

ISSN: 2664-3812 (ONLINE)
ISSN: 2664-3804 (PRINT)

Journal

JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH ON
CHILDREN, PARENTS & TEACHERS



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ISSN PRINT: 2664-3804

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REG. NO.: 2019/368041/08 SOUTH AFRICA

**Student teachers' experience of teaching in the pre-primary phase during school-based studies:
The case of Hifikepunye Pohamba campus**

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Abstract

Teaching practice is an essential exercise in training an effective teacher as it exposes student teachers to the real world of the profession. This study aimed at investigating student teachers' experience of teaching at the pre-primary level during their teaching practice. The study adopted a qualitative research approach and a case study research design. Data was gathered from a focus group interview and questionnaires administered to B.Ed. junior primary third- year students from the University of Namibia. The results indicated the presence of certain gaps in both the theoretical framework and the practical component of the programme. Based on the findings of the study, measures are suggested for improving the programme and addressing various related issues, including the student teachers' concerns.

Keywords: Pre-primary phase. Students. Teacher training. Teaching practice.

Introduction and background

In 2015, the Namibian Ministry of Education introduced the pre-primary phase of schooling and implemented the revised curriculum for Basic Education to ensure a better integration of learners into the school system. Prior to that, our student teachers were practising their teaching skills in Grades 1 to 4. During School Based Studies (SBS), year three students practice for six weeks (two periods of three weeks in February and June) at any school near their residence. The Bachelor's degree for pre- and lower-primary education is a four-year course that prepares student teachers both theoretically and practically for the teaching profession. As Cakmak (2008) remarks, "teaching experience is one of the necessary components for effective teaching including both theoretical knowledge and practical skills" (p. 63).

While the emphasis of the curriculum is mostly on lower primary subjects, the various modules offered try to include pre-primary children in their scope. However, when the student teachers embark on their School Based Studies (SBS), they mostly select to teach at grade levels 1-3. Seldom do we find our students practising their teaching at pre-primary levels. Opfer and Pedder (2011) claim that one way of improving student learning is through the provision of more effective professional learning activities for teachers in schools, where 'effective' means that the activities result in positive change for teachers and their pupils. Similarly, Msangya, Mkoma and Yihuan (2016: 113) remark that

...for teachers to play their role effectively in schools, there must be a well-designed and successfully implemented teaching practice programme for student teachers that aims at producing teachers who

are academically qualified, professionally skilled and attitudinally and ethically committed to their profession.

Knowledge of practice includes content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, technological knowledge, or what is known as pedagogical content knowledge. This consists of a repertoire of teaching skills and abilities in respect of subject matter, pedagogy, curriculum and the technology used to help learners learn (Mena, Hennien & Loughran, 2017; Koehler & Mishra, 2008; Shulman, 1986; Elbaz, 1981; Fenstermacher, 1994). We decided to find out more about the teaching practice experience from our third-year students engaged in teaching practice during the three-week period in June/July. Fourth-year student teachers have the option of specializing in various fields, including Early Childhood Education. However, only 30 or so are allowed to opt for this specialization as they have choices to make in other areas as well.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for the research is based on the constructivist theory of Jerome Bruner, which maintains that learning is an active process in which students construct new ideas or concepts based upon their current and past knowledge (Bruner, 1996). Thus “instruction must be concerned with the experiences and contexts that make the student willing and able to learn (readiness)” (Bruner, as cited in Virolainen p. 56). Bruner’s theory is appropriate for the study in terms of the experience that our students gain from teaching at the pre-primary phase. The programme therefore should not rely on theoretical content alone, but should ensure that sufficient practical experience at all levels of the primary phase is gained. The students should acquire actual competencies at the pre-primary level, even though the content of the B.Ed. programme is tilted towards the teaching of the lower primary grades 1-3. The content of the programme informs our students of the different theories of teaching and learning, thus empowering them with the relevant intellectual context. However, this should be amplified and extended through experience of and reflection on teaching at all the phases concerned. The notion of reflective practice is critical. Schön (1966) defines reflective practice as the practice by which professionals become aware of their implicit knowledge base and learn from their experience. The author talks about reflection in action and reflection action. Reflection in action is to reflect on behaviour as it happens, whereas, reflection on action involves reflecting after the event, so as to review, analyse and evaluate the situation.

