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Contextual Characteristics of Teaching Practice Schools and Supervision of Student Teachers in Kenya

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Abstract

Student teaching is first and foremost a learning situation; hence the school context in which it takes place is quite important. This paper examines contextual characteristics of teaching practice schools and supervision of student teachers in Kenya based on a study on perceptions on the influence of the school context on teacher interns' performance in Moi University. It is concerned with whether and how the school context is taken into consideration when posting, supervising/assessing and grading student teachers during teaching practice. School contextual supervision and assessment related challenges are highlighted. Data was collected using questionnaires and interviews from a sample of 31 university supervisors and 148 fourth year Bachelor of Education students in the Degree programmes offered in the School of Education. Frequencies and percentages were computed using the SPSS computer package. The findings revealed that financial-related concerns were the overriding factors in the posting of the student teachers to teaching practice schools. School contextual characteristics with regard to professional concerns related to the opportunities the schools would accord the student teachers for practice was least taken into consideration. Consequently, supervision was affected such that student teachers were sometimes penalized for issues that were beyond their control during assessment because the school context was rarely taken into consideration. It is therefore recommended that contextual characteristics of teaching practice schools such as the availability and quality of cooperating teachers and teaching/learning resources among others, be taken into consideration when posting and supervising/assessing and grading student teachers.

Keywords: School context, teaching practice, supervision, student teachers, university supervisors

Introduction

The teacher is an essential facilitator in the implementation process of any curriculum. The development of the ability to teach well calls for a great deal of training and experience, thus, teaching practice constitutes a very important component in teacher education (Karanja, 1996; Shiundu & Omulando, 1992; Ondiek, 1978; Tabot, 2014). It serves as an internship in teacher education as it gives student teachers an opportunity to apply all the content taught at the university. An important aspect of teaching practice is the supervision and assessment of the student teachers.

Supervision and assessment is considered a key factor in quality assurance (Kasomo, 2012; Ngara, Ngwarai & Ngara, 2013). It is a process through which student teachers continuously

learn and develop professionally. It is a constant and continuous process of personal guidance based on frequent visits to the teaching practice school to give constructive advice so as to improve teaching and learning (Ayodele & Oyewole, 2012). In this regard, the University through its supervisors should develop a good relationship with the school to which the student teacher has been sent in order to help the student teachers in their professional preparation. The University supervisors, the cooperating or host schools and their teachers and the students preparing to be teachers are the three essential components of the university teaching practice programme (Ondiek, 1978). Teaching practice supervision is therefore, a collective venture which is influenced by contextual characteristics of the teaching practice schools.

Contextual characteristics of teaching practice schools

Student teaching is first and foremost a learning situation; hence the school context in which it takes place is quite important. Tang Yee Fan (1996) points out that support from the placement school is indicated by various forms of student teachers' contact with the school personnel, student teachers' evaluation of the support they get from the regular supporting teachers, and the student teachers' participation in the wider school life. The demographics of a school site, will affect the quality and quantity of opportunities at the site for the student teachers as well as the quality and quantity of supervision and feedback (Ribich, 1995).

Teaching practice as a learning situation lays emphasis on experience. The constructivist theory postulates that learning takes place in contexts and that the learners form or construct much of what they learn and understand as a function of their experiences in situations (Schunk, 2012). The process of knowledge construction through the experience of the practicum (teaching practice) is possible within a learning environment that provides a range of opportunities to learn by doing, in a setting relatively low in risk and with access to coaches who initiate the student teachers into the profession (Schon as cited in Gidron, 1996). The student teachers therefore, learn from the exposure in the teaching practice schools. Since student teachers are posted to different schools of varied contexts, the paper examines the factors taken into consideration when posting, supervising, assessing and grading the student teachers during teaching practice.

As a learning experience, school contextual characteristics need to be among the most important criteria in selecting schools that would be involved in Teaching Practice (Al Barwani, 1997 as cited in Tabot, 2014) as well as classrooms whose teachers have demonstrated expertise rather than being chosen for convenience (Darling-Hammond, 1999; Law Sin Yee & Fu Yin Wah, 1996; Diab, 1996 & Oakland, Fernandez, & Kueter, 1995, as cited in Tabot, 2014). This is because pre-service teachers have more frequent contact with the supporting teachers than the university supervisors and have been noted to emulate their cooperating teachers by the end of teaching practice (Martin, 1997; Al Barwani, 1997). Moreover, the relationship between the cooperating teacher and student teachers is influenced by shaping forces exerted by the ecological system of the classroom and the school (Al Barwani, 1997).

