

CHAPTER SIX

HOW DIFFERENT ARE PROFESSIONAL DEGREES IN EDUCATION? A CASE OF THE BEd PRIMARY PROGRAMME AT THE UNIVERSITY OF BOTSWANA

Introduction

This chapter is based on one fundamental question: how different are professional degrees in education? The question was structured to identify the perceptions the graduates had about the contributions made by the degree in their lives. The chapter scans the BEd (primary) degree to find out how different it is from other teaching degrees. It argues that though there seems to be a commonality that centers around professional programmes that offer courses relating to the demands of the job, the nature of the courses is not only dependent on the professional needs of the workplace, but to a large extent is dependent on the capacity of the students to respond to such training. Training has to be explicit, especially if students are not experienced in certain things.

The professional BEd primary degree

Teaching degrees operate on different levels and may actually involve different understandings. BEd degrees for other teachers at the University of Botswana require O levels with First class and very good Second class passes as entrance requirements into the programmes (UB Calendar, 1993/4). The understanding is that these people would be in a better position to conceptualise information since they would have already proven their capabilities through their O levels examinations, with admission into the courses largely dependent on how students performed in them. Curriculum for these programmes includes theory of teaching, professional skills, curriculum skills, content and teaching methodology (UB Calendar, 1993/4). Specialisation of the chosen subjects starts in year one (UB Calendar, 1993/4), as these students do not need any bridging courses.

This new BEd (Primary) teaching degree differs slightly from the other teaching degrees, as entrance requirements into the programme are lower than entrance requirements for other teaching degrees. To be considered for this new teaching

degree, initially candidates had to have a Junior Certificate pass (although this changed to O levels during the years), with PTC and a teaching experience of at least two years (Department of Primary Education Handbook, 1992/93, 1996/97; 2003/4). This degree takes into consideration the fact that most candidates earmarked for the programme had lower levels of basic education and that even if they have O levels, their pass marks may not have been good compared with candidates for other teaching degrees.

What further distinguishes this degree from the other teaching degrees is the structure of the programme. Since students who sit for this programme already have a teaching qualification, this degree was developed as an in-service programme (UB Calendar, 1993/4) to improve the performance of teachers by enhancing their professional practices and encouraging them to improve productivity in the schools (NPE, 1977). This is in line with Bear's (1982:20) views on professional degrees that in most cases people who undergo professional training are in-service students who are already in possession of some form of qualification. With the BEd degree, teachers needed to know more for their professional practices so as to improve the quality of teaching in the schools. To maximise student learning, it is actually the teacher who has to translate the content to the context of the learning process.

The BEd (Primary) programme offers a degree of understanding and exposure to critical forms of knowledge, all of which are linked to professional expertise. Understanding of different knowledge gives teachers the autonomy and latitude to teach efficiently and effectively. The content of the curriculum was such that it covered different subjects, but in a more practical manner than before, so that training could be linked to the workplace. This was in response to the call by the NCE (1977: 69) that schools:

Give children a range of educational experiences that will enable them to discover and develop their own special interests, talents and skills, whether these be manual dexterity, physical strength, intellectual ability, artistic gifts, organization and leadership skills, a special capacity of friendship or some distinctive quality.

Important therefore was that teachers be empowered to facilitate these developments. The university reserved the mandate to handle this professional development in ways

it saw fit in order to extend its contribution to the development of teacher education in the country (Rec. 110 of NCE, 1977). Evidence pointing to the importance of this move is provided by Miller (1987:7) when he asserts that university lecturers play a critical role in the manner in which courses are to be structured, by determining the extent of the changes. Professionalisation of the degree in this case meant offering courses with advanced studies in education. This includes theoretical studies in Psychology, Philosophy, Management as well as the History of Education in Botswana (UB Calendar, 1993/4). Professionalising the degree also meant improvement of the teachers' basic education. With their low educational backgrounds it was perceived that teachers needed information on all subject disciplines. This explains why all year one courses are made compulsory for all students and why the courses cover all subjects comprising the options. By making these courses compulsory, it is perceived that perhaps studying would be made easier for students to identify well with the subjects they like best and are comfortable with. More importantly, making the courses compulsory may be used as a screening device by lecturers to allocate students subject options at the end of year one, guided by their performance.

Lastly, professionalisation of the degree meant making the programme more practical and relevant to the world of work (teaching) by sensitising teachers on methods of teaching primary school children in their different options (NPE, 1977). It is believed that development of pedagogical skills would enhance professional practices of the teachers, thereby assisting them to discharge their duties effectively. The degree in this way is in line with the policy's belief that teachers ought to have authority of the best possible methods to use in teaching, for example (NPE, 1977), ways about lesson design and presentation. The degree recognises that the authority of the teachers helps them to perform their duties. Having authority of the best possible methods in teaching reduces the discretion of the teacher to that of facilitator. Facilitation paves the way for students so that they find solutions to problems on their own.

Graduates' experiences and perceptions of the BEd programme

The courses that the graduates said they did were a combination of theory and practice. Graduates maintained that some of the degree courses specifically prepared them for the teaching profession. Accordingly, the courses are said to have provided

both a theoretical and practical element, as recommended by the NCE of 1977. These courses, the graduates said, concentrated on their areas of specialisation, which were divided into four options. The options were such that each graduate specialised in at least two or more subjects in a particular option, and were those of Languages (Setswana and English), Mathematics and Science, Social Studies and Religious Education and Art, and Infant Education. Although the options concentrated on different areas of knowledge and skill development, with special reference to subject specific expertise, graduates maintained that content was said to be theory, methods and practicals for those who were doing activity-oriented courses. Those in the Mathematics and Science option, as well as the ones in the Art and Infant Education option, said they did activity-oriented courses.

