

Challenges Encountered by Student Teachers in Teaching English Language during Teaching Practice in East London, South Africa

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ABSTRACT An integral component of teacher education, training and preparation is teaching practice. It affords student teachers experience in the actual teaching and learning environment. The major focus of teaching practice is for teachers to bring theories and ideas developed about teaching into practice in actual classroom settings. This qualitative study investigated the challenges encountered in the teaching of English language during the teaching practice by the student teachers. The study examines some challenges faced by student teachers during their professional teaching practice, these include among others; school placement, resources, learners discipline and classroom management, supervision and support, and observations. It further employs reflectivity approach by considering the student teachers' reflections after their lessons. Four questions were posed as a guide to the reflections written by the student teachers. The data was thus analyzed through the use of content analysis and the findings suggested an exposure of the student teachers to a learning environment in which they can contextualise the theoretical knowledge they gathered during their training. The study therefore recommends that students should have a multiple pre-service training before they complete the program.

INTRODUCTION

School experience or teaching practice is an important component of becoming a teacher. This is the case because it exposes student teachers experience in the actual teaching and learning environment (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 (Kiggundu and Nayimuli 2009). Student teachers also know the value of teaching practice. In view of this, Menter (1989:461) remarks that student teachers perceive it as "the crux of their preparation for the teaching profession" since it provides for the "real interface" between their lives as students and membership of the teaching 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).

In view of this, student teachers need to be able to express their personal educational philosophies, theories and understandings. Based on this, the paper seeks to investigate the challenges encountered by pre-service teacher in teaching English during their teaching practice.

As such, school experience should be an excellent opportunity for student teachers to

experiment and test their knowledge and skills in the profession of teaching and learning with an understanding of their personal educational philosophies and theories. Based on the above, Davis and Hall (2003: 2) argue that it is "a socializing experience into the teaching profession". Thus, the rigorous negotiation during the school experience essentially leads to higher confidence in improving student teachers' learning and professionalization. Furthermore, school experience provides them with the satisfaction of their teaching career (Oh et al. 2005). In this way, student teachers have to question their beliefs and assumptions in developing pedagogical knowledge during teaching practice to avoid practices that are not founded on pedagogical knowledge and theories since in the profession of teaching, the theoretical facets are embedded in and inseparable from practice (Kabilan and Izzaham 2008).

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. An understanding of the student teachers' experiences can be able to facilitate the teacher-training faculties, schools and colleges of their awareness of the challenges faced during the school experience which could induce a negative attitude on the part of the student teachers

towards the profession. In this regard, it is needful for teacher-training programmes to reconsider and review ways of overcoming these challenges so as to enable these novice teachers to achieve their desired outcomes.

Research on teaching practice has focused extensively on the challenges faced by student teachers and how they affect numerous aspects of teacher education. Based on this, Thomas (2006) highlights cultural (diversity) and environmental barriers experienced by four American student teachers in Central Asia and how they coped and successfully managed in gaining valuable experience during their teaching practice. On the other hand, Pomerantz and Pierce (2004: 55) contributed to this by exposing the challenges experienced by student teachers in the “real world”, and to what degree the “courses prepared them for those challenges”. This is to suggest that the theory and micro teaching done in classroom context does not manifest itself as easy as it seems to be. That is, the actual thing lies in the teaching practice itself.

In addition, Chung (2002) examines the challenges of developing effective teaching strategies of student teachers through quality feedback from supervisors. She concludes that the dialogues that they have facilitate knowledge building and encourage collaborative reflection on individual teaching practice to improve the understanding of teaching. By using such dialogues, Chung (2002) insists that supervisors are able to assist the novice teachers in identifying and evaluating “the context of the problem or deficiency and establish developmental goals or standards” and “the personal strengths and resources of the student-teacher may be used to improve plans for teaching”.

With the new knowledge gained and the reconstruction of existing knowledge, the teachers have the potentials and the power to be adept in confronting the challenges and eventually prevailing over them. And as for teacher education providers, it may assist in improving teacher preparation courses (Pomerantz and Pierce 2004). A recent nationwide evaluation study of teaching practice in the Malaysian teacher education program seriously suggests that it is very important and beneficial to identify and examine the challenges that the pre-service teachers face during their teaching practice (IPT et al. 2005). The study contends that findings from such an

investigation can enrich and improve the effectiveness of teacher education programs in Malaysia, particularly the teaching practice component. And in this respect, many teacher education institutions in Malaysia aspire to provide effective and meaningful experiences for future English language teachers (Kabilan 2007), especially the teaching practice component which has always been a focus of these institutions.

