

Pre-Service Teachers' Professional Identities in Work Integrated Learning: Experiences from A South African University

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Abstract: The study explored the impact of work-integrated learning on shaping the professional identities of Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) pre-service teachers at a university in South Africa. The research employed a qualitative case study approach where data was generated using a semi-structured interview protocol with 26 PGCE pre-service teachers, 14 females and 12 males, that were purposively selected as the study sample. Data generated through the semi-structured interviews was analysed using thematic method. The study is framed using the Personal Construct Theory (PCT). According to the theory, constructs (professional identities) are drawn from the experiences and perceptions of individuals about a specific exercise, in this case, teaching practice. Thus, the application of PCT in the teaching practice exercise revealed that Work Integrated Learning (WIL) aided PGCE pre-service teachers in articulating the various constructs experienced during the WIL as it exposed them to mentor teachers and other staff members' support. According to the findings, such exposure resulted in the development of professional identities in pedagogical knowledge, inclusive education strategy, classroom management and communication skills, and collaborative and administrative skills. Thus, it is concluded that the condition of the school environment can impact pre-service teachers' development of professional identities. Based on the conclusion, recommendations were made, which include, among others, the need for robust collaboration between teacher training institutions (universities) and partner schools to ensure every member understands their role in providing the needed support for pre-service teachers at their respective learning sites and the need for the capacity building of mentors in schools who guide the pre-service teachers on a daily basis during teaching practice.

Keywords: Identities, Pre-Service Teachers, Professional, Personal Construct Theory, South Africa, Teachers, Work Integrated Learning

1. Introduction

In sub-Saharan Africa, about 774 million youth above the age of 15 and adults can neither read nor write, according to the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, Germany (FMECDG, 2013). Within Africa, South Africa has been identified as one of the worst-performing countries in the field of education, as reported by the Centre for Development and Enterprise (2023). Besides, according to global rankings, South African Mathematics and Science education is second last, which is among the worst in the world (Business Tech, 2015). Similarly, it has also been reported that in Mathematics, South Africa remains a low-performing country (Reddy et al., 2016).

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Relentless inequality, a high rate of learner dropout, and an awkward quality of instruction are inherent challenges in the South African education system (Amnesty International, 2020).

Corroborating this, Brown (2019) averred that the problem with the South African education system is complex and multifaceted, among which is teacher qualifications. Thus, this calls for quality teacher education programmes that address educational disparities as well as improve learning outcomes.

Teachers as agents of transformation in society play key roles in nation-building (Manzar-Abbass, Malik, Khurshid & Ahmad 2017), hence the need for competence. In South Africa, the problem of teacher competence has been reported in many studies (Cascio, 2013; Condy & Blease, 2014; Modise, 2016; Botha & Rens, 2018; Jiyane & Gravett, 2019; Mabena et al., 2021). Some of the challenges highlighted in the studies above hinge on pedagogical knowledge, classroom and resource management, administrative duties, a lack of motivation, and a lack of preparedness on how to deal with learners. These are all problems associated with teacher competence in South Africa.

From the foregoing, it is suggestive that beginner teachers are deficient in the necessary skills required to cater to the needs of the contemporary classroom. Accordingly, a beginner teacher should have subject content and pedagogical knowledge, collaboration and communication with staff and students, understanding of diversity in the South African context, and the ability to communicate their subject knowledge effectively. In addition, lesson planning and use of multiple teaching strategies, positive work ethics, commitment to the profession, and professional appearance, among others (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2015; Zeiger, 2018; Botha & Reyneke, 2020). Therefore, developing these skills in teachers require some form of formal training (Khalid, 2014), in a work-related environment, to ensure effectiveness in the discharge of their duties.

As argued, “work-integrated learning (WIL, hereafter) does not only equip its participants with related competencies but also guides them to different approaches to reflection and professional development” (Dorasamy 2018, p. 8). This is because it is a system of education that connects students to a workplace related to their field of study in their respective institutions of higher learning (Atkinson, 2021), where they are exposed to real-life experiences related to their profession. According to the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications (MRTEQ) policy, the initial teacher education (ITE) (university programmes for teacher training) curricula must ensure that pre-service teachers have access to different types of knowledge, and this can be acquired through WIL (DHET, 2015). Thus, the three benefits of WIL to the preservice teacher are that: “it enables pre-service teachers to accumulate “concrete” classroom experience (DHET, 2015, p. 18); it provides pre-service teachers with opportunities to engage in “practical learning which is “an important condition for the development of tacit knowledge, which in addition is an important component of learning to teach” (p. 10); as it contributes to students’ “situational learning.” The policy stresses the importance of exposing students to “varied and contrasting contexts of schooling in South Africa” (p. 18).

Findings from studies conducted revealed that the focus has been on WIL involving undergraduate preservice teachers. While the problem associated with deficient teacher competence persists, and with evidence showing limited or no study that directly explored the impact of WIL on shaping pre-service teachers’ professional identities at the postgraduate level, this therefore signifies a problem and a gap in

the body of knowledge. Therefore, it is on this premise that the current study aims to explore the impact of WIL on the professional identities of PGCE pre-service teachers. Studies such as this, and those at the postgraduate level are very important since those who enrol in PGCE programmes are originally with foundations other than a Bachelor of Education and were not trained to serve the same purpose. Therefore, it is imperative to conduct similar studies as occasioned at the undergraduate level to ascertain the achievement of the programme objectives.