Research questions

The research was guided by these questions:

- What are some of the students’ experiences during SBS with regard to teaching?
- How is teaching at pre-primary different from grades 1-3?
- What possible improvements might be made to current SBS practices at the pre-primary level?

Methodology

Prior to conducting the study, the researchers followed the ethical procedures recommended by the UNAM Research and Publication Committee. All participants were informed verbally and in writing about the purpose of the study. The participants were required to give their written consent to take part before the start of data collection. A qualitative research approach was selected as the researchers were keen to find

out about the personal experiences of students during their teaching practice. The population consisted of 86 pre-primary and lower primary student teachers in years 3 and 4. The study employed purposive sampling to identify 12 third-year and 74 fourth-year BEd students majoring in pre- and lower primary phases. A short questionnaire was administered to year-4 students to find out about their experience of SBS, since they started with teaching practice in year 2 of their studies. A focus-group interview was conducted to glean information about year-3 students' experience of SBS. The questionnaires distributed to year-4 students were analysed using a cross tabulation grid to collate the data and grouped according to phases and grades taught and the information collected from the interviews was transcribed and analysed using narrative data analysis and interpretation. Themes based on the main research questions were extracted.

Findings

What follows is a summary of the various data collected for the study. The data is grouped under themes which have been formulated according to the wording of the research questions.

Experiences of teaching during SBS

Teaching practice is an important component of the degree programme. In year 2, students mostly observe, but in years 3 and 4, they should teach a verifiable number of lessons that are observed and graded by their subject teachers and lecturers. We asked the (2017) year-4 students, by means of a short questionnaire, to indicate their School Based Studies observations and experiences in teaching at the different levels since year 2. This was to find out if and how they taught in the pre-primary phase as well as in Grades 1-4 during the 3 years of SBS. A total of 74 students returned the questionnaires, which revealed the following:

Table 1.
Number of students that observed and/or taught lessons at the different grades.

SBS	Pre-primary	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 4	%	Pre-primary
Year 2/2015	41	56	56	53	8	55%	
Year 3/2016	12	27	47	43	2	16%	
Year 4/2017	11	27	35	42	0	14%	

In year 2, students embark on their SBS practice for a period of 4 weeks. They mostly observe and only teach in two major subject areas according to their specialisations. In year 3, students embark on their SBS practice for a period of 6 weeks. Two periods of observation are conducted by their tutors and the rest by their respective support teachers. In year 4, students embark on their SBS practice for a period of 12 weeks, of which two are observed by their tutors and the rest by their support teachers. The results clearly indicate that it was only in year 2 that as many as 55% of students observed and or taught in the pre-primary phase, with this percentage decreasing significantly in years 3 and 4.

The interviews with year-3 students yielded the following outcomes.

Students' preferences

All the students responded that they preferred to teach in grades 1-3. Some said that the pre-primary learners got tired easily and their attention span was short. Among the reasons why they did not like to teach at the pre-primary phase, include the following:

- there are no materials in place
- they do not know how to read and write
- it takes time to cover the syllabus
- *they make too much noise, it is like baby-sitting,*
- *we are still too young for them and not well equipped to bring them up, it is better to leave pre-primary for the more experienced teachers.*

One of the students stated that *"The reason why people do not choose pre-primary is that people do not see any difference between kindergarten and pre-primary and kindergarten in villages are taught by people who failed with grades 10 and 12. So people think we are here for grades 1-3. There is need for a programme where people are encouraged that pre-primary is also a grade. Maybe a forum on the importance, something like exhibition could be held."* It seems that lecturers make an influential contribution to this predicament, since all the students stated that the curriculum (including assessments) emphasised Grades 1-3, and that the pre-primary phase is mostly neglected. Another student claimed that *"it has to do with lecturers in most cases. Even during their presentations, they don't focus on pre-primary, only on 1-3, especially in languages where, they do not put more effort on in Grade 1 or 2. We are not really exposed to teaching methods of pre-primary. It is a waste of time and we are not going to stress ourselves."*

The study found that the only time students went to the pre-primary classrooms was when tasked by lecturers to do micro-teaching at that level. As the students stated: *"Yes, we did attend during SBS, the pre-primary because of assignment as we wanted to have experience in Environmental Studies."* One student commented that *"I think I will never teach in pre-primary,"* while another student remarked: *"Last year I taught 2 lessons there, it was not my choice, and I just had to do it, because it was an assignment. This year (year 4), yes, I went there because it was the beginning of the year and I wanted to experience the steps they go through, I did on my own."* These experiences aside, the student teachers felt competent enough to teach at that level. As one student stated: *"It is difficult, at least we acquired enough, knowledge but the situation prevents us from going there... I am capable of doing it, nothing is missing. But the situation is preventing us from practising. I am capable to teach."*

