



The Transformative Potential of School-Based Learning for Preservice Teachers at a University of Technology

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored the transformative potential of school-based learning for preservice teachers at a university of technology in the Free State province of South Africa. Preservice teacher education programs globally face the ongoing challenge of effectively bridging theoretical learning with practical classroom experience. Grounded in transformative learning theory, the research employed semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with 15 purposefully selected third-year Bachelor of Education students specialising in being trained to teach in the Further Education and Training (FET) phase (Grade 10-12).

The findings reveal significant shifts in preservice teachers' beliefs about teaching, illustrating a movement from idealistic views rooted in theoretical knowledge to a more nuanced understanding shaped by practical classroom experience. Participants highlighted diverse school contexts as sources of both challenges, such as resource limitations and opportunities for innovation and adaptability in teaching practices. These experiences were pivotal in developing a professional identity and commitment to social justice in education. The study concludes with the critical need for teacher education programs to prioritise robust, contextualised school-based experiences, suggesting that such transformative training can better equip preservice teachers to meet the diverse needs of learners and navigate the complexities of the South African education system. The implications extend to curriculum development and mentoring practices, which require re-evaluation to enhance educational outcomes in Southern Africa.

Keywords: Preservice teachers, reflections, School Based Learning, Secondary schools

Introduction

The education systems globally continue to evolve and are driven by the ever-changing needs of society, the demands of globalisation, and advancements in pedagogical methods. Within this context, teacher education, including preservice teacher training, has emerged as a critical component in shaping the future of education across the globe (Malik, 2018). Some scholars agree that effective teacher education is fundamental to producing competent teachers who can meet the diverse needs of learners (Kerkhoff & Cloud, 2020). According to Cochran-Smith and Villegas (2015), preservice teacher education must be designed to engage prospective teachers deeply, integrating both theoretical frameworks and practical experiences to equip them with the necessary skills and knowledge for the classroom. The training of preservice teachers is an important aspect of educational development in South Africa.

Some of the key objectives of preservice teacher training is to shape the competencies, attitudes, and values of future teachers (Chambers, 2017). Through structured programs, student teachers engage in various learning experiences that promote critical reflection and skill development. Ngene (2023) argues that effective training not only enhances practical teaching skills but also encourages student teachers to develop their educational philosophies.

Many preservice teacher training programs in South Africa face challenges in effectively integrating school-based learning (Singh-Pillay, 2020). Often, these programs focus heavily on theoretical coursework, with limited time frame and opportunities for practical application in schools (Heerden, 2024). This disconnect between theory and practice can leave preservice teachers feeling ill-equipped to handle the realities of the classroom. As noted by Tachie (2022), the way in which preservice teachers are prepared to be teachers significantly influences their ability to effect positive change in the teaching environment.

This research aims to explore the transformative potential of SBL for preservice teachers at a university of technology in South Africa, focusing on their personal and professional development during their training phase. Therefore, the study seeks to contribute to an essential dialogue regarding the effectiveness of existing teacher education frameworks and the continuous improvement of teaching practice in Southern Africa. The study is guided by two research questions:

- How do student teachers perceive the transformation of their school-based learning experiences on their professional development and readiness for the teaching profession?
- What are the key factors that contribute to both the challenges and successes of transformation experienced by student teachers during school-based learning?

Literature Review

School-Based Learning in South Africa

SBL, also termed “teaching practice” or “practicum,” represents an important phase in preservice teacher education (Nesje & Lejonberg, 2022). Although diverse terminology exists, the essence of SBL lies in bridging theoretical knowledge acquired during university-based training with the practical realities of the classroom. Preservice teachers engage in lesson planning and delivery, assessment, and classroom management, all within the dynamic social context of a school. This actual interface between student and teacher involves a complex interplay of anticipation, anxiety, and excitement as preservice teachers navigate this crucial transition (Heerden, 2024).

