

Teaching Practice Assessment: - Are We Reading From the Same Script? A Case of the Department of Teacher Development, Zimbabwe Open University

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ABSTRACT

This study investigate the quality assurance processes in the assessment of teaching practice of students in the Department of Teacher Development at the Zimbabwe Open University. The qualitative study used the case study design. Interviews and document analysis were used to generate data from a convenient sample of 11 participants. The participants included ZOU lecturers, school heads and students who had gone through the teaching practice course in the various programmes. The findings that emanated from this research revealed that the assessment process of students on Teaching Practice is systematic but the ratings of the different assessors are not consistent. The absence of clearly indicated performance indicators for use by the university and school based assessors is the source of the inconsistent ratings of students on Teaching Practice. The study recommends that there be staff development workshops on Teaching Practice assessments for all supervisors and assessors.

INTRODUCTION

Internships, also referred to as practicum, attachment, and in education, teaching practice, have taken on an increasingly important role over the past decade since they present students with many advantages, ranging from gaining experience and obtaining career-related direction to networking with other students from various institutions as they interact at the organisation or institution providing the internship (Lubbers, 2008; Tackett et al (2001). Thus teaching Practice is a very important component in teacher education as it ensures that the student teacher acquires practical hands on experience of what happens in the school and the classroom. As such, it must be well organised in terms of content, implementation and assessment. The organisation at the Zimbabwe Open University is such that the students on Teaching Practice have school based supervisors who happen to be heads of schools, their deputies or any other person delegated the responsibility by the head. These supervise the student teacher on a daily basis. Also, the host university lecturers supervise and assess students during scheduled visits during the school term. A sample of the students is also assessed by a team of external assessors appointed by the ZOU Arts and Education Faculty Board. These external assessors are lecturers from the various colleges and universities across the country. This arrangement has seen different assessors awarding different ratings to the same student. This difference in the ratings by the different of sets assessors raises a number of issues in the assessment process. This study, therefore sought to investigate the quality assurance processes in the assessment of Teaching Practice of students in the Department of Teacher Development in view of the different ratings by different assessors.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Teaching practice has been hailed for integrating classroom education with practical experience in enabling student teachers to develop their professional knowledge and professional skills (Beard, 1998). However, given the different ratings by different assessors, the question that needs to be addressed is: What quality assurance measures are put in place for the assessment of the student teachers on teaching practice?

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RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study aimed at addressing the following research questions which stood as sub problems:

- What processes are involved in the assessment of students on teaching practice?
- What criteria are used to assess students on teaching practice?
- How consistent are teaching practice grades awarded to students on Teaching Practice?
- How can Teaching Practice assessment be improved?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Models of Teacher Education

Basically, the theory/practice debate has been dominated by three teacher education models. The first model is the apprenticeship model or school based model. In this model, the training of teachers should be school based with the experienced classroom teacher playing the major role. All that is needed is for a trainee teacher to spend time with an experienced teacher in school to pick up “tips on teaching”. This idea of apprenticeship has been attacked by some educationists. The training is carried out in individual schools and lacks uniformity. Each school has its own professional standards. The model emphasizes the acquisition of practical teaching skills at the expense of theory. [5] argues that this approach de-professionalizes both teaching and teacher training because the model lacks training in theory of education.

The second model is the college based model which argues that much of the training must take place in the training institution with the school facilitating teaching practice for a shorter period [2]. In Zimbabwe this has been the traditional method used by conventional teachers colleges. The training programme is three years. Trainee teachers spend the first year in college studying the theory of education and professional foundations, the second year on teaching practice in the schools and the third year back in college to write the research project and examinations. The major limitation of the model is that it puts more emphasis on theory of education at the expense of practice and takes too long to produce qualified teachers especially in the face of a national crisis of teacher shortage.

The third model is the equal partnership model involving the training institution, the school and the government, with the training institution teaching theory, the school facilitating teaching practice and the government providing funding. The training programme is normally four years. Students spend the first and third years in college studying theory of education and professional foundations. The second and fourth years are spent on teaching practice in schools.

