

The making of a teacher: The rigour in pre-service teacher preparation for Teaching Practice by Universities

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Abstract

Pre-service teacher practicum socialises and exposes trainees to their eventual workplace, the classroom to contextualise theoretical knowledge gained in university. The process also enables them to teach real learners in real classrooms. This paper explores the rigour with which Bachelor of Education students at one South African university are prepared for teaching practice. Drawing on prominent conceptions of teacher professional knowledge by Cochran-Smith and Lite (2001), qualitative data generated from 20 student teachers through open-ended questions on a questionnaire, complemented by focus group discussions were analysed through open coding. Findings suggests that student teachers were rigorously prepared in content, some pedagogical aspects, learner motivation, handling diversity and professionalism. There was lack of preparation for classroom management, learner discipline, and teaching practical lessons. Students lacked exposure to micro-teaching. Preparation for practicum inter-alia should include all aspects of teaching and learning as this is the starting point for building education as a profession with opportunities for growth that sustain a teacher's craft over their career, not just a couple of years. Strong collaboration of the university, DBE and schools is vital if student TP is to achieve the intended purposes.

Key words

Preparation; Teaching Practice; rigour; South African university; student teachers.

Introduction

Teaching Practice (TP) is that period when student teachers go for work-integrated-learning in schools to acquire both practical and professional experiences under the guidance of qualified and experienced teachers. TP is indispensable in initial teacher education (ITE) as it empowers future teachers with knowledge, skills and abilities for a lifelong career in teaching (Iwu, 2021). It also exposes them to diverse populations, which aids their understanding of the complexities of teaching and the full scope of a teacher's role, allowing them to examine the connection between theory and practice (Dalinger et al. 2020; Darling-Hammond, 2017). Viewed as the most vital component of an effective teacher development programme, TP offers student teachers (herein called students) an opportunity to transition from student role to teacher role through active engagement and inquiry within authentic teaching and learning contexts (Conderman & Hedin, 2014). This transition to teacher role socializes students into the profession through collaborations, and supportive relationships with schools, learners, mentors, lecturers and parents (McLeod, 2020). Consequently, TP is a time-honoured and highly valued

teacher preparation tradition conceived of as a ‘rite of passage’ given that this initiation exposes them to their eventual work place – the classroom and school.

Notwithstanding that TP is esteemed in teacher education, viewed as indispensable for student development and initiation into teaching, it is often highly fraught and various anxieties may emerge if student teachers are not rigorously prepared for this process. In developing countries like South Africa, TP challenges may be severe when there is inadequate rigour in student preparation, often compounded by lack of school-based support and guidance. These aspects can diminish its effectiveness. Mukeredzi and Samuel (2020) note that TP effectiveness can be diminished by low levels preparation by universities before going into schools. While current discourse fuels emphasis on TP quality as a universal concern among teacher education stakeholders, it is recognized that current teacher development practices still have a long way to go, regarding student TP preparation (McLeod, 2020).

Extant literature about TP (Aglazor, 2017; la Velle, 2022; Mukeredzi, 2017; du Plessis, 2020) focuses on operational logistics of assessment, supervision, experiences and management. However, questions regarding the rigour with which universities prepare pre-service teachers for TP, needed to be answered. The research addressed the question: In what ways, are pre-service teachers rigorously or not rigorously prepared for Teaching Practice (TP) by universities? This study therefore explored whether one South African university prepared Bachelor of Education students rigorously for TP.

Studying rigour in student TP preparation may illuminate some complexities students face that may militate against positive TP outcomes. Findings may offer teacher educators insights to conceptualise TP preparation through students’ eyes, and consequently review preparation programmes to enhance production of desired outcomes from this exercise. It is argued that an important factor inhibiting complete transfer of theories taught in university to classroom practice, lies in the failure of respective teacher education programmes to act upon and challenge students’ experiences during TP.

Materials and Methods

Background

A crucial part of becoming a teacher is putting teaching theory into practice by giving students hands-on experience in real teaching and learning environments (Ngidi & Marais, 2020). Before entering the real world of teaching, students are permitted to observe how to teach, as both teacher educators and students recognize the importance of instructional practice. TP in teacher education draws on national teacher education policies (Aglazor, 2017). South Africa education policies require all teacher education institutions to ensure that students undertake TP during training to experience and interact with realities of classroom practice and school environment (South African Department of Higher Education and Training (2017). Effective TP is a key influence on learner learning - a desired outcome and primary goal of higher education institutions. Mokoena (2017) indicates that TP involves three key aspects: practicing teaching skills and acquiring teacher role; acquiring experiences in schools; and practical component of teacher preparation distinct from theory.

During this period, students are exposed to learning and development as teaching professionals related to pedagogy including classroom management, content, pastoral knowledge, ecological knowledge, inquiry knowledge, social and personal knowledge (Mokoena, 2017). Mokoena adds that during TP, students observe teachers at work and learn teaching strategies and classroom management. Generally, students also acquire professional skills, competencies, relational characteristics and experiences for full-time teaching after graduation. Through classroom practices, students experience learning situations different from lecture-room as they respond to new circumstances (la Velle, 2022). TP thus, exposes students to real life classroom experiences, supervised by experienced teachers who give them a forum to translate theories learnt in university, into practice (Aglazor, 2017). Through reflection, and interaction with mentors, other teachers and lecturers, students evaluate their teaching and learn different approaches, and skills which may enable effective learner learning and achievements. Reflection enables students to identify their strengths and weaknesses in classroom practice and provides opportunities to address those weaknesses to enrich their strengths (Aglazor, 2017). Reflection-in-practice or judgement-in-practice promotes development of the ability to make moment-by-moment decisions on how to act next time, depending on specific context rather than theory. The student reflects upon what is transpiring here and now, and reframe how such situations might be handled or interpreted (Harvey, et al. 2025). Through reflection students discover new ways of acting, clarify issues, and develop solutions to problems.

