Liberating the Oppressed Consciousness of Preservice Teachers Through Critically Reflective Praxis[1]

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Abstract

This article focuses on preservice teachers' critical reflections on after-school, one-on-one tutoring of learners. We discuss the conceptualisation of two modules in which the tutoring is located. Reflective dialogue is used to capture preservice teachers' tutoring experiences and perceptions. A critical theory lens is used to analyse preservice teachers' reflections to distinguish between reflection that remains at a descriptive level and that involving more criticality and consideration of social change. We argue that the after-school tutoring approach creates opportunities for preservice teachers to reflect on the practice of tutoring and creates opportunities for advancing their critical reflection on social change as pedagogy. Our analysis shows opportunities to critically reflect on key elements of pedagogy that arose within the tutoring experience, but preservice teachers needed support in challenging assumptions they have of learners, and what it means to engage them explicitly.

Keywords: preservice teacher education, critical theory, social change, critical reflection

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Introduction

The quality of teacher preparation in the South African context is of ongoing concern in a climate of national assessments in which poor learner performance is often linked to teacher preparation. An important component of teacher preparation is the nature of professional experiences provided. In a traditional model of professional experience, the process of learning to teach can result in a theory/practice dichotomy in which the mastery of technical skills for teaching dominates (Zeichner, 2010). A critique of these models of professional experience is the lack of a reflective stance that moves beyond the technical nature of teaching to focus on the ethical, moral, and sociocultural issues involved in teaching and learning in a particular social context (Korthagen & Kessels, 1999).

In a reflective professional experience paradigm, the theory/practice divide is moderated by shifting towards supporting preservice teachers to critically reflect on their practices, with the aim of developing a deeper understanding of pedagogy and teacher–learner interaction. Le Cornu and Ewing (2008) argued that, in such a paradigm, preservice teachers are required to take control of their learning. They further argued that the development of a reflective stance requires taking risks in one's practice to increase professional agency. The central research question guiding this study is: "What is the nature of preservice teachers' reflections on their perceptions and experiences of tutoring learners in the after-school context, set within a critical theory paradigm?"

First, we provide a discussion on the conceptual design of the tutoring approach. The Bachelor of Education (BEd), BEd 2 English and BEd 3 Mathematics modules have a tutoring component with a common goal of developing preservice teachers' critical reflective stances on practice. Both modules are discussed to highlight some of the different pedagogical tutoring strategies followed while pursuing this goal. Secondly, we describe the first joint reflective dialogues of the BEd 2 English preservice teachers and BEd 3 Mathematics preservice teachers to capture their descriptions and reflections on their learning experiences of tutoring learners. Finally, we present an analysis of the preservice teachers' learning experiences and how their reflections provide insights that might ultimately enhance their understanding of the broader social context in which learning takes place.

Theoretical Background

Critical Theory

Critical theory is concerned with personal agency to effect change in situations that are oppressive and unjust. Giroux (2003) saw critical theory having a dual purpose in that it both provides a lens with which to analyse situations as well as a means to change them. Relevant to this study, an after-school tutoring programme, informed by critical theory, encourages preservice teachers to use their experience of tutoring learners to analyse and respond to injustices in society (Mitchell, 2008). Apple (1989) argued that the structure of schooling is the structure of the dominant culture, which sets up unequal cultural, political, and economic dynamics that influence the foundations of education. We concur with Apple (1989) that, unless we understand how these inequalities operate, injustices in society cannot be addressed. Consequently, we distinguish between critical reflection operating only at the level of the cognitive and that which takes into consideration the social, historical, and political issues that operate in conjunction with the cognitive.

We draw on the core elements of critical theory, of which critical reflection is one, and consider the implications of these elements in the design of a critical pedagogy approach for our modules. If we want our preservice teachers to be change agents, then taking a critical stance in problematising existing norms in society is an important step. This is also important in the light of our personal experiences as lecturers, which show our preservice teachers have tended not to question the

assumptions, beliefs, and knowledge they have of learners and, more generally, the roles of teaching and schools in society. In critical theory, the assumption is that if preservice teachers are critical about how their own identities have been shaped by current and past sociocultural, political, and economic forces (Kincheloe, 2004), they develop a deeper awareness of how others' identities are influenced by the dominant culture—which enhances their awareness of social justice and reciprocity.

In critical theory literature, a particular view of identity is developed. Gutièrrez (2013, p. 10) argued that factors critical to identity formation are the circumstances under which identities are constructed and whose interests are served in these constructions. In critical theory, concepts of power and identity are deconstructed. The implication for a critical pedagogy is to critique power relations in the classroom that limit opportunities to learn—with a view to developing transformative views of teaching and learning that might enhance change.

