

Preparing student teachers for teaching in rural schools using work integrated learning¹

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the preparation of student teachers for teaching in rural schools using Work Integrated Learning (WIL). Generally, teachers are not prepared to teach in rural schools and those that are currently working there want to leave. Amongst other recruitment strategies for rural teaching, South Africa uses the Funza Lushaka bursary scheme for student teachers to work in rural schools after obtaining qualifications, and a rural school allowance for teachers already working there. This paper reports on the findings of 10 student teachers placed in two rural schools for WIL, two rural school teachers, the Teaching Practice (TP) officer and the Subject Advisor for rural schools. Participatory Action Research (PAR) was used as a methodology to allow participants to be co-researchers in generating data. Meeting discussions were conducted to get experience of rural teaching and data were analysed and interpreted through the use of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The findings are that many teachers are not trained for rural teaching during their study, and that there is no collaboration between the rural schools and Teacher Education Institution (TEI). The paper recommends collaboration between TEIs and rural schools and collaboration between the Department of Higher Education and the Department of Basic Education for teacher training programmes.

Keywords: Work Integrated Learning (WIL), Teacher Education Institution (TEI), Student teachers and rural school

INTRODUCTION

Teachers were trained at the Colleges of Education in South Africa (SA) long before the introduction of Initial Professional Education Training (IPET). Students were enrolling for a Teaching Certificate to qualify for teaching. More recently, students had to study for a three-year diploma for their qualification. In all these qualifications to teach, Teaching Practice (TP) was used as a means to expose student teachers to teaching in schools while still studying (DHET, 2000).

In 2007, South Africa introduced IPET to transform teacher education for student teachers while in their field of study (DBE, 2007). The purpose of IPET was to professionalize teaching qualifications for student teachers to study for a four-year Bachelor of Education degree to qualify for the profession, and those

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with degrees had to enroll for a one-year Post Graduate Certificate (PGCE) to become fully qualified teachers. IPET was introduced to overcome the teaching challenges experienced by new teachers in schools during their first year in the teaching profession. The minimum requirements for the Teacher Education Qualification (MRTEQ) policy in South Africa, pronounce specific provisions for the development of learning programmes and guidelines for practical and Work Integrated Learning (WIL) structures of student teachers (DHET, 2015). WIL is the placement of student teachers in schools to practise teaching in an authentic environment for a prescribed period.

Another policy, Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), prescribes the same curriculum for delivery in all South African schools irrespective of the socio-economy of the area in which the schools are located (DBE, 2011). Although the MRTEQ policy identifies WIL as important, there is still the challenge of insufficient preparation of student teachers for rural teaching because teacher education in South Africa is urban centric (Bertram & Rusznyak, 2015). The effectiveness of CAPS and MRTEQ can be diminished by rural factors such as geographical distance, low and uneven levels of teacher expertise, a wide-ranging lack of resources, as well as a lack of discipline among a wide cross-section of teachers. WIL is used in other countries like Zimbabwe, USA, Lesotho and others to address the challenges of teacher preparation programmes to prepare teachers while still studying for the profession. Zimbabwe adopted the principle of mentoring where a student teacher is attached to a qualified teacher, who is experienced and knowledgeable during WIL (Makura & Zireva, 2013). The USA emphasises that student teachers must incorporate teaching theories with practising, rather than teaching theories before practising (Karamustafaolu, 2009). The practice in Lesotho is internship for student teachers in different schools away from the university, while still studying for the profession, with the purpose of learning and practising (Bitso & Fourie, 2014).

Different countries operate WIL in different ways and the duration depends on the uniqueness of the Teacher Education Institutions (TEIs). This paper focuses on how to improve the preparation of teachers for work in rural schools while still studying for the profession. The study recommends that the teacher education institutions should work collaboratively with rural schools to prepare professional teachers for rural learning. Another recommendation is for teachers and student teachers in rural schools to use multiple methods and multiple resources for teaching.

