

# University Supervisors' Perceptions on Preservice Teachers' Lesson Planning During Teaching Practice: The Case of a South African University

Mbusiseni C. Dube<sup>1</sup>, Chinaza Ulieny<sup>2</sup>, Dumsani W Mncube<sup>3</sup>, <sup>1,3</sup>University of Zululand, KwaZulu.Natal, South Africa, <sup>2</sup>University of South Africa, Gauteng, South Africa

Lesson planning, a pivotal aspect aiding the achievement of any lesson objective and eventually education goal, seems to be not handled as expected in recent times. This is perhaps because preservice teachers tend to fail in meeting the expected demands in their lesson planning. Hence, this study explores the perceptions of university supervisors on preservice teachers' lesson planning during their teaching practice, using selected schools where preservice teachers from a rural based university in South Africa undertook the teaching practice exercise. The study employed a qualitative method. Thus, structured interviews were conducted for 19 university supervisors who supervised preservice teachers during teaching practice. The findings of the study show that lesson planning is crucial to the delivery and attainment of lesson objectives. Also, a majority of the supervised preservice teachers still lag in the area of lesson planning. The study therefore recommends, among other things, that preservice teachers be taught lesson planning from the early stages of their study and be drilled on it, so that they understand clearly its elements.

**Key words:** *Lesson Planning, Preservice Teachers, Teaching Practice, University Supervisors.*



## Introduction

Preservice teachers are expected to plan their lessons in order to present them effectively in the classroom. However, some of them plan them well whereas others still need to improve their lesson planning skills. Preservice teachers are those Higher Education Institution (HEI) students who are studying towards attaining their professional teaching degrees through a Bachelor of Education (BEd). At the third-year level, preservice teachers attend a teaching practice for at least six weeks, when they are expected to put the theory learned from the higher institution into practice. During this period, preservice teachers get the opportunity to experience and 'experiment' with their knowledge and skills in a real teaching and learning environment (Goh & Matthews 2011). In other words, teaching practice affords preservice teachers a platform to demonstrate their teaching techniques (Cilliers, Fleisch, Prinsloo & Taylor 2020). However, they are expected to start by planning their lessons, which can serve as yardstick for measuring the possible success of a lesson.

## Literature review

### *General perspectives on teaching practice and lesson planning*

Planning a lesson is a very crucial aspect because it reveals what will happen in class, in terms of the teaching strategies and methods to be used, to mention but a few. In line with this notion, Rusznyak and Walton (2011) argue that lesson planning involves a written document which explains the sequence of activities a teacher has planned for learners. Hence, they argue that lesson planning is of great importance because it provides an effective learning environment. With a lesson plan, preservice teachers are expected to systematically organise the various learning tools they will need to make a lesson effective (Süral 2019). To further emphasise the importance of a lesson plan, Janssen and Lazonder (2016) assert that a lesson plan compels preservice teachers to think about what pedagogical and content knowledge is needed for effective teaching. Lastly, lesson planning exposes the beliefs, understanding and orientations of teachers (Li & Zou 2017). There is a great hope that if a lesson is properly planned, effective lesson presentation is a great possibility. When preservice teachers attend teaching practice, it is anticipated that they will be well informed about planning their lessons and hence can plan their lessons without fail.

In order to evaluate whether preservice students have acquired the requisite knowledge and skills for conducting teaching and learning activities, university supervisors visit them in schools for evaluation. Before both preservice teachers and their supervisors get to class for the evaluating lesson presentation, the supervisors evaluate the lesson planning in order to check if the preservice teacher has planned what they will execute in class. University supervisors are all employees appointed by the university to supervise and evaluate students during the teaching practice period. University supervisors are largely composed of academics

or lecturers in the faculty of education, and former principals and subject advisors, on the basis of their in-depth knowledge of teaching and learning. Subsequent to the lesson plan evaluation, university supervisors come across some issues which shape their perceptions. These perceptions may range from well-planned lessons to the worst planned ones. Li and Zou (2017) argue that if a lesson is well planned it should embody effective pedagogy for teaching and learning. However, Tashevska (2008) argues that preservice teachers find planning their lessons challenging, and Johnson (2000) expands on this by indicating that preservice teachers found initial lesson planning steps cumbersome. Therefore, it is possible that the supervisors evaluating the lesson plans found these issues that needed attention. If preservice teachers fail to plan their lessons properly, they may not succeed in the teaching process, because the teaching process depends greatly on high quality lesson planning, as argued by Semeglou (2005). Therefore, this paper seeks to unpack the issues that university supervisors uncovered when they evaluated the lesson plans of preservice teachers. Unpacking these issues will create an understanding of the challenges that preservice teachers face when planning lessons. The study will further recommend some steps that can be taken to ameliorate the planning of lessons by preservice teachers.

