The professional orientation of first year student teachers in a non-placement work-integrated learning program

MARYNA REYNEKE
CAROLINA BOTHA[1]
North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa

In 2019 a South African university adapted its program for initial teacher training to substitute school-based work-integrated learning in the first year with a non-placement campus-based program called Professional Orientation Program (POP). This paper deals with the rationale, aims and conceptualization of the program. It furthermore shares data collected from participating students regarding their expectations and experiences of the POP, their views on the contribution of the program to raising awareness of professional teacher identity, and suggestions to improve the POP. The findings in this article suggest that this non-placement WIL program positively influenced the development of students' personal and pre-professional identities and created an awareness of the challenges posed by the profession, laying a solid foundation for teacher training. The focus on reflective practice promoted personal growth and invited students to self-directed learning and critical thinking that can bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Keywords: Work-integrated learning, non-placement, initial teacher education, professional identity

Adhering to the *Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications* (MRTEQ), in South Africa (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2011) the Faculty of Education at the North West University (NWU) places BEd students at schools for work-integrated learning (WIL) for 3 weeks per semester over 4 years of training. The practice of annual six-week placements is underpinned by a training program in which academic content is integrated with pedagogy from first year level up to the final and fourth year. While school placements in teacher training are earmarked to give students the opportunity to gain practical experience and to interweave their classroom learning (theory) with practice, Jackson (2017) reports on a growing focus on non-placement WIL which allows students to connect with the workplace in a classroom or virtual setting and which, according to Burke, Marks-Maran, Ooms, Webb, and Cooper (2009) may include simulations, role plays and industry projects. Following serious deliberation on the timing and purpose of WIL for first year teacher trainees and the challenging lived experiences formerly reported by a number of students at the institution, the Faculty of Education opted for non-placement in the quest of living up to its responsibility to suitably socialize newcomers in their intended profession. In April 2019 first year contact students stayed on the different campuses of the university and completed a Professional Orientation Program (POP). The POP was developed by experienced teacher educators and presented by academic and professional members of faculty on each of the university's three campuses and online. This paper deals with the rationale, aims, conceptualization, and the design of the program. It furthermore shares data collected from participating students at one of the three sites with regards to their expectations and experiences of the POP, their views on the contribution of the program to raising awareness of professional teacher identity, and suggestions to improve the POP.

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[1] Corresponding author: Carolina Botha, Carolina.Botha@nwu.ac.za

RATIONALE OF THE PROFESSIONAL ORIENTATION PROGRAM (POP)

The main reasons for non-placement WIL for first year students in their first semester are:

- The majority of first year students find themselves in the critical stage of transition between being learners at school a mere four months ago to being students at university for only two months before embarking on their first placement. Adding to the complexity of the transition is the fact that these former learners are now starting their teacher training (Botha & Rens, 2018).
- Students are from different backgrounds. Main variables include coming from dysfunctional schools in some of the worst poverty-stricken areas of the country; highly functional schools in affluent communities; homogenous classrooms in terms of race, culture, language and/or gender; and multilingual and multicultural classrooms.
- Students emerging from results-driven basic education have not necessarily acquired the skill of critical reflection or self-reflection.
- Since mentoring programs and induction programs are not yet mandatory in South Africa, schools may place students with any teachers that are willing to accommodate them and not necessarily with those fit to be professional mentors.
- WIL as envisaged by the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications (MRTEQ) ought to support the professional development of student teachers (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2011)
- The practicum is envisaged to "provide an authentic context within which student teachers can experience and demonstrate the integration of the competences they developed" (DHET, 2011, p. 15). No competences will have developed two months into teacher training.

AIMS OF THE PROFESSIONAL ORIENTATION PROGRAM

Primarily the POP program aimed at laying a solid foundation for teacher training and creating a vision of what it takes to be a champion teacher in the dynamic educational environment of South Africa and beyond.