THE TEACHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION AND RURAL SCHOOLS

The Teacher Education Institution (TEI) is an education institution that trains teachers for a teaching career. The TEI prepares student teachers from their first year of study using modules which include content that is theoretical and practical, but some of the practical modules are presented theoretically. Mukeredzi (2013) indicates that South Africa started to reorganise the TEI after 1994 to change the way student teachers were taught during the apartheid teacher education system, by redressing the apartheid legacies related to under-resourcing, particularly in rural schools. There is a difference between the way student teachers were taught then, and today. There is also an existing discrepancy between teacher preparation programmes to teach in urban and in rural schools that needs attention. The TEI referred to in this paper is a university that offers teacher training programmes, namely a four-year Bachelor of Education and a one-year Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) for students in possession of a junior degree. The Bachelor of Education qualification in this university consists of Foundation phase, Senior and Further Education and Training (FET) phase; and PGCE for the Senior and FET phase.

Student teachers learn theory of teaching from different modules at the university and a teaching practice module which needs practical work in schools. This paper focuses on the practical component of teaching student teachers for the profession with more emphasis on rural schools during WIL. Rusznyak and Bertram (2015) mention that teacher education programmes in South Africa are not sufficiently preparing student

teachers to teach in underprivileged or rural contexts. Avery (2013) defines a rural school as a school in an area that lies outside the urban area, characterised by low population density and a smaller number of learners in a school. A rural school in this paper refers to schools in the area with limited resources that require schools to do more with less, where one teacher is teaching many subjects, it is difficult to attract staff to stay and, as a remote school serves highly poverty-stricken communities with limited economic opportunities (Nkambule & Mukeredzi, 2017). Among other challenges associated with rural teaching, the paper focuses on how student teachers are trained to work away from their homes where there is a shortage of public transport and they must teach many subjects.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study is guided by Critical Emancipatory Research (CER) as a paradigm to enable interaction among the student teachers with rural school teachers and those involved in rural education to work on an equal basis (Nkoane 2012). Mahlomaholo (2009) affirms that CER is emancipating, it changes the lives of people to liberate them from less important practices and thoughts, and to meet the needs of the life situation. Biesta (2010) also emphasises the idea of emancipation as having a central role in modern educational theories and practices. He states that emancipating people makes them independent and free as result of intervention. For the purposes of this research, I worked together with student teachers in rural schools to address issues affecting education, to come up with the best approaches to improve the situation.

In this study, student teachers and experienced teachers at a rural school participate in the issues related to their own society through rural learning ecologies. Opportunities for discussion to point out views about rural teaching experiences and how to bring about changes and improvements where there is a need, is created through CER. Participants work collaboratively as co-researchers in the marginalised rural ecologies with the main researcher and Teaching Practice (TP) officer, to come to a common understanding of rural learning. The marginalised group of co-researchers contributes to the teacher preparation programme.

The MRTEQ document emphasises WIL to take place in the workplace and includes aspects of learning from practice (DBE, 2015). Dlamini (2017) mentions that WIL enables student teachers to become more socialised and more collaborative in their learning to teach. The collaborative nature of WIL as espoused in this paper changes the lives of student teachers by liberating them from less useful practices and thoughts, to meet the needs of real life (Mahlomaholo, 2009). Furthermore, the transformative nature of the critical theory is founded upon anti-oppressive philosophy as a lens through which to identify and change the root sources of oppression (Moleko, 2014). Student teachers learn holistically by being exposed to different challenging environments to apply their own thoughts.

The WIL in this paper creates a platform for student teachers to be exposed to rural schools' teaching and be treated equally as partners in the study, not as the researched. They are part of the group in a social setting and all principles of democracy are adhered to while the study is conducted. As student teachers in the study are not prepared to teach in rural schools after completing their teaching qualifications, this paper aims to prepare teachers for rural schools. WIL in rural schools makes it possible for students to respond to the two objectives of the paper. Firstly, to find the solutions to the challenges associated with rural teaching and secondly, to establish the need to send student teachers to rural schools for WIL.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Student teachers are assigned to experienced teachers at rural schools for mentoring and assessment in teaching. Lecturers from the TEI also visit the schools on WIL to assess student teachers in classroom teaching. The paper uses a Participatory Action Research (PAR) method with a qualitative approach in

