



University-Community Partnership of Work-Integrated Learning for Preservice Teachers as Support to Primary Rural Schools

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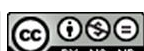
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ABSTRACT

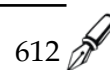
This qualitative paper reports on the work-integrated learning of preservice teachers in two primary rural schools implementing multigrade teaching as support to schoolteachers. The problem in this study is that it is not common for preservice teachers to do their work integrated learning in multigrade schools. The aim of this study is to use work-integrated learning of preservice teachers as support to teachers teaching in rural primary schools. The study is couched in critical emancipatory research as the theoretical framework to empower and engage participants in the research study. Participants in this study were ten purposefully selected preservice teachers from one university and four experienced teachers, two from one of two primary schools. Participatory action research with focus group discussions was used to generate data. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis by identification and reporting of patterns. The findings revealed that work-integrated learning of preservice teachers provides support to teachers in rural schools. The study suggests a continuous working relationship between rural schools and the teacher education institutions. The recommendation in this study is for teacher education institutions to support teachers in rural schools by sending preservice teachers to rural schools during work-integrated learning.



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INTRODUCTION

Preservice teachers in South Africa visit schools for work-integrated learning programs while studying for the teaching profession. This paper reports the views of a group of second-year preservice teachers enrolled for the Bachelor of Education in Foundation Phase and Intermediate Phase at one university in South Africa. These preservice teachers visited two rural schools once a week for two years for a funded community project. The two-year visit to schools by preservice teachers in this project served as support to teachers in rural schools and support to preservice teachers in their practicum, which is referred to as teaching practice or work-integrated learning (WIL) in South Africa. Van der Merwe (2022) mentions that the quality of education in South Africa can be raised by ensuring that newly qualified teachers can guide and support learning in varying school contexts. WIL is a mutual teacher education program for preservice teachers that reinforces mutual integrative design – coursework learning and practice learning experiences in schools (Department of Higher Education and Training, DHET, 2015). Work-integrated learning (WIL) is a term used to describe cooperative learning, service learning, and industry-based learning; however, the term "WIL" is used in this article for consistency. "Professional learning is the development of professional capabilities through teaching and learning experiences and activities that integrate academic, discipline-specific, and industry-referenced knowledge, skills,



and attitudes" (Lawson et al., 2011). In teacher education, WIL is a formal program that integrates the theory of learning with the practice of work (Venville et al., 2018). Riera et al. (2023) support that theoretical knowledge alone is not enough to develop future teachers, but understanding of teaching methods and real-world experience working as educators in various classrooms and contexts provides future teachers with a tangible perspective on imparting knowledge. In 2019, Ojo further explained that since learning is a process of human adaptation, preservice teachers need to be involved with workplace practice to reconstruct, improve, and provide balanced learning experiences. WIL provides preservice teachers with opportunities to gain experience in an authentic environment. Preservice teachers gain practical experience by applying lecture room learning in a 'real world' work environment (Dwesini, 2017). Work-integrated learning offers opportunities for preservice teachers to increase their credit outcomes in their teaching qualification and is one of the most powerful learning experiences compared to learning in a classroom setting (De Beer, 2020). Therefore, WIL programs expose preservice teachers to the labor market by offering them training opportunities and work experience in different contexts.

Work-integrated Learning (WIL) is prescribed by the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualification Policy (MRTEQP) as a structured learning program guiding the development of practical skills for preservice teachers in South Africa (DHET, 2015). Bertram and Rusznyak (2015) indicate that education in South Africa is still urban-centric, which makes WIL continue to experience challenges of insufficient preparation of preservice teachers for rural teaching. During WIL, preservice teachers learn the practice of teaching by observing the lessons of experienced teachers and discussing them (Rusznyak & Bertram, 2021). The rural factors, such as geographical distance, low and uneven levels of teacher expertise, and a wide-ranging lack of resources, as well as a lack of discipline among a wide cross-section of teachers, diminish the effectiveness of the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) and MRTEQ. WIL is operating in different ways in different countries, where the duration of the program depends on the uniqueness of the institution offering the teaching qualification. WIL is used in countries like the USA, Zimbabwe, Lesotho, and others to prepare teachers while they are still studying for the profession to meet the requirements of teacher preparation programs. In Zimbabwe a preservice teacher is attached to a qualified teacher as an experienced and knowledgeable mentor during WIL (Makura & Zireva, 2013). Bhebhe (2022) mentions that preservice teachers in Zimbabwe do teaching practice in schools where they could put what they had learned in their teacher education institute into practice. The USA emphasizes incorporating teaching theories with practicing for preservice teachers, rather than teaching theories before practicing (Karamustafaoğlu, 2009). The preservice teachers in the US undergo an internship program, and each is assigned to two mentors for the program of internship, which is referred to as WIL in this study (Dan & Liu, 2021). The similarity between the two countries, Zimbabwe and the US, is that the preservice teachers are assigned to the mentors who are experienced, and the teacher education institutions rely mostly on their expertise. The focus in this current study differs from the two countries in the sense that preservice teachers provide support to the host schools while still studying for the profession.

