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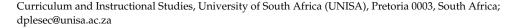
The Preparedness of Student Teachers in Open and Distance Learning Environments for the Classroom

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Abstract: Teaching practice is crucial to preparing teachers for teacher education globally. Studies on open and distance learning (ODL) environments, in which collaboration and discussion play a crucial role, ought to inform the design of distance learning. They should also force a more in-depth examination of and interest in teaching practice in higher education. Learning is seen as a positive experience, whether entirely lecturer-room-based or distance-based. It is essential to combine theory and practice with efficient distance training as part of work-integrated learning. Consequently, this study aimed to determine the perceived classroom skills of ODL student teachers during the teaching practice sections associated with their Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) course. The objective of ascertaining the preparedness of ODL student teachers after their PGCE program carries substantial importance in guaranteeing the quality, efficiency, and influence of the education system by cultivating competent and well-equipped teachers. A qualitative research approach was used to gather, analyse, and interpret data. Fifteen (15) student teachers registered at a College of Education of an ODL organisation were invited to participate in the research voluntarily. In the light of the research findings, it is suggested that extra care be given to the collaboration between academic lecturers, mentor teachers and student teachers, as well as to the expectations and duties of these role-players.

Keywords: communities of practice; teachers as mentors; open and distance learning; professional development; student teachers; teaching practice

1. Introduction

Globally, the role teachers play in shaping society requires quality training and preparedness of teachers when they start teaching. This statement is supported by international authors from, for example, Ghana, India, Finland, Singapore, Mexico, and Australia [1–3]. South Africa is no exception, and the context of this study is an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institution where the author is involved.

As stated by the University of South Africa [4], open learning is an approach to learning that gives students flexibility and an opportunity to exercise their preferences as to what they study, where and when they study it, how they study, and at what tempo. Open learning is all-encompassing and consists of distance education (DE), technology-based correspondence learning, flexistudies, and self-paced learning. Kgosinyane [5] indicates that ODL is considered the most viable means for expanding educational access whilst increasing the quality of training, promoting peer-to-peer collaboration, and giving students a greater feeling of autonomy over and responsibility for their own learning. Students use learning environments to construct and understand their own learning [6] while they experience learning as a constructive process [7].

There are currently more discussions than ever about the role of research in improving educational practice [8]. These discussions involve questions such as how the exploration of distance learning settings, where cooperation and dialogue play a major part, can advise

academic conversations on topics such as teaching practice. Maphalala [9] contends that teaching practice is vital in the teacher education programme.

This study aimed to determine the teaching readiness of ODL student teachers after completing the Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) awarded by one of South Africa's largest teacher training institutions by examining their ability to effectively apply teaching practice in real classroom settings. A student teacher is a person who is currently enrolled in a teacher preparation program that provides classroom-based, supervised experience with children, youth, and/or adults in public or private schools [10].

The preparedness of student teachers in ODL environments for the classroom will be discussed under the research methodology section, where the researcher employed a qualitative approach utilising semi-structured interviews. Concepts such as ODL, the principles of teaching practice, the duration of teaching practice, and mentoring are all integral parts of a community of practice within the context of education and highlight the importance of social learning, collaborative engagement, and knowledge sharing in educational contexts. The theoretical framework underpinning this research will be discussed next against this background.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework in this research serves as an epistemological guide or appraisal tool that helps interpret the knowledge presented in the research. This is in line with Vinz [11] (p. 7), who states that "a theoretical framework provides scientific justification for an investigation by showing that the research is both grounded in and based on scientific theory".

While incorporating constructivist and interpretivist philosophical underpinnings, this research aligns with the social constructivist paradigm. Lave and Wenger's theory of situated learning [12,13] suggests that learning entails a method of commitment in a "community of practice" [13,14]. Communities of practice are groups of individuals who share a problem or a passion for something they do and who discover ways to do it better as they interact often [14,15]. Through the years, collective learning has been shown to end in practices that reveal both the interests of communities and the consequent social relationships. These practices are the belongings of a form of community created over time by means of the sustained pursuit of a shared organisation. It makes sense, therefore, to call communities of this kind communities of practice [14,16,17].

