

Ethnic diversity and pre-service student teachers' school choice during teaching practice

Orientation

Transformation remains a complex phenomenon in any society and its force of impact in a multiracial and multicultural society is even more complex and demanding. In recent years, the cumbersome transformational process started in earnestness in South Africa. With its distinct, yet unique variety of ethnic and cultural identities and driven by a moral imperative, the South African citizenry opted in 1994 for a non-racial, multicultural democracy based on values associated with social justice. This transformational process affected (and still does) all spheres of society. With regard to the South African education scenario, the transformational process is characterized by, among others, a metamorphosis of the education system, a reorientation towards curriculum matters and the desegregation of schools. With reference to the latter and in the context of social reconstructivism, which regards schooling as one of the crucial elements in a movement towards a more just society (Liston & Zeichner, 1991:33; Pendlebury, 1998:334), South African schools are now, more than ever, challenged to implement measures to meet the needs of all learners irrespective of their racial and cultural backgrounds. For this purpose, teachers need knowledge and skills that will enable them to demonstrate competence in dealing with the many facets associated with ethnic and cultural diverse learners. Moreover, they should be able to reflect critically on the relationship between schooling and societal inequities by also demonstrating a moral commitment to correcting those inequities through their daily classroom activities (Liston & Zeichner, 1991:33), since they are seen as visible social actors in promoting equity and acting against racism and inequality (Jokikokko, 2005:70).

Because of our segregated history, the differences between the various South African population groups is a reality yielded by ignorance. To prove this, Van der Walt, Grimbeeck and Marais (2001:153) denote that the complexity of multiculturalism experienced in South African schools during recent years, left most teachers unprepared for their task. Gumbo (2001:240) also raises his concern about South African teachers' ability to teach in schools reflecting an ethnic and cultural diverse composition by indicating, "teachers are not fully trained to teach in multicultural contexts". On his turn, Mazibuko (2006:68) also questions the

capabilities of practicing South African teachers when he remarks that the majority of teachers have been trained in racially exclusive institutions, preparing them for teaching in racially segregated schools.

The reconceptualization of South African teacher education programmes for delivering multicultural adept teachers within a society characterized by ethnic and cultural integrated patterns of life therefore becomes obligatory. Against this backdrop and in concurrence with Robinson's (1999:192) opinion that "the present generation of South African trainee teachers constitute a unique and exciting group, in that they represent the first generation of future teachers who will be expected to teach in a vastly different context from the one in which they were schooled", this paper intends reporting on how South African pre-service student teachers view their preparedness to teach in the new landscape of South Africa's desegregated schools.

A brief overview of school desegregation in South Africa since 1992

Demographically and socially, South Africa has always been a plural society. According to Mathubuti and Mathubuti (1994), South Africans represent a "mosaic of diversity", which during its history witnessed a variety of educational migratory trends (Paterson & Kruss, 1998:150-151). However, the introduction of a new political dispensation in 1994 can be regarded as a watershed period in the history of South Africa. Not only did it bring along the emancipation of diversity but also a dynamic upsurge of segregated public schools. School desegregation started to gain momentum in 1992 when a reportedly 7923 learners from racial groups other than white, were admitted to schools traditionally reserved for whites (Du Toit, 1995:212). Towards the end of 1993, this figure rocketed to about 80 000 (*Ibid.*, 1995:212). Jansen (1998:101), Memela (1998:4), Hofmeyer (2000) and Marais and Meier (2004:223) are just a few of the South African authors who mentioned phrases such as "school choice in a unified education system", "an intensified process of desegregation", "a spontaneous migratory movement in the school system" and "a migratory tidal wave", which characterized the desegregation of public schools since 1994.

Though the pattern of desegregation is especially prominent from schools situated in townships (traditional black schools) to suburban schools (traditional white schools), the changing demographic representation of learners in South

African public schools has resulted in classrooms that are becoming more heterogeneous by the day and it can be projected that it will increasingly become diverse in the future.

