

EXPERIENCES DURING TEACHING PRACTICE: PERSPECTIVES OF STUDENTS IN AN OPEN, DISTANCE AND E-LEARNING INSTITUTION

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ABSTRACT

Teaching practice is a fundamental element of Teacher Education, as it equips student teachers with professional practice in real classroom settings. This practice takes place under professional guidance and supervision. The study focused mainly on student teachers' experiences regarding placement, supervision, mentoring, workbooks and support during teaching practice. It explores student teachers' experiences during their placement periods in schools in an Open, Distance and e-Learning Institution. The study utilized the theory of knowledge conceptual framework, which emphasizes that individuals generate knowledge and meaning from an interaction between their experiences and their ideas. This case study explored student teachers' experiences, and mapped ways to improve support to student teachers during their school placement periods. Textual data were also analyzed using content analysis. The findings revealed that students experience a number of challenges that hinder their teaching practices and these experiences varied according to their background within the diverse contexts of their particular host school environments. This research contributes to the development of effective strategies required when supporting students during their Teaching Practice sessions. It is also intended to make policy makers, academics, course coordinators and the student community aware of the challenges in the area of Teaching Practice and how to address these.

Keywords: mentor teachers, school placement, student teacher, supervision, teaching practice.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching practice is a key component for Initial Teacher Education. It is a mandatory requirement set out in the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications (MRTEQ) by the Department of Higher Education and Training (Department of Education 2014). The Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) and the Council on Higher Education (CHE) set guidelines that Teacher Education institutions adhere to, in fulfilment of accreditation requirements. Teaching practice is therefore required for effective preparation of student teachers by Teacher Education Institutions (Ulvik & Smith 2018).

The Teaching Practice Office at the University of South Africa (UNISA) plays a major role in ensuring successful student placement in schools to fulfil Work Integrated Learning (WIL) requirements as set out in the MRTEQ document. WIL prepares students for the world of work and highlights the importance of work place learning, assessment and partnerships. Teacher Education qualifications are not complete without adequate preparation of student teachers of diversified roles in schools through teaching practice. Teaching practice is therefore a practical and critical phase of teacher preparation.

At UNISA, students registered for the Bachelor of Education are required to spend twenty-five school days as part of their WIL experience. Students registered for the Post

Graduate Certificate in Education are required to spend fifty school days in fulfilment of their WIL. Administrative personnel in the Teaching Practice Office (TPO) have the responsibility of ensuring placement and student support in schools. Lecturers and externally contracted supervisors visit students to assess their lesson presentations in class. This study focuses on student teachers registered for Teacher Education qualifications, specifically in the Bachelor of Education program at UNISA. It seeks to explore student's experiences of teaching practice in an ODeL context.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Teaching practice focuses on competencies of becoming a teacher, expected to take place in an actual teaching and learning environment (Leke-ateh, Asan & Debeila, 2013). Similarly, MRTEQ document also identifies five types of learning expected during teaching practice and these are as follows;

- Disciplinary learning which refers to subject matter knowledge.
- Pedagogical learning: This entails how to teach, an understanding of learners and how learning takes place, as well as accommodation of diversity.
- Situational learning, which refers to knowledge of different learning contexts and situations, policies and diverse social challenges that learners face.
- Practical learning, meaning learning from and in practice, observing others, being observed and reviewed.
- Fundamental learning, which encompasses learning to communicate effectively in a second language, the use of integrated communication technologies and the development of academic literacies.

The above types of learning are crucial and need to be developed and enhanced during Teaching Practice. It remains the responsibility of the institution to ensure that the qualifications and modules presented focus on the above types of learning.

The placement process offers students an opportunity to try the art of teaching before actually getting into the real profession. According to Major and Tiro (2012), teaching practice exposes students to a range of experiences and challenges, and such are important to prepare students for the world of work. Students often consider geographical distance before selecting schools for teaching practice, to ensure that they do not travel longer distances. In certain situations, the schools that they select might not necessarily be good and functional schools, but students are bound to practice in these schools due to financial constraints. Some students practice in school where there are low and uneven levels of teacher expertise, where there is a lack of resources and lack of discipline, both on the side of learners and teachers. Abdullahi and Salisa (2017) maintain that students need to understand their challenges in connection with their individual differences, personalities and logical presentation of instructional objectives as opportunities to learn and improve their practice.

