

## The Notion of School 'Functionality' in a Teaching-Practice Placement Policy

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**ABSTRACT** Placement of students in schools for teaching practice is an integral component of teacher education. When these placements are arranged, several factors are taken into consideration, including availability of co-operating teachers, space and alignment between teacher-education institutions and schools. While there is abundant literature on placing students in schools, few studies have investigated the policies underpinning these placements, and the meanings embedded in them. Within this context, teaching-practice placement of students in 'functional' schools with different racial contexts, as stipulated in the teaching-practice crossover policy, was investigated. The goal was to establish the meaning and understanding that students attached to 'functional' schools, and to assess the impact of this understanding on students' growth and development. The study was informed by the situated learning theory. The design was qualitative. Data were collected using semi-structured focus-group interviews from 47 first-year Black students enrolled in a Bachelor of Education teacher-education programme. Only students who had been placed at least once in a 'functional' school with a racial profile other than their own were included. The findings revealed that due to the ambiguity of the term *functional* in the policy, students developed their own definitions based on their personal experiences. Similarly, the perceived impact of the placements was shaped by their experiences in these contexts. The study ended with implications for teaching-practice placement policies.

### INTRODUCTION

The importance of good placement of student teachers in schools has been widely recognised as a vital component of ensuring a smooth development of their professional skills (HM Inspectors of Education 2005). When placing students for teaching practice (TP), TP co-ordinators make several considerations that ensure the placements are conducive for students' learning, growth and development. These considerations include matching students with co-operating teachers (Darling-Hammond and Bransford 2005); matching students with placement sites (Bozella 2008; Cochran-Smith and Fries 2005); the relationship, connection and coherence between the university and TP schools (Boyd et al. 2009); as well as accessibility to placement sites, diversity, students' requests, availability of spaces for student teachers and willingness of school principals to participate in TP supervision (Bozella 2008; Department of Education Services 2006). Several factors mitigate students' placements in schools. In the document published by the Department of Education Services (2006), the following barriers are cited:

- (i) the reluctance of school principals to participate in TP supervision

- (ii) travel and accommodation costs which result in pressure on metropolitan schools to place students
- (iii) costs related to the TP practicum due to under-funding of teacher education
- (iv) popularity of placement in *government* schools rather than in *private* schools.

In South Africa, placement of student teachers in 'functional' or 'suitable' schools is emphasised (Department of Education (DoE) 2006, 2007; Department of Higher Education (DHET) 2011; University of KwaZulu-Natal 2013). Yet the meaning of these concepts remains vague and not clearly defined in a way that TP co-ordinators, teacher educators and students would understand.

Within this context, this study investigated first-year Black students' understanding of 'functional' schools, with the goal of establishing their own interpretations of this term and the impact that their understanding had on their growth and development. The rationale for selecting these students is explained in the methodology. The research question was: Based on the students' placement in 'functional' schools, how do they understand the meaning of 'school functionality' and what impact does this understanding have on their growth and development? Since the meaning of 'functional' is not

clear to teacher-education stakeholders, this term is subjected to multiple (mis)interpretations which might obscure its intended purpose.

This study was undertaken as part of a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) initial teacher-education programme (TEP) which aims to prepare students for secondary school teaching. In this TEP, the TP co-ordinator introduced a crossover policy which requires placement of students in 'functional' schools with racial contexts other than their own. Although this policy has been implemented for a number of years in this TEP, the meaning of the embedded term, school 'functionality', has not been examined. The next section discusses the crossover policy and its rationale.

### **The Crossover Policy and Students' Placements in 'Functional' Schools**

In the programme in which this study was based, TP placements are administered by two TP co-ordinators; one places first- to third-year students, and the other places final-year students. The procedures followed in these placements vary; final-year students choose the schools in which they wish to be placed, whereas first- to third-year students are placed by the TP co-ordinator in 'functional' schools, in accordance with the crossover policy. Nonetheless, the latter are given a list of five 'functional' schools from which to choose their placement. The meaning, however, of 'functional' is never explained to the students when these placements are administered.

