

Theory against Practice: Training of Teachers in a Vacuum

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Abstract

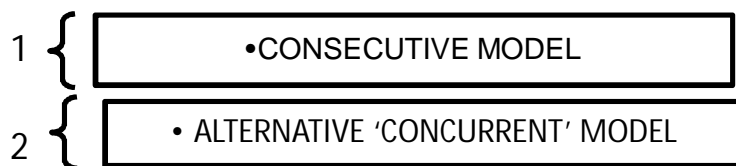
This paper is based on a study conducted in selected schools in Lusaka District in Zambia. The study aimed at getting teachers' and head teachers' perceptions on the performance of University of Zambia student teachers on teaching practice. The study employed both qualitative and quantitative research designs. Questionnaires and interviews for head teachers and class teachers mentoring the student teachers were administered. The main findings were that the training offered to these students did not prepare them for really-life situations in the field. The absence of values, attitudes, morals and practical approaches, methods, and techniques to suit real life situations in schools make the training offered ineffective and to some extent irrelevant. The study recommended more field observations within a classroom under the supervision of the classroom teacher, longer period of teaching practice where a student teacher is under close supervision of the classroom teacher and internship where a newly qualified teacher is supervised within his or her own classroom for some time.

Key words: Teaching practice, perceptions, training, professional development.

1.0. Introduction

It is common knowledge world over that quality education relies heavily on, among many other things, its delivery by teachers entrusted with that responsibility. This means that the teacher is the pivot of any country's entire education system. The rationale the Zambian government has taken on teacher education is that until the teacher is properly trained, the desired end in the field of teaching learning process cannot be achieved. Teacher education, in the Zambian context, refers to the policies and procedures designed to equip prospective teachers with the knowledge, attitudes, behaviors and skills they require to perform their tasks effectively in the classroom, school and wider community (Chishimba (1996). The shaping of a teacher to develop such desired qualities depends on how they were trained and oriented into the teaching profession long before they leave teacher training institutions.

In Zambia, Initial Teacher Education (ITE) is also known as Pre-Service Teacher Training (PSTT) and) takes place largely or exclusively in tertiary institutions or institution of higher education. Often organizations of such type of education or training follow particular models. However, the practice in many countries is the use of the two basic models illustrated below:

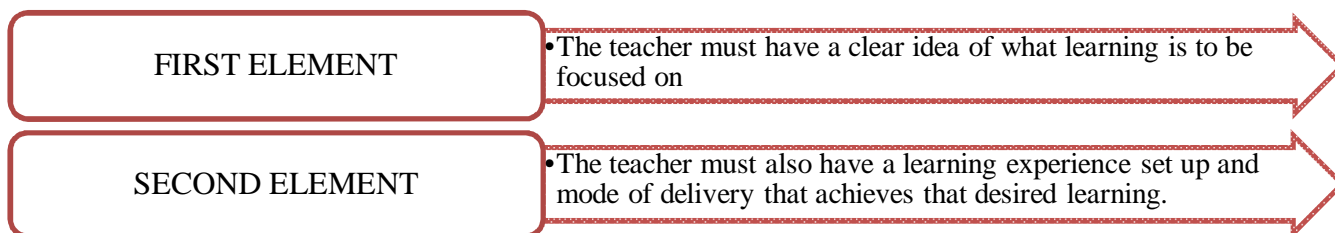


In the **'consecutive' model**, a teacher first obtains a qualification in one or more subjects. This is often an undergraduate Bachelor's degree (academic qualification) and then studies for a further period to gain an additional qualification in teaching (professional qualification). Ideally, this was the proposed model when Nkrumah and Copper belt Colleges of Teacher Education were established. The initial plan was to make all those intending to become teachers obtain an academic qualification in one subject or so and later go to the colleges of education for a professional qualification as a teacher. This model has never been followed. Many challenges that student teachers could be experiencing when on teaching practice could be as a result of lack of values, attitudes and skills that a teacher could develop if this model is to be followed.

