RPL in teacher education: lessons being learned from the National Professional Diploma in Education

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Introduction

The Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is now a formal part of the assessment and development policy landscape that has grown up around the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) in South Africa. In all sectors of the economy, the notion is that a diversity of training, educational or life experiences can, *in principle,* provide learners with the required knowledge and individual development necessary to enter more advanced learning programmes when they have not been able to acquire these prerequisites in the mainstream. RPL is envisaged as the mechanism whereby this recognition of diverse learning experiences will be carried out. The education and training system is now very much at the point where it must develop and implement the mechanism in concrete ways in a vast range of different education and training contexts.

The aim of this paper is to try to deepen our understanding of the problem of implementing the RPL of teachers and teaching in relation to these very important imperatives. It takes as its focus the first offerings of the National Professional Diploma in Education (NPDE) by various higher education institutions in South Africa. SAIDE's involvement with the process has been in working with the national Department of Education in developing the NPDE plan, as an active support agency in two of the institutions offering an extensive NPDE programme, and as a research organisation engaged in ongoing conceptualisation and evaluation of RPL in teacher education. What follows is related to our extensive ongoing research on and engagement within the emerging practices of RPL in the NPDE.

The structure of this paper is as follows: first, it briefly describes the character of the NPDE and the envisaged role of RPL strategies within it. Following that, it sets out a general account of the RPL research literature in South Africa, and some of the crucial theoretical, policy and implementation

questions that arise within it. Here, problems in the actual 'rolling out' of the NPDE are highlighted. The paper goes on to consider the issues that have arisen in RPL for teachers in the three different areas of concern:

- It suggests that particular theories of the situatedness and transfer of skills and knowledge have come to dominate the debate, and questions whether or not this should be the case.
- It explores the widespread tendency to view RPL as a mass access mechanism rather than as a strategy for individual development, and suggests that this is counterproductive and inconsistent with the very nature of RPL.
- It argues that the technical implementation requirements of RPL have tended to dominate institutional contexts offering the NPDE, at the expense of its human and social development imperatives.

The National Professional Diploma in Education (NPDE)

In national educational planning, the need for this qualification emerged from the phasing out of certificates, diplomas, higher diplomas, and further diplomas in teacher education. Many educators are still in possession of such certificates, and, for those whose qualifications are classified as REQV 12 or lower, there is a need to provide alternative access routes into the new qualifications framework.

The NPDE, which is envisaged as an interim qualification, is designed to provide this access for teachers. It is pitched at level five on the NQF, and is a 240 credit qualification. Since it is meant for upgrading of educators in schooling, it assumes knowledge and skills gained from experience. It also assumes that educators will have knowledge of two languages and at least four other school subjects up to a Standard Eight or Ten level, as well as some professional training. The qualification is made of four groups of exit-level outcomes, which together reflect the work of a professional educator. These are:

a.   *Component One: Competences relating to fundamental learning*
The focus in this component is on the role of the scholar, researcher, and lifelong learner. However, there is some reference in the application of the

communicative and numerical competence to the roles of learning mediation, assessment, and management/ administration.

b.   *Component Two: Competences relating to the subject and content of teaching*

The focus in this component is on the role of interpreter and designer of learning programmes and materials, the role of learning mediation, as well as on the specialist role.

c.   *Component Three: Competences relating to teaching and learning processes*

The focus in this component is on the roles of the specialist, the learning mediator, assessor, manager/administrator/leader, interpreter and designer of learning programmes and materials, as well as the pastoral role.

d.   *Component Four: Competences relating to the school and profession*

The focus in this component is on the role of manager/administrator/ leader, as well as of the community, citizenship and pastoral role.

Of particular interest for our purposes here is that the NPDE qualification documentation states that learners on the NPDE are entitled to assessment for recognition of prior learning and experience. There are two forms of RPL for NPDE programmes:

a.   Exemption from credits on the basis of qualifications already achieved; and

b.   Achievement of credits towards the NPDE through assessment and recognition of prior learning and experience.

A maximum of 120 credits in the qualification may be credited through RPL – either through exemption or assessment. The first form will be available for teachers whose qualifications are evaluated at REQV 12. The second should be available for teachers whose qualifications are evaluated at REQV 11. The NPDE qualification gives guidance about the way in which this RPL should be done:

> Providers are required to develop structured means for the assessment of individual learners against the exit-level outcomes of the qualification on a case by case basis.

Crucially, there are no nationally established RPL[1] procedures or instruments, the official position being that higher education institutions should each develop their own autonomous programmes in the NPDE.

