

Peer-reviewed academic journal

**Innovative Issues and Approaches in
Social Sciences**

IIASS VOLUME 18 (2025)

Innovative Issues and Approaches in Social Sciences

IIASS is a double blind peer review academic journal published 3 times yearly (January, May, September) covering different social sciences: political science, sociology, economy, public administration, law, management, communication science, psychology and education.

| 2

IIASS has started as a Sldip – Slovenian Association for Innovative Political Science journal and is being published by ERUDIO Center for Higher Education.

Typeset

This journal was typeset in 11 pt. Arial, Italic, Bold, and Bold Italic; the headlines were typeset in 14 pt. Arial, Bold

Abstracting and Indexing services

COBISS, International Political Science Abstracts, CSA Worldwide Political Science Abstracts, CSA Sociological Abstracts, PAIS International, DOAJ, Google scholar.

Publication Data:

ERUDIO Education Center

Innovative issues and approaches in social sciences, 2025,
vol. 18

ISSN 1855-0541

Additional information: www.iiass.com

EXPLORING PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' SCHOOL-BASED PRACTICUM EXPERIENCES IN GRADE R: INSIGHTS FROM THE SOUTH AFRICAN EDUCATIONAL LANDSCAPE

Welile N. Msimango, E.C.A. Kok, S.C.B. Xulu, Oluwatoyin Ayodele Ajani¹

Abstract

The South African education system under apartheid was regarded as a tool of segregation. However, the transition to a democratic state brought significant reforms to education, focusing on providing quality education and ensuring that young learners are taught by qualified, well-trained teachers. Integrating qualified teachers into Reception Year classrooms represents a key shift in the education landscape. This qualitative study explores the experiences of Level 3 and 4 Bachelor of Education in Foundation Phase student teachers during their school-based practice in Reception Year classrooms, alongside insights from university lecturers who evaluated them during school visits. Grounded in the experiential learning framework, the study aims to capture the reflections of teacher educators on the student teachers' experiences in Grade R. A qualitative interpretive research design was used, with data collected through two open-ended questions posed to student teachers. Content analysis was applied to interpret their responses. The findings indicate that student teachers had positive experiences in Reception Year classrooms. However, university lecturers reported that the lessons delivered were often teacher-centred, lacking elements of play or inquiry-based methods. Additionally, lecturers raised concerns that the Foundation Phase teacher education program does not adequately prepare student teachers for Reception Year teaching due to time constraints and limited

¹ Msimango, WN; Kok, ECA; Xulu SCB; Ajani, O.A., Faculty of Education, University of Zululand, KwaDlangezwa. Contact email address: oaajani@gmail.com

physical space for practical activities. In response to these findings, the study recommends reconsidering the inclusion of Reception Year training in the B.Ed. Foundation Phase program, as time limitations hinder the full development of necessary skills. It further suggests creating an assessment tool to evaluate the planning and presentation skills of Grade R student teachers while the program undergoes review.

Keywords: teacher education, experiential learning, school-based teaching practice, Grade R, student teachers, university lecturers, teacher-centred instruction

Introduction

South African teacher training institutions are mandated to produce capable teachers through work-integrated learning (WIL) programmes, which encompass both learning from practice and learning in practice (Department of Education, 2014). With the advent of democracy in 1994, the government prioritised the delivery of quality education by ensuring that qualified teachers, including those for the Reception Year (Grade R), are deployed across the education system (Department of Education, 2002). The Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS) and the subsequent Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) offer frameworks for teaching and learning, promoting learner-centred approaches and encouraging teacher innovation (Department of Education, 2011). Continuous professional development is essential for effective curriculum implementation, equipping educators with the necessary theoretical and practical understanding of curriculum design and delivery (Mpofu & Maphalala, 2018).

A key component of teacher education programmes is teaching practice, guided by the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications (MRTEQ) (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2015). MRTEQ mandates that the practical, workplace-based element of WIL occurs in school classrooms. However, the effectiveness of such programmes hinges on the quality of experiences offered during teaching practice, particularly in Reception Year classrooms. Although the RNCS and CAPS provide theoretical frameworks for classroom instruction, successfully translating these frameworks into practice requires student teachers to engage in deep reflection and meaningful application of what they

have learned (Department of Education, 2011; Department of Higher Education and Training, 2015; Khumalo & Utete, 2023).

The experiences of student teachers during their school-based placements in Reception Year classrooms are thus critically important. Experiential learning theory provides a suitable framework for analysing these experiences, facilitating the identification of both challenges and opportunities encountered by student teachers (Kolb, 1984). This qualitative interpretive study aims to explore the experiences of student teachers and the perspectives of university lecturers who assess them during teaching practice. By documenting these experiences and evaluating them in the context of curriculum frameworks and professional development initiatives, the research seeks to contribute to enhancing teacher education programmes and improving curriculum implementation strategies (Mpofu & Maphalala, 2018; Govender et al., 2023).

