

A Qualitative Perspective on Student Teachers' Experiences of Social Science Teaching and Learning in South African Multicultural Classrooms

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Abstract

This qualitative study is an investigation of final years Social Science education students' perceptions of Social Science teaching and learning in South African multicultural classrooms. The current South African schooling landscape is of a multicultural setting, where learners from different racial, ethnic, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds are admitted. This study seeks to ascertain the perceptions of student teacher's engagement with diverse learners in Social Science multicultural classroom and the influence it has on the teaching and learning project. Through a qualitative research methodology, data was gathered from Focus Group Discussion (FGD) sessions with three groups of five teacher education students from the same race, in their final year, specializing in Social Science teaching. The results of the study indicate that student teachers find the teaching of Social Science in a multicultural classroom very challenging, irrespective of their race, culture, or socio-background. The study therefore recommends regular exposure to diverse learners through mandatory teaching practice at multicultural schools, appropriate training, and development throughout the students' teacher training with supported policies and integration of social justice into the curriculum content.

Keywords: Social Science, Teaching and Learning, Multicultural, Perceptions, Classrooms, Diversity, Student Teachers

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Introduction

The South African Schools Act (SASA) (Act, 84 of 1996) is one of the instruments designed to achieve equal and non-discrimination in education. By articulating the stipulations of the Constitution, this Act effectively advanced the opening of doors of learning to all races and created opportunities for all to attend the school of their choice. With this policy directive, the South African Department of Education demonstrated its intention to “redress past injustices in educational provision” (DoE 1995) and to advance the democratic transformation of society, combat racism and sexism and all other forms of unfair discrimination and intolerance, and to protect and advance our diverse cultures. Whilst the desegregation of schools implied the promotion of social equality, it anticipated the creation of solid relationships amongst various races at all schools, which would ultimately promote tolerance and strengthen social cohesion and unity in South African society. The downside of the status quo remaining about teachers, triggered challenges, such as teachers having little or no understanding of the learners’ social, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds, which resulted in uncomfortable situations, especially in the Social Science classroom.

This study investigates the student teachers’ perceptions of Social Science teaching and learning in South African multicultural classrooms. This study identifies challenges and opportunities regarding South African student teachers’ teaching of Social Science to diverse learners, with the objective of developing knowledge and understanding of the diverse learners in the South African Social Science classroom, creating and implementing an optimal classroom experience for both teachers and learners. To cultivate respect and acceptance for diversity, through the teaching and learning of Social Science.

Literature Review

Multiculturalism created a platform for the introduction of democratic initiatives in the curriculum; pedagogy; social relations in school settings; and an understanding of participation in diverse communities, which seems to support efforts towards the acquisition of social cohesion and cultural harmony (Arslan & Rata, 2015). Hopkins-Gillespie, (2011) views multiculturalism as an enabling form of education which focuses on harnessing the abilities, skills and commitments of teachers and learners in promoting social change, nation building and competent global citizenry. In the end, multicultural education should be directed at expounding the principles and values of the South African Constitution, whilst also instilling a conducive school culture which is geared at transformation, reconciliation, inclusion, nation building and quality education.

Despite various approaches for Social Science teaching, most teachers invariably institute some form of multicultural education as the primary goal for Social Science instruction. It is in this context that the National Council for Social Studies (1994) could be viewed as the proponent, through its mission, the inclusion and inculcation of civic competence in learners. However, Arslan and Rata (2015) observed that fundamental differences exist in the way in which individuals define multicultural education. For example, according to Aydin (2012), multicultural education in the broadest sense is concerned with helping students to acquire the appropriate knowledge, skills, and values in an increasingly ethnically diverse nation-state. The Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) in South Africa is built on the principles of providing all learners with knowledge, skills, and values. Like teaching for multicultural education, teaching Social Science involves teaching about and for multicultural perspectives and viewpoints; establishing respect for cultural diversity; and working towards

identifying and transforming areas of injustice that inhibit the goals of democracy (Castro, 2013).

