Newly Qualified Female Teachers' Perception of Teaching Practicum as a Component of Initial Teacher Education in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This study was undertaken with the aim of understanding how newly qualified female teachers perceive teaching practicum in the South African context. Teaching Practicum is a vital component of the initial teacher education (ITE) programme because it enriches future teachers' knowledge, skills and abilities towards a lifelong career in the teaching profession. Teachers make valuable contributions to the growth of any nation as they help produce future leaders. It is therefore necessary to have a competent teaching workforce to improve pass rates as well as reduce dropout rates among learners. The study took the qualitative deductive premise making use of semi-structured interviews to collect data from more than 30 novice teachers. Key words, which helped in the identification of themes, were distilled from the responses. A core overall finding of the study point to a mix of experiences - benefits and shortcomings - which not only affect the development of prospective teachers but also have profound implications for both policy enhancement and implementation. Regarding policy enhancement and implementation, it is suggested that universities and schools where novice teachers are posted for teaching practice should have good relations for support advancements. In this case, it is advised that the novice teachers should be exposed to critical mentoring opportunities to allow for clearer understanding of the real classroom scope. This study believes that for this to be fruitful, schools should among others be well-equipped. Suggestions for further research are also flagged.

Introduction

It has been commonly reported that South Africa's basic education is in crisis (Mckeever, 2017; Kubow, 2018; Essack & Hindle, 2019). Foundation Phase teaching is seen as a critical supply chain that can reduce some of the problems that have been reported (Sayed & McDonald, 2017; Schaffler et al 2019), which include poor pass rates, high dropout rate among learners and unpreparedness of those who access institutions of higher learning (Ramrathan, 2017; Mlachila & Moeletsi, 2019). Other solutions have however been suggested for these problems. Among them is an increase in the number of qualified teachers (Mzuza et al 2014; Mlambo & Adetiba, 2020). Worryingly, there is a low uptake of teaching as a career (Mlambo & Adetiba, 2020). This is even more disturbing when one considers the rate at which teachers exit the profession in search of greener pastures ((De Villiers, 2017; Mlambo & Adetiba, 2020). A seemingly more viable option is to try and provide adequate (quality) training to those who are studying towards becoming teachers (Musset, 2010). Quality training goes beyond classroom teaching in institutions of higher learning (Kolb, 2015; Köksal, 2019).

Teaching practicum is one way of enriching the learning experience of future teachers (Kolb, 2015; Iwu, 2019). It is considered a vital component of the initial teacher education (ITE) programme because of its capacity to influence future teachers to embrace the teaching profession. This component provides prospective teachers with the relevant knowledge and experiences to deal with teaching in a real classroom.

In line with understanding how those in training to become teachers, specifically Foundation Phase teachers, are sufficiently inspired and encouraged to remain in the profession of teaching, this study sought the views of newly qualified female Foundation Phase teachers regarding the Teaching practicum.

A Foundation Phase teacher is expected to promote a learner's social, emotional and intellectual development (Schaffler et al 2019). If this is not done during the early stages of a child's learning experience, according to Robinson (2016), the learner is bound to experience serious developmental challenges. Robinson goes further to advise teacher training institutions to strengthen their teacher education programmes so that teachers of Foundation Phase learners are

well-equipped for the task. A similar call was made in 2009 by Kiggundu and Nayimuli who suggested a review of ITE programmes for the benefit of those on teaching practicum. Therefore, it is important to ensure meaningful teaching practicum experiences in South African ITE programmes. If those in training are not sufficiently exposed to positive experience during teaching practicum, interest in the teaching profession will continue to dwindle (Korthagen, 2016). This is especially instructive for South Africa considering the urgency to produce high quality teachers not only for their diverse classrooms but also to stem the low pass rates and high dropout rates (Mateus et al, 2014; Ramrathan, 2017; du Plessis &Mestry, 2019; Mlachila & Moeletsi, 2019; Muremela et al 2020).

Literature review

The goal of this study was to understand how newly qualified female teachers perceive the teaching practicum in the South African context. To achieve this, the researcher needed to determine the benefits and disadvantages of teaching practicum. Owing to this, this section presents the benefits and shortcomings of teaching practicum. Thereafter, a conceptual framework drawn from literature is presented.

Benefits of Teaching Practicum as a component of ITE

Teaching practicum prepares prospective teachers for the teaching profession by enhancing the necessary knowledge and skills for the classroom. It is an important learning opportunity for newly qualified teachers to appreciate the role and process of conducting the business of teaching (Aglazor, 2017).

Several benefits accrue from exposing newly qualified teachers to a 'real' classroom. Quality practice learning experiences in real classrooms contribute to student teachers' development as well as help to cement an interest in the profession. According to Pham et al (2020), novice teachers gain both emotionally and physically from the interactions with students. These gains were related to considerable progress in classroom management skills. Interestingly, Gravett and Jiyane (2019) argue that these gains are only possible in a well-functioning school. A well-functioning school may be characterized as one with quality infrastructure (Alzahrani, et al. 2016), effective school management and leadership (Leithwood, 2016), considerable attempt to realise the mission and vision of the school (Kirk & Jones, 2004), well-trained teachers who can serve as mentors or supervisors (Kriauciuniene & Targamadze, 2019), and many other factors.

Essentially, stakeholders in teacher education such as policy makers, school governing bodies and educators emphasise the need for sound leadership and management practices for the purpose of improving student teacher outcomes (Harris, 2004). Overall, the concept of a well-functioning school hinges on outcomes and achievements (Feng, 2007; Ganihar & Hangal, 2008) which means that the schools where the student teachers are posted for teaching practice must exemplify good teaching practices, have a good stock of expert teachers and quality infrastructure to facilitate the achievement of outcomes.