Aglazor (2017) says, TP is the culminating point as relationships among the tripartite: university lecturer, mentor, and student interface to enable quality experience for students to take away. It forms the bedrock on which students once they have graduated and joined the profession, build their professional identity. This therefore positions the underlying goal of TP as to initiate students, and prepare them for the profession, familiarizing them with real school environment as their future work place and help them develop appropriate attitudes towards teaching (la Velle, 2022). Consequently, students in South African Higher Education Institutions only graduate if they have successfully undergone TP, a compulsory course for all students in teacher preparation programmes (Ibid).

Students appreciate TP, viewing it as the most significant component of their teacher preparation because they gain skills of teaching from teaching real learners in real classrooms (Brooke, 2016). This opportunity enables contextualisation of theoretical knowledge from university by practicing classroom techniques in preparation for real world of teaching (du Plessis, 2017). They expect practicum to show them what teaching truly involves and most of them practice all theories and concepts learned to establish whether they actually work. This is of significant value as students develop insights and perceptions into their roles as future teachers.

Gravett and Jiyane (2019) add that involvement in practicing schools exposes students to challenges and complexities typical in many schools which help them comprehend what to do and what not to do in other teaching settings. This also offers students awareness of their performance and equipping them with tools to become effective managers of their future classrooms. Dursun, and Aykan (2025) assert that notwithstanding its value, TP is often complex, and demoralizing when students are not adequately prepared. Such experiences influence their views and attitudes to the profession broadly, specifically to subjects they trained to teach. Hence, TP represents a variety of experiences to which students are exposed when they work in classrooms and schools. However, rigour in their preparation for TP remains crucial.

Dursun, and Aykan (2025) add that students are often troubled by managing classroom discipline, relationships with mentors and other teachers, knowledge of curriculum and understanding their learners. These complexities cause significant anxiety if students are not rigorously prepared. Odundo, Ganira, and Ngaruiya (2018) say TP preparation needs equipping students with knowledge of all classroom and school aspects: resources, lesson delivery, class management, assessment, including co-curricular, for them to adjust to varying situational learning and other school demands.

Gal and Fallik (2021) posit that TP preparation should include micro/peer teaching which provides students opportunities to perk up teaching skills, promoting real-time experiences. This technique for learning teaching skills adopts real teaching situation for competence development, offering deeper knowledge regarding the art of teaching. Reddy (2019) adds that micro-teaching develops student confidence, positive teaching attitude, understanding own practice, and that of others. The strategy draws on Vygotsky's cooperative learning where students teach each other, learn with and from one another based on cooperation and social learning, without cognitive distance and often using everyday language familiar to them all (Räisänen & Lindblom, 2021). Thus, with such rigorous TP preparation, students can facilitate learning processes and guide learners in classrooms while developing professionally.

The Study context

This paper did not receive any funding from any organisation or individual. Whatever expenses incurred in printing questionnaires were met by the authors.

The B.Ed. programme offered at this university was a four-year full-time study at Further Education and Training (FET) Level in three specialisations: Economic Management (EMS80246) Natural Science (NS80247) and Technology (TECH80248) (DUT School of Education Students Handbook, 2024/25). The curriculum had three module components: core education; teaching specialisation; and TP. Core education introduced students to knowledge around curriculum, assessment, learning theories, classroom management, barriers to learning, language across the curriculum and teaching strategies. The specialisation modules focussed on particular school subjects that students were enrolled for and how to teach them. TP component, (Work Integrated Learning (WIL) formed a major constituent of the B.Ed. course, spread across four years of the programme as follows:

1. WIL (EXBE 101) Year 1, 4 weeks: Academic Literacy and Micro-teaching.
2. WIL (EXBE 201) Year 2, 4 weeks: Guided Observation
3. WIL (EXBE 301) Year 3, 4 weeks: Guided Observation and Collaborative Teaching
4. WIL (EXBE 401) Year 4, 6 months, Full-Time Teaching (School Handbook 2024/25)

Students spent 4 weeks engaged in TP in first, second and third year, and six months in the fourth year. In first-year, students engaged in academic literacy and micro/peer-teaching at university (DUT School of Education Students Handbook, 2024/25). In second and third-year students undertook guided observation complementing co-teaching with mentors. The guided observation enabled students to observe mentor lesson preparation, delivery strategies, language used, scaffolding learners, and learner learning styles. This helped students to prepare their own lessons. Aglazor (2017) points out that when students observe mentors and learners in action, it is not a mechanical application of methods and techniques, but a reflection of how

mentors interpret these processes. During co-teaching, students had opportunities to glean new insights into effective classroom practice, becoming aware of what mentors consider important in lesson preparation and delivery (Mukeredzi, 2017). Students would teach sections or whole lessons while mentors observed for feedback. In their fourth year, students assumed full teaching responsibilities for six months guided by mentors. This study therefore sought to understand the rigour in preparing these future teachers for TP.

Literature Review

Literature in this section discusses rigour in students' preparation for TP, and the challenges that students are often confronted with in the absence of rigorous preparation. Literature also includes some aspects that students often struggle with during TP for which they will not be prepared.

Rigour in Preparing Students for Teaching Practice

Rigour in preparing students for TP involves equipping them with a holistic repertoire of professional, pedagogical, and practical competences that transcend mere content delivery. It requires systematic scaffolding of students' professional knowledge through content mastery, pedagogical content knowledge, classroom management, inclusivity, reflective practice, and exposure to authentic teaching experiences, contexts and collegial relations. Scholars argue that rigorous preparation entails not only ensuring that students understand the knowledge-for-practice (theoretical foundations) but also that they are afforded opportunities to enact knowledge-in-practice and knowledge-of-practice through micro-teaching, collaborative inquiry, and reflective engagements (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001; Kelly, 2006). Internationally, best practices highlight structured induction, feedback-rich simulations, and school-university partnerships as crucial in ensuring rigour and coherence between theory and practice (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Burn & Mutton, 2015). Rigour also demands preparing students for the affective and ethical dimensions of teaching, including resilience, adaptability, professionalism, collegial interactions and relations, which are essential for navigating the complex realities of classrooms and schools (Gravett & Jiyane, 2019). Without such multi-dimensional rigour, students often experience a "practice shock" when confronted with classroom realities, underscoring the need for teacher education programmes to integrate comprehensive, practice-based approaches to TP preparation (Mukeredzi & Samuel, 2020).

