

Pre-service teachers' experiences of a lesson study approach as a form of student support

Wiets Botes

Sol Plaatje University, South Africa

Boitumelo Moreeng

University of the Free State, South Africa

Moeketsi Mosia

Sol Plaatje University, South Africa

This paper reports on how a team of final-year pre-service teachers experienced a lesson study approach, as a program-specific form of student support. Guided by Bandura's social learning theory, this purposive qualitative case study reveals how the pre-service teachers' engagement in the lesson study approach triggered feelings of commitment, dedication and motivation to succeed in the process of developing well-structured lesson presentations for a teaching practicum experience. The paper describes how the lesson study approach allowed the team of pre-service teachers to engage in collaborative practices which enabled them to share creative lesson ideas in a small-group format. The paper further reports on the lesson reflection experiences encountered by the pre-service teachers which empowered them to reflect and learn from their fellow peers' teaching experiences. The paper suggests that the lesson study approach, as a form of student support, serves as a valuable intervention that has the potential to better the lesson preparation capabilities of pre-service teachers in development. Further research should consider a larger sample that might render more diverse experiences in terms of how pre-service teachers experience a lesson study approach.

Introduction

It has been widely claimed that interventions that relate to student-academic support serve as a means to better the educational experience of students within the higher education sector (Lavhelani, Ndebele & Ravhuhali, 2020; Skoglund, Wall & Kiene, 2018). The general assumption is that academic support is key to ensuring optimal student throughput and academic success (Owens, Murkowski, Price & Johansen, 2018). Given this focus, various forms of academic support have been introduced that are aimed at promoting the academic success of students. In particular, academic literacy support interventions are considered to supplement the academic literacy skill development of students (Khumalo, 2019). Specialised cross-aged mentor support, on the other hand, responds to the academic needs of students with learning difficulties (Kendall, 2016). Another form of academic support is supplemental instruction, that is driven towards utilising peer-assisted study sessions to improve student retention and success within targeted, historically difficult courses (Skoglund, Wall & Kiene, 2018). Finally, online, peer-assisted tutor support provides academic assistance to students in complex and long-distance environments (Tibingana-Ahimbisibwe, Willis, Catherall, Butler & Harrison, 2020).

Apart from these academic support interventions having the potential to better the academic success of students at the tertiary education level, its generic focus, however, has come under scrutiny by researchers. Lozada and Croft (2021) for instance, criticised academic support intervention for its nuanced and generic approach that is not program specific but somewhat remedial in nature. Bennett, Richardson and MacKinnon (2016) explained that a generic approach towards academic support fails to respond to the program-specific attributes that students are required to develop. One such example of a program-specific skill set that students should develop, in the context of teacher education, is the ability to adequately prepare and present lessons in an authentic, “real-life” teaching context.

It can therefore be argued that academic support interventions may serve as a mechanism to better the module pass-rates of pre-service teachers (Hill, Walkington & France, 2016) but lacks focus in shaping the expected teacher qualities that pre-service teachers should develop, such as the ability to prepare lessons for an authentic teaching experience. Consequently, a typical academic support intervention might have an insignificant impact on the professional skills development of pre-service teachers (Dean, Eady & Yanamandram, 2020). It is for this reason that scholars suggest that academic support interventions be intentional in responding to program-specific outcomes (Dean, Eady & Yanamandram, 2020).

Given this call, one such support intervention that focuses primarily on the development of program-specific skill sets in the context of teacher education is the lesson study approach. What distinguishes a lesson study approach from other academic support interventions, is the drive towards shaping the pre-service teachers' ability to effectively plan and prepare lessons (Towaf, 2016). In response to the preceding argument, which shed light on the generic nature of academic support interventions and the shortcomings thereof on the professional skill development of pre-service teachers, this study provides an account of how a lesson study support intervention was perceived by a team of final-year pre-service teachers in development.

