

## Institutions' Expectations from Students during Teaching Practice

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**ABSTRACT** This paper investigates the institutional expectations of student teachers during teaching practice. It offers a critical examination of the different views of the host teachers, students and university lecturers during teaching practice. The analysis of these different views would inform and improve the teaching practice experiences of the student teachers, while creating a better learning atmosphere among the student teachers and host teachers. The study is qualitative in nature and makes use of interviews and observations as methods of data collection. The study concludes that teaching practice is an important component for teacher education curriculum and evokes different emotions in students. Hence, the need to learn more about the students' and host teachers' experiences for future reference when preparing students for teaching practice.

### INTRODUCTION

School Experience or Teaching Practice is the most valued and necessary part of teacher education for students to become competent teachers (Marais and Meier 2004). It grants student teachers with an experience in the actual teaching and learning environment (Kiggundu and Nayimulli 2009). 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. It exposes the students to a teaching environment wherein they will contextualize their theoretical knowledge gained during the training. It also grants student teachers with an experience in the actual teaching and learning environment (Kiggundu 2007).

As the student teachers move from the theory-based education, at the university to the school's practice-based approach, this experience invokes a lot of emotions, perceptions and anxieties from both, the student teachers and their host teachers. It is therefore important that Teacher Education and the related programs learn deeply about the student teachers' experiences, perceptions and realities. Although teaching practice has been described generally as beneficial, a consistent minority of the student teachers in teaching practice has persistently been stressed by the exercise (Mapfumo et al. 2012). Student teachers in many parts of the world have reported moderate to high levels of anxiety with respect to Teaching Practice (Mapfumo et al. 2012). In the same vein, the researchers posit that stress and workload are reported to be re-

curing themes explaining the withdrawal of student teachers from teacher training programs in some countries. Such experiences are both positive and negative and assist in terms of reflecting on how student teachers perceive their school-based classroom experience. It also assists the partners that are involved in teacher development to improve and rethink the models used for student teacher development and training.

### Research Objective

The objective of this paper is to examine an institution's expectation from student teachers during teaching practice as well as exploring the support the student teachers get from the host teachers and the school heads

### Student Teachers' Experiences of the School-based Practice

According to Marais and Meier (2008), the experiences of student teachers in schools are influenced by various factors and challenges that they do not anticipate. Wagenaar (2005) found that practical experience could also be of great value in learning how to teach. An appropriate mix of challenge and support contributes to the students' positive experiences of practical education (Wagenaar 2005).

### School-based Experiences

School-based relationships between student teachers, school staff, fellow students and learners form an integral part of their experience (Ma-

rais and Meier 2008). Among these relationships, the most important is between the student teacher and their mentor teacher. This is because mentor teachers have the greatest influence on the student teacher's development, orientation, disposition and general classroom practice (Marais and Meier 2008).

Wagenaar (2005) notes that the mentor teacher also plays a crucial role in the student's personal perception of the teaching practice. Wagenaar (2005) reported that a good relationship with the mentor teacher is essential during practice teaching, although there was some disagreement among the student teachers in the study as to exactly what constituted a "good" relationship. There was however some consensus that a good relationship with a host teacher would be one that is not threatening (Wagenaar 2005). A teacher-mentor relationship was reported by Marais and Meir (2010) in South Africa to be one where student teachers experienced the following:

- ♦ School staff 'accepted the students and made [them] feel welcomed'. 'They respected [them].' Under such positive circumstances, student teachers reportedly "copied the style of teaching from their host teachers as role models and student teachers stated that they 'enjoyed the different instruction styles and teaching methods of the different teachers'. Respondents also indicated that the supervisors 'set the best example'.
- ♦ Help from mentor teachers being a 'marvellous support system'
- ♦ Students viewed them as competent since they were 'dynamic and well organized'. According to the respondents, the mentor teachers invested considerable effort in the instruction of learners and were 'committed, dedicated and experienced'.

Similarly, in a study by Hobson et al. (2006) in England, student teachers felt positive about their school-based experiences, they felt that they could talk with their mentor or another colleague who was concerned with their wellbeing and progress. Statistics in the study revealed that 37 out of 79 case study trainees were able to engage in professional dialogues, which helped them think about their practice as teachers.

