

Beyond Familiar Grounds: Expectations of Final Year Student Teachers on Being Placed in Unfamiliar Schools during their Teaching Practice

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Abstract

This empirical study investigates the expectations and perceptions of final-year student teachers who are placed in unfamiliar schools during their teaching practicum. The research aims to understand how student teachers derive meaning from unfamiliar experiences, particularly those that challenge their existing assumptions and beliefs. The study utilises Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory as its lens. This theoretical framework provides a solid foundation for exploring the internal transformations student teachers undergo as they confront and adapt to novel teaching contexts during their teaching practice. Through qualitative data collected from semi-structured interviews, the study investigated how these student-teachers anticipate working in new and diverse educational environments that extend beyond their comfort zones. The research involved 20 final-year student teachers from a South African University of Technology, each assigned to schools that significantly differed from their previous placements in terms of location, language, and cultural context. Thematic analysis reveals that while initial expectations were characterized by anxiety, uncertainty, and concerns about classroom management and cultural adaptation, many participants also expressed a strong desire for professional growth, resilience-building, and exposure to varied teaching situations. The findings underscore the dual nature of unfamiliar school placements, presenting both challenges and opportunities for transformative learning. The study concludes with recommendations for targeted support mechanisms to better prepare student teachers for such placements, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness of initial teacher education programs.

Keywords: *anxiety, classroom management, cultural adaptation, resilience-building, teacher education*

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INTRODUCTION

Teaching practice, also known as work-integrated learning or school-based learning, is a central pillar of teacher education. It allows pre-service teachers to engage in real classroom experiences, apply theoretical knowledge, and develop a professional teaching identity (Caires, Almeida, & Vieira, 2012). In South Africa, the *Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications (MRTEQ)* emphasize the significance of structured, supervised teaching practice as essential for the development of competent and reflective practitioners (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2015). Accordingly, teacher education programs have the responsibility not only to expose student-teachers to diverse school environments but also to ensure adequate support structures for their professional development.

Historically, many universities have placed student-teachers in schools within or near their hometowns, drawing on the assumption that contextual familiarity can reduce the stress and logistical difficulties associated with school-based learning. However, some institutions, including the University of Technology, where this study is based, have recently introduced policies that assign fourth-year students to schools within the vicinity of the university, rather than to their hometown schools. This move, while well-intentioned, raises important pedagogical and psychological questions. For instance, how do students perceive this shift? What expectations, anxieties, or uncertainties do they experience? And how might these affect their learning, adaptation, and professional growth?

The reasoning behind this shift is that placing students in unfamiliar contexts may enhance their capacity for adaptability, critical reflection, and professional autonomy qualities essential for effective teaching in South Africa's diverse schooling landscape (Du Plessis & Sunde, 2017). Again, placement in unfamiliar schools can introduce a myriad of challenges, including navigating unfamiliar school cultures, adapting to diverse student populations, and adjusting to different teaching methodologies (Hardy, 1999). These challenges, while potentially stressful (Admiraal, 2020), can also foster adaptability,

**Beyond Familiar Grounds: Expectations of Final Year Student Teachers on
Being Placed in Unfamiliar Schools during their Teaching Practice**
Paseka Patric Mollo & Mokete Letuka

resilience, and a deeper understanding of the complexities of the teaching profession. Examining the expectations of student teachers in these unfamiliar settings provides valuable insights into their preparedness, anxieties, and aspirations, which can inform the design of more effective support systems and professional development opportunities. Furthermore, understanding the congruence or discrepancies between student teachers' expectations and their actual experiences in unfamiliar schools can highlight areas where teacher education programs may need to enhance their curriculum or provide more targeted support.

From the perspective of Transformative Learning Theory (TLT), these placements can be understood as dynamic educational ecosystems where students interact with new physical, social, and institutional conditions that either support or challenge their learning (Sterling, 2004; Gough, 2014). TLT emphasises the importance of integrating place-based learning, inclusive pedagogy, and responsive institutional practices that promote equity, well-being, and resilience, which are particularly crucial when students are removed from familiar support networks.

