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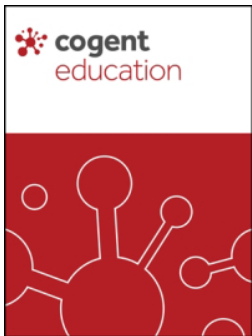


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PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION & TRAINING | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Foregrounding a teaching philosophy statement in scaffolding reflective practice and professional development of higher education teachers in Lesotho

Tebello Tlali^{1*} and Pulane Lefoka¹

Abstract: At some point in the teaching career, educators are expected to develop a teaching philosophy statement (TPS). This could be during the initial teacher training programme; when applying for a teaching post or when seeking promotion. It could also be a component of a continuous professional development programme that teachers undergo or a component of a teaching portfolio they have to submit for a specified purpose. This paper explored the extent to which articulating a teaching philosophy statement promotes reflective practice and also advance the professional development of higher education teachers. Narrativism was employed as the over-arching paradigm for this study. A qualitative approach was adopted, and data was collected through an online qualitative or open ended questionnaire, in which the participants were requested to narrate their teaching philosophy statements. Thematic analysis was utilised to analyse the data. The findings revealed that writing a TPS does, to a large extent, enable a reflective

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Tebello Tlali holds a PhD in Educational Philosophy and Policy studies in Education, as well as a Post-PhD Masters in Higher Education Studies. She is currently a Senior lecturer in the department of Educational Foundations, at the National University of Lesotho. Her research focuses on philosophical issues in education, with a special interest in epistemological matters, educator ethics, professional development of educators including that of postgraduate supervisors; engendering reflective practice among educators, as well as issues pertaining to deep teaching and learning in Higher Education. Pulane Lefoka holds a PhD in Educational Curriculum and Instruction. She is an Associate Professor of Higher Education. She served as the Director for the Centre for Teaching and Learning for ten years. She is currently an independent consultant. Her professional activities include part time teaching at the NUL CTL, undertaking consultancy work and publishing mainly in the field of education.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Reflective thinking involves deep thinking which leads to improvement of practice. Educators at various levels of education are required to think reflectively with a view to improve their craft. However, thinking reflectively does not come naturally to some educators, especially those who did not train as teachers. Hence this has to be explicitly taught either through formal or informal models of professional development. There are various reflection tools that can be utilised by teachers, and writing a teaching philosophy statement (TPS) is one of them. Most higher education teachers in Lesotho, who did not initially train as teachers, may not be familiar with the concepts of a *teaching philosophy* and a *teaching philosophy statement*, and they may also not be aware of the role played by a TPS in developing teaching. It is against this background that we explored the extent to which articulating a TPS can promote reflective practice and advance the professional development of higher education teachers Lesotho.

practice. Furthermore, the exercise promotes professional development by allowing teachers to rethink their practices.

Subjects: Higher Education Management; Teachers & Teacher Education; Theory of Education; Philosophy of Education; Further & Higher Education; Education & Training; Teacher Education & Training

Keywords: constructivism; higher education; higher education teachers; teaching philosophy statement; reflective practice; professional development

1. Introduction and problem statement

The Lesotho Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) and the Lesotho Council on Higher Education (CHE) are making efforts to improve the quality of the higher education offerings (CHE, 2010; MoET, 2016). However, Lefoka (2011) established that most people teaching in higher education in Lesotho have not been professionally trained to teach in this sub-sector. This was underscored by Tlali (2019a) in a case study conducted at one University in Lesotho, which confirmed that the majority of lecturers were not trained as teachers. In recognition of this status quo, the Lesotho CHE has urged higher education teachers to obtain some teaching credentials (CHE, 2010). Higher education teachers are required to acquire threshold competencies which include: (1) the requisite knowledge of students or adult learning; (2) general teaching skills that are relevant to the higher education context; and (3) a deep knowledge of a specific discipline.

The establishment of the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) at the National University of Lesotho (NUL) in 2014 was a much-needed development for the higher education fraternity at the NUL and in Lesotho. The NUL CTL has since provided continuing professional development workshops for higher education teachers. The thematic areas for these workshops include teaching and learning in higher education and related topics, such as methods of teaching in different disciplines; assessment in higher education; the use of information technology in teaching in higher education; assisting tutors with basic counselling skills; and supporting students by equipping them with study skills (Tlali, 2019a).

