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THE STRATEGIC ROLES AND CHALLENGES OF MENTOR OR CO-OPERATING TEACHERS IN THE PREPARATION OF PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS IN ZIMBABWE.

BEN JOHN SIYAKWAZI

AND

PEGGY DORIS SIYAKWAZI

INTRODUCTION

In Zimbabwe today, the partnership scheme of association in the preparation of teachers is realised through the co-operation among Ministry of Education, Ministry of Higher Education, teachers' colleges, the University of Zimbabwe and schools. The Department of Teachers Education monitors the sixteen teacher's colleges in the country. Among other things, professional activities are co-ordinated; syllabuses are scrutinized, examinations moderated including teaching practice and finally successful candidates are awarded a diploma by the University of Zimbabwe.

In this scheme of association, partners aim at excellence and this cannot be achieved unless the partnership is strong. Teachers' colleges and the University cannot succeed in the scheme of association without meaningful participation of the schools through the Regional Offices. It should be noted that educational quality, as measured by pupils, academic achievement, is a function of teacher quality. If what happens in classroom is largely determined by the action of the teacher and if teachers can learn to teach in more effective ways, then it is clear that teacher education should continue to be an important policy option to improve the quality of education. It is important to note that the scheme of association is instrumental in facilitating reforms in schools through teacher education.

This paper focuses on preparing teachers to reform schools through teaching practice. Reports on schools reflect a decline in the academic performance of students and the problem of ineffective teaching approaches. There is indeed sickness in education, teachers are accused of being mediocre, and this is reflected in the poor results of most schools. In some cases the pedagogy is lacking in better teaching strategies. This matter of poor performance needs urgent attention, but we cannot improve the quality of education in schools without

improving the quality of teachers.

The focus in this paper is pre-service supervision of teaching practice by co-operating teachers and in service orientation as part of school reform. The major objective is improving the quality of instruction in the classroom and improving the status of classroom teachers. Whilst key partners, in pre-service programmes include: college lecturers, practising teachers, headmasters, student teachers and University Faculty of Education, in this study, the strategic role of classroom teachers to whom student teachers who are on teaching practice are attached has been ignored. The paper examines student teaching experience in schools, selection of the co-operating teachers, their strategic duties and responsibilities of co-operating teachers, interacting with the student teacher, commitment and empowerment in school reforms.

The rationale for the study is promotion of excellence in teacher education through school reforms in teaching practice. The methodology involved literature review and documentary analysis of data collected. It should be realised that partnership in professional development has long been an integral part of teacher education in countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom. The success of collaboration among schools, colleges and university build a history of trust upon which future co-operative venture can be built. In view of this, it is important to understand the selection and role of the classroom teacher or co-operating teacher to whom the student teacher is attached.

REFORMS IN SCHOOLS THROUGH TEACHING PRACTICE

In order to improve the quality of teaching, Bondolfi Teacher's College under its Principal, Mr Herbert Chikukwa and his lecturing staff tried to bring in an innovation by holding annual teaching practice workshops since 1995. Their vision of a teaching practise workshop is a progressive move that they accepted and is now part and parcel of their college culture.

In the past, the participants at Bondolfi Teachers' College included Headmasters, college lecturers, student teachers and academics of the University of Zimbabwe and officials from two ministries of education. In 1996 a new dimension was the inclusion of the classroom teachers. The emphasis in this paper is on the new teaching practice pattern of student teaching attachment and the strategic role of the co-operating teacher. This idea of workshops has the support of the department of Teacher Education of the University of Zimbabwe that monitors teacher preparation programmes. The approach may indeed bring reforms in schools through teaching practice.

BACKGROUND

In 1979 the enrolment of both primary and secondary schools was 885,801 and in 1984, the enrolment rose to 2,570,446.¹ Such an increase had implications with regard training more teachers and financing a rapidly expanding education system. The partnership in the training of teachers was not very effective since independence in 1980. Part of the problem was due to Ministry of Education's policy on the status of student teachers. Student teachers were deployed in schools and assumed the full responsibility as class room teachers and these student teachers were on their own in classrooms and as a consequence they were not attached to experienced teachers. This may have been a contributing factor to ineffective teaching. In view of this, there was no supervision from an experienced classroom teacher. It was however in a few cases where the busy and overworked headmaster made erratic supervision visits.

The recent shift in policy whereby a student has no class of his/her own and is attached to an experienced teacher is a step in the right direction. Classroom teachers have the opportunity to experience challenging roles of supervising students. This approach significantly increases the sense of joint ownership in the task of preparing new teachers for the profession.

