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Student Teachers' Experiences of the Portfolio of Evidence as a Tool for Assessing Work-Integrated Learning during Pre-service Teacher Training at a South African University

Godfrey Mutesasira[1*], **Joseph Baidoo**[2]
[1]Department of Humanities and Creative Arts, iYunivesithi Walter Sisulu, South Africa
Email: gmutesasira@wsu.ac.za
[2] Department of Mathematics, Science, and Technology Education, iYunivesithi Walter Sisulu, South Africa
Email: jbaidoo@wsu.ac.za

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Abstract

Effective teacher education requires robust tools to bridge theory and practice. The Portfolio of Evidence (PoE) is widely used in Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) to assess pre-service teachers, yet empirical research on student teachers' lived experiences with the PoE remains limited, particularly in resource-constrained contexts such as South Africa. This hermeneutic-phenomenological study explored student teachers' experiences of the PoE as a WIL assessment tool, focusing on its impact on professional development and reflective practice. In-depth interviews and reflective journals were analysed thematically with seventeen final-year student teachers from a South African university, guided by Humanistic Theory. Four interconnected themes emerged: the PoE as a catalyst for professional identity formation through self-reflection and self-efficacy; emotionally intelligent pedagogy that enhances inclusive classroom connections; adaptive teaching through technology integration to address diverse learner needs; and assessment transparency that fosters trust and accountability. Findings advance Humanistic and Experiential Learning Theory by mapping Kolb's cycle onto PoE processes. Practical recommendations include embedding emotional intelligence training into teacher education, strengthening mentor support for reflective dialogue, and leveraging technology to promote equitable pedagogy. Policy recommendations include standardising adaptable PoE criteria and investing in digital infrastructure for underserved schools. The PoE transcends assessment, becoming a transformative scaffold for developing reflective, empathetic, and adaptive educators.

* Corresponding author at: Nelson Mandela Drive, Mthatha, 5117, Eastern Cape, South Africa.
E-mail address: gmutesasira@wsu.ac.za
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INTRODUCTION

Effective teacher development requires integrating theoretical knowledge, practical skills, and reflective practice (El Atmani, 2025; Smeplass, 2025). Work-integrated learning (WIL) is a critical component of teacher education, providing essential real-world experience (Van den Berg, 2020). Within WIL, the Portfolio of Evidence (PoE) is a key assessment tool that evaluates student teachers' professional growth during practicums by compiling evidence of teaching activities and engagement (Gqeba et al., 2022).

Despite the acknowledged value of reflective practice for addressing diverse learner needs (Gqeba et al., 2022) and the PoE's role in fostering critical thinking (Ferreira, 2026; Zainuddin et al., 2026), empirical research specifically exploring student teachers' lived experiences with the PoE in assessing theory-practice integration remains limited. This gap is significant given the documented challenges pre-service teachers face transitioning from theory to practice, even with mentor support (Van den Berg, 2020), and South Africa's pressing need for adequate teacher preparation to address literacy issues (Reddy, 2024). Furthermore, while mentoring relationships enhance PoE quality (Reddy, 2024; Ferns et al., 2024), little is known about how student teachers perceive and utilise the PoE for their competency assessment and professional development within WIL contexts. This study addresses this gap by investigating student teachers' experiences with the PoE as a WIL assessment tool at a South African university, with the aim of informing more effective teacher preparation programmes.

METHOD

This study employed Humanistic Theory as its foundational framework. The theory emphasises self-efficacy and personal growth, which directly influence how student teachers perceive their abilities (Javadi & Tahamsbi, 2020; DeRobertis & Bland, 2020). As student teachers compile their portfolios and reflect on their teaching practices, they experience increased self-efficacy, reinforcing their sense of competence and confidence as educators. Reflective practice is central to this process: by evaluating their experiences, strengths, and areas for improvement, student teachers not only enhance their self-understanding but also clarify their teaching methodologies (Javadi & Tahamsbi, 2020). This reflective approach deepens emotional and intellectual engagement, enabling them to recognise the impact of their work on student learning.

Motivation is another essential factor shaped by Humanistic Theory (DeRobertis & Bland, 2020). Student teachers in the Chris Hani East District viewed the portfolio not merely as an institutional requirement but as a meaningful record of professional growth, fostering commitment and stronger professional identity. A supportive learning environment further reinforces these effects: when mentors and supervisors are perceived as supportive, student teachers feel validated, develop confidence, and experience reduced assessment-related anxiety (Hondonga et al., 2022; Fenton & Grover, 2023). Compiling portfolios enables students to recognise their competencies, alleviating the overwhelming feelings typically associated with assessments (Dachille, 2025; Humphries et al., 2023). Goal setting through the portfolio aligns with Humanistic Theory's emphasis on self-determination, empowering student teachers to take ownership of their professional development and progress (Walker et al., 2020).

