TOPIC: EDUCATING TEACHERS: STUDENT TEACHERS’ VIEWS ON THE QUALITY OF THEIR PRACTICUM: A CASE STUDY OF ZIMBABWE OPEN UNIVERSITY IN THE MIDLANDS PROVINCE

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Abstract

Education is widely considered as the key to development. For increased rate of development, teachers who are facilitators of learning should be recipients of high quality professional training. Teacher education is then critical as it contributes to individual and national development by training and educating teachers. The progress of a country depends upon the quality of teachers. Improving teacher quality is a key ingredient for improving schools. Teaching Practice (T.P.) is one of the components of teacher training and development. Generally speaking, Teaching Practice is an indispensable element in the development of the professional competence of a student teacher. The quality of teachers depends immensely on the quality of their teacher education, part of which is Teaching Practice or Practicum. During T.P. student teachers get the opportunity to learn about learners in real life and the chance to learn the skills, values and attitudes of effective teachers. Some variables at times negatively affect the quality of student teachers’ practicum and consequently the quality of teacher education. A study was conducted with student teachers at Zimbabwe Open University who were pursuing the Bachelor of Education in Early Childhood degree and were in their second semester of T.P. to determine their perceptions on the quality of their T.P. through the administration of an open ended questionnaire. The findings showed that all students considered their T.P. as useful to them. The quality of T.P. was regarded good by the majority of the participants as regards its duration, timeous placement in the programme, and timeous supervisions by university lecturers. Nonetheless, in terms of the nature of supervisions and mentoring, and work overload, student opinions about the quality of T.P. were rather negative. The study recommended ample time to supervise students rather than just assessing them. In addition the study recommended making mentoring tasks for assisting teachers clear, among other things.

Indexing terms/Keywords

Practicum, student teachers

Academic Discipline and Sub-Disciplines

Teacher Education

SUBJECT CLASSIFICATION

Teaching Practice/Practicum

TYPE (METHOD/APPROACH)

Case study, Open ended questionnaire

INTRODUCTION

At the time the study was conducted, Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) was the only State open and distance learning (ODL) institution in Zimbabwe. There are four Faculties offering services in (ODL) at ZOU namely, the faculty of Arts and Education, faculty of Commerce and Law, faculty of Applied Social Sciences and the faculty of Science and Technology. In addition, there is the Higher Degrees Directorate. The Teacher Development Department operates under the Faculty of Arts and Education. Several teacher education courses are offered in the department of teacher education, among which are the Post Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE), Bachelor for Early Childhood Development (BEC) and Diploma in Primary Education (DIPED).

The Bachelor for Education in Early Childhood Development, for instance is a four year programme which admits holders of the O-level certificate. However, a diploma or certificate in education is an added advantage [9]. Since BECD is a teacher education course, it cannot not be completed without the practicum component. Student teachers’ practicum is an important stage in the professional development of teachers. To develop quality teachers, a teacher education programme curriculum usually includes the following:

- Improvement of the general educational background of the trainee teacher
- Pedagogy and understanding of learners and the concept of learning
Increasing student teachers’ knowledge and understanding of subjects or some subjects that are taught in the primary or secondary school

The development of practical skills and competencies

Student teachers’ practicum is a critical component in teacher development courses. It is an opportunity to student teachers to gain professional experience and ethics so that the trainees become socialised into the profession [6]. It is an induction into the profession to improve teachers’ skills and extend the body of knowledge on effective teaching practices [4, p.9]. Among other things, student teacher practicum provides an opportunity for student teachers to apply the knowledge and theories learnt to the real classroom.

The ZOU model of BECD practicum borrowed characteristics from some T.P models operational elsewhere. The T.P model for the BECD practicum, offers practicum as a separate block of classroom based teaching. The students go for T.P for two consecutive semesters commencing at part 3, semester 1, after students would have covered sixteen modules, most of which serve to prepare students for the practicum. Among these courses are: Philosophical Perspectives in ECD, Sociological Foundations of ECD, Theories of Child Development, Psychological Foundations of ECD, and Curriculum Issues in ECD programmes. While on T.P student teachers get help from the collaborative efforts of qualified and experienced teachers, school administrators, Zimbabwe Open University lecturers and tutors. While on T.P student teachers are expected to be guided by the Public Service Commission Rules and Regularities Statutory Instrument 1 of 2000. This instrument guides them on disciplinary and grievance procedures, inter alia. While ZOU plays a bigger role in student teacher practicum student T.P is also the responsibility of host schools and external examiners play a role in it. However there seem to be some problems in the management of student teachers’ practicum which ultimately may affect the quality of T.P. For example in some instances there have been logistical difficulties in supervising classroom practice. It was against this background that the study was conducted.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The planning, execution and control of Teaching Practice activities seem to be complicated and as a result some goals of T.P. cannot be met wholesomely. The absence of effective collaboration and resources are some of the variables that render T.P. unproductive. The complexity of logistics can easily affect the quality of student teacher practicum. The question was, “How do BECD ZOU students perceive the quality of their practicum in the face of logistics-linked problems?”