Open, Distance and e-Learning institutions, are also required to comply with accreditation requirements for Teacher Education (Mubika & Bukaliya, 2013). During school placement periods, communication between the teaching practice office and the schools is important to ensure that mentors are appointed for students. As Musingafi and Mafumbate (2014) posit, mentoring has emerged as an essential and effective process for developing teacher practice. School-based mentors require workshops on how to support students during distance

learning. This is necessary so that mentors are equipped with skills and knowledge to support and guide students (Kalogiannakins & Papadalis, 2019). During these workshops, facilitators need to outline activities to guide mentors. According to Mtika (2011), success for the student in teaching practice depends on the quality of mentoring received. A mentor is therefore, an experienced teacher expected to guide, support and assist the student to acquire the relevant professional knowledge, skills and experience (Mukeredzi & Manwa, 2019). Supervisors assess students and discuss the students' progress with the mentors. Despite all these measures in place to support students, they often report challenges, which require the teaching practice office, schools, supervisors and school based mentors to address.

Students generally encounter challenges and these often affect their performance during teaching practice, as well as their overall perception of the teaching profession (Montonen & Eriksson, 2013). Teaching practice aims to provide learning experiences to student teachers in real settings (Tshuma, 2010). Students begin their teaching practice by observing their school-based mentors teaching, and they then need to reflect on these observations, and create their own lessons and be able to teach them (Reljic, Pajnikihar & Fekonja, 2019). During such observations, students learn teaching skills, techniques, methodologies and strategies effective for use in classrooms (Shikulu & Lekhetho, 2020). Students learn classroom management evaluating experiences as they interact with school based mentors, lecturers and other stakeholders in schools. School based mentors play the important role of supporting students' professional growth (Ulvik & Smith 2018).

Self-reflection is important for students as they implement different approaches, strategies and skills required for meaningful learning (Reljic, Pajnikihar & Fekonja, 2019). The purpose of teaching practice is therefore to develop competencies including interpersonal, pedagogical, intercultural and psychological competencies (Carless, 2020, Carless & Boud, 2018). School based mentors are key in providing opportunities to learn for students (Du Plessis, Marais & Van Schalkwyk, 2011). This learning takes place through observation and peer or team teaching. During school placement, mentors are assigned to students at school level and these mentors play a key role in guiding and supporting students regarding school orientation, teaching and learning activities, extra-curricular activities, policies, curriculum matters and classroom management and control (Bakirci & Filiz, 2018).

Placing students in functional schools ensures a supportive, interactive and conducive classroom environment for effective teaching and learning (Gravett & Jiyane, 2019 and Bjorndal 2020). Students are supervised, and this supervision has considerable influence on the development of student teachers' orientation, disposition, conceptions and classroom practice. During teaching practice, students get an opportunity to link theory to practice (Gravett & Ramsaroop, 2015), and this is reflected in their planning and presentations of lessons.

The theoretical underpinning of this research is that of the Constructivist theory of knowledge (Good & Brophy 1994) which emphasizes that individuals generate knowledge and meaning from an interaction between their experiences and their ideas. Students' voices are important in structuring effective WIL. Their voices include both positive and negative aspects of their experiences needed for effective teaching practice, which is a key influence on student learning (Maphalala, 2014). It is important to understand the teaching process through the lens of the student teachers themselves. Teaching practice exposes students to varied teaching experiences in schools and institutions of higher learning.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research was to explore the challenges facing students' teaching practice and to explore ways in which these challenges could be addressed to ensure effective WIL. A qualitative design explored the diversified underlying perceptions, understanding of teaching practices and experiences of student teachers. A case study approach was appropriate as it explored the features of students with their characteristics in relation to their real life situations, as well as their individual subjective experiences (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000). Selected participants were students in the third year of study in the Bachelor of Education programme. These were students that the researcher personally visited in schools. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and field notes and analyzed using content analysis (Neuendorf, 2010).