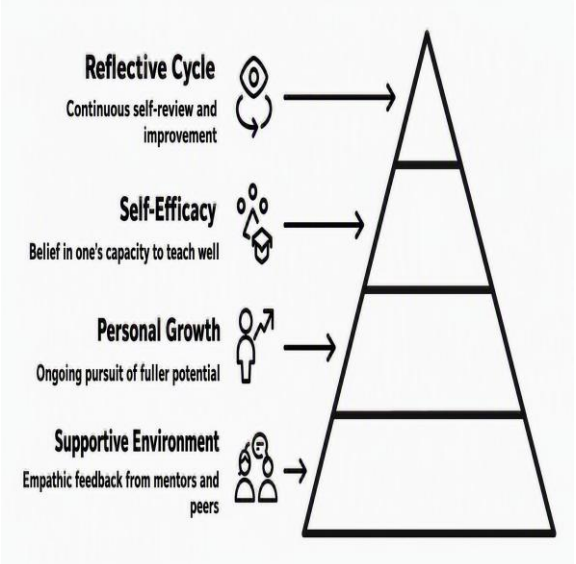


Figure 1: Humanistic Theory and Reflective Practices of the Portfolio of Evidence

Figure 1 positions the PoE at the centre of a continuous reflective loop fed by

three humanistic pillars: self-efficacy, personal growth, and a supportive environment. Each pillar energises ongoing reflection while the cyclical core reinforces these humanistic conditions, creating a virtuous spiral of professional development for student teachers.

Paradigm and Design

The study employed an interpretive paradigm to explore the subjective experiences and meanings that individuals attribute to their realities (Tanaka & Aryal, 2025; William, 2024). Central to interpretivism is the concept that social reality is shaped by human interactions and interpretations. By focusing on student teachers' lived experiences, this perspective offered a deeper understanding of how they view the portfolio as both a reflective instrument and an assessment tool.

Within this paradigm, a hermeneutic-phenomenological design was adopted to uncover the essence of student teachers' lived experiences with the PoE during WIL. Phenomenology seeks to describe rather than explain phenomena, allowing common meanings to emerge across participants (Watson, 2024; van Manen, 2023). The researcher engaged in epoché, bracketing prior assumptions about assessment practices to approach the data with fresh awareness (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and reflective journals, providing rich first-person narratives. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed (Smith & Fieldsend, 2021). Reflexive memos maintained methodological transparency throughout, ensuring that emergent themes authentically represented participants' voices (Finlay, 2021).

Sampling

Seventeen final-year student teachers from a South African university in the Chris Hani East District were purposively selected because they had completed the PoE during WIL placements, ensuring direct experience with the focal phenomenon (Memon et al., 2020). Purposive sampling enabled the researchers to target participants with recent, first-hand experience of the PoE. Participants were drawn from diverse school contexts, subjects, and levels of teaching experience, capturing a broad range of perspectives and enabling a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Ethical Considerations

Participant confidentiality was protected by using pseudonyms, and all data were stored and analysed securely. Informed consent was obtained prior to data collection, and participants were provided with comprehensive information regarding the study's purpose, procedures, and risks. Participants were reminded of their absolute right to withdraw at any time without penalty. These measures upheld participants' safety, dignity, and autonomy throughout the research process.

Research Gap

Three interconnected gaps characterise the existing literature on the PoE in WIL contexts, and this study directly addresses each of them.

First, phenomenological inquiry into student teachers' lived experiences of the PoE during WIL is notably absent from the literature. Existing studies predominantly adopt survey-based or case-study designs that measure portfolio outcomes rather than illuminate the meaning-making processes underlying them (Newton & Jones, 2025; Feder & Cramer, 2023). The interpretive, subjective dimension of how pre-service teachers experience the PoE as an instrument of professional growth, rather than a compliance requirement, is therefore poorly understood. This study addresses that void by employing a hermeneutic-phenomenological methodology that foregrounds participants' voices and situated understandings, generating insights that outcome-oriented methods cannot produce.

