



In-service trainee teachers' Reflective Perspectives of Teaching Practicum Issues, challenges and new frontiers

Daniel Otieno

Africa Nazarene University, Department of Education, Nairobi.

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the findings of a qualitative phenomenological study of teaching practicum as a critical component of teacher training program at a leading private University in Kenya. This phenomenological study evaluated the teachers prevailing understandings of the teaching practice phenomenon (Borg and Gall, 2007). It focuses on exploring the issues and concerns related to the planning, teacher placement, implementation and administration of teaching practicum. It addresses the teacher trainees' experiences, challenges, pedagogic and philosophical concerns during the teaching practicum. The participants in the study were selected using purposive sampling techniques. These were teachers who had completed the mandatory course requirements in a private university and were taking the final units in readiness for the final examination before graduation. The participants took their teaching practicum in their teaching duty stations, under the mentorship of a cooperating teacher and were supervised by two faculty members during the first term of the school calendar. The research design used a phenomenological interpretive methodology that gave prominence to the participants' subjective meanings (Cohen and Manion, 2000). The participants in the study were 78 teachers who took part in the teaching practicum in the last phase of their teacher training program. Data were collected from professional journals, reflective papers and portfolios prepared by the teachers during and after the teaching practicum. Analysis of data was done by coding the teachers' experiences into broad themes. Following the emerging perspectives and challenges during the practicum, suggestions are made to improve aspects of planning and pedagogy the teaching practicum.

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Introduction

Teaching practicum has continued to generate a lot of global interest and research within educational circles (Mtika, 2011). All universities engaged in training teachers for primary and post primary institutions have included teaching practicum in their teacher training curricula. It is a mandatory requirement for trainee teachers to earn credits from their teaching practicum as part of their training for the teaching profession. In Kenya, this requirement applies equally across the board from first time trainee teachers preparing to join the teaching profession upon completion of their secondary school education to those already in the practice having attained certification as either P1 or Diploma teachers in various specializations. The second cadre of teachers is upgrading their qualifications from certificates and diplomas to graduate levels.

Statement of the problem

Teacher education in Kenya has been a major concern to teacher educators and other educationists. Management of teacher education programs has been deficient since colonial days (Kafu, 2011). This is evident by the under-emphasis and inadequate attention accorded to this sector of education. Immediately after independence, teacher education was given prominence as a key driver towards national development. With time, this emphasis has declined and teacher education has experienced reduced government expenditure outlays and neglect of teacher training institutions leading to quality concerns. There are genuine concerns that the quality of teachers

produced by the country's training institutions falls below the minimum threshold of professionalism. Critics argue that educational institutions prepare teachers insufficiently and do not provide adequate pedagogical knowledge and skills for successful teaching (Qazi et al, 2012). Teachers who complete the teacher training program and are ready to join the profession are unable to link the "reality of the classroom" with the theories learned (Curzon, 2004; Qazi et al, 2012). The ultimate paradox is, these teachers are mandated with the moral responsibility of teaching and training students to become professionals in other areas of specialization. Teaching practicum is considered as one of the critical intervention in addressing the issues of quality in teacher training. This increased attention and prominence accorded to the teaching practicum provides the rationale for research in this area, with a view of understanding the structural processes and identifying possible ways of improving the practicum experience.

The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research is to investigate the different perspectives of trainee teachers of the teaching practicum and suggest ways of improving this aspect of training. There is need to understand better the teachers' perspectives of the teaching practicum and identify new ways of organizing the practicum experience in order to improve quality of teacher training. The study presented in this article is a qualitative case analysis that describes and interprets teachers' reflective experiences during the teaching practicum. This study was conducted in a private

University where Reflective Teaching is an essential component of the teaching practicum. Although still not taught as a course in the teacher training curriculum, the practicum is an essential requirement for the teacher training program.

The researcher asked the following exploratory research questions: What kind of preparation and planning is accorded the teaching practicum? What are the teachers' experiences during the practicum? What are the themes and perspectives emerged during the practicum period? What theoretical constructs helped the researcher understand the teachers' perspectives? The researcher makes suggestions on various reform avenues that may lead to improvements in the quality of planning and implementation of the teaching practicum in future. These recommendations are useful for teachers, teacher educators and other researchers in future planning and administration of the teaching practicum.

