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Experiences and Preparedness of School-Based Mentors in Supervising Student Teachers on Teaching Practice in Zimbabwe

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Author's contribution

The author MST designed the study and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. The author MST read and approved the final manuscript.

Original Research Article

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ABSTRACT

This study presents an analysis of school-based mentors' experiences and preparedness in supervising student teachers on teaching practice in Zimbabwe. The strategy employed was concurrent triangulation because it enabled the researcher to use both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection concurrently. The population comprised 14 universities, 3 secondary teachers' colleges. The informants comprised 100 heads of schools, 560 lecturers involved in teaching practice, 1120 school-based mentors and 7200 current and former student teachers. The sample was selected through purposive sampling procedure. The sample comprised 3 universities, 2 teacher training colleges, 25 heads of schools, 75 lecturers, 250 school-based mentors and 200 current and former student teachers. The study was carried out in Zimbabwean universities and teacher training colleges between June 2012 and November 2013. The methods of data collection used were content analysis, interviews, questionnaires and focus group discussions. The heads of schools and school-based mentors were interviewed. Qualitative data collected was analysed using the constant comparative approach and cross case analysis. Quantitative data collected was analysed using the descriptive statistics through the conversion of figures into percentages. The findings revealed that the school-based mentors were not helpful in assisting the student teachers in developing teaching or pedagogical skills. There was no collaboration between the schools and the

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teacher training institutions and this reflected ineffective mentoring practices and mentoring relationships. The researcher recommends teacher training institutions to design a participatory training programme with school-based mentors and student teachers for effective development of pedagogical skills.

Keywords: Mentoring; supervising; teaching practice; preparedness; school-based mentors.

1. INTRODUCTION

School-based mentors responsible for supervising student teachers undergoing teaching practice are facing a number of challenges. According to Gadzirayi, Muropa and Mutandwa [1] there is no universal theory on how students learn to teach despite the fact that there is an abundance of research literature on learning to teach. Carr and Kemmis [2] call for the development of a critical educational science, based on forms of reflection that aims at involving all the stakeholders in the joint critical analysis of their own situation with a view to transforming them in ways that lead to improvement of educational situations for pupils. Teaching practice is regarded as the most valuable part of teacher preparation in Zimbabwe.

When student teachers are placed in schools for teaching practice, they are assigned to a school-based mentor who is entrusted to give guidance to the student teacher during the duration of the teaching practice. According to Chakanyuka [3] ideally mentors should be volunteer-experienced teachers who are expert classroom practitioners and are prepared to share their expertise with student teachers. Maphosa and Ndamba [4] in his study concluded that 19% volunteered to be mentors whilst 81% were simply asked by the school head to be mentors. Although some volunteered for genuine reasons, it appears others volunteered for wrong reasons, particularly when they thought that their work load would be reduced.

A mentor is an experienced teacher who takes care of an inexperienced student teacher in order to assist him or her learn how to teach [5,6,7,8,9]. The relationship between the two is a matter of pre-service teacher education inclusion. In Zimbabwe at secondary schools during teaching practice, the student teachers are attached to school-based mentors who are expected to be qualified, experienced and knowledgeable in teaching practice as well as about their roles as school-based mentors [10]. Mentoring in teacher education is defined as a strategy of individual and institutional support, realised in learning-partnership of two persons and aiming at professional development of school teachers [11]. Mentoring is aimed at a smooth transition of the novice teacher into the classroom. This improves productivity for the school system. Mentoring is usually regarded as a task of an experienced teacher to introduce student teachers in their teaching practice [5]. Mentoring results in the continuous and lifelong development trainee teachers.

The current supervision practices in Zimbabwe are segmented and isolated. The authors argue that while universities and teacher training colleges 'dose' students with theories of teaching based on written literature, when student teachers go to schools for teaching practice, they receive traditional advice from practising teachers based on practical experience [1]. This suggests that in Zimbabwe, there is discord between teacher training colleges and universities on one hand and the schools' expectations in as far as teaching practice is concerned. Theory learnt during lectures should be married with practice. Supervision of student teachers by college lecturers is mainly based on theories of teaching and learning from various authors, whereas in schools, most mentors and/ or heads base

their supervision on practical experience [1]. This suggests that supervised student teachers are not able to input what they would have learnt in lectures into the supervision process.

Studies by scholars such as [3,4,7,8] suggest that more has to be done in terms of improving the quality of mentoring in Zimbabwean schools. A study done by [8] 37.5% of the respondents indicated that they did not benefit much from their mentors since most of the mentors were not aware of college expectations. This was an indication of the need for institutes to provide mentors a serious systematic training programme.

A study carried out at Midlands State University in Zimbabwe, [12] revealed that the school-based mentors were not helpful in assisting the student teachers in developing teaching or pedagogical skills. There was no collaboration between the schools and the Faculty of Education and this reflected ineffective mentoring practices and mentoring relationship. There was need to determine the experiences and the level of preparedness of school-based mentors in supervising student teachers on teaching practice. This apparent lack of collaboration between the training institutions and the cooperating schools maybe an indication of the lack of confidence the training institutions have in cooperating schools.

