

The Student Teachers' Perceptions On Teaching Practice Supervision In Zimbabwe: Is It A Process Of Grading Or Improvement Of Teaching Skills?

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Abstract: Supervisors are expected to observe how student teachers prepare, deliver the lesson and conduct themselves as members of teaching profession and are expected to advise the students on how to improve their teaching skills. The present study is a descriptive survey which sought to analyze student teacher's perception towards teaching practice as an exercise for grading or improvement and examine student teacher's perception towards student-supervisor comments during discussion after classroom assessment. The sample comprised of 50 second year Diploma in Education who had undergone teaching practice in 2016. The students were purposefully sampled. In purposeful sampling, the researcher selects the participants because they possess particular characteristics or knowledge being sought. A questionnaire was used to collect data for this study. The findings indicated that majority of student teachers who participated in the teaching practice perceived that the supervisors gave grades which did not reflect the comments made about the teaching performance of the student teacher. Based on the findings recommendations were made, among others, that assessment should match the comments on areas needing improvement and meaningful accompanying comments should be made to guide student teachers in the desired directions during teaching practice, encourage student teachers to try harder or to give credit for work done well.

Key words: grading, supervision, student teacher, teaching practice, teaching skills

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Teaching practice is a component of being trained to teach in teacher education, which provides a transition from theory to real teaching contexts (Saban & Cocklar, 2013). The aim of teaching practice therefore, according to Altintas and Gorgen (2014), is to ensure that pre-service teachers are well prepared for the teaching profession. Teaching practice denotes the preparation of student teachers for teaching by practical training. Teaching practice grants student teachers experience in the actual teaching and learning environment. It grants student teachers experience in the actual teaching and learning environment (Ngidi & Sibaya, 2003:18). During teaching practice a student is supervised and evaluated not only by a supervisor allotted to him but also by a group of other lecturers who supervises him as a team as well as a staff of the school in which he is teaching. Teaching Practice aim to provide student teachers with practical experience in teaching and to enhance student teachers' abilities to further develop their knowledge and skills in the areas studied in their education courses, and to apply these in teaching pupils in school. Student teachers will be able to draw on a given scheme of work to produce lesson plans for all activities they plan and lead themselves. During Teaching Practice, student teachers will be able to work with individual pupils, and will also organise and teach groups and whole classes to facilitate learning in pupils. Student teachers will be able to monitor and evaluate the work produced by the pupils, adjusting teaching and future planning in the light of this information.

Student teachers are expected to evaluate each lesson taught, reflecting on their own professional development and demonstrating a sound understanding of the role of the teacher. Teaching Practice experience consists of an extensive period of school-based activities such as observations, discussions, planning, teaching, assessing, evaluating and reflecting. All of these activities are undertaken in a supervised working through mentoring. Teaching practice exercise is an assessment process whereby teacher-trainees are graded and rank their rate of improvements as they grow in their training journey. Teaching practice employ all the rules and regulations of assessment so as to make sure that the skills attained by learners in the field are recorded and ranked clearly. According to Anumaka (2016), with reference to Teacher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa (TESSA), the role of supervisors is to equip student teachers with skills and competencies to enable them to function effectively in the classroom. It is therefore, necessary for the college lecturers to be well acquainted with those skills of teaching practice supervision because the lecturer works closely with the student teacher on campus and in the field. Supervision is the assessment of student teachers during teaching practice. It involves the monitoring of progress of the student teachers, grading, predicting future achievements and motivating students (Chase, 1999). During teaching practice exercise the student teachers have to be assessed by their tutors (supervisors) in order to realize their strengths and weaknesses through the feedback given by their supervisors on what went on in the classroom during the teaching process in their classrooms. The assessment is an integral and prominent component of the entire teaching and learning process (McInnis & Devlin, 2002). Supervision exercise helps prospective teachers to make reflections after teaching hence can be able to refine their skills. Feedback from the practicing school, administration, supervisors and prospective teachers must be taken seriously, so that the teaching practice exercise can play an effective role to develop confidence, vision and competency in the prospective teachers teaching profession. Supervision of teaching practice is really the didactic element in teaching practice where the supervisor helps the student to develop and refine his/her teaching skills. In teacher education colleges in Zimbabwe, the