Method

Participant characteristics

The teachers who participated in the study were practicing teachers pursuing their Bachelor of Education degree. These teachers are already qualified at Certificate and Diploma level and have varying teaching experience at Early Childhood Centres of primary schools. Participants were drawn from a cohort of students who participated in the teaching practicum during their final year of the Bachelor of Education degree program.

Sampling procedures

The participants were selected through purposive sampling techniques. Teachers were asked to summarise their experiences during the teaching practicum. They were expected to maintain reflective journals during the teaching practicum and write reflective papers and summaries of their teaching practicum experience. These were read and themes emerged to reflect their perspectives of the practicum experience. This process assisted in eliminating the researcher's personal bias concerning the interpretation of the data (Etherington, 2011). Borg and Gall, (2007) reiterate that a phenomenological study should be free of the researcher's preconceived notions and ideations.

Research design

The research design adopted a phenomenological interpretive methodology that gave priority to the participant's subjective meanings (Etherington, 2011). The method of data collection involved extracting the reflective papers, minutes of meetings, and journal entries of individual participants. These data were coded and emergent themes drawn from them.

Analysis

The analysis of data collected from journal entries, reflective papers and summaries of teachers' experiences during practicum was conducted in a series of steps. The reflective papers, journal entries and summaries were read and re-read to find common threads of thoughts and experiences. These were later coded into key words descriptive of the emerging perspectives. The coding process was "iterative" (Goh & Matthews, 2011), and involved corresponding and classifying "chunks" of related information from the student journals, reflective papers and summaries of their practicum experiences. These enabled the researcher to draw out emerging themes from the data. The emerging themes are discussed in a different section in this paper.

Teaching Practicum

Teaching practice is not designed to simply provide an opportunity for trainee teachers to practice teaching in their

various schools. It also provides teachers with an opportunity to interrogate their teaching and engage in meaningful reflection regarding their pedagogic orientations. Reflection as a component of teaching practicum "is integral to trainee teachers' professional development, and shapes their beliefs and thinking about teaching" (Mtika, 2011, p. 552). Teachers engaged in teaching practice have an opportunity to reflect on their philosophical orientations and pedagogic styles as they practice their profession. It provides a kaleidoscopic lens through which teachers may view their teaching ideologies, analyze their methodologies and derive ways of improving their practice.

Brookfield (2004), notes that for teaching to be reflective, teachers need to be involved in a critical interrogation of their professional practice. This critical reflection is an essential component and forms the conceptual foundation of the teaching practicum. Accordingly, he maintains that one of the paradigms of critical reflection is the principle of self-evaluation and assessment of individual practice in the light of existing pedagogic orientations. Teaching is, thus, a process of continuous self-introspection and evaluation. This process must ultimately lead to greater depths of self-awareness and insights on ways of improving pedagogy as a preamble to quality in teacher education. The teaching practicum provides an avenue for internal self-dialogue and thinking in retrospect. Minott (2011) observes that reflective teaching "involves teachers examining, framing, attempting to solve dilemmas of classroom and schools, and asking questions about assumptions and values they bring to teaching." p. 133.

Despite the benefits accruing from critical reflection, this aspect of teaching has not been appropriated adequate attention. It is until recently, that Universities have integrated reflective teaching in their teacher training programs. Even for those Universities where critical reflection is encouraged among trainee teachers, this component is not taught as a separate unit within the curriculum despite its merits. Minott (2011) confirms that a "course in Reflective teaching aided in the development of students' reflective teaching and thinking." p.131. It is sad to note that such an important component of teaching is conspicuously missing from the teacher training curricula in nearly all teacher training institutions in Kenya.

Reflective Teaching

Minott (2011) defines reflective teaching "as involving a questioning disposition and critically thinking or reflective thinking about one's teaching techniques, personal goals, values, beliefs, assumptions about teaching, and the teaching context." p. 133. Loughran (2002) envisage reflective teaching as a "well-defined and crafted practice that carries very specific meaning and associated action." p. 33. The common element across these definitions is the underlying fact that reflection in teaching incorporates a sense of introspection and self-directed personal inquiry into the nature of one's beliefs, values and assumptions and how these impact on choice of teaching methods.