CONCEPTUALIZATION OF THE PROFESSIONAL ORIENTATION PROGRAM

In thinking about putting together a meaningful program, program planners were guided by the rationale of the program. However, because of the intricate nature of the teaching profession on the one hand and extensive real life teaching experience of teacher educators cum program planners on primary, secondary and tertiary level of education on the other hand, it was a challenge to identify specific themes and to minimize overlapping of content. In agreement that the 15-day POP ought to focus on aspects other than those covered by existing modules in the academic program, the following five themes were identified:

- the transition from school to university and the socialization of newcomers in university life and in their intended profession.
- students' individual identities and awareness of professional identity.
- the environment of education in the South African context.
- the task of teaching, and
- the impact of teaching.

Socializing the Individual into University Life and the Broader Landscape of Teaching

Program planners realized the need and importance for newcomers to teacher training, who find themselves in a critical stage of transition, not only to be socialized in the environment of university life and studies but also to be prepared for the dynamic social and professional environment in which they will work as teachers. Apart from the individual being challenged to cope cognitively and emotionally, entering university means that a student in the South African context might, for the first time ever, be challenged to share classes and experiences with people from different cultures, races, languages and socio-economic backgrounds. In this regard, POP had to address the development and fostering of students' soft skills aligned with the University's Code of Ethics (North-West University, 2018) which focuses on human dignity, loyalty, integrity, human connection, impartiality, empathy, freedom for all, tolerance, peaceful coexistence, intellectual and personal growth, intellectual autonomy, and critical thinking. A safe space needed to be created for students to explore the concept of diversity, not only among themselves but also in teaching.

The Broader Self and the Development of Pre-Professional Identity (PPI)

Linked to the development and fostering of student educators' soft skills it would be important, right at the start of training for the teaching profession, to challenge newcomers, both in terms of their individual identity, pondering questions such as Who are you? What are your values? Can you take care of yourself? Will you survive in this environment? Are you internally motivated? and in terms of the professional identity that ought to be developed during teacher training.

Jackson (2017), who conducted a study on the development of the professional identity of business students through work-integrated learning (WIL), claims that while students are still in the process of being trained, they form their own pre-professional identity (PPI), a less mature version of professional identity, which if effectively developed, has a positive influence on academic progress, engagement in learning and professional success (Nadelson et al., 2017). Jackson (2017, p. 837) mentions the critical importance of stakeholders engaging with processes for proactive PPI formation, arguing that institutions of higher education should allow students to "gain a clear understanding of and connection with the core values, expectations and behaviors central to most professions, thereby encouraging them to construct their own PPI aligned to these common elements" (Jackson, 2017, p. 835). Samuel and Stephens (2000) speculate whether student teachers are afforded enough time, space, and curriculum input to form their own professional identities. Time spent on WIL, which provides the space where practical work experience is interwoven with classroom learning and which is a non-negotiable part of all teacher training programs in South Africa and throughout the world, might address concerns raised by scholars such as Samuel and Stephens. Billett (2009) believes WIL provides an ideal platform for socializing students in their intended occupation while Jackson's study (2017) affirms the role of WIL in the development of early stages of PPI among students with specific reference to their understanding and awareness of the responsibilities, expectations and standards, attitudes, beliefs and ethical values associated with their profession. WIL placements might however seriously hamper the development of PPI if any negative effects of the 'apprenticeship of observation' (Lortie, 1975) are enhanced in situations where students are continuously exposed to poor practice or where they may not be properly mentored.

Given the fact that preprofessional identity and its more mature version, professional identity, is formed over time and that it involves a process of becoming, it would be naïve to think a lot might necessarily happen during the first three weeks of WIL as part of initial teacher training at the North-

West University (NWU). The Faculty of Education at the university however realized the need to live up to its responsibility to offer first year students the best opportunity possible to start becoming the type of teachers that South Africa needs as profiled by Paterson, Higgs, Wilcox, and Villenuve (2002) in terms of professional standards, expectations, ethical values, ideology and conduct which frame behavior and professional stance.

