

ENABLING CONDITIONS FOR STUDENT TEACHERS LEARNING TO TEACH ON TEACHING PRACTICUM

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Abstract

This paper concerns itself with conditions which enabled the learning experiences of student teachers on teaching practicum at resource-constrained schools in the greater Cape Town area. While the importance of teaching practicum is widely discussed, the specific enabling conditions which inform student teachers' experiences of learning to teach in schools on teaching practicum is not. Student teachers at one university chose to be part of this study. This is a qualitative, empirical study which gathers data through successive semi-structured interviews, after observing a lesson taught on teaching practicum. The findings were that the productive relationships with mentor teachers and the care that the student teachers felt for their pupils, were the enabling conditions in their learning to teach, leading them to develop new ways of teaching to reach their pupils better. The conclusion is that relational aspects on teaching practicum are important to learning to teach. The study offers insights into the specific conditions, on teaching practicum, which enable learning to teach.

Keywords: Mentor Teacher, Relationships; Student Teacher Experience; Teaching Practicum.

Introduction

Teaching practicum is a central component of learning in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes. Yet there are few empirical studies investigating student teacher experiences of teaching practicum in South Africa. And even less is known about *how* student teachers experience the teaching practicum. This paper provides insights regarding student teacher experiences of teaching practicum at a university of technology in South Africa. It begins by situating the research in the context of the existent literature, then outlines the research methods, discusses the findings and concludes by identifying the relevance of these findings.

Framing the Paper

This research is theoretically informed by care ethics. Care ethics stress the interpersonal dimension and that relational approaches to teaching and learning are not only kinder, but can be more effective and create better social values through the teachers' modelling of caring (Noddings, 2018). Essential to these caring interpersonal relationships are dialogue and talk (Noddings, 2018). Pedagogically this necessitates a less top-down type of teaching and involves a high level of regard and engagement. This gentler and more respectful approach is especially useful when one considers the very necessary antidote to the alarming volume of reported violence in South African schools (Power, 2017; Ncontsa, & Shumba, 2013). Learning to teach is a complex and demanding process (Nkambule & Mukeredzi,

2017; Mpofo & Maphalala, 2018), and what teachers ought to be learning on initial teacher education (ITE) has been the subject of much discussion in the literature (Darling-Hammond, 2016). To improve ITE and student teacher experience on practicum, research in teacher education needs to pay significant attention to the full array of facets of the practicum, including student teacher support in the form of the mentoring, and the development of pedagogic approaches which are effective in resource-constrained circumstances.

The teaching practice (TP), regarded as a central component of ITE (Ngidi & Sibaya, 2003; Marais & Meier, 2004; Kiggundu & Nayimuli, 2009), is the period student teachers spend valuable time in a school, both observing teachers and teaching some classes, under guidance. One of the reasons teaching practicum is regarded as the centrepiece of a teaching degree is the higher order knowledge and practical synthesis required, which is possibly also why 'learning to teach' is acknowledged as a complex process (Nkambule & Mukeredzi, 2017).

The teaching practicum requires the synthesis of theoretical (or, coursework) knowledge and hands-on practice enabling prospective teachers to practice at schools by immersion into the social context of the school, the curriculum, the pupils, the education subjects and the various ways of teaching these subjects. As such, it affords student teachers the opportunity to synthesize theory and practice while pursuing much needed hands-on experience (Bhargava, 2009; Kiggundu & Nayimuli, 2009; Quick & Sieborger, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2017). This time also affords the opportunity to "practice in authentic classrooms" (Wilson, 2016) as it is, essentially, experience in the field (Ulrik & Smith, 2011).

Key to successful teaching practice is the 'mentor' teacher, the teacher who is assigned to guide and mentor a student teacher on teaching practicum. A mentor guides, encourages (Becker, Waldis & Staub, 2018), leads and supports the student or novice teacher (Maphosa, Shumba & Shumba, 2007). Koki notes that the mentoring process "includes modelling because the mentor must be able to model the messages and suggestions being taught to the beginning teacher" (Koki, 1997). The mentor teacher is of significant and obvious practical importance but also of symbolic importance for the student teacher, as this is the person who advocates for or curtails freedoms or risks. The mentor teacher is also a kind of gatekeeper for assessing the capabilities of the student teacher, also someone who as a gatekeeper, controls the when, what and how the student teacher can teach; someone who demonstrates acceptable approaches to a subject, and for giving instructional assistance (Becker, Waldis, & Staub, 2018). Furthermore, mentors offer interpersonal, psychological and emotional support to student teachers (Davis & Fantozzi, 2016; Hennissen, Crasborn, Brouwer, Korthagen & Bergen, 2011).

