South African rural high school teachers' experiences of teaching English poetry

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Abstract

Research suggests a reluctance by teachers to teach poetry in South African English Second Language (ESL) classrooms. The teaching of poetry is shaped by issues such as resources, professional and personal experiences, societal influences, learners' attitudes toward poetry, and professional development opportunities. In this qualitative case study, we aimed to understand ESL teachers' experiences of teaching poetry in rural South African high schools by considering their Pedagogical Content Knowledge and how they align what they know about teaching with what they teach. Data was generated using reflective journals and individual semi-structured interviews from ten purposefully sampled ESL teachers from rural schools. The findings indicate that ESL teachers in rural settings rely heavily on their own personal, professional, or social experiences when teaching poetry, lack ongoing professional development, and do not appear to be aware of effective teaching strategies to teach poetry.

Keywords: teaching poetry, South African rural schools, teachers' experiences, pedagogical content knowledge

Introduction

In many classrooms around the world, despite a resurgence in global literature, poetry appears to be seen as lacking intellectual and cultural relevance, contributing to its declining status (Bigelow, 2002; Mastrangelo, 2009). Even in South Africa, research suggests that teachers hesitate to teach poetry in English Second Language (ESL) classrooms (Hlabisa, 2020). Since poetry is seen to navigate through realms of the ordinary, the magical, the abject, and the spiritual (Ndyoko, 2017), teachers have viewed poetry historically as an

overly sophisticated and intricate genre in the English curriculum (Ngidi, 2020; Panavelil, 2011; Syed & Wahas, 2020). There is no consensus among scholar and poets even on the definition of poetry (D'Abdon, 2010; Fynn, 2019). Boyd (1973) stated that there should be an agreement that poetry is more than the creation of meaningful arrangement of words and that poetry is more than verse; it is verse plus magic. For Trinya (2005), "Through its images (created by means of language), poetry appeals to thought or intellectual contemplation; through its music (achieved by means of rhythmic and phonic devices), it appeals to emotional contemplation" (p. 5). Poetry does not use everyday language, it is a form of communication that is filled with paradoxes and ambiguities of figurative language to explain the extraordinary to the ordinary, to make visible the unseen, and to make complex that which is seen to be simple.

Consequently, some teachers opt either to exclude poetry from their curricula (Maake, 2017), or teach poetry mechanistically by providing the poem's meaning and urging learners to identify figures of speech and poetic devices (D'Abdon et al., 2020; Newfield & Maugendzo, 2006). This approach fails to equip learners with the skills needed to analyse poetry in relation to an understanding of a poem's significance. Instead, it treats poetry as something to be memorised and regurgitated rather than comprehended and appreciated, thus exacerbating learners' anxieties in relation to poetry.

To address learners' and teachers' anxieties, Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001) and Newfield and Maugendzo (2006) suggested the use of multimodal pedagogies in the teaching of poetry in ESL classrooms. Multimodality involves using various semiotic modes in the creation of a semiotic product or event and understanding the specific ways in which these modes are integrated. While the use of multimodality in pedagogies allows teachers to enhance their creativity in both the planning and delivery of poetry lessons (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001), teachers should also tap into their personal, social, and professional experiences to enrich their creative approaches to teaching poetry effectively (Xerri, 2012). Integrating both multimodal strategies and experiences could address challenges encountered during the teaching of poetry (Xerri, 2012).

Simecek and Rumbold (2016) pointed out that in our arguing for the teaching of poetry in schools, we must think critically about the benefits of poetry and "why they are particular to poetry rather than other artforms" (p. 309). This is important since numerous scholars, among them D'Abdon, et al., (2020) and Newfield and Maugendzo (2006) have observed its decline in schools. However, according to Fynn (2019, p. 10) "at its best, poetry is designed carefully to portray the art, beauty, meaning and mystery of language." Poetry offers learners more than just means of communication and appreciation of a language. If taught properly, it can enhance learners' proficiency in a language (Qwabe, 1996). Poetry can be used for more than meaning making and can help learners learn new vocabulary, forms of punctuation, and the intricacies of grammar among other things (Syed & Wahas, 2020).

