perspective. In task C, through undertaking a literature review of exclusion, marginalisation and inclusive pedagogies, pre-service teachers are required to move beyond their common sense understanding of concepts and engage with the text-based ideas of others. Models such as Lewin's (2009) zones of educational exclusion enable them to see previously unnoticed distinctions. Similar to task A, task C requires pre-service teachers to articulate a precise understanding of concepts. Both task A and task C assists pre-service teachers to navigate the theoretical field in task A by defining the competing paradigms that conceptualise disability in education and in task C through a literature review, which requires pre-service teachers to synthesise scholarly positions in the field. Task B, on the other hand does not enable pre-service teachers to distantiate from their common sense understanding. So while task B has a visible contextual object of study, it limits the extent to which pre-service teachers come to understand inclusive education as a theoretically informed practice, as the conceptual lens is largely invisible (Shalem & Rusznyak, 2013).

In order to appropriate specialised conceptual knowledge, assessment tasks would need to require that pre-service teachers use a new concept to address an existing concern. In task A, there is some potential for appropriation, as pre-service teachers are not merely asked to describe disability in education from three perspectives but in each case, consider the merits associated with that view. However, the *appropriation* is minimal, as the questions do not require pre-service teachers to consider these concepts in the light of given or their own contextual concerns. There was some potential for appropriation in the knowledge-in-practice approach of task B, as pre-service teachers were asked to address real-life problems that could arise in the everyday classroom practices of teachers. However, without a strongly demarcated conceptual lens, this potential is not realised and the depth and rigour, which may have been part of the inclusive education module is not carried through in the assessment task. In task C, however, the research project opens up possibilities for appropriation. In the literature review, pre-service teachers will have had to articulate a distantiated view of concepts including exclusion, marginalisation and inclusive pedagogies. The literature review provides a basis against which teachers' views on existing school practices can be gauged. Pre-service teachers are therefore required to bring a non-intuitive conceptual perspective to evaluate the extent to which existing practices offer possibilities for inclusion.

Tasks A and B did not require pre-service teachers to undertake a systematic research project, although they may have been introduced to reading/s of empirical research in preparation for task A. By way of contrast, task C positions pre-service teachers as novice researchers. Although as novices, they were not required to conceptualise the whole study, they were required to complete parts of it. The requirement for them to submit their parts and sections that were provided to them (introduction, the methodology and the ethical requirements) alerted them to relationships between the whole and the various parts. Using a questionnaire as a data collection instrument encouraged pre-service teachers to engage in practice-based conversations with their supervising teacher/s. The nature of this assessment task conveys to pre-service teachers that inclusive education draws on the conceptual tools (provided by philosophy and sociology of education) by which existing education practices

can be interrogated, with the view of constructing a more socially just educational system. The questionnaire explicitly asks for the perceived potential benefits and drawbacks of various practices, thereby opening up the possibility that practices that are generally assumed as being inclusive may in fact not be inclusive at all. Prevalent practices that claim to support diverse learners are therefore positioned as valid objects of study and the questionnaire prompted pre-service teachers and supervising teachers to articulate (and potentially reconsider) some of their taken-for-granted assumptions about the benefits and drawbacks of common practices such as streaming, learner retention, extra lessons and academic awards. Pre-service teachers' understanding of key concepts is assessed through their explanations in the literature review. Furthermore, the directive to analyse existing school-based practices through conceptual lenses provided by the literature alerts pre-service teachers to ways in which concepts allow critical engagement with existing schooling practices.

All three tasks required pre-service teachers to *articulate* their understandings of the knowledge that was assessed: theories, models or concepts in the first, the reasons underpinning a professional judgement in the second and conceptual understandings, research findings and discussions in the third. While pre-service teachers were required to write up their findings for task C as a mini-research report, they were not required to present their findings or defend their conclusions. As a coursework project, the results were not disseminated beyond the assessor. In the case of this assessment task, however, the lecturer obtained institutional ethical clearance and invited all pre-service teachers and their supervising teachers to participate in a wider research project. Where informed consent was obtained, the data will be collated, analysed and disseminated. Pre-service teachers therefore were introduced to the notion of collating and disseminating findings beyond small individual projects.

6.2 Providing authentic assessment for pre-service teachers in the practice-based work within inclusive education

Despite the opportunities task A gives pre-service teachers to distantiate themselves from their common sense notions of disability, the questions in task A fall short of providing authentic assessment with respect to direct practice-based applicability, fidelity based authenticity and personal meaning. It may even be that practising teachers who are concerned solely with the action not the cognitive processes and reasoning underlying conceptually informed action may even dismiss task A as being "too theoretical" and "not relevant to the realities of classroom life". While it is true that task A does not offer opportunities for students to rehearse authentic tasks that practitioners do, the distantiation might very well establish a conceptual foundation that enables teachers to make conceptually informed judgements in practice possible over time.