Shortcomings of Teaching Practicum as a component of ITE

Despite the benefits discussed above, researchers (for example Pham et al, 2020; Lestari, 2020) have pointed to some serious shortcomings of teaching practicum. Pham et al (2020) found "inadequate duration and inappropriate timing" (p.29) to have impeded newly qualified teachers' capacity to enjoy a positive experience. A study by Lestari (2020) in Indonesia found that newly qualified teachers had negative emotions at the start of the program. The feelings of negative emotion are associated with unpreparedness (Sulistiyo, et al. 2017) which in some cases relate to poor supervision and school choice (Pham et al 2020). These, according to the authors do not bode well for a pleasurable experience during teaching practicum.

The absence of quality teachers and good infrastructure especially in poorly funded schools also add to the shortcomings of teaching practicum. Gravett and Jiyane (2019) found the absence of teaching aids as displeasing to the novice teacher. This was against the backdrop of the student teachers looking forward to proper guidance and mentoring from the teachers at the school where they were posted. Mentoring student teachers during teaching practicum is an important element for confidence boosting.

In South Africa, supervision of student teachers takes the form of regular visits by faculty to the schools where student teachers are posted. Kanjee (2018) reported that student teachers felt that their lecturers needed to visit them more often for the purpose of providing clarity in cases where they were confused. This somewhat confirms what Kriauciuniene and Targamadze (2019) said regarding the necessity for mentoring and supervision for student teachers.

Conceptual framework

This study considers the role of teaching practicum in preparing prospective teachers in the South African context. In this regard and drawing from literature, four conceptual elements are considered significant.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework
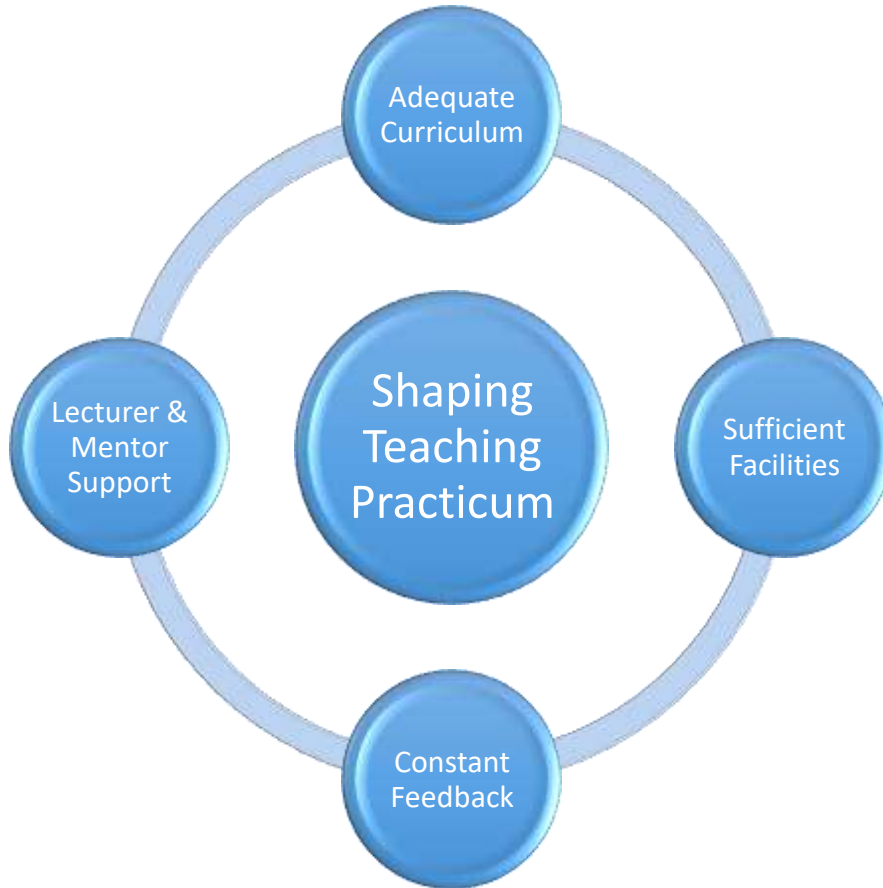
Adequate curriculum

Considering the varying nature of how teacher education is structured, the length of time and requirements for successful completion, supervision, feedback as well as the assessment of student teachers (Kanjee, 2018), the curriculum for teacher education and training has undergone some necessary reviews since 1994.

Govender (2018) argues that the curriculum for educators is fundamental to the success of society and thereby consistently experiences reform and change. The DHET [Department of

Higher Education and Training] (2017:10) defines curriculum "as a statement of intended outcomes to be achieved, what knowledge content is to be acquired, which competencies and skills are to be developed, and the levels of performance that are expected from students. It defines what is to be taught, what students must learn and what is to be assessed." With this in mind, it is understandable why a review of the curriculum for teacher education is necessary especially if one considers that the many curriculum changes since South Africa gained independence has been catastrophic (Maharajh et al 2016).

