SUBJECT MATTER OR PEDAGOGICAL CONTENT KNOWLEDGE? A CRITICAL CURRICULAR COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF INITIAL EFL TEACHER EDUCATION IN NIGER

CONNAISSANCES DISCIPLINAIRES OU EXPERTISE PÉDAGOGIQUE ? UNE ANALYSE COMPARATIVE CURRICULAIRE CRITIQUE DE LA FORMATION INITIALE DES ENSEIGNANTS D'ANGLAIS AU NIGER

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Abstract : This is an empirical study which drew from the perspectives of teacher knowledge established by Shulman (1986; 1999; 2000) and Richards (2011) to comparatively examine the curricula of two university EFL programs in Niger. Using curricular documents as data sources, the research yielded a range of insights that are indicative of minor and major gaps within the two cases. Data has revealed minor issues concerning the EFL Program at the TNS, as courses provided seem to include all the knowledge categories identified by Shulman (1986; 1999; 2000) and Richards (2011) but lacking few aspects that relate to language systems, skill and culture. On the contrary, only two categories out of six seem to be provided by the EFL program of the faculty of humanities. Many other aspects within the existing categories also appeared to be missing. These constitute a major gap considering the fact that the majority of EFL teachers in Niger originate from this program. The study has suggested ways to cope with those gaps, importantly by merging and/or reforming the two programs.
Key words: English as a foreign language, Teacher knowledge, Quality

Résumé : Ceci est une étude empirique qui s'est appuyée sur les perspectives établies par Shulman (1986 ; 1999 ; 2000) et Richards (2011) pour examiner de manière comparative les programmes de deux départements d'anglais au Niger. En utilisant des documents curriculaires comme sources de données, la recherche a produit une gamme d'idées qui indiquent des lacunes mineures et majeures dans les deux cas. Les données ont révélé des problèmes mineurs concernant le département d'anglais de l'école normale supérieure, car les cours dispensés semblent inclure toutes les catégories de connaissances identifiées par Richards (2011) et Shulman (1986 ; 1999 ; 2000) mais manquent de quelques aspects liés aux systèmes linguistiques, aux compétences et à la culture. Au contraire, seules deux sur six catégories de connaissances semblent être assurés par le département d'anglais de la faculté de lettres et sciences humaines. En plus, beaucoup d'aspects liés aux catégories existantes semblent également manquer. Ces problèmes constituent une lacune majeure compte tenu du fait que la majorité des enseignants d'anglais au Niger sont issus de ce département. L'étude a suggéré des voies pour combler ces lacunes, notamment en fusionnant ou en réformant ces deux départements.
Mot clés : Anglais langue étrangère, Connaissances pour l'enseignement, Qualité
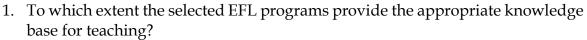
Introduction

The preparation of English language teachers is a major concern to many African countries, such as Niger. In this country sustainable reforms rarely take place to alleviate problems and enhance the quality of teacher learning. English as a foreign language (EFL) initial teacher education in Niger has experienced major changes since the 90s, when contract teaching has been adopted by the government. Behind those changes was the need for the country to comply with the requirements of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which partly aimed at raising the access rate of education (Bourdon et al., 2006). In other words, the MDGs have exerted pressure on governments to create more schools and recruit more teachers. The goal for access to education has been achieved to a certain extent, but that of quality remains problematic. Recent reports have tended to include initial teacher education among the major causes to this problem (UNESCO, 2016). For example, secondary school teachers have been said to lack pedagogical skills and knowledge of secondary school curricula due to the fact that most of them receive training from subject matter faculties (OIT, 2006). Reform initiatives based on an adopted version of the Bologna Process have been conducted over the last ten years to align higher education curricula to the demands of the market (Éyébiyi, 2011). Nonetheless, very little is known about the way these fit the needs of teacher-learning. Even though a recent doctoral study has revealed the predominance of traditional approaches within a subject matter program (Ousseini, 2016), there still exists a range of questions that remain unanswered. The current paper attempts to raise more of those questions by comparatively reviewing the curricula of two university EFL programs in Niger. This endeavour provided useful and critical insights about the knowledge base imparted on EFL student-teachers and underlined areas that need to be bridged.