Supervision and assessment of student teachers

With regard to supervision, Ondiek (1978) points out two important roles of teaching practice; thus:

- a) a professional exercise through which the student teacher interacts with other professionals in the field, namely the head teacher, subject teachers and supervisors as well as the pupils in order to gain experience prior to absorption into the teaching service
- b) an examination which must be passed by a teacher trainee to be awarded a Bachelor of Education degree.

The teaching practice supervisor is therefore required to exercise these functions simultaneously; one as a supervisor advising a student and thereby contributing to his professional growth, and the other as an examiner assessing a student's classroom performance and grading it accordingly. The function of supervision; to give professional support and advice (Otieno-Alego, 1990) cannot be over-emphasized hence the significance of contextual characteristics of the teaching practice schools.

Supervision of student teachers by the university supervisors involves three phases; pre-observation conference, classroom observation and post-observation conference. Werner, Avila, Resta, Venglar, and Curtin (1995) emphasize the importance of feedback during the supervision of teaching practice. Feedback helps the interns analyze what happens in their field experience and more important, generalize to future situations. It is a vehicle for improving the quality of field experiences and guiding the professional development of pre-service teachers hence determining the quality of future teachers. Feedback consists of information that facilitates the interns' learning from their own practical experiences in classrooms. Werner, et al. indicate that after each observation by university supervisors, notes taken during the observation are shared with the interns and reviewed during the post-observation conference hence reiterate that;

“...because the main purpose of these conferences is to promote teacher interns' ability to reflect upon their own teaching and solve their own dilemmas of practice, it is critical to refrain from simply giving praise, criticism or suggestions. Time must be dedicated to having interns verbally analyze their own practice and effects on pupils, generate alternative strategies to use, and commit to self examination and self-improvement” (1995, p.51).

To this effect, Werner, et al suggest that there must be a private meeting space for appropriate, productive feedback which he, however, observes is lacking in most public schools.

In his study, Al Barwani (1997) investigated the contribution of the university supervisors and the cooperating teacher in the student teacher's learning how to teach and specifically on the role of feedback that student teachers receive from them. The results of the study based on responses to a post and pre-teaching practice interview schedule and a feedback questionnaire, showed that student teachers expect an important and positive contribution from both the university supervisors and the cooperating teachers, though the expectations with regard to the role of the cooperating teacher were higher. The results further indicated that the university supervisors conducted less visits though they gave more significant and meaningful comments on the student teachers' performance. The cooperating teachers, though available provided feedback less frequently which was, somewhat more general. In some schools as revealed by Tabot (2014), student teachers were not assigned cooperating teachers whereas in other schools the cooperating teachers were not trained teachers hence

the student teachers' expectations were not attained. Such is the effect of contextual characteristics on teaching practice supervision.

Tomlinson (1995) argues that even if the school-based teacher preparation were only interested in summative assessment of the student teacher's teaching competence, the effects of differing pupils, and contexts, and the variety of people likely to be involved in official and non-official mentoring roles would make a quite broad-ranging assessment strategy necessary. It is no wonder that teacher education programmes have different priorities on the competencies to be observed in the classroom and evaluated such as subject matter presentation and planning skills. For this reason, teacher training institutions tend to develop their own evaluation forms to determine student teacher effectiveness. Such an instrument, referred to as the "Teaching Practice observation form" (Claessen, Gitau & Groenewegen, 1995; Moi University, 1990) requires the supervisor to record specified behaviour demonstrated by the student teacher (Barret, 1986) during the lesson. The instrument should take cognisance of the varied contextual characteristics of the teaching practice schools.

In many teacher education institutions, there is no awareness that problems exist in the field of supervision. This, Stones (1984) attributes to the fact that supervisors of practical teaching are frequently recruited from staff who have not made a study of any of the foundation disciplines of education, apart from a little exposure during their own teacher training. He further notes that even those who have studied further in the field of education are extremely unlikely to have given thought to the theory and practice of supervision. It is also unlikely that they will be inducted into the methods of supervision, and criteria for assessment of practical teaching are likely to be un-explicated. It is as a result of this, that when examples of teaching are rated independently by different people, it frequently occurs that there is little agreement among them. This is exasperated by the school contextual factors.