The term *crossover* originated from two premises. The first was that all the students had to cross over to schools with different racial backgrounds other than their own so that they would be exposed to diverse teaching contexts and acquire the skills of dealing with learners from diverse backgrounds. The rationale was that South African society, to a great extent, is still separated along racial lines, with the main racial groups being Africans, Whites, Coloureds (people of 'mixed race') and Indians. Public schools, in which students are placed for TP, are, to a certain extent, still racially segregated. This despite the influx of Black students to racially different schools contexts. As a result, putting diversity into practice remains a big challenge in the country. Therefore, 'crossing over' would

provide students with the opportunity to acquire the above-mentioned skills.

The second premise was that all the students had to be placed in 'functional' schools so that they would gain positive learning experiences and become effective teachers. The rationale was that South African society is still divided into 'haves' and 'have-nots'. Consequently, students who practise teaching in impoverished schools may not have the opportunity to gain positive experiences due to factors such as poor infrastructure and lack of resources in these schools. The danger with this rationale is that it seems to assume that impoverished schools cannot be considered 'functional'. While the premises and rationale of the crossover policy are clear, the definition or what makes a school 'functional' remains unclear.

Attempts have been made to provide a detailed definition of 'good' or 'functional' TP placements. For example, in their study, LaBoskey and Richert (2002: 8) defined a 'good' TP placement that they claimed provides students with a 'generally positive and productive learning experience'. They categorised it as one where students have multiple opportunities to:

- (i) recognise the principles in action, that is, teachers modelling teaching behaviours and practices
- (ii) reflect (in and on action, that is during and after action)
- (iii) enact teaching principles
- (iv) embrace teaching principles to guide future teaching.

They further found that 'better' placements in which most student learning occurred were in contexts where 'a composite (or blending) of the principles (i-iv) above was present' (p.27). Safety and supervisor support were other good features that emerged in the conversations with student teachers. It would be safe to add that high quality human- and material resources, as well as excellent physical infrastructure, also contribute to making school contexts 'good' for TP placements. This comprehensive definition can contribute immensely to facilitating the implementation of effective TP placements and to the students' growth and development.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study was informed by situated learning theory (Lave and Wenger 1991). This theory describes learning as a situated activity and

process in which people learn by doing and participating in a community within which learning takes place. This way they acquire requisite knowledge, skills and attitudes that qualify them as members of that community. Initially, the learner participates as a peripheral member, gradually gaining and being accorded legitimacy by the more knowledgeable and skilled members who are positioned at the centre of the community of practice.

Situated learning is conceptually linked with Vygotsky's (1987) social constructivist theory which emphasises the social nature of learning (Dewhurst and McMurtry 2012; Kasperbauer and Roberts 2007). Vygotsky (1987) suggested that professional learning and development do not occur in isolation but that they evolve through participation in social practice (TP placements). Constructivism involves significant others helping the learner to perform actions directed towards outcomes which are meaningful to the learner. In short, there is a relationship between learning and the social situation in which it occurs. Borko and Putnam (1996: 677 in Cuenca 2011) state it succinctly when they observe that 'In acquiring experiential knowledge, learning to teach becomes contextualised and embedded in the practice from which it arose'. In other words, how a student acquires teaching knowledge and skills is inextricably linked to the context in which these were learnt. For this reason, Dewhurst and McMurtry (2012: 159) argue that 'the Vygotskian perspective on learning and development offers a comprehensive paradigm for teacher education'.

Generally, student teachers occupy a marginal position in their practice schools, with little status (Dewhurst and McMurtry 2012). This peripheral positioning is worsened in cases where a student has to struggle for recognition and to fit in, and when the social context is alien and different. This study situates TP placements as a learning process that is not neutral or apolitical, but that which may be characterised by contradictions, paradoxes and dilemmas, the latter which may impact on the growth and development of culturally diverse student teachers in several significant ways.