Regulations for SBS Practices

Students were unaware of such regulations, claiming that they could teach in any grade of their choice. One student stated, *"It is up to us, there are no regulations, some may never teach because of noise and difficulties."* Another student said that normally the principal decided in which grade(s) they should do their

practice teaching. There were no regulations as long as the grade concerned was in the lower primary phase.

Differences between teaching in pre-primary and grades 1-3

When asked if they discerned any differences between teaching at pre-primary and grades 1-3 levels, one student responded: *"They know how to read and write in Grade 3 and it is easy, you go straight to the point. When tutors come, you do not choose pre-primary, even if you tell them to keep quiet, one will repeat after you, The pre-primary children are too slow and have 30 minutes, not 40 minutes, so you just go for Grades 1-3. Pre-primary learners are too slow"*. Another student stated, *"I see the difference, there is totally a big difference, because with pre-primary, it is more like informal teaching, there are no real policies, I mean regulations, that you should teach. It is more of teaching and playing, informal teaching in play way, but in grades1-3, that is where you start real teaching. They learn through playing and just manipulating stuff but Grades 1-3 learners can learn a certain content."* A third student had the following to say: *"A very big difference exists because when I was in pre-primary in my first SBS practice observation, when you teach pre-primary today, tomorrow if you ask them, they forget everything and if you do not repeat, they forget, they do not cope well. You should at least teach them, repeat that and ask questions to make sure they understand, but in other grades, they can remember what they learned previously. The attention span is short and, if you teach them more, some will go under the table, you need to be focused."*

A few students said that the pre-primary learners are *"noisy and they like to go outside all at the same time. They learn only through singing, they don't write but only sing."* Classroom management was an area of concern to some of the students, as they found the learners got excited when the teacher engaged with them and were eager to participate and concentrate. Furthermore, the students described how, when disciplining the pre-primary learners, they had to be polite and use non-violent measures, or else the children would erupt into noise making and withdraw from participation. The students noted that they found it difficult to introduce changes during SBS that might ameliorate the situation, since class teachers were reluctant to accept changes in their classrooms.

Possible Solutions for Improving SBS Practice

The students who participated in this study proposed certain suggestions for the implementation of the curriculum and assessment. One of the suggestions focused on the pre-primary phase, when students expressed the opinion that lecturers should emphasise this phase, not only in their presentations but also in assessment activities such as micro-teaching. In addition, the students felt that SBS practices should include a specific time allocated to pre-primary teaching.

One student stated that *"for SBS, there should be something like a week or more for pre-primary. We must teach if we are given choices because if you want to apply for pre-primary teaching posts it will not be a challenge."* And yet another stated *"we just need to do more practical. We need to do more practice, teaching practical, presenting lessons, because there are times you are teaching... We need more practice, we need more methods to help them understand."* A different student made the following suggestion: *"I think we should do more micro-teaching, or just those presentations that pretend to teach*

with, students made to act like pre-primary, sometimes they are jumping up and down, to get the experience. We must be strict with the timing in Micro-teaching, if in large groups, only 2 or 3 speak, the rest are just standing, time management strict. Micro-teaching should be in smaller groups, only 2 or 3 speak and the rest are quiet.”

Another suggestion was to make pre-primary a module of its own, from year 1 to year 4. *“With pre-primary, I would say it needs to have a separate module, like we have Env 1-3 which includes pre-primary. If we can have Env for pre-primary, or other modules separately, it would help in methodology teaching.... Things are different, teaching, methodology are different so there should be a module to help us to be able to teach pre-grade syllabus. There should be a separate module or something to help us teach since pre-primary has separate syllabus.”* Many of the respondents noted that Year 4 students can opt for different specialisations, one of which is the Pre-primary Education Module, while conceding that the number of students admitted to these specialised modules is limited to 35.