In this paper, we aim to answer two research questions: "What are the personal, social, and professional experiences of South African teachers when teaching poetry to English Second

Language learners in rural high schools." And, "How do such experiences shape their poetry teaching practices?"

Literature review

Stone (2022) defined experiences as activities or events undergone that encompass skills or knowledge acquired through direct involvement or emotional response. Strawson (2003) posited that experience necessitates a subject since, inherently, it requires someone or something to perceive it. Teaching literary texts can evoke various types of experiences— personal, social, and professional (Martell and Stevens, 2017; Schrijvers et al., 2017; Wintels et al., 2018). Makumane and Khoza (2020) asserted that for the poetry curriculum to be implemented effectively, teachers should integrate social, professional, and personal experiences to achieve desired outcomes. This includes reference to societal needs, social experiences, and personal ones. This research indicates that focusing solely on one type of experience while neglecting others could impede the achievement of one's teaching objectives.

Achieving teaching objectives (and, thus, successful learner performance) in the poetry classroom is linked to teachers' pedagogical approaches, influenced by their subject expertise and teaching methods (Evans et al., 2020; Romylos, 2021; Timothy and Obiekezie, 2019). Haidar and Fang (2019) pointed to a decline in teachers' confidence when teaching poetry that leads to anxiety in their professional decision-making. Turner (2020) noted that teachers resist teaching poetry because of perceived deficiencies in their professional training, social experiences in the school community, and personal teaching strategies. This indicates that those who have had bad social and personal experiences in teaching poetry because of how they were taught, negatively impacts their professional experiences of teaching poetry. However, Márquez-García et al. (2020) contended that teachers who incorporate their personal experiences into their teaching practices place themselves at the core of their teaching environments and that this aids them and their learners in forming their professional identities. Teaching environments need to be supportive of experiential and subjective activities if they are to facilitate learners to construct knowledge that holds personal significance (Khoza & Mpungose, 2022; Makumane & Khoza, 2020; Ndlovu, 2016; Zuma, 2020).

Teachers' personal experiences

Teachers often draw on their personal experiences to inform their teaching practices as Buthelezi (2016) and Khoza (2016) have reminded us. Timothy and Obiekezie (2019) argued that ESL teachers often lack the motivation to teach poetry because of its perceived complexity in meaning and complicated language that makes it difficult to teach to ESL learners. This negative perception affects their approach to teaching poetry. Consequently, their teaching methods, shaped by fear and reluctance, lead them to adopt reductionist and prescriptive strategies that limit learners' authentic engagement with the poems being studied (Timothy & Obiekezie, 2019; Viana & Zyngier, 2019). Similarly, Evans et al. (2020) found that teachers simplify the teaching of poetry in focusing on extracting information rather than

encouraging learners to engage with the text through personal interpretation. This suggests that teachers who allow their negative personal experiences to shape their poetry teaching tend to favour teacher-cantered, reductionist approaches focused on delivering prescribed content, and potentially neglecting the diverse learning needs of their learners. Their resorting to reductionist methods also points to a lack of confidence in teachers (Vala et al., 2012). The study by Hennessy et al. (2021) found that teachers exhibit low confidence in teaching poetry and that this leads to high levels of anxiety about their subject knowledge and, in turn, to ineffective teaching practices. This fear of teaching poetry contributes to learners' reluctance to engage with the genre and this results in poor performance.

In South Africa's rural areas, some teachers have ceased teaching poetry because of their self-doubt, anxiety about their subject knowledge stemming from their personal experiences, and their struggles to grasp the intricate language involved in teaching it (Fynn, 2019). In addition, many teachers perceive the language employed in poetry as overly challenging for ESL learners given its inherent ambiguities and paradoxes (El-Hindi, 2008; Fynn, 2019). Consequently, teachers often find themselves compelled to address their learners' language barriers, rather than the content of the poems, during instructional sessions. Further, ESL teachers often experience anxiety when teaching English poetry, particularly if they are not proficient English speakers themselves (El-Hind, 2008). Similarly, Samuel and Stephens (2000) highlighted the challenges teachers face in teaching and learning English poetry in rural areas, attributing their difficulties to a lack of comprehension of the English language. In addition, when teachers have to engage with higher-order questions and symbolic language, they tend not to use their personal experiences as starting points (Godsell, 2020).