In dealing with socializing the first year student in life at university, the POP needed to make provision for students to grapple with their personal identity and interpersonal relationships focusing on topics such as self-knowledge, self-confidence, self-awareness, various forms of communication, stress and burnout, time management, setting of personal goals and resilience. In the professional domain the focus would be on building healthy professional relationships, power relationship, boundaries, conflict management and professional and ethical behavior.

The Environment

Thirdly, in agreement with Prince (2014, p. 679) who states that the environment, specifically *place*, actively contributes to the development of young people's future self-concept and enables them to "envision different future possible places", planners of the POP wished to raise student teachers' awareness of the educational environment and the ever-changing landscape regarding the profession in the 21st century.

First year teacher trainees who would ideally become agents of change in whichever workplace they would find themselves as professionals, needed to become aware of relevance, authenticity and responsiveness towards critical issues unique to different settings. The challenge would be to bring the real world of a practicing teacher into the POP program, focusing on praxis, rather than simply on theory and practice.

The Task of Teaching

In the fourth place program planners wished to focus on the task of teaching, specifically aspects of good and innovative pedagogy as identified by renowned scholars and researchers. Program planners realized that students who enroll for formal teacher education at the North West University do not report for training as blank slates. They arrive with certain perceptions of teaching and teachers based on their classroom observations and experiences that span over at least 12 years. Lortie, (1975), who conducted a sociological study on schoolteachers, coined the term 'apprenticeship of observation' in reference to the period that children spend observing teacher practice. He discusses the effect of these hours of observation with specific reference to anyone who wishes to qualify as a teacher and postulates that past experiences of the profession, which mostly started in kindergarten, greatly affects what the future teacher believes about teachers, teaching and learning, and overall instructional philosophies. In agreement with Lortie (1975), Borg (2006) states that schoolchildren simply observe what is visible to them without having the slightest idea of what constitutes a successful learning experience. This kind of superficial observation might create an impression with beginner teachers that teaching is simple and easy as it merely entails the mechanical transfer of information (Borg, 2006; Bullock, 2011; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Elliott & Calderhead, 1993; Wideen, Mayer-Smith, & Moon, 1998).

It is disconcerting to note that such mechanical transfer of information might even be appreciated as good practice by education students emerging from examination-driven and results-driven systems such as basic education in South Africa (Reyneke, 2016); even by those students who are capable of being analytical and critical of prior learning experiences (Mewborn & Tyminski, 2006). In agreement

with Bullough (1997) who states that whatever student teachers believe about teaching and learning is of vital concern to teacher education because it forms the basis for meaning and decision making, Darling-Hammond (2006) cautions that Lortie's *apprenticeship of observation* and its subsequent impressions may indeed be troublesome to teacher educators who wish to provide teacher trainees with a theoretical knowledge base while they strive to foster progressive, non-traditional perspectives.

In dealing with the negative effects of the phenomenon identified by Lortie, (Grossman, 1991, pp. 345, 350) suggests that teacher educators not only raise awareness of its existence and its effects on teaching, but also strive to "overcorrect" negative past experiences by "providing extreme examples of innovative practices". Based on this suggestion, architects of the POP included extreme examples of innovative pedagogical practice in the 21st century classroom which is set in the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Their planning also focused on the role of reflection in the process of deconstructing students' existing perceptions on effective and ineffective pedagogy (Calderhead & Robson, 1991; Fang, 1996; Feiman-Nemser & Buchmann, 1987) and the importance of students' self-reflection which researchers believe should be placed at the center of teacher training and practice (Loughran, 1995). An important focus of this theme was the profiling of these children as learners and the challenge of promoting self-directed learning and sustainable life skills with the implementation of innovative pedagogies.

Impact of Teaching

Finally, the program would deal with the impact of teachers on the lives of learners, and the impact of schools and teachers in the wider community. While aspects of this theme would already have been addressed in previous themes, it was deemed essential for first year teacher trainees to take note of the pivotal future role they would play in the emotional well-being and academic progress of diverse learners and in promoting wellness in the school and wider communities where they would find themselves.

