



# Foundation phase pre-service teachers' experiences of teaching life skills during teaching practice



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**Background:** In South Africa socio-economic problems such as poor health conditions, juvenile delinquency, high rates of school dropout and teenage pregnancy are increasing. Therefore, it is vital to prepare foundation phase (FP) pre-service teachers to fortify children with basic life skills (LS) that will help them to cope with real-world challenges and demands.

**Aim:** The study is aimed to explore the experiences of pre-service FPLS teachers during their teaching practice.

**Setting:** This qualitative case study was conducted in the FP department of a teacher-training institution at a South African university.

**Methods:** Twenty final-year pre-service teachers were purposively selected to participate in semi-structured interviews and reflective writing exercises. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data, and the classification of the emerging themes was informed by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory.

**Results:** The findings revealed pre-service teachers' experience of support from mentors, a struggle with implementation of FP curriculum, realities of classroom interaction, inefficient language of interaction for the FP classroom, and a lack of awareness of the importance of LS as a subject.

**Conclusion:** The study argues that to improve the pedagogy of future LS teachers, a review and reform of the LS teacher-training curriculum are necessary. This curriculum needs to provide more extensive micro-teaching that promotes teachers' general proficiency in the home languages of their learners and equips them with effective teaching strategies. The implementation of the LS curriculum needs to be regularly evaluated to ensure that these skills are imparted to young learners for their individual benefit and for the benefit of society.

**Keywords:** pre-service teachers; life skills curriculum; teaching practice; foundation phase; South Africa.

## Introduction

Life skills (LS) is one of the three subject areas of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) for the foundation phase (FP) (Department of Basic Education [DBE] 2011). The CAPS document describes the aim of the subject as 'guiding and preparing learners for life and its possibilities, including equipping learners for meaningful and successful living in a rapidly changing and transforming society' (DBE 2011:8). Consequently, FP is viewed as the best stage for teachers to successfully fortify children with problem-solving skills for life, and the values and knowledge needed to become twenty-first century citizens (eds. Naude & Meier 2020). If this is to be achieved in South African children, then the teachers who will be responsible for teaching LS in the FP need comprehensive pedagogical knowledge that informs practical teaching skills. These skills are often put to the test during the teaching practice of pre-service teachers. Practical exercises reveal the strengths and weaknesses of the FP pre-service teachers in teaching LS to the learners, allowing the pre-service teachers to work on their deficits and attain proficiency before entering the teaching profession.

Over the years, research has been conducted locally and internationally on different aspects of in-service FP teachers' experiences (Bruce 2011; Cekiso, Meyiwa & Mashige 2019; Kanjee & Mthembu 2015; Masnan, Sharif & Josin 2018; Meiring 2019; Sheldon 2015), on FP pre-service teachers' experiences during their teaching practice (Matzembacher, Gonzales & Do Nascimento 2019; Steyn & Adendorff 2020; Zinn et al. 2014) and on the LS module in the FP at higher education

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institutions (Ansar & Ikhfan 2018; Nasheeda et al. 2019; Ntinda & Dlamini 2019; Whitley, Wright & Gould 2016).

However, there is a dearth of research on exploring FP pre-service teachers' experiences of teaching LS during teaching practice, particularly in South Africa. This is of concern because these experiences, if not identified and handled appropriately, could constitute a determining factor regarding the attitudes of the pre-service teachers in teaching LS to FP learners once they enter the teaching profession. This may jeopardise the goal of including LS as one of the three subject areas of CAPS. Cassidy (2018) has claimed that imparting LS to learners at an early age will help them to grow into healthy young adults with a good knowledge of how to deal with real-world issues and expectations. Thus, negligence of the appropriate and effective teaching of LS by well-prepared pre-service teachers could lead to an increase in juvenile delinquency and moral decadence in South African society.

Consequently, the aim of this study was to explore FP pre-service teachers' experiences of teaching LS to learners during their teaching practice. Our objectives were twofold: to explore the experiences of the FP pre-service teachers in teaching LS to learners during teaching practice and to ascertain the connection between their teacher training and the effective teaching of LS to FP learners during their teaching practice.

This is a qualitative case study conducted in the FP department of a teacher-training institution at a South African university. The study begins with a brief overview of the importance of teaching LS to FP learners. This is followed by a review of related literature after which the research questions are stated. Next, the research method and design are presented, followed by the ethical considerations, findings of the study, a discussion of the findings and implications of the study. Afterwards, the limitations and recommendations of the study are stated followed by the contribution of the study to the body of knowledge. The study concludes by highlighting the importance of the findings and further research.