1. Rationale for the Study

In Niger, the initial training of secondary school EFL teachers is officially provided by the tertiary normal school (TNS). This is an entity within Abdou Moumouni University in Niamey. In the past, trainees used to originate from the Faculty of Humanities and upon obtaining a two-year diploma or a bachelor degree. As such, student-teachers were expected to acquire the subject matter knowledge from that faculty before entering the TNS where they should receive the knowledge of pedagogy. With reforms imposed by certain Bretton Woods institutions in the 90s, that arrangement was abandoned for the purpose of cost saving (Bourdon et al., 2010; Duthilleul, 2005; Fyfe, 2007; Pandey, 2009). From then, most of the secondary school EFL teachers in Niger tend to be graduates of the faculty of humanities. Ten years ago, or so, training at the TNS was resumed for both middle and high schools EFL teachers, and this has somehow contributed to raising the level of access to education, as the number of teachers was importantly increased.

Considering the issue of quality mentioned earlier, the provision of secondary school EFL teachers by both the TNS and the faculty of humanities raises questions in relation to the appropriacy and comprehensiveness of the knowledge base endowed to student-teachers. This justifies the need to conduct the current study which strives to answer two questions by focusing on two EFL programs – one from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences and the other from the TNS.

1. To which extent the selected EFL programs provide the appropriate knowledge base for teaching?
2. What are their curricular gaps to be filled?

In the conceptualisation of this study, it was assumed that the existence of two independent EFL programs – with almost the same ends – is not healthy for English language education and the institution hosting them. Identifying gaps and areas of redundancy is, therefore, a worthwhile endeavour which aims to contribute to the quality of initial EFL teacher education in Niger. To present a solid data-based argument around the central issue, the study draws on conceptualisations of teacher knowledge from Shulman (1986, 1999) and Richards (2011).

2. Concepts of Teacher Knowledge

For more than four decades, teacher knowledge has been conceptualized in many ways. Interests in this area have spread across disciplines, mainly with the works of Shulman and associates at Stanford University (Borg, 2015). Even though Shulman (1986; 1999; 2000) tended to emphasize the importance of the *subject matter knowledge* in a context that prioritized the *knowledge of pedagogy*, his works provide clear characteristics of the two categories in relation to *content knowledge*. The latter is described as inclusive of subject matter content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge and curricular knowledge. Beyond these, Shulman (1999) suggested four additional categories as part of the knowledge base for teaching. He included the *general pedagogical knowledge*, the *knowledge of learners*, the *knowledge of educational contexts*, and the *knowledge of educational ends*.

As it could be noticed, Shulman's conceptualization of teacher knowledge is applicable to any discipline. Due to the focus of this study, it is deemed necessary to extend it to the field of English language teaching. This could be achieved by analysing the work of Richards (2011) who approached the appropriacy of the English language teacher's knowledge base through the angles of 'effectiveness'. Even though Richards warned against the fact that effectiveness is culturally-loaded, the taxonomy of knowledge he presented is useful for examining an EFL teacher education program. The taxonomy includes language proficiency, content knowledge, teaching skills, contextual knowledge, language teaching identity, learner-centeredness of teaching, pedagogical reasoning skills, theorizing from practice, membership to a community of practice, and professionalism. The analysis of these – as well as those from Shulman – reveal, however, the fact that they cannot be entirely provided through initial EFL teacher education but through a lifelong learning process (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007; Elliott, 1993), which bridges initial and in-service teacher education. As a matter of fact, initial EFL teacher education programs cannot entirely shape the identity of student-teachers or ensure their professionalism and full membership to a community of practice. The only possibility is to facilitate their transition through teaching observation and practice. Another important possibility is to teach them how to use innovative procedures, such action research, lesson study and reflective practice, through which they could learn to:

a) Theorise from their own practice,
b) Strengthen their teacher identity,

c) Build more knowledge of their learners,
d) Extend and reshape their contextual knowledge,
e) Undertake collaborative projects with other teachers to ensure membership to a community of practice, and
f) Acquire more pedagogical reasoning skills, which generally relies on experience and the knowledge of learners and context.
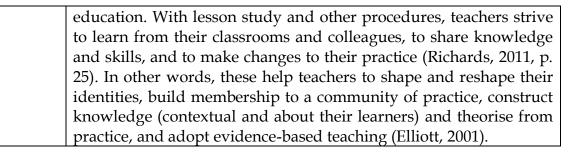
The attainment of the above will lead to what Richards called professionalism or professional development.