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study was guided by the following questions:

- In what ways do BECD students regard practicum as useful?
- Which aspects of the BECD practicum are regarded by students as being of good quality?
- Which aspects are considered as of not good quality?
- What improvements are necessary to increase the quality of T.P of BECD?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

It was hoped that the findings of the study would make significant contribution to knowledge within teacher education in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) by providing useful information about practice geared towards quality professional development of student teachers. It was hoped that leaders in Teaching Practice particularly those in ODL could use the study as a platform to reflect on their practices and strategies in heightening quality in Teaching Practice. The unveiling of T.P. quality-linked challenges could be a basis for addressing them through efforts of stakeholders. Researchers also hoped that insights gained through the study could stimulate further study.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Design

The qualitative design was employed to conduct a case study. The focus of qualitative research is the nature or essence of things. Zimbabwe Open University Students in the Midlands Region who were pursuing the Bachelor for Education in Early Childhood Development Degree and who were doing their practicum were identified for a situational case study.

Sample

The target population were all Zimbabwe Open University BECD students doing T.P. in the Midlands Region in the year 2013. Ten students were conveniently sampled for participation.

Instruments

In the study, an open ended questionnaire was physically administered at a weekend school where the participants were assembled and this ensured a hundred percent return of the instrument.
Limitations

The study was just a case study of the Midlands Zimbabwe Open University regional campus and so its findings are not generalisable to other Open and Distance learning institutions. In addition the sample was rather small. Notwithstanding, the picture maybe a replica of what obtains in the minds of teacher trainers, student teachers and school-based student supervisors elsewhere in teacher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In his contribution titled ‘Teachers in Anglophone Africa: Issues in Teacher Supply, Training and Management’,[8] found out that in Zambia student teachers were deliberately sent to remote rural schools. While this may assist in teacher distribution, it increased the logistical difficulties of supervision and in effect reduced the frequency of external supervision and supervision of student teachers by tutors from the training institution was limited. In Malawi, for example, tutors were expected to visit each student six times during the year of T.P. but this was prevented by difficulties of transportation and the unavailability of resources. The study further established that the impact of T.P. was diminished by the limited role it played in the final assessment of student teachers. In some cases, performance in T.P. had no impact at all on the final grade of the student. In Zambia, for example, there was no assessment of T.P. in the student overall grade.

In a study titled ‘Problems of Prospective teachers during T.P.’[2] found out that 20% of the participants did not have their lessons being checked regularly by concerned supervisors while 80% were of the mind that their lessons were being checked regularly. In addition 23% of the participants expressed the view that the class teachers were often present in their classes during teaching practice while the other 77% opined that class teachers or mentors were often not present in their classes during the teaching practice of the prospective teachers.

Findings made by [2] and [7] relate to the current study which sought to determine the ways in which the BECD students regarded the quality of their practicum.

PRESENTATION OF DATA

Question: In which ways is T.P. beneficial to you?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stated form of usefulness</th>
<th>No of Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provides opportunity to link theory and practice</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tool in evaluating the BECD programme in schools</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acquisition of proper technical skills in handling ECD classes</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gives student teacher opportunity to evaluate the applicability of learnt theories</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obtaining assistance in problem areas through University and school supervision</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All the ten participants viewed their practicum as beneficial in enhancing acquisition of proper technical skills necessary in handling ECD classes. That T.P. provided students the opportunity to link theory and practice was indicated 6/10 participants. Six times it was also indicated that student teacher practicum was useful to students as it was a useful tool by which they could obtain assistance in problem areas through university and school supervision. 4/10 participants regarded their practicum as being useful in giving student teachers the opportunity to evaluate the applicability of learnt theories. Two students regarded T.P as instrumental in enabling the evaluation in schools of the BECD programme offered by ZOU.

