

MENTOR AND TRAINEE ISSUES IN TEACHING PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, a criteria was adopted to report on the findings of the study conducted with teacher trainees from the Kano metropolitan, Kano state in North Western region of Nigeria. The challenges and prospects of teaching practice programmes was reviewed. A case study method in the form of qualitative descriptive research was used for the methodology and design of the research. A sample of 2 out of every 5 teacher trainees who had spent a minimum of 2 years from different tertiary institutions was randomly selected. The data analysis was based on research questions and guided by the theoretical framework of the study. The findings reveal that teaching practice for the 21st century is plagued by challenges that affect the success of the programmes. Some of the challenges identified are that teacher trainees use wrong criteria to select practice schools, teacher trainees are not adequately prepared for teaching practice, mentors are not sufficiently involved in teaching practice because they lack knowledge of mentorship, and the assessment and awarding of teaching practice marks are subjective.

INTRODUCTION

The fact that teaching practice is an exercise that is carried out by most colleges faculties of education in Nigeria and the rest of the world and is considered a necessary and valuable activity for the qualifications of an envisaged teacher, means that it needs to be conducted effectively. Over the past decade, considerable attention has been focused on exploring meaningful ways to prepare pre-service students for the teaching profession. With increased demands being placed on teachers to meet the needs of diverse students and to design classrooms and use methods of teaching that are learner-centred, the work of teaching has become more complex. Hence universities and colleges of education are exploring new approaches to teacher education. As most of the influential pedagogies in teacher education are those relating to supervised field experience, there is a need to study new models or improve existing models on how to assist pre-service teachers in the transition from the role of students to the role of beginning teachers.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The challenge of education has never been as great as it is today. These challenge include the requirements for capable graduate teachers, the educational policies of government and changes in socio-cultural values. All contributed to the demands placed on teachers for the benefit of Nigerian society (Hinchcliffe 2001). Teacher education studies, however, attest to a disparity between the theory of pre-service teacher programmes and the practice in the workplace (Cochram-Smith 1999; Cochran-Smith et al. 2011). Consequently, one of the main criticisms levelled at teaching practice is its purported inadequacy in enabling students to bridge the theory-practice gap (Kalantis et al. 2003). As the role of teachers has grown to include consultation,

collaborative planning and other kinds of joint work (Hargreaves 2000, 2012), there is a need for effective teacher education and relative teaching practice capable of bridging the gap between theory and practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Teaching practice in the 21st century is considered to be one of the most influential aspects of pre-service teacher education (Haigh 2001). McGee and Fraser (2001) emphasise that it is in teaching practice that student teachers are baptised with the experience to gain knowledge of how teachers go about the many and complex task involved in actual classroom practice. In as much as teaching practice is important in preparing pre-service teachers, it is not an easy path to take. Broadbent (1998) sees teaching practice as the most challenging experience for student teachers in the teacher education programme. In view of this challenging and problematic nature of teaching practice, it has in recent years initiated a significant increase in research studies on how the existing gap between theory and practice can be breached and on how the practice can best be undertaken. This is done in order for the practical context of teaching practice to be better established as it is believed to be the avenue that provides teachers with the ability to create successful teaching-learning didactical relationships in their classrooms (Tambo 2005). The need for teaching practice prompted to indicate that teaching practice provides the much-needed avenue and time frame for student teachers to actually apply their interactional classroom skills in an attempt to change their behaviour or teach something new (Bruner 1996). According to Ezewu et al. (1994), the term “teaching practice” has been accepted almost universally and uncritically by all concerned with the preparation of teachers and its use has embraced all the learning experiences of student teachers in schools.. Samuel (2010) expands on the lineage, and refers to teaching practice as far back as the first model of teacher education, the master-apprenticeship model, in which the novice teacher learns best through behavioural modelling, through imitating the expert teacher. The recent and universally accepted terminology of teaching practice forms part of the dominant model of teacher training in South Africa established prior to the demise of apartheid, namely the applied science model which states that the novice teacher must first learn the theoretical basis of the discipline and then seek the context within which he or she will enact and apply the theory in practice (Samuel 2010). This model is also dominant in many other professions. According to Lewin and Stuart (2003), the model presumes that knowledge of the discipline base will provide the foundation for practice. According to Cohen et al. (2001), since the establishment of training colleges in the middle and late 19th century, teaching practice in one form or another has remained an unchallenged, essential element in the preparation of generations of teachers. Unchallenged, that is until quite recently, the concept of teaching practice has been subjected to close scrutiny and found to be somewhat anachronistic and ambiguous. In the ambiguity of teaching practice, it has three major connotations. The first is the practice of teaching skills and assuming the role of a teacher. This embraces the whole range of experiences that students go through in school and the practical aspects of the course as distinct from theoretical studies which we presumably have in mind when we first speak about a student’s teaching practice mark. The second is when we describe a student as being

on teaching practice. And the third is when we encourage the need to integrate theory and practice in the education of teachers.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This paper was written under the guides of the following research questions: 1. What are the challenges in the management of teaching practice in the North Western region of Nigeria? 2. What are the strategies to curb the challenges inherent to the exercise?