Moreover, the move aligns with a broader vision of education articulated in the *Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4)*, which calls for inclusive, equitable, and quality education that prepares learners to thrive in complex, changing environments (UNESCO, 2017). However, this transition is not without tension. Student-teachers may experience discomfort, cultural dissonance, or logistical barriers, all of which can influence their motivation, engagement, and ultimately, their performance during teaching practice. This study aims to investigate the perceptions, expectations, and concerns of fourth-year student-teachers as they prepare for their final teaching practice in schools located outside their hometowns.

Data will be collected during a send-off workshop specifically designed to prepare them for this placement. By capturing students' voices and exploring their lived experiences, this study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how teacher education programs can better design, support, and contextualize school-based learning in a way that is both pedagogically sound and personally meaningful.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing research suggests that the expectations of pre-service teachers are influenced by a variety of factors, including their prior experiences, personal beliefs, and the information they receive from teacher education programs and peers (Parkes & Holden, 2024). The availability and use of technology can also influence pre-service teachers' expectations of their placement schools (Martinović & Zhang, 2011). When expectations are not met, student teachers may experience frustration, disappointment, and a decline in motivation (Mokoena, 2012). The level of support and guidance provided by mentor teachers has been consistently identified as a critical factor influencing the success of student teachers during their teaching practice. Effective mentors provide constructive feedback, model effective teaching practices, and offer emotional support to help student teachers navigate the classroom challenges (Gill & Dalgarno, 2017). The culture and resources of the placement school are also key determinants of the teaching practice experience (Gill & Dalgarno, 2017). Student teachers placed in schools with supportive administrations, collaborative colleagues, and adequate resources are more likely to thrive and develop into effective educators.

The unique challenges and opportunities presented by unfamiliar school settings warrant further investigation. Unfamiliarity can stem from various factors, such as differences in socioeconomic status, cultural diversity, or the presence of specialized programs. While such placements can broaden student teachers' perspectives and enhance their adaptability, they may also require additional support to navigate unfamiliar contexts and meet the diverse needs of students. Therefore, the study of student teachers' expectations in unfamiliar schools is crucial for several reasons. First, it can inform the design of more targeted and effective teacher education programs that adequately prepare pre-service teachers for the realities of diverse classroom settings. Second, it can help identify specific areas where student teachers may need additional support during their internships, such as cultural sensitivity training, classroom management strategies for diverse learners, or strategies for working with students with special needs. Third, it can provide valuable insights into the factors that contribute to a positive and enriching teaching practice experience, even in challenging environments.

**Beyond Familiar Grounds: Expectations of Final Year Student Teachers on
Being Placed in Unfamiliar Schools during their Teaching Practice
Paseka Patric Mollo & Mokete Letuka**

Furthermore, understanding the expectations of final-year student teachers placed in unfamiliar schools has implications for teacher retention and the overall quality of the teaching profession. When student teachers feel adequately prepared and supported during their teaching practice, they are more likely to enter the profession with confidence and a commitment to long-term success. Conversely, negative internship experiences can lead to disillusionment and attrition, exacerbating the existing teacher shortage in many regions (Andrews & Richmond, 2019). By addressing the needs and expectations of student teachers during this critical period, we can contribute to a more sustainable and effective teacher workforce that is equipped to meet the diverse needs of 21st-century learners.

Experiences in schools are critical to the education of teachers (Gallego, 2001). Student teaching experiences are valuable opportunities for students to develop their professional practice (Tomlinson et al., 1994). Experiences in classroom teaching caused students to focus less on subject matter and maintaining order in the classroom (Lamote & Engels, 2010). Experiences associated with learning the pragmatic facets of professional practice were more valued by student teachers compared to learning the conceptual aspects of initial teacher education (Tang et al., 2015). It is critical that conversations transpire among student teachers, their colleagues, their mentor teachers, and themselves (Crawford et al., 2021). This type of discussion enables the exchange of thoughts and ideas that may not have been considered otherwise (Eröz-Tuğa, 2012). This further creates the opportunity for student teachers to find their strengths and weaknesses.

