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Moeniera Moosa & Nageshwari Pam Moodley

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Preparing Pre-Service Teachers for Teaching Practice: Insights from Mentor Teachers in Johannesburg

Moeniera Moosa
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6231-9370
University of the Witwatersrand
Moeniera.Moosa@wits.ac.za

Nageshwari Pam Moodley
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3695-2479
University of the Witwatersrand
pam.moodley1@wits.ac.za

Abstract

In preparing undergraduates to become teachers, initial teacher education (ITE) institutions enter into partnerships with schools, a necessary but often ambiguous undertaking. Alignment or misalignment of the key roles and responsibilities of each stakeholder influences pre-service teachers' experience of teaching practice. The overarching research question that guided this study was: What can universities do to better prepare pre-service teachers for teaching practice? The study is underpinned by Cochran-Smith and Lytle's framework of knowledge for practice, knowledge in practice, and knowledge of practice. The article reports on findings from a case study of 79 purposively selected mentor teachers' views on how to prepare pre-service teachers for teaching practice. Data were collected using a qualitative open-ended questionnaire distributed by email, with responses received in writing. The findings indicate that most mentor teachers (73%) highly value student teachers' knowledge of the practice, and would like them to have a more detailed understanding of what teaching entails before they go on teaching practice. Based on the mentor teachers' input, we recommend that fewer student teachers be sent to each school at one time, more emphasis be given to students' professional behaviour, and that students be better prepared with content and lesson planning knowledge.

Keywords: initial teacher education; mentor teachers; pre-service teachers; teaching practice; university tutors

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Introduction

Teaching practice can be a make-or-break experience for pre-service teachers who are sometimes placed in uninformed and unsupportive schooling contexts. This being the case, mentor teachers play a critical role during teaching practice, assisting pre-service teachers to apply theory to practice and to become familiar with professional and administrative requirements. Research has shown that initial teacher education (ITE) institutions across the world send pre-service teachers to schools to gain the required experience. However, as Rusznyak and Bertram (2021, 35) have shown, spending the required amount of time in classrooms does not necessarily result in meaningful learning experiences for pre-service teachers. Good quality mentorship makes the difference between a lacklustre experience and one that grounds the pre-service teacher in excellent teaching practices. Good quality mentorship and supervision are more likely to occur when solid relationships have been established between the university and the school (CHE 2010, 71). One way of building this kind of relationship is to give mentor teachers the opportunity to express their views on what pre-service teachers need to know before beginning their teaching practice.

Much has been written about the need for a well-functioning mentorship programme in which academics and mentor teachers share a common vision for teacher development (CHE 2010). Despite the call for collaboration between schools and universities in this regard, pre-service teachers continue to experience challenges in the mentorship they receive during teaching practice (Moosa and Rembach 2018, 2020). In addition to participating in well-structured mentorship programmes, pre-service teachers need and can benefit from the insights of mentor teachers on to how to prepare for practicums. Insights from mentor teachers are also of value to ITE institutions since mentors have experience in both teaching and working with pre-service teachers. Currently, little is known about what mentor teachers view as important for preparing pre-service teachers for practice. Thus, an exploration of mentor teachers' views regarding pre-service teacher preparation may yield valuable insights which ITE institutions can use to better prepare pre-service teachers for practice.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used for this study is that of Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999), who examined the complex relationship between theory and practice by focusing on the role of professional communities in supporting learning. They found that teacher learning depends on certain essential knowledge–practice relationships, with teachers' pre-existing knowledge affecting the quality of their teaching. Three forms of knowledge contribute to optimum teaching: knowledge of practice, knowledge for practice, and knowledge gained in the practice. Each is underpinned by the images that teachers hold of knowledge: images of teachers and their professional practice, images of the way in which teacher learning takes place, and images of teachers' roles in educational change. In addition, pre-service teachers' practice of teaching is shaped by

ongoing initiatives in teacher education, professional development, and the ways in which teachers are assessed (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1999).