Furthermore, the NUL CTL has also recently launched a Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education (PGD-HE), a formal qualification meant to advance the professional development of higher education teachers. This programme offers courses in Teaching and learning, Assessment, Quality assurance, E-learning, The Lesotho higher education policy context and The Scholarship of teaching and learning (National University of Lesotho, 2018). The course on Teaching and learning entails, among other topics, how to articulate a teaching philosophy as a foundation for curriculum development, teaching and assessment practices. In this context, a teaching philosophy can be conceptualised as a philosophical disposition embedded within the various teachers' practices (Omodan, 2022). As a curricula topic, a teaching philosophy is meant to enhance reflective practice, which is one of the skills that teachers at any level of education must possess. Thus, reflective practice involves looking at one's teaching, questioning what drives it, and assessing its impact (Almusharraf, 2020).

Recognising that majority of the Lesotho higher education teachers still have no form of training in teaching and learning; and that they may consequently lack reflectiveness (Fairman et al., 2020; Liu & Phelps, 2020), the paper explored the extent to which articulating a teaching philosophy statement promotes reflective practice and, in turn, contributes to the professional development of higher education teachers in Lesotho.

2. Research objectives

In line with the above background, the study was guided by the following objectives:

- To examine the extent to which a teaching philosophy statement may promote reflective practice among higher education teachers;

- To establish the link between a teaching philosophy statement, reflective practice and professional developmental of the Lesotho higher education teachers; and
- To identify the professional developmental areas which emerge from the participants' teaching philosophy statements.

3. Theoretical framework

This study was framed within constructivism. The central principle of this theoretical perspective is that humans play an active role in constructing the meaning of their experiences and practices (Bada, 2015). This theory refutes the assumption that knowledge exists outside the knower. Instead, it recognises that knowledge construction is a product of reflection about, and synthesis of the prevalent circumstances and practices by the knower. Constructivism grants individuals ownership of what they learn (Bada, 2015; Jaiwal, 2019).

According to Affandi and Tantra (2022), constructivism regards learning as an active process through which humans grow by developing effective behaviour and adapting accordingly to their environment. From a constructivist point of view, growth is the ultimate purpose of any learning process. Hence, professional growth can be achieved through problem-based activities, evaluation, reflection, collaboration and learning by doing (Affandi & Tantra, 2022). Against this background, constructivism is regarded as a suitable theoretical framework for underpinning this study since it supports reflective practice as a means of knowledge construction (Bada, 2015).

In the context of teacher professional learning and development, constructivism can be construed as two-pronged: firstly, as the philosophical basis, and secondly as the content for teacher professional learning. As a philosophical basis, constructivism seeks to promote a teacher's epistemological change and develop positive engagement with the content to be taught. As the content for teachers' learning, constructivism promotes teachers' willingness to engage with change and modify their professional practices (Affandi & Tantra, 2022). Most importantly, constructivism offers opportunities for teachers to articulate and re-articulate their beliefs concerning teaching and learning, both for themselves and the students. Such self-reflection and self-evaluation of one's beliefs, values, and experiences are essential for transforming one's practices (Almusharraf, 2020).

4. Literature review

The literature review consists of the conceptualisation of professional development in higher education, conceptualisation of a teaching philosophy statement and the role of reflective practice in developing teaching.

4.1. Professional development of higher education teachers

According to Darling-Hammond et al. (2017, p. 2), professional development is "a product of job-embedded activities that increase teachers' knowledge and help them change their instructional practice in ways that support students' learning". Higher education teachers need professional development in order for them to continually learn and grow their pedagogical skills and efficiently scaffold students' learning (Artman et al., 2020; Cleary et al., 2022; Fairman et al., 2020; Liu & Phelps, 2020). As Abonyi et al. (2020) indicate educational institutions should have clear policies and invest in training employees to improve their performance.