The creation of an equal interactive teaching environment can be started by changing the roles of teachers and students (Chu, 2019). The role of contemporary teachers in education has become increasingly complex, yet it has also given learners the responsibility for their own learning (Ramirez, 2020). The new and contemporary methods of teaching may involve group discussions, collaborative learning, and problem-solving skills, which can enhance students' communication skills (Rafique & Juman, 2021). When pre-service teachers use real-life situations in their lessons, it helps students relate the material to their own lives (Dickerson et al., 2018). Teacher preparation programs are very important and must be prioritized by

**Beyond Familiar Grounds: Expectations of Final Year Student Teachers on
Being Placed in Unfamiliar Schools during their Teaching Practice
Paseka Patric Mollo & Mokete Letuka**

universities and institutions responsible for graduating teachers (Tabieh et al., 2022). Teacher quality has a direct impact on students' learning outcomes (Dubash et al., 2020). Better teaching in elementary and secondary schools has been shown to increase students' college participation rates, raise their subsequent earnings, and improve other long-term outcomes ("Developing a Proficient and Motivated Teacher Workforce in the Philippines," 2016).

Teachers' teaching quality is expected to align with the 21st-century curriculum goals, which aim to equip students with valuable skills and enhance their knowledge and capabilities in their chosen fields (Islam et al., 2022). The internship period is crucial in determining the quality of teachers, as it fosters effective teaching practices (Kwaah & Palojoki, 2018). It is essential to consider the variables that may influence student teachers' expectations, given the significant role of practical experience in teacher preparation. Cultivating reflective practice is also essential to aiding student teachers in connecting their experiences to theory. Through reflection, student teachers can gain insights into their actions, assumptions, and beliefs, which can then inform their future teaching practices (Silva et al., 2023). Furthermore, by promoting reflective practice, teacher education programs can empower student teachers to become lifelong learners who are committed to continuous professional growth (Eröz-Tuğa, 2012). The teaching practice experience is crucial in determining the quality of teachers, as it fosters effective teaching practices (Fessehatsion & Peng, 2020; Mancenido et al., 2025). It is essential to consider the variables that may influence student teachers' expectations, given the significance of practical experience in teacher preparation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework underpinning this study is Transformative Learning Theory, as developed by Mezirow (1978). Transformative Learning Theory describes the process by which individuals critically examine and potentially reshape their deeply held beliefs, perspectives, and assumptions (Mezirow, 2018). Mezirow argues that learning involves not merely the acquisition of new information, but also a fundamental shift in one's frame of reference, the lens through which one interprets experience. This transformation occurs through critical reflection and rational discourse (Mezirow, 2003), allowing

**Beyond Familiar Grounds: Expectations of Final Year Student Teachers on
Being Placed in Unfamiliar Schools during their Teaching Practice
Paseka Patric Mollo & Mokete Letuka**

individuals to move towards more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative perspectives.

This paper examines Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory as a robust conceptual framework for analysing the experiences of final-year student teachers placed in unfamiliar school environments during their teaching practice period. This theoretical lens is particularly pertinent, given that such placements often induce "disorienting dilemmas," a core tenet of Mezirow's theory, which necessitate a re-evaluation of pre-existing expectations and pedagogical assumptions (Code, Ralph, & Forde, 2022). Mezirow's theory, rooted in psychoanalytic and critical social theory, posits that transformative learning involves a profound shift in one's frame of reference, often catalysed by such disorienting experiences (Sveinunggaard, 1992). This transformative process compels individuals to critically reflect on their established beliefs and perspectives, thereby fostering a more integrated and nuanced understanding of their professional identity (Witt et al., 2023). Specifically, this paper will explore how disorienting dilemmas, triggered by unfamiliar school contexts, lead to critical reflection and subsequent perspective transformations among student teachers, thereby enhancing their professional competence (Lalor, Lorenzi & Rami, 2015). This theoretical framework offers a powerful lens for understanding how student teachers adapt and grow from challenging internship experiences, moving beyond the mere assimilation of new information to a profound reshaping of their professional outlook (Khabanyane, Maimane, & Ramabenyane, 2014). The exploration will delve into how these disorienting experiences, such as mismatched expectations between student teachers and cooperating teachers, can serve as catalysts for significant learning (Rajuan, Beijaard & Verloop, 2009). This includes an examination of how new teacher educators, often defaulting to an impoverished pedagogical model, might undergo transformative learning when confronted with the differing demands and cultures of novel workplace settings (Field, 2012).