Question: Which aspects of your Practicum do you consider to be of good quality?

Responses to the questions were as presented in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practicum aspects of Good Quality</th>
<th>No. of Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Timeous placement of T.P. in the programme</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adequate duration</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adequate preparation prior T.P</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support by school administration</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of dialogue in supervision</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adequate and timeous lecturer visits</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good lesson demonstration by ECD mentor</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Information in Table 2 depicts that in a number of ways the BECD students regarded their practicum as being of good quality in a several aspects. 8/10 were of the mind that their practicum was timeously placed in their BECD programme. 8/10 viewed the duration of their practicum as being adequate, while 5/10 were of the opinion that visits by University lecturers were timely and adequate and that there was adequate student preparation by the university, prior practicum. Use of dialogue by student supervisors was considered a useful aspect of the student practicum by 4/10 participants. 3/10 participants regarded T.P. as of good quality in that the school administration gave the necessary support while 2/10 participants opined that good lesson demonstrations by their ECD mentor contributed to the good quality of their T.P.

**Question: State aspects of your T.P which you think compromise the quality of T.P.**

Participant’s responses to the question were presented in Table 3 and Fig. 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspects indicated as not of good quality</th>
<th>No of Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inadequate supply of ECD materials necessary for effective T.P</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heavy learning load</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools heads not very supportive in giving ECD classes</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No degree ECD mentors</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of mentor motivation</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delayed and irregular supervisions by university lecturers</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No lesson demonstrations by school or university lecturers</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor focused more on assigning marks rather than being a guide</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECD mentor not crystal clear about tasks in which to assist student</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Fig.1**: T.P. aspects perceived as of not good quality

**FACTORS NEGATIVELY AFFECTING T.P. QUALITY**

- Inadequate supply of ECD materials necessary for effective T.P
- Heavy learning load
- Schools heads not very supportive in giving ECD classes
- No degree ECD mentors
- Lack of mentor motivation
- Delayed and irregular supervisions by university lecturers
Information in Table 3 and figure 1 showed that lack of degree ECD mentors and mentor demotivation were indicated every five students in each case, as aspects rendering T.P bad quality. Practicum quality was considered by five participants as not of good quality in that there was inadequate supply of ECD curriculum materials necessary for effective T.P and that student learning load was heavy while they were on T.P. Five times, it was also indicated that lack of lesson demonstrations by school and university supervisors rendered the practicum of poor quality. 4/10 participants opined that irregular visits by the university lecturers negatively affected the quality of T.P. According to 2/10 students the quality of student practicum was negatively affected by school heads who were not supportive in giving BECD students Early Childhood Classes to teach. Three participants were of the mind that supervisors focused more on assigning marks rather than being a guide. In the opinion of two students ECD mentors were not crystal clear about tasks in which to assist student.

Suggestions by trainees

Five students suggested reduction of number of courses/modules during T.P and adequate provision of ECD curriculum materials. Four suggested regular university based supervision and attachment to degree mentors.

DISCUSSION

In which ways is T.P useful to you?

All the ten students viewed their Practicum as being beneficial in several ways to them. For instance practicum was viewed as useful in enhancing the acquisition of proper technical skills in ECD didactic situations, providing opportunity to link theory and practice, offering assistance in problem areas through University and school –based supervision. T.P. was also considered as useful tool in evaluating the BECD programme in schools. Views given by the participants on how they perceived the ways practicum was beneficial to them support [1] who says objectives of Teaching Practice are to provide student teacher with an opportunity to put theories into practice, to develop a deeper understanding of educational principles and their implications for learning fundamental procedures, techniques and methods of teaching. To provide an opportunity to student teachers to have their teaching evaluated and to gain from the benefits of criticism is another objective of T.P. [1]. The opinions given by students on the ways in which they considered their Practicum useful to them could be an indication that the BECD programme was meeting some of its objectives in providing students with school and classroom practice.

In which aspects do you consider your practicum to be good quality?

