




RS Global
Journals

Scholarly Publisher
RS Global Sp. z O.O.
ISNI: 0000 0004 8495 2390

Dolna 17, Warsaw, Poland 00-773
Tel: +48 226 0 227 03
Email: editorial_office@rsglobal.pl

JOURNAL	International Journal of Innovative Technologies in Economy
p-ISSN	2412-8368
e-ISSN	2414-1305
PUBLISHER	RS Global Sp. z O.O., Poland
<hr/>	
ARTICLE TITLE	PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' PRACTICUM IN GRADE R: INSIGHTS FROM SOUTH AFRICA
AUTHOR(S)	Msimango W.N, Kok ECA, Xulu SCB, Ajani O.A
ARTICLE INFO	Msimango W.N, Kok ECA, Xulu SCB, Ajani O.A. (2024) Pre-Service Teachers' Practicum in Grade R: Insights from South Africa <i>International Journal of Innovative Technologies in Economy</i> . 3(47). doi: 10.31435/rsglobal_ijite/30092024/8239
DOI	https://doi.org/10.31435/rsglobal_ijite/30092024/8239
RECEIVED	08 August 2024
ACCEPTED	29 September 2024
PUBLISHED	30 September 2024
LICENSE	 This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License .

© The author(s) 2024. This publication is an open access article.

PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' PRACTICUM IN GRADE R: INSIGHTS FROM SOUTH AFRICA

Msimango W. N.

Department of Curriculum & Instructional Studies

Kok ECA

Department of Early Childhood Education

Xulu SCB

Department of Early Childhood Education

Ajani O.A.

Department of Languages and Social Sciences Education

University of Zululand

South Africa

DOI: https://doi.org/10.31435/rsglobal_ijite/30092024/8239

ARTICLE INFO

Received 08 August 2024

Accepted 29 September 2024

Published 30 September 2024

KEYWORDS

Reception Year, Student Teachers, Experiential Learning, Teacher-Centred, Play-Based Learning.

ABSTRACT

Since 1994, South Africa has prioritized quality education by ensuring that young learners are taught by qualified teachers. A notable shift has been the inclusion of qualified teachers in Reception year classes. This study investigates the experiences of Level 3 and 4 Bachelor of Education in Foundation Phase student teachers during their practicum in Reception year classrooms and the perspectives of university lecturers who assessed them. Using an experiential learning theoretical framework and a qualitative interpretive research design, data were collected through open-ended questions posed to student teachers. Findings indicate that student teachers had positive experiences, but university lecturers noted that lessons were often teacher-centred, lacking play or inquiry-based methods. Lecturers also highlighted that the Foundation Phase teacher education programme did not adequately support Reception Year teacher development, citing time constraints and insufficient physical space for practical activities. The study recommends re-evaluating the inclusion of Reception year training in the B. Ed Foundation Phase programme and developing an assessment tool to evaluate Grade R student teachers' planning and presentation skills.

Citation: Msimango W.N, Kok ECA, Xulu SCB, Ajani O.A. (2024) Pre-Service Teachers' Practicum in Grade R: Insights from South Africa. *International Journal of Innovative Technologies in Economy*. 3(47). doi: 10.31435/rsglobal_ijite/30062024/8239

Copyright: © 2024 Msimango W.N, Kok ECA, Xulu SCB, Ajani O.A. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the **Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY)**. The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) or licensor are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.

Introduction.

South African teacher training institutions are mandated to produce competent teachers through work-integrated learning (WIL) programmes, which encompass both learning from practice and learning in practice (Department of Education, 2014). Following the transition to democracy in 1994, the government prioritized quality education by ensuring the deployment of qualified teachers, including for the Reception year, or Grade R (Department of Education, 2002). The Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS) and the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) provided frameworks for teaching and learning, emphasizing learner-centred approaches and allowing for teacher creativity (Department of Education, 2011). Professional development is essential for effective curriculum implementation, facilitating a deeper understanding of curriculum theory and practice among educators (Mpofu & Maphalala, 2018).

Teaching practice is a vital component of teacher education programmes, guided by the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications (MRTEQ) (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2015). MRTEQ stipulates that the workplace-based component of WIL for teacher education qualifications occurs primarily in classroom settings. However, the success of these programmes relies on the quality of experiences during teaching practice, especially in Reception year classrooms. Despite the RNCS and CAPS providing theoretical grounding, translating these frameworks into effective classroom practices requires thorough reflection and practical application by student teachers (Department of Education, 2011; Department of Higher Education and Training, 2015).

In this context, the experiences of student teachers during their school-based teaching practice in Reception year classrooms are crucial. Experiential learning theory serves as the theoretical framework for understanding these experiences, exploring the challenges and opportunities encountered by student teachers (Kolb, 1984). Through qualitative interpretive research, this study aims to elucidate the experiences of both student teachers and university lecturers involved in the assessment of teaching practice in Reception year classrooms. By documenting and analyzing these experiences in light of existing curriculum frameworks and professional development initiatives, this research seeks to inform potential improvements in teacher education programmes and curriculum implementation strategies (Mpofu & Maphalala, 2018).

Context.