Similarly, Ulrik and Smith (2011) found that with a good mentor teacher, student teachers are "encouraged to master practical skills and, in addition, to take risks and they may develop beyond their mentor's level". The mentor teacher is a necessary aid to student teacher learning experiences, as guidance and encouragement are important to student teacher development.

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Generally, it has been found that despite the taxing nature inherent in the complexity of learning on the teaching practicum, this can be offset this by mentors who are helpful and supportive. Robinson found that a supportive environment (one in which help, encouragement and approval are apparent) was key to student teacher well-being on teaching practicum (Robinson, 2014). Darling-Hammond also outlines that practical experience is necessary for student teachers, and this occurs best in schools where “good practice is supported” (2017). While much has been written about the complexity of learning to teach, the necessity of mentors and importance of teaching practicum, little has been written on precisely *how* student teachers learn from these relationships with the mentor teacher, and with the pupils, on teaching practicum and how these relationships develops their teaching skills.

Relationships, in fact, are vital effective teaching and thereby the teaching practicum: relationships between a mentor teacher, student teacher and pupil. Noddings’s ‘ethic of care’ (1984, 1992, 2005) explains that relationships and kindness are important to teaching and learning. Caring teachers strive *first* to establish and maintain caring relations, as these relations “exhibit an integrity that provides a foundation for everything teacher and student do together” (Noddings, 2005). In both relationships – between student teacher and mentor and student teacher and pupils – the social-emotional aspects of care are highlighted in the literature. Nguyen claims that “care is crucial to conceptions of good teaching” (2016), and likewise, the emotionally supportive role of the mentor teacher has been foregrounded (Davis & Fantozzi, 2016; Hennissen et al. 2011). Similarly, foregrounding the more emotional role played by teachers in resource-constrained schools, Alcott (2017) found that the encouragement of the teacher is a powerful force in the educational persistence of children from lower incomes.

The complexity of learning to teach has been described as an “individual, collaborative, and situated process” (Mpofo & Maphalala, 2018). Pendlebury (1990) discusses the importance of “situational appreciation” in education. In an empirical study of Serbian teachers in developing capabilities, Mogliacci notes that “teachers’ work is contextual and situation-dependent, affecting teachers’ reasoning and understanding of their every-day practice, their pupils as well as the content they are teaching” (2015).

Classroom discipline and behaviour management in teaching are situationally dependent. On teaching practicum, student teachers are expected not only to teach, but also to manage pupil behaviour. Mpofo and Maphalala’s (2018) research speaks of the student teachers’ needs to consider their approaches to discipline. Similarly, Thapa, Cohen, Guffey and Higgins-D’Alessandro (2013) write of the student teachers’ needs to “accommodate individual and group activities and the physical resources in the classroom”. Thus, apart from teaching, student teachers are expected to learn a number of other skills including management of the classroom and pupil behaviour which entails weighing up pupils and adapting strategies to match the pupils. However, as Mpofo and Maphalala (2018) point out, it is not only the duration of the teaching practicum that is important for this, but the quality of assessment and learning on the teaching practicum, and in this regard, mentor

teachers play a critical role. All of these factors underscore the central importance of the teaching practicum to the ITE.

The above literature points to two key aspects of the teaching practicum on which this paper focuses. First is the importance of the mentor in mediating the experiences of student teachers. Second is the importance of productive relationships in teaching, manifest in the interrelated dimensions of understanding and acknowledging learner backgrounds for teaching and for calibrating discipline by recognising the context of the learners. This paper's research question is 'In what ways are relationships beneficial to student teachers' development on teaching practicum?' It thus sets out to investigate the relationships which support student teachers' development as teachers during the practicum. Central findings were that the support of the mentor was critical and enabled the student teachers to develop productive pedagogic relationships with pupils, thereby enabling them to display care and empathy as well as using positive approaches to discipline in the classroom during the teaching practicum of their ITE programme.

