

# The “Journey to Becoming” Pre-Service Teachers’ Experiences and Understandings of Rural School Practicum in a South African Context

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## Abstract

That rural schools suffer from issues of *hard to staff* and *harder to stay* has been well documented in extant literature. However, the literature seems to indicate inadequate teacher preparation for work in rural schools. Literature also demonstrates that teaching in rural settings ostensibly requires relevant knowledge and skills to cope with various eventualities, and complexities in those contexts. One way to cope with these complexities is for teacher education programmes to adequately prepare pre-service teachers for work in rural environments. This paper reports the experiences and understandings of 15 Bachelor of Education student teachers who took part in a four-week residential teaching practice whilst living alongside the community in a rural South African setting. The researcher sought to understand their experiences and conceptions of rural school teaching during their professional *journeys to becoming* professionals through this form of residential practicum in a rural setting. The pre-service teachers’ daily reflective journals and audio-taped collaborative reflection sessions constitute the data of evolving constructions of the value of this rural residential practicum towards their understanding of rurality, rural teaching and rural life as they develop as teachers. The paper illustrates that exposure to rurality in teacher preparation promotes better understanding of rural issues and pedagogy, dispelling myths and misconceptions and, broadening students’ career prospects in these settings which may ultimately foster interest in country teaching.

## Keywords

Rural, teaching practice, pre-service teacher, experiences, Rural Teacher Education Project,

## Introduction

Recruitment of high quality teachers is seen as critical for the future of rural education provision globally (Adie & Barton, 2012). Internationally, many rural schools face pressures of *hard to staff*, *harder to stay* quality teachers than their urban counterparts (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005; Eppley, 2009;

Green, 2009; Kline, White & Lock, 2013; Lingam, 2012; Lowe, 2006; Miller, 2012; Mitchell, de Lange, Balfour & Islam, 2011; Monk, 2007; Mukeredzi, 2013; Pennefather,

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2012; White, 2006). This impacts the quality and equity of educational outcomes for rural learners and communities creating a big challenge for many education systems (Arnold et al., 2005; Green, 2009; Lock, 2008; Mitchell et al., 2011; Sharplin, 2002). It however does not appear that preparing more teachers is the solution to this staffing crisis, rather a re-orientation of teacher education curricula and a focus on how teachers for rural communities can be more effectively prepared is the key. Extant literature (Adie & Barton, 2012; Islam, 2010; 2011; Mitchell et al., 2011; Moletsane, 2012) confirms that measures to effectively prepare teachers for positions in rural and remote schools need to be addressed by teacher education. Research into rural and remote education (Adie & Barton, 2012; Balfour, 2012; Halsey, 2005; Islam, 2012; Mitchell et al., 2011; Pennefather, 2011) supports this claim, blaming teacher education for not doing enough to equip pre-service teachers with the skills and knowledge required for rural and remote school teaching. The implementation of such strategies and programmes in many teacher education systems has tended to be haphazard and limited (Sharplin, 2009). South Africa is no exception.

Islam (2010), arguing for rural school-university partnerships, points out that teacher development is fundamental to changing South African rural education. Such partnerships would contribute to pre-service and in-service teacher professional development and, promote the *rural* as attractive and not deficient, inferior, and undesirable (Balfour, 2012; Mitchell et al., 2011; Moletsane, 2012; Pennefather, 2011). In light of *this*, *teacher education institutions* need to envision alternative ways to generate interest and supports for development of teachers for rural and remote settings. One way to address the crisis is for teacher education programmes to expose pre-service teachers to the realities of living and teaching in rural contexts during teacher preparation. This may help broaden

their career prospects in these settings and ultimately develop interest in country teaching.

This paper reports on experiences and understandings of a cohort of 15 Bachelor of Education pre-service teachers, generated within a specific rural school-university partnership initiative adopted in a teaching practice (TP) design striving to address teacher preparation for rurality as its rationale. The model was designed to prepare cohorts of between 14 and 20 student teachers annually, to work alongside practicing teachers in rural schools, and to promote better understanding of rural issues and pedagogy (Islam, 2010), ultimately fostering interest in rural school teaching. The rural school-university partnership initiative entitled the Rural Teacher Education Project (RTEP) set out to examine alternative TP models of placement to service the specific educational and learning needs of rural schools (Balfour, 2012). Contrary to traditional practices where single individuals are attached to a school during practicum, these pre-service teachers were placed at one school, shared residential facilities alongside the school and lived in a community of both teacher educators and fellow students.

The aim of this paper is to explore their experiences and understandings during their *journeys to becoming* (Feiman-Nemser & Buchmann, 1989) during TP within a large cohort in a rural school. It addresses two questions: How do pre-service teachers experience rural school TP? How do they understand these experiences as they become teaching professionals? This research is distinctive as it involves a group of pre-service teachers experiencing TP in one rural school and living alongside a rural community, in a commune of peers and teacher educators. The communal living arrangements and the structured opportunities for personal and collaborative reflections were intended enhance students' learning, reflection and reflexion on their experiences and conceptions within the context of their rural practicum. Reflection here

implies standing “outside” and analysing one's experiences, while reflexion represents looking “inward” inside oneself during the analysis.

## **The Rural Teacher Education Project (RTEP)**

The RTEP was a rural school–university partnership initiative of the Faculty of Education in conjunction with rural schools in the Northern Districts of KwaZulu-Natal Province of South Africa. KwaZulu-Natal is the second largest province of South Africa both in terms of population (10.27 million after Gauteng 12.27 million) and land area. It comprises large rural areas and, large parts of previous *homeland* areas across the province (Punt, 2008). “Homelands” are deep rural areas in which native Black South Africans were forced to live by the Apartheid Government (Wedekind, 2005).

