

Pre-service Teachers' Challenges during Teaching Practice in One University in the Eastern Cape, South Africa

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ABSTRACT Teaching practice provides student teachers with the chance to express their personal educational philosophies, theories and understandings and creates an opportunity for student teachers to experiment and test their knowledge and skills in the profession of teaching and learning. However, student teachers face challenges during this professional exercise. Hence, the study examines challenges encountered by pre-service teachers during teaching practice. This qualitative study adopts an interpretivist research paradigm. 67 files were purposively selected for analysis and discussion. It was discovered that a conducive environment, exploration of experiential knowledge, student centeredness, and teaching language as a social practice are the fundamental teaching philosophies. The study concludes that the student teachers were able to identify most of these challenges, which to the researchers is a good starting point for finding solutions. The study recommends among others that school based mentors should ensure that student teachers are supported during their work integrated learning since they require opportunity for personal growth.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching practice is known to expose student teachers to the actual practice of teaching. It is during this period that student teachers are given the opportunity to try the art of teaching before actually getting into the real world of the teaching profession (Kiggundu and Nayimuli 2009). In view of this, Perry (2004) argues that teaching practice creates a mixture of anticipation, anxiety, excitement and apprehension in the student teachers as they commence their teaching practice. Thus, this provides student teachers with the chance to express their personal educational philosophies, theories and understandings. In other words, this creates an opportunity for student teachers to experiment and test their knowledge and skills in the profession of teaching and learning with an understanding of their personal educational philosophies and theories.

It is needful to voice out clearly that teaching practice is not completely a bed of roses for the student teachers because they experience challenges, which in a way can hamper their ability to derive maximum benefit from the exercise.

Literature Review

Most teaching practice scholars agree that the exercise is thought provoking but a very

important part of a student teacher's preparation and training, especially in the developing and underdeveloped worlds where teaching can be disrupted by a range of challenges. Some of these challenges are geographical distance, low and uneven levels of teacher expertise, a wide ranging lack of resources as well as a lack of discipline among a cross-section of learners and educators (Marais and Meier 2004). It is important that these challenges be addressed, as they may affect the student teachers' performance during teaching practice as well as their perception of the teaching profession in subsequent years (Quick and Sieborger 2005).

In this regard, the following factors have been identified as the commonest challenges faced by student teachers. They include but are not limited to the following.

1. School Placement

School placement is a critical part of initial teacher education, which is designed to give student teachers the opportunity to learn about teaching and learning. It further helps the student teachers gain practice and experience in teaching as well as apply educational theory in a variety of teaching and learning situations and school contexts. Moreover, it provides an opportunity for them to participate in school life in

a way that is structured and supported (Griofa and Ruairc 2013).

2. Resources

Resources are vital to facilitate effective teaching and learning in schools. In the absence of resources, or lack thereof, students get frustrated and this can make their teaching practice a difficult task. This is challenging for student teachers as it draws on issues of classroom management and control together with learner's discipline (Marais and Meier 2004).

3. Learners' Discipline and Classroom Management

Discipline is a challenge in most South African schools and it appears that there are no effective disciplinary measures taken against delinquency and transgressions (Kepe 2014). In schools such as this, student teachers find it difficult to manage and control the class. In certain instances, learners know that student teachers are only at the school for teaching practice and as such cannot exert any authority towards them. This requires that discipline in schools be approached thoughtfully and systematically, with the aim of identifying and pre-empting or removing potential causes.

4. Supervision and Support

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. In certain institutions, relevant and appropriately qualified external service providers also conduct supervision duties. 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 curric-

ulum as well as program and module requirements (Kiggundu and Nayimuli 2009).

The supervision process is conducted in an atmosphere of trust and respect. Supervisors, lecturers and tutors are expected to respect students and to engage with them constructively and adopt a professional and supportive role in their interactions with students. Supervisors are provided with lists of student teachers to visit and support, and proper and clear communication is required in order to make the assessment visits a success. 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 non-verbal 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, behavior 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).