There were suggestions about the duration of the SBS practice. Some students felt that teaching in the pre-primary phase should no longer be an option but should rather be made compulsory. Another student commented: *“I think from the SBS department, they need to prolong the weeks for SBS. I think the time given is less, especially this phase 2. We need more time at schools, the period of 4 weeks is too little to get the experience, they need to increase the weeks or time.”* A student added that *If maybe, in some cases with module specializing in pre-primary, then lecturers should consider activities strictly based on pre-primary approach, like SBS phase 2 at the beginning of the year and in June again, between these 2 sessions, lecturers choose to assess us in pre-primary, what if they assess us in pre-primary and assess us in 1-3? At least it should be a must. Assess in pre-primary and in grades 1-3. I do not know if my lecturer knows how I teach in pre-primary. I want to add that I think the course needs to focus on pre-primary, maybe in a separate session. Maybe we can have a separate session of 2 weeks for pre-primary.”*

Discussion

The findings revealed some gaps and ambiguities that will be discussed here. With regard to students' experience, the results show that most students avoided teaching in the pre-primary phase because they felt they were not sufficiently competent. The various modules and assessment activities (including micro-teaching) offered for these courses mostly accentuate content and methodology for grades 1-3, as per their course outlines. These do not incorporate much pre-primary content. The course curriculum leans heavily on teaching in grades 1-3 and lecturers tend to follow the curriculum to the word, thus leaving insufficient space for teaching pre-primary content and methodology. Kiggundu and Nayimuli (2009) assert that in order to achieve the standards required for qualified teacher status, teaching practice – whatever form it takes –should be aimed at inducting student teachers more fully into the professional work of teachers. Another reason given by the participants for the lack of interest in teaching in the pre-primary phase was that the community perceived it as a phase to be taught by grades 10 and 12 drop-outs and unqualified teachers. Our students may also regard this as a reason not to put more effort into practice teaching at this level. Thus, student teachers do not choose to teach at this level because they might encounter unqualified teachers who cannot offer them the support they need or they might be unwilling to be associated with a phase that anyone can do, not only university students. This points to an attitudinal problem in the communities that needs to be addressed. As Namibia's Fifth National Development Plan

(NDP5) (2017) indicates, “the system is fragmented with 5-8 year olds managed by Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture (MoEAC), 0-4 by Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare (MGEWC), while nutrition and parenting [are] managed by Ministry of Health and Social Services (MoHSS), which leads to duplication of efforts” (p. 55). This was a remarkable and noteworthy finding that emerged from the group interview, since it clearly indicated that students only taught at this level because of an assignment that required them to do micro-teaching at pre-primary level. Otherwise, they would not have had this experience. In a microteaching programme, prospective teachers are trained to adjust theories to the actual learning conditions at school such as the duration of lessons, teaching methods and learning approaches as well as the diversity of students’ characteristics (Retnawati, Sulistyarningsih & Yin, 2018).

This discovery made us recognise that there were no strict regulations of teaching practice at the pre-primary level, so student teachers feel free to disregard or overlook this level. It seems that SBS has no regulations for the duration and or for which grades students must do their practice teaching.

In terms of students’ preferences for placement at schools, the results revealed that this depends both on the availability of the grades to be taught (the school’s prerogative) and the students’ own choice of grade. Therefore, many do not opt for the pre-primary level, either because the schools do not have a pre-primary grade or because they are unwilling to teach there because of lack of confidence. These results concur with those of Retnawati *et al.* (2018), who noted that the absence of a good initial introduction between the teaching practice team, the teachers and the school staff has also been one of the obstacles to implementing the teaching practice. If the schools were more flexible and receptive to accommodating student teachers in different grades, they would benefit immensely from this exposure.

The only experience that most student teachers gained at the pre-primary level was as a result of related assignments given them by their lecturers. In a more positive light, we noted that assessment activities in certain modules provided an opportunity, however minimal, to assist the students to teach at the pre-primary level.

In the SBS regulations, the prospectus for B Ed in respect of the pre- and lower primary phases states that students should have broad experience of teaching and learning in the different subjects across all the grade levels. This requirement may not always be met because of the absence of pre-primary grades or a school’s internal arrangements or the lack of clear guidelines indicating how much time student teachers should spend in each grade (Faculty Prospectus, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017). This situation is similar to that described by Retnawati *et al.* (2005) who state that teachers should have at least four competencies to ensure effective learning namely pedagogical competence, professional competence, personal competence and social competence. Mokoena agrees (as cited in Mtetwa & Dyanda, 2003) that teaching practice offers student teachers the opportunity to learn and develop as professional teachers along the dimensions of pedagogic knowledge, subject matter knowledge, pastoral knowledge, ecological knowledge, inquiry knowledge and personal knowledge. The data gathered from student teachers in the study revealed that pre-primary learners have a different attention span and that there is insufficient guidance regarding the time allocated for teaching, teaching and learning materials, teaching strategies and management in particular. This is in line with Retnawati *et al.* (as cited in Uçar, 2012) who assert that “therefore, the quality of the teaching practice is determined by several variables such as teacher and prospective teacher, mentor and school where teaching practice is implemented” (p. 3654).

