

Teaching Practice for the 21st Century: Challenges and Prospects for Teacher Education in the North-West Province, South Africa

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ABSTRACT The objective of this paper is to report on the findings of the study conducted with teacher trainees from the North-West province of South Africa on the challenges of and prospects for a teaching practice programme. A case study method in the form of qualitative descriptive research was used for the methodology and design of the research. A sample of 20 out of 200 teacher trainees who had spent a minimum of 2 years at the tertiary institution 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 programme. 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. It is recommended that the organisation of teaching practice be revised to include stipulated criteria to select practicing schools and to provide training to mentors on their responsibilities during teaching practice.

INTRODUCTION

The fact that teaching practice is an exercise that is carried out by most schools of education in South Africa 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 world of teaching has become more complex. Hence universities and schools 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. The experience has been that the actual practice of using field experience varies greatly depending largely on the amount of support that is provided to student teachers. As such, this paper re-

ports on the findings of a research project that sought to unveil the entire teaching practice process of teacher education in the North-West province of South Africa. This reveals the challenges affecting the effectiveness and success of the programme and those involved in order to suggest strategies to improve on the 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 prac-

tice 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.

There has been worldwide expression by societies today that school graduates contribute to the growth of societies. Therefore teachers must pay attention to how they groom students in schools. For this reason, in South Africa the psychomotor and cognitive abilities of student teachers are considered to be the most reliable predictors of performance in teacher education (Carretta and Ree 1997). A teacher education programme in South Africa is a blend of theory and practice. Research confirms that results of education do not meet employers' expectations (Tambo 2005). This indicates that educators are not sufficiently empowered in training to empower their learners. Against this background, schools of education in the North-West province thought it wise to make the training of teachers a blend of theory and practice in order to meet society's demands for quality teachers. As such the curriculum for teacher education was designed for students to go out on teaching practice; in fact this was a criterion to complete their training to become teachers.

Teaching practice in the North-West province, as in other parts of South Africa and the rest of the world, is a very important activity in teacher education. Feiman-Nemser (1990) indicates that teaching practice has long been an important part of teacher education. It is in this activity that schools of teacher education believe they will produce capable and competent teachers. The need for teaching practice prompted Etimbi (1994) 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. The entire teaching practice is therefore aimed at encouraging the prospective teacher to develop his or her philosophy of life and to place theories into his or her field of experience. As such, this philosophy must be organised and carried out in such a way that it will enable the student teacher to render the best possible service to the learner and to the society according to his or her legitimate needs and interests.

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. This concept has been handed down from the earliest days of the development of training colleges. After carefully assessing teaching practice, one can observe that the underlying principles of the current practice of student teaching are probably of extremely ancient lineage. Bruner (1996) discussed the way in which Bushmen pass on adult skills to their children. There is very little explicit teaching—what the child knows, he or she learned from a direct imitative interaction with the adult community. These primitive practices are not dissimilar to those typifying our current approaches to student teaching. 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. (1996), 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. It is evident that the ambiguous meaning of teaching practice is not simply philosophic-linguistic. It has practical implications which address the following question: which type of activity do participants in the practice have in mind on any given occasion? In a practical field such as teacher preparation, this ambiguity seems intolerable: an attempt to resolve this is therefore of great importance.

Organisation of Teaching Practice in the North-West Province

Teaching practice is a compulsory part of the teacher's course necessary to qualify as a teacher in the North-West province of South Africa. This practice exposes student teachers to action-oriented experiential training practicals. This aligns with the views of Duminy et al. (1992) who see this practice as that part of education students' professional training which is directly and practically concerned with their learning to do their jobs as teachers. In most teacher education programmes, the practical component (teaching practice) forms one of the main elements in the training. The two other central components are usually theoretical training consisting of various educational subjects and training in approved learning areas.