Context

This study was conducted at a rural-based South African university, known for its comprehensive teacher education programmes spanning from undergraduate to postgraduate levels, with a particular focus on meeting the needs of students from predominantly rural backgrounds (Munyai & Ngozwana, 2019). Historically, before 2018, pre-service student teachers undertook a general teaching practice module that lacked phase-specific experiences, resulting in limited contextual relevance for teaching in distinct educational phases (Chisholm & Motala, 2004). However, curriculum revisions introduced in 2018 addressed this issue by offering more tailored and phase-specific programmes. These revisions included targeted instruction for Foundation Phase student teachers on teaching young children aged 4–9, with specific emphasis on Reception Year learners aged 4–5 (Ramphole, 2017). The introduction of the revised Foundation Phase teaching practice module was a significant shift in curriculum design, aiming to develop competencies essential for teaching learners in the Foundation Phase, especially those in the Reception Year (Shalem & Shalem, 2019).

The revised curriculum ensures that exposure to Reception Year teaching competencies occurs primarily in the first year of the programme, where students engage in campus-based practice teaching activities to familiarise themselves with the organisational dynamics of Reception Year classrooms (Patel & Kanjee, 2013). However, financial constraints hindered the creation of a dedicated Grade R observation classroom, raising concerns among teacher

educators about the potential impact on students' preparedness to effectively teach Grade R during school-based teaching practice (Naicker & Karodia, 2015). In light of these challenges, this study aims to explore the experiences of Level 3 and 4 Foundation Phase student teachers during their engagement in Grade R classrooms, alongside the perspectives of teacher educators responsible for assessing their teaching during the third-year school-based practice (Butler et al., 2016). The research focuses on understanding how B.Ed. Level 3 and 4 students navigate their practice teaching experiences in Grade R classrooms, highlighting key aspects of teacher preparation and professional development within the context of South African teacher education (Pillay & Reddy, 2010).

Aims of the study

To establish how student teachers perceive the school-based mentoring by Grade R mentor teachers, in Kwa-Zulu Natal, South Africa.

Preliminary Literature review

Traditionally, pedagogy has been characterised by a unidirectional flow of knowledge from teacher to student, with learners assuming passive roles. However, contemporary educational paradigms advocate for diverse instructional approaches that foster active learner participation. Teaching is a complex endeavour, encompassing content delivery, communication, and feedback processes (Rajagopalan, 2019). Universities play a crucial role in preparing future educators with the essential skills to meet the requirements outlined in the *Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications* (MRTEQ) (DHET, 2015). The MRTEQ places specific emphasis on play-based learning, physical development, and language acquisition in Grade R education, while requiring Foundation Phase student teachers to demonstrate competence across Grade R and Grades 1-3 (DHET, 2015). However, concerns persist regarding whether universities have sufficient resources and time to adequately equip student teachers for their Grade R teaching roles.

Teaching practice forms a core component of pre-service teacher training and professional development (Leke-Ateh, Assan & Debeila, 2013). Despite its recognised importance, there is limited research on the design and implementation of effective teaching practice assessments, which are essential for developing professional competencies (Mpofu & Maphalala, 2018). At the institution under

study, the criteria for assessing student teachers' lesson planning and delivery in Grade R are identical to those used for Grades 1-3. This standardised approach may unintentionally affect how student teachers plan and execute lessons for Grade R learners, potentially undermining the development of age-appropriate teaching strategies. Although pre-service teacher training is widely offered across South African universities, the delivery modes and challenges vary between institutions. Aldridge, Fraser, and Ntuli (2009) highlight logistical and educational obstacles in organising effective teaching practice, yet practice teaching remains a cornerstone of teacher preparation, providing crucial opportunities for assessing both pre-service and in-service teachers in authentic classroom settings.

Since the transition to democracy, early childhood development (ECD) has been prioritised as a critical area for national reconstruction and development (Shaik & Ibrahim, 2015). International and domestic frameworks, including the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* and the South African Constitution, emphasise the importance of quality education for young children (Williams et al., 2001). However, challenges persist in implementing learner-centred pedagogies in Grade R classrooms, with many classrooms constrained by inadequate resources and underqualified teaching staff (Shaik & Ibrahim, 2015). Key policy frameworks, such as *White Paper 5 on Early Childhood Development* and the *National Curriculum Statement*, underscore the importance of learner-centred teaching practices (Department of Education, 2008). Nevertheless, anecdotal evidence suggests that traditional, teacher-centred approaches remain prevalent in many Grade R classrooms, limiting opportunities for learner engagement and active knowledge construction (Department of Education, 2008; Shaik & Ibrahim, 2015).