The study was conducted at a rural-based South African university known for its comprehensive teacher education programmes, ranging from undergraduate to postgraduate levels, and catering primarily to students from rural backgrounds (Munyai & Ngozwana, 2019). Historically, before 2018, pre-service student teachers underwent a uniform teaching practice module that lacked phase-specific experiences, leading to a disconnect in contextual relevance across different educational phases (Chisholm & Motala, 2004). Following curriculum revisions in 2018, the programmes became more tailored and phase-specific. Foundation Phase student teachers began receiving targeted instruction on teaching young children aged 4-9, including Reception year learners aged 4-5 (Ramphela, 2017). The new Foundation Phase teaching practice module emphasized developing competencies relevant to teaching Foundation Phase learners, particularly those in the Reception year, marking a significant shift in curriculum design and instructional focus (Shalem & Shalem, 2019).

In the revised curriculum, exposure to Reception year teaching competencies occurs primarily in the first year, where students are introduced to the organizational dynamics of Reception year classrooms through campus-based practice teaching activities (Patel & Kanjee, 2013). However, logistical constraints due to financial challenges impeded the establishment of a dedicated Grade R observation classroom, raising concerns among teacher educators about the potential impact on student teachers' readiness for effective Grade R teaching practices during school-based teaching practice sessions (Naicker & Karodia, 2015). This study aims to elucidate the experiences of Level 3 and 4 Foundation Phase students regarding their engagement in Grade R classrooms at schools, juxtaposed with the perspectives of teacher educators assessing Grade R lessons taught by student teachers during their third-year school-based teaching practice (Butler et al., 2016). Central to this inquiry is understanding how B.Ed. Level 3 and 4 students navigate their school-based practice teaching experiences within Grade R classrooms, highlighting critical aspects of teacher preparation and professional development in South African teacher education (Pillay & Reddy, 2010).

Preliminary Literature review.

Traditional vs. Contemporary Pedagogical Approaches.

Traditionally, pedagogy has been characterized by a unidirectional flow of knowledge from teacher to student, with students being passive recipients. This method emphasized rote learning and memorization, limiting students' opportunities for critical thinking and problem-solving (Rajagopalan, 2019). In contrast, contemporary educational paradigms advocate for varied instructional approaches that encourage active participation among learners. These approaches include collaborative learning, inquiry-based learning, and the use of technology to facilitate interactive learning environments (Dhawan, 2020). The shift towards these modern pedagogical strategies aims to foster a deeper understanding of subject matter and the development of critical thinking skills among students.

Role of Universities in Teacher Preparation.

Universities play a pivotal role in equipping future educators with the requisite skills to effectively discharge their duties. This is in accordance with the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications (MRTEQ) outlined by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET, 2015). Specifically, the MRTEQ emphasizes the importance of play-based learning, physical coordination development, and language proficiency enhancement in Grade R education. Additionally, it expects Foundation Phase student teachers to demonstrate competence in teaching both Grade R and grades 1-3 (DHET, 2015). Despite these guidelines, there are concerns regarding the adequacy of university resources and time allocations to adequately prepare student teachers for Grade R teaching roles. The theoretical framework provided by universities must be complemented by practical, hands-on experiences to ensure comprehensive teacher preparation (Korthagen, 2010).

Importance of Teaching Practice.

Teaching practice constitutes a fundamental aspect of pre-service teacher training and professional development (Leke-Ateh, Assan & Debeila, 2013). It provides student teachers with opportunities to apply theoretical knowledge in real classroom settings, thereby developing their teaching skills and professional competencies. Despite its acknowledged importance, there has been limited research on the challenges associated with designing effective teaching practice assessments. These assessments are essential tools for cultivating professional competencies and ensuring that student teachers are well-prepared for the classroom (Mpofo & Maphalala, 2018). At our institution, the assessment of student teachers' lesson planning and presentations for Grade R is conducted using the same criteria as those for grades 1-3. This standardized approach may inadvertently influence the planning and delivery of Grade R lessons by student teachers.

Challenges in Practice Teaching.

While most South African universities offer pre-service teacher training, the modes of delivery and associated challenges vary among institutions. For instance, logistical and educational difficulties in organizing practice teaching for teacher trainees have been identified (Aldridge, Fraser, & Ntuli, 2009). These challenges include limited access to diverse teaching environments, inadequate supervision, and the need for more phase-specific training. Nevertheless, practice teaching remains a cornerstone of teacher preparation, offering invaluable opportunities for assessing both pre-service and in-service educators in authentic learning environments. Effective practice teaching requires careful planning and support from both the university and the schools involved (Smith & Lev-Ari, 2005).

Early Childhood Development (ECD) in South Africa.

Since the advent of democracy in South Africa, early childhood development (ECD) has emerged as a focal point for national reconstruction and development efforts (Shaik & Ibrahim, 2015). Various international and domestic policy frameworks, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the South African Constitution, underscore the importance of quality education for young children (Williams et al., 2001). Despite these initiatives, challenges persist, particularly regarding the implementation of learner-centred pedagogies in Grade R classrooms. These challenges are often exacerbated by inadequate resources and underqualified teaching staff (Shaik & Ibrahim, 2015). South African education policies, including the White Paper 5 on Early Childhood

Development and the National Curriculum Statement, emphasize the learner-centric approach to teaching and learning (Department of Education, 2008).

Implementation of Learner-Centred Approaches.