PROGRAM DESIGN

The professional orientation program (POP) provided for the presentation of each theme to five groups of between eighty and hundred-and-ten students over a period of 15 days. Content for each of the themes was developed by teams of lecturers who volunteered to be part of the project. The themes were captured and covered in the program under the following headings:

- Theme 1: Excursion
- Theme 2: Self
- Theme 3: The environment
- Theme 4: The task of teaching
- Theme 5: The impact of teaching

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Since the faculty embarked on a challenging new route when it opted for non-placement WIL for first year students, the following primary research question had to be answered:

How effective was the POP from the perception of participating students?

Secondary questions were:

- What do first year teacher trainees believe about teaching, the teaching profession and their readiness to teach?
- What were students' views regarding the contribution of the POP in raising awareness of and developing pre-professional identity?
- Which part(s) of the POP was/were experienced as negative and which as positive?
- In which way, according to the student participants, could the POP be improved?

RESEARCH AIMS

- To determine whether the POP program was effective from the students' point of view.
- To identify negative and positive aspects of the program.
- To be informed on how the POP may be improved from the students' point of view.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Methodology

This qualitative study aimed at exploring the experiences of teacher trainees during the professional orientation program (POP) to test the rationale for and aims of a non-placement WIL for first year students.

A qualitative analysis of ninety reflective journals of the five hundred and thirty students who attended the POP on one site of the university, was used as a data source. Only using reflective journals might be seen as a limitation, because it was not combined with focus group or in-depth interviews, but it was clear that the quality of data in the reflective journals was sufficient for data saturation as students were expected to write in their journals on a daily basis instead of only evaluating the program, based on memory, at the end. Quality can, in itself, not be guaranteed through daily writing, but given the guiding prompts students were supplied with, they were offered the opportunity to create substantive reflections. Reflective writing also provided more detailed data on the personal experiences of students, rather than merely reporting on their experiences of the content and delivery of the program.

Data from the reflective journals were analyzed using thematic coding (Creswell 2014). This process involved the close reading and comparison of student responses, followed by sorting the responses into themes and categories. The identification of emerging themes and patterns regarding students' experiences of the POP, the mentioning of what they perceived as shortcomings and suggestions for improvement of the program, allowed the researchers to address the research questions and lead to attaining the aims of the research.

Philosophical Orientation

The POP for first year education students is underpinned by (Vygotsky's, (1978/1934, 1986) constructivist learning theory and by Bandura's (2001) socio-cognitive learning theory. Learning, in the former, links with and adopts from the socio-cultural context (Bonk & Cunningham, 1998) while personal agency is focused on in the latter (Bandura, 2001).

The four main principles of the constructivist theory relevant to this study are: (1) new knowledge is constructed; (2) knowledge is developed socially; (3) learning is a process of making sense of reality and the world; and (4) learning is effective when solving meaningful and challenging problems. These

principles were evident as first year students engaged and interacted socially with lecturers and peers in theme 1 and when they interacted with the presenters and facilitators of themes 2 to 4 and collaborated in groups to complete a variety of informal and formal assignments for each theme; some of which focused on meaningful and challenging real life problems faced by student- and practicing teachers. Engaging students in this way created the opportunity for them to construct and develop their own knowledge and understanding regarding teaching and profession. Personal agency (Bandura, 2001) was promoted by the fact that each student kept a journal in which written reflections were entered after each session.

Sampling Strategy

A random selection was done of ninety reflective journals from the five hundred and thirty students who attended the POP on one of the sites. In order to control the process of submission, students had been requested to submit their reflective journals on different scheduled times to two different offices. The first journals that had been submitted at one of the offices on the first day of submission, were selected for analysis.

Data Collection Method

In addition to attending 15 days of sessions where the themes were unpacked, each student was requested to keep a reflective journal throughout the process.