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tendency is to simultaneously supervise and assess the student in one visit. Shumba (1996) states, due to practical considerations, lecturers have to perform supervision and assessment functions simultaneously. Lecturers serve as both assessor and advisor. The fact that a tutor, grades and advises, creates in the student an element of fear which could become an obstacle to the student's effective acquisition of the role of a teacher. The tutor typically assigns a grade or mark for work undertaken by students or trainees. In grading students, sufficient evidence needs to be collected by the teacher or supervisor to enable the person assign accurate grades. It should be noted also that the corrections and feedback provided should be evident and informative so as to help students towards improvement in their teaching. Supervisors should be aware of this in roles imposed upon them by practical considerations and system constraints. Nyarawanda and Siyakwazi (1993: 151) contend that; after supervising or assessing a student's lesson, disagreements have sometimes arisen between the student and his/her tutor. These disagreements have at times ended in fiery verbal exchanges, and, on very rare occasions, physical exchanges. This approach has resulted in the supervision element suffering, while the assessment is viewed with suspicion by students who feel they are not fairly treated. Research has shown that a mentor and/or supervisor has considerable influence on the performance of the student teacher during teaching practice. To emphasize the importance of a mentor, Marais and Meier (2004) pointed out that in as much as student teachers expressed their experience of practical training through a range of interactions and relationships such as with staff, learners, fellow students, and university lecturers; a major prerequisite for learning is the student teachers' relationship with the supervisor. Smith (2010) observed that, as a result of the supervisor's attitude towards student teachers, student teachers tend to be very submissive because they are made to feel inferior and powerless. Some supervisors assume that students are already equipped by the university with the knowledge and skills required to teach and are therefore reluctant to assist them with the development of the basic skills they need. It was found in numerous studies that inadequacy in the supervisor's guidance and training reduces the effectiveness of practical teaching and can lead to a negative experience of teaching practice. (Marais and Meier 2004).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Teaching practice is the experience of working in-school placements. In addition to providing direct experience and an opportunity to apply newly acquired skills and knowledge, it is a major source of curriculum in the sense that they bring student teachers face to face with concrete situations. The underlying assumptions of this approach are that teaching can be considered as a form of problem solving and that student teachers learn best within cohesive academic and practical situations that allow them to understand and to master their environment. Teaching practice enables student teachers to acquire beginning teaching competencies. The purpose of teaching practice is to help prepare student teachers for the realities of student teaching by providing them with a clear understanding of the contexts for schooling. It plays a major role in bridging "theory and practice". Further, it offers the context for student teachers to develop their personal teaching competence (Smith & Lev-Ari, 2005) and to acquire and

develop the knowledge of teaching and professional content knowledge of teachers. It is through the teaching practice experience that student teachers develop important professional knowledge such as knowledge of people, knowledge of themselves, self-control and inter-personal sensitivity - all of which are important traits that would see them through their professional lives. In addition, it teaches skills such as independent problem-solving, working collegially with fellow teachers and developing professional values and attitude. Literature has revealed the importance of teaching practice in the training programmes of student teachers for their career (Gujjar, 2010). It serves as the most significant factor in the shaping of the student teachers' experiences. Nwanekezi, Okoli and Mezieobi (2011) point out that teaching practice is the first official opportunity for student teachers to be involved in actual teaching experience. They add that it enables the student teachers to be well prepared for their assumption of duty as professional, motivated, conscientious and efficient classroom teachers who will encourage the spirit of inquiry, creativity and intellectual development among the beneficiaries of the educational system. Assessment of teaching skills or competences constitutes an area of debate and development (Smith, 2010). This is because of the widespread dissatisfaction with the professional assessment procedures that are being used (Mattsson & Rorrison, 2011). Furthermore, Mattsson & Rorrison (2011) noted that many problems surrounding assessment practices arise out of an inability to reconcile traditional assessment practices with the kinds of learning outcomes that might be expected from the practical. According to Gujjar (2010), the positive perceptions in teaching practice is concerned with student teachers' growing knowledge and skillfulness, their increasing sense of efficacy, flexibility and spontaneity in their performance and interactions, and the awareness of having achieved reasonable levels of acceptance and recognition amongst the school community. On the negative side show that teaching practice is perceived as a demanding period which involves considerable amounts of distress, changes in psycho-physiological patterns, and an increasing sense of weariness and vulnerability. The study conducted by Malik and Ajmal in Pakistan (2010) found that student teachers perceived teaching practice as a stressful period which involved a heavy workload, being observed, assessed and evaluated by teachers, and inadequacy in classroom management. They identified supervision, workload other than teaching, and pedagogical and content knowledge as challenges many student teachers faced during teaching practice (Goh & Matthews, 2011). According to Caires and Almeida (2007:516), student teachers are concerned about three specific roles, which are: to be observed by their cooperating teachers when teaching and be provided with feedback; to be provided with moral support and encouragement; and lastly, to be provided with instructional seminars that enhance their teaching experience. The supervision process during teaching practice aims to promote good practice among students in classrooms and to affirm and acknowledge best practices. It seeks to improve the quality of teaching offered by students and it promotes self-reflection and continuous improvement in the development of pedagogic skills among students. It also allows students to get support from experienced professionals and practitioners. Personnel appointed for supervisory positions usually have the requisite knowledge and experience of pedagogical practices that enable them to make informed