However, local studies in Malaysia have highlighted numerous difficulties and problems faced by the student teachers during their teaching practices. Hanifah (2004) for instance, find that student teachers seldom question their assumptions and beliefs that they developed during teaching practice in school. In addition, Toh (2002) asserts that student teachers become less student-centred and more teacher-oriented in their educational beliefs which is contrary to the aspirations and belief systems of CAPS. Although Ong et al. (2004) discovered many positive aspects of teaching practice of primary teachers of ELT, there are also very many disturbing trend. In view of this, their study portrays that almost 55 percent of the student teachers come to realise at the end of their service that their teaching practice failed to give them the opportunities to engage in theory and practice because these teachers were overwhelmed by the realities of the classrooms. Their study helped them to identify five challenges that burdens the student teachers.

Objective of the Study

The paper aims to investigate the challenges encountered by pre-service teacher in teaching English during teaching practice.

Review of Literature

There are a lot of challenges facing the student teachers during their professional teaching practice. This study listed very few of them:

School Placement

School placement is a critical part of initial teacher education (ITE) and is designed to give student teachers an opportunity to learn about teaching and learning, to gain practice and experience in teaching, to apply educational theory in a variety of teaching and learning situa-

tions and school contexts and to participate in school life in a way that is structured and supported (Griofa and Ruairc 2013).

Student teachers are expected to undertake and observe a wide range of teaching and non-teaching activities, thereby developing an appreciation of the intricacy of teaching and the variety of roles undertaken. School placement facilitates the development of the student teacher's capacity for self-reflection, often in conversations with supervisors, mentor teachers, lecturers, teaching practice administrators and tutors, and affords the student teacher valuable opportunities to seek and receive advice in an atmosphere of support. Various institutions of Higher Learning have different structural arrangements and administration towards teaching practice placement (Griofa and Ruairc 2013).

According to Griofa and Ruairc (2013), during school placement, student teachers are mandatory to develop a range of knowledge, skills, competences and professional dispositions which are critical to their professional identity. Parallel growth within individuals and personal identity is enhanced as student journey through the learning-to-teach process. It is through school placement that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and schools identify student teachers who are most suited to and competent in teaching.

While HEIs set up the opportunities and the support mechanisms, the student teachers themselves took ownership of the activities, making their own arrangements for visits and lessons (Neal 2011). Whilst at school, student teachers face various challenges ranging from professional relations, unfriendliness, isolation, unfriendly staff room settings and conflicting teaching philosophies. If not addressed properly, these could impact negatively on the student teachers' self-image and confidence and result in a high level of unproductivity. School based mentors need to ensure that student teachers are supported during their work integrated learning. Student teachers require an opportunity of personal growth. This is enhanced when they take full responsibility of classrooms, learner discipline, curricula as well as extra-curricular activities.

Resources

Resources are vital to facilitate effective teaching and learning in schools. In the absence

of resources, or lack thereof, students get frustrated and this makes their teaching practice a difficult task. There are still schools in South Africa with no libraries and a huge shortage of textbooks. There are learners who still share textbooks in class. This is challenging for student teachers as it draws on issues of classroom management and control as well as learner discipline. Some schools still experience challenges with photocopiers and this poses problems when students prepare lessons and additional support material for learners for assessments and homework (Marais and Meier 2004).

Learner Discipline and Classroom Management

Discipline is a challenge in most South African schools and it appears that there are no effective disciplinary measures taken against delinquency and transgressions. In schools such as this, student teachers find it difficult to manage and control the class. In certain instances, learners know that student teachers are only at the school for teaching practice and as such cannot exert any authority towards them.

Schools need to assist student teachers to establish a system that creates better prospects for learning, a system where learners recognise themselves as beneficiaries of classroom discipline rather than its victims. This requires that discipline in schools be approached thoughtfully and systematically, with the aim of identifying and pre-empting or removing potential causes. Schools need to have proper measures in place to curb minor disciplinary matters before they become major (Salsbury and Schoenfeldt 2008).

Supervision and Support

The supervision process during teaching practice aims to promote good practice among students in classrooms and to affirm and acknowledge best practices. It seeks to improve the quality of teaching offered by students and it promotes self-reflection and continuous improvement in the development of pedagogic skills among students. It also allows students to get support from experienced professionals and practitioners.

HEIs undertake the supervision of students during teaching practice periods. In certain in-

stitutions, relevant and appropriately qualified external service providers also conduct supervision duties. Personnel appointed for supervisory positions usually have the requisite knowledge and experience of pedagogical practices that enable them to make informed and objective judgements on the teaching and learning observed in classrooms. These supervisors are constantly trained to ensure that they are in line with current trends in the curriculum as well as programme and module requirements (Kigundu and Nayimuli 2009).