In task B, inclusive education is represented as a school- or classroom-based practice and pre-service teachers act as prospective practitioners who are required to articulate and justify the reasons for their actions. The classroom (not the academy) is portrayed as the site where inclusive education is enacted, both materially (in the case of lesson plans and worksheets/ resources in the first part) and relationally (in the case of the second part). Inclusive education is considered valuable to pre-service teachers because it provides pre-service teachers with the 'practical skills' needed for working with diverse learners and learning needs (Carroll, Forlin & Jobling, 2003; Forlin, 2006). This accretion of the wisdom of experience is made available to pre-service teachers and forms the grounds on which they would imagine a solution to the practical problems presented in these assessment tasks. The assessment

tasks therefore offer the potential for authenticity in relation to applicability to real-life contexts. Although task B situates inclusive education as supplying the techniques that are directly relevant to inclusive practices, it may unintentionally encourage student teachers to provide common sense responses without the academic depth that a systematised body of theoretical knowledge is able to provide.

Task C has some features of an authentic assessment but does not meet all the criteria. The assessment is intellectually challenging and familiarises pre-service teachers with actual practices of learner support and recognition in particular school contexts. However, despite its contextual embeddedness, surveying and analysing data from a completed questionnaire is not likely to be regarded by teachers as representative of the day-to-day work they do. It therefore lacks fidelity and does not simulate a rehearsal for practice-based problem solving.

6.3 How the assessment tasks position inclusive education

Having considered the affordances of each of the three tasks for developing pre-service teachers' knowledge and classroom-based practices, we now turn to the extent to which assessment in knowledge-for, -in and -of practices supports learning about inclusive education.

Situating inclusive education as knowledge-for-practice indicates to pre-service teachers that inclusive education can be examined as a disembodied idea. While task A provides an opportunity for distantiation, it misses an opportunity to invite a personal engagement with the responsibility of teachers for promoting inclusivity in their classrooms. Inclusive education, says Allan (2005: 293), is not something to be done to a discrete population of learners but "something we must do to ourselves". In other words, task A does not point pre-service teachers to the attitudes and dispositions that have been shown to be necessary for the promotion of more inclusive classrooms (Savolainen *et al.*, 2012; Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Parasuram, 2006). Not only does this task eliminate the need for any personal commitment, it potentially precludes the development of the "critical sensibilities" that Waitoller and Kozleski (2010: 66) describe. The conceptual focus may offer pre-service teachers the means to avert their gaze from the recognition that "exclusion and inclusion are about real people who ought not to be abstracted" (Slee, 2011: 2). While we are convinced that assessing students' understanding of the theoretical foundations of inclusive education is crucial in promoting academic depth and rigour in inclusive education modules. Without an explicit application of concepts to practice, it could be too easy for students to dismiss inclusive education as a theoretical idea that has little practical relevance to them as prospective teachers, to existing practices in schools and to their developing classroom practices.

There are those who have argued that inclusive education should focus on practice, rather than rhetoric or policy (Booth & Ainscow, 1998). However, we suggest that positioning inclusive education as knowledge-in-practice for pre-service teachers can be problematic. While task B offers authenticity regarding a complex task that simulates practice, alone, it is not simultaneously able to provide opportunities for pre-service teachers to develop knowledge-based academic practices. Without a focus on knowledge-based academic practices, this assessment task may suggest to pre-service teachers that inclusive education is contextually contingent, subject to each teacher's individual interpretation and without any basis in theory or research.

Despite the logistical challenges in setting up the project, the knowledge-of-practice approach in task C conveys to pre-service teachers that inclusive education has theoretical and

conceptual foundations, which enable understanding of practice in non-intuitive ways. The task used all four of the strands of academic practices defined by Slonimsky and Shalem (2006) and the conceptual and contextual objects (Shalem & Rusznyak, 2013) in the assessment task were highly visible. Notwithstanding the promise of assessing inclusive education learning as knowledge-of-practice, we note that if pre-service teachers demonstrate a weak conceptual understanding and superficial engagement with the provided texts, their ability to reflect critically on their findings would be compromised. Despite this limitation, this approach to assessing students' knowledge-of-practice in inclusive education offers the possibilities of retaining disciplinary integrity, inducting students into academic practices of the university, applicability to context-based realities and offers a potentially meaningful task to students. As such, it offers conditions of possibility for academic depth and contextual authenticity.