A further implication for a critical pedagogy is to recognise and legitimise the lived experiences of learners. Learners' experiences were considered by Freire (1970) as cultural capital that can generate ideas for the teacher to support learners in solving dilemmas arising from these experiences. Freire's emphasis on dialogue is considered an essential part of informal education, which is often dialogical (or conversational). However, Freire emphasised that such dialogue requires respect where no one person acts on another; rather, people work in a reciprocal manner. Changing societies includes giving a voice to those who may not have had one before. Freire stressed the importance of situating educational activity within the lived experience of participants. This, he argued, bridges the divide between educator and learner in a pedagogical space. And, this was our experience in the tutoring project discussed in this article, too. Participants in our project shared enabling conversational spaces that emphasised dialogue, engagement, and equality. That is why we espoused the Freirean position (1970) that one needs to start with the lived experiences of learners in order to create opportunities for them to question their experiences as they relate to and intersect with larger societal issues.

We take the position that learners and preservice teachers should develop their voices and assume agency for their own lives. A number of studies (for example, Dahl, 1995; Flutter, 2007) focus on the important role that learners' voices play in providing insights to improve teaching and learning. Cook-Sather (2002) argued that, while both constructivist and critical pedagogies view learners as active in their own knowledge construction, the role of learner voice in critical pedagogies foregrounds the political nature of education. The teacher's role is crucial in using learners' thoughts and speech as a base for developing critical understanding of personal experiences as well as unequal conditions in society and existing knowledge.

Critical Reflection

Critical reflection is a theme permeating the literature on critical theory in education. A distinction is drawn between critical reflection as a process involving social and political analyses leading to transformative action, and reflection that remains at the level of thinking—undisruptive in nature (Fook, White, & Gardner, 2006, p. 9). Greene (1995) took a critical theory view on education which she described as "a mode of opening the world to critical judgements by the young and to their imaginative projections, and in time to their transformative actions" (p. 56). She posited *critical judgement* as providing the necessary form of thinking to develop alternative ideas that might lead to change. Brookfield's (1995) characterisation of critical reflection in teaching as *stance and dance* saw a critical reflective stance as one involving inquiry and openness to further investigation, and dance depicting a preparedness to experiment and take risks in improving teaching. As pointed out by Weiner (2015, p. 323), students should be encouraged to "examine axes of power and privilege across social boundaries"—which can only be achieved through critical reflection of the inherent social justice or lack thereof. In our modules, we worked with Greene's (1995) and Brookfield's (1995) notion of critical

reflection as questioning the decisions made in one's practice, both on an individual level and in dialogue with others.

Research Context

An English and a mathematics module, both underpinned by critical theory, provide the context for our research. Preservice teachers enrolled for these modules were asked to consider their own socialisation when entering school communities in which they would tutor learners. Although the preservice teachers were informed that the school communities were poor in an economic sense, we avoided a deficit perspective of these communities. Rather, the preservice teachers were encouraged to respect the knowledge and practices of the learners they met as assets to inform their teaching and reflection on the learners' actions (Gutièrrez, Morales, & Martinez, 2009).

Most preservice teachers in the modules were classified as white, and attended schools that were demarcated for white learners before the transition to democratic rule in 1994. Tutoring learners in poor socioeconomic communities is often a first-time experience for preservice teachers who completed their own schooling and subsequent practice teaching in relatively advantaged rural towns or urban middle-class contexts. Thus, the tutoring experience for these preservice teachers was a border-crossing (Giroux, 2005) experience—not only in terms of the move between the university and school contexts but also in terms of the sociocultural border crossing that relates to different home and broader community experiences of the preservice teachers and learners.

The learners to be tutored were identified by their schools as top achievers in mathematics and English. These learners could therefore present a challenge to preservice teachers' thinking skills, content knowledge, and pedagogical content knowledge. The learners received one-on-one tutoring even though preservice teachers tutored two to three learners at a time. Learners attended a one-hour tutoring session each week, alternating between mathematics and English, and attending 20 sessions over the course of the school year. In the next section, we describe the way in which critical theory informed the design of the modules.

Ethical considerations were approached from four perspectives, namely, the topic, the participants, the data analysis, and the institutions. We argued that not presenting learners from marginalised communities with dedicated tutoring in two key subjects (mathematics and English) to be unethical given that our university has the mission and capacity to do so. It would also be unethical to have preservice teachers from advantaged communities do the tutoring without appropriate preparation.