## Literature review

In state policy on education (DBE 2011), the South African government has acknowledged the key importance of teacher training, the aims and objectives of which are to train efficient and competent teachers who are able to impart the twenty-first century skills needed for the creation of a democratic and healthy society. Buang and Bahari (2011) view teachers as agents of transformation who are responsible for performing multiple roles in society, and thus they have emphasised the need to explore pre-service teachers' teaching practices to evaluate whether the objectives of teacher education have been achieved. Paris, Polson-Genge and Shanks (2010) found that when pre-service teachers are empowered with teaching techniques, strategies and classroom ethics, they can effectively perform their teaching roles and impart the expected skills to

the learners during practicum. These authors have further stated that teachers' performance in the classroom is inextricably linked to the teacher-education curriculum and to their own educators' methods of implementing that curriculum. This implies that the ability of the pre-service teachers to impart the required skills to FP learners depends on the quality of the teacher training.

In their research on Colombian pre-service teachers' perspectives on their teaching practice experiences, Castañeda-Trujillo and Aguirre-Hernández (2018) revealed that some pre-service teachers are dissatisfied with the teacher education they receive, as inefficiencies in this education contribute to certain challenges and limitations in their performance during teaching practice. In particular, the LS teacher-education curriculum in some universities is too compressed. The CAPS for FP teacher education in South Africa comprises three learning areas, which include mathematics, literacy and LS (DBE 2011). Life skills, which is the focus of this study, is a complex and dense curriculum (Dixon et al. 2018), as it is divided into four sections (Beginner Knowledge, Personal and Social Well-being, Creative Arts and Physical), each of which is further divided into knowledge segments.

Presently several South African universities engage in Early Childhood Education teacher-training programmes that offer LS as one of the recommended subjects for pre-service teacher training. The university where this research was conducted is one of the renowned teacher-training institutions in South Africa. Most of these universities use CAPS as a guide to organise and implement the learning and teaching areas. Some of these universities offer LS education for just one semester in the third or fourth year of training, during which time pre-service teachers are expected to conduct their teaching practicum at schools (Arasomwan & Mashiya 2018). However, many pre-service teachers are not able to impart the LS content effectively during the teaching practicum (Arasomwan & Mashiya 2018), as they are deficient in pedagogical strategies and, therefore, experience difficulties in practically implementing the theory that they have been taught (Mkhasibe 2018). Certainly, one of the determinant factors, and the main indicator of efficient and effective teacher training programmes, is the ability of the pre-service teachers to put into practice the skills they have learnt to attain the programmes' aims and objectives (Adams-Ojugbele & Moletsane 2019).

Taylor, Rhys and Waldron (2016) have identified the major aims of FP education as promoting children's standards of attainment and inculcating in them problem-solving LS that will improve their educational prospects and assist them to become useful to themselves and their society. The necessity of LS as a learning subject in early childhood and adolescence is further confirmed by Sheldon (2015), who found that scientific, technological, numerical and linguistic skills produce wholesome individuals. In addition, the World Health Organization (WHO) (1994) has identified personal

hygiene, study skills, social skills, effective communication, problem-solving, emotional coping, empathy, stress-control, decision-making, self-awareness and creative and critical thinking as the core skills that are integral to the promotion of young people's health and well-being. Srikala and Kishore (2010) added that in a constantly changing environment the acquisition of LS is vital for coping with the challenges of everyday life. The necessity of LS education to the well-being of children demands well-equipped and skilful pre-service teachers (Mannathoko 2013) who are well trained, mature, equipped with problem-solving skills and have the developmentally appropriate understanding and skills to provide constructive education for children (Bruce 2011).

The failure of teacher-training programmes to equip pre-service teachers with adequate skills to achieve the aims and objectives of the FPLS programme has implications for learners who are the recipient of the curriculum, for the design of the Early Childhood Education curriculum and for higher education. Learners are less likely to develop the LS needed to cope with daily challenges, thus increasing the possibility of further social problems developing in society. Hence, this study argues that the strategies for preparing pre-service teachers to teach LS should be reviewed, and that universities should encourage the acquisition of practical skills rather than providing only theoretical knowledge and condensing the curriculum into one semester. Producing incompetent teachers has grievous consequences for FP learners. Thus, it is imperative for teacher-training institutions to be aware of these learners' educational needs to be able to implement new and innovative approaches to teacher education.