Taking into account Shulman's (1986; 1999) and Richards' (2011) conceptualisations of the knowledge base for teaching, the framework below has been developed to serve as a basis for analysing the curricula of the selected university EFL programs.

Knowledge Type	Description
Language proficiency	This refers to the mastery of English language skills. Richards (2011) has enumerated twelve characteristics of language proficiency among which he included the abilities to comprehend texts accurately, to provide good language models, to maintain fluent use of English, and to provide examples of words and grammatical structures. In Shulman's (1986) perspectives, this bears some characteristics of subject matter knowledge.
Content knowledge	Content knowledge has two aspects. It includes the knowledge of what is to be taught – language systems and theories of second language acquisition (*subject matter knowledge*) – and the knowledge of how to teach them. The latter is referred to by both Shulman (1986) and Richards (2011) as *pedagogical content knowledge*. It includes "course work in areas such as curriculum planning, assessment, reflective teaching, classroom management, teaching children, teaching the four skills, and so on" (Richards, 2011, p. 6). This, therefore, includes the *general pedagogical knowledge* (Shulman, 1999).
Teaching skills	These constitute a practical knowledge acquired from teaching observations and teaching practice. As Richards (2011, p. 9) indicated, it falls in the realm of performance and requires a teacher "to have a repertoire of techniques and routines at her fingertips."
Knowledge of curriculum	This category of knowledge is presented by Richards (2011) as a component of contextual knowledge acquired after initial EFL teacher training. However, this has been conceptualized by Shulman (1999, p. 64) as the knowledge of "the materials and programs that serve as 'tools of the trade' for teachers." As such, it constitutes a set of knowledge that can be partly constructed during initial teacher education. In fact, in Shulman's (1986) conceptualization, it is considered as a subcomponent of content knowledge.
Knowledge of innovative procedures	To develop professionally, student-teachers need the knowledge of innovative procedures, such as lesson study, reflective practice, or action research. A grasp of these procedures allows them to bridge the gap of knowledge that cannot be provided by initial EFL teacher

education. With lesson study and other procedures, teachers strive to learn from their classrooms and colleagues, to share knowledge and skills, and to make changes to their practice (Richards, 2011, p. 25). In other words, these help teachers to shape and reshape their identities, build membership to a community of practice, construct knowledge (contextual and about their learners) and theorise from practice, and adopt evidence-based teaching (Elliott, 2001).

3. Methodology

This is a comparative case study research. It examined two instances in relation to a specific focus. The key purpose of such examination was "to discover contrasts, similarities, or patterns across the cases" (Campbell, 2009, p. 174). In this endeavour, two EFL programs at a Nigerien university – one from a tertiary normal school and the other from a faculty of humanities and social sciences – constituted the cases. The first case is known for its pure orientation in initial EFL teacher education while the other is known as a subject matter program. Each of them explicitly or implicitly prepares EFL teachers for secondary schools in Niger.

Data in this study were solely made of curricular documents at Bachelor degree (BA) level gathered from the selected EFL programs. The study acknowledged the importance of documents as meaningful data sources (Yin, 2014). As Olson (2009) claimed, "Documents, as a record of human activity, provide a valuable source of data in case study research" (p. 318). The collected curricular documents were meant to provide insights on the nature of courses and knowledge base imparted on EFL student-teachers. Even though there was no intention to assess the effectiveness of the selected EFL programs based on their curricular content, examining those documents was a necessary step for possible changes and future research endeavours.

Being a comparative study, data from each case were analysed iteratively based on the framework constructed from Shulman (1986; 1999; 2000) and Richards (2011). In this process, content analysis, "which has been a staple of document analysis" (Olson, 2009, p. 319) was used for identifying similarities and contrasts from the curricular documents. In other words, document analysis allowed comparison to confirm or contradict the emerging patterns. Occasionally, percentages were used to underline the weight of a specific category of knowledge within a curriculum.

4. Results

To ensure clarity of this analysis, data is presented under each case. This provides readers with the opportunity to underline other aspects that are not discussed. Afterwards, a comparison of the two cases is presented.