5. Observations

Observation is an important component of teaching practice and it needs to be carefully planned. Observations can be in various forms, including the student teacher observing a mentor teacher, the mentor observing the student, the supervisor observing the student teacher or the student observing another student. As part of their first year of teaching practice, student teachers are required to observe teachers during class teaching. The purpose and nature of observation differs according to who participates in the observation process. Student teachers are required to observe classroom interaction during the lesson presentations, teaching and learning activities, maintenance of discipline, questioning and assessment, classroom management and control, teaching and learning strategies, and creation of a conducive atmosphere for teaching and learning. Students are then expected to implement and apply what they observed. The role of a school-based mentor is to guide, support and ensure that students gain the necessary expertise during teaching practice (Morrow 2007).

6. Teaching Practice Duration

Teaching practice is compulsory for all students enrolled in teacher education. It is an important aspect of teacher preparation as highlighted in the Higher Education Qualifications Committee (HEQC) document. The HEQC is a structure accountable for accreditation of qualifications in South African institutions of higher learning. HEI's determine the duration of teaching practice for the different programs. This requires that students be placed in schools and be in those schools for the entire duration of teaching practice. In certain Open and Distance Learning Institutions, students do not relate very well to this requirement. They assume that they may not be placed in schools for teaching practice because they are engaged in distance education. Some of these students may be working full-time and therefore face challenges with taking leave from work to do teaching practice. It is important that before registration, prospective students understand the requirements stipulated for the programs they are interested in and ensure that they would be able to comply with the requirements before committing themselves (Morrow 2007).

7. Induction in Schools

Induction in a school setting is an important role to be played by school-based mentors. Students require general initiation when they arrive at the schools. These entail being introduced to all staff members, school governing bodies and administrative personnel. Some student teachers experience a sense of alienation in schools. They feel estranged, with no sense of belonging. Such feelings of alienation resulted in anxieties and a lack of self-confidence, which in turn reduces the effectiveness of teaching practice and negatively affects the student teachers' attitude towards the teaching profession.

On the contrary, a good reception from the whole school community contributes to a positive attitude towards teaching and learning. Student teachers need to understand school ethos as well as the language of learning and teaching at schools where they are placed. School communities need to assume that student teachers know this upfront. In most South African public schools, the language of learning and teaching is English. This needs to be adhered to in over-

all school communication. In instances where there are common languages of communication in a particular school, the induction process should take this aspect into consideration.

8. Involvement in Other School Activities

Teaching practice includes a variety of experiences, and student teachers are required to get involved in all aspects of the school. Student teachers have to be exposed to, for example, completing class registers, marking the learners' books, attending staff meetings, and helping with extramural activities, to mention but a few duties. In most instances, the student teachers are treated as "visitors" and not involved in schooling activities. They are sometimes not invited to staff meetings and this negatively impacts their knowledge of decision-making strategies and cooperative learning. Permanent and full time teachers ignore the fact that student teachers could also make valuable inputs in school activities.

METHODOLOGY

The data for this study is based on the teaching philosophies and goals that are put side-by-side reflective journals for the duration of the teaching practice by the English language student teachers. They set goals and wrote their teaching philosophies before going to the actual practice and were expected to write reflective journals after each lesson. The study is interpretative in nature based on the case of English language teachers. The qualitative approach is deemed necessary because most of their philosophies, goals and challenges are similar.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

When the researchers read through the 67 files that formed the data for this study, they noticed that their teaching philosophies and teaching goals echoed things like conducive environment, exploration of experiential knowledge, student centeredness, teaching language as a social practice, and classroom management. It is needful to signal at this point that the teaching philosophy and goals were based on theory learnt from the university but the reflective journals were based on the actual practice in the

classroom. Refer to teaching philosophy in appendix A and B, respectively.

On the other hand, the reflective journals had another story to tell (appendix C). Below are some of the reflections from student teachers.

Reflection A: *On my first day, I was so excited that the day I was looking forward to has come. I went to the class with a high zeal to make things happen but I had a challenge when it came to understanding my learners. They did not know me, and most of the class to an extent where after three weeks I thought there were only 12 learners in that class. When we were writing a test, I was shock to see that there were 47 learners in that class.*

Another challenge that I came across was the fact during my first lesson I was teaching them conjunctions but they were so clueless. I designed an exercise where learners were required to fill in the missing conjunctions and when I asked the class what a conjunction is they said it was the missing word.

