

Pre-Service Teachers' Experiences of Teaching Practice: Case of South African University

Prem J. Heeralal and Anass Bayaga*

Faculty of Education, School of Initial Teacher Education, East London, South Africa
E-mail: Pheerale@ufh.ac.za, *abayaga@ufh.ac.za

KEYWORDS Pre-Service Teachers. Teaching Practices. South Africa

ABSTRACT The current study examined faculty of education students' experiences of the quality of teaching practice. The intent was to determine how to equip prospective teachers to effectively cope with feelings and common problems they faced during teaching practice. A qualitative research design was adopted using a case study. Semi-structured interview schedule was administered, while content analysis was used for analysing the data. The sample included forty- three pre-service teachers in a South African university. The data revealed that education pre-service teachers need to pay attention to (1) flexibility in time of course participation, (2) flexibility in content in the course, (3) flexibility in instructional approaches and learning materials, and lastly (4) flexibility in course delivery and logistics.

INTRODUCTION

Much has been said about the importance of teaching practices in in-service teachers education (Marais and Meier 2004; Quick and Sieborger 2005). Sadly, a component which received little attention is about the quality of pre-service teaching practice (Kiggundu 2007; Hill et al. 2008). Traditionally, the quality of universities' faculties around the world has been judged from indicators such as entrance standards, reputation rankings, and/or the presence of distinguished famous graduates (Huber et al. 2005). But, when it comes to education faculties across universities, the aforementioned expectations are relatively skewed. Recent research suggests a "... range of experiences to which student educators are exposed when they work in classrooms and schools" (Kiggundu 2007: 25). The author remarked that "one of the aims of teaching practice is to provide opportunities for student teachers to integrate theory and practice (Kiggundu 2007: 27). This is because, quality in education is not only characterised by those indicators (Huber et al. 2005). Indeed, one most important indicator for the training of any professional teacher is *Teaching Practice* (Nancy 2007). For this reason, judging quality of such a faculty is difficult, because the needs and expectations of teachers vary (Sternberg 2008). This is particularly true if the university attracts its cohort from a rural setting (Lang 2007). On this account, researchers suggest that quality of *Teaching Practice* is a relative term that reflects individual values, perceptions, and experiences and geographically controlled (Sternberg 2008).

To address issues of quality of *Teaching Practice*, educational scholars recognise the need to identify measurable correlates of *Teaching Practice*. Without measurable correlates, the meaning of this complex concept can easily be confused. If the meaning of quality *Teaching Practice* is not clear, then our efforts to enhance it will not likely be successful. Undoubtedly, *Teaching Practice* is often perceived to be of lower value in rural settings than their counterparts in urban settings (Shulman 2004). In fact, recently, it was noted that "... the effectiveness of the teaching practice can be diminished or eroded by geographical distance" (Kiggundu 2007: 25). The author added that "... isolation, low and uneven levels of teacher expertise, and a highly structured (rigid) system of schooling and teacher training" all impact negatively to teaching practice (Kiggundu 2007: 25). Perhaps, reasons ranging from infrastructure, transport, the will to accept rural environment and support (Seeley and Adler 2008). Additionally, "research has shown that a mentor and/or supervisor has considerable influence on the performance of the student teacher during teaching practice (Kiggundu 2007: 28). Ironically, recent debates have fuelled a heightened emphasis that the quality of *Teaching Practice* should be one universal concern among stakeholders in education (Nelson 2007). Even so, local researchers acknowledged that the current institutional culture is not supportive of rural teaching in South Africa (Kiggundu 2007). Past research cited candidate teacher's resistance to rural settings as a major obstacle to the success of *Teaching Practice*. In fact, this is par-

ticularly true with pre-service teachers (Drent and Meelissen 2008). Sadly, critiques have lamented over such experiential difficulty particularly for ideal teacher (Paul 2004). In fact, there has been an outline of an ideal teacher.

The ideal teacher as suggested is one who is working diligently towards a firm grasp of basic pedagogical skills (Drent and Meelissen 2008). That teacher must be adequate – thus actualised or realised himself/herself. This suggests that an essential characteristic of a good teacher is an adequate self. Even, past research noted characteristics of an adequate personality which constitutes a good teacher as: (1) a positive self image (2) willing to accept others as well as self (3) identifying in a positive way with others, and (4) being well informed (Very 1990: 202). These characteristics contribute to developing pedagogical skill and are further enhanced during teaching practice particularly in rural environment. Practice teaching is an integral component of the curriculum of teacher training. Consequently, it grants student teachers three stages and experience in the actual teaching and learning environment (development of teachers).