Knowledge for practice refers to formal knowledge that university researchers generate from theory to improve the practice for pre-service teachers. From the students' point of view, it concerns the knowledge they gain in lectures. *Knowledge in practice* concerns essential content and teaching knowledge, with practical knowledge usually embedded in reflections on practice. For students, it concerns the knowledge they gain from practical experience in the classroom. *Knowledge of practice* concerns knowledge generated in the context of the larger educational community.

Pre-service teachers' acquisition of knowledge is important as it directly feeds into their professional practice. However, there are no set rules for improving teachers' practice (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1999). Teachers' knowledge is not established only by pedagogical means but also by images that they hold of knowledge, specifically knowledge of teaching practice and the teacher's role.

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) argue that the communities in which teachers work influence their professional learning and development. They assert that teachers' conceptions of the practice are influenced by both theoretical and practical knowledge, and that professional communities play a critical role in shaping teachers' knowledge and practice. Professional communities provide spaces in which teachers share ideas, discuss challenges, and find collective solutions to ongoing problems. They advocate for the deliberate creation of supportive and reflective communities that encourage ongoing teacher learning. Based on this premise, we believe that mentor teachers' views and insights can contribute significantly to the overall preparation of pre-service teachers.

Literature Review

The Role of Work-Integrated Learning in Initial Teacher Education

Work-integrated learning (WIL), also known as teaching practice, practicum, teaching experience, professional learning, and school-based training, refers to opportunities for pre-service teachers to gain the required teaching skills by working under the supervision of experienced teachers (Rusznyak and Bertram 2021). WIL involves "learning from practice and in practice" (Reeves and Robinson 2014, 237). This clearly shows that there is no singular theory of how teachers learn and develop (Rutton 2021). We regard WIL as a period in which pre-service teachers are afforded opportunities to socialise and interact with those in practice to enable them to develop a teacher identity. A teacher identity is not static, nor is it formed at the time the student registers to study for a bachelor of education (BEd) degree. We view teacher identity as something that is ever-changing, with the changes affected by both the theory of teaching and pre-service teachers' practical exposure and mentorship during teaching practice. Research has indicated that for many students registered for ITE programmes, teaching was not their

first choice; they found themselves in the teaching programme because they were not accepted for other programmes (Moosa 2020). This implies that some pre-service teachers begin their qualification without commitment or passion for the profession. However, McIntyre and Hagger (2013) note that pre-service teachers can become passionate and committed teachers over time. Proponents of this viewpoint argue that teaching is a socially constructed practice in which a professional identity is formed by engagement with a community of practitioners and their practices (Rusznyak and Bertram 2021; Morrow 2007). Raichel (2022) sees the ideal teacher as one who takes an active part in the community, that being learning from teachers and the willingness to be nation builders. The professional identity of a teacher should be maintained by ensuring that every qualified teacher is registered with the South African Council for Educators (SACE).

This being the case, a period of WIL is of primary importance for students (Aglazor 2017). WIL permits students to experience teaching in a classroom environment, enabling them to acquire knowledge in real time (Kiggundu and Nayimuli 2009). WIL also provides pre-service teachers with the opportunity to engage with the social aspects of teaching as they interact with learners, fellow teachers, and mentors. WIL provides opportunities for collaborative learning and teaching, ensuring that pre-service teachers observe, listen, emulate, discuss, and work with more knowledgeable others (Newman and Latifi 2021). Teaching, therefore, should be seen as the practical activities informed by theory (Wolff, Jarodzka, and Boshuizen 2020). In addition to this, Fives and Barnes (2020) argue that the theoretical and philosophical foundation knowledge are imperative to teacher development and should be used to inform instruction.

WIL should expose students to the intricacies of the practice, ensuring that pre-service teachers learn about the daily workings, teaching requirements, and administrative systems of the classroom and school. Pre-service teachers should be supervised, assessed, and supported by mentor teachers (Darling-Hammond 2017).