Furthermore, the framework enables an investigation into how student teachers, through reflective practices, reframe their observations and interactions within these new environments, leading to a more sophisticated understanding of pedagogical nuances (Scherff & Singer, 2011). This process involves a shift from an uncritical

**Beyond Familiar Grounds: Expectations of Final Year Student Teachers on
Being Placed in Unfamiliar Schools during their Teaching Practice**
Paseka Patric Mollo & Mokete Letuka

acceptance of educational norms to a more discerning approach, wherein student teachers actively construct new knowledge frameworks (Lalor et al., 2015). This paradigm shift from assimilation to constructive knowledge building is crucial for developing adaptive and resilient educators who can navigate diverse educational landscapes (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2011). Moreover, the theory offers insights into how student teachers integrate new understandings and revise their pedagogical approaches, moving beyond mere technical skill acquisition to a deeper conceptual understanding of their role within varied educational systems (Kheang, 2019). This exploration will also consider how the negotiation between individual agency and contextual factors, often fraught with struggle, contributes to the development of a professional identity, particularly when confronted with unfamiliar settings (Hsieh, 2014). The theoretical framework also facilitates an examination of how student teachers develop a more complex understanding of teaching and learning, recognizing the intricate interplay between theory and practice in real-world educational contexts (Hidalgo, 2016). This involves a critical examination of their personal epistemologies, directing them towards effective learning within practice settings and integrating this learning into their university programs (Billett, 2015).

Ultimately, this framework offers a robust foundation for examining how the critical examination of social conditions influencing educational practice, which can often be a source of discomfort, can facilitate perspective transformation in student teachers (Faulkner & Crowhurst, 2014). This paper will specifically investigate how final-year student teachers, when faced with unexpected challenges in unfamiliar school environments, engage in critical self-reflection, leading to a re-evaluation of their teaching philosophies and ultimately, a more refined pedagogical approach. This analysis will further illuminate how these experiences contribute to the development of professional competence, fostering a deeper understanding of assessment as a constructivist and reflective practice (Lalor et al., 2015).

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research design, which, according to Lim (2025), aims to explore how individuals perceive and interpret their real-life experiences, perceptions, and emotions, was employed in this study. The study was positioned within an interpretivist paradigm (Treagust and Won, 2023) to investigate the expectations of final-year student teachers as they prepare for their teaching practicum in schools with which they are unfamiliar. Qualitative design was the most feasible approach for this study, as it enabled an in-depth understanding of student teachers' expectations, concerns, and anxieties as they prepared for a significant transition in their learning journey (McLeod, 2024). The study was framed by Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory, which, in the view of Pang, Cox, and Acheson (2023), emphasizes the role of critical reflection in enabling individuals to re-evaluate their perspectives and assumptions when navigating challenging and unfamiliar situations. This theory best suits this study because the participants in this study (student teachers) are faced with and must navigate the challenging prospect of completing their teaching practicum in unfamiliar schools situated in unfamiliar towns. The construction of research questions, data gathering instruments, and data analysis was guided by this theoretical framework.

Sampling

Twenty final year student teachers at a University of Technology were purposively selected as participants in this study. Purposive sampling was most appropriate for this study because the goal was to gather a contextual and in-depth understanding (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2024) of their expectations, fears, and anxieties as they prepare for teaching practicum in geographically, linguistically, and culturally unfamiliar territory. The student teachers completed their teaching practicum in schools in their hometowns for the last three years. Furthermore, due to its nature to select information-rich participants who are believed to be best positioned to provide relevant information (Bouncken, Czakon & Schmitt, 2025), purposive sampling was employed in this study to answer the research questions. The student teachers are considered information-rich, as they will be communicating their expectations and the emotions they are experiencing regarding placement in unfamiliar environments.

Data collection

The university's teaching practicum committee organized a send-off workshop that aimed to prepare students for the upcoming practicum, during which data were collected. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 20 student teachers, which Ruslin, Mashuri, Rasak, Alhabsyi, and Syam (2022) assert enables the revelation of refined insights into a phenomenon being investigated, by facilitating an in-depth understanding of student teachers' lived realities. To elicit the student teachers' expectations, anxieties, anticipated challenges, and possible areas for development during the forthcoming placement, 20- to 30-minute-long interviews based on an interview schedule were conducted.