### Literature Review

This section presents pertinent literature on the types and effects of teaching-practice place-

ment contexts. In existing literature on pre-service teacher education, it is evident that pre-service teachers rank teaching practice or field experience as the most influential component of their preparation (Goodlad 1990; HM Inspectors of Education 2005; Hollins and Guzman 2005 in Ronfeldt 2010). However, Boyd et al. (2009) claim that even though teacher-education programmes select and manage teaching-practice placements effectively, they do not examine the types of school in which they place student teachers. Although they raise this issue; they do not investigate it. Darling-Hammond and Hammerness (2005) reiterate the same view, that the contexts from which student teachers acquire a range of experiences remain unexamined.

Ronfeldt (2010) supports this argument, adding that instead of focusing on the types of school in which student teachers are placed to learn to teach, as in the current study, existing studies generally centre on the changes in the student teachers' attitudes, perceptions and beliefs. He argues that

*[I]t is also worth knowing whether different kinds of field placement schools make better or worse sites for teacher learning ... Yet, relatively few studies examine the type of schools in which we should place student teachers to learn to teach, despite this being a practical question faced by field experience co-ordinators and program directors regularly (p.4).*

To pursue this matter, Ronfeldt (2010) investigates the relationship between placement-school characteristics and teacher effectiveness and retention. He distinguishes between easier-to-staff schools, which are better-functioning schools with strong leadership and support for developing professional growth, and difficult-to-staff schools which he describes as poorly functioning, under-served and often challenging settings in which teachers may feel unsupported. It appears that 'support' is at the heart of field-placement contexts. This fact is reiterated by the Institute of Education (2006-2007) which posits that 'trainees are learning their professional skills and need supported practical teaching placements throughout their training' (p.3). Ronfeldt's (2010) study found that learning to teach in easier-to-staff placement schools has positive effects on teacher retention and student achievement for teachers, even if they are subsequently placed at difficult-to-staff schools. However, he acknowledges the oppos-

ing view that field placements of students in easier-to-staff schools can leave them unprepared for the challenges of working in difficult-to-staff schools.

Unlike Ronfeldt (2010) who perceives easy-to-staff schools as promoting retention of teachers, Neal (2011) believes that in order to reduce the turnover of newly appointed teachers, students should spend more time in the same schools in order for them to be able to decide on the type of school context in which they would like to work. He reports on a study that teamed students with school teachers. In this placement context, students got the opportunity to work side-by-side with teachers and learners on a weekly basis. The result was that students got a feel of the schools, which helped them to decide if they could or could not work in those schools in the future.

The importance of placing students in multicultural contexts is raised in some of the literature. The idea behind such placements is to prepare teachers to meet the ever-changing social demands of the teaching profession. In South Africa, the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications (MRTEQ) framework (DHET 2011) stipulates that teacher-education institutions should expose students to the 'concrete experiences of the varied and contrasting contexts of schooling in South Africa' (p.15), thereby equipping them with knowledge and skills to function in diverse South African schools. Similarly, the Council on Higher Education (CHE) (2006) also emphasises the need for student teachers to develop professional competence in a diverse range of authentic South African school experiences. Ronfeldt's (2010: 4) argument for these placements is that,

*[N]ew teachers, who are typically White and often from non-urban backgrounds, will benefit from guided immersion experiences with students from different backgrounds during professional preparation, especially since many of these teachers will eventually work in urban schools and with diverse student populations.*

Nevertheless, views on the impact of these placements vary. For instance, in some studies, development of a *positive* attitude among pre-service teachers immersed in those contexts is reported (Athanasé and Martin 2006; Downey and Cobbs 2007). Hollins and Guzman (2005: 512) support this view, claiming that students placed in field settings with diverse students

'acquire more complex understandings and awareness of cultural and experiential differences than do their peers placed in suburban settings', a fact further supported by Gurin (2002). On the contrary, other studies report that placements of students in these sites can present challenges for them to learn to teach (Buehler et al. 2009). Goodlad (1990: 61) seems to disagree with the latter view, pointing out that 'fieldwork in clinical sites where family backgrounds and educational resources almost ensure success are programs that disadvantage future teachers and short change society', as they do not match the realities of diverse school contexts. Hence, like Ronfeldt (2010), Goodlad calls for the placement of students in both affluent and impoverished schools so that they can be exposed to both contexts and learn to deal with learners from diverse backgrounds. Sadly, in South Africa, the Department of Education (2005: 68 in Robinson and Zinn 2007) notes that White student teachers are generally not known for having a keen interest in teaching in 'Black schools'.

