Experiences Of Student-Teachers During Teaching Practice: A Critical Analysis And Suggestions As To How They Could Be Better Prepared

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ABSTRACT
This article explores the experiences of Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) Life Orientation (LO) student-teachers in Contact (face-to-face) Institution during teaching practice in Gauteng schools. Teaching practice is an integral component of teacher training. It is, however, not certain what the student-teacher’s experiences in the teaching and learning environment are. This study is concerned with the question: What are the experiences of student-teachers during teaching practice? Qualitative research was used as the mode of inquiry since this study is concerned with the lived experiences of student-teachers. Furthermore, the theoretical framework underpinning this study is experiential learning and reflective learning theory. PGCE (LO) student-teachers were purposefully selected. These student-teachers were identified as at-risk students. Furthermore, during student assessment, I observed that they were not performing well in their teaching practice. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven (7) LO student-teachers and a reflective journal, student-teachers’ reports as a tool for document analysis was used to provide contextual details. Thematic analysis was used to identify themes and analyse the data. Findings revealed that student-teachers were not adequately prepared for the actual teaching and learning environment at some schools. Furthermore, in some schools there was no support from the mentor teachers and other key role players involved in student support during teaching practice.

Key Word: Experiences, Teaching Practice, Learning Environment, Student-Teacher

INTRODUCTION
The term ‘teaching practice’ has three major connotations: the practising of teaching skills and acquisition of the role of a teacher; the whole range of experiences that students go through in schools; and the practical aspects of the course as distinct from theoretical studies (Kolb, 2014). Performance during practice-teaching provides some basis for predicting the future success of the teacher. During practice-teaching, working with student in schools provides a high degree of emotional involvement of a mostly positive nature. Moreover,
through practice-teaching experience, student-teachers begin to connect to a culture of teaching. The objective of teaching practice is to provide the student-teachers with an opportunity to establish an appropriate teacher-pupil relationship and a professional relationship with the teachers in the school (Akbar, 2001).

Furthermore, it is also an opportunity to put theories into practice and to develop a deeper understanding of educational principles and their implications for learning. In addition, (Dodd, 1990) Note that, during teaching practice, student-teachers are provided with practical experience in schools to overcome the problems of discipline and to learn methods of control. According to (Ramsden, 2003), the other objective of teaching practice is to provide an opportunity for evaluating the student’s potential as a teacher and suitability for the teaching profession. Teaching practice also enables the student-teachers to plan and prepare lessons effectively and to develop their skill in the use of fundamental procedures, techniques and methods of teaching (Ramsden, 2003). Moreover, teaching practice develops desirable professional interests, attitudes and ideas applicable to the teaching profession, enables student-teachers to acquire desirable characteristics / traits of a teacher and to display appropriate behaviour (Akbar, 2001).

Teaching practice also provides student-teachers with an opportunity to have their teaching evaluated, to gain from the benefits of constructive criticism and self-evaluation and to discover their own strengths and weaknesses (Perry, 2005). The skills of future teachers such as fluency, comprehension, appropriate use of teaching aids, engaging students, listening and responding to their questions are developed during teaching practice. (Goh & Matthews, 2011) Argue that teaching practice provides for the exchange of ideas and methods between schools that enable student-teachers to gain their practice there (called practising schools) and teacher-training institutions, by providing teacher-training institutions’ staff and students with information about new ideas, material and equipment being used in practising schools and introducing new ideas, material and equipment into the school. Teaching practice is the term used for the preparation of student-teachers for teaching by practical training. In addition, teaching practice is an integral component of teacher training. Furthermore, it gives student-teachers experience in the actual teaching and learning environment.

The PGCE LO student-teachers are students who have completed their degrees and intend to be teachers, specialising in teaching in the Senior Phase (SP) (Grades 8, 9 and 10) or Further Education and Training (FET) phases (Grades 10, 11 and 12) upon the completion of their professional diploma
qualification. Teaching practice takes place every year during the first semester, for a period of three weeks and during second semester for a period of seven weeks.