These three perspectives (school based model, college based model and equal partnership model) have characterized the development of teacher education in Zimbabwe. However, the demand for qualified teachers brought about by the expansion of the education system at independence (1980) and failure by conventional colleges to meet this demand, has forced Zimbabwe to search for new models in the training of teachers. The trend in training teachers is now shifting away from the traditional conventional mode to a more flexible approach through open and distance learning. However, distance teacher education programmes at the Zimbabwe Open University are experiencing a number of challenges that threaten their very existence. The present study, therefore, examined challenges and opportunities faced by ZOU in the training of teachers through distance education.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study was qualitative in nature and used a case study design. Interviews and document analysis were used to generate information from the research participants. The case study design was seen fit for the current study since it aimed at understanding a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting [3]. Also the case study design was the best option given the fact the researchers wanted to try and figure out why a certain situation prevail [1], [6]. The study adopted the use of interviews and document analysis. The use of multi methods of data generation strategies helped in promoting data credibility or “truth value” [4], [6].

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

The total number of participants for the study was 35. This consisted of 15 students who had gone through teaching practice in Mashonaland East in the Teacher Development Department during the January to December 2013 academic year. Other members of the population included 1 National Teaching Practice Coordinator, 3 National Programme Leaders in the Department of Teacher Development, 15 heads of schools and 1 Regional Programme Coordinator. From these participants, a convenient sample of 4 students, 1 National Programme Leader, 1 National Teaching Practice Coordinator, 1 Regional Programme Coordinator and 4 heads of schools was obtained for use in the study. These were deemed information rich participants capable of providing the much needed information to assist in answering the research problem.

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The study was guided by four sub problems that were meant to assist in addressing in the main research question. Results are presented and discussed under each sub problem.

Sub Problem 1: What Processes Are Involved In The Assessment Of Students On Teaching Practice?

Participants were in agreement on who assesses the students on teaching practice. All seemed to agree that the function of assessing the students was vested on the heads of schools or their deputies or any other person designated by the head to do so, at school level. The training institution provided the Regional Programme Coordinator, the National Teaching Practice Coordinator and the National Programme Leaders as assessors. It was also the duty of the national office to provide with external assessors. However, there concerns especially among the students that at most it was the school head who did the assessment because the national office had no adequate funds to carry out the assessment, more so for external assessors.

When asked how often students were assessed on teaching practice, results show that students were assessed at least once by the lecturers and more than twice by school heads or by their deputies. All the school heads and student teachers indicated that external assessors had not visited them for external assessment. This claim was supported by the national office which indicated that lack of funding was a hindrance. Document analysis also revealed that students` and heads` responses were actually correct in terms of the numbers of visits and assessment made as well the non-availability of external assessors. This then goes to show that while assessment at school level was adequate, there was a weakness in the assessment system due to the absence of external assessment which validates the whole process.

Results from the participants show that documents in terms of standard supervision forms were provided by the department. All the students acknowledged receipt of the relevant forms as part of their registration package. The package included the introductory letter to the head of school, the teaching practice tutorial letter and the supervision forms. A look at the dispatch memorandum for the two semesters under review shows that in deed the documents were part of the registration package for the students going on teaching practice.

When asked if they held any department meetings before assessment of students on teaching practice, all the stakeholders involved indicated that no meetings had been held hitherto. Meetings could have helped to clarify issues to be focused on during teaching practice assessment. If external assessors were invited to such meetings it would also help to have a common understanding of teaching practice assessment.

Sub Problem 2: What Criteria are used to Assess Students on Teaching Practice?

Participants indicated that the teaching practice file was the most important document which was required for teaching practice assessment. The file was expected to have the student's time table, syllabus, schemes of work, lesson plans, record of marks, inventory assessment reports and teaching notes. The heads and the institutional assessors were in agreement that if the teaching practice file contained the relevant up to date documentation, the student deserved a pass mark. However, in the absence of the file or having not up to date documentation warranted a fail for the student.

Most assessors were of the view that a distinction student was one who performed well in the organisation of the teaching/learning environment. Some focused on the classroom displays and documentation. Given this scenario, therefore, this could be a source of variations in awarding grades among assessors. The Grading Scale: Assessment of Teaching Practice/School Experiences document specifies the criteria for awarding of grades. Hence a student who, in addition to the creativity of the teaching shows marked awareness of alternatives and a capacity of self criticism of practice and experiences, having teaching practice documents which reflect self criticism and learning from experiences, deserves a distinction. The same student should also demonstrate unusual and effective organisation of the teaching and learning environment. Other performance indicators for distinctive students include unusual and perceptive choice of teacher actions and pupil activity.

Considering the many issues raised in the criteria, assessors are bound to come up with different grades for the same student. A closer look at the grading scale document, shows that it is also subjective as it does not spell out the specific attributes and marks for each attribute.

