

# Cooperative Learning as an Innovative Strategy in the Teaching of Life Orientation Education: Experiences of PGCE Pre-service Students

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## Abstract

This article explores cooperative learning as an innovative teaching strategy to prepare Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) pre-service students in terms of their teaching skills and content knowledge in Life Orientation (LO) Education. The LO Education curriculum is challenging as it focuses on the holistic development (physical, social, personal, intellectual, emotional and spiritual) of a learner. Working within a qualitative approach, this paper presents a case-study design involving ten purposively selected LO final year PGCE pre-service students as respondents. Data was generated using recorded semi-structured focus group discussions and reflective journals. Data analysis using a phenomenological model revealed problems in relation to ineffective promotion of positive interdependence, lack of effective and creative strategies for group activities, lack of knowledge of reflective practice and lack of confidence in teaching sensitive topics in the LO curriculum.

**Keywords:** cooperative learning, PGCE students, Life Orientation teacher, reflective journals

## Introduction and Background

Every country needs teachers with specialised knowledge, skills, values and research capabilities on which they can draw in the task of developing competent and confident individuals empowered to participate as active

responsive citizens. In *Action Plan to 2014: Towards the Realisation of Schooling 2025* (Department of Basic Education 2010), Goal 16 is ‘Improve professionalism, teaching skills, subject knowledge and computer literacy of teachers throughout their entire careers’. This complements the responsibility that a teacher has to advance education and develop learners as individuals, as construed in the South African Council for Educators Code of Professional Ethics.

To achieve this objective Life Orientation (LO) was introduced as a compulsory subject for grades R–12 as part of the restructuring of the South African education system after 1994, and also as part of the curriculum package for pre-service students registered for the one-year Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) qualification in a Higher Education Institution (HEI). The prerequisites for registration in PGCE LO specialisation in the university where the study was conducted are Sociology and Psychology (level 2) as majors in the Bachelor’s degree that students have already acquired. Other subjects which provide an added theoretical advantage in understanding the interdisciplinary nature of LO education are Anthropology, Theology, Political Science, Criminal Law and Philosophy. In the 19 years during which the new curriculum has been now in operation it has been observed that PGCE students registered for LO encounter a number of problems, which include reduced self-esteem and self-confidence, complexity of experiences in study activities, and difficulty in adapting to new roles and relationships, especially during teaching practice (TP) (Bertram, Mthiyane & Mukeredzi 2013). This runs counter to the aims of the one-year (full-time) PGCE programme which is to equip pre-service teachers as good professionals who take the interest of learners to heart.

A particular challenge presented by the LO curriculum is that its focus goes beyond scholastic and academic achievement to include the holistic development and well-being (physical, social, psychological, emotional, spiritual, political and economic) of the learners (Magano 2011; Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana 2010; Prinsloo 2007; DoE 2000, 2002, 2006, 2011). During teaching practice for pre-service PGCE full-time students, which comprises a ten-week module working in two different schools, students are expected to demonstrate academic and professional abilities and utilisation of a range of teaching strategies relevant to different contexts (Robinson 2003). Pre-service teachers often find it a daunting transition to go

from HE academic programmes to teaching practice with practical application in an actual classroom (Frick, Carl & Beets 2010).

Following the recommendations made by Frick, Carl & Beets (2010), this study explored the experiences of pre-service LO teachers during the TP session and their use of cooperative learning as a teaching strategy. The study was underpinned by the following critical questions:

- What are the experiences of the LO pre-service teachers in relation to cooperative learning as a teaching strategy?
- How do pre-service teachers put cooperative learning into effect during their TP?

## **Literature**

The pivotal task for LO teachers is to address the outcomes specified the LO curriculum. It has been noted by a number of authors (Helleve, Flisher, Onya Mukoma & Klepp 2011; Magano 2011; Theron 2008; Prinsloo 2007; Harden & Crosby 2000) that the LO teacher is expected to serve as role model, mentor, counsellor, pastoral carer, friend, parent, social worker and psychologist, *and* be creative and sensitive towards his or her learners.