In addition, the perspective of the pre-service teachers needs to be included, as too often the voices of curriculum implementers, policymakers and higher education programme designers are acknowledged whilst the voices of pre-service teachers are overlooked (Gozali et al. 2017). Mannathoko (2013) has also asserted that teaching practice can be a frustrating and challenging experience if the pre-service teachers are not efficiently and adequately prepared. Thus, effective pre-service teacher training is understood to be a prerequisite for productive teaching performance. Much has been said on the pre-service teachers' experience of teaching practice; however, little of it explores the FPLS pre-service teachers' perspective on how they experience their teaching practice, hence the rationale for this study.

## Research questions

If the teaching practice exercise is recognised as an integral aspect of teacher education and the means through which pre-service teachers develop and acquire teaching skills, then this study seeks to address the following research questions:

- What is the experience of FPLS pre-service teachers during teaching practice?
- What is the connection between their teacher training and the teaching of LS?

## Theoretical framework

This study was grounded in Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which has had an important influence on educational philosophy and classroom pedagogy in the developed world (eds. Kozulin et al. 2003). The social-constructivist paradigm, according to Creswell (2013), is an interpretive structure that enables individuals to explore their environment, thereby deriving meaning that supports their knowledge. The origins of social constructivism can be found in Socrates, who proposed that students can only construct and benefit from their learning when they work in collaboration with an experienced teacher (Amineh & Asl 2015). Vygotsky similarly argued that an advanced level of mental development and learning is embedded in social collaboration with the support of an expert, whom he called 'the more knowledgeable other' (Vygotsky 1980). Vygotsky further asserted that learning is a process, hence the need to design effective processes to facilitate advanced mental development. Renowned scholars and psychologists, such as Watson, Piaget, Bandura and Bronfenbrenner, share Vygotsky's views on how people develop cognitive knowledge and expertise through their interaction within an organised cultural setting (Tudge & Winterhoff 1993).

In this study, the more knowledgeable people that social constructivism emphasises are the higher education educators in relation to pre-service teachers, and the pre-service teachers in relation to the FP learners. Teaching and learning require actions that record a positive result, hence the need to employ various innovative strategies to achieve teaching and learning objectives. When higher education educators understand this and employ a variety of such innovative strategies to implement the LS education curriculum, then the curriculum is beneficial to pre-service teachers. Similarly, using all the teaching and learning resources equips pre-service teachers to transfer the desired skills to the FP learners.

## Research methods and design

As indicated above, the focus of the qualitative case study was to understand how the pre-service teachers experience their teaching practice, with attention paid to the teaching of LS in the FP classrooms. To explore these experiences, sociocultural theory was adopted to conduct a single case study at a South African university. Sociocultural theory emphasises students' acquisition and construction of knowledge through effective interaction with more knowledgeable educators at any level of education (Abrahamson 2017; Krishnan 2010). Educators are expected to be mediators who facilitate learners' acquisition of knowledge, rather than owners of knowledge who dispense what they deem necessary.

The research setting has a proud and rich heritage of academic excellence and ranks as the third most productive university in South Africa in terms of research output. The university is a dedicated teacher-training institution that

includes students training to be FP educators; thus, the location was deemed suitable for the research study. The researcher purposively selected 20 ( $n = 20$ ) final-year FPLS students from a cohort of 45 students, of which 15 ( $n = 15$ ) were female and five ( $n = 5$ ) were male. The participants were aged between 19 and 22 years. The students had gone into the field twice for teaching practice, during the third and fourth years of their teacher training. Their teaching practice took place during the second semester and spanned a period of 3 months. This experience had exposed them to real-world teaching, and they were therefore able to relate the negative and positive experiences they had had during their teaching practice. The researchers had daily interaction with the students in the classroom and during extra-curricular activities. The students were, therefore, familiar with the researchers and were comfortable with expressing themselves and sharing their experiences of their teaching practice.

Semi-structured interviews and reflective writing were employed as instruments for data generation. Data were generated after the necessary processes of obtaining ethical clearance from the university and informed consent from the intended participants. The three ethical principles suggested by Tangwa (2009) were followed: maintaining the participants' autonomy (by allowing them to participate voluntarily and consensually), ensuring non-maleficence (by safeguarding the confidentiality of the participants and avoiding any physical or psychological harm) and ensuring beneficence (that the research benefits the study participants directly or indirectly). The researcher explained in detail the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw should they feel uncomfortable with continuing.