The first argument is that of survival stages – these are the concerns about one's adequacy and survival as a teacher (Drent and Meelissen 2008). While, there seem to be much written on adequacy related to in-service teachers, not the same is true about survivability of students for pre-service teaching. For instance other factors such as- being liked by pupils, about supervisors' opinions, about being observed, evaluated, praised and failed- are taken for granted. Additionally, not much is known about feelings evoked by one's status as a student. It is thus lamented that pre-service teachers have more concerns of this type than in-service teachers (Drent and Meelissen 2008).

Secondly, there have been discussions lately on teacher situation concerns of pre-service teachers (Leach 2005). These are concerns about having to work with too many students or having too many non-instructional duties. Yet, the discussion excludes time pressures, inflexible situations, lack of instructional materials, related to pre-service teachers. These frustrations seem to be evoked by teaching situations. In fact, studies have long identified that pre-service teachers have more concerns of this type of indicators than in-service teachers (Leach 2005; Drent and Meelissen 2008). Even, with these past researches,

there was no evidential for their claims. Additionally, almost all of the past and present studies were foreign based. This is not to discount on the context, since the various studies gave the basis for the present, but to contextualise the present in a rural South African University.

The third and final stage is learner concerns- although, past studies suggest that these are concerns about (1) recognising social and emotional needs (2) about the inappropriateness of some curriculum material for certain students (3) about being fair to pupils and (4) about tailoring content to individual students (Leach 2005; Mtika 2008). The studies did not include pre-service teachers (Mtika 2008).

In view of the above, it is imperative that experiences of pre-service teachers be conducted to investigate the context as aforementioned. Dealing with and overcoming barriers as early as possible particularly with pre-service teachers will contribute to addressing the issues of economic problems (that is, attracting and retention of pre-service teachers), ergonomic problems (that is, job fatigue, burn-out and job satisfaction) and psychological problems (that is, stress, anxiety, anger and depression). Other studies have even indicated that as a result of inexperience in dealing with challenges, the behaviour exhibited by beginning (pre-service) teachers appear to be a lack of understanding of the contestations discussed. This leads them to feeling confused, frustrated and isolated.

Teaching Practice at 'Case' – Case Analysis

To qualify as a teacher in South African University, one has to finish undergraduate study programme related to teaching. Most programmes last for four years. The study programme offers courses in language, mathematics and other related fields. Teaching practice methodology course is offered as a year course from 1st to 4th year of study. Lectures and seminars are taught on a weekly basis, while teaching practice is organised sometimes in one block (six weeks) in July - October (cf. methodology for details). Students are assigned to one school to do classroom observation and teaching. *Teaching practice* implies first observing the mentor teach a certain number of lessons and then the trainees' own teaching. Whenever possible, the trainees observe a variety of lessons (different age of learners, different levels of knowledge). During

observation periods the trainees fill in the variety of observation sheets they get from the teacher trainer (host teacher and the university). Observation sheets contain classroom observation tasks the aim of which is to raise the trainees' awareness about some aspects of the teaching and learning processes.

Additionally, the school experience file has assessment form(s) which require(s) that a student provide names of principal, teachers, dates of school experience and visits by lecturers, provide class information including class timetables, classroom layout and term planners, include a list of the names of learners indicating date of birth, gender, primary language, family circumstances and after care. Next students are required to pay attention to record of learner's progress. This requires them to describe the performance and development social, cognitive, physical and moral development of four contrasting learners. This normally includes a list of selected learners, included examples of selected children's work with accompanying critique and evaluation. It is also a requisite that a student motivates why learners were required to produce the work included and how this work informed learning and teaching. In most cases, students are also required to provide assessment rubric for mathematics and language units/modules taught (focusing on 6 learners).

The third section includes planning, preparation and assessment. This requires that students provide a grid of daily teaching and co-curricular involvement. Also, they prepare lesson plans 2 hours or half the lessons per day. Then the learners are assessed and explained how learners were assessed during the lesson. Also required is to evaluate lesson plans and teaching and provide evidence of co-curricular involvement and reflect critically on learning gained. The final section requires a summative self-evaluation. Thus, provision of copies of previous years summative self-evaluation, three personal measurable and achievable goals at start of *Teaching Practice*, provide reflection of own teaching strengths, provide reflection on challenges and areas of improvement, comments on influences of educational theory on own practice.

The journal has to provide evidence of and reflect critically on learning gained in terms of: hopes, fears, expectations, observations and issues, special days, new learning and experiences, teaching ideas and examples, particular learners,

feedback from lecturers and links between theory and practice and growth and development as a teacher.

Lastly, when planning the trainees follow the model of the planning process that is suggested by the teacher trainer.