The role of teaching practice is very significant in the teacher training institution and their practical orientation remains a source of grave concern for policy makers. The review of literature seeks to present a diverse view about the perceptions of university supervisors when they evaluate preservice teachers. William (2017) sees teaching practice as a powerful model designed to reinforce the significance of the teaching profession, which underscores the importance of practical competence on the part of preservice teachers, which underpins skill development towards lesson planning. This may come with the backdrop of many failures by higher education institutions to address the lesson planning component in training preservice teachers. This impacts negatively on the current status of teaching and learning, which is deeply problematic (Boikhutso 2010). The development of professional skills is seen as a panacea for promoting highly competent teachers in the South African context (Maphalala 2017). This section of the literature review deals with how institutions of higher learning and school supervisors prepare preservice teachers, the general understanding of teaching practice in South Africa, the role of the lesson in the teaching practice and why the voice of the university supervisor is critical in exposing preservice teachers to various lesson planning templates and ways of planning lessons.

### ***The role of lesson planning as a component of teaching practice***

Lesson plans are an important blueprint prepared by any teacher in order to prepare learners for the learning experience. Boikhutso (2010) agrees that lesson planning demands teachers approach this process with care in order to promote the development of learners' cognitive structures. A study conducted by Sánchez-Solarte (2019) reveals that most successful teachers excel at instructional orientation when content is highly organised at the planning phase. In essence, this study underscores the importance of training teachers to be effective by

developing values aligned with effective planning. The adoption of various lesson plans by universities is a source of frustration as student teachers struggle to make a meaningful impression towards school improvement. As such, Boikhutso (2010) predicted that a failure to adopt uniform acceptable lesson plans might affect the transfer of pedagogical skills and knowledge to real life situations, effective learner engagement within the classroom and later compromise the relationship of trust between schools and student teachers. The following discussion highlights some of the anticipated cautions presented by policy makers during the configuration of CAPS. First is the notion that:

*The quality of teacher training programmes remains the backbone of the education system. As such, education needs to first address lesson preparation and planning stage to ensure effecting teaching practice and the promotion of quality teaching and learning within the school context. The planning dimension includes course planning, lesson planning, classroom management planning and even planning how to react to certain challenging situations (DBE 2011: 13).*

The above viewpoint suggests that preservice teachers need proper training to handle the most difficult task characterising teaching practice in recent years, which is lesson planning. In other words, Boonsena, Insprasitha, Chansri and Matney (2019) implore for this foresight as it is the first step toward addressing gaps in the current teacher training programmes for teachers aimed at perfecting the quality of lesson presentation in the classroom. Lesson planning as envisioned in the teaching profession should focus on learners learning in the classroom, the live classroom, teacher learning, teaching and observation, and school-based development (Mkhasibe & Mncube 2020). In essence, educating preservice teachers to effectively plan their lessons is a significant challenge in almost every teacher candidate preparation system and BED programmes (Derri, Papamitroua, Vernadakisa, Koufoua & Zetoua 2014).

### ***Preparation of preservice teachers in South Africa***

Preservice teachers experience more difficulties during the planning stage in their learning to teach, and for this reason, school mentors advocate for a more streamlined teaching practice programme (Derri et al. 2014). In teacher training, Dustova and Cotton (2015) underscore the importance of intensifying pedagogical training targeted at lesson planning and presentation, for this to remain the central tenet of teacher education programmes. This training should be tailor-made to reinforce preservice teachers' confidence and is likely to empower learners to conceptualise and focus on much-needed activities in class (Sanchez-Solarte 2019). This study assessed the extent to which preservice teachers improve the level of discipline and behaviour of learners in classrooms during their teaching practice. Understandably, lesson planning was identified as one of the main grey areas which pose a serious challenge to most preservice teachers when they are in schools for the duration of a teaching practice (Beare Torgerson Tracz & Grutzik 2012).