The purpose of reflection is to improve one's teaching. This inquiry into the processes involved in teaching creates an awareness of the teacher's underlying beliefs and assumptions that guide and influence the teaching process. It involves a kind of self-assessment and SWOT analysis to determine the strengths and weakness in one's teaching and establishing the causative factors. This causative determination helps the reflective teacher to isolate the areas that require improvement based on sound pedagogic theory, thus strengthening the link

between theory and practice. Reflection is a meaningful way of learning about teaching (Loughran 2002).

Reflection places emphasis on learning through questioning one's knowledge of their practice, considering what they have learnt and making informed judgment through reflection on practice. There is a danger of teaching becoming a routine process especially in the primary school level, where teachers in the lower level classes have to teach the same subjects to the same students over a long period of time, in most cases, upto 3 years before they are assigned to a new cohort with whom they restart the entire process. Such routinisation of teaching can be minimized through reflection and ensuring "that significance and meaning continually accompany the construction of purpose and application of reflection to the world of practice so that the value of experience can be realized by teachers in ways that minimize the possibility that the problematic nature of practice might simply be routinized." (Loughran, 2011, p. 34)

Indeed, the prevailing discourse is that teachers should be given an opportunity to reflect on their own teaching and identify strategies to improve delivery. Although experience accords the student teacher opportunity to adopt alternative ways of approaching the practice (Loughran, 2011), it is reflection that enhances learning such that divergent rather than convergent outcomes are encouraged. The critical interplay between experience and reflection has a dramatic impact on teaching outcomes. As teachers reflect on their teaching experiences, they develop different skills and abilities. The process of reflection becomes effective when it leads the student teacher to derive meaning in ways that enhance understanding of the teaching setting (Loughran, 2011). In teacher education, teachers are encouraged to try out different ways of teaching and feel how it is to use different methods. It is common knowledge that learning is a two way processes in which learners are involved in professional dialogue and active interaction with the subject matter content.

In most institutions, the Teaching Practicum is structurally organized into 3 stages – preparation, actual teaching practice and post-practicum stage. During the preparation stage, the student teachers are equipped with pedagogic knowledge and skills relevant to their professional practice and the practicum. The training institutions conduct placement in schools where teachers will conduct their practicum. In preparation, the student teachers conduct micro-teaching sessions and get feedback from other student teachers and faculty members who are knowledgeable and experienced. The second stage of the practicum is the actual teaching in the schools. During the teaching experience, teachers apply the theoretical principles in actual classroom settings. Professional support is provided by cooperating teachers and faculty supervisors who visit the student teachers several times, depending on the training institutions requirement, to observe the teacher and provide professional feedback on their teaching. Evaluation of the student teacher is also done at this stage. The post-practicum period is a time for reflection of the teaching practicum experience. At this stage, student teachers engage in introspective inquiry of their teaching experiences during the practicum.

Reflective Journal

In order to assist the teachers in their reflective experiences, the teachers maintain a journal of the daily experiences during the practicum. This allows teachers to look back and deliberate on their own thoughts and actions (Faziah, 2008: Goh &

Matthews, 2011). The reflective journal is a tool that enables the student teachers to record their daily experiences as they reflect on their practice. Journal writing encourage writers to record their insights in form of reflective reviews and narrations (Loughran, cited in Goh & Matthews, 2011). These records provide invaluable data on the teachers' internal thoughts and insights as they engage with the pupils, cooperating teachers and the supervisors during the practicum. Matthews, (2011) postulates that majority of teachers do not maintain a professional journal. The reason is that the teachers are inadequately prepared for the teaching practicum during the preparation stage. For the teachers who kept a record of their insights it provided them with an opportunity to reflect on their experiences of teaching as they go through the teaching practicum. This wealth of information from teachers experiences provide useful data upon which teachers can reflect and ponder on as they improve their practice. One participant recorded the following in her reflective paper, "reflection helps the teacher to consider his/her teaching as a whole and recognize that learners bring a variety of talents, abilities and attitudes to class." This type of first hand data may be difficult to obtain using other types of instruments (Faziah, 2008). A Reflective journal stimulates reflective thinking and provides one of the best ways for teachers to evaluate their professional issues. For a reflective journal to be useful, the students must write them with their own interpretation or perspective. Consequently, they are "believed to enlighten the students and their lecturers on issues." (Faziah, 2008, p. 33).