Teacher education within multicultural school systems

Based on what has been said in the introductory section about South African teacher education for a diverse society and because of the rapid and dramatic demographic trends experienced in public schools, it can be concluded that South African teachers are not adequately prepared to meet the demands of teaching in ethnic and cultural diverse classrooms. Related to this, a variety of studies reveal that teachers in general, do not regard their training as being adequate for preparing them to teach in cultural diverse settings (*cf.* Gollnick & Chinn, 2002; Cruz-Janzen, 2000; Manning 2000; Banks 1999; Yeo, 1999; Gallavan, 1998; Aaronsohn, Carter & Howell, 1995; Cannella & Reiff, 1994). Yet, other researchers found that teachers apparently possess the theoretical knowledge of how to deal with ethnic and cultural diverse learners but they do not know how to apply it (Kirova, 2001; Ukpokodu, 1999; Brown & Kysilka, 1994). Gay's (1986:155) observation that "teachers cannot be expected to be effective in teaching multicultural content and working with ethnically diverse students without having had professional preparation for these tasks" together with Zeichner's (1993) concern (in Guyton & Wesche, 2005: 21) that there is a dire need for the effective preparation of pre-service teachers in multicultural education, is also noteworthy.

The challenge to teacher education institutions thus becomes evident: the complexity of a multicultural school system demands relevant teacher education. The pivotal role of teacher educators in tackling the phenomenon of diversity should therefore not be underestimated. In fact, within the context of South Africa, Samuel and Stephens (2000:477) indicate that teacher educators are "charged with the responsibility of developing teachers who will be ambassadors of the policy imperatives of a new democratic order". However, the ongoing debate on how to best facilitate prospective teachers' education and professional development in order to equip them adequately for teaching in ethnic and cultural diverse classrooms continues.

The literature reveals several attempts in response to this debate. For example, Erasmus and Ferreira (2002:34) suggest that teachers teaching in a multicultural

school system should be able to meet the needs of “learners from pre-industrial, modern and post-modern environments as well as from different cultural, socio-economic and historic-political backgrounds”. To enable teachers to deal with such a variety of multicultural challenges, they regard it as “imperative that educators should possess the necessary interpersonal and professional skills” (*Ibid.*, 2002:34). Implied training needs of teachers teaching in a multicultural school system are also signified in research done by Manning (2000) in which teachers indicated a discomfort in dealing with the differences in behaviour, customs, language, and attitudes displayed by learners from diverse cultures. Bennett (1990), Banks and Banks (1989), and Sleeter and Grant (1988) have recommended that the following be included within teacher education curricula to accommodate ethnic and cultural diversity:

- Considering the needs of students, at least one course to provide a theoretical orientation on multicultural education and the principles thereof.
- Information about the history, culture, values and societal contributions from a number of relevant and indigenous ethnic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds.
- Field experiences and teaching opportunities with learners from varying backgrounds in order to plan according to multicultural principles and implement multicultural teaching practices.

In his turn, McGeehan (1982) also outlined four broad areas that multicultural teacher education would have to address to be effective: knowledge, experience, attitudes and behaviour. Whereas Larke (1990) and Hadaway (1988) maintain that multicultural courses with a theoretical focus alone are insufficient to affect the cross-cultural sensitivity of pre-service teachers, Melnick and Zeichner (1997) suggest that lack of cross-cultural experiences during teacher education is a significant drawback in meeting a multicultural agenda. In addition, Beyer and Zeichner (1987:324) argue that there is a need in multicultural school systems to develop “programs that self-consciously foster in students the commitment to becoming active, informed critics of their own experiences and situations”.

Thus, the inherent value of teaching practice for preparing teachers for ethnic and cultural diverse classrooms is acknowledged.

Teaching practice as component of teacher education in multicultural school systems

While a shift in the literature from the concept teaching practice (associated with an apprenticeship model) to field/school experience (associated with an experiential model) is observed (Menter, 1989:460), the South African Norms and Standards for Educators (2000:11) apparently prefers the first when it suggests, “*Teaching practice* is recognised as an essential feature in all teacher education programmes.” Whatever one calls it and however it is conceived, the notion of teaching practice is strongly rooted in experience-based learning initiated by Dewey (1938); Vygotsky’s (1978) social cognitive theory and founded on the premise of situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Consequently, teaching practice is meant to provide for the authentic context (South African Norms & Standards for Educators, 2000:12) within which student teachers are exposed to experience the complexities and richness of the reality of being a teacher.