the preparation of student teachers for rural teaching. PAR is chosen to allow freedom of participation of student teachers and teachers in the rural school, and to commit themselves to the results of the study (Mallick, 2007). Ten student teachers were sent to two rural schools in the Free State province. These student teachers were in their third year of study and they volunteered to participate in the study. They all had no previous experience of rural learning which is characterised by being outside urban areas, with little resources and low population density (Mukeredzi, 2013; Avery, 2013, Hlalele, 2013). Two rural school teachers who were mentors to student teachers from each school were requested to be part of the research team because PAR is an action research which involves the researcher and the participants to work together in coming up with the best strategy to improve the situation (Biesta, 2010).

The TP officer from the university and the Subject Advisor for rural schools were also part of participants in the paper. The TP officer was recruited because she is doing administrative duties for teaching practice at the university. The Subject Advisor was recruited to give credibility to the study as he is responsible for curriculum quality assurance in rural schools assigned to him by the education district. Data were generated using observations and group meetings during the WIL period, following a cycle of planning, observing, reflecting and re-planning until improvement is achieved (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2007). I observed student teachers presenting lessons in the classroom environment where there are limited resources for teaching and learning. We also conducted meetings to discuss the teaching of student teachers in rural schools and other challenges they experienced in rural teaching. Two lessons of 10 student teachers were observed to initiate discussions. Each of these lessons lasted one hour, meaning each student teacher was observed for two different lessons.

The first lesson was observed by an experienced teacher in the rural school and the second lesson by the researcher. The rural school teacher and the researcher used a similar classroom observation form to generate data. The forms were written in English because the lessons were presented in English. Two meetings were conducted with student teachers, rural school teachers, the researcher and two parents of learners in the school. The meetings were conducted for everybody involved in the study to take full participation, because PAR was used as a method for data collection. The first meeting was conducted at the end of the first week and the second meeting at the end of the third week of WIL. All the meetings were conducted in Sesotho to accommodate parents who could not speak English. It was agreed during this meeting that a voice recorder would be used to record spoken words. This was for the researcher to have enough time to listen to the comments of all members for the purpose of analyzing data.

The number of students was limited to 10 because of financial constraints. These students were transported to the school on the first day and were collected after the WIL. The Faculty of Education from the university assisted with the funding of the students to get food for the period while in a rural school for WIL. The university provided funding because TP is one of the modules in the teacher training programme. Committed teachers in the school under study and the rural school Subject Advisor contributed by introducing student teachers to multi-grade teaching and motivating them for rural school teaching. Parents in the rural school were involved because of their life experience in the rural area to mentor student teachers on rural life, which lacks the teaching and learning resources that are found in urban areas. They were members of the School Governing Body who do not have full-time employment. They were mostly available to participate in the meetings during the study.

Data were collected from the lesson presentation in the classroom and during the general discussions. Two instruments were used for data generation: observation forms and a recording device. Observation forms were used by experienced rural school teachers and the researcher to collect data from classroom teaching. The two observers used similar observation forms in different lessons to collect data from classroom teaching. The experienced rural school teachers were used to collect data from the classroom

to avoid the challenge of captive participation that could emerge from student teachers to the researcher. The two objectives identified above were used to generate discussions to generate data collected on the challenges associated with rural teaching and how to implement WIL in rural schools.

Challenges experienced for the whole WIL process by rural school teachers, student teachers, the researcher and parents through observation from in and outside the classroom were discussed in these meetings. The reliability of this study is based on the fact that its data were collected using two methods: observation and group interviews. Student teachers were observed by two different people to avoid captive participation. Each of the 10 student teachers were observed by experienced rural school teachers and the researcher who is a TP lecturer. Observation forms were used to collect data from the lesson presentation. Discussions during meetings were used to confirm validity and reliability of the study. During the meetings, participants were able to voice their observations. A recording device was used to record the responses of participants.