Cochran-Smith and Fries (2005: 48) call for, among other things, 'questions to be posed about ... the conditions that are needed to ensure effective teachers'. In a similar vein, Zeichner (2010) challenges teacher educators to think deeply about placement sites that are conducive for student teachers. Likewise, Wideen et al. (1998) advocate attention to conditions and contexts that are appropriate for students to learn to teach. Due to the fact that little is known about the effect of context on the outcomes of teacher quality and student learning, Cochran-Smith and Fries (2005) suggest a closer look at the prospects of matching student teachers with placement sites. Reiterating the point, Bozella (2008: 11) contends that 'matching student teachers with clinical placement-sites is a salient issue for investigation'.

It would appear that teaching-practice placements of students in certain contexts influence their values and belief systems. For instance, Doody and Connor (2012) report on a study that involved a student's reflection on a teaching-practice experience in an inclusive school setting. They report that the student found this placement 'worthwhile, enlightening, rewarding and educational' (p.117), as well as 'rewarding and beneficial' (p.116) to his growth, development, and attitudes towards teaching learners with disabilities.

The literature emphasises the importance of examining the contexts in which students are placed for teaching practice. It has shown that examining field-placement contexts in which students learn to teach has benefits for them. Although this issue is seen as important, the literature highlights the dearth of research in this area.

### METHODOLOGY

This study used the qualitative paradigm (Cresswell 2007) to draw understandings of 'functional' schools from first-year Black students who participated in this study. Three conditions were set for the students. The first was that they should have been placed for at least *once* in a 'functional' school with a racially different context other than their own. The second was that prior to entering the TEP or any tertiary institution, students should have obtained prior education in an only Black school(s). The third was that prior to entering the TEP, they should never have lived, worked, or become intimately involved with people from other racial groups. The last two conditions were meant to control students' prior exposure and interactions with other racial groups as these could have created familiarity with the school contexts in which they were placed. Consideration was given to the fact that there was no way of controlling interactions between these students and their counterparts from different racial groups in the TEP.

The rationale for selecting only Black students with these characteristics was that, due to the apartheid system, they had received schooling in environments completely alien to those of the other three racial groups. Furthermore, unlike the other three groups which, to a great extent were bound by factors such as language (English and Afrikaans) and Western culture, Black students' African language and culture set them apart from these groups. Hence, being placed in 'functional' school contexts with different racial groups would probably present them with different understanding and unfamiliar and unique experiences with profound impact on them.

Overall, 54 names were drawn from the lists of first-year students. The students were informed about the study and their participation was requested. They were also requested to in-

dicate the number of times they had been placed in crossover 'functional' schools. Out of the 54 students, 47 met the criterion. Participants were split into six focus groups, with focus-group sizes ranging from seven to nine students. Reid et al. (2005) propose a focus-group sample size of 15. In-depth semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. The duration of the interviews varied between 50 and 90 minutes. In order to gather as much data as possible from the group, each participant was allowed at least two to three opportunities to contribute to the interviews. Where there were variations in the students' responses, the researcher probed with further questions to determine the source(s) of the variations until she was satisfied with the truthfulness and accuracy of the responses.

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview transcripts were later analysed, using a system of open, axial and selective coding (Harry et al. 2005) and the highlighting approach (Cohen et al. 2007) in order to uncover the thematic aspects. Phrases and sentences which stood out in the text were colour-coded, classified, and condensed into two themes, as shown in the results below. After data analysis, three students were asked to verify the accuracy and authenticity of facts by reading analysed data and the first draft of the manuscript.

Participants were informed of the confidentiality of information gathered. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the faculty from which the research participants were drawn. Pseudonyms were used in order to ensure the anonymity of the participants.