With the goal of finding new ways for inclusive education in South Africa post-apartheid especially with reference to Blacks, curriculum policy change was necessary (Schmidt, 2017). Therefore, the intention to do away with the apartheid era 'borrowed' policy of outcome-based education (OBE) was aimed at introducing curricula that addressed local knowledge forms (Fomunyam, & Teferra, 2017; Mckay, 2018), "stress an integrated and inclusive curriculum that embraces diversity" (Schmidt, 2017, p. 370), while at the same time encouraging local and community participation in school administration (Maharajh et al, 2016). The current curriculum comprises the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (otherwise known as CAPS). Maddock and Maroun (2018) aver that the CAPS centres on quality and content knowledge and how learners are able to achieve higher standards of performance. Even though CAPS has been hailed as transformative and helpful in engaging local knowledge, it has been plagued by poor implementation and teachers' lack of understanding of the real intent of the policy (Maharajh et al 2016).

A working curriculum is one that produces a wholesome individual who is prepared to face a real classroom. This is the view of DGMT (2018) who acknowledges that the weakness of teacher training stems from a curriculum that does not have the input of teachers and so fails to fully prepare a teacher in training who ultimately struggles during teaching practice. In this regard, Govender (2018) calls for the integration of educators in curriculum reform which Botman (2016) believes will benefit teacher training. Maserow (2015) argues differently that the quality of current teachers and existing teaching practicum cannot be improved through teacher training and teaching cannot be improved, save by improving the quality of current teachers and teacher practices. In other words, simply looking at curriculum reform will not bring out positive

outcomes for teaching practicum. Quality teaching is a function of several support systems including mentoring for new teachers entering the profession (Kanjee, 2018; Gravett & Jiyane, 2019). This view suggests that to realise an effective teaching team, teachers should also be involved in the process of curriculum reform, to transform the way they teach in practice thus, influencing teaching practicum positively. This view seems to be shared by Botman (2016) who is of the view that to become a teacher requires a good knowledge of how to study, teach, learn and even entertain in the classroom.

An adequate curriculum for teaching practicum should consider multi-cultural classrooms that necessitate effective communication competency. Even though multi-cultural intolerance is common in South Africa, Koen and Ebrahim (2013) explain that multi-cultural environments facilitate a strong appreciation of the different backgrounds, language, communication, social values, beliefs of people by Foundation Phase learners thereby reducing the level of difficulty they face teaching in diverse classrooms. Afterall, teaching practicum comprises a range of programmes for learning, communicating and developing the necessary competencies, experiences, skills and knowledge for the real classroom.

Sufficient facilities

Adequate resources are required to successfully implement any curriculum. Poorly funded or ill-equipped schools may distract from the objectives of gaining meaningful experience during teaching practicum (Alzahrani, 2016, Gravett & Jiyane, 2018). For instance, it is impracticable for both old and trainee teachers to effectively perform their functions if the environment is inconducive (Sedibe, 2011). An inconducive school environment is one that lacks resources such as textbooks, furniture, laboratories, and classrooms (Robinson, 2016). Often, the lack of these resources is the reason for poor education outcomes in the developing countries (Sedibe, 2011). Essentially, because of inadequate and poor facilities, shaping teaching practicum becomes much more challenging.

Despite the common notion that trainees ought to be assigned to schools in diverse contexts, insufficient infrastructure and capacity at numerous schools could likewise limit the realisation of positive outcomes for teaching practicum (Leithwood, 2016; Robinson, 2016). In fact, Robinson (2016) articulates that a "shortage of facilities like libraries, laboratories, books or desks undermines student teachers' abilities to function in optimal ways, as does a disorganised

internal management system that lacks clear systems and procedures" (p.19). This suggests that trainees ought to be assigned to schools that are functional in terms of available facilities so that they can acquire the best quality training from their teaching practicum. Gaining practical experience through quality teaching practicum improves the desire to take up a career in teaching (Kolb, 2015; Köksal, 2019; Mlambo & Adetiba, 2020). The absence of facilities in the schools where student teachers are posted deprives them the opportunity to gain practical experience (Sedibe, 2011; Alzahrani, et al. 2016; Gravett & Jiyane, 2018). The teaching practicum process thus requires all stakeholders to make the provision of quality education a priority by providing the necessary infrastructure including the use of mentors and lecturers to give trainees constructive and productive feedback (Sulistiyo, 2017; Kriauciuniene & Targamadze, 2019).

Constant feedback

A training activity requires feedback to offer the trainees the opportunity to know how well or poorly they are performing (Khumalo & Maphalala, 2018). Teaching practicum as a learning opportunity is no different. Researchers (such as Miranda & Hermann, 2015; Carl & Strydom, 2017) believe that teachers have an important role in providing feedback to trainee teachers to allow for an appreciation of their strengths and weaknesses. Overall, there is a necessity for constant feedback so that the trainees are aware of how they are performing. Deacon (2015) argues that as an essential learning instrument, feedback can be provided in the form of structured meetings between trainees and the mentors or heads of the departments which oftentimes are the mentors or even the lecturers during their visits. Constant, real time feedback should be in the form of constructive criticism (van Wyk, 2017).

Feedback needs to be informed by the actual content of a subject. In this regard, Cilliers et al (2018), argue that feedback should reassure knowledge of subject to inform delivery techniques that encourage successful teaching. Materials for feedback can be obtained through classroom observations (Mpofu & Maphalala, 2018) suggesting that school visits are helpful in supporting the development of the trainee teacher (Kiggundu & Nayimuli, 2009). This seems to be the beneficial way of providing constructive feedback since the trainee is receiving criticism on real honest classroom advice (Mpofu & Maphalala, 2018). Mpofu and Maphalala continue by articulating that an observation carried out by a mentor will be mainly informal, formative and

developmental in nature and will be intended at supporting the trainee teacher with feedback on his or her learning progress.