There are different forms of professional development models which include the conventional (formal) and non-conventional (informal) models (Artman et al., 2020; Bergmark, 2020). Conventional models consist of workshops, seminars, conferences, and short or full-term courses offered by colleges or universities (Abu-Tineh & Sadiq, 2018; Artman et al., 2020). The full-term formal programme was thus the model in which the participants of this study were engaged.

Professional development programmes should have a meaningful impact on educator's teaching practice and student learning (Artman et al., 2020; Bergmark, 2020; Darling-Hammond et al.,

2017). In the higher education context, the content of professional development programme is often about embedding student-centred approaches into teaching, advancing effective assessment methods and course design, facilitating the scholarship of teaching and learning, as well as introducing staff to institutional policies (Kalman et al., 2020; Noben et al., 2021).

4.2. Conceptualising a teaching philosophy statement

Teachers at all levels of education are often required to be mindful of their teaching philosophies. According to Omodan (2022), a teaching philosophy is a concept that some practitioners have embraced, yet many are still unaware of it. A teaching philosophy nurtures reflection and metacognition, providing a coherent approach to teaching and enabling teachers to reflect on what they do, how they do it, and why they do it (Caukin & Brinthaupt, 2017; Kurita & Yoshida, 2020; Omodan, 2022).

A teaching philosophy statement (TPS) is also phrased by other scholars as a statement of teaching philosophy (STP). This concept is described by Beatty et al. (2009, p. 100) as “a narrative description of one’s conception of teaching, including the rationale for one’s teaching methods”. More scholars (Almusharraf, 2020; Bowne, 2018; Klockner et al., 2021; Supasiraprapa & De Costa, 2022) support the idea that a TPS is a purposeful reflective narrative that offers insight into a teacher’s conceptions and beliefs about teaching. This also includes the teachers’ core values, views and opinions surrounding the *what*, *how* and *why* of the teaching and learning, while also examining the sources of such beliefs (Baker, 2021; Bowne, 2017, 2018).

As indicated by Beatty et al. (2009, p. 101) “developing a more rigorous teaching philosophy statement entails grounding one’s teaching philosophy in ‘philosophy itself’”. Klockner et al. (2021) add that when the TPS is tied to an existing philosophical tradition, it has deeper roots. Therefore, as a prerequisite to writing a TPS, a teacher must acquaint oneself with the existing philosophies of education such as idealism, realism, pragmatism, existentialism, critical theory, or constructivism. This can formulate a framework for anchoring one’s teaching philosophy statement (Caukin & Brinthaupt, 2017; Klockner et al., 2021). When the process of writing a TPS is scaffolded through appropriate philosophical questions and feedback, it provides insight into the teacher’s preconceived notions of their professional identity, thoughts, beliefs about teaching and learning, identifying inconsistencies, and thereby forcing them to locate and compare, validate or revise their practice (Baker, 2021).

The process of writing a TPS provides a valuable space for reflection and metacognition (Almusharraf, 2020; Baker, 2021; Caukin & Brinthaupt, 2017; Klockner et al., 2021; Laundon et al., 2020; Supasiraprapa & De Costa, 2022). Such a reflection often leads to evolution and professional growth on the part of a teacher (Farrell & Kennedy, 2019). Teachers may need to write TPSs at various stages of their career, such as during their initial teacher education programmes, upon applying for a teaching job or promotion; during engagement in a continuous professional development programme (Baker, 2021; Bowne, 2017, 2018; Kurita & Yoshida, 2020; Supasiraprapa & De Costa, 2022), which was the case with the participants in this study. In support of this position, Beatty et al. (2009, p. 100) allude that “many teachers are encouraged to draft their first formal teaching philosophy statement ... as part of their teaching portfolio”. In the case of this study, writing a TPS as part of a teaching portfolio is taught as part of a conventional professional development programme administered by the NUL CTL.

A well-crafted TPS portrays a vivid picture of “the author as a teacher and their thoughts and ideals regarding interactions between learning and teaching, perceptions of the teacher’s and students’ roles, and goals and values of the educational journey” (Klockner et al., 2021, p. 2). While there is no prescribed length, TPSs are typically two-four pages in length and are written in first person “I”. Also noteworthy, TPSs are dynamic, and they evolve and become more rigorous as the teacher gains more experience and grows in the profession (Caukin & Brinthaupt, 2017).