The generated data were analysed thematically, by using the approach designed by Miles and Huberman (1994). Firstly, the researcher listened carefully and transcribed the tape-recorded information verbatim and read through the reflection activity of each participant discretely to ensure that the data were well comprehended. After becoming familiar with both the written and recorded generated data, the researcher identified the initial codes and noted any reoccurring patterns that were relevant to the research questions, which addressed the pre-service teachers' experiences of teaching LS during their teaching practice. Thereafter, related codes were grouped together as they emerged and were categorised to form themes. These themes were critically examined to extract relevant information that provided answers to the research questions, and this information was eventually developed as the concluding theme. The themes were arranged to address the research questions coherently.

## Results

Data from this study showed that the majority of the participants complained of having difficulty in effectively managing the classroom and in connecting the content they had learned at university to what they were expected to teach the FP learners. These students connected their

successes and failures in the classroom to their teacher training and described how the LS teacher-education curriculum had facilitated or impeded their effectiveness during teaching practice. A small number of the pre-service teachers reported positively on how the knowledge of various theories of child development they had gained during the teacher-training programmes with the help of mentors had supported their effectiveness in implementing the LS curriculum during the teaching practicum. Some stated that what they had been taught about development milestones provided them with the necessary insight to be able to assist children of different ages in learning LS. Some of the students resorted to further independent research to learn how they could best interact with the learners.

However, some of the pre-service teachers felt that there was a mismatch between the content they had learned and what they were expected to teach the learners. There were contrasts between the two curricula. Hence, they associated their failure to teach effectively with inappropriate teacher training.

The findings of this study were grouped into four themes: support from mentors; curriculum, content and implementation strategies; the pre-service teachers' experience of the language of interaction during the teaching practice; and the lack of awareness of the importance of LS as a school subject in the host schools.

### Theme 1: Support from mentors

Successful and productive teaching practice could be linked to the role of the mentors of the pre-service teachers. The data showed that some of the students were able to successfully carry out the teaching practice because of the support provided by their mentors. The students below had pleasant experiences during their teaching practice because they sought help from mentors or from other knowledge sources, as seen by their comments:

'I think am lucky because the school and my mentor really supported me in simplifying the curriculum to the learners' level, so I successfully managed my classroom. She gave me her previous lesson plans, which served as a guide.' (Participant 8, interview on 24 September 2017)

Another student associated her success in implementing the LS curriculum with the usefulness of the CAPS document and with her mentor's guidance:

'I was able to teach life skills in my school because my host school followed the CAPS, and so it was easy for me. I watched as my mentor taught the children and managed the classroom. She also helped me to put the children under control while teaching them life skills. And as a mother who loves children, it was easy for me to interact easily with them.' (Participant 9, interview on 05 September 2017)

One of the pre-service teachers stated:

'We are taught the various theories on child development. Life skills gives us an insight of how children develop, what to teach and how to teach them to understand better. I think I'm happy with the knowledge gotten. I taught life skills during my teaching

practice, though in an English-speaking school. Also, my mentor is very helpful.' (Participant 11, interview on 07 September 2017)

The responses of these students revealed that they had encountered no difficulties during their teaching practice.

## Theme 2: Curriculum, content and implementation strategies

One student addressed the issue of implementing the curriculum, focussing on the difficulties experienced with controlling the learners and with simplifying the content appropriately for FP learners:

'Eish! It was not easy to implement the life skills curriculum to the children. I felt I did not do well; I could not get the children to settle down to learn. I could not effectively break down the content to suit the FP learners' level. I think they should have taught us the content relevant to foundation phase learners rather than just giving us slides. What we met during teaching practice does not correspond with what we are taught on the campus. Even lesson plans, the lesson plan template they gave was different from what we met out there.' (Participant 3, interview on 07 September 2017)

Some of the pre-service teachers felt that the LS programme they were taught at university was not the same as the LS programme, they were expected to teach, and they therefore struggled with implementation strategies and classroom management during their teaching practice. The pre-service teacher as stated below eventually conducted her own independent research to discover how to implement the FPLS CAPS curriculum:

'The experience was not palatable. Yes, we learned different types of theories that helped us to understand the way different children behave but we are not taught how to simplify the contents and how to write on the chalkboard. Rather, we are taught education courses that are not relevant to us. I could not write on the chalkboard and neither could I excite the children to learn. In fact, I struggled throughout the teaching practice period. I eventually learnt some implementation strategies that are relevant to children, from the Internet. This helped me towards the tail end of the exercise.' (Participant 15, interview on 12 September 2017)