Professional Portfolio

The portfolio is now acknowledged "as a valuable tool for assessment of competence and has been widely used and tested in many disciplines" (Benson & Smith, cited in McColgan & Blackwood, 2009). Student teachers are required to construct individual portfolios as part of their reflection during the practicum. The teaching portfolio is an educator's personal assemblage of factual accomplishments and shortcomings in teaching (McColgan & Blackwood). It depicts the scope and quality of the teaching experience from the reflective lenses of the educator. The review of studies related to use of portfolios by undergraduate students have confirmed the benefit for educators a means to provide focus and relevance in teaching (McColgan & Blackwood, 2009). Studies that focus on teaching portfolios are often descriptive and exploratory in nature. They examine the perceived effects of portfolios and participants' views. The portfolio is a reflective tool that assists the teachers to interrogate their work as professionals and develop strategies to improve their teaching. With increasing quality concerns and accountability in education, there is need to develop tools to measure quality of delivery in the classrooms and assess educators' competences during vetting for promotions or annual performance reviews. The portfolio is an excellent tool for fulfilling this purpose. Portfolios have gained growing attention as a tool for promoting reflection among teachers and effective facilitation of student learning (Joyce & Showers cited in McColgan & Blackwood, 2009). The portfolios enable student teachers to develop reflective learning through analyzing their teaching to reconstruct new meanings and understanding. This reconstructive process assists teachers to learn from past experiences and improve their practice.

Mentorship and supervision

The student teachers benefit from the support of teacher mentors and supervision by faculty members of the sponsoring

institution. The mentors are knowledgeable and experienced teachers with greater understanding of the school context. These are teachers who provide support to the student teachers regarding instructional techniques and guide the student teachers during the practicum. They observe the student teacher during actual teaching and provide feedback on how to improve practice. The faculty members from the sponsoring institution are experienced teachers who in most cases are Lecturers who taught the student teacher during the coursework and assisted the student teacher at the preparation stage of the practicum. These faculty members frequently visit the student teachers during practicum and conduct classroom observation. They evaluate the teacher's effectiveness in teaching and provide critical feedback during the post observation session on how to improve teaching. The feedback given is based on sound pedagogic principles, classroom management techniques and lesson preparation.

Emerging Perspectives: Insights from the field

After analyzing the qualitative data from the reflective papers and students experiences, the following themes were identified: practicum preparation, classroom management and student discipline, Learner support, learning environments and classroom teaching.

Teaching Practicum preparation

The teaching practicum exercise is rigorous and requires a lot of time input in preparation on the part of the student teacher. This demands for time is complicated by the fact that these teachers are also working full-time and have to balance their professional planning and planning to teach as student teachers. One participant reported that, "assessors came when I had not prepared all the requirements needed." Other changes in the institutional set up such as teacher transfers also occasioned some delays in the teacher's planning because, "they took long to share subjects and classes..."

The use of Individualized Education Program as an instrument to accommodate learners with special learning needs was widely reported in the literature. A number of participants recorded their challenges in preparation of IEPs. These teachers were from a category which had no previous training in Special Needs Education. These teachers require more training on the preparation and use of the IEP and other methods of remedial teaching. Others participants reported the difficulty posed in preparation of teaching and learning aids. Janet wrote that: "it was not all that easy to prepare all the requirements as well as to teach." This was compounded by the fact that some teachers on practicum had other responsibilities from their administrative roles. Being a head teacher, Janet had to fulfill her other responsibilities during the day and this required a lot of hard work and effective time management. Participants recorded success in using the IEP to improve instruction and learners achievement. In one instance, a participant said that:

"After a length of time, the IEP learner showed great improvement. This made me strongly believe that disability is not inability. Such learners can do well if their needs are adequately met. I would anticipate utilizing the knowledge gained to better the performance of learners with special needs in order for them to be functional members of the society and contribute to national development."

Priscilla expressed the time limitations given that the time stipulated on the timetable was only 30 minutes. This left her with inadequate time to guide the learners as planned in her Individualized Education Program. She also reported that a lot of time is spent in identifying the learners with special needs.