In June 2002, JET Education Services, supported by SAIDE, ran a workshop on RPL for NPDE providers. Participants went through a series of role plays modeling the stages of the RPL process – drawing up a profile of the RPL candidate, developing appropriate assessment tools, supporting the candidate through the assessment, and moderating the assessment. There was considerable discussion of three types of tools to RPL that could be used across providers – classroom observation schedules, portfolios, and challenge tests. A set of guidelines emerged from the workshop setting out the process to be followed to help providers implement satisfactory RPL approaches in the NPDE.

In March 2003, this time under the auspices of the ETDP SETA, a further workshop took place, in which national providers of the NPDE inter alia grappled further with issues and problems related to the implementation of RPL in their programmes. A set of minimum standards for RPL was set up at that workshop. The ETDP SETA ETQA has become formally involved in the rollout of the NPDE, which is one of the qualifications delegated to it for quality assurance by the Higher Education Quality Committee of the Council on Higher Education. It is responsible for checking whether or not the minimum standards for RPL are being met by the providers. In addition, however, the ETDP SETA's Board has agreed to support an NPDE and RPL research and development project to further the development of best practices in relation to RPL and integrated assessment.

Between October 2003 and May 2004, the Centre for Education Policy Development commissioned by the Education Labour Relations Council, carried out a curriculum evaluation of the NPDE, which involved site visits to all 17 providers. The interim findings of the RPL section of the evaluation were presented at a workshop for NPDE providers in March 2004 (Buchler, in Welch and Francis, 2004, p.23). Buchler's general conclusion was that RPL within the first cohort of teachers has been inadequately conceptualised, funded and implemented.

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[1]   Incidentally, SAIDE's view is that there is a place for a common national challenge test for level 4 literacy and numeracy, in the interests of quality control and comparative national policy research.

The major issues are:

- Insufficient assessment methods
- Inadequacy of the portfolio
- Blurring of current/new and prior learning
- Inadequate training of staff
- Insufficient time for advising students
  (Buchler, in Welch and Francis, 2004, p.23).

The purpose of this paper is not to explore these issues in detail. Rather, what we are concerned with here is to highlight some of the contradictions that are evident in the RPL terrain in teacher education, and to point out examples of how these are being engaged by various of the providers. As we will go on to suggest, there are various factors in the NPDE and in teacher education more broadly that make the implementation of RPL problematic.

The growth of local research

There is a broader research and policy context in South Africa against which we need to consider these moves to establish a viable approach to RPL in teacher education. As is now well documented in South African research, RPL originated in the United States of America shortly after World War Two. A concept and set of practices closely connected to workplace education and training, its aim is to assist learners who have acquired knowledge and skills through life and work experiences to receive credits for this work. In South Africa, the concept has come to acquire growing significance nationally through the establishment of the NQF, which is likewise based on the principle of providing formal recognition to appropriate skills and knowledge, regardless of how or where they have been acquired. As a policy lever, RPL is of particular importance because it holds out the promise of redressing historical injustices and deprivations caused by the apartheid education system. Further, it promises to provide cost-effective mechanisms for speeding up the acquisition of skills and knowledge, a process that is critical to accelerating economic growth in the country.

Despite its potential, RPL has a limited history of implementation in South African education and, as a quick scan of available research illustrates, an equally limited research history. As the body of local research grows, however, it is emerging that implementation of RPL is fraught with intellectual and logistical challenges. The concept and its potential to deliver on its promise are subjects of intense debate, a debate that easily polarises participants based on

their vested interests. Although RPL is a national education and training policy imperative, it is new and remains an untested policy. Where there has been research, the findings suggest that there is still a "lack of clarity about the nature, value and purpose of RPL" (Ralphs and Motala, 2000, p.3), and that institutional reluctance and inexperience, rigid curriculum, and the absence of expertise in the assessment of experiential learning remain constraining factors for implementing RPL (Buchler et. al., 2000, p.2).

Recognizing the importance of the concept and challenges associated with its implementation, JET started the Workers Higher Education Project (WHEP) in 1995 to inspire, initiate, and fund new RPL projects in the workplace and in higher education. Since that time, WHEP has fostered a series of projects, papers, publications, and seminars to promote RPL. This work was presented in the public domain in 2000, particularly through two nationally coordinated research projects and a national conference in October. That conference established a set of new priorities around RPL, which reflected a more strategic approach to both RPL and experiential learning in South Africa.

