

Open and Distance Learning Students' Perceptions of the Efficacy of Teaching Practice Supervision in Teacher Preparation in Zimbabwe: A Case of PGDE Students' in Mashonaland East Province

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Abstract— The development of teacher competencies and skills is anchored in teaching practice (TP) as this platform provides for application of theoretical knowledge acquired. TP affords institutions the opportunity to assess the level of professional development achieved by trainees. This qualitative research focuses on how post graduate trainee teachers in Mashonaland East Province in Zimbabwe view the current TP supervision by institutions is helpful in developing the requisite teaching competencies and skills. The qualitative approach was used in order to understand the students' perceptions of teaching practice through in-depth interviews with trainee teachers deployed in the province from different institutions. Trainee teachers lamented on weak communication, weak student preparation before TP, work overload during TP, fault finding approach to supervision, short post observation conference and uncondusive school environments. The study recommends thorough advance trainee preparation before TP, have TP in its own semester, clinical supervision approach, consider school environment of trainees during supervision.

Index Terms— Teaching practice, teaching practice supervision, teacher preparation

I. INTRODUCTION

Labaree (2004:299)

Why is teaching difficult? Most professions can carry out their work independent of the client, surgeons operate the anesthetized and lawyers defend the mute. But, teachers can only accomplish their goals if students are willing to learn. Surgeons' and lawyers' errors end up either buried in the grave or locked up somewhere. Labaree (2004) further explains that the general perception is that teaching is easy, as such anyone can teach. These perceptions and complexities of the teaching profession makes teacher preparation even more difficult.

Olugbenga (2013) defines teaching as the "process of imparting knowledge from one more knowledgeable person to a less knowledgeable person." This definition weakens the teaching profession as it does not indicate the "ologies" that one needs to have in order to effectively execute the teaching responsibilities. Teaching may be viewed as the application of

educational theories, pedagogies for effective knowledge acquisition by the less knowledgeable.

Teacher preparation comprises basically of two components, theoretical knowledge of teaching and teaching practice. Fagbulu (1984) defines teaching practice as a kind of apprenticeship for student teachers to gain practical and professional experience by translating the educational theories acquired into practice. Endeley (2014) defines teaching practice as professional experience where the student teacher is provided an opportunity to bridge the gap between theory and practice in education and develop competence. Teaching practice is the stage at which the trainee teacher translates the in-depth knowledge of the subjects learned and pedagogies into actionable knowledge and gains experience of the professional aspects of the teaching profession.

In emphasis of the essence of TP, Chen and Mu (2010) conclude that teacher training programme cannot be complete without an effective practicum programme. Student teachers need hands-on experience of the various classroom related situations and taking responsibilities for them (Aljassar and Altamar 2004). Wambugu, Barmao and Ng'eno (2013) explain the TP is the time the student teacher gets to work with experienced teachers as mentors and as a professional development community for an appreciation of the roles and responsibilities of the teacher and confidence boosting (Al-Magableh 2010).

Post graduate diploma in education (PGDE) in Zimbabwe is offered by some universities. It is offered to holders of degrees, which are higher levels of subjects offered at secondary and high school. Most students are fully employed teachers on the strength of their degree qualification, so they are untrained teachers. Though they are untrained, they have in-depth knowledge of the subjects, which is one of the most important standards for effective teaching North Carolina Teaching Profession Standards (2012). Teaching practice for such trainees has a different feel from students who have their first feel of the classroom during teaching practice. Some of them have already developed habits. Some of them "think that they know how to teach before entering teacher education programme" (Labaree 2004:300). So essentially teaching practice for PGDE students is to de-learn the habits acquired in the days of pre-training service. In addition, teaching practice develops trainee teachers, "interpersonal, pedagogical, intercultural and psychological contemporaries" (Owusu and Brown 2014:26). The acquisition of teaching skills may be complex and as such trainee teachers are attached to a mentor (Owusu and Brown 2014). The mentor is

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appointed by the school authorities to give guidance, coaching, and -----.

II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In view of the generally held view that teaching is easy, and that some students have been teaching for quite some time, do they view teaching practice as helpful in teacher preparation?

3.0 Research questions

Does the management of TP have an effect on students perception of the importance of teaching practice in Zimbabwe?

To what extent does TP student preparation affect students' perceptions of TP?

What is the effect of feedback on students' perceptions on TP?

