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Student evaluation of teaching in Initial Teacher Education in South Africa: A critical qualitative analysis of lecturers' assessment practices and student teachers' experiences

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ABSTRACT

Teaching practice evaluation is a critical component of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) because it determines student teachers' professional readiness while simultaneously supporting their professional growth. This study explored how university lecturers conduct teaching practice evaluations and how student teachers experience these assessment processes within selected South African universities. A qualitative interpretive research design was employed. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews with 12 university lecturers, focus group discussions involving 24 final-year Bachelor of Education (BEd) and Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) student teachers, and analysis of institutional teaching practice assessment documents. Data were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that teaching practice evaluation functions simultaneously as a developmental mechanism and a high-stakes gatekeeping process. Student teachers reported anxiety, inconsistent assessment practices, unequal power relations, and contextual challenges associated with under-resourced school placements. Lecturers acknowledged the importance of formative feedback but highlighted workload pressures, institutional requirements, and professional judgement complexities. The study further found that contextual inequalities often influence evaluation experiences and perceptions of fairness. The study recommends the development of transparent and context-sensitive assessment frameworks, enhanced lecturer assessment literacy, stronger university-school partnerships, and dialogical feedback approaches that promote student agency. The study concludes that evaluation practices should balance accountability with professional learning to support equitable and transformative teacher education. The contribution of this study lies in extending scholarly understanding of teaching practice evaluation as a relational, contextual, and power-mediated process within South African Initial Teacher Education.

Keywords: Initial Teacher Education, Teaching Practice Evaluation, Student Teachers, University Lecturers, Professional Judgement.

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INTRODUCTION

Teaching practice forms the bedrock of initial teacher education (ITE) programmes. Student teachers get to learn about the theory for a certain period and then, through teaching practice, have time to develop their professional competence, confidence, and identity while they also integrate theoretical knowledge with practice.[1] Essentially, the evaluation of student teachers during the practicum period is not an ordinary technical administrative task but a profound professional act with far-reaching implications.[2] South African universities, as teacher education providers, highly value student teachers' evaluation during their teaching practice as a way of raising the standard of education for all and meeting the demands of a rapidly changing society.[3]

University lecturers are the people directly involved in the evaluation of the student teachers. As evaluators, mentors and members of the institution, they are accountable to the public for the work of student teachers through their instruction and by making decisions about their academic and professional progress.[4] On the other hand, student teachers are in a liminal state, being evaluated and judged; their success depends on obtaining favourable assessments, which also determine their status as learners and professionals.[5] Thus, the student teacher evaluation practices in South African ITE have remained somewhat underexplored in scholarly research, especially in terms of studies focusing on both the lecturers' and the student teachers' perspectives.[6] The teaching practice has been positioned at the centre of teacher education programmes through national policy frameworks such as the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications (MRTEQ) which have set mandatory standards for the rigorous assessment of the competences developed through teaching practice, the subject knowledge, the pedagogical skills, the ethical and professional behaviour, and the ability to reflect critically on teaching and learning being among these areas.[7] Within the given policy framework, universities need to have an assessment system that meets the criteria of reliability, transparency, and consistency with professional standards. Hence, teaching practice evaluation methods serve not only as pedagogical tools but also as institutional accountability and professional gatekeeping devices.[8]

Still, according to the literature, the assessment of teaching practice is a complicated and controversial matter in the eyes of those involved. Lesson observations, portfolio assessments, and reflective tasks are interpretive and context-dependent, shaped by evaluators' disciplinary orientations, pedagogical beliefs, and assumptions about effective teaching.[9] To lecturers, the evaluation of student teachers presents the additional challenge of juggling different accountabilities, i. e., being an agent of student development and, at the same time, the one who must judge their learning outcomes and professional readiness.[10] Student teachers may find that most of their behaviours are framed and regulated by the evaluation arrangements, and this causes them to feel

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1 Linda Darling-Hammond, "Teacher Education around the World: What Can We Learn from International Practice?," *European Journal of Teacher Education* 40, no. 3 (2017): 291–309; Pat Hutchings and Lee S Shulman, "The Scholarship of Teaching: New Elaborations, New Developments," *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* 31, no.5 (1999): 10–15.

2 Donna M Metens and Amy T Wilson, "Program Evaluation Theory and Practice" (New York, London: The Guilford Press, 2019).

3 Council on Higher Education., *Framework for Institutional Quality Enhancement in the Context of Ongoing Quality Assurance* (Pretoria: Council on Higher Education, 2016).

4 D. Gosling, *Peer Observation of Teaching in Higher Education: A Practical Guide* (London: Routledge, 2018); P. Seldin, *The Teaching Portfolio: A Practical Guide to Improved Performance and Promotion/Tenure Decisions* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2019).

5 F. Quansah, "Students' Evaluation of the Quality of Teaching Using Generalisability Theory: A Case of a Selected University in Ghana," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 34, no. 5 (2020): 136–50.

6 Rosaline Sebolao, "Enhancing the Use of a Teaching Portfolio in Higher Education as a Critically Reflexive Practice," *The Independent Journal of Teaching and Learning* 14, no. 2 (2019): 20–28.

7 Council on Higher Education., *Framework for Institutional Quality Enhancement in the Context of Ongoing Quality Assurance*.

8 Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2015).

9 T. A. Schwandt, *The SAGE Dictionary of Qualitative Inquiry*, 4th ed. (Sage Publications, 2015); Gosling, *Peer Observation of Teaching in Higher Education: A Practical Guide*.