(Sari, 2020) During teaching practice, these students are placed at neighbouring high schools after the university has been granted permission to accommodate them. Through this teaching-practice period, which accounts for about 25% of student-teachers’ time during their degree, they observe practising teachers during three weeks of the first term. They also get the opportunity to teach their own lessons during the seven weeks of the second term. Furthermore, the student-teachers are expected to prepare, plan and teach lessons according to their teaching subject specialisation, following the school’s timetable. For some student-teachers, the compulsory teaching practice period they spend in a school before qualifying is the highlight of their degree. They experience the joys and tribulations of working with teenagers. It can also be a stressful and negative time due to student-teachers not receiving adequate mentoring and support or seeing other teachers acting as less than positive role models. As noted by (Nasution et al., 2021), student-teachers feel engaged, challenged, and even empowered during teaching practice.

During the period of teaching practice, student-teachers are encouraged to attend a debriefing session at the university campus every second week. Additionally, an online discussion forum, WhatsApp groups are used as tools to support student-teachers to improve their performance during teaching practice. This is facilitated by a lecturer responsible for a specific module that the student-teacher is specialising in. During this session, student-teachers share their different experiences and challenges encountered during teaching practice. This process helps in identifying and addressing critical issues. Likewise, student-teachers are empowered with knowledge and skills on how to deal with challenging situations. This article also explores the contribution of different role players in supporting student-teachers during teaching practice. These role players in student support include supervisors, mentors, and administrators. Also, stages in teaching practice and teaching practice strategies are explored.

The theoretical framework which underpins this study is experiential learning and reflective learning theory. According to (Kolb, 2014), this type of learning can be defined as the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combinations of grasping and transforming the experience. The experiential theory proposed by Kolb takes a holistic approach and emphasises how experiences, including cognition, environmental factors and emotions influence the learning process.
In this study, student-teachers were able to share their experiences and lessons learned through teaching practice in various schools. This was facilitated through an online discussion forum and a WhatsApp group. Furthermore, student-teachers were encouraged to use reflection as a practice that facilitated the exploration, examination and understanding of what they were feeling, thinking and learning. It is a thoughtful consideration of academic material, personal experiences and interpersonal relationships.

Through reflection, student-teachers were able to do an internal inquiry that extended the relevance of theory and deepened their understanding of the practice of everyday life during teaching practice. (Cranton, 2002) asserts that, through reflection, we challenge our assumptions, ask new questions and try to make sense of our experiences. Instead of being passive receivers of external (expert) knowledge, we become active creators (and co-creators) of our own knowledge. describes reflection as “a form of mental processing with a purpose and/or anticipated outcome that is applied to relatively complex or unstructured ideas for which there is not an obvious solution” (p. 23), Reflection as active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusion to which it tends. Introduced the concept of the reflective practitioner as one who uses reflection as a tool for revisiting experience both to learn from it and for the clarification of murky, complex problems of professional practice. Similarly, reflective learning involves the processing of experience in a variety of ways. Student-teachers explore their understanding of their actions and experience and the impact of these on themselves and others. Meaning is constructed within a community of professional discourse, encouraging student-teachers to achieve and maintain critical control over the more intuitive aspects of their experience (Ananda & Hayati, 2022).

However, for reflection to genuinely be a lens into the world of practice, it is important that the nature of reflection be identified in such a way as to offer ways of questioning taken-for-granted assumptions and encouraging someone to see his or her practice through the eyes of others. Learning effectively from one’s experience is critical in developing and maintaining competence across a practice lifetime. Most models of reflection include critical reflection on experience and practice that would enable identification of learning needs (Finnigan, 2010) as one’s professional identity is developed, there are aspects of learning that require understanding of one’s personal beliefs, attitudes and values, in the context of those of the professional culture. Reflection, thus, offers an explicit approach to their integration. Therefore, building integrated knowledge bases requires an active approach to learning that leads to
understanding and linking new to existing knowledge. In addition, these capabilities may underlie the development of a student-teacher who is self-aware, and therefore able to engage in self-monitoring and self-regulation. Furthermore, the emergence of reflective practice is part of a change that acknowledges the need for students to act and to think professionally as an integral part of learning throughout courses of study, rather than insisting that students must learn the theory before they can engage in practice. Reflective practice can be applied as a blended method across online and face-to-face teaching.