There are many challenges in the teaching of multigrade classes. In 2014, Quail and Smyth mentioned that teachers need to vary their instructional materials and activities to accommodate the needs of the learners of different grade levels and ages. In 2016, Ramrathan and Mzimela viewed that multigrade teaching is teacher-centered, where the teachers are only the central influencing factor in mediating teaching and learning. On the contrary, Makoelle and Malindi (2014) perceived the importance of multigrade teaching. They mention that multigrade teachers allow for communication among learners, learners collaborate in a multigrade class, and they believe the content integration in a multigrade class promotes socialization and democracy within a class. Another importance of multigrade teaching, according to Naparan and Alinsug (2021), is that it addresses the challenges of not meeting the standard number of learners enrolled at a school, which may lead to closure of the school.

Teachers in most rural schools are subjected to multigrade teaching, where they are required to teach different subjects and sometimes different grades in one classroom (du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). In many cases, teachers in the multigrade teaching schools are also faced with administrative duties of the school apart from their teaching roles (Ozmantar & Civelek, 2017). South Africa experiences the same situation of multigrade teaching and teachers having to perform administrative duties. Many studies have been conducted on WIL, but few are looking at the program from multigrade teaching perspectives. This study extends the WIL program by placing groups of preservice teachers in rural schools once a week from the second year of their study. These preservice teachers observe the lessons presented by experienced teachers in the multigrade class and get the opportunity to teach using gained experience and reflect on their own lessons and obtain feedback on their own teaching. In 2017, Barends and Nel indicated that placing preservice teachers in 'authentically diverse South African contexts' makes WIL more authentic. Preservice teachers would benefit in the long run from exposure to a variety of schools, particularly if they encounter teachers who could serve as role models of how to deal with challenges in schools that are under-resourced or in impoverished communities.

Many studies were conducted about teaching challenges in rural schools, and many attempts have been made in South Africa to address those challenges. Among other attempts are the closure of small rural schools by transporting learners to larger rural schools and placing learners in schools with hostels to reduce multigrade or multiphase teaching, where one teacher teaches different classes or phases in one classroom (Kalender & Erdem, 2021). Despite all these attempts, multigrade teaching, where one teacher is teaching different grades in one class, still exists among rural schools because of the small number of learners enrolled in those schools. This current study continues to explore these challenges by involving preservice teachers as supporting agents during Work-Integrated Learning (WIL). The expectation in this project was to fulfill the school experience component, referred to as WIL in South Africa, to allow preservice teachers to experience teaching in the multigrade classes (Kartal & Demir, 2023). This begs the question of whether the teacher education institutions are developing teachers who are fully trained to face the challenges faced by teachers in schools. In addition, preservice teachers are being prepared for a different education system and challenges. This study thus explores how current preservice teachers (PSTs) make sense of the constructs in rural teaching.

The university and schools' collaboration in this study was initiated through an agreement between the two schools and the provincial department of education with a view to assist experienced teachers in performing their teaching in the multigrade classes and assisting preservice teachers in their learning to teach. Preservice teachers observed experienced teachers teaching, worked as classroom assistants, and did limited teaching. The teachers in these schools acted as mentors to preservice teachers throughout the project. This study is situated in South Africa, where small rural schools were closed and learners from those schools were placed in one school away from their homes. Within this context, we pursue the following research questions:

Research Question 1 (RQ1): How do preservice teachers conceptualize rural teaching?

Research Question 2 (RQ2): What humanizing aspects are apparent in preservice teachers' conceptualizations of rural school teaching?

In this qualitative research study, the study addresses these questions by using thematic analysis to come up with patterns in the meaning. In what follows is a brief conceptualization of multigrade teaching and work-integrated learning (WIL). Through thematic analyses, I present patterns in how PSTs attempted to operationalize notions of teaching in rural schools and WIL. All this is done to achieve the aim of this study, to use work-integrated learning of preservice teachers as support to teachers teaching in rural primary schools.



