

The perception of Students about Teaching Practice in the Foundation phase in South

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Abstract: Teaching practice is a crucial program that provides aspiring student teachers with practical teaching experience to prepare them for the challenges of teaching in school settings. Teaching practice in the foundation phase is fundamental for the education and development of student teachers. Teaching practice enables them to apply their theoretical knowledge in real teaching scenarios. A recent study examined student teachers' perspectives during their practice in the foundation phases, revealing a range of responses. The study explored student teachers' perceptions of teaching practices using a qualitative research method with a case study design. Six student teachers were purposively selected and interviewed using semi-structured interviews. The findings highlighted the importance of dedicating enough time to teaching practice for professional development. Also, they shed light on the challenges teachers face, such as handling large classrooms and balancing university coursework with teaching practice. Furthermore, the findings underscored the need for improved classroom management and support systems. Schools must address student teachers' challenges during teaching practice while providing adequate support systems to help them maximise their experiences in teaching in the foundation phase. The study recommends that schools and teacher training institutions offer support and resources to help student teachers enhance their professional skills.

Keyword: Teaching practice, student teachers, classroom management, foundation phase, teaching method, lesson plan, inclusive practices

Introduction

Teaching practice is a critical program that equips aspiring teachers with practical school-based and classroom experiences. Teaching practice helps students develop the requisite skills and competencies to become effective instructors. More importantly, teaching practice in the foundation phase of schools is fundamental for the development of student teachers and the moulding of children. Teaching practice empowers new teachers to translate theoretical knowledge into authentic teaching experiences and hone instructional skills in an authentic classroom context (Adeoye et al., 2024). The experiential learning student teachers benefit from schools that help to bridge the gap between academic preparation and the possible challenges they confront in the school context. The foundation phase of school, in the context of South Africa, includes grades R to 3, which is a critical stage in the education of pupils (Dlamini, 2022). This phase ensures effective teaching and contributes to the professional growth of future teachers. However, it is observed that student teachers are faced with various challenges that adversely impact their experiences in

schools. As a result, this study aims to investigate students' teachers' perspectives of their experiences during teaching practice in the foundation phase in South African schools.

Numerous studies have been conducted to explore teaching practice and highlight its role in enhancing instructional skills. According to Philips and Condy (2023), teaching practice helps to bridge the theory and practice gaps by preparing teachers for practical challenges in schools. Teaching practice has been described as a structural training period where student teachers are expected to use their theoretical understanding in a classroom context (Wolff et al., 2021). This usually takes place under the supervision of an experienced teacher or mentor. Teaching practice offers critical students a critical transition from professional training and fosters adaptability and confidence in the school and classroom settings (Resch & Schrittesser, 2023). According to Stromg and Viesca (2023), the acquisition of practical experience by students in the school context equips them to support teaching and learning. Student teachers use teaching practice placements to enhance their practical teaching and classroom management skills (Mahmood et al., 2023). De Clercq and Phiri (2018) observed that teaching practice and teacher development have evolved in accordance with teachers' responsibilities, professional growth, and societal demands.

In South Africa, the government emphasises school-based experience as a critical component of the professional development of aspiring teachers. This position is strengthened by the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications (MRTEQ) policy, which is the fundamental framework regulating the teaching profession (Singh & McDonal, 2025). The MRTEQ policy offers a structured framework for training and developing student teachers and ensures that they are prepared for the teaching profession in South Africa (MRTEQ, 2011). The policy was implemented in 2011 and revised in 2015 to create a criterion for teacher qualification in South Africa (Nakidien et al., 2021). The primary goal of this policy is to facilitate the preparation of student teachers and ensure that qualified teachers are equipped with the essential skills in South African schools (Zongozzi, 2022). In spite of the important role of the MRTEQ policy in developing student teachers, concerns have been raised about its effectiveness. Singh and McDonald (2025) found that most new teachers do not cope with the school environment and managing student discipline. This shows a gap existing between the policy intentions of MRTEQ and its implementation in supporting teachers.

Existing studies on teaching practice show the importance of teaching practice in moulding student teachers' profession. Teaching practice helps student teachers to apply their theoretical knowledge to authentic teaching and learning experiences (Stavridis & Papadopoulou, 2022; Franklin & Harrington, 2019). According to Kwatubana and Bosch (2019) such experiences influence the professional judgement of students through attitudes, emotions and practical experiences. Kiggundu and Nayimuli (2019) assert that the effective school-based practice ensures classroom management, supports critical thinking and encourages learner progress. In spite of the extensive studies about teaching practice, there is a gap in knowledge about the experiences of student teachers and how they implement pedagogical approaches to enhance teaching and learning in the foundation phase teaching in South Africa. Most of the past studies use a wider scope of methodology to focus on this critical phase of education. The current study contributes to this gap by focusing on the perspectives of student teachers about their experiences and challenges in this phase. This study investigates student teachers' perceptions about teaching practices in this phase and their nuanced insights. The study will contribute to the formulation and implementation of education policies and the reforms in teacher training programs.