Following the aim of the paper is to investigate pre-service teachers' experiences and personal views. The study was based on the results of a semi-structure interview schedule that was submitted to the students at the end of teaching practice sessions in 2010. The results provide data on the difficulties students had with certain aspects of teaching and the level of help they received from the school.

Purpose of the Study

Following the aforementioned contestations (*cf. Background of Study and Nature of Teaching Practice*), the current study examined pre-service teachers' experiences during teaching practice. It did this by determining how to equip prospective teachers to more effectively cope with feeling and approaches with common problems and issues that they face during teaching practice. This is needed to inform planning of teaching practice and to refocus and reaffirm the commitment to the teaching of organisation and management skills.

This paper sought to identify some of the barriers that pre-service teachers experience and propose ways in which they can be overcome so that practice teaching benefits the professional development of the student teacher.

PROCEDURE

A qualitative research design using a case study was adopted. Semi-structured interviews with all student teachers were used to collect the data while content analysis was used for analysing the data. For the four year Bachelor of Education degree that comprises 480 credits, 100 credits are allocated to practice teaching. For the practice teaching course, students spend one day per week over a period of twelve weeks in the first semester and a period of six consecutive weeks in the second semester, per year, at schools (*cf. Nature of Teaching Practice*). Students choose, from a list of schools, the school that they do their school experience in. For the practice teaching to be meaningful to students in de-

veloping teaching competencies, barriers that they experience need to be minimal or overcome completely.

Data and Case Selection

For the purpose of the current paper, final year Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) students as well as Post-graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) students, from a South African university were used as respondents. The population size was sixty-nine, (69). Of the population of sixty-nine, forty-three students (sixty two percent - 62% response rate), volunteered to participate in the study and responded in writing to an open ended question posed to them relating to the experiences during practice teaching. The data was gathered after the students had completed their practice teaching.

Instrumentation

The instrument consisted of items which aimed to discover students' experiences in their initial training in terms of difficulties they had experienced with teaching and the level of help they had received on teaching. It also attempted to discover students' personal views on the teaching practice. In this part, students were encouraged to give their views on the teaching practice as a learning experience and to give suggestions for improving the teaching practice activity.

RESULTS

Responses to the instrument was analysed using content analysis. However, themes that emerged were grouped in pupils, behaviour, with mentors' behaviour, and with own behaviour. The biggest group of complaints concerned pupils' behaviour in the classroom. For purpose of ensuring validity, the instrument was re-examined by colleagues to ensure that statements of ambiguity are reduced to the minimal.

This section examines the results of the study. Students expressed various complaints which can be grouped into those concerned with pupils' behaviour, with mentors' behaviour, and with own behaviour. The biggest group of complaints concerned pupils' behaviour in the classroom. Students mostly complained about the pupils' lack of interest for what was going on in the classroom. Another group of comments concerned the

teachers, thus their attitude towards pupils and towards student teachers. Students mostly complained about teachers who neglected weaker students during classroom interaction. The third group of complaints concerned mentors' attitude towards teachers. Students complained about mentors not being cooperative and not providing required help. One student wrote "...mentors were just looking forward to getting done with the students' teaching practice as soon as possible" (student 4). There were some aspects of own behaviour that frustrated students such as concerns about not doing everything properly and on time, nervousness, stage fright.

Respondents were asked what in their experience formed the most significant concern of the teaching practice. Students reported that teaching practice brought considerable amount of experience to their study, and expected to be able to apply the information immediately (student 1). On the other hand, it was reported that teaching practice tended to be very busy with other commitments and generally had poorer academic preparation (student 7). Student 1 had this to support that claim:

The file and journal that we have to keep, takes up a lot of time, and most of it is irrelevant. Having to type out lessons every day is time consuming. What we are taught at varsity is not relevant in the classroom (Student 1).

Student 1's lamentation was re-echoed by student 6 who suggested that:

The lack of knowledge about the school and what is expected of us in the beginning. The stress to perform distinctive work from the lecturers places pressure on the students. File and journal require too much of work from the student. Lack of understanding from lecturers: if tasks cannot be done (Student 6).

As for courses, students indicated that they did more preparation for teaching practice courses and were better organised. But, student claimed learner were not used to doing group work. The pre-service teachers noted that they were frustrated by the amount of interruptions during the day.