RESEARCH METHOD

This study used a qualitative research design conducted in two rural primary schools in South Africa during a funded two-year university-community project aimed at exposing preservice teachers to multigrade teaching while relieving the workload of experienced teachers in rural schools. Two rural schools were used as research sites in the Thabo Mofutsanyane Education District, South Africa. These two schools were purposefully selected based on the rural characteristics they possessed. The two schools are categorized in Quintile 1 in the South African school context based on their poverty associated with rurality, and learners from these rural schools are exempted from paying school fees (Myende & Hlalele, 2018). The schools solely depend on government budget allocation, which in turn is faced with resource scarcity (Mkhize & Davids, 2023). The budget dependability of rural schools on the government makes the schools continue running short of teaching and learning resources. This qualitative research focuses on understanding how preservice teachers perceive rural schools and multigrade teaching (Ozlav and Akinci, 2024). The participatory action research method was used to ensure comprehensive participation in this study.

Purposeful sampling of ten preservice teachers from one university in South Africa participated in this study; five of the three preservice teachers were selected from the Foundation Phase (FP) and another five from the Intermediate Phase (IP). The ten preservice teachers were deliberately chosen due to their inexperience with multigrade teaching qualities and may find themselves employed in rural schools after obtaining teaching qualifications (Patton, 2014). Purposeful sampling is typically used in qualitative research to identify and select the information-rich cases for the most proper utilization of available resources. Five of the ten preservice teachers were visiting one primary rural school, and the other five another rural school, every Friday to observe multigrade teaching and do alternate teaching with experienced teachers in multigrade classes. Convenience sampling of four experienced teachers, two from each rural school, were selected to participate in the study. Etikan et al. (2016) assert that convenience sampling is easily administered where the participants are 'accidental samples,' readily available in the research site. Participants in this study were teachers who were working in the two rural schools identified as research sites.

The study used participatory action research (PAR) with the focus group discussions for data generation to explore skills preservice teachers acquired from rural teachers during WIL. Loewenson et al. (2014) indicate PAR as a method of synthesizing local experience and organizing shared collective analyses of the relationships between problems and their causes. The experiences of local teachers in rural schools with their multigrade teaching challenges were collectively acknowledged and analyzed. The PAR cycle was followed in this study for reflection, where participants identified thematic concerns or issues to turn those issues into common goals (Eruera, 2010). This was done because Kemmis (2007) explains that the PAR cycle includes planning a change, acting and observing the process of change, reflecting on the processes, and re-planning until positive outcomes are achieved. The PAR cycle is continuous and can be repeated until change is observed and can start anywhere in the cycle until the outcomes are achieved (Bendien et al., 2022). The PAR cycle in this study started in the preparation phase, and we held continuous meetings once a week with participants until the project was completed. The main research question was used to generate discussions with participants, who later became co-researchers.

In the preparation phase of PAR, the researcher and participants started by conceptualizing the rural teaching problems and discussed the degree to which multigrade teaching is conducted in schools (Singh, 2012). Among other reasons for the challenges in rural teaching during discussions was the unpreparedness of teachers working in rural schools, resulting in learners moving away from those schools. The researcher introduced the project to preservice teachers, and many of them were interested in participating in the project. Many of the preservice teachers were never exposed to the multigrade classes in their school experience. This conceptualization

revealed the need to expose preservice teachers to rural teaching. We agreed to have a maximum of five students in each of the two different rural schools. The size of the participating schools, transport costs, and daily meals for preservice teachers when in schools informed the number of preservice teachers to each school. We agreed on the date to visit the rural schools, which are the research site, to conceptualize the problem with experienced teachers, and to indicate the degree to which WIL is conducted in schools (Singh, 2012).

The researcher and preservice teachers met with experienced teachers in rural schools from the planning phase of PAR to plan and set the priorities. Through PAR, adjustments were made since a new voice can destabilize the status quo and power hierarchy (Buffel et al., 2019). The agreement was reached with co-researchers for preservice teachers to come to the schools on Fridays for observations and teaching in the multigrade classes as part of their WIL program. A consensus about how the WIL program would be administered was reached between preservice teachers and experienced teachers in rural schools. All participants understood that each person has valuable knowledge and that all can learn from each other and share power (Condre et al., 2011). A team of 16 participants was now developed: a researcher, ten preservice teachers, one Masters of Education student, and two experienced teachers from each school. We included everybody we thought was part of the rural school community for validating the voices of the marginalized rural communities because a single voice or thought cannot explain the experiences of an entire society (Leonard et al., 2010). Moloi (2014) argues that the team in PAR is developed in recognition of the wealth of social indigenous knowledge that teachers from rural schools possess and that the collective voice of the community can help find a sustainable solution to problems.