The supervision process is conducted in an atmosphere of trust and respect. Supervisors, lecturers and tutors are expected to respect students and to engage with them constructively and adopt a professional and supportive role in the interactions with students. Supervisors are provided with lists of student teachers to visit and support, and proper and clear communication is required in order to make the assessment visits a success. During the school visits, supervisors give student teachers written and oral feedback. Improvements are commended, shortcomings highlighted and suggestions made on how to, for example, overcome anxiety, use non-verbal language to enhance their teaching and learning activities, and how to apply a variety of strategies to improve their teaching. School-based mentors also observe the students' progress, behaviour and attitude at school, and assess the student teachers' practical teaching and learning activities according to specific guidelines given by course coordinators (Kigundu and Nayimuli 2009).

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

Some students experience various challenges with school based mentors who are negative towards students. These mentors do not pro-

vide students with relevant opportunities for growth and choose to exploit and abuse them by imposing exorbitant demands and unrealistic expectations in terms of workload. Some mentors exhibit unprofessional conduct and engage in unprofessional acts like absenting themselves from duty or reporting late. This is in contrast with mentors roles and responsibilities whereby a mentor would be required to guide and lead the student teacher all the way, advising on shortcomings, appraising on strength and encouraging until the student teacher is able to present lessons effectively.

Observations

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

METHODOLOGY

The study is qualitative in nature as the data collected is based on the reflections from student teachers after their lessons. The study is conducted in East London; South Africa and it made use of 8 pre-service English language teachers registered for the postgraduate certificate in Education (PGCE). These students have their undergraduate degrees in different disciplines and are now registered for a one year teacher qualification, thus they have no teach-

ing experience. The students were therefore asked to reflect on their lessons in writing immediately after their classes to see what they did correctly as well as what they were disappointed with. In addition to this, these researchers as their lecturers also observed them in a few instances to see if the reflections were replica of what they witnessed in the classroom. There were a total of four questions that guided their reflections after each lesson which were:

- I. What went well? What do you think that the learners learnt from the lesson? Why do you think so?
- II. What disappointed or frustrated you during the lesson?
- III. What would you like to do differently when you teach a similar lesson?
- IV. What would you do in the next lesson to build from this one?

FINDINGS

Of the many difficulties involved in the teaching practice, this study focuses principally on relating theory and practice and teaching and learning challenges. It is important to note that because most of the students had similar experiences, one representative extract was used to avoid redundancy.

Relating Theory to Practice

As mentioned earlier in this paper, when student teachers are about to go to schools, they feel that the theory they learnt is enough for them to handle classrooms but when they get to the classroom, they tend to see that practice is the baby of experience, not theory. It is important to caution the reader that the researchers' focus is on question two above but they tend to draw from questions three and four from time to time in their presentation and analysis.

The following data brings out the disillusionment of student teachers when they do the actual practice based on their reflections after lessons during their teaching practice.

Respondent A: I was disappointed at the beginning of the lesson when I saw that the learners did not understand the purpose and importance of the things that I was teaching them.

I was disappointed by learners who were making noise during my class. When it is their host teacher, they will keep quiet.

Respondent F: Participation was so bad. Maybe it was because it is my first day

The way the responded to my questions was quite frustrating because they were only speaking isiXhosa

Respondent E: The grouping of learners was chaos because it took a long time and learners only wanted to sit with their friends

Asked what he would do differently he wrote:
I will devise a strategy for grouping learners so that friends should not sit together.

From these responses, one can see that these student teachers went to the class with some stereotypes of what a classroom should be. They expected a friendly atmosphere for teaching and learning without an understanding that teachers create such atmospheres with their learners.

Teaching and Learning Challenges

Most of the students experienced difficulties with teaching and learning during the teaching practice. Let us try and unpack how the teacher could possibly reflect on the levels of intelligence of the learners that he/she is responsible to teach.

The following reflections capture the frustration of student teachers on teaching and learning:

Respondent B: I was disappointed to find out that they have forgotten other types of essays whereas their teacher has taught them discursive essay. They do not know what a discursive essay is.

Respondent J: The only frustration I had been with myself. For some reasons I became irritable and I still do not know why. Maybe it was the nerve because my learners were fine and well behaved.

Respondent D: In the beginning, the learners were very tense and it made teaching very difficult

Respondent F: It was a shock to me that learners could not identify subject, verb and object. I can see these learners can be unteachable.