and objective judgements on the teaching and learning observed in classrooms. These supervisors are constantly trained to ensure that they are in line with current trends in the curriculum as well as programme and module requirements (Kiggundu and Nayimuli 2009). Supervisors, lecturers and tutors are expected to respect students and to engage with them constructively and adopt a professional and supportive role in the interactions with students. During the school visits, supervisors give student teachers written and oral feedback. Improvements are commended, shortcomings highlighted and suggestions made on how to, for example, overcome anxiety, use nonverbal language to enhance their teaching and learning activities, and how to apply a variety of strategies to improve their teaching. School based mentors also observe the students' progress, behaviour and attitude at school, and assess the student teachers' practical teaching and learning activities according to specific guidelines given by course coordinators (Kiggundu and Nayimuli 2009).

Statement of the Problem

The study sought to analyze student teacher's perception towards teaching practice as an exercise for grading or improvement; assess student teachers' perception towards teaching practice supervisor treatment and examine student teacher's perception towards student-supervisor comments during discussion and after classroom assessment.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to investigate student teachers' perception and concern of teaching practice exercise taking place in Teachers' Colleges of Zimbabwe.

Research Questions

1. What are student teachers' perceptions towards their supervision by lecturers in Teachers' colleges of Zimbabwe?
2. How do student teachers perceive the grading of their teaching practice assessment by their lecturers in Teachers' Colleges of Zimbabwe?

METHODOLOGY

Design

This study employed a descriptive research design and utilized qualitative approaches. Qualitative approach enabled the researcher to describe the nature of supervisors' comments in order to understand the meanings and values students attach to them. Using the qualitative approach, the researcher sought the views of the student teachers about the supervisors' comments and how the comments help them to improve their teaching skills. The qualitative approach is in recognition of the diverse interpretations of quantitative assessment during the practicum. The nature of supervisors' comments and the extent to which marks awarded reflect comments were also coded in order to derive percentages, hence the use of quantitative approach.

Sample

Fifty-second-year Diploma in Education student teachers at United College of Education, Bulawayo, took part in the study. The students were purposefully sampled. In purposeful sampling, the researcher selects the participants because they possess particular characteristics or knowledge being sought

(Cohen et al. 2007). In this study, second-year Diploma in Education student teachers at United College of Education were selected because of their knowledge and experience in teaching practice.

Instrumentation

A questionnaire with mainly open-ended items was used in this study. The items focused on the student teacher's perception towards teaching practice as an exercise for grading or improvement and the student-supervisor comments during discussion after classroom assessment. Two education experts were asked to check on the relevance and clarity of the questionnaire items.

Procedure

A research assistant distributed and collected the questionnaire. She explained the purpose of the study to potential participants. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary and that they were free to withdraw from the study at any stage during the study.

Data Analysis

The data was content analyzed. Content analysis produces a relatively systematic and comprehensive summary of data. Recurrent instances were systematically identified and grouped together.

Ethical considerations

The researchers explained the purpose of the study to the participants. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary and that they could discontinue their participation if during the process they found that they were no longer interested in completing the process. Verbal consent was obtained from the participants. Respondents were asked not to write their names on the questionnaires to ensure confidentiality.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Student teachers' perceptions towards their supervision, during teaching practice, by lecturers in Teachers' colleges of Zimbabwe. The study sought to find out student teachers' perception towards their supervision by lecturers in Teachers' colleges of Zimbabwe. The findings indicated that majority of student teachers who participated in the teaching practice perceived that supervision by lecturers was to develop the students and that the lecturers wanted the student teachers to improve on their teaching skills.

The following are some of the responses from the participants:

Student teachers love feedback both oral and written. We can go home and look at it and reflect on the feedback and when we're planning we can refer back. (Participant 05)

From the supervision, I felt that student teachers should be prepared to assume some responsibility for their learning processes within the teaching practice by asking questions and for specific feedback related to their teaching (Participant 11)

There is need for constructive feedback from supervisors as it is essential in the supervision process as it helped student

teachers in their learning experiences (Participant 30).

I enjoyed being supervised by the lecturers, each time they visited me, the lecturers had enough time to discuss areas which I needed to improve, my strengths and weaknesses in teaching (Participant 42)

Some lecturers do not have time for me. They come in a hurry and attend to the lesson in a very short time and give a mark. They do not want to be asked questions about the lesson under observation. Some of them are shy even to give a comment. The College should do something about this. (Participant 28).