10 A. Brew and D. Boud, " Teaching and Research: How to Support Disciplinary Learning," *Higher Education Research & Development* 40, no. 6 (2021): 1196–1209.

confused and uncertain about whether to be guided or to find ways to meet the requirements that are not always very clear.[11]

Besides that, the South African scenario exacerbates the problem due to the existing inequalities within the education system, lack of uniformity in mentoring capacity within the different schools used as placements, and structural differences in the higher education institutions, as well as their staff and assessment cultures.[12] For example, student teachers who are appointed to schools with limited resources will have to deal with factors like the large number of learners in the classroom, lack of teaching and learning materials, and diversity in the languages spoken, all situations that will definitely impact the implementation of the lesson and how the teacher will manage the learners. However, these factors are not always accounted for when the evaluation decisions are made, which gives rise to issues of fairness, consistency, and equity.[13]

Power relations are the key to understanding student-teacher evaluation practices. Lecturers' assessment is by its nature an asymmetrical relationship where the assessor has authority over the student teacher, who is the assessor's object of assessment and whose academic success and professional status are dependent on a favourable judgment from the assessor.[14] Although evaluation is frequently framed as formative and supportive, student teachers may experience assessment encounters as surveillant and performative, encouraging conformity to perceived expectations rather than pedagogical experimentation or critical reflection.[15] The fall of these attitudes and feelings is that assessment is a means of control and surveillance, and the reflection and inquiry orientation gets discouraged and undermined, which is precisely what these programs aim to develop.[16]

On the other hand, the lecturers themselves are faced with the institutional and regulatory forces shaping their assessment practices. The use of standardized rubrics, increasing workloads, and accountability pressures may limit the time a teacher has for observing the teaching of their student teachers in detail, giving feedback through a discussion, and judging from a contextualized perspective.[17] Lecturers can also find themselves torn between their professional values and the institutional requirements, especially when the ITE programs are large and cater for a student body that is very diverse.[18] Therefore, it makes sense to incorporate the lecturers' viewpoints for gaining a clearer picture of evaluation practices and for exploring the potential of reforms that are not only meaningful but also doable at the same time.

Even though evaluations of teaching practice are very impactful and significant in the context of ITE, most of the literature on them tends to focus mainly on technical assessment design or on student teacher performance outcomes, with only a scant reference amongst them to the ethical, relational, and power-related aspects of evaluations.[19] There is still a necessity for qualitative, contextually grounded research that sees evaluation through the lens of a socially situated practice, which implies that elements such as professional judgement, institutional culture, and historical inequality determine how it is shaped.[20] By means of an interview conducted with both lecturers and student teachers from South African ITE programmes, the study aimed to understand the evaluation process, its different forms of enactment, experience, and interpretation from a holistic perspective.

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[11] Quansah, "Students' Evaluation of the Quality of Teaching Using Generalisability Theory: A Case of a Selected University in Ghana."
[12] A. Fataar, "Reaching for Relevance in South African Higher Education: Transformative Knowledge Strategies," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 32, no. 3 (2018): 1–12; P. Higgs, " Contextualizing Evaluation in African Universities," *Evaluation in Higher Education* 8, no. 2 (2019): 45–59.
[13] B. Makhanya and Y. Chetty, "Teaching Excellence and the Academy: Issues and Challenges," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 35, no. 1 (2021): 95–110.
[14] C. Shore and S. Wright, *Audit Cultures: Anthropological Studies in Accountability, Ethics and the Academy* , 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2018).
[15] Brew and Boud, " Teaching and Research: How to Support Disciplinary Learning."
[16] Hutchings and Shulman, "The Scholarship of Teaching: New Elaborations, New Developments."
[17] Council on Higher Education., *Framework for Institutional Quality Enhancement in the Context of Ongoing Quality Assurance*; Gosling, *Peer Observation of Teaching in Higher Education: A Practical Guide*.
[18] Metens and Wilson, "Program Evaluation Theory and Practice."
[19] Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*; Schwandt, *The SAGE Dictionary of Qualitative Inquiry*.
[20] Sebolao, "Enhancing the Use of a Teaching Portfolio in Higher Education as a Critically Reflexive Practice."

In light of the above, this article is centred on the analysis of student teacher evaluations in initial teacher education in South Africa. The study was qualitative and involved university lecturers and the student teachers from both BEd and PGCE programmes. The study is based on a foundation of the critical and transformative perspectives on evaluation. What the study did was to interrogate the evaluation practices that are conceptualised and utilized, the experiences of student teachers, and the effect of evaluation on the formation of professional learning and identity. The argument of the paper is that if there is no greater transparency, dialogical engagement, and contextual sensitivity, then teaching practice evaluations are likely to end up functioning mainly as gatekeeping mechanisms rather than as transformative learning opportunities. Thus, reimagining evaluation practices is a prerequisite to realizing equitable, reflective, and professionally grounded teacher education in South Africa.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The assessment of student teachers during their teaching practice has been a topic of international scholarly debate for years. However, within the South African higher education landscape, the concept is still unevenly theorised and empirically investigated. In this section, we have critically examined the literature on the assessment of teaching practice by looking into four interdependent aspects: the aims and roles of practicum assessment in ITE; lecturers' assessment methods and professional judgement; student teachers' experiences of being assessed; and the impact of contextual and systemic factors on evaluation in South Africa. The review article points to the conceptual conflicts and empirical gaps that exist in the literature. Furthermore, it also underlines the necessity for comprehensive and context-sensitive student teacher evaluation approaches.

