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Challenges of Pre-service Teachers in Rural Places of Teaching Practice: A Decolonial Perspectives

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Abstract. Unlike other countries, rural community schools in South Africa are faced with many challenges that hinder them from discharging their academic responsibilities. This study seeks to understand the challenges faced by South African pre-service teachers deployed to rural communities during their teaching practice. This study adopted qualitative research approach and was viewed from a decolonial perspective and lensed using a transformative paradigm within the participatory research design. The participants comprised ten pre-service teachers who underwent their practice in rural schools and were selected using the snowballing method. The participants were asked to reflect on their experiences, especially their challenges during teaching practice. Thematic analysis was employed to make sense of the data based on the objectives of the study. The study found out that rural schools lack basic amenities, physical resources, teaching aids. The study also revealed that language of instruction challenges rural students, and another finding showed that absenteeism and truancy are the major challenges in rural schools. The study concludes that inadequate resources, the language of instruction, absenteeism and truancy are major challenges with recommendations that a concerted effort is needed to decolonise the rural communities and their schools towards transformation.

Keywords: rural communities; student-teachers; teaching practice; decoloniality; transformation

1. Introduction

Rural education worldwide experiences various challenges due to inadequate resources and students' socio-economic background (Considine & Zappalà, 2002; Kline & Walker-Gibbs, 2015; Moore et al., 2020; Troester-Trate, 2020). These have gone a long way to affect schools' progress in rural areas. Even the universities situated in such environments also have their share of resource allocation deficiencies, and most students attending such universities are from the nearest rural communities. In some cases, especially in South Africa, people from the rural community are regarded as previously disadvantaged because of the segregation

of white and blacks during the apartheid regime in South Africa (Nyahodza & Higgs, 2017; Sedibe, 2011).

While there is much transformation that has taken place to ensure rural transformation in the country, the majority of rural communities are still wallowing in the illusion of perversity, low level of transformation, low level of civilisation, lack or inadequate social amenities such as electricity, schools and access to health care facilities, potable water, modern market and internet connectivity (Flora et al., 2018; Mfenyana et al., 2006; Omodan, 2020; Sovacool, 2012). One way or the other, these deficiencies form the chrematistic of rural schools. Such schools are also expected to house the pre-service teachers who are currently in teaching training in the various rural universities. In this study, pre-service teachers are students studying in the university to become teachers in their future careers. This study will use pre-service teachers and student teachers interchangeably for consistency's sake. The study will focus on the experiences and challenges of pre-service teachers who have completed their mandatory teaching practice programmes.

In South Africa, as with many countries, the process of becoming a teacher is rigorous and lengthy. Student-teachers are mandated by policy (Department of Education, 2007) to undergo teaching practices for a certain number of times during their studies. The majority prefer to undergo the practice in schools close to their homes. However, in most cases, the practice is far from their residences or hometowns. Teaching practice may be a very positive experience for students because it exposes them to real classrooms before their practicum placement. Alternatively, it can be highly stressful with lots of pressure, especially on first-time teachers who are unsure of what to expect or how to handle the situations they encounter during the placement period (Ham & Davey, 2005; Sinclair, 2008). Therefore, one can argue that teaching practices are aimed at helping education graduates acquire skills required for teaching in schools where student-teachers are attached for specific periods. It is also a practicum that involves supervision. That is, it uses supervision and structured evaluation to provide feedback on how well students perform in school during their teaching practice (Ibrahim, 2013; Sivan & Chan, 2003). Teaching practice is intended to be relevant to the student's future role as an educator, not just a continuation of academic studies where everything is done for you (Maphalala, 2013; Toom et al., 2015). Furthermore, student-teachers teaching practice should impact their performance after they graduate from college and become teachers themselves. In other words, such a practical process provides an appropriate transition from educational settings in higher education institutions to real classroom situations in actual schools or other places where students teach.

However, as productive as the intention of teaching practice to student-teachers, they still face many challenges in the process. According to existing literature, these challenges affect their performances and hinder them from acquiring the needed tanning. Student teachers face challenges such as stigmatisation and marginalisation due to long commutes; they also tend to spend more money on transport which affects the cost incurred on food, accommodation and other expenses (Ekundayo et al., 2014; Mukeredzi & Mandrona, 2013). This fluctuation

can strain student teachers' budgets as many come from low-income homes and cannot afford the additional costs that long commutes to practicum sites pose. As an experienced teaching practice supervisor, student-teachers have to manage school timetables and their teaching practice timetables, which can sometimes be confusing.