Furthermore, good teaching and learning is not just about the curriculum or academic matters, nor is it confined to classroom; it is about stimulating young minds to think, through teacher–learner and learner–learner communication. Various authors (Wilken 2008; Morrow 2007; O’Brien 2004; Robinson 2003; Harden & Crosby 2000) have commented that good teaching should involve reflective experience – where the teacher is more than just expert or knowledgeable in his or her field, but is also capable of assisting learners to interpret knowledge through a range of interactive educational strategies.

The LO curriculum recognises that learning experience and instructional setting go beyond the traditional confines of the classroom. An informal setting has benefits for both teachers and learners since it presents learners with opportunities to solve real-life problems through play, creative art, and interaction with peers and adults, drawing on the resources of language and culture. Similarly, the physical education (PE) aspect of the LO

curriculum helps to promote the social, physical, psychosocial and emotional development of the individual.

## **Learning through Interactive Practices**

The human/personal development aspect of LO reminds us on the one hand that each person is unique and on the other that no one exists in isolation. This makes it all the more appropriate, then, to foreground the value of cooperative and interactive modes of learning in the teaching of this subject and to give them priority in supporting pre-service teachers who are faced with the potentially daunting expectations of the LO curriculum and who are trying to get acquainted with their learners in the short space of time available to them in the TP session.

Cooperative, participatory learning is an active and reflective form of learning, centred on the learner, with the teacher as facilitator: small, heterogeneous groups of students participate in a collective task designed by the teacher in such a way that the students mutually maximise their learning (Vaughan 2002; van Wyk 2012). It is a mode of teaching in which the teacher needs to be well informed about the topic content and has a critical responsibility for lesson planning and for clear explanation to the learners of the requisite group activities, while at the same time catering for individual learning styles among the group to connect with their real-life experiences and prior learning. It is also important for the learners to have a sense of what is to be learnt, what conceptions or ideas may be changed, and why such learning or change of thinking may be desirable. As Kohonen (2003:9) remarks,

An intentional conceptual change becomes possible when the person understands the reason for it and is facilitated to plan, monitor and evaluate the change processes through motivation, support and encouragement.

Getting learners to become actively engaged and responsible for their own learning in a class community enhances creativity and innovativeness in the culture of learning. Through cooperative learning they experience the benefits

of positive interdependence and acquire a belief in the value of working collaboratively (Haller, Gallagher, Weldon & Felder 2000; Slavin 1995).

### **In the Teaching Practice Classroom**

South African society is extremely diverse, and both teachers and learners will bring to the classroom a wide range of backgrounds and life experiences. During the time of apartheid South African education served to exclude rather than to include, having little or no relevance to the culture and educational needs of the society, but in today's schools respect for diversity is critical for the daily process of learning and relationship between the students and teachers.

In the ten weeks of teaching practice, PGCE students are expected to demonstrate academic and professional abilities and ability to utilise a range of teaching strategies relevant to different contexts and stages of the teacher-learner relationship. In addition to being competent in subject content the trainee teacher has the further responsibility of creating a positive, safe environment where learners are allowed to explore, engage in discussions, construct and share new knowledge (Bertram, Mthiyane & Mukeredzi 2013; Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana 2010).

Literature on traditional classroom practices, where instruction is teacher-centred and teacher-directed, notes that this provides learners with little or no opportunity for active learning and authentic engagement with content (Adeyemi 2008; Hammann & Hendricks 2010; Kohonen 2013). A constructivist perspective, on the other hand, holds that learners can be empowered to construct meaning through interaction with others and can be encouraged to actively participate in dialogue though planned activities, and that this also represents best practice for teacher to demonstrate his or her competency or command of basic knowledge academically, pedagogically, socially and culturally (Arends 2007: 15). Extending this view, Spalding, Garcia and Braun (2010) stress the benefits of collegiality among teachers in allowing them to capitalise on each other's strengths. Similarly, Lunenberg, Korthagen and Swennen (2007: 586-587) point to the 'role model' function of the teacher as being productive of 'new learning outcomes, new kinds of learning processes and new instructional methods wanted by society'.

Embedded in the principles of the South African National Curricu-

lum Statement (NCS) and LO aims (DoE 2011) is the centrality of creative and critical thinking for both teachers and learners, where critical thinking involves development of logical reasoning and application of reflective practice and is self-empowering insofar as one sets standards to assess one's thinking skills.