Classroom management and discipline

Burden (2003) defines classroom management as, "teacher actions to create a learning environment that encourage positive social interaction, active engagement in learning, and self-motivation" p.3. Classroom management relates to "events that occur in a classroom such as maintaining order and cooperation..." (Levin & Nolan, cited in Goh & Matthews, 2011). Inherent in both these definitions is the fact that the activities involved in classroom management are teacher controlled with a definitive purpose of facilitating the learning process. Gor & Matthews, (2011), differentiate between classroom management and discipline. In their study, they mention that teachers use the two terms interchangeably. While this may not be necessarily true, it is a clear fact that discipline or lack of it is a function of the type of classroom management practices that the teacher uses to maintain order and create a positive "learning environment" (Burden, 2003, p.3). Different teachers reported the effect of the type of classroom management style and the outcome of such styles of student behavior.

One teacher's primary concern is maintaining the learner's motivation. Teachers observed varying levels of motivation amongst learners. Subject grades are an important ingredient in learners' motivation. Another teacher observed that, "some learners were motivated by the fact that they had been previously performing well in the particular subject areas." The learner's success in particular subjects helped in nurturing their interest in these particular subjects. The teachers can build on this by "helping learners set their short and long term goals" and "rewarding pupils through tangible and non-tangible rewards like appraisals." While this is recommendable, the same teacher encountered difficulty in helping learners to create a connection between their actions and the end results.

Large classroom sizes presented a major challenge to participants. One participant reported that:

"At the beginning of the term, there was only one stream of standard two with a population of 93. These pupils crammed together in one room with 98% of them sitting on the floor. There was hardly room for the teacher to go around the class and check pupils work. Most of the teachers avoided teaching this class and truth be told; there was no way any teacher could cater for individual differences and therefore learning in this class was very minimal."

This observation captures lucidly what is common experience in most public primary schools in Kenya, following the introduction of free and compulsory primary education. The outcome of this scenario as the teachers correctly observe is a decline in the quality of teaching and learning within such classrooms.

Learner support

The teacher provides support to learners in different ways. One way is through giving feedback on tasks and assignments performed by the learners. By promptly correcting learners' work, teachers are able to diffuse anxiety and tension among learners. When the teacher reassures the learners, especially the low achievers, this boosts their confidence and morale. However, one participant recorded that this area was, "challenge to me because I found consistent reassurance seemed to be cumbersome...learners needed to be pushed so as to work." By positively rewarding learners, the teacher achieves greater reading milestones as recorded by Ann, who wrote that: "this really made the learners to participate ..." and as a result,

“...improved my class performance ...in the sense that about half of the class new how to read.”

Teachers’ behavior within and outside the classroom lends support to the learners or as reported in the following case, erodes whatever gains they make in the classroom. In this case, the teacher revealed the learners’ perceptions regarding the teacher’s behavior and what they teach in the classroom.

“One afternoon, I eavesdropped on a conversation whereby pupils were discussing some male teachers who came to school while drunk and their conduct in the village whenever they were tipsy. They even went ahead to talk about a female teacher who unfortunately, happens to have loose morals. The pupils despised these teachers and had a negative attitude towards the subjects they taught.”

Such unprofessional behavior occurred in schools where learners are expected to learn good conduct from their teachers. Yet, some teachers do not think their behavior outside the school is important. This raises questions of integrity and credibility of those graduating from our teacher training institutions. To what extend do the training institutions develop the character of the teachers as well as equipping them with professional skills and knowledge? It also raises concerns on the effectiveness of government in ensuring and safeguarding quality education in the schools.

Most teachers in public schools deal with pupils from financially deprived backgrounds. This presents difficulties in the levels of parental support and involvement in their children’s education. Such parents have characteristically low levels of education and little understanding of their role in education. By providing support and educating such parents, teachers ensure that learners are supported both at home and in school. This support came in form of advice or even financial support in rare cases. On participant recorded that: “I enlightened [the parent] about her child’s health condition and even assisted her financially to take the child to hospital for treatment. I am glad that the condition was diagnosed and dealt with accordingly.” This was reported by the teacher when she discovered a child in her class suffering from “urinal incontinence.”