Other teacher educators using Lave and Wenger's community of practice are, for instance, Wenger-Trayner, Fenton-O'Creevy, Hutchinson, Kubiak and Wenger-Trayner [18], in their book *Learning in landscapes of practice: Boundaries, identity, and knowledgeability in practice-based learning*. This book builds upon the original theory, exploring the dynamics of learning and identity within communities of practice. It provides insights that can be relevant to understanding how teachers develop their expertise through participation in teaching communities. Furthermore, it is used by Coburn and Penuel [8] in a paper titled *Research-Practice Partnerships in Education: Outcomes, Dynamics, and Open Questions*. This paper discusses the concept of research–practice partnerships in education, where researchers and practitioners collaborate to bridge the gap between research and classroom practice. It draws on elements of the communities of practice theory to emphasise the importance of collaboration and shared learning.

Wenger [15] alludes to three elements being important in differentiating a community of practice from other groups and communities:

- The domain. Communities of practice are larger than societies of peers and connections between people. "It has an identity defined by a shared domain of interest. Membership, therefore, implies a commitment to the domain, and, therefore, a shared competence that distinguishes members from other people" [15].
- The community. "In pursuing their interest in their domain, members engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information. They build relationships that enable them to learn from each other" [15].

- The practice. "Members of a community of practice are practitioners or students in training to become practitioners. They develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, and ways of addressing recurring problems—in short, a shared practice. This takes time and sustained interaction" [15].

A community of practice subsequently includes a good deal more than the technical knowledge or competency related to undertaking just a few ventures. In the context of student teachers' readiness for the classroom and their development of teaching practice, members of a community of practice are concerned with relationships over the years [19] and groups develop around matters that matter to human beings [14,16,17].

Learners or students necessarily participate in groups of practitioners, and mastering understanding and ability requires newcomers to progress towards full participation in the socio-cultural practices of a community. "Legitimate peripheral participation" offers a way to talk about the relationships among beginners and those who have been there for a long time, as well as about activities, identities, artefacts, and groups of information and practice. A person's intent to learn is engaged, which means that gaining knowledge is configured through becoming a full participant in a socio-cultural exercise. This social technique consists of—or indeed subsumes—studying informed skills [15] (p. 29), [17].

By using a theoretical framework, researchers can frame their research questions, guide their data collection and analysis, and draw meaningful conclusions from their findings. It allows for a systematic and coherent approach to studying complex phenomena and enables researchers to situate their work within existing theories, concepts, and scholarly discussions.

3. Conceptual Framework

The following concepts of ODL, the principles of teaching practice, the duration of teaching practice, and mentoring are all integral parts of a community of practice within the context of education.

3.1. Open and Distance Learning

In a community of practice, ODL refers to the specific methods and approaches used to train student teachers who are geographically separated from their instructors or educational institutions. It involves designing and delivering teacher education programs tailored for remote or online learning environments.

ODL has gained a new breath with the turn of the 21st century, with more and more courses delivered through distance education models worldwide [20]. Initially, undergraduate distance education (DE) programs were established to offer educational opportunities to students residing in remote areas were travelling to cities for in-person courses was not feasible [21]. DE is nowadays defined more as ODL. ODL is a form of education in which the main elements include the physical separation of lecturers and students during instruction and the use of various technologies to facilitate student–teacher and student–student communication [22].

The number of courses offered in this modality has increased over time, and its original objectives have changed. According to Giolo [23], this approach occasionally turned out to be the most lucrative choice for colleges. There is no agreement on whether initial teacher preparation using DE or ODL is viable because of the ongoing discussion surrounding DE or ODL [21].

ODL, as the foundational education for teachers, is criticised by writers such as De Freitas [24] and Giolo [23] because it denigrates the locus (the academic community, the school, or the university), which was created specifically for teaching and learning. In this educational modality, they also talk about the massification of teacher education. Alonso [25] examines how the massification of higher education harms teacher preparation.

According to several studies on teacher preparation through ODL, the organisation of teaching practice for student teachers offers logistical and instructional obstacles [26]. The

context of this study is an institution offering DE since 1873, which trains 52 per cent of South Africa's teachers and has moved to ODL more recently.