### RESULTS

It appeared, as discerned from students' statements, that they were unsure of the meaning of 'functional' schools. It also became apparent that the perceived impact of their placements in these schools was shaped by the personal and subjective meanings that the students attached to 'functional' schools; as discussed in the analysis below. The two emergent themes deriving from the data analysis were:

- ♦ Ambiguity and obscurity of the terminology of 'functionality'
- ♦ Perceived learning experiences based on assumptions about 'functional' schools.



### **Ambiguity and Obscurity of the Terminology of 'Functionality'**

Evidently, and as shown earlier, defining schools as 'functional' originated from the official teacher-education policy frameworks of the DoE and the DHET. Apparently the students in this study struggled to come up with a clear-cut and operational definition of 'functional' schools. During the interviews, over half of them expressed concerns about the 'dysfunctional' state of the 'functional' schools in which they were placed, citing 'shootings that happened every day; lack of fencing around the schools and poor discipline among learners'. These conditions led Fundi to ask this question:

*Can XXX [TP Co-ordinator] define the words 'functional' and 'dysfunctional' and whether he has researched these schools? I am asking because some of these schools have not been checked in terms of safety. For instance, at XXX [Coloured] High School, student teachers experience violence every day from learners, yet it is classified as a functional school?*

The issue of race was raised when about two-thirds of the students expressed being constrained by the limited number of Black 'functional' schools in the list from which they had to select placements. This constraint, they claimed, limited their opportunity to learn optimally from teaching practice, as articulated by Tiyo in the following excerpt:

*We have to select a school from a list of five functional schools and out of those five; four are White or Coloured schools and there is one Black township school. So you have no choice but to go there as that one Black school is far from your home, whatever XXX [TP Co-ordinator] means by functional. Then we miss out on the opportunity to be nurtured by teachers whom we can relate to culturally and otherwise.*

The situational learning theory suggests an intricate relationship between learning and the social context in which it occurs, a fact confirmed by Vygotsky's (1987) social constructivist theory. The above excerpt suggests that Black students believe they could have learnt better in environments with teachers and learners with whom they shared the same culture. It appeared that they felt deprived of this opportunity by the implied lack of 'functional' Black schools. Clearly, they might not have regarded this situa-

tion favourably as it apparently disempowered them by limiting their choices.

Besides these discrepancies, a large proportion of students sounded dissatisfied with the fact that the crossover policy did not seem to be implemented equitably with all students. They contended that this bias obscured the meaning and the good intentions of the policy. For instance, Siyamthanda voiced his dissatisfaction thus:

*I have been in crossover schools twice now and I have no problem, but I question why White, Coloured and Indian students are not placed in our [African] township schools. Are our township schools not functional for them?*

Thus, it can be seen above that the ambiguity of the terminology used in reference to 'functional' schools might have created the attitude of 'them' versus 'us' among students. Further, this student's utterance presents questions for debate about the importance of acquiring knowledge about different school contexts and learners' backgrounds. Teaching and learning do not occur in a vacuum but among people and therefore have to be contextualised. However, if a section of student teachers is not exposed to diverse backgrounds, as shown in the excerpt above, and assuming it is correct, there are questions about how and where these students will acquire these skills. Since the rationale behind placements in 'functional' schools lies in a perceived need to expose students to best teaching experiences and diversity, the observations by first-year Black students might point to a failure of this TEP to fulfil its mandate.

### **Perceived Learning Experiences Based on Assumptions about 'Functional' Schools**

The students' statements above indicate a level of confusion about the meaning of 'functional' schools. However, in this section, the students' utterances appeared to imply that they understood the concept of school 'functionality' in terms of race, as reflected by their references to 'White' and 'Coloured' when referring to 'functional' schools.