Permission was granted by the Free State Department of Education and the ethical committee of the Faculty of Education at the university to conduct the study. I visited the principals of the two schools to introduce myself as a researcher to indicate the aim of the study. We held separate meetings with teachers of the two different schools to inform the teachers about the aim of the study. I informed them that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time during the study if they so wished. We agreed with participants to use a recording device in meetings, to assure correct interpretation of the discussions. The team was guaranteed confidentiality of the discussions during the study and that the records, including the voice recorder, would be kept in a lockable safe until the study was complete. Their real names would not be used in the study and generated data will be destroyed after publication. I promised them to come back after analysing the results, before completing the finding, to confirm whether the text had been captured correctly. All participants signed the consent forms, which were written in English and Sesotho.

Only two rural schools were used to conduct the study because of the geographical distance from the university to take student teachers daily for WIL. The study needed funding to transport student teachers on the first day and back on the last day after the WIL. The other challenge was to place student teachers for such a long time away from their homes without adult supervision, while their parents sent them to the university to study.

DATA GENERATION AND ANALYSIS

Data were generated and analyzed from the observations of the classroom teaching and meeting discussions. The two research objectives formed the basis of the lesson presentation and asked the meeting for discussions, the challenges associated with rural teaching and the implementation of WIL in rural schools. Data were analyzed from interpreting the responses on the observation forms of mentor teachers and by using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) from meeting discussions, to interpret it at textual, social and discursive levels (Jaekel, 2016). Hamrita (2016) affirms that according to Critical Discourse Analysts, language is a 'social practice'. This paper analyses written and spoken discourse to explore the sources of power, dominance, and inequality that might occur during discussions. CDA is used to describe, interpret, and explain the relationship between language and rural school communities.

I used observation forms from the experienced rural school teachers and my own observation as a researcher for analysis. The first response addresses the first objective, to find the solutions to the challenges associated with rural teaching and the second response the second one, the need to send student teachers to rural schools for WIL. I took all the responses from observation forms to the discussion meeting to initiate discussions with all the co-researchers, student teachers, TP officer, Subject Advisor and teachers.

Responses were elicited from the lesson observation sheets of the four teachers from the two schools for discussion. The common responses from four rural school teachers indicated that student teachers talk too much in the classroom without engaging learners in their teaching. I took note of the responses to be used to initiate discussions in the meeting. This was to understand whether the teachers expected student teachers to give more notes for learners to copy or give them more activities to do.

Student teachers know their content, however is like they are lazy to write on the chalkboard (Sheet 1 from School A).

Student teachers do not involve learners in their lessons (Sheet 2 from School A).

The students write too much on the chalkboard without explaining important points (Sheet 2 from School B).

They have a challenge of putting important points on chalkboard (Sheet 3 from School B).

Only one teacher from School B indicated not detecting students experiencing challenges in rural teaching.

I did not see anything wrong about chalkboard writing from all students I observed in this question. To me students were teaching as taught from the university and writing on the chalkboard. The challenge I observed is that they relied on one textbook as a source of information.

Failure to allow learners to construct their own knowledge during the lessons was one of the challenges observed during the meeting with participants. The rural school teachers indicated that student teachers lack knowledge of how to facilitate learning using constructivism. It appeared again that they rely more on the textbooks and electronic resources to be used in class. This became a problem for them because there are no such resources in rural schools. For teaching to be effective in rural schools, teachers must first understand constructivist theories and how to implement them. WIL in rural schools is a platform for student teachers to practise the art of teaching while studying. The statement of student teachers about lack of resources hampering teaching indicates the need for student teachers to be prepared for rural teaching while still studying.

Student A: For the rest of the two weeks' Teaching Practice session, learners had not received stationery. Another challenge is the workshops organised by the DBE affecting the whole school timetable.

Teacher A: The timetable is affecting the whole school because one teacher teaches many subjects. You will find that all other teachers are busy if one teacher has attended the workshop. They will close during the periods for the day.

One student teacher was brave to indicate that they are being abused by experienced teachers to do work that is not theirs, like teaching subjects in which they have not specialised.

...teachers here give us to do subject that we are not specialising with...

The student teacher talked out of curiosity to indicate that something was wrong and indicated that the situation must change. To the other teachers who did not respond to the statement, it is likely that it is the norm for learners not to have stationery at the beginning of the year. They did not respond to that point. Only the teacher responded on the affected timetable during workshops. His response shows that he was defending the situation. This is seen by the point that he responded on why learners are left unattended during workshops.