By the same token, it is also required of mentors to be able to use mentoring as a channel of communication that is thought-provoking but helpful, and to discover ways of providing fruitful feedback (Gravett, Petersen & Ramsaroop 2019). Generally, mentors have the tendency to provide the type of feedback that is "narrow, particularistic, and technical" (Clarke, Triggs & Nielsen, 2014:175) when they should essentially give feedback that fosters "deep and substantive reflection on practice" (Clarke et al., 2014:175). The type of feedback mentors provide during teaching practicum can produce effective and efficient prospective teachers. Mentors have a significant role to play in the development of trainee teacher's teaching career. Trainees need all the support, guidance, constructive and productive feedback during their teaching practicum as a way of developing the essential knowledge and skills for a professional teaching career. Lecturers and mentors play a meaningful role in this regard.

Lecturer and mentor support

Teaching practicum assists prospective teachers to improve competences needed for teaching but more importantly helps to them to cultivate a good level of confidence in the classroom (Khalid, 2014). Achieving the competences may not be possible without the help and support of lecturers and mentors to guide trainee teachers through the teaching practicum process (van Wyk, 2017; Mpofu & Maphalala, 2018). Linked to the idea of cultivating self-confidence is that trainee teachers, mentors and lecturers should engage in sound dialogue on issues of techniques of delivery and effective classroom management (Khalid, 2014).Therefore, because school level mentoring is fundamental to ITE programmes, the mentoring dialogues included in the process of becoming a teacher are significant in shaping trainees for teaching (Mena, Hennissen & Loughran, 2017).

As hinted earlier, lecturer support can be in the form of mentorships whereby lecturers visit schools where trainees are in training to see how they fare and be in tune with the challenges they may be facing. Mentoring is a key teacher preparatory tool that helps shape newly qualified teachers' learning about teaching (McKimm, Jollie & Hatter, 2007). Teacher education at the university does not fully cover the necessary experience, skills and knowledge that a novice teacher needs to face real classroom situations (Mena, Hennissen & Loughran, 2017). Mentoring

closes this gap by providing structured, practice-oriented and context-based conversations that support teacher learning. As a well-informed, and highly skilled teacher working with a novice teacher, the mentor "appeals to the paradigm of mentoring namely 'reciprocity, empowerment and solidarity'." (DeMarco, 1993:1234).

Despite being experienced and well-skilled, mentors need regular exposure to different methods of mentoring as well as practice including the observation and analysis of interactions between mentor and mentee (Harrison, Lawson, & Wortley, 2005; Mena, Hennissen & Loughran, 2017). With reference to mentor-mentee relationship, Bird and Hudson (2015) refer to 'personal attributes, system requirements, pedagogical knowledge, modelling, and feedback' as core elements for properly harnessing mentor-mentee relationships. This is necessary because mentoring continues far into the real career of teaching (Harrison, Lawson, & Wortley, 2005; Mena, Hennissen & Loughran, 2017) and should be well-cultivated, focussed and planned with its outcomes not left to chance (Bird & Hudson, 2015).

Newly qualified teachers require practice teaching fused with successful mentoring to assist them to comprehend whatever would be essential in their new position. As argued by many (such as Hobson, Ashby, Malderez & Tomlinson, 2009; Gisbert, 2018), to reduce culture and reality shocks, mentoring must be provided for novice teachers to augment their learning experiences. This will arguably stand them in good stead to sustain a solid and long-lasting teaching career.

Methodology

Before describing the method used for data collection and analysis, it is necessary to remind that the study's aim was to understand how newly qualified female teachers perceive their teaching practice. Within this aim, it is the researcher's goal to further the discussion on the necessity for optimal support for newly qualified female teachers during teaching practice. As the literature has shown, novice teachers need immense support during teaching practice as this is the stage where real life classroom engagement is exposed to them.

Methodologically, this study followed the qualitative deductive approach, applying in-depth semi structured interviews, which enabled the participants to disclose important information related to the study. The qualitative method is common in educational research, to capture, in this case, the quality, value and efficacy of teaching practicum (Thanh & Thanh, 2015).

Qualitative research comprises an interpretive, naturalistic approach to a selected research phenomenon and strives to make sense of, or to interpret, such a phenomenon in terms of the meaning people generate (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). An interpretivist approach is sought by researchers who seek answers to studies based on real life situations from people who make individual experiences within a particular context.

More than thirty (30) newly qualified teachers (NQTs) were identified for this study. As the data collection progressed, it was clear that no new information was forthcoming as the responses sounded similar. Therefore, the researcher applied the methodological principle of data saturation (Nascimento et al. 2018) and settled for the narratives of the six NQTs whose responses are used in this study. Purposive sampling permits the use of participants who will offer rich, relevant and contextual information pertaining to an investigation (Luborsky & Rubinstein, 1995) irrespective of the size (Sandelwoski, 1996; Koc & Ilya, 2016).

To make sense of the interviews, the researcher read and re-read the interview scripts to identify the key points raised, a methodological practice suggested by Erlingsson and Brysiewicz (2017) for the purpose of content analysis. This method allowed for the reduction of the data into themes (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018; Kiger & Varpio, 2020;). The following themes emerged: Issues linked to school environment/posting; issues linked to mentoring, and overall impeding factors.