Most of the pre-service teachers interviewed mentioned that they had experienced problems in teaching LS to the FP learners. Their teacher-education programme had not modelled good practices to draw on during their practical experience, and the teaching strategies and the content advised did not support their teaching. The pre-service teachers struggled to develop outcomes for their teaching, as they had not been taught how to do so. One participant focussed on the inappropriateness of the teacher-training for the LS curriculum:

'The implementation strategy in foundation phase is different from what we are used to in the teacher training. I spend extra time to prepare myself to teach; I also tried to watch my mentor and followed the strategies she adopted in implementing the life skills module. I wish our lecturers would help us by teaching the relevant content and adopting those implementation strategies that are relevant to foundation phase. And look at the curriculum on the campus, there are things that we should not be learning

which they are teaching us. I want to suggest that the curriculum be made more relevant to us.' (Participant 7, interview on 13 September 2017)

Another participant's response indicated that their LS teacher training had largely favoured those who were already skilled and had not considered those who needed additional support. This participant also complained of limited time allocated for the teaching of LS:

'I must confess, it is hard for me to implement the curriculum. Breaking down the content into parts to suit the foundation phase level and to get the attention of the children was not easy. Even the time was not sufficient to effectively teach. However, I struggled through. I think the teacher education favoured those who are cognitively sound and those that attended English-speaking schools. The lecturers forgot that we do not have the same cognitive ability, and they adopted the lecturing method of implementation.' (Participant 5, interview on 12 September 2017)

The following participant had a similar response and commented that their teacher training had been conducted by using a teacher-centred approach and had focussed on content that did not take their needs and those of the FP learners into account:

'To me I love the life skills subject but have a problem in organising the contents and the necessary procedures in implementation. I am supposed to know the major steps in interacting with the pupils but could not perfectly do it. I think our lecturers need to adopt a better strategy in preparing us for this teaching practice. They have the skill, but presentation is poor. They use a teacher-centred approach, and they teach from slides without detailed explanations. In fact, they end up talking to themselves.' (Participant 17, interview on 12 September 2017)

The above responses indicate that several pre-service teachers in this study encountered difficulties in effectively and adequately implementing the FPLS curriculum during their teaching practice. They were largely in agreement that whilst they had been taught various theories of child development, they had not been taught practical implementation strategies. In particular, they had not been taught how to structure and deliver the LS content in a way that was suitable for the FP learners.

## Theme 3: Language of interaction during the teaching practicum

Vygotsky (1980) identified language as an important tool for promoting effective interaction. However, language was described by the pre-service teachers as a significant barrier to success during their teaching practice. The findings clearly showed that most of the students performed their teaching practice at rural schools, where they were expected to teach using the children's home language. The recommended medium of instruction for the FP is the learners' home language. For most South African learners this is an African language, and for the learners associated with this study the language was isiZulu. Thus, translating English language content to the learners' home language became a problem. Hence, under this theme it emerged that a number of students experienced difficulties with teaching LS in

isiZulu. One pre-service teacher commented on the resulting difficulties as follows:

'We don't have the vocabulary in isiZulu. And teaching the learners is a big problem for me because when you write on the board, they will tell you that, no, this word is not spelled like that. That is the big challenge we are faced with during the teaching practice. If you ask many of us, the major problem is the language of implementation.' (Participant 1, interview on 08 September 2017)

This point was reinforced by another participant:

'How do I teach effectively? I lack the right simple language to teach the life skills. Language is another big challenge.' (Participant 6, interview on 12 September 2017)

Another pre-service teacher emphasised the problem of translating the LS curriculum into isiZulu:

'The language is really challenging because most children do not understand English, but only their home language, isiZulu. Eish! There was a problem in translating the curriculum into isiZulu. There was a time one of the children was correcting what I wrote on the chalkboard. It was not a good experience.' (Participant 2, interview on 13 September 2017)

Another student related her own experience as follows:

'I did my teaching practice in a deeply rural area where the setting and historical background dictated the use of both English and their mother tongue to explain some concepts. I managed to skate through because of my versatility in isiZulu.' (Participant 4, interview on 14 September 2017)

The findings revealed that the majority of the pre-service teachers experienced difficulty in implementing the FPLS curriculum effectively because of barriers created by the language of interaction. Most of the participants conducted their teaching practice in a rural area where they were expected to teach in isiZulu, but only a few could implement the curriculum effectively in isiZulu. They complained about their inability to translate LS content effectively from English into isiZulu and therefore supported the inclusion of basic isiZulu courses and isiZulu vocabulary into the university teacher-training curriculum for FP pre-service teachers. In addition, pre-service teachers who had a more sophisticated command of language found it difficult to simplify the LS curriculum to the level required for FP learners. Thus, they struggled with developmentally appropriate language suitable for the FP classroom.