Although Wiggins, Follo and Eberly (2007:655) indicate that teaching practice have not enjoyed its deserved high priority in teacher preparation programmes, Menter (1989:460) suggests that it has long been widely recognised that the teaching practice component of initial teacher education has a strong influence on the professional development of teachers. While Marais and Meier (2004:221) conclude that teaching practice represents a vast range of experiences to which student teachers are exposed when they work in classrooms and schools, it can be concluded that teaching practice forms an invaluable part of any teacher education programme. Research even suggests that it has a much stronger influence than the institutional parts of courses since it provides for meaningful opportunities of action and reflection on practice, as well as for an ongoing dialogue with practice and a continuous construction of knowledge and meaning. It therefore appears as if teaching practice does not only prepare student teachers to teach in a more competent and autonomous way, but also to deal with other challenges of the profession. Put differently, “teaching practice represents a unique opportunity for the development and consolidation of a significant variety of knowledge and skills” (Caires & Almeida, 2005:112). Even student teachers themselves recognize the value of teaching practice. Menter (1989:461) remarks in this regard that they perceive it as “the crux of their preparation for the teaching profession” since it

provides for the “real interface between studenthood and membership of the profession”.

The preceding paragraph on teacher education within multicultural school systems concluded that teacher education for such a system would be successful only to the extent that theoretical courses are supplemented by a well-planned teaching practice component. To continue the discussion on the value of teaching practice within the context of teacher preparation for a multicultural school system, Caires and Almeida (2005:111/112) assert that various pedagogical experiences take place during the teaching practice period: the manipulation of teaching tools, the resolution of real problems, and the reflection on the political, social and ethnical aspects of teaching and education. Zeichner (1996:150) reckons that teaching practice is “perhaps the most common strategy advocated in the literature for preparing teachers for cultural diversity ... (because it) puts teacher education students in direct contact with pupils and adults with cultural backgrounds different from their own”. In corroboration, Wiggins *et al.* (2007:655) regard teaching practice as one of “the most effective methods for achieving the goal of cultural sensitivity” while Goodlad (1990) in Phillion, Miller and Lehman (2005:3) maintains that it is the best means to prepare future teachers for the diversity and complexity of classrooms. Research by McNeal (2005:417) suggests that pre-service teachers who have had diverse experiences are more predisposed, sensitive and accepting of diversity since opportunities for interacting and applying instructional activities in a variety of contexts and with different learners are provided. In this regard, Caires and Almeida’s (2005:112) remark that learning to teach is largely influenced by the interplay between individual and contextual variables is also significant.

The question to be asked, however, is whether teaching practice/school experience as an element in the professional preparation of prospective teachers to teach in a multicultural school system is structured to be a transformative learning experience or does it remain essentially conservative in nature? Generally speaking, Marais and Meier (2004:222) raise their concern about the effectiveness of present-day teaching practice when they remark that student teachers sometimes find it difficult to relate theory to everyday classroom practice. Mitchell (1996:47), who refers to student teachers “inability to question and comprehend the overall purpose of what is being done in the real classroom”, shares this concern. Ghosh’s (1996:49) observation that teacher education institutions have been slow to respond

to change their current programs and practices by assuming that student teachers either do not need to, or will automatically be able to deal with the wide range of cultural diversity in the classroom, bears relation to the imperfection of teaching practice as a transformative learning experience in a multicultural school system. He further maintains, “teacher education programmes do little to equip student teachers with skills for working in multicultural classrooms, either during their student teaching experience or in the first years on the job” (*Ibid.*, 1996:49). An observation made by Hickling-Hudson and McMeniman’s (1996:23) raises concern about student teachers’ competence to teach in diverse classroom settings when they proclaim “many student teachers, after their first encounter with teaching-practice, return to campus expressing shock at the ethnic diversity of classrooms, and their lack of preparedness for dealing with this situation”. McWilliam (1994:62) also expresses uneasiness about teaching practice as a transformative learning experience in a multicultural school system by indicating the lack of student engagement with practices which question or challenge educational inequalities.

Empirical study

Background. The empirical research being reported in this paper should be seen against its explorative nature. The research is positioned to set the foundation for an intended comprehensive research project on the ecological validity of teacher education in South Africa.

To contextualize the research under discussion, information on the topic of teaching practice and its possible role in preparing prospective teachers for ethnic and cultural diverse classrooms was gathered by means of a brief literature overview. In addition, the changing landscape of South African schooling was highlighted. However, the empirical part of the research is aimed to establish if the reasons guiding student teachers’ school choice for the purpose of teaching practice have anything in common with these students’ self-efficacy beliefs and attitudes about teaching in ethnic and culturally diverse classrooms.