It is clear that with these rules discipline will get much-needed attention and be thoroughly maintained, so that learners will be likely to make better decisions toward becoming responsible for their learning (McDonald 2010). This is one significant realisation in dealing with the challenges facing teachers, especially the pre-service teachers, which they encounter in schools as part of classroom management techniques. Marais (2016) posits that all teacher training programmes should offer programmes aligned with these principles to assist pre-service teachers in dealing with classroom dynamics. In practice, these principles help them gain the skills and confidence they need in their lesson presentation in schools. Sanchez-Solarte (2019) avers that preservice teachers face a multitude of problems linked to lesson planning as observed by resident mentors, who voiced their displeasure at student teachers' lack of basic knowledge of lesson planning because of the shortage of sources which deal with it; they depend on their experience. Lesson planning fulfils three role functions as suggested by Boonsena et al. (2019), who argue that firstly, it emotionally boosts learners' self-confidence. Second, it organises instructional elements to be used for learning. Third, it enables teachers to monitor, evaluate and fix their teaching activities. It is therefore pivotal for preservice teachers to plan their lessons properly so they can fulfil these functions, which in the long run can shape the efficiency of the lesson.

### ***Teaching Practice in South Africa***

Most teacher training institutions have a compulsory teaching practice component which provides preservice teachers with structured tuition, with the view to enhance student access to a quality school experience (Mkhasibe & Mncube 2020). The main objective of this component is to narrow the divide between academic theory and practical experience, hence, one of the critical opportunities is to gain the practical teaching experience of becoming immersed in a school environment (Marais 2016). This period of transmission seeks to challenge preservice teachers by exposing their learned knowledge and skills in order to be critically evaluated by school mentors. Theorists such as Dewey (1964, cited in Duffield, 2006) anticipated the significance of clinical work as part of the basic foundation of teacher training programmes accredited with the preparation of quality preservice teachers. In essence, his work acknowledges that preservice teachers need to spend enough time with their mentors in schools to gain real world experience of how and why learners learn (Boonsena et al. 2019). South African teacher education programmes value teaching practice within the framework of professional education in which the theoretical and practical knowledge must be integrated. Most studies agree that the teaching practice component in higher education should establish a link with participating schools as part of embedding this component within teacher education philosophy. To this end, the roles of each actor must be clearly defined to avoid unintended overlap that might compromise the relationship that is so crucial in promoting teaching practice with credibility and that will be respected by many schools (Mkhasibe & Mncube 2020). Therefore, Derri et al. (2014) strongly believe that strong university programmes championing teachers' education should provide clarity on the roles of the triad of preservice teacher, cooperating teacher and university supervisor during the teaching practice process. Suffice to

state that South African higher education institutions value teaching practice greatly and envisage proper implementation for good results.

### ***The role of university supervisors during teaching practice***

Burleigh and Meegan (2013) conducted a study on the role of university supervisors and they concluded that it is multifaceted and complex. However, they understand that this relationship forged with schools can promote a deeper level of integrity for the teaching profession. Martin et al. (2016) concur, along with Marzano and Marzano (2013), in asserting that professional development of teachers requires university supervisors to perform multifaceted activities even under extreme circumstances. It is against this background that Busayanon (2018) stated that university supervisors are constantly working to establish links and working relationships between the host university and the host school to handle teaching practice with absolute integrity. In essence, Burleigh and Meegan (2013) acknowledged their profession as important ‘gatekeepers’ to the profession. That is why most supervisors carry unique status and a level of authority rarely recognised across the education sector; however, university supervisors in general frequently assume a position of low status within the university ranks (Sánchez-Solarte 2019). Studies in higher education show that the level of supervision provided to preservice teachers by schools is not treated with the priority it deserves (Basayanon 2018; Sánchez-Solarte 2019).