The application of appropriate data-gathering strategies and research instruments ensured quality criteria and ethical considerations. This research took into consideration the required ethical standards for carrying out research with human beings, as advised by Seale (2004). Face to face interviews were conducted with the participants. These interviews took place during the teaching practice visits to schools. Each interview lasted for 35 minutes. The researcher clarified the research questions to participants and informed them about their rights to withdraw from the study whenever they needed to. The author complied with ethical clearance as required by the Ethics Committee of the University of South Africa. The research took place within ethical awareness leading to credibility of the study. The researcher received permission from student teachers and acknowledged their voluntary participation.

RESEARCH AIMS

The aim of this study is to explore student teachers' experiences during their placement in schools and to understand the challenges they face in order to develop effective strategies to address them. Furthermore, this research aims to determine how student teachers' experiences influence their classrooms practices.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This paper explores students' experiences during their teaching practice placement periods, with special emphasis on the way their experiences enables or hinders effective teaching and learning practices. The following research questions guided this research;

Research Question One: What are the student teachers experiences during their teaching practice periods?

Research Question Two: What kind of challenges affect students during their teaching practice periods and how do student teachers' experiences influence their classroom practices?

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The following themes were extracted from the narratives provided by participants and were based on the interview questions.

i) School based mentors

School-based mentoring is often seen as a challenge as some mentors do not know how to support students. One student highlighted that when she got to the school, her mentor teacher asked her what she was supposed to do. The TPO provides students with teaching practice guidelines as well as a document explaining procedures for mentoring. It is clear from some of the student's conversations that some schools do not receive any communication before students come to their schools. It is important that students provide the mentor teachers with the relevant documents relating to teaching practice so that they understand how best to support them.

Some students described their mentors as not being supportive. One student shared that her mentor looked down upon her and she felt she was doing a lot of work without due recognition:

I feel that my mentor teacher does not trust me at all. Every time I have to do something on my own, she steps in and finally wants me to do what she wants. On the other hand, she gives me many workbooks to mark as if I am an assistant teacher. I need to be in another school for my next teaching practice because I feel that I am not learning much from this school.

Another student shared as follows;

My mentor does not know how to guide and support me. She often asks me what I expect from her. She was not comfortable when I asked to observe her teach the other time. I do not think she understands her mentor role; she also does not know what the university expects from her.

It is evident in the above excerpts that some school-based mentors do not guide and support students in the way that they should. This is the case even when UNISA teaching practice academics and supervisors conduct workshops for mentor teachers to help them to understand their roles and responsibilities. The challenge is that, given the large enrolment of students, and the fact that more mentors need to be trained, school based mentor workshops do not cover all schools where students are placed. During the workshops, mentors roles are clearly defined, as well as effective ways of guiding and supporting students.

ii) Full time employed students

Some full time employed students are not able to take leave from work in order to comply with the placement requirement. Students often request permission from lecturers to do a lesser teaching practice period or to even spend a few hours in a day at school. Another student shared her frustration as follows:

I work full time and cannot take some time off from work. I managed in my first and second year because I was not working then. If I request leave, it can only be half a day and not five weeks. If I do not go to work, I will not get my salary. I cannot afford this as I am paying for my own studies.

Another student also shared as follows;

I teach full time at a school. I cannot leave my class to go and teach in other classes. My principal does not allow me to do this because we are under-staffed. I am required to do teaching practice for five weeks and I cannot fulfill this requirement

because of my activities at the school.