The implementation phase started with the preliminary visit to the rural schools to get the history, culture, and local context of the schools and to build a social relationship with the experienced teachers (Loewenson et al., 2014). The first visit to the schools was to introduce the university school project to the school principals, request permission to continue with the study, and introduce preservice as participants in the project. There was no problem from the school principal for the students to come for the TP program. We went to the school for a research meeting with five preservice teachers who volunteered from the practicum class to do their teaching practice in rural schools and a teaching practice officer to meet with rural school communities as arranged, as one of the objectives of PAR is “to emancipate people from irrationality, injustice, alienation, and the suffering found in social settings” (Kemmis, 2006). All the ten preservice teachers had never been exposed to rural schools before, and they were excited to take part in the study to get experience of rurality before they can be employed or placed after obtaining qualification. The team was assured to share ownership of the project until the outcomes are achieved in implementing the action for improvement according to the three attributes of PAR (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2007).

The reflection phase of PAR was a cyclical problem-solving process, which is carried out systematically and deliberately with theory envisaged as research-based concepts related to practice (Morales, 2016). This phase encompasses other sub-processes of action such as planning, evaluation, observation, and collaboration. Through PAR, a democratic platform was created for engagement of participants to actively work together as co-researchers in finding solutions to their problems since research findings are fed back into the environment from which they were generated (Mgijima, 2014). The team of co-researchers, preservice teachers, and experienced teachers met for two hours every week after classroom teaching for the duration of the study (Carr & Kemmis, 2003). The study explores the perceptions and experiences of preservice teachers and experienced teachers in multigrade teaching in rural primary schools. In 2020, Babbie maintained that in PAR, numerous encounters between the researcher and participants are required, as research should be seen as a mutual activity that involves the beneficiaries in the analysis of their own reality.

Data were analyzed through the use of thematic analysis to identify and interpret patterns or themes in the use of work-integrated learning of preservice teachers to support teachers in rural primary schools (Elliott, 2018). All data addressing the same theme from the focus group discussions were grouped together to avoid repetition and give logic to the meaning. Direct quotes from the data from participants are included in the findings to emphasize the participants' reactions and to further enhance the legitimacy of the findings and interpretations (Eldh et al., 2020).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

One of the best strategies that emerged was a need to support rural schools with teachers to get quality education in the rural schools. The suggestion was to extend the support of preservice teachers beyond the project to continue doing their WIL in rural schools for human resource support.

Preservice teacher (PS), *"The teachers in rural schools are not given enough human support as teacher. One teacher is working alone by teaching the subject alone."*

The statement was supported by PS2 to say that preservice teachers will be supporting those teachers in rural areas.

PS2, *"We are available to assist while studying as part of our teaching practice experience."*

One experienced teacher (XP) mentioned that the multigrade teaching sometimes makes some learners learn the content in their next grade before reaching that grade. The teacher further mentioned that it makes these types of learners get more results when arriving into the next grades.

XP, *"Some of learners are good to catch up with the content in their next grade before doing that grade and they excel when they reach the next grade"*

The preservice teachers continue to indicate that the teacher in one class with three different grades does not have any free period to plan and prepare for the next class. If maybe there could be a teacher assistant to relieve the teacher. These utterances of preservice teachers showed a hope that rural schools may continue to sustain if given support. The participants suggest more staff to be employed to teach in rural schools to relieve the workload of teachers. As preservice teachers, they showed some commitment to assist while in their studies for the profession. This commitment responds to the call by the National Development Plan 2030 (NDP2030) that all levels, inclusive of rural areas, should get quality education as a catalyst for socioeconomic transformation and creation of job opportunities (NPC, 2011). It will not be easy for rural schools to offer quality education since many South African schools in rural contexts are not well equipped to execute their duties (Mkhize and Davids, 2023).

Another challenge that came from participants is that rural schools are lacking teaching and learning resources. Preservice teachers indicated that there was a shortage of textbooks with no photocopying machine to make copies for learners.

PS4, *"The school is running short of textbooks and does not have photocopy machine to do copies for learners."*

One preservice teacher mentioned that he was going to the extent of bringing copies for learners to work in groups from the university every day before going to the school for teaching. Literature by Shikalepo (2020) shows that lack of resources in rural schools affects the provision of education, including aspects such as learners' attendance of classes, teachers' motivation, and parents' understanding of education and the roles they must play towards the education of their children. It becomes clear that solely depending on government budget allocation by rural schools is resulting in schools facing resource scarcity (Mkhize & Davids, 2023). The budget dependability of rural schools on the government makes the schools continue running short of teaching and learning resources.

Lack of learner participation in class came as another challenge of rural teaching. Preservice teachers mentioned that learners in the two rural schools were not participating in class. One preservice teacher indicated the language diversity influencing learners not to participate.