Research design. In conducting the empirical research, a quantitative approach was followed. Because of the intention to conduct an exploratory study to initiate a research project, the research is non-experimental in nature. The research design

can therefore be typified as a descriptive study (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006:24/25).

Data collection instrument. Guyton and Wesche's (2005) Multicultural Efficacy Scale served as point of departure to develop a simplified questionnaire suitable to the field of reference of South African students. The literature study and an evaluation by two colleagues of the draft questionnaire served as measures for ensuring the content validity of the instrument. The questionnaire consisted of structured items addressing students' biographical information, determinants of school choice for teaching practice and self-efficacy beliefs and attitudes about teaching in ethnic and culturally diverse classrooms. I administered the completion of the questionnaire during March 2007 after the students' returned from a two-week observation period at schools of their choice.

Sample. It was argued that all second, third and final year education students enrolled for the four year BEd qualification at one of the campuses of the university where I am lecturing should participate in the research. First year students were excluded as they only started their teacher education studies. Because of considerations such as the exploratory nature of the research and time constraints, non-probability sampling in the form of convenience sampling (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005:206) was applied in selecting the research participants. According to Cohen and Manion (1994: 88), this type of sampling is often used when dealing with captive audiences, which in this case happened to be all the BEd students on the particular campus. Eventually a heterogeneous group of one hundred and seventy four (174) students participated in the research.

Data analysis and interpretation.

Biographical information. Under this section, information regarding the respondents' gender, race and home language is reported.

Gender

Gender	n	%
1. Male	41	23.56
2. Female	133	76.44

The gender information obtained from the respondents mirrors the fact that the teaching profession still attracts more women in South Africa. This tendency compare favourably with research reports of other countries (*cf.* Milner, 2005; Lai, Chan, Ko & So, 2005; Richardson & Watt, 2005; Johnston, Mckeown & Mcewen, 1999).

Race

Race	n	%
1. White	116	66.67
2. Black	58	33.33

For the purpose of the research, racial groups known as 'disadvantaged' in the South African context and who previously resorted under separate Departments of Education were categorised as Black. These include Black, Indian and Coloured students.

According to the figures on race, it is interesting to note that white prospective teachers outnumber the group consisting of Black students. While the South African Black middle class showed a rapid growth after 1994, this may be attributable to the fact that learners of colour who completed their schooling successfully aspire for better paid positions than teaching when enrolling at higher education institutions.

Home language

Home language	n	%
1. Afrikaans	106	60.92
2. English	15	8.62
3. African	53	30.46

The majority of the respondents indicated Afrikaans as their home language, which is perhaps indicative of the fact that teaching is still being regarded as a noble profession amongst this predominantly White language group. It should be noted though that some of the Coloured students' home language could also be Afrikaans. While the English-speaking group may include Indian students, this language group forms the minority. The African language group include the nine indigenous African

languages such as isiNdebele, isiXhosa, isiZulu, Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, SiSwati, Tshivenda and Xitsonga. Interesting is the low figure of English home language speakers.

From the above analysis, the majority respondents who participated in this research can be characterized as white, Afrikaans speaking, females.

School choice. With the second section of the questionnaire, I wanted to establish what determinants guide students to select a preferred school for their teaching practice. It should be noted that students are free to select any school of their choice for the observation periods of their teaching practice. However, when teaching practice comprise of school visits by lecturers for assessment purposes, students select a school from a list of preferred schools. (Preferred schools are usually closer to the university to allow lecturers to commute between the university and the school in the most economical way).

The following determinants, with brief descriptions, were listed: proximity, familiarity, association, future prospects and prestige. By means of a Likert scale, the students responded on each of the determinants.