On the question of partnership, it is also important to take note of philosophic advice by Neil Postman and Charles Weingarter who advise us by stating: 'you can't stage a successful revolution without allies, those in the world of education who want the curriculum, the policies and the power structure to be truly democratic'. The implication of this statement is that in any school reform, there must be full participation of all partners and this includes classroom teachers.

THE PROBLEM

Great concern has been expressed that claim a deterioration in the quality of teaching in schools. This is clearly evidenced by Professor Phineas Makhurane's address at Chinhoyi Technical Teachers' College graduation ceremony on 10th August, 1996.

Professor Makhurane stated in his speech:

The most disturbing thing about "O" Level examinations is that a disproportionately large number of candidates do not pass the examinations. For example, of the over 117,000 candidates who sat for "O" level November last year (1995) only 27,000 passed five or more subjects at grade C or better. Some 90,000 failed to obtain full certificates. This trend has been similar over the last so many years. This is a terrible loss especially seeing that the unsuccessful candidates fall back to Grade 7, or Junior Certificate which as we have already seen do not lead them

anywhere. Thus while we boast of having done very well in the provision of education since independence, the largest single portion of our annual budget (Z4 billion) this financial year has gone to education, we have to admit that we have not done too well in ensuring that the money is ultimately put to maximum use as demonstrated by the success of our children in the schools. As a matter of fact, a large number of the schools run by rural district councils have invariably come out with zero pass rate. As one who presides over the work of ZIMSEC, I feel very concerned that our examinations seem to benefit less than a quarter of the secondary school population. Clearly something is wrong somewhere with our teaching.

The above statement challenges the Zimbabwean nation to critically examine the problem and urgently bring some reform. The comment seems to tally with the Commission on Excellence Report, a Nation at Risk in the United States which begins with this statement:- "Our nation is at risk, the educational foundations of our society are presently being shaken by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and a people".

While the above statement refers to the United States, this also seems to apply to Zimbabwe because of wide spread feeling that there is sickness in education. The Shurugwi Council has also indicted schools for the poor results at ordinary level. Criticisms are an indicator that the quality of teaching leaves much to be desired. There is need to revisit teacher preparation since part of the problem is poor teaching which leaves much to be desired. Professor Makhurane further states that the results recorded in recent years are a reflection of the professional inefficiency of the teaching staff.

1. WHO IS A CO-OPERATING TEACHER?

The regular and certified professional staff member of school to whom a student teacher has been assigned is a very important ally or partner in teacher preparation. Such a "class teacher, is always an experienced practitioner, who is carefully selected for his or, her classroom skills, takes on the role of mentor, guiding and supervising the trainees teacher throughout the year". In the United Kingdom, such a teacher is normally called a 'mentor' and in the United States the term used is a 'co-operating teacher'. For the purpose of this paper, we shall use the co-operating teacher and define him or her as an outstanding individual who is committed and eager to make substantial contribution to the educational programme through effective teaching.

In our scheme of association in Zimbabwe, a co-operating teacher should play a strategic role in assisting the student teachers attached to him/her. The quality and quantity of experiences of the student teacher depends upon the co-operating teacher. During the student's teaching experience, the co-operating teacher plays many roles--- instructor, counselor, colleague, model and friendly guide. As a result, the student teachers will grow in

confident, professional attitudes and teaching competence.

CRITERIA FOR SELECTING THE COOPERATING TEACHER OR MENTOR

Teachers who serve as co-operating teachers should meet the following requirements:-

- 2.1 At least four years of full time teaching experience with a strong knowledge of curriculum.
- 2.2 Should hold an appropriate professional teaching certificate or a teacher education diploma.
- 2.3 Has a proven record as a highly competent classroom teacher through either the school or district assessment in teaching.
- 2.4 Should be an effective classroom teacher who is innovative and resourceful.
- 2.5 Varies in teaching/learning approaches and takes into consideration individual differences.
- 2.6 Willingness to assume the roles expected of a mentor, or co-operating teacher (i.e. a trusted friend, advocate, coach and critic).

In addition to the above criteria, it is important to consider the mentor's ability to work as a team member and facilitate learning experience including pedagogical instruction. Finally, one should have the ability to work with student teachers in a positive enthusiastic manner.

3. In the selection of a co-operating teacher, one should consider Bloom's study in looking for a Master Teacher. The criteria required that a teacher should:
 - 3.1 Have a superior knowledge of the subjects.
 - 3.2 Be skilled in teaching.
 - 3.3 Command respect for the student.
 - 3.4 Constantly nurture the student in the subject and
 - 3.5 Produce demonstrable results.

