THEORY VS PRACTICE: THE EXPERIENCES OF POST GRADUATE DIPLOMA IN EDUCATION (PGDE) STUDENTS FOR ZIMBABWE OPEN UNIVERSITY DURING THEIR TEACHING PRACTICE IN INCLUSIVE SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

The teaching practice is designed to smooth the transition from teacher to student. At the same time the teaching practice assignment gives the teachers training institutions an opportunity to evaluate the students teaching capabilities. It is the responsibility of teacher education institutions to provide such learning experiences to student teachers that they may be able to select, innovate and organize such learning experiences which may develop competence in the student teachers to teach the course of their specialization on the one hand and recreational activities and social useful production work on the other hand. This qualitative study examines the experiences the student teachers during their teaching practice, these include among others; relationship with the mentors, learners discipline and classroom management, supervision and mentoring, and observations. Data was collected and tabulated using semi structured interviews from 50 PGDE student teachers at Zimbabwe Open University doing teaching practice in Bulawayo in 2016. Major finding are: student teachers are not imparted practical training of different methods of teaching before they are sent for teaching practice and that the student teachers are not informed about the rules and regulations of the practicing schools. Based on the findings of this study, measures are suggested on how to improve teaching practice in order to have a positive influence on the student teachers' perception of, and attitude towards, the teaching profession.

Keywords: Teaching Practice, Training, Student Teachers, Theory and Practice, Mentor.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching practice is an integral component of teacher training. It grants student teachers experience in the actual teaching and learning environment (Ngidi & Sibaya, 2003:18; Marais & Meier, 2004:220; Perry, 2004:2). During teaching practice, a student teacher is given the opportunity to try the art of teaching before actually getting into the real world of the teaching profession (Kasanda, 1995).McGee and Fraser (2001) emphasize that it is in teaching practice that student teachers are baptized with the experience to gain knowledge of how teachers go about the many and complex task involved in actual classroom practice. It is in teaching practice that a student teacher is given the opportunity to try the art of teaching before actually getting into the real world of the teaching profession. Based on this, the paper seeks to investigate the challenges encountered by PGDE student teachers during their teaching practice in the period 2015-2016. Teaching practice is a form of work-integrated learning that is described as a period of time when students are working in the relevant industry to receive specific in-service training in order to apply theory in practice. Researchers such as Marais and Meier (2004:220), Perry (2004:2) and Maphosa, Shumba & Shumba (2007:296) describe teaching practice as an integral component of teacher training. It is meant to provide for the authentic context within which student teachers are exposed to experience the complexities and richness of the reality of being a teacher. This process allows the student teacher an opportunity to establish whether the right career choice has been made or not. Teaching

practice is aimed at inducting student teachers more fully into the professional work of teachers (Perry 2004:2). To this effect the student teacher is expected to fulfill all the responsibilities of a teacher, which according to Perry (2004:2) is exciting but challenging. Student teachers know the value of teaching practice and as remarked by Menter (1989:461), they perceive it as 'the crux of their preparation for the teaching profession' since it provides for the 'real interface' between student hood and membership of the profession. As a result, teaching practice creates a mixture of anticipation, anxiety, excitement and apprehension in the student teachers as they commence their teaching practice (Perry, 2004:4).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. Despite the enriching experiences during teaching practice; student teachers also experience challenges which in a way can hamper their ability to derive maximum benefit from the exercise.

The study was prompted by the observations made by the researchers during teaching practice supervision where students indicated that they were doing the course by default. The students saw it as a stopgap while they waited for better career opportunities in other fields. These students enrolled because they had no alternative, since they were not able to get jobs after their undergraduate qualification and because the available form of employment was teaching. They indicated that they had no intention of joining teaching after the course. Despite the enriching experiences during teaching practice, PGDE student teachers experienced challenges, which may have significantly affected their ability to derive maximum benefit from the exercise. An understanding of the student teachers' teaching practice experiences will help improve the teacher-training programmed at Zimbabwe Open University. According to Marais and Meier (2004:221), teaching practice is a challenging but important part of teacher training, especially in developing countries such as Zimbabwe, where the effectiveness of the teaching practice can be eroded by a range of challenges, such as geographical distance, low and uneven levels of teacher expertise, a wide-ranging lack of resources as well as a lack of discipline among learners and teachers. These challenges, if not addressed, may affect student teachers' performance during teaching practice and may in the long run affect their perception of the teaching profession.