More than one-quarter of the students mentioned that placements in 'functional' schools provided them with enabling and supportive learning environments which facilitated their growth and development. In such teaching environments, it is possible for students to feel

legitimised as members of the teaching community and to quickly progress to the centre of the community. Students articulated a wealth of positive teaching experiences which they associated with practising in 'functional' schools, as shown in Yoliswa's utterance below:

*I have been in White and Coloured schools for the past three years and I have learnt good admin techniques. These schools provide a positive working environment as they are well equipped with resources (computers, Internet and printers). On top of that we get free lunch!*

About one-third of the students agreed that teachers in 'functional' schools provided them with high-quality support, a fact which is emphasised in the constructivist theory about the importance of the role of the significant or knowledgeable others in providing learners with meaningful learning. Nandipha added that at the boys' high school where she taught,

*Teachers at XXX [White] school were always willing to help in the midst of their busy schedules. They were honest and open to tell you if they couldn't help you because they were busy. They were nice, accommodating and receptive to the students.*

Other advantages of practising in 'functional' schools, as identified by slightly more than one-third of students, was that the schools involved students in all school activities. Evidently, such involvement empowers students as, according to the situated learning theory, people 'learn by doing'. Involvement of students probably eliminates the distance and boundaries between the periphery and centre of the community of practice, and facilitates students' progression to the centre. Puo elaborated thus:

*They [teachers] at XXX [White] school involved us in all the school activities, including extramural activities. By so doing they put [together] all the pieces of the puzzle of becoming a good teacher in crafty ways as they exposed us to both formal and informal curriculum.*

Nonetheless, about a quarter of other students perceived involvement in extramural activities as an inconvenience. In a situation where students fail to get involved in the activities of the schools in which they are placed, they are likely to remain on the periphery and may find it difficult to shift from that position. This group of students expressed frustration with this involvement, claiming that it meant they had to come to school early and leave late, creating

public transport problems for them as buses stopped running early. Sandile's concern was:

*Doing teaching practice at XXX [Coloured] school means having an 8am to 4pm working day. As a result I don't have time to prepare for the next day as I get home very late.*

About three-quarters of the students mentioned lack of support by school principals, heads of departments, teachers and students in some of the 'functional' schools. They cited the lack of a sense of belonging in those environments and language barriers. To describe his experience, Tom articulated these words:

*At XXX [White] school we felt isolated. Teachers didn't have time as they minded their own business. They didn't talk to us or greet us. We didn't mingle with them during breaks and they were not there to help us. Language was a huge barrier and it kept us even further apart because in these schools they don't speak XXX [African] language.*

Clearly, being among learners and teachers who were less like them in terms of factors such as race, language and culture, Black students might have faced challenges with identifying with the TP communities (teachers, learners, etc.) within those environments. They may have found this situation unsettling and disorienting, resulting in a feeling of alienation and marginalisation. These situations support the assertions of Buehler et al. (2009) and Hill et al. (2007) about multicultural school placements resulting in challenging learning experiences for student teachers. The spaces in which these students found themselves are in sharp contrast with Vygotsky's (1987) suggestion that professional learning and development evolve through participation in social practice. This implies that student teachers and qualified and experienced teachers should find spaces to mingle and interact.

The students' accounts above are testimony that their experiences of being placed in 'functional' schools varied according to their personal and subjective judgements of the school environments in which they were placed. They also raise implications for how placements should take the affective aspect into consideration.

## DISCUSSION

The statements made by students are an indication that their placements in 'functional' schools provided them with mixed learning ex-

periences, and growth and developmental opportunities. On the one hand, based on their utterances, one might argue that some students found placements in these schools meaningful and contributing greatly to their progression from the periphery to the centre of the community of TP (Lave and Wenger 1991), thus providing them with opportunities to grow and develop as effective teachers. This is commensurate with the principles of the situated learning theory which emphasise the intricate relationship between learning and the context in which it occurs. The resulting sense of belonging might have facilitated this transition, enhancing their participation in that community. On the other hand, some students' placements in 'functional' schools might have hindered their growth and development, as discerned from the negative experiences they articulated.