Furthermore, student teachers face transportation challenges such as poor transport facilities and travel time (Mapinda & Honori, 2022). They often feel stressed due to lack of support and inadequate supervision (Ekundayo et al., 2014; Mukeredzi & Mandrona, 2013; Mapinda & Honori, 2022). Inadequate supervision affects the learning experience of the student-teacher as they do not get sufficient support during teaching practices (Apolot et al., 2018; Ozdemir & Yildirim, 2012). Student teachers often feel unsupported and might experience reduced morale due to a lack of supervision. Student teachers are less likely to exhibit significant gains when they are not adequately supervised during teaching practice (Naidoo et al., 2012; Naidoo & Wagner, 2020). Inadequate support is attributed to school policy that does not provide enough time for practicum facilitators to spend with student-teachers in the schools where they are placed (Talvitie, 2000), as well as insufficient skills in facilitating student-teachers learning at the schools where practicum sites were located (Cuckle & Clarke, 2002).

The literature above shows that teaching practice is faced with many challenges; the most concern is the teaching practice in rurally located communities where there are limited resources for both the student-teachers and the schools themselves. This was confirmed by findings that rurally located secondary schools lack enough educational resources such as teaching materials, adequate classrooms, internet facilities, computer laboratories, science apparatus for science subjects, among others (Amenyedzi et al., 2011; Kawalilak et al., 2012; Sampath-Kumar & Basavaraja, 2016; Shaban et al., 2021). Also, they are mostly short of adequate human capital, that is, teachers who can serve as the mentor teachers for the student teachers (Ingersoll, 2003; Mathis, 2003). Perhaps, this is why there are recommendations that concerted effort should be put in place to ensure adequate resources are available for the student-teachers in the rural environment during their teaching practice (Owoeye & Yara, 2011; Omodan, 2020). Hence, this study also banked on the experiences of the student-teachers who have served in various rurally located communities in South Africa during their teaching practice to investigate the challenges they face. The study seeks to understand the challenges faced by South African pre-service teachers during their teaching practice. However, this is restricted to rural communities with these experiences as many communities have called for a decolonial transformation because of the seeming marginalisation in their education system. Hence the adoption of decoloniality as a theoretical lens for this study.

1.1 Decoloniality as a Theoretical Framework

The decolonial project emerges mainly from Latin America, Harding (2017); Maldonado-Torres and Cavooris (2017); Mignolo (2010); Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015), but can be used in all contexts where colonisers excluded groups that were considered inferior or foreign to their project (Aman, 2017; Mignolo, 2009). Decoloniality is a tool that can be used in different contexts and understood as the

rethinking of educational systems around concepts such as indigeneity, culture, community development and self-determination (Nakata et al., 2012; Shahjahan et al., 2017). Decoloniality understands education not only from a Eurocentric perspective but also from an indigenous perspective, which means that it has a language rooted in local contexts and ways of living together (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2014). That is, decoloniality recognises communal knowledge processes based on the traditions and practices of decolonised groups. These knowledge processes help communities learn about themselves by going back to their ways of doing things in order to relaunch themselves into the world of being (Sindane, 2020). Although decoloniality is not an alternative epistemology, it creates a space where indigenous peoples can learn about their community's knowledge systems that were excluded by the rise of Western academia, which helps people to understand that there are different ways of knowing and not all ways of knowing depend on Western cultures (Ahenakew, 2016). That is, decoloniality is not just an idea or a concept; it is rather a tool for transformation which aims to remove all forms of colonialism within institutions while promoting local and ingenious epistemologies (Ani, 2013; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). One can argue that decoloniality means undoing colonialism by transforming Western epistemology imposed on indigenous societies through their inclusion into modernity.

