

From Graduates to Educators: The Influence of the PGCE on Teaching and Learning in Historically Disadvantaged University

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This study investigates the influence of the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) programme on teaching practices and student learning outcomes in historically disadvantaged university in South Africa. Drawing on Shulman's Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK), Vygotsky's Social Constructivism, and Freire's Critical Pedagogy, it explores the role of mentorship, the development of pedagogical competencies, and the challenges encountered by PGCE students during their professional preparation. Employing a qualitative, phenomenological design, data was collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis of teaching practice files, lesson plans, CAPS documents, and reflective journals. Findings indicate that mentorship plays a central role in fostering PGCE students' confidence, reflective practice, and classroom management skills. Participants who received consistent and constructive mentor feedback demonstrated greater alignment of their lesson plans with curriculum expectations. However, inconsistencies in mentorship and instances where students were overburdened as substitute teachers constrained professional development. Pedagogical competencies were uneven: while students demonstrated strong content knowledge and lesson preparation skills, gaps emerged in differentiated instruction, inclusive education, and sustained reflective practice, often exacerbated by workload pressures and limited school support. Additional challenges, including inadequate teaching resources and the brief duration of teaching practice, further hindered the application of PGCE-acquired methodologies. To address these issues, the study recommends formal mentor training, structured feedback systems, and extended mentorship engagement. It also advocates for enhanced preparation in inclusive education, the systematic use of reflection templates, longer teaching practice placements of at least one academic term, and stronger collaboration between universities and host schools. These evidence-based insights aim to strengthen PGCE implementation and cultivate reflective, competent educators capable of addressing enduring educational inequalities.

Key words: *Postgraduate Certificate in Education, Teaching and Learning, Mentorship, Pedagogical Competence, Previously Disadvantaged Universities*

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Introduction

In South Africa, the National Policy Framework for Teacher Education and Development (NPFTED) establishes the minimum qualifications required for professional teaching, mandating either a Bachelor of Education (Bed) degree or a Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) as pathways to accreditation (Tabe, 2024). The PGCE, in particular, serves as a transitional qualification designed for graduates from non-education disciplines who wish to enter the teaching profession. Offered as a one-year full-time or two-year part-time programme, it focuses on developing pedagogical knowledge, reflective practice, and effective teaching methodologies, rather than re-teaching subject content already acquired at undergraduate level (Hodes et al., 2022; Tynan, 2021).

Despite its intended purpose of transforming subject specialists into competent educators, the effectiveness of the PGCE programme remains contested, especially within historically disadvantaged universities. These institutions

often grapple with systemic challenges such as inadequate teaching resources, insufficient mentorship structures, and diverse learner needs, which collectively hinder the translation of theoretical training into practical classroom competence. Questions persist regarding whether PGCE graduates are adequately prepared to implement inclusive pedagogies, manage classrooms effectively, and enhance student learning outcomes in these contexts. This study critically examines the impact of the PGCE programme on teaching practices and learner achievement in historically disadvantaged universities, with particular emphasis on mentorship, pedagogical competencies, and the challenges faced during professional development. Drawing upon Shulman's Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK), Vygotsky's Social Constructivism, and Freire's Critical Pedagogy, the research provides an evidence-based analysis that seeks to inform policy, strengthen teacher education practices, and contribute to the broader discourse on educational transformation in South Africa.

Research Questions

1. What is the role of mentorship in the professional development of PGCE students within Previously Disadvantaged University (PDU)?
2. Which pedagogical competencies do PGCE students within PDU employ to enhance student learning outcomes?
3. What challenges do PGCE students encounter when implementing teaching methodologies acquired from PDU?

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in three interrelated theoretical frameworks: Shulman's Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK), Vygotsky's Social Constructivism, and Freire's Critical Pedagogy (1970). Collectively, these frameworks provide a lens for examining how the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) programme prepares teachers to be both effective and equitable in diverse educational contexts. Shulman's (1986) concept of PCK underscores the integration of content knowledge (what is taught) and pedagogical knowledge (how it is taught). This dual focus equips aspiring teachers with the capacity to deliver instruction that is contextually responsive and sensitive to the diverse needs of learners. A critical requirement in institutions grappling with the legacies of educational inequality. Vygotsky's (1978) Social Constructivism posits that learning is fundamentally social and shaped by cultural contexts. This perspective aligns with the PGCE programme's emphasis on experiential learning, peer collaboration, and reflective practice, fostering environments where knowledge is co-constructed through dialogue and shared experiences. Such an approach is particularly relevant in multilingual, multicultural university settings where students bring varied life experiences into the learning space.

