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**SHIFTING UNDERSTANDINGS: THE PROFESSIONAL
DEVELOPMENT OF STUDENT TEACHERS DOING THEIR
PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE IN TWO RURAL SCHOOLS IN
KWAZULU-NATAL, SOUTH AFRICA**

Abstract:

This study locates itself within the confines of qualitative research and draws on an interpretivist paradigm. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the student teachers' experiences when placed in a rural school to perform their Professional Practicum as part of their professional development. The placement of students at rural schools for their professional practicum was part of the Rural Teacher Education Project (RTEP). This project was a pilot project undertaken by a higher education institution in two schools in the rural district of Vulindlela in the KwaZulu-Natal province in South Africa. The purpose of the project was to develop a partnership between the higher education institution and the rural schools to assist students in their professional development as teachers.

In order to understand their lived experiences, we used drawings, individual interviews and focus group discussions. The data was analysed using Tesch's open coding to identify themes.

The findings indicate that a myriad of lived experiences inform the student teachers' understanding of the role of the teacher; that they draw on these to envisage their role as being a teacher in a rural school; that their experiences of teaching in a rural school. This deepened their understanding of teacher professionalism, the lives of learners, classroom realities, mentoring and the management and organisation of school and classroom; and that they learnt about their professional and personal selves.

Conclusions drawn from the themes are used to generate several recommendations to be used to improve the Professional Practicum experience of student teachers.

Keywords:

Professional practicum; Professional development; Teaching practice; Rural education