Teaching Practice Evaluation in Initial Teacher Education

Teaching practice is widely acknowledged as the single most significant component of ITE. It is the primary setting where theoretical knowledge is put into practice, challenged, and adjusted through actual classroom teaching.[21] Consequently, evaluation in this setting is essential for establishing whether student teachers have acquired the professional knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for their first entry into the teaching profession.[22] In general, teaching practice assessments across various international contexts comprise lesson observations, reflective portfolios, mentor reports, and official evaluation rubrics, which are used either by university lecturers or school-based supervisors.[23]

The literature identifies the formative and summative purposes of teaching practice evaluation as separate. Formative evaluation aims at assisting the development of a professional through feedback, reflection, and guided improvement, while summative evaluation serves the function of certification of competence as well as progression or qualification outcomes determination.[24] However, these functions are often so entangled that they cause confusion between assessors and also student teachers.[25] Overall, research reports that whenever summative consequences rule, formative purposes get sidelined, and assessment becomes something that is done to comply or pass tests rather than being oriented towards learning.[26]

In South Africa, policy documents regard teaching practice as a component of teacher education programmes which should be assessed strictly and counted for credits, thereby emphasising accountability and quality assurance.[27] Such regulation is mainly aimed at raising the levels of professionalism; however, scholars warn that if the assessment system is highly bureaucratised, it might

[21] Darling-Hammond, "Teacher Education around the World: What Can We Learn from International Practice?"
[22] Hutchings and Shulman, "The Scholarship of Teaching: New Elaborations, New Developments."
[23] David Carless et al., *Scaling up Assessment for Learning in Higher Education*, vol. 5 (Springer, 2017).
[24] Chris Beaumont, Michelle O'Doherty, and Lee Shannon, "Reconceptualising Assessment Feedback: A Key to Improving Student Learning?," *Studies in Higher Education* 36, no. 6 (2011): 671–87.
[25] D. R. Sadler, *Instructional Alignment: Essays on Learning, Teaching, and Assessment* (Springer International Publishing, 2013).
[26] Brew and Boud, " Teaching and Research: How to Support Disciplinary Learning."
[27] Council on Higher Education., *Framework for Institutional Quality Enhancement in the Context of Ongoing Quality Assurance*.

cause the complex process of teaching practice to be reduced to mere checklist compliance, thus leaving no room for professional judgement and contextual interpretation.[28]

Lecturers' Assessment Practices and Professional Judgement

University lecturers are essential players in the process of evaluating student teachers during their teaching practice. They perform multiple roles as assessors, mentors, and representatives of the institution. [29] Unlike standardised tests, practicum evaluation necessitates that lecturers make interpretive judgements based on brief lesson observations in school settings that can vary.[30] Hence, professional judgement is necessary in assessment decision-making.

Studies show that lecturers consider numerous indicators when they decide on the abilities of student teachers; such indicators include lesson organisation, student involvement, disciplinary management, expertise in the subject matter, and the ability to reflect.[31] However, research studies also uncover the fact that there is a big range in the way lecturers understand assessment standards and make use of rubrics, which consequently raises suspicion about consistency and the fairness of the assessments.[32] This kind of variability does not always mean that it is a sign of poor practice, but rather it is an indicator of the fact that the nature of professional judgement is contextual and value-laden.

Lecturers' evaluation methods are largely influenced by their own pedagogical beliefs, disciplinary backgrounds, and professional identities. [33] Thus, lecturers who strongly identify with constructivism, for example, might focus on learner-centred pedagogies, whereas others might stress the importance of content accuracy or maintaining order in the classroom. Such values that remain unexpressed might be responsible for the kinds of perceptions that student teachers have towards their assessments. Firstly, they are opaque and unpredictable.[34]

According to local studies, student batches are so large and the time allocated for observation is so limited that these, combined with the faculty's heavy workloads, essentially rob the lecturers of the chance to offer meaningful, continuous formative feedback.[35] Consequently, evaluation might only be carried out occasionally and with a focus on the results, thereby disregarding the opportunities for dialogical engagement and reflective learning. This is suggestive of structural constraints that determine teacher evaluation practices, where an individual's will or ability to change is limited.

Student Teachers' Experiences of Being Evaluated

Research has widely documented the different aspects of student teachers' experiences with the assessment of their teaching practice, and more recently, some focus has been shifted toward studying the affective dimension. In testing situations, the pressure experienced by students is comparable to that in situations where their survival must be tested (i. e., they experience fear, anxiety, heightened self-surveillance, etc.). Undoubtedly, student teachers know that instructors' judgements not only affect their marks but also their professional status and employability later.[36]

It is also well documented how student teachers feel torn between doing something they genuinely want and feel is right and giving in to expectations and rules predetermined by outsiders (i. e., evaluators of their lessons). [37] Hence, to meet the perceived assessor's expectations, student teachers may resort to using the same lesson plans repeatedly, not trying new teaching strategies and simply following reflective work mechanically. In this way, student teachers are less

[28] Higgs, " Contextualizing Evaluation in African Universities."
[29] Gosling, *Peer Observation of Teaching in Higher Education: A Practical Guide*.
[30] Schwandt, *The SAGE Dictionary of Qualitative Inquiry*.
[31] Claire Wyatt-Smith, Val Klenowski, and Stephanie Gunn, "The Centrality of Teachers' Judgement Practice in Assessment: A Study of Standards in Moderation," *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice* 17, no. 1 (2010): 59–75.
[32] Sadler, *Instructional Alignment: Essays on Learning, Teaching, and Assessment*.
[33] Gosling, *Peer Observation of Teaching in Higher Education: A Practical Guide*.
[34] Quansah, "Students' Evaluation of the Quality of Teaching Using Generalisability Theory: A Case of a Selected University in Ghana."
[35] Sebolao, "Enhancing the Use of a Teaching Portfolio in Higher Education as a Critically Reflexive Practice."
[36] Quansah, "Students' Evaluation of the Quality of Teaching Using Generalisability Theory: A Case of a Selected University in Ghana."
[37] Brew and Boud, " Teaching and Research: How to Support Disciplinary Learning."

likely to become adaptable experts and will also fail to develop a proper professional judgement that is fundamental to criticality.