Teachers' social experiences

Social experiences involve interactions with others that foster the development of communication and social skills (Jones et al., 2022). In an educational context, as is the context of this study, teachers engage with colleagues, subject advisors, and learners. Teachers who draw from their social experiences are influenced by societal viewpoints which may be anecdotal, subjective, and shaped by cultural norms (Ngubane-Mokiwa & Khoza, 2021). Moreover, these teachers may discuss poetry teaching in community settings based on societal expectations, learners' social needs, and the skills necessary to address societal demands (Mpungose & Khoza, 2022; Ngubane-Mokiwa & Khoza, 2021). They are empowered to share their viewpoints in receiving encouragement and validation from peers, learners, mentors, and instructors. Such teachers teach poetry with confidence; they are supported by societal consensus and are equipped with skills tailored to societal requirements through collaborative interactions (Kohn Rådberg et al., 2020).

Fynn (2019) suggested that teachers who base their teaching on social interactions have a better grasp of their learners' developmental stages. This understanding guides their selection of poems, ensuring that they choose poems appropriate for their learners' language proficiency levels. Since learners are integrated into the teacher's social environment, they are able to comprehend their learners' poetry learning needs and their challenges, including language barriers. Sung (2021) asserted that teachers' decisions regarding poetry instruction

are frequently shaped by their social engagements. However, teachers' social experiences may also lead to their decisions to stop teaching poetry or teach only what they believe their learners can comprehend. It becomes clear that teachers' interpretations of their social experiences influence their perspectives, including how they perceive the process of teaching poetry.

Teachers' professional experiences

Although teachers may draw from personal or social experiences, it is crucial for them to possess professional expertise in the subject matter, particularly when teaching poetry (Kaufman & Baer, 2012; Van, 2009). This expertise, gained through professional experience, is instrumental in ensuring effective teaching. A teacher's professional background in poetry teaching is shaped by the prescribed curriculum content and factual knowledge acquired from diverse disciplinary or professional sources (Khoza, 2021; Loughran, 2019; Makumane & Khoza, 2020). Guided by resources such as the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), teachers' guides, and their qualifications, teachers can select pedagogical approaches like problem-based learning, discovery learning, inquiry-based learning, and information-based strategies that are suitable for teaching poetry in their classrooms (Santos et al., 2019). The CAPS document (2011) also suggests the use of the close-reading approach when one is teaching poetry since it does not require extra resources. While this approach is appropriate and necessary, however, it cannot cover all the prescribed poems since many require more than the close-reading of the text if they are to mean anything.

Professional experience is acknowledged as essential to teacher training programmes (Ellis et al., 2020), where teachers have experienced teaching in a school setting, and have undergone teaching practice experiences guided by both school and university mentors (Ellis et al., 2020). Teachers in schools are acknowledged as professionals and are expected to apply their professional insights when they are teaching poetry. However, Wexler (2019) pointed out that assuming that professionally experienced teachers inherently possess the necessary expertise to effectively teach poetry is a misconception. According to Singh et al. (2020) and Burroughs et al. (2019) teachers who rely solely on their professional training and experiences encounter difficulties in teaching poetry when compared to those who incorporate both social and personal experiences.

Additionally, Singh et al. (2020) found that teachers who draw predominantly on their professional backgrounds and experiences encounter challenges in introducing poetry to learners in that they often feel unsure about the most effective teaching and learning methods. Relying solely on professional experiences leads to difficulty for teachers in planning and implementing appropriate strategies for teaching poetry in the classroom. These teachers, while equipped with professional knowledge of poetry and trained in teaching strategies, may hesitate to teach it because of personal doubts about their abilities along with uncertainties regarding their learners' learning needs (Luthuli, 2020; Molosiwa & Boikhutso, 2020; Mtetwa, 2021). Quinlan's (2019) study found that teachers believe they lack adequate professional preparation and experiences to teach poetry effectively in the classroom despite its being a required part of the curriculum and despite its inclusion in their professional pre-

service training. However, there are some teachers who express a willingness to incorporate poetry into their teaching despite having limited professional experience, knowledge, and understanding of how to do so (Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020; Gabrielsen et al., 2019).