Despite government efforts to expand Grade R provision, the quality of these programmes remains inconsistent across South Africa (Department of Education, 2008). In light of these challenges, this study aims to explore the perceptions of Level 3 and 4 Foundation Phase student teachers regarding their experiences in school-based practice teaching within Grade R classrooms. The study seeks to provide insights into the challenges and opportunities in Grade R teacher preparation, with the broader aim of informing improvements in the quality and delivery of early childhood education.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework guiding this study is rooted in experiential learning theory, which emphasises both cognitive and affective processes in learning (Dudley, Gilroy & Skaife, 1998). Experiential learning posits that knowledge is acquired through direct engagement with the environment, where learners reflect on their experiences to construct understanding (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). This framework supports the exploration of teacher educators' and student teachers' experiences in Reception Year classrooms, highlighting the importance of experiential learning in shaping effective pedagogical practices (Akpan et al., 2020). By applying this framework, the study aimed to uncover the perspectives of pre-service teachers and teacher educators on the dynamics of Grade R classrooms.

Experiential learning is a dynamic process involving continuous interaction between the learner, the subject matter, and reflective practice (Kolb & Kolb, 2017). It stresses the importance of integrating theory with practice and engaging in critical reflection to refine pedagogical strategies (Kolb, 1984). Kolb asserts that learning transcends the passive acquisition of knowledge, presenting it instead as a transformative process emerging from active engagement with real-world experiences (Jarvis, 1987). Experiential learning encourages continuous reflection, enabling learners to adapt their understanding in response to changing contexts and promoting meaningful learning outcomes (Fry, Ketteridge & Marshall, 1999). In this study, the application of experiential learning theory enabled teacher educators to critically evaluate the experiences of student teachers in Grade R classrooms to inform pedagogical improvements.

The focus on experiential learning underscores the role of reflective practice in both teacher education and professional development (Kolb & Kolb, 2017). This approach invites educators to reflect on their teaching experiences and those of their students, fostering a culture of continuous improvement (Kolb, 1984). Reflective inquiry enables educators to identify areas for enhancing pedagogical practices and refining curriculum design, thereby strengthening the quality of teacher education programmes (Fry, Ketteridge & Marshall, 1999). Through the lens of experiential learning, this study provides deeper insights into the perspectives of student teachers and offers a framework for implementing meaningful changes in teacher education.

The choice of experiential learning theory is particularly relevant to understanding the complexities of teacher education and

professional development. It posits that knowledge is built through direct engagement with the environment, followed by reflective analysis of these experiences (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). In the context of teacher training, this theory offers a robust framework for examining the practical experiences of student teachers in real classroom settings. This aligns with the objectives of the study, which seeks to explore how student teachers navigate their practice teaching in Reception Year classrooms. By adopting this framework, the study acknowledges the critical role that practical experiences play in shaping the professional growth of future educators (Akpan et al., 2020).

Additionally, experiential learning theory highlights the iterative nature of learning, involving cycles of active experimentation, reflection, and conceptualisation (Kolb, 1984; Mncube et al., 2021). This iterative process is especially pertinent to teacher education, where student teachers must navigate the complexities of instructional practice and pedagogical decision-making. Experiential learning encourages pre-service teachers to reflect critically on their experiences, identify areas for growth, and refine their teaching methods accordingly (Jarvis, 1987; Ajani & Govender, 2019). Thus, the framework enables this study to capture the dynamic interplay between practical experience and reflective practice in fostering professional development.

Furthermore, experiential learning theory offers a holistic perspective on both the cognitive and emotional dimensions of learning in teacher education (Dudley, Gilroy & Skaife, 1998; Ajani, 2023). It recognises the importance of cognitive understanding alongside emotional engagement, providing a nuanced view of how student teachers make sense of their experiences in Reception Year classrooms. This comprehensive approach is essential for gaining insights into the complexities of teacher development and the various factors that influence instructional decisions (Kolb & Kolb, 2017). Consequently, the use of experiential learning theory provides a sound theoretical foundation for examining the perceptions and experiences of student teachers within the Grade R context (Ajani, 2021).