The way feedback is given plays a vital role in how student teachers perceive their evaluation. Constructive, clear, and communication-based feedback is therefore instrumental in boosting confidence, encouraging critical reflection, and furthering professional growth.[38] In contrast, unclear, inconsistent, or harsh feedback leads to disappointment, withdrawal, and reduced self-belief.[39] Also, student teachers often complain about unclear rubrics and not understanding how the assessor arrived at the given grade, thus increasing the feeling of powerlessness and lack of transparency in the whole assessment.[40]

Moreover, the South African context deeply influences student-teacher experiences since the schooling sector is highly unequal. Student teachers who are placed into disadvantaged schools feel that they are at a disadvantage when they are assessed against universal standards that do not consider such contextual constraints as overcrowded classrooms, lack of teaching materials, language diversity, etc.[41] This, therefore, brings to the fore such ethical concerns as equity and fairness in the evaluation of teaching practice.

Power Relations and the Politics of Evaluation

Critical scholars perceive evaluation as a place where power, surveillance, and professional regulation operate rather than as a neutral instructional practice.[42] During teaching practice appraisal, lecturers are the ones who hold the institutional authority, whereas student teachers are the ones who get judged and classified. This imbalance determines the way evaluation is experienced and conducted. Foucault-driven studies have revealed that evaluation is a means of control through which "good teaching" is defined, and the teachers who deviate from this norm are excluded.[43] Student teachers internalise the assessment criteria and adjust their behaviour accordingly, but they often sacrifice their experimentation and critical inquiry to the demands of visibility and compliance. The situation becomes even more complicated if the assessment criteria are perceived as rigid or inflexible.[44]

In South Africa, power dynamics play out alongside the historical and social inequalities in the higher education and schooling sectors.[45] Student teachers who come from historically disadvantaged backgrounds may find evaluation processes doubly alienating, especially if the professional standards or norms are, although indirectly, aligned with middle-class or Eurocentric pedagogical models. Some literature calls for reflexive evaluation practices that recognize positionality, context, and power.

Contextual and Institutional Influences in South Africa

The initial teacher education sector in South Africa is influenced by stringent regulations, the massification of higher education, and a persistent lack of equality in the quality of schooling.[46] All these aspects have a profound impact on the assessment of teaching practice. Universities are expected to demonstrate their responsibility and standardisation mainly through detailed rubrics and formal reporting systems. However, while such measures indeed bring about more clarity, they can also limit professional judgment and disregard the nuances of the context.[47]

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[38] Carless et al., *Scaling up Assessment for Learning in Higher Education*.
[39] Quansah, "Students' Evaluation of the Quality of Teaching Using Generalisability Theory: A Case of a Selected University in Ghana."
[40] Quansah, "Students' Evaluation of the Quality of Teaching Using Generalisability Theory: A Case of a Selected University in Ghana."
[41] Makhanya and Chetty, "Teaching Excellence and the Academy: Issues and Challenges."
[42] Shore and Wright, *Audit Cultures: Anthropological Studies in Accountability, Ethics and the Academy* .
[43] Brew and Boud, " Teaching and Research: How to Support Disciplinary Learning."
[44] Brew and Boud, " Teaching and Research: How to Support Disciplinary Learning."
[45] Saleem Badat, *Black Student Politics: Higher Education and Apartheid from SASO to SANSCO, 1968-1990* (Routledge, 2016).
[46] Council on Higher Education., *Framework for Institutional Quality Enhancement in the Context of Ongoing Quality Assurance*.
[47] Higgs, " Contextualizing Evaluation in African Universities."

The quality of school-based mentoring varies greatly, with some student teachers benefiting from strong support while others hardly get any.[48] This means that lecturers' assessments tend to be detached from a deep understanding of the student teacher's development over time, thus increasing the dependence on mere snapshot observations. Given these conditions, scholars have been urging universities and schools to form stronger partnerships as well as to adopt more collaborative evaluation models.[49]

There is a dearth of empirical research on teaching practice evaluation in South Africa, especially qualitative studies that would combine the viewpoints of lecturers and student teachers. Most of the existing research pays attention to policy compliance or performance outcomes of students rather than the relational and experiential dimensions of evaluation.[50] This indicates a research gap that calls for a deeper investigation of evaluation as it is understood, negotiated, and experienced within institutional and societal contexts.

Synthesis and Research Gap

The evidence from the literature points out that assessment of teaching practice is a multifaceted, controversial, and important exercise that, aside from being directed by pedagogical intentions, is also heavily influenced by professional judgement, power relations, and contextual limitations. While international research in this field provides valuable theoretical inputs, local research is quite scattered and less developed, especially concerning the perspectives of both lecturers and student teachers.

More significantly, there has not been much empirical research on evaluation as a relational practice situated at the crossroads of accountability and professional learning. Very few studies critically investigate how lecturers cope with their evaluative roles or how student teachers make sense of and respond to their assessment experiences in contexts of unequal schooling. This research bridges the gap by offering a qualitative, richly contextualised account of student teacher evaluations in South African ITE from both the perspectives of lecturers and student teachers.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws on a multi-theoretical framework which combines sociocultural learning theory, assessment for learning, professional judgement theory, and critical evaluation theory. The blend of these perspectives allows for a comprehensive analysis of the way student teacher evaluations during teaching practice are understood by university lecturers, experienced by student teachers, and conditioned by institutional and systemic factors in South African ITE. Each theoretical strand, taken separately, points to evaluation as a social process imbued with power and interpretation, rather than a neutral or purely technical one.