The following questions are pending: How can undergraduate education be enhanced? And how can teachers be prepared to put theory into practice? When Chickering and Gamson [27] created the seven standards for effective practice in undergraduate education, they provided an answer to this question. It was confirmed by Siering [28] that these principles can also be applied to remote learning or ODL.

The author acknowledges that many changes, including technology, have occurred since 1987. However, the motivation for this dated source (backed up with a more recent one) is that these principles are considered core principles for teaching practice and remote learning. The seven principles are based on research into effective college-level teaching and learning and are still relevant.

3.2. Principles of Teaching Practice

The principles of teaching practice encompass the core beliefs, strategies, and approaches that guide effective teaching. These principles serve as a foundation for designing instructional activities, managing classrooms, promoting student teachers' engagement and learning, and fostering positive student teacher–learner interactions.

These principles, which are supported by more than 50 years of research on students' and teachers' actual experiences, provide guidelines to faculty members, students and administrators to prepare student teachers for the teaching profession [29].

Principle 1: Encourage contact between students and faculty.

Communication modes such as e-mails, computer conferencing, discussion forums, and the World Wide Web are efficient, convenient, and protected. The interaction between students in the classroom should expand with the introduction of these new methods of face-to-face communication [28,30].

Principle 2: Develop reciprocity and cooperation among students.

The success of pupils depends on their interaction with their teachers. The sense of isolation that children feel is one of the primary causes of leaving school. Students and lecturers now have additional communication modes because of technology, such as e-mail, computer conferencing, and the internet. Working together improves thinking and understanding. Student-to-student communication can be conducted through chat rooms and discussion forums. With enough people present at each location, teams can be organised to communicate via phone or e-mail. Students can be encouraged to form online discussion groups that require interaction. Competition is ineffective at advancing student learning, while cooperation is more effective [28,31].

Principle 3: Encourage active learning.

Due to many students' learning backgrounds, encouraging active learning is difficult in higher education. Learning must be active to be effective. Curriculum design, internship programmes, community service, scientific laboratory education, musical and speaking performances, seminar sessions, undergraduate research, peer teaching, and computer-assisted learning are all forms of active learning. Each of these activities aims to encourage students to reflect on their educational process, what they are learning, and their role in their own education [28,32].

Principle 4: Give prompt feedback.

Students need to get a chance to reflect on what they have learned, what they still need to learn, and how to evaluate themselves. Online testing, software simulations, and web-based applications can provide this chance and offer immediate feedback. A chat group, where the instructor is present, can be scheduled and used as a question-and-answer session when appropriate. The value of feedback in the teaching and learning process is so clear that it is frequently taken for granted [33].

Principle 5: Accentuate time on task.

Effective time management abilities are crucial. Setting clear time expectations for faculty, staff, and students can lay the groundwork for everyone to perform at their best. Student achievement depends on more than the amount of time they spend on a task. Even though time is necessary for learning and development, it is a mistake to ignore how well the available time is spent [28,34].

Principle 6: Communicate high expectations.

The more you demand, the more you will receive. High expectations are necessary for everyone, including the unprepared, the lazy, and the bright and determined. There should be a thorough syllabus with assignments, due dates, and a grading scale. Universities have high standards for student achievement in the classroom, but they also demand dedication to moral principles on both a personal and professional level [35].

Principle 7: Respect diverse talents and ways of learning.

Students come to class with a variety of skills and learning preferences. All pupils should have the chance to showcase their abilities and study in a way that suits them. Diverse points of view should be expressed by students during dialogues. It is important to design educational activities that include varied viewpoints and real-world examples [31].

3.3. Duration of Teaching Practice

The duration of teaching practice refers to the period during which student teachers engage in supervised teaching experiences, typically in real classrooms. This practical component allows student teachers to apply their knowledge and skills, receive feedback, and develop their teaching abilities under the guidance of experienced mentors or cooperating teachers. In South Africa, the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications (MRTEQ) [36] (p. 31) specifies that a "total of 32 credits must be allocated to practical learning". Of these, 24 credits must be devoted to work-integrated learning (WIL) that takes place in schools and includes teaching practice that is monitored and graded. In a full-time contact programme, students should engage in formally supervised and evaluated school-based practice for a minimum of eight weeks and a maximum of 12 weeks over the course of the one-year term of the programme. At least four of these weeks should be continuous. Students may spend more time in school during a part-time or distance learning programme, for instance, if they are hired as professionally unqualified teachers. However, the same quantity of supervised, evaluated practice in schools is necessary [36].