Critical thinking generates sophisticated decision-making and problem-solving abilities which enable an individual to evaluate and question assumptions in different contexts such as the choices and decisions that confront learners in frequently complex career guidance element of LO (Rosenberg, Raven, Nsubuga, Mosidi, Ramsarup & Burt 2009).

## **Theoretical Considerations**

Teaching practice exposes pre-service teachers, especially those with LO as their subject specialisation, to a complex set of interdependent relationships with the schools where they are placed, with their mentors, and with the learners in classroom. Differing environments will have a differing impact for each individual trainee, and each will in turn respond differently to the environments they encounter (Darling 2007). If the trainee encounters a major disturbance, relationships and interdependencies may become hard to keep in balance; when the relationships and cycles are in balance, the system can be sustained, but troubling psychosocial issues can be barriers to effective teaching and learning.

## **Research Design and Methodology**

This qualitative study utilised a case-study approach with ten purposively selected PGCE student teachers having LO as their subject specialisation. As an HEI tutor/lecturer, I was allocated 12 students to visit in different schools for TP evaluation, of whom 10 consented to participate in the study. Eight of the schools – in which the ten participating students were placed – were in former African, Indian and Coloured townships; in a ninth school, a former white school, the two remaining two students chose not to participate. The participant sample comprised African, Indian and Coloured male and female pre-service teachers. They were all informed about the project and had

workshopped ahead of TP sessions on lesson planning and keeping a reflecting journal. Prior to the teaching practice, all participants had been exposed to a variety of teaching strategies including cooperative learning during LO lectures and tutorial sessions.

Data for the study was generated using two semi-structured, recorded 60-minute focus group discussions (FGDs) which sought to capture the perspectives of all participants. The discussions took place after the students' TP sessions had concluded. Individual reflective journals in which participant pre-service teachers reflected on their experiences prior and after the teaching of LO lessons (see Kohonen 2013) also played an important role as they provided a bridge between practical experience and theoretical conceptualisation. Participation was voluntary and flexible and all ethical issues were taken into account.

Following data collection, I used qualitative analysis in accordance with the phenomenological model proposed by Giorgi, Fischer and Murray (1975). I reviewed FGD transcripts and individual student teacher reflections and I determined categories and coded for key themes and interpretation.

#### Findings and data analysis

Data from the focus group interviews and reflection journals revealed students' experiences of using cooperative learning as a teaching strategy for LO lessons during TP, with respect to the following thematic/interpretive categories.

### **(a) Passion for Teaching and Complexity of Curriculum Content**

South African learners face many social challenges in their personal lives, in their relationships, in issues concerning their peers, in their families and in their communities (Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana 2010; Clarke 2007; Arends 2007). Where these issues are addressed in the schools is in the LO classroom, which makes the quality of the LO teaching and learning they experience in the classroom crucially important; good teaching and learning happens, as Clarke (2007) reminds us, 'when learners are thinking about their thinking', and it happens in what Taggart and Wilson (2005) refer to as 'reflective thinking/practice'.

An innovative teacher has the potential to bring about change in the lives of all learners, including those confronted by cognitive and psychological obstacles. Student teacher respondents in the study indicated awareness of this potential in comments such as the following:

*We need to protect them and care for them as if they are our own. / It kept them interested and I used real-life examples. / Grade 6, Grade7, and even Grade 10 couldn't read and write. / Some terms in LO are difficult to understand and explain... language and communication is a barrier as English is my mother tongue and theirs IsiZulu / at schools there are no books..... I had to buy books*

Essentially, they had to try to make sense of the situation and be responsive in their pedagogy – and their responses indicated that they were learning the value of self-reflection.

*I had thought LO is easy but ayi-khona [not at all] I had to do my homework / I knew my learners needed planning strategies that best suited them. / Deal with emotions of Teaching Practice.... escape frustrations of unruly learners....\_I had to show them that I am here for the reason.... wondered if I was boring, current issues?*

The trainees were experiencing at first hand the multiplicity of problems facing South African education ‘at a crossroads’, and the challenges that face them as future teachers of the LO curriculum in particular.