There is now a growing literature on the subject in South Africa. This paper, and the longer-term research project that it is related to, conceives itself as forming part of the abovementioned research agenda. It will seek to build on existing research in South Africa, which to date, has focused on such issues as conceptualising RPL (Gawe, 1999; Breier, 1998a, 1998b), the potential of RPL for social justice and redress in education (Michelson, 1999; Harris, 1999, 2000), epistemological issues in RPL (Shalem, 2001), case studies of RPL in institutional settings (Osman and Castle, 2001) and institutional policy development (Geyser, 1999).

A brief scan of existing research into RPL in South Africa quickly reveals that there are many questions still unanswered around both the theoretical concept and implementation of RPL in the country. In considering what these are more precisely in relation to teacher education and development, a number of issues come to the fore. The purpose of setting them out here is not to undermine the importance of particular lines of enquiry, but rather to try to define the ongoing research questions that SAIDE faces in its own engagement with RPL in the NPDE.

RPL issues emerging in South African teacher education

The growth of work competence in and across content domains

When RPL is considered in the context of the NQF, then the question arises as to how it contributes to achieving the goal of *the portability of qualifications, knowledge and skills* across work and learning domains. There is a great deal of current educational research which suggests that knowledge and skills are *situated* in a context of particular activities or practices, and that they do not transfer straightforwardly into other contexts. For example, a high level of skill as a political orator and strategist does not necessarily entail the ability to teach well, and competence as a history teacher does not necessarily entail the ability to teach biology. On the other hand, there is a strong indication from contemporary psychological research that the knowledge and skills that people acquire become *embodied* – that is to say, as human beings, they carry certain kinds of competence with them across the different life and work contexts that they act within. In this sense, it is perfectly conceivable that particular teachers, through systematic engagement with general ideas about teaching and learning in a theoretical context and/or through their own development of a range of pedagogic strategies related to the alternative structures and constructions of knowledge, might acquire generic teaching competence that would transfer across different subjects or levels.

From the point of view of teachers, the heading of this subsection might be translated as 'the growth of teaching competence in and across subject domains'. An RPL strategy for teachers must engage with the question of what teacher knowledge is subject- or domain-specific and what is generic to teaching across different subject domains. It cannot simply declare in advance that RPL can only be concerned with the recognition of one or other kind of competence, on the strength of unresolved questions about the nature of the subject knowledge or the pedagogic knowledge of our existing teaching personnel. This would beg the crucial RPL question at stake in programmes like the NPDE: how much of each kind of knowledge do teachers seem to have acquired in 'on the job' learning?

Developmental versus transformational models of RPL[2]

A crucial area of debate has focused on the differences between developmental and transformational models of RPL. In brief, certain protagonists have argued that, although some developmental forms of RPL help to develop the student – rather than simply assessing existing levels of competence – they are still flawed because they do not engage with the need for institutions to transform their academic programmes and curricula to take account of 'other' knowledges such as culture-, gender- or class-specific experiential knowledge and learning which are usually invisible in an academy. Thus, transformational models of RPL seek to recognize non-formal and experiential learning for itself rather than attempting to articulate and match such knowledge and learning with knowledge prevalent in the receiving institution.

The ideas raised by transformational models of RPL are a critical component of reflecting on the validity of curricula in general, and pose important debates about what is and is not considered valid knowledge. In regard to teacher development and upgrading, they pose the question as to whether schools should be engaged with indigenous or 'local' knowledges rather than with the classical school subjects, and indeed, whether such a distinction makes any sense in terms of the needs and global interests of Africa.[3]

The attainability of equivalence

Another clear theme in debates around RPL relates to the attainability of equivalence. In brief, some commentators – locally and internationally – have questioned the extent to which it is possible to claim different learning experiences in different contexts as equivalent. Often, this line of questioning

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[2]   The terms 'developmental' and 'transformational' are taken from Osman (2001).

[3]   It is worth noting that research based on such assumptions may ultimately force a review of the entire norms and standards and competence framework constructed nationally for teacher education programmes. This poses particular difficulties for research on what is an already existing programme like the NPDE. SAIDE's view is that, while such research may be valuable in its own right as a mechanism for reviewing the teacher education outcomes, it is important first to allow implementation of NPDE and other programmes before beginning such a review. We operate on the assumption that the nationally defined outcomes for the NPDE – having been broadly agreed by a range of constituencies – are not in urgent need of transformative review. Ultimately, though, we think that research on RPL may be used to open such further debate.

comes from people within the higher education sector, who argue that the academic experience is, by its very nature, different from other types of learning, whether they be formal or experiential. The issue is often construed as one about the epistemological assumptions of the RPL enterprise – can it be assumed that the way one comes to know and the cognitive character of one's knowledge is the same across different life and work contexts? In teaching, for example, what kind of learning in what kinds of social domains of practice can we take to be predictors of the ability to teach well? It is no exaggeration to suggest that the whole enterprise of RPL is related to this issue, since the limits of the equivalence of learning constitute the real constraints that will determine what counts as appropriate RPL.