One of the few such partnership projects in South Africa, the RTEP was first piloted in 2007, since then has annually taken cohorts of students to experience rurality in these districts. This paper explores the 2012 cohort. While teacher education programmes in this institution did not discriminate against rural school TP placement, it was not a requirement that pre-service teachers be placed in such schools, but they were expected to experience practicum in both resourced and under-resourced contexts (Mukeredzi & Mandrona, 2013). Consequently, student teachers sought placements in urban schools where transportation and accommodation were easily accessible. The RTEP was born partly to counter this urban bias, trying to re-orientate teacher education in the university's education faculty to rural schools as vital sites for pre-service teacher learning thereby cultivating interest in rural teaching.

The project combined research and teacher preparation approaches to explore ways of making teaching/learning significant and,

professionally developmental by placing groups of pre-service teachers to work in rural school settings with practicing teachers (Islam et al. 2011). The project goal was to make teacher educators and pre-service teachers aware of the challenging but stimulating or exciting possibilities of rural education, and to prepare teachers for rural school teaching, generating knowledge through mentorship, classroom practice and reflection on teaching experiences and the rural context (Mitchell et al., 2011). In conceptualizing this partnership project Balfour, Mitchell, and Moletsane (2008) theorized that understanding the subjective perceptions of South African rural youth could be helpful to teachers.

Islam (2011) noted that partnerships can contribute to teacher preparation, particularly for rural schools, as they can provide an entry point for supporting teachers, learners and communities, and be a development path for young people who choose teaching as a career particularly in rural contexts. Such context-based rural school–university partnerships can be solutions for making teacher education more responsive to rural school educational needs (Islam, 2011, Pennefather, 2011). Moreover, collaborations could also shape perceptions and attitudes towards rurality and professional development of new teachers.

The cohorts of pre-service teachers had an opportunity to experience rurality within the context of their residential TP in rural schools through this partnership. Specifically the RTEP goals were to enable trainees to: first, to experience teaching and learning in a rural school living working with experienced teachers and community members; second, to understand the realities of life and work in rural contexts by living alongside the community; third, to contribute to educational development in a rural school; fourth, to gain first-hand opportunities to observe and talk to rural based teachers about rural life and teaching practices; and fifth, to establish and build networks with

teachers within their specific subject specializations in rural schools; and sixth, to offer pre-service teachers from the city an introduction to rural schools (RTEP Recruitment Brochure, 2012).

The South African Education system categorizes learning stages into phases. Foundation Phase refers to Grades R to 3, Intermediate Phase Grades 4 to 6, Senior Phase Grades 7 to 9 and, Further Education Training (FET) Phase Grades 10 to 12. The RTEP was widely publicized in the School of Education and pre-service teachers formally applied. To be selected, they had to: express enthusiasm for teaching in rural schools; be in second, third or fourth year of study; be in Senior Phase or Further Education and Training. Additionally they had to specialise in one or two of these subjects: technology, management studies, English, computer studies, mathematics and science. Pre-service teachers specializing in Foundation Phase teaching and able to speak a little isiZulu were also considered. IsiZulu is the local home language and the language of learning and teaching at Foundation Phase level in this District and most rural districts in KwaZulu-Natal province.

For efficient in-field coordination, the project team required on-site leadership, thus, at least two advisors were appointed, one with a PhD in Teacher education. That is how I joined the RTEP in 2011. At the time I was a resident post-doctorate with a PhD in Teacher Education and originally from Zimbabwe. In the advisor capacity I saw myself as both *insider* and *outsider* regarding my interactions with the different groups within RTEP. These identities were flexible depending on the activities or the day. Many times though, it felt like I was *in between*, I was not a South African national and, I came as an add-on to the research activities five years after the RTEP had been running.

Advisors and student teachers were accommodated at a guesthouse close to the school. They helped drive students to and from

school every day and remained at the school to provide on-spot guidance and support. The RTEP leaders created this form of residential arrangement to promote a sense of professional community among students and teacher educators while professionalizing the experience through individual and collaborative reflections and academic mentorship (Mitchell et al., 2011). Every evening on school days, I led students through debriefing and reflection sessions. Although I was an authority figure in this sense, many times I felt vulnerable. I had to understand the operations of a school which was transitioning from private to public school governance before assisting the pre-service teachers to navigate that rural setting. Again, I was dealing with students of multiple races, experiences, cultures and backgrounds (See Appendix). The situation was further compounded by the fact that I neither understood nor spoke the local language, isiZulu.

### **The Rural Context in South Africa**

The concept of rurality remains complex and difficult to define. Hlalele (2012) pointed out that defining rural evades those who try to understand it because of its ambiguity and the fallible comparison with urban settings. Generally all rural areas are confronted with social ills like disease, poverty, low literacy levels, low learner achievement, inadequate facilities and services, unfavourable policies and, low self-esteem of those who live and work there due to conceptions that living or working in rural settings is low-grade (Johnson & Strange, 2009; Myende & Chikoko, 2014; Pennefather, 2011). Balfour et al. (2011) add that rurality is concerned with space, isolation, community, poverty, disease, neglect, backwardness, marginalization, depopulation, conservatism, racism, resettlement, corruption, entropy and exclusion. These challenges lead to associating rurality with deficiencies and disadvantage (Balfour et al., 2011; Moletsane, 2012).