Douglas Samuels, and Robert Griffore found that students identified teacher's knowledge of subject matter and ability to teach as the most important characteristics in good teachers. The ideas by Bloom and Samuels indicate the views by some scholars on characteristics that should be exhibited by outstanding teachers.

4. **STUDENT TEACHING EXPERIENCES**

It should be noted that the three year Diploma in Education programme includes school experience. In other words, the student teacher spends one year on attachment in a school. This is an important learning experience as the student teacher learns the skills and crafts of teaching by working alongside experienced colleagues and by continuous experience with children in the classroom situation.

Student teaching practise is a period of guided teaching during which the student teacher is under the direction of a co-operating teacher. He/she takes increasing responsibility for teaching a class in a school over an extended period of time and engages directly in all of the activities which constitute the wide range of teacher's responsibility.

During this period, the student teacher should engage in a learning situation as a student of teaching. He/she should take into consideration the following:

Student teaching refers to guided teaching, and increasing responsibility. Such guided teaching implies that supervisory help must be provided; increasing responsibility indicates the gradual induction of the student to the teaching roles.

In UK, student teaching experience is supported by the Secretary of State of Education who stated:

What I welcome most in these developments is the increased emphasis on work in schools - not just teaching practice, but more formal study too, so that teachers in the schools are more in the whole training process. This improves teacher training. It offers student teachers an immediate and real experience, where they feel that they are part of the teaching staff of the school.

Through out the student teaching experience, the student should be encouraged to experiment, to study, to probe, to question, to examine, to inquire, to reflect and to learn for himself/herself how the theory previously studied applies to real pupils in

actual classrooms. The classroom becomes a laboratory where the prospective teacher attempts to synthesize theory learned on campus in an actual classroom. Student teaching should be done under the watchful and helpful assistance of the co-operating teacher to whom the student is attached.

5. **STRATEGIC ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF A CO-OPERATING TEACHER OR MENTOR**

The co-operating teacher should play a strategic and critical supportive role while the student teacher is on teaching attachment. The duty of monitoring the student teacher is a professional assignment. Duties of a co-operating teacher should include among other things, the orientation of student teachers to the school and professional culture. The rationale is that the student teacher should be familiar with his/her environment. This gives the student teacher confidence at the workplace. In view of this, the mentor should introduce the student teacher to school personnel and building layout e.g. classroom, office, staffroom, etc.

With respect to the professional responsibilities, expose the student teacher to school rules, regulations, policies, school calendar, class timetables, textbooks, resource materials and show location of media centre. It is the duty of the mentor to provide the student teacher with specific responsibilities early in the teaching experience.

In order to facilitate the preparation and planning of work, provide syllabuses and share information on scheming, taking into consideration school practice and expectations by the college. There is need for guidance in long term and weekly planning including daily instructional planning. In the induction process, it is important to share with the student teacher class records such as class register, progress records, tests records etc.

6. **TEACHING RESPONSIBILITY OF THE CO-OPERATING TEACHER OR MENTOR.**

IN THE CULTURE OF TEACHING AND LEARNING THE MENTOR HAS SPECIFIC RESPONSIBILITIES SUCH AS:-

- 6.1 Demonstrating effective classroom instructional skills.
- 6.2 Teaching some demonstration lessons while the student observes.
- 6.3 Arranging for the student teacher to observe other teachers in the school. at least one lesson a week.

- 6.4 Providing time for visitations and observations of other classes.
- 6.5 Involving gradually student teacher in teaching duties.
- 6.6 Supervising student teacher instructional activities by observing his/her teaching and provide performance feedback.
- 6.7 Aiding with discipline and classroom control
- 6.8 Guiding in marking pupils' work.
- 6.9 Helping in keeping class progress records and individual records.
- 6.10 Making aware of parent teacher conference techniques.
- 6.11 Encouraging involvement in professional meetings such as teacher's association and workshops.

INTERACTING WITH THE STUDENT TEACHER

In interacting with the student teacher, it is expected that the co-operating teacher should:

- 7.1 Be enthusiastic and interested in the student teacher. This will promote good human relations.
- 7.2 Meet regularly with the student teacher to provide assistance in the following: curriculum and instructional planning, diagnosing learner needs and differences.
- 7.3 Evaluate student teacher's teaching progress, class management, selecting teaching strategies and instructional materials.
- 7.4 Give constructive criticism, discuss alternative methods, and encourage experimentation.
- 7.5 Keep discussions confidential.
- 7.6 Encourage questions and seeking for help.

8. **COMMUNICATION BETWEEN CO-OPERATING TEACHER AND THE COLLEGE**

It is necessary for the co-operating teacher and the student to communicate effectively. The suggestion for the co-operating teacher is to develop a plan for communicating with the student teacher's college and to identify student teacher progress as needed. In addition the cooperating teacher provides input to evaluation of student teacher on teaching practice by submitting evaluation reports to the college.