4.1. The EFL Curriculum at the Tertiary Normal School

The Bachelor degree at the TNS is a three-year program which encompasses thirty-one (31) courses. The latter account for eighty (80) credits. Based on the conducted analysis, it appeared that all the knowledge types described in the

analytical framework are provided by this program but with different weight as shown in the table below.

Knowledge Type	Credit	Weight
Language Proficiency	12	15%
Subject Matter Knowledge	17	21%
Pedagogical Content Knowledge	13	16%
Knowledge of Curriculum	2	3%
Teaching Skills	24	30%
Knowledge of Innovative Procedures	12	15%
Total	**80**	**100%**

The table above shows that *teaching skills* constitute the most valued knowledge. It is imparted to student-teachers through the following courses:

Course	Credit
Micro-Teaching	4
Teaching Practicum 1	4
Teaching Practicum 2	16
Total credit	**24**

As it can be observed, these courses are more practical than theoretical. They involve student-teachers in a process of *doing* through which they receive feedback for improvement.

Another category with an important weighting (17 credits) concerns the *subject matter knowledge*, which goes through eleven (11) courses.

Course	Credit
Language Awareness 1	2
Language Awareness 2	2
Phonetics for EFL Teachers	1
Grammar for EFL Teachers	2
English Composition for EFL Teachers	2
Linguistics for EFL Teachers	1
Introduction to General African Literature	1
Phonetics and Phonology for EFL Teachers	2
Grammatical and Stylistics issues for EFL Teachers	1
Readings in Anglophone African Literature	1
Theories and Methods in Teaching EFL	2
Total credit	**17**

The diversity of these courses can be explained through their relation to different language systems. While some of them relate to grammatical knowledge, others are more relevant to the knowledge of second language acquisition (SLA) theories,

literature, and phonology. These are complemented by seven (7) courses attributed to the *pedagogical content knowledge.*

Course	Credit
Learning Objectives and Lesson Planning	2
Teaching the Skills	2
Teaching Vocabulary	1
Managing Large Classes and Time	2
Language Diagnostics and Assessment	3
Teaching Grammar in Context	2
Integrating the Target Culture in Teaching	1
Total credit	**13**

These courses and those relevant to subject matter knowledge are part of a bigger category known as *content knowledge.*

The EFL program at the TNS also provides student-teachers with courses that reinforce their *language proficiency* (12 credits) and those that offer the *knowledge of innovative procedures* (12 credits).

Course	Credit
Oral Practicum 1	1
Translation 1	2
Oral Practicum 2	2
Conversation 1	3
Conversation 2	2
Translation 2	2
Total Credit	**12**

Courses in the table above are destined at building the proficiency of student-teachers in terms of listening, pronunciation, speaking, and the use of grammar and vocabulary. These are somehow supported by other courses, such as *Readings in Anglophone African Literature* and *English Composition for EFL Teachers*, categorized under subject matter knowledge.

As for the *knowledge of innovative procedures*, the program includes two courses:

Course	Credit
Portfolio	10
Lesson Study	2
Total Credit	**12**

For the first course, student-teachers are supposed to engage in a process of reflection by drawing from their experiences with *Practicum*. The second course is expected to involve them in a collaborative analysis of lessons they teach.

The last category of courses included in the preparation of EFL student-teachers at the TNS focuses on the *knowledge of curriculum*.

Course	Credit
Introduction to EFL programs and Textbook in CEG	1
Analysis of English programs and Textbook	1
Total Credit	**2**

These courses are aimed at providing student-teachers with the preliminary knowledge about the materials used in secondary schools. Through these, student-teachers are expected to have a grasp of the national curriculum for English language teaching and how it connects to the materials.

Overall, the knowledge base provided to EFL student-teachers at the TNS seems comprehensive, even though there exist some areas of gap that require the attention of decision makers. For example, language proficiency courses do not sufficiently include aspects on writing and reading skills. Furthermore, courses on literature, which are supposed to provide student-teachers with cultural knowledge, do not include literature from native speaker contexts (British and American literatures for example). This aspect is necessary as student-teachers need to develop intercultural competence, which is a key requirement for achieving communicative competence (Byram, 1997). Furthermore, the subject matter knowledge is not inclusive of all the language systems that are necessary for teaching. The knowledge of grammar and phonology tended to be overemphasized at the expense of syntax, morphology, sociolinguistics and lexis.

