



Towards a theoretical framework for understanding PGCE student teacher learning in the Wild Coast Rural Schools' Partnership project

Abstract

This article focuses on a theoretical model that I am developing in order to understand student teacher learning in a rural context and the enabling conditions that can support this learning. The question of whether a supervised teaching practice in a rural context can contribute to the development of student teacher professional learning and their preparation to teach in a range of contexts needs to be researched in an academically rigorous way in order to understand student teacher learning in the Wild Coast Rural Schools' Partnership Project and the implications for teacher education. The article aims to go beyond the "story" of the project and a description of student teacher experiences, to focus on a theoretical framework for understanding student teacher learning. Previous work with Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) students has indicated that immersion in rural contexts in a supported way can provide opportunities for the interruption of the knowledge of many of the students (such as their existing schemata of rurality and of teaching in rural areas). Furthermore, it can facilitate the creation of new knowledge and altered mindsets through social participation in rural communities and with each other in communal living and teaching. The article explains the construction of a theoretical model, which addresses situational and contextual elements needed to understand student teacher learning.

Keywords: *PGCE student teacher learning; case study; rurality; situated learning; communities of practice; teacher knowledge; professional learning; cultural historical activity theory (CHAT).*

1. Introduction

The focus of the article is on the development of a model/theoretical framework in order to understand student teacher learning in a rural schools' project; thereby contributing to current discourses in teacher education on teacher knowledge, professional learning, practical learning and preparation for contextual diversity. The model is being developed as part of a PhD thesis, which endeavours to research the student teacher learning in the Wild Coast Rural Schools' Partnership Project in an academically rigorous way. The thesis aims to go beyond the "story" of the project and a description of student teacher experiences, to focus on a theoretical framework for understanding

student teacher learning. It represents a shift from reporting on a project to understanding the epistemological and ontological underpinnings of the project. In order to deepen my understanding of this project as a learning experience for student teachers, I needed to research the pedagogical spaces of the teaching placement context with their situational and contextual elements. In order to understand the “what” and the “how” of the student teacher learning in this context, I have needed to examine concepts of situated learning, rurality and teacher knowledge/professional learning. As part of the process of monitoring, understanding and reporting on the project, much of the data had been collected during the project but the doctoral study facilitated a deeper analysis of the data regarding these pedagogical spaces for a range of stakeholders. The emerging model/theoretical framework discussed in this article aims to understand the student teacher learning in the project through three interconnected and complementary aspects: situated learning, rurality and early professional learning.

Morrow (2007: 104) argues that in preparing students to teach, teacher education programmes should develop an understanding of the formal (i.e. the professional practice of organising systematic learning, which is the same across contexts) and the material elements of teaching (i.e. how the practice may be embodied in a range of contexts). He criticises most teacher education programmes for failing to reflect this distinction, tending to define teaching as a set of generic teaching practices free from the contexts in which the teaching happens (2007: 105). The general lack of preparation of student teachers as “professional agents” (Morrow, 2007: 105), with the flexible competences needed to teach in a range of contexts as well as the shortage of teachers in many rural schools in South Africa formed part of the contextual framework from which the Wild Coast Rural Schools’ Partnership Project emerged. In Africa, between 60-70% of school age learners are enrolled in rural schools (HSRC, 2005). In South Africa, more than 14 million people live in rural contexts (SA National Statistical Office, 2014).

The inequalities of the past in South Africa under apartheid therefore remain deeply reflected in what has been described as a bimodal schooling system where schools today still reflect the apartheid past, both in terms of school infrastructure, resourcing and in the results from international and national benchmarking tests (Spaull, 2012). Students arriving at universities reflect the bimodality of the schooling system in terms of the range of schools from which they come. Universities in turn frequently teach students as though they were a homogeneous group; often resulting in the dominant voices of the more confident students from the better resourced schools being the voices of the lecture room. Nowhere is this more evident, in my experience, than in the annual intake of the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) students. Whether there are spaces for the development and emergence of the capabilities of all of the students and the consequent enrichment of the lecture learning space is frequently not questioned.