Sociocultural Learning Theory and Teaching Practice

Sociocultural learning theory is one of the primary lenses through which practice teaching can be seen as a situated and relational learning process. The Vygotskian scholars associated with this theory point to the fact that social interaction, mediated activity, and engagement with communities of practice are the channels through which learning takes place rather than individual cognition alone.[51] Here, teaching practice is the legitimate peripheral participation of the student teachers who, in this way, gradually move closer towards full professional participation in the teaching profession.

In line with sociocultural learning theory, evaluation of teaching practice should be understood beyond the scope of a mere measurement of competencies. Lecturer observations, feedback discussions,

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[48] Makhanya and Chetty, "Teaching Excellence and the Academy: Issues and Challenges."
[49] Darling-Hammond, "Teacher Education around the World: What Can We Learn from International Practice?"
[50] Sebolao, "Enhancing the Use of a Teaching Portfolio in Higher Education as a Critically Reflexive Practice."
[51] Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511815355; Harry Daniels, "Vygotsky and Dialogic Pedagogy," *Dialogic Pedagogy: The Importance of Dialogue in Teaching and Learning* 10, no. 3 (2016): 48–67.

and assessment reports are the kind of cultural tools which influence the way student teachers interpret good teaching, professional norms, and standards.[52] Therefore, evaluation is a key factor in identity development, so dialogues and reflections are part of the assessment experience.

Sociocultural theory also highlights how much student engagement depends on the learner's environment, which is local and even variable over time. Student teachers' performance in an evaluation is a reflection of the material, social and institutional conditions of their placement schools, as well as the school culture, mentoring and resources.[53] When evaluative judgements do not consider these contextual realities, assessment may fail to reflect good teachers' practice in the actual context. Hence, this research uses sociocultural theory to query the extent to which evaluation practices in South African schools acknowledge or disregard the realities of the context.

Assessment for Learning in Initial Teacher Education

Assessment for Learning (AfL) theory is a key model that allows one to look at evaluation from the viewpoint of the developmental impact it is supposed to have. AfL regards assessment as a part of learning itself that serves to enhance growth through feedback, self-reflection, and involvement of the learner rather than just verification of achievement.[54] The role of teaching practice and the way it is assessed, to produce and nurture reflective practitioners who can critically examine and improve their practice, is in line with AfL principles.

Teaching practice assessments are mostly, at least at first stage placements, presented as a form of formative assessment with the clearly stated purpose of facilitating the pedagogical growth of student teachers.[55] Lecturer feedback is to be used by students for the improvement of their work, for the intensification of their reflective practice and for the crossing of the theory-practice gap. However, there is tension between the coexistence of formative intentions and summative outcomes, as shown by research.[56] Student teachers may choose to focus on compliance and performance instead of learning when outcomes of assessment are used as the basis for progression and qualification decisions.

By employing the lens of AfL theory, this research reflects on whether teaching practice evaluations are functioning in ways that facilitate learning, or if the pressure of summative assessment is limiting the formative aspect. The way feedback is given, the explanation of the criteria, and the extent to which student teachers are regarded as the central figures in the process that leads to their evaluation are some of the things that will be looked at closely. This theoretical model allows for examining the pedagogical part of evaluation practices, i. e., whether they simply follow the technical designs.

Professional Judgement and Lecturer Assessment Practices

Professional Judgement Theory is the dominant, theorised explanation of lecturer evaluation of teaching practice. Standardised tests are different in that they do not require the assessor to infer from complex, actual teaching situations in ITE what the quality of teaching and learning is.[57] These judgements may be based on what is formally set down in criteria and rubrics, but also assessors' disciplinary knowledge, teaching philosophies, and previous professional experience play a very significant role.

Lecturer judgement in ITE implies that one must switch between different identities: a mentor, assessor, gatekeeper, and a representative of the institution.[58] On the one hand, lecturers support student development, but on the other, they are also held accountable, which means that time can be very short

[52] Hutchings and Shulman, "The Scholarship of Teaching: New Elaborations, New Developments."
[53] Fataar, "Reaching for Relevance in South African Higher Education: Transformative Knowledge Strategies."
[54] Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam, "Developing the Theory of Formative Assessment," *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability (Formerly: Journal of Personnel Evaluation in Education)* 21, no. 1 (2009): 5–31; Carless et al., *Scaling up Assessment for Learning in Higher Education*.
[55] Council on Higher Education., *Framework for Institutional Quality Enhancement in the Context of Ongoing Quality Assurance*.
[56] Beaumont, O'Doherty, and Shannon, "Reconceptualising Assessment Feedback: A Key to Improving Student Learning?"
[57] Sadler, *Instructional Alignment: Essays on Learning, Teaching, and Assessment*; Wyatt-Smith, Klenowski, and Gunn, "The Centrality of Teachers' Judgement Practice in Assessment: A Study of Standards in Moderation."
[58] Gosling, *Peer Observation of Teaching in Higher Education: A Practical Guide*.

and the student cohorts are large. Professional judgement theory understands such decisions as inherently interpretive and value-laden, rather than objective or purely procedural.[59]

The issues raised by professional judgement are particularly relevant in South Africa, where the diversity of school contexts and the disparity of mentoring quality that makes difficult to apply standardised criteria.[60] With professional judgement being in the forefront, this research looks at how lecturers explain their evaluation judgements, how they handle the ambiguous aspects of such judgements, and how they understand competence in the context of their teaching. Also, it serves as a tool for investigating the consistency, fairness and transparency of practicum assessment practices.