*Rurality* in this study is understood as synonymous with remote. The term *remote area* refers to an underclass model describing a notion of rurality in social development (Chikoko, 2011). Consequently rurality signifies social disadvantage on the people under discussion. Chikoko adds that people in such settings are usually socially excluded, fully or in part from active participation in national mainstream socio-political activities. In South Africa, other features of rurality include low literacy levels among adults and low quality education in schools.

Defining rural, Wedekind (2005) explains that during the South African apartheid, the Land Act Group Areas' Act of 1953 and Separate Development Act policies forced native Black South Africans to live in deep rural or *homeland* areas. The former *homelands* are characterized by poor infrastructure, services/facilities and, either considerably dense homesteads or village-style settlements. Today the poorest and least developed South African rural communities are located in the former *homelands* of Eastern Cape, Limpopo and KwaZulu-Natal provinces where conditions of poverty and underdevelopment are depicted by the poor education quality available there (Gardiner, 2008). Thus, most South African rural schools are deficient in learning and infrastructural resources, basic services and facilities. Having been disregarded as sites for development for a long time, South African rural schools and communities compete with urban areas for resources (Teacher Development Summit, 2009). Lacking in resources, infrastructure and human capital, rural areas have in some instances deteriorated to such an extent that they are not seen as an attractive choice for a teaching career or for living (Mitchell et al., 2011). A thriving economy, adequate health facilities, and quality education are often non-existent, contributing to poverty, illness, and lower literacy levels. Hugo, Jack, Wedekind and Wilson (2010) discovered that schools were

without toilets on site and more than 50 learners used one toilet, there was no source of electricity or water source near or on site, making schools rely on borehole or rainwater harvesting.

The South African government through the many policy initiatives and the establishment of the Rural Education Directorate currently acknowledges rural education as priority (Michell, et al., 2011). However, Moletsane (2012) lamented that rural education still remains plagued by substantial challenges. Mukeredzi and Mandrona (2013) attributed this to issues around implementation and links between rural realities and government response which remain unresolved. This is notwithstanding that many school-age children reside in rural settings. The World Bank (2013) reported that approximately 40% of the South African population is located in non-urban areas, and in KwaZulu-Natal province approximately 54% of the population of resides in rural areas (Statistics South Africa, 2011). Gardiner (2008) added that KwaZulu-Natal has about 3 000 rural schools accommodating over 1 000 000 learners. This suggests that providing quality education to rural areas contributes to developing a democratic society (Mukeredzi & Mandrona, 2013).

There is strong international cognizance that institutions and schools involved in teacher education should develop strong partnerships for more effective pre-service teacher training and support for rural school teaching appointments (Haugalokken & Ramberg, 2007; Multi-Site Teacher Education Research Project, 2003). Teacher education should form partnerships with learning sites, engaging in collaborative reflective practices, continuously examining and challenging existing practices and theories to generate new philosophies consistent with contemporary South Africa (Samuel, 1998) and the call for teacher preparation for rural contexts. Such partnerships could help make teacher education more responsive to rural school contexts while

shaping perceptions and professional growth of a new crop of teachers (Islam, 2010). RTEP assumed that the cohort model of TP could be an effective way of fostering partnerships and the development of teachers for rural teaching. Haugalokken and Ramberg (2007) distinguished between two partnership models: where cooperation is controlled by the teacher education institution; and a cooperative model where there is equal partnership between schools and the teacher education institutions. The latter, is the type of model the RTEP wanted to establish.

### The Research Site

In 2012, the RTEP was taken to Masiwa (pseudonym) Combined School approximately 150 km north of Durban, for the first time. A combined school is a school that combines primary and secondary sectors under one principal, with two deputy principals as operational leaders. This school presented a perfect choice due to its combined structure which enabled placing the entire cohort under one roof. The school was centrally located within rural village settlements and had a total enrolment of approximately 1450 learners, 850 in primary and 600 in the secondary sector. Due to its location; at the centre of many densely populated villages and, with no other school nearby, Masiwa inevitably serviced a large enrolment as it drew its students from multiple villages. All the RTEP pre-service teachers were placed at this school for their practicum. The school exhibited a particular appeal/charm, ethos and culture: good discipline, cleanliness and orderliness, neatly dressed and respectful learners, a calm and business-like approach to teaching/learning. These qualities were not extraordinary given the catholic governance under which the school had been, often linked to autocratic leadership practices.

The principal lamented under-resourcing noticeable in large classes; Grades 8–10 with 70–80 learners. Office space was in short supply, consequently the RTEP team was accommodated in the school library. Although this arrangement was ideal for student consultation and support, it somewhat created distinct communities: one for students and the other for school staff. Again a joint staffroom would provide students another way of ascertaining *how things worked* within the rural school community, as it was in such situations that they would most ably gain insight into the rituals, routines and jargon of the rural school and, would learn both from listening and speaking as legitimate members of the school.

Each student was attached to at least two mentors. Mentors were expected to offer pre-service teachers moral, social and professional support through demonstration lessons, and lesson observations and feedback to enhance their development. Other school staff would support their learning and integration into the rural school life. Mentor selection was done by the school and, student-mentor partnering was based on subject specialisation.

### Method

A qualitative research design was adopted for exploring experiences and understandings of rural school TP for a cohort of 15 purposively selected B.Ed. pre-service teachers. Ten were female and five were male. Their biographical data shows diversity in teaching phase, specialization, year of study, race, age and gender. There was one White, three Indian and 10 Black students (Table 1). This diversity was valuable for additional tiers of support. Their mean age was 23.4 and the actual ages ranged from 19 to 40 years.