In another study by Hobson (2002:13), still in England, the student teachers were impressed with the support received from mentor teachers. He stated this:

*The mentor and the department were very supportive and I got a lot of encouragement there and they actually helped me a great deal... He [teacher mentor] was never critical, all the feedback I was given was very positive: 'well that lesson didn't go well but don't knock yourself...you're learning, you are here to learn, so what you made a mistake? I make mistakes'. You know stuff like that, always encouragement, like 'next time around do it this way', or 'next time around you know what's going on don't you?'*

#### ***Institution's Expectations from the Host Teacher***

A host teacher is expected to assist the student teacher's development in both, administrative and classroom-based activities (Pracana and Silva 2013). The knowledge, time, and involvement that is required to make this experience a valuable one for student teachers and the mentors is much appreciated by the university collaboration (Maphalala 2013).

### **METHODOLOGY**

The study used a qualitative research method and adopted a case study research design. The data was collected through the use of interviews and observations, which were validated using trustworthiness with purposefully selected student teachers, host teachers and university lecturers. In addition, a substantial amount of time was spent observing the research site and a recording of these observations in daily field notes.

### **OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION**

Upon arrival in a school, a student teacher (ST) or student teachers (STs) are assigned host teachers (HTs). The first meeting between the HTs and the STs is an orientation on the school context or a school induction. This is a critical meeting wherein the HT among others, aims to make the ST feel welcomed at school, and also to introduce him/her to the rest of the staff. The HT shows the student around the school. It is also expected that the HT introduces the ST to the policies that guide the school as a whole. These may include dress code, the use of cell phones, and the use of school resources including the photocopier and computer lab. Also, the HT allocates the ST the lessons and the subject

areas that the latter is going to teach during the duration of the SE. She also generally talks to the student about what it means to be a teacher in that particular school. Furthermore, this first meeting unpacks the roles of the HT and those of ST, as well as explaining the philosophy of the mentor-mentee relationship. This may however not be a once-off activity as the ST may now and then seek clarifications to some of these issues. On the other hand, the HT is expected to:

- ♦ Let his/her learners know the student teacher will be arriving, what to expect, and introduce him/her to the learners on the first day.
- ♦ Let the student teacher understand the interests/abilities of certain students.
- ♦ Discuss classroom protocols for things such as handing in papers, grading papers and projects, recording grades and moving from one activity to the next.
- ♦ Discuss appropriate behaviors and manners within the classroom and school building.
- ♦ Make the student teacher aware of classroom rules and procedures.
- ♦ Inform the student teacher about the overall objectives and goals of the classroom, school, and school district.
- ♦ Orient the student teacher to the school building, regulations, use of machines, and materials and supplies.
- ♦ Introduce him/her to administrators, other teachers and media specialists.
- ♦ Be flexible with the student teacher so he/she can experiment and develop a personal style and strategies of his/her own.
- ♦ Model professional expertise and ethical behavior at all times.
- ♦ Provide frequent, honest and constructive feedback.
- ♦ Allow the student teacher to participate in faculty meetings, parent-teacher conferences and other pertinent school functions. When the mentor teacher is absent, a substitute should always be called upon to supervise the student teacher.

### **Host Teachers as Mentors**

#### ***Competency Profile and Tools of Mentors***

As indicated earlier, mentoring is a continuous process that aims at developing and improving the student teacher's deeper understanding

of subject matter and how to relate it to diverse students' population. The leading question hence is: Which kinds of competencies are involved in "good" mentoring? The following tools have been suggested by academics and teacher educators for good mentoring of student teachers.

- ♦ Observation of instruction, classroom management, realization of students' needs
- ♦ Feedback procedures
- ♦ Communication and interpersonal skills
- ♦ Supervisory tools
- ♦ Assessment of teaching practice
- ♦ Professional thinking and discussion of beliefs about teaching and learning
- ♦ Explication of practical knowledge
- ♦ Content-focused coaching

#### ***Emotional and Personal Support***

Butler and Cunce (2012) and Smolik (2010) note that one of the strongest needs of beginning teachers is emotional and personal support. Within this approach, there exists a focus on the development of trust, collaboration, and consistent communication (Butler and Cunce 2012). Novice teachers also have uncertainties about what it means to be a teacher, and from a supportive perspective, the mentor's purpose is to help the novice teacher move past these fears (Butler and Cunce 2012). This therefore should be characterized by mutual trust and respect where the student teacher is also provided with an opportunity to identify fears and concerns about the practice. As such, emotional support helps novice teachers better understand the context of the work of teaching and a positive condition learning to teach in field experiences. The types of interactions necessary to build trust center on the concept of "constructing knowledge" versus "giving knowledge" illustrates a respect for the knowledge a protégé brings to the relationship as well as the mentor (Smolik 2010:49). In the process, the student teacher is assisted in adjusting with the new roles of being a teacher. The initial period of the relationship entails mutual sharing and the building of deep respect through a process of observing, questioning, and participating (Smolik 2010).

