

The Right to be Heard: Open Distance Learning Student Teachers' Challenges Regarding Extra-Curricular Activities

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ABSTRACT It is incumbent on all teacher training institutions to ascertain whether they are imparting appropriate made-to-measure skills that will enable student teachers to attain internationally competitive levels when entering the teaching profession. The specific aim of the paper was to determine open distance learning student teachers' reflections on the problems they experienced with regard to extra-curricular activities when they had to do their teaching practice at schools. Within the perspective of qualitative research, phenomenology as a qualitative research design has been chosen as the method of obtaining data. Semi-structured and open-ended questions were used to collect data. Two theories were used as theoretical frameworks, namely, an ODL theory called the Com-model and Piaget and Vigotsky's social-constructive learning theory. The results revealed that numerous problems were experienced by ODL student teachers with regard to their participation in extra-curricular activities during their teaching practice periods at schools.

INTRODUCTION

The perception that student teachers' participation in extra-curricular activities while they are engaged in teaching practice is a matter of course, or that it is self-evident is a myth (Weimer 2010: 15). A school's educational offerings comprise curricular activities (academic) and extra-curricular, extra-mural or co-curricular activities (non-academic). Research conducted by Kiggundu and Nayimuli (2009: 350) indicate that concern about the involvement of student teachers in extra-curricular activities during their teaching practice periods at schools is justified. Msila (2014: 343-344) emphasises that student teachers who are not trained properly might contribute towards the nature of dysfunctional schools. Student teachers learn through experience and they need to deal with real-life challenges (Muller-Christ et al. 2014: 134-137) such as extra-curricular activities during their teaching practice.

The findings of Kiggundu and Nayimuli (2009) revealed that student teachers' participation in extra-curricular activities was extremely limited despite a request to the school management teams to involve student teachers in such non-academic activities. In fact it was found that student teachers were sometimes even purposefully excluded from extra-curricular activities (Kiggundu and Nayimuli 2009: 350-355). According to Hinkle (2006: 5), student teachers might not

be eager to participate in extra-curricular activities during their teaching practice periods at schools because they are concerned that their academic modules would be neglected. Such students are more likely to participate in activities that are related to academic work. Some student teachers also thought that they did not have the time for these activities. However, according to Hinkle (2006: 5), they were eager to participate in curriculum-related activities, such as field trips. Hinkle (2006: 5) believes there existed a great possibility that student teachers would only engage in activities that require "low commitment involvement", such as attending a once-off cultural event. Although extra-curricular activities fall outside the realm of the normal curriculum of school education, such activities should not be neglected by student teachers.

There is usually a choice of activities in the form of involvement in games, school bands, school newspaper reports, cabaret, clubs, debates, cultural and sports activities, and these can take place during normal school hours, the lunch break or after school (Nesan 2009: 1). Extra-curricular activities are regarded as a means to enhance social interaction, leadership, healthy recreation, self-discipline and self-confidence. As noted above, in some instances extra-curricular activities take place during normal curriculum hours and sometimes not, and in the latter case they require that teachers commit their time

beyond the regular school day (for example, choir practice).

Training institutions must make it clear to student teachers that involvement in extra-curricular activities during their teaching practice periods is a requirement (Hinkle 2006: 5). Marais (2011: 87) points out that student teachers' involvement in extra-curricular activities is essential as it is an integral part of their practical teaching experience and it should therefore be compulsory. The reasons why student teachers' involvement in extra-curricular activities should be compulsory are discussed in the paragraphs below.

Learners attend school to be educated not only academically but also non-academically in order for them to develop harmoniously as a whole person. The variety of learning and teaching events offered to learners is usually one of the criteria for a successful school. Extra-curricular activities all add value of a learner's life and therefore it is important that student teachers participate in extra-curricular activities during their training years (Marais 2011: 81-82).

Involvement in extra-curricular activities plays an important role in the physical, social, emotional and intellectual development of learners. Extra-curricular activities enhance social interaction, leadership, healthy recreation, self-discipline and self-confidence. Thus, apart from academic curricular activities, extra-curricular activities are an important source of enrichment and vitalisation and it enhances self-expression and serve as outlets for the flow of the surplus energy of learners (Marais 2011: 82).