Research methodology

The adoption of a qualitative research approach in this study aligns with its aim to explore the experiences of Reception Year student teachers during their school-based teaching practice in rural schools. Qualitative research, characterised by its interpretive and naturalistic

nature, was considered appropriate for capturing the nuanced perspectives and lived experiences of participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Semi-structured interviews were employed to gather data from ten Reception Year student teachers, purposively selected to provide detailed insights into their practice. These interviews, conducted via WhatsApp, allowed for flexibility in questioning and encouraged in-depth exploration of participants' perceptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The qualitative approach, using thematic analysis, enabled the identification of patterns and themes within the data, offering a comprehensive understanding of participants' feelings, opinions, and experiences (Denzin, 1989). The study deliberately focused on Foundation Phase Level 3 and 4 pre-service teachers who had participated in the teaching programme since its introduction in 2018, ensuring their familiarity with the curriculum's emphasis on Grade R teaching. The purposive sampling strategy ensured that participants had relevant insights, fostering a deeper exploration of the research questions (Bertram & Christiansen, 2017). The sample comprised 20 students from two distinct classes, with the size determined by the principle of saturation to capture a broad range of perspectives while maintaining data richness and depth (Guest et al., 2006).

Open-ended questions were developed to facilitate a thorough examination of participants' experiences during their teaching practicum. Although such questions can be challenging to analyse, they provided the flexibility needed to elicit comprehensive responses and reveal nuanced insights (Sarantakos, 2005). These questions were designed to encourage reflection, enabling participants to articulate their experiences freely. To ensure accessibility and continuity amid the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, data collection was conducted through the institution's Learning Management System (LMS), offering participants a convenient and familiar platform for engagement (Oppenheim, 1992). Additionally, the option to communicate via WhatsApp with the lecturer provided an alternative mode of participation for students experiencing connectivity issues, thereby enhancing inclusivity and facilitating efficient data collection. This blended approach ensured that all participants could share their experiences, regardless of logistical constraints, enriching the depth and quality of the data gathered.

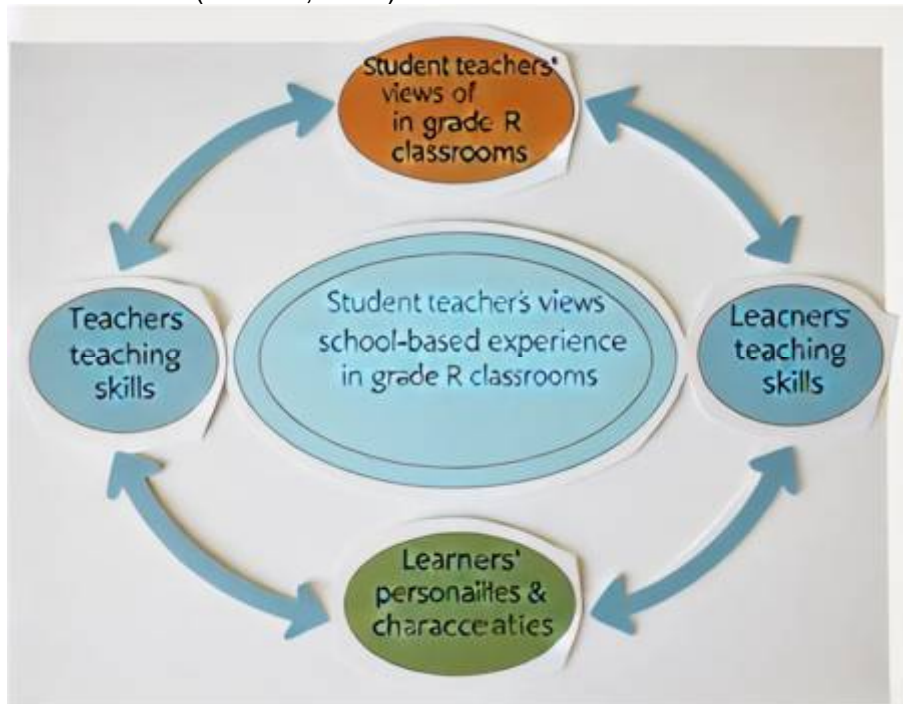
Presentation of Findings

The study revealed key insights into the perceptions and experiences of student teachers within Grade R classrooms during their school-based teaching practicum. Participants highlighted various aspects of their observations, interactions, and emotional responses during teaching sessions, shedding light on the complex dynamics between teachers and learners as well as the instructional methods employed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A recurring theme in the findings was the pivotal role of teacher-mentors in shaping the professional growth of student teachers, particularly within the Grade R context, where hands-on guidance played a crucial role in developing teaching competence (Leke-Ateh, Assan & Debeila, 2013). The value of practical learning experiences was emphasised, with participants recognising the importance of school-based teaching as an instrumental component in preparing them for their future roles as educators (Denzin, 1989).