Second, the preponderance of PoE-related WIL research originates from well-resourced Global North contexts where digital infrastructure, mentorship capacity, and institutional support are relatively secure (Walker et al., 2020). South Africa's resource-constrained schooling landscape, characterised by infrastructural deficits, large class sizes, and persistent socio-economic inequality, presents qualitatively distinct conditions that existing frameworks do not adequately theorise (Van den Berg, 2020; Reddy, 2024). Pre-service teachers in districts

such as Chris Hani East navigate these realities daily, yet their PoE experiences remain invisible in the international literature. This study situates the PoE squarely within that underserved context, contributing empirical evidence from a setting that global teacher education scholarship has largely ignored.

Third, prior research has not examined how the PoE functions as a mechanism for the formation of professional identity among pre-service teachers. While the PoE's evaluative utility is acknowledged (Yang & Wong, 2024; Gqeba et al., 2022) and its association with reflective practice is established (Zainuddin et al., 2026), the specific processes through which PoE compilation catalyses a coherent teacher professional identity, including self-efficacy, emotional intelligence, and pedagogical agency, remain under-theorised (DeRobertis & Bland, 2020; Javadi & Tahamsbi, 2020). Most identity-formation research focuses on practicum supervision or peer communities rather than on structured assessment tools such as the PoE (Van den Berg, 2020). By grounding this analysis in Humanistic Theory and mapping Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Cycle onto PoE processes, this study repositions the PoE as a transformative scaffold for professional identity formation in resource-constrained WIL contexts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Thematic analysis of the interviews and reflective journals produced four interconnected themes: reflective praxis and self-efficacy; emotional intelligence and inclusive pedagogy; technology and equitable access; and assessment transparency and professional socialisation. Representative participant voices illustrate each theme below.

Theme 1: Reflective Praxis and Self-Efficacy

The PoE consistently prompted critical self-evaluation that participants described as transformative rather than perfunctory. Rather than functioning as a compliance exercise, portfolio compilation became a process of professional reconstruction. Participant 17 captured this succinctly:

> *"Self-reflection is crucial; it allows me to evaluate my methods and enrich my teaching through insights drawn from my practical experiences."*

This reflective disposition extended to systematic problem-solving under real classroom conditions. Participant 4 described how the PoE cultivated analytical rigour:

> *"The programme taught me how to dissect challenges, root out their causes, and craft relevant solutions that address the needs of my students and the learning context."*

Lifelong learning emerged as a closely related dimension of self-efficacy. Participant 8 noted:

> *"Engaging in the Tutorship Programme has reinforced my commitment to lifelong learning, ensuring I stay informed about the evolving best practices in education."*

Across these accounts, PoE-driven reflection evolved into metacognitive agency. Student teachers did not merely record teaching activities; they reconstructed challenging experiences into narratives of resilience, building a sustained belief in their capacity to grow as professionals. This positions the PoE as a dynamic scaffold for self-actualisation rather than a static record of competence.

Theme 2: Emotional Intelligence and Inclusive Pedagogy

Portfolio documentation heightened student teachers' attunement to the socio-emotional dimensions of teaching. Compiling evidence of classroom interactions required participants to critically examine their relational practices, thereby developing empathy as a professional competency. Participant 5 described this development explicitly:

> *"Through the Tutorship Development Programme, I have honed my emotional intelligence, enabling me to connect with my students on a deeper level and nurture a more inclusive classroom environment."*

This emotional awareness translated directly into adaptive, inclusive pedagogical

action. Participant 9 illustrated the concrete application of this attunement:

> *"True inclusion materialises when we actively listen to our learners' needs. I adapted my approach for a student with hearing impairments by utilising visual aids and seating arrangements that promote access to information."*

The PoE also fostered collaborative environments. Participant 1 reflected on how the portfolio prompted a shift toward participatory teaching:

> *"By organising learners into discussion groups, I fostered a culture of collaboration that opened channels for communication, enabling me to appreciate their perspectives on learning."*

Collectively, these accounts reveal that portfolio compilation compelled student teachers to confront their assumptions and move toward co-constructed, student-centred classroom norms. The PoE thus functioned as a vehicle for confronting bias, cultivating empathy, and enacting socio-transformative pedagogy in resource-constrained settings.

Theme 3: Technology and Equitable Access

Technology integration emerged as both a facilitator and an outcome of PoE engagement in this context. Facing infrastructural constraints, student teachers innovated with available digital tools to democratise access to learning. Participant 3 described this directly:

"Using platforms like Microsoft Teams and WhatsApp has allowed me to meet the varied learning needs of my students, particularly those in remote areas, making education more accessible."