During teaching practice periods at schools, student teachers must be given ample opportunities to participate in the full range of teaching experiences in order to learn and reflect rationally on the skills, knowledge and attitudes required for the teaching profession. Teaching practice is an excellent platform with abundant opportunities for student teachers for personal and professional development during this time (Alexander and Van Wyk 2014: 413). Therefore, student teachers must get involved in all aspects of curricular (academic) as well as extra-curricular (non-academic) activities (Marais 2011: 81-82).

As with any other teaching related activities, student teachers need to understand the nature and challenges of extra-curricular activities in order to commit fully to the task of guiding and coaching learners in this regard. How-

ever, the author could find no research that has been done in South Africa on the problems that ODL student teachers enrolled for a BEd. degree with specialisation in Early Childhood Development and Foundation Phase experience regarding their participation in extra-curricular activities during their teaching practice periods. This gap needs to be addressed, because if this is not done the problems experienced by student teachers will not be identified, which is the first step in resolving their problems. On the other hand, if the problems concerning involvement in extra-curricular activities are addressed during the training years, student teachers' responsibility and accountability regarding their involvement in extra-curricular activities can be encouraged and supported by the ODL lecturers. Furthermore, mentor teachers, too, can be guided by the ODL lecturers, which will benefit the professional development of the student teachers. This paper is an attempt to fill the gap regarding the lack of knowledge about the specific problems experienced by Foundation Phase student teachers' involvement in extra-curricular activities.

The ODL institution under review offers a four-year bachelor's of Education degree (BEd.) that specialises in Early Childhood Development (ECD) and the Foundation Phase. This degree consists of 40 modules and comprises the following four major components: three approved school subjects which include two of the official languages; ten modules in educational themes, 15 modules in professional studies and additional modules from which students can choose, to make up the required number of 40 modules. Of the latter, four are allocated to teaching practice, namely, Teaching Practice 1 and 2, at an ECD centre, and Teaching Practice 3 and 4 in the Foundation Phase. Each of the four practical teaching modules requires 5 weeks of teaching practice in a school, which means that a student would have completed 20 weeks of teaching practice on completion of the BEd programme. During the periods of teaching practice, experienced teachers mentor the student teachers and the ODL lecturers would visit as many students as possible to observe, guide and assess.

As stated above, this paper's problem statement addresses the problems experienced by ODL student teachers regarding their involvement, or lack of involvement, in extra-curricular

activities during teaching practice sessions at schools and the aim of this paper was to determine the problems experienced by ODL student teachers concerning their involvement in extra-curricular activities at schools and their perceptions of ODL lecturers' support concerning their involvement in extra-curricular activities at schools.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Theoretical frameworks serve as epistemological guides that support interpretation of the knowledge presented in a study. Studies that are theoretically developed yield data that can be interpreted in more depth (Agherdien 2009: ii). ODL research is growing significantly and it requires solid theoretical foundations. For the purpose of this paper, two models were chosen as theoretical frameworks, namely, an ODL learning model, the Com-model (communication model) and the social-constructive theory of learning postulated by philosophers like Jean Piaget (1896-1980) and Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934).

The Com-model forms part of two other models, namely, the Flex-model (Flexibility) and the Sim-model (simulation). These models are to be found in a final report to the European Union Commission, Education and Culture (2005) under the title, "The use of ICT for learning and teaching in initial vocational education and training". For the sake of this paper, only the Com-model was used.

In ODL, the Com-model blends web-based distance teaching and learning with on-site teaching and learning, that is, with on-the-job training. The Com-model provides for direct, electronic communication with student teachers during their teaching practice period at schools, which is clearly very important. Thus, the Com-model can bridge theory and practice and thereby improve student teachers' practical teaching skills. In other words, in practical situations (such as teaching practice situations at schools) principles from the Com-model can enhance training as it focuses on intensive electronic, web-based communication (Final Report to the EU Commission, Education and Culture 2005: 69). Intensive communication between ODL student teachers and ODL lecturers during teaching practice can occur via electronic discussion forums, e-mails and satellite broadcasts. These increase the value of training during teaching

practice because they ensure that there is frequent contact between the student teacher and the lecturer as well as among fellow student teachers. The student teachers can discuss their experiences, problems and challenges regarding teaching practice and also ask the lecturer questions via the electronic discussion forum. Thus, they do not have to wait for the lecturers' feedback on the assignments which they must submit after they have completed the practical teaching period.