The project was conceived and discussed within the university, with preservice teachers, and with the schools to find consensus compliant with the mission of the schools and aligned with the curriculum and ethical practices of intervention programmes at the schools. Information sharing discussions were held with preservice teachers who had accepted the invitation to join the programme, the school management, and involved subject teachers as well as the parents. The learners identified by the school were also briefed about the programme. Informed consent was obtained from all the participants in writing. Participants were assured that data generated would be used for research purposes only, and that their identities would be protected. They were informed that they were free to withdraw from the research at any stage in the process for whatever reason, without any consequences. Member checking and cross checking between coders were utilised during the coding process. Finally, due process was followed, both in the instance of the university and the Western Cape Department of Education. Both institutions certified ethical clearance for the project.

English Tutoring

These sessions aimed to enhance the English proficiency and teaching skills of the preservice teachers and the English proficiency of learners. Our approach focused on enhancing communication through conversational tutoring sessions and games. After each session, the preservice teachers wrote reflections on their expectations of the session—what they had planned would happen, and what happened in reality. They were required to compile a portfolio of evidence that included a description of each session, their reflections, and a final report. The preservice teachers were new to teaching and their early reflections were often very descriptive. However, during class discussions, they were prompted towards deeper consideration of why realities differed from plans and how they might turn unforeseen situations into beneficial ones. Thus, a dialogue emerged, focussing on deepening understanding of the factors making a difference to learning through transformative tutoring practices. The lecturer attempted to focus discussions on building social capital through conversational dialogue between the preservice teachers and learners. The idea was to generate a stronger voice for the learners, facilitating the development of a consciousness that Taylor (1993) posited could transform reality for preservice teachers, learners, the lecturer, and even the wider community. Preservice teachers were encouraged to value the power of simply being in conversation with others, instead of merely focussing on teaching new content.

Mathematics Tutoring

The aim of the mathematics tutoring sessions was for preservice teachers to learn about their learners' participation in mathematics. The preservice teachers therefore enquired about their learners' experiences of learning mathematics in class and out of class during the tutoring sessions. According to our theoretical lens, would provide insight into learners' sociocultural capital for learning (Freire, 1970), and provide the preservice teachers with insight into the way the culture of learning in the school was instrumental in the development of the learners' identities in mathematics. It was emphasised that a learner's identity is not static (Gutièrrez, 2013), and that preservice teachers have the potential to create learning opportunities that shift identity. At the same time, preservice teachers were required to reflect on the development of their own identities as learners.

Learners were required to bring their books and any assessments, reflecting errors they had previously made, to tutoring sessions so that they could explain their reasoning to the preservice teachers. The importance of providing learners with opportunities to explain errors was intended to develop learners' voices and ownership of their reasoning as they tried to make sense of the problems they had to solve. The responsibility to learn was thus intended to be shifted to the learners, thereby developing their sense of agency by showing that the preservice teachers gave learner reasoning legitimacy. The context of error analysis was not viewed from a deficit perspective but created a shared learning opportunity for the learners and the preservice teachers. Preservice teachers were required to do an in-depth analysis of the content of the mathematics in which learners' errors were embedded. More importantly, they were required to analyse the reasoning behind learners' errors and provide opportunities to explore how their experiences of learning about the mathematical concepts contributed to their thinking. The aim of such pedagogical moves was to explore learners' insights into power relations in their classrooms, and to provide preservice teachers with opportunities to analyse the nature of teacher–learner relations. As for the English sessions, preservice teachers were required to keep a reflective journal on each of the tutoring sessions. Reflection on learners' lived experiences was divided into three themes: learners' mathematical identities, learners' participation in class, and learners' experiences in their homes and broader community.

Research Design and Method

The research design used was narrative inquiry in a collaborative setting, using reflective dialogue to gain deeper understanding of the experiences of the preservice teachers. Experiences of tutoring learners over a period of 10 months were narrated via focus groups where personal experiences became a source of reflection and inquiry for the preservice teacher community. In this sense, narrative was both a phenomenon (stories as told by the preservice teachers) as well as a method of inquiry used by the researchers. The narratives captured and analysed in this paper emerged from one-hour focus group sessions, and do not include the ongoing reflections of the preservice teachers captured in their journals or those generated in professional learning communities established later within modules. The data used thus result from the first focus groups in which preservice teachers from both the English and the mathematics modules participated in the after-school tutoring.