#### **Theme 4: Lack of awareness of the importance of life skills as a school subject**

One aspect of the primarily negative experiences of the pre-service teachers during their teaching practice was being denied the opportunity to practise and teach what they had learnt. It was evident from the findings that within the schools LS was not given priority as a learning area and was relegated to the margins. Some of the pre-service teachers struggled to find time to teach LS at their schools, and some believed that they did not have enough content knowledge to teach the subject effectively.

One of the pre-service teachers commented on the dismissive institutional attitude to LS as a subject:

'Another thing, they don't take life skills seriously in some of the schools. They are focussing on mathematics, science and isiZulu. I think something must be done to make the public aware of the importance of life skills to foundation phase learners.' (Participant 20, interview on 25 September 2017)

Another participant's experience supported the above comment:

'I did not teach life skills but was given another subject to teach.' (Participant 19, interview on 15 September 2017)

One of the pre-service teachers declared that she did not have enough LS content knowledge to teach the learners:

'We were taught life skills modules partially in our third year. Because of the student protests we wasted a few weeks. In fourth year, for just a semester. Eish! I did not want to stand before the children fidgeting so I opted for another course suggested to me by the host school.' (Participant 10, interview on 24 September 2017)

As mentioned previously, LS is an important feature of the FP CAPS document, as it constitutes one of the three primary learning areas, the other two being literacy and mathematics. However, the findings from this study showed that many of the pre-service teachers were unable to interact effectively with the learners, as they lacked implementation strategies, the appropriate language skills suitable for their FP learners, classroom management skills and the appropriate institutional incentive to teach the content. Life skills as a subject is often simply not offered in the FP, as many schools assign more importance and, therefore, give more attention to literacy, mathematics and science and relegate LS to the margins. Some of the pre-service teachers were forced to teach other subjects instead of the LS they had prepared for. The data from this study revealed that the aims and objectives of the FP pre-service teachers were not achieved in their teaching practice. There was a contrast between theory and practice.

## **Discussion**

There were four important findings. These findings showed that the pre-service teachers had both negative and positive experiences of teaching LS to FP learners during their teaching practice.

### **Theme 1**

The first important finding related to the assistance from mentors received by five of the study's participants. The data from this study revealed the significant role played by mentors in supporting the pre-service teachers to successfully conduct their teaching practice exercises. Five out of the 20 participants described their teaching practice as a positive experience, as they were able to teach LS successfully. However, these participants were assisted by their mentors in the host school. This finding is supported by Mena, Hennissen and Loughran (2017), who affirm that the effective

supervision of pre-service teachers by experienced educators during teaching practice is crucial to the development of teaching skills and classroom management strategies and the acquisition of a professional teaching philosophy.

The pre-service teachers received support in different areas of their practice. They were guided on how to teach and present the content in a way that accommodated the learners' needs, and on how to design lesson plans, as one of them mentioned that the lesson plan template they had been taught at university was different from the one they were expected to use. The students were also assisted in managing their classes and bringing the children under control. This finding was congruent with Ambrosetti's (2014) finding that:

[T]he classroom-based teacher who agrees to mentor a pre-service teacher needs to nurture, advise, guide, encourage and facilitate authentic learning experiences for developmental growth. (p. 30)

This point is further supported by Vygotsky's social constructivist theory, which focusses on the construction of knowledge through the social interaction and support of more knowledgeable others – which in this study were the mentors (Vygotsky 1980). However, all these students carried out their teaching practice at urban, primarily English-speaking FP centres, so the positive experiences they reported were rooted in a specific context. The significant role played by the mentor implies that there is a need for collaboration between higher education and the mentors in socialising the pre-service teachers into their teaching career.