As part of the experiential learning programme necessary for the PGCE under discussion, student teachers must complete at least 10 weeks of teaching practice. Schools in South Africa that have partnered with the Department of Teacher Education through cooperative agreements conduct teaching practice at those schools. Student instructors are assigned to institutions that offer specific courses related to their fields of study.

3.4. Mentoring

Mentoring plays a vital role in a community of practice by providing support, guidance, and constructive feedback to novice teachers. Experienced educators serve as mentors, sharing their expertise, offering advice, and helping student teachers navigate the challenges and complexities of the teaching profession.

According to Baker [37], mentorship consists of two parts: the locations where the experiences take place and the mentor instructors who direct and assist student teachers. For student teachers to develop and flourish, mentor teachers must play a critical role [38].

Barrett [39] and Nesbitt, Barry, Lawson, and Diaz [32] compiled a list of best practices for mentoring based on their observations regarding teacher mentoring programmes. The list is as follows:

1. Make the student teacher feel at home and like a member of the school family;

2. Assign a mentor to the student teacher, one who has been carefully chosen based on a track record of achievement, expertise, and abilities;
3. Provide enough opportunities for the student teacher to plan with their mentor teacher and classmates, cooperate on projects, and acquire "best practices" via work-integrated professional development;
4. Give the student teacher exposure to real-world teaching situations;
5. Give the student teacher control over discipline so they may build a toolkit of tactics;
6. Offer chances for professional advancement.

The important role of mentors cannot be ignored. The findings are given and discussed once the research methodology has been described.

4. Research Methodology

Although this study includes constructivist and interpretivist philosophical foundations, it fits into the social constructivist paradigm. In social constructivism, researchers aim to comprehend the environment in which they operate. According to Creswell [40], social constructivists create subjective interpretations of their experiences that are geared toward things or objects in general. However, a lot depends on how the participants perceive the circumstances.

4.1. Research Approach

In teaching practice, a qualitative research approach allows for an in-depth examination of educational phenomena, enabling researchers to gain rich insights into the complexities of teaching and learning processes. By employing qualitative methods such as interviews, observations, or case studies, researchers can explore the nuances, contexts, and subjective experiences that shape teaching practice. Thus, a qualitative method thoroughly explores a problem and offers a thorough resolution [41]. This approach enables the researcher to reach beyond initial responses and rationales, for example, "Help me understand why you feel that way" [42] (p. 1).

4.2. Selection of Participants

Data to determine student teachers' classroom readiness were collected from 15 PGCE students who had completed their teaching practice modules. These students were purposively selected to provide rich data for the research. The criteria were that they had to complete the PGCE programme.

4.3. Data Collection Instrument

Semi-structured interviews were used for this research. Therefore, the use of an interview schedule comprising fourteen (14) open-ended questions and one closed question aligns with the concept of pedagogical mobility by facilitating the collection of rich, context-specific insights and promoting a flexible and adaptable approach to teaching. Question one was restricted for the purpose of gathering biographical data. The following questions were asked:

1. Biographic information (see Table 1).
2. Do you feel confident and ready for teaching after completing your teaching practice (TP) modules? Motivate by addressing the following requests:

    Explain three events that contribute towards feeling confident after TP.
    What was your personal benefit for feeling confident?
    How did feeling confident improve your professional development?

3. Was your TP a "hands-on experience"? Motivate by addressing the following request: discuss three examples of hands-on experiences during your TP sessions.
4. Putting theory into practice: discuss three examples of theoretical content that you applied in the classroom environment.

5.   Discuss three examples of learners' needs that you identified and what you did to address them.

6.   Address the following two aspects regarding being prepared and competent after your TP experiences to enter the teaching profession.

