

## The State of Teaching Practice Planning at a Rural University in South Africa

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**KEYWORDS** Organizing Teaching Practicum. Partnership. Student Teachers. Competence. Teacher Education. South Africa

**ABSTRACT** This study sought to establish the status of teaching practice planning at Walter Sisulu University. The sample consisted of 50 participants (30 student teachers, 10 host teachers, 10 university lecturers). The mixed-methods approach consisting of quantitative and qualitative approaches was employed. Questionnaires and Focus Group Discussions were used to collect the data. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse quantitative data. Content analysis was used to analyse qualitative data. The study revealed that there was a serious lack of communication between the university and the schools used for teaching practice in the planning of the exercise. The role players in teaching practice were not fully involved in its planning. The majority of the host teachers were never involved in the planning for teaching practice. What was clear was that the planning of teaching practice is undertaken by the university alone without involving the host teachers. The study recommends collaborative planning of teaching practice by the university and the schools.

### INTRODUCTION

One of the important aspects of teacher education programmes is teaching practice (Marais and Meier 2004; Caires and Almeida 2005; Kiggundu and Nayimuli 2009; Chireshe and Chireshe 2010; Mapfumo et al. 2012; Makura and Zireva 2013). During teaching practice, student teachers are expected to integrate the theoretical knowledge they are taught at university with practical experience in schools (Fraser et al. 2005). In other words, teaching practice is a period during which student teachers are given an opportunity to do teaching trials in an actual school situation (Ngidi and Sibaya 2003; Hapanyengwi 2003; Kiggundu and Nayimuli 2009). Terms such as field experience, practice teaching, professional experience, student teaching, internship, school-based experience and practicum are used interchangeably to refer to teaching practice (Marais and Meier 2004; Fraser et al. 2005; Le Cornu 2008). Teaching practice is the term that is used to describe this period in this study.

Caires and Almeida (2005: 112) are of the view that teaching practice represents “a unique opportunity for the development and consolidation of a significant variety of knowledge and skills” for the vast majority of student teachers. In addition, student teachers can acquire the various pedagogical experiences such as lesson planning, teaching and assessment that take place during this period. Teaching practice offers student teachers the opportunity to learn and develop as professional teachers along the dimensions of pedagogic knowledge, subject matter knowledge, pastoral knowledge, ecological knowledge, inquiry knowledge and personal knowledge (Mtetwa and Dyanda 2003). Thus, the underlying aim of teaching practice is to introduce students to, and prepare them for, the teaching profession.

Teaching practice is also considered to be an opportunity for student teachers to develop creative and thoughtful approaches to teaching within a supportive and knowledgeable collaborative context (Cameron and Baker 2004). Similarly, Breiting (2006) views teaching practice as a period of supervised classroom teaching during which student teachers practice and acquire classroom skills. During teaching practice student teachers are provided with an authentic context within which they experience and demonstrate the integration of the knowledge, skills and values developed in the entire

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curriculum (Department of Education (DOE) 2000).

According to Hapanyengwi (2003), teaching practice is necessary for the development of the professional competence of student teachers as it serves as an indication of the quality of the teacher a programme is likely to produce as well as the quality of education in the schools. Another significant aspect of teaching practice lies in that it offers lecturers the opportunity to get to know the student teachers better and to get exposure to current practices in the schools and classrooms. In support of this view, Izuagie (2003) likens teaching practice to highly-valued induction programmes in fields such as Accountancy, Business Studies and Medical Studies in which the trainees are exposed to the professions in the real world of work. Amedeker (2005) argues that because teaching practice assists in familiarising student teachers with teaching, their confidence improves and commitment to teaching practice results in successful teachers.

Samuel (2009) argues that the improvement of the quality of education in schools is closely connected with producing quality teachers for and within the schooling system, and managing the teaching practice experience to achieve quality teacher education is a fundamental aspect of initial teacher education. He contends that the professional teaching practice offered within the teacher education curriculum is the climax of initial teacher education programmes where the culmination of expertise of being a teacher is enacted.

Teaching practice as a focus of this study is a component of a formal academic programme, the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed), for preparing educators. The Norms and Standards for Educators (NSE) laid the foundation for defining competent teachers and appropriate teacher education programmes (DOE 2000: 24). This document sets out in detail the notion of teacher competence and explains what competences educators should be able to demonstrate across a range of teacher roles (Fraser et al. 2005).