Respondent I: I try hard to explain but the learners cannot understand.

It is needful to say here that of the 64 language students that were cited during the 2014 session a majority were unable to pick up their difficulties that they were going through.

DISCUSSION

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

In view of this, Isaac (2012) suggests the following reasons for the lack of theory practice integration

- ♦ Hidden curriculum – learning takes place although it is not formally planned
- ♦ Lack of careful curriculum development – the theory does not compliment the practice.
- ♦ Lack of emphasis given to practical skills in the classroom.
- ♦ The under-utilization of different effective teaching and learning strategies.
- ♦ Lack of role models in the practical setting.
- ♦ Increased workload.
- ♦ Conflict between educators and management.
- ♦ Theory is too idealistic and impractical.
- ♦ Lack of formal feedback on formative evaluation
- ♦ Lack of planned support for students.

Application of theory in practice requires an understanding of concepts associated with teaching and learning and how to use these concepts in actual classroom teaching. Based on this argument, Isaac (2012) further thinks that the possible methods to enhance theory practice integration are:

- ♦ Problem based learning: Assignments that involve complex classroom scenarios.
- ♦ Student learning organized around self-directed work. This relates to making students responsible for their learning regarding a particular problem.
- ♦ Concept maps. A concept map helps to integrate new knowledge with prior knowledge by creating a knowledge graphs that depicts networks of concepts
- ♦ Reflective practice. A kind of practice that develops through personal reflection on one’s own practice, as well as guided re-

flection, where peers and others share in the reflection process.

- ♦ Group discussion: This enhances skill acquisition in decision making and problem solving, critical and creative thinking processes as well as thoughtful application
- ♦ Support and demonstrations by role models. This will help learners to apply various skills to a diversity of problems, use different educational strategies and provide meaningful learning experiences in which learners can correlate theory and practice.

The teaching practice curriculum should therefore include every possible requirement to enhance professional and personal growth of student teachers in becoming motivated, enthusiastic and independent teachers (Boikhutso 2013). Theory – practice integration can be facilitated if joint planning is implemented regarding curricula, teaching methods, and assessment criteria, and the different roles of educators and student teachers should be clarified (Isaac 2012). In this regard, teaching practice is valued as bridging the gap between theory and practice. Student teachers are often challenged with translating theory to practice, where they tend to place theory in one category and practice in another (Marais and Meier 2004). They are often overwhelmed by modules and find it challenging to reconcile and integrate the teaching methods as explained in their tutorial material, as well as different elements of knowledge, with those applicable in schools.

According to Atanda (2013), these authors maintain that the emerging role of classroom teachers contributes largely towards an effective school. They link, school effectiveness with the teaching-learning process, this implies that the “desired level of output is achieved while school effectiveness refers to the performance of the organisational unit called “school” (Atanda 2013). Furthermore the author explains “the position of teachers as key players in determining school effectiveness” (Atanda 2013). The challenges that teachers face is the way they deal with learners, or more eloquently stated, the relationship that a teacher has with the learners. As we know the challenge within itself are the learners who manifest different ways of learning and hence the teacher is required to teach and plan according to the different styles of learning that learners display. This in itself is a challenging task – 30, 40, 50 or even 60 learn-

ers in one grade, with one teacher trying to teach and meet learners' scholastic needs. Teaching becomes a mammoth task that requires the teacher to be an exemplary planner, manager and organizer (Salsbury and Schoenfeldt 2008).

Kiguundu and Nayimuli (2009) however argue that a teacher is required to plan sensitively and consciously in a classroom. Most countries are applying the "no child left behind" policy which means that all learners are to be included in the teaching-learning process embracing their diversities into the socio-cultural environment of the school and the school community. This presents a teaching and learning challenge for the teacher as diverse forms of learning and intelligence ought to be factored into a teaching-learning program.

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

CONCLUSION

The findings suggest an exposure of the student teachers to a learning environment in which they can contextualise the theoretical knowledge they gathered during their training. The environment further provides student teachers an opportunity to find out whether they are on the right career path. In this regard, it can therefore be said that teaching practice prepares the student teachers for the classroom. In as much as teaching practice prepares student teachers for the teaching profession, there are quite a good number of challenges that come with pre-service training. In view of this, these researchers think that the placement of student teachers in schools at the end of the year is not such a good idea because this is a critical time for the host teachers and their learners.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the ensuing argument, the study recommends that student teachers should go for their pre-service more than once but not at

the crucial time of studies like the end of the year. Secondly, the university needs to work hand in glove with the schools to ascertain that student teachers are mentored and supported by the host institutions.

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