## Theme 2

The second important finding of the study was the students' experiences in relation to effectively implementing the FP learners' LS curriculum. The data from this study showed that the majority of the students lacked the ability to present content to their learners effectively. They struggled to manage the children's behaviour and noise levels in the classroom. In their own learning, most of the pre-service teachers were used to learning with slides and group work, but the FP learners were not used to group work, and it was difficult for the pre-service teachers to teach LS effectively to them. This implied a discrepancy between the curriculum content and the implementation strategies taught to the pre-service teachers at university on the one hand, and the needs of the FP learners on the other hand. There was a lack of congruence between the two curricula. The content, the curriculum implementation strategies and the lesson plan template that the students were taught during their teacher training did not suit the FP learners. The content and the implementation strategies taught at university were designed for teachers in training, and it was, therefore, difficult for the pre-service teachers to simplify the content to suit the FP learners. The data further revealed that the focus of the LS lecturers at university seemed to be on covering the syllabus, with little consideration for how much of the content was grasped and absorbed by the pre-service teachers. These findings support previous studies

by Hennemann and Liefner (2010), Mooi (2010) and Rasul and Mansor (2013), who reported that university graduates in education were not well equipped for their careers, as there was a gap between the skills acquired during training and those required in practice in the classroom.

It was further disclosed from the data of this study that the time allocated for LS was not sufficient to cover all the subject areas. Life skills in FP has four focus areas: Beginning Knowledge, Personal and Social Well-being, Creative Arts and Physical Education. In a bid to design the lesson plan and cover the content within the limited time allocated, the students ended up not giving of their best. A study conducted by Dixon et al. (2018) supported the students' claims that the complex and dense nature of the LS curriculum makes it difficult for teachers to implement effectively.

The implication of this for higher education is that it seems the objective of FPLS teacher education in preparing them for the teaching profession is not being achieved as expected.

## Theme 3

The third important finding was that the language of interaction in the classroom created barriers to teaching and learning especially in rural areas. The medium of instruction at FP level is the learners' home language; thus, the pre-service teachers were expected to teach the FP learners in the learners' home language, which for most learners in this study was isiZulu. Many of the pre-service teachers who were not proficient in isiZulu, therefore, found it difficult to communicate effectively enough to implement the FPLS curriculum. It was embarrassing for the pre-service teachers to be corrected by the learners they were supposed to teach. This problem could be understood in terms of Vygotsky's (1980) focus on language as a vital tool for facilitating the types of effective interactions that lead to constructions of knowledge. Without this vital tool, the pre-service teachers were unable to establish such constructions of knowledge to teach LS effectively. According to Dippenaar and Peyper (2011), when an educator lacks proficiency in the language of teaching and learning, which is integral to the learners' success, the possibility of achieving teaching and learning outcomes is drastically reduced. A recent study by Wildsmith-Cromarty and Balfour (2019) added that some practising teachers in rural schools do not have adequate language of communicating the skills they are expected to teach to the learners.

## Theme 4

The fourth important finding was that LS as a subject was relegated to the margins of the curriculum, as most of the host schools devoted the bulk of their time and resources to mathematics and science learning. This defeated the purpose of the pre-service teachers being trained to teach LS to FP learners and will no doubt rob the learners of the benefits they would have derived from LS education before entering the intermediate phase and high school (Arasomwan & Mashiya 2018). The implication of this finding for policymakers and curriculum designer is to

adequately follow up and supervise the curriculum to ensure the effective execution and achievement of the purpose.

The data showed that the pre-service teachers had diverse experiences during their teaching practice. Some were able to teach LS to the FP learners smoothly and successfully with the support of mentors, whilst others complained of difficulties in implementing the FP curriculum, as they lacked the skills to simplify the content to suit their learners. The inability of these students to teach the FP content effectively and the struggles they had with a lack of a language of interaction formed significant concerns for them. These findings were congruent with Mkhasibe's (2018) conclusion that some pre-service teachers lack the knowledge and ability to direct learners appropriately. They also revealed certain issues specific to LS education at FP level, such as a lack of appropriate training in the subject at university and a generally negative and unsupportive attitude towards the subject at schools. Kasapoglu and Didin (2019) raised a very pertinent point on the importance of training effective pre-service teachers to impart LS to FP learners, declaring that the determining factor in FP learners' success is an experienced, passionate and well-equipped LS teacher. Demotivated and ill-equipped LS teachers are unable to be 'the more knowledgeable other' that is required for the construction of knowledge according to Vygotsky's (1980) social constructivist theory, which emphasises the construction of knowledge through effective interaction between individuals and a more knowledgeable other in a social context.