Responses by teachers from the observation indicated the need for student teachers to do WIL in rural schools. The teachers and parents were happy to have student teachers assisting them in their teaching;

they talked about 'offloading' them. They suggested that there should be a working relationship with TEIs to send student teachers regularly for WIL. From the observation form, teachers indicated the lack of collaboration between TEIs and rural schools as one of the challenges. This issue was also highlighted during the meeting.

Teacher B: I am happy to have people who are assisting us in teaching these learners. These student teachers are also assisting us because we also learn new things from them as we observe them teaching in class. The student teacher under my mentorship showed me a different method of doing the introduction to the topic after observing him for two different lessons.

Teacher C: I would suggest that these students come regularly to our school; if the school was closer to the university, they could even come during extra classes to assist.

The teachers showed interest to have the student teachers in their rural school. The presence of student teachers in the school is not what they expected. They forgot that students were there to practise teaching under supervision of experienced teachers, not to replace the teachers. The willingness of the teachers in the school contributed significantly for student teachers to be able to practise their teaching in an authentic environment. This supported the discussion in the first meeting, that it is proper that students do their WIL in a rural school for them to feel the reality of rural school teaching.

The above discussion indicates the need for the TEIs to work closely with schools, for WIL to address the requirements of the MRTEQ policy for integrating theory and practice of teaching practice. This policy insists that the institutions incorporate the types of learning during teacher training programmes for the students to meet the requirements of the qualification. Empirical data found during discussions supported that for teachers to be prepared to work in rural schools, they must practise the art of teaching while still in their training. They need to have thorough practice in the skills for rural learning ecologies. It became evident that there was no collaboration between the institutions of teacher education and the rural schools under study. Participants did not know that they could contribute something to teacher education.

The following comments were captured from the Subject Advisor for rural schools:

Experience is the best teacher; I am sure that if the majority of students could be accommodated in the rural schools during their practice teaching, the government would not decide to close rural schools as many teachers would understand working everywhere in the country.

The TP officer responded to the comment from the Subject Advisor by saying:

This is the only rural school with many characteristics of rurality close to the university. There are many challenges with other rural schools to place students, like daily transport to the school, accommodation and catering, to mention some.

The two participants, the Subject Advisor and TP officer, showed the need for collaboration by the TEIs and the rural schools for learning experience, to prepare rural teachers. The principal from the marginalised rural school is happy to have students coming to the school for WIL. In her text she stated

We usually experience challenges about newly appointed teachers who come to teach here and later they disappear ...

as if all newly appointed teachers in the school are not prepared to work in rural schools. The Subject Advisor supported the need for the TEI to work with rural schools. Talking from the side of the DBE, the

Subject Advisor finds that the DBE would benefit if many student teachers could be placed in rural schools for WIL. The TP officer responded from the university side, pointing out the challenges of WIL for many students at rural schools.

One teacher also indicated that he never had a chance to be trained in rural schools' teaching. He mentioned that he learnt to teach in a rural school by himself after being appointed at that school. The teacher further indicated that he is now used to rural teaching and does not see anything wrong. This is supported by literature that experiential learning typically requires reflective exercises with direct contact with the phenomenon being studied, rather than merely thinking about or discussing the potential for such contact.

Teacher B: The first time when I arrived at this school was a nightmare; I was thinking I will not cope to teach in a rural school, where there are different grades in one classroom. This was because we were not trained to teach a multi-grade class during our teacher's training...

Student D agreed with Teacher B by saying 'yes' and other students nodded, showing that they also agreed with the teacher.

The statement by teacher B indicates that it was hard for him in the beginning to cope with rural teaching. The statement by the teacher, 'The first time', shows that he has now developed or adopted the skills to teach in rural schools. This shows he learnt teaching in a rural school from his own experience as a teacher in a rural school; he was not trained during his study for the teaching profession. The nodding by students also shows that they are also not being taught to teach in rural schools. Their facial expressions when responding indicated the need to prepare teachers for rural teaching while studying. PAR created a platform for co-researchers to speak freely in discussions without power relations that could exist among participants while assisting student teachers. The responses by teachers supported PAR by responding freely about the lack of training in rural school teaching, which supports the need for teaching practice for rural teaching as part of learning. The student teachers in the study practised teaching in a school with situations similar to where they will be employed.