Methods

The present study explores student teachers' perceptions about teaching in the foundation phase schools during teaching practice. This study uses a qualitative approach to understand student teachers' perceptions about teaching in the foundation phase during teaching practice. A qualitative approach was preferred to gain an in-depth insight into the lived experiences, perspectives and their meaning concerning a phenomenon (Lame, 2019). This approach allows research to explore complex issues in their context and obtain rich and comprehensive data that quantitative methods do not consider (Abuhama et al., 2021). This study approach was complemented by a case study design to explore the research objective of the study. Case study design assists the researcher in understanding a phenomenon that occurs within a particular setting (Renjith et al., 2021). A case study design permits an in-depth insight into complex issues through a detailed assessment of a particular case (Tomaszewski et al., 2020).

The study population comprised foundation phase schools, teachers, student teachers, and pupils. The research sample consisted of six student teachers who were purposively selected because they were attached to the selected school and were teaching in the foundation phase. These participants were used because they were the only participants who were attached to the selected school. This makes them the most relevant and accessible sources of in-depth information for the study. According to Hennink and Kaiser (2022) and Vasileiou et al. (2018), a smaller sample in a qualitative study allows for in-depth and rich insights to be gained as opposed to generalised findings. Similarly, McDermott (2023) and Abuhama et al. (2021) argue that a smaller sample allows for an intensive engagement with participants and enables the researcher to explore complex experiences of and meanings in daily life. The limited sample size was deemed appropriate to facilitate a thorough examination of the experiences and perceptions of the selected participants.

For the sake of maintaining anonymity, the participants were given pseudonyms. Female participants were designated as PF1, PF2, and PF3, while male participants were designated as PM1, PM2, and PM3. Semi-structured interviews were used in the study to gather data from participants regarding their teaching experiences in the foundation phase. This data collection instrument is associated with qualitative research and provides a balance between flexibility and structure (Rutledge & Hogg, 2020). According to Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenike (2021), semi-structured interviews offer the researcher a guide for the interaction with participants, which allows for the generation of themes and insights from participants. The interviews were conducted at a specific time as agreed upon by the student teachers and the researcher.

The researchers communicated with the participants to arrange a mutually convenient interview location. The researchers ensured ethical compliance by acquiring ethical clearance from the university before conducting the interviews. Additionally, the researcher sought the school leadership's permission to conduct the study within the school premises and interview the student teachers. Prior to the interviews, students were requested to provide consent for participation. The participants were briefed on the study's objective and told that their identities and any information they supplied would be treated confidentially and not disclosed to any other entity. Participants were also allowed to withdraw from the study if they experienced undue discomfort over their involvement.

To ensure the reliability of this study, member checking was ensured by sharing transcripts and interpretations of participants' experiences with them to ensure the accuracy of the data

collected (Motulsky, 2021). An audit trail was ensured by keeping detailed records of the data that were collected during the data collection process, which included raw data, notes, codes, and theological changes (Carcary, 2020). The transparent process in this study allows for querying how data was gathered, analysed and interpreted (Barcellos et al, 2022). This approach ensures that appropriate measures were taken to ensure the dependability and trustworthiness of the study. A major limitation in this study was the use of a smaller sample size, as it can affect the generalizability and adaptability of the findings to a larger population (Safari et al., 2023).

Result And Discussion

Table 1: The summary of findings and discussions of student teacher experiences

Table 1 shows the summary of themes that emerged for student perceptions of their experiences during teaching practice in foundation schools. The findings integrate participants' responses with current literature findings to show the opportunities, challenges, support mechanisms, mentoring relationships and professional development during teaching practice. The synthesis of these findings focuses on personal reflections and the wide systemic themes resulting from school-based placements.