The teaching of poetry comes with numerous challenges particularly in the ESL context that is often defined by its lack of resources that makes it difficult for teachers to employ different approaches in such teaching. In addition to this, is that both teachers and learners have negative attitudes towards poetry. Khatib (2011) pointed out that some teachers conclude readily that poetry is difficult for learners, so it will be out of their reach. The assumption that ESL learners do not have sufficient vocabulary and language proficiency required to analyse poetry along with other perceptions about them, prove to be a challenge in the teaching of poetry in ESL classrooms.

Theoretical underpinning

The concept of Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) is underpinned by Shulman's (1986) awareness that PCK is a type of knowledge that envisions and puts into practice the fusion of teachers' understanding of subject content and their pedagogical approaches. Shulman challenged the conventional belief that one must prioritise either content knowledge, with pedagogy considered secondary, or pedagogy with no accountability for content knowledge. In this paper, we use PCK to analyse the personal, social, and professional experiences of South African teachers who are teaching poetry to ESL learners in rural high schools and explore how such experiences shape their poetry teaching practices.

When they are teaching poetry, teachers need to use their PCK, as Shulman (1986) has noted, since this is when they align what they know about teaching poetry with what they teach when they are actually teaching poetry. Teaching experience has been recognised as a significant factor in PCK development. Since topic-specific PCK develops over time and through experience, informing how to teach certain content in certain ways, one would expect teachers to draw on their personal, social, and professional experiences to inform their teaching of poetry.

Teaching poetry, like teaching any literary genre, requires special attention and particular pedagogical skills to do it effectively (Young, 2016). PCK allows us to ask critical questions about the hidden curriculum of teachers as knowers and how their experiences of poetry (how they were taught and how they teach it) manifests in their pedagogical practices. Shulman (1986) prompts us to think critically about the content taught by teachers by asking, "How do teachers decide what to teach, how to represent it, how to question learners about it and how to deal with problems of misunderstanding?" (p. 8). Thinking critically about these questions regarding the teaching of poetry forces us to question pedagogical knowledge and personal, social, and professional experiences and see how these concepts merge. Thus, we use the "special amalgam of content and pedagogy that is uniquely the province of teachers, their own form of special understanding" (Shulman, 1986, p. 8), to understand their experiences and how they influence their teaching of poetry. Kathirveloo et al. (2014) remind us that when we are thinking about education, it is not only learners who might have misconceptions

about the content subject, but so might teachers too. Therefore, the concept of PCK allows teachers to reflect on their subject matter and how they teach the content effectively.

Methodology

In this study, we employed a qualitative case study, within an interpretive paradigm, of ESL rural high school teachers in one of the districts in KwaZulu Natal. The choice of the interpretive paradigm was appropriate to our goal of comprehending the human actions and experiences of our participants. Our aim was to delve into participants' interpretations of their personal, social, and professional experiences (see Shinga & Pillay, 2021) and this paradigm facilitated our deep understanding of the participants' professional, personal, and social experiences by examining the significance they attributed to these experiences. The interpretive paradigm facilitated exploration and understanding of these South African teachers' personal, social, and professional experiences in teaching poetry to ESL learners in rural high schools and how their experiences have shaped their poetry teaching practices and choice of methods (and continue to do so).

The interpretive paradigm was effectively complemented by the qualitative approach that facilitated the creation of in-depth reports that enabled us to gain insights into the experiences of the teachers involved, the social environments influencing their teaching, and the subsequent impact of all this on their real-world situations. The approach proved valuable in unravelling the intricacies of poetry instruction in rural schools since direct engagement with participants during data generation deepened our understanding.