**Table 1***Participants' biographical data*

ST(udent)	Race	Age	Gender	Phase	Level	Specialisation
1	Black	24	M	FET	4	Accounting, Bus Management
2	Black	40	M	FET	4	English, IsiZulu
3	Black	20	F	FET	2	English, Arts/drama
4	Black	32	F	FET	4	Accounting, English
5	Black	21	F	FET	4	English
6	Indian	20	F	FET	4	Maths, Biology
7	Indian	21	F	FET	3	Biology, History
8	Black	20	F	F/Phase	2	All F/Phase subjects
9	Black	21	F	FET	3	Biology, Nat Science
10	Black	32	F	F/Phase	4	All F/Phase subjects
11	Black	21	M	FET	3	Mathematics, IsiZulu
12	Black	20	M	FET	4	Physics, Mathematics
13	Indian	20	M	FET	3	Computer Science, Accounting
14	White	19	F	FET	2	Biology, Sports Science
15	White	20	F	FET	2	Geography, Sports Science

Table 1

**Preparation for TP**

Although pre-service teachers were prepared for professional practice in their undergraduate programmes, the RTEP mount additional, one-day workshops for students and school-based mentors separately before commencing the four-week TP. These workshops were intended to build positive, supportive relationships with the school and expose both mentors and students to the university expectations of mentoring support during practicum. The school principal and two school-based mentors attended the students' workshop to discuss the school's expectations of pre-service teachers during TP and to enlighten them on some of the contextual issues around rural school teaching. However, in retrospect, these one-day mentoring workshops tended to be insufficient for translation into effective mentoring practice.

At the conclusion of the students' workshop, I requested the pre-service teachers

to document their reflections on the workshop including their views and understandings of rural school TP responding to guiding questions below. Before using these questions, I asked one of the RTEP leaders for comments and, then piloted them with five students. In each case modifications were made. Again, before and after using the questions for the first time with students, I discussed them in great depth to obtain their perspective. All these efforts were intended to enhance rigor.

- How did it go?
- What did you experience? How did you feel? (satisfied, bored)
- Why did things happen that way?
- What does all this mean to you personally and professionally?
- What could have been done differently?
- What are your understandings/views about TP in a rural school?

These questions provided a framework for students' individual and collaborative reflections.

### **Data Generation and Data Sources**

Throughout TP, pre-service teachers were required to engage in daily journaling of their thoughts, observations and experiences, and would draw on these recordings during collaborative reflection sessions. The collaborative conversations were held between 16h30 and 19h00 on each school day and all were audio-recorded. Students would reflect more broadly on teaching/learning in the rural classroom and on rurality itself, sharing their experiences and views about rurality, their teaching activities, describing, cross-examining, and interrogating them. Such engagements would promote their ability to articulate and justify what they were doing; evaluate their lessons, approaches and language, successes and failures, their own learning therefrom, and what they would do differently. Engaging in rural school teaching exposed pre-service teachers to the challenge-filled reality of the South African education context and, through continuous reflection on classroom and contextual activities, attitudes, and experiences, pre-service teachers built a deeper understanding of what it meant to be a teacher in a rural setting (Mitchell, et al., 2011). In retrospect, compelling students to articulate and reflect on their classroom experiences may be viewed as a way of getting them to conform to the RTEP requirements which approach could be regarded as producing some form of *contrived collegiality* (Hughes, 2012) to comply with the normative expectations of classroom reflection and action and/or project participation requirements.

The data for this paper was drawn from students' reflective journals and transcripts of the audio-recorded collaborative reflection sessions. The prolonged engagement in fieldwork, the steps taken in the research

procedures to ensure the perspectives of these participants were authentically gathered, accurately interpreted and represented in the findings through verbatim quotations giving them their own voice, enhanced rigor. Again, while participants were aware that they were being video-recorded during collaborative reflection sessions, the recorder was employed discretely with their knowledge. Further, the thick descriptions provided and data triangulation also helped to enhance rigor. The notion of thick description derives from the tradition of interpretive ethnography in anthropology, and involves "deep, dense, detailed accounts" of a phenomenon of inquiry with particular consideration of the context(s) in which it occurs. The purpose of thick description is that it creates verisimilitude, statements that produce for the readers the feelings that they have experienced, or could experience, the events being described in a study. Thus credibility is established through the lens of readers who read a narrative account, and are transported into a setting or situation (Lietz & Zayas, 2010).

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analysed through content analysis. Content analysis involved carefully and systematically examining and interpreting particular texts to identify patterns, themes, biases, and meanings (Plunkett & Dyson, 2011). I read transcriptions several times and listened to audio tapes over and over to determine themes, while comparing and contrasting them. I then repeated the process with all transcripts, re-examining the data and selecting quotes that represented each theme while ensuring fitness and representation across specialization, gender and race. The quotes would reveal and confirm participants' accounts of their experiences and interpretations of their views about TP and working in a rural school.



Data analysis was also informed by Mauthner and Doucet (2003) who suggested that the “interplay between our multiple social locations and how these intersect with the particularities of our own personal biographies need to be considered at analysis stage” (p. 419). Students often deeply expressed analytical and fundamental experiences, but these recordings and collaborative reflection reports, remained mediated and obligatory objects. Hence, may not genuinely epitomize students’ experiences as these activities were built into the RTEP design requirements. Again, the presence of teacher educators and peers may have mediated the quality and kinds of issues reflected on. However, the engaging and immersive analytical approach that I adopted to understand students’ accounts, and the synthesis of the often implicit tensions within a TP environment, augmented the analysis and provided another way of enhancing rigor.

## Findings

The aim of this paper was to explore a cohort of students’ experiences and understandings of practicum in a rural context through two questions: What are the pre-service teachers’ experiences of rural TP? How do they understand those experiences? In presenting findings, participants are identified by Codes (e.g., ST1).