One specific aspect of LO that some student teachers found initially daunting was the PE element of the curriculum:

*Physical Education...I had no idea of what is done / I managed to convince students to participate [in LO PE lessons]. They felt proud of themselves..... I also felt so good as a teacher! / The lesson was very interesting. I enjoyed it myself*

This was to be expected as the pre-service teachers had not been exposed to PE methodology in their courses prior to TP. Notable in this context was an instance where teamwork and the teacher’s gender had encouraged female learners to participate and made the trainee feel like a ‘good teacher’.



**(b) Establishing Interconnection of Isolated Social Stations**

As Slavin (1995:73) puts it, ‘cooperative learning usually supplements the teacher’s instruction by giving students an opportunity to discuss information or practice skills’, but for some of the student teachers, problems of discipline in a cooperative learning setting produced escalating feelings of helplessness:

*I questioned myself as to whether I was joining the correct profession and do I want to subject myself to such abuse from learners at this age.*

Faced by lack of respect from learners, the beginner teacher may well struggle to maintain discipline, especially in group work (Clarke 2007), as respondents in the study discovered:

*My mentor... we both failed to control them / I realised that these kids don't have respect for themselves, so how can they have respect for others?*

This mention of ‘others’ highlights the pre-service teachers’ prior expectations of collaboration, collegiality and support. Some of the respondents felt isolated and abused – ‘not part of the collective’ – and even the presence of the mentor did not ameliorate the feeling of being both disrespected and disregarded. As one respondent put it, expressing doubt as to whether she was making the right career choice,

*Who am I to deal with these learners? ... at this age [and] out of control.*

Cooperative learning hinges on respect, responsibility and accountability, and the requisite interrelationships for effective group culture take time to develop. The process happens in a context that, according to Donald, Lazarus and Lolwana (2010), calls for attention, exploration, manipulation, elaboration, and imagination. For the study respondents, the learner behaviour they encountered was outside of their expectations, with learners manifesting signs of being in trouble and having ‘issues’ of behaviour where appropriate intervention needed to be established.

Remarks by various respondents suggest some of the ways in which they sought to meet the classroom problems they encountered:

*I spoke to them like adults, laid down rules of my classroom space together with them / Consider the manner in which you carry yourself out / We did not do LO when we were at school, different generation...you have to groom them; it's your responsibility as a teacher*

The respondent who spoke here of 'my classroom space' quickly remembered that in a cooperative learning setting each and every member of a group has a responsibility and is accountable, qualifying her comment with the addition, 'together with them', thus acknowledging the need to motivate learners and show that they are valued and that their opinions count. Classroom rules apply to all members of the class: as a teacher you should provide a model for behaviour and tolerance and show your expertise and confidence in your class. These novice teachers acknowledged the impact of the generation gap, the challenges in the teaching of LO that require patience, and also their responsibility as LO teachers to 'groom' appropriately.

Arends (2007: 60) notes how diversity in culture, ethnicity and race present difficult instructional challenges for teachers. Although it is necessary to acknowledge diversity in cooperative learning, for solving problems in a collective the emphasis should be on what groups create (their culture) rather than on groups in themselves. Group culture does not reside in students alone but extends to the wealth of strategies that teachers use to avoid what Arends refers to as 'discontinuity and miscommunication' between home and school, based on culture, beliefs and values.

The respondents also expressed strong feelings about what they considered realistic and what they considered unrealistic in LO teaching expectations. The chief complaint in this regard was the gap between what the training institution expected of group work and the reality they encountered in the schools. The barriers were contextual: for example, in nearly all classes, especially LO classes, the respondents encountered threatening contextual factors: 72 learners, or 86, or 93 in a single class. Even so, 'no matter what the circumstances are, the job of the teacher is to teach' (Morrow 2007:4). Overcoming challenges on such a scale meant drawing from a variety of resources to keep learners motivated and interested in an LO lesson:

*incorporate many resources / recognition of hard work, understanding, [being] motivational / much effort in preparing this lesson.../ But planning is important. Plan ahead guidelines / and read! read!*

One of the respondents commented that LO had given her a platform and foundation to become an excellent, innovative teacher through practice and reflecting on her practice, and mentioned the value of her reflective journal: ‘*I did not know what reflections were. I just reported what happened on that day*’. This is one of the skills that all teachers need to cultivate in order to improve their practices and widen their range of variety of teaching strategies, and also to inculcate reflectiveness in their learners.