As with the previous issue, this continues to be an important theme for educational research, and encapsulates many concerns central to the ongoing development and transformation of education in South Africa. However, we suggest that, for purposes of practical teacher development, this 'epistemological' debate is not necessarily the most incisive starting point for the establishment of any RPL programme. In regard to teacher education, the hypothetical case for RPL seems to rest on lots of prima facie evidence that skills and knowledge learned in any number of ways, formal or experiential, in and outside the classroom, can be equated. In regard to the NPDE, a national diploma, it would seem that our starting point for investigation should be the assumption that there are certain kinds of experiential learning, acquired 'on the job' in the classroom, that contribute to the development of teacher competence. The key question then becomes one of whether or not formal and/or experiential learning have led to the acquisition of the skills and knowledge defined by the NPDE curriculum.

The challenges of credit transfer

As has been noted above, two forms of RPL are being made available to educators taking an NPDE programme. The first, targeting educators on the REQV 12 level will be to offer the opportunity of transferring credits from other qualifications into the NPDE. This is a process which will no doubt face many challenges. In particular:

•   RPL of this nature will have to grapple with the long-standing problem of how to standardise the ways in which institutions recognise the formal learning experience of learners from other institutions.

- At a national level, it will be important to consider the problem that historical acquisition of teaching diplomas – particularly on courses and programmes developed as part of the apartheid system – has unfortunately not always equipped the recipients with the level or kind of learning achievements articulated for the NPDE. Most importantly, the historical legacy of *fundamental pedagogics* in many programmes often runs counter to the kinds of competence outlined for the NPDE. This introduces several logistical challenges for national teaching qualifications, which are often simply not dealt with by credit transfer systems.

Finding solutions to the above problems, as well as others associated with credit transfer, will be critical to RPL within the NPDE.

The question of finance

A theme mostly absent from research papers on RPL is the question of cost, and particularly who will foot the bill. Unsurprisingly, case studies of RPL suggest that the more rigorous and learner-focused the process, the more expensive it becomes. In relation to the NPDE, the national Department of Education (DoE) funds the students' tuition fees, but obviously within certain budgetary limits (we return to the implications of this issue below). The University of South Africa has attempted to outline a formula for budgeting for RPL more generally, where the cost of RPL is borne by the student. It is apparent from these cases that the costs of different methods of RPL have not yet been worked out accurately. Given the importance attached to RPL in the NPDE and more generally, questions need to be raised about how much different methods of RPL cost, as well as the appropriateness of using fees to sustain RPL within programmes.

The above review of emergent issue and question in regard to RPL for teacher education in South Africa highlights many crucial questions being thrown up by the NPDE programme. This paper now goes on to examine some of the underlying tensions in more detail, in regard to the theory, policy and implementation of RPL.

Theory: the issue of transfer

Kraak (1999) captures well a particular notion concerning learning and its transfer that has become very influential amongst policy makers in South African education. It has enormous resonance for RPL:

> a. . . powerful criticism of OBET. . . is that outcomes models assume that learning acquired, assessed and accredited by OBET – specifically core or generic competencies – can be transferred and applied across differing knowledge and societal contexts. . . This central proposition flies in the face of recent theories of cognition and learning. . . [that] stress that generic competences or capabilities are acquired in specific contexts. . . and, as a consequence, are not applicable in other knowledge or occupational contexts. (Kraak, 1999, p.47)

Now there is a central flaw in this formulation, which, simply put, is that it should say '*some* recent theories of cognition and learning'. The theorists that Kraak names – Gee, Bernstein, Lave and Wenger (to the extent that they are indeed theorists of *cognition and learning*) – certainly do hold views akin to this formulation, but it would be a naïve theorist indeed who would suggest that such views are dominant in cognitive development and learning theory generally, especially with regard to the ontological stratum[4] of psychology, as distinct from the social relations of learning. There are profound implications of this kind of slippage in relation to the way we think about RPL.