A concern which was prominent was lesson planning. Lesson planning was a tedious task. In fact, their concern was that "...introductory lessons may need more input, but not every lesson in between" (student 11). "There is so much that goes into this file and at this level where we have other expectations, the file appears unnecessary"

“So much time and effort goes into these files” (student 5 echoed). Time could be spent on something more important as they argued. The four learners who are assess/observe for the duration was a matter of concern. On a positive note, students indicated that a hands on activity was appropriate in *Teaching Practice*. Nonetheless, others included uncertainty about a strike that plunged the process of teaching experience, unwilling and unhelpful mentors, ill-disciplined children, not enough time and having to do a daily journal. Student 14 specifically noted that “...infrastructure – lack of basic facilities at the school for multi-grade classes. In student 5’s view, not knowing everything about the school thus the “...paper work, the amount of administrative work required ...” was frustrating. Number of hours required to teach, when there is no time was equally a challenging issue. It was noted that some “... host teachers are not always helpful” (student 9). Reason being that too much importance was placed on the file. Sports which was a component of the school activities was not easy to do at school as they have limited activities, therefore this section in the file was not properly done. In most cases student note that they were not taught to do an attendance register or reports, suggesting that “...the time of the year that we visit schools is not good as learners are busy with assessment” (student 7).

Although, students did their best to complete their work, it was noted that they were “...given enough time to complete everything...” required as commented by Student 13. Nonetheless, they agreed that as teachers they have a huge workload. In addition to time and flexibility, a student noted that:

Not enough time to teach. Host teacher does all other things and my teaching is pushed aside or rushed. Doing the stupid file – useless information wanted in the file that wastes time. Not being given the opportunity to teach in a different district – limits me as I don’t intend teaching in East London. Journals should not be written everyday. Confidentiality not always followed – other students discuss what is said at school and varsity. Varsity not fully aware of a real school day – expect us to work magic some days, and do what they expect but we don’t have the time. Not enough time to do research during Teaching Practice (Student 14).

It was argued that authorities (university and mentor) were not flexible enough to fit in with

the school as the school has other commitments. The particular concern was teaching for the whole day when the host teacher needs to do other things with their class. Students also argued that they felt that they should not have to stay at school for the same amount of hours that the school allocates for teachers as they “... have to plan for the next day and staying at school is a waste of time” (student 14). These frustrations pertained to getting all the “...things for the files such as prospectus, policies...” (student 14). This also included a reflection of four lessons in the file each week.

Students gave suggestions for improving several areas. These areas are students’ teaching opportunities, teaching and learning conditions, cooperation between students and the teacher trainer, cooperation between school and university and organisation of teaching practice. Students had this to say about Lecturers. It was noted that “lecturers are not transparent enough to explain to us clearly why we are doing this and that” (student 15). The student added that “...we are just told how to do it, which gives us no idea.” Amongst other frustrations included discipline. “Discipline is something I am not good at, my grade 5 learners frustrate me, they are too comfortable around me, they make noise all the time” (student 15). This is in sharp contrast with a Gauteng study which highlighted that “learners were well behaved and actively participated in the class activities” (Kiggundu 2007: 32).

DISCUSSION

Although, previous studies suggest that teaching practice is interesting because students are able to apply what they studied (Huber et al. 2005; Kiggundu 2007; Mtika 2008). One main concern of teaching practice in the current study is to adjust to student needs and interests and that learning would be more likely to have long-term usefulness to students. Students involved in teaching practice should be encouraged to design their courses with student needs in mind to capitalise on this central quality issue. If student needs are not met, it makes little difference whether the process of delivering instruction is of high quality, this is consistent with recent study (Mtika 2008).

Students’ greater disparities seem to be on efforts to enhance teaching practice quality. Thus, quality of teaching practice should be enhanced

on all factors by systematic analysis and improvement of work processes. Data from this study suggest that emphasis should be placed on making host teachers available to students, being sure that courses represent instructors' best efforts, using a variety of teaching methods and assessment procedures, encouraging students to use support structures that are available to them, and finding ways to enhance interaction during teaching practice. This is consistent with previous study which indicated that "majority of respondents also revealed that teaching practice motivated them to teach and that they received 'constant guidance from their mentors'" (Kiggundu 2007: 30). The findings in the current study are affirmed the previous study.

With regards to their experiences of the question 'what can we do to improve the process of delivering teaching practice? Clearly our (universities) focus should not be on administrative work (Drent and Meelissen 2008). Student cannot be expected to do this successfully without support. However, research and data concluded that students lacked competence and confidence in teaching practice which impacted on them. This view was recently noted by a study which affirmed that some respondents expressed negative experiences with their mentors (Kiggundu 2007: 31). Resources must be directed to student's development programs that give hands-on experience with the technologies and methodologies that will ultimately be used to deliver courses. The support must be ongoing. Thus students can not be expected to embrace teaching practice if the methodologies constantly get in the way of their teaching and of their students' learning.