Besides, the problem associated with beginner teachers still persists, pointing to the need for similar research at postgraduate levels since the focus is also on teacher training. Hence, the purpose of this study. This present study explores the impact of WIL on shaping the professional identities of PGCE preservice teachers. This is because these are candidates who have completed qualifications in particular disciplinary fields (without any pedagogical focus) and now want to be trained to become teachers in those fields. In the following sections, an overview of the related literature on the subject is presented, followed by methodology, findings, discussion, conclusions, and recommendations.

2. Background /Literature Review

This section presents a review of related literature on the current study, which aims to explore how WIL, with a specific focus on teaching practice, shapes the professional identities of pre-service teachers at the PGCE level. In doing so, the review focuses on how professional identity develops through WIL during teaching practice.

2.1 Professional Identity

Identity, according to Sarraf-Yazdi et al. (2021, p. 3521), is a manifestation of qualities, conditions, beliefs, values, and ideals that humans possess and regard with importance. According to Wenger (2010), identity development can take place across communities at diverse levels and entails negotiations of meanings or practices that individuals face in their social interactions. Besides, an individual's present identity is an integration of past experiences, relationships, and practices, and it positions one for the future (Wenger, 1998, 2010). Professional identity is the integration of two different facets of interests, namely, the professional self and the personal self (Moss, Gibson & Dollardhide, 2014). Thus, the formation of professional identity requires being armed with an awareness of what matters most in practice as well as what values and interests inform decision-making (Trede, 2012). That is, being, thinking, and acting as a professional is a function or manifestation of professional identity (Trede, 2012) in any given career, including teaching.

In the teaching profession, pre-service teachers' identities are said to be developed through their studies at the teacher-training institution in addition to their previous aspirations prior to the commencement of their training programme (R & Tai, 2017). However, Hong (2010) as well as Yuan and Lee (2014) believe that pre-service teachers' experiences in teaching practice, which is part of the preparatory phase of their training, may significantly influence their teacher identity development in the profession. According to Nghia and Tai (2017, p. 2), the complexities of social interactions that pre-service teachers experience during their teaching practice may transform their existing professional aspirations or expectations into a new version of their teaching identity or may alienate them from the community of teachers. The

implication is that the teaching practice programme is considered an outstanding means for the career and professional preparation of pre-service teachers because it provides work-related experiences to its recipients (Anjum, 2020). Teaching practice (Nghia & Tai, 2017) as work-integrated learning according to the South African education context (Rusznyak & Bertram, 2021) positions the pre-service teacher in a real-work environment where they acquire different knowledge related to their profession.

2.2 Work Integrated Learning

Knowledge is increasingly produced within and around the workplace (Mumford & Roodhouse 2010). According to Ha (2022), this is indicative of the fact that learning occurs through the participation of people facing similar situations in a community of practice. A community of practice, as defined by Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002, p. 4), is ‘a group of people that share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic and deepen their knowledge and expertise in an area by interacting on an ongoing basis’. Accordingly, it is believed that in a community of practice, there are few core and regular members who actively contribute to the community, while peripheral members who rarely participate in the activities make up a large proportion of the community (Wenger et al., 2002; Ndebele, 2020). One structure that offers this programme is work-integrated learning (WIL, hereafter).

In WIL systems, students are exposed to numerous communities of practice and join multiple group memberships, as this is regarded as the space in the curriculum where professional identity is tested, threatened, and reshaped (Trede, 2012). WIL is a programme that connects students to a workplace related to their field of study in their respective institutions of higher learning (Atkinson, 2021). Globally, WIL is recognised as an effective strategy to enhance student job readiness (Nghia & Duyen 2018). It is an educational strategy that combines academic learning at the university and workplace to enrich students with knowledge and skills relevant to their programme of study and career (Groenewald, 2004). WIL provides opportunities where the world of work is brought into the classroom and where students go to authentic workplace settings (Trede, 2012). WIL is an integral part of initial teacher education for preservice teachers (Gillett-Swan & Grant-Smith, 2017). Pre-service teachers are those who enrol in teacher-education programmes for the acquisition of credentials in public schools or private sectors, domestically or internationally (Lee, 2015). WIL for preservice teachers takes place between partner schools (primary and high schools) and universities as the service providers of teacher education (Van Niekerk, 2018). The essence of this collaboration is to ensure career-specific and full-rounded learning through the application of theory and academic learning with real-life practice of teaching and learning in selected schools (Van Niekerk, 2018, pp. 66–67)”.

Consciously or unconsciously, the development of preservice teachers’ professional identities is a product of input from three stakeholders within the WIL, namely academics at the university and educators at work who mentor pre-service teachers who are also students learners in both settings (Trede, 2012). More importantly, it is imperative in terms of personal construct theory to understand from pre-service teachers’ perspectives how they construe themselves and their surroundings (Grice, Burkley, Burkley, Wright & Slaby, 2004). Within the WIL strategy, pre-service teachers are trained by academics in the university who also serve as supervisors during their teaching practice exercises, while they are placed under educators at schools who mentor the various professional competencies in them via the assignment of diverse teaching

tasks. The implication is that, under government policy and higher education context, partnerships between students, universities, and industry are pivotal in the nature and quality of WIL (Ha, 2022).