The Com-model also involves practical learning (learning-by-doing) as well as the acquisition of theoretical knowledge. Theory is incorporated into practice, that is, knowledge from the theoretical modules is applied in actual teaching. In this way student teachers assume responsibility for their own learning processes, including the theory of teaching and the acquisition of practical teaching skills (Final report to the EU Commission, Education and Culture 2005: xxi).

The second theoretical framework used in this study was Jean Piaget's (1896-1980) and Lev Vygotsky's (1896-1934) social-constructive theory of learning. This approach focuses on the active role of the learner (in this case, the student teacher) in building understanding and making sense of information in a social context (in this case, the school). Social constructivist education does not focus on individual learning activities. Instead it focuses on group activities and the learning outcomes generated by the collaborative efforts of the group (Woolfolk 2010: 312). Participation in team sports, dancing and cultural clubs are examples of extra-curricular group activities. According to social constructivists, learners actively construct knowledge by means of social interaction. For example, student teachers construct knowledge and develop skills when participating in extra-curricular activities in a social context (Bruning et al. 2004: 195).

Construction of knowledge requires effort and purposeful activities on the part of the learner. However, self-construction of knowledge does not mean that mentor teachers and lecturers have no input in the knowledge construction process of student teachers. The mentor teacher and the lecturers have overarching goals that guide student teachers' ideas and experiences in relation to key topics such as lesson plans, teaching media and assessment criteria. The mentor teacher and the lecturers arrange

situations that help student teachers to elaborate on or reorganise their pre-existing knowledge. As student teachers work collaboratively, extra-curricular activities naturally lend themselves to using the principles of social constructivism as an aid to imparting knowledge during and after specific activities, especially since the activities concerned are usually undertaken by groups and have well-defined goals.

The Impact of Extra-curricular Activities on Student Teachers' Professional Development

Research done by Marais (2011: 86) revealed that student teachers' perceptions of the value of their participation in extra-curricular activities during teaching practice periods was that such participation provides invaluable learning opportunities regarding their professional development. They testified that their involvement in extra-curricular activities resulted in a better understanding of the learners and generated respect for the learners and their parents without becoming too familiar with them. The student teachers also agreed that their knowledge regarding sport activities improved and it contributed to a development in their organisational skills.

Teaching Practice as a Culminating Experience in an ODL Context

The experiences that student teachers encounter during teaching practice periods are generally recognised as important for their professional development. Teaching practice offers student teachers the opportunity to be trained in a setting in which they will be able to contextualise their theoretical knowledge gained during their training - training that is meant to enable student teachers to acquire maximum teaching skills (Kiggundu 2007: 25) and to develop them professionally.

According to Struyven et al. (2010: 43, 61) student teachers' attitude towards teaching is dependent on variables such as performance, academic self-esteem and perceived workload. A variety of discovery-learning activities, such as problem-based projects that require active involvement in the learning content, practical usage of teaching methods and teaching strategies, creating classroom learning environments, managing discipline, and planning and present-

ing lessons in multicultural classrooms, are everyday events that student teachers have to deal with.

Besides being an important factor contributing towards the quality of teacher training programmes, teaching practice holds a key position in these programmes as it is the culminating experience that prepares student teachers for the teaching profession. It is an actual hands-on experience within a social learning environment (Struyven et al. 2010: 56), and the student teachers can feel themselves grow through their experiences as they begin to form ties with the culture of instruction (Gujjar 2011: 1).

During their teaching practice sessions student teachers have to apply the theory that, in ODL, is taught by means of deliberately designed printed materials, as well as online technological communication that offers both collaboration and support for learning and teaching. Examples of such technological communication are SMS messages and e-mails which is generally used for instant feedback, tips or urgent announcements, discussion forums, satellite broadcasts and video conferencing (Mabunda 2010: 232-234). Thus, ODL is not a passive process of uncritical assimilation of learning content. Students are guided to engage with expert-sand with facts, beliefs, ideas, opinion, impressions and reflections. The aim is to enhance two-way communication in which students interact with texts not only to construct knowledge, but also to assess their own learning, thus promoting an in-depth learning approach.