The case study approach was appropriate for this study because it allowed us to gain concrete, contextual, and in-depth knowledge about the ESL teachers' experiences of teaching poetry. The purpose of a case study approach is to analyse and interpret the uniqueness of a situation in its real-life condition (Cohen, 2018). Following Shinga and Pillay, (2021) using a qualitative case study, we could delve intensively into the phenomenon by having participants keep reflective journals and by conducting semi-structured interviews as key methods in our exploration. Mthembu (2022) suggested that employing a qualitative case study is particularly suitable when one is exploring the underlying reasons for current events and especially when studying the contextual factors surrounding the phenomenon under study. In line with Siggelkow's (2007) suggestions, this case study offered opportunities for in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study.

For the study, ESL teachers working in different rural settings in a specific district of the KwaZulu-Natal province in South Africa were purposefully selected. Purposive sampling is used to select respondents that are directly linked to and will likely provide appropriate responses to the phenomenon being studied (Kumar, 2018)) To be sampled, the participants had to hold university degrees with qualifications in ESL teaching. The ten participants were native IsiZulu speakers and had between 3 and 15 years of experience teaching ESL, and were aged between 40 and 60 years.

The choice of rural schools drew on understandings of rurality in relation to economic factors and accessibility (Abdulwakeel, 2017), since rural schools, in contrast to urban ones, are characterised by a development model that excludes them, resulting in limited resources, poverty, and a reliance on social and welfare grants. In post-apartheid South Africa, rural areas often lack basic infrastructure such as proper housing, sanitation, and electricity. Many schools remain unchanged or show less progression in terms of resources after 30 years of democracy. Many rural schools rely solely on basic resources like chalkboards and shared books, which are insufficient for effective teaching and learning (Abdulwakeel, 2017). This inadequacy is particularly apparent in the teaching of poetry in rural contexts.

We had the teachers in the rural ESL schools keep reflective journals to generate data on their experiences as ESL poetry teachers. Each participant received twenty questions via WhatsApp to prompt reflection on these experiences. The questions did not invite responses; they served to help guide the participants towards structured reflection on their experiences of teaching poetry. Some participants found the questions too long and this resulted in incomplete responses from three participants. Also, teachers' busy schedules reduced their eagerness to participate in such research because, for them, it was just more "admin work." We acknowledge that this was a limitation of our study.

Following our perusal of the reflective journals, we held and recorded one-on-one semi-structured interviews, lasting between 30 to 40 minutes, in places chosen by the participants. The rationale for semi-structured interviews was for teachers to clarify some of their written reflections and provide us with a detailed explanation of their experiences. Some participants expressed discomfort with the recording process and opted to provide written responses instead. This proved to be another limitation since it hindered our ability to probe for deeper insights into their initial answers. Although some participants occasionally code-switched between English and isiZulu, we conducted the interviews in English rather than isiZulu because of the participants' roles as English teachers. The combination of reflections and semi-structured interviews proved to be effective in generating data in a study that focused on understanding lived experiences (see Abawi et al., 2018).

In order to ensure confidentiality and anonymity, participants were identified as P1 to P10 and were informed of their rights to voluntarily participation and withdrawal at any point during the study. We took the insider-outsider position. We are insiders because we had been teachers in rural under-resourced schools and we have experienced the difficulties of teaching in such conditions. This gave us empathy for the teachers in our study. We also acknowledge our positions as outsiders as university personnel and were careful to remain aware of the power dynamics involved. Our insider position tended to be dominant during this study since we had experienced similar difficulties. We explained our roles to the participants, and the interconnectedness of them. Ethical approval was obtained prior to the study from the relevant university.

Data from the teachers' reflective journals was compared and analysed thematically alongside the data from the interviews. Thematic analysis, a systematic approach for identifying, organising, and interpreting patterns of, enabled us to code it. Through this

coding process, distinct categories were identified, leading to the identification of relevant themes aligned with the research objectives. Initially, we formulated a preliminary set of themes based on the data from the reflective journals. Upon analysing the interview data, we discovered similar themes, and this allowed us to refine and finalise the themes by integrating insights from both data sets.

