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# TEACHER EDUCATION COURSES IN RELATION TO PREPARATION FOR TEACHING PRACTICE: VIEWS FROM STUDENT TEACHERS

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## Abstract

*This study was an attempt to elicit student teachers' suggestions on how teachers' colleges can better prepare students for teaching practice (TP) and how the college can support them more while on TP.*

*The sample comprised of 40 student teachers from Mutare Teachers' College. Data for the study was collected through the administration of an open ended questionnaire. The results of the study show that student teachers had a number of pedagogically sound suggestions on how the college could better prepare and support them while on TP. These suggestions are presented and discussed in this report.*

## Introduction

From a teacher educator perspective, one of the main functions of teaching practice (TP) is to indicate the shortcomings of the teacher education programmes presented at college (Brown and Brown, 1990; Kasanda, 1995; Ondiek, 1978). Brown and Brown (1990) further argue that if the majority of the student teachers (also referred to as just students in this article) do well on TP, it can be assumed that they have learned something from the training programme and are putting it into practice. In such situations, the programme should be continued and if possible, further improved. However, the converse is also true. If the majority of the students fail year after year,

there is probably something wrong with the programme or the system of evaluation. In this respect, TP serves as a self evaluation measure on the part of teachers colleges. To that effect, student teachers' reflections on TP can be used to improve the practices and content of the teacher preparation programmes.

## Background

### Teacher Preparation Programmes in Zimbabwe

The current mode of teacher education programmes in Zimbabwe resembles what Perraton (1993) calls the "Sandwich" model. Sandwich in the sense that in a three-year course, the second year is somehow 'sandwiched' between two years of residential courses. The advantage of a sandwich course is that a student is given a chance to marry theory to practice during TP and to reflect on his/her teaching experiences when he/she comes back to college.

The structure of pre-service teacher education programmes consists of four sections, and these are: Section 1 (Practice of teaching), Section 2 (Theory of Education), Section 3 (Academic study or Main subject), and Section 4 (Professional Studies). (TERC, 1986).

### Section 1 ( Teaching Practice)

The current pattern of TP in colleges that train student teachers for three years is such that the student teachers go for TP during the whole rest of the second year of their three year training period. Student teachers are deployed to schools where each one of them gets attached to a co-operating teacher (mentor). The mentors share their teaching loads (classes) with the student teachers. The mentor is also supposed to advise the student teacher on matters pertaining to his/her teaching. During TP, student teachers are supervised by mentors, head teachers, and college lecturers. It is however unfortunate that the student teachers are subjected more to assessment than supervision during this period of TP, and yet the reverse should be the case if student teachers are to get the most benefit out of their TP.

## **Section 2 ( Theory of Education)**

Section 2 consists of four major areas: Psychology of Education, Sociology of Education, Philosophy of Education and Educational Administration. The rationale of introducing the Theory of Education (TOE) to students is that student teachers should acquire a sound grounding in educational theory and understand the reasoning behind the teaching methods they will use as classroom practitioners during TP and as fully qualified teachers later on.

## **Section 3 (Academic Study or Main Subject/s)**

In Section 3, students carry out an in-depth study of one or two academic disciplines such as English, Shona, Science, Maths, Geography, History, etc. Generally, the academic subjects are meant to broaden and deepen the students' knowledge of their main subject(s) so that they can teach that subject confidently at secondary school level during TP and after as fully qualified teachers. It must also be noted that specific subject methodology is also taught under this section.

## **Section 4 (Professional Studies)**

The lack of consensus, especially among secondary teachers colleges on what constitutes Professional Studies (Mukorera, 1997) means that different teachers colleges have different views of what Professional Studies is. It is therefore against this background that this report will highlight what Professional Studies is, as viewed by Mutare Teachers College since this is where the research was done

Professional Studies at Mutare Teachers College consists of three main examinable sections namely, Teaching and Learning Skills (TLS), Educational Media Technology (EMT) and Research Methods.

TLS is a course which seeks to impart the general methodology skills. The major areas covered in TLS are study skills, classroom communication skills, the interactive teaching approach and classroom management. The major topics covered in EMT are, nature of EMT, teaching aids, lettering, graphic production, chalk board skills, projected aids, using the community

and local resources. Research Methods is a taught course where students are introduced to the theory of research methodology. After that the students are required to do a classroom based research project when they are on TP.