Work-Integrated Learning in South Africa

In South Africa, all students registered for a BEd or postgraduate certificate in education (PGCE) must complete teaching practice as a compulsory part of their qualification (Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications [hereafter referred to as MRTEQ] 2015). For BEd and PGCE students, the practical teaching period is 24 weeks and 10 weeks, respectively. During this time, pre-service teachers are mentored and supervised by mentor teachers at the schools to which they are allocated based on their subject or phase specialisation. MRTEQ (2015) affirms the notion of situated learning by referring to learning in context, with pre-service teachers needing to understand the diverse contexts of schools and to situate their teaching in these different contexts. Teaching practice also helps pre-service teachers understand the interactions between theory and practice (CHE 2010, 61). WIL should involve constant structured supervision, mentoring and assessment (MRTEQ 2015). WIL imparts “knowledge in

practice," also known as "practical learning," which can involve both simulated and authentic classroom environments (MRTEQ 2015, 10).

Mentorship during WIL

The concept of mentoring has evolved over time and remains a contested issue. Mentoring is complex in every sector where it is practised (Ellis, Alonzo, and Nguyen 2020). According to Koki (1997, 3) and Ellis, Alonzo, and Nguyen (2020), mentoring entails someone facilitating and assisting another's development. This definition can be extended to the following aspects of teacher training:

- Cognitive coaching through the use of constructive questioning techniques (knowledge for practice)
- The modelling of professionalism (knowledge in practice)
- Knowledge of teaching methods, and the modalities and styles of teaching and learning that affect student achievement (knowledge of practice)

Klinge (2015) and Nesje and Lejonberg (2022) state that for pre-service teachers to gain the appropriate pedagogical knowledge, skills, and competencies, a skilled mentor teacher is required to guide the mentee in the school environment. We extend this view of mentoring to the university, which can also benefit from the guidance of mentor teachers. Their input can assist lecturers and course designers to prepare pre-service teachers so that they derive the most from their practical teaching period.

Ideally, pre-service teachers are placed under the supervision of experienced mentor teachers, who guide and supervise their daily activities (Ellis, Alonzo, and Nguyen 2020; Hudson and Nguyen 2009). Mentor teachers should provide pre-service teachers with insights on lesson planning and its delivery (knowledge of practice), classroom management skills (knowledge in practice), and subject specialisation pedagogy (knowledge of practice) (Moosa and Rembach 2020). Under the auspices of their mentor, pre-service teachers should supplement their pedagogical content knowledge with knowledge of learners, learning, and the curriculum. In addition, pre-service teachers are expected to adopt and imitate the mentor teachers' behaviour and attitudes towards teaching practice (Nesje and Lejonberg 2022). The expectation is that mentor teachers will fully involve pre-service teachers in all aspects of teaching and assist with "structured supervision and mentoring" (MRTEQ 2015,18).

Mentor teachers are responsible for mirroring teacher professionalism and the mentee's mastering of subject knowledge and pedagogy. Mentor teachers are considered facilitators of learning in a relationship that focuses on the accomplishment of student teachers' goals and objectives and the modelling of good practice (knowledge in practice). Mentor teachers should be highly qualified, possess knowledge of classroom management, and be experts in their subjects (Nesje and Lejonberg 2022). Excellent teachers hold important pedagogical knowledge (Shulman 2015; Torbeyns, Verbruggen, and Depaepe 2020). It is through the mentor–mentee relationship that knowledge for practice and knowledge in practice is conveyed to the pre-service teacher

(Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1999). Furthermore, for new teachers, both theoretical knowledge and practical experience are rooted in the example of experienced teachers (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1999).

Against this backdrop, we consider mentor teachers' insights on the knowledge required by pre-service teachers to be a crucial component of a successful teaching experience.

Methods

Research Design

An interpretivist qualitative design was used to obtain the subjective views of mentors on how universities may better prepare pre-service teachers for the teaching profession (Creswell and Poth 2016; Mertens 2012). This design is appropriate because the study involved "making sense of data in terms of the participants' perspectives" (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2007, 461). In the study, participants explored their "common experiences" (Creswell 2012, 20) with regard to how universities can better prepare pre-service teachers for teaching practice. The researchers sought insight into the mentor teachers' lived experiences, and therefore took a phenomenological approach (Williams 2021) This approach allowed us to obtain rich data from the participants based on their lived experiences, requiring us to "bracket all prejudgements" in order to gather data on how people "make meaning of a particular experience or scenario" (McMillan and Schumacher 2010, 24). A disadvantage of the phenomenological approach is that data processing can be difficult because the design does not assume the existence of any theoretical or conceptual framework (Rahman 2017). However, in the current study, this was deemed a strength rather than a weakness since it enabled the facts to speak for themselves.