The preservice teachers from both modules were invited to participate in a reflective dialogue session. Six mathematics preservice teachers (from the group of 25) and eight English preservice teachers (from the group of 25) volunteered to participate in the reflective dialogue—which allowed two focus groups to be formed. The facilitation of the dialogue in one group was done by the lecturer of the English module; this dialogue was audio recorded. The facilitation of the second dialogue was done by a lecturer involved in the general research of the modules; this dialogue was video recorded. Both groups consisted of preservice teachers from the English (BEd 2) and mathematics (BEd 3) modules.

Although reflective dialogue sessions were informal, conversational, and open-ended, both facilitators used the following questions to stimulate discussion:

- How did you experience the after-school tutoring?
- How did your learners engage with the learning material during the sessions?
- What have you learned from this experience about yourself, and about your learners?
- What were your challenges during the tutoring?
- What suggestions do you have to improve future after-school tutoring?

Preservice teachers were given an opportunity to discuss the questions, and to reflect on their experiences, before probing more deeply on their engagement with learners. The audio-recorded dialogue was transcribed, each transcript coded separately by each of the authors and then compared to reach consensus on the specific issues we wanted to identify: preservice teachers' critical reflections on personal agency; issues of social justice, power and identity; and to what extent preservice teachers were able to reflect on their own identities and could perceive themselves as potential change agents. Thus, to a certain extent, coding was carried out on an a priori basis in terms of our theoretical foundations, although we kept an open mind as to what else might emerge that was of interest and relevance during the coding process.

At initial coding, we each read through the transcripts to familiarise ourselves with preservice teachers' opinions after which, we carried out line-by-line coding where we examined the data more closely. Transcripts of both group interviews were organised on an Excel spreadsheet where common themes were highlighted and identified using inductive coding to break the text into the smallest units possible to make sense of the data (Christians & Carey, 1989). We organised concepts in our data into categories before structuring the analysis and interpretation.

Although the data were centred around the specific questions asked, responses were grouped around two major themes emerging from the data: "Preservice teachers' reflections on challenges in engaging learners" and "Preservice teachers' reflections on learners' engagement in the tutoring." Table 1 below describes the dominant themes and subthemes identified from this coding process.

Table 1: Themes and Subthemes Identified From Transcripts of Preservice Teachers' Reflections

Theme 1: Preservice teachers' reflections on challenges in engaging learners	Theme 2: Preservice teachers' reflections on learners' engagement in the tutoring
Subtheme Building relationships with learners	**Subtheme** Learners attitudes towards the tutoring
Subtheme Dealing with diversity and uncertainty	**Subtheme** Shifts in learner engagement
Subtheme Questioning opportunities to learn	**Subtheme** Move to learner-centred rather than curriculum-driven learning

Findings

In the following sections, we detail findings highlighting instances of critical reflection, explaining what these may have meant for the preservice teachers involved in this after-school tutoring, and based on our interpretation of critical theory. The organisation follows the order of Table 1 beginning with the subthemes of Theme 1.

Theme 1: Preservice Teachers' Reflections on Challenges in Engaging Learners

Building relationships with learners.

Preservice teachers all described their first encounters with learners as being exceptionally challenging because they found initial communication difficult. Learners were reluctant to speak and did not elaborate when asked questions. One mathematics (M) preservice teacher's response captures this challenge:

> *Carl (M): The first three tutoring sessions were incredibly difficult because . . . the children do not know you. I discovered, you must pull everything out of them. If you ask them a question, it's just a quick answer. They do not feel comfortable to open up to you yet.*

Most preservice teachers reasoned learners were introverted and shy. They noted learners chatted to each other when they left the tutoring room but, as soon as they reentered, they were shy again. An English (E) preservice teacher noted a difference in the way in which the learners communicated with each other during the tutor sessions and when with their friends, and reflected on this:

> *Tracy (E): I also discovered that when you work with them in the class, then they are very respectful and they work together nicely and they are very well-mannered. But when they leave the class and when they are with each other, it is like they change a bit. . . . I will not say that they are ill-mannered but they are different when they are with a group of friends . . . they use a lot more slang in their groups outside but with me—not sure how to describe this—their language is more prim and proper.*
>
> *Facilitator: How would you explain this?*

Tracy (E): I am not sure. It is like she said, we were told that they come from poor communities. It is like we set a standard for them. They come from poorer communities. But they are very respectful.

One preservice teacher suggested consideration of the importance of understanding the learners' home environments in building relationships of trust that could allow learners to talk about their experiences of learning mathematics in their classrooms.