In the **alternative 'concurrent' model**, a student simultaneously studies both one or more academic subjects, and the ways of teaching that subject, (Secondary School Teacher Education Model) or a number of subjects (Primary School Teacher Education Model) leading to a combined Bachelor's degree/ diploma and teaching credential to qualify as a teacher of that subject or in the primary sector of education. This is the model currently being employed in Zambia. It is argued that teachers who are produced through this model tend to teach subjects rather than pupils in the early stages of their profession unless they have been inducted very well and many effective skills have been integrated in the content for in-service training for Capacity Professional Development (CPD). In the Zambian case, student teachers are not involved in these school based in-service training as their main focus is to finish their teaching practice and be assessed for certification purposes. Even the lecturers who come to observe these students do it mainly for the same purpose of enabling them fulfill the examination demands.

There are also other pathways used elsewhere. For example, in some countries, it is possible for a person to receive training as a teacher by working in a school under the supervision of an accredited experienced practitioner. In the Zambian case this model is followed in Community schools where the majority of 'teachers' are untrained. The one or two trained teachers the government sends to such schools is tasked to offer some kind of training and guidance. Student teachers are seldom sent to such schools for their teaching practice as it is assumed that they would learn nothing in such schools. Paradoxically 'teachers' in community schools tend to exhibit better qualities, attitudes and values than those in regular public schools. Recent studies have shown that literacy and numeracy levels of pupils are higher in these community schools than in regular schools with trained teachers. However, our argument is that there is need to train teachers and promote peer teaching sessions during the training period. This is because in teacher training institutions, peer teaching sessions and teaching practices during the training period are crucial in the production of an effective teacher.

Effective teaching means quite a lot of things and as such those that are doing peer teaching are required to tailor their teaching along the lines of effective teaching. Kyriacou (2009:7) contends that effective teaching can be defined as the teaching that successfully achieves the learning by pupils intended by the teacher. In essence, he asserts that there are two simple elements to effective teaching:



Over the years, thinking about effective teaching has been approached in a number of different ways. Until the 1960s, research on effective teaching was largely dominated by attempts to identify attributes of teachers, such as personality traits, sex, age, knowledge and training, which might have a bearing on their effectiveness. Moreover, since the 1990s, increasing attention has been paid, firstly, to establishing a research evidence base for effective classroom practices and using this to underpin the initial and continuing professional development of teachers, and, secondly, to gaining a deeper understanding of the teaching and learning that takes place in the classroom.

This, in fact, has also become the basis upon which any teaching practicum is anchored. Most of the issues that have been identified on the attributes of teachers have equally some bearing on those that are doing their school experience in schools. Hargreaves in Sugrue and Day (2002:3) states that if you want to improve learning, improve teaching! Thus, the injunction contained within this deceptively simple equation has driven numerous research and reform efforts over the years to define and improve the quality of teaching.

Training teachers in the skills and strategies of 'effective' pedagogy, setting and applying professional standards of what teachers should know and be able to do, even testing teachers periodically on their basic, subject-matter knowledge – are among the methods that reformers have employed to try and raise standards in teaching. These prevalent reform strategies and the research agendas that feed them – on teacher thinking, teacher planning, teacher behaviour and professional knowledge – address some of what is important in teaching. Setting standards of what teachers should know and be able to do can certainly help insure the profession against truly awful teaching, against ignorance and incompetence in our classrooms. Moreover, professional standards can spur teachers and their systems on towards learning and acquiring more sophisticated and effective skills and strategies over time. But some how, measures such as this miss a lot of what matters most in developing really good teaching. They do not quite get to the heart of it. Against this background the essence of teaching practice becomes a key component in the attainment of not only good but effective teaching.