To ensure reliability, two identical questions were posed to all participants, by email. Thus, the data collection tool was consistent, which is a key consideration for data reliability. If our research methods were used again with the same population at the same time of year as this study, the results are likely to be similar. A diverse sample of participants from a number of school contexts ensured a variety of viewpoints, further enhancing the validity of the data. In addition, the theoretical framework used in this study is widely accepted in the ITE field.

Two open-ended questions were asked, with participants required to email their responses:

- What do you think the university can do to better prepare students for teaching practice?
- How can the university make the teaching practice period more meaningful for schools?

Permission to conduct this research was granted by the ethics committee of the University of the Witwatersrand. Participants were made aware that their involvement

was voluntary, and that they could withdraw from the study at any point. All identifying participant information has been kept confidential.

Participants

Our institution requires students to complete their teaching practicum at a number of carefully chosen schools in and around Johannesburg. During teaching practice, students complete their teaching practice at government-funded and private schools situated in rural and urban areas throughout the greater Johannesburg area.

A total of 250 schools that accept pre-service teachers were purposively selected (Campbell et al. 2020; Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim 2016) to take part in the study, of which 79 consented to participate. Of these, 32 were high schools, 41 were primary schools, and six were combined schools. Despite a follow-up email, the other schools did not reply to the invitation.

The 79 participants comprised 18 men and 61 women; 21 were principals, 28 were deputy principals, 17 were liaison teachers, and 14 were teachers in various school settings.

The main research question that the study sought to answer was: What can universities do to better prepare pre-service teachers for teaching practice?

Analysis

Participants' emailed responses were copied into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet and numbered 1 to 79. A two-step procedure was used to analyse the data. First, responses were categorised by means of an emergent and a priori coding method (Stemler 2000), using both inductive and deductive reasoning (Goel and Waechter 2017). We began by reading participants' responses and applied an emergent coding method based on the nature of the data and inductive reasoning. This enabled us to identify specific actions universities can take to better prepare pre-service teachers for teaching practice. Second, we used deductive reasoning to code the data from the emergent categories using a priori coding methods. The statements were coded to identify themes related to knowledge for practice, knowledge of practice, and knowledge in practice.

Findings

Table 1 indicates the a priori and emergent data framework, with the percentages and numbers in brackets indicating the percentages and numbers of participants who referred to the category, along with examples of each. A discussion of the information follows Table 1.

Table 1: A priori and emergent categories

A priori categories[1]	Description	Emergent categories	Examples
Knowledge *of* practice 73%	This refers to an understanding of what teaching entails—the complexities of the practice.	Professionalism (27)[2]	Make students aware that the school is accommodating them, and not the other way around.
		Numbers of students sent to each school for teaching practice (24)	Place a small group of students at each school rather than a large group.
		The realities of teaching (24)	Focus less on the academics; try to focus more on the practicalities of teaching.
		The selection and screening of prospective pre-service teachers (16)	Select a calibre of student that fits the requirement of the profession.
		Participation in school activities (8)	Encourage them to volunteer for as many extra duties as possible.
		Working with mentor teachers (10)	Consider providing written feedback to the mentor regarding the pre-service teacher's experience.
		Working in specific contexts (9)	Fit into our school and ethos.
Knowledge *for* practice 33%	This is the pedagogical knowledge needed by teachers and acquired in lectures. This forms a basis for teachers'	Lesson planning (20)	Be more creative and original in lesson planning and pedagogy.
		Pedagogic knowledge (15)	Conduct micro lessons at university before giving

1 Numeric values were calculated by identifying these categories from overall responses and dividing the total number by the number of participants. Participant responses fell into more than one category; therefore, the values do not add up to 100 per cent.