SOME HINTS FOR THE CO-OPERATING TEACHER

One of the effective strategies is holding regular conferences with the student teacher. When conducted properly, meetings are valuable to both the student teacher and the co-operating teacher. It is during the phase of student teaching attachment that the student teacher receives individual guidance from an experienced classroom teacher. In addition, the student is given direction to his/her becoming a student of teaching. It is through the conference that the student teacher can reflect and analyse the relationship between theory and practice. In many significant ways, the conference becomes the testing ground in which the student in which the student teacher organizes, synthesizes and assimilates the experience of the co-operating teacher.

Conferences may occur at any time as necessity demands and may be as formal or informal as the participants dictate. In some studies carried out by the University of Tennessee at Martin reveals that previous students had indicated that daily conferences of short duration are helpful and they certainly recommend a planned conference on a weekly basis. The weekly conference is an excellent time for the co-operating teacher, to evaluate cooperatively the student teacher's competence in terms of strengths and weaknesses as exhibited by performance and then plan new teaching approaches.

The following points are suggested for conducting meetings between the co-operating teacher and the student teacher:

- Accepting the student teacher as a co-worker and keeping things in an informal and friendly basis.
- Giving consideration to all problems, but avoid lecturing.

-Having specific data for frank direct criticism, keeping them objective, constructive and professional.

-Beginning a conference by commending the student teacher's strong points but avoiding flattery and seeking to help the students self-appraisal.

-Giving the student teacher a copy of supervision reports and suggested remedies and giving encouragement with a definite goal.

CONCLUSION

In summary the co-operating teacher has important strategic roles to play among them are the following:- ensuring that the student teacher's experiences help him/her to develop pedagogic skills, values, attitudes and beliefs about teaching which are independent of their specific school contexts and that it encourages them in analytic reflection on their teaching.

When student teachers are on teaching practice, the professional experience is of critical importance. Under the three-year pre-service programme in Zimbabwe, there is recognition of the professional experience and this is evidenced by the provision for student teaching attachment for the whole of 2nd year as reflected by the table below:

STRUCTURE OF THE THREE YEAR PROGRAMME

YEAR	TERM 1	TERM 2	TERM 3
1	In college	In college	In college
2	In schools	In schools	In schools
3	In college	In college	In college

It is our conviction that student teaching experience is a learned profession characterised by high, ethical, normal and technical standards. Therefore prospective teachers are in the process of becoming students of teaching. One of the distinguished scholars has stated the following:

"Professional experiences in pre-service teacher education provide for opportunities for students of teaching to study and engage in the teaching activities in a variety of settings under the supervision of highly qualified personnel". The above quotation confirms that student teachers at colleges have the need for professional experience such as teaching practice under the supervision of a caring co-operating teacher where student teachers are deployed.

The schools are therefore ideal laboratory settings, "that prepare students of teaching to be

thoughtful and independent professionals, capable of monitoring their own behaviours, that is teachers who act on principles, who continue to study teaching and learning in order to become more creative in the translation and transmission of ideas and ideals and who continue to grow.

In summary one would view the following as the main purposes for the professional teaching experience:

1. Providing opportunities to relate knowledge, the skills, and the attitudes learned in teacher education and to direct experiences, and to perform professional teaching duties.
2. Providing opportunities to apply and test principles of learning and to apply teaching strategies.
3. Providing opportunities for career exploration in the profession of teaching.
4. Provision in demonstrating principles of professional and ethical behaviour.

In conclusion, this paper calls for critical examination of the strategic role of the co-operating teacher. It is important to seriously consider our educational mission. We aim at excellence in teacher education. To put it in another way, an education system is only good as its teachers as the international labour organisation advocated. "The quality of the teacher, the kind of people attracted to teaching and the way they are taught is at the heart of all problems of education quality. No reform of education is worth its salt if it does not address to this range of question". In our view, the preparation of teachers in Zimbabwe ought to involve all parties namely, The Ministry of Higher Education, Ministry of Education, Regional Offices, Colleges, University, Schools and all involved in the preparation of teachers. One way of achieving this goal is through the effective role of a committed co-operating teacher who should have the mandate and empowerment to do so through their participation. Perhaps some kind of reward may be necessary for the cooperating teacher. It could be monetary reward or credit towards a study programme. The workshop held at Bondolfi Teachers' College on 1st November, 1996 offered an opportunity to headmasters, cooperating teachers, student teachers and College and University lecturing staff to meet and share ideas as part of school reforms.

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