FINDINGS

Data indicated that there is lack of collaboration between the rural schools and the TEI to better prepare teachers for rural teaching. TEIs run their programmes without exposing student teachers to practise teaching in rural environments as expected by the MRTEQ. This lack of collaboration between rural schools and the TEI was discovered during the study: that students experienced a different teaching and learning environment. They were exposed to multiple rural perspectives like one teacher teaching many subjects, more than one grade classes in one classroom, teaching without resources or with limited resources, and teachers who cannot go for shopping after school because of geographical distance to the shops.

Students took time to understand rural teaching and learning in order for them to be better prepared to teach in that environment. It was discovered that the main problem for the lack of collaboration between TEI and rural schools is that the two institutions belong to two different education departments. TEIs belong to the DHE with its programmes and the schools belong to the DBE with different programmes and school calendar. The TEI would send student teachers to a rural school, only to find that there were other projects organised by the DBE or that teachers refused to cooperate with the requirements of the TEI.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper suggests that there should be a collective agreement between the DHE and the DBE nationally in the way teachers should be trained, because teachers are trained by the DHE for DBE. This information

should go to the provincial department of education, and down to the education district. The DBE should also monitor the programme for teacher training in different TEIs, to ensure that the programme caters for the needs of all schools in the country. This would assure that student teachers are prepared in totality to teach in all schools, irrespective of diversity. TEIs, on the other hand, should inform the DBE of their teaching practice programme before sending student teachers to the school for WIL. This is to align the WIL of student teachers with the DBE programmes in the schools and to make sure that student teachers are learning everything affecting the rural learning ecologies. The study also suggests that students go to rural schools for WIL as a form of motivation. This could serve to recruit many students to do their WIL in rural schools away from their home place.

It was discovered in the study that student teachers rely more on the use of textbooks as the only teaching resources. They fail to use teaching approaches that are engaging, meaningful and relevant to learners. Rural school teaching needs a teacher who has knowledge of different teaching approach to address the needs of learners. This is to address the challenge of the lack of resources in rural schools. A teacher who always depends on a textbook will not meet the needs of rural learners because many textbooks are only focusing on learning in urban areas and some of them may be outdated copies or be out of context in relation to the learners' everyday lives. The paper therefore suggests that student teachers should also learn skills that are necessary to cater for teaching in rural schools.

The paper closes the existing gap between theory and practice and student teachers need to be able to teach in rural schools without depending on the textbook but rather to provide opportunities for learner-centred approaches of teaching that require learners to gather the necessary evidence and identify suitable arguments. The paper recommends the use of constructivist teaching as a suitable approach that can foster rural learning. In a classroom where constructivism is employed, the teacher uses the prior knowledge of learners as the base to introduce new concepts, procedures and classifications. Student teachers facilitated the lessons in the rural learning ecologies by promoting dialogue on the material, so that learners could critically think about what they were learning. Student teachers actively construct knowledge rather than passively relying on the textbook (Sharma, 2011) and are able to generate knowledge from their own experience. Therefore, through their engagements they develop an inner drive to engage deeper and learn more about the rural activities.

CONCLUSION

This paper presented the challenges of teaching in rural schools and WIL in rural schools. The study justified the need to prepare teachers for rural teaching and the challenges associated with WIL in rural schools. The result suggests collaboration of the national DHE and the national DBE in the way teachers are trained for the profession. It also suggests that to implement WIL in rural schools, the TEIs on the ground should also collaborate with neighbouring rural schools to better prepare teachers for rural teaching. A further recommendation is for rural school teachers and student teachers to use multiple methods and resources in their teaching to engage all learners in their teaching. Through the implementation of these recommendations rural school communities could be supported by having teachers who are better prepared to teach in rural schools.

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