Student teachers generally reported positive experiences in the Reception Year classrooms, where they gained a deeper understanding of the varied personalities and behaviours of both learners and teachers. This exposure contributed to their grasp of effective teaching techniques and classroom management strategies (Akpan et al., 2020). Furthermore, participants appreciated the opportunity to translate theoretical knowledge from their teacher education programs into practice, which significantly contributed to their professional growth and teaching competence (Kolb & Kolb, 2017). Overall, the findings highlighted the enriching nature of the practicum, underscoring its role in refining the pedagogical skills and perspectives of student teachers in the Grade R setting.

Through reflective narratives, student teachers offered valuable insights into the multifaceted challenges and rewards of teaching in Grade R classrooms, providing a nuanced understanding of early childhood education (Bertram & Christiansen, 2017). Their reflections reinforced the importance of fostering supportive learning environments and strong mentorship within teacher education programs, emphasising the critical role that practical teaching experiences play in enhancing pedagogical effectiveness and shaping the professional identities of future educators (Guest et al., 2006).

Fig. 1 Student teachers' views of school-based experience in Grade R classrooms (Authors, 2024)



Based on the analysis illustrated in Figure 1, as evidently revealed from the findings, university lecturers found that the Grade R lessons they assessed were predominantly teacher-centred, with minimal evidence of child-centred approaches, such as play-based or inquiry-based learning. This observation prompted deeper reflection among teacher educators regarding the adequacy of the Foundation Phase teacher education program. They concluded that the program did not adequately equip pre-service teachers to implement child-centred pedagogies effectively within Grade R classrooms. Additionally, the limited physical infrastructure at the university was identified as a constraint, impeding the development of practical competencies required for teaching Reception Year learners.

This finding aligns with existing research on teacher education and instructional practices. For example, Leke-Ateh, Assan, and Debeila (2013) underscore the importance of aligning teacher education programs with the evolving needs of modern educational environments, including the application of child-centred pedagogies in early childhood education. Similarly, Akpan, Agbaji, and Okorie

(2020) advocate for experiential learning strategies in teacher preparation, emphasizing that practical experiences are crucial for equipping future teachers with the necessary skills and competencies for effective classroom practice. These studies highlight the importance of hands-on learning and practical engagement—elements that seem to be insufficiently integrated within the university's teacher education program.

Moreover, the gap between the observed teacher-centred practices and the desired child-centred pedagogical approaches underscores the need for ongoing professional development and reflective practice for both pre-service and in-service teachers. Bertram and Christiansen (2017) stress the value of continuous learning and reflection in fostering teaching effectiveness, suggesting that teacher educators must critically evaluate their own teaching methods and actively seek opportunities for growth. Addressing the identified gaps in the Foundation Phase teacher education program will require a comprehensive strategy involving curriculum redesign, targeted pedagogical training, and the provision of sufficient resources and support systems to facilitate the effective preparation of student teachers for Grade R classrooms.

Discussion

The Policy on the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications (DHET, 2015) mandates that the practical, school-based component of Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) for teacher education must take place within classroom environments (Khumalo & Utete, 2023). Institutions offering teacher education programs facilitate these WIL opportunities, ensuring students receive hands-on teaching practice (DHET, 2015). At the institution in question, Foundation Phase student teachers across all four year levels participate in school-based practice teaching. During their time at schools, they are expected to apply their teaching skills, deepen their theoretical understanding of Grade R education, and engage with various aspects of early childhood education. These include organising Grade R classrooms, employing play-based learning, conducting indoor and outdoor activities, understanding the importance of improvisation, and preparing children for their transition to Grade 1 (Osman & Booth, 2014). Students are also introduced to these theoretical elements in their first year, while subsequent years focus on other Foundation Phase grades.

Student teachers observed that Grade R teachers exemplified particular personality traits, especially kindness and patience, which are vital in early childhood education. Participant C expressed:

"If you are a Grade R teacher, you need to be friendly, patient, supportive, loving, and show young learners unconditional love. In that little time, I experienced that being loving and caring is the first thing needed to deal with young ones. They need constant support and guidance. They admire their teachers more than their parents, so being a good role model is crucial because you are building future leaders."

This reflection highlights the critical attributes student teachers believe are essential for effective teaching in Grade R. It aligns with research indicating that early childhood learners have unique needs, necessitating specific educational knowledge, attitudes, and skills (Kruger, van Rensburg & Els, 2012). Students also emphasised the importance of mentorship, noting that their mentors exhibited kindness, humility, and determination, which greatly aided their learning (Du Plessis et al., 2010). The student teachers further reflected on the characteristics of Grade R learners. Participant J described them as follows:

"Grade R learners are an amazing class to teach—too much noise, but controllable. They are pure souls, full of energy, and always ready to learn. They participate in class discussions, respect and love teachers. They communicated well with me because I was on their level, which made them feel free around me."