4.3. The role of reflective practice in developing teaching

There are various reflection tools which teachers can utilise. These include peer observation, reflective journals, digital technology, and writing TPSs, which was the focus of this study. Reflective practice can be traced back to the work of John Dewey (1933, p. 118) who defined reflective thinking as an “active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it ...”. The definition was further expounded by Schon (1983, 1987), who described reflection as the knowledge gained from experience. Since then, reflection has received noticeable attention in teacher education and is considered a key component in teachers’ professional development (Almusharraf, 2020; Tlali, 2019b).

Koukpaki and Adams (2020) illustrate that reflective practice is well-embedded in teaching and learning contexts. This view is underscored by Almusharraf (2020) who indicates that reflective practice focuses on one’s teaching, what drives it and its impact on learning. This systematic exploration of instruction is essential in providing teachers with the opportunity to learn more about their teaching. A well-executed reflective exercise involves deep thinking, thereby leading to improvement and professional growth (Almusharraf, 2020). Engaging in reflective practice necessitates residual learning through which a practitioner continues to reflect in conversations with the self and others (Koukpaki & Adams, 2020).

Reflective practice increases the confidence and willingness of the practitioners to become lifelong learners. Thus, engaging in reflective practice or being a reflective practitioner is one of the critical attributes of educators who manifest high-quality teaching and elicit high-quality learning (Baker, 2021). However, it needs to be clarified that becoming a reflective practitioner does not happen by chance, which is why this skill needs to be taught and developed through explicit instruction (Almusharraf, 2020). Higher education teachers, like all other teachers, need to engage in extensive reflection on their conceptions of, and approaches to teaching so that they may improve their practice (Tlali, 2019a).

5. Methodology

The study is qualitative in nature and it was anchored within the narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry enabled us to study and analyse the teaching philosophy statements of the Lesotho higher education teachers. The approach is further underscored by Daiute (2014) who considers the storytelling method suitable for exploring socially situated phenomena. This form of inquiry seeks to understand real-life experiences and provides a detailed description of these experiences. It also involves an exploration of the meanings that participants ascribe to these experiences. Narrative inquiry amplifies the voices that may have otherwise been muted (Grady et al., 2018; Wang & Geale, 2015).

5.1. Participants’ selection

The participants were purposively selected by virtue of being students enrolled in a professional development programme, with a prospect of writing TPSs. Twenty-five students who enrolled in the Teaching and learning course of the PGD-HE offered by the NUL CTL were invited to participate. Fourteen of them expressed interest and gave consent for their narratives to be used in this study. The participants were current educators in the different higher education institutions of Lesotho, and they were students in the PGD-HE programme at the time. They came from diverse disciplines such as Pharmacy, Nursing, Law, Languages, Information Technology and Social Sciences.

5.2. Data collection

The participants took part in a series of lessons where they were introduced to the concepts “teaching philosophy” and “teaching philosophy statement”, respectively. During those lessons, they were actively engaged in articulating teaching philosophy statements that resonate with their teaching. Since the PGD-HE is a fully online programme, it was not easy to physically access the participants. Hence they were asked to respond to an online qualitative or open ended questionnaire. The

questionnaire items required them to share their conceptions of a teaching philosophy. The questionnaire provided an open ended space for their responses and allowed ample space to write narratives of their teaching philosophy statements without guiding them on what to include. They were asked to submit their written narratives for analysis (Grady et al., 2018), and they did. This data generation method yielded a lot of data and afforded the participants some deeper reflection on their experiences as well as their trajectories as higher education teachers.

5.3. Data analysis

The narratives were analysed using qualitative inductive codes that emerged from the data (Merriam, 2014). In addition, thematic analysis was employed to understand the contents of the TPSs. While several themes emerged from the data, we selected to report only those that illuminated aspects of professional development on the part of the participating higher education teachers.