2 Numbers in this column denote the actual number of times this category was indicated by participants.

	practice. It includes the application of theories and models acquired in various modules of the BEd or PGCE.		lessons in the school.
		Practical knowledge (8)	Teach them better time management.
		Content knowledge (7)	Teachers must have excellent content knowledge.
Knowledge *in* practice 1%	This is the knowledge and practical skills acquired in the school setting—also known as craft knowledge or tacit knowledge. Teachers need to make this knowledge their own. Decisions will be made on the basis of their personal experiences.	Classroom management (5)	Teach them how to discipline a class.

Table 1 shows that most participants (73%) prioritised knowledge *of* the practice (73%) for the preparation of pre-service teachers. Of less importance to participants were knowledge *for* the practice (33%) and knowledge gained *in* the practice (1%). Thus, participants were not much concerned with craft or tacit knowledge, and tended to devalue the knowledge gained during the period of teaching practice.

The emergent categories associated with each a priori category are discussed below.

Knowledge *of* the Practice

Almost three-quarters (73%) of the responses focused on aspects linked to professionalism, the number of students sent to the school for teaching practice, the practicalities of teaching, the selection and screening of prospective pre-service teachers, their participation in school activities, and their ability to work with mentor teachers and in specific contexts. Each of these is discussed below.

Professionalism

This term was used by 27 participants and appeared in 48 per cent of the responses. Mentor teachers indicated that the university needs to "emphasise the importance of always being professional." Professionalism was linked to pre-service teachers' understanding that teaching entails "hard work." Mentor teachers stated that pre-service teachers needed to "be aware of departmental policies" that specifically relate to educators' "professional code of conduct as set out by the SACE." Furthermore, mentor teachers stated that pre-service teachers need "a clear understanding of their role and responsibilities" and "a clear understanding of legislation governing schools with regard to curriculum management."

Many comments focused specifically on pre-service teachers' work ethic, mentioning "dress codes, preparation, use of cell phones." Mentor teachers emphasised the need to "teach [pre-service teachers] the etiquette required. They are not learning it at home. For example, don't play on your phone during a staff meeting." In addition, mentor teachers noted that pre-service teachers "must guard against familiarity with the children they are teaching or coaching."

One participant stated:

> I think the university should be more specific as to the school's expectation. When students are asked how they would like to proceed, they appear to have no idea as to what they should be doing. I think students should be thoroughly briefed as to what to expect and how to behave themselves in terms of dress code and attitude.

Furthermore, professionalism was linked to pre-service teachers' use of language. A participant said:

> Universities must dwell more on language usage. The importance of students being able to address themselves appropriately and using correct and acceptable language is important.

Participants were also concerned that pre-service teachers lacked "willingness to learn from their time at school."

Number of Students Sent to Each School for Teaching Practice

Twenty-four (24) participants felt that the university should "send fewer students at a time" to schools for teaching practice. The consensus was that when "too many students arrive" at the school it "can be disruptive." Mentor teachers also stated that the timing of teaching practice was important, because "if students come too early in the term or very late in the term or mid-term" it affected their learning experience at the school. One participant stated that "students should come on the first day of opening so that the school plans ahead." One mentor noted that pre-service teachers should not be sent to schools "in Term 3, as the academic pressure to finish [the] syllabus is tremendous."

The Realities of Teaching

Twenty-four participants stated that the university should "focus less on just the academics" and spend more time preparing students about the "real aspects of schooling," stating that teaching is "a very hard job." One participant mentioned that pre-service teachers should be better informed about the schools' expectations. Participants made the following recommendations:

> Discuss school hours and that, like any workplace, there are set hours for remaining on the premises. Teaching is not a flexi-time job.

> They can make sure that the students know exactly what is expected of them.
>
> Ensure students are fully aware of workloads and responsibilities of a full working school day.
>
> The university can assist schools in preparing them for the world of work in line with [how] the normal school would operate.
>
> To prepare them better about the realities of being a teacher—everyday struggles. Students have a wrong perspective of their responsibilities.
>
> Make them aware that they are not the children's friends.
>
> Student teachers want to use laptops and projectors but township schools are not well equipped and nor are the teachers. Can the universities assist in bridging the gap?