Conceptual Framework

This study wishes to acknowledge that a critical multicultural framework requires a theoretical lens that recognises the importance of racial positionality and the role that community and family play in the expectations/aspirations of identity construction (Bolgatz, 2005). Norton (2001) asserts that identity reconfiguration is the impetus behind all learning and according to this author, learners participate in learning when such learning helps them to attain the identities they desire, and as such, increases their value within the social environment. Gray (2017) is of the opinion that learners' investments in certain imagined communities and identities influence positively or negatively participation in classroom learning. The influences of imagined communities for pre-service teachers then becomes an important factor in determining how the empowered feel about teaching the controversial topics of Social Science. This empowerment forms the sense of agency that serves as a key component in pre-service teacher decisions about whether and /or how to implement aspects of critical multicultural education e.g., taking up issues, such as social justice, power, and diversity as foundational in their teaching.

Advocates of multicultural education promote the revision of the total curriculum to reflect accurately the multicultural composition of society and diverse groups' contributions to society. However, a variety of influences on the prescribed content of the social studies curriculum may have an impact on the degree to which classroom teachers include it. I contend that the curriculum contents and specifically that of the Social Sciences has a bearing on how the teacher approaches it in the classroom, and to what extent the teacher deals with those controversial themes, while embracing the diverse nature of the class at the same time.

Methodology

As a fragment of a broader part of research, this qualitative study examines how student teachers from different race groups perceive and engage a subject such as Social Science in a multicultural classroom. Student teachers to think more deeply about the learners' beliefs, values, and identities in relation to what is being learned and how these influences teaching and learning.

The study was conducted at the University of Free State, where the subject Social Science as a specialisation in the intermediate phase is offered. The University has a diverse student population that caters for students from different cultures and socio-backgrounds. The diversity of the students was of interest to me and since it assisted me. For the purpose of this study, the sampling method that I used was a mixture of purpose and stratified sampling. In stratified sampling, all the people in the sampling frame are divided into 'strata' (groups or categories). With each stratum, a simple random sample or systematic sample is selected. In this research, the target population was the final year Bachelor of Education intermediate phase students, from the University of Free State. I chose the purposive sampling, 20 participants, and further sampled the students using stratified sampling, by dividing the group into race groups.

The table below, presents the students who participated in the focus group discussion.

Table 1: Participants of the focus group discussion

Focus group	Number of students who participated
FGA A (White students)	5
FGB B (Coloured students)	5
FGC C1 & C2 (African students)	10
Total	20

Methods of Data Collection

Assembling people belonging to similar backgrounds together to ascertain their insights, views, beliefs, and attitudes in a coordinated discussion, is regarded as a focus group discussion (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Participants in this type of research were, therefore, selected on the basis that they would have something to say on the topic; are within the age-range; have similar socio-characteristics; and would be comfortable talking to the facilitator and one another (Oladeji, 2012).

The discussions were conducted with final year Social Science student teachers at the identified university. I grouped the participants according to racial groups. The rationale behind this was to garner perceptions based on South Africa's main racial groups. The FGD had a white only group of five participants; a coloured group of five participants; and two groups of five each of black African participants. The aim of the research was to capture the richness and uniqueness of everyone's perception that emanated from the natural settings of the participants' environment. The division according to racial groups allowed participants to open-up and engage freely without fear of prejudice. Although the discussion was guided by a list of questions to be asked, the dialogue took the form of free conversation, and the participants were encouraged to talk without restraint.

The discussions were audio-taped and transcribed with the permission of the participants. This was done to capture the participants' responses. In total, 20 participants took part in the FGD. The participants were male and female, obtained by means of purposive sampling, selected for fitting a particular profile, which simply means selective sampling was followed to obtain their quantity.

Data Analysis

The conceptual framework shaped my data analysis. It assisted me to develop concepts and themes and test them with participants through analysing and interacting with the collected data, while also transcribing and coding the texts. The conceptual framework assisted me in understanding and explaining how the different practices of Social Science teachers have played significant roles in perceptions of South African learners in Social Science. It assisted me to interpret how racial, ethnic, socio-economic, and cultural identities of South African learners have intertwined and interacted with their perspectives on Social Science.

Findings

In this study, the student teachers interpreted their Social Science teaching and learning experiences in various ways. Several major themes emerged from my data analysis, for the purpose of this paper only two will be discussed.

Theme 1: Social Science Teaching and Learning Experience

A description of what the participants identified as their views on their experience of Social Science in the classroom as a learner and student teacher.

• Interesting, Fascinating, and Related to Politics

This section is the presentation of how the teacher education participants view the teaching and learning of Social Science. Social Science is regarded as not as other school subjects and is viewed by many scholars as closely related to politics, which makes it a very awkward subject to teach or learn (Ucus, 2018).