Smith (2002) in emphasising the need for creating and sustaining a healthy relationship between student teachers and practicing schools indicates that teacher educators everywhere experience and are concerned about strained relations between universities and practicing schools during teaching practice. Boudreau (1999) further mentions that the professional relationship established during teaching practice has implications for, and contributes significantly to, mentor teachers' and student teachers' development and learning. This relationship is at times complex and needs to be developed and negotiated for a variety of reasons (Fairbanks et al. 2000; Dolan 2012). Therefore to create a healthy relationship between practicing schools and universities in order to improve student acceptability by schools and enhance the prac-

tice, schools of education in the North West province prepare covering letters which are given to student teachers to take to their respective practicing schools. These letters serve as assurance that the students are there for the purpose of studies and are under the instruction of the university.

While at practicing schools, student teachers are assisted by a mentor in the school who is of their learning area and who monitors their activities and corrects them where necessary. According to Fletcher and Barrett (2004), mentors are believed to have first-hand knowledge of their supervisory skills, immediate access to dialogue and opportunities for observing whether any improvements are being made (or remain to be made) by student teachers. Mentors tend to exert influence over their student teachers in different areas. Duminy et al. (1992) say that a student teacher is allocated to a teacher who is a permanent member of staff while on teaching practice. The student is guided by the cooperating teacher as well as by the tutors. While at the cooperating school, the student spends a period of time observing while the mentor teacher teaches. This is for the student teacher to understand his or her pupils and their needs. According to Etimbi (1994), observations provide students with the ingredients for preparing lesson plans and notes. After these observations, the student teacher can now participate in the actual teaching, often referred to as 'live teaching' to gain skills.

As this interesting exercise unfolds as organised in teacher education in the North West province, the entire activities of the student teacher are evaluated by the mentor teacher, and the school's cooperation and feedback is sent to the institution. Back at the university, student teachers are allocated lecturer supervisors who supervise the teaching process periodically and evaluate them. But it does not matter who supervises, whether school cooperation or lecturer supervision, but there is a need for it to be done. Farrant (1990) confirms that during teaching practice a supervisor can either be an experienced teacher or a tutor from the same school or an external examiner, and that supervisory exercise is very necessary if the exercise has to achieve its objectives. Korthagan (2004) further supports the value and need for supervision by indicating that the time many prospective teachers spend in classrooms under supervision has increased in recent years and is desired.

Due to the fact that mentors and supervisors evaluate the student teacher, and also because this activity counts on the nature of teachers that will be produced, most student teachers give of their best to see this activity as a success and to be regarded as necessary. So do some cooperating schools, supervisors and mentor teachers. But does this entire exercise unravel in entirety without hurdles preventing it from achieving its prime purpose?

Objective of the Study

Teaching practice like any other professional activity is plagued by challenges, some of which are quite glaring and conspicuous while others are hidden and yet to be unveiled. As such, the main objective of the study was to investigate the factors which influence the teaching practice organisation for teacher education in the North-West province. The study also investigated strategies to improve the organisation of the programme.

As teaching practice is an exercise that is carried out nationwide and internationally, and considered an important activity for the qualifications of a well-rounded teacher, there is a need for it to be undertaken effectively. For this to be done, the exercise needs to be evaluated for challenges and prospects as well as the suggestions need to be made to effect it

Statement of the Problem

The challenge of education has never been as great as it is today. The complex, dynamic nature of societies, schools and teachers (most teachers are no longer teachers or lecturers but mere pedagogues (Hinchcliffe 2001), and the requirements for capable graduate teachers, the educational policies of government and changes in socio-cultural values all contribute to the demands placed on teachers for the benefit of South African society.

Teacher education studies, however, attest to a disparity between the theory of pre-service teacher programmes and the practice in the workplace (Cochran-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).

While strong evidence suggests that teacher effectiveness spikes sharply after the first few years in the profession, research shows that many teachers exit prior to attaining this level of

expertise (Okon and Ibanga 1992). Therefore, there is a need for teachers to become more knowledgeable and skilful in connecting the curriculum to their students' lives particularly with the help of outcomes-based education. 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 as part of the process.

Research Questions

This paper was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the challenges in the management of teaching practice in the North West province?
2. What are the strategies to curb the challenges inherent to the exercise?