These observations emphasise the enthusiasm and energy that Grade R learners bring to the classroom, reinforcing the need for adaptable, child-centred teaching approaches. The findings revealed that while students appreciated these traits, they also recognised the importance of creating a supportive environment conducive to learning. During their practicum, students learned several important teaching skills, such as managing young learners, using relevant objects to illustrate lesson themes, and conducting practical activities like morning circle time. The unique pedagogy of Grade R requires specific techniques that differ from those of other Foundation Phase grades. As noted by Osman and Booth (2014), effective teaching in Grade R demands a nuanced understanding of child development and learning environments to optimise learning.

Participant L summarised their experience:

"It was a great experience; teaching Grade R is exciting. I had fun being around them and wouldn't mind teaching them every day. I was scared initially, but I found it easier than expected. I was happy to

help them learn to write their names and remember what they had learned previously."

While most student teachers reported positive experiences, one student noted that overcrowding at their placement school prevented them from gaining hands-on experience in Grade R. However, students generally agreed that their mentors were supportive and knowledgeable, offering valuable guidance in preparation for university assessments. Mentors also helped students learn essential skills, such as managing discipline, catering to diverse learners, and understanding the South African Council of Educators (SACE) standards.

The role of mentorship in teacher preparation is well-documented. Adams, Koster, and Brok (2020) found that fostering supportive relationships with pupils, providing structured instruction, and engaging learners in academic tasks are key components of effective teaching practice. This study corroborates those findings, revealing that mentors, despite their heavy workloads, dedicated time to observe and provide feedback on student teachers' lessons, enhancing their learning through practical experience. One participant highlighted the importance of curriculum knowledge:

"I gained so much from my mentor. She taught me the value of using different teaching strategies and following curriculum guidelines, such as lesson planners and Trackers. I also learned about classroom management and the correct handwriting to use in Foundation Phase classrooms."

This experience underscores the value of practice teaching in bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application (Ranjan, 2013). Practical learning opportunities, facilitated by experienced mentors, align with the expectations outlined in the MRTEQ, which emphasises the importance of developing tacit knowledge essential for effective teaching (DHET, 2015).

Exposure to diverse teaching materials during practice teaching further benefited the student teachers, enhancing their ability to integrate theory with practice. Magday and Pramoolsook (2021) emphasise that teacher education programs must prepare student teachers to maintain high standards of teaching quality. Classroom management also emerged as a key focus, with students recognising that effective teaching involves managing both the learning environment and the individual needs of children (Connelly, Shaik & Mosito, 2020).

Despite the positive feedback from students about their mentors, university lecturers who assessed student teachers in Grade R

classrooms expressed concerns about the lack of child-centred, practical activities. None of the assessments identified evidence of play-based or inquiry-based lessons, which may be attributed to the assessment tool used, which was not tailored specifically for Foundation Phase teaching. This suggests a need for more targeted assessment criteria to ensure alignment with the pedagogical requirements of Grade R education.

Conclusion

This paper highlights how Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) has provided student teachers with practical experience in teaching Grade R, supported by knowledgeable mentors. However, university lecturers expressed concerns that the skills imparted did not adequately incorporate child-centred pedagogies, such as play-based and inquiry-based learning, resulting in content-driven lessons that fail to align with learner-centred approaches. Furthermore, the B.Ed. Foundation Phase programme is criticised for not allocating sufficient time to properly develop Grade R teaching skills and concepts, with the absence of a dedicated Grade R observation classroom since 2013 further limiting practical engagement.

The findings suggest that the current structure of the Foundation Phase B.Ed. programme is inadequate for preparing student teachers for the specific challenges of teaching Grade R. Due to time constraints, one year of preparation is insufficient for fostering the specialised skills, attitudes, and values needed for Reception Year education. It is recommended that Grade R training be separated from the broader Foundation Phase programme to ensure young learners' needs are effectively addressed. These conclusions align with the research of Kruger, van Rensburg, and Els (2012), which highlights that existing programmes spread focus across all four Foundation Phase grades, failing to meet the specific educational needs of Reception Year learners.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed to enhance the preparation of pre-service teachers for Grade R classrooms, involving key stakeholders. *Universities and teacher training institutions* should prioritise restructuring the Foundation Phase teacher education curriculum to align with the specific demands of teaching Grade R learners. This involves revising course content to incorporate more practical, child-centred pedagogies, including play-based and inquiry-based teaching

methods. *Higher education institutions* should also increase opportunities for pre-service teachers to gain hands-on experience through extended practicum placements or through simulated environments that replicate real classroom scenarios.