The participants (FGDA) indicated they found the subject to be interesting and challenging (FGDA A1, FGDA A2). Participant FGDA A3 said it was easy to understand and relate to because it relates to what is happening daily in communities, while participant FGDA A2 indicated it was interesting depending on the type of learners you have in front of you. In relation to the views of the latter mentioned, participant FGDA5 highlighted the following aspects:

“I found the subject very interesting and challenging, closely related to politics. I found myself at times very uneasy about expressing myself while teaching it during teaching practice.”

The participants (FGDB B5) responded that they also found the subject to be interesting with elements of politics and in admission to that, they (FGDB B1, FGDB B3 and FGDB B4) believed the fact that they grew up in the township and were confronted daily by politics, made the Social Science classroom both as learner and teacher fascinating and enjoyable. The participant FGDB B3 further indicated that Social Science connects one to one’s environment and community and that the subject can assist in shaping us. In this regard FGDB B2, stated the following:

“I enjoy the subject SS because it is fascinating and one always learns something new about one’s community, country, and the world. I enjoy teaching it because of the interesting facts around Social Science and the impact it can make on the learners.”

The participants (FGDC1 C2 and FGDC1 C4) concur with the two other groups that they found Social Science to be very interesting because of its relation to the human being and their environment (FGDC1 C2, FGDB C5, FGDC2 C8 and FGDC2 C10). The participants (FGDC1 C4 and FGDC2 C6) indicated that the element of the subject’s interrelatedness to politics, also contributed to their love for the subject. FGDC2 C7 articulated the following sentiment regarding the nature of Social Science:

“I enjoy SS because it makes me understand where I come from as a black person and why my parents and grandparents struggled that much. This subject opened my horizons to how the earth operates and how people find in it a living space.”

• **Debates and Discussions**

Teacher education participants had mixed views on the role of debates and discussions in the Social Science classroom. Hess (2010) is of the opinion that debate, and discussion are key elements in a Social Science classroom and should therefore be encouraged.

The participants FGDC1 C1 and FGDC2 C7 had very strong opinions of enjoying the subject due to the debates and the discussions that normally takes place in the Social Science classrooms. This sentiment was echoed by the participants FGDB B1, B4 and B5, while participants FGDA A3 and A5 did not find the debate and discussion a factor that determined the interest or enjoyment of the subject. In relation to the previous participants, FGDC2 C9 stated the following:

“As a student I enjoyed it even more because the debate levels became even better at university and the discussions were at a much more mature level.”

Teacher neutrality and not veering outside the curriculum are parameters for having safe discussions about controversial issues in the Social Science classroom (Hess, 2009).

• **Social Injustices and Inequalities in Communities**

The teacher education participants engaged with terms, such as social injustice and inequalities, and some made first encounters with challenges in communities.

The participants FGDC1 C1 and FGDC2 C9 revealed that the subject caused them to have a better understanding of the social injustices and the unequal society they live in, and this was also revealed by FGDB B3 and FGDB B4 that the subject gave them a better understanding of the social ills and problems of people living in townships and in rural areas. Camicia and Dobson, (2010) assert that learners should leave school with a clear sense of their rights and responsibilities as citizens and be prepared to challenge injustice and to promote the common good. FGDC1 C3 stated:

“The subject made me understand why most black people are so impoverished and why there are such deep divisions between different racial groups in South Africa. I enjoyed SS because it gives perspective to why there are social injustices and inequality in the world. I think the interest in the subject comes from the fact that I see the subject as a vehicle that can assist in the redress process.”

• **Understanding of the Environment**

Participants in all the groups indicated that the subject gave them a better understanding of their environment and that it installs an awareness to care for the environment and to preserve it for future generations. Controversial issues, including those that are ‘high risk’, have curricular relevance, as well as importance to learners’ lives, their character development, and their sense of safety and security (Haynes & Karin, 2008). FGDC2 C8 stated:

“I started to have a better understanding of my environment and how to preserve it for the next generation.”

Theme 2: Challenges Faced by Student Teachers in Multicultural Schools

This is a description of what the teacher education participants identified as the challenges for student teachers in multicultural schools. The teacher education participants had to indicate challenges that they thought they might face or have faced while teaching in multicultural schools. They had to rely on the experiences while on teaching practice or what they anticipated would be challenges.