Mandy (M): It is important that we understand the home situations of the learners and to understand what they have available to them. Because, I think that if a learner is able to talk to you about his home situation then he will most likely be more comfortable to talk about his experiences with his mathematics in the classroom. . . . say, "The teacher does not help me with this."

The importance of building relationships of trust with the learners emerged as critical for developing generative relationships. The preservice teachers reflected on some of the strategies they embarked on to encourage learners to speak. One of the English preservice teachers shared the importance of creating a relaxed and fun environment using games—which showed that if the learning environment is one in which learners are motivated, they do open up. A mathematics preservice teacher reported on the use of games that supported learners' mental calculations, which learners found fun and which, consequently, resulted in more meaningful interaction.

Dealing with diversity and uncertainty.

Learners chosen for the tutoring represented the top performers in English and mathematics but, in many cases, a learner who was good in one subject was not necessarily good in the other, which presented preservice teachers with the challenge of handling differentiation. In addition, preservice teachers noted that learners have different personalities that needed to be considered when working with pairs or groups. For example, an English preservice teacher observed that one of his two learners responded much faster, and that this led to the other beginning to feel inadequate. In an intimate tutoring setup involving two learners of slightly different abilities but with quite different personalities, this preservice teacher had to carefully manage social interactions between the learners so that a positive environment for learning was created. This linked to our interpretation of critical pedagogy to recognise and legitimise the lived experiences of learners.

For most preservice teachers, the tutoring of learners on a one-to-one basis was a new experience that gave rise to feelings of anxiety and uncertainty about how to apply theory met in lectures:

Carl (M): In the beginning, I was uncertain as you did not know what to expect, you were thrown into the deep end. You have not tutored before and have not worked with learners in this way—now we must analyse their errors and know how to support them. . . . But as time progressed we began to know how to deal with this . . . we learnt about the gaps and what we have to work at.

The mathematics preservice teachers (BEd 3) had been taken through a process of how to analyse learners' errors during their second-year lectures, but did not have experience in working with learners in this way during their traditional practice teaching. And, the limited practice teaching experience of English BEd 2 preservice teachers was an underlying reason for their anxiety and fear of how to engage their learners:

Denise (E): In the English . . . before we went, we were anxious about what we must do [at the tutoring sessions]. We had no idea. We only had one month of teaching practice—our only experience.

An English preservice teacher acknowledged that they were well supported during lectures with how to engage learners with reading in a tutoring session. Preservice teachers from both disciplines noted that in a tutoring space one has to be prepared to deal with learners' difficulties that one did not plan for, and that "having to think on your feet" was a challenge but also a positive learning experience. While these learning experiences at first created anxiety for the preservice teachers, on reflection they found that they learned more than in traditional teaching practice where opportunity for this form of intense engagement with learners was limited:

Charlotte (E): When we started, we did not have that self-confidence. We even doubted our knowledge . . . but as time progressed you realised you have knowledge . . . they enjoy it and can learn from you . . . and this builds your self-confidence.

Tracy (E): We were told in lectures that things will not always go as planned in the classroom. So we planned for the tutor session but, due to time limitations, we needed to adapt. And sometimes a learner posed a question based on work the learner does not understand and you had to deal with it even though it was not part of your planned lesson and you had to think about how to handle the situation.

Charlotte's and Tracey's narratives capture what many preservice teachers agreed on, namely, that their self-confidence grew through a journey of doubt, taking risks, and realising that one has the knowledge and the ability to recognise growth points in that knowledge.

Questioning opportunities to learn.

Many preservice teachers described opportunities to learn about learners and teaching through their tutoring experiences. One preservice teacher's narrative reflects a perception that opportunity to learn about practice may be less when working with so-called "clever" learners:

Beth (M): I would prefer not to work with clever learners . . . if we work with more average learners it will help us more . . . we will really learn and it will help us in our practice.

In the focus group discussions, this view was challenged immediately by another preservice teacher based, on her classroom observation:

Jessica (E): I will say that we must take clever children because I was at a school—a Grade 4 class—there were learners who could barely read and the teacher had to spend so much time with them that the clever children were neglected . . . and those learners are aware of it . . . and that was bad . . . so I will say we must work with the clever learners.

A third preservice teacher reflected on the challenge of working with strong learners, supporting Beth's idea that one cannot learn as much about teaching when engaging only strong learners:

Vanessa (M): I gave my learners the set of questions that were recommended as challenges and within half an hour the learners were done and then I worked through their test problems and then I did not know what to do with them.