It is clear that the student above teaches in a particular class, but is registered to do TP in a different school setting. On the other hand, some students do not spend a full day at a school. They often ask lecturers to grant them permission to do half days because of their other commitments. Such requests are not granted, as they go against accreditation requirements and standards as set out in the MRTEQ document. UNISA TP office has made it clear that requirements for teaching practice need to be strictly adhered to.

iii) Teaching practice support and orientation

Some students often claim that they do not know what is required of them for teaching practice. A student mentioned the following;

We do not have face-to-face orientation for teaching practice. We would like to have contact with our lectures and share our frustrations with them. We get instructions from workbooks and often feel that this is not enough. Sometimes our mentors also do not have the answers to our questions and this can be frustrating.

iv) Teaching practice supervision

Some students do not perceive supervision in a positive light. They are concerned that supervisors do not contact them well in time to arrange for visits, nor do they explain in detail what they expect from them. One student shared her sentiments as follows:

My supervisor contacted me after I had finished my teaching practice. She demanded that I go back and arrange with the school so that she could come and assess me. I told her that I cannot go back to my work and that I had earlier taken unpaid leave and cannot afford to be away again. Fortunately, I contacted my lecturer who resolved the matter.

UNISA teaching practice supervisors are trained by academics and such challenges as the ones above are addressed during the workshops. The training that is offered covers the supervision process, communication with students, assessment of teaching practice, lesson presentation and planning and overall professional conduct of students and supervisors in schools. Students also escalate such encounters with their lecturers and the teaching practice staff.

v) Placement procedures

UNISA TP office administrative personnel are responsible for placing students in schools. When students register and select teaching practice modules, they complete a Department of Student Admission and Registration (DSAR) TP placement form called the DSAR25 for students in South Africa and the DSAR27 form for international and Southern African Development Community (SADC) students. On this placement form, students select schools that they prefer and also indicate the dates in which they will be able to do teaching practice and then send these to the office for capturing. Some students experience challenges with communication processes and therefore their TP is delayed. Some would then proceed with their teaching practice without having acquired relevant confirmation. This is reflected in the excerpt below;

I registered in February already and it is now April, I have not received any confirmation letter for school placement. I did everything from my side and to date I have not heard anything from the office. I saw in the workbooks that these must be submitted before end of August, and took it upon myself to go ahead with my teaching practice. I tried to call but could not get through.

As reflected in the student's concern below, students prefer to call the TP office rather than communicating online as directed by online platforms.

vi) Lesson plan guidance

Some students shared that their preparation for teaching practice is hampered because they do not know how to plan lessons. One student teacher shared as follows:

The lesson planning guides that we find in our workbooks are sometimes different from what the teachers use in schools. I end up having to do two planning documents; one required in the workbook and the one actually used in schools. The one in the book is a guideline and not detailed.

Another student responded as follows towards the issue of lesson planning;

UNISA does not give us set lesson plans, and I sometimes find it challenging because my mentor teacher does not have any written preparation. I had to google to understand key components of a lesson plan. When I asked her about lesson plans, she showed me the weekly and term planning that DBE provided. I did feel lost at some point, but my supervisor was very helpful.

The above is evident that student support is an important component in ODeL. This support also needs to be provided by school based mentors during teaching practice placement in schools.

vii) Classroom management and control

Some students experience classroom management and control as extremely challenging. One student highlighted;

I must be honest; I find that learners in schools are disrespectful of us student teachers. I was not introduced as a student teacher, but somehow learners knew that I was a student. I find it difficult to manage discipline, especially when my mentor is out of class. She is very helpful, I must say, and the learners respect her. I wish I could command the very same respect. This makes me sad every time I have to be in control.

Students require mentor support to enhance their professional growth and personal development.

viii) Addressing barriers to learning

Students have a challenge of addressing barriers to learning during their school placement. One student reflected:

Our modules promote inclusive education, and we are taught how to accommodate and teach learners with barriers to learning. It is sometimes difficult to translate what you read in modules into practice, and apply it to a practical situation that confronts you. I struggle with assisting learners with different challenges; I do not

know how to encourage maximum participation of learners.

It is evident from the above that some students experience difficulties with regard to addressing barriers to learning and therefore require support.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveals that students rely on school based mentor support and regard this as a challenge. Some students are concerned that their mentors do not know how to guide and support them and often treat them as teacher assistants. These mentors might not be equipped with strategies to effectively guide and contribute towards students' personal and professional growth. As Mukeredzi and Manwa (2019) posit, the process of mentoring begins with understanding the mentor-mentee relationship. This relationship requires an outline of schedules, where activities and engagements must be recorded. A good mentor-mentee relationship is characterized by communication, mutual respect, punctuality and commitment. Well prepared schedules provide opportunities for students to acquire knowledge on school regulations and policies, code of conduct, assessment, learner discipline, inclusivity and a good relationship with all stakeholders and the professional aspect of becoming a teacher (Mukeredzi & Manwa, 2019). A mentorship programme that is well planned allows for reflective practice, where students are able to apply what they have learnt.