According to Smith, Chen, and Liu (2008), when interviews are conducted in a language understood by both researchers and participants, and transcribed word-for-word (verbatim), refined meanings are conveyed, and core meanings are retained. English-language interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim in this study to capture and preserve conceptual integrity. Knott, Rao, Summer, and Teeger (2022) argue that semi-structured interviews allow researchers to probe participants' responses meaningfully, thereby soliciting more precise data. The semi-structured nature of the interviews in this study allowed student teachers to communicate and expand on aspects of their expectations, anxieties, and anticipated issues that were most important to them.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis, as described by Kiger and Varpio (2022), was adopted in this study. This approach involved becoming familiar with the data, code generation, theme identification, and refinement. Waeraas (2022) asserts that thematic analysis is best suited for exploring shared meaning among participants' responses, as well as understanding emerging patterns, which allows researchers to conduct a rigorous examination of data without compromising depth. Participants in this study provided similar responses to some interview questions. These responses were categorized into themes that were analysed in depth.

**Beyond Familiar Grounds: Expectations of Final Year Student Teachers on
Being Placed in Unfamiliar Schools during their Teaching Practice
Paseka Patric Mollo & Mokete Letuka**

Themes emerged from the student teachers' raw emotional responses, such as pre-placement anxiety, and their *impact on performance*. Manual coding, as described by Ahmed, Mohammed, Nashwan, Ibrahim, Abdalla, Ameen, and Khdir (2025), is a deeply immersive process where the researcher interacts with the data to identify recurring concepts, which were used in this study. Recurring words such as *uncomfortable, not sure, uneasy, and worried* were identified from participants' responses, coded together, and eventually led to the formation of themes.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

Participants in this study were consulted, and the study's findings were shared with them so they could validate the accuracy of how their responses were interpreted. McKim (2023) refers to this process as "ensuring credibility through member checking." To ensure transferability, which Brown, Stalmeijer, and O'Brien (2025) also term "Applicability", which alludes to the provision of adequate context to help readers to establish relevance, thick descriptions of the study background and participants were provided. Dependability was ensured through peer debriefing as described by Hadi, Ansong, and Solomon (2019). The findings of this study were shared with colleagues within the teaching practice committee, who were tasked with challenging interpretations and revealing possible bias. Lastly, confirmability was guaranteed through peer audits, as described by Ahmed (2024).

Ethical considerations

Student teachers who participated in this study were guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality, as outlined by Moosa (2013), who asserts that researchers have an obligation to protect participants' privacy by anonymizing their identities. The identities of the student teachers as participants in this study were never revealed, nor could any response be traced to a particular student teacher. Additionally, before the student teachers could answer any interview question, they were transparently informed of the study's aim and how the findings would be disseminated, and they voluntarily provided informed consent to participate in the study. In the view of Xu, Baysari, Stocker, Leow, Day, and Carland (2020), informed consent involves ensuring

**Beyond Familiar Grounds: Expectations of Final Year Student Teachers on
Being Placed in Unfamiliar Schools during their Teaching Practice
Paseka Patric Mollo & Mokete Letuka**

that participants fully understand what they are getting involved in, so that they may participate voluntarily in a study without coercion. The following section presents the detailed results of this study.

RESULTS

This empirical study employed a qualitative approach to explore the expectations of final-year student teachers during their placements in unfamiliar school settings. In-depth semi-structured interviews with a subset of participants were conducted to gather qualitative data on their preconceived notions, concerns, and anticipated challenges and benefits (Fajet et al., 2005). The qualitative interviews provided rich, contextualized insights into the nuances of these expectations, revealing underlying motivations and the specific experiences that shaped their perspectives (Lalor et al., 2015). The data collection process was conducted during the student teachers' send-off workshop to capture their expectations before they began their school placements.

The data was presented in a table format. Alphanumeric codes were used to protect the participants' identities. Given that the participants were student teachers, the alpha code "ST" was used, along with a unique number assigned to each individual. For instance, **Student Teacher One** was identified using the alphanumeric code **ST1**.

To address the research questions of this study, a thematic analysis was conducted on the collected data concerning student teachers' expectations of unfamiliar school placements during their teaching practicum. The following themes emerged from this analysis:

Theme 1: Pre-Placement Anxiety and Vulnerability due to behavioural and cultural differences

All responses indicate that student teachers experience a level of anxiety and insecurity due to the knowledge that they are about to enter an unfamiliar school environment, often stemming from a fear of the school's unfamiliar culture or an inner fear that they might not meet the school's standards. Qi, Li, Xie, and Zeng (2023) demonstrate that student teachers placed in unfamiliar school settings linguistically and culturally undergo high levels of pre-teaching practicum stress and anxiety. Additionally, Mardhatillah, Widiati, and Sujiatmoko

**Beyond Familiar Grounds: Expectations of Final Year Student Teachers on
Being Placed in Unfamiliar Schools during their Teaching Practice
Paseka Patric Mollo & Mokete Letuka**

(2024) refer to student teachers' concerns over different mentor and learner attitudes as significant stressors for student teachers going into teaching practicum.