However, the Professional Studies syllabus is in the process of being revised to encompass two more examinable areas: Family Health and Life Studies (FHLS), and Professional Enrichment. FHLS covers such topics as the Family, Guidance and Counselling, Aids Education in Schools, Adolescence and Reproductive Health, Gender Issues and Love Relationships. Professional Enrichment will cover Curriculum Issues, Supervision and Assessment of Teaching.

## The Problem and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to elicit student teachers' views on the adequacy of the components of teacher education courses in as far as they prepared them for TP. In addition, the study sought suggestions from student teachers on the ways of improving preparation for TP and support systems during TP. Specifically the study sought to provide answers to the following research questions:

- (i) Which of the first year courses did the student teachers find most useful during TP ?
- (ii) How can the college better prepare students for TP during the first year at college ?
- (iii) How can the college support students more while they are on TP ?

## The Sample

The subjects were 40 third year students at Mutare Teachers College whose main teaching subject was Science. These students had just completed their TP the previous year in 1996. During TP, the student teachers were deployed in all the nine administrative districts of Manicaland Province in Zimbabwe. The sample consisted of 16 females and 24 males. The academic

qualifications of 90 % of the students were five 'O' level subjects and the remaining 10% had attempted 'A' level.

## **Methodology**

Two weeks after the first term had started in January 1997, the student teachers were issued with a questionnaire which consisted of questions meant to elicit their views on the adequacy of their TP preparation.

The students were asked to respond to the following questions:

- (i) Rate the following components of your first year course (TOE, main subject content, main subject methodology, TLS, EMT, micro-teaching) in terms of their usefulness to you during TP. Use the following scale: 1 = not at all, 2 = very little, 3 = satisfactory, 4 = very much.
- (ii) How can the college better prepare you for TP during the first year?
- (iii) How can the college support you more while you are on TP ?

The data was collected and then analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively.

## **Limitations of the Study**

The conclusions reached in this study should be generalised with caution, given the fact that the students were all doing Science as their main subject and therefore one may argue that the sample was biased. A similar study with a more heterogeneous group is recommended to validate the findings and conclusions of this study.

## Results

Table 1  
Students' Rating of First-year Courses in Relation to Preparation for  
TP (n=40)

Course	very much		satisfactory		very little		not at all	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
TOE	15	37.5	17	42.5	8	20	0	0
Main Subject Content	17	42.5	14	35	9	22.5	0	0
Main Subject Methods	18	45	18	45	2	5	2	5
TLS	30	75	10	25	0	0	0	0
EMT	10	25	21	52.5	9	22.5	0	0
Micro- Teaching	11	27.5	11	27.5	11	27.5	7	17.5



**Table 2**  
**Suggestions on How Students Can Be Better Prepared for TP**  
**(n=40)**

Suggestions	No.	%
More time should be allocated to methods courses.	28	70
More time should be allocated to micro-teaching.	25	62.5
All topics covered at "O" level, especially the most difficult ones, should be introduced to students before they go on TP.	11	27.5
Lecturers should give demonstration lessons during micro-teaching.	10	25
There should be formal interaction (organised by lecturers) between first and third year students before first year students go for TP.	5	12.5
Exchange programmes with students of other colleges to discuss TP experiences should be encouraged.	2	5

**Table 3**  
**Suggestions on How Students Can Be Supported More While on**  
**TP n=40**

Suggestions	No.	%
Lecturers should do more supervision than assessment during TP.	31	77.5
Student teachers should be supervised by subject specialists.	20	50
There is need for all mentors to be aware of college expectations.	15	37.5
More seminars should be held during TP.	6	15
Lecturers should 'standardise' their supervision to reduce areas of conflict.	9	22.5

## Discussion and Recommendations

When asked to rate their first year courses in terms of their usefulness in preparing them for TP, 75% of the students indicated that TLS was very useful in terms of preparing them for TP. A combined total of 35% indicated that micro-teaching sessions did not help them much in terms of preparing them for TP. Considering that micro-teaching should be used as a bridge between theory and practice, there is need for teachers colleges to institute more effective micro-teaching programmes as a way of preparing students for TP.

In response to the question on how the college can better prepare students for TP, student teachers put forward a number of suggestions which serious teacher educators should consider. Seventy-percent of the students suggested that more time should be allocated to methods courses. These results are consistent with how the students rated the usefulness of their first year courses. The results also seem to suggest that teacher preparation programmes should allocate more time to professional studies than is the case now. This suggestion is similar to the one put forward by the Department of Teacher Education Academic Board (University of Zimbabwe) Sub-Committee on Section 4, (1994). Recommendation 5 by the Sub-Committee was that:

The balance of contact hours allotted to content and methodology within Main Subject should be 50:50 and there should be equal weighting of content and methodology assessment.