I feel prepared to enter the teaching profession after my practical teaching because...
I feel competent to enter the teaching profession after my practical teaching because...

7.   Do you feel the TP period of 10 weeks is long enough? Motivate or make recommendations.
8.   Does the programme for which you are enrolled offer what is necessary to prepare you for TP? Motivate.
9.   What aspects of your TP training are lacking, such as instruction on how to handle discipline, multi-grade classes, diversity, technology, or class management?
10.   Describe the interactions between student teachers and university staff (lecturers).
11.   Give five examples of good mentoring by your classroom teacher (mentor).

Also, give five examples of improper and inappropriate mentoring by your classroom teacher (mentor).

12.   Do you know how to prepare teaching plans effectively? Motivate your answer.
13.   What is positive about TP?
14.   What is negative about TP?
15.   Do you have any suggestions for how universities should train student teachers to be equipped and ready to enter the teaching profession once they have completed their qualifications?

Table 1. Biographical data of the participants *n* = 15.

AGE	25–30	31–40	41–50
MALES	0	3	1
FEMALES	5	3	3
TOTAL	5	6	4

4.4. Data Analysis

Inductive analysis was used to analyse the transcribed data, which is a process whereby qualitative researchers summarise and make meaning of the data [43,44]. Coding the data, breaking the text into smaller pieces, assigning a table to each unit, and then organising the quotes into themes are all steps in the qualitative data analysis process [45]. For the purposes of this article, the researcher first read through the text data, divided it into informational segments, labelled the segments with codes, and then broke down the codes into themes. By employing this systematic approach to analysing data and deriving themes, the researcher could gain a deeper understanding of the pedagogical reasoning underlying the text data. This process allows for the identification of overarching patterns, perspectives, or strategies that inform instructional practices, contributing to the advancement of pedagogical knowledge and informing evidence-based decision-making in educational contexts.

Four components make up a trustworthy framework: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability [46]. The trustworthiness of a study is established when its findings support the hypothesised conclusions, as well as improve knowledge skills or understanding of the targeted phenomenon. Informed permission, confidentiality, privacy, anonymity, no risk or injury to participants, and no deceit were all considered throughout fieldwork by the researcher, who believes the study was open, honest, objective, and devoid of research bias. Ethical clearance was granted by the institution concerned.

5. Findings and Discussion

The findings are presented with reference to the voices of the participants, which are discussed, interpreted, and linked with the theoretical framework and the literature. The

qualitative data collected for this research was used to organise and interpret the findings. Once data saturation had been reached, the findings were categorised into six themes, namely, (1) teaching practice as a hands-on experience, (2) application of theory to practice, (3) mentoring, (4) duration and placement, (5) negative experiences, and (6) the need for visitations by lecturers.

5.1. Teaching Practice as a Hands-On Experience

The first theme from the data was student teachers' reflections on teaching practice as a hands-on experience. All the participants agreed that their teaching practice at schools had provided them with ample opportunities for interacting with learners and facilitating learning programmes. They testified that they had presented compulsory lessons and even stood in for classroom teachers by presenting extra lessons. They had set worksheets, marked books, and acted as invigilators by watching over learners who wrote examination papers to prevent cheating. A remark from a 41-year-old female participant emphasised the value of teaching practice experience by stating that she had taught "classes as scheduled on my timetable as well as other additional classes not scheduled on my timetable". Another 27-year-old female participant confirmed that she had made the most of "every opportunity to get exposure in all aspects of the school setups". For a 36-year-old female student teacher, the teaching practice had been a hands-on experience regarding extracurricular activities, such as facilitating sports events.

From the exceeding comments, it is clear that student teachers experienced teaching practice as a direct encounter with the everyday classroom as a learning environment. These events provided ample opportunities for them to prepare for the teaching profession. Even extracurricular activities were part of their responsibilities at school.

The findings of Nalda [47] and Siering [28] affirm that active learning is effective learning. This theme also links with the third of the seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education [29], namely, to encourage active learning by stimulating student teachers to take responsibility for their own education.