Freire's Critical Pedagogy further strengthens the study's focus by highlighting the transformative potential of education in addressing systemic inequalities. Given that Previously Disadvantaged University (PDU) often serve students from historically marginalised backgrounds, Freire's approach is highly pertinent. It calls for the development of critical consciousness among both educators and learners, encouraging them to engage actively with real-world issues such as poverty, systemic inequality, and educational exclusion. By situating the PGCE within these interconnected theoretical frameworks, this study aims to explore how teacher preparation programmes can foster reflective, socially conscious, and contextually relevant teaching practices in historically disadvantaged higher education institutions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The primary purpose of a literature review is to establish the existing body of knowledge relevant to the study and to position the research within prevailing debates and evidence (Henning et al., 2004). According to Peer (2001), a literature review provides critical insight and a conceptual foundation to support the inquiry. In this study, the literature is reviewed under the following themes aligned with the study objectives:

Understanding the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) in the South African Context

The Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) is a professional qualification designed for graduates with a relevant undergraduate degree who intend to pursue a teaching career in South Africa. Accredited by the Council on Higher Education (CHE), the PGCE is positioned at NQF Level 7 (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2015). It is offered as a one-year full-time or a two-year part-time programme and qualifies graduates to teach at the Intermediate Phase (Grades 4–6), Senior Phase (Grades 7–9), and Further Education and Training (FET) Phase (Grades 10–12) (South African Qualifications Authority [SAQA], 2020). The programme consists of modules aimed at developing educational research skills, practical teaching competence, and reflective practice (Lim et al., 2009). It integrates both theoretical and practical components, including pedagogy, curriculum design, assessment, and classroom management, to ensure that graduates acquire essential teaching competencies (DHET, 2019). Applicants are required to hold a bachelor's degree in a relevant field with sufficient academic credits in at least one teaching subject, such as Mathematics, Science, or English. In some cases, academic transcript evaluations may be conducted to determine eligibility.

The Role of Mentorship in the Professional Development of PGCE Students within PDU

Traditionally, teacher education relies on experienced mentors guiding novice teachers, but this conventional model often perpetuates traditional teaching practices and limits innovation in teacher preparation (Gershenfeld, 2014). Contemporary mentoring practices increasingly promote collaborative relationships between mentors and mentees, with mentorship playing a critical role during teaching practice placements. According to Ajani (2020), mentoring is among the most effective methods of teacher preparation. Successful mentorship depends heavily on mentors'

commitment, responsibility, and enthusiasm (Ajani & Govender, 2019). Mentors serve multiple roles as guides, supporters, supervisors, and coaches (Mkhasibe & Olaniran, 2019).

Student teachers benefit significantly from mentors in school settings because such mentors provide direct supervisory support that university lecturers often cannot offer (Goldshaft, 2024). Effective mentorship combines constructive feedback, motivational support, and inspirational guidance (Taylor & Black, 2018), thereby fostering student teachers' confidence and commitment to teaching (Schatz-Oppenheimer, 2017). Mentors also help mentees develop pedagogical content knowledge, diversify instructional approaches, and strengthen reflective practice (Ndebele & Legg-Jack, 2022). Furthermore, Maphalala (2013) highlights that mentoring provides crucial guidance in classroom management, student discipline, assessment, and parental engagement. However, practical implementation often falls short of the ideal model. Mentor–mentee conflicts may arise due to divergent values, working styles, or expectations (Taylor & Black, 2018). Some mentors invest insufficient time or misuse mentees for substitute teaching duties, sometimes engaging in unethical practices that hinder professional growth (Oyinola & Okwara, 2023). According to de Beer (2024), mentors' personal challenges, including mental health difficulties, can negatively affect teaching practice experiences. Such issues undermine the purpose of mentoring, which should provide supportive, developmental, and empowering guidance for novice teachers (Wendy, 2014).