SBL is viewed to ensure that preservice teachers develop the necessary competencies to address the diverse needs of South African learners (Van der Merwe, 2022). For example, the emphasis on inclusive education requires student teachers to develop skills in differentiating instruction and catering to learners with diverse learning styles and needs. Similarly, Padagas (2019) explains how post-apartheid curriculum reform sought to address historical inequities in schooling. However, Mavrogordato and White (2020) reveal that policy changes may not always translate seamlessly into classroom realities, given implementation challenges.

South African higher education institutions have implemented various approaches to SBL. The duration and structure of SBL placements vary across institutions, ranging from short-term practicums to extended placements in partner schools (Van der Merwe, 2022). Some programs incorporate a phased approach to SBL, gradually increasing student teachers’ responsibilities over time (Padagas, 2019). For example, the teacher education programme of the university of technology under study adopted four-phase SBL program. The program structures teaching practice into incremental periods over a four-year training program. In the first year, the emphasis lies in orienting preservice teachers and students to the school context. Second-year experiences afford students chances to observe classroom dynamics, develop lesson plans, and execute teaching tasks under mentorship. Years three and four involve progressively increasing autonomy in lesson planning, presentation, and assessment. This phased approach allows preservice teachers to transition from observation to active participation, facilitating professional growth and confidence development.

Furthermore, most South African teacher education programs increasingly emphasise the role of mentor teachers in supporting and guiding student teachers during SBL (Kasperski & Crispel, 2022). Mentors act as role models, sharing their practical knowledge and expertise, offering constructive feedback, and helping student teachers navigate the challenges of the classroom (Van der Merwe, 2022). The recognition of the importance of mentoring in SBL is reflected in professional development initiatives aimed at enhancing mentor teacher capacity and establishing effective mentoring partnerships (Padagas, 2019). This focus on mentorship shows the value placed on collaborative approaches to teacher education, emphasising shared responsibility between universities and schools in preparing future teachers (Kasperski & Crispel, 2022). The emphasis on contextualisation within South African teacher education reveals the commitment to developing teachers who are responsive to the unique needs of their learners and the specific challenges of the South African educational landscape (Vala & Talwanga, 2015).

Challenges and Opportunities of Preservice Teachers during School Based Learning

Challenges with SBL have been reported in many countries, such as Rwanda (Njiku, 2024), Romania (OECD, 2024) where teaching practice not yet reflects the learning goals of the national curriculum, Ghana (Amankwa et al., 2017) and India (Das & Chowdhury, 2019) amongst many others. The complexities of SBL extend beyond structural and logistical considerations to encompass the lived experiences of preservice teachers as they navigate the practical realities of the classroom. These experiences are crucial in shaping their professional development, influencing their pedagogical approaches, and ultimately impacting the quality of education provided to learners. Classroom management, a multifaceted aspect of teaching, often presents difficulties for student teachers as they learn to establish routines, manage learner behaviour, and create a conducive learning environment (Bonna, 2023). Lesson planning, another key area of challenge, requires student teachers to translate theoretical knowledge into practical lessons, considering learner diversity and curriculum requirements (Chizhik & Chizhik, 2018). Assessment, integral to teaching and learning, poses challenges as student teachers grapple with designing appropriate assessment tasks, providing effective feedback, and using assessment data to inform their teaching (Bonna, 2023). Catering to diverse learner needs, a core principle of inclusive education in South Africa, requires student teachers to develop differentiated instruction strategies and address individual learning styles, often with limited resources and support. Koross (2016) refers to the numerous unfamiliar aspects that student teachers must adjust to during their SBL, noting the need to work with different mentor teachers and teaching styles and adjust to new school environments.

However, SBL presents valuable opportunities for preservice teachers' professional growth. The practical experience gained during SBL enables them to develop essential teaching skills, refine their pedagogical approaches, and gain confidence in their abilities (Singh-Pillay, 2020). SBL also offers a platform for student teachers to build professional networks, collaborate with experienced teachers, and gain insights into the complexities of the South African education system (Malik, 2018). SBL experiences can profoundly shape student teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and practices, influencing their understanding of teaching and learning and their commitment to the profession. This transformative potential extends beyond the acquisition of technical skills to encompass the development of professional identity, ethical awareness, and a sense of purpose as teachers (Haber-Curran & Tillapaugh, 2015).