Mentor teachers and schools play a crucial role in supporting pre-service teachers during their school-based practice. It is essential to strengthen mentorship programs, ensuring experienced Grade R educators guide pre-service teachers in mastering effective teaching practices. These programs should promote reflective practice, enabling student teachers to critically assess their instructional approaches and improve continuously. Collaboration between *universities, schools, and education departments* is essential to align teaching practice with curriculum requirements and to facilitate open communication, feedback, and professional dialogue between all stakeholders involved in teacher preparation.

Additionally, *education policymakers and university administrators* must invest in developing the physical infrastructure required to foster Grade R teaching competencies. Establishing dedicated teaching spaces on university campuses, equipped with age-appropriate materials and resources, will support the practical development of pre-service teachers. By addressing these recommendations, stakeholders across the teacher education system can ensure the preparation of competent and effective educators, ready to meet the unique challenges of teaching young learners in Grade R classrooms.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank Level 3 and Level 4 B. Ed. Foundation Phase students who participated in this project. Thanks to Dr JF Magwaza for proofreading and editing the manuscript.

References

- Adams, T, Koster, B & Brok, PD, 2020, Student teachers' classroom management during the school internship, *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 1-19.
- Ajani, O. A. (2021). Teachers' perspectives on professional development in South Africa and Nigeria: Towards an andragogical approach. *Journal of Educational and Social Research*, 11 (3), 288-300.
- Ajani, O. A. (2023). Teachers' Professional Development in the Context of Experiential Learning Theory for Improved Instructional Delivery. *African Journal of Development Studies*, 13(4). 24-38.

- Ajani, O. A., & Govender, S. (2019). Teachers' perspectives on in-service professional development in South African and Nigerian high schools. *Gender and Behaviour*, 17(2), 13146-13160.
- Akpan, A. B., Agbaji, D. D., & Okorie, J. U. (2020). Experiential Learning Strategies and Teacher Education in Nigeria. *International Journal of Progressive Education*, 16(4), 132-144.
- Akpan, VI, Igwe, VA, Mpamah, IBI, & Okoro, CO, 2020, Social Constructivism: implications on teaching and learning, *British Journal of Education*, 8(8), 49-56.
- Aldridge, J, Fraser, B, & Ntuli, S, 2009, Utilising learning environment assessments to improve teaching practices among in-service teachers undertaking a distance education programme, *South African Journal of Education*, 29(2), 147-170.
- Anning, A, 1991, *The first years at school*. Milton Keynes, Open University Press.
- Bertram, A., & Christiansen, A. (2017). The role of reflection in teacher education: Towards definition and implementation. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 49(10), 955-970.
- Bertram, C, & Christiansen, I, 2017, *Understanding research: An introduction to reading research*. Pretoria, Van Schaik.
- Binson, B, & Lev-Wiesel, R 2018, Promoting personal growth through experiential learning: The case of expressive arts therapy for lecturers in Thailand, *Frontiers in Psychology*, 1-12, 2276.
- Bird, DK, 2009. The use of questionnaires for acquiring information on public perception of natural hazards and risk mitigation- a review of current knowledge and practice, *Natural Hazards Earth System Sciences*, 9(4), 1307-1325.
- Cohen, L, Manion, L, & Morrison, K, 2007, *Research methods in education* (6th Edition), London, Routledge.
- Connelly, AS, Mosito, C, & Shaik, N, 2020, Grade R teachers' understanding of reflective practice, *South African Journal of Childhood Education*, 10(1), 1-10.
- Denzin, NK & Lincoln, YS, 1994, *Handbook of qualitative research*, London, SAGE Publications.
- Denzin, NK, 1989a, *The Research Act: Theoretical Introduction to Sociological Methods*, 3rd Edition, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice Hall.
- Department of Education, 2002, *Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS)*, Pretoria, Government Printer.
- Department of Education, 2008, *Grade R Practical Ideas*, Pretoria: Government Printer.