Pedagogical Competencies of PGCE Students within PDU

The Department of Basic Education (DBE, 2000) identifies three key categories of pedagogical competencies essential for preparing student teachers: foundational, practical, and reflexive competencies. **Foundational competence:** This refers to mastery of subject content alongside an understanding of appropriate teaching strategies and classroom practices (DBE, 2000). Competent teachers not only know what they teach but also why they teach it, how students learn, and how to foster learner-centred environments (Sithole, 2024). Feiman-Nemser (2001) emphasises that foundational competence enables teachers to clarify their instructional goals. In PGCE programmes, this shifts the focus from narrow content delivery to a broader understanding of teaching's educational purpose.

Practical competence: While foundational competence concerns knowledge and understanding, practical competence involves applying that knowledge effectively in real classroom contexts (Morrow, 2007). Teachers demonstrating practical competence adapt instructional strategies, manage diverse classrooms, and align learning activities with curriculum goals. **Reflexive competence:** This competency entails the ability to critically reflect on teaching practices, make informed decisions, and adapt to learners' needs (DBE, 2000). Despite opportunities for reflection embedded in lesson planning frameworks, such practices are often underutilised. Smith and Hodson (2010) argue that reflective practice remains limited in many teacher education contexts. Reflexive thinking enables PGCE students to identify gaps in their knowledge and improve their pedagogical strategies. According to Mohamed et al. (2017), teacher competence is enhanced through structured content, coherent curricula, practical experiences, and effective modelling by teacher educators.

Challenges Encountered by PGCE Students in Implementing Teaching Methodologies

PGCE students face multiple challenges in translating pedagogical theory into effective classroom practice. One major challenge stems from pre-service teachers' preconceived attitudes towards teaching, often shaped by their own experiences as learners, which can hinder the adoption of innovative strategies (Mkhasibe et al., 2021). Additionally, insufficient training in inclusive education leaves many unable to adequately support learners with disabilities. Some PGCE programmes provide only limited exposure to inclusive teaching during school placements, without robust theoretical preparation, resulting in underprepared teachers (Sepadi, 2018).

Motivational factors also play a role in student retention and engagement. Many individuals enter teaching as a secondary or tertiary career choice, often without strong intrinsic motivation, leading to disengagement or attrition (Ajani, 2020). Moreover, the persistent gap between theoretical knowledge and practical implementation remains a significant issue. Many PGCE students struggle to apply teaching methodologies effectively, particularly in lesson planning, goal setting, and differentiated instruction (Mkhasibe et al., 2021; Heeralal, 2014). Limited teaching experience further exacerbates these challenges, leaving novice teachers underprepared to make critical pedagogical decisions and manage classrooms effectively.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative, phenomenological design within an interpretive paradigm to explore how the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) programme influenced teaching practices and student learning in previously disadvantaged universities. The interpretive paradigm was chosen because it facilitates the construction of meaning through participants' lived experiences, recognising multiple realities shaped by their social and educational contexts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013; Bertram & Christiansen, 2020). A qualitative approach was considered appropriate for its ability to capture the depth and complexity of human experiences (Creswell, 2020) and to enable the researcher to develop trust, maintain ethical sensitivity, and respect the norms of the study environment (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The target population comprised PGCE students from a previously disadvantaged university in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Purposive and convenience sampling techniques were employed to select 15 participants, ensuring diversity in gender representation. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis of teaching practice files, lesson plans, CAPS documents, and reflective journals. Semi-structured

interviews, lasting 30–60 minutes, explored pedagogical competencies and challenges encountered by students, while document analysis provided contextual insights into mentorship and practical experiences. Thematic analysis was applied to interview data, and content analysis was used for document analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2023) systematic approach to ensure credibility and rigor. These methodological choices enabled a rich, nuanced understanding of the PGCE programme's influence on teaching and learning in historically disadvantaged contexts.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) programme on teaching practices and student learning outcomes in historically disadvantaged universities, with a focus on mentorship, pedagogical competencies, and the challenges encountered by PGCE students during their professional development. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis of teaching practice files, lesson plans, CAPS documents, and reflective journals. The findings are presented under three main themes: the role of mentorship, pedagogical competencies, and challenges in implementing teaching methodologies.