#### ***Providing Technical Assistance***

Smolik (2010) notes that providing technical assistance is another key factor in effective mentoring. This technical assistance is described

by Hudson (2004) cited by Smolik (2010) as the system requirements, such as the aims, goals, and related school policies that provide direction for implementing primary education. Butler and Cuenca (2013) also note that mentor teachers should assist pre-service teachers in developing the repertoire of skills needed to teach.

### ***Modeling***

Schmidt (2008) as cited by Smolik (2010) suggests increased self-confidence in mentees as they observe the mentors' teaching practices. Since mentors are defined as experts, modeling technical aspects of teaching provide protégés with explicit guidance, which underscores self-assurance. Displaying enthusiasm during lesson planning and implementation as well as in a rapport with students are other components to modeling. This includes the discourse used by the mentor when modeling lesson planning since this needs to be consistent with current science education in order to assist in the scaffolding of a mentee's professional development. However, as mentoring is a critical constructivist process, student teachers are not expected to be their mentors' replicas (Schmidt 2008).

### ***Communicating Feedback***

Literature indicates that all learning requires effective feedback that is accurate, diagnostic and constructive. Also, feedback opens opportunities for reflection and possibilities. Helping new or trainee teachers "get inside the practical and intellectual demands of teaching" may sometimes focus the feedback through "reflective conversations", while at other times, the feedback may comprise of a direct telling and asking (Smolik 2010). In this regard, feedback meetings between the mentor teacher and the student teacher should be direct, open, frank and constructive. Maphalala (2013) notes that:

- ♦ Feedback should not be only about the weaknesses of the student teachers, but also about their strengths.
- ♦ Detailed feedback to the student teachers about their teaching performance should be provided.
- ♦ Feedback to the student teachers should also entail their communication skills.
- ♦ In providing feedback, the student teacher should also be afforded an opportunity to reflect on their teaching.

### **Some Mentor Teachers' Experiences and Realities**

Mentor teachers (MTs) have all sorts of experiences and feelings about any imminent school experience (SE) and the arrival of student teachers. These include excitement and relief that there will be "some Educator Assistant" that will assist the mentor teacher with academic, administrative and extracurricular activities. While some mentor teachers do not really celebrate the arrival of student teachers, some consider STs in their classrooms as "waste of time when completing the syllabus". Some mentor teachers consider their mentorship as giving back as well as a process of co-learning between the HT and the ST. The following section will explore some anecdotal research done on the experiences and dilemmas faced by mentor teachers have raised the following.

### ***Student Teachers and their Content Knowledge***

Mentor teachers are mostly concerned about content knowledge that student teachers bring when they come for SE. They comment that this is the area that sometimes makes them feel frustrated about what they regard as the gap between what the universities teach the students and the expectations the schools have. Linked to this is the change in curriculum, which sometimes results in miscommunication and frustration. What the university expects from the student teacher's lesson and lesson plan sometimes does not match with what the host school expects. It is under such circumstances when some MTs, during the post-lesson conference even decide to teach the ST the content knowledge expected as well as question their roles as mentors. Butler and Nuenca (2012) observe this dilemma and note that there is a lack of a definitive role for host teachers/mentors. Wilson (2006) also observes a lack of an explicit curriculum during student teaching experience.

Regarding the MTs' frustration is valid when the ST does not meet the curriculum expectations with regards to content knowledge. In some very unfortunate instances where the ST is not providing the learners with proper content knowledge, some MTs take over the class in the middle of the lesson. This is because it is usually very difficult to correct wrong models already given to the learners.

### *Involvement in Extracurricular Activities*

Literature indicates that STs should be involved in all curricular and non-curricular activities of the school (Marais 2011). The co-curricular activities include sports, music lessons and choir practicing, public speaking and debating, fundraising, school nutrition programs, redecorating the classroom and the library, and others. With regards to the STs' participation, mentor teachers have diverse experiences. For instance, there are those who feel that STs are very helpful especially in sports such as rugby, cricket and soccer. Some STs are reported to continue working with their host schools even after the SE block session. Similarly, there are STs who are reluctant to participate in co-curricular activities in the host schools. Sometimes it is due to the restrictions placed on them by schools. However in some cases, students reportedly do not participate for the following reasons.

- ♦ Sports activities taking place after school hours.
- ♦ Co-curricular activities considered less essential to academic activities.
- ♦ The school-based assessment (assignment) does not include participation in co-curricular activities.

In one case, STs decided to redecorate the Foundation Phase classes as a Community Engagement project (Marais 2011). The mentor teacher explained that these students raised funds and solicited human resources to mend the walls, paint them and organize the library. The mentor teacher explained that one of student teacher's father was a builder and therefore helped with the classroom walls on weekends, whilst another one's mother was a librarian and assisted with the library organization. The MT further explained that as a result of the good work the STs did, they began appreciating the wealth of teaching resources and materials the school had.