Here are some of the verbatim responses by the participants (student teachers) in this study, to a question that requested them to describe any anxieties or fears they might have regarding teaching practicum placement in schools they had never been placed in before, in unfamiliar towns than they are accustomed to:

ST 5 *"The fear of having to work with new people that I do not know, and the manner in which they do things. Having to adapt the ways of that school and its learners. Not knowing the learner is also the anxiety that I have because I do not know how their attitude will be like toward me."*

ST 12 *"I am scared of how learners will receive me, in terms of respect. Most of the schools in these locations are known to have students who are problematic. So, I have fears on that, also, how am I gonna reprimand them if they are being disrespectful?"*

ST 17 *"Having to get to know new ways of doing things, especially in the staff room with the teachers. Dealing with different learners who are from different cultures, speaking different languages."*

Theme 2: Uncertainty Around School and Mentor Support

In this theme, the participants highlighted the uncertainties surrounding the support provided by mentor teachers, as well as the roles these mentors are expected to fulfil in unfamiliar school environments during teaching practicums. According to Mpate (2024), student teachers placed in new settings often grapple with concerns about the effectiveness of communication with their mentors and whether these mentors will be willing to engage with and support them constructively. This uncertainty, as noted by Mbhiza, Nkambule, and Masinire (2024), contributes significantly to the stress and anxiety experienced by student teachers entering their practicums. Additionally, Eksi and Yakisik (2016) contend that unfamiliar school environments, unhelpful staff, and the presence of unfamiliar schoolteachers or mentors all exacerbate anxiety levels among student teachers.

**Beyond Familiar Grounds: Expectations of Final Year Student Teachers on
Being Placed in Unfamiliar Schools during their Teaching Practice
Paseka Patric Mollo & Mokete Letuka**

The thematic analysis of the interviews highlighted the vital role of mentorship and school-level support in alleviating the challenges stemming from unmet expectations (Plessis & Sunde, 2017; Rusznyak et al., 2022). Furthermore, the findings emphasize the importance of teacher preparation programs that explicitly address the complexities inherent in unfamiliar school contexts, thereby better equipping student teachers for the diverse realities they encounter during their professional placements (Jones & Saye, 2017).

Below are some of the student teachers' verbatim responses to the question relating to their concerns about the school's and mentors' support rendered to them:

ST3 *"Being placed under a mentor teacher that is strict and expects you to do things alone without offering you any help, and also having to deal with learners, especially those involved in gangs and are under the influence of drugs."*

ST9 *"As I'd be new to that school, I am hoping and praying that I receive a warm welcome and adequate support from the school staff and mentor teacher. Especially the mentor teacher because I will be there for 4 weeks, which means that I am gonna need their support."*

ST14 *"No, I am not sure if the teachers there will give me the support that is adequate, but I'm hoping for the best and willing to like the experience. I say this because I have never worked with teachers with a different race than me, which makes me wonder how the working relations will be."*

Theme 3: Expectations Reality Dissonance

Before beginning their teaching practice, many student teachers expressed specific expectations regarding the learning environment, the quality of mentorship, and the challenges they anticipated encountering in unfamiliar schools, often influenced by their previous observations and experiences (Parkes & Holden, 2024). Their expectations centred on the presence of strong support systems from cooperating teachers, as well as opportunities for independent pedagogical experimentation. Many anticipated receiving a warm welcome, enhancing their knowledge, and gaining confidence in their teaching abilities. Although they faced challenges related to

**Beyond Familiar Grounds: Expectations of Final Year Student Teachers on
Being Placed in Unfamiliar Schools during their Teaching Practice
Paseka Patric Mollo & Mokete Letuka**

uncertainty, classroom management, and cultural adaptation, they embraced these obstacles and looked forward to applying the skills and knowledge they acquired from the university. For instance, some noted:

ST10 *"I want to learn and be the best teacher that I can be. As this profession to me is a calling, so this final teaching practice is to sharpen me to be the best I can be."*

ST14 *"I expect this final teaching to challenge me and help me grow professionally. I hope to improve my classroom management skills, refine my lesson planning, and gain more confidence in delivering lessons."*

ST7 *"In my hometown, I was familiar with everything; teachers were my former teachers, and everything from the rural school. But this is a huge school, I don't know the teacher, everything is unfamiliar, the school has stairs, and everything is new. I am so nervous."*

Theme 4: Impact on Performance and Engagement

The envisaged "reality shock" that student teachers expect to experience may significantly impact their pedagogical performance and overall engagement with the teaching practice. This section outlines the potential consequences of this dissonance, which include potential declines in teaching efficacy, reduced motivation, and altered perceptions of the teaching profession itself. Specifically, this dissonance may be linked to increased levels of stress and anxiety among participants, directly correlating with declines in teaching performance, particularly in areas that require adaptive problem-solving and prompt decision-making. Consequently, many participants reported feelings of incompetence and a sense of being underestimated by their learners, which further intensified their anxiety and impeded effective material delivery. Some participants noted that:

ST5 *"I would like to believe that I'm emotionally intelligent which helps me not to dwell on things that makes me sad. My lessons won't be affected by negative remarks."*

**Beyond Familiar Grounds: Expectations of Final Year Student Teachers on
Being Placed in Unfamiliar Schools during their Teaching Practice
Paseka Patric Mollo & Mokete Letuka**

ST6 *“Being scared results to nervousness, which will affect my ability to teach, when you are introduced to a new environment you try to be too perfect, which lead to mistakes in teaching.”*

ST13 *“My emotional state will affect me in a bad way especially during the first week as it will be a new environment, I will be anxious, trying to adapt and form relationships with new faces.”*

ST19 *“Yes, as much as I’m nervous I am also happy that will work with different staff members in new school. I am willing to have an experience of working with new people.”*

DISCUSSION

These findings highlight a critical need to bridge the gap between pre-service teacher education and the realities of the professional setting, particularly for those placed in unfamiliar environments (Field, 2012). This underscores the necessity for teacher preparation programs to incorporate more authentic, immersive experiences that accurately reflect the complexities of diverse school contexts (Catalana, 2020). Addressing this issue requires a multifaceted approach, including enhanced mentorship programs and more explicit discussions about potential challenges during initial teacher education to mitigate the impact of this "reality shock" (Kim & Cho, 2013; Field, 2012). Conversely, robust support systems, including consistent mentorship and collaborative environments, were pivotal in mitigating these negative impacts and fostering resilience among the student teachers (Dadvand et al., 2023). This underscores the indispensable role of effective mentorship in navigating the complexities of unfamiliar school settings, as it directly influences a student teacher's ability to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, thereby fostering professional growth (Andrews & Richmond, 2019). Such structured support frameworks, when effectively implemented, can alleviate the initial stressors faced by new educators, thereby increasing their retention rates and overall effectiveness in the classroom (Dias-Lacy & Guirguis, 2017). Indeed, comprehensive induction programs and ongoing professional development opportunities are crucial in supporting novice teachers,

ensuring they are well-equipped to manage the demanding nature of the profession (Falk, 2012).

The challenges inherent in teaching, such as unrealistic demands, can be mitigated by fostering strong bonds with students and promoting collaboration among staff, which contributes to a more fulfilling professional experience (Xu et al., 2023). This collaborative environment is particularly beneficial during internship periods, as it provides a robust support system for student teachers navigating unfamiliar school contexts (Putman & Polly, 2021). This support system can help student teachers develop a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of classroom management and pedagogical adaptation in diverse settings, thereby enhancing their professional competence and reducing feelings of isolation (Grudnoff, 2011). Moreover, collaborative experiences during teaching practice significantly improve pre-service teachers' attitudes toward integrating effective collaboration within their own future practice, even if initial measures of collaborative behaviour might not immediately reflect this attitudinal shift (Smith et al., 2003). Such collaborative frameworks are instrumental in bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge acquired in university settings and the practical application of pedagogical skills within diverse classroom environments (Genc, 2016). This collaboration fosters a more comprehensive understanding of the teaching profession, equipping student teachers with the adaptability and resilience required to navigate the complexities of unfamiliar school environments (Massa et al., 2021; Mayer, 2002).