Findings

Issues related to school environment/posting

As reported in the literature (for example Derosa 2016; Alexander, 2018; Gravette & Jiyane, 2019; Lestari, 2020), it is not uncommon to find novice teachers expressing mixed feelings as they encounter real life classrooms. Some of the expressions showcase confidence based on the ability to deliver lessons in the classroom. For instance, a novice teacher said:

> *"I don't feel uncomfortable in a class, I don't feel like I didn't have enough practice. I feel because when we did our lessons, we did the lessons that we were taught to do".*

One of the participants also gave the impression that she was comfortable to teach in the classroom. Teaching practicum provided her with adequate classroom exposure and would be able to teach since she felt she acquired the necessary experience to prepare her lessons. Another

said: "*To me, I'm excited to be a teacher, and the children are also working with me and they [are] going along with me [on] everything"*. This is perhaps an indication that this teacher's overall experience is a pleasurable one.

> *"Teaching practicum is actually a breeze. At the time it didn't seem that way but all that we must do for Teaching Practice is sit with your CAPS, plan 30 lessons and teach it. I was sheltered with Teaching Practice; Teaching Practice painted a very awesome picture."*

'Sitting with CAPS' suggests that this trainee teacher was encouraged to actively participate in curriculum and lesson planning. If CAPS aims to encourage critical thinking amongst teachers but barely allows for their direct participation in its implementation, the response of the trainee teacher suggests a significant integration into the process of curriculum and lesson planning, which Maharajh et al (2016) argue helps in building a future teacher. Another NQT volunteered that she was given what to teach and did not participate in developing her lessons: "*I didn't do lesson plans"*.

The experience was not altogether positive in relation to how the NQTs perceived teaching practicum. For instance, some NQTs expressed dissatisfaction with what they regarded as lack of inclusion in the affairs of the schools. There were responses such as:

> *"I was not invited or even included in planning meetings. We were taught at school to make sure we attended staff meetings and I looked forward to it..."*

> *"I didn't understand what they needed from me there because no one was saying anything to me"*

> *"I feel that the majority of my Teaching Practicums showed me exactly what not to do".*

It is evident from the responses above that effective communication was lacking. It is equally evident that the schools were unable to provide the necessary support. The novice teachers seemed dissatisfied with what they experienced and so did not find teaching practicum to be advantageous. It would also seem that teaching practicum did not quite deliver to their expectations. Could this be a case of lack of confidence among the novice teachers? It is understood that expectations were not met, but if no one was talking to them, could they not ask for support?

The trainee teachers above felt teaching practicum did not influence their teaching positively since what they experienced during that time was not what they felt should happen in a real classroom. Could this be related to what Alexander (2018) and Derosa (2016) said regarding a misalignment of expectations of novice teachers? Often, a novice teacher's expectation is met when the receiving school understands the goal of teaching practice (Gorard, 2017).

There was also a case of a novice teacher who mentioned an almost similar experience of under preparedness and gap in expectations thus:

> *"I often must prepare myself for a class on my own, where all these children are going to depend on me. No teacher, no nothing."*

While that paints a picture of lack of mentoring, it also depicts a lack of support and understanding of the level of readiness of the teacher to carry out classroom techniques.

Another NQT seconded that:

> *"During my teaching practicum we were mostly given the things that the teacher didn't want to do. For instance, I have never done Fractions. So, imagine I had to teach Fractions? Luckily, I am in grade one, so I don't teach Fractions."*

That response seems to suggest that the novice teachers were assigned tasks that they were unprepared for.

Evidently, teacher education at university did not prepare many for the kind of experience they had during teaching practicum. One equally picks up that teaching practicum was not a pleasurable experience as senior and established teachers did not seem to show an interest in the trainee teachers beyond offering them those tasks that were either boring or challenging.

Issues related to mentoring/support

During teaching practicum, trainees are provided with mentors to support and guide them. As part of the induction process aimed at acquainting one with the work environment, mentors are as important to novice teachers. This way, NQTs can effectively apply their experiences, and put their knowledge and skills into practice. In response to whether adequate mentoring was available, the novice teachers availed this much:

> *"I could teach new concepts and things like that, but I didn't get that exposure I sought."*

What one gathers from that participant is a feeling of dissatisfaction. The expression "*I
didn't get that exposure…*" may be interpreted as the NQT was not afforded the necessary
exposure to explore a range of activities. A different view was shared by another novice teacher
who believed that teaching practicum was useful. The novice teacher said: *"Fortunately, when I
was doing my teaching practice, I came across a concept where the teacher, my mentor, was
teaching fractions and even the resources that she used; she came with concrete objects."*

This NQT believed the mentor's use of various objects in describing a concept was
helpful. This type of mentoring known as support giving by Kemmis et al (2014) presents ample
opportunities for a new hire to understand the different ways of practicing a profession. In the
case of the trainee teacher reported above the theoretical concepts learned at university are used
as foundation to explore critical nuances for professional knowledge of teaching. Applying this
model of mentoring can be beneficial to a trainee teacher (Mena et al. 2017).

Another expression of favourable experience was offered by a novice teacher thus:

*"I think I feel what I'm doing now works better, because they [the learners] are free to
make mistakes and not be like, oh God, my teacher's going to kill me, I got it wrong. I feel
they're just more eager to learn now."*

That response suggests an interesting insight that possibly highlights the difference
between what was taught at school and what the real-life classroom dynamic is all about. Could
this mean that this participant was reporting that having passed through teaching practicum, one
is able to make better judgement regarding how to deal with learners?

The statement "*I think I feel what I'm doing now works better, because they [the
learners]are free to make mistakes and not be like, oh God, my teacher's going to kill me…*" is
probably evidence that she is able to treat her learners differently owing to exposure to teaching
practicum. Again, noting that learners were free to make mistakes and that she would allow them
to do so perhaps alludes to the benefit she had derived from participating in teaching practicum.