### Fears and Worries About Rural School TP

Pre-service teachers’ views about TP in a rural school at the end of the preparatory workshop generally indicated vague expectations of what teaching, working and living in a rural school looked like. Three students acknowledged a lack of understanding of rurality and rural teaching highlighting only blurred views from media and word of mouth from peers. Others had some idealized picture of TP in a rural school like “welcoming teachers”, “helpful staff and students, my university peers being empathetic,

friendly and caring,” “a friendly residence,” “I don’t think I will be lonely”. Others expressed concerns such as, “very demanding mentors,” “unsupportive mentors,” “teaching practice in a rural school is scary,” “I may have difficulties when I am far away from home,” “some dirty environment, with paper and clatter.”

Others who believed that distance from the city would limit access to resources indicated by such comments “I am worried about resources, rural schools are poor in resources and technology – it’s difficult to teach with few resources,” “it will be hard without adequate resources, teaching is poor without them.” The predominantly urban dwellers were concerned about understanding students from different economic, social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. They envisioned “difficulties communicating with students in English,” “students who do not understand English,” “some unfriendly students,” “poorly disciplined and hard to manage students,” “difficulties motivating and controlling students.” “where anything goes, nobody really cares.”

Most of these concerns were erased after interacting with and experiencing the rural context.

### Connecting With the Rural Context

Pre-service teachers were surprised by how much learners understood and spoke in English, the official language of teaching and learning in the school.

ST6: I am surprised that these learners understand and speak English.

The following comments imply notions of viewing rural learners from a discourse of deficit. Discourse of deficit broadly refers to erroneous beliefs that rural students are deficient or lacking in many respects including speaking English. This general overbearing discourse of insufficiency perceives rural school teaching as inferior and undesirable

(Pennefather, 2011). This realization of learners' linguistic ability probably impacted positively on their conceptions and, attitudes towards rurality and rural learners. Others commented on the environment:

My first impression – this school structure and environment are well kept, no litter that you can see anywhere, all windows intact, children well behaved and in clean uniforms, all wear shoes. (ST1)

TP here is the most important way of making you know about teaching and learning in a rural school because you experience it ... you see it for yourself. (ST7)

Nobody can tell me about a rural school because I now know it. (ST16)

These experiences offered the pre-service teachers, particularly from urban and township backgrounds, a hands-on introduction to rurality and first-hand opportunities to observe and talk to rural-based teachers and learners about rural life, learning and rural teaching practices. Comments also suggested an appreciation of the rural experience.

Pre-service teachers generally expressed satisfaction with the way things were organised in the school and how they were received. Some comments made were: "the welcome by the principal made us feel wanted in this school" (ST12) and "the way individual mentors welcomed and introduced us to various classes and, held meetings with us, made the excitement to teach here even more" (ST5) "everybody is warm, welcoming" (ST13). Pre-service teachers in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year of study commented that the overall welcome by the school was a factor that gave them confidence as they indicated that they had not experienced that in their previous practicums.

However, two students met with their mentors but had unfruitful meetings: "I was

introduced to my mentors, but as a first day of term, they requested that we meet the following day because things are a little chaotic" (ST11). Another three were frustrated by not meeting with their mentors. ST8 in the evening session complained:

I did not meet my mentors. It's annoying, I don't know who they are. It made me feel like a stranger and, unwelcome which makes me nervous. ... the principal and Head of Department didn't know where they are.

Making students feel welcome to the school on the first day is critical for placing them in good stead particularly in unfamiliar rural contexts (Sharplin, 2002). Sentiments also suggested some unpreparedness on the part of the school. Dates had been communicated in advance and a reminder sent to the school a week before our arrival. While this was an official school day, where all staff were expected to attend, it was not clear whether management was aware of some of the teachers' absences. Looking back however, getting students to commence TP on the first day of term may not be such a good idea.

Generally, pre-service teachers commented positively about being viewed as colleagues, for example ST3 recorded:

You feel good being treated as professionals, as members of staff, able both to learn from them and also to contribute the expertise that you have.

Negative emotional experiences usually exist when there is a distance between individuals, for instance where pre-service teachers feel a sense of loss or are devalued. Pre-service teachers' comments revealed that they were valued. Their situated identity (Putman & Borke, 2000) also emanated from performing some out-of-class roles. ST9 commented:

Being assigned netball trainer to prepare the team for a big district competition was huge.... You learn to discipline learners outside class. In my previous TP no one ever talked to you or thought you were capable of doing anything.

ST 4 said:

I am proud of myself, being able to lead assembly with my lecturers and the whole school watching, taking charge, controlling everything, it was a good learning experience.

The ways in which pre-service teachers engaged in the many school activities often had a significant impact on both student teachers and school-based teacher educators. "Fitting in" was important as often both pre-service teachers and the school used professional placements as opportunity to assess "fitness" for purposes of future employment. Murphy and Angelski (1997) noted that the "ideal" rural teacher is certified to teach more than one subject or grade level, teaching students of diverse abilities and, supervising extra-curricular activities.

Students' experiences helped to dispel some of the myths and misconceptions about rural education and rural schools. One misconception is related to a deterioration of moral values, neglect for discipline and low motivation to learning in rural schools (Kiggundu, & Nayimuli, 2009). At the end of the preparatory workshop many students had expressed misapprehensions about poorly disciplined and hard to manage students, students who did not speak/understand English, who were unfriendly and difficult to control or motivate, an absence of a culture of teaching and learning, where anything goes, nobody really cared. These mistaken beliefs may have emanated from lack of knowledge/experience about rurality. From their interactions with learners and teachers and, through engagement in teaching and out-of-class activities, pre-

service teachers began to challenge those misconceptions. However, pre-service teachers acknowledged the value of preparation and commitment to teaching.