The attitude of school mentors always seems to shock preservice teachers during teaching practice, as evident in the study conducted by Mkhasibe and Mncube (2020). At times, their conduct contrasted with the values and aspirations embodied in the integrity and professionalism taught at the university. In an attempt to streamline the roles of both school and university mentors, Acheson and Gall’s (1987) categorised the role of supervisors into five – councillor, coach, inspector, mentor and master – thus further highlighting the complexities associated with the role. Supervisors assume the responsibilities of evaluator, judge and gatekeeper, but more importantly, preservice teachers perceive them as uninvited guests in their professional space who carry out a fault-finding mission (Marais 2016). The entire environment within the school sector is seen as contested space while to others, schools can often be territorial places. In other words, preservice teachers are taught how to survive in this space by being exposed to pre-established territory and norms in a form of teaching practice labs to gain confidence and negotiating power to survive within the territory (Britzman 1991). It is noteworthy that university supervisors face similar backlash from subject mentors and preservice teachers when entering schools as established territory, yearly. Boonsena et al. (2019) suggest that power dynamics are sometimes disruptive, leaving university supervisors more vulnerable when confronted with negative criticisms from school supervisors who always question student preparedness.

Sanchez-Solarte (2019) ascertained that most university supervisors are expected to assert their existence, however, they have to fend for themselves when unwarranted criticisms are levelled

against them while enacting their role. In most cases, they spend more time doing public relation exercises than discussing important supervisory practices, university expectations and goals with participating schools. Understandably, the nature of the relationship between the school and the university is limited by inevitable structural constraints during teaching practice. There is simply no way that university supervisors can be present in every classroom as frequently as school mentors, nor is there any way for them to have the sort of ongoing conversations that are possible between preservice teachers and cooperating teachers. In a study of supervision of student teachers by Thornton and Luthy (2019), supervisors expressed dissatisfaction with the time constraints they are confronted with. Observation/conference arrangements and travelling from school to school cause a scheduling nightmare for university supervisors. Supervisors felt that they could have accomplished more if they had additional time with their preservice teachers. It has also been found that they are unlikely to devote the necessary time to their supervisory role in schools because they have tremendous research and teaching loads (Bowyer & Van Dyke 1988). Martin et al. (2016) found that preservice teachers appeared to set little stock in the feedback they received from their university supervisors, because they did not feel the supervisors had sufficient information on which to base their judgements.

The research shows that university supervisors often face a dilemma of promoting a balanced expectation between schools and university obligations (Marais 2016). As long as university supervisors are often projected onto as hostile critics by preservice teachers, the preservice teachers are likely to perceive them in an assessment rather than an assistance role (Calderhead 1988). In recent years, studies have revealed that unnecessary tension and struggle for dominance in defining and balancing their role must be addressed. Some proponents in education, Boonsena et al. (2019) and Boikhutso (2010), have recommended that these indicators be addressed: (a) the mission and goal of teaching practice need to be clearly defined; (b) the supervisor's role must be clarified in the teacher education programme; (c) the importance of supporting and validating the supervisor as a member of the teacher education community; and (d) the re-conceptualisation of the supervisor as facilitator and liaison in light of new knowledge related to learning to teach, collaboration and reflective practice. The main aim of the research is to understand how these issues impact on preservice teachers' ability to implement lesson planning during a teaching practice placement. The perceptions of university supervisors were used as a basis for understanding the experiences of preservice teachers during the lesson preparation stage.

## **Methods**

### **Theoretical framework**

Preservice teachers are key vanguard frontline workers meant to sustain education for the nation. The nature of academic training demands balanced and rigour, immediate, real and

concrete exposure to schooling experiences. Training of this nature informs how teaching practice as a platform creates quality assurance to safeguard the integrity of the qualification as espoused in the history of experiential learning evolution. In essence, the teaching practice component represents practical learning experience for pre-service teachers to formulate and test abstract concepts learned from the academic environment. This ideal proved critical in the development of the learning theories of Dewey (1933) and Kolb (1984), frontrunners and gurus who provided foresight during the conception of the cycle of learning as seen in these essential components: concrete experiences, reflection, formation of concepts and generalisations, and testing concepts in new situations. Preservice teachers need to embrace the practice teaching component as one of the most common "real world" learning experiences implemented in schools of education across South Africa. These student teachers are required to prepare and implement lessons, manage learner behaviours in order to promote an environment conducive to learning while assessment of student learning continues. It has become a central feature of experiential learning to demand preservice teachers to reflect on their practice, think about its impact on student learning, and implement changes to meet the needs of their students. The most immediate role of both university and school-based supervisors is to provide an enabling environment through coaching, while in the process help the preservice teachers reflect on their strategies to develop their teaching abilities. In short, teacher training institutions have aligned their curriculum with experiential learning theories which use all the elements of the learning cycle.