Factors impeding NQTs learning experience during teaching practice

Teaching Practicum allows for practical opportunities to test one's ability to teach in a real
classroom. Feelings of inadequacy from novice teachers may be due to unpreparedness from
training received at university or lack of support from the schools where they are posted. A novice

teacher said: "*So my teaching practicum was a waste, I feel, the majority of them. Because it just literally reaffirmed that it's not about the teacher. And what we learnt here showed us it's about the entire class. So that's the only thing I learnt.*"

That feedback suggests a misalignment of expectation. Evidently, the novice teacher expected her teaching practice to concern issues about her development and not necessarily only about the learners. Essentially, what one picks up from this response is that what was taught during teacher training would serve as valuable material during teaching practicum. Could this be a case of insufficient understanding of the purpose of teaching practicum leading this respondent to say: "*it just literally reaffirmed that it's not about the teacher.*"

An NQT hinted that she was overburdened by administrative duties. Her view was that she was used to attend to duties she felt the experienced teachers were not willing to do: "*many times I was asked to do certain admin jobs that I didn't think concerned me such as filing.*"

With reference to how the school overall environment shaped their teaching practice, some NQTs offered the following:

"*Some of the learners were unable to make sentences in English. It was more of their local language that they used to speak to me. Luckily I could understand*".

"*The learners did not show discipline. I tried to talk to them but they made so much noise*".

"*I went to ask for assistance how best things are done here because of learners not sitting quiet and making noise it was not possible to get good answer*".

"*I can say some did not like my presence; maybe I was a threat*".

Regarding support from the school where they were posted, a novice teacher said:

"*They're in control… at teaching practicum we have to sit and listen to the teacher, this is how we do it, do it exactly like this...*". This novice teacher was not impressed with the way she was shown how things were done at the school which explains the lack of involvement mentioned above.

Discussion

Primarily, this study aimed to understand how newly qualified female teachers perceive teaching practicum with the underlying motivation of ascertaining the benefits and shortcomings of teaching practicum. As indicated, teaching practicum is an essential part of the curriculum in the preparation of prospective teachers, to ensure that the practical aspect of teaching is sufficiently conveyed in relation to the content learnt at university.

There was a mix of reactions in terms of how the NQTs perceive teaching practicum. Even though the participants related some benefits of the teaching practicum, the researcher noted some disparaging narratives of some of the participants.

Teaching practicum prepares trainees for effective classroom management including dealing with pupils for diverse backgrounds. To achieve these relies on the availability of several essentials such as functional infrastructure and services, supportive 'co-workers' and regular visits from lecturers. The participants in this study referred to these in some cases not so colorfully. For instance, some NQTs felt that after four years of university training and subsequent teaching practicum, they still found it difficult to express exactly what they had learnt. This specific disjunction mirrored an overall finding of this study that many NQTs showed readiness to teach but few proved their full competence and preparedness to do so. Could there be a disjunction between what was learnt at university and how things are done in the classroom? Kolb's (1984) experiential learning philosophy posits that individuals learn through experience which allows them to reflect upon, and engage with, their teaching environment, by actively experimenting, developing techniques and strategies for practice.

The findings also suggest that NQTs expressed various reasons to teach; since they believed they were prepared to teach. To some extent, some expressed that the experiences they acquired during teaching practicum were beneficial since they were able to apply what they learnt in the classroom. It was equally evident from some of the participants' responses that they were exposed to hands on learning experience during the programme: providing real-life situations, some of which included knowing when to allow the learners to figure things out for themselves. Evidence of this can be found in the following expression, "*To me, I'm excited to be a teacher, and the children are also working with me and er they going along with me with everything*". Equally, is this somewhat a similar experience: *"I think I feel what I'm doing now works better,*

because they're free to make mistakes and not be like, oh God, my teacher's going to kill me, I got it wrong. I feel they're just more eager to learn now". These comments indicate specific modes of learning related to real-life experience through classroom learning and lecture.

The majority of the NQTs in this study indicated they were taught effective pedagogical knowledge during teaching practicum, which improved their ability to teach. They were able to reflect on their experiences during teaching practicum that influenced how they taught in the classroom as teachers. They mentioned their experience with a specific lecturer, who contributed to their teaching experience by exposing them to practical methods to use in the classroom. In a report on beginner teacher induction in Manchester, Haggarty, Postlethwaite, Diment and Ellins (2009) argue that NQTs experience 'reality shock' during the transition to the real classroom and that this can be overwhelming and stressful. This experience was evident in this study with expressions of dissatisfaction and confusion among the trainee teachers. In one case, one of the NQTs showed dissatisfaction with the treatment she received as well as not quite understanding how to manage class dynamics. The NQTs experience is somewhat consistent with the views of Haggarty et al. (2009) who also averred that NQTs handling of the intricacies of the profession as well as working with different types of colleagues who may not regard their presence as necessary could affect their morale to remain in the profession. Therefore, NQTs must try and understand the school environment and how to conduct themselves. Basically, the real-life classroom situation cannot be taught at the university.