Carr et al. (2002: 167, 172) note that the most widely used strategy is one that integrates questions and/or activities into the learning content in order to stimulate the learning environment that typifies a traditional, residential/direct contact based university/college. The students engage actively with the text by being required to give critically argued answers to questions posed by lecturers in the text. In this way the cardinal requirements for successful ODL are satisfied in that the materials provided are self-instructional. These study materials must, of course, be accurate, "well-designed, comprehensive and at the correct academic level" (Cadorath et al. 2002: 141).

Excellent ODL tutorial matter should also reflect the need for the students to learn to recognise and acknowledge the individual differences that exist between the school learners that

they are teaching, and the fact that such knowledge is gained through keen observation of the learners (Samaras 2000: 106).

METHODOLOGY

The researcher employed a qualitative approach couched in a phenomenological research design to obtain an understanding of the views of student teachers regarding extra-curricular activities. The reason for selecting the qualitative approach was that understanding of the research phenomenon, that is, fourth-year student teachers' views on their involvement in extra-curricular activities while training, should develop naturally. Marshall and Rossman (2006: 2) point out that qualitative research examines the complexity of social relationships expressed in daily life and the significance that the participants attribute to these interactions. This translates into research into the problems and challenges that student teachers' face when involved in extra-curricular school activities as well as their relationships with the learners and mentor teachers and their reflections on the problems they experienced and the recommendations they suggested.

Purposeful sampling was used to select 51 information-rich assignments received from fourth-year, that is, final year, students registered for the BEd degree (Foundation Phase), which is the field in which the researcher teaches. The reason for using fourth-year students was that their three previous teaching practice modules could be a rich source of data and, furthermore, their judgement was likely to be more mature than that of students not yet in their final year. Maximum variation sampling was used. Both genders and a wide age distribution (23 to 44 years) were involved. Moreover, these students had completed their practice at schools in widely differing socio-economic areas. The schools' locations ranged from those in affluent areas, rich in human and material resources to schools in poverty-stricken areas where human and material resources were deficient. Participants also represented a variety of cultural groups. The above-mentioned information is indicated in Table 1.

Data collection was done by means of a non-compulsory assignment in the workbooks that had to be completed by student teachers during their teaching practice sessions. Several of these non-compulsory assignments contained hardly any useful data due to a lack of a substantial

Table 1: Information about the participants and schools

<i>Variables</i>			
<i>Gender</i>		<i>Age</i>	
Male	2	30 years and younger	35
Female	49	31 to 39	15
		40 years and older	1
<i>Ethnicity</i>		<i>Schools</i>	
Coloured	4	Urban	28
Black	17	Rural	23
White	21		
Asian	9		

N-51

factual account. These were excluded from the final sample.

To guard against bias in the findings three strategies were used, namely, (1) peer reviewing, (2) participant reviewing and (3) self-monitoring. Three lecturers involved in teaching practice were used for peer reviewing in order to reach consensus on the interpretation of the data. After interpreting the data, reviewing thereof was also done by conducting a focus group interview, involving 5 participants to contribute towards the interpretation of the data. Moreover, the researcher tried to avoid bias by resorting to maximum variation of participants and continuous self-monitoring. Before the research began, the researcher made notes of her own subjective and possibly biased opinions about student teachers' reflections on extra-curricular activities. The researcher consciously bracketed these pre-formed opinions while interpreting the data. Ethical considerations such as confidentiality and anonymity were also adhered to. The participants were informed that their names, the names of mentor teachers and the names of the schools where they did the teaching practice would be kept confidential.

The data were subjected to content analysis. This was done by organising, analysing and interpreting the data in four stages. Stage 1 was the identifying of keywords such as "unethical behaviour" and "mentor teachers". Stage 2 was the categorising of the responses according to keywords, such as "unethical behaviour of mentor teachers". Stage 3 was the consolidation of the categories into themes and sub-themes such as "Problems experienced by student teachers" (theme) and "Unethical behaviour towards student teachers" (sub-theme). Stage 4 was the presentation and discussion (interpretation) of the data. The data were in-

terpreted by referring to the literature review and the theoretical frameworks.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings were organised for discussion according to the following three themes that arose from the findings: (1) the student teachers' perceptions of extra-curricular activities; (2) problems identified by them regarding their involvement in extra-curricular activities and (3) the student teachers' reflections on the ODL support that they received when they experienced problems while engaged in extra-curricular activities.