The Selection and Screening of Prospective Pre-Service Teachers

Sixteen participants mentioned the idea of "select[ing] a calibre of student that fits the requirements of the profession, not just because it is a last choice based on tertiary education." The idea of "personality profiling" was promoted by these participants because they believed that this would enable the university to select pre-service teachers who are "committed [to] being active in the discipline." Mentor teachers stated that the university needs to "be more selective as to who they allow into the faculty." Participants provided specific recommendations regarding what the screening process should entail:

> Conduct language tests on them. … You cannot speak properly … you cannot become a teacher. One cannot be taught to speak properly at university level.
>
> Do ethics tests on them. A dishonest, unethical, violent person, for example, cannot hold a place in society as a teacher.

Participation in School Activities

Eight participants noted that "students should be encouraged to participate and play active roles in and out of the classroom." Participants believed that the university should "encourage [pre-service teachers] to volunteer for as many extra duties as possible."

Working with Mentor Teachers

Ten participants noted that "the university must prepare and workshop the student teachers" to "work effectively with supervising teachers and mentors to make for a productive learning experience." Participants specifically noted that pre-service teachers should be prepared with regard to "how to deal with criticism effectively and constructively."

Participants' feedback also focused on how university tutors ought to engage with mentor teachers. They noted that "tutors who crit the ... students need to be more approachable and adaptable, communicate better with student teachers they have been allocated to." They noted that the university should "allocate the right person to assist student teachers positively, rather than discouraging them."

Working in Specific Contexts

Nine participants felt that pre-service teachers should be "exposed ... to different school environments." One way to do this is by providing pre-service teachers with "some background information on specific schools." One stated that "research about the particular school must be done." Participants commented on the relationship between pre-service teachers and the schools they were posted to:

> … fit our school and ethos, especially as we are religion based.
>
> … be prepared about the challenges of township public school. Challenges such as lack of discipline amongst the learners, overcrowding, lack of resources, learners substance abuse, and gangsterism.
>
> Students should read and understand school policies and regulations before placement.

Knowledge *for* Practice

Thirty-three responses focused on the pedagogical knowledge required by teachers and acquired in lectures, such as lesson planning, content knowledge and practical know-how. Each of these is discussed below.

Lesson Planning

Twenty participants indicated that pre-service teachers needed more knowledge than they had on "developing a lesson plan" and "how to plan for a lesson." Participants said the following about lesson planning:

> Equip them with curriculum changes.
>
> Focus on working with actual CAPS [Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement] policy documents and the interpretation thereof.
>
> Students' lessons should be in compliance with the annual teaching plan.
>
> How to be more creative and original in lesson planning and pedagogy.

Pedagogic Knowledge

Fifteen participants believed that pre-service teachers needed better pedagogic knowledge before they are sent to schools for teaching practice. One participant stated that the university should "teach pre-service teachers' pedagogy—actual teaching skills,

not just the theory." Participants made the following suggestions with regard to pedagogic knowledge:

> Let them give lessons on the relevant subject to each other to get used to speaking in front of others.

> Equip all students with the necessary teaching and learning techniques, as well as lesson preparation, before placing them in the actual classroom situation. Lecturers should conduct lessons by using actual learners in a classroom situation to give students better exposure. Equip students with better interpersonal skills. Allow them to spend more time observing lessons in real classroom situations before engaging in practice teaching. Allow students specialising in the arts such as music, visual arts and physical education to conduct lessons on a much more frequent basis at schools. It was done before at our school, where the music students came in every second week to conduct their lessons in all grades. They were accompanied by their lecturer who took turns to observe the students' capabilities and performances in the actual classroom situation.

> Allow the students many opportunities to practise lesson planning. Student teachers should not take offence when learners question them. The university should prepare them for this. Student teachers should … expect questions that may put them out of their depth. Student teacher should be ready and willing to watch teachers of other subjects than their own.

> How to ask and pose questions to enhance learning.

Practical Knowledge

Eight participants focused on the need for pre-service teachers to have more practical knowledge about teaching. Their recommendations included:

> Show them how to do the admin part of teaching, e.g., completing daily registers, completing support forms, doing reports end of term.