2.3 Teaching Practice

Hence, the purpose of this study, on how WIL shapes the professional identities of preservice teachers. Teaching practice (TP, hereafter), encapsulated and conceptualised as WIL in education according to the South African context for educators, is a period when preservice teachers are exposed to the actual teaching experience where they apply their theoretical knowledge gained in the classroom in real-life (Ndebele & Legg-Jack, 2022). The process is considered very crucial to the training of prospective teachers (Clarke, Triggs & Nielsen 2014). As an element of teacher education, TP prepares preservice teachers through their initiation into the actual teaching environment (Mangope, Otukile-Mongwaketse, Dinama & Kuyini, 2018; Mannathoko, 2013); to build in them the required competences that qualify them as professional teachers. Four major areas are considered paramount for preservice teachers' improvements during the TP exercise: planning and preparation, classroom environment, instruction, and professional responsibility (Manasia, Ianos & Chicioeanu, 2020). TP is considered a preparation of preservice teachers for maximum practical and professional training where they learn and gain experience through participation and observation under the supervision of a school-based mentorship of experienced teachers in the host institution (Kihwele & Mtandi, 2020). This exposure to the work environment helps preservice teachers develop professional skills and competencies that guarantee effective teaching (Kihwele & Mtandi, 2020) because they are given the opportunity to marry theory with practice under the supervision of a mentor at the host school (Nakpodia, 2011).

Studies in the literature have confirmed that TP contributes to equipping preservice teachers with the right competencies. For example, having experience in different educational settings, effective classroom management strategies, knowledge and understanding of assessment strategies, and knowledge of teaching resources are essential qualities and competencies required to qualify as a teacher for good practice (Bernard Jr., 2015; Mukeredzi & Manwa, 2019). Others are awareness of school routine (Chan, 2020), advice for professional development (Munjita, 2019), proper use of language in the classroom (Macario, 2018), and pedagogical, administrative, and time management skills (Botha & Rens, 2018; Modise, 2016). These core qualities portray the professional identity of a good teacher. Therefore, to develop each of them, preservice teachers are required to undergo teaching practice, which is WIL in the South African education context. Hence, the purpose of this study is to examine how WIL shapes the professional identities of preservice teachers.

2.4 Theoretical Framework

This study is informed by Personal Construct Theory (PCT, hereafter) by Kelly (1955). According to the theory, people develop constructs about how the world operates and apply these to the meaning of what happens around them (Kelly, 1955). PCT views people as scientists who draw conclusions based on their observations of their environment and understanding of events. Therefore, people formulate hypotheses about how the world works and test them daily. The theory attributes this to the reason why people may experience similar things but perceive them differently. These experiences and perceptions are used by individuals to draw conclusions referred to as 'Constructs'. Constructs, as defined by Kelly (1955), are

based on similarities and differences between concepts. Accordingly, a construct system is therefore a highly complex network of interconnected concepts, frequently being reviewed and altered in order to refine or differentiate an individual's reaction at all levels of experience. More importantly, it is imperative to understand from pre-service teachers' perspectives how they construe themselves and their surroundings (Grice, Burkley, Burkley, Wright & Slaby, 2004). Thus, the adoption of Personal Construct Theory (PCT) as a framework for this study. From the perspective of the PCT, the elements that comprise a given situation cannot be disentangled from the personal construct an individual will use to make sense of the situation (Bonarius, 1977).

The choice of this theory is premised on the objective of the study, which focuses on how WIL shapes the professional identities of preservice teachers. It is believed that the pre-service teachers sampled in this study all experienced WIL learning; however, they have varied views on how this aspect of their training shaped their professional development.

The use of this theory is evident in scholarly works. For example, a study revealed that the use of PCT allows one to gain knowledge about clients' individual systems of meaning and the level of their cognitive development, as well as reconstruct part of the person's perceptual space (Paszowska-Rogacz & Kabzinska, 2012). PCT, as used in a study, allowed the participant to describe the specific features (or constructs) of the technology they were exposed to and how these features impacted their understanding and learning using the technology (Kurz, Kleinsasser & Kokić, 2019). The evidence of PCT in the domain of teaching is to help novice science teachers reflect on the changes in their construction of the role of a science teacher (Shapiro, 1991) and how teachers construct an effective classroom in relation to variations across career phases (Kington, Reed, & Sammons, 2014). Thus, the adoption of the theory on the exploration of how PGCE preservice teachers' construct the various professional identities during the WIL since none of the studies considered the sample category of the current study.

This section presents a review of related literature on professional identity. WIL also refers to teaching practice and the theoretical framework that underpinned the study. According to the review, pre-service teachers' identities are formed prior to and during their training at the university, as well as in WIL through teaching practice exercises. The implication is that pre-service teachers who have received training at the university are positioned in the real-work environment during teaching practice, where they navigate the diverse complexities of social interaction that help shape their career identities, which they understand personally as constructs that guide the profession. Thus, in the following section, the approaches followed in the exploration of how WIL impacts pre-service teachers' development of their professional identities are presented.