TEACHING PRACTICE AT ZIMBABWE OPEN UNIVERSITY

The Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) is a teacher-training programme being offered in the Department of Teacher Education at Zimbabwe Open University. The programme is offered over one semester. Teaching practice is done in Zimbabwean schools where the teachers will be attached during the teaching practice period. The student teachers would be afforded the opportunity to participate in all school activities. Beside the fact that students were teachers in-training, they were given the opportunity to integrate in a practical way and had to apply the theoretical knowledge and newly acquired teaching skills. During the teaching practice the student teachers were involved in completing class registers, marking learners' books, attending staff meetings and helping with extramural activities. Student teachers were subject to a minimum of two formal class visitations and assessments

done by Zimbabwe Open University lecturers. It is during the school visits that the lecturers had to give the student teachers written and oral feedback. Improvements were commended, shortcomings highlighted and suggestions made on how to improve their teaching skills. The school-based mentors also had to observe the students' progress, behaviour and attitude at school, and assess the student teachers' practical teaching and learning activities according to specific guidelines given to them by the university.

PROBLEM OF THE STATEMENT

Student teachers are exposed to varied teaching experiences contingent upon university and school-related circumstances. On the basis of such precedence, the current researchers sought to explore the challenges encountered by PGDE student teachers during their teaching practice in Bulawayo.

Research Questions

This research was guided by the following research questions:
* What are the challenges experienced by PGDE students during teaching practice in Bulawayo?
* What are the strategies to curb the challenges inherent to the exercise?

Objective of the Study

The purpose of this study is to identify various challenges faced by PGDE student-teachers during the teaching practice exercise and also to proffer solutions to those challenges.

METHODOLOGY

The study is qualitative in nature as the data collected is based on the reflections from student teachers after their lessons. The study was conducted in Bulawayo and it made use of 50 PGDE students for Zimbabwe Open University. These students have their undergraduate degrees in different disciplines and are now registered for a one and half year teacher qualification, thus they have no teaching experience. The researchers as their lecturers also visited students during their teaching Practice period. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of 50student teachers in the PGDE programme from Zimbabwe Open University at the end of the teaching practice period. 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. Data was analyzed through careful reading of the transcripts of interviews with the participants; the views presented by participants from the transcripts were identified around a number of themes. The themes were selected to provide reliable and accurate views concerning the issues that arose pertaining to the research questions. Using these themes as 'organizing categories', a more detailed re-analysis of the transcript was carried out, looking specifically for comments or details that related specifically to the themes identified by the initial analysis. The key themes that became apparent in reading the interviews, and which were significant in terms of the research questions, formed the basis of the analysis of the paper. Each of these themes is discussed in detail in the following section.

FINDINGS
Ability to Translate Theory into Practice

The respondents in this study indicated that they were prepared and able to translate theory into practice and also that they were able to apply the education theory learnt at university into practice during the teaching practice. They felt that the PGDE course had fully prepared them for the teaching practice. In theory, the students had been taught the code of conduct, professional ethics, duties and responsibilities of teachers in secondary schools. As a result the student teachers were able to handle themselves in a professional manner and were able to carry out their duties without fear in the schools. The student teachers enjoyed the teaching practice because they were able to combine theory and practice. This is confirmed by one of the PGDE student teachers, who said,

"I found teaching practice very interesting because I was able to apply what I had studied in Theory of Education modules and enjoyed teaching because I was conversant with the subject I was teaching."

One student teacher commented thus, "*I discovered that learners became enthusiastic and they actively participated in activities when they were praised and rewarded for their efforts*". This indication shows that the respondents had applied the knowledge they had acquired during the time they were doing theory at university level. They also acknowledged that they were able to plan, prepare and present the lessons and to draw up a timetable. However some of the participants indicated that they had difficulties in assisting students with disabilities who were included in their classes. One of the respondents indicated that: "I *had problems of trying to assist students with learning disabilities. My course modules had indicated very little information about inclusive education and hence what I had learnt in theory could not be matched with praxis."*

Relationship between Mentors and Student Teachers

Each student teacher was assigned to a qualified and experienced secondary school classroom teacher. The experienced teacher assumed roles of being the student supervisor, counselor, coach, teacher, model, supporter, critic and instructor (Holloway, 2001; Maphosa, Shumba & Shumba, 2007: 297). The respondents indicated that the mentors were supportive and always willing to help. The student teachers pointed out that the mentors gave them valuable advice and shared their skills and experiences. This is supported by one respondent who said, "*My mentor worked nicely with me. He was a good role model in the profession.*" The student teachers appreciated the positive attitudes of their mentors which enabled them to be part of the school. This is summed up by one student teacher who said this about her mentor "*I am indebted to my mentor. She made sure that I did the right thing and gained good experience in the process. She helped me to put the theory that I learnt into practice."*