Furthermore, one can argue that a system or a community is decolonised only when it removes itself from those elements that have been imposed on them without their own initiative and thus decide for themselves how they want to be. In contrast, the term "decoloniality" based on this study's argument can also mean a process of redefining own identity, people, cultural norms, beauties and epistemologies towards transformation. Perhaps, this informed Walsh's (2012) argument that decoloniality is an ongoing transformation process that allows a people or a cultural space to access sovereignty by removing all that imprisons their development. The revelations from all indications show that rurally located communities, including their schools and educational systems, are still wallowing in the abyss of the leftover of colonialism. Many rural students are not achieving adequate levels of literacy and academic achievement (Gardiner, 2008; Gao et al., 2018; Tayyaba, 2012; Wills & Hofmeyr, 2019). Also, Hlalele's (2012) study confirms that high illiteracy levels characterise rural South Africa. Research has shown that rural education faces fewer resources, cultural differences between rural and urban schools, lack of consolidated districts, drug abuse in rural neighbourhoods, poverty among rural families (rural people are more likely to live below the poverty line than their urban cousins) and others (Alemu, 2012; Ngcobo & Tikly, 2010; Oladeinde et al., 2020; Ramnarain, 2014).

The relevance of decoloniality to rural communities means moving away from a previously dependent phenomenon, where rural communities are positioned to work towards their own goals without relying on external powers. This form of self-reliance will give rural communities more autonomy; thus, allowing them to make decisions regarding their own lifestyles and present conditions (without outside influence). This could also lead to the galvanisation of available human strength to create the life they deserve without waiting for the government. That is, going back to traditional, sustainable lifestyles that rural communities once

lived before colonists is imminent. Therefore, the endpoint will enable the rurally located schools to be readily prepared to receive student-teachers who are positioned to undergo their teaching practice as required without the hurdles and challenges that could hinder them from acquiring the needed knowledge. Based on the problem of the study, the research question; what are the challenges hindering productive teaching practice and possible solutions to the challenges toward rural transformation was answered.

1.2 Research Objectives

In order to answer the research question, the following research objectives were formulated to guide the process:

- The study examined the challenges student-teachers face in rural places of teaching practice.
- The study recommends solutions to ameliorate the challenges that hinder productive teaching practice experience.

2. Methodology

This section discusses the methodological process that was adopted to conduct the research. This was done to explain the research approach, research paradigm, research design, participants and selection of participants, instrumentation, method of data analysis and ethical consideration.

2.1 Research Approach, Paradigm and Design

This study adopted a qualitative research approach because it enables the researcher to obtain rich insights into a problem and subsequently generates solutions to the problem using the perspectives of the researched (Alase, 2017; Teherani et al., 2015). According to Landrum and Garza (2015), this entails gathering and analysing non-numeric data (such as text, video, or audio) to understand the people's ideas, beliefs, or experiences under investigation. This approach provides a means for individuals' views/interpretations of the situation to be presented in natural contexts, thus reflecting real-world behaviours (Willig, 2017). Hence, this study used the perspectives of student-teachers who face challenges due to their location during their teaching practice. The students' challenges call for a transformational change into the predicament of rural communities and their schools to enable them to provide adequate training to the student-teachers.

Therefore, a transformative paradigm was adopted as the research worldview that informed the study. This is appropriate because it aims to address the perceived marginalisation of the previously disadvantaged communities (Mertens, 2017), which affect the tanning of the student-teachers. This agrees with the argument that research must specifically seek to understand and involve the people facing the problem in providing solutions to the problem (Mertens, 2004; 2007). Moreover, this is what informs the choice of research design for the study. A participatory research design was adopted to enable the researcher to work hand-in-hand with the researched in providing solutions to the problem (Farrell et al., 2021; Levac et al., 2019). In view of this, the student-teachers were actively involved in the study process and were made to participate in generating new knowledge (solutions).

2.2 Participants and Selection of Participants

The participants for this study are university students who enrolled under the faculty of education to become teachers. Hence, they are called student-teachers or pre-service teachers who must undergo teaching practices for several months during their university education. The participants are also enrolled in a particular module (course). They are required to observe the state and condition of their teaching practices, especially their challenges in the schools. The selected students are mostly those posted to rural communities during their teaching practices. This is because the study is only interested in the teaching practices training provided to the student-teachers who are posted to the rural schools. Ten participants were selected using snowballing sampling technique because the researcher did not know those posted to rural schools but located them by asking other students to suggest and refer the students posted to rural schools. This is appropriate because snowballing selection method allows researcher(s) to sort for participants by inquiry and referrers (Etikan et al., 2016). This was patiently done until ten participants with adequate required knowledge were found and participated in the process.