3. Methodology

This section presents the research methodology employed in the execution of the study. A qualitative case study design located in the interpretive paradigm was deemed appropriate for the research because it is aimed at gaining an understanding of how WIL contributes to the shaping of the professional identities of preservice teachers during teaching practice. Qualitative study is deemed appropriate because it provides deeper insights into real-world problems (Moser & Korstjens, 2017), while case study is applied when there is a need for an in-depth understanding of a contemporary issue in a bounded system (Coombs,

2022). On the other hand, an interpretive paradigm becomes necessary when the aim of the study is to understand for the purpose of interpretation (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020).

3.1 Sample and Sampling

Twenty-six postgraduate certificate in education (PGCE) student-teachers were purposively selected to form the study sample. The criteria that guided the selection of this particular group as the study sample is that they were registered students of the PGCE programme and willing to participate in the research. Purposive sampling, according to Campbell et al. (2020, p. 653), is the better matching of the sample to the aims and objectives of the research, thus improving the rigour of the study and the trustworthiness of the data and results. Credibility in the study was achieved through peer debriefing. It is the process whereby a researcher asks a qualified and impartial colleague to review and assess the transcripts, methodology, and findings by probing the various processes involved in an unbiased way in order to establish credibility in the research (Delve, Ho & Limpaecher, 2021). Consequently, the analysis and findings of the study were subjected to peer debriefing by a qualified colleague in the field of qualitative research. The qualified colleague who read through the entire manuscript with specific attention to analysis, findings, and interpretation thereof provided comments on aspects that were not clear as well as areas that needed amendment, and this was followed strictly as well as corrected adequately. This approach was also significant in reducing the biases that may have arisen due to the researcher's role since the analysis and conclusions reached from the results were verified by a senior research colleague.

3.2 Instrument

A semi-structured interview protocol was used as an instrument for data collection, as it is one of the acceptable techniques in qualitative research methodology (Ruslin, Mashuri, Rasak, Alhabsyi & Syam 2022). The semi-structured interview technique was employed because it enabled the researchers to gather from key participants in a relaxed environment personal experiences, attitudes, and perceptions as well as beliefs related to the subject of interest (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019, p. 2). The choice of a semi-structured interview is useful for understanding the viewpoints of participants within an agency because it gives them the room to participate in the process and discuss concerns related to the objectives of the study (Ahlin, 2019). To ensure the validity of the instrument and its alignment with the study objective, the open-ended questions on the interview protocol were designed to cover pre-service teachers negative and positive experiences and the impact of university training on their teaching practice. Others include the benefits of a mentor or class teacher's feedback, the benefits of class visits by university lecturers, the stressful aspects of teaching practice, and how the teaching practice should be organised by the university in the future. In compliance with research ethics, participants were assured of their confidentiality and voluntary participation in the study through a signed informed consent form.

3.3 Data Analysis

Data generated from the semi-structured interviews was analysed using thematic method (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). Accordingly, it has been argued that thematic analysis is an appropriate and powerful method to use when seeking to understand a set of experiences, thoughts, or behaviours across a data set (Braun & Clarke 2012). This approach to data analysis entails a six-step framework, namely, "familiarising yourself

with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, as well as producing the manuscripts” (Kiger & Varpio, 2020, pp. 848–852). These processes were adhered to in executing the analysis.

4. Results

The analysis and findings of the study are presented in this section. From the analyses, the following themes emerged: mentors and staff members support, pedagogical knowledge, inclusive education strategy, classroom management and communication skills, collaborative and administrative skills, professional ethics, preparation, and exposure to a real-work environment. In the following section, we commence the presentation of analyses and findings with mentor and staff member support and conclude with professional ethics, preparation, and exposure to a real-work environment.

4.1 Mentors and Staff-Members Support

This theme describes the type of support pre-service teachers received from their mentor teachers and other staff members during the teaching practice exercise. Pre-service teachers articulated different types of support from mentor teachers and other staff from the schools where they were assigned for their teaching practice exercise. The support aided pre-service teachers in the development of different professional identities in different areas. These include such areas as pedagogy, inclusive teaching and learning strategy, classroom management and communication, collaborative and administrative skills, as well as career ethics and professional development. The excerpts below are revelations of the different support they enjoyed.

“The good part was that I got enough support from my mentor, the staff members. The staff members of the school were also supportive and caring a lot.”

“The teaching practice exercise that was positive was at X secondary school (name of school removed to protect its identity) where your mentor gives you a chance to deliver your content and observes you and guides you throughout the process.”

“My teaching experience has been good in all the schools I have been to. Teachers and principals were very supportive and encouraging.”

From the analyses of the comments above, it is revealed that both mentor teachers and other staff members provided support for student-teachers at their various schools where they did their teaching practicum. According to the first comments, staff members were caring, while for the other, the mentor was there to provide guidance during lesson delivery. Besides, pre-service teachers also emphasised other forms of support they received, as can be read in the comments below.

“They were always there for us, encouraging us, sharing with us their experiences and how to deal with the behaviour of the learners in the classroom”.