Challenges and Dilemmas in Student Teaching Practice

Despite the recognised value of TP, student teachers often encounter profound challenges that complicate their preparation. These include dilemmas of identity formation, navigating conflicting expectations between universities and schools, and coping with inadequate support from mentors and other teachers. The misalignment between university curricula and school practices frequently creates a theory–practice divide, leaving students uncertain about how to translate abstract principles into actionable strategies in under-resourced or disruptive classrooms (du Plessis, 2017). Relationships with schools also pose dilemmas, as some host teachers perceive students as burdens rather than collaborators, which undermines learning and limits opportunities for authentic professional growth (Kiggundu & Nayimuli, 2009). Moreover, students often face contextual challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, learner indiscipline, and lack of teaching resources, particularly in rural schools, which exacerbate their anxieties and erode their confidence (Mukeredzi, 2017; Moletsane, 2012). These challenges suggest that the dilemmas of preparation are not only pedagogical but also

institutional and relational, requiring stronger partnerships between universities and schools, structured mentoring, and reflective dialogue to bridge the gap between the idealised vision of teaching and its lived realities (Marais & Meier, 2008).

Poulou (2007) who studied students' preparedness for TP discovered three challenges:

- Limited content knowledge for teaching, and putting it across for learner comprehension.
- Classroom management, handling learners with behavioural problems.
- Lack of essential attributes, and competencies for classroom control.

Students' challenges with classroom management are confirmed by Tshuma and Bhebhe (2016) who indicate that learner behaviour management is the biggest challenge of students on TP. Odundo, Ganira, and Ngaruiya (2018) also lament that students are left in the dark about realities awaiting them regarding learner discipline and classroom management when they report for TP and are at a loss where to begin. To add, Marais and Meier (2008) say students on TP lack of knowledge of handling classroom discipline thus impeding smooth and effective lesson presentation. Inadequate students' preparation for classroom management also relates to what Odundo, Ganira, and Ngaruiya (2018) discovered as trainees' lack proficiency in preparation and management of classroom practice. When students are rigorously prepared for TP, they develop confidence from content, pedagogical mastery, classroom management and use varied resources for successful instructional pathways. In the absence of rigorous preparation, they lose confidence. Addressing these concerns is vital if TP is to serve as a transformative, rather than disillusioning, component of initial teacher education.

Reddy (2019) posits that some institutions disregard micro-teaching in student TP preparation due to lack of awareness of its importance. This deprives trainees of opportunities for skills development through participation in micro lessons. Micro-teaching is an organized, scaled-down teacher development scheme where students plan, teach a small group of peers in a 15-20-minutes lesson, followed by reflection, review, discussion, analysis, and evaluation to give feedback (Reddy, 2019). Tshuma and Bhebhe (2016) view this as an activity which prepares trainees to better understand teaching/learning processes, providing opportunities to learn teaching skills, study their own teaching, and that of others. Trainees put themselves under the microscope' of a small audience, teaching faults are observed to get constructive feed-back and they also observe and comment on peer performance. By so doing students develop confidence before undertaking TP.

du Plessis (2017) reports that students on practicum are confused about mismatches between university curriculum studied and that required for teaching due to lack of liaison between universities and schools, creating a theory/practice dichotomy. This creates a momentous problem confronting students on TP. Such weak university/school linkages contribute to shortcomings in education as many teacher education programmes often do not address contexts in which students practice. This author also says students reveal lack of rigour in TP preparation, displaying limited knowledge on the nature of children, school routines, teaching strategies, assessment, and classroom layout. Without rigorous preparation around these pedagogical aspects, teaching, learners and students suffer.

Tshuma and Bhebhe (2016) indicate that pre-service teacher training starts in teacher education institutions, and students should be rigorously prepared and equipped with teaching skills required for practice in schools. Burn and Mutton (2015) outlined seven goals for TP which include: awareness of limitations of research-based understandings for students; valuing

the expertise of experienced teachers; understanding of the intricacy of their knowledge; prioritizing practical experience coupled with experimentation; acknowledging the challenges of inadequate student preparation and professional learning conditions in schools; preparing students for diverse school settings; and cultivating a commitment to ongoing learning; and the creation of new knowledge among students. Whether these goals were considered in preparing students for TP, was yet to be established.

Conceptual Frameworks

This study draws on concepts from Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2001) who highlight three prominent conceptions of teacher professional knowledge, also vital for students' success during TP: knowledge-for-practice; knowledge-in-practice; and knowledge-of-practice.

Knowledge-for-practice is the knowledge-base for teaching, theoretical and research-based knowledge essential for effective teaching encompassing understanding teaching strategies, theories, and subject-specific methodologies like different approaches for mathematics teaching applicable in classroom practice on TP. The assumption is that for students and teachers to teach effectively, they need content, educational theories, and teaching strategies for various subjects. This is knowledge that university-researchers generate as formal knowledge and theory for teachers to improve practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 2001). This theory-for-practice, is the knowledge that trainees rely upon to teach during TP as it constitutes domains of knowledge for teaching like content knowledge, because teaching itself has a distinctive knowledge base which, when mastered, provides teachers with a unique knowledge reserve/fund not held by people generally (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001; Kelly, 2006).