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study was based on a descriptive qualitative research approach. Qualitative research was viewed as a preferred approach to this study as it provided the researchers and the study with an opportunity to understand the social phenomenon of the participants' perspectives on the issues in the teaching practice. A sample of 20 student teachers was selected randomly from 200 student teachers who have spent a minimum of 2 years at the teachers training institution.

METHODS

Fifteen (15) mentors to the 20 student teachers were purposefully selected based on the criteria of being mentors to student teachers for at least two years. The participating schools of the respective mentors to the student teachers automatically became part of the study. Five (5) supervisors from the teachers training institution were selected based on them being assessors to the randomly selected 20 student teachers. Two broad processes of data collection were used. The first was the collection of theoretical data which was done through a literature study. The second was the collection of the empirical data in which the researcher used document analysis and in-depth individual interviews were conducted with mentors and college assessors and with student teachers on the challenges they experienced as they undertook their roles in teaching practice. The focus was on the split of the challenges into two parts: those challenges in the organization of the practice and those in relation to the participants in the practice. Observations were made about live classroom situations of student teachers to evaluate the nature and extent of mentor assistance and the relationship with student teachers. Documents such as student teachers' portfolios, assessment forms, permission letters and practicing schools' reports on teaching practice were reviewed for information relating to the challenges of teaching practice.

DATA ANALYSIS

The procedure began with the naming and categorization of phenomena through close examination of data. As such, the movement from one stage of analysis to another was a gradual and critical process as the bulk of the analysis took the form of written language.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The researchers had a moral and professional obligation to be ethical and objective, even when research subjects were unaware of or unconcerned about ethics (Neuman 2003). Adhering to this, the researchers ensured that those being interviewed were absolutely clear about their right to an explanation of aims, procedures, purposes, and consequences of the research, publication possibilities and the right to refuse to take

part or withdraw at any stage. The participants were given the confidence to make the decision of acting voluntarily and making their decisions based on the fullest possible information (Briggs & Coleman 2007). The researchers protected participants from harm and violation of privacy, while at the same time maintaining the integrity of the research and its ethical standards. Participants were informed that they may withdraw their participation at any time without any penalty to them.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Challenges in the Management of Teaching Practice in the North- Western part of Nigeria

PREPARING FOR TEACHING PRACTICE:

One of the most crucial factors in the teaching practice situation for the student teacher is lesson preparation. That is finding as many possible strategies for formulating aims and objectives purposefully, selecting appropriate content, deciding on the best method of presentation, and writing actual lesson notes. This stage is considered crucial but can be much easier if a student teacher has studied his teaching concepts effectively. Farrant (1990) observed and recognized teaching practice and confirmed that all practice teaching, as far as student teachers are concerned, is in a sense experimental and as such requires thorough lesson preparation beforehand if it is not to be a waste of time. And this preparation starts off with observation. In the case of teacher education in the North-Western part of Nigeria, most of the participants indicated to have had theoretical lessons at the colleges in modules that oriented them regarding professional studies toward becoming teachers before going out on teaching practice. This indicates that preparation is done before teaching practice.

A participant indicated thus, “We were taught in modules in the colleges on teaching strategies, portfolios, and how to design a lesson plan before we went out on teaching practice.” Another participant indicated that “after being taught in the colleges on the theory of how to teach, my first outing for teaching practice was for close to a month in which I only did observations and then teach in my practicing school.” Supporting this view, Jenkins et al. (2005) confirm that preliminary observation is essential for effective planning of teaching practice as this affords the student teacher a quick means to get acquainted with his or her task and then to know how to tackle it continuously. Despite the indication of a variety of strategies used to prepare student teachers for teaching practice, some of the participants still felt that the preparation was not enough for the experience in the field. A participant expressed dissatisfaction with the preparation of teaching practice. Thus “we were actually taught in the colleges before going out on teaching practice, but what I saw out there was completely different from what we were taught; the theory does not match the practice; I was embarrassed. I think we are not properly oriented as to the expectations in the practicing schools. Worse still, I did not even have time for preliminary visits and observations.” Supporting this contention, many of the participants responded thus, “Yeah!! He is right.” To make this opinion clear, another participant indicated thus, “I was asked to start teaching on the second day I stepped my foot in the practicing school without having enough background information on what was going on in the school.” To emphasize the need and importance of observation in preparing for teaching practice, Houston (2007)