Dewey (1933) develops his argument on the premise that learning is guaranteed to be effective when students are afforded opportunity to explore new behaviours and be given the opportunity to reflect on them. On the other hand, Kolb in *Experiential Learning* (1984) aligns learning experienced with a learning model that is grounded in experience. In other words, all students must be subjected to reflection as a basis for their experience to develop concepts and plan action needed for setting new goals and strategies for teaching. This learning cycle continues until content and practice produces practice consistent with quality outcomes envisioned in the CAPS document (DBE 2014). During this process, supervisors act as mentors, guides, and observers of the process to ensure that the student does engage in personal reflection and planning. However, learning is in the hands of student teachers. Using this model changes the university supervisor/student teacher relationship from authoritarian to a cooperative, exploratory interaction, guided by the student's reflections and aided by the supervisor's questioning and observations.

## **Methodology**

Sequel to the nature of the study, a qualitative method was adopted for data collection. According to Creswell (2014) and Kumar (2019), qualitative method is most suitable in research in order to get in-depth information about a phenomenon. In support of the work of Creswell (2014), Du Plooy-Cilliers, Davis and Bezuidenhout (2014) state that the adoption of the qualitative method for data collection in a study aids the collection of in-depth information



over a subject matter. The method was adopted in this study in order to give participants the opportunity to express themselves on the subject matter. Thus, the qualitative method was adopted for the collection of in-depth information from participants on the subject matter of pre-service teachers' lesson planning during teaching practice. Structured interviews were used for data collection. Random sampling was used to select 19 schools from a particular province in South Africa where preservice teachers from a certain university were undertaking teaching practice exercise. Random sampling was used to select the schools in order to give all schools in the selected province the opportunity to participate in the study. Meanwhile, participants were conveniently selected following their time schedule, availability and interest in the study. The participants of the study numbered 19, from selected university lecturers who supervised preservice teachers during teaching practice. In other words, a university lecturer, otherwise known as 'supervisor' was selected from each school. Structured interviews were conducted for all 19 university supervisors. The table below shows the distribution of selected schools for this study.

**Table 1: Distribution of selected schools**

Primary Schools	High Schools		Total
09	10		19

### *Instrument*

Structured interviews were conducted for 19 conveniently selected university supervisors, in order to elicit in-depth information about the subject matter. The lecturers, otherwise called university supervisors for this study, were conveniently selected based on their time, schedule, availability and interest to participate in the study. The responses retrieved through the structured interviews conducted for the selected supervisors were used to proffer answers to the identified research question guiding the study: what are the perceptions of university supervisors on preservice teachers' lesson planning during teaching practice? The researchers had an interview schedule guide, which guided the questions asked during the interviews. The interview guide was used in order to ensure uniformity in the questions that were asked by the interviewers during the interviews.

### *Analysis*

The collected data were coded and analysed following responses of interviewees to the identified questions coined from the research question guiding the study.

### **Results Findings and Discussion**

The findings of this study are presented using the research question guiding the study. The responses of the interviewees on the subject matter are as presented below. Meanwhile, "USR"

which stands for ‘University Supervisor’s Response’ is used to present the comments of participants of the study, where necessary.

What are the perceptions of university supervisors on preservice teachers’ lesson planning during teaching practice?

The results of the analysed data collected through structured interviews with university supervisors show that lesson planning is a crucial part of teaching, and the entire teaching practice exercise. For instance, one of the interviewees stated that:

USR<sub>17</sub>: Lesson planning is a cogent issue. This is supported by the report of the Department of Basic Education (DBE 2014), which shows that lesson planning is vital in any teaching and learning exercise. In order to show the importance of lesson planning, the report states that education needs to first address the lesson planning stage to ensure effective teaching practice and the promotion of quality teaching and learning within the school context. This shows that the achievement of lesson objectives and the eventual goal of teaching, as well as education, are majorly hinged on lesson planning. This finding also agrees with the findings of the work of Boonsena, Insprasitha, Chansri and Matney (2019), who state that in order to address gaps in the teacher training programmes and ensure quality, lesson planning is of utmost importance. This implies that bad or poor lesson planning may hamper the learning abilities of learners. One of the participants of the study also noted that the lesson planning of some supervised preservice teachers was poor and needed urgent attention. This is captured in the statement reported below:

USR<sub>7</sub>: The lesson planning and preparation of our students is poor and needs urgent attention. This implies that preservice teachers from the selected university lacked skills in lesson planning in spite of its importance. This finding concurs with the findings of the work of Beare, Torgerson, Tracz and Grutzik (2012), who hold the view that preservice teachers are lagging in the area of lesson planning possibly because it is one of the main grey areas to which they are exposed during teaching practice. This implies that preservice teachers need further assistance in such an important area before embarking on the preservice exercise. In congruence, a review of the work of Hildenbrand and Arndt (2016) suggests that lesson planning is one of the main grey areas which demands attention during the teaching practice exercise, hence, key behaviours that should be carefully observed when dealing with lesson planning in schools are identified to serve as a guide to preservice teachers.