However, this disagrees with studies cited by Al Barwani (1997) on whether supervisors could rate student teachers reliably as well as determine the criteria which is deemed important. The studies showed that the supervising teachers could reliably rate student teachers though supervisors mainly concentrated their assessments on lesson preparation and presentation. 'Teaching' comments were also noted to be predominant in the supervisors' feedback. The university supervisors' comments though, were evaluative in nature and prompted critical thinking about the lesson observed and also tended to connect what was observed to teaching strategies and learning principles. How school contextual factors that may influence the teaching learning process were taken into consideration during assessment is not highlighted in the studies.

Koetsier (1996) and Francis (1985) emphasize on the need for close collaboration between teacher educators and cooperating teachers in the supervision of student teachers and considerable attention and support for each student teacher as an individual. Moreover, the inexperience of the student teachers should be taken into consideration when assessing their worth and promise as a teacher. The main criterion in assessing a student teacher should be his/her progress in the use of skills of teaching (Igaga, 1978) bearing in mind that teaching practice mirrors the personality strengths and limitations of a student teacher hence the need to pay attention to the progress of the student teacher (Ondiek, 1978) taking into consideration the varying school characteristics which may influence the teaching learning process. The supervisor should also give the student teacher an opportunity to discuss the

comments given during observation and defend himself against any criticism they may contain. Hence every lesson should be followed by a meeting, preferably a private one (ibid). Supervision therefore is a very important aspect of teaching practice especially for the student teachers. However, much emphasis in supervision is laid onto classroom teaching and thus, the need to find out the extent to which contextual factors in a particular school are taken into consideration during posting and supervision and their influence on assessment and grading of the student teachers. This is because school contextual factors have been noted to influence the acquisition of teaching skills and student teachers' overall performance in teaching practice (Tabot & Nyandusi, 2012).

Results and Discussion

Factors considered when posting student teachers

In preparation for teaching practice, student teachers are given an opportunity by the university to choose schools for placement. When the student teachers were asked to give reasons which prompted them to choose the particular teaching practice schools, the findings were as outlined below in order of their frequencies:

- a) financial considerations whereby student teachers chose schools near their home areas or those schools which could provide them with accommodation and other essentials such as food ranked high. Such consideration was mainly for their convenience rather than the quest for professional development.
- b) The need to acquire various experiences such as teaching in boys, girls or mixed schools, large or small school, and urban or rural schools.
- c) The nature of the school in terms of high academic standards, high pupil discipline, good administration and cooperative staff thus, a conducive working environment.
- d) Influence from friends who were either teaching in the school or fellow student teachers who were familiar with the school.
- e) The availability of the student teachers' teaching subjects in the school or schools that lacked teachers in some of the subjects.
- f) The student teachers' earlier experience in the school or their familiarity with the school either due to being a former student of the school, having taught there as an untrained teacher or during the short teaching practice.
- g) Availability of learning resources and facilities in the school.
- h) Rejection from the school of choice
- i) Laxity in the school administration.

From the above findings, it was noted that except for financial considerations which was indicated by a high proportion of 119(80.4) student teachers, all the other reasons given were in small proportions ranging from 49(33.1) to 7(4.7) student teachers. This implies that what prompted the student teachers most in their school choices was financial considerations whereas the demographics of a school site, which affect the quality and quantity of opportunities at the site for the student teachers as well as the quality and quantity of supervision and feedback (Ribich, 1995) and enhance their professional development and growth, were least considered. It is interesting to note that a negative factor such as laxity in the school administration, commonly identified in the district schools, determined school choices for some student teachers. Yet this is a factor which has been noted to affect negatively student teachers' performance in terms of teaching competencies and grades attained during teaching practice (Tabot & Nyandusi, 2012).

The interview with the teaching practice coordinator and area supervisors, revealed various factors which were taken into consideration when assigning student teachers to the teaching practice schools in line with the student responses. These are outlined below in order of their frequencies:

- a) Availability of the schools based on the willingness of the administration to accept student teachers. It was noted that some schools did not accept student teachers due to the indiscipline of some student teachers in the past as well as the schools' need to maintain their academic standards. These were mainly those schools which were well staffed so that those that lacked staff readily accepted the student teachers; mostly the district schools. Some schools were noted to be interested in specific student teachers and especially their former students. On the part of the university, schools which had rejected or mishandled student teachers in the past were not considered.
- b) The availability of accommodation for the student teachers within the school or willingness of the school to help them get accommodation in a nearby area. Such schools that were willing to assist student teachers even in providing them with foodstuff were mainly those in the rural areas. This explains why the majority of the student teachers practiced in the schools in rural areas most of which were close to their homes. Some of the student teachers from outside the Western region, where Moi University deployed its students for teaching practice and were not familiar with the area to be able to locate places for accommodation on their own, were thus assisted.
- c) Accessibility to the schools was also taken into consideration especially as most of the supervisors relied on public transport to reach the teaching practice schools. Schools that were located along the main roads as well as those in proximity to each other were chosen.
- d) Whether the schools had the subject combinations for the particular student teachers. This was especially so for the Technical subjects and Home Science which were not offered in all schools. This was also because of the fact that there were other student teachers from other universities so that some subjects may have been handled by student teachers previously and thus the need by the schools for the regular teachers to teach those subjects.
- e) The student teachers' choice or request to be posted to some schools for reasons of convenience. These were mainly schools that were near the students' homes.
- f) The quality of the teachers so that there could be at least a trained teacher to guide the student teachers. This also included the willingness of the members of staff to help the student teachers; that is whether they had keen interest in student teaching.

From these findings, most of the factors that were considered were mainly for economic reasons due to inadequate finance so that an important factor such as the availability and quality of cooperating teachers was least considered. Facilities and teaching/learning resources in the school were also not mentioned by the respondents as well as other school factors such as the nature of the pupils in terms of their academic orientation and self-discipline. Yet in various studies, the ecology of the school is considered as one of the most important factor to be considered when choosing a site for teaching practice (Al Barwani, 1997; Darling-Hammond, 1999; Law Sin Yee & Fu Yin Wah, 1996; Diab, 1996; & Oakland, Fernandez, & Kueter, 1995 as cited in Tabot, 2014).

Factors considered when supervising, assessing and grading student teachers

Since student teachers were posted to schools of different contexts, which have been noted to affect student teachers performance, it was important to find out whether such varied contexts were taken into consideration when assessing and grading student teachers. Table 1 gives the

supervisors' opinion on the frequency with which the nature of the school was taken into consideration.

Table 1
Consideration of school contextual factors when assessing and grading student teachers

Frequency	N	%
Never	7	22.6
Very Rarely	6	19.4
Rarely	11	35.5
Often	4	12.9
Very often	3	9.7
Total	31	100

The findings show that 7 (22.6) respondents indicated never, 6 (19.4) very rarely, and 11(35.5) indicated rarely. Only 4 (12.9) and 3 (9.7) indicated often and very often respectively. This shows that the majority of the supervisors either did not take the nature of the school into consideration during supervision or they did so rarely. The document analysis also revealed that very few supervisors noted in their comments the debilitating factors that hindered or hampered the student teachers' performance. Moreover, the competencies captured in the "University Teaching Practice Observation Form" which was used in the assessment of the teacher interns' performance had no specific aspect on school contextual characteristics. The competencies included in the form were mainly those of preparation, introduction, teaching strategies, instructional procedures, resources, and personality.

When the student teachers' performance was analysed based on these six main teaching competencies as were contained in the teaching practice observation forms, the findings were varied. In all the competencies, the district school category had a lower proportion of high performers as compared with the other two school categories; that is, Provincial and Other (Private and Tertiary) institutions. This, therefore, implies that the school context had an influence on the performance of the student teachers. It also emerged from the interview with the area supervisors that consideration of school contextual factors during assessment was an individual supervisor's decision in agreement with Stones (1984). There was therefore no uniformity among the university supervisors implying that there were no clear guidelines to that effect in line with previous findings (ibid). This implies that the student teachers were sometimes penalized for occurrences which were beyond their control due to school contextual factors. Such factors such as availability of facilities and learning materials as well as the nature of the learners might have interfered with the teaching/learning process (Tabot & Nyandusi, 2012).