Beyond connectivity, technology motivated and energised diverse learners. Participant 13 described its transformative effect:

> *"Integrating technology into my teaching has been revolutionary; it ignites enthusiasm and keeps my diverse learners motivated and eager to participate."*

Technology also enabled the creation of inclusive learning spaces. Participant 6 reflected on how digital integration enhanced equity:

> *"Incorporating technology into my lessons has been essential for creating an equitable learning space, enhancing communication and collaboration among all students."*

Student teachers documented these digital interactions in their PoEs, providing evidence that virtual spaces fostered a sense of belonging and participatory learning. The PoE thus positioned technology not as a mere logistical tool but as an equity lever, challenging technocentric assumptions and demonstrating how digital practice can mitigate geographic and infrastructural barriers in Global South contexts. Participants also noted persistent disparities in access to technology, underscoring the urgent need for institutional investment.

Theme 4: Assessment Transparency and Professional Socialisation

The PoE reshaped participants' understanding of assessment itself, shifting their orientation from compliance to pedagogical accountability. Clear evaluation criteria within the portfolio framework modelled fairness for student teachers, who subsequently transferred these principles to their own classroom practice. Participant 7 articulated this learning:

> *"I have learned the importance of establishing clear, objective criteria for assessing my students, ensuring that the evaluation process is fair and transparent for everyone involved."*

This assessment literacy had direct implications for feedback practice. Participant 14 described how PoE processes informed their approach to student progress:

> *"By setting clear objectives and regularly assessing progress, I can provide constructive feedback that directs my students toward their improvement and success."*

Professional communication skills were equally developed through the PoE process. Participant 16 noted:

> *"This programme has significantly refined my communication skills and*

bolstered my professional growth, reinforcing my dedication to ongoing learning."

These accounts reveal that PoE rubrics serve as tacit mentors, guiding student teachers toward evidence-based decision-making and the internalisation of professional standards through praxis. The PoE thus operates as a powerful socialisation instrument, embedding the habits and values of accountable professional practice before student teachers enter the profession independently.

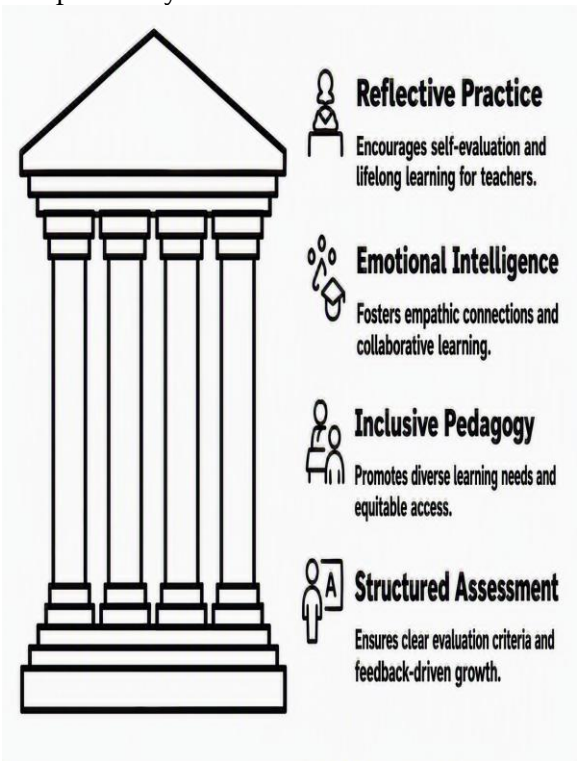


Figure 2: Dimensions of the PoE's Impact

Figure 2 illustrates the four foundational pillars of effective teaching practice conceptualised in the PoE framework: Reflective Practice, Emotional Intelligence, Inclusive Pedagogy, and Structured Assessment. Each pillar contributes to teacher development by encouraging self-evaluation and lifelong learning, fostering empathetic classroom environments, promoting equitable access, and ensuring transparent, feedback-driven assessment.

Discussion

This study examined how final-year student teachers experienced the Portfolio of Evidence (PoE) as an assessment instrument within school-based work-integrated learning in the Chris Hani East District of South Africa. The findings indicate that the PoE was experienced as considerably more than an administrative record of practicum activities. When supported by reflection, dialogue, and contextualised mentoring, it became a mediating space in which student teachers interpreted classroom events, evaluated their developing competence, and translated theoretical knowledge into situated pedagogical action. Four interrelated dimensions were particularly prominent: reflective praxis and self-efficacy; emotional intelligence and inclusive pedagogy; technology-mediated equity; and assessment transparency as professional socialisation. Taken together, these dimensions suggest that the educational value of the PoE lies less in the volume of evidence collected than in the quality of the interpretive work enabled by the evidence.