There are two kinds of *prior learning* that the NQF has wanted to bring into the assessment frame since its inception as a policy tool of the emergent and new South African government. These relate closely to what psychologists and educationists term *domain-specific* and *domain-general* learning:

a.   The specialised knowledge and skills that persons acquire 'on-the-job' within a particular domain of practice, but that have been ignored owing to a lack of appropriate assessment mechanisms and human development policies. Such knowledge and skills have executive[5] bearing on a person's ability to perform a job at a much higher level of sophistication and responsibility within that same domain. Failure to recognise them:

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[4]   Perhaps *strata*?

[5]   The word 'executive' is used here in its psychological sense, that is referring to a person's embodied ability to carry out (execute) a particular task successfully.

1.   denies individuals the possibility to further their careers and
        learning capacity, and
2.   deprives the economy of a recognised level of skill, as it is
        available in the work force in each sector of the economy.

B.   The generic knowledge and skills that persons acquire in early basic
        education, in broad everyday life domains and/or in both formal and
        non-formal 'on-the-job-training', but that have not been recognised as
        education and training proper owing to the very rigid,
        compartmentalised certification that characterised the formal
        apprenticeship and schooling systems of the past. Such knowledge and
        skills have executive bearing on a person's ability to transfer across
        domains of work specialisation, to learn new skills quickly in a new
        domain (i.e. to be 're-skilled'), and to re-enter formal education
        pathways. Failure to recognise them:

        1.   denies individuals (in particular, members of the current
                generations of adult workers) the right to take advantage of new
                educational and training opportunities opened up by the
                dismantling of apartheid, and
        2.   deprives the emergent 'information economy' of the ability to
                recognise, formalise and continue to train a more flexible,
                adaptable workforce that will arise with it.

The difficult task that the NQF set out to achieve entailed both of these aims.
While each is emancipatory and developmental (as the characterisations above
make clear), they can only fully 'address the visible and invisible barriers
underpinning transformation of the education and training system' (SAQA,
2002) in concert with each other. It is at least arguable that to concentrate only
on A will mean that the single most historically emancipatory vision of the
NQF, the principle of *the portability of qualifications, knowledge and skills*
within and across domains will be stillborn.

However, there has been an unfortunate recent trend in discussions of RPL to
suggest (along the lines of Kraak's comment about 'recent theories on
cognition and learning') that learning cannot *in principle* be transferred and
applied across different knowledge and task domains. This is evident, for
example, in:

•   moves to restrict RPL activities only to SETA contexts, and not to
        establish principles, guidelines and mechanisms for the RPL of

knowledge and skills that can enable movement across sectors of the economy (SAQA, 2002);

• the characterisation of RPL as exclusively a comparison of previous learner experience against learning outcomes for a specified qualification, rather than (also) against a particular level of expertise common to a range of qualifications at a particular level of the NQF 'ladder'.

One implication is ostensibly that RPL related to 'generic competence' is misguided, and that knowledge and skills can only be developed *for a particular domain of practice in that domain of practice.* Notions such as 'communities of practice', 'activity system', 'situated knowledge, 'situated literacy' and 'distributed cognition' – which may all be captured for purposes of this commentary by the notion of *situated knowledge* – are taken to imply that knowledge and skills are only domain- or context-specific.

There can be no question that any knowledge is always *situated.* Most immediately, this implies that one's consciousness is always bounded by external space-time co-ordinates – for instance, "I know what year it is, what place I am in, what time of day it is, the season of the year", etc. (Searle, 1995, p.28). More expansively, it entails that one operates in thought always in relation to a specific, distinctive set of cultural artifacts and practices, that one's knowledge is at all times necessarily embedded in cultural practices. However, this does not mean that the individual does not learn things that are unique to him or her within these cultural domains, that tend to become embodied in him or her as familiar practice, and that can be carried by him or her to other more or less unfamiliar domains of practice and become the basis for initial participation in such domains.

To suggest that 'situatedness' implies the non-transfer of an individual's knowledge across domains is a rather narrow view of the theory that could inform RPL, for a number of reasons:

• If *situated knowledge* constitutes a new or recent paradigm within the broad terrain of cognitive and learning theory, then it does so alongside a whole range of other newly emerging theoretical traditions, including *embodied knowledge/learning* and theories of *connectionism.* Both of the latter perspectives pose an understanding of RPL that suggests that *embodied* knowledge and skills certainly are carried across contexts of practice, and in some way or another must constitute the conceptions and habits on the basis of which individuals can or cannot engage in any

new, unfamiliar practice. In fact, situated learning theory is intimately connected with notions about the acquisition of *embodied* knowledge, as any review of its theoretical origins and parameters will demonstrate. It does not necessarily follow that to adopt the view that knowledge and skills are situated is to hold that there is nothing about them that is embodied and transferable across contexts.