Presentation and discussion of findings

In this section, we present and discuss three main themes: Knowledge of the content and language; Professional, social, and personal experiences; and Lack of professional development.

Knowledge of the content and language

As indicated earlier, all participants were qualified, experienced ESL teachers who had undergone professional training to teach English. When they are teaching English poetry, it is crucial for teachers to possess a strong command of English to comprehend the sometimes-intricate language used If ESL teachers lack proficiency in English, they may experience concerns and anxieties when tasked with teaching texts that demand a high level of language proficiency (Hennesy et al., 2021). Insufficient knowledge of the target language may result in teachers focusing solely on what will be assessed, relying on memoranda for analyses, avoiding class discussions, and simplifying complex ideas presented in the poetry being taught (Viana & Zyngier, 2019).

During the interviews, seven of the ten teachers were not comfortable engaging in English, and they switched from English to their mother tongue, isiZulu. Those who engaged in English made numerous grammatical errors in their responses. This was also evident in their reflective journals. Responses[1] included this from P7:

> P7: Language barrier, some poems are hard to grasp. It is often difficult to get to the meaning of the poem. The content of the poems then becomes difficult to understand.

This points to a lack of understanding of the content of some poems and, possibly, this teacher's inadequacy in relation to using English. Such insufficient content knowledge affects the teacher's capacity to teach effectively. Teachers need to know about what they have to teach, including the text and the language they have to use and how it is used in practice. Here, inadequate language and content proficiency informed this teacher's practice. P1 indicated: I sometimes have difficulty in teaching poetry due to the language diction that is used by poets that adds to the lack of understanding the content.

This finding suggests that teachers who are language proficient and know their content are able to teach poetry effectively since teachers' understanding of content knowledge results in good pedagogical practices and vice versa (Young, 2016). However, the opposite is also true; a lack of understanding of content knowledge results in inadequate pedagogical practices as

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[1]   These responses have not been edited.

can be seen in this response. P7: Language barrier, some poems are hard to grasp. It is often difficult to get to the meaning of the poem. The content of the poems then becomes difficult to understand.

These findings also suggest that the decisions to discard poetry in schools may be a result of the English teachers' inadequate understanding of the language complexity used by some poets. P1 indicated: I sometimes have difficulty in teaching poetry due to the language diction that is used by poets that adds to the lack of understanding the content. Here we see how ae teacher's low confidence levels in the subject may indicate both insufficient pedagogical skills and inadequate subject knowledge which. in turn, results in learners' poor performance.

Professional, personal, and social experiences

The poetry curriculum can be successfully enacted if English teachers incorporate social, personal, and professional experience when teaching it (Makumane & Khoza, 2020). The reliance on one type of experience may hinder the attainment of teaching and learning goals. The participants' responses indicated a lack of understanding of teaching strategies and teaching experiences and of the need for reliance on social and personal experiences. In addition, they could not differentiate between whether they were drawing from their personal, their professional, or their social experiences in their teaching. In their reflective journal, when asked whether they incorporated specific experiences, P4 stated, "I incorporate all of the above." P1 said, "They are able to view it widely and understand better for each poem when I use all of the above." The participants were expected to say if they used these specific experiences and how and why they used them, but they failed to do so in their reflective journals. They used generalised answers that, while possibly true, could not explain details of their use of their different experiences. It is also possible that the participants had little understanding of what was meant by these different experiences and no awareness of how teachers use the different experiences in classrooms. They appeared not to understand that their experiences informed their teaching in their classrooms and this is why they had to draw on them. This is evident in P10's journal response:

> I use both social and professional experiences because there are lot of poems and poets on social media these days. Some are as young as the kids we teach in our classrooms. So, it is better to let them be incorrect and guide them going forward.