As a lecturer in the PGCE programme, I became increasingly aware that we were not preparing our student teachers for effective teaching in diverse contexts (the authentic space of the South African schooling context) and that we were not challenging the deficit frameworks many of them had regarding rural contexts. As a response to this, I began developing a number of partnerships with rural schools, culminating in the Wild Coast Rural Schools’ Partnership Project. Previous work with PGCE students had indicated that immersion in rural contexts in a supported way could provide opportunities for the interruption of the knowledge of many of the students (such as their existing schemata of rurality and of teaching in rural areas).

It could also facilitate the creation of new knowledge and altered mindsets through social participation in rural communities and with each other in communal living and teaching – the “affordances” (Kelly, 2006) of the rural school contexts in which students were placed. Building on this initial partnership work with rural schools, the Wild Coast Rural Schools’ Project was designed to provide PGCE students, supported by university tutors, with the opportunity to complete their second six-week school placement period living and teaching in deeply rural school environments on the Eastern Cape Wild Coast. This was a three-year project involving approximately 25 PGCE students per year who were each placed in one of seven deeply rural schools. This area is deeply rural, characterised by under-resourced schools, high unemployment, adult illiteracy, health challenges and poor socio-economic development. However, it is also characterised by rural communities with deep levels of organisation at a local traditional level and intact traditional cultural practices. The districts chosen and schools selected for the initial placement of student teachers all represented examples of existing and emerging partnerships and their selection was informed by my own local knowledge of the areas in which the schools were based.

The educational problems addressed by this project were the challenges teacher education faces in preparing pre-service teachers for the complex and differentiated nature of South African schools and society in meeting some of the needs of rural education. A particular challenge is training teachers who have a positive orientation to teaching in rural contexts or working in partnerships with under-resourced schools and who have the flexible competences to teach in a range of contexts. The partnership approach used in this project brought together multiple voices in the construction of new knowledge, which could serve to challenge a deficiency framework regarding rural contexts and develop new flexible competences needed to teach in a range of contexts. From a university institutional perspective and a national policy perspective, there is an increasing imperative to orientate students to nuances of context. This is a shift from the national policy on teacher education, *the Norms and Standards for Educators* (DHET, 2000), with its conception of teaching defined by the seven roles, which largely ignores the reality of the diverse contexts of South African schools. Concepts of community engagement, social responsibility, work-based and service learning are increasingly evident in government policy for South African universities. *The Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications* (DHET, 2011) recognises the various types of knowledge that underpin teachers’ practice and the need for teachers to be able to meet the demands of different contexts. This includes learning in and from practice (practical learning) and knowledge of varied learning situations, contexts and environments of education (situational learning). In providing guidelines for the various types of knowledge that underpin teachers’ practice, the government policy on teaching practice in South Africa, the *Revised Policy on the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications* (DHET, 2015), emphasises the need for practical learning which is responsive to the contextual demands of the country.

The question of whether a supervised teaching practice in a rural context could contribute to the development of student teachers’ professional learning and their preparation to teach in a range of contexts therefore became the focus of the PhD study. This article articulates the development of a theoretical model to understand more explicitly the student teacher learning.

2. Research design and methodology

A case study methodology within an interpretive paradigm was used, with its “search for local meanings” (Borko, Whitcomb & Byrnes, 2008: 1025), its “thick, rich descriptions” (Rule & John, 2011: 7) and its focus on multiple realities and range of possible interpretations of events and situations (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014). The study set out to document, narrate, analyse and theorise the learning of the student teachers. The case study methodology offered an opportunity to understand the rich texture of the project within its multi-layered contexts with the focus on understanding student teacher learning and the contexts within which this phenomenon arises. Bassey (1999) advocates the use of educational case studies as a means of enhancing educational practice. This project had its roots in the PGCE programme and the development of students’ teaching practice, thus the case study approach became appropriate in terms of the development of teaching practice. The study attempted to understand the “how”; the “why” and the “what” of student learning, through a range of data sources, using interviews, focus groups, questionnaires and document analysis.