Student Teachers' Perceptions of Extra-curricular Activities

All 51 participants confirmed that extra-curricular activities in addition to the academic programme were offered by the schools. The participants indicated that such activities took place during break time, during after school supervision, on weekdays in the afternoon after school (for an hour or two) and on weekends, especially on Saturdays. They indicated that the activities fell outside the formal school curriculum and some carried an extra cost which was sometimes expensive. The following are some of their remarks:

- ♦ *Extra-curricular activities are any non-academic activities that are different in summer and winter, like sports. Some activities are offered at a reasonable price.*
- ♦ *They are activities that are offered after school, throughout the week and on weekends.*
- ♦ *They are activities that are sometimes offered by professional trainers, for example sport coaches.*
- ♦ *They are activities such as dances, sport, speech and drama, music lessons, and cultural activities.*
- ♦ *They are ballet classes, revue, computer classes, chess and choir.*
- ♦ *They are activities that make one feel as if you do it without remuneration.*

From the responses of the participants it is clear that the student teachers are fully aware of the difference between the academic curriculum and non-academic curricular activities and the time and space allocated to the latter in the school

programme. They gave examples of typical extra-curricular activities. The responses were in line with the social-constructive theory which emphasises an understanding and making sense of information in social context (the school as a social structure). The second theme that arose from the findings was the reality that the student teachers experienced problems regarding their involvement in extra-curricular activities.

Problems Experienced by the Participants

All the participants used in this study experienced problems and challenges and all had negative experiences regarding their participation in extra-curricular activities. When saturation of the data regarding the problems and challenges experienced by the participants was reached, the findings could be organised into 3 sub-themes namely, (1) unethical behaviour towards student teachers; (2) disrespect towards student teachers; and (3) student teachers' lack of knowledge.

Unethical Behaviour towards Student Teachers

Relevant comments regarding the first sub-theme, namely, unethical behaviour towards student teachers were:

- ♦ *I received negative feedback from the school principal and mentor teachers when the school's team did not win.*
- ♦ *I experienced misunderstanding and conflict between mentor teachers. How can they be role models for student teachers?*
- ♦ *The mentor teacher embarrassed me in front of the learners by calling me names.*
- ♦ *Mentor teachers are absent because they want to go home and then they leave student teachers to take responsibilities on their own.*
- ♦ *No supervision. A student teacher is lucky if a mentor teacher is available to assist you.*
- ♦ *I was simply seen as an extra set of hands and eyes.*
- ♦ *I felt "left-out" as the class teacher did not allow me to be involved.*
- ♦ *'Outside' people who offer activities at the school do not want me to participate and shut me out.*

- ♦ *The teachers at my school don't enjoy facilitating extra-curricular activities and therefore are constantly moaning at talkative children.*

Unethical conduct on the part of school principals, mentor teachers, and coaches as outside trainers is a serious concern. The participants testified that they were criticised when the school lost a game or had a low score in competitive sport activities against other schools. They were held responsible for the image of the school.

The participants also claimed that the mentor teachers humiliated them in front of the learners by subjecting them to name calling. Student teachers also reported absenteeism of mentor teachers from extra-curricular activities, leaving the student teachers with no help and support with the supervision of these extra-curricular activities. The researcher views this as unacceptable unethical behaviour that needs to be urgently addressed.

Some participants also felt that their abilities were not recognised by their mentor teachers as they were allowed to be present, but they were not allowed to actually participate in the teaching and coaching of the extra-curricular activities. This resulted in student teachers feeling neglected, ignored and overlooked. According to Kiggundu (2007: 25), teaching practice should offer student teachers an opportunity to acquire knowledge and skills. In other words, teaching practice must provide opportunities that allow student teachers to accumulate maximum teaching skills. Furthermore, according to socio-constructive theory, student teachers must be actively involved in order to construct knowledge and good teaching skills. The social-constructive theory makes it clear that unethical conduct of school principals and mentor teachers is unacceptable and could actually harm the student teachers and their professional development.