Classroom teaching

The methods of teaching adopted by the teacher significantly affect the outcomes of teaching and learning process. In order to achieve variety, teachers use different approaches ranging from experimentation to discovery. The participants expressed their concerns about the merits and limitations of their teaching strategies. Some of the participants’ written views expressed concern about the need to use innovative approaches in teaching. Ann recorded her success with peer teaching where she involved the learners with better reading abilities to lead the rest of the class during the English lesson. She reported that: “three quarter of the learners attempted to read without fear compared to when I am teaching.” Similar successes were recorded by Janet, who reported that after involving her learners in peer teaching, “their understanding of the lesson was demonstrated when most of them scored highly in the class exercise.” Another participant reported that “slow learners tend to copy the speech from fast learners and this helped to improve their grammar and pronunciation.” Providing developmentally appropriate tasks challenge the learners to think, while simple tasks did not challenge them, which in turn may contribute to “killing their morale of learning.”

Learning environments

The creation of positive learning environment enriches the learning process and promotes the development of other competencies which the teacher may not directly teach to the learners during a traditional lesson presentation. In one instant the teacher achieved this by “befriending the learners”, gave them “opportunities of airing their views” and accorded them the opportunity to select what they wanted to learn. Other concerns involve creating an inclusive learning environment to integrate learners with special needs. One teacher overcame this situation by adopting a collaborative teaching approach, in which she grouped the ‘slow learners’ and ‘high achievers’ to work together in groups. She reported that, “after two weeks ...the high achievers were gaining deeper understanding of the subject matter, while slow learners had also gained confidence from their group members.” Some participants reported how they created positive learning environments by equipping their classrooms with abundant materials for reading, writing, language development and learning centers that reflect the context areas. They ensured “a print-rich environment which appealed to the learners’ interest and guided them on how to use all the available learning materials in the class so that they benefit from them.”

Others reported on how they successfully used real objects and storytelling to stimulate learners’ interest and maintain high motivational levels. Teachers who work with young learners used storytelling to captivate learner’s interest. By asking learners to narrate stories after reading in a Library lesson, learners were encouraged to want to do the same during the next lesson. Involving learners in field trips assisted them in their schoolwork “when they see a relationship between what they are studying and the real world.” A participant reported that: “this method became effective when we went to a nearby hill during social studies lesson to study on physical features.” Although teachers reported positive efforts in creating conducive learning environments, there were instances where these efforts were hampered by factors beyond their control. One participant reminisced on the scarcity of suitable desks in the classrooms that made learning uncomfortable because learner had to sit on desks with unequal sizes. She reports that, “some pupils sat on the floor and this affected their handwriting.... and their books were always dirty.” This confirms the obvious scarcity of resources in most public schools.

A notable technique for involving the learners is the project method. As reported by Ednah, learners found this method very interesting and effective “as it captured their enthusiasm, stimulated their initiative and encouraged the spirit of inquiry.” Involving the learners in classroom discussions deepens their understanding of concepts taught and promotes the development of other skills such as listening. One participant reported that: “the method probed learners’ thinking by continuous series of questions which helped them to clarify their ideas ending up in building the problem solving skills.” Socratic questioning is useful in focusing the learners’ attention and was used by the teachers to introduce the lesson. This method was over utilized as most teachers relied on it entirely to review previous lessons and also to introduce the new lesson.

Teachers dealing with special needs learners have to adopt innovative techniques of teaching. One such approach is the heuristic method in which schemes or past actions are used as a foundation for behavior in a new situation. This method was particularly useful with one participant dealing with mentally

retarded children. She observed that this method is, “useful because it saves time for pupils who are trying to figure out the appropriate behavior for a situation they have experienced before.” The teacher notes further that this method is “typically useful.” In another instance, one child with mental handicap “was able to interact freely with other learners especially during science practical lessons.” Despite the government’s policy on inclusive education, teachers are not properly equipped to integrate the Special needs learners. A notable example is where a participant reported difficulty in explaining concepts that required direct observation to a visually impaired learner. She recorded how the learner asked, “Teacher, cloud *ni vitu vemekaaje?*” meaning “Teacher, how do clouds look like.” Without adequate resources, teachers are unable to fully integrate these learners in the mainstream lessons, yet they are required to do so. This calls on the government to support this inclusive policy by providing necessary resources and adequate training for teachers.