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

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 tertiary institution. 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. 5 lecturer supervisors from the university were purposefully 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, observation and field notes, and interviews. In-depth individual interviews were conducted with mentors and university assessors while focus group interviews were conducted 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 organisation 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 categorisation 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 and 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- West Province

Preparing for Teaching Practice

One of the most crucial factors in the teaching practice situation for the student teacher is 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 recognised 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 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-West province, most of the participants indicated to have had theoretical lessons at the university in modules that oriented them regarding professional studies toward becoming teachers before going out on teaching practice. Moreover, they indicated to have been to practicing schools for preliminary visits and observations before the actual teaching practicum. This indicates that preparation is done before teaching practice. A participant indicated thus, "We were taught in modules in the university 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 university 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 in my practicing school. I only started teaching during my second outing." 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 university 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 emphasise the need and importance of observation in preparing for teaching practice, Duminy et al. (1992) mentioned that a student teacher can learn a great deal from such expert knowledge and personal experience while on observation. Etimbi (1994) 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 university 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 activ-

ities 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. 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. 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 university assessors/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. This is because of a lack of agreement on teaching strategies and classroom management strategies as student teachers and mentors blame each other for being ineffective.

Mentors are supposed to oversee their student teachers' daily activities, including assisting them to solve classroom situations when they arise, holding conferences with them and evaluating their performance over time. Hence, they have first-hand knowledge of their supervisees' skills, immediate access to dialogue, and opportunities for observing whether any improvements are being made (or are still to be made) (Fletcher and Barrett 2004). Effective teacher mentors may become a source of advice, and sounding boards for concerns about teaching who challenge beginning teachers to think more broadly about their practice (Fairbanks et al. 2000). The findings further confirm that some mentors are still practising the craft apprenticeship system of teaching practice which requires student teachers to do exactly as they are told by their mentors and what they see their mentors do.

A participant indicated that “[m]y 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.

Assessment and Awarding of Marks

According to the Department of Education and Training’s syllabus for teaching practice, Group 1 subject, 1990 structure in South Africa, it is stated that in the syllabus for teaching practice for the Primary Teaching Diploma (PTD) Junior Primary (JP), Primary Teaching Diploma (PTD) Senior Primary (SP) and Senior Teaching Diploma (STD), a minimum of 110 lessons must be taught and recorded by each individual student during the various school practicum sessions. Of these, at least 10 must be presented in the presence of college lecturers and supervisors and must be assessed by the lecturers.

The findings of this paper reveal that the Department of Basic Education Policy Guidelines (2007) on Teacher Education are adhered to, but when it comes to assessment there are irregularities. Mentors are not objective in the

assessment and awarding of marks to student teachers. It may be possible that student teachers during teaching practice build relationships with mentors and school administrators which blind their objectiveness in assessing them. A review and comparison of assessment forms of mentors and university assessors reveal a scenario of mark disparity within a very broad margin. All mentor marks were significantly higher than those of university assessors. This raised questions in the minds of the researcher. To look for answers, the researcher decided to also assess the confidential reports from school administrators which also reveal awards of excellence to all participants of the study, whereas some of the university assessors’ remarks reveal the contrary. Given the present scenario, it was confirmed that mentors are not objective in their assessments.

Roles of Inquest for Supervisors (University Assessors) 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) 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. (2003) 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 university assessors are not consistent in their duties as supervisors. Participants’ responses reveal that lecturer supervisors from the university do not pay regular visits to practicing schools. Student teachers indicated to never have been visited by university assessors, 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 is recalled to have indicated that "I was never supervised or assessed by any lecturer from the university; well, for the person who was supposed to assess me from the university, 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 undertook and are undertaking their practice in remote areas which are a far distance from the university. The impact of the location of these schools on teaching practice is that those student teachers who complained about never being assessed by university 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 prov-

inces of the country they select schools that are close to the university. 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 university assessors' proximity to the university (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.