Research Methodology

This research is of a qualitative and interpretive nature, forming part of a larger research project examining the relationship between Intermediate Phase student teachers' backgrounds, including upbringing, social circumstances, motivations, beliefs and values, and their subsequent learning experiences during the initial teacher education course at one Western Cape University.

The university where this project took place is a relatively 'new' university of technology, having gained university status in 2005 after a merger between two institutions, incorporating a regionally historic teacher training college.

This research used a sample of five third year student teachers who volunteered to participate in the study. They were tracked over a year and a half (thus ending in the fourth year) at one university from 2015 until the end of 2016. The research relied on a strong, in-depth and personalized understanding of each research participant. To achieve this, several in-depth interviews were conducted. The unit of analysis is the learning experience of the student teachers while on teaching practicum.

All five student teachers participating in this research were on teaching practicum in resource-constrained urban schools belonging to quintiles 1-3, characteristically typified by charging low or no fees and relying on a feeding scheme. These schools demonstrated no significant change since the apartheid years, including the social conditions of the pupils: schools of "poor learners and those who were predominantly disadvantaged under apartheid" who continued to "attend the high number of poorly resourced schools" (Sayed, Badroodien, Salmon, & McDonald, 2016).

Observations were conducted on teaching practicum. Observation is commonly used in education as a tool to support understanding and development: to make sense of educational situations, gauge the effectiveness of educational practices and plan attempts for improvements (Malderez, 2003). Observations were conducted without

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a schedule. Copious detailed and descriptive notes were made about the school (including the number of pupils, appearance of the classroom, available school resources), the lesson content, pupil engagement and response, behavioural issues if any, and the relationship visible through responses between the teacher and the pupil, as well as mentor and teacher. These were the primary elements used to inform the post-observation interview, on which this paper is focused.

All data was transcribed. Using Atlas *ti*, codes were attached to accounts of teaching practice. Examples of initial codes included the following: accounts of sharing ideas with the mentor teacher / feeling confident in the classroom / trying out new things / trying to reach the learners / going the extra mile / using learner experiences. Linkages formed by merging codes into related groups or families of codes. At the head of a group of codes would be a supercode. An example of a supercode was 'relational teaching' made by combining 'using learners' experiences' and 'trying to reach learners'. Some other examples of supercodes were 'emotional commitment to pupils', 'relationship with mentor teacher' and 'learner-centred'. These supercodes were used to structure the findings, as discussed below.

Volunteers in this study, informed of the research project, signed an informed consent agreement guaranteeing anonymity and confidentiality. The university has also been anonymised in this study. Ethical clearance was gained from the university research directorate. Permission and ethical clearance were also obtained from the individual schools and the Western Cape Education Department for the classroom observations.

Findings

Drawing on the framework described in the preceding literature review, findings focus on the dimension of student teacher relationship with mentors and student teacher relationship with pupils in developing their teaching practices.

Student Teacher Relationship with Mentor Teacher

All student teachers interviewed cited a good relationship enjoyed with their mentor teacher as a key experience during teaching practicum. Since the underlying the idea of mentorship is support, a supportive relationship with the mentor teacher could potentially off-set stress which might detract from the TP experience. Specific to these findings is the idea that the mentor teacher nurtured the student teacher's feelings of belonging, feelings of being cared for, and feelings of freedom and affirmation.

The positive relationships with mentors reported by student teachers was manifest in student teachers feeling very much cared for by these mentors. The below comment by Zahraa captures the perception of a high level of care from a mentor teacher on teaching practicum:

[she] is absolutely lovely; she really treats me like one of her children, she makes sure that I have what I need, and I am taken care of. (August 2015, Interview 2)

In addition, mentor teacher support was evident in displays of openness to student teacher ideas, and reasonably unrestricted freedom to try new pedagogic strategies. This meant that student teachers could expand their repertoire of ways of working with children and be pedagogically innovative, some of which will be described shortly. Janey captures this feeling by noting that her mentor teacher “is always keen on new ways to do stuff with the children, open to suggestions” (May 2015, Interview 2). Janey felt that her mentor teacher valued her opinions and ideas, affirming her confidence in having pedagogical ideas and strategies to offer. She also noted that her mentor was both helpful and flexible regarding her ideas: “Anything I want to do, she lets me go ahead and do my thing” (May 2015, Interview 2). By this, the mentor teacher encouraged openness and the championing of trying new and innovative ways of teaching, experimenting with pedagogic strategies in the classroom.