2.3 Instrumentation

This study adopted student reflection as an instrument to elicit information from the student-teachers who were selected to participate in this study. Reflection is a process that allows teachers to make links of students' experiences towards knowing reality. For example, the reality could be to know the level of their knowledge as a result of a particular experience (Roberts & Westville, 2008). This is appropriate because it enables the research to know their challenging experiences and how they truly feel about them. This was done by asking them to reflect on the challenges they faced in their teaching practices, and their presentations were recorded.

2.4 Method of Data Analysis and Ethical Consideration

The study adopted thematic analysis to make sense of the data. Thematic analysis was adopted because it enables the researcher to arrange the data into themes following the objectives of the study. This is in line with the argument that thematic analysis identifies textural materials that could be quantitatively coded by being reduced to their simplest terms to provide an accurate, exhaustive, and objective account of the data (Bergman, 2010). The aim was to analyse the data in a systematic, scientific way to provide meaning for what the participants said. However, the researcher was careful not to impose preconceived interpretations on participants' experiences, and the data were reported and interpreted within the principle of credulity, transferability, confirmability and dependability to ensure research trustworthiness (Kyngäs et al., 2020). The issue of research ethics was followed by ensuring that all the participants were adequately informed about the research and all consented to participate voluntarily without any reservation. They were promised that their identities would remain anonymous during and after the research. And that no one will be able to link their statement to them after the research is published. Hence, their identities were represented as S1 for student 1, S2 for student 2, S3 for student 3, among others. See below analysis.

3. Presentation and Discussion

This section presents the data and its analysis to answer objective 1, which was done based on the identified themes in the data. The themes are: lack of resources, the language of instruction, and absenteeism and truancy.

3.1 Lack of Resources

One of the challenges faced by student-teachers in rural South Africa is the lack of adequate resources, which is not limited to lack of physical facilities, which has led to overcrowded classrooms, teaching materials, social and basic amenities and human resources. This surfaces in the participants' statements below:

S1: "The challenges that I encountered in my teaching practice was power failure because even when I planned a lesson well, my lesson did not go the way I wanted because when I arrive early in the morning, there will be no electricity at the school and I discover a delay in buying petrol for the generator. And when they come to start the generator, it is already late for my lessons".

S4: "The other challenge was a shortage of water, whereby learners will be sent home because there is no water and then my work will be not done for the day. Although there is a Jojo tank you will find it without water as we used the water the previous day to cook the learners' food and clean the toilets. The worst part is when we can't wash our hands because there is no water".

S9: "As for me, I encountered internet data shortage. I couldn't access some resources online during school hours".

S4: "Teaching aids were not used, only textbooks were the teaching aid in the classroom sometimes we do not use the textbook or we leave the textbook while teaching".

S6: "Physical education requires materials like tennis balls, soccer balls and other materials. But there were no such materials within the school to support this subject as a learning area".

The above statements confirm a shortage of basic amenities in the rural schools that could enhance the teaching practices of the pre-service teachers. This was confirmed by S1, who encountered frequent power failure. In the same vein, S4 reiterated that the water supply was not adequate, which delayed their teaching, learning time and other relevant duties. Also, according to S9, the rural schools have a shortage of internet facilities that could enhance the student-teacher's teaching practices experiences. Apart from the lack of basic amenities, S4 further complained about the non-usage of teaching aids because they are available and the textbooks that are supposed to represent the teaching aids are not used as and when due. S6 complained that materials like tennis balls and soccer balls are not available to facilitate physical education practices.

Also, the issue of overcrowding was also raised, which could be linked to inadequate physical facilities such as classrooms. S10's statement below confirms this:

S10: The school is overcrowded and there is a lack of learning resources. Most learners do not have textbooks/books, which leads to low participation in class, disruption, and not writing their class activities and homework.

S2: In one classroom, there are 42 learners, which makes it a challenge to teach in the classroom.