These observations raise questions about the status of preservice teachers' content knowledge and pedagogical flexibility in being able to rise to the challenge of teaching strong learners, whom they may not have encountered often in previous school practices. These experiences encouraged preservice teachers to critically analyse diversity and some of the injustices learners may have previously encountered, limiting their opportunities to excel (Mitchell, 2008)

Theme 2: Preservice Teachers' Reflections on Learners' Engagement in the Tutoring

Narratives on learners' engagement in the tutoring sessions reflected three broad subthemes: learners' attitude towards the tutoring, shifts in learners' engagement in tutoring, and how best to engage learners in acquiring knowledge.

Learners' attitudes towards the tutoring.

There was a general perception among preservice teachers (based largely on their own experiences as learners) that it must be extremely taxing for learners to attend tutoring almost immediately after a whole day in class. The perceived negative attitude of learners towards tutoring, based on absence from sessions that were close to holiday periods, was ascribed to the learners being tired. On the whole, there was a perception that learners enjoyed the tutoring sessions because they were receiving special attention and were aware their classmates also wanted to be a part of tutoring and to learn from them. One mathematics preservice teacher pointed out that learners felt tutoring to be a safe space to ask questions because they were afraid to ask questions in class for fear of being ridiculed by friends. The notion of the tutoring being a safe space to talk about one's challenges was also raised by an English preservice teacher. We infer from these reflections that, when learning spaces become safe spaces for talking about challenges, this can influence attitudes to learning.

Shifts in learner engagement.

Many preservice teachers accounted for shifts in learners' engagement in terms of feeling more comfortable. A preservice teacher reflected on how one of her learners, a quiet boy who barely spoke at the beginning of tutoring, later displayed the confidence to speak to her in a challenging yet respectful way:

> *Denise (E): I think that a highlight for me was when we were there last Wednesday. . . . we played picturenette after we completed handling tenses. The learner really enjoys drawing and I complimented him before on his drawing. When he got his card, he said to me "I am now going to show Miss"—in other words, saying he is going to beat me in this. And while he was drawing I thought to myself, for a child to speak to you like that, you must have made a breakthrough. You are still his teacher and he has that respect . . . but he is much more comfortable now.*

We infer that this involved transcending normal perceptions of power relations that might have existed for this learner. Many reflections only foregrounded the importance of shifts in learners' content knowledge of the subject. In some reflections, it was suggested that tutoring learners who were gifted and who were already scoring 80% on tests, was not going to make much of a difference to their test scores. One preservice teacher made an insightful contribution about assumptions held about test scores and how we might view education:

> *Charlotte (E): When I arrived there . . . we were supposed to work with the top learners, but my learner could not speak English. They are now doing well on the English tests but then again, we do not know on what standard these tests are. But they were shy to speak in English and would not respond in English when we spoke . . . they responded in*

Afrikaans. Then after a few sessions, I let them read books. Then the one girl asked if she could tell the other girl what happened in the book. I asked whether she was going to tell her in Afrikaans and she replied, no she was going to do it in English. And then the other girl also told hers in English . . . they just developed this self-confidence . . . that they can and that it is fine to make a mistake.

Move to learner-centred rather than curriculum-driven learning.

Preservice teachers' reflections included perceptions on how knowledge is acquired. The emphasis on complete understanding of a concept explains choices to focus on one concept for a lengthy period of time. Narratives reflected what was concentrated on in the tutoring sessions:

Denise (E): I noticed that both my learners struggled with tenses and I have been busy with this from the beginning of the year until now.

Mandy (M): You cannot assume after a week they will understand. . . . You have to give them tests and exercises over and over to ensure that they understand and are now ok. I know that the CAPS documents does not allow for so much time to just focus on one topic . . . but to make it worthwhile you will make time.

Carl (M): Work with them on their level and do not move too fast . . . do the basics first before moving over.

These reflections indicate support for the notion that it is important to understand the basics and, through consolidation, to develop concepts. However, no fuller explanation of what was meant by a basic understanding was provided that demonstrated a more sophisticated appreciation of the nature of conceptual development.

Discussion

The literature on teachers' reflections on practice identifies that these often remain at the level of simple descriptions of experience rather than involving elaboration, and providing reasons for experiences. Descriptive reflection does not involve the critical elements described in the theory section of this paper. These include processes of deconstruction, questioning of underlying assumptions, and reconstruction—all of which can open up inquiry and exploration of alternative views or practice that could change and improve a teaching situation, and change social justice praxis (Fook, 2002). We categorised preservice teachers' reflections to determine the nature of critical reflection on their tutoring experiences, using the following dimensions and subdimensions drawn from our reading of critical theory (Table 2).