With regards to the balance that needs to be maintained between academic and non-academic activities, Marais (2011) advises the universities on the following:

- ♦ More extra-curricular activities included in TP assignments.
- ♦ Universities modules on coaching be part of TP.
- ♦ More use of technology.

### **Professionalism and Ethical Conduct of Student-Teachers**

Even though some mentor teachers brief student teachers on the professional conduct expected of them upon arrival at the host school, what Kiggundu and Nyimuli (2009) refer to as *induction*, during the first two days, some student teachers still do not meet the expected behavior and conduct expected from a student teacher. MT identified the following ethical conduct as mostly committed by the STs.

**Dress Code:** Even though in some schools there is no documented dress code, there are some "expected" ways of dressing for a teacher. MTs observe that sometimes STs do not differentiate between their identities as university students and that of being student teachers. There is almost complete acceptance that university students dress "like students". Some dress in tattered jeans, which are sometimes regarded as a "form of expression". This form of dress is "acceptable" at the university level. However, when they go to schools they are expected to abandon their student identities and assume a teacher identity. With regards to the female STs, MTs raise concerns over the "lack of dress" by some student teachers. With regards to this issue one MT commented, "These girls give too much information. They show off their cleavages and wear very tight jeans". Some teachers, especially male teachers reported they even felt disempowered to raise issues of dress code with their female STs. There is an overwhelming understanding that STs cannot be dictated upon what to wear. However, as in any profession, there is a dress code that must be respected and in the case of student teachers, this may include:

- ♦ Maintain respect
- ♦ Establish credibility
- ♦ Establish yourself as an authority.
- ♦ One university, for instance, has the below dress code for their students when they embark on SE:
  - o Dressing and appearance must be clean. Appearance must not disrupt class or learning activities.
  - o Clothing and/or tattoos should not promote alcoholic beverages, tobacco, controlled substances, profanity, nudity, violence or sex by words or symbols.
  - o Any clothing made of denim cannot be worn, this includes, pants, skirts and jump-

ers. Denim skirts and jumpers/dresses may be worn if allowed by the participating school. Denim may be worn on a designated spirit day, workday, or casual day, if this has been adopted by the school.

- o Sweatpants cannot be worn.
- o Piercings can be worn in ears only.
- o Clothing cannot be tight fitting or short. This includes pants, dresses and shorts (for P.E. majors). Clothing cannot be low-cut in the chest area. Tube tops are not permitted. The chest area cannot be exposed when standing, sitting or bending.
- o Flip-flops, bedroom slippers nor sneakers may be worn (P.E. students can wear clean sneakers). Sneakers may be worn on a designated spirit day, workday, or casual day, if this has been adopted by the school.
- o Shirts must be tucked inside. Ties must be worn for men, if required by the school.
- o Hairstyles must reflect professionalism. Hairstyles cannot be a distraction to student learning (for example, a purple and pink hair color).

**The Use of Cell Phones:** The students, both university and school-based learners are considered to be living in the digital world unlike their elders who are BBC (Born before Computers). The students are technologically literate and seem to enjoy making use of the technology gadgets that include cellular phones. In the past ten years, during SE periods, there have been some debates about how the students should use their cell phones in classroom. For instance, should cell phones be switched off or be kept on the silent mode. However, some lecturers continue to raise concerns about what they regard as disruptive use of the cell phone in the classroom by students. As a result, lecturers are being challenged to think of how best they can accommodate the students' passion (cell phones) to enhance the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom. The students that use cell phones in careless ways reportedly continue to use these IT gadgets irresponsibly during SE. One teacher reported that during the lessons when students are supposed to be observing the lessons by the MT, they instead play with their cell phones, play games and chat on platforms like Facebook or Twitter. The use of cell phones by STs is one of the areas of concerns for the MTs.

A student teacher was reportedly expelled from a school in the middle of SE for violating the school's use of the Computer Lab. The report from the school was that the student teacher, without seeking permission, was found downloading music during tuition time. This student was summarily dismissed from the school and had to look for an alternative school during this time, s/he had to look for the school and not the university, as it is usually the case. Also, in these days of technology use, where teachers and students communicate using social networks such as Twitter, Facebook, BBM and WhatsApp, STs need to think carefully about engaging them.