Researcher positioning in this project needs to be highlighted. The multiple roles of researcher/project coordinator/community member (with my own deep personal history in the area) and participant (as university tutor of students) meant that I was intimately immersed in all aspects of the process. Although my subjectivity as participant had the potential to erode my role as researcher; the extensive literature in the field of ethnography generally highlights the value of this immersion in the context; what Spry (2001: 709) describes as “an embodied methodological praxis”. Insider/outsider roles and the establishment of social networks were important in understanding the dynamics of the project and in gaining legitimate access to these rural communities (Elias & Scotson, 1994; Bruggeman, 2008). This had implications for methodological approaches and ethics in researching issues in rurality and directed the research approach in my study, which was about immersion in rural communities and authentic learning from the experience for all participants. It was about “being there” but also about respecting the place, the people and understanding issues of power.

3. An “emerging” theoretical model/framework

Given the layers of “story”, inhabited by so many characters/elements, it became apparent that in order to understand the types of interaction contributing to the student teacher learning in the social space of the project (the situated and social nature of the learning), I needed an analytical tool that would incorporate the shared meaning of the activity. With its focus on interaction, cooperation, support and mediation, Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) and in particular Engestrom’s third generation of activity theory (2001), provided a language and useful set of tools to understand and visualise the various components of a complex activity system (i.e. student teacher learning in this project) with specific focus on the inter-relationship between the components of the activity system.

Figure 1, below is based on Engestrom’s (2001) reformulated third generation of activity theory, adapted for use in visualising and naming the components of the activity system in my study. This is then embedded in figure 2 (following from figure 1). Figure 2 represents a composite model that I refer to as an “emerging” theoretical framework. It incorporates the CHAT framework and the substantive theoretical elements needed to understand and theorise the student teacher learning.