Timeous placement of practicum in the BECD programme was considered as an important aspect in which the participants practicum was of good quality. In the BECD programme, offered at ZOU, students go for teaching practice at level 3, semester1. Before they go for T.P. they would have covered 16 modules most of which prepare them for the practicum. Some of the modules which are covered before practicum are BECD101 -philosophical perspectives in ECD, BECD102- Sociological Foundations of ECD, BECD103-Theories of child development, BECD 104- Curriculum issues in ECD Programmes, BECD202-Professional studies in ECD and BECD203- Infant and Toddler Education, inter alia. So the coverage of appropriate content prior T.P contributes to the good quality of T.P as perceived by the participants. Student practicum was regarded as of good quality since its duration was perceived as adequate. The T.P duration is two semesters which is equivalent to eight consecutive months. Such a period is reasonably adequate to give the students ample exposure necessary as they do their practicum. Students also viewed adequate and timeous lecturer visits, use of dialogue in supervision, employment of lesson demonstrations by some mentors and adequate prep prior T.P as aspects in which T.P was of good quality. Some of these views by participants,[8] who say demonstrations are critical in T.P supervision as a follow up to some noted weakness or just to show case a critical didactic skill.
In which aspects do you consider your T.P as of not good quality?

Lack of degree ECD mentors and mentor demotivation were regarded as elements negatively affecting the quality of student T.P. According to [2] lack of motivation is one of the impediments to effective supervision. At the time the study was conducted very few ECD teachers were degree so that could have made some complication in situations where ECD students who were pursuing their Bachelor of Early Childhood Development, were being mentored by non-degreed ECD teachers. Mentor demotivation could be attributed to lack of mentor linked incentive. This challenge might also give some explanation on the opinion expressed by two participants that some mentors seemed unclear on about how to assist students. The mere fact that the participants were pursuing a higher qualification than their mentors could have put the mentors off and in the process they could have presented themselves to the mentees as rather unsure of their expectations as mentors. Three of the participants were of the mind that the quality of T.P. was not of good since supervisors played the role of assessor more significantly than that of being guides. May be this problem could be attributed to inadequate resources in terms of money and time. Delayed and irregular supervisions by university lecturers were cited by some four students. The issue of delayed and irregular supervisions by university lecturers clearly relates to the challenges of execution and control of Teaching Practice activities. Logistics in T.P. can be affected by lack of resources and effective collaboration and this in turn affects the quality of practicum. Since 6/10 participants regarded university-based supervisions as adequate and timeous the difference in views regarding regularity or irregularity of supervisions could be attributed to the different locations in which students were doing their practicum. Those who were fairly near the regional campus could be supervised more often than those distant from the regional campus. Financial problems could also be a contributing variable. Half of the participants were of the mind that; inadequate supply of ECD curriculum materials, heavy learning load and lack of lesson demonstrations by either school or university were T.P aspects which rendered T.P. not of good quality. For any teaching to be effective provision of adequate curriculum materials is critical and employment of lesson demonstration when necessary is also important for successful T.P. The non-use of lesson or teaching skill demonstrations by university lecturers could attributed to the limited contact time lecturers at Zimbabwe Open University have with students. Contact time with students was just six hours per module or course or T.P. preparation session at the time this study was carried out. The feeling by 5/10 students that a heavy learning load compromised on the quality of their T.P could be attributed to the fact that while student teachers are on T.P they are expected to study four other courses or modules in addition to executing all other T.P. related duties. Of course this might be quite heavy on the part of some students. While they are on T.P BECD students at ZOU are expected to do eight assignments, attend week school tutorials and write examinations at the end of each T.P semester in addition to the rather heavy T.P load.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

By and large participants regarded practicum as being useful to student teachers in a variety of ways and their opinions on the usefulness of T.P confirm that T.P is an indispensable tool in the development of teachers. The quality of T.P was viewed as good by the majority of the participants as regarding its duration, timeous placement of T.P in the BECD programme and regular and dialogical supervisions by university lecturers. Nevertheless, some T.P aspects such as lack of lesson demonstration when need arose, mentor demotivation, heavy learning load and inadequate supply of ECD curriculum materials were opined as aspects of T.P of not good quality.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Employment of lesson demonstrations by mentors and university lecturers, when need arises to assist students on noted weaknesses and just to showcase some critical skills in teaching.

Adequate provision of curriculum materials necessary for effective teaching by school administration with assistance from Government and local authorities.

Collaboration by school administrators in promoting endeavors of student teachers doing T.P.

Academic advancement by ECD teachers who are holders of a mere Teaching qualification, so that as universities continue to offer higher qualifications to prospective teachers, the qualified teachers in school will meet the necessary expectations and be comfortable to help trainee teachers confidently.

Awaiting of ample time by the training institution to supervise students rather than just assessing them and running of workshops necessary to clarify mentoring tasks for assisting teachers

REFERENCES


ZOU, BECD Programme Regulations