Reflection on experience enhances learning through experience such that divergent rather than convergent learning outcomes are encouraged. This important interplay between experience and reflection is also influenced by the time of reflection, which has a dramatic impact on what can be seen and acted on. Anticipatory, retrospective, and contemporaneous reflection demand different skills and framing abilities (Loughran, 2002) and impact learning from experience in a variety of ways. Suffice to say, the different demands associated with the time of reflection can influence student-teachers’ learning through experience.

Opportunities for reflection:

Videos, For Seago (2004), the video is more than a practical extension of theoretical training; it responds to the need for a primarily practice-based training stimulating reflection. Video recordings foster reflection on teaching practices in two forms: (1) self-observation, whereby student-teachers view playbacks of their teaching lessons (usually simulated); and (2) observation of others, whereby student-teachers view videos of other teachers (Seago, 2004)

Blogs, Student-teachers can use blogs as reflective journals where they could write about and reflect on events occurring in their classrooms. Rodgers (2002) refers to reflection as a “disposition” for critically questioning what is going on in their classrooms. Blogs are used not only to think about their teaching, but also to assess their own performance as student-teachers. As Rodgers (2002) argues, this disposition is critical if student-teachers are to successfully integrate theory into practice. Experience can offer the student-teacher opportunities to live through alternative ways of approaching the practice setting, but there is little doubt that the initial framing inevitably impacts on what is seen, the nature of the risks taken, and the diversity in learning through action. Hence, it seems reasonable to emphasise that the way in which a student-teacher engages with his or her actions within the practice setting, through reflection on those actions, must shape improvement in practice.
RESEARCH METHOD

This study used a qualitative approach to collect data. To gain understanding and explain human behaviour, qualitative researchers focus on language, experiences and perceptions (Moule et al., 2016). In addition, the emphasis is placed in the perspective of the participant, as they are considered the experts of the phenomenon (Lapan, Quartaroli, & Riemer, 2011). The research design indicates the plan of how one intends to conduct research, in relation to its context and describes it in detail (Creswell, 2013). Phenomenology was identified as an appropriate mode of enquiry for this study in order to understand the lived experiences of student-teachers. This study is concerned with the question: *What are the experiences of student-teachers during teaching practice?*

To gain a holistic picture of the phenomenon under study semi-structured interviews were conducted. These interviews were facilitated with the 7 participants after debriefing sessions at the campus and lasted for thirty minutes, followed by reflective journals and observations during assessment of teaching practice. To ensure that rich data were collected, interviews were grounded upon reflection, clarification, description and listening (King, 2014). I, first asked permission from the participants to record each interview session to ensure accurate capturing of data. Document analysis was also used. These were the reports from the various secondary and high schools where students were placed for their teaching practice. Made it clear that document analysis is by nature very useful because documents are usually very detailed. If documents are obtained in advance, they can be helpful as this will avoid unnecessary interruptions during the interviews.

In this study, data analysis and collection were done concurrently to ensure that important information was properly recorded. This was done through listening to each recording after each interview. I listened to the recordings several times and compared them with field notes I had written during the interview sessions. Furthermore, thematic analysis was used to identify themes in the data that had a bearing on the research question and commonalities among the participants. This form of analysis provides a clear and in-depth understanding of the daily experiences of the participants through themes that arise (Flick, 2013).

Table 1.

The Themes That Emerged Were As Follows

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RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Student teachers shared their different experiences and how they were received in various schools during teaching practice. Out of students’ shared experiences, major themes were identified in the data analysis. The following section discusses findings from the interviews.

Lack of Support from Mentor Teacher

Supervision is an essential component of teaching practice. Teaching practice is basically the act of teaching under the supervision of an experienced teacher. They add that the task of the supervisor is to help the student-teacher make sense of his or her experiences and to help each student-teacher find the pattern in his or her success or failures. However, some student-teachers were not receiving any support from their mentor teachers.

“I have a serious problem with my mentor teacher. They have only given me an opportunity to teach one lesson and the rest of the time I haven’t taught anything. Then they blame me for not asking to teach, but I have asked numerous times, but the teacher is too busy or says they are stressed.”