The Faculty of Education at Walter Sisulu University (WSU) has had to re-curriculate the B.Ed programme in order to align it to the NSE. According to the re-curriculated programme second year student teachers visit local schools for two weeks where they observe educators teaching in the classroom. The third year stu-

dent teachers are expected to complete a four-week supervised teaching practice programme at local schools, which is experiential learning and at the fourth year level the whole year is to be devoted to teaching practice.

Although teaching practice is highly valued it can come as a 'culture shock', as in the case of Ghana where tutors were found to be insisting that things should be "done right", leaving little room for experimenting (Lewin and Stuart 2003). Teaching practice has also been found to be associated with challenges that compromise its effectiveness. For example, it has been found to be stressful in Trinidad and Tobago (Lewin and Stuart 2003); in South Africa (Ngidi and Sibaya 2003; Marais and Meier 2004) and in Australia (Murray-Harvey 1999).

Since teaching practice is very critical for the development of competent teachers, and is associated with challenges that compromise its effectiveness, it is important to investigate how it is planned. The organization and implementation of any programme depends on a plan, hence the focus of this study on planning.

The planning of teaching practice refers mainly to the duration, at what points of the programme teaching practice happens, who is involved in the planning and the different activities planned for the period. Izuagie (2003) argues that extensive logistics are involved in the planning of teaching practice placement. These include consultations at various levels and sensitisation of all stakeholders including student teachers. It is important that transport problems as they affect staff and students are duly studied and reduced to minimum proportions. This study sought to establish the activities that are planned for teaching practice and to what extent they can promote student teacher development. It is important that student teachers' development should be structured and direction sustained with meaningful activities for them to benefit from teaching practice.

In effective teaching practice programmes the planning of teaching practice involves establishing partnerships between the universities and the schools. Breitingner (2006) argues that good teacher education depends on the quality of the partnership between the university and the school and not on the contractual agreement made. In such a partnership the university and school are equal partners and their partnership contains mutual respect for differing roles (Dar-

ling-Hammond 2006). Similarly, Lam and Fung (2008) contend that it is important for teaching practice to have a structure which identifies the administrative roles and operations. The present study sought to establish whether or not the role players participate in the planning of teaching practice as planning together can promote the understanding of the purpose of, and the roles and responsibilities of, the different role players during teaching practice.

Reddy et al. (2008) established that teaching practice for a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) is organised in different ways in South African institutions ranging from weekly visits to schools for teaching practice in some institutions to block periods of school visits in others. This situation of variations in the number of days or weeks that student teachers spend in the schools as well as in the manner of teaching practice supervision is similar to a variety of teaching practice models in Tasmania most of which include sequenced school placements supervised by cooperating teachers and university staff (Brown and Lancaster 2004).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Since teaching practice is seen as a learning activity involving the process of social participation whereby the impact of the situation is fundamental (Boer et al. 2002), this study of the status of teaching practice planning is grounded in the framework of situated learning theory. The theory suggests that learning should be understood as social participation with the apprentice observing the community of practice (Herrington and Oliver 2000). Since learning occurs through apprenticing with others who are already part of a particular community or culture, the facilitation of student-teacher learning has to do with understanding and providing a field experience. Among the features of learning environments found to be useful for situated learning as identified by Herrington and Oliver (2000) are the provision of authentic context that reflects the way the knowledge will be used in real life; the provision of authentic activities; and the provision of access to expert performances and the modeling of processes. The proper planning of teaching practice ensures that teaching practice takes place in environments with the features identified above. These characteristics gave direction to the con-

tent of data collection tools used in this study and were put under investigation.

### **Goals of the Study**

This study sought to establish the status of teaching practice planning and to determine how it contributes to creating an environment that promotes the development of student teachers' competences. The study was part of a larger study on an evaluation of the effectiveness of teaching practice as a context for student teachers' competence development at Walter Sisulu University (Ntsaluba 2012) which is a rural university located in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. The study was guided by the following main research question: What is the nature of planning for teaching practice and how does it contribute to creating an environment that promotes the development of student teacher competences?

## **METHOD**

### **Research Design**

This study used a mixed-methods design which is a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. Creswell and Plano Clark (2007: 9) contend that "mixed-methods research helps answer questions that cannot be answered by qualitative or quantitative approaches alone". The mixed-methods design was found to be appropriate for this study as it would potentially yield a better understanding of the planning of teaching practice by obtaining different but complimentary data on the topic (Creswell and Plano Clark 2007). In line with the view of Cohen et al. (2007), qualitative data from focus groups was used to compliment quantitative data and for purposes of triangulation.