Sixty-two-and-a-half percent of the students suggested that more time should be allocated to micro-teaching and peer-teaching. It was also suggested that lecturers should give demonstration lessons during micro-teaching so that they could act as role models. This suggestion could be a result of students suspecting that lecturers preach what they cannot practice. Indeed for lecturers to be more effective in teaching students how to teach, there is need for them to sometimes go back to the real classroom so that they can keep abreast of what is actually taking place there. Lecturers cannot bank on experience gained some years back since that experience may be outdated

and no longer relevant. In fact there is no harm in college lecturers going on 'contact' leave for a month or two to teach at a nearby school so that they can keep abreast of what is actually happening in the classroom. The experience gained during the contact leave can then be used to inform their practice at college.

As far as subject content is concerned, 27.5% of the students suggested that all topics in the 'O' level syllabi, especially the most difficult ones, be covered before students go on TP. They suggested that the topics could be covered at a level slightly higher than 'O' level during first year and then have the same topics revisited at a higher level in third year. Because of the nature of current teacher education programmes where student teachers go on TP for the whole of their second year, it is almost impossible for all the content to be covered before they go on TP.

Therefore, what the above suggestion might be calling for is a revisit of the mode of training so that student teachers go on TP after they have covered enough content for them to "survive" during TP. One suggestion would be for students to go on TP in the third year. However, the idea of students going on TP for a continuous year looks pedagogically unsound because some students may not benefit from the TP reflections since they will not get a chance to go back on TP to implement their reflections. Therefore, another suggestion which the writer thinks is pedagogically sound is to institute a 5-7-9 scheme where student teachers go on TP during the fifth, seventh, and ninth terms of their three-year course.

The 5-7-9 scheme would still give student teachers an opportunity to teach for a period of one year, though it would not be continuous. The scheme would also ensure that the colleges will continue to enrol the same number of students as before since the scheme can accommodate two year groups in any one term. Instead of spending three terms before students go on TP, this scheme would give students an extra term (the fourth term) to get more theory before they go on TP. Since the TP programme would no longer be continuous as is the case now, student teachers would benefit from their TP reflections during that term they will be back at college.

Some students (12.5%) suggested that there be formal interaction between first year and third year students towards the end of the year so that TP experiences could be shared from a students' perspective. Some students (5%) suggested that there should be exchange programmes with students from other colleges so that they could discuss TP issues. While this suggestion of exchange programmes looks ambitious it is worth trying out. The exchange programme could be just for a day.

In response to the question that required students to suggest how the college could support students more on TP, 77.5 % of the students suggested that lecturers should do more of supervision than assessment during TP. In this context, supervision involves counselling the student on matters pertaining to their teaching, helping and guiding the student teacher while the main thrust in assessment is giving a value judgement which culminates in a form of a mark. Since assessing is easier than supervision, this could be one reason why lecturers find themselves doing more of assessment than supervision. One student teacher described lecturers who visited him on TP as strangers, foreigners and fault finders. Generally, student teachers called for more positive supervision from lecturers.

From the results in Table 3, it can be shown that 50% of the student teachers were supervised by lecturers who were not specialists in the subjects the students were teaching. This practice may lead lecturers to concentrate on 'surface skills' such as chalkboard skills, voice projection and other generalisations at the expense of deep skills such as logical development of concepts being taught.

In this study, 22.5% of the student teachers suggested that lecturers should 'standardise' the way they supervised students so as to minimise areas of conflict. This problem can be overcome by instituting regular staff development programmes at colleges to discuss how to supervise students and share ideas on TP matters.

Six student teachers (15%) suggested that more seminars should be held during TP to iron out any problems that they might have encountered during TP. Students deplored the idea of having a seminar for all students conducted

at college. This they said was very ineffective and instead suggested that seminars be held in small groups.

37.5% of the students indicated that they did not benefit much from their mentors since most of them were not aware of college expectations. This might be an indication of the need to institute a serious systematic training programme for mentors. In any case, this attachment TP programme should not have been instituted before the mentors were trained.

## Conclusion

In this study, student teachers have raised a number of pertinent suggestions, some of which are pedagogically sound. If student teachers' TP experiences are to be successful and meaningful, then colleges of education, and in particular Mutare Teachers College, should take these suggestions into account.

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