Husu in Sugrue and Day (2002) has noted that a widely accepted explanation of the practice of teaching is that it requires an understanding of specific cases and unique situations. According to such a view, this practical know-how is mostly built up by teachers in the field as they cope with the daily challenges of teaching and as they attempt to develop their professional practices. It is derived largely from the experiences and interpretations and it is mainly formulated in concrete and context-related terms. In the field of teacher knowledge, it has been referred to as craft knowledge (Leinhart, 1990; Grimmet and MacKinnon, 1992), practical knowledge (Elbaz, 1983; Johnson, 1984), personal practical knowledge (Clandinin, 1985) and as the professional knowledge landscape (Clandinin and Connelly, 1995). The school teaching experience being the main practicum of the School of Education of the University of Zambia is being depicted by terms such as 'the practicum', 'student teaching practice', 'field work', and/or 'school experience'. The practicum enables student teachers to acquire beginning teaching competencies and is a core component of the Initial Teacher Preparation programme in Colleges of Education and University of Zambia. The purpose of the practicum is to help prepare student teachers for the realities of student teaching by providing them with a clear understanding of the contexts for schooling.

The practicum further plays a major role in bridging the gap between "theory and practice" but beyond that, it offers the context for student teachers to develop their personal teaching competence (Smith and Lev-Ari, 2005, 291) and to acquire and develop the knowledge of teaching and professional content knowledge of teachers (Shulman, 1987). It is through the practicum experience that student teachers develop important professional knowledge such as knowledge of people, knowledge of themselves, self-control and inter-personal sensitivity - all of which are important traits that would see them through their professional lives (Eraut, 1988, cited in Yan & He, 2009). In addition, the practicum teaches soft skills such as independent problem-solving, working collegially with fellow staff teachers and developing professional values and attitudes (Ramsden, 1992). During practicum, student teachers are mentored and guided by their serving teachers and lecturer supervisors through systematic observations, assistance and advice. They have opportunities to become involved with, and to actively participate in all aspects of the school's activities. Through these experiences, they learn to link theory and practice, and to acquire the understanding and skills necessary for effective teaching.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

Perry (1997) suggested that becoming an educator or a professional teacher involves, among other things, developing specialized knowledge, using that knowledge to assess and make decisions and acquiring high standards of practice. Although such attributes are necessary anecdotal, evidence has proved that in some cases student teachers have not been able to show such ideas and thoughts when doing their school teaching experience in the schools. This has always generated some mixed feelings and apprehension from the schools where these students do their practicum. This leaves one wondering whether or not the training provided is properly done. It is against this background that the study was conducted to explore perceptions of mentor teachers and school administrators of the schools where our student teachers go for their teaching practice on the performance of University of Zambia students on school teaching experience.

1.2 General Objective

The study aimed at exploring head teachers' and mentor teachers' perceptions on the general performance of the University of Zambia students on teaching practice.

Specific objectives

- a) To establish the head teacher/ mentor teachers' perceptions on the performance of student teachers doing the practicum
- b) To ascertain the head teacher/mentor teachers' views on pedagogical issues of student teachers who were on school experience
- c) To find out the general conduct of student teachers while on school experience?
- d) To identify some of the features that characterize student teachers' behaviour/general attitude to work while on school experience?
- e) To establish the general pattern for all schools on admitting University of Zambia students who were on school experience in these schools.

1.3. Research questions

The following research questions guided the study:

- a) What were the head teacher/ mentor teachers' perceptions on the performance of student teachers doing the practicum?
- b) What were the head teacher/mentor teachers' views on pedagogical issues of student teachers who were on school experience?
- c) What was the general conduct of student teachers while on school experience?
- d) What were some of the features that characterize student teachers' behaviour/general attitude to work while on school experience
- e) What is the general pattern for all schools on admitting University of Zambia students who were on school experience in these schools?

1.4. Research Design and Methodology

The study set out to explore the perception of school administrator and mentor teachers in schools where University of Zambia student teachers did their practicum. The survey covered a sample of 38 schools in Lusaka region. Both qualitative and quantitative research designs were employed. Thus, questionnaires and structured interviews for head teachers and class teachers mentoring the student teachers were administered. Ten items were used to measure the perception schools had towards University of Zambia students going for school teaching practice. An exploratory factor analysis was conducted on the ten items to extract the barrier factor to effective teaching and general behaviour. This was to help in the examination of the structure of performance and assess its impact on student's effectiveness. A matrix rotation was used to obtain more interpretable factors.