“My mentor was so supportive and could help me every step of my day and help me with those learners that are not disciplined”.

“It was exactly good. The teachers there were very cooperative and had time to guide us as student teachers”.

“Teachers were very supportive of us student teachers. Whenever we encounter problems with learners, they will come to assist us with those troublesome learners.”

Findings from the analyses of the comments above reveal that pre-service teachers on teaching practice enjoyed support from both mentor teachers and other staff members at the various schools where they were posted for their teaching practical. This support spans across lesson delivery, encouragements, sharing of experiences, managing learners’ discipline, as well as actions to take while handling disruptive learners. The support received by pre-service teachers ensured the development of good pedagogical knowledge, as explained below.

4.2 Pedagogical Knowledge

This theme underpins competencies related to strategies and techniques for teaching specific subjects. Pre-service teachers articulated at different points that they were also availed of the opportunity to improve on their teaching competencies. This is evident in the comments below.

“The teaching practices were positive because my mentor showed great interest in my teaching methods, and learners were well behaved in most cases as they were more involved in the lesson”.

“Getting many different methods of approach during lesson delivery”.

“The part where my mentor gave me full responsibility to teach certain topics and the use of my own activities. It helped me to grow academically and gave me a chance to be in charge”.

From the analyses of both comments above, it is evident that the teaching practice exercise gave pre-service teachers the opportunity to improve on their teaching competencies. From the comments of the three participants, it is revealed that improvements were made to teaching competencies. Evidently, the result of this improvement is seen in learners’ involvement and behaviour in the classroom, as articulated by the first participant. Also, this aided academic growth and the ability to work independently. This finding corroborates that of Mufida (2019), who reported on how pre-service teachers improved their pedagogical skills during teaching practice. Other aspects of pedagogical knowledge developed were inclusive teaching and learning strategies as well as classroom management and communication skills, as shown in the themes below.

4.3 Inclusive Education strategy

This finding hinges on the skills that encourage an all-round approach to instruction where no learner is left behind in the teaching and learning process, irrespective of the needs of that child. A participant in the study also voiced out part of the skills developed as touching on how to handle learners with special needs

to ensure they are not excluded from taking part in teaching and learning activities with their peers. This is expressed in the comment below.

“Handling learners with learning barriers because every child deserves to learn and should be assisted in every possible way.”

From the analysis of the excerpt above, it is indicative that the participant developed pedagogical knowledge on how to ensure that every learner is accorded the right to learning, irrespective of their barriers. A good mastery of this inclusive teaching and learning strategy will culminate in good classroom management and communication between the teacher and learners. This confirms the assertion that the onus of implementing inclusive education lies on teacher education programmes (Majoko & Phasha, 2018). As obtained in the policy, initial teacher education must ensure that newly qualified teachers understand the diversity of the South African context, thereby teaching in a manner that includes all learners (DHET, 2015).

4.4 Classroom Management and Communication Skills

This theme focuses on maintaining a conducive classroom atmosphere that encourages quality instructional delivery by setting up certain rules that guide learners’ conduct. Participants in the study articulated the above-named theme as part of the professional identities they developed, as expressed in the comments below.

“Classroom management and good communication skills. I was able to control the classroom because I was asking many learners more questions, especially those that were causing distraction such as noise.”

“Teaching practice gave me much experience in a way that I now know how to handle a large number of teachers and successfully manage the classroom situation.”

From the analyses of the comments above, it is evident that the teaching practical provided pre-service teachers with the opportunity to develop competencies on how to manage the classroom to ensure learning is maximised. In addition, as expressed in the first comment, communication skills were developed, as this was employed as a strategy to handle distractions caused by learners. This finding confirms the assertion that the classroom climate is one of the most important predictors of learner achievement (Thapa et al. 2013, p. 358). According to Mpofu and Maphalala (2018), no effective teaching and learning can take place in a chaotic and disruptive classroom environment. Hence, effective classroom management strategies involve teachers being prepared for lessons, motivating learners, providing proper and effective discipline, making learners feel comfortable, building learners’ self-esteem, and designing constructive and entertaining lesson plans (Williams & Williams, 2011, p. 2). These skills are adopted by the teacher while in the classroom (Abdullah, 2020) to ensure outcomes that are motivating (Petre, 2022).

4.5 Collaborative and Administrative Skills

The process of teaching practice helped in the development of both interpersonal and intrapersonal competencies by working with others to ensure the effectiveness of the teaching and learning processes,

as well as other skills related to teaching, such as the handling of paper-related works. This was the experience of some participants in the study, as emphasised in the comments below.

“...being able to work well in groups. These experiences were positive because they facilitated the whole teaching and learning process”.

“Teaching practice can be welcoming and, at the same time, not welcoming. It depends on the school setting and environment. Nevertheless, sharing knowledge is wonderful.”.

Findings from the analyses of the excerpts above indicate that certain collaborative skills were developed by preservice teachers in the study. According to the first comments, the ability to work together as a group brought about positive output from the teaching and learning process, while for the second excerpt, such collaboration led to knowledge exchange, which was described as a wonderful experience.

During the teaching practical, participants were not only exposed to classroom teaching, but they also had the privilege of executing other official tasks, such as administrative chores, among others. These are expressed in the comments below.