The research team trusted that when students needed to reflect on each session of the program and on each day of the program, any false perceptions of teaching and unfitting expectations of teacher training would be deconstructed while an awareness would be created of what it takes to be a champion teacher in the dynamic educational environment of South Africa and beyond.

Students were guided towards reflection-in-action, reflection-on-action and reflection-through-action. It was important to first introduce students to effective reflective practices as many of them might not have been engaged in such exercises before.

Rué, Font, and Cebrian (2013) explain that reflective writing gives students an opportunity to foster personal ownership of their development. Another advantage is a reduction in the gap between theory and practice (Bruno & Dell'Aversana, 2017). Aligned with the aims of the POP, it was important not only to foster personal reflection, but also to work towards group reflections on some aspects of the program. Groups would be made up of students from diverse backgrounds who would be challenged to listen to and respect each individual's input in order to record and share meaningful reflections.

Baker's four step model (Baker, 1996) was used to structure written reflections after each session of the POP:

- Step 1: Identification (select a significant experience).
- Step 2: Description (share detail e.g., thoughts and feelings regarding the experience).
- Step 3: Significance (derive personal meaning from the experience).
- Step 4: Implications (explain how the experience impacted you).

The following questions were provided as prompts that students could use to write their daily reflection:

- What I expected this morning when the session began.
- What I experienced today.
- What is the most important thing I learned today? Why do I think so?
- What do I want to learn more about, and why?
- What I enjoyed most about the day. Why?
- What surprised me today, and why?
- What I liked least about today. Why?
- What I struggled with today or what I had trouble dealing with.
- What frustrated me today? Why?
- How today will impact my career.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the institution for a larger project on the experiences and expectations of first year students. The ethics approval number is NWU-00479-17-A2.

DATA ANALYSIS: LISTENING TO STUDENT VOICES

The following themes were identified in the qualitative analysis of ninety reflective journals:

- Expectations of school-placements versus experience of POP.
- Perceptions of teaching and the teaching profession linked to apprenticeship of observation.
- Positive perceptions of the POP.
- Negative experiences.
- Suggestions for the improvement of the POP.

A discussion of what students wrote regarding each emerging theme follows:

Expectations of School Placements Versus Experience of Professional Orientation Program (POP)

The general feeling among first year students was one of disappointment when they learned that they would not be placed at schools for WIL but needed to remain on campus. For many students, WIL placement would mean going home for three weeks and returning to a former school. After being subjected to the POP however, feelings of disappointment generally made way for an appreciation of the program. Participant 11 wrote:

> Initially I was very negative about POP and the prospect of not going back to my own high school for my first WIL, but halfway through the program I realized the value that POP had for my future as a teacher.

In similar notion, Participant 31 stated:

> I thought going for practical through this period would be nice because I did not understand the whole purpose of POP, but now I see that I know nothing and going out to schools was not going to be easy without all the knowledge I gained here.

While the majority of students reported that their experience of the POP exceeded their expectations, a number of individuals stated their preference for school placement. The latter opinion however seemed to be related to personal experience of particular content of the program and the presentation of certain themes rather than the concept of the POP.

The fact that most students were under the impression that they were ready to go into schools as teachers in training a mere two months after enrolling at university links with their perception of teaching and the teaching profession derived at after spending at least twelve years observing how the job is done while they were pupils going through the school system.

Perceptions of Teaching and the Teaching Profession Linked to Apprenticeship of Observation

As an introduction to the reflective journal, students were asked to answer the question: Do you feel that you are ready and able to immediately take up a full-time teaching position?

More than half of the students in the sample reported that they felt ready to take up a full-time teaching position right away. Justifications for this perception included that they knew what was expected of a teacher, that they gained experience of teaching over the previous twelve years, that lesson presentation was not tough at all and that the job could be done by anyone who had a passion for teaching. .

Students that indicated that they were not ready to teach yet, mainly identified a lack of classroom management skills, commenting on the challenge to handle difficult classroom situations and maintain discipline. Some students acknowledged a lack of experience without indicating the type of experience that they lacked. They generally referred to not being able to assist learners yet.