4.2. The EFL Curriculum at the Faculty of Humanities

At the faculty of humanities, the EFL program offers twenty-two (22) courses for one hundred thirty-two (132) credits. The analysis has allowed to assign these to two categories of knowledge: *Language Proficiency* and *Subject Matter Knowledge*.

Knowledge Type	Credit	Weight
Language Proficiency	30	23%
Subject Matter Knowledge	102	77%
Pedagogical Content Knowledge	0	0%
Knowledge of Curriculum	0	0%
Teaching Skills	0	0%
Knowledge of Innovative Procedures	0	0%
	132	**100%**

As shown in the table above, there do not exist courses that can be linked to *pedagogical content knowledge*, *knowledge of curriculum*, *teaching skills*, or *knowledge of innovative procedures*. The knowledge category that is most prevalent is the *subject matter knowledge*. This represents 77% of the offer. It encompasses seventeen (17) courses, all accounting for one hundred and two (102) credits.

Course	Credit
Introduction to English Phonetics	6
English Grammar 1	6
Advanced Writing and Stylistics	6
Introduction to African Literature	6
American Literature	6
African Drama	6
Introduction to British and American Civilizations	6
English Grammar 2	6
African Novel	6
The Anglophone Tradition in Poetry	6
African Civilizations	6
African Oral Literature	6
British Drama and Novel	6
African and Diaspora Women Writers	6
English Grammar 3	6
Teaching English as a Foreign Language	6
English as a Second or Foreign Language	6
Total Credit	**102**

This situation confirms the greatest value attributed to the subject matter knowledge by the focused EFL program. The seventeen courses reflect a special emphasis on the knowledge of culture (literature and civilization) and the knowledge of grammar. Out of the seventeen (17) courses, ten (10) are about African, American and British literatures and civilizations, and four (4) others dedicated to grammar. Only two courses are related to the content knowledge of SLA theories and one (1) on the study of English phonology.

As *language proficiency* is concerned, it includes five (5) courses with six (6) credits each.

Course	Credit
Initiation to Basic Writing	6
Composition and Translation	6
Practical Phonetics	6
Listening Comprehension	6
Translation - Version/theme	6
Total Credit	**30**

These courses are centered on the proficiency of writing, listening, pronunciation, and the use of grammar and vocabulary.

Considering the above categorization, some relevant aspects seem to be missing from the EFL program at the faculty of humanities. Regardless of the fact that there do not exist courses that provide pedagogical content knowledge, the knowledge of curriculum, teaching skills, and the knowledge of innovative procedures, those provided are still not comprehensive. Concerning language proficiency, for example,

there is an emphasis on listening and grammatical proficiency at the expense of reading and speaking. Furthermore, in terms of subject matter knowledge, the program does not include the knowledge of other language systems beyond grammar. There is a high degree of imbalance within this category, which gives the impression that learning a language or learning to teach a language is equal to learning literature written in that language. The imbalance is also apparent when comparing the credits allotted to language proficiency and those for subject matter knowledge: 30 credits against 102.

5. Discussions.

Considering the data presented in the two subsections above, it appears that the EFL Program at the TNS offers the most appropriate knowledge base for teaching. The EFL program at the faculty of humanities, on the contrary, is limited to only two categories of knowledge, namely language proficiency and subject matter knowledge, regardless of the fact that it offers more credits (132) than that at the TNS (80). It has been evidenced that more than half of its courses are focused on literature while the rest of them offer knowledge on areas of linguistics or second language acquisition. These characteristics are attributable to the traditional approach of EFL teacher education where cultural knowledge and linguistics are considered as the most important elements for teaching English (Grave, 2009). These also confirm the analysis made by Tedick (2005) indicating that most of the second language teacher education programs tend to orientate teachers' education towards learning the language they wish to teach. As such, similar programs are likely to offer many language-related courses as major and very few or none on pedagogy and teaching skills. While Tedick's view applies to some American contexts where student-teachers are expected to fulfil twenty-seven (27) or more credits of language courses and only one third of that on pedagogical courses, the situation seems to be worse at the EFL program of the faculty of humanities. The number of courses providing pedagogical content knowledge are non-existing. Even those related to theories of second language acquisition are far below one third: there are only two relevant courses out of twenty-two. As such, there is less provision of knowledge about language learning and language teaching (Al-Jaro et al., 2017), which are key constituents of professional knowledge identified by Richards (1998) and Kumaravadivelu (2012).