1.5. Research Schools and Participants

The survey covered thirty-eight schools with 104 respondents. The schools were selected purposefully because of their accessibility and because of their reputation among education leaders, the high opinion of them shared by their neighbours and surrounding area. Snowball's sampling techniques helped to identify various schools where University of Zambia students did their practicum. Of the 38 schools, 20 of these were high schools while 18 were basic schools. Ten of these schools were classified as rural schools, eight were peri-urban and 20 were urban schools. At each of the thirty-eight sampled schools, at least three respondents were identified in line with the objectives of the study. Participants included Head teachers, Deputy Head teachers, Heads of Department and in some instances ordinary class teachers who were assigned with the task of mentoring student teachers.

The Head teachers, Deputy Head teachers and Heads of Department were selected on the basis of their availability and willingness to participate in the research. Thus the limitation of the study is that the sample was not representative of the whole educator population. Issues that were investigated included, but were not limited to, student teachers' application of suitable teaching methods to class level, student knowledge of subject content, use of teaching aids, student staff interaction, students teachers' dressing, attitude towards work and general professional conduct of student teachers.

1.6. Data analysis

The data analysis process was done using thematic analysis generated from the themes that emerged from research objectives. The SPSS was the main tool used to analyze quantitative data while qualitative data was analyzed manually.

2.0. Presentation and Discussion of Research Findings

Ten items were used to measure the perceptions schools have towards university of Zambia students doing school teaching practice. An exploratory factor analysis was conducted on these 10 items to extract the barrier factor to effective teaching and general behavior. This helped to examine the structure of performance and assess its impact on students' effectiveness. A matrix rotation was used to obtain more interpretable factors. The results of the factor analysis are reported in Table 1.

Out of the 10 items, 8 have loadings greater than 0.40 and were used to analyze the data. The scales of these variables demonstrate a high level of reliability with an estimate of $\alpha = 0.87$. Questions that heavily load on the barrier to effective teaching factor cover a large range of issues.

Table 1: Perceived Barrier Factor Loadings

Item	Factor Loading	Cronbach's alpha (α)
Barrier		0.87
Deficiency in teaching methodology	0.89	
Short duration for STE for effective teaching	0.91	
Poor dressing code for both males and females	0.85	
Poor hair dressing/dreads	0.54	
Lacking punctuality after being observed	0.71	
Absenteeism after being observed by UNZA Lecturers	0.70	
Reluctance to learn from local teachers	0.50	
General indiscipline	0.57	

The contents of items with the highest loadings relate to the aspects of short duration for School Teaching Experience (STE) for effective teaching; that deficiency in teaching methodology affected effective teaching negatively, and that poor dressing code for both males and females did not represent the teaching profession well as teachers were expected to be role models to learners. It is evident from this exploratory factor analysis that items discussed above had the highest loadings on the barrier factor. On the other hand, reluctance to learn from local teachers and general indiscipline among student teachers had the lowest loadings on the barrier factor.

2.0. Head Teacher/ Mentor Teachers' Perceptions on the Performance of Student Teachers Doing the Practicum?

2.1. Deficiency in Teaching Methodology

100 respondents out of the total number of 104, representing 96% indicated that the students doing teaching practice had deficiency in teaching methodology. One mentor at one of the schools visited had this to say:

Most of student teachers from the University of Zambia have problems with lesson planning and following learner centered methods. Permanent class teachers often re-teach the same lessons taught by these teachers for the benefit of pupils so that they do not fail the examination should questions be set on the areas taught by these student teachers. These are the problems we have. Yes, some have the subject content but they do not know how to put across the messages. That is why we say they leave the university while very raw in teaching methods.

However, we can argue here that in such cases even the class teacher should share the blame because if they were well trained as well they would do cooperative teaching with this student teacher or prepare the lesson plan together and co-teach rather than teaching the same content again and alone.