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Framework

Social constructivist theory championed by Vygotsky provides basis and inspiration to TP. Social constructivists hold three main assumptions. They assume that reality is constructed through human activity Kukla (2000) resulting in socially acknowledged knowledge (Ernest 1999), implying that learning takes place through social activities McMahon (1997). TP facilitates assimilation and accommodation of teaching in its totality by integrating the student teacher into the teaching community. They interact with the university supervisors, mentor and the whole school community. It is at this stage that PGDE students learn the teaching profession language and ethics as these play an important role in the learning process Vygotsky (19...). The theory assumes that students operate at actual development level which is state of knowledge and capability to solve problem. The zone of proximal development is the possible level of operation through the guidance and assistance of teachers and peers, that is supervisors, mentors, and schools authorities. Progression moves from dependency on mentor and supervisors to limited consultation up to fading, that is final independent work. The views motivation as both intrinsic and extrinsic. In Zimbabwe the recent upsurge of PGDE students might have been a result of the government initiative to have trained teachers throughout the system encouraging graduates to embark on the programme in order to maintain their teaching posts. Even in those circumstances the PGDE have the desire to excel as teachers.

2.2 Does the management of TP have an effect on students perception of the importance of teaching practice in Zimbabwe?

In the United States according to Victorian Institute of Teaching (2010), the minimum practicum (supervised teaching practice) requirements for approved programme made all four year undergraduate programme to include at least 80 days which is equivalent to 12 weeks. For one year post graduate teacher programme must include at least 45 days. In Nigeria, it is six weeks equivalent to 40 days (Ayodele and Oyewole 2012). In Zimbabwe, PGDE students have one term (13 weeks) TP.

The majority of PGDE in Zimbabwe are located in rural areas as they secure jobs in no particular pattern. Most outlying rural areas in Zimbabwe are characterized by poor infrastructure, under resource (Mlahleki 1995), without

communication facilities (telephone, cellphones and broadband), electricity, piped water and poor transport facilities due to poor state of roads (Mukeredzi 2009). These challenges may have performance of students teachers in terms of communication with fellow students, supervisors, and use of educational technology. Similar observations were made by Alkharusi (2010) who concluded that each class has an assessment environment and that students develop their perceptions. In light of these challenges, Chireshe and Chireshe (2010) established that student teachers wanted to be warned of impending visits, especially that PGDE students in Zimbabwe are actually employed adults with responsibilities.

2.3 To what extent does TP student preparation affect students' perceptions of TP?

Before students embark on TP they have to be prepared. This can be achieved through TP orientation. It is at the orientation session that the TP outcomes are spelt out. These include, as cited by ZOU Teaching Practice Draft Policy,

Translate relevant syllabi into schemes of work, lesson plans and lesson notes.

Maintain up to date records of the class one is assigned.

Skillfully use existing and self-made teaching media when teaching.

Emphathise with students both during teaching and remedial work

Deliver effective lessons that are tuned to the level of the learner

Employ good classroom management skills to facilitate and maximize learning and

Cultivate cordial relations with other professionals in the school.

As part of TP preparation, student teachers conduct micro-teaching exercise. This prepares the student teachers with important first contact with the class. Students also learn under close guidance how to plan, execute lessons, use instructional media, classroom management skills and evaluate. Olugbenga (2013:239) asserts that "teacher educators have the duty of making adequate arrangement in terms of learning contents, methodology and evaluation in the preparation of students for such a programme." Housego (1990) contends that teachers who felt ill-prepared to teach had challenges in creating an effective learning environment. A study conducted by Chireshe and Shumba (2011:117) indicated that the "majority of teachers produced by teachers' colleges were technologically incompetent" because that aspect was not thoroughly dealt with in their training. Such teacher preparation gaps produce students who do not have the confidence in teaching practice.

2.4 What is the effect of feedback on students' perceptions on TP?

Students have good perceptions of TP if they find the exercise worth engaging in. Owusu and Brown (2014) explain that in Zambia Mulkeen (2012) found that student supervision was limited due to logistical challenges thereby weakening the impact of TP supervision in teacher preparation. In Malawi resources reduced the frequency of visits. Ngwarai and Ngara (2013) found that college supervisors did not visit students timeously and frequently. Chireshe and Chireshe (2010) established that while students positively viewed TP, they felt that there was need for more institutional visits during the one

term of TP. They also established that students were pleased with the local and institutional assessments as they were a true reflection of their performance.

The conduct of the supervisors also influence the students' perceptions of TP. Supervisors should be conscious of the students' low confidence levels as a result of perceived low performance levels Ayodele and Oyewole (2012). Supervisors should work towards facilitating, mentoring, and guiding students to higher levels of teaching, classroom management, use of media and confidence levels. Effective supervision thus needs technical competence, mental ability, human relations skills, high achievement and creativity (Oforma 2005). For effective feedback to take place the supervisors should provide a platform for supervisor-supervisee interaction through post observation conference. Ayodele and Oyewole (2012) note that many supervisors do not provide post observation conference. It is through post conference observation that the supervisor gets to know of students' misconceptions, worries for correction. The student can also be guided and gets ideas on effective practical hints on how to improve lessons.