Emotive topics such as death and mourning require sensitivity on the part of LO teacher, especially in cooperative learning settings, and forward planning should make provision for counsellors, educational psychologists and social workers to be on standby for possible referrals should there be a crisis. Magano (2011) comments that HEIs should align the training they offer to produce what she refers to as ‘a new kind’ of a teacher who will meet the demands of a the 21st century. The respondents largely concurred, in their critique of the disjuncture between what is taught in HEIs and what they are faced with in schools when they go for teaching practice.

### **(c) Cooperative Learning and Critical Thinking**

Thinking critically means asking questions instead of accepting facts at face value; it means working creatively with knowledge and exercising control of the learning material. Respondents felt that although they initially found it difficult to conduct cooperative learning activities, by the end of the TP session things had changed:

*I know some students who were affected and infected by HIV and AIDS .... Group work, role plays, watching the video, drawings, all made them to open up .... [bringing in] .real life experiences ... [they found] their ideas valued and self- esteem enhanced.*

In one instance, testimony from a learner who was a trained caregiver in a

community organisation for people affected by HIV/AIDS proved to be informative for the whole class and consequently changed attitudes.

Although putting cooperative learning into practice in PGCE LO classes showed positive results for the trainee teachers, challenges remained in relation mainly to management of discipline in schools and the status given to LO as a subject.

Despite the many educational and social problems faced by learners, cooperative learning methods are gaining popularity and many studies indicate that they heighten achievement and self-concept for learners, and quality of interpersonal relationship and regard for others for student teachers. Some responses from study participants indicated that support for cooperative learning as a strategy stemmed in some cases from prior experience:

*abuse was just like normal to some students... so they could understand or relate and identify with some ideas shared / I felt very bad to say goodbyes*

As previously mentioned, established teachers very often lack confidence in teaching critical issues and pass them off to novice teachers to grapple with., But the fact of the matter is that every teacher must commit to being a lifelong learner, and to knowing and understanding the subject content. In particular, accountability and competence define someone as an effective life skills teacher. Collaborative learning requires ongoing renewal of approaches, development of trust and recognition of the uniqueness of each individual. A declaration by one of the respondent was expressive of this kind of commitment:

*I will use this approach... I had changed, I fell in love again with teaching...where I 'felt alone', 'no support', 'ill-disciplined learners' had to happen for me to be strong and follow my passion.*

Student teachers confirmed that it was not easy to control discipline because some of the topics led to learners becoming 'too excited' and 'out of hand'. The emphasis was on getting learners to participate in their roles and activities planned for them.

## **Conclusions and Suggestions**

The study revealed a multitude of challenges facing student teachers of LO in their teaching practice sessions, but also potential steps to meet some of these challenges. Using cooperative learning was an unfamiliar experience for the respondents, and their participation in this project and the sharing of their teaching practice experiences revealed a need for individual and collective support. Among the points that emerged was their realisation that teaching LO is by no means as easy as it may have seemed, and that many of the LO topics needed to be studied in depth because learners '*want to learn and they participate*'; there was also a realisation that this requires thorough planning, good student–teacher and learner–learner relationships, and also more specific attention to the Physical Education aspect of LO. The respondents also found it interesting to notice the change in academic and social behaviour of the learners as the pre-service teachers themselves gained increasing confidence in their practice and began to acquire the classroom management skills that are crucial for good mutual interaction between teacher and learners. They also came to realise that LO benefits from working in small groups.

One of the suggestions made by the respondents was that the HEI should network with the schools to support teachers and PGCE students jointly in the students' first year of practice. The particular suggestion was that the teachers should be encouraged to collaborate by through forums to be held at the HEI, during school holidays, in which HEI lecturers dealing with LO would be briefed on practical realities of LO activities and programmes in the schools that could be taken into account in the development of corresponding HEI programmes and courses. This idea was enthusiastically supported by the respondents as a potential structure to build confidence and to integrate PGCE students in a community of practice. An alternative suggested forum would include participation of learners and LO teachers from neighbouring schools.

Respondents also suggested planned activities, workshops, and community engagement that would enhance critical understanding of the existence and development of the self-in-society. Teachers learn best through interaction with other teachers, and, with experts acting as 'critical friends' in professional learning communities, an environment of mutual trust may be possible.

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