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## **THE FOREST IN MY HAND: STUDENT TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES OF ENGAGING IN AN EDUCATIONAL EXCURSION**

### **Abstract:**

This paper sheds light on the value of a three-day excursion for South African student teachers in their first year of study. The rationale for the excursion should be considered from two perspectives: the unfortunate history of the country that divided people along racial lines, and the poor quality of teaching and learning that characterizes many South African school classrooms. This context dictates innovative interventions in pre-service teacher education, in order to ensure that South Africa has teachers who are inclusive and who enhance social justice on the one hand, and on the other hand who are well educated in making use of learner-centred and inquiry learning approaches. South Africa is a young democracy, and the legacy of the apartheid regime is still seen in a society that is not completely integrated. The North-West University (NWU) has three campuses, and whereas the Mafikeng Campus hosts predominantly Black students, the Potchefstroom Campus again has mainly White students. When student teachers board the buses to take them to the venue where the excursion is held, they also enter a different epistemological learning space, where they will reflect on their journeys of becoming teachers in socially diverse groups. While navigating the learning space as *homo ludens* (the playing human), engaging in a pedagogy of play, student teachers are confronted with their own biases and naïve understandings of teaching and the profession. The excursion also creates the opportunity for potential conflict and tension, which Veresov refers to as “dramatical collisions”. Such social discomfort or disequilibrium acts as a good catalyst in the journey of becoming truly inclusive practitioners. However, the excursion, in contrast to a ‘real’ classroom, provides a low-risk setting (laboratory) for such learning. The pedagogy of play that characterizes the excursion, furthermore provides the student-teachers with an alternative approach to the “chalk-and-talk”, transmission-mode teaching and learning approaches, which a large percentage of them experienced when they themselves were school learners. In this paper, the authors disseminate findings that emerged from a qualitative inquiry into the experiences of almost 1700 NWU student-teachers who participated in the 2019 excursions. Data were collected by means of questionnaires, focus group interviews, and studying artefacts.

### **Keywords:**

Pre-service teacher education; excursions; pedagogy of play; teacher as an inclusive practitioner

**JEL Classification:** I23, I24