Bhargava (2009) found that in Zambia supervision was confined to lesson delivery with little emphasis on stimulus variation and overall teacher development. Benton-Kupper (2001) found that TP experience was very positive as it provided opportunity to gain knowledge and skills in the area of teaching (Owusu and Brown 2014). Ngwarai and Ngara (2013) found that college supervisors were not friendly and reports were illegible and so were of little help to the students. Similar findings were made by Chireshe and Chireshe (2010), where students expressed that they did not want bias, harassment but fairness, advise and encouragement.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The qualitative inquiry was used to describe students' perceptions using non-numerical data (David and Sutton 2011). Students', in their natural working environment (LeCompte and Schensul 1999), gave their perceptions of TP. The researcher as a key instrument in data collection conducted in-depth interviews (David and Sutton 2011, and Hatch 2002) to get the students' perceptions of the efficacy of TP in teacher preparation. The approach was ideal as it gave space to detailed explanation of the students perceptions on TP (Miles and Huberman 1994), motivation, emotions, prejudices and conflict in TP (Charmaz 1995). The qualitative approach allowed the voices of the informants to be heard. The case study design was adopted and this facilitated the creation of multiple perspectives as represented by the informants views interpreted by the researcher (Gray 2009).

4.1 Population

Approximately 200 PGDE students on teaching practice are deployed around the Mashonaland East Province. These students comprised the population. The informants were mainly drawn from the Southern and central districts of the province that is Chikomba, Hwedza and Marodera.

4.2 Sample

A purposive sample of 13 informants were interviewed mainly drawn from the Southern and central districts of the province that is Chikomba, Hwedza and Marondera. It was ideal to use purposive sampling so as to generate data from

rich sources of information, that students on teaching practice from across the university divide.

V. DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

5.1. Does the management of TP have an effect on students perception of the importance of teaching practice in Zimbabwe?

Informants were asked to comment on the time and timing of the TP exercise. Informants responded that;

“One semester (13weeks) for teaching practice is enough in view of the fact that I have been teaching for a couple of years now. University supervisors can visit me any number of times they so wish”

Another informant responded, “one term is fine, however, we are so pressed for time. Remember this is the semester we have to conduct research. These are demanding tasks which should not be conducted in the same semester.”

Yet another informant responded, “One term is quite good in view of the fact that we have already covered most the courses. However, having research and TP one semester is hell. Why not have research running from second semester to third semester.”

The informants from the various institutions were satisfied with the length of the TP period. The period of TP offered for PGDE in Zimbabwe concurs with international practice as reported to be in Nigeria, (Ayodele and Oyewole 2012) and in the United States according to Victorian Institute of Teaching (2010). Informants had reservations on having TP and research in the same period as this had challenges for the students. The duration provides ample time for trainee teachers to develop “interpersonal, pedagogical, intercultural and psychological contemporaries” (Owusu and Brown 2014:26). The informants had good perceptions of teaching practice as they appreciated the long period they wish their supervisors to have with them. Informants had good perceptions of TP as they would want to have TP in its own period to avoid time competition with research which they also view as time consuming.

Informants located in outlying areas registered with a university about 400km from their base school were asked if this posed challenges to them.

Informants responded; “Definitely, because if university supervisors fail to locate me, I may have to travel to the institution with my documents, which is more difficult with the strict supervision visits from the employer, I may end up losing my job altogether.”

“If I had a choice I would chose to be somewhere close to the institution.”

“I have serious challenges with teaching media, as you can see the school has limited resources because this is only a subsistence farming community.”

“From what you can see when are we likely to have internet here?”

“While we have one laptop for administrative purposes we will certainly not entertain the idea of a computer that can be used by students thereby confining media to the environment, yet you will compare my performance with a student in an urban school.”

“We have challenges motivating learners here because we have few role models, there is serious lack of enthusiasm to learn.”

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Informants in outlying stations had challenges ranging from communication, instructional media and technology in particularly its inavailability and motivation of the learners. These findings concur with the conclusions made by Alkharusi (2010) that each class has an assessment environment. The findings also concur with the views aired by students in the research conducted by Chireshe and Chireshe (2010) that student teachers wanted to be warned of impending visits to avoid being missed on. The findings indicate that the supervision environment is different giving rise to the need to take cognizance of such variations as they have a strong bearing on the students' performance.