• Understanding Different Cultures and How to Deal With Them

Participant FGDA A1 indicated that a lack of understanding of other cultures and customs could be a challenge for pre-service teachers in multicultural school settings. FGDA A2 and A3 agreed and indicated that a better understanding of the learners could contribute to successful teaching and learning in a multicultural classroom. In relation to challenges faced in multicultural schools FGDC1 C3 made the following comment:

“I think we might have a challenge understanding all our learners, because we are not really exposed to multicultural schools during teaching practice.”

The literature in chapter three emphasised the importance of a good understanding of different cultures in multicultural school settings. The findings of this study provide clear evidence that most of the teacher education participants lacked knowledge about other cultures and consequently, made them susceptible to attack by people from those cultures.

• Lack of Training to Deal With Diverse Groups

FGDB B1 emphasised that a lack of training to deal with diverse groups could be a challenge for pre-service teachers. The sentiments were also shared by FGDC1 C4, who in turn, indicated that because of the reality of facing multicultural schools, pre-service teachers should deal with this during training. Teaching is a profession that revolves continuously as knowledge and technology changes and require that teachers upskill themselves frequently, thus the opportunity for professional development is critical (Landsman & Lewis, 2011). In relation to the latter statement, teacher education participant FGDA A3 agreed by asserting the following:

“I think it is not easy to manage diverse groups, because we are not trained to deal with diversity, or the training is not adequate.”

I share the above-mentioned sentiment, that teachers in the multicultural classroom should be provided with knowledge about several cultures of their learners, their experiences, communication styles, and learning approaches that are harmonious for all learners in the multicultural classroom (Multicultural education & curriculum, 2012).

• Black Learners Blaming Whites for Poverty and Lack of Empathy

Participants FGDA A2, FGDA A3, FGDB B1 and FGDC1 C5 were blunt and indicated that race plays a major role in how to deal with diversity. Alsubaie (2015) supports the above-

mentioned view and argues that teachers should build interactional relationships between them and their learners, to allow learners to express themselves and not offend another race group. In corroboration with the latter argument, teacher education participant FGDA A4 mentioned the following:

“Black learners always blame us whites for the fact that they are poor and want to make our lives difficult or even threaten us.”

The above-mentioned assumptions are isolated views and not really the view of the majority of South Africans, and those views are in most instances excuses that some ill-informed people use to defend their own limitations about reaching out to diverse people. The view that race plays a role in diversity was not openly shared and the assumption that I could make was that teacher education participants were not ready to engage further on the sub-theme, because not even probing questions could induce further responses.

• **Adaptation to School and the Surrounding Community**

Participant FGDA A2 thought that a challenge could also be a slow adaptation to the school, learners, and the community, while FDGC1 C1 believed that pre-service teachers must adapt to the history and traditions of a school if they want to succeed. A study by Perso (2012) indicated that learners are reluctant to participate in activities or speak in multicultural classrooms because they are learning in a new environment, unfamiliar to themselves. This may result in teachers and learners having communication, teaching, and learning challenges, because learners do not acclimatise to the classroom’s atmosphere. The example that FGDB B1 gave was if the tradition at the school was for male teachers to wear ties and a pre-service teacher does not adhere to that tradition, it will make it difficult for the pre-service teacher to feel part of the school. In relation to the adaptation to schools and communities, teacher education participant FGDA A2 made the following statement:

“Quick adaptation to the school and the community and make sure that I know my learners and their circumstances.” Regarding the latter statement, participant FGDC2 C6 commented: *“we will have to be given proper orientation and training on the ethos and traditions of the school, the learners and the community.”*

My view is that novice teachers feel, in most instances, overwhelmed in their new positions and usually must deal with many challenges in their new environment; therefore, it will take them longer to adapt. Acceptance and support by parents and other members of the community might assist teachers to adapt quicker to the school.