Some students eluded to the need for content knowledge, but then immediately reverted back to the psycho-social aspects around the challenges of difficult classroom situations. An example of this would be where a student wrote that he needed to gain subject knowledge followed by the wish to help learners who face difficult situations. Another student acknowledged that she ought to learn more about actual teaching, adding that it was imperative to learn to work properly with children

Students had to answer the same question (Do you feel that you are ready and able to immediately take up a full-time teaching position?) at the end of the POP. A comparison of individual students' answers reveals that the majority of students who felt that they were ready to start teaching right away, were not that confident anymore. The following student entry reflects the general impression expressed by participants:

> The greatest thing I learnt during POP was before we started I was convinced that I was ready to immediately be a full time teacher if I got the opportunity. POP taught me that there was so much that I did not yet know. There are so many skills that I had to learn (Participant 7).

This links to the next theme that was identified.

Positive Perceptions of the Professional Orientation Program

What emerged from the data analysis was that most students felt positive about the POP.

Some of the adjectives used to describe the program were: successful, inspirational, valuable, eye-opening, practical exciting, relevant, and informative.

Most students reported that they gained from the experience as it contributed to their conceptualization of the foundational issues on their journey to becoming a teacher.

Themes that were dealt with during the orientation program, were considered informative and important in preparation for teaching practice. Participant 2 commented:

> Although there were some sessions where I could not find the connection between the content and teaching, the greater majority of the themes did however add value. It helped prepare me for situations I might encounter.

Another simply, albeit naively, stated "I now feel ready to go to a school".

Theme 2, that focused on personal and professional development, was identified by the majority of students as the most engaging and valuable.

While it was noted above that those students who felt that they were not ready to teach yet identified the lack of classroom management skills as a weakness, many commented on the role of the POP in creating awareness of the particular skills that needed to be acquired and developed in this regard.

Students stated that they gained knowledge of what it meant to behave professionally in the working environment, and they managed to make the connection between the content of the POP and the actual teaching environment. Students also reported that they enjoyed the practical interaction with presenters which contributed to their altered perception of what it meant to be a teacher. One student was surprised to learn that although she had many different facilitators during the sessions, they each had an individual story and through sharing their personal experiences as former teachers, a golden thread emerged. Through this she learned that there were core truths, values and practices that all good teachers shared. Many students also felt inspired by the passion they experienced from presenters for the different topics they had to cover. Students mentioned that the comments and recommendations that were made by their facilitators were positive, constructive and relevant to the learning process.

Many students also spent time reflecting on their understanding of diversity and how the presentations and the group-based activities embedded in the program challenged them to reflect on their perceptions of this concept. Students wrote that they engaged with the concept of diversity on a deeper level. One of the students shared that she initially had negative ideas about adversity but came to the realization that it could be a positive and exciting thing. Another participant realized that he had much to learn about different cultures and ways of doing and stated that he would not want to stand in a school classroom one day and unintentionally offend someone from a different racial group.

Negative Experiences

Overall students felt that the POP was too long and cumbersome.

Theme 4, that dealt with the task of teaching in the 21st century in the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution received the most negative criticism. The majority of students struggled to connect the content of this theme that dealt with pedagogical theory and innovative professional practice in preparation for their future careers as teachers, with their current lives.

Participant 82 remarked: "One part of theme 4 dealt with artificial intelligence and a story of a car driving itself that then ran over a lady. This has nothing to do with teaching".

Suggestions for the Improvement of Professional Orientation Program

Students suggested that the program be limited to two weeks (10 days instead of 15 days) and that the 6 hour days be shortened. A number of students suggested more practical activities, the use of different venues, and the utilization of outside spaces.