mentioned that a student teacher can learn a great deal from such expert knowledge and personal experience while on observation. Smith, (2002) confirms that observation provides students with ingredients for the preparation of lesson plans and lesson notes. Participants' responses reveal without a doubt that the preparation of student teachers for teaching practice has its challenges. These challenges are seen to originate from the different stages of the process, i.e. from the colleges to the practicing schools. The content of the modules in the theoretical preparation is lacking as regards teaching practice as a core topic. General orientation to teaching practice which is different from the theoretical preparation is inadequate. The next stage of the process which is at the practicing schools is also challenged. Staff at practicing schools lack orientation in the activities and procedures to be undertaken by student teachers while on teaching practice. This is why student teachers are allowed to teach immediately they arrive there without having experienced observation. An analysis of records of lessons taught confirms that student teachers start teaching upon arrival at practicing schools.

MENTORS' INVOLVEMENT AND PARTICIPATION IN TEACHING PRACTICE

Mentors, also commonly called cooperating teachers, are generally considered to be the holders of more knowledge and are supposed to share that with student teachers. But this does not mean that they too can't learn about certain aspects from student teachers. Of course real teachers are lifelong learners. That is why mentors are supposed to create a rapport with students that will ease a two-way helping communication. Haigh (2001) says that "mentors are expected to promote the confident practice of student teachers and acknowledge themselves as learners". McGee and Fraser (2001) in their working with teachers in practice assert that "mentor teachers are responsible for the instructional programme and also for guiding the activities of the student teachers". Therefore to function as a mentor, one must be qualified and experienced in the teaching field. Although some participants affirm that mentor teachers are effective in the undertaking of their roles of guiding, directing and providing professional and emotional support to student teachers during teaching practice, the findings further reveal complaints that mentors are ignoring and abandoning student teachers to themselves while on teaching practice, thus increasing their workload (Fletcher & Barrett, 2004). A review of leave application documents by educators during an academic year of practicing schools reveals that most teachers (mentors) applied for and were issued leave while student teachers were at their schools (Gravett & Geyser 2009). This indicates that student teachers are seen as relieving some of the workload at no extra cost. This finding is further confirmed by interviews with supervisors who indicate to have hardly met mentors of students when they visited the schools to assess students. Notwithstanding, the paper further reveals that mentors are stereotyped and subjective in allowing student teachers to try new teaching strategies in their classrooms, especially those that they are not knowledgeable about. It is for this same reason that some mentors indicate that student teachers are contributing to the drop in performance in their schools (Dolan, 2012). A participant indicated that "my mentor was very supportive; he always motivated and guided my practice. He was very consistent during my lessons and he gave me proper orientation throughout my practice." Another participant indicated that "my mentor did not do anything to help

me; he was hardly around while I presented my lessons. He abandoned the class and his entire workload to me when I arrived. It was the principal who from time to time assisted me." The view of this participant was further confirmed when the researcher assessed the portfolios of most of the student teachers which contained assessment forms to be completed by mentors. This revealed that most portfolio files had forms not completed by mentors. Another participant respondent portrayed some mentors as not qualified for the role.

"My mentor did not seem to know what she was doing; she instead helped to frustrate and confuse me; she even embarrassed me in front of the learners when I tried out something she was not familiar with in the learning area; we never had any constructive discussions after my lessons; all she did was criticise everything without orientating me as to how to do it properly." Hsu (2005) mentions that weak mentors deny student teachers the opportunities to learn potentially powerful lessons. Combined efforts of key mentors, a supportive environment, a reflective mentoring process, and peer support contribute to the overall success of student teachers.