This behaviour is unprofessional compared to what mentor teachers are expected to do. The mentor’s role as to guide and lead the student-teacher, as well as to encourage, advising on challenges until the student-teacher can present lessons successfully. Therefore, the role of the mentor teacher is to provide support and give feedback after the lesson has been conducted as well as to share ideas and give encouragement and guide, direct, model and demonstrate.

Some of the experiences described were that the mentor teacher was not available when needed, and the student-teachers were left alone in class to teach all the subjects.

“My mentor teacher only comes to class in the morning to mark the register. I had to teach all the classes including the subjects that are not my speciality.”

The same sentiments were shared by another participant:

“I feel that my mentor is abusing the situation. He does not even guide me. I’m expected to do everything. I’m not even allowed to sit in the staff room.”

Mentor teachers are expected to model good teaching, carrying out tasks explicitly for the student-teacher to observe as well as setting a good example of professional behaviour. Contrary to the above, other student-teachers reported that mentor teachers were supportive and willing to assist them when they

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were not sure of how to approach some of the lessons. This statement was confirmed by one of the student-teachers:

“My general experience at the school has been very positive and enlightening. My interaction with the learners and mentor is excellent. I have built a good relationship with my mentor teacher and can truly say that I have learned a lot from him.”

This is in line with who found that student-teachers and mentor teacher should work as equal partners, and this will promote mutual support and learning from each other.

On the same note, another student shared the following:

“My practice-teaching experience has been good. My mentor supported me in every way, and I have gained a lot of knowledge about things. My mentor has been very helpful every step of the way. She provides positive criticism and constructive feedback. When my assessor came, she was there supporting me and rooting for me every step of the preparation process.”

The above statement confirms that mentoring is a specific method of learning wherein the mentor not only supports the mentee, but also challenges them productively so that progress is made (Boulton et al., 2010). Furthermore, mentoring involves assisting, befriending, guiding, advising and counselling. Mentoring in teacher education as “complex social interactions that mentor teachers and student-teachers’ construct and negotiate for a variety of professional purposes and in response to the contextual factors they encounter stages in teaching practice” (p. 103).

Unwelcoming Environment

The role of the school principal includes introducing student-teachers to school personnel, the students in the classes, the school administration rules, the materials used during teaching practice. In addition, a supportive school environment is crucial to the enhancement of student teaching experiences. Principals also play a key role in creating and sustaining a positive school climate in which teaching, and learning can take place (Fullan, 2007).

Student-teachers shared their experiences and said that they were not welcomed by the principal on their arrival day at school. The following are some of the comments from the student-teachers:

“My first day was not nice at all. First, we didn’t know where to sit in the staffroom. No one bothered to attend to us. We ended up feeling as if we were intruding. Instead, we were told to go to the school hall where learners were assembling to be with them until they finished the meeting.”

Some student-teachers felt neglected and disrespected. This feeling could lead to lack of self-confidence and a sense of not belonging. As such, the success
of teaching experience in the classroom can be affected and some student-teachers might even have doubts of whether they have entered the right profession. That it is important for student-teachers to feel respected and treated as a teacher both by their mentors and schools as part of a good teaching practice placement.

The same sentiments were attested to by one the student-teachers:

“Unfortunately, with me, my principal was not at school on my first day, so there was no staff meeting. I waited in the reception area for almost an hour for someone to give me a direction. Teachers were just passing without asking whether I have been helped.”

Another student-teacher commented that they were excluded, which made the student-teacher feel unimportant:

“Every morning, briefing meetings take place in the staff room; however, as student-teachers we are excluded from those meetings. We are told to sit in the corner of the staff room or to wait in the receptionist’s office. This situation makes us feel like we are not part of the school team. Interestingly, we are doing the same work, but we are excluded from the staff meetings. After the briefing, we are expected to take on the responsibilities.”

However, not all schools were unwelcoming as some schools were very inclusive. Student-teachers felt a sense of belonging and looked forward to a good partnership. Below are some of the positive statements:

“The reception on my first day was so positive, I was welcomed with warm hands and introduced to the entire staff. The principal also told my mentor teacher to assist me where I need help.”

Another student-teacher affirmed:

“A special meeting was called on my first day to welcome me and other student-teachers from a different university. We were assigned mentor teachers to work with.”