There seemed to have been courses that prepared students generally for the teaching profession and were said to have been compulsory for all of the graduates. They included knowledge on issues pertaining to Educational Administration and Management, Philosophy of Education, Psychology of Education, Measurement and Evaluation, Special Education as well as Guidance and Counseling. The graduates saw these courses as general knowledge, as they felt that they could be used as part of any professional practice. In agreeing with this view, some graduates maintained that the above courses could be applicable to any work, while others agreed that there was a balance between theory and practice brought about by their having been given theory and a chance to practice it. Others believed that there was a lot of theory and not enough practice. One graduate expressed this strongly when she explained that, “since I was in the Math and Science option, I feel we did a lot of theory than practice.” Furthermore, this graduate claimed that, although the subjects were both practical in nature, they did not do a lot of methodology in terms of how to teach these subjects in schools, so she felt that there was too much theory and too little practice.

Another graduate maintained that there was more theory than practice. This, she said, was further reinforced by the problems she experienced during internship, as she had to research a lot on her own in order to handle certain topics, especially Biology. This, she claimed, led to her total dependence on the lecturers, whereas the programme should have equipped her with the skills. There was, however, one graduate who felt that generally the programme offered more practice than theory. As she noted, many

of the courses were connected to teaching, such as Special Education, Guidance and Counseling, Psychology, Measurement and Evaluation, and even Management.

In general, the responses of the graduates point to confusion as to what the programme actually offered. The confusion seems to be on the terms ‘practical’ and ‘methodology’. Practicality of the courses, however, as articulated by the NCE (1977) involves structuring of the courses in such a way that they reflect real situations that happen in the schools. Methodology, on the other hand, calls for demonstration of how to carry out a particular task or ways of making the practicality of the courses a reality.

Whether the course actually paid for the graduates depended largely on the extent to which it managed to equip them well both knowledgeably and skillfully. Accordingly, it was generally believed that the degree offered the graduates a wide range of experiences in terms of knowledge, pedagogy and skills. This view was consistent among all graduates, and it was given purely in terms of the degree having been able to serve two different, but complementary roles. These roles are different in that the knowledge learnt through the degree was said to have built upon and added value to what was already known by the graduates, while the skills ensured that what was learnt through the programme would be adequately applied to practice. These roles are complimentary in that, on the other hand, one cannot function well without the other. No one can be said to be knowledgeable without actually proving how much or how little he or she is. Similarly, one has to have some form of knowledge so as to be skilful about it. The roles are meant to augment each other.

Graduates provided evidence of the extent to which the degree actually affected them. Cited here are some of these affections as captured during the interview process:

“The degree enhanced my academic and professional skills and developed me mentally and psychologically.”

“I am now able to look at things from a professional point of view because I have become a better person.”

“The content from the BEd programme was very broad; it covered a lot of things.”

“With the degree I feel that I am now more focused in my work as well as in life because I understand things better now.”

“I now look at things differently as compared to the time before training.”

“The BEd made a difference in my life; I now have a broader knowledge base and understanding.”

“The programme was very challenging and developmental.”

To this end the degree was characteristically described as follows by the graduates:

“intellectually challenging”; “an eye opener”; “enhanced performance”; “improved perception”; and “increased focus”. The course’s capacity to satisfy the above qualities was described by one graduate in this way:

The BEd developed me as an individual. I learnt diverse skills and became more knowledgeable. It did not only satisfactorily build the foundation of my work, it also nurtured it, I am able to do various things because of the BEd.

Graduates displayed much confidence as a result, considering themselves as having been appropriately developed and having learnt a lot from the degree programme. The way they perceived their development is such that they are now self-disciplined, possessed with initiative and able to communicate. Employers want to hire graduates who are in possession of some of these skills, as observed by Roizen and Jepson (1985), as they centre on problem solving, critical thinking, creativeness, decision-making, team work and self management. The implication of this observation is that if one has such skills, one can handle the demands of the job well.

The degree therefore impacted profoundly on the development of the graduates, as evident in the above discussion. It enhanced students’ knowledge, equipped them with skills needed to do their work well, made them critical thinkers, and increased their creativity. It provided graduates with a range of opportunities that had the potential of diverging them from their initial duties. This confirms some of the views about what degrees do, as articulated in the literature review section. These skills are needed in all domains of life, not only for a particular profession and may be what makes people with degrees competitive and more in demand than those without.

Conclusion

The chapter unpacked the BEd programme as a measure used to professionalise degree courses to find out what the programme offered the teachers. It provided evidence detailing the nature of the courses and how they impacted on the graduates. Evidence also points to the degree having equipped the graduates with a wealth of knowledge and skills that they lacked before. As a result, graduates seem to have become more creative and capable of handling certain things. They are able to think in a critical way, since by their own admission they are more focused and able to put things into perspective. This in my view creates a mirror of people who appeared well prepared and anxious to make a contribution to society in a way they initially did not.