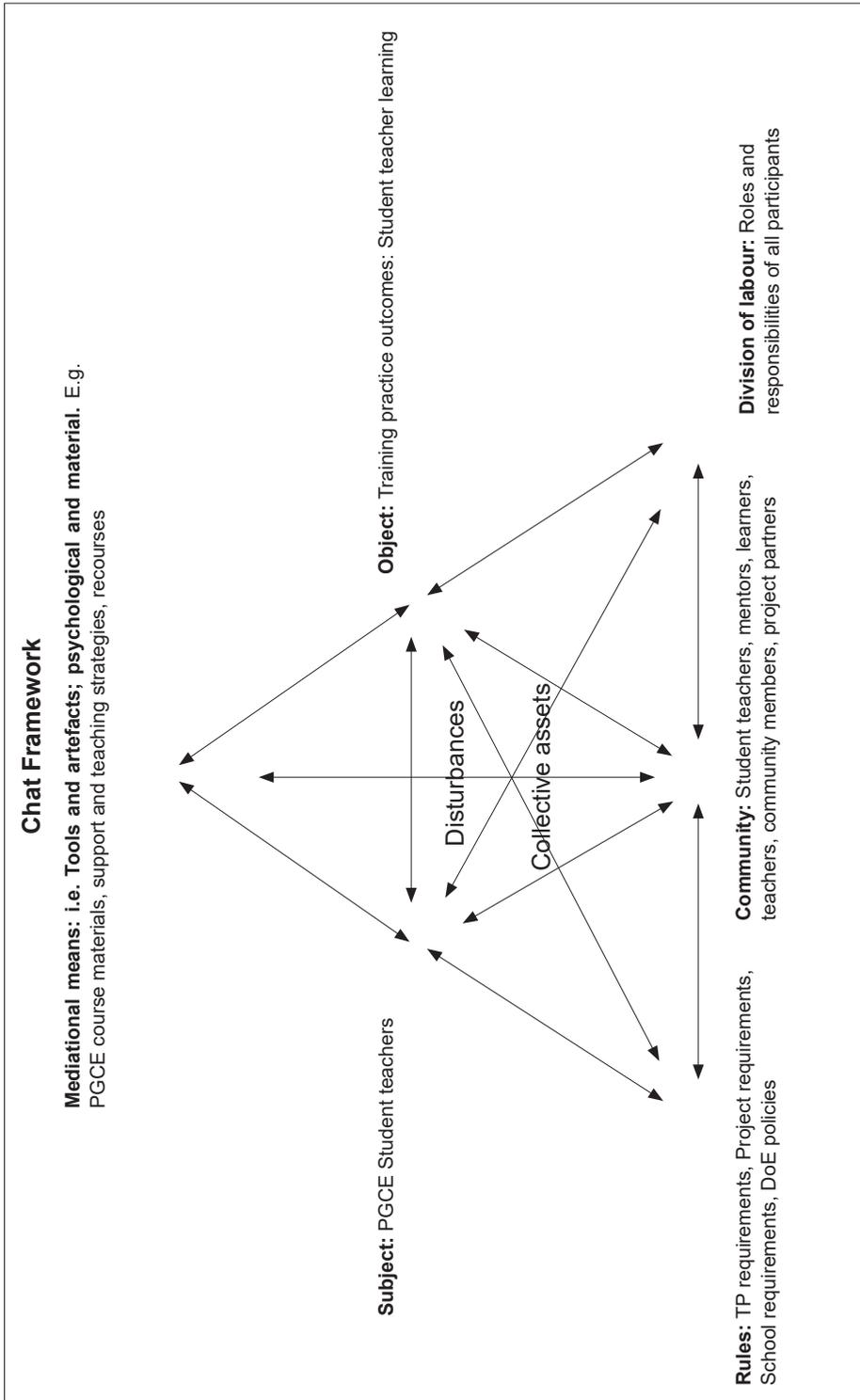


Figure 1

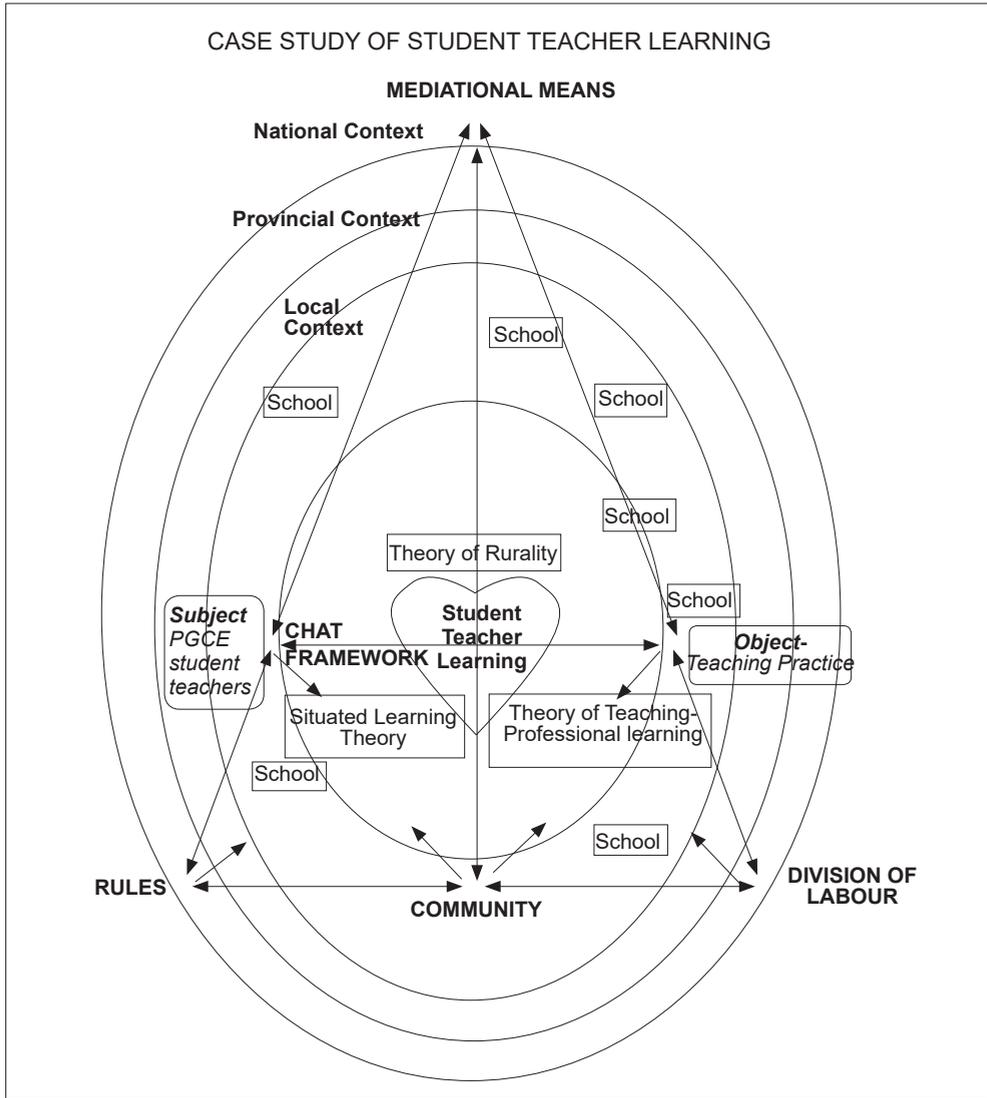


Figure 2

The model (figure 2), entitled “A case study of student teacher learning” depicts the layers of context, both past and present, national (policies, history etc.), provincial (Eastern Cape) and local (environmental, community, school, student groups, partners etc.) impacting upon the student teacher learning at the heart of the activity system. Embedded in this model are the substantive theories, which help in understanding the phenomenon of student teacher learning in those layers of context.

The CHAT framework (figure 1), is a tool/language for visualising the components of the activity system and is part of the structure of the model addressing the relationships among the multiple elements making up the collective activity (Sawchuk, Duarte & Elhammoumi, 2006). The contradictions/disturbances (for example, teacher strikes during the period of teaching

practice, absent principals, flooding rivers impacting upon student teachers' ability to get to schools etc.) and the collective assets (for example, membership in local rural communities enabling cultural immersion experiences, existing historical partnerships contributing to context of trust etc.) in the activity system are also identified as potential forces for student teacher learning.

4. Towards the substantive theories informing an understanding of the student teacher learning

In the journey towards understanding student teacher learning, issues of context, in particular *rurality*, *situated learning* and the contested domain of *teacher knowledge* emerged as key substantive theories which could provide the lenses through which the "story" of learning could be more deeply understood. Applying the three lenses of teacher professional learning, rurality and situated learning (the 3 substantive theories of the model) to the data sources, a complex multifocal lens/composite is created in order to understand the "what" and the "how" of the student teacher learning in this context.