Some of the lecturers and mentors create fear in you and it becomes very difficult to stand in front of them teaching. (Participant 01)

Supervisors should be selected based on their content knowledge. Supervisors were made to supervise subject areas different from their own did not help at all (Participant 44)

From the above given responses, it can be deduced that student teachers experienced a number of difficult issues and tensions. The student teachers felt that the lecturers should be prepared to assume some responsibility for their learning processes within the practicum by asking questions for specific feedback related to their teaching practice and to assume responsibility for their role in supervising and guiding student teachers into the professional role of teaching by giving them time for discussions and guidance. Regular, clear, constructive feedback from lecturers was highlighted as essential in the supervision process as student teachers stated that it helped them in their learning experiences. The feedback was given through formal, informal, formative, or summative methods. Feedback is, as Hinett (1998) suggested, not just looking backwards, but also about looking ahead to improve performance and learning. Lecturers should be able to provide many experiences in teaching practice needed by student teachers to progress and develop with regular feedback given. In fact, it is important that during feedback in the supervision process between the lecturer and student teacher, goals are set that are specific and challenging. The importance of the relationship between the lecturer and student teachers during supervision at a school was shown to be vital and can only enhance and develop the teaching and learning skills of the student teachers. The student teachers pointed out that it needs to be positive, professional and collaborative involving open and frank communication. However, the existence of a strong reciprocal relationship between lecturer and student teacher is essential if constructive criticism be given and received more easily. Blunden (1994) commented that from a student teacher's viewpoint, good supervisors should be friendly, approachable, and supportive and have pedagogic knowledge and advice to give. How student teachers perceive the grading of their teaching practice assessment by their lecturers in Teachers' Colleges of Zimbabwe. As supervisors, lecturers are expected to observe how student teachers prepare, deliver the lesson and conduct themselves as members of teaching profession and are expected to advise the students on how to improve their teaching skills. As assessors, the lecturers are expected to grade the student teachers by assigning a score based on

how the student teacher performs. Considering that assessment grade is summative whereas supervision comments formative, it is not always possible for a single lecturer to objectively assess the student at the same time provide advice for improvement during the teaching practicum. On the other hand, supervision may influence the assigning of the assessment grade. This dual function of supervision and assessment raises a question about how the two are related to each other.

The student teachers had this to say:

Supervisors write marks and comments even before they discuss issues emanating from the teaching with trainee teachers. At the same time, the supervisors are often not friendly and that it seemed always as if they distanced themselves from the trainee teacher (Participant 40)

Supervisors practiced penultimate grading as opposed to stage by stage grading. The penultimate stage grading seemed acceptable if everything was correct, but not very informative when something was incorrect (Participant 33)

Some lecturers, wrote negative comments about their students' work; yet gave good grades. Lecturers generally did not look up on their written advice and instructions to students in order to derive a grade based on the observable student teaching performance (Participant 17).

The study revealed that the supervisors gave grades which did not reflect the comments made about the teaching performance of the student teacher. For example, grades were consistently lower than the good comments made about students' performance. This phenomenon highlights a mismatch between supervision and assessment and this might cause the whole assessment procedure less credible. This finding shows that the assessments of students' competence during practicum remain problematic. The student teachers indicated that they found step by step marking helpful and positive comments by their lecturers encouraging. It was established that student teachers felt that instructional and content-related comments gave them guidance on what was needed to be done and how it could be done. Student teachers disliked negative comments and found them to be discouraging.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings suggest an exposure of the student teachers to a learning environment in which they can contextualize the theoretical knowledge they gathered during their training. The environment further provides student teachers an opportunity to find out whether they are on the right career path. In this regard, it can therefore be said that teaching practice prepares the student teachers for the classroom. From the above discourse, it is clear that student teachers found it highly beneficial in the inculcation of practice skills and positioning them well for future teaching experience. Being friends to student teachers and giving professional coaching to them are some of the surest ways of helping student teachers teach with confidence and hope during their training period. It would also be very helpful if supervisors consciously make the effort to assess trainees comprehensively and not just a part of the lessons as some supervisors are in the habit of doing because

this may not give global outlook of the trainee teacher's classroom competencies. Feedback for trainee teachers helps them reorganize subsequent lessons and therefore it becomes imperative for supervisors to discuss delivered lessons with them (trainees) as a way of obtaining feedback for future remedial teaching. When these concerns are properly attended to, it would positively affect quality of teaching practice in the country.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that assessment should match the comments on areas needing improvement and meaningful accompanying comments should be made to guide student teachers in the desired directions during teaching practice, encourage student teachers to try harder or to give credit for work done well. The researcher felt that it is better to give assessment grade which are consistent with the supervision comments. If this is not possible, then the two functions, assessment and supervision must be separated by time or persons to do them.

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