Despite the policy emphasis on learner-centred approaches, anecdotal evidence suggests that many Grade R classrooms still employ traditional, teacher-centred instructional methods. These methods hinder active participation and constrain learners' opportunities for knowledge construction (Department of Education, 2008; Shaik & Ibrahim, 2015). Implementing learner-centred approaches requires teachers to create engaging and interactive learning environments that cater to the diverse needs of young learners. This shift necessitates comprehensive training and support for teachers to develop the necessary skills and competencies (Darling-Hammond, 2006).

Quality of Grade R Programmes.

Despite government efforts to expand Grade R provision, the quality of Grade R programmes remains uneven across South Africa (Department of Education, 2008). Factors contributing to this disparity include variations in teacher qualifications, access to resources, and the implementation of curriculum frameworks. Addressing these disparities is crucial for ensuring that all children receive a high-quality early education that sets the foundation for their future learning and development (Barnett, 2011).

Perceptions of Pre-Service Teachers.

This study seeks to explore the perceptions of Level 3 and 4 Foundation Phase pre-service student teachers regarding their school-based practice teaching experiences in Grade R classrooms. Understanding these perceptions is essential for identifying the challenges and opportunities in Grade R teacher preparation. By examining the experiences of student teachers, this study aims to provide insights into how teacher education programmes can be improved to better prepare future educators for the complexities of the classroom (Butler et al., 2016).

Role of Experiential Learning Theory.

Experiential learning theory serves as a theoretical framework for understanding the experiences of student teachers during their school-based teaching practice (Kolb, 1984). This theory emphasizes the importance of reflection and practical application in the learning process. By documenting and analyzing the experiences of student teachers, this study seeks to inform potential improvements in teacher education programmes and curriculum implementation strategies (Mpofu & Maphalala, 2018).

Informing Teacher Education Programmes.

By documenting these experiences and analyzing them in light of existing curriculum frameworks and professional development initiatives, this research seeks to inform potential improvements in teacher education programmes. The findings of this study can provide valuable insights for curriculum developers, policymakers, and teacher educators. These insights can help address the gaps in teacher preparation and ensure that future educators are well-equipped to meet the demands of the classroom (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005).

Theoretical framework.

The theoretical framework of experiential learning theory underpins this study, emphasizing the cognitive and affective processes involved in learning (Dudley, Gilroy & Skaife, 1998). Experiential learning posits that understanding is acquired and integrated through direct experience, where learners interact with their environment and reflect on their encounters (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). This framework guided the exploration of teacher educators' experiences in Reception Year classrooms, highlighting the significance of experiential learning in shaping pedagogical practices (Akpan et al., 2020). By employing experiential learning theory, the study sought to elucidate the perspectives of pre-service teachers and teacher educators on the dynamics of Grade R classrooms.

Experiential learning is recognized as a multifaceted process involving the dynamic interplay between the learner, subject matter, and reflective practice (Kolb & Kolb, 2017). This approach

emphasizes integrating theoretical knowledge with practical experience and fostering critical reflection on pedagogical practices (Kolb, 1984). According to Kolb, learning is not merely the acquisition of knowledge but a transformative process that occurs through engagement with experience (Jarvis, 1987). Thus, experiential learning entails continuous reflection and adaptation of one's knowledge and beliefs in response to contextual experiences, facilitating meaningful learning outcomes (Fry, Ketteridge, & Marshall, 1999). In this study, experiential learning theory guided teacher educators in critically evaluating student teachers' experiences in Grade R classrooms to inform pedagogical improvements.

The adoption of experiential learning theory underscores the importance of reflective practice in teacher education and professional development (Kolb & Kolb, 2017). By encouraging educators to critically reflect on their own experiences and those of their students, this approach fosters continuous learning and improvement (Kolb, 1984). Through reflective inquiry, educators can identify areas for enhancement in pedagogical practices and curriculum design, thereby enhancing the quality of teacher preparation programmes (Fry, Ketteridge, & Marshall, 1999). In this study, teacher educators' engagement with experiential learning theory facilitated a deeper understanding of student teachers' perspectives and informed meaningful changes in teacher education practices.

The adoption of experiential learning theory in this study is well-justified given its relevance to understanding the complex dynamics of teacher education and professional development. Experiential learning theory posits that individuals acquire knowledge and skills through direct engagement with their environment, followed by reflection on their experiences (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). In the context of teacher education, experiential learning offers a robust framework for examining the practical experiences of pre-service teachers in real classroom settings. This aligns with the study's objectives, which seek to explore student teachers' perceptions and experiences in Reception Year classrooms. By embracing experiential learning theory, the study acknowledges the significance of practical experience in shaping the professional development of future educators (Akpan et al., 2020).

Furthermore, experiential learning theory emphasizes the iterative process of learning, whereby individuals engage in active experimentation, reflection, and conceptualization of their experiences (Kolb, 1984; Mncube et al., 2021). This iterative approach is particularly pertinent in the context of teacher education, where pre-service teachers navigate the complexities of classroom practice and pedagogical decision-making. Through experiential learning, student teachers are encouraged to critically reflect on their teaching experiences, identify areas for improvement, and refine their instructional practices (Jarvis, 1987; Ajani & Govender, 2019). Thus, by adopting experiential learning theory, the study aims to capture the dynamic interplay between practical experiences and reflective practice in shaping the professional growth of student teachers.