### **Sample**

The sample was made up of 50 participants. Thirty were third year B.Ed students in the Economic and Management Sciences and Consumer Sciences education areas of specialisation. Ten were WSU university supervisors of teaching practice. Two of these university supervisors were specialists in Economic and Management sciences; three in Consumer sciences and five in Educational foundation subjects. Ten were host teachers, that is, from the schools used for

teaching practice by the university and situated within a distance of 100 kilometres from the university.

Purposive sampling was used to select the sample. The researchers handpicked third year BEd students because they had recently come from a three week period of teaching practice. Host teachers who had student teachers attached to them during the last teaching practice block, and supervising lecturers who had recently supervised student teachers during teaching practice were also selected.

### **Instrumentation**

A combination of questionnaires and semi-structured interview guides for focus group discussions were used to collect quantitative and qualitative data respectively. Questionnaires with both closed-ended and open-ended items were administered to third the year student teachers, host teachers and university supervisors. For most of the items a 5-point Likert scale was used. The main advantage of closed-ended questionnaire items is that the responses are consistent for all respondents and the information generated can be quantified and compared (Cohen et al 2007; Wierma and Jurs 2009). On the other hand, open-ended questionnaire items were included in order to allow the respondents an opportunity to express themselves in their own words with regard to their experiences of the planning and operation of teaching practice. The questionnaire items revolved around whether: the participants were involved in the planning for teaching practice, the roles of all involved in teaching practice were discussed before the teaching practice, the University and schools worked as partners in the preparation of student teachers and whether the schools in which the student teachers were placed used the stated guidelines with regards to teaching practice.

Focus group discussions with the third year student teachers were conducted in order “to obtain a better understanding of a problem or an assessment of a problem, concern, new product, program or idea” (MacMillan and Schumacher 2006: 360). The semi-structured interview guide was used to generate information on the perceptions of student teachers about the planning of teaching practice and its appropriateness for the development and demonstration of student teachers’ competences.

An expert in teacher education discipline checked on the relevance of the instruments’ items. A pilot study was also conducted to further check on the relevance and usability of the instruments. To ensure quality of qualitative data, participant checking was used to confirm with the participants that the data was what the research participants meant.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

The questionnaires were personally distributed to the host teachers at their schools and university supervisors in their offices and were collected after two days. All the questionnaires were returned. The questionnaires for student teachers were also personally administered by the first researcher to the respondents at a set venue and were completed and collected immediately thereafter to avoid discussion among the respondents. This also enabled queries and uncertainties to be addressed.

The first researcher conducted focus group discussions after the questionnaire data had been analysed. Sixteen of the thirty student teachers who had completed questionnaires were available for the focus group discussion. The participants were divided into two groups based on their programme specialisations with one group having ten student teachers and the other with six. The purpose was to have homogenous groups in terms of the field of specialisation, as suggested by Litoselliti (2003). The researcher took notes during the focus group discussions, and to enhance accuracy mechanically recorded the focus group discussions with the use an audiotape recorder. The average duration for a focus group discussion was one hour.

### **Data Analysis**

The researchers made use of descriptive statistics to analyze data from questionnaires. Qualitative data were coded by dividing the text into small units and unitized until themes and relationships were identified. Verbal quotes reflecting or illustrating the main findings from the focus group discussions were presented.

### **Ethical Issues**

Permission to carry out the study was obtained from the Provincial Department of Education. The participants gave informed consent

verbally. Confidentiality was guaranteed by making sure that the data could not be linked to individual respondents by name as the participants were not requested to write their names on the questionnaires (Ntsaluba 2012).

## RESULTS

### Responses from Closed Questionnaire Items

Host teachers' and University supervisors' views on their involvement in the planning of teaching practice

Table 1 reveals that the majority of the host teachers were never involved in the planning for teaching practice. The table also shows mixed opinion on university supervisors' involvement in planning for teaching practice. There was also mixed opinion on host teachers' involvement in teaching practice arrangements whereas the majority of university supervisors

indicated that they were often involved. The table also reveals that the majority of both host teachers and university supervisors often had their roles during teaching practice discussed. The majority of the host teachers indicated that the schools often used guidelines for teaching practice. There was mixed opinion from the university supervisors on the use of guidelines by the schools.