INTERPRETATION OF DATA

Fellenz (2016, p. 276) states that it is important for anyone being trained for a profession to know him-/herself in order to become, be and eventually start practicing as a professional since "the professional self is a subordinate subset of one's general self". In other words, only once a student has an idea of who he/she is, will it be possible for him/her to start developing a professional self. Fellenz (2016) sees the development of a professional self as a negotiated process in which the general self considers the demands of the profession as well as the social and other contextual elements. Trede, Macklin, and Bridges (2012) believe that during this process, the individual starts understanding the role played by certain values, morals and outlooks in the profession and the need arises to reconcile personal with professional understandings. It became clear from the data analysis, that the findings of the abovementioned research also translated to experience of POP.

Most students reported that, through the guiding prompts, they managed to critically reflect on their experiences instead of merely listing the activities of the day. The researchers got the impression that the participating students spent time unpacking their personal feelings, expectations and experiences about their personal and professional development as well as their future careers. These actions validated the role of the apprenticeship of observation (Lortie, 1975) in the conceptualization of the pre-professional identity (Jackson, 2016) of these first-year students.

We expected that students would initially be upset about not being placed at schools for their first WIL experience. While the data reflected their disappointment, it also confirmed what was expressed in the rationale of the POP, namely that students would mostly return to their former schools where they had been leaners a short while ago and that they would be under the impression that they would be ready to teach, mainly because of the apprenticeship of observation (Lortie 1975) that had not been challenged yet. Thus, the inclusion of theme 2 that focused on the development of students' personal and pre-professional identity (Jackson 2016) was justified, especially also with regard to participants remarking on the importance of getting to know themselves better in order to become successful teachers (Fellenz 2016). One student stated that it was important for student teachers to love who they were before they would be able to truly care for their learners. The positive experience of theme 2 can also be linked to the fact that it dealt with teacher attributes such as self-confidence and patience and the importance of these in dealing with challenges in the classroom. This highlights the importance of gaining and developing soft skills in preparation for the teaching profession (Botha & Rens, 2018).

Aligned with the development of soft skills, are students' comments regarding diversity. Comments quoted above in this regard, are especially valuable in terms of socializing students in the multicultural and multilingual context of the university and in laying the foundation for the preparation of teachers who will be expected to work in diverse settings. These comments reiterate the thinking of program planners when they worked on the rationale of the POP and realized that many of the first year students

would never have been exposed to interacting and working with people from different cultural backgrounds (Billet 2009).

The negative experience of theme 4 may be attributed to the fact that presenters of this theme, in alignment with Grossman (1991) actively strived to deconstruct apprenticeship of observation. While students' only frame of reference would be what they experienced as learners they might have felt overwhelmed by "extreme examples of innovative practice" (Grossman, 1991, p. 350) that align with the reality of 21st century classrooms in the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Only once they start learning about educational theories that underpin effective pedagogy and come to a thorough understanding of the dynamic educational environment, will they be able to make meaningful connections with the content of this theme.

Students' comments on the length of the sessions may be interpreted against the background of basic education that they recently emerged from. The duration of sessions at school is rarely longer than 35 minutes. Students would also not be used to being confronted by a series of presentations each day for 12 days (excluding the 3 days of the excursion) and being challenged to critically engage in thought-provoking activities and projects covered by the different themes.

LESSONS LEARNT

Based on the analysis and interpretation of the data it would be fair to say that the primary research question was answered. Students' overall positive experience of the program confirms that it was effective, and that faculty took the right step not to place first year teacher trainees at schools for the first round of WIL but to subject them to a carefully constituted POP instead. Furthermore, the rationale for the decision proved to be well-founded.

Going forward the Faculty needs to:

- notify first year students who have been admitted to study education in time that they will not be placed at schools for the first round of WIL to curb any false expectations.
- take note of student feedback in revising the POP. Program planners need to consider which themes to keep or replace. The content of remaining themes also needs to be revised.
- decide on the length of sessions and the duration of the entire program in order to ensure a more effective student experience.

This study offered opportunity for subsequent research. It is important to note the limitations to this study, including aspects like only using one source of data. During future studies, interviews and focus groups can add greater depth of data. Furthermore, the findings in this study cannot be generalized, but valuable suggestions from this study can be utilized in other WIL programs and research endeavors.