**Maintaining a Professional Relationship with the Learners:** Student teachers need to engage with students in a friendly and professional manner. However, the ethical boundaries of the student-teacher relationship need to be maintained and not compromised. The ST as has been indicated earlier in this study should always behave in ways that do not undermine their professional positions. In other words, STs are expected by the code of their profession (expected to be known even if these may not be written) to maintain respectful relationships with the learners (Clement 2013). These relationships can be compromised in the following ways:

- ♦ The manner in which the ST communicates with the learners inside and outside the classroom is very important. The STs should not be rude to learners and should use a professional language. As adults and professionals, STs need to be able to mask their emotions and control emotions and avoid using vulgar language with their learners or even amongst themselves.
- ♦ The use of gestures is also important in SE. There are gestures considered as appropriate, which include, a "high five", "hand shake", thumbs down" or "thumbs up". It is also advised that MTs talk about the appropriate gestures to be used with the learners in public, not when the ST and the learner are alone.
- ♦ Financial boundaries should also be maintained at all times between the STs and the learners. An observation made by one MT was that some STs tend to provide learners with some financial support, which at times can be misunderstood as buying something resulting in learners becoming depended on

such STs. This however, does not discourage acts of kindness that STs can perform but such can be done through the auspices of Community Engagement whereby the ST identifies a learner and assists in some ways that need to be discussed with the teacher/principal/parent or guardian of the learner.

- ♦ Emotional engagement between the STs and the learners is also considered unprofessional. This includes intimate, romantic and sexual relationships. It is also worth noting that learners (teenagers) are emotionally vulnerable and are prone to succumb to such advances. However, ST as adults and professionals should stay away from such practices.

**Classroom Management:** During some feedback sessions between the university lecturers and the HTs, the student teachers' inability to manage the classroom was identified as the main challenge of the STs. The learners take advantage of the STs inexperience by not doing homework. One MT raised this concern as such activities count towards the students' continuous assessment marks. However, there is also appreciation expressed by some MTs that STs bring in improved activities, ideas for learner collaboration, seating arrangement and the effective use of technology in the classroom as some classroom management strategies (Arnold 2002:125).

### Can Any Teacher Become A Mentor Teacher?

As indicated earlier, there is lack of clarity on the actual roles of the MTs. Also, there is no clarity on what makes schools and universities choose certain teachers as MTs. In some schools, STs are placed under the care of the Head of Department (HoD) as their mentors. Whereas in schools where there are no HoDs, STs are placed under the care of Senior Teachers (Maphalala 2013). Generally, there is no consensus as to what teacher attributes are looked for in a MT. However, the fact remains that there is no easy response to this situation given that the perception of student teacher mentoring is an uncomplicated and self-evident activity (Butler and Cuenca 2013). Hence, mentoring a student teacher will come as a natural activity as experience, professional training and mentoring are exercises that come without too much effort. There is a common perception that any teacher who has taught effectively can mentor student

teachers resulting in situations where MTs are left to fend for themselves.

As a link between the classroom placement and the university, there is a need for communication between the two to craft terms of reference and the general expectations of the two institutions. In one university in the United States, there is a 30-hour training course for MTs, which helps them with teaching and learning to teach. Whilst in the University of South Africa, there is a program referred to as Mentoring Workshop, which is a voluntary exercise for teachers who wish to be mentors (Maphalala 2013). The University of Fort Hare (UFH) introduced a workshop program for mentor teachers and principals before STs embark on SE. This program covers the following:

- ♦ Feedback on the schools' perceptions and on students' levels of Knowledge Content and preparation and learning.
- ♦ Feedback on students' levels of professionalism.
- ♦ Share with the schools the University's ideas on the roles of the MTs.
- ♦ Share with the schools the University's Assessment activities for the STs and the Lesson Plan Format.

There needs to be a common understanding between the host schools and the universities for the common good of the supervision of student teachers during SE. However, Butler and Cuenca (2012) warn that common conceptualization of mentoring is important, and commonality is not enough. They emphasize the importance of communication and coherence between the university and field-based actors in the professional preparation of teachers.

### CONCLUSION

School Experience or Teaching Practice is an important component of the Teacher Education curriculum. This important component evokes different emotions in students. These include questioning if they are ready to teach in the real classroom situation, how the learners will respond to them, and generally how the school community will welcome them. In the context of diversity, student teachers question themselves whether they are ready to face diversity issues in the classroom, large classes and the lack of resources and materials.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

It is therefore important that one learns about student teachers' experiences so that Education Faculties can refer to such experiences as they prepare students for the SE journey. Such experiences also assist in the structuring of the curriculum so that issues such as stress and stressors during SE can be addressed and conceptualized in the program. The host teachers also need to learn the student teachers' fears, challenges and general feelings about SE so that they can minimize such negative emotions.

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