Table 2: Dimensions of Reflection

Dimension	Subdimension
Descriptive reflection	Description of situation
	Description with elaboration (providing reasons)
Critical reflection	Deconstruction: Questioning assumptions about the self or social context identified
	Reconstruction: Inquiry and further investigation of a particular situation Consideration of alternative views

Our analysis of the preservice teachers' reflections indicates that narratives from dialogues of experiences show some degree of elaboration to search for explanations. Preservice teachers produced counter-narratives contesting different perceptions of their experiences of teaching and learning. Counter-narratives on the benefits or restrictions of working with strong learners in after-school tutoring were presented, and allowed opportunities to explore how social interactions observed in classrooms might be linked to preconceived notions about learning from and with others of diverse abilities.

The marginalisation, for example, of strong learners, in the sense that teachers often focus on weaker learners, required a deeper analysis of how forms of marginalisation in classrooms limit opportunities to learn. As seen in the findings, one preservice teacher felt these learners were often neglected by teachers because they had to deal with the majority of learners who were not as accomplished in the subject. The tutoring intervention provided opportunities to critically acknowledge this and to address the individuality of learners by giving them extra attention. The finding that some preservice teachers were unsure how to provide for stronger learners speaks to their own agency as learners and teachers—resulting in an apparent lack of confidence.

At times, there emerged a level of critical reflection that questioned assumptions about learners' attitudes towards tutoring sessions:

> *Charlotte (E): Learners are keen to learn and are eager for attention. It seems they do not feel appreciated in their own classrooms . . . however, I thought they would question me more.*

In this case, Charlotte's deconstruction of self represents a significant move towards a higher level of criticality.

Not all critical reflection involved the questioning of such assumptions; some involved a critical view on matters such as creating a safe space for learners, as referred to earlier. Two preservice teachers used this idea of different learning spaces to take a critical view of the curriculum:

> *Tracy (E): The prescriptive nature of CAPS does not always allow for thorough consolidation of concepts, but I feel the teacher has to find time to address concepts that are not clear.*

> *Mandy (M): My learner did not understand the concept in class, but there was no time for her to ask the teacher. . . . I do not see how the teacher can continue if not even the bright learners have grasped the concept.*

To a certain extent, we think this shows preservice teachers' ability to reflect on the socioeducational and political power inherent in any teaching and learning context, and which the learners experienced firsthand. Similar to the ideas of Freire (1970) on conscientisation and learning, preservice teachers intuitively became aware of the inherent power relation between knowledge and learning. Preservice teachers' recognition of the time it takes to engage learners with their reasoning is a significant reflection from the perspective of a critical pedagogy that values learners having potential to take up the challenge of correcting flawed reasoning. These examples illustrate how key ideas in critical theory (such as questioning the role of curriculum in limiting opportunities for deep engagement with learners' thinking) emerged. The preservice teachers were confronted with the dichotomy of practicality of time versus the idealism of quality teaching and learning—and had to rethink their own assumptions and ideology of teaching critically.

In the following subsections, we present two assumptions made by preservice teachers and discuss the opportunities that arose to deconstruct them: firstly, an assumption about the way in which learners responded to questions in the tutoring space and secondly, the preservice teachers' assumptions about the kinds of learning experiences that learners would value in a tutoring space. These examples present the opportunities for advancing critical reflection that emerged.

Learners are Introverted and Shy

Preservice teachers, when reflecting on their challenges in building relationships with their learners, understood learners' brief responses to questions as their being introverted and shy or not being comfortable with them. However, emerging in the preservice teachers' narratives were several episodes that point to opportunities for the preservice teachers to question these assumptions.

The idea that learners' lacked self-confidence to read in English was suggested and yet no connection was made between being shy and lacking self-confidence, nor questions about the underlying reason for this lack of self-confidence. Further inquiry into being shy and lacking self-confidence could have been explored in a context in which the tutoring space was regarded as a safer space than the classroom to ask questions or speak. An opportunity for critical inquiry into connections between different categorisations of learners' dispositions and learning identities and how these were shaped by the social and cultural practices in their classroom, or even in their broader communities, was created but not explored.