Moreover, experiential learning theory offers a holistic framework for examining the cognitive and affective dimensions of learning in teacher education (Dudley, Gilroy & Skaife, 1998; Ajani, 2023). By acknowledging the importance of both cognitive understanding and emotional engagement in the learning process, experiential learning theory provides a nuanced understanding of how student teachers make meaning of their experiences in Reception Year classrooms. This comprehensive approach is essential for gaining insights into the multifaceted nature of teacher development and the factors that influence pedagogical decision-making (Kolb & Kolb, 2017). Thus, the adoption of experiential learning theory in this study provides a robust theoretical foundation for investigating the experiences and perceptions of student teachers in Grade R classrooms (Ajani, 2021).

Research methodology.

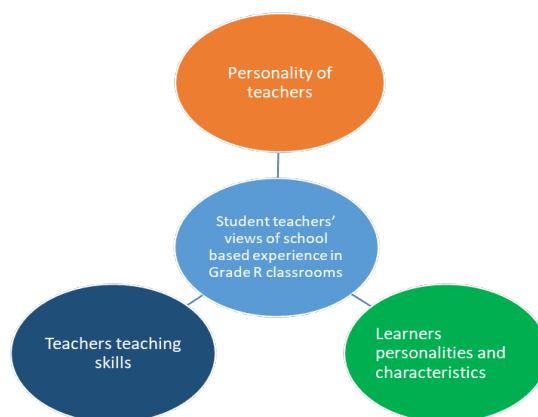
The choice of a qualitative research approach in this study aligns with its focus on exploring the experiences of Reception Year student teachers during their school-based teaching practicum at rural schools. Known for its interpretive and naturalistic approach, qualitative research was deemed suitable for delving into the nuanced perspectives and experiences of the participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten Reception Year student teachers, purposively selected to provide rich and detailed insights into their experiences. These interviews, facilitated through WhatsApp, allowed for flexible questioning and in-depth exploration of participants' views and perceptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Through thematic analysis, the qualitative approach enabled the researchers to uncover patterns and themes within the data, offering a comprehensive understanding of the participants' feelings, opinions, and experiences (Denzin, 1989).

The selection of Foundation Phase Level 3 and 4 pre-service teachers, who had undergone the teaching programme since its inception in 2018, was deliberate. This cohort was chosen for their firsthand experience with the programme and its emphasis on Grade R teaching. The purposive sampling strategy ensured that participants possessed relevant insights and experiences conducive to addressing the research questions (Bertram & Christiansen, 2017). The sample size of 20 students from two separate classes was determined based on the principle of saturation, aiming to capture diverse perspectives while ensuring data richness and depth (Guest et al., 2006). Open-ended questions facilitated a thorough exploration of the participants' experiences during their school-based teaching practice, allowing for detailed responses and uncovering nuanced insights (Sarantakos, 2005). Utilizing an online platform, such as the institution's Learning Management System, ensured accessibility and convenience for participants, particularly amid the constraints posed by the COVID-19 pandemic (Oppenheim, 1992). Additionally, WhatsApp chats with the lecturer provided an alternative mode of participation for students facing connectivity issues, thereby enhancing inclusivity and data collection efficiency.

Presentation of Findings.

The study provided insights into student teachers' perceptions and experiences within Grade R classrooms during their school-based teaching practicum. Participants articulated various aspects of their observations and interactions, shedding light on the dynamics between teachers and learners, the instructional methodologies employed by teachers, and their own emotional responses during teaching sessions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Participants emphasized the significant role played by teacher-mentors in facilitating their professional development and learning process, particularly in the context of teaching Grade R learners (Leke-Ateh, Assan & Debeila, 2013). The findings underscored the value of practical learning experiences gained through practice teaching in school settings, highlighting its instrumental role in preparing student teachers for their future roles as educators (Denzin, 1989).

The student teachers' accounts revealed predominantly positive experiences during their engagement in school-based Reception Year classrooms. They were able to discern the diverse personalities and characteristics exhibited by both teachers and learners, contributing to their understanding of effective teaching practices and classroom management strategies (Akpan et al., 2020). Moreover, the student teachers appreciated the opportunity to apply theoretical knowledge gained in their teacher education programmes to real-world teaching contexts, fostering their professional growth and competence (Kolb & Kolb, 2017). The findings underscored the enriching nature of the school-based teaching practicum and its significance in shaping the pedagogical skills and perspectives of student teachers within the Grade R setting. Their reflections and narratives provided valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of teaching in Grade R classrooms, offering a nuanced understanding of the challenges and rewards associated with early childhood education (Bertram & Christiansen, 2017). Their positive experiences highlighted the importance of fostering supportive learning environments and mentorship structures within teacher education programmes, emphasizing the critical role of practical experiences in enhancing pedagogical effectiveness and professional identity development (Guest et al., 2006).



Upon analysis, it was evident that the university lecturers perceived the Grade R lessons they assessed as predominantly teacher-centred, lacking substantial evidence of child-centred pedagogical approaches such as play-based or inquiry-based learning. This finding prompted the teacher educators to reflect on the broader implications for the Foundation Phase teacher education programme. They concluded that the programme inadequately prepared pre-service teachers to effectively employ child-centred pedagogies in teaching Grade R learners. Furthermore, the physical infrastructure of the university campus was deemed insufficient to facilitate practical activities geared towards developing Reception Year teaching competencies.