The main factor limiting the delivery forms has been the difficulties associated with communication among the administration. Since administration plays a critical part in teaching and learning, this impediment has traditionally minimised and limited the learning opportunities for the teaching practice. Although, it is important for students to be competent in all of the aforementioned, having to include all aspects in one school experience session of six weeks places an enormous burden on students. The issues are further exuberated by the fact that the second year students will have to repeat the procedure in the third and fourth years of their studies. The burden on students could be lightened if a developmental approach is used where in progressive

years specific or different aspects are targeted which are not expected of student in subsequent years. Considering the volume and depth of information that has to be collected and presented in the file, by the student, during a six week period of practice teaching, it would be reasonable to concur with students that the file is a serious barrier or source of frustration that can adversely affect the professional development of the student. Hence, having further consequences as the student becomes a fully fledged teacher. Such consequences could include making a long term career choice, thus suggesting that pre-service teachers' experiences have an influence on decisions that the individual has to make regarding in-service performance and length of service in the teaching profession.

This study concludes and affirms that the experience and challenges faced by pre-service teachers are attributable to factors concerning the preparation during training, relationship with school-based mentors, induction into the school, attitude of other educators, involvement in other activities, learner discipline lack of resources and implementation of OBE. The current study also resonates with the previous author's findings, which concluded that it is important that teacher trainers be made aware of the factors that militate against positive teaching practice experience to which end teacher education will have to be reconceptualised to assist student teachers to achieve the desired outcomes from the teaching practice in a more comprehensive manner (Kiggundu 2007).

CONCLUSION

The current study examined pre- service teachers training during teaching practice. The intent was to determine how to equip prospective teachers to effectively cope with experience and approaches they faced during teaching practice. The data suggested that education faculties need to pay attention to (1) flexibility in time of course participation (2) flexibility in content of *Teaching Practice* (3) flexibility in instructional approaches and learning and (4) flexibility in course delivery and logistics.

It is clear that for a teaching practice to be considered truly flexible, it requires significant freedoms and controls for the learners. Much of what is currently done by university is far from being flexible in many of these areas. However,

it requires astute use of methodologies that are possible within the existing boundaries of university *Teaching Practice*.

REFERENCES

- Drent M, Meelissen M 2008. Which factors obstruct or stimulate teacher educators to use ICT innovatively? *Computers and Education*, 51(1): 187-199.
- Hill H, Ball DL, Schilling S 2008. Unpacking pedagogical content knowledge: Conceptualizing and measuring teachers' topic specific knowledge of students. *Journal for Research in Mathematics Education*, 39(4): 372- 400.
- Huber MT, Hutchings P 2005. *The Advancement of Learning: Building the Teaching Commons*. NY: Jossey-Bass.
- Kiggundu E 2007. Teaching practice in the Greater Vaal triangle area: The student teachers' experience. *Journal of College Teaching and Learning*, 46: 25-36.
- Lang JM 2007. Did you learn anything? *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 9: 38-59.
- Leach J 2005. Do new information and communication technologies have a role to play in achieving quality professional development for teachers in the global south? *Curriculum Journal*, 163 : 293-329.
- Marais P, Meier C 2004. Hear our voices: Student teacher's experience during practical teaching. *African Education Review*, 1(2): 220-233.
- Mtika PDG 2008. *Teaching Practice as a Component Of Teacher Education in Malawi: An Activity Theory Perspective*. Ph.D. Thesis. Nottingham: University of Nottingham.
- Nancy L 2007. Critical thinking dispositions as an outcome of undergraduate education. *The Journal of General Education*, 56(1): 17-33.
- Nelson CE 2007. Student Diversity Requires Different Approaches to College Teaching, Even in Math and Science. From <www.pkal.org/documents/Student DiversityRequireDifferentApproachesto> (Retrieved on 05 November, 2010).
- Paul GP 2004. *Situated Language and Learning: A Critique of Traditional Schooling*. New York: Routledge.
- Quick G, Sieborger R 2005. What matters in practice teaching? The perception of schools and students. *South African Journal of Education*, 25(1): 1-4.
- Seeley BJ, Adler R 2008. Minds on Fire: Open Education, the Long Tail, and Learning. Educause Review. From <<http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ERM0811.pdf>> (Retrieved on 05 November, 2010).
- Shulman LS 2004. *The Wisdom of Practice: Essays in Teaching, Learning, and Learning to Teach*. NY: Jossey-Bass.
- Sternberg R 2008. Applying psychological theories to educational practice. *American Educational Research Journal*, 45(1): 150-165.
- Very JD 1990. *The Self-actualising Educand*. Pretoria: University of South Africa.