S1: The last challenge in the school is the overcrowded classrooms whereby we have 54 learners in the classroom.

S9: As a student-teacher dealing with diverse learners in large classrooms, it is exhausting and requires serious attention. Remember, a student-teacher is still trying to get used to being in a teaching environment; however, they are expected to ensure smooth and conducive teaching to all the diverse learners in the various classrooms.

The revelation of the overcrowded classroom was not only mentioned by S10. The statement by S2 also confirmed that there are 42 learners in a classroom, which is more than the student-teacher ratio and constitutes a challenge for the student-teacher. S9 also faced the challenge of overcrowded classrooms due to a shortage of physical facilities that must be addressed. S9 also experienced frustration on what it takes to manage large classrooms, especially classrooms laced with diverse students with individual differences.

Based on the above analysis, it was found that rural schools lack basic amenities, physical resources, teaching aids, among others. This, according to the participants, constitutes significant threats to their teaching practice experiences. This finding corresponds with Mukuna & Aloba (2020) that rural schools in South Africa operate within the low level of resources such as "insufficient personal protective equipment, poor access to network access, and lack of learning devices" which affects productivity. This is also in line with Mtsi and Maphosa's (2016) argument that teaching aids and materials are inadequate in rural schools, incapacitating teachers to discharge their teaching effectively. All these findings may not be unconnected to the unequal distribution of academic resources between the rural and urban metropolis (Grydehøj, 2016), which calls for adequate provision of educational resources to improve education in the rural communities (Owoeye & Yara, 2011; Omodan, 2020).

3.2 Language of Instruction

The data collected indicated that student-teachers faced the issue of language in their place of teaching practice. Language in the sense that most rural students are not adequately equipped with the knowledge of English, which is the adopted language of instruction in schools. This, according to the participants, hinders their productivity in the training process. See the statements below:

S5: "The major challenge is the use of teaching and learning language, English. Learners cannot grasp the content easily as English is not their mother tongue. Some learners do not even understand what you are teaching as they do not understand the language you are speaking. So, in this case, I had to code-switch to their native language but, the challenge is that when

you over-explain in their native language, they will not be able to write in English".

S6: "One other challenge identified is attributed to barriers to learning, lack of concentration and understanding of general topics as a result of language. Students don't understand me when I speak English language only".

S5: "When it comes to writing, they write in their native language and write other English words in the Sesotho version. In addition, these learners lack knowledge of the language of instruction, limiting the teachers from exploring other teaching methods as it is difficult to tell learners procedures for some teaching methods because they don't understand since we are teaching in English".

S7: "During teaching practice, I had a problem with learners whose barrier to learning was the language of instruction. I had to teach using English and a little bit of isiZulu".

S2: "Language barrier whereby the majority of my learners do not understand the language of instruction. It makes our lesson a bit slower because lessons have to be repeated twice if not thrice so that no learner is left behind".

S3: "The issue of language. Most learners are not well exposed to the English language, which brings up the high level of misunderstanding amongst the learners, and it even stultifies the communication between the teacher and the learners".

Based on the revelations from the participants, one can see that rural learners are not very well equipped to learn a second language (English language). This surfaces in the statement by S5 that learners cannot understand easily when English is used to teach, which most time leads the student-teacher to code-switch and ensure that learning takes place. S6 also express the same challenge that learners do not understand general topics as a result of language barriers. The statement by S5 confirms that the learners write in their native language instead of the English language as required by policy. According to the participants, it limited them to the number of teaching methods they could use in the classrooms. This was also experienced by S7, who was able to manoeuvre the situation by teaching in "*English and a little bit of isiZulu*". IsiZulu is the language of the Zulu tribe of South Africa. As expressed by S2, this challenge delayed their teaching activities because they need to ensure that learning takes place. Lastly, the statement by S3 showed that the student-teacher also have an issue with the English language as the language of instruction. This may be because the participant also grew up in a rural community with a similar challenge.