Based on the above, the number of courses dedicated to pedagogy is not enough for an adequate preparation of teachers for today's EFL classrooms . Students from this EFL program are likely to embrace teaching without the necessary knowledge. This situation confirms the report, 15 years ago, of the International Labor Organization (OIT, 2006), which indicated that secondary school teachers trained from subject matter faculties – faculty of humanities and faculty of sciences – lack knowledge of pedagogy and knowledge of curriculum. Even though it is very justifiable that student-teachers must develop adequate linguistic competence, there is an equal need to ensure they understand the different approaches to learning and teaching and what it takes to grow in the profession. By emphasizing cultural and linguistic knowledge more than professional pedagogical knowledge, student teachers are likely to behave as pure consumers. They are also likely to develop beliefs framed by traditional models

of teacher education (Ousseini, 2018) and consequently shape their future practices accordingly.

However, it is worth acknowledging that courses offered at the EFL program of the faculty of humanities in relation to culture are more comprehensive than those at the TNS. The former offers a variety of courses in literature and civilization while the latter covers only the African context. Literature being recognized as a special form of culture (Karakaş & Yavuz, 2018), the existence of such diversity at the EFL program of the faculty of humanities is a necessary element towards building student-teachers' cultural awareness. The study has revealed a relatively equal emphasis on three different contexts: African, American, and British contexts. This might provide them with backgrounds of contexts where English is used as either a native or a second language. Due to the need for prospective EFL teachers to be able to explain some culturally driven materials to their future students, literature courses may provide a wide range of skills and backgrounds based on which intercultural competence can be developed. Beyond these aspects, the study of literature is likely to provide learners with models of ways in which language can be used to achieve certain social or personal goals. In other words, literature and civilization courses may serve to present learners with ideological perspectives necessary for their intellectual and social growth.

Conclusion and Further Research Directions

To conclude, the two programs reflect some different degrees of weakness that need to be considered to ensure comprehensive teacher learning. Areas of gap underlined must be filled, mainly at the faculty of humanities, in order to prepare more qualified EFL teachers for secondary schools. Considering the poor resources of the institution, it would also be highly advisable to revert to the old system, which consisted in a co-management of cohorts between the faculty of humanities and the TNS. In other words, EFL student-teachers would spend two (2) years at the faculty of humanities before moving to the TNS for one (1) year. In this way, the first two years would be entirely dedicated to language proficiency, culture, and language systems. The one year at the TNS would be spent attending courses related to pedagogy, second language acquisition theories, secondary school curriculum, and other innovative procedures for lifelong learning.

The above recommendations are supported by Abrahams and Farias (2010) who suggested the implementation of an integrated curriculum which encompasses two major strands: 1) English language and 2) Methodology. As they indicated,

> English language includes the following sub-strands: (i) Integrated skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening, (ii) Linguistic components: lexico-grammar, pronunciation, (iii) Culture and literature, and (iv) Reflective and critical skills. The (b) Methodology strand includes (i) Reflection workshops, (ii) Field experiences, (iii) Practicum, (iv) Action Research, and (v) Methods. The Methods sub strand includes: (I) Teaching/learning strategies, (II) Classroom management skills, (III) ICTs and other resources, and (IV) Assessment and evaluation (p. 116).

As such, I recommend the English language strand to be allotted to the faculty of humanities. Students who wish to become EFL teachers will have to move to the TNS for the second strand – methodology. Implementing this frame could even help the institution to exert some cost-saving related to human resources and facilities.

Finally, it is worth recollecting that this comparative case study was undertaken to raise questions on possible ways that add to the problem of quality known to the Nigerien education system today. This was achieved with some limitations as the study failed to consider certain crucial aspects. For example, it did not use observations to look at aspects of delivery (Ousseini, 2022) and what is really taught to student-teachers. This could be overcome by a new research project focusing on how student-teachers are engaged in those courses and how their socialization takes place during practicum. This could yield more insights for drawing comprehensive conclusions about the problem of quality. Furthermore, the current study did not collect data from stakeholders (administrators, student-teachers, educators…) to understand their level of satisfaction and the possible difficulties they encounter in their attempt to create conducive learning opportunities. Looking into this aspect would certainly inform decision makers on what works and what requires adjustments.

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