- Department of Education, 2011, Curriculum & Assessments Policy Statement: Foundation Phase Grades R-3, Pretoria, Government Printer.
- DHET, 2015, Department of Higher Education & Training Revised 2014 Policy on the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications, Pretoria, Government Printer.
- Du Plessis, EC, Marais, P, Van Schalkwyk, A, & Weeks, F, 2010, Adapt or die: The views of UNISA student teachers on teaching practice at schools, *Africa Education Review*, 7(2), 323-341.
- Dudley, J, Gilroy, A, & Skaife, S, 1998, Learning from experience in introductory art therapy group. In S, Skaife & V, Huet (Eds.), *Art Psychotherapy Groups: Between Pictures and Words* (pp. 128-142), London, Routledge.
- Fry, H, Ketteridge, S, & Marshall, S, 1999, *Handbook for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education: Enhancing Academic Practice* (3rd ed.), London: Routledge.
- Govender, S., Ajani, O. A., Ndaba, N. H., & Ngema, T. (2023). Making In-service Professional Development Effective in a Rural Context. *Contextualising rural education in south African schools*, 3, 78.
- Harre, R, & Gillett, G, 1994, *The discursive mind*, London, Sage Publications.
- Hohr, H, 2013, The concept of experience by John Dewey revisited: Conceiving, feeling and “enlivening,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 32(1), 25-38.
- Jansen, J, & Vithal, R, 1997, *Designing your first research proposal*, Cape Town, Juta.
- Jarvis, P, 1987, Meaningful and meaningless experience: Towards an analysis of learning from life, *Adult education quarterly*, 37(3), 164-172.
- Kolb, AY, & Kolb, DA, 2005, Learning styles and learning spaces: Enhancing experiential learning in higher education. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 4(2), 193-212.
- Kolb, AY, & Kolb, DA, 2017, Experiential learning theory as a guide for experiential educators in higher education. *Experiential Learning & Teaching in Higher Education*, 1(1), 7-44.
- Kolb, D, 1984, *Experiential learning: experience as the source of learning development*. Eaglewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall.
- Kruger, C, Janse van Rensburg, O, & Els, CJ, 2012. Professional development for Reception year teachers in an ODL developing context, *Progressio*, 34(2), 170-187.

- Leke-Ateh, BA, Assan, TEB, & Debeila, J, 2013, Teaching practice for the 21st century: Challenges and prospects for teacher education in the North-West Province, South Africa. *Journal of Social Sciences*, 37(3), 279-291.
- Leke-Ateh, J., Assan, T., & Debeila, C. (2013). A Review of Teaching Practice in Teacher Education: Challenges and Opportunities. *American Journal of Educational Research*, 1(8), 314-318.
- Magday Jr, WD, & Pramoolsook, I, 2021, Exploring Teaching Demonstrations in the Teaching Journals: A Case of Filipino Pre-Service Teachers, *Language Related Research*, 12(5), 176-203.
- McGuirk, PM, & O'Neill, P, 2016, Using questionnaires in qualitative human geography. *Faculty of Social Sciences- Papers*, 2518.
- McLafferty, S, 2010, 'Conducting questionnaire surveys.' In N, Clifford & G, Valentine (Eds.), *Key methods in Geography*, 77-88, London, Sage.
- Mkhasibe, R. G., Mncube, D. W., & Ajani, O. A. (2021). The Nexus between Teaching Practice and PGCE Student-Teachers: The Perceptions of Subject Mentors on Pre-Teachers' Readiness for Teaching Career. *Universal Journal of Educational Research*, 9(9), 1617-1627.
- Mpofu, N, & Maphalala, MC, 2018, A comprehensive model for assessing student teachers' professional competence through an integrated curriculum approach, *The Journal for Transdisciplinary Research in Southern Africa*, (14(2), 1-9.
- Msangya, BW, Mkoma, SL, & Yihuan, W, 2016, Teaching practice experience for undergraduate student teachers: A case study of the Department of Education at Sokoine University of Agriculture, Tanzania, *Journal of Education & Practice*, 7(14), 113-118.
- Oppenheim, AN, 1992, *Questionnaire Design, Interviewing Attitude Measurement*. Continuum, London.
- Osman, R, & Booth, S, 2014, 'A research base for teaching in primary school: A coherent scholarly focus on the object of learning,' *South African Journal of Childhood Education*, 4(3), 159-173.
- Rajagopalan, I, 2019, Concept of Teaching, *Shanlax International Journal of Education*, 7(2), 5-8.
- Ranjan, R, 2013, A study of practice teaching programme: A transitional phase for student teachers, *Voice of Research*, 1(4), 24-28.
- Sarantakos, A, 2005, *Social Research (2nd Edition)*. Hampshire, Palgrave Macmillan.

- Shaik, N, & Ebrahim, HB, 2015, Children's agency in Grade R: A case for a child participation focus, *South African Journal of Education*, 35(2), 1-8.
- Shulman, LS, 1986, Those who understand: Knowledge growth in teaching, *Educational Researcher*, 15(2), 4-14.
- Tummons, J, & Duckworth, V, 2012. *Doing your research project in the lifelong learning sector*, New York, McGraw-Hill.
- Wessels, M, 2005, *Experiential learning*, Cape Town, Juta & Co.
- Williams, T, Samuels, ML, Mouton, J, Ratele, K, Shabalala, N, Shefer, T, & Strebel, A, 2001, *The nationwide audit of ECD provisioning in South Africa*, Department of Education, Directorate.
- Wood, EA, 2014, Free choice and free play in early childhood education: Troubling the discourse, *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 22(1), 4-18.