PS5, *"I had a challenge with learners who do not want to talk in class... I discovered latter that other learners laugh at them when responding in their mother tongue, which is not the language of learning and teaching (LoLT)"*

PS6, *"One learner mentioned that they were afraid to respond in class because they are not sure of answers"*

XT responded to the point, *"I want to thank you students for being available to these learners, assisting them with homework after school... They are now starting to give answers when I ask in the class."*

The comment of the preservice teacher that learners do not participate in class because of those who laugh at them supports what Ntuli (2025) noticed: that South African children have poor reading skills because they are learning in a foreign language by being taught in English. Learners are afraid to speak in class because of English, which is foreign to them and is the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) in South Africa. One of the preservice teachers mentioned that the learners are not doing their homework.

PS7 *"Learners in this school do not do homework given to them and those who do it they come with wrong answers."*

PS8 supported, *"It is true, and they will tell that they do not have any person at home to assist"*

Many of the learners in rural schools do not do the homework given. They would give reasons like they were busy with household duties for the whole day after school and could not get time to do the homework. The study conducted in Zimbabwe indicated lack of educational achievements of parents in rural areas is one of the major barriers to learner achievement in schools (Ncube, 2013). Participants in that study argued that parents of rural learners tend to be low in their own personal achievements, which tends to lead to low aspirations for their children's education.

Discussion

Data from the results of this study is divided into four themes: human resource support, teaching and learning resources, learners not doing homework in rural schools, and learner participation in class.

Improved Human Resource Support

The result of this study reveals the disadvantages, benefits, and suggestions for the future of teaching in rural schools. The disadvantage of working in rural schools is a shortage of human resources. Teachers in rural schools are obliged to combine different grades in one classroom when teaching, which is called multigrade teaching. The benefit of using multigrade teaching for teachers is to have control of the other grades when engaged with another. The other benefit that came out was that gifted learners can learn concepts in the next grade before doing that grade. One of the recommendations that came from the results was for preservice teachers to continue coming to the rural schools for support. One preservice teacher further commented that they are available to assist while studying for the profession.

Increased Teaching and Learning Resources

This study also reveals limited teaching and learning resources as a challenge faced by teachers and learners in rural schools. The school is short of textbooks and does not have a photocopy machine to make copies for learners. Learners in this school are sharing textbooks, which makes it difficult for teachers to give them reading homework. The lack of resources in this school is one of the socio-economic factors in rural schools that contributes to poor reading skills and underperformance of learners (Mjobo, 2025). This reflected the influence and pressure on teachers

to provide extra resources for the learners. To mitigate this challenge, the preservice teachers were making copies of teaching materials from the university to assist learners in their learning. The support is what a preservice teacher said they can assist with if they can continuously be placed in the school while studying.

Improved Learner Participation in Class

Lack of learner participation was another factor revealed from the results. It became apparent that the learners were not participating in class because they were afraid to speak English. The other reason for not participating is because they were not sure of the answers, as they do not have anybody home to assist with the homework. The presence of preservice teachers in rural schools improved the learners' confidence, because the preservice teachers were available to assist them with homework after school.

Homework

The rural school learners did not do their homework and mentioned different reasons, like nobody being available to assist at home or others talking about other roles they play at home after school. Preservice teachers were assisting learners with homework after school before they go home, and the experienced teachers were happy that their learners' self-confidence was improving.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to use work-integrated learning of preservice teachers as support to teachers teaching in rural primary schools. The study shows that the WIL program for preservice teachers in rural schools assists the teachers by relieving their workload, while they also learn the skills of teaching in multiple contexts, unlike when they only learn to teach in schools without challenges. This statement shows that the presence of preservice teachers in rural schools for WIL addresses the challenges of a shortage of teachers. Preservice teachers increase the human resources when available to the rural schools for WIL by relieving the workload of experienced teachers. They also address the challenge of a shortage of teaching and learning resources because they bring resources from the university while in their WIL. They also come with new teaching methods that would promote learner participation in class. Given this situation, the study recommends that the teacher education institutions opt to use rural schools as teaching schools for teacher education programs as new approaches to education. It is also essential for rural primary school teachers to be afforded an opportunity to voice their opinions on strategies that are appropriate for their schools. In this regard, the contributions by various participants in this study clearly demonstrated the importance of this research.

This study cannot be widely representative, as few university students participated. The study is limited to two rural schools with ten preservice teachers from one university in South Africa. This study could also be critiqued on the fact that the data generated and reported could be biased since only focus group discussions were used to collect data. A similar study can be conducted with preservice teachers from different universities with different rural contexts.

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