5. Theory of rurality

Students were immersed in a deeply rural context, thus in terms of an understanding of their learning, it is necessary to engage with a theory of rurality. The partnership work upon which the Wild Coast Rural Schools' Partnership Project is based acknowledges that it is not possible to find a good definition of rurality but it views rurality as a sense of place, inherently spatial, with its strengths and weaknesses (Pennefather, 2011). It engages with the possibilities for place sensitive work and it is these possibilities that need to be understood in terms of the student teacher learning. Gruenewald (2003: 626) describes this sense of place as a fluid "human experience of geographical contexts". Budge (2004), in writing about practised ways of living in rural contexts, suggests a context in which the "peculiarities of the local... must be understood". Balfour, Mitchell and Moletsane (2008) argue for a generative theory of rurality where relationships between space, time and agency are taken into account. *Emerging Voices: A Report on Education in South African Rural Communities* (HSRC & EPC, 2005) provides an overview of the complexities of the problems of rural communities and schooling but also points to the importance of listening to the voices of the poor. Sen (1999) writes about multiple deprivations but also the shared capabilities and the spaces for individual and community agency. The rich historical, social and cultural contexts of these rural communities provided new "transaction spaces" or "boundary zones" (Gibbons, 2005), in which new relationships were developed and the frequently held deficit discourses towards rurality were challenged and new understandings emerged. When asked about their learning and in writing in their journals it was clear that much of the student learning emerged through their immersion and increasing membership in the rural communities:

"I was very nervous before coming here, but now would definitely consider working in a rural area with different cultures. People welcomed us into their lives."

"I thought the children knew nothing; but they were amazing."

"They had so much knowledge of things that I did not know like looking after cattle, gathering food from the rocks, dance and cultural practices."

"People in community taught us about culture and traditional leadership."

The cultural immersion experiences of the students in these rural communities, where they ventured outside their cultural comfort zones, where preconceptions were dislodged, leading to new, shared understandings, transformed their understanding of others. This was a form of *'boundary crossing'* with its often contradictory and tension filled practice leading to new and different knowledge, values and skills. This concept is continued in the discussion on situated learning below.

6. Situated learning theory

The concept of learning to teach as a *situated activity*, which can be educative or non-educative (Dewey, 1938) is useful in understanding the enabling conditions necessary for the student teacher learning. Borko (2004) explains the term *situative* as a set of theoretical perspectives that are used to conceptualise learning as having both *individual* and *socio-cultural* features. Lave and Wenger's (1991) social theory of learning focuses on how people learn through everyday informal interaction with significant others in the course of their shared practices i.e. learning through increasing social participation in a community of practice, starting with 'legitimate peripheral participation' and proceeding to 'full participation'. What the individual and the shared practices were and how increasing social participation occurred in the project are examined. By involving students in active learning in rural contexts ("activity settings"), where they lived together in a community while on a school placement, where they travelled daily in a vehicle with other teachers or walked long distances with community members, where they grappled together with the challenges of context, there was always the possibility of new knowledge being constructed in collaboration with others. Students supported each other in negotiating the challenges of their teaching and in learning to live together and in the rural community. A number of students when interviewed commented that they could not have coped without support from tutors, peers and the community:

"When we did not know content or a concept we could talk to each other."

"Especially important for me as I did not speak Xhosa – could learn from the others who encouraged me to learn to speak some words of Xhosa."

"Learnt about different cultures in our group and in the community."

Post-placement questionnaires also revealed that these shared practices included shared problem solving by groups of students both formally and informally regarding challenges experienced in their teaching including the lack of resources, language challenges, inadequate mentoring and large classes. Increased immersion in local communities lead to deeper understanding of learners and parents' challenges thereby contributing to more meaningful teaching, deepening understanding of each other as students from different backgrounds and learning to live with each other, for example, learning more about the Shembe religion of one of the students. One of the white students, who initially found it extremely difficult to understand certain Shembe practices which impacted on their daily living in a shared space, wrote about this in depth in a reflective journal. By learning to understand the prohibitions associated with the Shembe Sabbath, students had to move beyond the boundaries of their life experiences in order to chart new paths of learning.