Table 2 shows that the majority of student teachers agreed that they were involved in planning for teaching practice, they were aware of arrangements for teaching practice, their roles were discussed and they were aware of host teachers' and supervisors' roles.

### Responses from Focus Group Discussions

As already mentioned earlier on, focus group discussions aimed at generating information on the student teachers' perceptions on the plan-

**Table 1: Involvement in the planning of teaching practice**

Respondents	Item	Opinion on aspects of planning for teaching practice					Total
		Very often	Often	Seldom	Very seldom	Never	
Host teachers University supervisors	Involvement in planning				2	8	10
		2	2	4		2	10
Host teachers University supervisors	Involvement in teaching practice arrangements	2	2	3	1	2	10
		2	3	2	1	2	10
Host teachers University supervisors	Your role during teaching practice discussed	3	3	1	1	2	10
		3	2	2		3	10
Host teachers University supervisors	Schools use guidelines for teaching practice	2	4	1		3	10
		2	2	2	2	2	10

**Table 2: Student teachers' opinions on aspects of teaching practice planning**

Respondents	Item	Opinion on aspects of planning for teaching practice					Total
		Strongly agree	Agree	Un-decided	Dis-agree	Strongly disagree	
Student Teachers	Student teacher involvement in planning for teaching practice	11	14	2	2	1	30
	Student teacher awareness of arrangements for teaching practice	9	15	2	2	2	30
	Student teacher role discussed	16	10	1	3		30
	Student teacher made aware of host teacher teacher's role	12	11	4	1	2	30
	Student teacher made aware of university supervisor's role	9	14	4	1	1	29

ning and appropriateness of teaching practice for the development and demonstration of student teachers' competences.

Data from focus group discussions showed that the student teachers were of the view that some host teachers were not clear about what was expected of them in relation to the student teachers during teaching practice. The excerpts below reflect the finding on the lack of awareness of expectations during teaching practice on the part of host teachers:

*"I was given three classes and I realised that the teacher had not taught ever since I had come to collect lesson topics. So whereas I had prepared to teach Term 3 topics I now had to start with Term 2 work that the teacher had not done. I found that disturbing".*

*"I was given a Grade 10 class that had no teacher for Economics and the teacher who had been teaching the class left everything to me. I worked alone without any help from the teachers"*

The responses also revealed that within the same school, teachers did not adopt a common practice in dealing with student teachers. The following statement illustrates this finding:

*"I was allocated two classes and the other teachers told my host teacher that she should be giving me one class but she ignored them. Sometimes I had timetable clashes, so I had to prepare to give notes to one class to keep them busy while I was teaching the other. The subject teacher was seldom at school, she was very busy with music practices. So I was responsible for two classes all by myself."*

The data further revealed that some student teachers were not expected by their host teachers when they first visited the schools whereas others were properly received. This finding is reflected in the statement below:

*"When I came back for teaching practice in July I did not feel welcome because the subject teacher ignored me for two days until the other teachers tried to find out why she was not giving me a class to teach."*

Another one had this to say:

*"I was happy to be at the school but there was a problem when I had to go to class because there was a lot of work waiting for me. There was so much work that I could have even given up."*

The student teachers reported that the use of their own transport to and from the schools dur-

ing teaching practice was a great inconvenience. The following responses reflect this finding:

*"We had to find our own way of getting to school unlike in the other campus where students are provided with transport by the university."*

*"Our transport arrangement was a challenge because it made us appear inferior to the students from the other campus and the teachers were commenting that things were not improving at our campus. We felt neglected when we compared ourselves with the students who were provided with transport."*

*"Sometimes we arrived so late at school that we were even afraid to go into the school. Whereas the school started at 7h30 sometimes we arrived as late as 8h30."*

The student teachers also indicated that they were confused by the fact that teachers got ready-made lesson plans from the district office which were different from the ones that the university required from them. The statement below illustrates this finding:

*"The teachers get their work schedule from the district office. The lesson plans as well are prepared for them. Their lesson plan is different from the one we are expected to use by the university. The teachers therefore are not able to help us with lesson planning. Their lesson plan is for 2 weeks whereas ours is for each day. The university does not accept the lesson plan used in the schools and this confuses us."*

## DISCUSSION

It emerged from this study that the role players in teaching practice were not fully involved in the planning of teaching practice. Although the student teachers revealed that they were involved in the planning of teaching practice, the majority of the host teachers indicated that they were never involved. There was mixed opinion on university supervisors' involvement in planning of teaching practice. Even when it came to arrangements for teaching practice there were mixed opinions on the part of the host teachers, whereas the majority of university supervisors indicated that they were often involved. The experiences related by the student teachers during the focus group discussions indicated that the host teachers behaved like outsiders to the teaching practice programme. Even though the majority of the student teachers reported that

they were involved in planning and making arrangements for teaching practice there were still a few who were undecided about the issues as well as about their awareness of host teachers' and university supervisors' roles. This finding bears similarity to the traditional approach to student teaching in which student teachers are confronted with ideas that are entirely different from those they had learnt in theory because the university and school-based staff did little planning of teaching together (Darling-Hammond 2006).