Based on the findings presented, some permanently employed students experience challenges when it comes to TP. These students often request their TP to be shortened, with some requesting to do half days at school. Teaching practice is an indispensable component of Teacher Education (Abdullahi & Salisu 2017; Leke-ateh, Asan, & Debeila, (2013).and students are required to do it as an accreditation requirement. Exposure to TP is a crucial aspect of teacher preparation and it is during TP periods that students acquire real life experiences.

Evidence gleaned from the findings reveal that some students still require face to face interaction. In an Open, Distance and e-Learning environment, communication and support to students takes place through many forms, which are not necessarily face to face all the time. The UNISA student support model allows for a variety of online activities; video-conferencing, the use of developed teacher and regional centers. The reality is that in certain instances, these facilities are not accessible to students because of distance and remote areas. Students are often encouraged to send e-mails to lecturers and access materials posted on the website and communication platforms. Student support activities offers opportunities for students to balance their study and personal lives in relation to an ODeL environment (Shikulu & Lekhetho, 2020). Such an environment allows for local as well as international students, young and older, employed and not employed. However, provision of resources, clear lines of communication benefits both.

It is crucial that teaching practice supervisors visits students in schools (Yeşilyurt & Semerci, 2012) to assess whether they are learning what they are supposed to learn. Supervisors contact students and arrange to visit them. During this pre-conferencing space, the supervisor explains how the assessment will unfold. However, the process of teaching practice supervision is often not well conceived by students.

It is important for students to understand the teaching practice process, as Gujjar, Naoreen, Saifi, & Bajwa (2010) posit. Students are expected to study the theoretical component covered in the modules and also link what they have learnt with real classroom settings.

However, some students feel that it is just enough to study the theoretical modules and that it is not important for them to be in schools. Students who are teaching full time do not see the need for teaching practice placement. The UNISA teaching practice model requires all students registered for the B.Ed and PGCE programmes to do teaching practice. Students who feel that they fulfil requirements for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) apply to be exempted from doing teaching practice. These students need to fulfill requirements of such exemption, and one important criteria is that their experience must be relevant to the phase of the programme.

As evident in the findings, students often communicate telephonically with the TP office. This is a challenge in the sense that administrative tasks have different responsibilities and responding to student queries is much easier through online platforms and emails. The teaching practice office is categorized into workstations and these are demarcated according to provinces in South Africa. The workstations deal with students in a particular province, and the provincial coordinator plays a key role in supporting students, mentors and supervisors in the province that they coordinate. It therefore remains important for students to send emails and use online university platform to communicate with the office. Kalogiannakis and Papadakis (2019) concurs that students need to manage and use e-learning in order to enhance their professional practice.

Teaching practice aims to bridge the gap between theory and practice, as argued by Ulvik and Smith (2018). Students are expected to put what they have learnt into practice. In the same way as all other disciplines, teaching practice is a discipline that produce experts and specialists. Students are placed in schools for experiential learning (Bakirci and Filiz, 2018). Their understanding of theory and practice is strengthened by the guidance they receive from the stakeholders involved in teaching practice. The lesson plans that students referred to from the workbook accommodate all registered students. The workbook lesson plans provided, do not only cater for South African students, but international and SADC students can also benefit from them, since they are not based on the South African curriculum. This is the same reason that students are not told to focus on the South African curriculum, as UNISA does not only serve only local students.

Based on the findings, students require support with lesson planning and presentation. Students registered for the Teacher Education programmes are encouraged to visit the Teacher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa (TESSA) website. The website provides examples of lesson plans and presentation activities that students can adapt and use as guidelines for their own lesson plans. This requires critical reflection (Reljic, Pajnkihar and Fekonja, 2019). It is important for students to scrutinize their challenges and create their own practical solutions. The Open Educational Resources (OeR's) on the TESSA website aim to assist students with lesson planning and presentation. Although some students battle with understanding the OeR's, specific guidelines on the use of these are communicated to students. These allow students to bring creativity in the classroom, to be innovative and to make their own resources to facilitate learning.