Power, Surveillance, and Critical Evaluation Theory

Critical Evaluation Theory offers a crucial viewpoint on the relationship between power and student teacher evaluation at various levels. Combining insights from critical and post-structural scholarship, this view locates evaluation uniquely as a device of power that controls, normalises, and produces a new type of individual.[61] In ITE, evaluation practices not only help the learners but are also used to standardise, reproduce and institutionalise a specific form of the teacher/professional.

From this point of view, lecturer observations and student evaluation reports might be viewed as instruments of surveillance when student teachers feel that assessments are only for the purpose of judging, are closed and are penalizing.[62] The unequal distribution of power between lecturers and student teachers may prevent genuine conversation, reduce openness in critical reflection, and encourage the latter to merely act for the benefit of the lecturers' imagined standards rather than by their own authentic pedagogical experimentation.

Critical Evaluation Theory is especially relevant in the South African higher education context, where the historical inequalities, institutional hierarchies and professional gatekeeping intersect.[63] In this research, the writer applies a critical framework to look at how the evaluation processes might contribute to the reproduction of inequalities, the marginalisation of contextual problems and the silencing of students' agency. At the same time, such a framework is instrumental in uncovering the possibilities for emancipation, such as dialogical feedback, shared criteria, and reflexive assessment cultures, which have the potential to transform evaluation into a more ethical and participatory practice.

Integrating the Framework for the Present Study

By merging Sociocultural Learning Theory, Assessment for Learning, Professional Judgement Theory, and Critical Evaluation Theory, the study is well equipped with an all-encompassing analytic framework. These diverse theoretical perspectives have been drawn together to depict the evaluation of teaching practice as a social, pedagogical, and moral process which is impacted by institutional conventions, professional ethics, and power dynamics.

METHODOLOGY

Research Paradigm

This study was situated within the interpretivist research paradigm, which assumes that reality is socially constructed and that meanings are shaped through human interaction and experience.[64] The interpretivist paradigm was appropriate because the study sought to understand how university lecturers and student teachers perceive, experience, and make meaning of teaching practice evaluation within South African ITE. Furthermore, the study was informed by a critical orientation that enabled the examination of power relations, institutional practices, and contextual inequalities embedded within assessment processes.[65]

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[59] Schwandt, *The SAGE Dictionary of Qualitative Inquiry*.
[60] Higgs, " Contextualizing Evaluation in African Universities."
[61] Shore and Wright, *Audit Cultures: Anthropological Studies in Accountability, Ethics and the Academy* .
[62] Brew and Boud, " Teaching and Research: How to Support Disciplinary Learning."
[63] Badat, *Black Student Politics: Higher Education and Apartheid from SASO to SANSCO, 1968-1990*.
[64] S. B. Merriam and E J Tisdell, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, 4th ed. (CA: Jossey-Bass, 2016).
[65] Schwandt, *The SAGE Dictionary of Qualitative Inquiry*.

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative multiple-case study design. The design was selected because it facilitated an in-depth exploration of teaching practice evaluation across different institutional contexts while allowing for a detailed examination of participants' lived experiences and perspectives. The qualitative approach enabled the researcher to generate rich, contextualised insights into lecturers' assessment practices and student teachers' experiences of being evaluated during teaching practice.

Research Context

The study was conducted across three public universities in South Africa that offer both Bachelor of Education (BEd) and Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) programmes. The universities were purposively selected because they represented diverse institutional contexts, geographical locations, and student populations. All three institutions had established teaching practice programmes aligned with the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications (MRTEQ) policy framework and utilised formal teaching practice assessment instruments.

The selected universities were considered information-rich sites because they had extensive experience in preparing student teachers and implementing teaching practice evaluation processes. Including multiple institutions enabled the researcher to capture similarities and differences in assessment practices across diverse higher education settings.

Population and Sampling

The target population comprised university lecturers responsible for supervising and evaluating student teachers during teaching practice and final-year student teachers enrolled in BEd and PGCE programmes. Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who possessed direct experience and knowledge of teaching practice evaluation. This sampling strategy ensured the inclusion of participants capable of providing detailed and relevant information regarding assessment practices and experiences. The final sample consisted of 36 participants, comprising 12 university lecturers and 24 final-year student teachers.

Lecturer Participants

The lecturer sample consisted of seven female and five male academics involved in teaching practice supervision and assessment. Their teaching practice supervision experience ranged from three to twenty years. Participants represented different academic disciplines, including Languages, Mathematics Education, Science Education, Social Sciences Education, and Foundation Phase Education.

Student Teacher Participants

The student teacher sample comprised 24 final-year students, including 15 females and 9 males. Fourteen participants were enrolled in Bachelor of Education programmes, while ten were enrolled in Postgraduate Certificate in Education programmes. Participants had completed teaching practice placements in rural, township, peri-urban, and urban schools across different provinces.

Inclusion Criteria

To ensure the selection of information-rich participants, the following criteria were applied:

- Lecturers had to be actively involved in teaching practice supervision and assessment for a minimum period of two years.
- Student teachers had to be registered in the final year of a BEd or PGCE programme and have completed at least one formal teaching practice placement.
- Participants had to be willing to participate voluntarily and provide informed consent.

Data Generation Methods

Data were generated through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the 12 university lecturers. The interviews explored lecturers' assessment practices, professional judgement, experiences of evaluating student teachers, challenges encountered during supervision, and perceptions regarding fairness, consistency, and accountability in teaching practice assessment. The flexibility of semi-structured interviews allowed participants to elaborate on their experiences while ensuring alignment with the study objectives.[66]

Focus Group Discussions

Three focus group discussions were conducted with the 24 student teachers. Each focus group consisted of eight participants. The discussions explored student teachers' experiences of teaching practice evaluation, perceptions of assessment fairness, experiences of feedback, contextual challenges during school placements, and the influence of evaluation on their professional development. Focus groups were particularly useful in generating collective reflections and enabling participants to compare and discuss shared experiences of assessment.