Additionally, some other participants reported that preservice teachers struggle during lesson planning. This suggests that as important as lesson planning is, a lot still need to be done for preservice teachers to be able to function as expected during teaching practice. This finding agrees with the work of Boonsena et al. (2019), who in the South African context hold the view that preservice teachers are lagging in the area of lesson planning, hence, they need to spend adequate time with their mentors in schools to gain real world experience of how and why

learners learn. This implies that preservice teachers are to be well and practically taught, in order to be knowledgeable about lesson planning, before being exposed to the actual world of work. Meanwhile, Kolb in *Experiential Learning* (1984) holds the view that learning is to be experiential. In other words, learning is best through the use of a model that is grounded on and promotes experience. Thus, it is required that preservice teachers are exposed to lesson planning practically while undergoing their teacher education programme, before embarking on teaching practice exercise.

Additionally, while some preservice teachers have good knowledge of lesson planning, and do such, others fail in this area. For instance, seven (7) of the interviewed university supervisors perceive and agree that preservice teachers were competent in lesson planning and preparation, while the other twelve (12) disagree. This suggests that some pre-service teachers had credit for their lesson planning and preparation. Some of the reports of the interviewees on the good planning of preservice teachers are as reported below:

USR<sub>1</sub>: All records were kept up to date by the preservice teachers whom I supervised, other students' records were maintained by them and attested to by the subject mentors. This report indicates that as part of planning for lessons, the preservice teachers ensure that their records are up to date, as well as those of the learners. This finding suggests that one way by which preservice teachers can show adequacy in lesson planning is to ensure that they are able to keep their records, and those of the learners, up to date. Similarly, a university supervisor in support of preservice teachers being appropriate in lesson planning reported by saying: USR<sub>5</sub>: lesson planning issues were generally well attended to and neat. Another reported USR<sub>19</sub>: Lesson planning were properly done by the preservice teachers whom I supervised. This finding suggests that while some university supervisors were pleased with some supervised preservice teachers in the area of lesson planning during teaching practice, others were displeased with poor lesson plans. Suffice to state that while some preservice teachers were well-grounded and prepared for the real world of teaching, others tend to seem unprepared, by following their actions. However, the submission following the finding of the work of Boonsena et al. (2019) states that there is a need for preservice teachers to spend more time with their mentors in order to gain more knowledge, skills and experience of lesson planning.

## **Conclusion**

The study explored the perception of university supervisors on preservice teachers' lesson planning during teaching practice. A selected university in South Africa was adopted for the study. Qualitative method was adopted for data collection. The perceptions of nineteen (19) lecturers otherwise described as university supervisors who were out on teaching practice supervision were gathered through structured interviews. Sequel to the findings of the study, it is inferred that while few preservice teachers seem to show preparedness on lesson planning during teaching practice, a majority still have challenges in this regard. Meanwhile, they are expected to be exposed to the real world of teaching shortly after the teaching practice exercise.



This implies that more is still needed in getting the preservice teachers prepared in becoming actual teachers. Thus, the following recommendations are made:

- Preservice teachers should be exposed to lesson planning from an earlier stage of their programme and be drilled on it. This will enable them master the act of lesson planning, both theoretically and practically, before their teaching practice exercise, which is usually conducted close to the end of their programme. Suffice to state that preservice teachers should be exposed to lesson planning from their first year at university, before they go out for teaching practice in their third year.
- Workshops should be conducted for subject mentors on the need and ways of assisting preservice teachers in handling lesson planning appropriately. In this regard, preservice teachers would have first-hand support and guidance on the act of lesson planning during the period of teaching practice. This would also help them in building confidence while getting ready for the world of teaching.

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### **Competing interests**

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.



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