5.4. Ethical considerations

Ethical issues were also addressed (Cohen et al., 2018) by seeking permission from the relevant institutional offices before this study commenced. The participants were also requested to sign consent forms in google forms before participating in the study. We also ensured confidentiality throughout the study in order to protect the identity of the participants. This was done by allocating pseudo-code: HET which is an acronym for Higher Education Teacher. Accordingly, the participants were labeled HET1 to HET14. The coding also ensured ease of reference when reporting the findings. In addition, sufficient direct quotes were included from the data to amplify the participants' voices and enhance the trustworthiness of the findings (Cohen et al., 2018).

6. Findings

The objectives of this study were to examine the extent to which a teaching philosophy statement may promote reflective thinking among higher education teachers; to establish the link between a teaching philosophy statement, reflective practice and the professional development of higher education teachers; and to identify the professional developmental areas which emerge from the participants' teaching philosophy statements. Several issues emerged from the inductive codes which were derived from the data itself (Cohen et al., 2018; Merriam, 2014). These pointed to the extent to which articulating a teaching philosophy statement evoked reflectiveness and highlighted the link between the TPS, reflective practice and the professional development of higher education teachers. The finding further highlighted areas of professional development which the reflective exercise aroused among the participants. The issues were categorised into the following four themes (1) the before picture; (2) the turning point; (3) philosophical alignment, whose further analysis yielded six sub-themes (conceptions of teaching, learning atmosphere, the students, teaching goals, teaching strategies, and assessment strategies); and (4) the milestones.

6.1. Theme 1: the before picture

Some participants indicated that when they started teaching, they were not sure what was expected of them. Some of the participants began their TPSs by relating their novice experiences and practices, as follows:

When I started teaching, I only used the lecture method. I didn't have any teaching background, and I used to consider myself the sole provider of knowledge in my classes. (HET-1)

When I first started teaching, I could not wait for a platform to showcase how much I have acquired at the university. I didn't realise how teacher-centred my approach was. I gave it hard to my students who were excited to learn from somebody who is almost their age. But their excitement gradually died and that caused me to rethink my skills.(HET-3)

Initially, I was thrown into a deep end without any prior training in teaching and learning. I survived by emulating my previous instructors and lecturers. (HET-4)

From the above findings, it can be noted that without prior teacher training, higher education teachers struggle in their job, and some resort to emulating their previous teachers. Adversely their practices are also prone to being highly teacher-centred, which is what constructivism refutes.

6.2. Theme 2: the turning point

The participants shared the experiences that positively influenced their professional journey. Some explicitly cited their enrolment in the PGD-HE as a turning point in their career and hailed this programme for significantly enhancing their professional growth. In their own words, here is what the participants said:

The PGD-HE has strengthened my teaching prowess towards facilitating learning experiences, both academic and co-curricular. (HET-2)

My teaching approaches and strategies transitioned drastically after enrolling in the PGD-HE programme. I am now able to create student-centred learning environment in which the students lead in their learning. (HET-7)

This programme has added value to my teaching. I have come to understand my role much better as a higher education teacher and I am now more mindful of my practices. My teaching style is now highly interactive and engaging. (HET-14)

The above quotes indicate that some of the participants' teaching prowess improved considerably after they enrolled in the PGD-HE. They also illustrate the extent to which the participants feel empowered and confident in the way they now teach. The above findings resonate with constructivism in the sense that they indicate how the relevant professional development may help higher education teachers to shift from teacher-centred to more interactive and student-centred practices.

6.3. Theme 3: philosophical alignment

The participants indicated which school(s) of thought now influenced their practices. They specified their philosophical dispositions as follows:

I am driven by a passion for producing pragmatic and innovative learners ready to solve modern-day social problems. (HET-1)

My teaching philosophy is grounded within constructivism where knowledge is constructed through interactions and collaborations with others. This has helped me shift from teacher-centred to student-centred teaching, with the recognition of learners as the primary stakeholder in their learning. (HET-3)

I believe that my teaching aligns very well with constructivism since I enjoy throwing a topic for the day to my class, and highlighting its basic aspects and the expected outcomes while allowing students to approach it their way. The wealth of knowledge that students always bring is immeasurable. (HET-6)