Reflective praxis and the development of professional agency

Participants described portfolio compilation as a process of examining, reinterpreting, and learning from practice. This finding is consistent with the humanistic premise that professional development is strengthened when individuals are enabled to recognise their capacities, articulate their goals, and assume responsibility for their growth (DeRobertis & Bland, 2020; Javadi & Tahamsbi, 2020). The PoE appeared to support this process by requiring student teachers to move beyond descriptions of what happened in a lesson and to consider why it happened, how learners responded, and what could be done differently. In this respect, the portfolio created conditions for metacognition and professional agency rather than simply documenting compliance.

The findings also extend research that identifies reflection as a central mechanism in work-integrated learning (Van den Berg, 2020). Reflection was not experienced solely as retrospective commentary. It functioned as a form of professional sense-making through which participants reconstructed difficult classroom episodes as sources of learning. In under-resourced school environments, student teachers may encounter large classes, uneven learner preparedness, limited teaching materials, and unpredictable access to digital

tools. A portfolio that merely records these constraints risks portraying them as deficits. A reflective portfolio, by contrast, can make visible the situated reasoning through which student teachers adapt to constraints and exercise judgement.

Nevertheless, the findings caution against treating reflection as automatically transformative. Reflection becomes developmental when it is accompanied by specific prompts, constructive feedback, and opportunities to revisit prior decisions. Without these conditions, portfolio writing may become repetitive, descriptive, or oriented towards satisfying assessment requirements. The apparent reduction in assessment anxiety reported by participants should consequently be interpreted as relational and pedagogical rather than as an inherent property of the PoE. Mentor responsiveness, transparent criteria, and recognition of student teachers' progress are likely to mediate the experience of portfolio work as empowering or burdensome (Hondonga et al., 2022; Reddy, 2024).

Emotional intelligence and inclusive pedagogy

A second significant finding was the connection participants made between portfolio work, emotional intelligence, and inclusive teaching. The PoE required student teachers to attend to learner responses, classroom relationships, and the consequences of their pedagogical choices. Through this process, participants reported developing greater empathy and sensitivity to learner diversity. This extends the literature on mentoring and reflective practice by showing that structured documentation can make relational dimensions of teaching more visible and discussable (Reddy, 2024). The portfolio thus provided a concrete basis for considering whether classroom participation, communication, and assessment practices enabled or constrained learners' involvement.

The findings are especially relevant in the South African context, where inclusive education is shaped by linguistic, socio-economic, cultural, and disability-related differences. Participants' accounts of adapting seating arrangements, using visual resources, and organising collaborative learning suggest that inclusion was understood not as a separate intervention for a small number of learners, but as an ongoing redesign of classroom participation. The PoE linked emotional awareness to pedagogical action: noticing a learner's difficulty was followed by a change in communication, grouping, representation, or support.

At the same time, the findings should not be read as evidence that individual empathy can resolve structural exclusion. The PoE can document and strengthen responsive practice, but it cannot substitute for institutional resources or system-level support.

Technology, contextual innovation, and equitable access

Technology emerged as both a pedagogical resource and a site of inequality. Participants described using platforms such as WhatsApp and Microsoft Teams to maintain communication, extend learning opportunities, and support learners in remote locations. These accounts suggest that technology was not adopted simply because it was innovative. Rather, it was selected pragmatically to address problems of distance, continuity, and learner engagement. The PoE made these adaptations visible and enabled student teachers to connect digital choices with specific pedagogical purposes.

This finding contributes to a more context-sensitive understanding of technology in work-integrated learning. In well-resourced settings, digital practice may be discussed primarily in terms of enhancement or efficiency. In the present context, technology was also associated with continuity and access. However, participants' experiences equally reveal the limits of digital solutions. Unequal connectivity, device availability, data costs, and varying levels of digital literacy can reproduce exclusion even when teachers are highly motivated. The study, therefore, challenges both technological optimism and technological pessimism.

The PoE is particularly valuable in this regard because it can capture the reasoning behind technology-mediated decisions. Evidence of a digital lesson, communication exchange, or learner activity is insufficient on its own. An assessment framework should also ask which learners were reached, which learners were excluded, what alternatives were available, and how the teacher evaluated the intervention's effectiveness. Such prompts would reposition

technology documentation from a showcase of digital competence to a critical account of equitable pedagogical design.