Document Analysis

Document analysis was undertaken to supplement interview and focus group data. Documents analysed included teaching practice assessment rubrics, lesson observation schedules, assessment feedback forms, moderation reports, and institutional teaching practice guidelines.

The analysis of institutional documents provided insight into the formal assessment criteria, expectations, and standards underpinning teaching practice evaluation and enabled comparisons between official assessment policies and participants' lived experiences.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework.[67] The process involved familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Interview and focus group recordings were transcribed verbatim before analysis. Initial open coding was undertaken to identify recurring ideas and patterns. Similar codes were subsequently grouped into broader categories that reflected the study's theoretical framework and research objectives. Themes were refined through an iterative process involving constant comparison across data sources. Throughout the analysis, analytic memos were maintained to document emerging interpretations, theoretical insights, and reflexive observations.

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of the study was enhanced through credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.[68] Credibility was strengthened through methodological triangulation by combining interviews, focus groups, and document analysis. Data source triangulation was further achieved through the inclusion of both lecturers and student teachers. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary interpretations with selected participants to verify accuracy. Dependability was enhanced through the maintenance of a detailed audit trail documenting methodological decisions, coding processes, theme development, and data management procedures. Confirmability was strengthened through reflexive journaling and peer debriefing, which assisted in identifying and minimising potential researcher bias during data collection and analysis. Transferability was facilitated through the provision of rich descriptions of participants, institutional contexts, and teaching practice environments, thereby enabling readers to determine the applicability of findings to similar contexts.

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[66] S. B Merriam and E. J Tisdell, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* , 4th ed, 2016.

[67] Victoria Clarke and Virginia Braun, "Thematic Analysis," *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 12, no. 3 (May 4, 2017): 297–98, https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2016.1262613.

[68] Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1985).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant university research ethics committee before commencement of the study. Permission was also obtained from the participating universities.
Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty, and the intended use of the data. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through the use of pseudonyms and the removal of identifying information from transcripts and reports. Audio recordings, transcripts, and field notes were securely stored using password-protected electronic systems accessible only to the researcher. Particular attention was given to addressing potential power imbalances between lecturers and student teachers. Student teachers were assured that participation would have no influence on their academic performance, teaching practice assessments, or institutional standing. Throughout the study, the researcher remained committed to ethical principles of respect, beneficence, justice, and research integrity.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and interprets data from interviews, focus groups, and document analysis. To enhance the understanding of lecturing practices and student teachers' experience of being assessed, direct participant quotations have been used. The story is unfolded through five closely related themes.

Teaching Practice Evaluation as a High-Stakes Professional Encounter

Both students and teachers stressed the significant pressure associated with evaluation. One student who was in a teaching practice said:

> *"When it feels like the whole of what I've done is being judged, I get very nervous, and I'm always afraid of making mistakes, as it will affect not only my marks but also my future".*

Another student teacher agreed:
You try differently when someone is evaluating you; I catch myself following the scripts instead of experimenting with new methods.
Teachers understood these students' feelings. One teacher said:

> *"I give constructive feedback, but I also understand that my marking can be the thing that lets the student pass, and I feel the weight of that responsibility".*

The quotations are an indication of the contradiction between the different purposes of assessment, and the research shows that high-stakes evaluation can cause anxiety and a performance-oriented behaviour.[69] Theoretically, it can be considered a match with assessment for learning theory, which emphasises how summative stakes can hide the learning opportunities.[70]

Professional Judgement and Variability in Lecturer Assessment Practices

Frequently, lecturers said that they relied on their professional judgement to assess student teachers who were in a difficult classroom environment:

> *"I am doing the rubric, but I am also looking at the students' progress from my experience and understanding, I guess, in a way, almost a bit like guesswork".*

On the other hand, students noticed differences in the lecturer's behaviour:
One lecturer says you should work on classroom management, but the other one is stressing the content.

> *"I am completely lost and don't know what they are after".*

The stories reveal that although professional judgement by an expert is indispensable, an obscure situation can increase insecurity, which is in line with Sadler's professional judgement theory.[71] The

[69] Brew and Boud, " Teaching and Research: How to Support Disciplinary Learning"; Quansah, "Students' Evaluation of the Quality of Teaching Using Generalisability Theory: A Case of a Selected University in Ghana."
[70] Beaumont, O'Doherty, and Shannon, "Reconceptualising Assessment Feedback: A Key to Improving Student Learning?"
[71] Sadler, *Instructional Alignment: Essays on Learning, Teaching, and Assessment*.

variability that the participants pointed out is a clear demonstration of the critical evaluation perspective: assessments are not merely based on fact but are interpretative and socially mediated.[72]

Feedback as a Site of Learning or Control

Feedback was vital to the experience of assessment. One student teacher shared:

> *"If the lecturer outlines for me what went well and what needs to be changed, I feel I can develop. But in some cases, feedback was only that you should have done better next time, and it simply wasn't helpful at all".*

Lecturers admitted that they understood the significance of good and useful feedback, but they also pointed to the lack of time:

> *"I want to make my comments clear and understandable, but when there are so many students to be evaluated, I often fail to give my comments the time they deserve, and they become quite vague and general".*

These tales correspond to the AfL view that to facilitate learning, feedback should be specific as well as dialogical.[73] Where feedback was not clear or failed to consider the circumstances, it was felt as control, which means evaluation can reinforce hierarchical power structures.[74]

Contextual Constraints and the Question of Fairness

Student teachers who taught in under-resourced schools highlighted issues that affected their work:

> *"I must teach 50 students in one classroom where there are almost no materials available to use. It is, therefore, very difficult for me to demonstrate to the class the strategies that the lecturers expect us to use".*

Lecturers were fully aware of these differences and, at the same time, had ideas about how they might alter their judgement:

> *"I try to understand school environments when making judgement calls; however, the rubric establishes minimum standards, and I cannot compromise a lot if I want to keep it fair for the students".*

These views go through the lens of the sociocultural and critical evaluation perspectives: teaching practice is always the place where things are going on, and fairness in assessment implies taking into consideration structural inequalities.[75] If context is ignored, students are put at a disadvantage, and the developmental power of assessment is reduced.