My philosophy is humanistic and constructivist. Humanism helps me gain the trust of my students and to create an inclusive environment where each student feels respected. I ensure the cognitive construction of reality through students' activities because knowledge cannot be constructed unless students are active. (HET-8)

I embrace a constructivist pedagogy that emphasises active discovery on the part of my students. My lessons are designed to allow students to learn through trial-and-error and finding solutions to problems. (HET-11)

While pragmatism and humanism were also mentioned, it seems that constructivism has gained popularity among participating higher education teachers. This theory seems to provide a solid anchor upon which they ground most of their conceptions and activities. Further analysis of the TPSs illustrated that for these participants, constructivism intrinsically permeates the components captured in the sub-themes which follow:

6.3.1. *Sub-theme 1: conceptions of teaching*

In line with their philosophical dispositions, the participants conceptualised what it means to be a teacher. Here is what they had to say:

I believe that a good teacher require students to regurgitate information. Rather, a teacher equips students to think for themselves. Therefore, I strive to challenge, motivate, and actively engage students to accomplish this goal. (HET-3)

A great educator guides and takes a student through the thought processes concerning how and why something should or should not be done to appreciate the far-reaching implications of whatever undertaking. (HET-9)

As can be seen from these conceptions, the participants seem to be mindful of the multi-faceted nature of the teacher's task in developing the students' potential. Moreover, this conception aligns with constructivism, as this theory recognises the goal of all teaching and learning activities to foster growth in the student (Affandi & Tantra, 2022).

6.3.2. *Sub-theme 2: the learning atmosphere*

The participants also shared their views about how they perceive their role in creating a conducive learning environment. The following is what they said:

I set a relaxed and comfortable yet professional tone in my classroom. Besides, I am approachable and open to students' ideas. I instil the virtues of being sympathetic, caring and patient. (HET-1)

I strive to engage the learners in an enjoyable learning experience through stimulating higher-order thinking skills and respecting their opinions and backgrounds. (HET-5)

In my classes, I put the students at ease so that even the most timid student can contribute. Many students will be happy to be in a class where they feel part of a family, where relationships are based on respect, and everybody's ideas are listened to and discussed equally. (HET-7)

Even though I am usually organised in precise lesson planning, I am also the kind of teacher who encourages flexibility. Even though I would have planned my lesson in a certain way, if the interaction with students sways my lesson, I quickly adapt and use that towards achieving my goals. I have come to appreciate the wealth of knowledge that my students can bring to the classroom. (HET-8)

In my class, students freely express themselves with no boundaries. I think this style works well in ensuring high learner involvement. I must acknowledge that, at times, the lesson tends to go off-track, but the approach stimulates their aspiration and willingness to learn new things. (HET-12)

The above findings suggest that some participants are mindful that optimising students' learning requires a warm, inclusive, and caring environment. This brings out the best in students and allows them to be at ease while resonating well with constructivism because it advocates for student-centeredness.

6.3.3. Sub-theme 3: the students

The participants further shared their perceptions about what the students mean to them and their views about what the students bring to the teaching and learning, and they illustrated:

I believe that all my learners are distinctive and different. Their needs and concerns are different. As a result, my approaches to my learners are different as they are influenced by various aspects such as backgrounds, lifestyles, community, peers, and educational experiences. (HET-3)

I encourage my students not to allow their background to determine or limit their thinking capacity. I always use my upbringing as an example to show that we all start from a humble beginning to succeed in life. That has inspired most of them. (HET-5)

I believe strongly that all my students, with the help of the right tools, can overcome any difficulties that come with learning. I think that one of my best qualities as a teacher is my ability to inspire confidence in my students so that they feel comfortable expressing themselves. (HET-13)

From the above quotes, it can be noted that the participating higher education teachers are mindful of the students' factors that affect learning, such as their background, needs, and level of confidence. Hence the participants consider these in their teaching.