“Administration work and classroom experience. Both experiences enabled me to integrate the job description of internal and external duties”.

“In general, my teaching practice was fine. I learned a lot during that period. However, at times I felt like I was there for paperwork rather than going to classes since the first week will be about closing chapters that were not closed before recess”.

Findings from the analyses of the comments above indicate that these pre-service teachers had the privilege to develop collaborative skills and were also exposed to both teaching and non-teaching activities, such as administrative tasks. This result corroborates the findings of another study in the Philippines, where pre-service teachers also developed collaborative skills as part of the important competencies required for them to be effective in the teaching profession (Gonzales & Dinagsao, 2020). Similarly, other scholars found that pre-service teachers, during their activities at their practicing schools, participated in other activities such as handling paperwork and setting examination questions, thereby leading to the acquisition of administrative skills (Suyatno et al., 2023). The Suyatno et al. (2023) study also reinforced the need for pre-service teachers to work collaboratively with other colleagues in a way that advances their understanding and skills.

4.6 Professional ethics, Preparation and Exposure to Real-work environment

This centres on the development of the real ethics of the teaching profession as a result of being exposed to a real-work environment. Participants in the study revealed that the teaching practice exercise helped them develop of principles that guide the behaviour of individuals within the work environment. They exemplified this in their various comments below.

“Professional conduct: how to behave, talk, and act as a professional in a working environment”.

“It was a positive teaching experience. Professional conduct and personal development. It was teaching, nurturing, and developing”.

From the analysis of the comments above, it can be gleaned that the teaching practice exercise develops pre-service teachers’ ethical principles that guide work behaviour at the workplace. According to the first excerpt, one learns how to behave, talk, and act as a professional in a working environment. On the other hand, the exercise also prepared them for what to expect in the teaching profession by exposing them to real work situations, as elicited in the comment below.

“It was good to be faced with the real situation of my profession. I have learned many things about my profession during my teaching practice.”

“Final year teaching practice has prepared me for the corporate world”.

“Looking at the bright side, I would say it gave me a feel for what to expect next year when I start working”.

“It was a good opportunity to learn to put theory into practice. It somehow felt like I was at work because it was a moment of responsibility. Marking, teaching, advising, etc.”

From the analysis of the comments above, it is obvious that pre-service teachers were exposed to real work situations, as this gave them the opportunity to put theory into practice, where they interacted with both full-service teachers and learners, thus developing more knowledge about the teaching profession. This is true as reported: the teaching practice exercise creates an avenue for pre-service teachers to blend theory with practice (Stavridis & Papadopoulou, 2022) and is perceived as a supportive duty that prepares them for a future in the teaching profession (Ramírez Montoya & Matsumoto Royo, 2021).

In addition, and as part of the experience gained during the teaching practical, pre-service teachers also learned how to discipline learners with disruptive behaviours in an acceptable manner. This is what they all stated in the sample comments below.

“Learners discipline: how to discipline learners in a constitutionally recognised way.”

“It assists with regards to student-teacher discipline...”

“It taught me a lot about what to expect on the field, which includes how to discipline a learner, how to keep learners’ attention on content for a long time, and also how to behave towards other teachers.”

From the above excerpts, it can be gathered that the teaching practice exercise prepared pre-service teachers for the future in different ways on what to expect on the field, especially on how to discipline learners in an acceptable manner as well as keep their attention focused to ensure learning is achieved. An indication in the last comment also signposts professional ethics on how to relate with other teachers. This also aligns with the findings of the study carried out in Indonesia, where part of the results revealed that pre-service teachers gained experience on how to relate with colleagues, students, and the surrounding community (Suyatno et al., 2023).

4.7 Condition of the School Environment

Some participants in the study expressed mixed feelings about the state of the school environment where their teaching practice took place. To some, the school environment was conducive, while for others, the reverse was the case, as expressed in the comments below.

“The experience was enjoyable, especially this year because I was going back to the same school. The teachers knew me, the learners were used to me, and I was comfortable with the environment.”

“My experience of practice teaching was just moderate, and it was successfully completed. The staff members there were very welcoming, and the learners were very welcoming. The school environment was very conducive”.

“I really enjoyed my teaching practice; the atmosphere of the school was wonderful”.

However, some of the preservice teachers had a different feeling about the school environment, as they considered it not conducive to their teaching practice because of the various experiences they encountered. This, they articulated:

“I have noticed that some teachers are not making the school environment conducive to us.

“... the school was so boring. Teachers told the learners that we are student teachers, and learners used to call us like that. Teachers made us feel that we do not belong there; we are just visitors”.

From the analyses of the excerpts above, it is evident that preservice teachers experienced both conducive and unconducive practicing environments. According to the first comment, the success of the teaching practice exercise depends on how conducive the environment is. This is evident in the confession made in the rest of the three positive comments about how the participants teaching practice exercise was successful considering the promotional school atmosphere. However, the latter comments indicated contrary views regarding the serenity of the school atmosphere. These comments indicated that the school environments were not conducive to encouraging active teaching practice, thereby leading to a lack of cooperation between teachers and learners in the host school. The implication is that it will be difficult for preservice teachers posted to such school environments to develop the right professional identities. While a conducive school environment aids pre-service teachers’ development of the necessary competencies, another study reported a lack of a conducive atmosphere as one of the major challenges encountered by pre-service teachers while on teaching practice exercise as a factor that impedes their performance (Guzman, 2023).