Classroom management and control also pose challenges to students. Students are expected to plan and present lessons during their teaching practice periods. At this point, feedback is important so students can learn through self-reflection. Carless (2020) and Bjorndal (2020) concur that feedback remains crucial to students and this requires partnership between mentor teachers and students. Provision of feedback emphasize the co-construction of knowledge and understanding among key role players in a school (Carless and Boud, 2018).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Guidance and support is required for students' actual TP activities such as lesson planning, presentation, discipline, assessment and creating opportunities for learners to learn as well as maximizing learner participation. Lecturers use video lessons, screen and podcasts, live broadcasts, micro-teaching lessons, video conferencing to strengthen student support. Teacher centres are available across the country, and students can use these to access all relevant materials relating to their studies.

The findings from this research revealed that students need more professional development workshops that need to connect their existing knowledge with the current approaches to teaching practice. It remains important for academics to continuously reflect on students' perceptions, practices, and the relationship between their perceptions and their practices, in order to structure teaching practice approaches that accommodate students. Support to students is crucial, and this does not refer to once off discussions with students, but requires continuous engagement with students, to ensure that they understand how TP unfolds.

School-based mentor workshops must reach all teachers. These workshops need to be planned with supervisors to ensure that the same information is shared. Mentors and supervisors must be good role models, competent in their conduct and work ethics and they need to be adequately prepared for their roles through these kinds of training and workshops. It is important that academics conduct orientation sessions at the beginning of the year so that students are aware of what is required from them. In these sessions, students need to be aware that they cannot leave their teaching practice until later in the year.

Administrative personnel need to ensure that placement happens early in the year, to ensure that students are well prepared for teaching practice. Timeous placements will allow students with challenges to communicate with the TP office and request for alternative arrangements. Academics and supervisors need to arrange micro-teaching lessons and share good lesson presentations with students. Students themselves, to show other students that it is possible for them to share good practices among themselves, can do other examples of video-taped lessons.

CONCLUSION

Students experience a variety of contextual factors such as inability to take leave due to work related reasons. It is important that students prioritize their studies and complete teaching practice as stipulated. The guidelines for teaching practice at UNISA comply with accreditation requirements as set in the MRTEQ document. Compliance ensures that the quality of the programme should not be compromised.

As revealed in the data presented, some school-based mentors are not supportive to students; some are not fully available due to school activities and workload. These mentors perceive mentoring of students as extra workload on top of what they already have. UNISA academics conduct school based mentor workshops across the country and ensures that mentor teachers are equipped with skills and knowledge relating to student support.

Students do not take supervision in a positive light. Some complain that there are no clear directives from supervisors regarding visits. Students do not take school visits seriously because

the assessment is only for support and not for the final module assessment. UNISA supervisors continuously attend workshops to ensure that they are up to date with the procedures and guidelines as set out by the Teaching Practice Office. The emphasis is placed on professional support of students, and ensuring that quality teaching and learning is not compromised.

Participants in this study needed a lot of administrative support, The TPO continues to ensure that all administrative duties are fulfilled, and that student support remains the core task of the office. A new teaching practice management model needs to ensure that all students receive support as outlined in the vision and mission of the TPO.

Some students raised concerns that they do not receive immediate assistance from lecturers regarding teaching practice related queries. Students need lecturers to be readily available to assist them with assignments and workbooks, which they often find to be lengthy and requiring many resources. Communication platforms need to be fully utilized as ways of supporting students across the globe.

This research is important in as it provides a contribution towards the body of knowledge in Teaching Practice, suggesting the development of effective strategies for student support during work integrated learning. The findings are also intended to make policy makers, academics, course coordinators and the student community aware of the challenges in the area of Teaching Practice and how these can be mitigated to ensure that students are well prepared for the world of work.

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