The kids are disciplined and, eager to learn, some are really sharp. As a teacher you need to be well prepared for your class, once you are prepared you enjoy working with kids . . . this is a school in which I would gladly accept a position (ST7).

I was amazed at how respectful learners are towards new people, I felt very welcomed. (ST6)

A real eye opener to see how much learners appreciate education in rural areas. (ST9)

Another generally accepted notion that was challenged was that effective teaching could not take place in under-resourced schools. While they acknowledged that performance resources (which enhance/change how teachers can accomplish teaching tasks e.g., overhead projector) and pedagogical resources (which focus primarily on transforming the teacher's competencies e.g., reading materials) (Putnam & Borko, 2000) were vital for effective teaching and learning, they confirmed that under-resourcing should not be an excuse for poor teaching. ST11 recorded:

It's about creativity and innovativeness to teach effectively. Yes the RTEP experience is opening us up to life and teaching in rural schools. I have seen that in rural areas resources are few ...I now know how to improvise...I can teach effectively with minimum resources, all you need to do is think through your lesson, prepare and plan for it.

While some students experienced some challenging discipline related situations, they viewed them as learning opportunities:

There are a few kids driving me insane daily, but that's how a normal classroom is set up. This will help me in the future because experience is what you get when you don't get what you want, had these kids all been well behaved every time, I would not know techniques to discipline them. (ST5)

Ideally the teaching role requires willingness to give both personal skills and professional knowledge, and a person who can mediate possible issues of conflict, invoking strategic knowledge (Shulman, 1987) while remaining focused and maintaining a harmonious classroom environment. However, three second year students pointed out that four weeks was too short to understand complexities of rural settings. ST3 documented: "four weeks is too short, you can't be conclusive about rurality and its demands." Such sentiments may have been influenced by many factors, for example, this was their first teaching practice.

### **Connecting With the Classroom**

The pre-service teachers were generally surprised by the effort teachers and learners put into their work, despite the limited resources. A number had assumed that learners were lazy and lacked motivation and, teachers were uncaring. These assumptions were challenged by an increasing understanding of the context and the barriers to learning faced by learners and teachers. Many indicated that interacting with rural teachers and learners, teaching and being in the classroom were valuable opportunities to experience and understand rurality, rural teaching and rural life. For example ST10 commented that:

You learn a lot by doing the teaching, it's fantastic. The most exciting thing is actually being in a rural classroom, working like a teacher, feeling how rural teaching and life are like, being part of it,

teaching rural children, seeing the effort of teachers and learners in school work ... really amazing. This was a good TP, a mind-blowing experience. I would jump at an opportunity to teach here if there is good accommodation.

The pre-service teachers also viewed classroom practice as exposing them to the teaching profession and the nuances of practicing in a rural school. Some described it as good preparation for the future as ST4 said:

The classrooms are small with lots of learners. I am sitting with 71 in 8A. It's a challenge but I have to grab the bull by its horns and make it work, and I will 😊. In the future I'll be a teacher and this is what I am going to be faced with. So let me gain experience and perfect it.

### **Connecting With Mentors**

Many (10) of the pre-service teachers commented that they had enjoyed support and collaboration with their mentors. They acknowledged the value of the mentors' professional knowledge and experience from the way they explained and justified to pre-service teachers how they organized and worked in their classrooms. A 3<sup>rd</sup> year student, ST16 recorded: "these experiences make you question and reflect on your thoughts and attitudes". The pre-service teachers had expressed some anxieties about demanding expectations coming from mentors. These anxieties were challenged. Some of those who had good mentors considered themselves fortunate because of the amount of support they received. The way they described their mentors demonstrates the value that they attached to mentoring relationships.

I was very, very lucky, I gained valuable information from my mentor that will not only benefit me now but throughout my teaching career, how to move learners from what they know to new stuff. I think

TP also really depends on your mentor.  
(ST1)

The relationship I have with both my mentors is great, we learn from each other. They ask me to reflect on my lessons and their lessons. This experience has taught me that good mentoring really exists in these rural schools. (ST11)

We sit down before my lesson, I tell her what I am going to teach, my methods and everything. Then after I have taught she asks me to think about my lesson and say how I feel it went and then we reflect together and discuss. It's a good relation actually with both mentors. (ST3)

Evidence suggests the current conceptualization of mentoring built on collegiality in the relationship (Shank, 2005). Generally the prime aim in giving oral feedback is to get the student to actually identify their strengths and weaknesses, the things they were happy with and those they would do differently in the future. Thus, mentoring should help students not only to manage the learning, but also to explore, interpret and explain the how and why of what happened which then flows naturally into the next stage of the teaching cycle, (re)planning of the next lesson.

While the majority of students had beneficial mentoring experiences, five reported minimal learning from the process. Some mentors appeared to either have had a narrow view of "good" mentoring practice, or they lacked effective mentoring skills and an understanding of student teachers' professional learning needs as they did not offer useful guidance.