Summarily, as can be seen in this section, several professional identities are said to have been developed by pre-service teachers who went for their teaching practical. Evidence of this is revealed in the findings, which highlighted the following themes: pedagogical knowledge, inclusive education strategy, classroom management and communication skills, collaborative and administrative skills, and professional ethics.

5. Discussion of Findings

This section presents the discussion of findings on the following themes: mentors and staff members support, pedagogical knowledge, inclusive education strategy, classroom management and communication skills, collaborative and administrative skills, professional ethics, preparation, and exposure to a real-work environment.

5.1 Mentors and Staff Members Support

Preservice teachers in the study emphasised the enjoyment of support from both mentor teachers and other staff members in their places of teaching practice. These mentors are instrumental in the development of several professional identities for these preservice teachers in their teaching practice. This finding is in consonance with the result highlighted in the study of Khalid (2014), whose research revealed that mentors' role in the development of student-teachers is that of giving advice and coaching that help preservice teachers become better in their profession. These mentors share experiences and give useful advice to preservice teachers on how to make their teaching and learning activities more diverse and suited to students' needs (Khalid, 2014). Similarly, the findings of this study agree with another study that revealed the positive impacts of mentor teachers on preservice teachers' development of different arrays of skills required of a professional educator (Ndebele & Legg-Jack, 2022). Accordingly, the mentoring of preservice teachers, who are novices, helps them gain insight into the professional requirements in the field, hence making them competent in the teaching profession (Mgeni & Anangisye, 2017). Also, in a Chinese study, it was reported that other staff members were instrumental in equipping student-teachers with the required skills (Zhao & Zhang, 2017). However, in another study, it was reported that non-teaching staff members were not supportive of pre-service teachers during their teaching practice exercise (Guzman, 2023). According to PCT, an individual's conclusion about a construct is based on their experiences and perceptions of it. Thus, this finding, as experienced and perceived during the WIL by preservice teachers, helped in shaping their professional identity, which they constructed as mentors and staff support (Kelly, 1955).

5.2 Pedagogical Knowledge

These are skills related to the methods by which teachers teach. This was revealed as part of the competencies developed by preservice teachers during their WIL. This result agrees with the study of Oparah, Nwoke, and Ikwuanusi (2017), which revealed preservice teachers' development of pedagogical skills through the enactment of different teaching techniques. The study further found that preservice teachers developed skills on how to prepare their lessons as well as apply different methods of teaching them. Similarly, it was also reported that teaching practice, a component of WIL, has the capacity to enhance preservice teachers' pedagogical competence (Mdluli, 2020). Accordingly, preservice teachers had the privilege to apply different methods of teaching (Mdluli, 2020), as found in this study. In line with PCT, preservice teachers' exposure to WIL equipped them with an array of teaching methods. They were all exposed to similar environments, but their experiences and understandings generated different conclusions in relation to the development of pedagogical competencies (Kelly, 1955).

5.3 Inclusive Education Strategy

The implementation of an inclusive education strategy has been one of the challenges confronting teachers in South Africa. Hence, the need for a proper teacher training programme to ensure the production of educators with the right knowledge to implement inclusive education. In this study, it was found that some preservice teachers, though few, had the privilege to develop inclusive education strategies that ensured no learner was left behind due to one need or another during the teaching and learning process. Corroborating the findings of this study, the results of Griful-Freixenet, Vantieghem, Gheysens and Struyven (2020) provide insights on professional development initiatives that support preservice teachers in responding to the implementation of inclusive education with a focus on all learners. Similarly, this finding corroborates that of whose study exposed students to different approaches to teaching mathematics through the application of the PCT (McQualter, 1986). The inference drawn from the study of McQualter (1986) in relation to the finding on developing different inclusive strategies is that the research exposed student-teachers to different approaches to teaching mathematics, which in this case relates to the different understanding and knowledge of a particular individual regarding a particular situation that was experienced by all.

5.4 Classroom Management and Communication Skills

In the study conducted by Akar (2007), it was reported that classroom management skills are very crucial to teacher education. Thus, in the current study, it was established that preservice teachers developed classroom management and communication skills. This result is corroborated by the finding of Ramirez (2020), who reported high classroom management and communication skills for preservice teachers in their teaching practice. These competencies are considered key considerations in shaping an effective teaching practice (Mufidah, 2019), thus making them internationally viable and allowing them to face a modern and multifaceted society across continents with self-efficacy (Ramirez, 2020). Classroom management and communication skills are both constructs developed as professional identities by preservice teachers as they experience them in the WIL (Kelly, 1955). According to PCT, the emergence of a construct is based on its recurrence in one's experience; hence, preservice teachers understanding of WIL exposed them to the development of classroom management and communication skills.