Furthermore, the findings are in line with Lave and Wenger's model of situated learning in [12,13], which maintains that the process of acquiring knowledge involves a process of engagement in a community of practice. People who engage in a process of collective learning in a common field of human endeavour establish communities of practice (in this case, teaching practice).

5.2. Application of Theory to Practice

Fourteen participants confirmed that they had been able to apply theory in practical, everyday learning events during their teaching practice. However, one of the participants stated that teaching practice provides ample opportunities to apply theory in practical situations, but "some classroom situations sometimes arise surprisingly, and a student teacher has to act immediately such as in emergency circumstances". Furthermore, the same 14 participants testified that they would not be able to teach without theoretical knowledge. One of the participants, a 25-year-old female student teacher, pointed out that theoretical knowledge had "helped [her] so much to be well prepared for the practice". The same participant attested that theory helped her to be "task-orientated and to be people-orientated". One of the participants revealed that she had studied techniques and strategies in her theoretical module and that this knowledge had helped her to master techniques and models for managing discipline. Eleven participants listed a variety of teaching skills emanating from theoretical knowledge, such as respecting learners' diversity, involving learners, planning lessons, maintaining classroom discipline, identifying the needs of learners, and developing curriculums. These 11 participants also appreciated the study material that addresses theory in depth. For example, a 45-year-old participant emphasised the outstanding quality of the module on didactics. Thirteen of the 15 participants agreed that the programme prepared them for teaching in schools. One of the participants remarked that "the study guide assisted me in being well prepared for Business Studies". The

two participants who did not agree that the programme had prepared them for teaching in schools revealed that curriculum changes, an open-based education (OBE) approach, which is still followed, and the implementation of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) were challenges they had to deal with.

Most participants seemed to believe that teaching in actual classrooms enables them to apply the theoretical knowledge they learn from formal academic instruction to real-world teaching situations. However, it was also evident from the findings that difficult classroom circumstances can emerge, making it necessary for student instructors to act immediately. Indeed, unexpected situations may occur at any time. It also became clear from this research that applying theoretical knowledge empowers student teachers to be task-directed and people-orientated. Participants could apply teaching models, techniques, and strategies covered in their theoretical modules, which resulted in their mastering teaching techniques and strategies. Features such as honouring diverse backgrounds, emphasising learner participation, creating structured lessons, dealing with disruptive behaviour, identifying learner needs, and developing curricula are aspects of academic content.

Karen [35] observed that it is crucial to acquire in-depth academic knowledge at teacher training institutions through programmes with excellent study material. To master teaching skills and abilities and to address the challenges of teaching in schools, the point of departure on the journey to becoming a teacher is to apply theory to practice. One of the principles of situated learning theory is that learning takes place according to the context, the culture, and the activity in which it occurs. Context includes a sound academic theoretical knowledge background, which can be activated in classroom activities (practical implication).

5.3. Mentoring

Eleven participants appreciated their mentors. They emphasised things such as the assistance and inspiration they had received from their mentors. Common remarks were that the mentors had given them advice, guidelines, and tips on how to improve their lessons and how to engage with the learners effectively. Seven participants testified that they had received valuable feedback after lessons. Six participants disclosed that, due to the classroom mentors' support, guidance, and assessment, they had learnt what was expected of them and how to improve their teaching. A 25-year-old female participant remarked that she had "learnt the value of cooperative learning". Furthermore, some participants revealed that, during their teaching practice, they had been exposed to the essence of a teacher in a holistic sense due to the involvement of mentor teachers. Mentoring helped them to develop pedagogical skills because it exposed them to valuable real-life experiences. One of the participants revealed that she had come to "understand that learning is not restricted only to the classroom but occurs outside of the classroom as well". Another participant remarked that she wished she "could be like the mentor teacher" one day when she teaches in her own classroom. Participants also stated that their mentor teachers had encouraged them to be positive and enthusiastic because they could be role models for learners while teaching in a real classroom environment.

The above responses from the participants reveal student teachers' gratitude towards their mentor teachers. According to the participants, the mentor teachers took the responsibility to help them through a variety of activities in an authentic everyday learning environment. The participants praised and admired the mentor teachers' dedicated involvement and devotion. Furthermore, they recognised the value of cooperative learning.