This observation aligns with existing literature on teacher education and pedagogical practices. Studies such as those conducted by Leke-Ateh, Assan, and Debeila (2013) emphasize the importance of aligning teacher education programmes with the demands of contemporary educational contexts, including the need for child-centred approaches in early childhood education. Additionally, Akpan, Agbaji, and Okorie (2020) advocate for experiential learning strategies in teacher education, which would better equip pre-service teachers with the skills and competencies necessary for effective classroom practice. Such approaches emphasize the importance of practical experiences and hands-on learning opportunities, which the current study suggests may be lacking in the university's teacher education programme.

Furthermore, the discrepancy between observed teaching practices and desired pedagogical approaches underscores the need for ongoing professional development and support for both pre-service and in-service teachers. Research by Bertram and Christiansen (2017) highlights the value of continuous learning and reflective practice in enhancing teaching effectiveness. It suggests that teacher educators should engage in critical reflection on their own instructional practices and seek opportunities for improvement. Therefore, addressing the identified shortcomings in the Foundation Phase teacher education programme requires a comprehensive approach that encompasses curriculum revision, pedagogical training, and the provision of adequate resources and support structures.

The findings also point to the necessity of revising the assessment criteria used for evaluating pre-service teachers' lesson planning and delivery in Grade R. Currently, the use of standardized criteria for assessing both Grade R and grades 1-3 may not fully capture the unique pedagogical demands of teaching younger learners. Tailoring assessment tools to reflect the specific competencies required for effective Grade R teaching, such as the ability to facilitate play-based learning and promote inquiry among young children, would provide a more accurate measure of pre-service teachers' readiness and effectiveness. This adjustment would not only enhance the assessment process but also drive improvements in teacher preparation and support the overarching goal of fostering high-quality early childhood education.

Discussion.

The Policy on the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications (DHET, 2015) specifies that the workplace-based component of Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) for teacher education qualifications primarily occurs in classroom settings. Institutions offering teacher education programmes are responsible for arranging these WIL opportunities (DHET, 2015). At our institution, Foundation Phase student teachers across all four years engage in school visits for observation and practice teaching. During these visits, students are expected to practice their skills and deepen their theoretical understanding of teaching Grade R learners. This includes understanding how Grade R classrooms should be organized, the importance of play-based inquiry, indoor and outdoor practical activities, the strengths and roles of the Grade R teacher, the treatment of young children, the importance of improvisation, preparing young learners for the transition to Grade 1, and understanding how young learners learn (Osman & Booth, 2014). The theoretical aspects of Grade R teaching are introduced in the first year, with subsequent years focusing on the remaining Foundation Phase grades. School-based practice teaching offers students invaluable experiences within the actual teaching and learning environment (Msangya, Mkoma & Yihuan, 2016).

It was evident that Level 3 and 4 Foundation Phase student teachers were able to articulate the characteristics of the Grade R teachers they had observed. Through their observations, the majority of these students indicated that effective Grade R teachers must exhibit qualities of love and kindness. Participant C answered by saying:

“If you are a Grade R teacher you need to be friendly, patient, supportive, loving, and show young learners unconditional love. In that little time, I got, I experienced that being loving and caring is the first thing needed in order to be able to deal with those young ones. Grade R learners are still young, they need support and guidance every time. As a teacher, it is so much important to be careful of what one is doing because they admire you more than their parents, being a good leader showing a good portrait is so much needed because you build future leaders.”

The above extract depicts a summary of the personality traits of the Grade R teacher as portrayed by mentor teachers. Through these reflections students got a clear understanding of how they should behave in Grade R classrooms. This accords with earlier observations which showed that Reception year pupils have specific needs and therefore require teachers to obtain specific Reception Year educational knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Kruger, van Rensburg & Els 2012). The findings further revealed the benefits of being mentored by friendly teachers. All students praised their mentors’ personalities. They indicated that mentors demonstrated kindness, humility, willingness to share information, patience, care, love, and determination to help (Du Plessis, Marais, Van Schalkwyk & Weeks 2010).

Student teachers also described Grade R learners’ characteristics. The following extract from Participant J gives his/her views on young Grade R learners. These views are shared by many of the participants.

“Grade R learners are an amazing class to teach, too much noise but controllable; they are pure, innocent souls and they are observant. They are full of energy and always ready to learn. Grade R learners participate in class discussions, they respect and love teachers. They communicated very well with me because I was on their level that made them feel free when I am around them.”

The above extract conveys the characteristics of Grade R learners as observed by the Level 3 and 4 Foundation Phase student teachers. Students demonstrated their understanding of the personalities of the 4-5-year age group of children who were not yet ready for formal education. The findings revealed that student teachers all agreed that young children are full of energy, always willing to learn but require teachers who are able to adjust their teaching to ensure young Grade R learners learn in a friendly environment.

Also, student teachers indicated that they learned different teaching skills, such as: how to manage the Grade R learners; how to behave as a Grade R teacher; the importance of using real objects related to the theme of the week so that children could understand better; to present the lesson in a way that children would understand, and the different practical activities which some of them had to start the moment they entered the classroom, such as morning circle activities. Grade R has a unique teaching pedagogy which is different to the other Foundation Phase grades. As such, this pedagogy must be learnt by teachers of Grade R. Osman & Booth (2014) state that to become a competent teacher, one needs to understand and master how to teach and how children learn in order to adapt the environment to enhance children’s learning.