Reflection B: *The first week was very remarkable for me because I worked with my mentor and the class was full. The learners were so happy to have me and I was happy to be there. Truly speaking, I did not present any lesson this week, as my mentor wanted me to observe first. In the second week, I was alone without the mentor and I noticed that teaching is impossible without preparation although being prepared cannot guarantee that there will be no challenges. Despite the preparation made, I encountered another serious challenge, which was the learners' interaction during the lesson. The third week was a bad one for me since I was expecting my lecturer to visit. When the lecturer came, learners from the other classes that were not attended to were disturbing and I was panicking and thought I will fail the crit lesson.*

The above reflection suggests that teaching practice is an ideal moment for student teachers to find out if they are in the right career path. It further presents an opportunity for them to learn that theory and practice are estranged partners who seem to share the same bed but with different features. Classroom management does not seem to play out the way it was envisaged in the teaching philosophy and the actual practice. In view of this, the teaching philosophy and the goals are theory based while the reflective journals are practice oriented.

There is an indication that the supervisors (lecturers) are a little hard on the student teachers since this respondent was so scared because it was a visit from the lecturer. Kiggundu and Nayimuli (2009) argue that supervision 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. The power play identified from the response above seems to portray this.

Reflection C: *When I got into the first class, I got a challenge that the learners did not want to be taught in English, the same subject that I was teaching. They said that they are only used to writing English, not speaking or listening to it. When my mentor visited me for the first time in the fourth week, she was so shocked that the learners were interacting in English.*

The above reflection is indicative of the fact that student teachers do not get the necessary support from their mentors. The stress put on "She was so shocked" suggests that the mentors are worse than the student teachers. In view of this, it can be concluded that the teachers themselves are not trained and developed enough to handle these classrooms. According to Atanda (2013), the challenges that teachers face is the way they deal with learners, or more eloquently stated, the relationship that a teacher has with the learners. Based on this, it can be argued therefore that the teachers themselves create most of the problems in a classroom. Thus, the aspirations and goals of student teachers can only be met with only after some quality time has been put in practice.

According to Boikhutso (2013), school-based mentors are appointed at the school level for every student. These are qualified and experienced classroom teachers who assume multifaceted roles of support towards the students to ensure that work integrated learning is achieved and students are made to feel that they are part of the school. Students should at the end of their teaching practice duration be motivated to take up the teaching profession because of the constant guidance they receive from their mentors. School-based mentors are expected to inspire student teachers and help them translate the theory they learn into practice. They need to serve as role models. Some

students experience various challenges with school-based mentors who have a negative attitude towards them. These mentors do not provide students with relevant opportunities for growth and choose to exploit and abuse them by imposing exorbitant demands and unrealistic expectations in terms of workload. Some mentors exhibit unprofessional conduct and engage in unprofessional acts like absenting themselves from duty or reporting late. This is in contrast with the mentors' roles and responsibilities whereby a mentor would be required to guide and lead the student teacher all the way, advising on shortcomings, appraising on strength and encouraging until the student teacher is able to present lessons effectively.

Furthermore, it was noted that school placement facilitates the development of the student teacher's capacity for self-reflection. Such a capacity is often created in conversations with supervisors, mentor teachers, lecturers, teaching practice administrators and tutors. In addition, it affords the student teachers valuable opportunities to seek and receive advice in an atmosphere of support. According to Griofa and Ruairc (2013), during school placement, student teachers are mandatory to develop a range of knowledge, skills, competences and professional dispositions, which are critical to their professional identity. Parallel growth within personal and professional identity is enhanced as the student teachers journey through the learning-to-teach process. It is through school placement that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and schools identify student teachers that are most suited and competent in teaching.

While HEIs set up the opportunities and the support mechanisms, the student teachers themselves take ownership for the activities, making their own arrangements for visits and lessons (Neal 2011). At schools, student teachers face various challenges ranging from professional relations, unfriendliness, isolation, unfriendly staff room settings and conflicting teaching philosophies.