> Focus on time management.

> Teach students about the use of teaching aids, especially basic skills of chalkboard/ whiteboard writing.

> From personal experience, I think an admin module is vital. Things like teacher file requirements (ATP [Annual Teaching Plan], WS [worksheets], lesson plans, assessment year plans, marksheets, LTSM [Learning and Teaching Support Material] lists), admin needed for assessments (pre and post moderation), Blooms or similar breakdown of assessment questions, learners at risk documentation, handling marksheets and stats, departmental requirements, etc. These are a few of the things that usually overwhelm first year teachers ... I think some of these can be addressed at university level, perhaps in conjunction with the GDE [Gauteng Department of Education]. It might also be a good idea to require student teachers to attend a Subject Information Sharing Meeting, and a SAT [School Assessment Team] meeting from the district at least once during

> their studies. Perhaps also the peer moderation meetings. This is not directly preparing them for practical teaching, but will definitely give them a better understanding of the actual work expected of a teacher.
>
> Topics such as completing a school register, how to make charts, making a learner's book and classroom management.

Content Knowledge

Seven participants regarded pre-service teachers' subject content as "critical" in teaching. One stated that "students need to be more familiar with the curriculum coverage relevant to the phase and grade they would like to teach. If they know and understand the content to be taught, they will be better prepared." Another noted that pre-service teachers need to be taught "how to research and where to find additional information for lesson preparation and extension of content knowledge—beyond the textbook and Wikipedia."

Knowledge *in* Practice

One percent of participants focused on classroom management as an aspect that could be improved through better teacher preparation.

Classroom management

Five participants stated that they wanted the university to teach students about class management. One spoke of teachers' need to know "different systems of discipline, not just merit/demerit/detention and heavy-handedness. Anxiety management is important." Another stated that it is important to "make students more aware of handling discipline in a class in an effective manner" while another felt that "students could come with some up-to-date relevant policy documents, curriculum documents, or information on topical subjects that we could use for staff development, e.g., bullying, LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender], teenage pregnancy …" For these participants, it was imperative that pre-service teachers have practical classroom management skills before they begin their period of in-service training.

Discussion

From the findings it appears that mentor teachers do not view the training of pre-service teachers as a mutual task, but rather as the university's responsibility. This, however, is in contradiction of the MRTEQ (2015) that declares that the in-practice learning should take place in a school-based classroom with provision for mentoring and assessment. Given that classroom-based teaching is in the policy, Rusznyak and Bertram (2021) argue that spending time in the classroom does not necessarily result in meaningful learning experiences. This clearly shows that there is no singular theory of how teachers learn and develop (Rutton 2021).

Participants felt that the university should ensure that before students are placed in schools, they have a clear understanding of what teaching entails and are exposed to the many facets of teaching, including the requirements of professional conduct, language, and dress code. What is missing from this conceptualisation is an awareness that teaching entails learning from and in practice (Reeves and Robinson 2014). However, Raichel (2022) sees the ideal teacher as one who takes an active part in the community, that being learning from teachers and the willingness to be nation builders. This can only occur if the pre-service teachers are guided, mentored, and supported by in-service mentor teachers to build a social responsibility and relationship between schools and the universities. In the absence of a strong relationship between ITE institutions and schools, pre-service teachers are challenged by unrealistic expectations on the part of the school. To combat these challenges, Ellis, Alonzo, and Nguyen (2020) suggest that a set of norms, standards, and requirements be presented to the mentor teachers prior to students attending for teaching practice. They further emphasise that there is a need for universities to foster collegial relationships between student teachers and the university lecturers.

In total, 73 per cent of the participants saw knowledge of the practice as insufficient, conveying that student teachers lacked an understanding of what teaching entails. It can be further argued in agreement with this outcome that MRTEQ (2015) expresses that there should be a synthesis of different knowledge types in the moment of practice. There should be a focus on *what* should be learnt and *how* it is to be learnt during teacher education. Teaching, therefore, should be seen as practical activities that form a strong foundations for the application of theory (Wolff, Jarodzka, and Boshuizen 2020).