Knowledge-of-practice represents systematic knowledge gained from research into teaching and learning. It bridges theoretical understanding and practical application like small research to determine how different seating arrangements impact student engagement. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2001) indicate that this is knowledge for teaching, from research on: teaching, learners, learning, subject matter, curriculum, schools and schooling. The knowledge is generated from micro and macro educational contexts. Students also need this knowledge to teach effectively during TP as it encompasses principles of lesson delivery, learners, learning, curriculum, schools and schooling (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001). Knowledge-of-practice, includes students' knowledge of their subject e.g. mathematics pedagogical approaches, class management or common mathematics misconceptions learners have (Kelly, 2006). The knowledge is crucial, for easy application in the classroom, to enhance learner learning as it enables learner engagement. Kelly (2006) adds that 'knowledge-of-practice' is propositional while 'knowledge-in-practice', is practical, unspoken (tacit) knowledge underpinned by professional activity, which cannot be easily articulated. In teaching, students draw on both knowledge-of-practice and knowledge-in-practice as these are intimately interdependent.

Knowledge-in-practice is practical, experience-based knowledge that teachers develop while teaching. It is reflected upon and shared through discussions, peer collaboration, and self-evaluation (Kelly, 2006). This is practical teaching knowledge, pedagogical knowledge embedded in reflection on practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001). In other words, this knowledge is from reflective practice. Students often keep reflective journals, probing their experiences and expertise as makers of wise judgments, and constructors of learning interactions in the classroom. Kelly (2006) adds that knowing-in-practice does not reside within an individuals' head; but shared across teachers, learners, conceptual and material mediational artefacts like knowledge, experiences, books, computers etc. Included are explicit and implicit

conceptual resources students bring, their knowledge-in-practice and knowledge-of-practice. This knowledge is gained in interaction, complemented by artefacts. Also included are tacit understandings students acquired from prior experiences and interactions, making it dynamic given the collaborative activities of students and learners in classroom practice. The knowledge is therefore specific, and particular to precise contexts/instances of social learning practice. It emanates from a constructive process where participants internalize their experiences forming a basis of subjective knowledge-in-practice, reflected upon and reified to enhance knowledge-of-practice (Kelly, 2006).

Methodology

The study sought to understand the rigour with which one South African university prepares students for TP. To gain such an understanding, a qualitative approach was employed. Twenty B.ED. Year 4 students' perspectives were elicited through open-ended questions on a questionnaire, complemented by focus group discussions. Convenience sampling which involves selecting accessible and willing participants was adopted. Year 4 students were preferred because they spent six months on TP, carrying full teaching loads, which would enable them to determine and articulate the extent of rigour.

Data generation was conducted between June and November 2022. Before students left for TP, we requested to hold a meeting with all Year 4 students. We explained our study in detail clarifying that participation was voluntary and they could drop out at any time without any prejudice to them. We also explained that confidentiality and anonymity would be strictly observed. We then asked for 20 volunteers. All the 20 (volunteers) participants were over 18 years. They all freely-gave informed consent to participate in the study, and consent to publish results anonymously. At the end of the meeting they voluntarily signed consent forms.

The questionnaire was administered and returned at the end of November when student returned to university. Of the 20 participants, 16 students returned completed questionnaires (80% response rate). Thirteen were men and seven women. The questionnaire had five open-ended questions and these were the questions that guided focus group discussions. Questions elicited data on students' experiences, relations with mentors and other teachers, whether they felt that the university had rigorously prepared them for TP, the aspects in which they felt they were rigorously prepared and those aspects that they felt they were not prepared.

Upon their return to university we met the participants and arranged for focus group discussions (FGDs). We held three FGD meetings with four-six heterogeneous participants. Heterogeneity worked well for perspective comparisons. The number of students in FGDs was determined by lecture timetables. We used the questionnaire as the discussion schedule, and students explained and elaborated on their responses. The two researchers facilitated FGDs which lasted approximately two hours and half hours and all were audio recorded.

The generated data were transcribed verbatim. Data analysis which involves carefully and systematically examining and interpreting texts to identify patterns, themes, biases and meanings (Plunkett & Dyson, 2011) adopted seven interrelated stages of open coding

First, familiarisation, reading and re-reading transcripts, listening to audio tapes over and over. Second, comparing, contrasting transcripts, scrutinizing and writing words or phrases in margins after identifying interesting/relevant information.

Third, assigning codes, listing and grouping similar/related words from margins to form topics.

Fourth, clustering codes to form categories using descriptions of what the group was about.

Fifth, reviewing, refining categories and clustering them according to relevance to research questions.

Sixth, clustering related categories into themes based on similarity of perspectives.

Seven, Hermeneutic cycle, examining data against transcriptions, codes, categories, and themes verifying and confirming them, ensuring that themes represent the data.

The co-author then examined the data set to check for errors/omissions and confirm themes.

To make data visible we selected quotes which represented different themes, ensuring appropriate representation across data sources and gender. Mukeredzi (2017, p. 6) defines this use of quotes as “. . . capturing in their language and letting them speak for themselves.”

Checking data set by the co-author was vital for enhancing trustworthiness.

Results

Findings show two opposed areas of preparation for TP reflected in Table 1:

1. Rigour in preparation for TP.
2. Lack of rigour in preparation for TP.

Table 1 Participants responses

Rigour in Preparation for TP							Lack of Rigour in Preparation for TP						
Student	Content	Lesson Planning	Lesson Delivery	Learner Motivation	Handling Diversity	Professionalism	Class management	Learner discipline	Practical Lessons	Content Matching	Micro-Teaching	Relationships	Under-resourcing
1	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
3	✓				✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4		✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				
6	✓		✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
7	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
8		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
9	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓		
10	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		
11	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓			✓		✓
12	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		
13	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		
14	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓		✓		✓
15	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		
16	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓		✓		✓
17	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓			✓	✓		
18	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓		
19	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓			✓		
20		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓		✓
	16	20	18	12	14	12	19	16	7	10	18	6	7

Key

1-7were Women, 8-20 were Men.

MST represents Male Student Teacher. FST represents Female Student Teacher.

Students are identified by Numbers for example: MST8 represents Male Student Teacher 8.

FST1 represents Female Student Teacher 1.

Source of data is indicated as Questionnaire or FGD.

Areas with Rigor in preparation for TP.