6.3.4. Sub-theme 4: teaching goals

Congruent with their philosophical beliefs, the participants illustrated what they wish to achieve with their teaching. The quotes have captured their teaching goals:

My goal is to motivate, inspire and empower my learners to become decisive, take responsibility for their own learning and develop into socially responsible citizens. (HET-1)

For every class I teach, I wish to build students' confidence to solve problems. This requires me to challenge them and ensure that they know why we are doing what we are doing. Many times, I ask students the simple question, "why?" I could easily tell students to memorise the formulas and principles, but I want them to justify their position. It is rewarding for me to observe students ponder on profound questions and firmly grasp the material. (HET-4)

My goal is to produce self-directed students who can use appropriate collaborative and communication skills in interaction with other people. They should also be confident in making decisions that help individuals, families and communities. (HET-11)

Among the goals that participants strive to achieve, they seek to empower their students and develop them into responsible citizens who can apply the gained knowledge for both their benefit and their communities. These aspirations are aligned with constructivism in that knowledge does not become an end in itself, but such knowledge has to stimulate growth (Affandi & Tantra, 2022; Almusharraf, 2020).

6.3.5. Sub-theme 5: teaching strategies

Also linked to their philosophical beliefs, the participants' teaching strategies were stipulated as follows:

I prioritise authentic learning where students solve real-world problems. To diagnose problems, students use research skills to figure out solutions and understand how their education translates to life outside the classroom. (HET-1)

My students work in groups whereby they express and refine their thought processes. By listening to peers, they hear new perspectives that deepen their knowledge. I provide scaffolding and reinforcement from time to time where there is. (HET-2)

I believe in the Socratic method of teaching. Through a series of skillful questions, learners are probed to discover the solution to given problems. I believe that this method is the forerunner of problem-based learning education. (HET-8)

I use the interactive lecture method only at an introductory level to guide students. I believe that a learner is a person who is interested and self-motivated to learn and that students learn better if they are involved. (HET-9)

I believe in learning outside the classroom. I am committed to providing a learning environment that allows students to participate in educational field trips, engaging with different stakeholders through events, community work and experiential learning opportunities. (HET-14)

The teaching strategies that emerged from the findings include collaborative, problem-based and experiential learning, and there is room for scaffolding through interactive discussions. The Socratic method was also featured as a strategy that involves questioning and probing students such that they can solve problems. All of these are learner-centred teaching strategies that constructivism advocates for.

6.3.6. Sub-theme 6: assessment strategies

The participants also illustrated which assessment strategies they favoured in achieving their goals, and these came to the fore:

I construct assessment tasks that are based on learning outcomes and are well aligned with the course outline. I use creative assessment practices such as scenarios. (HET-2)

I focus on formative assessment so that I monitor my students' progress and provide assistance accordingly. This helps me to measure my teaching efficacy and to reflect on my strengths and weaknesses. I also provide timely and descriptive feedback so that students can learn and improve from it. (HET-4)

My assessment is structured in line with Bloom's Taxonomy, accompanied by rubrics to guide the learners on what is expected of them. As a matter of principle, I give feedback that is timely, specific and directive. (HET-6)

I use various authentic assessment methods such as portfolios and projects. Students' performance provides me with feedback that helps me to measure my effectiveness as I seek to continuously improve my practice. (HET-10)

I strive to give constructive feedback. I have seen that discussions of feedback on individuals' performance and on how grading has been done usually help students to understand better. (HET-11)

I use students' assessment results to reflect upon my practice. This enables me to identify areas that need more attention. (HET-14)

The findings indicate that the participants strive to ensure that their assessment strategies are aligned with the content they cover in their course outlines. They also utilise authentic and creative assessment strategies such as scenarios, portfolios and projects. Some are also aware of the value of anchoring their assessment strategies upon taxonomies such as Bloom's taxonomy which deepens knowledge in terms of engaging the different levels of the learner's cognitive domains. Most importantly, the participants know the value of providing constructive feedback to support students' learning.