Problem statement and rationale for the study

The study was conducted in a School of Education at an institution of higher education in South Africa. The study involved a group of six final year Bachelor of Education pre-service teachers. As part of their teacher development, the pre-service teachers were placed in schools in the city where the university is located for a period of four weeks to perform teaching practicum duties. During this time, the expectation was that the pre-service teachers prepare and present lessons for an authentic “real-life” teaching context. Given this task, the pre-service teachers took it upon themselves to establish a WhatsApp group that enabled them to share their teaching practicum experiences with their peers. The WhatsApp group further served as a mechanism for the pre-service teachers to share existing issues that impacted their practicum teaching experience. One of these issues circled around their capability to prepare lesson presentations for practical teaching duties. The issue was elevated to the module lecturers, who in this case also served as researchers of this paper. Upon receiving a brief from the student delegation, the researchers came to

an understanding that the pre-service teachers had the need to engage in a community of practice to enhance their lesson preparation skills. Given this call from the pre-service teachers, a space in the School of Education at a selected South African University was established wherein the pre-service teachers could plan their lesson presentations as a collective during the teaching practicum period. Against this background, this study sought to investigate how a team of final-year pre-service teachers perceived the lesson study support intervention in the School of Education at a selected South African University.

Bandura's social learning theory as a theoretical framework

The theoretical framework that underpins this study is Bandura's social learning theory. It is a cognitive and behavioural theory that attempts to give meaning to human learning and behaviour in a social setting that is guided by a process of reciprocal determinism (Bandura, 1986). Social learning theory values the importance of affirming and acknowledging the diverse realities of others (Beers, van Mierio & Hoes, 2016). The theory proclaims that individuals learn best through acts of interactive engagement. This approach, in itself, allows for the sharing of diverse ideas amongst individuals that results in a social learning experience (Bandura, 1977). In other words, the theory is based on the premise that individuals are social beings who thrive on social interaction through dialogue and observation.

The theory further promotes the aspects of self-efficacy and collaborative learning amongst individuals (Bandura, 1986; De Hei et al., 2017). Self-efficacy is viewed as an individual's belief to execute behaviours in order to succeed in specific situations (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, 1986). Self-efficacy exerts confidence in an individual's capacity as self-organised, self-regulated and self-reflective beings that are constantly adapting to diverse social contexts. In other words, self-efficacy allows one to internalise and give meaning to social events against the backdrop of individualised experiences and perspectives.

Bandura's social learning theory further encourages the aspect of collaborative learning amongst individuals. Collaborative learning is viewed as an educational approach whereby individuals learn together in a group format (De Hei et al., 2017; Schrader, 2015). The principle of collaborative learning promotes the value of mutual engagement through consistent discursive practices that allow for free-flow of information sharing between individuals (Molinillo et al., 2018). This approach enables individuals to work together in order to obtain a better understanding of social phenomena.

Conceptualising the lesson study approach

The lesson study approach is an academic-support intervention that focuses specifically on the development of teacher and teaching-specific qualities. What distinguishes the lesson study approach from other forms of student support is its drive towards shaping the teacher behaviour, teacher beliefs and teacher skill-sets of pre-service teachers in

development (Coenders & Verhoef, 2019). As a course-specific form of support, the lesson study approach has been used for centuries to expose educators to aspects of classroom practice (McMillan & Jess, 2021; Norton, 2018). More recently, the lesson study approach has also been adopted by initial teacher education programs to better prepare pre-service teachers for the profession (Bjuland & Helgevold, 2018; Sachmpazidi & Henderson, 2021).

The approach allows pre-service teachers to formulate teaching goals, prepare lesson presentations and reflect on past teaching experiences in a small-group format (Larssen et al., 2018). It is considered a "safe-space" for sharing teaching ideas, views and experiences (Wingate, 2018). Similar to Bandura's social learning theory, the lesson study approach also promotes the aspect of mutual engagement and discursive practices amongst individuals in a social setting (Arendale, 2020; Norton, 2018). Becker, Waldis and Staub (2019) added that the lesson study approach serves as a collaborative venture which empowers pre-service teachers to prepare lessons as a collective, through acts of brainstorming and idea-sharing.