Students further highlighted how they felt teaching Grade R learners. Participant L had this to say:

“It was a great experience; teaching is cool and it is exciting to teach Grade R learners. I had fun being around them. I enjoyed teaching Grade R learners, they are teachable; I wouldn’t mind teaching them every day. I was scared but through my observation, teaching Grade R is easy compared to other classes. I was happy to be in Grade R classroom because I helped them learn how to write their names, and to know that they remember what they have learned previously. I was so happy during my practicals in school because I learned more about kids and how to take care of them while learning together.” (Participant L)

Generally, all students reported enjoying teaching this group. However, one student mentioned that she did not teach Grade R because there were so many student teachers at the school that the management found it difficult to place all of them in Grade R, despite the university's insistence on evaluations in this class. Furthermore, students indicated that school mentors were highly supportive, helpful, and always willing to assist. Students appreciated the opportunity to observe in different schools, which allowed them to interact with various mentors and learn from their diverse expertise. These findings are supported by Adams, Koster, and Brok (2020), who conducted a study on student teachers' classroom management during school internships. They found that key elements for students learning how to teach included developing caring and supportive relationships with pupils, organizing

and implementing instruction to optimize pupils' access to learning, and encouraging pupils' engagement in academic tasks.

The study reveals that some mentors demonstrated an understanding of the importance of giving student teachers the opportunity to present lessons while observing and providing feedback, despite their workload. This approach allowed students to learn from their mistakes and improve their teaching skills. This finding aligns with Ranjan (2013), who found that student teachers valued practice teaching and perceived it as a crucial aspect of their preparation for the teaching profession. Mentors offered practical learning by guiding and demonstrating professional conduct in the school environment. This aligns with the requirements of MRTEQ, which emphasizes practical learning as essential for developing tacit knowledge crucial for teaching (DHET, 2014, p.10). The findings reveal that mentors taught student teachers how to manage discipline, accommodate all learners, address diverse abilities, and understand the role of the South African Council of Educators (SACE). Additionally, students highlighted that mentors helped them prepare for their evaluation day by university supervisors. Student S expressed:

"I will be lying if I say I did not get knowledge from my mentor. In her, I experienced the importance of using different teaching methods and strategies. I learnt from her the importance of following curriculum (Trackers and lesson planners). Some classroom management skills and the appropriate handwriting to be used in Foundation Phase classrooms."

The above extract revealed how students benefited from their mentors by gaining practical knowledge. All participants reported that they had gained from interacting with their mentors and that practice teaching offered them hands-on experience to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Exposing student teachers to different teaching and learning materials was identified as particularly beneficial during their teaching practice sessions in schools. This finding aligns with Magday and Pramoolsook (2021), who assert that university teacher education programmes prepare student teachers to fulfil their responsibilities and maintain educational excellence and quality. Mastering classroom management also plays a major role in the training of student teachers. This result corroborates the findings of Connelly, Shaik, and Mosito (2020), who found that it is the responsibility of the teacher to manage and develop the classroom environment based on their knowledge of teaching, knowledge of children, and knowledge of classroom management.

Despite the positive views of student teachers regarding their mentors' personalities and helpfulness in teaching and managing Grade R classes, university staff who assessed students in Grade R classes during their third year found that student teachers did not receive proper or sufficient guidance in terms of indoor and outdoor practical activities that were student-centred. No university lecturers reported observing play- or inquiry-based lessons. This issue may stem from the assessment tool used for evaluating lessons, which is the same one used for all phases, rather than being specifically designed for the Foundation Phase.

Conclusion.

This paper has shown how work-integrated learning has facilitated student teachers to learn in-practice in accordance with DHET (2014). Mentors were supportive and knowledgeable when assisting student teachers to equip them with skills to teach Grade R learners. On the other hand, university mentors felt that the skills imparted did not go far enough to include child-centred pedagogies such as play and inquiry-based teaching. This results in Grade R teaching remaining as "content driven" and not changing to a learner-centred pedagogy. In the lecturers' views, the B.Ed. degree in Foundation Phase teaching does not allow enough time for teaching Grade R teaching skills and concepts. Furthermore, the university where the study was conducted has not been able to develop a Grade R observation classroom since 2013. These findings could add value to the Department of Higher Education and Department of Education's decision about how Grade R teacher education can be redesigned and improved in order to do justice to young children who bear the brunt of being taught by underqualified teachers. This paper recommends that teaching of Grade R should not be included in the Foundation Phase B.Ed. Degree programme due to time constraints. One year is not sufficient to equip pre-service teachers with the necessary skills, attitudes, and values specific to Grade R teaching. These findings are supported by Kruger, Rensburg, and Els (2012), who found that a South African Foundation Phase programme does not provide the specialized knowledge and skills required for Reception Year education but includes all four grades of the Foundation Phase. As a consequence,

Reception Year children's specific needs are not met by the teacher education degrees currently offered in South Africa.

Recommendations.

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be made to enhance the effectiveness of teacher education programmes, particularly in preparing pre-service teachers for Grade R classrooms. First and foremost, there is a pressing need to restructure the Foundation Phase teacher education curriculum to better align with the requirements and demands of teaching Grade R learners. This restructuring could involve revising course content to include more practical components focused specifically on child-centred pedagogies, such as play-based learning and inquiry-based teaching methods. Additionally, opportunities for pre-service teachers to gain firsthand experience in Grade R classrooms should be prioritized, either through extended practicum placements or simulated teaching environments that closely mimic real-world teaching scenarios.