•   With regard to the *transfer* of learning, the dominant view in the psychology of cognition and learning is not that there is no knowledge or learning whatsoever that can transfer across contexts. Even amongst 'situationists', there are many who accept that certain kinds of transfer are possible. Despite Lave and Wenger's claim that transfer of learning cannot exist because knowledge cannot be de-contextualised, most theorists recognise that such transfer can be socially mediated and, particularly, that certain forms of knowledge enhance the likelihood of transfer across tasks and contexts (see, for example, the special issue of the *International Journal of Educational Research* on the question of transfer: De Corte, 1999).

In teacher education, the questions of transfer are open questions at this stage. Whether or not the knowledge and skills that teachers acquire in training to teach a specific discipline or a particular phase, or those that they construct on the job in teaching an initially unfamiliar discipline, can be the subject of a more 'generic' RPL process remains an open question. It should not be curtailed or constrained by the dominance of a particular theoretical notion of *situated learning* at this stage in the policy process. These questions can only be resolved ultimately by much more detailed theoretical work and by the attendant concrete research. Once it has been defined exactly what kinds of knowledge and skills might be expected to transfer and what to be acquired only in specific contexts, then only ongoing empirical scrutiny of them could prove or disprove these expectations. Such research is a vital part of the establishment and ongoing benchmarking of RPL mechanisms.

In the NPDE terrain, there is little indication at this stage that providers are engaging with the detailed research and assessment requirements in regard to this issue. A scan of the available RPL plans of the different institutions (which were submitted to the NPDE SETA as part of the workshop process during March 2003) reveals that all, either implicitly or explicitly, acknowledge the possibility of teachers having taught in learning areas for which they are not formally qualified being eligible for RPL. However, the RPL mechanisms that they envisage are still, at this stage, too general to engage with the questions of generic subject knowledge transfer.

Policy: the recognition of individual prior learning

In teacher education, RPL is focused in the first instance on a question that has been posed for a long time, not only in the post-apartheid transition in schools, but also in struggles against the racially defined, severely under-resourced schools of the past:

- How are we to define and recognise the teaching competence that has been acquired by teachers, whether they were unqualified, underqualified or differently qualified,[6] who have taught for a substantial period of time in classroom contexts for which they are not formally qualified?
- What means exist to differentiate those who have coped with and developed the necessary knowledge and teaching skills to succeed in these roles from those who have failed to teach effectively and to enhance their competence?

This two-part formulation of the question is important. A false assumption inherent in much RPL discourse is that simply anyone who has been through the motions of teaching has automatically acquired related teaching competence. At the same time, the developmental potential of RPL is to recognise the apparently many individuals who have indeed acquired new teaching competence substantially beyond anything they were formally trained or qualified to do. The challenge to RPL in the teacher development terrain, just as in any other human resource development terrain, is to come up with assessment mechanisms that can identify and assure such quality, in the interests of both social and individual growth.

Related to this is a second question, which emerges in the specific context of a rapidly transforming overall school curriculum. How are we to recognise competence, acquired 'on the job' by teachers, to teach effectively in the new progressive environment, despite their training many years ago that failed to equip them with appropriate subject knowledge and teaching skills? There is a massive national effort underway now to re-train and upgrade teachers in order to facilitate the effective implementation of the 'paradigm shift' in schooling. RPL is deemed an essential part of this overall strategy.

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[6] For instance, a teacher trained in biblical studies and guidance who has been deployed to teach mathematics for ten years owing to the non-availability of qualified mathematics teachers.

It is in this regard that a severe danger creeps into RPL practices in the terrain of teacher education. There is the tendency to treat any experience of teaching – or, one might say, the experience of standing in front of a classroom and making utterances of whatever kind – as the required experience of teaching needed to fulfill the outcomes criteria of a particular teaching qualification. This is related to a major fallacy that abounds too often in the RPL terrain, that merely having an experience of something or participating in something means that we know that something. On the contrary, it is well established, both theoretically and actually, that *experiential learning* should not be equated with the mere having of experiences. Rather, it necessarily entails the deliberate reflection on (Kolb), or reflective abstraction of (Piaget) or voluntary attention to (Vygotsky) the salient details of any experience as they relate to some or other overall framework of knowledge.[7] The point is that RPL mechanisms, in order be able to recognise whether or not the appropriate knowledge and skills have been acquired previously, must attend to whether or not particular individuals have acquired the ability, through experience, to reflect on their own experience in a manner that is somehow removed from that experience in time and space. RPL is an assessment of individual growth and development, in that it seeks to understand the nuances that different individuals bring to, and acquire from, apparently different experiences.