Proximity

Proximity		n	%
	Agree strongly	77	44.25
	Agree somewhat	55	31.61
	Disagree somewhat	24	13.79
	Disagree strongly	18	10.34

Future prospects

Future prospects		n	%
	Agree strongly	49	28.16
	Agree somewhat	60	34.48
	Disagree somewhat	39	22.41
	Disagree strongly	26	14.94

Association

Association		n	%
	Agree strongly	87	50.00
	Agree somewhat	58	33.33
	Disagree somewhat	18	10.34
	Disagree strongly	11	6.32

Familiarity

Familiarity		n	%
	Agree strongly	41	23.56
	Agree somewhat	74	42.53
	Disagree somewhat	34	19.54
	Disagree strongly	25	14.37

Prestige

Prestige		n	%
	Agree strongly	32	18.39
	Agree somewhat	55	31.61
	Disagree somewhat	51	29.31
	Disagree strongly	36	20.69

Derived from the analysis, the students prefer to go to schools where the dominant ethnic and cultural group is similar to their own. The second consideration for selecting a particular school is the distance a student has to travel. This decision could imply other factors such as time, costs and safety. The respondents also rated familiarity with the school environment and the staff high. The importance attached to this determinant could point to three possible reasons. It could be that students choose the schools they attended as learners because they feel more at home at these schools; it could be because of an underlying fear of the unfamiliar and it could point to an accentuation of the association with a familiar ethnic or cultural group. Although future prospects is lower down the students' list of determinants, it could be argued that in light of the importance attached to

association, students' will most probably use this as a guiding principle when considering future prospects. From the responses, it seems as if prestige is of less significance when deciding on a school for teaching practice.

Self-efficacy beliefs scale. Pohan (1996) in Marais and Meier (2004:334) points to the fact that student teachers' beliefs often serve as filters through which information and encounters are interpreted. As these filters may cause unconscious resistance when confronted with stimuli, teacher educators are compelled to take cognisance of student teachers' beliefs in order to increase the effectiveness of their training programmes. Teachers' self-efficacy beliefs can be described as "judgements of own capabilities to bring about desired outcomes of student learning" (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001:783). It was therefore necessary to establish student teachers' beliefs about their abilities to teach in ethnic and cultural diverse classrooms when attempting to explain their school choice for teaching practice better. The students were required to reflect on each of the statements below by indicating the extent of their competence to teach in ethnic and cultural diverse classrooms.

I don't believe I could do this very well		I believe I could probably do this if I had to, but it would be difficult for me		I believe I could do this reasonably well, if I had some time to prepare		I am quite confident that this would be easy for me to do	
n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
1. I am able to explain, describe and discuss the content of my learning area/subject in more than one of the official South African languages.							
13	7.47	31	17.82	84	48.28	46	26.44
2. I am able to use terminology and content in my learning area/subject to be ethnically and culturally sensitive.							
5	2.87	16	9.20	77	44.25	76	43.68
3. I am able to interpret the learning outcomes of my learning area/subject to be appropriate to ethnic and cultural differences.							
3	1.72	17	9.77	87	50.00	67	38.51
4. I am able to plan lessons in my learning area/subject to accommodate ethnic and cultural diversity.							
13	7.47	20	11.49	70	40.23	71	40.80
5. I am able to construct a learning atmosphere showing sensitivity towards ethnic and cultural differences.							
6	3.45	14	8.05	75	43.10	79	45.40
6. I am able to apply a variety of teaching methods to match ethnic and cultural differences.							

8	4.60	22	12.64	77	44.25	67	38.51
<i>7. I am able to create a classroom environment that reflects appreciation for ethnic and cultural diversity.</i>							
12	6.90	21	12.07	59	33.91	82	47.13
<i>8. I am able to get learners from different racial and cultural backgrounds to work together in a cooperative fashion.</i>							
8	4.60	10	5.75	67	38.51	89	51.15
<i>9. I am able to develop original teaching and learning materials (e.g. charts, models, worksheets) appropriate for accommodating ethnic and cultural diversity.</i>							
7	4.02	15	8.62	62	35.63	90	51.72
<i>10. I am able to analyse and select appropriate learning resources for ethnic and cultural diverse classrooms.</i>							
7	4.02	11	6.32	110	63.22	46	26.44
<i>11. I am able to identify practices that may harm cooperation between me and ethnic and cultural diverse learners.</i>							
8	4.60	19	10.92	83	47.70	64	36.78
<i>12. I am able to identify solutions to problems that may arise because of ethnic and cultural diversity.</i>							
8	4.60	22	12.64	68	39.08	76	43.68
<i>13. I am able to respond to the educational needs generated by an ethnic and cultural diverse classroom.</i>							
4	2.30	20	11.49	86	49.43	64	36.78
<i>14. I am able to apply a variety of assessment methods to match ethnic and cultural differences.</i>							
6	3.45	11	6.32	58	33.33	99	56.90
<i>15. I am able to communicate easily to someone of another race or culture.</i>							
4	2.30	13	7.47	49	28.16	108	62.07