The same views were shared by others:

“We were introduced to the whole staff and learners during the school assembly. The principal was kind to show us the whole school before we can go to our allocated mentor teachers.”

Classroom Management And Behavioural Problems

In preparing for classroom teaching, student-teachers can be given different case studies to analyse and respond to questions. Student-teachers can also form groups and role play using the same case studies during video conferencing. Notes that video recordings enable student-teachers to develop new competencies as they pursue their training programmes. For instance, they can analyse teaching sessions and relate theoretical notions to practical
situations. The impact of videos on teacher training is that they allow student-teachers to anticipate actual classroom situations so they can better prepare for them. “Video allows one to enter the world of the classroom without having to be in the position of teaching in-the-moment”. Classroom management as a climate conducive to proper learning, good behaviour, and positive interpersonal relationships. A different view of classroom management sees it primarily as discipline and management of student misconduct. However, successful teaching requires more than controlling student behaviour. Teaching can be a daunting endeavour for both experts and novice teachers. It is a profession that requires the ability to be responsive to new demands and changing needs. Noted that classroom management was reported by the participants as their most worrying issue. Furthermore, the classroom management issue contributes to the tensions and anxieties the student-teacher experience during teaching practice. Classroom management is particularly important as that determines the whole lesson and a class that is not managed correctly will lead to failure from the learners and the teacher.

One student-teacher indicated that:

“Some of the learners have an impression that we are their peers, so they don’t respect us. There is no discipline in the whole school at all. Learners are rude and unruly. It is not easy to manage the class. These learners don’t even have respect for their own teacher, learners would be talking, some playing games on their cell phones and eating in class in the presence of the teacher.”

Another student-teacher remarked:

“As for me, I have no complaints so far. However, I am concerned with the learners’ behaviour. Learners are not writing their work that I give them, and I don’t have any clue of how to deal with that since the school does not really discipline the learners.”

The same sentiments were shared:

“Just as I am about to teach, I got this class of 28 learners making this loud noise, so I spent like 10 minutes trying to get the class quiet. So, I am trying to discipline them, and I don’t know how to because I had never encountered such behaviour. So, I promise to send one learner out of my class if I caught them making noise; however, they laugh at me.”

Managing the classroom and maintaining discipline, seems to be emotionally draining to student-teachers.

“I have a problem with disruptive kids in my classes. Most of the time I ask them to go out of the class and they seem to enjoy that. Now I don’t know what to do and this disadvantages other kids who are willing to learn because we spend lot of time dealing with disruptive kids.”
In relation to classroom management and behavioural problems, one student-teacher had this to say:

“I have not encountered any problems so far but after lunch the learners are very hard to discipline especially now that the grade 12s are busy with their preliminary exams. After writing, they disrupt the other classes and the learners wander around the school while the teachers are busy with the lessons.”

The other student-teacher shared similar experience:

“During period 5, at 11:45-12:40, I experienced the most challenging moment of my life during the teaching practice. I had the Grade 8F class for LO, and I teach career choice. The good news about it is that my mentor teacher had done the LO prep work for me, so I knew what I needed to cover. Just as I am about to teach, I got this class of 28 learners making this loud noise, so I spent like 10 minutes trying to get the class quiet.”

In contrast to how the above student-teachers’ experiences with regard to classroom management and dealing with behavioural problems, one student-teacher viewed her experience as positive and a learning curve:

“My experience is the most interesting one. I encountered a lot of challenges regarding behaviour. However, I take it as a learning curve. I deal with learners who are disruptive and rude, and it’s very frustrating. I make sure I go to class prepared and find innovative ways to make the lesson interesting so that they don’t have time to fiddle around or talk in class. The experience is really preparing me for the worst in my teaching profession and I’m allowing myself to grow.”

Well-prepared lessons can also ease the burden of dealing with behavioural problems. This was confirmed by the student-teacher:

“So, I am trying to discipline them, and I don’t know how to because I had never encountered such behaviour. So, I promise to send one learner out of my class if I caught them making noise; however, they laugh at me. At one point, I managed to get the kids to pay attention to the content that I was teaching. What is nice was that I did plan my lesson very well and the learners really engaged with the topic so well.”