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[7]   *Experiential learning,* following the originator of the concept, (Kolb, 1984), entails learning thorough a deliberate process of reflection on one's experiences of everyday life, including experiences in the workplace, at home, in community organisations, in local politics, etc. Crucially (especially with regard to RPL issues), *experiential learning* is not to be equated with the mere having of experiences, no matter how rich and diverse these may be. It is deliberate reflection on experience that constitutes the crucial learning process in regard to experience. Only then can *new understandings* emerge, which break with the taken-for-grantedness of everyday life and constitute the emergent properties of what we in South Africa term new knowledge, skills, values and attitudes. There is a long history of discussion of this bottom-line requirement in 'experiential learning', associated not only with researchers who have developed the insights of Kolb, but with the earlier works of cognitive developmental theorists such as Piaget and Vygotsky. Piaget (1976, 2001) spoke of the importance of *reflective abstraction* from experience, and Vygotsky (e.g. 1930, p.35; 1931, *passim*) of *voluntary attention* to the salient details of experience, in order to account for the development of new knowledge in learners. There is too often a tendency in RPL discussions to assume that evidence of having had particular experiences in the past necessarily means that a learner has acquired the systematised knowledge associated with them.

RPL is not a mass access mechanism[8] – it is not a process which can be used to identify a class of people who, on the basis of some kind of disadvantage, underpreparation or disability, should be given access to an educational programme of a particular kind. Its very rationale is to differentiate between individuals in cohorts of this kind, to recognise that some will have learned certain things in non-formal or informal or everyday ways while others will not. One of the most difficult problems being encountered in the implementation of RPL in the NPDE lies in coming to grips with this issue. There is an enormous amount of pressure within the structure and rationale of the qualification *to seek to* 'rpl' all the REQV 11 teachers as having attained the necessary competence for the award of the first 120 credits and to do so within the minimum period of study for the qualification i.e. two years. This pressure arises simply by virtue of the fact that they have had many years of teaching experience. Of course, the problematic nature of credit transfer means that this issue is ducked completely – but in an equally implausible way from the point of view of what RPL is intended to identify in individuals – in relation to the REQV 12 teachers on the programmes.

To their credit, the majority of service providers in the NPDE seem to be taking this issue very seriously in the development of their RPL planning and implementation. A range of perspectives on the matter is emerging. UNISA puts its position strongly:

> The guiding principle for evidence to be acceptable is that educators demonstrate not just that they have experience, but rather that they have *learned* from that experience. For example, most will have attended several workshops regarding the implementation of OBE and C2005. So they must let us know that they have attended this training and then *show* us how these workshops have affected the way in which they teach (UNISA, 2003, p.2).

UNISA has developed a complex set of outcomes on the basis of which they will be able to determine which educators have met the required standards and which have not. The University of the Free State (UFS, 2003) has put in place a continuous RPL system that recognises that some educators will not have achieved the required outcomes on entry into their programmes. What it seeks to do is to identify learners who are not yet competent, to put in place a support

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[8] This should not be taken to mean that we think that mass access mechanisms are necessarily inappropriate in education. Indeed they are appropriate in many circumstances. Compulsory schooling, and its associated school funding norms, is a mass access mechanism that we would defend vigorously. Our point here is simply that RPL, by its very internal logic, is not such a mechanism. Where policymakers in education are determined to implement such a mechanism, they should look elsewhere for the means.

system whereby learners can be assisted to develop the required knowledge and skills during their period on the programme, with a view to them being successfully 'rpl-ed' by the end of the programme. Similarly, the University of the Western Cape (UWC, 2003) has an orientation programme in which its NPDE candidates are taught to understand RPL and to prepare learning portfolios which will allow them to meet required outcomes, and in which they are supported by individual mentoring and counseling. However, the UWC's programme seems more oriented to the kind of mass access that we are attempting to problematise here:

> Since the. . . NPDE is targeted at under-qualified educators with years of experience in the teaching profession, it is assumed that these educators have acquired additional skills and knowledge associated with. . . teaching (UWC, 2003, p.13).

Similarly, the programme of the University of the North and the University of Venda (Limpopo NPDE Project, 2003, p.15) has set up mechanisms to enable "REQV 11 educators who do not achieve enough credits. . . through the credit exchange system. . . to develop portfolios", which will be developmental in that they will "develop learners in their respective fields of specializations". However, although training was provided to tutors, and educators were given three support workshops, the portfolios produced demonstrated that neither the tutors nor the educators had developed a sufficient understanding of the difficult task of matching evidence with NPDE outcomes. The portfolios are being re-done, and there seems to be the recognition that there will be some educators who, despite apparently relevant experience, have not or will not demonstrate the necessary competence to receive RPL accreditation.