She was motherly if you know what I mean, very supportive, but she did not give me any developmental feedback about any of my teaching she would just say you are doing great. (ST14)

Evidence suggested that these mentors appeared to believe that their role was essentially to provide emotional support. Often, it was difficult to draw a line between being motherly and being a mentor who promotes mentee's development into the teacher they want to be. Other mentors did not allow their mentees enough time to observe them teaching:

My mentor is not giving me enough time to observe. He should allow me to observe to see how things are done, not just make me teach, telling me what to teach and how to teach, his own approaches. (ST9)

Often students wanted mentors to act as role models, effective practitioners who they could look up to and emulate. Observation offered student teachers a great deal of learning and, a quick means to acquaint themselves with the teaching and then to know how to tackle it continuously. The mentors' expert knowledge and personal experience provided them with ingredients for their own practice. Evidence further implied that some mentors still practiced the craft apprenticeship approach of TP which required student teachers to do exactly as they were told by their mentors and what they see their mentors do. Mentors should not "impose," nor should they dictate the content of students' classroom activities or the teaching methods (Maynard, 2000). There were some mentors who were reluctant to hand their classes over to student teachers. ST6 reflected:

My mentor doesn't want to give me more opportunities to teach alone, he does not seem to trust my ability, rather he just wants to teach with me, I really enjoyed it today on my own and I feel that the learners also had some fun.

It was common for mentors to be concerned about how their learners were taught

as the above comment reflects. Rather than regarding pre-service teachers as knowledgeable colleagues, they viewed them as intruders who did not possess much teaching knowledge.

### **Connecting With Peers and Viewing Self**

TP experiences that included peer collaborative reflection and mentoring provided opportunities for pre-service teachers to engage in integrated, structured interactions in which they could discuss the challenges posed by the diverse contextual conditions in their classrooms. Students saw collaborative reflection meetings as vital for helping them reflect and reflex on their teaching and, the rural context as whole. ST16 recorded:

They help me deal with situations that I face during the day in the classroom. I suggest solutions to problems but they confirm them before I go to class.

Seemingly, collaborative conversations promoted a shift from individualistic to collaborative thinking and behaviour as students appeared to look up to peers to confirm their proposals and tentative solutions to problems. This participation also seemed to help in re-imagining the "self," seeing themselves in the bigger picture and, what that meant to them personally and professionally. ST4 wrote:

I now believe in my teaching ability. My peers encouraged me with ideas and comments. This made me confident. I can now talk comfortably in the group and say my mind. I have never felt like a teacher before, I realize this is where I should be. To me teaching is where I have been called, a life career ... I do not mind where I am posted next year, even in a rural school.

Practicum generally provided authentic contexts where students experienced realities of teaching and confirmed whether or not they made the right career decision. Others saw

participation in the cohort as good preparation for classroom challenges in the future, as ST11 commented:

Peers will ask you to think harder on your stuff. You have to say what you should have done differently before they give suggestions. This makes you learn. If they just give you answers you don't learn, you won't think. ... makes you develop confidence to think and tackle your problems ... that's what a teacher should do, when we go out there you cannot be running to a colleague's class every time you have a situation and in rural schools sometimes you are alone in the specialization.

These pre-service teachers saw collaboration as having enhanced their self-confidence through encouragement and teaching ideas. It apparently improved their personal dispositions as teachers, including self-awareness and empathy with different viewpoints. They became able to bring out the best in themselves through engagement in genuine dialogue (Mukeredzi & Mandrona, 2013). Genuine dialogue requires ability to listen empathetically, look for common ground, probe ideas compassionately, opening up to new ideas, identifying challenges and acting as a critical friends irrespective of gender, race, cultural background or social class of participants. This makes equity a key feature (Prince et al., 2010) as discussions occur irrespective of these human elements.

### **Discussion**

Data revealed that pre-service teachers' experiences and conceptions revolved around their connections with the rural context, learners, mentors and, peers.

Before commencing the practicum, many pre-service teachers' had vague and somewhat negative views, understandings and expectations

of what teaching, working and living in a rural school was like as many had no prior experience. Most of their concerns were wiped out after experiencing the rurality. The pre-service teachers (8) who had anticipated linguistic problems with learners had anxieties dispelled because learners understood and spoke English. Sherwood (2000) lamented that many stereotypes about what rurality and rural education entails still exist, with expressions related to the unsophisticated, inferior intellectual capacity and backward nature of rural learners and their lack of knowledge regarding technological gadgets. Such stereotypes associate rurality and rural learners with educational and social deficit, deficiency and needs (Moletsane, 2012; Pennefather, 2011). Participants were also pleasantly surprised by the clean and well maintained school environment, the teaching/learning culture and the way they were welcomed into the school, contrary to prior misconceptions related to moral values, discipline and motivation to teaching/learning in rural schools that they had. Such myths and misconceptions were dispelled after interactions with learners and teachers, and engaging in both teaching and out-of-class activities. Adie and Barton (2012) contended that teacher education and first years of teaching are a critical time for disrupting entrenched assumptions of rurality.

All student teachers testified that they enjoyed and gained valuable learning experiences from classroom teaching. This kind of hands-on learning is what McLaughlin (1997) cited by Mukeredzi & Mandrona (2013) described as teaching/learning for understanding, which is an effective way to learn how to teach particular learners in particular contexts. It may also be that the all-encompassing context created by the school setting and the support the RTEP team offered promoted the pre-service teachers' confidence to

enjoy their classroom practice and rurality. Many of the pre-service teachers commended teachers and learners for the effort they put into their work, despite under-resourcing, dispelling misconceptions about laziness and lack of motivation in rural teachers and learners (Kiggundu, & Nayimuli, 2009). They also gained better understanding of resource complexities in rural contexts but argued that under-resourcing should not be an excuse for poor teaching (Islam, 2012).