The transformative aspect of SBL is revealed in a study by Dimmock and Goh (2011) which notes the importance of reflection on practices, leading to possible adjustments to their typical practices and beliefs. SBL provides a context for exploring beliefs about teaching, confronting assumptions, and developing a more nuanced understanding of the challenges and rewards of the profession. Preservice teachers' emotional and social development is also influenced by their SBL experiences. The challenges encountered during SBL can lead to stress, anxiety, and self-doubt, while the support and encouragement received from mentors and colleagues can foster resilience, confidence, and a sense of belonging within the professional community (Allen et al., 2024). Therefore, understanding the transformative experiences of preservice teachers at the selected university of technology is crucial. Investigating their transformative challenges, opportunities, and perceptions of SBL can contribute to enhancing the effectiveness of SBL and better prepare future teachers for the complexities of the South African educational system.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework underpinning this study is Transformative Learning Theory, as developed by Mezirow (1978). Transformative Learning Theory describes the process by which individuals critically examine and potentially reshape their deeply held beliefs, perspectives, and assumptions (Mezirow, 2018). Mezirow argues that learning involves not merely the acquisition of new information but also a fundamental shift in one's frame of reference, the lens through which one interprets experience. This transformation occurs through critical reflection and rational discourse (Mezirow, 2003), allowing individuals to move towards more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative perspectives.

The relevance of transformative learning theory to educational research, and specifically teacher education research, is well-established (Kucukaydin & Cranton, 2013). In the context of teacher education, this framework allows for an examination of how preservice teachers' beliefs and practices evolve during their training (Heerden, 2024). As such SBL, a crucial component of preservice teacher education, provides a context for such transformation. The SBL experience immerses student teachers in the complexities of real-world classrooms, often challenging their pre-conceived notions and prompting critical reflection on their own developing practices.

This framework was adopted in this study because it directly aligns with the research objectives of understanding how SBL can be a catalyst for transformative learning in preservice teachers, shaping their experiences of teaching. SBL placements expose student teachers to diverse teaching methodologies, classroom cultures and student learning styles, thus providing opportunities for reflection and growth. For example, a

preservice teacher might enter SBL with a belief that strict classroom management is essential. However, encountering a variety of teaching styles during their placement, such as an effective mentor teacher who employs student-centered approaches can help the student teacher question the limitations of their initial belief. This questioning leads to self-examination and encourages a shift towards more flexible and adaptable classroom management strategies.

Method

Research Design and Approach

In this study, phenomenological design has been followed, as phenomenology centres on exploring how individuals make sense of their lived experiences. It is especially useful for uncovering the underlying reasons behind people's behaviours and decisions, as well as for challenging common assumptions and widely accepted beliefs (McLeod, 2024). This study employed a qualitative research approach to explore the transformative potential of SBL from the perspective of preservice teachers. Qualitative research is a well-established methodology that aims to understand the complexities of human experiences and social phenomena (Pyo et al., 2023). Unlike quantitative research, which primarily deals with numerical data, qualitative research focuses into the 'how' and 'why' of research questions, providing rich, contextualised insights. The qualitative approach was utilised to gather rich, descriptive data from preservice teachers regarding their SBL experiences using semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions.

Sampling

This study focused on third-year Bachelor of Education students at a university of technology in the Free State province, South Africa. Their teacher training specialises them for teaching in the Further Education and Training Phase (Grade 10-12). In the 2024 academic year 213 students were registered in this program. A sample of 15 preservice teachers was selected using purposive sampling. Purposive sampling allows researchers to gather data that closely aligns with specific research objectives, contexts, and parameters. As a non-probability sampling method, it involves intentionally selecting participants or cases based on predefined criteria or characteristics that are most relevant to the focus of the study (Memon et al., 2025).

The specific criteria for participant selection were a) participants had completed at least one SBL placement, ensuring they possessed relevant experiences, b) participants were selected from placements across various school settings to capture diverse SBL experiences; c) willing to participate in interviews and focus group research activities.