Theme	Key Findings	Participant Views	Supporting Literature
1. Opportunities for Professional Growth and Development	Teaching practice enhances pedagogical skills, classroom management, and confidence.	PF1: Gained strategies and improved classroom management. PM1: Gained confidence engaging with learners. PF2: Reported limited teaching opportunities.	Dlamini (2022); Munna & Kalam (2012); De Clercq & Phiri (2018)
2. Challenges Faced by Student Teachers	Student teachers struggle with large classrooms and balancing coursework with teaching practice.	PM2: Large class size reduced teaching effectiveness. PF3: Found balancing coursework and practice difficult. PM3: Developed time management skills despite workload.	Homer et al. (2018); Dlamini (2022)
3. Mentoring Dynamics with Student Teachers	Mentoring improves planning, confidence, and teaching quality. Inadequate feedback hampers development.	PF2 & PM1: Reported strong mentor support and valuable feedback. PF3: Experienced distant mentor and poor feedback.	Mbhiza et al. (2024); Mtyakado (2024)
4. Support Systems During Teaching Practice	Access to resources, peer and mentor support improve teaching experience. Lack of support isolates student teachers.	PM2 & PF1: Benefited from school-provided resources and peer support. PM3: Felt sidelined and unsupported.	Aglazoe (2017); Franklin & Harrington (2019); Hew et al. (2020)
5. Student-Teacher Professional Development Opportunities	Workshops, collaboration, and mentorship deepen understanding of teaching. Limited opportunities hinder growth.	PF3: Gained insight from workshops. PM1: Broadened perspective through collaboration. PF2: Saw limited development opportunities.	MRTEQ (2011); Niser et al. (2019); De Clercq & Phiri (2018)

Source: Author (2025)

Teaching practice in the foundation phase provides students and teachers with practical experiences that support professional and personal growth. Students gain practical skills in the delivery of lessons, managing classrooms and implementing curriculum. This deepens their instructional skills and contributes to active classroom engagement. In spite of these varied

experiences, most student teachers report benefits. PF1 mentioned that teaching practice assists in enhancing instructional approaches and strengthening strategies for classroom management. PF1 stated. "I learned a lot of new pedagogical strategies for foundational phase teaching and improved my classroom management skills during my stay in the school. This has made me to be effective in teaching in this phase (PF1)". PM1, on the other hand, explained how teaching practice experience in the foundation phase has built his confidence by saying that, PM1: "I get the opportunity to engage with real pupils, which has helped to boost my confidence about facilitating teaching and learning in the foundation phase classroom (PM1)". PF2 had a contrasting view about teaching practice and how it offers little exposure for professional development. PF2 assert that, "I have had limited opportunities to teach in the classroom, and I believe this does not allow me the exposure I need for my professional growth as a teacher (PF2)". Teaching practice in the foundation phase provides student teachers with practical exposure that supports their professional and personal growth.

Teaching practice in the foundation phase allows student teachers to gain practical competencies in the form of lesson presentation, implementing curriculum and ensuring discipline in the classroom. These skills assist in deepening classroom engagement, improving learning, and student achievement. Whilst some student teachers benefit from teaching practice, some seem to be faced with hindrances that limit their experiences during this period. Dlamini (2022) argued that active participation in teaching improves student teachers' ability to facilitate learning. Munna and Kalam (2012) recommended placing students in schools where they can sharpen their skills. De Clercq and Phiri (2018) found that teaching practice helps student teachers build practical skills through real classroom tasks. While teaching practice offers valuable opportunities, student teachers need adequate support and resources to benefit fully.

Theme 2: Challenges faced by student teachers

Student teachers face various challenges during their time in foundation phase schools. Key issues include managing large classrooms, which demand significant time and attention. These difficulties limit their ability to make the most of school-based experiences and deliver lessons effectively. PM2 noted that handling large classes made it harder to manage the classroom well. PM2 said that, "In my school, I found managing a classroom challenging as the classes contain large numbers of pupils (PM2)". Similarly, PF3 also mentioned how focusing on coursework and teaching practice prevented him from benefiting from teaching practice in the foundation phase. PF3 pointed out that, "Having to focus on university coursework as a student and at the same time doing teaching practice was very difficult. This reduced the opportunity for me to fully benefit from foundation phase teaching and enhance my professional skills as a teacher (PF3)". Participant PM3 had a different view from the other participants. The participant explained how, despite a heavy workload in the intermediate phase, it motivated him to improve his skills in dealing with pupils. PM3 explained that, "Despite the workload, I was motivated to improve my time management and multitasking skills in the classroom (PM3)". These responses show that most participants struggle to find a balance when dealing with large classes and teaching demands. Few participants responded that they faced difficulties during teaching practice in the foundation phase. They used these challenges to develop professional skills such as classroom management, time management and multitasking.