In Janey’s case, the mentor teacher enabled the student teacher by giving her freedom which in turn built confidence on her teaching practicum. The student teacher believes the mentor teacher is giving her freedom because she trusts her abilities. In this, the mentor teacher showed faith in Janey’s teaching abilities, thereby building Janey’s teaching confidence. The fact that the mentor teacher was an older woman with decades of experience and who was very well regarded in the school, rendered her praise and affirmation all the more meaningful. Similarly, Grant explained that his mentor teacher, a science teacher, gave him “the space to work and do his thing.” Like Janey, Grant was gifted independence to grow his sense of his own ‘personness’ in the classroom. This was easily discernible in the lessons observed: the teacher visibly demonstrated the confidence she had in him.

In summary, mentor teachers should clearly support student teachers by openness to their new ways of doing things, and affirming and welcoming their teaching ideas. Further, student teachers expressed a strong belief that mentor teachers demonstrated care for them providing much appreciated emotional support through, for example, praise and encouragement.

Student Teacher Relationship with the Pupils

Significantly, all the student teachers began the teaching practicum with an attitude of hope for cultivating productive relationships with their pupils, including caring for them and adapting teaching strategies on teaching practicum to better accommodate each individual pupil. This was displayed in how student teachers incorporated an awareness of, and interest in, individual pupils and the pupils’ after school lives into their teaching, modifying their disciplinary approach based on knowledge of the pupils.

Tahira, a student teacher, reflected an awareness of pupils’ family backgrounds as follows:

...and they come from areas that are rife with gangsterism, where they have bad socio-economic issue – not all of them, but a lot of them come from areas like that - and I feel that a lot of them just need attention, to feel like you know, you don’t have to be an adult, you are a child, because a lot of the homes are child-run homes, they

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have to be the parent. There are drinking problems, alcohol problems, drugs; they come from that. 'You don't have to be the adult; you can be the child; it is okay to want things for yourself'. So I try to tell them it's okay, it is okay to sit here and learn, it is okay to want, you know, that for yourself. (August 2015, Interview 3)

In the above narrative, Tahira reveals that although she is on teaching practicum, and only in the school for a comparatively short time, she has been paying very close attention to her primary school pupils' behaviour and their stories about home. She has already identified several issues with which pupils have to cope and has collected knowledge pertaining to individual pupils' circumstances. What is also noteworthy in the above account is Tahira's empathic response, adapting her behaviour – giving more attention to the pupils – because of her understanding of their circumstances.

Similarly, Zahraa, aware of the pupils' home environments and associated problems, intentionally availed herself to the children on her teaching practicum:

So if they have a problem I'll say, "Talk to me. If something happened the night before and you just need to get it off your chest – rather come and speak to me about it. I won't speak to anybody about it; I won't judge you and I won't let anyone know. Or you can leave me a note. And I will always talk to you about it. (August 2015, Interview 2)

She explains further:

Because some of them come to school...and they come from backgrounds where their mother was abusing them and their father was a druggie, or they don't even have a father or mother to go to at night. So it's difficult for them. (August 2015 Interview 2)

Zahraa, like the other student teachers in this sample, displays awareness of the social and familial problems the learners face. She knew these could have a debilitating effect on their self-esteem and consequently on their learning. She intends to mitigate these effects as much as possible with a caring and concerned teaching approach. The care and empathy displayed by these student teachers of the learners' families and social backgrounds support learners, as Tahira puts it, to "want things for themselves".

Accommodation and awareness of pupil background were also translated into specific ways of teaching by the student teachers in this study. In particular, student teachers deliberately incorporated pupil knowledge in their teaching on the teaching practicum, using prior knowledge as a bridge to new knowledge to be acquired. By doing this, pupils used their personal knowledge to access new learning, and student teachers affirmed the pupils while integrating the knowledge to be acquired with what the pupils already knew. An example of this is found with pupils' colloquial language in one of Rania's lessons. In teaching a Shakespeare class, Rania recounts that the children began by exclaiming, 'What rubbish is this?'