Data Collection and Analysis

Collection of data occurred through semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion. Semi-structured interviews (Belina, 2023) comprise pre-determined open-ended questions, permitting flexibility to discover emergent themes during the conversation. Focus group discussions (Nyumba et al., 2018) involve a small group of participants discussing specific topics, facilitating interaction and shared understanding. In this study, the semi-structured interviews explored individual experiences and perspectives on SBL challenges, support systems, and changes in beliefs and practices. The focus group discussion further probed these themes in a collaborative setting to aid a deeper understanding of the collective and differing experiences among participants. The author's role in the focus group was primarily that of a facilitator, guiding the conversation and ensuring all participants had an opportunity to contribute.

After collecting the data through semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion, the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. This ensured the preservation of spoken language and provided a rich textual dataset for analysis. The transcribed data were then analysed using thematic analysis (Heerden, 2024), a common approach in qualitative research that allows for detecting, analysing, and reporting emerging themes within data. Lim (2024) discusses various data analysis techniques in qualitative research, emphasising the importance of systematic and rigorous approaches.

Thematic analysis, as described by Clarke and Braun (2017), involves a six-phase procedure: familiarising with the data, creating preliminary codes, seeking emerging themes, evaluating emergent themes, selecting themes, and reporting on the identified themes. In this study, the authors first immersed themselves in the data to obtain a holistic interpretation of the student teachers' experiences. Then, initial codes were generated inductively, directly from the participants' words and phrases. The codes were then grouped and categorised into themes that portrayed the recurring patterns and meanings across the dataset. The themes were continuously reviewed and processed to confirm they correctly denoted the data and captured the nuances of the student teachers'

perspectives. Each theme was then clearly defined and named, providing a concise summary of the key ideas. The analysis was presented in a narrative backed by descriptive quotes from participants.

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were observed throughout this study. The study sought ethics approval from the Faculty Research and Innovation Committee of the affiliated university. All participants provided informed consent before engaging in data collection. Anonymity and confidentiality were communicated to participants prior to conducting data collection sessions and were maintained with pseudonyms and secure data storage. Participation was voluntary, and individuals were free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Additionally, all information collected was used solely for the purposes of this study.

Findings

Only 13 of the 15 sampled preservice teachers were able to participate in the study. This did not affect the information obtained from the remaining sample. This section presents the key findings from this qualitative study exploring the transformative potential of SBL for preservice teachers. The findings are presented thematically, incorporating participant quotes to illustrate key themes. Participants were numbered PT 1 (Preservice Teacher 1), PT 2 (Preservice Teacher 2), etc.

Theme 1: Shifting Beliefs about Teaching and Learning

SBL experiences led to significant shifts in preservice teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning. Initially, many participants held idealistic views of teaching, often rooted in theoretical knowledge acquired during university coursework. Practical experience in the classroom challenged these preconceptions. Participants gained a deeper understanding of the complexities of teaching, including classroom management, student motivation, lesson planning, assessment and differentiated instruction. They developed more adaptable and context-specific teaching approaches, recognising the need for flexibility and responsiveness in real-world classroom settings. During the interviews, participants expressed that:

I thought teaching was all about knowing the subject. Now I realise it is about knowing the learners too (PST 4).

I used to think a good lesson plan guarantees success. Now I understand it's more about being responsive to the learners' needs in the moment (PST 8).

I learned so much about catering for different learning styles during my teaching at the secondary school. Now I understand it is important to change approaches based on who you are teaching (PST 1).

Theme 2: Development of Professional Identity

SBL played a vital role in shaping preservice teachers' professional identities. Through interactions with mentor teachers, colleagues, and learners, selected preservice teachers gained firsthand experience of the roles and responsibilities of a teacher. They developed a greater sense of belonging within the teaching community and a stronger commitment to the profession. This involved grappling with the challenges and rewards of teaching, reflecting on their own practices, and developing their own unique teaching philosophies. They moved from seeing themselves as student teachers to envisioning themselves as qualified professionals with the power to make a real difference in learners' lives. This was reflected by participants who asserted:

Observing my mentor teacher showed me what a good teacher looks like. I aspire to be like her one day (PST 11).