Literature review confirms the difficulties that student teachers encounter during teaching

practice periods in schools. Homer et al. (2018) stressed the importance of strengthening student teachers' classroom skills even in the face of the various contextual challenges they face in the classroom. Conversely, Van Diggele et al. (2020) also recognised a significant obstacle that hinders student teachers' ability to manage their classrooms efficiently. The study found that student teachers' failure to use instructional technology and media limits their ability to create a constructivist classroom that actively engages learners. This finding suggests that without the integration of technology, student teachers may find it difficult to adjust to the demands of teaching and engage learners meaningfully. However, this finding may overlook critical factors such as the quality of teacher training and availability of resources that can influence classroom management. Dlamini (2022) contended that mentoring student teachers at the foundation phase can enhance their professional development. This finding suggests that mentoring assists student teachers' professional growth through the guidance and feedback they receive from experienced teachers. However, the effect of mentoring may vary depending on the mentor's experiences and the consistency of support they provide student teachers. While teaching practice challenges provide valuable experiences for student teachers, students may also fail to benefit without the proper support from mentors.

Theme 3: Mentoring Dynamics with Student Teachers

Mentoring plays a crucial role in the professional growth of student teachers during the foundation phase. Mentors offer guidance, support, and constructive feedback to help student teachers make the most of their school experience. Participants expressed varied opinions on mentorship's impact. PF2 emphasized the value she gained from her mentor, stating that, "My mentor was supportive and instrumental in my teaching practice in the school. He made sure to provide me helpful feedback that enhanced my teaching skills in the foundation phase (PF2)". In support, participant PM1 also shared a similar view with PF2 by saying that, "I have a regular meeting with my mentor, and this has helped me to be more confident in preparing and planning lessons to teach (PM1)". Participant PF3 shared a contrasting view by explaining how the strained relationship with the mentor affected his teaching practice. PF3 said that "My mentor was distant and rarely provided constructive feedback during the teaching practice (PF3)". These findings show the importance of mentoring in influencing student teachers' competencies through the feedback and guidance they get from their mentors. However, it seems the effectiveness of mentorship varies, as some student teachers had poor support, which affected their teaching practice.

Participants had varied responses regarding mentoring during their school-based experiences. Most participants had positive perspectives that stress the need for mentoring, support, and feedback for student teachers. According to Mbhiza et al. (2024), mentorship and support help student teachers improve their teaching skills and build confidence in planning and delivering lessons. Some Participants agreed that mentorship played a key role in their professional development. However, some also reported negative experiences due to limited feedback and weak mentor relationships. These strained interactions reduced the impact of teaching practice. Mbhiza et al. (2024) support this, showing that effective mentoring enhances teaching methods, classroom management, and learner support. Mtyakado (2024) also highlights the mentor's role as a professional model and support system. The findings stress that strong mentor-mentee relationships are essential for the growth and positive experiences of student teachers. It also

emphasises that effective mentorship empowers teachers with the appropriate pedagogical skills to teach effectively in the intermediate phase. However, there were variations in students' experiences with their mentors. This shows the inconsistencies in the quality of mentorship and the need for support for student teachers.

Theme 4: Support Systems During Teaching Practice

Support from schools and teacher training institutions plays a key role in the professional development of student teachers during teaching practice. Supervision, incentives, and access to resources help build confidence and strengthen teaching skills, making the school experience more productive and positive. PM2 noted the value of such support by stating that, "In my school, the principal and heads of departments provide us with the necessary resources and materials. This makes it easier to prepare for lessons (PM2)". Participant PF1, on the other hand, indicated how the support that mentors provide enhances their teaching practice by saying that, "My supervisors support me to go through the daily demands from the school and classroom. This engagement provides me with the opportunity to learn from different experienced teachers during teaching practice (PF1). PM3, on the other hand, shared a contrasting view by showing how challenging it was to get the support needed during the teaching practice period. PM3 mentioned that PM3: "My experience teaching in the foundation phase was hectic because I felt more sidelined and isolated in the school where I was practising. There was no support from the teachers (PM3)". The responses indicate that while support from schools and mentors strengthens student teachers' professional skills, the absence of support for some student teachers contributes to isolation and a reduction in the benefits of teaching practice.

Literature highlights the importance of support that is given to student teachers during school-based practice. Aglazoe's (2017) and Franklin and Harrington's (2019) studies confirm that strong support systems help student teachers to boost learner achievement and manage classrooms more effectively. In support, Hew et al. (2020) stress the need for comprehensive training to promote inclusive education, showing that well-supported student teachers play a vital role in shaping positive school environments. These findings suggest that effective support and training of student teachers not only enhance teaching skills but also lead to inclusive education practices. In contrast, Mbhiza et al (2024) emphasised that mentoring helps student teachers to develop appropriate instructional skills like lesson planning, classroom management and assessment. Similarly, Nyakado (2024) found that mentors as role models provide feedback and practical guidance that equips student teachers with confidence and competence. These findings indicate that supporting student teachers is a critical factor in developing their instructional skills and confidence through feedback. This implies the need to emphasise skill acquisition and professional development during teaching practice in schools.