Based on the above analysis, the study revealed that language of instruction constitutes a challenge to rural students because the majority of them find it difficult to communicate in English, which affects their learning. This finding is consistent with Mtsi and Maphosa (2016) that second language (English), which is the language of instruction in schools, is a challenge to many rural students because they were not versed in school usage. This is also in line with the finding

that "code-switching to L1 (isiXhosa) is a common practice in order to sustain continuous communication between teachers and learners" (Makgato, 2014). This may result from the fact that their background is previously disadvantaged, and they have no access to quality basic education in the community. This may also be why Manten et al. (2020) recommend that foundation phase learners must be equipped with basic knowledge of the English language from home.

3.3 Absenteeism and Truancy

Lastly, the data also showed absenteeism and truancy on the part of the rural learners, which also constitutes a challenge to the existence of student-teachers. The statement of the following participants confirms that rural learners come late to schools, and in some instances, they do not come at all. See the statements below:

S1: "Learner's absence was a major challenge when I had treated the certain aspects, I had to go back because of the learners that were not at the school. Because of the assessments that we do. Weekly you find that these learners don't know anything about the content, and I had to start afresh again. As well as those always coming late when my periods are the first periods".

S2: "There are pupils who are absent most of the days, and their parents do not report to the school or class teacher as to why they could not attend school. Therefore, these learners fall behind and fail to follow the syllabus. This results in poor academic performance".

S3: "The challenges I have encountered during my teaching practice in the intermediate phase is that some learners skip school days and as a teacher, I have to make sure they do their tasks. It costs others time, so I normally ask those learners to stay after school so we can complete the work that was behind".

S8: "Learners were behaving in a very bad way; they were so stiff and stubborn and could not perform well because they mostly come late to school or not come at all".

From the above statements, it was obvious that learners absent in schools was a major challenge to the teaching activities of student-teachers. This challenge, according to S1, has caused them to repeat classes for the students as a result of being absent from their previous classes. Not only that, the same applies to latecomers because the teacher has to make sure that they are taught even when they arrive late. The revelation from S2 also showed that many students are absent most of the days, which makes them fall behind in their learning, resulting in poor performance. This blame of poor performance, in most cases, are shifted on the teachers; therefore, it constitutes stress for student-teachers when their student is absent. This action, according to S3, cost student-teachers extra time to make sure that learning takes place. The statement of S8 also confirm that learners are stubborn and cannot perform well because of truancy; they mostly come late to class.

These challenges affect the productivity of the student-teachers in the places of teaching practice. Therefore, the study found out that absenteeism and truancy are the major challenges in rural schools, which affect the performance of student-teachers that were posted to such areas. This agrees with the argument that absenteeism and truancy exist in schools and affect student learning activities (Gage et al., 2013; Reid, 2012). Perhaps that is why Reid (2003) recommended that schools change strategies and student support systems should be projected in schools to mitigate absenteeism and truancy to the barest minimum.

4. Conclusion and Recommendation

This section responds to objective two by providing a deductive conclusion and recommendations that could ameliorate student-teachers' challenges in their places of teaching practice. Therefore, based on the findings as discussed above, the study concludes that rural schools face challenges such as lack of resources, lack of adequate knowledge of the English language as a medium of instruction, and absenteeism and truancy on the part of rural learners, which affect the productivity and effectiveness of student-teachers. However, the following recommendations were made to ensure rural transformation and a decolonised rural way of living:

1. The study recommends that the concerned authorities (Department of Education and the Department of Basic Education) should ensure that adequate resources are devoted to transforming the predicament of rural schools. This enables them to fulfil all the required responsibilities, including standing as a training guard for the upcoming teachers. This will relaunch the community into an indigenous place where people can learn about their community's knowledge systems to better themselves (Sindane, 2020).
2. The study also recommends that school learners should be exposed to the language of power and economics. This will empower them to remove any undue coloniality and work towards empowering themselves against all oppression (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). The idea is that you can only challenge Western epistemology when you know the prowess behind the knowledge. Since the language of instruction in schools is the English language, all efforts must be made to expose learners to the English language to enable them to compete with their urban counterparts academically and economically.
3. Lastly, the study recommends that both the schools and the relevant government agencies strategise on addressing the issue of absenteeism and truancy. This situation may differ from school to school, which will require a situational approach in responding to it. However, home and learners' socio-economic backgrounds are paramount in doing this. This suggests that the previously disadvantaged people need to be re-membered into the life they deserve (Hamman, 2006; LeGall & Mboro, 2020).

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