Many participants raised the issue of professionalism or the lack of it, referring to overfamiliar, casual or unethical behaviour in the workplace. It can be determined that since these are pre-service teachers, they lacked understanding of the SACE's Code of Professional Ethics (2000). Given that students from different years of study attend teaching practice, the Code of Professional Ethics is taught in the fourth year of study. This study shows that the programme should include the teachings of professionalism from the first year of study. A combination of teacher professionalism from the SACE Code of Conduct and that of teacher professional identity becomes crucial in becoming a teacher (Flores 2020).

Only 33 per cent of the participants raised the issue of a lack of knowledge for the practice, as conveyed by pre-service teachers, as a problem. In this regard, they referred to the importance of the pedagogical knowledge received in lectures, and the kind of knowledge teachers need in order to develop their practice, such as an ability to apply theories and models. This is an important concern given that the actual job of teaching is in the classroom. Teachers' pedagogical content is an imperative and contributes to instructional quality and student outcomes (Torbeyas, Verbruggen, and Depaepe 2019). Pre-service teachers need to apply the theory they learnt during their lectures to the practices at school (Rusznyak and Bertram 2021) during teaching practice.

Of far less significance was knowledge developed in practice (1%). Participants who raised this issue seemed to expect pre-service teachers to know how to manage classrooms before they arrived to learn this skill. However, Fives and Barnes (2020) argue that the theoretical and philosophical foundation knowledge are imperative to teacher development and should be used to inform instruction. This notion of knowledge is further emphasized by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) that teacher learning depends on certain essential knowledge–practice relationships, with teachers' pre-existing knowledge affecting the quality of their teaching. For effective quality teaching and learner performance improvements, there is a need to bridge the gap between teacher knowledge and classroom management (Wolff, Jarodzka, and Boshuizen 2020).

From the complete set of responses, it would appear that many participants expected teachers to possess a sophisticated array of skills and knowledge about the practice, and to fully understand what teaching entails. Mentor teachers seemed to underestimate the impact that knowledge gained in practice provides for the development and identity formation of teachers. It is in this setting, and not the university, that student teachers are exposed to mentors in practice, where they imitate and adopt the behaviours and attitudes of mentor teachers.

Conclusion

This article has highlighted that mentor teachers place a high value on the professionalism of pre-service teachers. They see this as falling under the ITE's domain.

Mentor teachers believed that ITE programmes should spend more time on preparing pre-service teachers for the classroom, ensuring their professionalism in matters such as language usage, dress, time management, and general behaviour. Teachers needed more than theory and subject knowledge; they should enter the school prepared for the challenges of the real classroom situation, and be more creative in their lesson planning. Many participants expressed dissatisfaction with the calibre of student they were receiving, and felt that prospective pre-service teachers should be screened before being accepted into the programme. They may have been overlooking the fact that many excellent teachers grow into the profession, having started out with reservations, just as many of these pre-service teachers do. They made several useful suggestions which the university should consider, such as send fewer preservice teachers to each school, encourage preservice teachers to volunteer for extra-curricular activities at their schools, and require preservice teachers to give written feedback of their experience to their mentors (or to the school principal).

This article contributes to the field of knowledge on ITE and mentorship during teaching practice. If ITE institutions and mentor teachers are not aligned in their thinking with regard to which forms of knowledge are developed (knowledge of the practice, knowledge for the practice, and knowledge gained in the practice), pre-service teachers will not derive the maximum benefits from either ITE programmes or WIL.

A limitation of the study is that the data were collected from schools that accept students for WIL from a particular university. We do not know if these schools accept students only from this university or from other universities in the area. As such, the findings may not be generalisable to all schools, mentor teachers, or ITE institutions.

We recommend that stronger partnerships be built between universities and mentor teachers at schools (Du Plessis 2013). Such partnerships should include regular opportunities to give and receive feedback, enabling universities to benefit from teachers' insights, and the mentor teachers to benefit from student feedback regarding their experience. We also recommend that similar research be conducted in other areas and provinces with mentor teachers on ways to better prepare pre-service teachers for their placements.

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