Content, Lesson Planning and Delivery

The study investigated the nature of rigour in student preparation for TP. Rigorous preparation emerged in content, lesson planning and delivery, motivation, handling diversity, and professionalism. Class management, learner discipline, teaching practical lessons, content-matching, under-resourcing, relationships, and micro-teaching lacked rigour in TP preparation. Students reported that at the beginning they hailed TP because they could apply the content they had studied, and consequently enjoyed teaching because of this conversance with subject matter. MST13 (FGD) explained:

For me it was great because I did TP in all previous years, so this 4th year was quite easy because even learners were mature and knew why they were at school which made teaching for me a lot easier because they listened and remained attentive throughout the lesson. Even lesson preparation was not difficult.

FST5, (Questionnaire) wrote:

They taught us all the content following the Curriculum Statements from Department of Education (DBE).

MST8, (FGD) confirmed:

For content aah... we were well prepared, the lecturers covered the whole Caps Curriculum Statement document from beginning to end. I knew all the topics in those statements from DBE. I had no problems, I knew my stuff very well, was ready to teach any topic.

MST9 (Questionnaire) wrote:

I always walked into the classroom confident because I knew my stuff. They taught us how to introduce a lesson, how to follow on the introduction and that you should have your steps on paper. They also said if you want to use group work you should have tasks written and you should monitor the groups closely to make sure there are no passengers.

FST1, (Questionnaire) explained:

I was well prepared in content of each subject, including lesson planning, questioning techniques and all lesson delivery.

FST4, (FGD) said:

We went through teaching manuals, lecturers explained how to prepare a

lesson plan, TP file, and how to conduct a lesson.

MST17, (FGD) added:

We were taught how to plan lessons. They said before going to class you should teach your lesson to the wall. Once you have planned, the lesson will go well.

FST7 highlighted:

The school is well equipped with computer labs, books, and their classrooms are in a good state. I knew my content and methods of teaching and I could vary methods in one lesson and even combine some like explaining and group work.

Cogill (2008) suggests that content knowledge (CK) is a fundamental aspect of classroom practice since it affects planning, task setting, questioning, explaining, giving feedback and assessment. From what Cogill says, content knowledge is the backbone for teachers' professional activities in the classroom from lesson preparation through delivery and assessment to giving feedback. In its absence there is no teaching and there is no learning, because teachers cannot teach what they do not know. CK is knowledge-for-practice that teachers should teach; which learners must learn. From Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2001) these students were equipped with the knowledge-base for teaching: knowledge-for-practice. Additionally, subject content is crucial, not only for effective teaching but for evaluation of textbooks, preparation/selection of teaching materials and computer software, etc. (Webb & Smith, 2019). This is essential, as teachers should assess content of different textbooks before drawing on them in lesson planning and delivery. Thus, teachers with strong content knowledge are well-equipped to make good choices relating to tasks that engage their learners and to organise them in such a way that learners benefit.

Lesson planning is essential for a successful lesson, and when there is inadequate teacher preparation, poor teaching occurs. Mukeredzi (2013b) summed it up saying without lesson planning, a teacher prepares to fail. She further says planning allows for thorough preparation and increases teacher efficiency and confidence through “self-interrogating, stepping back, ‘pre-playing the lesson’ and pre-evaluating classroom practice, and this way, develop new knowledge and beliefs on content, pedagogy and student learning” (2013b: 97) Thus, these professional learning processes around preparation and planning influence teachers' instructional performance and general classroom practice, and consequently, their professional growth. In South African schools, lesson preparation is generally informed by documents from the DBE: The Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) and Annual Teaching Plan (ATP) (CAPS, 2013). The CAPS document indicates content to be covered per topic including specific aims but does not explain how the topic should be taught. Therefore, it is in the lesson plan where teaching strategies and steps are clearly and sequentially explained. The ATP is structured, showing content to be covered per week, number of formal and informal tasks and weighting of each task (CAPS, 2013). These two official documents, including set text books, guide the teacher in lesson planning.

Learner Motivation

Other students reported rigour in preparation around learner motivation and classroom communication which. FST6 on the questionnaire wrote:

They taught us classroom communication, learner motivation, grabbing attention and maintaining it throughout. ...

They said we must use different ways of motivating learners everytime. They emphasized motivation as important otherwise learners won't learn. They need to be encouraged even after giving wrong answers. (MST9, FGD).

They said give positive comments after learners give correct answers, or ask class to clap hands. These were said to be effective in motivating learners. (MST17, Questionnaire).

Classroom communication is an important component of the teaching profession, without it, a teacher cannot teach and learners cannot learn. It is thus, vital for knowledge transfer in the classroom and should therefore be effective. Teachers' communication skills are integral to learning and classroom management skills. According to Mahdi (2023) teachers' effective and appropriate communication strategies, enhance learner autonomy, engagement, self-concept, well-being, responsibility and success in behaviour management. Thus, students need to develop effective communication strategies to address disruptions in the classroom, while supporting learner engagement, motivation, self-concept, and autonomy. However, Kiggundu and Nayimuli (2009) found that students had problems communicating with learners as they could not communicate in English, and teachers, in learners' mother tongue. Participants in this study reported ability to communicate.

Motivation represents eagerness or attraction that gets learners acting, keeps them learning, and determines where they have to go. Motivation and learning behaviour are two important factors in determining learner learning achievement. Zajda (2021) further says it is essential to engage, empower, motivate and inspire learners so they can adapt and improve in academic achievement. Motivated learners strive to become independent learners, employ self-regulated learning strategies, and take responsibility for their own learning, in order to reach their full potential.

In addition to motivation, participants reported having been prepared in creating conducive learning environments.

They taught us motivation, and creating a good environment. ...I discovered that learners become enthusiastic and actively participate when praised and rewarded for their efforts. (FST4, FGD).

She always said creating a conducive classroom environment is one of important things a teacher can do because it promotes learning, its free of intimidation and allows free exchange of ideas and expression which motivates learners. (FST7, Questionnaire).