Attitudes of Staff and Students of Practicing Schools

As student teachers selected practicing schools based on familiarity with the schools, the findings of this paper confirming this reveal that staff at practicing schools has a welcoming attitude and that the students do not. The staff has a welcoming attitude probably because they have previously established relationships with the student teachers whereas the students of practicing schools are only meeting most of the student teachers for the first time. The unwelcoming attitudes of students are revealed to have impacted negatively on the assessment of most student teachers of classroom management especially by university assessors who know little or nothing about the learners. Administrators of practicing schools are the chief body of most schools. They have many functions but for the purpose of this paper the researcher was only concerned with their responsibility in connection with student teachers during teaching practice. Della Fish (1989) recommended that there are, however, further responsibilities which schools administrators alone, and particularly the head or senior deputy, should shoulder when it comes to teaching practice. They have to welcome student teachers and formally introduce them to the entire school, generate a relaxed atmosphere in the school which will enable student teachers to feel at home and thus do their work fearlessly. School administrators have to provide accommodation (classrooms) where the

student teachers will be able to practise their learnt skills, reveal occasional classroom observations to student teachers, look promptly into problems presented to them particularly concerning recalcitrant students, and assign various members of staff as mentors to students.

Mentors' Perceptions of Their Roles in Teaching Practice

Scholars hold a more expansive view of teacher trainers in a variety of roles: parent figure, trouble shooter, scaffolder, counsellor, supporter (Hawkey 1997), instructional model, coach or guide (Bates 2002). If mentor teachers and/or lecturer supervisors are dissatisfied with how a student teacher handled classroom discipline, they should give concrete examples and indicate, or better yet demonstrate, model desired outcomes.

The findings of this paper reveal that most mentors are not well informed of their responsibilities as mentors to student teachers during teaching practice. Mentors consider their responsibility as being a university assignment to supervise. This mentor view reflected those basic responsibilities of a mentor as outlined by the university, which allows a pre-service teacher time to teach in your classroom, carry out observations and complete the assessment forms. This suggests that the role of the mentor involves giving the student teacher access to the classroom and time to fill in forms as required by the university. Moreover, mentors further consider their responsibilities in what can be referred to as providing emotional and professional support to student teachers: "I provide assistance, help, and guidance to student teachers." Looking at the nature of this support, mentors' perceptions can be classified into two groups: professional and emotional. Firstly, it reveals ways in which mentors help student teachers carry out professional responsibilities. In this, they indicated that "I make available my classroom resources to student teachers to access and I teach them how to manage a classroom well; I also teach them a variety of classroom teaching strategies and how to interact with students, teachers, and administrators." Nothing was indicated on providing emotional support to student teachers.

Furthermore, mentors lack personal qualities in establishing a good and sustainable relation-

ship with student teachers. Personal qualities generally describe in terms of the individual talents and abilities that the mentors believe they can introduce to their relationship with student teachers, such as being warm, friendly, reflective, honest, or a good listener. Rather mentors' responses to special qualities were only limited to the likes of kindness, "I am hardworking; I am approachable, calm and caring."

Moreover, the findings of this paper reveal that mentors lack training to function as mentors to student teachers during teaching practice. Very few mentors have received some sort of training or preparation to serve as mentors. Mentors' descriptions of the nature of training reveal that they had only received a brief orientation on how to complete evaluation forms and procedures and also that they had received training from their school district. There was no single mentor who indicated having received training from the university beyond learning how to use evaluation forms. This is an indication that the university is not training teachers in the practicing schools to function as mentors. As such, teachers in practicing schools serve as mentors to student teachers during teaching practice not because they are trained to do so or because they are fully aware of their responsibilities, but because the university wants them to do so. A mentor indicated that "I mentor this student just because the learning area he teaches is my learning area".

Strategies to Curb the Challenges Inherent in the Teaching Practice for the North- West Province

Prospective Teaching Practice for the 21st Century

The recent and universally accepted terminology relating to teaching practice and the dominant model of teacher training in the rest of the world is that which was established in South Africa after the demise of apartheid, namely the applied science model. According to this model, it is believed that the student 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 or practice. This new model of teaching practice is what is currently being practised in South Africa but the embodiment or the different stages of the practice are not performed in entirety. Thus, the practice is exposed to numerous challenges. The applied science model of teaching practice differs from the old outdated apprenticeship model of teaching practice as it exposes student teachers to exploring a variety of teaching strategies and experimenting with their classrooms as they practise. The old practice warrants student teachers to only practise what the mentor or master teacher asked them to do. This is based on imitation and rote learning, and thus hinders creativity and critical thinking and the reflectivity of student teachers.