Because of the language which was used the children don't understand it. But then what I actually did, like with Romeo and Juliet I told them – 'You all speak like you know, with these slang words, and Romeo and Juliet is about XYZ, it's a love story, it's a tragedy this that and the other...so write a summary of Acts One and Two but using your own slang words.' And I think it helped them. (September 2015, Interview 3)

The pupils were familiar with slang – it was part of their existing knowledge – but not with Shakespeare's English. Having witnessed their initial hostility to Shakespeare by the knee-jerk question, 'What rubbish is this?' this student teacher designed a way for pupils to access Shakespeare by discussing pupils' slang. She thus scaffolded from the pupils' everyday knowledge to integrate new knowledge. In this way, Rania used the pupils' common slang language actively in the lesson. Rania learned on teaching practicum that by adapting a subject to incorporate the pupils' existent language knowledge into her lesson, she could, much more easily, teach the more difficult target knowledge.

Similarly, Zahraa used the following introductory strategy in a Grade 4 classroom to step from existent knowledge to bridge into a new area of knowledge, in what appeared to be a seamless conversational introduction:

It is like, 'Let's have a conversation'... Whenever I get a topic, I ask them what they know about this topic: 'Do you know anything about it? Have you heard about it?' and then they will share what they know, and I will share what I know. And I like to do things like that. (August 2015, Interview 3)

Zahraa, like other student teachers in the sample, applied a discursive and conversational approach to build a bridge between new knowledge (what the curriculum prescribes that she teach) and the existent knowledge of the pupils, to create a relation between the two and make it easier for the pupils to access the new knowledge.

Janey provides a telling illustration of how student teachers use pupil background to teach social issues in a different subject. Janey, in her primary school classroom on the teaching practicum, taught a language lesson in which she used the life skills concept of bullying to promote social awareness.

I did a 'Bully' Lesson. It was actually a language lesson, an Afrikaans language lesson, but I integrated Life Orientation. We talked a lot about bullying in schools and they even shared their stories. Like they know bullies, and they have bullied, and how they were bullied. So instead of just focusing on the language, and synonyms, and so on – we brought that in, the social concept. (May 2015, Interview 2)

Two aspects which are of interest in Janey's above account are that she uses the pupils' knowledge and experience of being bullied, and bullying, to best engage them in the topic. She teaches the language lesson by using the pupils' own verbal accounts of bullying.

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Thus Janey uses the subject which is experientially closer to the pupils as a conduit to teach that which will be further removed and less accessible, that is, the language component.

The positive caring relationship that student teachers displayed in their teaching on their practicum is reflected in how they dealt with discipline, as evidenced in the account below by Tahira.

Being sent out, being kept in after interval, after school, being given detention slips, being sent to the principal - that type of thing - I try to give them the benefit of the doubt (because) sometimes they just want the attention that they don't really get at home. (August 2015, Interview 3)

Tahira's approach to discipline, in this instance, demonstrated her understanding of the pupils' social backgrounds, resulting in a gentler approach to discipline. By modifying their classroom behaviour management, student teachers are better able to positively address pupils' emotional needs.

The findings about student teacher experiences of teaching on the teaching practicum suggest that their relationship with pupils was crucial to their teaching. In particular, their understating of students' family and social backgrounds resulted in teaching approaches in which they strove to integrate pupils' own cultures to build bridges into the new, target subject matter. Their understanding of pupils' backgrounds also calibrated their approaches to classroom management and discipline during their teaching practicum experiences. A fuller discussion of the findings is presented in the subsequent section.

Discussion

The findings from this study reveal several factors about student teacher experiences on teaching practicum. Firstly, the mentor teacher plays a complex role in student teacher learning and experience of TP. The mentor is not only a gatekeeper for the student teacher, but perhaps more importantly, the person who supports and scaffolds their teaching on the teaching practicum by allowing them the freedom and opportunity to explore new approaches and ideas. In this study, student teachers felt that mentors provided them with the freedom to try new things, enabling them to have new learning experiences as they experimented with new approaches.