The quotation, "landscape shapes mindscape" (Haas & Nachtigal, 1998: 4), highlights the powerful effect a place might have in shaping us. Haugalokken and Ramberg (2005) also highlight the situated perspective on learning by basing it on the assumption that learning is

conditional on participation in a community of learning. This means that both cognition and learning are regarded as social phenomena and that learning cannot be understood in isolation from the social practice, which the students form. Drawing from a socio-cultural perspective on learning which suggests that learning is situated and that the situation itself contributes to the development of knowledge through activity, student teachers in the project were immersed as a diverse group in rural contexts living, teaching and learning, both formally and informally through other people. Students commented on the development of their relationships with the local community by having to walk to schools, by using local transport, by shopping in local stores and by participating in sport and other social activities. These cultural immersion experiences are seen as helping educators, (i.e. the students in my project) venture outside their cultural comfort zone and transform their understanding of others (Boyle-Baise & McIntyre, 2008: 310). The work of Griffiths and Guile (2003) on workplace learning identified '*boundary crossing*' as one of four practices of learning. McMillan (2011: 553), drawing on the work of Gibbons (2005) and Giroux (1992), explores the concept of service learning as a form of boundary work in higher education with its often contradictory and tension filled practice leading to new and different knowledge, values and skills.

7. Teacher professional learning

The focus of the research is on student teacher learning, which includes their early professional learning, recognising that there are different conceptions of teacher learning related to different conceptions of knowledge and respective roles for teachers. *The National Qualifications Framework Act 67 of 2008* recognises that teaching is "a complex activity premised upon the acquisition, integration and application of different types of knowledge practices or learning," (2008: 11). The understanding of early professional learning incorporates the concepts of 'learning' as well as 'knowledge' in a broad sense and it is therefore necessary to engage in what existing literature says about knowledge in order to link it to the students' early professional learning. Eraut (2000: 114) suggests that learning occurs "when existing knowledge is used in a new context or in new combinations" and in an earlier publication that teachers' understanding of that knowledge develops during frequent use and when tackling critical problems (Eraut, 1997). Student teachers' existing knowledge was challenged in a new context where they encountered new and different forms of knowledge, where they faced a range of challenges, including having to teach large classes with few conventional resources and where they worked with others in new communities of practice. In order to understand student teacher learning, different concepts of knowledge needs to be understood namely, knowledge-for-practice, knowledge-in-practice and knowledge-of-practice, (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). The unplanned non-formal learning experiences were useful in understanding the range of learning opportunities of the student teachers living in a rural context for an extended period of time. Non-formal learning opportunities included immersion in local cultural experiences (for example, learning about local initiation practices by being taken to sacred places by the local rural community). The formal learning experiences included the formal mentoring procedures of the PGCE programme.

Kelly (2006: 506) describes teacher learning as "the process by which teachers move towards expertise". He explains that teacher expertise is "closely linked to the circumstances to which it pertains..." (2006: 507) and "the affordances of school practices" (2006: 510). This process of student teachers' often difficult journeys towards expertise (the "*what*" and the "*how*" of the learning; the procedural or practical knowledge) and the "affordances" of the rural

school contexts in this development needs to be understood. Understanding the enabling conditions for learning, including the role of mentoring, collaboration and feedback from others in the students' emerging critical reflection and development of new ideas form an essential part of the data analysis. Interviews with students revealed that school mentors and university tutors played different roles in the development of their learning. In response to a question on the role of the school mentors, comments were as follows:

"teachers had a lot of confidence in us"

"often asked us for advice"

"Teachers seemed to undermine themselves"

"not much guidance; very little lesson planning"

"believed in bringing a stick to every lesson"

"helped us to understand rural contexts"

However, there was also a belief that they as students had contributed to the learning situation:

"often asked us for advice in content knowledge"

"we revived the spirit of planning"

"we brought ideas and prac work"

"they lived far away so were often late but we demonstrated punctuality."

Despite the frustrations regarding the quality of the formal mentoring from the teachers, it was still a learning opportunity. Students revealed an increasing development in their critical reflection on *what should be* and why it was not the case – a type of reflective lens for students, providing an opportunity for the development of their own professional learning, mediated by the university tutors and by their peers.

Student responses to the role of the university tutors indicated how vital this was in the absence of school mentoring and in learning about teaching in this context:

"they revived hope in us when we felt desperate "

"help in planning when there were so few resources"

"afternoon planning and reflection sessions gave us direction"

"she gave me more confidence to push forwards with the ideas I had even when I started doubting them."