Only P3 and P5 showed some understanding of their teaching experiences and how the experiences from which they drew when teaching helped them understand their practices in class. In the journal response, P3 noted, "A school is an academic institution therefore, it requires a professional approach to academic activities." This points to a classroom setting requiring teachers to behave in a professional way. This comment suggests that teachers draw from their professional experience as a requirement for all teachers in classes, thus reinforcing the idea that professional experience is a critically important part of any teacher program. P3's reliance on professional experience suggests that learning could be impeded if

teachers fail to plan and use suitable techniques, strategies, and approaches for teaching poetry. P5 noted:

> As teachers we must draw from these experiences so that our learners get a sense of what they are taught and realise that the poet's experiences are not peculiar but they are part of our realities.

The findings from P5 indicate an awareness that calling on various experiences can support teaching and learning in classrooms, so lack of awareness and understanding of these different experiences when teaching could result in teachers not effectively implementing the poetry curriculum.

There was an awareness that teachers relied on their social experiences when teaching. In their interview responses, P1 stated,

> Seeking advice from fellow colleagues and searching for better teaching strategies on the internet have been vital in assisting me in better choosing ideal teaching strategies that complement teaching poetry.

P9 responded,

> I did class visits to the teachers that have experience in teaching poetry. I looked at how they introduce their lessons and how would that help me for my own lessons.

Both P1 and P9 found support in their social experiences when teaching poetry and this indicates that their teaching experiences were influenced by the views of their social group (see Ngubane-Mokiwa & Khoza, 2021). While both participants drew on their social connections to improve their pedagogical decisions, they also drew on their personal initiatives to ask for assistance and thus improve their PCK.

Unlike P1 and P9, P8 drew from personal experiences. P8 stated,

> I believe the way I was taught is the same way that I would have to disseminate information to the learners. I am open to new strategies that may come but right now, for me, this is my basic mode of information sharing when it comes to such texts.

P8's response indicated that his teaching experiences were shaped by his personal history and experiences of learning and teaching poetry. He was drawing on his apprenticeship of observation (Lortie, 1975) which posits that teachers teach as they were taught. P8 demonstrated that he had used his personal experiences to align his content knowledge and pedagogical practices, i.e., his PCK with his history of being taught.

The findings suggest that English teachers use professional, personal, and social experiences when they are teaching poetry, but not necessarily all the experiences at once. Findings from Buthelezi (2016) and Khoza (2016) indicate that teachers choose whether they want to teach using their social or professional experiences. Whatever they choose, personal experience

becomes the foundation of professional and social teaching experience that is determined by individual choice.

Lack of professional development

Learners' poor performance is often associated with teachers' inadequate pedagogical strategies, often influenced by their experiences of inadequate or no professional development (Timothy & Obiekezie, 2019). Resistance to teaching poetry is not only because of teachers' lack of language competency in the subject but also because of their lack of professional development in the subject (Turner, 2020). Diminished teacher confidence when teaching poetry often results from the uncertainty of their experiences during their own teaching and learning (Haidar & Fang, 2019).

The data shows that nine out of ten participants indicated a lack of professional development. In their reflective journals, they pointed out that they had not received any professional capacitation regarding strategies to teach poetry. They relied on networking with other experienced English teachers (social experience) and their experiences of being taught poetry in schools and tertiary institutions (personal experience). This is evident in comments from the interviews, such as P10, who noted, "My colleagues from the neighbouring school always assist me with skills to teach poetry", and P9, who said, "My subject advisor only looks at my portfolio when he visits me at my school. He never shares his expertise on the teaching of poetry."

P10 and P9 indicate that they receive more social and professional support from peers than from professional experts, such as subject advisors. The fact that poetry is a requirement of the curriculum, subject advisors, principals, and heads of departments should endeavour to develop and support their teachers in relation to recent developments in the teaching of poetry (Quinlan, 2019). Only P4 indicated being partially trained by the Department of Education (DoE) on how to teach poetry in saying,

> I would say I was partially trained by DoE because we did cluster workshops last year. Together with colleagues in my cluster, we shared our experiences and capacitated one another on how we can effectively teach poetry.