Theme 5: Student-Teacher Professional Development Opportunities

Teaching practice helps student-teachers enhance and refine their instructional skills professionally in schools. It allows student teachers to reflect on their instructional experiences, learn from mentors and reflect on feedback received from assessors and mentors. These activities reinforce the professional growth of student teachers in the foundation phase of teaching. Participant PF3 indicated that the importance of complementing teaching practice with seminars and workshops by saying that, "Attending education workshops and seminars provides me with

an in-depth understanding of the teaching profession, pedagogical approaches and current trends in the teaching profession (PF3)". Likewise, participant PM1 shared how working with experienced teachers helps student teachers to develop a broader understanding of the teaching profession. PM1 said, "Collaborating with experienced teachers broadened my understanding of professional development (PM1)". In contrast, PF2 observed that few opportunities for growth existed in schools during the teaching practice period. PF2 pointed out that, "There are very few professional growth and development opportunities available in schools. There isn't enough support to address the challenges and issues that exist in the classroom (PF2). Though the various participants held divergent perspectives on the professional prospects, they acknowledged the importance of how student teachers derive their practical teaching experience.

Literature shows the need for opportunities to be created for student teachers during teaching practice to enhance the professional development of students. According to Niser et al. (2019), school authorities must prioritise teachers' professional development by offering essential assistance and training. In support of this claim, De Clercq and Phiri (2018) argue that establishing a conducive school atmosphere enables student instructors to observe and acquire knowledge from their mentors. These findings suggest the need to prioritise professional development and create a supportive school environment for student teachers to be effective. This shows the critical role that professional development and a supportive school environment play in improving the practical skill acquisition of student teachers. In contrast, Munna and Kalam (2021) argue that practical teaching experiences need to be combined with inclusive strategies and a classroom environment that allows students to participate in class actively. Similarly, Hew et al. (2020) underline the need for schools to offer comprehensive training to student teachers to be able to adapt to student-centred teaching in the classroom. This finding shows how blending a practical teaching method with an inclusive and participatory strategy can support student teachers in engaging learners in the classroom. The importance of empowering student teachers with training is considered to foster adaptable, learner-focused teaching practices in schools.

Conclusion

Teaching practice in the foundation phase schools in South Africa is pivotal in the professional training and development of student teachers. Teaching practice provides student teachers with the opportunity to apply their conceptual and theoretical understanding in a practical learning environment in the school. This exposes them to a variety of teaching experiences and support systems. The majority of participants regard teaching practice as an important avenue to empower them with professional training, which complements their university training. The practical experience acquired equips them with appropriate teaching skills like classroom management, instructional planning and learner participation. School-based support and mentorship contribute to improving the professional trajectory of student teachers. In addition, the opportunity to access mentorship, guidance, teaching resources and collaboration fosters the development of student teachers. This shows that when student teachers are equipped with professional skills and competencies, teachers can effectively prepare foundational phase learners to excel.

In spite of the benefits of teaching practice to student teachers, the study found challenges that prevent them from being effective facilitators and instructors in the foundation phase. Among these challenges are large classrooms, balancing academic work and teaching practice duties,

limited opportunities for practice and a lack of mentorship. These challenges undermine the professional development of student teachers and their ability to acquire practical skills relevant to foundation phase teaching. These challenges hinder student teachers' professional growth by limiting their ability to develop practical teaching skills, confidence, and instructional effectiveness in the foundation phase. Many student teachers had unclear expectations and a lack of feedback from assessors and mentors. This constraint had an adverse influence on student teachers' developing confidence and competence to facilitate effective teaching in the foundation phase. There is a need for teacher training programs and schools to address this gap by strengthening mentorship and opportunities for practical training.

This study finds teaching practice in the foundation phase schools to be a critical component for shaping the professional development of student teachers. Teaching practice empowers student teachers with the requisite skills, confidence and pedagogical skills. In spite of the benefits of teaching practice for student teachers, challenges like a lack of practical exposure, mentorship, and support systems obstruct the full benefit of teaching practice. As a result, this study recommends allocating instructional opportunities and strengthening mentorship for student teachers. In addition, student teachers should be empowered with the allocation of instructional resources, teaching opportunities, supervision and support from mentors and assessors, and organising workshops and seminars for the professional development of student teachers. A major limitation of this study is its small sample size of six participants. This restricts the generalisability and potential bias of the study. Future studies should incorporate a bigger sample size. This will enhance the reliability of the study's findings and contribute to the body of knowledge of student teachers' experiences in the foundation phase schools during teaching practice

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