7. Conclusion

In designing, presenting and assessing courses in inclusive education, teacher educators shape pre-service teachers' understanding of what inclusivity in education may mean. However, beyond the immediate concerns of the field of inclusive education, teacher educators in ITE programmes need to ensure that the courses they design contribute to building the academic practices that university students require. In this paper, we have argued that the knowledge-for, -in and -of-practice approaches to ITE have implications for the way in which university-based coursework is assessed. Using illustrative examples taken from an inclusive education module, we have shown how these approaches potentially open and close down opportunities for authentic and academically rigorous assessment of pre-service teacher learning. Assessing inclusive education coursework from a knowledge-for-practice tradition might ensure that pre-service teachers have a nuanced understanding of important concepts but they may not necessarily grapple with how these concepts might be useful to them as prospective practitioners. Conversely, we have shown how an assessment task emerging from a knowledge-in-practice tradition can potentially undermine useful teacher learning by obscuring a conceptual object of study.

Inclusive education has a mandated place in ITE programmes and is expected to facilitate the preparation of teachers for inclusive teaching and pedagogical responsiveness to learner diversity. In order to use courses such as inclusive education in a way that simultaneously introduces prospective teachers to the knowledge-based practices of the academy and the practice-based activities of the classroom, we conclude that there are two recommended approaches to assessing learning. The first is a combination of knowledge-for- and -in-practice approaches, in which pre-service teachers examine a conceptual object of study in its own right before considering how it might provide non-intuitive insights to practitioners within a practice-based context. The combination of the two approaches capitalises on the strengths of each approach but mitigates against the limitations. The second approach we recommend is assessment tasks that emerge from the knowledge-of-practice approach to ITE. While not without its limitations, this approach potentially provides opportunities for pre-service teachers to develop knowledge practices of the academy whilst simultaneously becoming familiar with and even questioning common classroom-based practices.

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Appendix: Three assignment tasks

Task A

1. Explain the relative merits of an individual/medical model, a social model and a (bio) ecosystemic model in understanding disability in education.

2. Account for the theoretical foundations of cooperative learning.

Task B

1. Select a lesson that you taught during your previous practicum. Redesign ONE aspect of the lesson (for example, the learner activity, or the content instruction) in a way that it meets the learning needs of THREE learning ability groups. Provide a rationale for the way you have divided learners into these three learning ability groups and submit all revised worksheets and resource materials.

2. Refiloe's teachers approach you as a member of the School Based Support Team. They are seeking assistance in dealing with Refiloe who has learning and other difficulties. The teachers say that that they are not in a position to teach disabled learners like Refiloe, and they advocate that she be placed at a special school where she can benefit better. Describe how you could assist the teachers while ensuring the provision of support for Refiloe. Make your suggestions and examples practical and relevant, and written in a supportive tone.

Task C[2]

Students participated as co-researchers in a mini-research project. The introduction, research questions, methodology and a data collection instrument were provided to student teachers, as were the documentation for ethical research (including letters of invitation to participate in a research project, and declarations of informed consent for supervising teachers to sign). The research project required students to analyse a practicum supervising teachers' views about the potential benefits and drawbacks of various prevalent practices in schools with respect to supporting (i) learners who experience academic and learning difficulties, (ii) learners who are academically successful and (iii) learners who are not yet proficient in the language of learning and teaching. Pre-service teachers were required to submit for three components of the research project for assessment, namely a literature review, a discussion of their findings and conclusion. For the literature review, pre-service teachers were asked to use a selection of provided readings to discuss exclusion from, and marginalisation within schools and the use of inclusive pedagogical practices in enabling epistemological access to all learners. They were asked specifically to draw on concepts they had been introduced to during lectures, such as the distinction between formal and epistemological access (Morrow, 2007); zones of educational exclusion (Lewin, 2009), and pedagogical practices that are known to be more inclusive of learner diversity, including collaboration with other teachers or support professionals and differentiated instruction (Black-Hawkins & Florian, 2012). To collect data, pre-service teachers were required to invite their supervising teacher to participate in the research project, and collect data using a provided questionnaire. In their discussion of their findings, pre-service teachers were asked to interrogate the various practices that their teacher had encountered and account for whether these strategies were as inclusionary or

2 Considering the length of the instructions to pre-service teachers, we summarise the expectations of them rather than provide the assessment instructions verbatim.

exclusionary both in the perception of the teachers, and in relation to their literature review. It was on this basis of their discussion that pre-service teachers were expected to answer the following research questions in their conclusion:

- *To what extent have teachers encountered selected school practices that respond to learner diversity?*
- *What do teachers regard as the benefits and drawbacks of the practices that they have encountered?*
- *How are the practices encountered by teachers seen as either inclusionary or exclusionary?*

(Endnotes)

i We use the term 'pre-service teacher' to refer to university students in initial teacher education programmes in higher education institutions. The term 'student' refers to university students in general, and 'learner' refers to children and young people in schooling.