Within the lesson study approach, pre-service teachers are considered as self-organising, inquiring and reflecting individuals. Characteristic to the lesson study approach, is the aspect of post-lesson reflection (Vermunt et al., 2019). Post-lesson reflection deals with the discourses surrounding the pre-service teachers' experiences of their lesson presentations. During the post-lesson reflection opportunity, pre-service teachers are encouraged to share their lived experiences, feelings and emotions that relate to past teaching experiences (Coenders & Verhoef, 2019). Key to the post-lesson reflection episode is the ability of pre-service teachers to use individualised teaching experiences as a driver to formulate powerful and purposeful ideas aimed at improving the quality of teaching (Allen et al., 2021).

Research design and method

A qualitative case study research approach was utilised to capture the pre-service teachers' experiences regarding their engagement in a lesson study approach. The case included six final-year pre-service teachers and their individualised accounts on the use of a lesson study approach as a form of course-specific student support during a teaching practicum opportunity. A focus group discussion was used as a data collection method to capture the rich experiences of the pre-service teachers. Characteristic of a focus group discussion is the free flow of information sharing that takes place through open dialogue between researcher and participants (Gawlik, 2018). In following this method, the pre-service teachers have the freedom to discuss and share their subjective views and opinions pertaining to the effectiveness of the lesson study approach. Within the focus group discussion, our role as researchers was merely to stimulate and facilitate discussion. In doing so, we were able to tap into the realities of the pre-service teachers. The focus group discussion rendered a large amount of empirical data that were transcribed verbatim and subsequently coded to identify common themes that associate with the diverse experiences of the pre-service teachers.

Methodological rigor in the study was considered through drawing on measures such as “confirmability”, “credibility” and “neutrality” (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Confirmability was ensured through the open dialogue that surfaced between the researchers and the pre-service teachers during the focus group discussion. Credibility and neutrality were confirmed through the researchers’ prolonged interactive engagement with the six pre-service teachers in the focus group discussion that took place over the course of a day. In addition, the findings of the study were shared with the team of pre-service teachers to ensure that the data were accurately identified, interpreted and described.

Research site, population and sample

The research was situated in a School of Education at a selected South African University. This School of Education offers a Bachelor of Education degree with areas of program specialisation in primary and secondary school teaching. From this research site, the population of the study included pre-service teachers who studied for a Bachelor of Education degree. A purposive sample of six final-year pre-service teachers opted to become participants in the study. All six identified as specialised in either primary school or secondary school teaching. The selection of the participants was subject to their call to be supported in terms of preparing lesson presentations for a teaching practicum opportunity.

Ethics

Permission was granted by the Postgraduate Research Ethics Committee of the University of the Free State (Ethical clearance number - UFS-HSD2018/0073). As researchers of the study, one was tasked to ensure that all relevant role-players involved in the study were consulted in advance (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Therefore, the pre-service teachers were approached to give consent to take part in the study. In addition, the pre-service teachers were also assured confidentiality throughout the research process and their names were withheld to ensure anonymity. It was also made clear that they were allowed to withdraw from the study at any time. Pseudonyms were also provided to the participants. A consent form was signed by each of the student teachers, which was archived for record-keeping purposes.

Findings

This study sought to investigate how a team of final-year pre-service teachers perceived the lesson study support intervention in the School of Education at a selected South African University. Given this aim, a focus-group discussion with the pre-service teachers was considered, to enable the researchers to tap into their experiences gained from their involvement with the lesson study approach. From the narratives it was found that various aspects of the lesson study approach left impressions on the pre-service teachers. These aspects were thematically categorised into four themes: 1. the values of commitment, dedication and motivation to succeed; 2. the surfacing of collaborative practices; 3. the subjective knowledge sharing amongst individuals; and 4. post-lesson reflection opportunities. An interpretation of each of these themes is provided next.

Theme 1: Team commitment, dedication and motivation to succeed

The first aspect that left an impression on the pre-service teachers' experiences was the fact that they encountered feelings of "commitment", "dedication" and "motivation" towards engaging in the lesson study approach. From the focus-group discussion, two of the pre-service teachers expressed how the lesson study session enabled them to be "committed", "dedicated" and "motivated" to succeed in the planning and structuring of lesson presentations for a teaching practicum experience.