5.2 To what extent does TP student preparation affect students' perceptions of TP?

Informants were asked what their dispositions toward TP preparation were.

Overallly informants across the university spectrum were happy with their preparation.

One informant explained,

"We had micro-teaching as part of preparation. We learnt how to scheme, plan evaluate using the institutional format. Micro teaching removed some of the anxieties I had on TP. How exciting for me as I also learnt some of the basics of group teaching"

"We had an informative TP orientation exercise the outcomes of TP were spelt out. All the expectations of the university such as record books were spelt out too."

Informants had positive perceptions of TP as there seems to be thorough preparations throughout the university divide and comes in different forms. The findings concur with Olugbenga (2013) who pointed out that teacher educators should prepare students for TP. A few informants decried poor TP preparation. It emerged that those who professed poor preparation turned out to be average to slightly below average performers. Further inquiry from their student colleagues showed that these had not attended orientation. For instance one informant fumed and exclaimed that she had not registered for TP and she accused the supervisors for not informing her of the impending visit, yet the institution had orientation before students left for TP and ironed out all the issues she raised. The informant was not prepared. The findings concur with Housego (1990) who contends that teachers who felt ill-prepared to teach had challenges in creating an effective learning environment. TP preparation has a great effect on student perception of the exercise and performance.

5.3 What is the effect of feedback on students' perceptions on TP?

Informants were asked to comment on the number of university visits during TP.

"My university supervisors came here twice and I think I got a lot of advice, coaching, guidance and gained a lot of confidence in my work after the two visits." The majority of the student teachers across institutions reported that they had two institutional visits.

"I was visited once then I asked to bring my TP file to the college. I think it is ideal that supervisors should observe me delivering a lesson. I got very constructive comments on the first visit, I was expecting for a critical assessment on the second visit." Mulkeen (2012) found that student supervision was limited due to logistical challenges. While the majority of

the informants reported that they had two visits, there was a case of a student from one institution who reported had only one visit then asked to bring documentation for assessment. The informant showed displeasure with the situation.

Informants were asked their disposition towards the conduct of TP supervisors in giving feedback and the following responses were given.

Supervisors from my institution are very positive of how I have conducted my lesson and my records. Constructive criticisms were made. I have learnt a lot from the feedback. I did not perform my best because I was nervous. This is because I was told supervisors do not take whatever you give as excuse for poor performance.

The supervisor who last visited me was harsh and arrogant. Instead of hinting on how I could improve my lesson, he went on to length telling me how serious I should take TP.

While I did appreciate that the supervisor had a point I do not approve of her taking over my lesson as this brings a lot of embarrassment in front of my students. I have also seen that in some instances the halo effect being practiced although the incidents are not so pervasive. I felt belittled. Similar findings were made by Chireshe and Chireshe (2010), where students expressed concerns over bias, harassment but preferred fairness, advise and encouragement. One informant also noted the importance of post observation conference. Even though the comments given on the critique cover almost every area, there is need for the supervisor to discuss their findings with students so as to clarify issues raised and the student can also explain their position.

Informants were asked if supervisors assessed their performance in all the areas of teaching.

Informant: "The supervisors adhered to the aspects covered by the supervision critique. As a result they covered all the areas in teaching. There were aspects they asked questions where the work was not apparent like responsibilities within the school." Most of the informants concurred that supervisors were thorough in approach. They assessed all the areas of teaching including co-curricular, projects undertaken by the students, professional conduct and overall application to their work. The assessment was generally well received as it covered all the areas of their work (Bhargava 2009). The assessment approach where supervisors stuck to the areas covered by the critique was an enhancement towards students' positive perceptions towards the teaching practice supervision. The thoroughness with which the exercise was taken by supervisors also contributed towards a positive perception of the exercise.

CONCLUSIONS

- Student teachers were satisfied with the teaching practice period of 13 weeks,
- Students were also happy with the areas covered by supervisors during supervision,
- Trainee teachers lamented on weak communication with regards to impending TP visits,
- Trainee teachers noted that there was weak student preparation before TP,
- Student teachers decried work overload during TP which they said compromised their performance,

- Student teachers also complained of short post observation conference and uncondusive school environments which they noted as having a bearing on their performance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The study recommends institutions have thorough advance trainee preparation before TP,
- Institutions send students on TP in its one semester and research in another semester,
- Supervisors conduct clinical supervision approach for effectiveness,
- Supervisors consider school environment of trainees during supervision,
- Institutions should thoroughly induct students before TP commences..

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