The Role of Mentorship in the Professional Development of PGCE Students

Mentorship emerged as a pivotal element in shaping the professional development of PGCE students. Participants consistently emphasized that effective mentorship involved structured guidance, constructive feedback, and emotional support throughout teaching practice. One participant explained: *"My mentor guided me not only on how to prepare lessons but also on how to handle disruptive learners without losing control of the class."* Document analysis supported this finding, revealing that PGCE students who received regular and meaningful mentor feedback demonstrated progressive improvement in their lesson planning and reflective practice. Their teaching practice files were more detailed, with clear evidence of iterative planning and refinement based on mentor advice. CAPS documents analyzed alongside lesson plans indicated that effective mentorship facilitated alignment with curriculum requirements, enabling students to design lessons that met prescribed learning outcomes.

These findings align with Ajani and Govender (2019), who argue that mentorship provides both structured pedagogical guidance and the psychological support necessary for novice teachers. Similarly, Ndebele and Legg-Jack (2022) contend that mentors play a critical role in helping student teachers develop both pedagogical content knowledge and reflective practice. However, inconsistencies in mentorship were noted by several participants, with some reporting limited mentor availability and minimal engagement: *"Sometimes I never see my mentor for weeks, and at times I am expected to take full responsibility for the class as if I am already a qualified teacher."* Such experiences mirror the concerns raised by Oyinlola and Okwara (2023), who critique exploitative mentoring practices that undermine the professional growth of student teachers by overburdening them with full teaching responsibilities without adequate support.

Pedagogical Competencies Employed by PGCE Students

Analysis of teaching practice files, lesson plans, and reflective journals revealed varying degrees of pedagogical competence among participants. Foundational competence, particularly in content knowledge and lesson preparation, was generally strong. As one participant observed: *"I know my subject well and can explain concepts clearly to learners, but sometimes I struggle to adapt my teaching for learners who learn differently."* This was corroborated by document analysis, which showed that while lesson objectives were typically clear and content-rich, differentiation strategies were often underdeveloped. Practical competencies, such as the application of varied assessment methods and the implementation of inclusive instructional strategies, were inconsistently applied, suggesting challenges in translating theoretical knowledge into practice. Reflexive competence was emerging but not consistently demonstrated. While some reflective journals documented thoughtful evaluation of lessons and adjustments for improvement, others revealed superficial reflection or gaps attributed to workload pressures: *"I try to reflect on my lessons, but the workload during teaching practice leaves little time for writing detailed reflections."* These findings reinforce Morrow's (2007) argument that while mastery of subject content is essential, the ability to adapt knowledge to diverse classroom contexts remains a critical challenge. Smith and Hodson (2010) similarly highlight the limited integration of reflective practice within many teacher education programmes, a pattern also evident in this study.

Challenges in Implementing Teaching Methodologies

Several challenges hindered PGCE students from fully implementing the methodologies acquired during their coursework. A major issue was the inadequate exposure to inclusive education and the lack of teaching resources within placement schools. One participant explained: *"We were told to apply inclusive strategies, but the school has no materials or training to support learners with special needs."* Teaching practice files often contained generic lesson plans with minimal differentiation, reflecting these resource constraints. CAPS documents showed that prescribed learning outcomes were not always realistically achievable in under-resourced contexts, further exposing the gap between theory and practice. Motivation and professional commitment also influenced students' ability to apply their learning effectively. Some participants entered teaching as a secondary career choice, which affected their enthusiasm:

"I am doing this because I needed a job; sometimes it's hard to stay motivated to apply everything I learned. "Additionally, the duration of teaching practice placements was widely regarded as insufficient for developing confidence and competence: "Two months of teaching practice is not enough to develop my classroom management skills or try out new teaching methods confidently. "These findings are consistent with Ajani (2020), who found that low intrinsic motivation impedes the full application of pedagogical skills, and Heeralal (2014), who emphasizes that insufficient practical exposure weakens novice teachers' readiness for the profession.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be made to enhance the effectiveness of the PGCE programme in historically disadvantaged universities:

Strengthening Mentorship Structures

Mentorship was found to be a central component in shaping the professional growth of PGCE students; however, its quality was inconsistent across schools. To address this, universities in collaboration with the Department of Basic Education should formalize mentor training to ensure that mentors are well equipped with skills in feedback provision, coaching, and reflective dialogue. Clear mentorship guidelines outlining roles, expectations, and accountability should be established to prevent the exploitation of student teachers as substitute teachers. Furthermore, mentors should be allocated dedicated time within their workloads for mentorship-related activities, including lesson observations, feedback sessions, and joint reflections. The introduction of formal mentor-student contracts could help ensure regular engagement, while a monitoring system involving student feedback and mentor self-assessment would help evaluate and improve the quality of mentorship.

Enhancing Pedagogical Competencies

While PGCE students demonstrated strong foundational competence, particularly in content knowledge and lesson preparation, gaps were evident in differentiated instruction and inclusive education practices. It is therefore recommended that PGCE programmes provide intensive workshops and micro-teaching sessions focusing on the adaptation of instructional strategies for diverse learners, including those with special educational needs. CAPS-aligned exemplars of differentiated lesson plans should be included within teaching practice files to provide concrete guidance. Reflective practice should also be strengthened by mandating structured reflection templates in teaching practice files, ensuring students systematically evaluate their lessons, learner engagement, and areas for improvement. Supervisors should assess reflective journals not only for completeness but also for the depth of analysis. Furthermore, practical assessment workshops should be introduced to enhance students' ability to use formative assessment data to inform instructional planning.

Addressing Implementation Challenges

The study revealed that PGCE students faced significant challenges in implementing teaching methodologies, largely due to inadequate resources, insufficient exposure to inclusive education, and limited duration of teaching practice. It is recommended that the duration of teaching practice be extended to at least one academic term to allow for deeper immersion and more meaningful application of PGCE-acquired strategies. Collaboration between universities and local education departments or non-governmental organizations should be strengthened to ensure that schools hosting PGCE students are adequately resourced with teaching aids, inclusive materials, and assessment tools. Formal agreements should be established between universities and schools to clarify the responsibilities of school management, mentors, and university supervisors. Orientation sessions for school management could also enhance their understanding of the PGCE programme and foster a more supportive environment for student teachers.

Enhancing Motivation and Professional Commitment

Motivation emerged as a factor influencing the effective application of pedagogical skills among PGCE students. To address this, PGCE programmes should integrate career guidance and teacher identity formation early in the curriculum to foster intrinsic motivation and a sense of professional purpose. Recognizing and rewarding high-performing students who demonstrate innovation, resilience, and reflective practice during teaching practice may also help to sustain engagement and enhance their professional identity as teachers.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies should consider longitudinal tracking of PGCE graduates over a period of two to five years to determine the sustained impact of mentorship and teaching practice on their professional development. Comparative research between historically disadvantaged and advantaged universities could provide valuable insights into how contextual factors affect mentorship quality, resource availability, and teaching outcomes. Additionally, research exploring the use of digital and blended mentorship models may reveal innovative ways to support PGCE students in resource-constrained environments, ensuring continuity of guidance and reflection.

Conclusion

This study examined the impact of the PGCE programme on teaching practices and student learning outcomes in historically disadvantaged universities, focusing on mentorship, pedagogical competencies, and challenges in professional development. The findings revealed that effective mentorship enhanced students' confidence, reflective practice, and classroom management, yet its inconsistent provision and instances of exploitation limited its overall

impact. PGCE students demonstrated strong content knowledge but faced difficulties in differentiated instruction, inclusive education, and sustained reflective practice, largely due to workload pressures and inadequate support. Challenges such as limited teaching resources, insufficient school collaboration, and the short duration of teaching practice further hindered the application of acquired methodologies. The study concludes that while the PGCE programme holds significant potential to develop competent teachers, its effectiveness is constrained by structural and contextual factors. Strengthening mentorship frameworks, extending teaching practice, improving training in inclusive and differentiated instruction, and enhancing school-university collaboration are essential for maximising its impact. Future research should track PGCE graduates longitudinally and explore innovative mentorship models to ensure sustained professional growth.

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