While the majority of student teachers perceived their secondary school based mentors to be effective in assisting their development as teachers, some trainees considered their mentors to be less effective and some of their mentoring experiences to be unhelpful or unsatisfactory. These respondents indicated that they did not have good support from their mentors. Some respondents as noted by Ralph (in Marais & Meier, 2004:222) saw it as exploitation and abuse by the mentors who imposed demands on student teachers in terms of workload. One respondent commented thus: "*The mentor is just enjoying himself; he does not come to class. I feel that the teacher should still take responsibility of his class and not throw everything at*

me. I don't have a problem but I strongly feel that as a class teacher, he should be available to provide the support and guidance because I am still learning." Similar responses were noted in the study conducted by Maphosa et al. (2007: 301) where respondents noted that some mentors exhibited unprofessional acts like absenting themselves from duty, reporting late or sending pupils on personal errands even during lessons.

Supervision and Support of Student Teachers

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. Majority (80%) of respondents indicated that they had discussion with supervisors before and/or after classroom assessment. However, 20% of the respondents reported that they had no discussion with supervisors before and/or after classroom assessment simplying that supervisors departed just after classroom assessment and therefore students are expected to learn from the comments written on the assessment paper provided. These findings are consistent with the findings by Christie et al. (2004) in Kirbulut et al. (2012) who found that pre-service teachers in Scotland could not receive any constructive feedback from their supervisors related to their teaching practice instead they were just told that their teaching was fine, even if it was not.

DISCUSSION

The student teachers in this study indicated that they had benefited from the teaching practice experience. They also felt that the theory they acquired during university lectures enabled them to teach, however it was the teaching practice that gave them the exposure into the experiences of the real teaching world. This is in support of arguments by researchers such as Buchner & Hay (1999:320) who pointed out that teaching involved many experiences that simply could not be replicated in a non-school environment. The findings in relation to the influence of the mentors in the present study varied from student teacher to student teacher. Respondents indicated that some mentors effectively fulfilled their role of guiding student teachers through their supervision guidance. This is supported by Marais and Meier (2004:230) who described some mentors as being exemplary role models who set a worthwhile example to follow. It is worthy to note that although some student teachers pointed out 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 also show that mentors are ignoring and abandoning student teachers to themselves while on teaching practice, thus increasing their workload.

The respondents also indicated that mentors are subjective in allowing student teachers to try new teaching strategies in their classrooms, especially those that they are not knowledgeable about. Such findings further confirm that some mentors still believe that the craft apprenticeship system of teaching practice which requires student teachers to do exactly as they are told by their mentors as the best model of assisting student teachers. 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. The findings of this study also revealed that the student teachers were not fully prepared to teach students with disabilities. In theory they had been equipped to tackle the difficulties involving the students with the disabilities but failed to put that into practice when they got to the real situation.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings indicate that student teachers view teaching practice as an important component in their training because it exposes them to the actual teaching and learning environment.(Marais & Meier, 2004). It is also an exposure of the student teachers to a learning environment in which they can contextualize the theoretical knowledge they gathered during their training. Student teachers felt that the PGDE course had prepared them for the teaching practice. Some respondents pointed out that the mentors were supportive and always willing to share their valuable advice and skills, however, others felt that they were being by the mentors. The findings in relation to the influence of the mentors in the present study varied from student teacher to student teacher. Some mentors effectively fulfilled their role of guiding student teachers. They offered student teachers under their supervision guidance and showed them what to do. The study therefore recommended that teacher-training institutions should work hand in hand with the schools and carry out workshops to empower and support mentors.

According to Maphosa et al. (2007:305), mentors should be constantly empowered through workshops, to work effectively in leading and guiding student teachers. The university needs to work hand in glove with the schools to ascertain that student teachers are mentored and supported by the host institutions. The good experience and the challenges faced by student teachers during their teaching practice are attributable to factors concerning the preparation during training, relationship with school-based mentors, induction into the school, attitude of other educators and involvement in other activities,. It is important that mentors be made aware of the factors that militate against positive teaching practice experience which assist student teachers to achieve the desired skills from the teaching practice.

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