The comments above, suggest rigour in preparation around pedagogy, and instructional strategies which foster more effective teaching according to (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001). A conducive classroom environment describes the overall climate or atmosphere of a classroom, devoid of both physical intimidation and emotional frustration which enhances free exchange of ideas and free expression. Such an environment functions as a community and everyone plays a part, with the teacher as head in control, and commands respect. Most participants

reported gaining knowledge and techniques during didactics and professional studies. All aspects relate knowledge-for-practice, formal knowledge, or theories from research-based findings (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001). Gravett and Jiyane (2019) on the contrary indicate that students are often unprepared in aspects like motivation, and pedagogy. However, this is inconsistent with findings from this study.

A study by Odundo, Ganira, and Ngaruiya (2018) in Kenya found that students got to TP schools without knowledge-for-practice and knowledge-of-practice related to the chalkboard, our participants were prepared for chalkboard work. MST13 (Questionnaire) wrote:

In didactics we were taught writing on the chalkboard in a way that learners can read from all points in the classroom.

We had two hours of chalkboard practice every Wednesday in professional studies. At first it was hard, but with practice, I got better. (FST5, FGD).

Chalkboard work, is a class management strategy through which teachers provide content to learners from a central location. It forms a powerful visual tool that facilitates effective instruction in the classroom and its use not only provides learners with holistic understanding of a lesson through visual representation, but also helps teachers retain attention in the classroom.

Handling Diversity

Students also highlighted rigour in handling classroom diversity and inclusivity. FST3 (Questionnaire) explained:

They taught us inclusive education, saying we should attend to all learners, ensuring their participation in all activities. We had a whole half semester where we were being taught classroom learning diversity and inclusive teaching.

I was well prepared for inclusive teaching/learning, barriers to learning, and learner-centred teaching which we learnt in Education 201. This is a big topic in our course. (MST9, FGD).

I went to TP knowing exactly how to deal with classroom diversity. Dr ... taught us strategies of dealing with learning diversity and inclusivity in the classroom. We were given a lot of examples for example remedial teaching ability grouping and we also got a handout on this. (MST12, Questionnaire).

Classroom diversity means recognising learners as unique in their own way. Examining classrooms today shows that learners differ socio-economically, by language, ability, culture, religion, racially, etc. and bring different experiences. The South African DBE (2017) advises educators and learners to value, embrace, and make positive use of those differences, with teachers ensuring that all learners, from whatever background feel included and affirmed in the classroom. Teachers should bracket their beliefs, attitudes and behaviours when handling diverse learners as no learner should be left behind. Handling diversity, and inclusive education

are about "Education for All", no learner left behind, the belief that everyone has a right to high-quality education, regardless of background, ability, or socio-economic situation (DBE, 2017). Handling diversity and inclusivity are consistent with both knowledge-for-practice and knowledge-of-practice as the two conceptions are drawn upon in classroom practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001; Kelly, 2006).

Professionalism

Students reported rigorous preparation around professionalism. FST5 on the questionnaire wrote:

We were taught to conduct ourselves as professionals, being teachers, dressing formally, speaking politely and respectfully etc. like teachers do. We were taught about punctuality and availability for extra-curricular activities.

They said we should be obedient, respectful to colleagues, and learners. Should learn from them all, without acting all supreme, with pride. (MST11, FGD).

They talked about the importance of good behavior without involvement in some nonsense, being prepared to listen and learn from everyone. (MST13, FGD).

Drawing on Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2001) and Kelly (2006) responses suggest both knowledge-for-practice and knowledge-of-practice as TP is intended to develop student teaching abilities, from talking, listening and learning from others, from cultural and contextual norms and practices, within the context. Mukeredzi and Samuel (2020) indicate that professionalism includes collegial collaboration and respect, working with colleagues and learners, building and maintaining evolving mutual engagement; friendly and open collegial interactions, and interacting with learners without being too familiar. A culture of respect at workplaces encourages innovation, sharing, staff wellbeing, satisfaction, performance, and productivity. When teachers know that they are valued by colleagues, they often become less stressed and more committed to their work.

Lack of Rigour in TP Preparation

Classroom management was one major area where students lamented lacked of preparation.

MST14 (Questionnaire) said:

We were not taught classroom management. Problem solving may come naturally but we should have been taught how to react and solve problems appropriately in the classroom.

They did not teach us learner discipline. I did not know what to do with them, I relied on my mentor which is bad because learners ended up respecting the mentor not me. (MST8, FGD).

We were not prepared for disciplining learners; corporal punishment is not allowed. Learners make so much noise. I did not know what to do, but sent them outside. (FST1, FGD).

They did not tell us how to handle screaming children. They did not do homework, did not participate. I didn't know what to do, it wasted teaching/learning time. I never felt safe inside school because of learners fighting, rude, and dis-respectful. (MST12, FGD).

Even assessment was difficult. Learners talking, laughing, walking around aimlessly, and making noise, ignoring my warnings to them to stop. (FST2, Questionnaire).

Like in all other township schools, the school had high incidents of robbery and crime, most male students are into drugs and they are disrespectful. Was scared and felt like abandoning the teaching practice but then I had to go on as this was my final TP. (FST7, Questionnaire).

Many participants reported lack of preparation for classroom management and learner discipline. Almost all of them (19) lamented lack of class management preparation and knowledge. Students bemoaned that despite thorough lesson planning, lessons were ineffective due to learner indiscipline. Notwithstanding knowledge-for-practice and knowledge-of-practice these aspects of conceptions of knowledge were ignored. The university rigorously prepared students on some aspects of professional knowledge-for and knowledge-of practice, completely ignoring other important aspects for effective teaching/learning. Indiscipline was reported by Kiggundu and Nayimuli (2009) who found deteriorated moral values in schools and neglect of discipline.