According to Araromi et al. (2013), the emerging role of classroom teachers contributes largely towards an effective school. They link school effectiveness with the teaching-learning process. This implies that the "desired level of output is achieved while school effectiveness refers to the performance of the organizational unit called 'school'" (Atanda 2013: 96). Furthermore,

the researcher explains "the position of teachers as key players in determining school effectiveness" (Atanda 2013: 97). The challenges that teachers face is the way they deal with learners, or more eloquently stated, the relationship that a teacher has with the learners. As the researchers know the challenge within itself are the learners who manifest different ways of learning and hence the teacher is required to teach and plan according to the different styles of learning that learners display. This in itself is a challenging task with 30, 40, 50 or even 60 learners in one grade, and one teacher trying to teach and meet the learners' scholastic needs. Teaching becomes a mammoth task and requires of the teacher to be an exemplary planner, manager and organizer. The researchers try and unpack how the teacher could possibly reflect on the levels of intelligence of the learners that he/she is responsible to. There are three types of learners with different levels of intelligence that a teacher has to be sensitive, which are discussed below.

Relating Theory to Practice

The relationship between theory and practice appears to be a continuing issue of concern for student teachers. This relationship is a reciprocal one in the sense that theory is rooted in practice. An important question is therefore, "*How does the failure in closure of theory-practice gap affect student teachers?*" Failure to close this gap affects the academic and personal development of student teachers and this is reflected in their inability to solve problems.

Teacher Challenges

The teacher assumes responsibility and accountability for a class and maintains the dignity of the profession under challenging circumstances at times.

- ♦ A school that does not share the learners religious beliefs.
- ♦ A school that overloads teachers with work, extra-mural activities.
- ♦ A school that expects the teacher to be on duty at all times.
- ♦ A disregard for the teacher's own personal and family life.
- ♦ Difficult and ill-mannered learners.

- ♦ Disrespectful parents, single parenting, absent parents, guardians, orphaned children.
- ♦ Un-cooperative teaching colleagues.
- ♦ Large classes, excessive marking, administration.
- ♦ Socio-economic, socio-cultural school community challenges.
- ♦ National policy demands on learner assessment, report forms, and work schedules.

According to the eight points listed above, it becomes evident that the teacher faces many challenges and has to apply his/her mind as to how best to deal with these situations, and/or persons in a professional way. This leads to the next section where teaching-learning spaces present challenges for teachers.

If the student teachers' challenges and strategies adopted during teaching practice can be understood more clearly, teacher educators would be able to supervise the student teachers in a more meaningful and effectual manner, where the educators could specify which strategies are more appropriate in which conditions. The student teachers have to figure out what strategies can be useful and convincing enough for their supervisors.

CONCLUSION

Based on the above argument, it is quite impossible to successfully overcome all the challenges that come along the teacher's way. But a focus on challenges faced can lead to an enlightenment of the ways and best strategies and practices that could provide answers to unlocking those challenges. There is justifiable evidence that the student teachers were able to identify most of these challenges, which to these researchers is a good starting point for finding possible solutions based on the 'trial and error' method, judging and evaluating what works and what fails, and why the challenges emancipated in the first place. This practice raised more 'questions' than answers thereby opened up many possibilities for alternative strategies based on the beliefs and value system of the student teachers in relation to their philosophical orientations, politics of educational ambitions, personality make-up and other related factors.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Schools need to assist student teachers to establish a system that creates better prospects

for learning, a system where learners recognize themselves as beneficiaries of classroom discipline rather than its victims. Schools need to have proper measures in place to curb minor disciplinary matters before they become major.

School-based mentors need to ensure that student teachers are supported during their work integrated learning since student teachers require an opportunity of personal growth. This is enhanced when they take full responsibility of classrooms, learner's discipline, curricula as well as extra-curricular activities.

Finally, there is a great need for prospective students to understand the requirements set for the programs they are interested in and ascertain that they would be able to comply with these requirements before committing themselves.

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