Furthermore, it is imperative to provide adequate support and guidance to pre-service teachers during their school-based teaching practice, particularly from experienced mentor teachers who are well-versed in effective Grade R pedagogies. Mentorship programmes should be carefully designed to facilitate ongoing professional development and reflective practice among pre-service teachers, allowing them to critically analyse their teaching experiences and refine their instructional approaches accordingly. Moreover, collaboration between universities and schools is essential to ensure that the learning needs of pre-service teachers are met comprehensively, with opportunities for constructive feedback and dialogue between all stakeholders involved in the teacher education process.

In addition to enhancing mentorship and collaboration, there is a need for investment in physical infrastructure and resources within university campuses to create conducive environments for the development of Grade R teaching competencies. This could involve establishing dedicated spaces for practical activities focused on Grade R education, equipped with age-appropriate teaching materials and resources. By creating these environments, universities can ensure that pre-service teachers have the opportunity to engage in hands-on learning experiences that are crucial for developing their teaching skills and pedagogical knowledge.

By addressing these recommendations, teacher education programmes can better prepare pre-service teachers for the unique challenges and opportunities associated with teaching Grade R learners. Ultimately, these improvements will foster the development of competent and effective educators in early childhood education, ensuring that young learners receive high-quality, developmentally appropriate instruction from well-prepared teachers. This, in turn, will contribute to the overall enhancement of educational outcomes and the promotion of equitable access to quality education for all children.

Acknowledgement.

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

REFERENCES

1. Adams, T., Koster, B., & Brok, P. D. (2020). Student teachers' classroom management during the school internship. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 1-19.
2. Ajani, O. A. (2021). Teachers' perspectives on professional development in South Africa and Nigeria: Towards an andragogical approach. *Journal of Educational and Social Research*, 11(3), 288-300.
3. Ajani, O. A. (2023). Teachers' professional development in the context of experiential learning theory for improved instructional delivery. *African Journal of Development Studies*, 13(4), 24-38.
4. Ajani, O. A., & Govender, S. (2019). Teachers' perspectives on in-service professional development in South African and Nigerian high schools. *Gender and Behaviour*, 17(2), 13146-13160.
5. Akpan, A. B., Agbaji, D. D., & Okorie, J. U. (2020). Experiential learning strategies and teacher education in Nigeria. *International Journal of Progressive Education*, 16(4), 132-144.
6. Akpan, V. I., Igwe, V. A., Mpamah, I. B. I., & Okoro, C. O. (2020). Social constructivism: Implications on teaching and learning. *British Journal of Education*, 8(8), 49-56.
7. Aldridge, J. M., Fraser, B. J., & Ntuli, S. (2009). Utilizing learning environment assessments to improve teaching practices among in-service teachers undergoing professional development. *Journal of In-service Education*, 35(5), 1-15.

8. Anning, A. (1991). *The first years at school*. Milton Keynes, Open University Press.
9. Barnett, W. S. (2011). Effectiveness of early educational intervention. *Science*, 333(6045), 975-978.
10. Bertram, A., & Christiansen, A. (2017). The role of reflection in teacher education: Towards definition and implementation. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 49(10), 955-970.
11. Bertram, C., & Christiansen, I. (2017). *Understanding research: An introduction to reading research*. Pretoria, Van Schaik.
12. Binson, B., & Lev-Wiesel, R. (2018). Promoting personal growth through experiential learning: The case of expressive arts therapy for lecturers in Thailand. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 1-12, 2276.
13. Bird, D. K. (2009). The use of questionnaires for acquiring information on public perception of natural hazards and risk mitigation: A review of current knowledge and practice. *Natural Hazards Earth System Sciences*, 9(4), 1307-1325.
14. Butler, D. L., Novak Lauscher, H., Jarvis-Selinger, S., & Beckingham, B. (2016). Collaboration and self-regulation in teachers' professional development. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 20(5), 435-455.
15. Chisholm, L., & Motala, S. (2004). The quality of primary education in South Africa. Background paper prepared for UNESCO EFA Global Monitoring Report.
16. Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2007). *Research methods in education* (6th ed.). London, Routledge.
17. Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2018). *Research methods in education* (8th ed.). Routledge.
18. Connelly, A. S., Mosito, C., & Shaik, N. (2020). Grade R teachers' understanding of reflective practice. *South African Journal of Childhood Education*, 10(1), 1-10.
19. Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2017). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.
20. Darling-Hammond, L. (2006). Constructing 21st-century teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 57(3), 300-314.
21. Denzin, N. K. (1989). *The research act: A theoretical introduction to sociological methods* (3rd ed.). Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice Hall.
22. Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). *Handbook of qualitative research*. London, SAGE Publications.
23. Department of Education. (2002). *Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS)*. Pretoria, Government Printer.
24. Department of Education. (2008). *Grade R Practical Ideas*. Pretoria, Government Printer.
25. Department of Education. (2011). *Curriculum & Assessments Policy Statement: Foundation Phase Grades R-3*. Pretoria, Government Printer.
26. Department of Higher Education and Training. (2015). *Minimum requirements for teacher education qualifications*. Pretoria, Government Printer.
27. Dhawan, S. (2020). Online learning: A panacea in the time of COVID-19 crisis. *Journal of Educational Technology Systems*, 49(1), 5-22.
28. Du Plessis, E. C., Marais, P., Van Schalkwyk, A., & Weeks, F. (2010). Adapt or die: The views of UNISA student teachers on teaching practice at schools. *Africa Education Review*, 7(2), 323-341.
29. Dudley, J., Gilroy, A., & Skaife, S. (1998). Learning from experience in introductory art therapy group. In S. Skaife & V. Huet (Eds.), *Art psychotherapy groups: Between pictures and words* (pp. 128-142). London, Routledge.
30. Fry, H., Ketteridge, S., & Marshall, S. (1999). *Handbook for teaching and learning in higher education: Enhancing academic practice* (3rd ed.). London: Routledge.
31. Harre, R., & Gillett, G. (1994). *The discursive mind*. London, Sage Publications.
32. Hohr, H. (2013). The concept of experience by John Dewey revisited: Conceiving, feeling and "enliving." *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 32(1), 25-38.
33. Jarvis, P. (1987). Meaningful and meaningless experience: Towards an analysis of learning from life. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 37(3), 164-172.
34. Kolb, A. Y., & Kolb, D. A. (2005). Learning styles and learning spaces: Enhancing experiential learning in higher education. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 4(2), 193-212.
35. Kolb, A. Y., & Kolb, D. A. (2017). Experiential learning theory as a guide for experiential educators in higher education. *Experiential Learning & Teaching in Higher Education*, 1(1), 7-44.
36. Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall.
37. Kruger, C., Janse van Rensburg, O., & Els, C. J. (2012). Professional development for Reception year teachers in an ODL developing context. *Progressio*, 34(2), 170-187.
38. Leke-Ateh, B. A., Assan, T. E. B., & Debeila, J. (2013). Teaching practice for the 21st century: Challenges and prospects for teacher education in the North-West Province, South Africa. *Journal of Social Sciences*, 37(3), 279-291.