While some students realised that there was a difference between the two levels, some did not even get to practise at the pre-primary level due to the fact that the school to which they had been assigned did not have a pre-grade class. There is a lack of understanding of this phase since the students regard it as a phase without structured policies and syllabi. Many stated that they only needed to sing and play, since no actual teaching and learning took place at this level. Those who experienced teaching at this level found it to be stressful and one even said that he was “tasked [with just keeping] them busy”. This indicates the poor light in which some schools see pre-primary learners as those whom anyone can teach or “keep busy”. On the lecturer’s side, it is true that we do not actually deal with pre-primary in our modules in any depth. However, some modules do give specific instructions for micro-teaching to be done at the pre-primary level during students’ SBS phases 1 and 2. What we try is to give options in our assignments for micro-teaching or theoretical assessments. As attested by students, they opt for grades 1-3 as they find it easier to cope at that level.

To address this situation, we need to take a closer look at the curriculum and devise mechanisms for revising the content, teaching and learning methodologies and the production of relevant learning materials. We also need smaller classes to allow for sufficient micro-teaching practices for our students, as with the current numbers it would be impossible to do that.

When it comes to the challenges they face when teaching at the pre-primary level, students identified the lack of teaching and training received on campus to prepare them sufficiently for this phase and made suggestions accordingly. This is in line with the report of the evaluation done by NCHE in 2015. The report clearly identified a lack of training for the pre-primary level and recommended that steps should be taken to address it at all campuses offering B Ed at the pre- and lower primary levels. SBS departments should take cognisance of this fact and formulate regulations so as to prepare all student teachers in such a way as to both facilitate and mandate their trainee teaching at this level.

Conclusion

This paper looked at the experiences of our student teachers during their teaching practice, a pillar of their professional training. Teaching practice offers student teachers the opportunity to learn and develop as professional teachers in the dimensions of pedagogic knowledge, subject matter knowledge, pastoral knowledge, ecological knowledge, inquiry knowledge and personal knowledge Mtetwa & Dyanda, (as cited in Mokoena, 2017). The researchers were astounded to notice the low numbers of students who actually did their practice teaching in the pre-primary phase. The following recommendations are made to address this issue.

Recommendations

These are our recommendations:

- i. With regard to students not having any teaching experiences at the pre-primary level, the researchers suggest clear regulations and guidelines for their teaching practice during SBS. Whether in phases 1, 2 or 3, students must be allocated a certain number of weeks or even lesson plans for them to ensure adequate exposure.

ii. Our data in Table 1 indicates that only 14% of year-4 student teachers had any teaching exposure at the pre-primary level which reveals quite a serious weakness in the programme. The omission should be rectified urgently, since the implications of having graduates in pre -and lower primary Education without any experience of pre-primary teaching are devastating for the foundation phase. Based on that and since students in year 4 are required to have 80 lesson plans, we recommend that these be divided into 4 phases of pre-primary up to grade 3, each with 20 lesson plans, thereby guaranteeing real experience of planning, teaching and learning for all these phases. This would serve to ensure that graduates have adequate knowledge and experience in all the phases as the Degree stipulates.

iii. Regarding students not being equipped adequately for this phase, the researchers recommend including one unit for each of the School Subject Modules, thereby ensuring that throughout their studies they will be kept informed of the pre-primary syllabus. This will include theory, practice and assessment. This will be in line with the recommendations made by National Council for Higher Education (2015) to improve the programme.

iv. SBS should ascertain that the schools are informed and implement the above recommendation for each phase so that all student teachers have specific allocations for each of the phases from pre-primary to grade 3 and rotate between the grades, unlike the present situation in which some schools allow a student teacher to remain in the same grade for the 11-week duration of SBS. The SBS department should ensure that all students are allocated to schools with pre-primary grades.

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