Some teachers involved the learners in the evaluation process. They assessed the learners’ response to determine whether objectives of the subject were achieved or not. One participant wrote that, “besides giving me the ability to control what was being learned, it also fostered increased social interaction between the learners and this enabled the learners to cooperate, build self-confidence and make them develop at their own rate and in their own direction.” In another case, a participant reported that this method requires constant teacher supervision because, “in some instances, when the teacher is not around, the learners with mental retardation abandon class work and opt to playing.”

Teacher expectations and Collaboration

Teacher’s expectation of the learners’ performance significantly affects the ultimate learning outcomes. Sabina reported that this was “one area which was rather hard to balance.” She wrote that she found herself holding positive expectations from high achievers than from the average and low achievers. Her challenge was to change her perspective and hold the low and average achievers to high expectations. All teachers participating in the teaching practicum are expected to collaborate with other teachers and in particular with one cooperating teacher. The cooperating teacher is usually a more experienced teacher who provides mentorship for the student teacher during practicum. Participants received support and encouragement from their colleagues especially the cooperating teachers. One participant had this to say: “my mentor teacher... was so supportive, often coming to assess me, correcting me appropriately and keeping a good assessment records...” She reckons further that, “teaching practicum experience taught me greatly the importance of developing healthy relationships with the people around me.”

One participant reported how her mentor teacher was so inspired by the IEP she had prepared to the point of adopting the program in her teaching. This kind of transfer of learning from one teacher to another is useful in improving whole-school performance through collaboration. On the other hand some participants did not receive support from their colleagues. One teacher reported that she had to negotiate with other teachers to give her their lessons so that she could take learners to fieldtrips.

Parental involvement in their children’s education was reported by participants. Ednah reported success when she asked parents of Class 8 candidates to support their children by providing lunch at school, so that she could have more

instruction time. This was met with different reactions with some parents supporting the initiative, while others thinking, “that the teachers want to benefit from the parents by eating their food.” She suggests, “that parents be educated to develop positive attitudes towards those who handle their children.” Another participant invited “a volunteer parent to teach some of the science topics like types of weeds found in the local environment.” This was done under the guidance of the regular teacher and provided a break from the monotony of regular classroom.

Teaching and Learning resources

The use of teaching and learning resources was widely reported in the teachers’ reflective papers. Despite the challenges of acquiring ready-made teaching/learning aids, participants reported various methods they used to make teaching aids from locally available materials. These resources “acted as information store and memory substitute that learners referred to during their free time.” They also assisted learners who were weak “as their peers volunteered to teach them during their free time because the learning areas were established properly, correctly labeled and maintained to hold pupil’s interest.”

When pupils are involved in making teaching and learning aids, it gives learning a deeper meaning. Participants wrote how they involved learners by asking them to bring objects from their homes for nature corner, project corner and the classroom shop. By involving learners in this way, they enhanced cooperation among them. Real objects are readily available from the environment thus enabling the teacher to make reference to the immediate environment and enhance development of learners’ manipulative skills and “provide clear and true experience compared to any other form of teaching.” When teachers invited resource persons to their schools, they had to get into their pockets to facilitate this by way of giving tokens of appreciation and transport reimbursement for the visiting resource person. This happened because most schools do not have vote heads for such expenses although they contribute significantly to pupils learning.

New Frontiers

In the analysis of the emerging themes, it is clearly evident that few teachers used prayer in their classroom. This is despite the fact that faith has a central role in the education that offered at this particular University. This elicited the question on whether teachers who undergo training at this institution fully imbibe the philosophical underpinning of their sponsoring institution. This calls for greater spiritual emphasis during the teacher training programs so that teachers can come out with deep roots on the spiritual principles governing the institution that trains them.

The issue of character training has been ignored for a long time. In most teacher training institutions, this area is simply granted a passing mention and very little is done to actually implement it. It therefore recommended that a character training component be introduced in teacher training curriculum. This will address some of the character flaws and lack of professionalism that some participants reported in this study. As part of a long-term strategy to improve professional practice, it is imperative to introduce the component of reflective teaching in teacher training curriculum. Teachers need to be encouraged to be reflective practitioners and maintain reflective journals/diaries.

Most teachers in the primary schools are generalists. Whilst, they are thoroughly trained to teach in their subject areas, these teachers are inadequately prepared to handle the challenges presented by children with special learning needs. It is therefore imperative that a component of training in inclusive education be introduced in the teacher training curriculum.

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