5.5 Collaborative and Administrative Skill

Findings from the study revealed that preservice teachers developed collaborative (interpersonal and intrapersonal) skills. This is consistent with findings in the literature that teacher collaboration helps in the building of diverse practices associated with teaching, as this is considered beneficial to school culture (Methlagl, 2022). Professional teachers possess not only pedagogical knowledge but administrative as well. The study also established that pre-service teacher had developed administrative skills. This agrees with a study that reported that preservice teachers showed great responsibilities in administration, among other tasks, thus leading to the development of certain skills related to paper handling (Meutia, Elyza & Yusnila 2018). Corroborating the PCT, individuals have different interpretations of constructing their experience. This is evident in this finding, as both students who experienced the WIL interpreted their understanding differently. For example, the first student has an understanding of positive experiences, while the second has both, though all relate to collaboration as a major construct (Kelly, 1955).

5.6 Professional Ethics, Preparation and Exposure to Real-work Environment

As mentioned earlier, WIL is considered an outstanding means for career and professional preparation because it provides pre-service teachers with work-related experiences (Anjum, 2020). This submission corroborates the findings of this study, as pre-service teachers in teaching practice had the privilege to gain certain experiences because of their exposure to the real workplace. In agreement with this finding, Du Plessis' (2019) declares that WIL is aimed at equipping pre-service teachers with the necessary skills, attitudes, and knowledge required to prepare them for their professional work. According to Nkambule (2017), the exposure of preservice teachers to a real-work environment through the teaching practice exercise assists them to grow and develop as professionals, as well as providing them with the necessary skills and professional abilities to help them become competent teachers. Professional ethics, preparation, and exposure to a real-work environment as constructs used in describing the identities developed by preservice teachers are all evidence of the different understandings of how each of them experienced the WIL, and this buttresses the principles of PCT, having varied conclusions to similar situations (Kelly, 1955).

5.7 Condition of the School Environment

The study established that there were mixed feelings among preservice teachers about the state of the school environment. Some of the preservice teachers articulated that the environment of their host institution was conducive; hence, they completed their teaching practice exercise successfully. On the other hand, their colleagues frowned at the unconducive environment of their host institutions. They expressed dissatisfaction with how teachers and students treated them. In support of this finding is the result of a study by Kihwele and Mtandi (2020), who argue that unconducive environments constitute a problem for the development of pedagogical competencies in preservice teachers. Consequently, Kiggundu and Nayimuli (2009) argued that when preservice teachers are not valued, they tend to be demotivated and, as a result, may end up treating learners with excessive force, which can develop hateful behaviour towards the teaching profession and anxieties. Although there are challenging moments during the teaching practice exercise, Aglazor (2017) argues that this stage of the training provides preservice teachers with a rewarding experience of dealing with students in real classroom environments and equips them with the necessary professional competencies. This finding demonstrates the philosophical foundations of the PCT in that, among all those who participated in the WIL, only six preservice teachers experienced the school environment as unconducive. According to PCT, constructs are bipolar or consist of two opposing sides, such as active versus passive or friendly versus unfriendly. Thus, the mixed feelings with respect to this construct typify the standings of PCT (Cherry, 2020).

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study explored the impact of WIL learning on shaping the professional identities of PGCE preservice teachers at a university in South Africa. A qualitative case study design was employed. Findings from the study highlighted mentor teachers and other staff members support, pedagogical knowledge, inclusive education strategy, classroom management and communication, collaborative and administrative skills, professional ethics, preparation and exposure to real-world work environments, as well as the condition of the school environment. Therefore, from these findings, it is concluded that WIL provides PGCE pre-

service the avenue to interact with both mentor teachers and other staff members through which they can develop the necessary professional competencies required of a trained educator, and this is premised on the condition of the school environment. The findings hold major implications for teacher education, especially for the PGCE programme in South Africa. According to the underpinning policy, PGCE programmes are professional qualifications that equip pre-service teachers with the knowledge and competencies required to teach learners at school (Bertrán, Mthiyane & Mukeredzi, 2013). The competencies cover the three aspects of the PGCE curriculum, namely, core education modules, teaching specialisation modules, and teaching practice (Bertram et al., 2013). Thus, the practical implication of the findings is the full attainment of the two key aspects of the PGCE curriculum, while the part on teaching practice is partially achieved due to the challenges of the school environment. As a result, it is suggested that all stakeholders concerned collaborate to address the issue of practicing school environment to ensure the achievement of the aim of teaching practice by adequately preparing pre-service teachers to execute their teaching responsibilities. Consequently, the study recommends the need for:

- a robust collaboration between stakeholders that constitute WIL, namely, the training institutions (university) and partner schools (teaching practice host), to ensure every member understands their role in providing the needed support for pre-service teachers at their respective learning sites.
- the training of professional teachers who serve as mentor teachers on how to provide support and guidance as well as make the school environment conducive for pre-service teachers during teaching practice to ensure the full development of their professional identities as well as forestall whatever will demotivate.
- the provision of the necessary resources and infrastructure to ensure the environment is conducive, thereby leading to the development of the necessary competencies by pre-service teachers.
- further research on the subject. Since the current research is limited in scope, design, sample, and context, its findings are subjective and contextual, and cannot be generalised to teacher education at the undergraduate level or to other contexts. It is therefore suggested that further research should be conducted considering a larger sample size and with designs other than qualitative as applied in this study.

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