The applied science model of teaching practice entails many stages ranging from theoretical classroom work beforehand to the actual teaching and moving down to evaluation. But this concept is not complete until the student teacher is satisfied and confident that he or she can teach properly. These processes and stages of teaching practice are what is referred to as the embodiment of teaching practice and they start off with micro-teachings, peer coaching, preliminary observations, preparation to teach, lesson presentation and assessment of lessons.

Getting Ready for an Institute Practicum

According to the applied science model of teaching practice, student teachers are supposed to visit practicing schools for the purpose of preliminary observations before the actual teaching practicum to prepare for the practice. During such visits, student teachers are supposed to carry out observations on a number of happenings around the practicing schools to better prepare their minds for what they are to encounter during the actual practicum. Jenkins et al. (2005) affirm that preliminary observations are essential for effective planning of teaching practice as they afford the student teacher a quick means to get acquainted with his or her task and then to know how to tackle it continuously. The student teacher gains familiarity with people and concepts during observation and can learn a great deal from such experts' knowledge and personal experience while on observation (Duminy et al. 1992).

In the theoretical classwork beforehand, it is also recommended that student teachers be drilled in micro-teaching sessions and peer

coaching to also prepare them for the institute practicum. Micro-teaching is one very essential method involving both theory and practice that is commonly used to prepare students for teaching practice. Student teachers are told about each skill, and this is even demonstrated, and are then given time and assigned a place in which to carry out a session demonstrating that skill. They teach and corrective feedback is given following the recordings. Ezewu et al. (1994) refer to this as a system of controlled practice that makes it possible for student teachers to concentrate on specific teaching skills and to practise teaching under controlled conditions. Peer coaching on the other hand is a training method in which pairs of student teachers observe each other as they teach and provide consultative assistance in correctly applying teaching skills and also propose alternative solutions to recognise instructional needs. This prepares students for what they are to meet in teaching practice and helps minimise errors they are exposed to in live teaching as they grow to understand learners and their curriculum beforehand.

Mentors and Mentorship in the Applied Science Model of Teaching Practice

Mentors are commonly called cooperating teachers and are generally considered the holders of more knowledge and are supposed to share that with student teachers. But this does not mean that mentors too can't learn certain aspects from student teachers. Real teachers are lifelong learners. For this reason, mentors need to create a rapport with student teachers that will ease a two-way helping communication. Mentors are expected to provide a friendly relaxed atmosphere for teaching and learning, prepare their students before the arrival of student teachers, and accept teachers as co-workers. They are expected to handover class records to student teachers, help and encourage them to become acquainted with the rules and regulations of the school, be prompt in pointing out successful achievements on the part of student teachers, and avoid criticising student teachers in front of the learners or other mentors. They should do so in a cordial manner and at an appropriate place, evaluate student teachers' performance objectively, recognise university assessors as team partners and establish mutual consultation with them. Mentors should encour-

age student teachers to develop their own teaching style, make decisions and implement new strategies. In addition, mentors need to appreciate their own ideas being valued, with opportunities to evaluate and reflect together.

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. Mentors assess their student teachers' daily activities, including assisting them to solve classroom situations when they arise, holding conferences with them and evaluating their performance over time. Hence, they have firsthand knowledge of their supervisees, skills, immediate access to dialogue, and opportunities for observing whether any improvements are being made or remain to be made (Fletcher and Barrett 2004). Mentors tend to exert influence over their student teachers in different areas. However, not all mentors to student teachers matches are successful. When weak or incompetent teachers become mentors, their student teachers end up witnessing ineffective teaching methods.