I knew that when we got started with the session [lesson study sessions] we will leave with nicely planned lessons for the schools. This was a nice thing for me, it motivated me to do my best and help others to the best of my ability. (Participant 3)

Working together with Thato [pseudonym] made the lesson planning so much easier. The two of us always got together to work on our lessons and we never left before both of us had a couple of lessons planned for the week. This helped a lot. (Participant 5)

Both these responses pointed to feelings of commitment, dedication and motivation. Phrases such as "I knew that when we got started we will leave with nicely planned lessons" and "we never left before both of us had a couple of lessons planned" suggest that the lesson study approach provoked feelings of commitment, dedication and motivation amongst the pre-service teachers. These feelings were pivotal in setting the tone for the effective planning and structuring of lesson presentations. This is further substantiated by the phrases "This was a nice thing for me, it motivated me to do my best and help others to the best of my ability" and "This helped a lot". These responses provided suggest that the lesson study approach was experienced in a positive light by the pre-service teachers.

Theme 2: Collaborative practices

The second aspect that left an impression on the pre-service teachers' experiences regarding their involvement in the lesson study approach dealt with the principle of "collaborative practices". Their responses within the focus-group discussion confirmed that the lesson study approach served as a space that allowed for the collective planning and structuring of lesson presentations within a small-group format. This can be confirmed by participant 3 who mentioned that, "Working together with Thato made the lesson planning so much easier ...".

In addition, both participants 1 and 7 also expressed how the principle of collaborative practices enabled them to prepare lessons in a small-group format when they mentioned that:

A nice experience was to not only rely on lecturers to tell us what to do. Instead, the session [lesson study] made us come together and think of ways to make our lessons better because we know what is happening in the schools... (Participant 1)

An experience that I cherish was our ability to work and plan together. (Participant 7)

The phrases “made us come together” and “our ability to work and plan together” serve as evidence that the principle of collaborative practices was considered a key driver of the lesson study approach. In addition, the response “not only rely on lecturers to tell us what to do” and “we know what is happening in schools” seemed to suggest that the team of pre-service teachers were able to draw on the subjective knowledge and diverse experiences of their fellow peers, instead of relying solely on knowledge transmission by the lecturers. The understanding is, therefore, that the lecturers took on a facilitator role during the lesson study approach.

The responses provided by participant 1 and participant 7 further indicate that the lesson study approach empowered pre-service teachers to take ownership in the planning and structuring of lesson presentations. The assumption can thus be made that the lesson study approach allowed them to independently manage their freedom in the sharing of lesson ideas with their peers in a harmonious manner, hence the comment “An experience that I cherish was our ability to work and plan together”.

Theme 3: Subjective knowledge sharing

A third aspect that seemed to leave an impression on the pre-service teachers’ experiences regarding their involvement in the lesson study approach dealt with the principle of “subjective knowledge sharing”. During the focus group discussion, it became apparent that the lesson study approach allowed the pre-service teachers to show an element of social awareness through communicating their rich lesson ideas in a safe space that was free from forms of intimidation and power dynamics. This can be witnessed in the following response:

I found the lesson study sessions that were arranged very valuable. It was just nice to share ideas with others and to learn from others. Some of the ideas sounded weird but after giving it some thought it will really work well in one particular lesson that I planned for my NST [Natural Science and Technology] grade 6 class. (Participant 1)

The aspect of subjective knowledge sharing was also evident in a response provided by participant 5:

One thing that really stood out for me was the way in which we were able to share lesson ideas with each other irrespective of what we are teaching. Yes, the topics can differ in our lessons but being able to share ideas in terms of the strategies or assessment that one can use was so helpful. (Participant 5)

An analysis of the responses provided by participant 1 and participant 5 serves as evidence that the lesson study approach allowed for the airing and sharing of diverse lesson ideas. This claim can be supported with the phrases “was just nice to share ideas with others and to learn from others” and “share ideas irrespective of what we are teaching”. In addition, participant 5 was able to provide a more detailed description of the lesson ideas shared by referring to “teaching strategies” and “assessment methodology” that serve as key components of a lesson plan. With these responses in mind, the assumption is that the

knowledge produced by the team of pre-service teachers stems from their individualised teaching views and opinions.