Classroom control and learner discipline are concerned with building an environment that optimises teacher professional development, therefore should not be viewed as peripheral but integral to teaching. Further, discipline constitutes a 'built-in' element of classroom practice, not a 'bolt on' extra (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison 1997). Hence, lack of rigour in such aspects of knowledge-for and knowledge-of-practice was a serious oversight given that this component of formal knowledge enables teachers to teach effectively (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001). Students needed rigorous preparation for understanding alternative ways of handling misbehaviour other than corporal punishment and exclusion. This would illustrate a shift from learner discipline to learner management, which stresses nurturing acceptable behaviour, fostering learner achievement through active engagement and participation in learning activities which results in effective teaching. Moletsane (2012) says nurturing involves less emphasis on criticism and punishment, but more on learner understanding, praise and reward. However, from the perspectives of these students, learner discipline remained a common reality, an emotive and controversial issue. Shaikhmag and Naidoo (2021) assert that learner indiscipline in South African Schools is getting worse, even out of hand, including bullying. Learners seem to undermine teacher authority and academic achievement. This lack of learner discipline may seriously hamper teaching and learning processes, and if disruptive behaviour prevails, education cannot be effective.

Micro-teaching

Eighteen students complained about the absence of micro-teaching which they said inhibited rigorous preparation of class management and learner discipline. Some said:

If they had exposed us to micro-teaching we would have discussed some of these things and how to handle them. My classes were rowdy! There were some big boys who sat on benches or even walked on benches shouting. You yell and yell at them to behave but they don't listen, I left and said when you want to be taught you can look for me in our library staffroom. After 15 minutes the class rep came to apologize and I then went back, time wasted. (MST14, Questionnaire).

They should have given us practice through micro-teaching to learn learner mis-behaviour and how to handle it and even to learn to teach from our peers or even from our own teaching. (FST6, Questionnaire).

Micro-teaching develops confidence. I was scared to stand in-front, some in-disciplined learners were big and took advantage of me. They influenced the whole class to make noise (MST8, FGD).

In other universities students teach their peers before going on TP to practice. We never did. The first days were not easy for me, I was terrified even though I had prepared my lesson very well and practiced it. (FST3, FGD).

From the responses above, other critical activities of knowledge-for and knowledge-of-practice were ignored in preparation for TP. Micro-teaching employs real teaching situations which develop pedagogic skills, offering students in-depth knowledge of the art of teaching. Reddy posits that micro-teaching promotes confidence development, positive classroom attitude and enhances content, pedagogy, and specific teaching skills from a “teach, critique, re-teach” model (2019, p.65). In other words, following feedback, students re-teach the micro-lesson, incorporating comments highlighted in the discussion and analysis. Thus, from micro-teaching students better understand teaching/learning processes, class management and learner discipline, and they learn teaching skills, study their own teaching, and that of peers. It also exposes students to what to look out for, during lesson observations.

Ten students lamented mismatches between curriculum taught in university and school curriculum. FST5, (FGD) explained:

They did not check changes made to school curriculum, so topics we learnt at University were different from those taught in schools. We had to study on our own relying on mentors.

They don't communicate with schools. The content that we were given to teach is different from what was in ATPs at university. We were shocked to get documents with different material. (MST14, FGD).

The University does not liaise with the DBE to get updates. We follow the CAPS but there are changes made every now and then and communicated to schools. (MST10, FGD).

Mentors studied by Kiggundu and Nayimuli (2009) found that students come for TP without knowledge of school curriculum. “They don’t know where to start. They come very raw, and you work hard to teach them (p.353).” This was apparently the case with some participants. Thus, students lacked adequate preparation in knowledge-for-and knowledge-of-practice. A discrepancy between theory learnt in university and classroom realities noted by du Plessis (2017). Consequently, these future teachers were not prepared adequately for classroom needs. Similar concerns were raised by Mukeredzi and Samuel (2020) who noted that initial teacher preparation programmes do not address specifics of classroom realities within which teachers work.

Technology students also reported lack of preparation for teaching technology practical lessons. MST16, (FGD) lamented:

We did not practice teaching technology practical, we learnt, lots of theory, but no lab experience. I was frustrated, looked foolish, embarrassed, they have a fully equipped workshop, but I did not know how or what to teach.

In technology at the university we learn only theory but computer labs are there, we use them for assignments and research. We don’t do any practical lessons at all of any kind. So, I just taught theory. I told my mentor and he said he would go through the practical aspects with the learners.

TP preparation for technology students neglected an important component of knowledge-for and knowledge-of practice. Nasimiyu (2017) confirms that university education courses are narrow in scope, conservative in nature and provide only theoretical work without teaching practical aspects of subject matter. Technology practical like sciences has been hailed for promoting students’ positive attitudes, enhancing motivation for learning, improving understanding, developing problem-solving skills and understanding the nature of technology by replicating actions of technologists (Sshana & Abulibdeh, 2020). Practical work may promote both students’ and learners’ positive attitudes which enhance motivation for learning, and a desire for achievement. Through practical work both students and learners achieve a deeper understanding by finding and seeing things for themselves. Practical work promotes communication skills, problem solving, critical thinking and analysis, animates and escalates subject interest, and consequently learners view it as an engaging subject making them become more motivated (Hinne, 2017). The lack of exposure to practical components gravely affects students’ development in the subject, their critical thinking, and problem solving, and they may become de-motivated and uninterested in learning.

Further to this, students practicing in rural schools complained about lack of preparation to handle contextual challenges. (FST1, Questionnaire):

We were not taught how to teach with limited resources. X Secondary school is under-resourced, so I had to use my transport money to get information for learners.

The school environment is not good starting from the school itself, resources to be used by the teachers are not enough to help them in teaching and learning. Such things like printing machines, photocopying machines, electricity were not there. We didn’t know what to do except to use our own money to print at the shops. (FST4, FGD).

The school is in a rural area, in a place called ..., lack of computers and printing machines and for photocopying, we were not allowed to print up to 10 copies per day. We were not prepared on how to operate with limited resources. (MST20, Questionnaire).