Mentoring can be an effective catalyst that enhances learning through reflection as student teachers learn about the "self" in context. Many pre-service teachers praised their mentors for providing curriculum guidance, observing lessons and offering constructive critique and feedback about teaching methods, and enhancing their reflection, contrary to their prior anxieties and apprehensions about demanding mentor expectations. However, mentoring should not only help student teachers to analyze and reflect systematically, after the lesson, but also during the teaching itself (reflection-in-practice, close to the action) (du Plessis, 2013). The pre-service teachers who experienced ineffective mentoring had expected their mentors to be critical, giving them specific guidance regarding what they needed to do to improve their teaching in addition to offering them emotional support. While they appreciated the sentiment and the support, offering students emotional support alone is often a source of frustration as what students need is constructive criticism and development of own teacher identity (Hyland & Lo, 2006). Students often expect mentors to recognize that they are individuals who need their own teacher identity and own teaching style. A few students (two) experienced problems of finding "themselves" as a teacher as their mentors bombarded them with their own ideas. Such mentoring approaches often leave students quite overwhelmed by the

suggestions wondering whether they should do that or go ahead with their own ideas. As the university would require mentor assessment reports, this meant that it was only at the end of their placement that mentors would articulate any concerns about their practice.

Some ineffectiveness in mentoring may result from ignorance and lack of clear understanding of the concept of mentoring, being unaware of the mentoring roles, and lack of coherence between school sites and the university (Nyaumwe & Mtetwa, 2011). Such factors influence some mentors' approaches to developing professional skills like reflection on student teachers' teaching because, generally, they are not trained or supplied with a blue print on how to conduct their mentoring duties (Gershenfeld, 2014, Maynard, 2000). Some mentor teachers may merely be experienced classroom teachers without a capacity for training others. Mentoring is not necessarily a natural activity, but rather requires making components of the teaching processes visible, and breaking down the complex teaching approaches into step-by-step instruction for pre-service teachers (Mukeredzi, & Mandrona, 2013). Again, rural school teachers often do not participate in many staff development programmes, nor have access to a variety of professional development activities like their urban counterparts (Islam, 2011). These mentors were exposed to a once-off university mentor training workshop. It seems this one-day workshop was inadequate to equip them with the appropriate skills.

TP is widely recognised as potentially stressful, more so in rural contexts where other challenges are already at play. The underpinning rationale for collaborative reflections methodology was to provide students an extra layer of support through regular discussion and reflection on their practice and experiences. Prince et al. (2010) concluded that an important

characteristic of professional learning for teachers is that it must be collaborative, ongoing and deeply embedded in practice. Engaging pre-service teachers in collaborative critical reflection can heighten the problematic nature of teaching practice making it more observable to them (Olsher & Kantor, 2012). Generally, students saw this as vital for developing confidence and celebrating success (Prince et al., 2010). Student teachers encounter numerous classroom challenges, it therefore becomes necessary to be able to recognise when things go well. Confidence is a multidimensional concept related to self-esteem, self-efficacy and, optimism which promotes self-belief in positive achievements, persistence and, self-awareness (Prince et al., 2010). It thus, enhances the ability to make judgements on how well, or whether, we can do something which is an important factor in the classroom as it affects pupils' reactions to instructions and communications.

## **Conclusion and Implications**

This paper explored pre-service teacher experiences and understandings generated within the context of a rural school-university partnership model attempting to address teacher preparation for rurality. While it may be improbable that a deep sense of rurality developed in a four-week practicum, data seems to suggest that these pre-service teachers developed an understanding of rurality which dispelled some of their myths and misconceptions seemingly broadening their career prospects in these settings, which may ultimately promote interest in rural school teaching. When rural TP is purposefully organized to provide pre-service teachers opportunities to experience and develop their own symbolized stories, then space is created to reconsider and disrupt previously held myths and misconceptions of rural living and teaching. Adie and Barton (2012) suggest that such



experiences may prompt the process of “ruralization of the mind”. Pre-service teachers need to be immersed in rural contexts, with opportunities to reflect on their experiences to prompt imaginations of new possibilities for themselves and new possibilities for linking curriculum to local contexts wherever they may teach. However, such experiences may remain artificial unless students are purposefully involved in reflecting and adding to experiences and understandings by engaging with theory and hearing diverse experiences from other contexts.

Islam et al. (2011) and Islam (2010) argued for teacher education focused on preparing pre-service teachers for understanding rurality and on ways of delivering quality education in rural communities. Given the diversity in the South African schooling context, it becomes imperative that teacher preparation focuses on quality education delivery for diverse contexts. Consequently, the onus is on education faculties to prepare willing and able teachers for rural schools. This small research based on a highly structured model has strong theoretical underpinnings for designing rural teacher preparation. It appears pragmatically unsustainable for replication to scale given the resources involved. Consideration of a TP model that places groups of students in rural schools, with structures for collaboration and reflection could be a feasible starting point.

## Limitations

While I acknowledge that communal living arrangements with and continued presence of peers and teacher educators provided space for learning, this may have limited the students’ experiences. Again, the presence of teacher educators and peers during collaborative reflections and the sharing of journal entries with teacher educators may have influenced the kinds of experiences reflected upon.

Notwithstanding, students often intimately expressed analytical and fundamental experiences, the journal records and collaborative reflection reports, were mediated and mandatory objects. Thus, they may not be a true reflection of students’ experiences as these activities were RTEP design requirements. Further, getting students to articulate and reflect on their classroom experiences might be seen as a way of getting them to align with the RTEP requirements and such processes often create some form of “contrived collegiality” (Hughes, 2012) to submit to the normative expectations of classroom reflection and/or project participation requirements. However, the immersive analytical strategy that I employed to understand students’ journal accounts and, the synthesis of the implicit tensions within a TP environment, augmented the analysis and enhanced rigour.

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