Theme 4: Post-lesson reflection opportunities

The fourth and final aspect that left an impression on the pre-service teachers' experiences regarding their involvement in the lesson study approach dealt with the principle of post-lesson reflections. From the focus-group discussion, it was made apparent that the lesson study approach not only enabled pre-service teachers to prepare lessons but also allowed them to engage in lesson reflections. Evidence of lesson reflection can be found in the following response:

One of the things that stood out for me was to chat with them [fellow peers] about how the lesson went. You know sometimes things work out and sometimes things don't work out. There are so many things that impact your teaching at the school and we don't always chat about it. I also feel that if you don't chat about it then it affects you negatively as a person. (Participant 2)

A closer look at the response implies that the lesson study approach allowed for the sharing of diverse teaching experiences. This can be confirmed by the phrase "chat with them [fellow peers] about how the teaching went". Moreover, an analysis of the phrase "sometimes things work out and sometimes things don't work out" indicates that the pre-service teacher was able to reflect on his/her quality of teaching. The understanding is, therefore, that the idea of lesson reflection serves as a vehicle to think differently about the process of teaching with the intent to improve the quality of the teaching process. This approach, in turn, allows the pre-service teachers to learn from each other's teaching practices and experiences.

Discussion of findings

The premise is that teacher education is a non-linear and irregular process, with some pre-service teachers developing teacher competencies earlier than others (Vermunt et al., 2019). This is supported by the view of Voss and Kunter (2020) when they pointed out that not all pre-service teachers learn the requisite teaching abilities and knowledge at the same rate. As a result, pre-service teachers frequently find themselves in a scenario where they require more time and support in order to develop the necessary teacher qualities, which in the context of this study included the capacity to plan lessons for a teaching practicum experience.

The paper recognised the need to offer a course-specific form of student-academic support identified as a lesson study approach. Initiating a lesson study approach was important since teacher development is considered a complex and non-linear process, whereby some pre-service teachers develop teacher competencies such as the skill to prepare lessons sooner than others (Lee & Tan, 2020). The need for the lesson study approach derived from the call of pre-service teachers to be better supported in their quest to prepare lessons for an authentic teaching experience. Following their

participation in the lesson study approach, the researchers sought to capture the experiences of the pre-service teachers regarding their involvement in the lesson study approach as a form of academic student support. A focus-group discussion was used to capture the experiences of the pre-service teachers.

The focus-group discussion that took place created leeway for engagement and open dialogue which promoted the pre-service teachers' sharing of rich individualised experiences of the lesson study approach they utilised. From the focus-group discussion, empirical data was collected that centred around themes such as “commitment, dedication and motivation”, “collaborative practices”, “subjective knowledge sharing” and “post-lesson reflection”.

In the first instance, the pre-service teachers reported how their engagement in the lesson study approach elicited feelings of commitment, dedication and motivation to succeed in the preparation of lessons. This is supported by responses such as “I knew that when we got started that we will leave with nicely planned lessons” (participant 3); “we never left before both of us had a couple of lessons planned (participant 5)”; and “This was a nice thing for me, it motivated me to do my best and help others in this short period of time” (participant 5). These feelings expressed by the pre-service teachers resonate well with the outcomes of the lesson study approach. Norton (2018) explained, that the lesson study approach serves as a form of academic support that not only affects the professional skill development of pre-service teachers but further promotes their teaching resilience as well. Mansfield (2020) explained that feelings such as teacher dedication, teacher motivation and teacher commitment are key factors that bolster teacher resilience. In the context of teacher development, teacher resilience involves the capacity of a pre-service teacher to draw on supportive interventions, such as the lesson study approach, to navigate through challenges that they experience regarding their professional development. The challenge, in this case, included their inability to plan and prepare lessons for an authentic teaching experience.