Collaborating with other my two friends who were also teaching at same school and other teachers made me feel like I was already part of the profession (PST 7).

Building relationships with learners helped me realise how important teachers are. It solidified my desire to become a teacher (PST 5).

Going through the ups and downs such being teased by some teachers and learners asking hard questions helped me confirm that teaching is definitely the right career path for me. I am now sure I can do it (PST 6).

Theme 3: Impact of mentoring and support

Most preservice teachers emphasised the critical role of mentor teachers and teaching practicum coordinators in their SBL experience. Positive mentoring relationships, characterised by encouragement, regular feedback, and guidance, supported their confidence and motivation. Equally, inadequate support, inconsistent communication from mentors, or negative mentoring experiences led to some feelings of stress, anxiety and self-doubt. The

quality of mentoring significantly influenced not only the overall practicum experience but also preservice teachers' perceptions of the teaching profession. As some participants expressed:

My mentor teacher was amazing. She always made time for me, gave me constructive feedback, and helped me improve my lessons. I felt so much more confident because of her support (PST 4).

I often felt lost and unsure of what to do. My mentor was very busy and did not have much time for me. It was a very stressful experience (PST 10).

The teaching practice coordinator was a great resource. He regularly checked in with us, offered support, and connected us with resources. Knowing someone was there to help made a huge difference (PST 9).

The most valuable part of my teaching was the feedback from my mentor. She helped me identify my strengths and weaknesses and gave me specific strategies for improvement. I learned so much from her (PST 1).

Theme 4: Challenges in Classroom Management

During the focus group discussion, the preservice teachers consistently identified classroom management as a significant challenge during their SBL. Difficulties included maintaining discipline, engaging diverse learners, adapting to different classroom contexts, and effectively addressing disruptive behaviour. Insufficient teacher training and support in classroom management techniques prior to and during SBL increased these challenges, contributing to feelings of unpreparedness and hindering their development of effective teaching strategies. They expressed:

Keeping learners engaged and on task was a constant battle. Some of us often felt like I was losing the war (PST 3).

Dealing with disruptive learners was the hardest part. I was not sure what to do, and I did not feel supported (PST 13).

My mentor offered some helpful tips, but I really needed more training in classroom management before I started my teaching the grade 10 learners at the school (PST 2).

Each classroom was so different. I struggled to adapt my strategies and find what worked best with each class (PST 6).

The preservice teachers' narratives above reveal that while mentor teachers offered some guidance, the lack of structured training prior to SBL left many feeling ill-equipped to handle the diverse challenges they faced. The unpredictable nature of classroom dynamics and the varying needs of learners further these difficulties.

Theme 5: Challenges and Opportunities in Diverse School Contexts

The findings revealed that diverse school contexts present both transformative challenges and valuable opportunities for preservice teachers. Participants described encountering a range of student needs, teaching styles, and classroom dynamics, prompting them to adapt and refine their teaching approaches. Some preservice teachers, particularly those placed in rural or under-resourced schools, faced challenges related to limited resources, large class sizes, and a lack of infrastructure. These experiences, while demanding, also provided opportunities for innovation, resilience, and a deeper understanding of the complexities of the South African education system.

At first, I was overwhelmed by the large classes and limited resources. But I learned to be creative and adapt my lessons to suit the context. I also realised the importance of building strong relationships with my learners and the community (PST 9).

Teaching in a rural school was a real eye-opener. I saw firsthand the inequalities that exist in our education system and the flexibility of both learners and teachers in the face of these challenges (PST 6).

It was tough managing a classroom with learners from such diverse backgrounds and learning needs. But I developed important skills in differentiation and classroom management that I would not have gained in a setting with no differences between learners (PST 12).