Furthermore, the development of relational resilience, characterized by the ability to navigate complex interactions and build strong relationships within the school community, is crucial for student teachers placed in unfamiliar settings, as it directly impacts their well-being and professional growth (Cornu, 2009). This is particularly important, given that positive and supportive relationships are crucial for healthy development and resilience, including those formed within educational institutions (Lang et al., 2013). The findings from this study highlight the profound influence of peer support and mentor guidance on the successful integration of student teachers into new professional environments, emphasizing that strong interpersonal connections can significantly mitigate the stress associated with unfamiliarity. These findings corroborate previous research on the

**Beyond Familiar Grounds: Expectations of Final Year Student Teachers on
Being Placed in Unfamiliar Schools during their Teaching Practice
Paseka Patric Mollo & Mokete Letuka**

importance of collaborative action research in fostering positive mentor-mentee relationships and enhancing the professional development of both preservice and experienced teachers (Levin & Rock, 2003). This reciprocal relationship, where experienced educators act as mentors, provides valuable feedback and guidance to pre-service teachers, while simultaneously encouraging in-service teachers to reflect on their own practices and theoretical underpinnings (Genc, 2016). This dynamic exchange not only enhances the pre-service teachers' practical skills but also enriches the mentors' pedagogical insights, fostering a continuous cycle of professional learning and adaptation within the educational ecosystem (Martinez et al., 2022; Chaliès et al., 2019). This ongoing professional development, particularly through reflective practice and peer mentoring, is instrumental in cultivating "reflective practitioners" who are continuously aware of the need for further professional improvement and better equipped to handle novel educational environments (Goldberg, 2018; Nguyen & Ngo, 2017). Such adaptability is a cornerstone for fostering resilience, which is often cultivated through a dynamic interplay of individual attributes and contextual factors (Beltman, Mansfield & Price, 2011). Research indicates that individual attributes, such as self-efficacy and altruistic motivations, serve as crucial protective factors for teacher resilience (Beltman et al., 2011).

CONCLUSION

The findings necessitate a re-evaluation of current teacher preparation curricula to integrate more practical, experience-based learning opportunities and to simulate the diverse challenges inherent in unfamiliar school environments. This involves not only enhancing pedagogical content knowledge but also developing robust strategies for classroom management, addressing student diversity, and promoting cultural competency, particularly within unfamiliar socio-economic and cultural contexts.

Furthermore, resilience is significantly influenced by emotional intelligence, enabling teachers to manage the intense emotional demands of the profession effectively. This interplay between internal resources and external support systems, such as collegial networks and

**Beyond Familiar Grounds: Expectations of Final Year Student Teachers on
Being Placed in Unfamiliar Schools during their Teaching Practice
Paseka Patric Mollo & Mokete Letuka**

institutional provisions, is vital for sustaining teacher well-being and professional longevity, particularly in challenging contexts. This highlights the need for comprehensive resilience-building programs within teacher education, focusing on both individual psychological resources and systemic support structures. Teacher education programmes must therefore adopt a multifaceted approach that integrates psychological support with practical strategies for navigating diverse school environments. Such programmes should emphasise the development of adaptive coping mechanisms and the cultivation of strong professional identities that can withstand the pressures inherent in an evolving educational landscape. This comprehensive approach can significantly enhance pre-service teachers' self-resilience, a crucial factor in their ability to respond positively to challenging professional situations and maintain their commitment to the profession. This perspective aligns with research emphasizing resilience as a multi-faceted and dynamic construct, shaped by the interaction between individual attributes and environmental factors. Consequently, fostering resilience in student teachers involves nurturing their intrinsic capacities while simultaneously creating supportive external conditions that facilitate their adaptation and growth in varied pedagogical settings. Ultimately, by fostering such comprehensive resilience, teacher education programs can better prepare future educators to not only survive but thrive in unfamiliar and demanding school environments, thereby ensuring a more stable and effective teaching workforce.

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Being Placed in Unfamiliar Schools during their Teaching Practice
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**Beyond Familiar Grounds: Expectations of Final Year Student Teachers on
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Paseka Patric Mollo & Mokete Letuka

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**Beyond Familiar Grounds: Expectations of Final Year Student Teachers on
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Paseka Patric Mollo & Mokete Letuka**

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