How effectively mentors train student teachers depends firstly on what they think of their roles in teaching practice. Mentors to student teachers matches during teaching practice are supposed to reveal some theoretical knowledge of what their roles are when they are performing them. This is because their theories will deeply affect the kind of student teachers to be produced under their influence. One of the widely recommended theories is considering and setting the intended learning outcomes for the teaching practice. That is, the goals for having student teachers in your class for you to be their mentor. Biggs and Tang (2009) indicate that in a teaching practice scenario, the more important intended learning outcomes (ILOs) refer to putting theoretical knowledge to work in a practical context. Unfortunately, in practically executing many ILOs that are in the domain of teaching practice containing action words such as "apply", many mentors only talk about applying the knowledge instead of getting student teachers to do the applying. This ineffectiveness on the part of mentors creates doubt as to whether mentors are trained to train student teachers.

Biggs and Tang (2009) suggest ILO programmes for teaching-learning situations which can be applied in the practicum of teacher education. Mentors are requested to exhibit the skills of professional competence, creativity, communication, teamwork, lifelong learning and ethical sense being made of the teaching practicum for the student teachers. To do this, they are to be trained in the necessary skills.

Supervision in the Applied Science Model of Teaching Practice

Supervision is inevitable in any teaching practice exercise. It is where correction and motivation are given to student teacher which in turn turns lessons into a success. Student teachers build a firm and stronger base for their teaching experience from the feedback of supervision. Wenger (1998) mentioned that it is through the supervisory process that student teachers begin to construct their personal knowledge and theories about teaching practice. The main aim of supervising during teaching practice is to offer assistance to student teachers in the development of basic skills and understanding necessary for teaching to facilitate classification of purpose, attitudes and values as well as to find out ways to interact in the school system. Undoubtedly, supervisors are also responsible for organising critique sessions at the end of the day showing the student teacher's weak points and suggesting changes that will work. It is a key part of the work that associate teachers engaged in with student teachers by virtue of their expertise and experience to help them develop new professional knowledge and skills as well as improve and change practice.

Assessing in the Applied Science Model of the Teaching Practicum

In an excerpt from Gravett and Geyser (2009), international developments and research in the field of assessment indicate a shift in focus from traditional testing practices to a more constructive assessment approach that aims to enhance learning. This shift in focus should also be reflected in our assessment of teaching practice as it is the most powerful instrument a mentor has to influence the way a student teacher learns. Assessing the teaching practicum is an integral part of teaching practice and it therefore has to

be planned and conducted in a constructive way. The reliability on traditional methods of assessment during teaching practice which rely solely on the reports of mentors or university assessors as an unconditional judge and which are almost entirely summative in nature, targeting only the student teacher's ability to demonstrate the acquisition of specific knowledge and skills as authorised by the mentors, promotes surface learning and encourages learning for assessment purposes.

It is therefore recommended that assessing teaching practice should reflect student teachers' levels of understanding within a content area, that is, the ILOs of the practicum. The curriculum outcomes and the learning content which are the central pillar of the teaching are supposed to be the focus of the practicum assessment (Gravett and Geyser 2009). In so doing, it eradicates student teachers' attitudes of demonstrating artificial behaviours instead of learnt behaviours while on teaching practice because they know that it is that they will be assessed upon. The assessment of teaching practice has to be driven by assessment techniques which will influence the student teacher to adopt a deep approach to understanding the practicalities of his or her teachings. The assessment should reflect the learning from the assessment results. Therefore, it should serve diagnostic, formative, and summative purposes. Undertaking diagnostic assessment during teaching practice helps identify student teachers' strengths and weaknesses and determines their prior knowledge which is based on the theoretical lessons student teachers undertake before they go out for teaching practice.

CONCLUSION

Effective teaching practice is in constant practice. It is therefore the foundation of teaching. Hence a teacher who had practised 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 South Africa, no student gains his or her certificate as a teacher without successfully going through the process of teaching practice. Teaching practice at the North-West University's Mafikeng campus is carefully and well designed to meet the goals of teaching practice 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 faculty 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.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

Approaches to coordinating, managing and redesigning teaching practice should be enforced and revised to take account of the challenges that student teachers, mentors, university assessors 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 university 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 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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