2.2. Short Duration for STE for Effective Teaching

The University of Zambia had reduced the period for School Teaching Experience from the original three months (one school term) to six weeks which was inadequate for effective teaching practice. This is unlike the situation in Teacher training Colleges where student teachers are subjected to two full terms of three months each for teaching practice. This is in addition to several peer teaching sessions they do throughout their training.

Perhaps this may explain why teachers from these Teacher Training Colleges perform better in the field than teachers from the University of Zambia (Manchishi, 1996). One mentor at one schools in the sample showed that these student teachers are even ranked from the worse to the worst:

Though training for a diploma, student teachers from Nkrumah and Copper belt Teachers' Colleges are by far better than those training for a degree from the University of Zambia. But those from Evelyn Hone College are the worst, especially those who claim to be training in English language teaching. They do not know anything at all.

2.3. Poor Dressing Code for Both Males and Females

This aspect came out strongly as 98 out of 104 respondents, representing 94%, indicated that the dress code for both male and female students was improper. They cited short skirts and skin tight dresses in the case of female student teachers and tight or sagging jeans in the case of male student teachers.

One head teacher narrated an incident where a teacher wearing such unwarranted garments was snapped by pupils using their cell phone cameras:

We have handled cases where pupils take pictures of the student teacher's sagging pair of trousers or a short skirt of a teacher as the teacher is busy writing on the board to the amusement of other pupils. What they do with such pictures, nobody knows. How can such a teacher have respect among pupils sure?

Our observation here was that perhaps student teachers are not oriented to the school dressing code once they have reported to school for their teaching practice so that they are fully aware of what they are supposed to do.

2.4. Poor Hair Dressing/Dreads

Related to the aspect of poor dressing highlighted above, the study also established that the students from the University of Zambia had acquired some fads of hair dressing such as colorful hair-dressing for females and dreads for both males and females. The study established that head teachers were at a loss to guide student teachers in dreads because they had observed that some lecturers who come to observe some student teachers also wear dreads. One head teacher lamentably said:

We sometimes find ourselves in a dilemma when we want to advise such student teachers against such habits of wearing dreads because we have also observed that some of the lecturers who come to observe these students have dreads as well. We as the Nyanja proverb say that, mwana wa mbuzi anaonera mai ake utundira mkhola (The baby goat learnt from the mother to urinate within the kraal). In such situations, what do you expect us to do other than watch and just wait for the teaching practice session to come to an end quicker than the expected time so that we prevent our pupils from copying such styles.

2.5. Lacking Punctuality after Being Observed

Another significant outcome of the study was on the aspect of the students being reluctant to get to work after the Lecturers had observed them. For instance 70% of the respondents indicated that students on teaching practice from University of Zambia had a challenge in the area of punctuality and this had impacted negatively on the quality of teaching after their observation. This has also been supported by Banja (2013: 18) who in addition has ranked absenteeism as one of the highest aspects in terms of reporting late for class in schools among the teachers. Clearly from this one gets the sense that these teachers were once student teachers and this behaviour might have emanated from the time of their school experience.

2.6. Absenteeism after Being Observed by UNZA Lecturers

In addition to coming late for school duties, the study further revealed that some students could not even report for duty after being observed. The implication of this is that if Lecturers observed student during the third week, the next three weeks would be marred with absenteeism and late coming. The study further revealed that this practice was worsened by the fact that student teachers were doing their teaching practice after they had already written their final examination and would not go back to the university where they could be reprimanded for any mischievous behaviour while on teaching practice. One head teacher provided a similar reason as suggested above:

We know why some student teachers often fail to attend to their classes once they are observed by lecturers from the University of Zambia. They know that their courses are over and they have gotten the desired assessment grade to enable them pass the examination and graduate. It is this kind of a system where teaching practice is just for examination assessment purpose and comes after the examination is written which has allowed this problem... We shall wait for this term system UNZA wants to introduce where the students will be in school for the whole term and go back to the desk at UNZA to evaluate their teaching practice. May be things will change.