The preservice teachers' narratives presented reflections on learners' attitudes to their tutoring as being influenced by "feeling special" and "knowing that their friends now wanted to learn from them." Raising questions about when a person is valued as having knowledge, and how this could influence how one's self-confidence and participation in a learning space is influenced, was another opportunity to deconstruct perceptions of learners being shy and introverted, and assumptions on the reasons for this disposition in a tutoring learning space. However, none of the preservice teachers in this reflective dialogue spontaneously reflected critically on her or his own learning experiences to question their assumptions of learners' dispositions.

While many of the preservice teachers' reflections noted the importance of gaining insight into learners' participation in their classrooms, and into their home environments (in other words, further investigation about their learning experiences), this did not prompt them to explore alternative views on their perspectives of learners' dispositions. It can be deduced that the aspects of deconstructing the normal power learning relationships embedded in whole class teaching did not completely disappear in the tutoring context. It could be because this was a new experience for both the preservice teachers and learners, and that they needed more time to adjust to the new context. However, what is important is that the preservice teachers were able to critically reflect on this and attempt to overcome the lack of communication.

Keep Them at Their Level and Practise—Practise Before Moving

A concern with ensuring that learners are provided with the basic knowledge in mathematics and English was noted in some reflections. Coupled with this concern was a strong emphasis on learners being provided with ongoing practice on the same basic knowledge. While it is important to understand the nature of conceptual progression, preservice teachers did not question their assumptions about these aspects in a tutoring space.

The perception of the preservice teachers was that the tutoring space was where complete understanding of a particular concept or set of concepts had to be guaranteed. Both English and mathematics preservice teachers spent extensive periods on the same topic or concepts without any reflection on how such an approach influenced learning, or how this shaped learners' belief in their capabilities when confronted with a new challenge. They were not able to identify and critically reflect on the affected learning efficacy they were able to instigate. Consequently, their own relationships with knowledge and power were not critically examined in any depth.

The tutoring space could act as a space for experimentation and risk taking but was not imagined as such. The assumptions about this space as one where knowledge is mastered in linear ways may be linked to preservice teachers' own experiences of being tutored, and these views of knowledge construction remained unchallenged. Learners' efficacy is affected by the learner–teacher relationship and the potential for this being enhanced was not really appreciated by these preservice teachers.

Conclusion

In our theoretical framing of this paper, we used critical theory to design modules with the overarching goal to challenge our preservice teachers' often *oppressed consciousness*, the Freirean concept of not recognising the important role and responsibility for transforming the world (in this case, the educational experiences of preservice teachers themselves and their learners in the tutoring space). Preservice teachers' reflections on tutoring experiences in our service learning approach brought to the fore opportunities to view education as not merely an engagement with concepts but an appreciation of the importance of understanding what it means to engage in dialogue in a learning process with others. As pointed out by Freire (1970), this created a powerful conversational space for the preservice teachers to engage with their learners, and also with their lecturer and fellow students.

Our preservice teachers' reflections on their tutoring experiences afforded them opportunities to confront challenges not necessarily experienced in traditional teaching practice. Their narratives reflected challenges of transitioning between contexts for both themselves and learners they tutored. For the learners, the contexts would be learning in a whole class context and the transition to one-to-one learning. Meaney and Lange (2013) argued that when learners transition between two contexts, the degree of adjustment required depends on the differences between the contexts. For the preservice teachers, the transition would be teaching in different contexts and working with learners from different backgrounds to their own. Preservice teachers' reflections moved to considerations of how to improve their understanding of their learners' experiences in other contexts such as out-of-school experiences in their communities. However, our preservice teachers did not make explicit what tutoring practices would facilitate this transition, and why a particular form of facilitation was necessary. An inquiry into how the cultural practices of the classroom impact on learners' disposition did not emerge in a critical reflective sense. The preservice teachers did not challenge forms of practice in classrooms that limited learners' confidence to take risks, nor did they discuss their thinking. In one of the narratives, the mere acknowledgement of power relations in a tutoring space was noted, and a shift in learner participation was seen as a significant increase in confidence within such a power relation. An inquiry into the nature of teacher–learner power relations in the class was not raised with specific intention to question how learning is influenced by these relations, and how these power relations can be changed. The after-school tutoring created opportunities for critical reflection to take place but these opportunities, while being a necessary prerequisite for critical reflection, do not guarantee that critical reflection will take place.

The challenge presented by our practice is to consider how to improve opportunities to engage preservice teachers with their own meanings of experiences, and to examine their assumptions. We need to create reflective spaces (individual and collaborative) in which we explicitly ask preservice

teachers to identify the assumptions that they make. This pedagogical move is necessary to challenge them to address oppressive practices in teaching and to engage with the sociopolitical context within which teaching and learning take place.

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