The exclusion of the host teachers from planning of teaching practice may render teaching practice ineffective as a context for the development of student teachers' competences since the host teachers may not support the exercise and yet they are central to the student teachers' experience at the schools. This finding is inconsistent with Reddy et al.'s (2008) argument that there should be continuous liaison between the university and school staff in effective teaching practice programmes. It is the contention of Reddy et al. (2008) that good relationships with and goodwill from schools are essential for effective teaching practice especially with regard to relationships with school principals and mentor teachers. Such good relationships can create an appropriate context for the co-operation of role players in planning for teaching practice.

The non-involvement of host teachers in planning of teaching practice revealed by this study may also explain the lack of commitment to and understanding of the teaching practice programme by the host teachers as reflected in the accounts of their negative attitudes towards the student teachers in some instances. This finding on exclusion of host teachers contradicts Brown's (2006) view that shared understandings between university staff and host teachers play a very important role in creating an effective context for the development of student teachers.

The university may be experiencing difficulty in involving host teachers in planning for teaching practice because the rural schools in which student teachers find placement cover a very wide area and are not easily accessible since student teachers have to find their own schools for teaching practice and some are in remote areas. It may also be possible that the role of the schools in the development of student teachers' com-

petences is not viewed in a serious light by the university. Lack of involvement of host teachers in planning for teaching practice coupled with the unfriendly environment that student teachers have to survive in during teaching practice is likely to have negative effects such as lack of self confidence and the development of negative feelings towards teaching on the part of the student teachers as they find the environment threatening rather than welcoming.

The finding on the exclusion of host teachers from planning for teaching practice is inconsistent with the views that effective teaching practice programmes are well planned through extensive communication between the university and the school teachers (Darling-Hammond 2006). The planning for the teaching practice programme at WSU is also inconsistent with Izuagie's (2003) view that effective teaching practice requires that comprehensive logistics, including consultations at various levels and sensitisation of all stakeholders, including student teachers, be attended to. The situation at WSU is not consistent with international practice probably because of the lack of dedicated staff/office for this responsibility and logistical insufficient support.

Furthermore, the finding on lack of guidelines for teaching practice as revealed by some host teachers and university supervisors contradicts the contention that to enhance harmony between organisation, implementation and conceptualisation it is necessary that written guidelines and training workshops for supervisors be included in the planning for teaching practice (Marais and Meier 2004). The effect of this lack of guidelines is that role players in teaching practice offer student teachers varying experiences.

## CONCLUSION

On the basis of the findings of this study it can be concluded that the planning of teaching practice at Walter Sisulu University has shortcomings that render the teaching practice programme ineffective as a context for the development of student teachers' competences. The shortcomings include non-involvement of all stakeholders in teaching practice planning, host teachers not clear of their expected role in relation to student teachers during teaching practice and host teachers not adopting a common

practice in dealing with student teachers. The university did also not provide its students with transport while some student teachers were not expected by their host schools.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The success of teaching practice depends on the co-operation among school managers and host teachers on the one hand and the university staff and student teachers on the other. Such co-operation can be established and maintained through the communication that university staff, school management, host teachers and student teachers have with one another. It is recommended that the university and the schools plan teaching practice programme and implementation collaboratively. This will bring about better understanding of the needs of the student teachers during teaching practice by all stakeholders. It is important for the role players to be involved in the planning and co-coordinating of the students' experience in order to: provide relevant information about the school; secure a well-planned induction; plan a timetable of realistic proportions; ensure the programme is structured and coherent; and provide opportunities for students to develop their professional knowledge. In this study the university supervisors recommended that planning should be central to the organisation of teaching practice. The planning of teaching practice should provide enough opportunity for student teachers to gradually assume increased responsibility for teaching with time rather than being allocated the full workload from the first day of teaching practice.

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