Assessment transparency and professional socialisation

The fourth finding concerns the PoE's influence on participants' conceptions of assessment. Clear criteria and explicit expectations helped student teachers understand how professional judgements were made and encouraged them to transfer similar principles to their own classrooms. This supports the view that assessment in work-integrated learning is not merely a mechanism for assigning grades; it is also a curriculum through which professional norms are learned (Van den Berg, 2020). By engaging with rubrics, feedback, and evidence requirements, participants began to appreciate assessment as a process of communicating expectations, monitoring progress, and supporting improvement.

The PoE consequently operated as a form of professional socialisation. It introduced student teachers to the language of evidence, accountability, feedback, and continuous development. Importantly, this socialisation was top-down. Participants interpreted assessment principles in relation to their own learners and adapted them to classroom realities. The portfolio, therefore, connected institutional standards with situated professional judgement. This is a productive tension: standards provide coherence and fairness, while contextual interpretation prevents assessment from becoming rigid or detached from learners' circumstances.

Practical Implications

The findings strengthen Humanistic Theory by demonstrating how recognition, reflection, supportive relationships, and self-directed goal setting can work together within an assessment process. They also provide a practical illustration of Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle. Classroom teaching constitutes concrete experience; portfolio documentation supports reflective observation; interpretation of evidence enables abstract conceptualisation; and revised lesson planning represents active experimentation. The PoE is therefore best understood as a learning architecture that connects experience to deliberate pedagogical change.

For practice, PoE guidelines should prioritise analytical commentary over the accumulation of documents. Universities should provide exemplars, reflection prompts, and structured review meetings in which mentors ask probing questions rather than merely verify completion. Mentor development should include training in feedback, emotional intelligence, inclusive pedagogy, and technology-sensitive supervision. Assessment rubrics should reward evidence of learner-responsive decision-making, ethical reasoning, and revision of practice.

At the policy level, teacher education frameworks should recognise the PoE as a developmental instrument within WIL rather than a peripheral administrative requirement. Investment in connectivity, devices, mentor capacity, and supervisory time is essential if the PoE is to function equitably. Without these supports, portfolio assessment may unintentionally intensify workload and reproduce inequalities between placements.

Limitations and future research

The study's interpretive design and purposive sample of 17 participants generated depth but limited transferability beyond the participating university and district. The findings also rely substantially on self-reported experiences, which may reflect participants' efforts to present themselves as competent or responsive. Although reflective journals and interviews provided complementary accounts, future research should incorporate portfolio artefacts, mentor assessments, classroom observations, and learner perspectives. Longitudinal studies could examine whether PoE-related gains in self-efficacy, assessment literacy, and inclusive practice persist during the transition into the first years of teaching. Comparative research across rural, urban, and differently resourced settings would further clarify which features of PoE design are context-dependent and which are broadly transferable. Finally, mixed-methods studies could investigate whether changes in portfolio quality and reflective depth are associated with observable changes in instructional practice and learner participation.

Overall, the study demonstrates that the PoE can bridge theory and practice when

it is designed as a reflective, relational, and context-sensitive process. Its value does not reside solely in documentation, but in how documentation enables student teachers to interpret experience, develop professional agency, respond to learner diversity, and internalise ethical standards of practice. In South African teacher education, this makes the PoE a potentially important mechanism for preparing teachers who are not only technically competent but also critically reflective, emotionally responsive, and capable of innovating under conditions of constraint.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

This study has illuminated the PoE as far more than an evaluative mechanism within WIL; it is a transformative scaffold for professional identity formation, pedagogical innovation, and equity-driven praxis in South African teacher education. By centring the lived experiences of student teachers through a hermeneutic-phenomenological lens, this paper reveals how PoE processes foster humanistic educators equipped to navigate the complexities of diverse classrooms. The findings affirm that the PoE bridges theory and practice by catalysing reflective self-actualisation, emotionally intelligent engagement, and adaptive resilience: core dimensions of effective teaching in resource-constrained contexts. Strategic implementation of the PoE can address South Africa's educational inequities while informing global teacher education practices.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Godfrey Mutesasira: Conceptu-alisation, Resources, Writing original draft. **Joseph Baidoo**: Methodology, Visualisation Writing review & editing. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

Declaration of competing interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests

Declaration of the use of AI

During the preparation of this work, the authors used Grammarly for proofreading and spell checking. The authors reviewed and edited the content as necessary and take full responsibility for its publication**.**

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