These experiences highlight the importance of preparing preservice teachers for the realities of diverse school contexts. Some of the challenges they encountered during SBL were transformative, pushing them to develop essential skills in adaptability, resourcefulness, and culturally responsive teaching. Furthermore, exposure to diverse learners and school settings broadened their perspectives and deepened their commitment to social justice in education.

Discussion and Conclusions

This discussion analyses the key findings from the study exploring preservice teachers' experiences during their school placements, focusing on the challenges, opportunities, and transformative learning they encountered.

During their SBL placements, participants encountered diverse learner needs, teaching styles, and classroom dynamics. This aligns with literature that highlights the importance of context-specific teacher training, where effective teaching requires adaptability and responsiveness to unique school environments (Deed & Lesko, 2015). However, research warns that placing preservice teachers in challenging contexts without adequate support may foster feelings of unpreparedness (Nganga et al., 2020). While some preservice teachers initially struggled, the study found these experiences often spurred professional growth, resilience, and a deeper understanding of teaching complexities.

Supportive mentorship emerged as another key theme. Participants valued mentors who offered constructive feedback and guidance, consistent with literature on effective teacher mentoring (Dreer-Goethe, 2023). Yet, inconsistent mentoring and feedback were reported, highlighting the need for structured mentor training. Scholars advocate for mentoring that fosters reflective practice, enabling preservice teachers to critically evaluate their teaching (Vinokur et al., 2023).

The study also reflects the transformative potential of SBL. Many participants experienced a shift from idealised views of teaching to more practical, experience-based understandings. This supports transformative learning theory, which emphasises experience and critical reflection in altering perspectives (Mezirow, 2018). However, some research shows SBL does not always lead to transformation, with preservice teachers sometimes conforming to existing norms (Flavian & Levin, 2024). This study suggests transformation depends on placement context, mentorship quality, and individual reflection, with South Africa's diverse school environments offering rich opportunities for such growth.

Participants encountered varied school contexts, ranging from supportive and collaborative to isolated and challenging. Those placed in supportive environments reported increased confidence and satisfaction, while others, particularly in rural schools, experienced frustration and feelings of inadequacy. These findings highlight the importance of strategic school placements and sustained support throughout the SBL experience. Moore (2021) emphasises the value of partnering with schools committed to mentoring, ensuring more enriching experiences for preservice teachers.

The diversity of school contexts also fostered transformative learning. Challenges, when paired with effective mentorship, prompted participants to reflect critically on their beliefs about teaching, resulting in meaningful shifts in perspective. This aligns with transformative learning theory, which posits that disorienting experiences can catalyse personal and professional growth (Mezirow, 2018). The findings suggest that improving SBL experiences requires re-examining the roles of both mentor teachers and SBL coordinators to ensure intentional, supportive engagement.

A key theme was the role of context in preservice teacher development. Participants navigated varying student needs, teaching styles, and classroom dynamics—echoing research that underscores the value of context-specific training (Heerden, 2024). Effective teaching, as the literature suggests, demands adaptability to particular environments. However, without adequate support, placements in difficult settings can hinder growth and lead to disillusionment (Mogashoa, 2021). While some participants struggled initially, the study found that these experiences ultimately fostered resilience and a deeper understanding of the complexities of teaching.

A key finding focused on the role of mentorship in shaping preservice teachers' experiences. Participants valued mentors who offered constructive feedback and guidance, supporting existing literature on effective mentoring in teacher education (Heerden, 2024). However, some reported inconsistent support, which hindered their development. This highlights the need for strong mentor training and support systems within teacher education programmes. Effective mentoring should promote reflective practice, enabling preservice teachers to critically analyse and adapt their teaching.

The study also explored the transformative nature of SBL. Many participants described shifts from idealistic, theory-based beliefs to more practical understandings of teaching, consistent with transformative learning theory, which emphasises experience and reflection in changing perspectives. However, some research indicates that not all SBL experiences are transformative (Mogashoa, 2021), as some preservice teachers may conform to existing practices without critical engagement. This study suggests that transformation depends on several factors, including the school context, mentorship quality, and the preservice teacher's willingness to reflect critically on their experiences.

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