• **Lack of Training to Deal With Discipline for Different Groups**

Participants FGDA A1, FGDA A5, FGDB B1, FGDC1 C1 and FGDC1 C3, indicated that the South African education system is silent on disciplinary measures in schools, and the lack of clarity about applying discipline would make it difficult in multicultural schools. Of all the things teachers are expected to do during their professional life, classroom discipline is perhaps the most significant and is clearly of concern to many parents and teachers alike (Landman & Lewis, 2011). In relation to the latter mentioned view, teacher education participant FGDC2 C10 agreed and articulated the following:

“I think we will have challenges dealing with difficult learners from other cultural groups, due to a lack of understanding of how to discipline diverse learners; that is one thing our training lacks and to now deal with diverse groups, will make it even more difficult.”

The South African education system’s lack of policies that give guidance to teachers on how to deal with diversity is of great concern; thus, the fear and reluctance of some student teachers to embrace diversity in schools.

I observed that the mentioned sub-theme featured only in the focus group discussions, of the black teacher education participants and realised that the need to change during a lesson to their own indigenous language comes to mind, but due to the diversity in the classroom it would not be possible.

Discussion

This study explores how South African student teachers perceive and interpret Social Science teaching and learning in multicultural classrooms. The findings indicate that Social Science is difficult to teach in a school with learners from different cultures, races and social backgrounds. Makoelle (2014) explains why participants would find it difficult, by indicating that despite all the significant policy pronouncements by the South African Department of Education, there has been silence on the inherent racial and ethnic divide which perpetuates exclusive stereotypes and conceptions about those viewed as racially and ethnically different.

In general, student teachers find it uncomfortable teaching Social Science; most of them feel that more exposure and advanced further training would benefit and equip them with the required skills, knowledge, and values, to teach without fear or prejudice. Participants were also of the opinion that exposure to the teaching and learning of different societies, cultures and communities, would benefit student teachers in developing their skills on how to interact with learners different from them. Kallaway (2009) expresses concerns by indicating that part of the problem is that nobody has trained the trainer; it is simply expected that if someone who has been a good student teacher, will become a good teacher and will therefore be aware of the skills needed to in a multicultural school.

Fair policies, laws, systems and appropriate processes. Procedural justice concerns the fairness and the transparency of the processes by which decisions in a society are made. While a fair process on its own does not guarantee a socially tolerable outcome, a fair system of law and due process are important to social justice, because they provide the mechanism by which everyone in society applies the requirements of social justice to particular cases, which is vitally important for those who have less power in society. Mogoashoa (2014) argues that teachers receive training in the various teaching and learning policies; however, some policies are not deemed appropriate to what teachers are doing in the classroom. Knowledgeable teachers can be beneficial not only to themselves but to society at large.

Recommendations

This study made several recommendations to South African Social Science student teach on how to address the challenges in dealing with diverse learners in the Social Science classroom.

Extended Exposure to Multicultural Classes

Teacher education students are currently exposed only to multicultural classes by choice, if they decide to do their experiential training (teaching practice) at a multicultural school. This study would recommend that teaching practice at a multicultural school be made mandatory and support be granted to student teachers who have problems with doing teaching practice at multicultural schools. The study revealed that student teachers avoid doing teaching practice at multicultural schools due to a lack of understanding other cultures, beliefs, and customs.

Engagement With Communities in All Socio-Economic Groups

The inhabitants of many South African public-school classrooms are from different spheres of life and learners are also from different socio-economic groups. A considerate approach to the learners is critical for the success of teaching and learning; therefore, teachers should have a broad knowledge, understanding and empathy towards all learners, irrespective of their situations. Based on this assertion, this study recommends that regular engagement with communities of different socio-economic groups in both official and on social levels, would be prudent.

Inclusion of Social Justice and Multiculturalism in the Training Programme of Social Science Teachers

Institutions of higher learning are frequently revising their programmes ensure that the curriculum is relevant to a changing world; therefore, a curriculum that addresses the challenges of society would be beneficial to all stakeholders. The establishment of partnerships between stakeholders who have an interest in education, i.e., the state, parents, learners, teachers, and other members of the community, in the vicinity of a school is critical. The recommendation to include social justice and multiculturalism in the training programme of Social Science should be regarded as relevant and is therefore suggested. If it has been done already, the recommendation would be to advocate that it be listed as priority.

Conclusion

This study enriches the current literature on student teachers' perceptions of Social Science teaching and learning in South African Multicultural classrooms, adding to the limited research in this area. My study therefore strongly suggests regular exposure to diverse learners through mandatory teaching practice at multicultural schools, appropriate training and development throughout the students' teacher training with supported policies and integration of social justice into the curriculum content.

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