There is a clear need for mentor teachers to uplift student teachers with support in the practicum (Williams, 1994). Beck and Kosnik (2002) stress the necessity of a friendly and supportive relationship with the mentor teacher. Kahn found that a factor of student teaching being "not-so successful" was a "poor rapport with the co-operating teacher" (Kahn, 2001 in Kitchel & Torres, 2007). Similarly, Talvitie, Peltokallio and Mannisto (2000) write of the importance of not just having a good rapport, but also of problematizing the teaching experience, and giving support in doing this: "If the supervisor (mentor) teacher does not give support and provide the student teacher with opportunities to explore dilemmas and contradictions when the student begins to question the existing structure of his classroom, he or she may

withdrew [sic] from the search rather than take further risks” (Talvitie et al: 2000). It could be suggested that mentor teachers, in allowing the student teachers the opportunity to try new pedagogic strategies, were allowing them the opportunity to problematize and challenge conventional or more tried and tested or traditional ways of doing things. In this respect, Maphalala (2013) reports on the importance of the mentor teacher in providing the emotional or psychological support necessary for appropriate teaching guidance. The mentor is thus the person who encourages the student teacher on practicum, instilling the confidence not only to teach but also to explore new ways of teaching, to generate the courage to take risks, the curiosity to experiment with different approaches, and more critically, the capability of adapting to the pupils’ knowledge positions, scaffolding the pupils’ knowledge and life experience into their teaching to draw closer to new knowledge. Manuel (2005) argues that is vital that teachers, including student teachers, are ‘told that you can teach’, reflecting the importance of confidence in providing student teachers with the necessary autonomy to teach well.

Secondly, the manner in which student teachers relate to pupils on teaching practicum, with the encouragement of mentors, plays a vital role in their experience thereof. Specifically, understanding a pupil’s background to provide social-emotional support is key to effective teaching experiences on the practicum, as seen in this study. It is noteworthy in this study that student teacher understanding of pupil contexts led student teachers to deepen a caring pedagogy which manifested itself in a non-dominating, highly engaged approach to teaching. This approach, which foregrounded productive relationships with pupils, enabled student teachers to adapt responsively to pupils’ needs, emotionally, in terms of classroom management and discipline, and also in teaching strategies and approaches. This was evident in student teacher contemplation of the underlying reasons for the behaviour for which they had cause to discipline the pupils. Typically, the student teachers chose to de-escalate the usual disciplinary procedures, making allowances for the emotional and physical contexts of the children’s lives, realising those factors as driving forces in the children’s behaviour.

A hallmark of student teacher responsiveness to pupils was that the student teachers favoured an interactive classroom which encouraged sharing, discussing pupils’ cultural experiences and drawing on prior pupil knowledge – all integrated into how student teachers taught on the practicum. Specifically, student teachers in this study used prior knowledge of the pupils as a bridge to new knowledge. Accessing existing knowledge depends on a discursive classroom environment in which knowledge is constructed.

Conclusion

This qualitative, interpretive paper has provided insight into the experiences of student teachers on teaching practicum, focusing on the relationships with mentors and relationships with pupils which were productively reflected in their teaching and learning how to teach. This was evident in how student teachers sought to incorporate pupils’ local understanding, their local language, and interest in their lessons to make their teaching more accessible to the pupils.

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The research reported in this paper suggests that relationships with mentors and pupils are significant to successful teaching practicum experiences. This is an important area of future research which unpacks how prospective teachers learn to teach on teaching practicum. In unpacking the black box of teaching practicum, this paper spotlights how relationships constitute the basis for effective pedagogy and for student teacher development as teachers. Crucial to this is better understanding of pupil backgrounds for generating more effective pedagogic encounters in the classroom, drawing on prior knowledge as well as empathetic approaches to discipline. This is only possible with supportive and caring mentors, for student teachers, who give them freedom to explore and infuse them with the confidence to affirm the backgrounds and validate the prior knowledge of pupils. This suggests that an ITE programme needs to be responsive, aware of how relationships in a teaching practicum will deepen the learning experiences of student teachers.

These findings suggest that in the context of 'learning to teach', the TP is an essential part of the ITE. Moreover, in a TP where the mentor teacher is encouraging, supportive and allows the student teacher the freedom to explore new ways of teaching, the potential of the TP as a learning experience is maximized. Furthermore, student teachers' productive relationships with pupils result in productive pedagogies in the classroom, enabling them to develop as beginner teachers on teaching practicum. This study strongly suggests that student teacher relationships with mentors and pupils are key to student teacher development on a teaching practicum.

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