In the findings, some trainee teachers indicated dismal support from their mentors and the lecturers. Some bemoaned the assignment of tasks that older teachers did not want to do. Therefore, support from mentors or lecturers are crucial during teaching practicum. Could the lack of this type of support be as a result of the inability of the older teachers to offer support? One trainee teacher felt that older teachers were threatened by them. Again, this could be as a result of lack of confidence on the part of the older teachers to interact with the trainee teachers. Often teachers face threat to their legitimacy especially as new ways of conducting the teaching business emerge (Korthagen, 2016; Snyder, 2017; Reeves, 2018). It is not surprising therefore that the older teachers may feel threatened considering that trainee teachers ought to present "novel situations, creative and innovative thinking, and instructional activities" (Bowman, 2019, p.112), which may confuse an older teacher especially in the South African context where teachers are said to possess archaic knowledge perhaps owing to inadequate training (de Jager,

2017; Taylor, 2019). Kolb (1984) however believes that being a teacher is not just for new ideas to be embedded but also to dispose of or improve outdated ones and sometimes resistance to change of new ideas hinges on disputes with inconsistent archaic beliefs. Therefore, older teachers have a role to play in the development of trainee teachers. In fact, there can be a sharing of ideas – new ideas can be learned by older teachers while trainee teachers can learn from the older ones. This way, both the old and trainee teacher are able to shape their experiences and expertise.

It is expected that during teaching practicum, trainees are placed with experienced teachers who have gone through the process of lifelong learning in the education profession to share their knowledge with the new teachers. Vikaraman, Mansor, and Hamzah (2017) argue that professional or skilled teachers should provide the necessary mentoring support to NQTs as it will lead to their individual development; through tools, guidance, resources and supervision from mentors. The experienced teacher can share knowledge and skills with the inexperienced teacher; and can be open to learn new things from them. Too often older teachers are resistant to change and do not want NQTs with new ideas upsetting their school environment (Korthagen, 2016; Snyder, 2017).

During the interviews, the researcher made an observation, which was not part of the study, that some NQTs had poor communication skills, which may have been one of the reasons why some of them struggled to convey their views adequately, despite protestations of readiness to teach. If communication is a problem, then it could possibly pose a challenge for NQTs to construct content knowledge with learners; especially at Foundation Phase. Foundation Phase learners require teachers who are competent and equipped with the relevant knowledge and skills. However, it was found that some novice teachers indicated they were ready for the classroom but lacked the confidence to teach certain subjects. The inability to clearly communicate is evident in the manner the NQTs communicated their views. There were those who indicated that they did not benefit from teaching practicum but were unable to substantiate their view. In fact, in those instances, it was not clear what the novice teachers learnt, or did not learn during so the researcher was obliged to make inferences based on their response.

Korthagen (2016) argues that previous knowledge is an essential function of learning during a teacher education programme and that NQTs are often resistant to change because of their preconceived notions. Kolb (1984) concurs and argues that prior life experience and

environmental factors have a bearing on the learning capabilities of some individuals, which could possibly pose a challenge in the acquisition of knowledge and skills. During the interviews conducted in this study a participant indicated that whilst on teaching practicum, her experience influenced her progress. Based on the literature and what is found in this study, it is evident that experiences can shape one's involvement in the teaching practicum. Kolb (1984) also suggests "a holistic integrative perspective on learning that combines experience, perception, cognition, and behaviour" ultimately leading to good teaching practicum. This signifies that teaching practicum can be viewed by NQTs in a holistic way in order to fully grasp and learn through their experiences to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills for the teaching profession.

NQTs believed the university did its job in equipping them to teach with the use of various teaching techniques while on teaching practicum. Tomkins and Ulus (2015) relate with this and offer an array of techniques that are linked with experiential learning, including "role-play, simulations, structured activities, outdoors activities, inquiry-based activities and private reflection." It was established that content knowledge is essential, especially at Foundation Phase and NQTs should use the experiences they acquired during teaching practicum to teach in a creative way to make sure learners are able to grasp certain concepts. Content knowledge cannot be learnt merely through abstract examples in some instances, but creativity is required to make learners understand through concrete illustrations. Teaching practicum provides the opportunity for NQTs to acquire this skill and incorporate it in their teaching.

NQTs often shared experiences of their teaching environment during teaching practicum and the reality of their situations in the classroom. Not all NQTs taught in well-disciplined schools and had to contend with teaching in settings where the reality of the classroom was chaotic. Many NQTs had to teach in non-conducive environments and had to deal with teaching in multilingual classrooms where the language of instruction was English while learners spoke it as a second or third language. There were instances where teachers indicated that they had to teach learners from four to five different languages in a single class. They were creative in their teaching strategy; by utilising experiences acquired during teaching practicum; making use of pictures, games and colours to teach mathematics or language, which suggests active, collaborative learning. Creativity is a skill that NQTs should nurture and utilise as required during teaching and Kolb (1984) argues that individuals learn from direct association with an object or phenomenon of their interest and that exposure to teaching practicum facilitates the acquisition of particular additional

skills and experience. Some NQTs who were assigned to fee-paying schools encountered resistance from the senior members of their schools: they were occasionally prevented from implementing the CAPS compliant forms of instruction, which they learnt during ITE.

Several novice teachers stated they had to teach in environments that 'shocked' them. They claimed that no education programme could prepare them for the realities of the classrooms to which they were assigned. NQTs claimed that they were unprepared to contend with heavy administrative workloads that eroded their teaching time. Gorard (2017) argues that there is a tendency by NQTs at primary school to be well-prepared for dealing with literacy and numeracy, yet "less prepared for planning, administrative aspects, assessment practices, handling parents, equal opportunities in the classroom, and support for pupils with behavioural and emotional difficulties and handling bullying/harassment". This is a common issue plaguing new teachers who are weighed down by heavy administrative workloads. The criticism levelled at the number of administrative tasks that the NQTs were often required to undertake appeared to overwhelm their teaching, lesson planning, and other activities. Administrative tasks are thus noted as enormously challenging for new teachers and several of them claimed that that brought unexpected shocks notwithstanding the missing support from mentors to help them cope.