Disrespect towards Student Teachers

The second subtheme with reference to student teachers' problems when involved in extra-curricular activities was the feelings of disrespect displayed by the learners towards them. The following are the comments expressed by the participants:

- ♦ *The learners did not want to listen to me because they know that I am not a qualified teacher.*

- ♦ *The learners did not take these activities as seriously as they do the academic activities-a situation that results in misbehaviour.*
- ♦ *Learners come late and leave their sport clothes at home. Then they do not take me seriously when I reprimand them.*
- ♦ *Learners take off their shoes and socks and I have to stand in for it. The parents are nasty with me when [their children's] stuff get lost.*

Learners as well as parents did not value the participation of student teachers, because they were still unqualified and thus judged as not capable enough to educate and teach. The participants experienced the misconduct of learners during extra-curricular activities as disrespectful and they found the management of discipline as problematic. Moreover, according to the participants, the learners were not serious about the activities and therefore they were often not on time and disrespectful when the student teachers rebuked them. The participants perceived the parents' behaviour towards them as offensive since the parents held them responsible for tasks that were outside their scope of practice, for example, they had to look after the learners' belongings.

Struyven et al. (2010: 43, 61) point out that student teachers' perception of their teaching experiences influences their self-esteem. This means that if and when student teachers are disrespected, erroneously blamed, disregarded and mistrusted, it will discourage them and hinder their professional development.

Student Teachers' Lack of Knowledge

The third subtheme focuses on the participants' lack of knowledge of the extra-curricular activities in which they were involved. Their remarks are illustrated below:

- ♦ *I could not handle sport injuries.*
- ♦ *I had no coaching experience and it showed.*
- ♦ *I had to be involved in swimming although I cannot swim and that had a very negative impact on my teaching practice experience.*
- ♦ *The tutorial matter did not prepare me for involvement in extra-curricular activities.*

It is clear from the findings that student teachers do not have the knowledge to attend

to sport injuries, or how to deal with the responsibilities that accompanied their involvement in extra-curricular activities. This may be ascribed to the fact that the present content of the teaching practice modules for the BED (Foundation Phase) does not prepare them for involvement in extra-curricular activities at schools. It is therefore important that training programmes require students to be involved in extra-curricular activities. This finding corresponds with the finding of Msila (2014: 343-344) who emphasises that student teachers need to be trained properly. The training years of student teachers focus inter alia on professional development and knowledge contributes toward professionalism. This is confirmed by (Alexander and Van Wyk 2014: 413) who believe that teaching practice is an excellent platform with abundant opportunities for student teachers for personal and professional development during this time.

Furthermore, to be involved in extra-curricular activities is in accordance with the main idea of the social-constructive theory, namely, that learners, in this case student teachers, actively construct their own knowledge by means of social interaction. For example, student teachers construct their own knowledge and develop their own skills when participating in extra-curricular activities (Bruning et al. 2004: 195). Thus teacher training programmes should provide relevant learning content as well as relevant learning experiences in the teaching practice modules, which will capacitate student teachers through the acquisition of the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes needed for responsible guidance of learners during extra-curricular activities. This finding is in accordance with the finding of Muller-Christ et al. (2014: 134-137) who emphasise that student teachers learn through experience and they need to deal with real-life challenges, in this case, the challenges while participating in extra-curricular activities.

To link student teachers' problems and challenges with the Com-model can be valuable. The Com-model involves the idea that learning to teach requires practical involvement in teaching events. The Com-model emphasises the acquisition of theoretical knowledge so that a high degree of theory is incorporated into the teaching practice experience. Application of the Com-model in ODL involves communication between the lecturers and the students via emails, discussion forums, satellite broadcasts and SMS

messages in order to address the problems. Such communication then supplements the study guides of the theoretical modules by explaining how the theoretical knowledge can be applied to the actual practice of teaching. The Com-model is thus a model that blends learning via web-based distance teaching (from the lecturers) with learning via on-site teaching (from the mentors and the student's own practical experiences during his/her teaching practice).

ODL Student Teachers' Reflections on ODL Support

The last theme obtained from the data was the ODL student teachers' reflections on the support they were given by their lecturers when they experienced problems while they were participating in extra-curricular activities. These reflections were organised into positive and negative remarks. The following are statements by the participants in this regard:

- ♦ *Students have to take responsibility to contact the lecturers via emails or SMS's when they have problems.*
- ♦ *ODL is effective because one practices extra-curricular activities when one is at a school and student teachers have to take responsibility for these activities whether they study at an ODL institution or a residential institution.*
- ♦ *Postal strikes are not a crisis when you can download teaching practice study material from the Internet.*
- ♦ *ODL is good in contacting all students wherever they are through e-mails and SMSs.*
- ♦ *It is flexible and I can balance my time for work, studies and family.*
- ♦ *ODL gives us a chance to contact lecturers wherever they are to solve problems.*
- ♦ *It forces me to work independently.*
- ♦ *I love having quick, easy access to the institution's webpage. The option "discussion form", where you are able to chat with other students doing the same modules has been a great help and a lovely way of meeting new people who have the same interest in my field of study.*
- ♦ *Students can communicate with each other on discussion forums, if help is needed.*
- ♦ *I do not think students get enough assistance from lecturers. I struggled to communicate with them.*

- ♦ *It was very difficult to study [through ODL] because I have a lot of other responsibilities and studying part time is very exhausted even if technology is available, like sending e-mails to lecturers.*
- ♦ *I have no support from lecturers by means of video conferencing.*

The findings illustrated that the majority of the student teachers appreciated and valued the opportunity to study through an ODL institution. Having the option to download tutorial matter when postal strikes occurred, was a benefit that was greatly valued by the participants. The participants all agreed that receiving SMS messages and e-mail communication and having the option of participating in group chats on the electronic discussion forums had a positive impact on their studies. For them studying at an ODL institution also allows them to further their study but at the same time they are able to work and attend to their families.

Electronic communication is not limited by distance, time and space and allows for rapid responses from lecturers and administrative staff and between student teachers. The findings also illustrated that student teachers can take responsibility for their own personal and professional growth. As social-constructive learning theory posits: active involvement in learning enables students to assume responsibility for the construction of knowledge. In effect, the findings illustrated that ODL can help students to study independently and develop self-motivation, persistence, dedication and self-discipline.

There was, however, some negative feedback from students. A few respondents thought that they did not get adequate support from their lecturers as they maintained that they struggled to contact and thus communicate with their lecturers and they were concerned that video conferencing was not used as a teaching aid. These matters need to be attended to. In this regard, application of the Com-model is important in order to ensure easy and frequent contact between student teachers and lecturers as well as contact between fellow students. Student teachers can electronically discuss their experiences with other students and electronically contact and receive immediate guidance from their lecturers instead of having to wait for assignment feedback from the lecturer.

CONCLUSION

As noted at the beginning of this paper, the aim of this paper was to determine student teachers' perceptions of the following: (1) ODL student teachers' understanding of extra-curricular activities at schools; (2) problems experienced by student teachers regarding their involvement in extra-curricular activities and (3) ODL student teachers' reflections on ODL support during their teaching practice sessions at schools. Student teachers' teaching identity can be developed by addressing the problems experienced when they are doing their teaching practice. This paper revealed that during their practical teaching periods ODL student teachers require constant engagement and interaction with their lecturers and with other students for emotional support and to share knowledge of extra-curricular activities, teaching techniques and teaching skills, not only with regard to classroom teaching but also with regard to extra-curricular activities. From the findings it can be concluded that student teachers have high expectations and devotedness regarding their involvement in extra-curricular activities but they do suffer to manage some learners' behaviour. Furthermore, some mentor teachers and parents fail to admire and appreciate their participation in extra-curricular activities. This paper has only been able to touch on the problems experienced by ODL student teachers' when participating in extra-curricular activities at schools.

RECOMMENDATIONS

After reviewing the participant students' responses to the questionnaire, it appears that one way to address the problems that the students experienced whilst involved in extra-curricular school activities is by incorporating the principles of the Com-model into all the practical teaching modules, from the first year up to the fourth and final year. It seems justifiable to suggest that the problems identified by the participants namely, unethical behaviour and disrespect on the part of the school principals, mentor teachers, parents and learners toward student teachers, as well as student teachers' lack of knowledge can be addressed by using the principles of the Com-model. The Com-model provides a variety of electronic ways and means for interaction between student teachers and fel-

low student teachers, university lecturers, and the ODL institution's administrative and tuition support systems. For ODL student teachers such engagement and interaction occur more easily through modern electronic media. Although the participants were selected from just one ODL training institution, the findings may be useful for discussions on how to address some learners' disrespect, some mentor teachers' negligence of student teachers and some parents' prejudice during extra-curricular activities. This paper also revealed areas for further research. These topics include the responsibilities of mentor teachers to equip student teachers with teaching skills in order to manage learner behaviour during extra-curricular activities as well as awareness of learners' ethical behaviour towards student teachers.

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