ROLES OF INQUEST FOR SUPERVISORS DURING TEACHING PRACTICE

Supervision is inevitable in any teaching practice exercise. It is where correction and motivation are given to student teachers which in turn cause the lesson to be a success. Student teachers build a firm and better base for their teaching experience from the feedback of supervision. Wenger (1998) and Korthagen, (2004) mentions that it is through the supervisory process that student teachers begin to construct their personal knowledge and theories about teaching practice. Undoubtedly, supervisors are also responsible for organising critique sessions at the end of the day showing the students' weak points and suggesting changes that will work. Supervision was viewed by Cohen et al.(2002) as a key part of the work of associate teachers engaged with student teachers by virtue of their expertise and experience to help them develop new professional knowledge and skills as well as to improve and change practice. This paper reveals that supervisors are not consistent in their duties as supervisors. Participants' responses reveal that lecturer supervisors from the colleges do not pay regular visits to practicing schools. Student teachers indicated to never have been visited by any supervisor not even once, and yet their visits and roles contribute heavily to the success of the practice. A review of the assessment forms in the portfolio files of student teachers further confirms this opinion as most of the participants' files had lecturer assessment forms which are not completed. A participant was recalled to have indicated that "I was never supervised or assessed by any lecturer from the college; well, for the person who was supposed to assess me from the college, he called that he is coming and wanted to know where my school is situated and when I told him, he said it's too far and that was the end of the story." This response revealed that the distance to the practicing school may have an impact on the teaching practice.

LOCATIONS OF PRACTICING SCHOOLS

Most student teachers affirmed that they are undertaking their practice in remote areas which are a far distance from the college. The impact of the location of these schools on teaching practice is that those student teachers who complained about never being

assessed by lecturers are those practising from distant schools. Apart from lecturers not assessing student teachers in distant schools, other potential dangers in these schools include a lack of human resources to train these student teachers as expected by the programme. Some of these schools are understaffed and lack adequate infrastructure. With all these disadvantages in some of these schools, what would prompt student teachers to want to practise in these schools? Probably because the criteria those student teachers choose in selecting schools to undertake teaching practice are poor.

CRITERIA FOR SELECTING PRACTICING SCHOOLS

The findings of this paper indicate that most student teachers select practicing schools based on familiarity with the area and staff of the school and that this familiarity is a criterion for selecting practicing schools. And this is not because they think the schools are well resourced and equipped to render the best of the practice. Others select practicing schools based on job opportunities; that is the hope of working in the schools upon completion of their studies. A background check on the student teachers and their respective practicing schools reveals that most student teachers undertake teaching practice in their home areas, and for those who live on campus residences and are from other provinces of the country they select schools that are close to the college. A participant responded with, "This is where I grew up and I am familiar with the teachers in this school because this is where I schooled; I want that and if I can be recruited after teaching practice, let it be here; also, I don't need transport to school because it is close to where I live." These criteria indicate a complete lack of consideration for training college's proximity to the college (which is why some don't make it) and the need for good mentors to see that the objective of the practice is achieved. It also fosters a lack of objectivity in mark allocation as mentors and student teachers are bonded in an unfamiliar relationship to the practice. Rather, practicing schools should be selected based on the required qualities to enhance the practice.

CONCLUSION

Effective teaching practice is in constant practice. It is therefore the foundation of teaching. Hence a teacher who had practiced teaching skills while on practice is likely to teach better. Teaching practice is real professionalism in the training of teachers. It is the avenue to what is referred to as active learners' participation in problem-solving in outcomes-based education. Learners encounter live experiences in teaching. In Nigeria, no student gains his or her certificate as a teacher without successfully going through the process of teaching practice. Teaching practice at the colleges and Universities in Nigeria is carefully and well designed to meet the goals of teaching nationwide. Despite the good structuring of this practice, it is being ruptured by some challenges which are hidden and need to be unveiled. Much has been done within the schools and faculties to curb most of these challenges affecting teaching practice as in the building of a good relationship between universities and practicing schools. But much still has to be done in relation to the findings of this study and in line with the recommendations proposed. Otherwise, there is most likely the possibility of a collapse in effective teaching practice in the future.

RECOMMENDATION

Approaches to coordinating, managing and redesigning teaching practice should be enforced and revised to take account of the challenges that student teachers, mentors and practicing schools face as they undertake teaching practice.

Selecting Practicing Schools

Practicing schools should be selected taking into consideration the availability of well trained and disciplined staff and students who will mentor learners according to the expected outcomes of teaching practice. Once a practicing school is well disciplined and has well-trained staff and resources, most of the other aspects of the practice will fall into place. The choice of a poor or perhaps trapped school for teaching practice risks exposing student teachers to numerous challenges ranging from poor mentoring to a lack of cooperation and support. It is therefore recommended that the criteria for selecting practicing schools be the responsibility of the college and not student teachers.

Provision of Training to Mentors

Mentors of student teachers during teaching practice should receive training in their mentorship responsibilities. Not only should mentors be trained, but all those involved in the management of teaching practice should be trained as regards to their responsibilities. Student teachers should be further oriented as to the expectations of teaching practice before they set out on teaching practice.

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