These findings support the research findings suggested who is of the opinion that during teaching practice, student-teachers are mostly affected by classroom management related problems.

Findings From Document Analysis

Professionalism

Time management was lacking; for example, some student-teachers were unable to complete the lesson presentation on the required time allocation. They either finished too early or ran out of ways to keep the learners busy. In other instances, student-teachers come late to class, and this contributed to
learners’ behaviour and classroom disruption. Other issue that was noted is that student-teachers’ manner of approach was unprofessional, especially towards learners with behavioural problems.

**Lesson Planning**

The findings from document analysis revealed that student-teachers are struggling to prepare lesson plans. Moreover, some students’ lesson plans were incomplete, lacking details such as objectives of the lesson, learners’ activities and resources used to enhance the lesson. For the preparation of lesson plans, student-teachers must know the subject content they are going to teach and have the relevant textbooks and teaching learning aids, because already-prepared lessons give confidence to the teacher. Student-teachers expected their supervisors to check their lesson plans, provide written and oral feedback on these plans, observe their teaching activities, provide constructive feedback on these practices, introduce them to the school personnel, explain the duties and responsibilities of the mentoring teachers and other individuals in the school, and be in continuous communication with them throughout the practice period.

**Presentation style**

Lack of creativity and use of different teaching methods appeared to be a problem. In this study, the findings revealed that student-teachers were using the question-and-answer method. Furthermore, there was no use of teaching and learning aids in class such as flash cards, posters or apparatus, and learners were referred to the textbook. Student-teachers are expected to be dynamic and creative and to engage all learners by responding positively to learners in class. Lesson presentation should be interesting and effective, and timely use of teaching methods and teaching aids should be encouraged.

**Discussion**

Teaching practice is a compulsory component of teacher-training programmes. Furthermore, quality education requires motivated and competent teachers at all levels. Teaching practice is a segment which provides the opportunity to prospective teachers to apply theoretical knowledge practically in a real situation. Objectives, a manual, orientation, rules and regulations for teaching practice are neither prepared nor supplied properly. These are prepared in few institutions but not supplied to all persons involved in teaching practice. States that an objective is specific and describes definite activities. However, it should be noted that it is the duty of the student-teacher coordinator to make sure that all the relevant documents are in place before teaching practice. In the face-to-face context of teaching practice, mentor teachers assess the student-teacher on both progress and required tasks using university-based criteria. Application of all methods and techniques are
essential for quality training, developing confidence, competency, and skills, which are helpful in transferring learning and knowledge to practical implementation.

The role of mentor teachers in teaching practice is largely absent and they do not provide proper guidance. Due to lack of adequate training facilities for university teachers, the present standard of teachers with proper professional competencies and training is alarming low. Regarding mentor teachers, it is evident that classroom teachers are also not prepared or informed in advance of what is expected of them, and their roles are not clearly outlined. It is also noted that many classroom teachers are not well prepared for mentoring, particularly when difficulties arise with the student-teacher. A reason for this situation is that preparation for mentoring has not been a priority in many teaching practice education programmes. Institutions of higher learning or universities are to rely on classroom teachers to mentor student-teachers, then they need to provide specific training or preparation for this.

CONCLUSION

Teaching practice is an activity which can play an important role in preparing teachers for future challenges in a classroom. Its impact on the nation is beyond question. It is a key part of professional training. It is an ongoing journey and requires a combination of personality, professional skills, knowledge and training. It is the responsibility of mentor teachers and teachers at practising schools to make the experience of student-teachers a fruitful one, especially as they are educating today’s youth for tomorrow’s world.

Coaching and mentoring are two vehicles that may provide student-teachers with the necessary structure and support to learn about, practise, and reflect on changing their classroom management practices. This can be done by using a discussion board forum whereby the student-teachers provide highlights of the day, focusing on the challenges and achievements. In this way the mentor teacher, subject lecturer and etutor can give guidance and student-peers can also give solutions as this is an open discussion forum. It goes without saying, however, that such efforts need to be supported by informed and progressive IT administrators who understand current research and who themselves foster communities of learning among their staff members.
REFERENCE