Evidently, the respondents are to a high degree confident that they would be able to deal effectively with ethnic and culturally diversity. The reality, however, shows this to be different because of the following reasons:

- Language competence is a relative concept, but fluency of expression and grammatical correctness can be regarded as prerequisites for using any language for the purposes of teaching and learning. Although English could be seen as the inter-cultural lingua franca in South Africa, it still poses many challenges to non-home language speakers. In addition, a small percentage of White South Africans are able to speak any one of the indigenous African languages, while the same is true for the percentage of Black people, able to speak Afrikaans.

- There is very little evidence from the course material that students are exposed to multicultural responsive pedagogy. This is also confirmed through informal discussions with the lecturers involved.
- Although disquieting, lecturers' own teaching practices show an 'assimilationist' orientation.
- The students' apparent preference of schools for teaching practice, especially for those reflecting the dominant ethnic and cultural grouping similar to their own, contradict the confidence levels expressed above. When argued from the angle of school choice, it means that students do not have any, or very limited, experience in teaching in ethnic and cultural diverse classrooms. Viewed from this position, they are not able to judge objectively whether they are indeed able to teach effectively in such classrooms.

Thus, there appears to be misconceptions amongst the respondents about varying learner needs in ethnic and culturally diverse classrooms. These misconceptions could be nestled in "cultural and racial mismatches", indicating a reliance on learned and internalised stereotypes or could be ascribed to "colour-blind ideologies" by assuming that "all people are created equally and experience the world equitably" (Milner, 2005:770 – 771).

Attitude scale. While admitting that self-efficacy beliefs and attitudes are both important constructs that warrant clear differentiation and intensive research, the intention with this section was to obtain a peripheral view of the respondents' 'feeling' or 'affective identification' with matters related to ethnic and cultural diversity. It was argued that the responses obtained in this section would be indicative of students' 'willingness' to do their teaching practice in schools accommodating diverse learners.

Agree strongly		Agree somewhat		Disagree somewhat		Disagree strongly	
n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
1. <i>Accommodating learners of ethnic and cultural diversity in one classroom is a recipe for tension and conflict.</i>							
32	18.39	56	32.18	53	30.46	33	18.97

2. <i>Teachers of the same ethnic and cultural decent and background as their learners, should teach such learners.</i>							
35	20.11	63	36.21	48	27.59	28	16.09
3. <i>Ethnic and cultural identity forming forces impact on classroom teaching and learning.</i>							
27	15.52	68	39.08	61	35.06	18	10.34
4. <i>All ethnic and cultural groupings within a classroom are entitled to maintain their own identity.</i>							
106	60.92	51	29.31	13	7.47	4	2.30

On the first three statements, the respondents appear to be divided between the negative and positive poles of the continuum. Although the majority view themselves as being competent to teach in ethnic and culturally diverse classrooms, a high percentage of the respondents appear to be having reservations about teaching in such classrooms (Question 1 & 2). Though the respondents reveal an apparent sensitivity towards others' identity by admitting that ethnic and culturally differences should be respected (Question 4), they seem to be uncertain about the impact of diverse identities on classroom teaching (Question 3).

Derived from the limited information from the attitude scale, it sheds more light on the respondents' preferences for doing teaching practice at schools reflecting similar ethnic and culturally groupings than their own.

Conclusion

Although it is accepted that schools usually reflect the diversity portrayed by the society in which they are situated, it appears as if preference to attend schools within own places of living seems to be the norm (Santoro & Allard, 2005:864). This means that opportunities to engage with others from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds during the years of schooling are minimal for the majority of learners. The result is that "most future teachers enter teacher education programs possessing limited authentic cross-cultural knowledge" (Brown, 2004:119). Moreover, it seems as if this 'preferred segregation' continues during the years of teacher education. Not only is there an apparent poor fit between the content and processes followed at teacher education institutions and the contexts or realities in which teachers are supposed to serve, but prospective teachers also show reluctance to teach in schools where the learners have different ethnic, cultural and