It was so under-resourced. We were shocked when we got there. There was nothing, not even textbooks only CAPS documents and other DBE documents for the teacher. Had to write and give notes every time. I did not know how to improvise in such cases. The Lecturers did not warn us. (MST14, FGD).

Extant literature (la Velle, 2022; Moletsane, 2012; Mukeredzi, 2017) shows severe under-resourcing in rural schools not only in South Africa, but the world over. Rural schools globally experience social ills and hindrances to quality learning and achievements: low learner attainments; poor financing and resourcing; problems of “hard to staff, harder to stay” due to prevailing discourse of deficiency which regards rural school teaching as low-grade. These obstacles may adversely impact education quality achievement, giving rise to associating rurality with deficiencies and disadvantage. It therefore would not be surprising that students were confronted with under-resourcing. However, Mukeredzi and Samuel (2020) found that students’ preliminary visits to host schools before TP were an effective way of establishing relationships with host schools and expose them to the nature of resourcing before taking up TP in such schools.

Relationships

Six students reported lack of cordial relationships with some mentors and teachers in the schools. FST4, on the Questionnaire wrote:

Some students felt they were unwelcome, we were shown mentors on the third day. The mentors were cold. We were allocated a staffroom in a computer lab, sometimes in any empty classroom, alone as students away from qualified teachers.

Some of them were cold towards us, like they never did TP. Even mentors were not supportive. I hated being in that staffroom, they didn’t talk to you but talked about you in their mother tongue. We were never warned of such things. (MST10, FGD).

Some teachers were nice, always encouraging, but many of them always gave ‘hateful eyes’ and we didn’t know how to handle such situations. They forbade us from using desks in the staffroom. One even said you are students, not yet teachers. We were not prepared on handling relationships. (MST20, Questionnaire)

Students felt undervalued or treated as burdens rather than colleagues-in-training, which undermined their confidence and sense of belonging during TP. Instead of supportive collegiality some teachers exhibited indifference or reluctance to provide constructive guidance, leaving students to navigate classroom challenges alone. This strained dynamic compromised the intended collaborative nature of TP, which depends on positive, professional relationships between teachers and students for effective professional learning

(Kiggundu & Nayimuli, 2009). While their own space promoted interaction among students, it tended to create “borders” between students and schoolteachers.

Discussion and Conclusion

Through an exploration of students from one university, we sought to understand rigour in TP preparation. Students were adequately prepared in content knowledge, pedagogical aspects like learner motivation, handling diversity and professionalism. All this was formal knowledge-for and knowledge-of -practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001). Content is essential, not only for teaching but also boosts teacher enthusiasm to go ‘above and beyond’ in their work. Cogill (2008) says teachers who are grounded in CK are interesting and dynamic when teaching whilst those with little CK may shy away from more difficult concepts, or adopt didactic strategies in their teaching. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2001) add that teachers with content understand relationships between knowledge and practice (*knowing-for-practice*) discerning that having more subject matter, more educational theory, more pedagogy, more instructional strategies lead to effective practice.

Given that motivation is a driving force behind human behaviour, the ability to motivate learners gained in university probably made learning effective, and exciting consequently improving their performance, enhancing their well-being and professional growth. Students also reported skills in handling diversity which includes ideas and initiatives to create safe, inclusive and equitable learning environments, that recognize, foster and develop sensitivity to learner needs as primary aims of educational diversity. Students were also prepared for professionalism, an important basis for a quality teaching force which impacts on how teachers feel about their work. Teachers who display professionalism are more satisfied and confident, have a higher perception of the value of teaching, and support their learners and peers.

Findings also revealed that student preparation for TP around classroom management and learner discipline, teaching practical lessons and micro-teaching lacked rigour. Classroom management and learner discipline which form an important component of knowledge-for-practice enhance student achievements as they may create an environment that minimises disruptions and maximises instruction time and learner learning engagement. Given the lack of rigour in student classroom management, this affected lesson delivery as poor learner behaviour and distractions inhibit learner focused learning. Effective classroom management and learner discipline often sustain an orderly classroom environment, increase learning, promoting social and emotional growth, decreasing negative behaviours while enhancing time spent academically. Teacher educators should ensure rigorous preparation of students in this Knowledge-for-practice aspect before they go on TP.

Micro-teaching which the university neglected is vital for practice elasticity as it aids development of diverse abilities, boosts development of confidence and positive attitude to achieve better results (Hinne, 2017). This system of controlled practice which enables focusing on specific teaching behaviours and practice teaching under controlled conditions is vital for feedback and discussion which can make teaching effective and offer students teaching experience likely to reduce error in the classroom. The lack of exposure to this process, placed students at a disadvantage and the university is encouraged to seriously engage students in micro-teaching during preparation processes for TP.

The study recommends that students be rigorously prepared and equipped with all the requisite teaching and learning skills for effective practice in schools. Strong collaboration of the tripartite (university, DBE and schools) should be developed if student TP is to achieve the intended purposes. While this was a small study, which however, offers significant insights, more comprehensive studies would yield more concrete results. Possible questions could include: How schools and teachers view their responsibility to students during TP? How DBE view their responsibility to student TP? Perspectives from such studies may assist in reconceptualizing teacher education and student TP.

Authors declare that there are no competing interests.

Declarations

Data availability Statement:

1. The hard copies of the responses are locked in a cupboard in the first author's Office. Transcriptions are available in a File labelled Research and Publications the first author's Computer.
2. **Ethical approval**
The Durban University Technology Institutional Research and Ethics Committee (IREC) approved the study according to the South African Ethics in Health and Research Guidelines: Principles, Processes and Structures 2024, Third Edition. Ethical Clearance was granted after submission of a proposal to conduct the study, before meeting participants and commencing data generation.
3. **Consent to participate**
All the 20 (volunteers) participants were over 18 years. They all freely-gave informed consent to participate in the study. At the end of the meeting they voluntarily signed consent forms.
4. **Consent to publish**
All freely-gave informed consent to participate in the study and consent to publish results anonymously.

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