Sub Problem 3: How Consistent are Teaching Practice Grades Awarded to Students on Teaching Practice?

Participants were asked whether there were any variations in the grades awarded to one student by different assessors. Student participants felt that this was a very pressing issue. Grades awarded by different assessors tended to be at variance. There was a very wide variation in the grades and scores awarded. Document analysis of the observation assessment forms confirmed this variation. Mostly heads and other school assessors tended to award very high grades unlike the university assessors.

Source of the variations were varied. Some students felt that the local assessors were very friendly to the student teachers and wanted them to pass their programmes. Some students attributed to the very grades by school assessors to lack of experience in student assessment. Asked to elaborate on this, one student replied:

We have inexperienced heads of schools in the district. As such, they may not be capable of assessing us. They fear that we may query some of the grades and they therefore, award us marks so that we do not complain. The majority of these assessors are only diploma holders hence they lack the necessary knowledge to assess the students.

Sub Problem 4: How Can Teaching Practice Assessment Be Improved?

The various stakeholders involved in the teaching practice programme provided very diverse views on what they thought to be potent strategies in the improvement of the teaching practice assessment.

A very common view was that the number of teaching practice visits by university lecturers and tutors be improved from one to three. Asked why this suggestion, one of the participants was of the view that it would be a fair assessment of the student. This accorded the student real chance to improve and be an effective classroom practitioner as opposed to a one off assessment.

For some, joint meetings between the school and the training institution helped to bring about effectiveness in the teaching practice programme, hence enhancing the quality of the teacher to be produced. At such for a, one participant remarked:

We are only told to assess the students without any induction at all. All colleges have their own way of doing things and we would have thought that you people could induct us into your way of doing things. We need workshops before deploying your students.

The above response was obviously from a head of school or deputy. Another response from a tutor showed similar sentiments as he felt that as ODL, there could be a tendency of doing things differently from one regional centre to the other. Hence there was need for regular workshops. A scrutiny of documents at the National Centre showed that only one workshop had been held for Regional programme Coordinators and National Programme Leaders. This however, excluded the heads of schools who play a crucial role in the teaching practice assessment.

An issue of very serious concern was on the variations in grades between and among different assessors and a sizeable number of participants felt the variations should be narrowed to bring about consistence. Workshops to scrutinise and deliberate on the documentation used for teaching practice were supposed to be held where all types of assessors were to be invited. One participant suggested

that there be a very objective assessment instrument. In her words, she pointed out "This is important to avoid the awkward variations that are currently being experienced especially between the lecturers' grades and those awarded by heads of schools".

Another participant brought in the suggestion of carrying out pilot team assessments first before students could be assessed for grading purposes. Teams of three or four members could assess the same student and agree on the grades to be awarded and thereafter, the actual assessment could take off. However, the National Teaching Practice Coordinator indicated that all this needed funding which was not always available.

CONCLUSIONS

From the above findings, it can be, therefore, concluded that:

- The assessment process of students on teaching practice is systematic.
- The ratings of the different assessors are not consistent as school based assessors tend to award higher grades than university assessors.
- No department meetings are held before the onset of the teaching practice assessment.
- The criteria used to assess students on teaching practice are unclear to most participants.
- The absence of clear performance indicators for use by the university and school based assessors is the source of the inconsistent ratings of students on teaching practice.
- The grading scale document is subjective as it does not spell out the specific attributes and marks for each attribute, hence prone to various interpretations.
- There are no external assessors to quality assure the process and give weight and credibility to the teaching practice assessment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

From the above conclusions, the following recommendations were made:

- There should be staff development workshops on teaching practice assessments for all supervisors and assessors, internal and external.
- There should be further research on assessment of teacher effectiveness for ODL students and the strengthening of quality assurance processes of the teaching practice component.
- There is need to increase the number of teaching practice assessment visits so as not to award grades basing on one assessment.
- There is need for pilot team assessments to improve on the award of grade and commenting on the teaching practice assessment documents.
- The current teaching practice assessment documents clearly indicate performance indicators for use by the university and school based assessors to avoid inconsistencies in ratings.
- The grading scale document need to spell out the specific attributes and marks for each attribute to avoid misinterpretations.
- The department needs engage external assessors to quality assure the process and give weight and credibility to the teaching practice assessment.

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Barnabas Muyengwa et al. “Teaching Practice Assessment: - Are We Reading From the Same Script? A Case of the Department of Teacher Development, Zimbabwe Open University”

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