This implies that student teachers begin to engage in critical reflection of their practices often working with others – what Shulman (1987) explains as the necessary questions needed in the development of professional judgement. Shalem (2010) however, acknowledging that teachers' professional judgement is situated and context-dependent, highlights the need to understand the role of theoretical knowledge in professional knowledge. Luntley (2005: 286-287) describes professional judgement as an act of attention at the foundation of teacher's expertise. The fact that the student teachers were PGCE students who had a relatively strong foundational knowledge in their teaching subjects is significant and the extent to which this shaped their emerging professional judgement in these rural contexts needs to be considered.

Regarding their professional learning, interview responses revealed an initial experience of apprehension and despair, for example: “if we were not living in a group or did not have the support of tutors, I could just give up and leave or just go with the flow of other teachers and not teach”.

This was in contrast to the scaffolded, mediated experiences by the end of the period when students were responding in interviews as follows:

“I learnt that you can teach no matter the resources – that the resources are actually there; I can use the environment”

“It is about the importance of finding support structures in teaching”

“About teaching, I realised South Africa has a long way to go but I as a teacher can make a difference. I can show that learning can be fun, not scary; that with my teaching strategies, I need to think about the context first; that I can’t just think that if something worked in one context it will work in another; then plan thinking about the learners; the context and the resources in that context; otherwise the lesson could be a disaster.”

There was the emergence of new capabilities related to the student teacher learning where legitimate, authentic spaces were created for the expression of individual freedom (Sen, 1999).

This was evident in interviews with students when they were asked about what had changed for them.

“I no longer felt helpless”;

“I see myself as an agent of change”;

“These learners are amazing – I want to help them to go further”;

“There were no resources but I could see the possibilities within the environment.”

From emerging data it became clear that there needed to be a set of enabling supportive conditions (the *how*) which allowed the emergence of student capabilities: the ability to act within a legitimate space where they could demonstrate their capabilities, where they could exercise appropriate professional judgement (the *what*) when facing challenges of huge classes, few conventional resources and cultural differences and where they had the flexible competences to make these professional judgements. This is what Morrow (2007) describes as the flexible competences that would enable them to teach no matter how unpromising the contexts and conditions may seem. Students began to ask Morrow’s key question: “How can I organize systematic learning in this context and these conditions?” (2007: 105).

8. Conclusion

The Wild Coast Rural Schools’ Partnership Project was designed to create a number of learning opportunities primarily for student teachers in initial teacher education and the extent to which it may have contributed to student teacher learning needs to be understood if it is to contribute to the discourse on teacher education and what is needed for teachers to undertake their jobs well. “Teaching as professional endeavour demands of teachers practical knowhow, conceptual understandings of education, teaching and learning and the ability to interpret and form critical judgements on existing knowledge and its relevance to their particular situation” (Winch, Oancea & Orchard, 2015: 202).

In order to understand the relevance of a project such as the Wild Coast Rural Schools' Partnership Project, the "story" therefore had to move beyond a description of events and experiences to a deeper, more rigorous understanding of student teacher learning in this particular context. In discussing the contribution of educational research to teachers' professional learning, Winch, Oancea and Orchard (2015) argue that teacher education must enable a positive relationship between educational research and teaching knowledge and practice. The study has the potential to explicate the challenges and opportunities student teachers and even novice teachers face in these contexts as well as to understand the enabling conditions under which these opportunities can be exploited. This was a complex project that from the outset had to be conceptualised and organised in rigorous detail. One of the potential dangers was for students' existing schemata of rurality and of teaching in rural areas to be reinforced or for students to simply reproduce examples of poor teaching, thus there needed to be a deep understanding of the complexity of *what* learning happens and *how* it happens. Because of the complexity of the learning experience and with few examples of research projects of this nature from which to draw, the concept of an *emerging theoretical model* is still being grappled with.

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