There is something of a continuum here, with some providers being clear that RPL is not an automatic access route into the NPDE and others seeking in some way to facilitate access through it, albeit with the recognition that there are certain minimum outcomes standards to be achieved. Our contention in this paper is that it cannot operate as a blanket access mechanism, a tendency which all the providers seem to be resisting. Nonetheless, the tendency is, as we shall see, exacerbated by the problems of implementation that seem to be being experienced in regard to the NPDE.

Implementation: the imperative to deliver

In SAIDE's experience, the delivery imperatives associated with the NPDE seem to take on a life of their own, leading to the conceptions and implementation of RPL measures which are remote from both the broader policies established to guide RPL and the theoretical concerns and insights which supposedly guide them. Reflections on concrete examples from NPDE providers will make this point quite starkly:

• There are two groups of teachers doing the NPDE (those with M+1/REQV 11 and those with M+2/REQV 12), but because of practical issues, the RPL process was not done before the teachers started the programme. In addition, both groups of teachers tend to be doing the same modules in years one and two.

• Technically, the only difference between the two groups of teachers in the NPDE is that those with M+1 do not have a senior certificate (their qualifications are Std 8 and a two year Primary Teachers Certificate, whereas the M+2 teachers have Std 10 and the two year professional qualification). In real terms, the difference between these two groups of teachers is negligible. But, as we have pointed out, and because of the numbers of teachers involved, the decision was taken to arrange RPL for half of the qualification by credit exchange (existing qualifications simply recorded – no additional assessment required). This means that, even though there may only be a technical difference between the two groups of teachers, the one group will have to be assessed for RPL, and the other group will not.

• The NPDE is a 240 credit part-time qualification, which means that the full qualification, without RPL, would be four years in duration. However, M+2 teachers will need to do only 120 credits – 2 years. This means that some of the teachers will be finishing in two years, while others will require a maximum of four years – though this could be reduced if they were successful in gaining credit through assessment of their prior learning and experience. However, in around April 2002, it became clear that the Department and the ELRC do not have the funds to provide bursaries for teachers beyond two years, and so are tending to put political and bureaucratic pressure on providers to ensure that all teachers complete in two years.

These factors mean that:

- the real purpose of the approach to RPL in the SAQA policy – to give *individuals* a chance to get credit on the basis of what they already know and can do, and to help them select the new learning that they need from the programme – has already been lost;
- since there is little real difference between the two groups of teachers, and the results of the assessment will not affect their programmes of study in any real way, there is little incentive for providers to do the RPL in any but a technical way;
- RPL assessment for M+1 teachers will need to be squeezed into the two year programme of study, and there will be no funding of additional modules the teachers may require. So the temptation appears to be strong for providers to adopt a 'pass one pass all' approach.

The upshot of all of this is a picture of implementation imperatives that increasingly drive the nature of the programme, at the expense of policy and theoretical imperatives. In this landscape, most providers are finding it extremely difficult to implement the NPDE programme. The provincial process of selection of teachers has been cumbersome and inefficient, most providers are dealing with much larger numbers of teachers than they are accustomed to, many providers have no experience of material-based, mixed mode, distance programmes, and there have been many uncertainties at a national level. To add to all of these difficulties by requiring a case-by-case RPL process within the already full two year minimum period of study seems to be unreasonable.

Tensions between theory, policy and implementation

This paper has explored difficulties associated with the implementation of a coherent, systematic and efficient RPL process for teacher education in South Africa. In doing so, it has highlighted a central problem in the way that such a system might be conceived and implemented, namely a tendency to treat RPL as a rite of passage of sorts, in which all practising REQV11 and REQV12 educators can be given access to higher level qualifications as a cohort rather than on a case-by-case basis. This, we have suggested, runs against the logic of RPL, which is to recognise real experiential learning that often transfers across disciplinary domains, when it has occurred, but also when it has not occurred. RPL is a mechanism to recognise and facilitate ongoing individual

development. Our contention is that when it is conducted as if it were a mass access mechanism, it substantially loses this potential. In the NPDE, at the moment, the theoretical issues that must be articulated in relation to RPL, the official policy positions emerging from government and the practical realities of implementation are pulling in contradictory directions. How these tensions are resolved will determine whether or not the programme is able to realise its potential to generate quality in teacher development.

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