CONCLUSION

It was the belief of this tertiary institution that the time had come to question some of the dominant discourses and taken-for- granted assumptions about WIL and 1st year students' experience thereof.

The findings in this article suggest that this non-placement WIL program positively influenced the development of students' personal and pre-professional identities and created an awareness of the challenges posed by the profession. It laid a solid foundation for teacher training and created a vision of what it takes to be a champion teacher in the dynamic educational environment of South Africa and

beyond. Interaction among students from diverse cultural and ethnical backgrounds promoted a sense of community of practice and contributed to attaining graduate attributes.

One of the most valuable findings of POP was that many students re-confirmed their sense of surety in deciding to study teaching yet was provided with a reality check into the lived experience of teachers. The focus on reflective practice promoted personal growth and invited students to self-directed learning and critical thinking that can bridge the gap between theory and practice in preparing them for the adventure of WIL and for becoming super teachers.

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About the Journal

The International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning (IJWIL) publishes double-blind peer-reviewed original research and topical issues dealing with Work-Integrated Learning (WIL). IJWIL first published in 2000 under the name of Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education (APJCE). Since then the readership and authorship has become more international and terminology usage in the literature has favored the broader term of WIL, in 2018 the journal name was changed to the International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning.

In this Journal, WIL is defined as "*an educational approach that uses relevant work-based experiences to allow students to integrate theory with the meaningful practice of work as an intentional component of the curriculum. Defining elements of this educational approach requires that students engage in authentic and meaningful work-related task, and must involve three stakeholders; the student, the university, and the workplace*". Examples of practice include off-campus, workplace immersion activities such as work placements, internships, practicum, service learning, and cooperative education (Co-op), and on-campus activities such as work-related projects/competitions, entrepreneurships, student-led enterprise, etc. WIL is related to, but not the same as, the fields of experiential learning, work-based learning, and vocational education and training.

The Journal's main aim is to enable specialists working in WIL to disseminate research findings and share knowledge to the benefit of institutions, students, co-op/WIL practitioners, and researchers. The Journal desires to encourage quality research and explorative critical discussion that leads to the advancement of effective practices, development of further understanding of WIL, and promote further research.

The Journal is ongoing financially supported by the Work-Integrated Learning New Zealand (WILNZ), www.nzace.ac.nz and the University of Waikato, New Zealand, and received periodic sponsorship from the Australian Collaborative Education Network (ACEN) and the World Association of Cooperative Education (WACE).

Types of Manuscripts Sought by the Journal

Types of manuscripts sought by IJWIL is primarily of two forms; 1) *research publications* describing research into aspects of work-integrated learning and, 2) *topical discussion* articles that review relevant literature and provide critical explorative discussion around a topical issue. The journal will, on occasions, consider best practice submissions.

Research publications should contain; an introduction that describes relevant literature and sets the context of the inquiry. A detailed description and justification for the methodology employed. A description of the research findings - tabulated as appropriate, a discussion of the importance of the findings including their significance to current established literature, implications for practitioners and researchers, whilst remaining mindful of the limitations of the data, and a conclusion preferably including suggestions for further research.

Topical discussion articles should contain a clear statement of the topic or issue under discussion, reference to relevant literature, critical and scholarly discussion on the importance of the issues, critical insights to how to advance the issue further, and implications for other researchers and practitioners.

Best practice and program description papers. On occasions, the Journal also seeks manuscripts describing a practice of WIL as an example of best practice, however, only if it presents a particularly unique or innovative practice or was situated in an unusual context. There must be a clear contribution of new knowledge to the established literature. Manuscripts describing what is essentially 'typical', 'common' or 'known' practices will be encouraged to rewrite the focus of the manuscript to a significant educational issue or will be encouraged to publish their work via another avenue that seeks such content.

By negotiation with the Editor-in-Chief, the Journal also accepts a small number of *Book Reviews* of relevant and recently published books.