39. Magday Jr, W. D., & Pramoolsook, I. (2021). Exploring teaching demonstrations in the teaching journals: A case of Filipino pre-service teachers. *Language Related Research*, 12(5), 176-203.
40. McGuirk, P. M., & O'Neill, P. (2016). Using questionnaires in qualitative human geography. *Faculty of Social Sciences- Papers*, 2518.
41. McLafferty, S. (2010). Conducting questionnaire surveys. In N. Clifford & G. Valentine (Eds.), *Key methods in geography* (pp. 77-88). London, Sage.
42. Mkhazibe, R. G., Mncube, D. W., & Ajani, O. A. (2021). The nexus between teaching practice and PGCE student-teachers: The perceptions of subject mentors on pre-teachers' readiness for teaching career. *Universal Journal of Educational Research*, 9(9), 1617-1627.
43. Mpofu, N., & Maphalala, M. C. (2018). A comprehensive model for assessing student teachers' professional competence through an integrated curriculum approach. *The Journal for Transdisciplinary Research in Southern Africa*, 14(2), 1-9.
44. Msangya, B. W., Mkoma, S. L., & Yihuan, W. (2016). Teaching practice experience for undergraduate student teachers: A case study of the Department of Education at Sokoine University of Agriculture, Tanzania. *Journal of Education & Practice*, 7(14), 113-118.
45. Munyai, F., & Ngozwana, N. (2019). Exploring the effectiveness of teacher education programs in rural South African universities. *Journal of Rural and Community Development*, 14(2), 35-50.
46. Oppenheim, A. N. (1992). *Questionnaire design, interviewing and attitude measurement*. London, Continuum.
47. Osman, R., & Booth, S. (2014). A research base for teaching in primary school: A coherent scholarly focus on the object of learning. *South African Journal of Childhood Education*, 4(3), 159-173.
48. Patel, M., & Kanjee, A. (2013). Exploring the impact of structured lesson plans on student learning. *South African Journal of Education*, 33(2), 1-10.
49. Rajagopalan, I. (2019). Concept of teaching. *Shanlax International Journal of Education*, 7(2), 5-8.
50. Ramphela, M. (2017). Developing foundational phase teaching skills: A focus on early childhood education. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 45(3), 289-298.
51. Ranjan, R. (2013). A study of practice teaching programme: A transitional phase for student teachers. *Voice of Research*, 1(4), 24-28.
52. Sarantakos, A. (2005). *Social research* (2nd ed.). Hampshire, Palgrave Macmillan.
53. Shaik, N., & Ebrahim, H. B. (2015). Children's agency in Grade R: A case for a child participation focus. *South African Journal of Education*, 35(2), 1-8.
54. Shalem, Y., & Shalem, G. (2019). Reconsidering teacher education: Lessons from South African schools. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 45(3), 267-278.
55. Shulman, L. S. (1986). Those who understand: Knowledge growth in teaching. *Educational Researcher*, 15(2), 4-14.
56. Smith, K., & Lev-Ari, L. (2005). The place of the practicum in pre-service teacher education: The voice of the students. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 33(3), 289-302.
57. Tummons, J., & Duckworth, V. (2012). *Doing your research project in the lifelong learning sector*. New York, McGraw-Hill.
58. Williams, T., Samuels, M. L., Mouton, J., Ratele, K., Shabalala, N., Shefer, T., & Strebel, A. (2001). The nationwide audit of ECD provisioning in South Africa. Department of Education, Directorate.
59. Wood, E. A. (2014). Free choice and free play in early childhood education: Troubling the discourse. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 22(1), 4-18.