Barrett [39] and Nesbitt et al. [32] confirm that the role of mentor teachers, who guide and support student teachers, is crucial during the training years. Mentor teachers must have some authority at the school and be able to enhance student teachers' learning to be sure they make a valuable and competent contribution [9]. Participants' comments above demonstrate two fundamental tenets of the contextual learning theory, namely the community of practice and valid peripheral participation Lave and Wenger in [12,13]. A community of practice is described by Lave and Wenger [19] and Mukhalalati et al. [17] as

an interaction between members where there is a discussion about a common endeavour, as well as the growth of a shared repertoire. Participants in the activities who are legitimately on the periphery and are supervised by mentor instructors are student teachers.

5.4. Duration and Placement

Twelve participants indicated that the timing of their placements had been good. The fact that participants could choose specific dates was a positive aspect. However, three of the participants had experienced the timing of their placements as negative. One participant indicated that the placement process had been "a bit confusing". This participant stated, "I got placed at the wrong school initially and it was not the one I chose on my placement form". Regarding the duration of teaching practice at schools, one participant felt that the time "is too long as sometimes we fail to get enough leave days to cover for the entire duration of the teaching practice". Another participant observed that the time allotted for teaching practice is insufficient, given that they must participate in a variety of academic, curricular, and extracurricular activities while working in the classrooms. She proposed that it be increased so that student teachers would have more time to finish all their portfolios before the deadline.

According to the findings, both positive and negative views were expressed. A total of 12 participants regarded the duration of their teaching practice and placements as excellent. However, three participants had negative experiences in this regard. Two participants indicated that the placement process had been complicated and the other participant testified that she had struggled to fit the compulsory teaching practice weeks into her heavy workload.

One of the main ideas of the situated learning theory is that learning is situated in the social engagement between mentors, student teachers, and learners. Therefore, clear guidelines, as set out in the MRTEQ document, are implemented.

5.5. Negative Experiences

Some of the responses of the participants point to aspects that they see as challenges. According to the participants, not all the teaching staff at schools accept student teachers. Teaching staff sometimes view them as an "extra burden on their shoulders", according to one of the participants. Another participant remarked that "relationships are crucial". According to one participant, teaching practice is "extremely stressful" for student teachers. Several other participants said that even in schools, lecturers should put more emphasis on mentoring the student teachers because they do not give them enough support and direction. The participants completed their teaching practice in different school environments in widely differing social areas, which resulted in different challenges, as can be seen from their responses. The schools ranged from those rich in human and material resources and situated in affluent areas to those deficient in human and material resources and situated in poverty-stricken areas.

The research findings reveal that student teachers are nervous and anxious and want to be assisted and advised throughout their teaching practice period. This is impossible without managing relationships between all stakeholders involved and leads to negative experiences.

The literature shows that 40 to 50 per cent of new teachers quit within the first five years [48]. Barrett [39] and Nesbitt et al. [32] emphasise that student teachers must feel welcomed and viewed as a part of the school family. Furthermore, schools for student teacher placement should be carefully identified to offer those being placed powerful support and guidance [49]. These ideas are in line with the situational learning theory. Schools are communities of practice, and a teaching practicum constitutes legitimate peripheral participation. According to Wenger [15], relationships in a shared domain of interest are imperative. Membership means building relationships that enable all the parties to learn from each other. Over time, members get involved in a variety of connections, and communities form around issues that are important to people [14,16,17,19].

5.6. The Need for Visitations by Lecturers

The last theme from the data concerns participants' demand for more visits by academic staff. According to the participants, visits by lecturers will help student teachers to enhance their performance. Student teachers require more input from lecturers. Therefore, lecturers should be more available during student teachers' teaching practice sessions at schools. They need their lecturers to be more involved at schools and to be present when they present lessons, to discuss the lessons in more detail afterwards.