2.7. Reluctance to Learn from Local Teachers

The other challenge was that some local teachers felt that they could not be mentors to University of Zambia students simply because they felt inadequate and thought that UNZA students were expected to be role models since they had higher qualifications compared to theirs obtained from other teacher training colleges. Secondly, Heads of schools who in the past studied at UNZA observed that UNZA lecturers should be role models to students studying in the School of Education. However, in one school it was reported that the student teachers they had were willing to learn from the classroom teachers despite the lower qualifications such teacher had compared to theirs.

2.8. General Indiscipline

This aspect was echoed by a number of head teachers and mentor teachers, for example about 62 out of 104 of the interviewees, representing 60% agreed with this aspect. They felt that they should be invited once in a while to address students on what is expected of them when they go for school teaching experience. One head teacher of a girls' secondary school had this to say:

We need to work as a team. Before these student teachers are sent to our schools, you must organise meetings where we as schools heads are invited to address these students and share with them the dos and don'ts of a teacher. This way, we will know that we speak the same language. We can also agree in such meetings what measures they should expect should they deliberately break the school code of conduct while on teaching practice. In such meetings students can be made aware that during their teaching practice they are accountable to us as school heads and not UNZA. This is the problem I have noticed that these students pay allegiance to UNZA lecturers alone even when they are with us on their teaching practice.

How UNZA Students Compare with Students from Other Colleges/Universities

The study further sought the head teacher and mentor teachers' views with regards to the general performance of UNZA students when compared to the performance of students from other colleges. The general picture obtained from the study seems to suggest that both head teachers and mentor teachers were of the view that in terms of methodology, students from other colleges performed better than those from UNZA. However, the respondents further indicated that when dealing with issues of content, UNZA students were well equipped when compared with students from other colleges. This result implies that UNZA students were better equipped with the theoretical aspect while lagging behind on the practical aspect of teaching. This therefore, necessitates the need to re-think the kind of practice given while students were at UNZA and the timeframe given to students when in the field for school experience. Additionally, the results show that some University of Zambia Students were able to perform well when teaching because they were able to learn from local teachers.

3. Ways of Strengthening School Teaching Experience to Acquire the Status it Deserves

The school teaching experience is a very important practicum of the school of education for it involves nearly all students in the school. The study has revealed that, the student teachers have adequate knowledge of the teaching content while the practical aspect had some flows. In order to strengthen the school teaching experience, the study came up with the following recommendations:

- The University of Zambia to allow students to do their School Teaching Experience for a longer period of time (at least three months as opposed to the current six weeks).
- Give grade for STE which will count towards degree classification.
- Lecturers to observe students only in the subjects of their specialization.
- Students to be attached to nearby schools before they go for School Teaching Experience.
- Schools to strengthen mentorship of the students during the period of their practice.
- Need for interaction with schools and other stakeholders through general meetings in and outside Lusaka.
- Lecturers to spend reasonable time when observing students and advise them accordingly and allocate marks to deserving students.
- Need to review the evaluation tool for students.
- The School of Education at UNZA should delink its graduation ceremony from the rest of the university to allow students to do their STE for a longer period of time.
- Student performance to be assessed in all areas.

- Lecturers to be role models to students being trained to be teachers.
- Induction programmes for student teachers on teaching practice should be established in all schools admitting students to do their teaching practice.
- All student teachers should be integrated into the ‘teacher group meetings’ of the In-service training package at school level during the period they are in school.
- Before student teachers are sent to schools, head teachers of schools within the University of Zambia catchment area must be invited to UNZA to attend the briefing session of the student teachers on their roles and functions while on teaching practice.

4. Conclusion

The study has revealed the need to promote team work between University of Zambia and the administration in practicing schools and the need for schools where student teachers do their teaching practice to have unambiguous school code of conducts which must be shared with these student teachers long before they report to schools for their teaching practice. The study has further established that the term system UNZA intends to migrate to will allow ample time for teaching practice as students will spend the whole term in school doing their teaching practice. The term will also accord lecturers enough time to conduct as many peer teaching sessions as possible. Finally, the coming of the teaching practice in the third year will enable lecturers to follow up on students’ school teaching experiences and make evaluations of the whole exercise for the benefit of students.

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