## Implications

The implications for the FP pre-service teachers and their learners centred on the inability of the pre-service teachers to put into practice what they had learned and impart the basic LS needed to live a balanced life. The WHO (2003) has stated that LS education prepares children for young adulthood by equipping them to:

[M]ake informed decisions, solve problems, think critically and creatively, communicate effectively, build healthy relationships, empathise with others and cope with and manage their lives in a healthy and productive manner. (p. 3)

Similarly, the CAPS' aim of LS education, which is stated here, is defeated:

Life Skills subject is aimed at guiding and preparing learners for life and its possibilities, including equipping learners for meaningful and successful living in a rapidly changing and transforming society. Through Life Skills learners are exposed to a range of knowledge, skills and values that strengthen their physical, social, personal, emotional and cognitive development; creative and aesthetic skills and knowledge through engaging in dance, music, drama and visual art activities; knowledge of personal health and safety; understanding of the relationship between people and the environment; awareness of social relationships, technological processes and elementary science. (DBE 2011:8)

Thus, a child who is denied these skills at FP level runs the risk of social and educational failure later in life. The inability

of the pre-service teachers to teach effectively affects their learners' acquisition of basic educational principles, whilst the implication of the findings of this study to higher education is the unachieved goal and objective of the FPLS teacher education, hence the suggestions for review and reinforcement of FPLS curriculum to achieve its aims of adequately preparing the pre-service teachers to carry out their teaching role.

## Limitations

This study was limited by certain constraints. The case study was limited to a population of just 20 final-year pre-service teachers at one South African university. It did not involve a wide sample of final-year students in South Africa and did not involve the educators who train them. The findings are subjective and contextual and thus cannot be generalised to the larger population. Another constraint is that the interview questions focussed primarily on the pre-service teachers' teaching practice experiences, rather than on their experiences in relation to the quality of the teaching training they received.

## Recommendations

This study proposes the inclusion of a practical component (micro-teaching) in the LS method module, during which lecturers should emphasise putting theory into practice and should guide students on implementation and assessment. This component should be included throughout the LS teacher training curriculum. An increased focus on practical implementation would allow LS pre-service teachers to develop teaching and classroom management skills before engaging with the final teaching practicum (Zakaria et al. 2019). Including a practical micro-teaching component in the teacher training programmes could help pre-service teachers to acquire basic teaching skills and develop self-confidence to avoid the challenges encountered by the participants of this study.

In addition, the congruence between the teacher-training curriculum and the LS curriculum implemented in schools should be improved. The curriculum content needs to be aligned and translated conceptually for young children, and linguistically to accommodate their home language. This is supported by Van den Akker's (2009) concept of the curriculum spider web, which proposes that curriculum content should be implemented in a way that accommodates cultural and linguistic differences and that addresses both the local and global context.

## Contribution of this study to the body of knowledge

This study has contributed to bridging the knowledge gap on FP pre-service LS teachers' experiences with implementing the FPLS curriculum during their teaching practice. Thus, the findings of this study may assist higher education institutions



with improving their pedagogical strategies and may assist policy makers with improving teaching and learning policies to suit the diverse needs of FP pre-service teachers and learners.

## Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the experiences of pre-service FPLS teachers during their teaching practice and to answer the following research questions: (1) What is the experience of FPLS pre-service teachers during teaching practice? (2) What is the connection between their teacher training and the teaching of LS? The experiences of FPLS pre-service teachers during teaching practice were both negative and positive. The positive aspect was that a few of the students have smooth and beautiful experiences because of the support provided by mentors, whilst the negative aspect was that the majority of the pre-service teachers experienced frustration and anxiety during their teaching practice because of their inability to effectively impart to the FP learners the LS curriculum they had been taught at university.

Regarding the connection between their teacher training and the teaching of LS, it was discovered that there is a mismatch between the content the pre-service teachers learned and what they were expected to teach the learners during teaching practice. The pre-service teachers connected their negative experiences during their teaching practice with the teacher education they had received at university. They were critical of their educators' pedagogical strategies, of the limited time allocated to LS in the university curriculum, and of the discrepancy between the content of the FPLS teacher training curriculum and the curriculum required to be taught at school to the FP learners. This is a cause for concern, and the underlying reasons need to be identified and addressed. Are the FPLS lecturers qualified and dedicated to their work? As students, are the pre-service teachers adequately prepared to study the LS module? And are the pre-service teachers equipped with adequate practical and essential teaching skills at university? These are vital questions that require further research(es) to answer.

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### Authors' contributions

D.A.A and N.M. contributed equally to this work.

### Ethical considerations

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### Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

### Disclaimer

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