Although participants acknowledged the role of mentor teachers, they still emphasised that lecturers' input is very important. They indicated that lecturers should be involved in performance-based activities like assessment and reflection. The need for student-centred assessment from the training institution results in an irrefutable responsibility for lecturers and can be linked with one of the principles related to preparing student teachers to deal with reality, namely, contact between students and lecturers, as explained by Clay [30] and Siering [28]. According to these researchers, contact between student teachers and university lecturers cannot be emphasised enough. Visits to schools entail face-to-face communication and interaction in classrooms. According to the situated learning theory, lecturers are also practitioners, and they develop a shared repertoire of resources such as experiences, stories, tools, and ways of addressing recurring problems [13,15–17].

Table 2 presents a summary of the findings.

Table 2. Summary of the findings.

Theme	Number of Participants Who Agreed	Number of Participants Who Disagreed
Teaching practice as a hands-on experience	15	0
Application of theory to practice	14	1
Appreciation of mentoring	11	4
Duration and placement	12	3
Negative experiences or challenges	15	0
The need for visitations by lecturers	15	0

The following section presents recommendations based on the findings of the research.

6. Recommendations

By including training that directly addresses the competencies relevant to teaching practice, pre-service preparation programs can enhance the pedagogical mobility of future teachers. This kind of training can provide them with the knowledge, strategies, and practical skills needed to effectively navigate diverse educational settings, adjust instructional approaches, and meet the needs of a wide range of learners. Mentoring should be viewed as a crucial leadership role in the teaching profession. Time and monetary compensation should be allocated for the mentoring of student teachers and the modelling of teaching practices and strategies. A sort of "internship" where a student teacher watches a teacher at a school for six to twelve months is suggested by the researcher. This aligns with the concept of pedagogical mobility by providing student teachers with an opportunity to observe and learn from an experienced teacher in an authentic classroom environment for an extended period. For that time, a mentor who will collaborate with the student teacher should be chosen. Following this period of practical experience, the student teacher can seek full-time employment.

The researcher also recommends that additional time and effort be devoted to collaboration between mentor teachers and academic lecturers, the expectations of student teachers regarding teaching practice, visits to schools by academic lecturers for authentic assessment, and the effective management of the placement of student teachers. This

collaboration can provide student teachers with valuable guidance, feedback, and support, enhancing their pedagogical knowledge and skills.

Practical knowledge and real-world experience need to be prioritised in teacher preparation programmes. The daily problems of the classroom must be met by student teachers.

7. Limitations and Future Implications

This study was performed at a single large ODL institution involving 15 participants, and the findings might not be generalisable. The research being examined briefly addresses the significance of evaluating the classroom readiness of ODL student teachers once they have completed the teaching practice modules within their PGCE program. As a result, it appears reasonable to propose conducting additional research in this area.

8. Conclusions

This research was performed to see how prepared ODL student teachers as legitimate peripheral participants were for the classroom after they had finished the teaching practice modules forming part of their PGCE courses. The aim to determine the teaching readiness of ODL student teachers after completing their PGCE holds immense significance in ensuring the quality, effectiveness, and impact of the education system by producing well-prepared and capable educators. Teaching practice is an essential part of teaching, and good teaching cannot exist without good teaching practice.

The picture we get from the participants is a positive one in general and, according to them, they are prepared to take on the teaching profession. Sadly, though, the reality of education in South Africa paints a different picture. Addressing the challenges in the South African education system requires a comprehensive pedagogical approach that considers the unique context, diverse student needs, and the development of effective teaching strategies. By promoting continuous professional development, supporting teachers with resources and mentorships, and implementing pedagogical reforms, the education system can strive to align the positive aspirations of aspiring teachers with the actual outcomes of education.

Therefore, this research revealed a necessity to improve the quality of teacher education courses and to increase admission requirements for student teachers. Too many new teachers enter the teaching profession without being ready to deal with discipline and under-sourced schools or being able to assess the impact that they have on learners.

Significant practice cues can be found in the idea of a community of practice and the broader conceptualisation of situated learning. The most accountability for enhancing undergraduate education lies with teachers and students. However, executives from colleges, universities, and schools must work together to make improvements. When this occurs, academic staff and administrative staff will view themselves as educators with a common objective.

The research under review merely touches on the importance of determining ODL student teachers' classroom readiness on completion of the teaching practice modules of their PGCE course. It, therefore, seems justifiable to recommend that further research be carried out in this regard.

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