Kolb et al. (2014) argue that learning through experience, and learner-centred education have extensively expanded and gained approval by a number of educators and curriculators who reflect upon experiential learning exercises such as "service learning, problem-based learning, action learning, adventure education and simulation and gaming." Schwartz (2012) agrees that learning through experience has seen growth in the classroom because of the many innovative practices, such as role playing, games, case studies, simulations, presentations, and various types of group work and suggests "'active learning' as one of the seven 'principles of good practice' for excellence in education."

Conclusion

This study sought to understand the perceptions of female NQTs about the teaching practicum. It has been established that teaching practicum is an important component in becoming a professional teacher. Some of the sampled NQTs indicated some form of under-preparedness for the real world, while others felt they were prepared to manage classroom roles. There were comments regarding lack of support from the schools where they were posted; some had looked

to the experienced teachers for mentorship and lessons on how to engage in classroom activities and displaying confidence to teach. In short, the findings reveal a mix of experiences – benefits and shortcomings - from the NQTs, which not only affect the development of prospective teachers but also have profound implications for both policy enhancement and implementation.

Some of the trainee teachers who participated in this study also indicated their satisfaction with mentors who supported them through the teaching practicum however, in some cases, mentors were not supportive and did not provide guidance as required. Guidance and support from mentors prepare prospective teachers with the relevant knowledge and skills but when this is lacking from their practicum, chances are that the opportunity to learn a broader approach to teaching is missed. They equally voiced their concerns of the shortcomings regarding the reality in the classroom in terms of heavy administrative duties that overwhelmed them, non-conducive teaching environments and teaching multilingual classrooms.

The findings suggest that the teaching practicum component of the ITE programme is significant to the development of future teachers and a requisite element that every NQT must embark on in preparation for a career in teaching. For a more productive and enhanced perspective of teaching practicum, all stakeholders have a duty to further develop the education system in order to improve learner performance and the pass rates.

Policy implications

This study has some important policy implications. First, improving and effectively implementing policy regarding initial teacher education and teaching practicum is key to eradicating the discomfiture experienced by NQTs during the teaching practicum. Perhaps a review of the policy to accommodate preparedness to teach at Foundation Phase is another important policy call. Literature suggests that teaching practicum enables the confidence to teach and the capability to relay theory into practice. However, the data generated from this study countermanded this readiness and enthusiasm. Many NQTs had to teach learners from diverse backgrounds and seemed ill-equipped to deal with this in a holistic way. Teaching at Foundation Phase is regarded as a crucial stage of a learner's school career since it is at this level that novice teachers are required to develop content knowledge to be successful as they proceed to intermediate and senior phases.

Several quintiles 1, 2 and 3 schools in South Africa are not well resourced and are overcrowded (Stott, 2018; Ogbonnaya & Awuah, 2019), which impedes teaching. Korthagen (2001) argues that teaching requires "holistic judgement about what, when and how" a specific class should be taught and that it is challenging to prepare teachers for such a holistic scope. Schools to which NQTs are assigned for their first year of teaching need to provide a conducive environment for NQTs; and all stakeholders should be involved in the provision of this kind of support. Operational induction programmes should be conducted by the host schools which the department of higher education and training (DHET) can monitor to ensure safe passage to the new teaching environment.

Another important policy consideration is that of instituting a 'compulsory' collaborative arrangement between universities and schools. This will likely enrich an understanding of the schools and their state of readiness to host NQTs. Developing this partnership will improve the quality of teaching practicum in such a way that receiving schools are aware of what to expect from trainee teachers and vice versa. Mention was also made of the utility of mentorship during teaching practicum. In reviewing the policy for teaching practicum, perhaps the DHET can consider this as a crucial element for all NQTs. Affording NQTs this kind of support from the beginning should be part of the induction process, which could alleviate some of the reality shock. In South Africa, many teachers are leaving the teaching profession and it is up to the department and the institutions to retain teachers; especially the experienced ones.

Overall, the DHET needs to revisit the ITE programme to ensure the quality of the programme in the context of the South African education crisis.

Suggestions for further research

Teaching practicum cannot be successful without the support and guidance of mentors. Mentors have the power to make or mar the teaching practicum experience. If mentors do not receive development opportunities, they could be the reason that future teachers lose interest in the profession. As such, the DHET, universities and schools have a responsibility towards future teachers to receive quality training so that learners can acquire quality education to improve their performance and the pass rates of those in basic education. Against the backdrop of experienced teachers leaving the teaching profession in South Africa, not much research has taken place

especially with reference to exploring the relationship between NQT performance and the necessity for mentorship.

There is also the problem of teaching multilingual learners at Foundation Phase. It is the researcher's understanding that a study needs to find ways to embrace this and reduce the difficulty that NQTs confront especially during teaching practicum. This weakness undermines the teachers' teaching ability and jeopardises the learner in the end. The teacher cannot be effective in preparing an inclusive lesson due to this challenge. Two authors have articulated this challenge. Baxen and Botha (2016) provide recommendations for more effective teacher preparation namely (1) recognising the essential role of language in learning; (2) the confidence to face up to the challenges that multilingual contexts present; and (3) valuing and using learners' multiple language repertoires as a resource. They further note that not much has been written on this subject of multilingualism within the context of teaching practicum. Multilingualism is a contentious issue in the South African classroom setting, thus requiring further research and better policy development.

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