6.4. Theme 4: the milestones

Upon reflecting on their teaching trajectories, the participants identified some milestones, especially in the PGD-HE. They reported:

I can now reflect on my teaching; I perceive teaching as an enjoyable and fulfilling experience that I would like to continue to share with my students. (HET-3)

I have come to enjoy teaching. I have become a more passionate and committed professional. I am constantly growing through peer reviews and a constant reflection that I always engage in. (HET-4)

I believe it is a privilege to be an educator and to be able to empower students. It is very rewarding to see them develop a passion for the material, and a genuine desire to know more is advantageous. (HET-7)

Several students have confessed that they always look forward to my classes as I bring the best out of them by developing them into reflective change agents who consume information but use it to explore alternatives and to the status quo. (HET-10)

Developing a TPS and discussing it with peers has improved my practice by encouraging a reflective process and has enhanced my professional development as I reflect on pedagogical values that inform my teaching. (HET-13)

From the foregoing findings, the participants also shared insights about how the exercise of writing TPSs has benefited them and advanced their reflective practice. They also expressed how much their passion for teaching has been enhanced. Some also indicated how they have come to value teaching as a privilege that enabled them to positively touch students' lives.

7. Discussion

This paper explored the extent to which the process of writing a TPS can evoke reflective practice and support the professional development of higher education teachers in Lesotho. After engaging in the exercise of writing the teaching philosophy statements, the participants attested to substantial reflective thinking and professional growth that led to the use of more student-centred approaches. This is concomitant with the literature that suggests that professional development programmes should have a meaningful impact on educator's teaching practice and student learning (Artman et al., 2020; Bergmark, 2020; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Most importantly, professional development programmes must promote student-centred approaches (Kalman et al., 2020; Noben et al., 2021).

The participants reflected on their professional trajectories by depicting (1) their outlook on teaching before they enrolled in PGD-HE, (2) their turning point and what prompted them to re-define teaching and learning, (3) their newly defined philosophical dispositions, as well as (4) how those inform their conceptions of teaching, their insights about the students, the learning environment, their aspired teaching goals as well as the teaching and assessment strategies. The findings illustrate that the participants extensively reflected on their professional trajectories and development as higher education teachers. Thus, as they were narrating their teaching philosophy statements, they also got to reflect on their philosophical convictions and how those permeate their conceptions about teaching and learning (Koukpaki & Adams, 2020).

Some of the participants explicitly acknowledged that writing the TPSs helped to advance their reflective practice and professional growth, and this necessitated the adoption of more student-centred approaches. Others outlined the milestones which they achieved since they adopted a TPS as their reflective tool. This resonates with constructivism as well as some previous research (Kalman et al., 2020; Noben et al., 2021) that conceded that in the higher education space, the main focus of teacher professional development should be the advancement of teaching and student-centeredness.

8. Recommendations

The findings revealed that the participants gained considerable residual learning which is illustrated by the diverse issues that emerged from the findings. This suggests that the process of

writing TPSs did indeed evoke reflective practice and metacognition, thereby prompting teachers' to rethink and modify their practices (Caukin & Brinthaupt, 2017; Kurita & Yoshida, 2020; Omodan, 2022). However, since reflective practice does not happen by chance, the study thus recommend that the professional development programmes that are meant for higher education teachers should offer explicit instruction on reflective practice and articulating a TPS. There should further be an emphasis on the link between a TPS, reflective practice and teacher professional development. Also on the basis of the findings, the study concludes that articulating a TPS is indeed a worthy exercise, hence the recommendation to foreground it in supporting reflective practice and in the advancement of the professional development of higher education teachers.

9. Limitations and possible future research directions

The findings revealed valuable insights about how articulating a teaching philosophy statement could support reflective practice and the professional development of higher education teachers. However, some of the participants' responses could be construed as mainly theoretical and based on what had just been learned in the PGD-HE programme. This may constitute a limitation to this paper. As the participants complete the PGD-HE programme, and seek to continually put their knowledge into practice, more valuable insight could come up. It would be necessary, therefore, to follow them up in future, and complement this research with data generated from observations and document analysis.

10. Conclusion

This study contributes to the literature on teaching philosophy statement. This is considered an under-researched subject in the Lesotho higher education context where most educators were not initially trained as teachers. The study also contributes to the practices in the professional development of higher education teachers in Lesotho, by highlighting the importance of reflective practice, and illustrating how that can be achieved by articulating a teaching philosophy statement. Other educators elsewhere could also relate to the findings of this study.

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