Ways in which the school context was taken into consideration when assessing and grading student teachers

Specific ways in which the differences in the schools were taken into consideration during the assessment and grading of the student teachers, as cited by the supervisors are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Ways in which the school context was taken into consideration when assessing and grading student teachers

Item	N	%
Consider student teachers' effort	6	19.4
Consider explanation given	7	22.6
Assessment by different supervisors	3	9.7
Consider debilitating factors	14	45.2
No consideration	9	29.0
Not sure	1	3.2
No Response	1	3.2

A majority of 14(45.2) supervisors considered the debilitating factors noticed during supervision and assessment hence student teachers were not penalized for factors which were beyond their control. Seven (22.6) supervisors took into consideration the explanation given by the school and/or the student teachers either during the pre or post conference sessions. Consequently, the student teacher was advised on how to deal with such situations in future. The ability of the student teachers to improvise or their creativity and innovation were taken into consideration by 6(19.4) supervisors. The student teachers were therefore assessed and graded according to their effort to deal with the prevailing situations. Moreover, different supervisors assessed and graded the student teacher on different occasions to cater for any inherent subjectivity and inconsiderateness among the supervisors. On the other hand, 9(29.0) supervisors, did not take the school context into consideration implying that the student teachers were assessed and graded irrespective of some of the debilitating factors in the school.

The findings show that there was no consistency among the supervisors implying that no guidelines were given. This was confirmed in the interview with the area supervisors who pointed out that consideration of school contextual factors in some instances depended on whether the supervisor gave the student teacher opportunity to discuss the comments given during observation (Igaga, 1978) and whether she had time to find out or verify the problems cited by the student teachers, such as lack of resources, with the school authorities. Confirmation with the school was emphasised by the area supervisors in the interview because "Information from student teachers may not be reliable. Some for example, feared performing experiments in the laboratory and hence gave excuses that the necessary materials were not available".

Otherwise, the student teachers according to the area supervisors were not penalized due to lack of textbooks and other learning resources, overcrowding in the classroom or a poor chalkboard on which the writings were not legible. The supervisors instead, advised student teachers on how to improvise or deal with such school contextual factors. For example, if copying notes from the chalkboard was a tradition in the school, the student teacher was advised by the supervisors to train the learners to write summary notes progressively during the lesson. Emphasis during assessment and grading was therefore based on the progress (Igaga, 1978) of the student teacher in developing teaching skills taking into account their inexperience (Ondiek, 1978) in dealing with prevailing school contextual factors.

The school contextual characteristics also presented problems to the supervisors as indicated in the free response items. Student teacher inability to deal with the constraints in the school

was problematic to the supervisor due to her dual responsibility as a guide and counsellor as well as examiner (Ondiek, 1978). Because of the possibility of other personal factors contributing to the performance of the student teacher, how to accommodate the differences in the schools during supervision, assessment and grading of the student teachers presented a challenge to the supervisors. This is because teaching practice mirrors the personality strengths and limitations of a student teacher (Ondiek, 1978). Moreover, unstable timetables and frequent unannounced out-of-school/class activities interfered with the supervision schedule thus reducing the required number of times the affected student teachers would be assessed. This in turn affected their performance since the more times they were assessed, the more guidance they received for improvement, as was pointed out in the interview with the area supervisors.

Other constraints to supervision due to school contextual characteristics cited by the supervisors include absenteeism of student teachers when they were required to be in school due to the laxity of some school administration. In other instances, lessons started late due to delays in other school activities such as morning assemblies (Mbiti, 1974) or learners' poor adherence to school time schedules. Hence, there is need for close collaboration between the placement schools and the university supervisors in the supervision of student teachers (Koetsier, 1996; Francis, 1985) for their professional development.

Conclusions

The teaching practice school context was taken into consideration when posting student teachers. However, some important school contextual factors such as resources and the cooperating teachers' quality were rarely taken into consideration because of other overriding factors such as the availability of subject combinations and accommodation for the student teachers due to lack of adequate finance in terms of teaching practice allowance. Despite the debilitating factors in some schools, especially the district school category, the school context was rarely taken into consideration when supervising, assessing and grading student teachers, so that the student teachers were sometimes penalized for factors beyond their control. In instances when the school contextual factors were taken into consideration, it was mainly at the discretion of individual supervisors. The school contextual factors therefore affected the supervision, assessment and grading of the student teachers.

Recommendations

It is therefore recommended that school factors such as the availability and quality of cooperating teachers, learning resources and facilities and the class sizes should be seriously taken into consideration when posting the student teachers. Clear guidelines should be provided to the university supervisors on when and how the school context should be taken into consideration when assessing and grading the student teachers. In this regard, the teaching practice supervision form should be expanded to accommodate comments on the contextual factors which may affect the teaching/learning process and the student teacher's learning how to teach. The university should find ways of minimizing financial limitations to the posting and supervision of the student teachers during teaching practice. Close collaboration should be established between the teaching practice schools and the University through workshops and seminars in order to reduce debilitating factors related to school contextual characteristics and enhance student teachers' learning how to teach.

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