In the second instance, the pre-service teachers reported on their experiences in terms of the collaborative and interactive nature of the lesson study approach. Phrases such as “working together made the lesson planning easier” (participant 3); and “come together and think of ways to make our lessons better” (participant 1), resemble collaborative practices. From the literature, one finds that the aspect of collaborative practices is an essential feature of the lesson study approach. Guner and Akyuz (2020) explained that the lesson study approach allows for a space to be created whereby educators cooperatively structure teaching goals and prepare lesson presentations. The surfacing of collaborative practices during the lesson study approach further resonates with Bandura's social learning theory, where the understanding is that individuals learn more constructively in a small-group format (Rumjaun & Narod, 2020).

In the third instance, the pre-service teachers reported on their knowledge-sharing experiences, through responses such as “was just nice to share ideas with others” (participant 2) and “share ideas irrespective of what we are teaching” (participant 5). These responses correspond with the view of Norton (2018) who added that dialogical interaction and collaborative practices nurture the construction of subjective knowledge

sharing among individuals. The understanding is, therefore, that in order to collaboratively engage in the sharing of dialogue, pre-service teachers had to display an element of social awareness of each other. For this to take place, the lesson study approach had to be regarded as a space that is free from forms of intimidation and judgment (De Hei et al., 2017).

In the last instance, the pre-service teachers also reported on their post-lesson reflection experiences. Phrases such as “chat with them [peers] about how the teaching went” and “sometimes things work out sometimes things don’t work out” (participant 2) serve as evidence of post-lesson reflections. Post-lesson reflections are a key feature of the lesson study approach (Wolthuis et al., 2020). This is supported by the view of Fox and Poultney (2020) when it is argued that the lesson study approach should enable pre-service teachers to share experiences of “what worked” and “what did not work well” regarding lesson design and instruction (Yakar & Turgut, 2017). The post-lesson reflection, in turn, empowers pre-service teachers to learn from each other’s teaching experiences with the ideal to improve future teaching practices (Dudley et al., 2019).

Conclusion

This paper reported on how a team of final-year pre-service teachers experienced a lesson study approach, as a form of program-specific student support. Couched in Bandura’s social learning theory, a theory that encourages open dialogue, self-efficacy, team collaboration and critical self-reflection amongst individuals, this purposive qualitative case study revealed that the lesson study approach was considered a supportive intervention that elicited feelings of commitment, motivation and dedication amongst pre-service teachers in their quest to structure well-thought out lesson presentations for a teaching practicum experience. The study further revealed how the lesson study approach served as a developmental space that enabled pre-service teachers to engage in collaborative practices, whereby they shared teaching views, opinions and lesson ideas.

The paper also reported on the post-lesson reflection experiences of the pre-service teachers, which allowed them to learn from each other’s teaching practices and experiences. The evidence from this study suggests that the lesson study approach serves as a course-specific form of support that specifically focuses on promoting the lesson preparation skill development of pre-service teachers. This form of support is in stark contrast with other generic forms of academic support that are concerned mainly with ensuring student success through promoting student throughput and retention (Lozada & Croft, 2021). The findings of this study contribute to the body of knowledge on course-specific student support in the context of teacher education and development. Unfortunately, the findings from this study cannot be generalised due to the relatively small sample size that included only six pre-service teachers in a School of Education from a selected South African University. Future research is needed which might render more diverse results regarding how pre-service teachers experience the lesson study approach as a form of student support.

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Dr Wiets Botes is lecturer in Natural Science education in the School of Education at the Sol Plaatje University in Kimberley, South Africa. He holds a doctorate in higher education studies from the University of the Free State, South Africa. His research interest includes pre-service teacher development and support and natural science teacher education.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3024-8969>

Email: wiets.botes@spu.ac.za

Dr Boitumelo Moreeng has a PhD in curriculum studies. He is currently a senior lecturer at the University of the Free State, South Africa. His research interest is in curriculum studies, history teaching and teacher education.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3644-3140>

Email: moreengbb@ufs.ac.za

Dr Moeketsi Mosia has a PhD in mathematics education. He is currently the director of the Centre for Teaching and Learning and Program Development at the Sol Plaatje University, South Africa.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7189-0018>

Email: moeketsi.mosia@spu.ac.za

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