even socio-economic class identities from their own. It therefore comes as no surprise when Phillion *et al.* (2005:4) postulate that many pre-service teachers may not recognize the need to understand diverse populations, as they plan in any case to teach in schools predominantly reflecting their own backgrounds. Adding to this, Santoro and Allard (2005:864) assert that teachers' propensity to prefer teaching in schools reflecting their own ethnic and cultural backgrounds could also be motivated by a number of other reasons. These may include fear of the unfamiliar or may be in part, due to the ways in which teaching for diversity is generally taken up in teacher education. Marais and Meier (2004:221) quote Ismail, Halse and Buchanan (2000) who refer to geographical distances, isolation and uneven levels of teacher expertise as some contextual reasons prompting the school preferences of teachers within the South African scenario.

Without underrating any of the mentioned reasons, the prominence of student teachers' associative priorities is evident. Combined with the fact that a monocultural approach (Fuller, 1994) to teacher education, which provides for little significant contact with people from diverse ethnical and cultural backgrounds (Cockrell, Placier, Cockrell & Middleton, 1999), prospective teachers in a multicultural school system such as South Africa's will end up having insufficient knowledge and skills in how to teach ethnic and culturally diverse learners (Futrell, Gomez & Bedden, 2003).

Since the school setting and the classroom provide for particular contexts within which the conception of being a teacher is framed and defined (Coldron & Smith, 1999), the exploitation of teaching practice for closing the disparity gap between cross-cultural borders of understanding and cooperation and preparing teachers to teach in ethnic and cultural diverse societies, needs to be intensified. Taking this argument further, McAlpine and Crago (1995:404) argue that student teachers' exposure to and experience in multicultural classrooms during teaching practice will enable them to predict and interpret outcomes and make decisions with more certitude when confronted later in their teaching career with multicultural classrooms. However, preparing student teachers for multicultural school systems also requires "thoughtful and guided instruction to facilitate developmental, pedagogical and conceptual changes" (Milner, 2005:783). One possible way of achieving this ideal is to ensure the ecological validity of teacher education.

Addressing the ecological validity of teacher education in South Africa.

Although Schmuckler (2001:420) indicates that there is no clear consensus on exactly what is meant by the concept ecological validity, Bronfenbrenner (1977:516) refers to it as “the extent to which the environment experienced by the subjects in a scientific investigation has the properties it is supposed or assumed to have by the experimenter”. Thus, important factors related to ecological validity appear to be the congruency between the environment as experienced by the subject and the properties of the environment, the relevance of the environment and its functionality. Teacher education in South Africa is guided by the Norms and Standards for Educators, which requires that student teachers should be able to demonstrate foundational competence by showing an understanding of relevant knowledge; practical competence by being able to perform appropriate actions within an educational context and reflexive competence in which “...performances and decision-making are integrated with understanding and with an ability to adapt to change and unforeseen circumstances and to explain the reasons behind these adaptations” (DoE, 2000:10). In addition, a student teacher should be able to integrate these competences within each of the seven educator roles: learning mediator, interpreter and designer of learning programmes and materials, leader, administrator and manager, scholar, researcher and lifelong learner, assessor, learning area/subject/phase specialist and the community citizenship and pastoral role (DoE, 2000:15-22). Viewed from a perspective of ecological validity it is imperative to address and relate the integrated competences within each role theoretically and practically, by also considering the realities of ethnic and cultural diverse classrooms. A theoretical approach will assist in eliminating apparent cognitive dissonances about teaching and learning in ethnic and cultural diverse classrooms, whilst the practical and reflexive components should be embedded in teaching practice to allow for the social contact between members of different ethnical and cultural groups in order to nurture understanding and acceptance.

Concerning ecological valid teaching practice, the school, while maintaining its crucial characteristics and integrity of a real-life situation by also remaining faithful to its everyday operational activities, represents the naturalistic secondary educational setting. It is during this period that the student teacher should be granted the opportunities to experience real-life situations in order to employ the knowledge, skills and dispositions obtained in the ‘safe’ environment of the training

institution. By ensuring that their teaching practice is ecologically valid, South African teacher education institutions will not only be able to challenge their student teachers' competence within schools representing a truly diverse environment but also student teachers' behaviour and responsiveness to the diversity of environmental stimuli.

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