It becomes clear that teachers' teaching practices improve when their pedagogical skills are developed professionally and socially, unlike those teachers who receive no professional development.

P3 said, "I have never received any formal training specific to the teaching of poetry from the DoE. I have always relied on my social and personal experiences and on what I was taught at varsity." Though P3 did not receive any professional development from the DoE, drawing on social, personal and educative experiences when teaching poetry indicated that they probably knew how to glean content knowledge and how to access pedagogical knowledge to teach poetry effectively in class.

Unlike P3, P2 noted, "There were no workshops, after COVID-19 things got worse. One only relies on personal experience." P2 drew from only one experience, and received no professional development to improve his PCK. P2 also did not indicate that he reaches out for support to his colleagues and thus does not have social experiences from which to draw. Such findings indicate an urgency to support English teachers in teaching poetry. While the blame for incompetency usually falls solely on the shoulders of teachers, the DoE needs to show more support in relation to teaching poetry (Yariv, 2011). As teachers continually rely on their personal and social experiences, the DoE should intervene in improving the professional experiences of teachers.

Implications of the study

Teachers' agency is fundamental in and for their professional development. This study implies that teachers who have a positive personal experience of poetry (whether having been taught well and/or enjoying poetry) are positively influenced in their professional experience and expectations of teaching poetry. Moreover, teachers who have negative personal and social experiences of poetry tend to have a negative professional experience. For example, P 3 indicated: I do not like poetry due to its complex language and this affects how I teach it. This is also substantiated by Khatib's (2011) argument on attitudes towards poetry, in arguing that people who think of poetry as being sophisticated and therefore, out of their reach, it becomes n genre that is impossible to teach. This, however, does not necessarily inhibit teachers' agency to remake and develop themselves and develop their competence in teaching poetry properly. Teachers' ought to be conscious of the influence of personal and social experiences on their professional practice and experience.

Therefore, the study recommends that the DoE provide specific professional workshops on the teaching of poetry. The workshops should also build teacher's PCK specifically for poetry teaching. The teachers as lifelong learners they should take it upon themselves that they attend these workshops for professional development.

Conclusion

In trying to ascertain how South African rural high school teachers experience the teaching of English poetry to ESL learners, certain findings were clear. First, ESL teachers noted that their struggles with teaching poetry were a result of the complexity and paradoxes of the language used in poetry, which, consequently, contributed to learners' poor performance. In addition, some teachers appeared to lack understanding of how to access the subject matter in poems. For example, P1 indicated: I sometimes have difficulty in teaching poetry due to the language diction that is used by poets that adds to the lack of understanding the content. Second, the participating ESL teachers drew from either personal, professional, and/or social experiences when choosing strategies to teach poetry and appeared not to understand the effectiveness of drawing from all these experiences for effective teaching. Nevertheless, when teachers drew on specific experiences for PCK support, they recognised the importance of those experiences. Third, the teachers' fear of and anxiety about teaching poetry also emanated from the lack of professional development offered to them in the teaching of

poetry. Some teachers noted the language and content complexity of poetry and were aware that the lack of ongoing professional development exacerbated the situation.

This study built on current literature on teaching English poetry in ESL classrooms. However, it moved the focus to the personal, social, and professional experiences of South African teachers. While every teacher has personal experiences of teaching and learning poetry, if they can build on these with the support of colleagues' inputs and suggestions to enhance their content and pedagogical knowledge, their PCK would increase. Similarly, when teachers engage in professional development programs that build professional knowledge while drawing on their own and their colleagues' experiences, their PCK improves, and the experiences of teaching become affirming.

If poetry continues to be seen as over-demanding and out of reach for teachers and learners, then the genre may become the one to remove, should choices have to made. If teachers unpack poetry using their personal, social, and professional experiences, and if they are able to align the content and pedagogy with these experiences, they will be able to access the genre with success. It requires teachers to take agency in their PCK development by drawing on what they know and what they can access. It also requires teachers to reach out to others with increased PCKs to learn through interactions. Finally, it requires formal interventions through ongoing professional development to uplift teachers professionally to enable success in the classroom.

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