Power Relations and Student Teacher Agency

There was a clear discrepancy of power between lecturers and student teachers. One student teacher remembered:

> *"Even if I do not agree with the feedback, I never question it. I fear that it might have an impact on my grade or how they think of me as a teacher".*

Lecturers were also aware of these kinds of interactions:

> *"I realize that students may feel intimidated, but on the other hand, I have the responsibility to ensure that they meet the professional standards of a teacher".*

The stories here depict how the student teacher's ability to act and to communicate is limited by hierarchical structures that, in turn, according to critical evaluation theories, serve to regulate the performance and the subjectivity of the individual.[76] If the student's capacity to act is influenced by such mechanisms, there is a danger that the evaluation will become a mere performance and not a genuine transformation.

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[72] Shore and Wright, *Audit Cultures: Anthropological Studies in Accountability, Ethics and the Academy* .
[73] Carless et al., *Scaling up Assessment for Learning in Higher Education*.
[74] Brew and Boud, " Teaching and Research: How to Support Disciplinary Learning."
[75] Fataar, "Reaching for Relevance in South African Higher Education: Transformative Knowledge Strategies"; Daniels, "Vygotsky and Dialogic Pedagogy."
[76] Shore and Wright, *Audit Cultures: Anthropological Studies in Accountability, Ethics and the Academy* .

Implications for Professional Learning in Initial Teacher Education

The combination of the voices of lecturers and student teachers shows that the evaluation of teaching practice is a complicated matter. On one side, lecturers struggle to find a good balance between formative and summative objectives, whereas student teachers must cope with their worries, with showing the necessary behaviour to get higher marks, and their very limited power. Their interactions are shaped by the contextual differences, the pressure of the workload, and the uneven power relations that go against the developmental capacity of the evaluation.

The findings suggest that, in general, the evaluation frameworks in the South African ITE should be clear, sensitive to context, and respectful of the participants, thus allowing student teachers to engage with feedback critically and reflectively. The voices of the participants show that if these aspects are not present, then the evaluation will merely be seen as a hurdle, the way to professional learning will be obstructed, and this will call for both systemic and pedagogical reform.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results obtained in this study, it is advisable that the institutions of higher education in South Africa that offer Initial Teacher Education programs formulate and implement comprehensive, context-sensitive, and participatory assessment frameworks for Teaching Practice that clearly demonstrate a balance between formative and summative purposes. Systematic training, mentoring, and peer review should be used to support lecturers, especially when it comes to improving their assessment literacy and professional judgment, thereby continuously ensuring the assessment of student teachers is consistent yet flexible enough to account for diverse school contexts. The feedback practices should be prioritised as dialogical, specific, and reflective; thus, student teachers would be enabled to take charge of their engagement with evaluative guidance and hence develop professional agency, rather than being made into passive recipients of judgement. Assessment policies at the institutional level should consider that there may be contextual differences, e. g., class size, shortage of resources, and linguistic diversity, and at the same time continue to uphold clear, transparent criteria to lessen the anxiety caused by perceived unfairness. A great University-School partnership and well-organised mentorship programmes are additional initiatives that could provide lecturers and student teachers with consistent support, helping them become collaborators in reflective thinking and evidence-informed assessment. Finally, the inclusion of critical and reflective cultures of evaluation at the core of teacher education programs can help to decrease the inequalities of hierarchical power, hence promoting fairness and turning the evaluation of practice into a real developmental, emancipatory, and professionally formative journey that shapes teachers who are reflective, resilient, and highly capable of handling the complex South African classrooms.

CONCLUSION

This study throws light on the challenging, multifaceted character of the student-teacher relationship in the context of South African Initial Teacher Education. It also reveals the dual role of Teaching Practice assessment, both as a developmental tool and a high-stakes gatekeeper. There is evidence that, on one hand, university lecturers rely on their professional judgement to meet the conflicting requirements of accountability, standardisation, and formative support; on the other hand, differences in interpretation and application of assessment criteria may lead to discomfort and insecurity among student teachers. The narratives of the latter group expose the cognitive and emotional strain of being assessed, the struggle to reconcile genuine teaching with the need to comply, and the limits that are imposed on them by the unequal conditions of their school placements. Feedback is shown to be a key place through which a student's potential for learning can either be tapped into or lost, which depends on the nature of feedback, how narrowly focused, dialogical and context-sensitive it is. The issue of power relations, in fact, the power structure, runs through the whole evaluation process, affecting both the student teachers' capabilities and the lecturer's freedom to carry out a fully participatory, reflective practice in assessment. Relaxation of regulations on Teaching Practice evaluations alone cannot resolve the dilemma between the contrasting roles of teacher education programs unless there is clarity,

contextual sensitivity and transparency in the evaluation process. The outcome would be Teaching Practice assessments that give the highest priority to summative results, and, therefore, the professional growth of students will be limited since there will be fewer opportunities for reflective learning, adaptive expertise, and equitable development. The study thus makes a case for ITE programs to view evaluation as a relational, formative, and emancipatory process at the same time, one that is based on a compromise between rigorous standards for the profession and pedagogical support, context awareness, and reflective, resilient, and competent future educators.

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