Arguably, as shown earlier in the literature review, placement of students in school environments that are different from their own is desirable. Therefore, placement of Black students, some of who may have come from backgrounds of poverty, in 'functional' schools is desirable as it might help them to experience teaching in well-resourced school contexts. Nonetheless, desirability does not necessarily translate to 'functionality'. Thus, while the school contexts may have been well-resourced, they may not necessarily have been 'functional' for the students or contributed to their development. That is why it is important to come up with a clear definition of 'functional', lest it be confused with other terms that have no relevance to it.

Judging by their statements, some students found the schools that the TP co-ordinator perceived as 'functional'; dysfunctional and disempowering. A 'functional' school should be conceived as one in which social interaction and support by knowledgeable others is possible, as was highlighted in Ronfeldt's (2010) easy-to-staff school contexts. Based on the students' utterances, it would be difficult to regard as 'functional' those schools in which teachers isolated and marginalised student teachers. Hence, one can safely conclude that the ideal of providing students with positive experiences that would have contributed to their growth and development were not attained in some of the 'functional' schools in this study.

The students' implied association of 'functional' schools with race presents a problem; as

it may suggest that being placed in White and Coloured schools has more benefits than being placed in Black schools. Ronfeldt (2010) argues convincingly that there are well-functioning and poorly-functioning schools among both underserved and privileged student populations. Therefore, it is unrealistic to assume that it is only White and Coloured schools that are 'functional', as it is possible that there are also Black 'functional' schools. Students might have been brainwashed and misled to believe that 'functional' schools exist only among these racial communities and not in Black environments. One of the students asked a question about non-placement of students from other racial groups in Black schools. This non-placement might signal discrimination in the manner in which students' placements are handled. As was mentioned in the literature, the placement of students in schools with cultures that are different from their own is healthy for their growth and development as teachers. Skewed assumptions about the meaning of school 'functionality' demand serious and urgent attention, as they might potentially pollute the minds of the students in this TEP instead of allowing them to grow as future teachers in a democratic South Africa.

This discussion has highlighted problems associated with the lack of a clear definition of the term 'functional'. It has also raised questions about issues of equity, race and discrimination embedded in the definition of the term 'functional'.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR TP PLACEMENTS

This section presents only a summary as some implications of this study have already been mentioned in the analysis of the results. The results of this study have indicated that the concept of 'functional' is vague and lacks a shared understanding by teacher education stakeholders, including the TP co-ordinator concerned and student teachers. To a large extent, this confusion is caused by the loose manner in which this concept is used in teacher-education policy frameworks, as shown in the literature review. TP co-ordinators who subscribe to the use of this concept in order to distinguish between schools find themselves caught up in the trap of having to use their discretion to define it, the result of which is misinterpretation and misrepresentation, as can be attested to in this study.



Obviously, when this situation arises, the good intentions of placement of students in 'functional' schools become eroded. Hence, there is a need to develop a clear and shared understanding of this concept and its rationale so that all teacher-education stakeholders 'speak the same language'.

TP placement should be perceived as an opportunity for drawing students towards the centre of the community of practice. By so doing, students may be exposed to best TP examples and develop effectively as teachers. As it currently stands, placement of Black students in 'functional' schools is discouraging due to the distorted meanings they attach to this concept. Nonetheless, they cannot be blamed for this distortion as the association of this concept with race and discrimination could be emanating from the 'crossing over of students to racially different school contexts' that students have to make, which itself does not seem to be applied equitably. Thus, it is safe to suggest that the terms 'functional' and 'crossover' should be divorced; as marrying them seems to create false and unrealistic assumptions about schools.

### CONCLUSION

Dewhurst and McMurtry contend that 'growth and development occurs in a varied, subtle, indeterminate and often unpredictable social situation. Whilst the desired outcome of a placement is professional growth and development, the experience is personal and subjective'. These statements are relevant to the findings of this study as students, based on their subjective experiences and the personal meanings attached to 'functional' schools, found placements either positive and empowering, or negative and disempowering. More importantly, these findings highlight the challenges that the unclear use of terminology can present to a community of practice, as seen in this study, and the importance of formulating policies using clear and shared concepts that everybody can understand. Hence, there is a need to revisit and define 'functional' in a meaningful way that the stakeholders will understand and implement effectively.

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