Mentoring involves, among other things, advice and guidance on scheming, working out detailed lesson plans, teaching approaches, preparing instructional media and class management among others. These areas would have been covered during lectures, but the realities of the classroom situation are often quite different from the theoretical situation [5, 8]. School-based mentors are expected to give the students guidance in pedagogical issues such as scheming, lesson preparation and planning, class management, effective teaching methods, maintaining classroom discipline and other daily routines such as marking the class register and written exercises [9].

The weighting for trainee on teaching practice from various colleges and universities in Zimbabwe is broken down as; two-thirds of the final mark comes from the lecturers and only a third from the mentor. This arrangement is viewed as shared appraisal or multifactor assessment which is also adopted in other professions like nursing and hospitality management [13]. Nyaumwe and Mavhunga [14] found out that the mentors awarded high marks because they only assessed lesson delivery and did not look at documents because these were assumed to be in order.

Assessment of learning to teach that uses a variety of information sources provides further opportunities for reflection and students need guidance for future action [14].

According to Chakanyuka [3] mentors in her research did not give honest assessment as they felt that in doing so they would dampen and destroy the students' confidence. She adds that assessment serves to ensure that only those student teachers who have developed sufficiently are allowed into the teaching field. Assessment also determines how much the student teacher has acquired in terms of professional knowledge and skills.

School-based mentors lacked confidence and preparedness in supervising student teachers on teaching practice. Very little was being done on student teachers observing school based mentors or vice versa. The study also established that despite the positive experiences during teaching practice, student teachers were not exposed to effective mentoring by the school-based mentors. There was lack of adequate supervision of student teachers by the school-based mentors. There was need to correct the situation in universities and

teachers' colleges if they were facing the same scenario so as to solve the afore-mentioned problem [12].

It is against this background that the study investigates the experiences and preparedness of school based mentors in supervising student teachers on teaching practice in secondary schools in Zimbabwe. The study also captures the stakeholders' suggestions for improving the preparedness of the school-based mentors in supervising the student teachers on teaching practice.

2. METHODOLOGY

The researcher employed a triangulated mixed methods design as the strategy for this study. The triangulated mixed methods design enabled the collection of data that gave useful information about the experiences and the preparedness of school-based mentors in supervising student teachers on teaching practice in Zimbabwe [15].

Thus, in this research interviews and focus group discussions were employed as follow-up to questionnaires. Content analysis was used to check the validity of answers and complement the data obtained from questionnaires, focus group discussions and interviews. The strategy used was the concurrent triangulation which uses both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection concurrently in order to best understand the phenomenon of interest [16]. In this study, the researcher used both quantitative and qualitative methods in an attempt to confirm and cross- validate or corroborate the findings.

The population comprised 14 universities, 3 teacher training colleges. The informants comprised 560 lecturers involved in teaching practice, 100 heads of schools, 1120 school-based mentors, 7200 current and former student teachers. The sample was selected through purposive sampling procedure. It comprised 3 universities, 2 secondary teachers' training colleges directly involved in training teachers, 75 lecturers from both teachers' colleges and universities involved in supervising student teachers on teaching practice, 25 heads of schools, 250 school- based mentors involved in mentoring students on teaching practice and 100 former student teachers who had gone through teaching practice in various secondary schools in Zimbabwe and 100 current student teachers who were doing their teaching practice during the time of data collection. Purposive sampling involved selecting participants because of some characteristics they possessed [17].

The researcher self-administered the questionnaire on former student teachers who had gone through teaching practice and current student teachers who were doing their teaching practice during the time of data collection. Focus group discussions were held with the lecturers in the Faculties of Education in universities and teachers' colleges involved in supervising students at teaching practice. The focus group discussions were structured around a set of predetermined seven questions but the discussions were free flowing. There were 2 groups per institution, each discussion group comprising seven to eight participants. The group participants were guided by the researcher who introduced topics for discussion or helped the group to participate lively and maintain a natural discussion among themselves. The researcher also took notes and ran the tape recorder. The interviews were held with the heads of schools where the students did their teaching practice and with the school-based mentors involved in mentoring the student teachers during their teaching practice.

The questionnaires and focused group discussions solicited information on the preparedness of the school-based mentors in supervising student teachers. The questionnaires and focused group discussions were pilot-tested to respondents who were not part of the sample. The researcher sought respondents' consent to participate in the study. The purpose of the research was explained to the respondents and procedures to be followed during the research. Content analysis was carried out on the available official documents in the institutions such as teaching practice guidelines, materials distributed to students in preparation for teaching practice, module outlines and teaching practice policies. The study examined the preparedness of school-based mentors in secondary schools in supervising student teachers on teaching practice. Qualitative data collected was analysed using the constant comparative approach and cross case analysis. Quantitative data collected was analysed using descriptive statistics through the conversion of figures into percentages.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following are responses from interviewing heads of schools, group discussion with the lecturers and school-based mentors, questionnaire from former and current student teachers and document analysis on the experiences and preparedness of school based mentors in supervising student teachers on teaching practice.

3.1 Results from Interviewing Heads of Schools

Among the interviewed 25 heads of schools hosting student teachers from universities and teachers' colleges, twenty heads of schools revealed that there was lack of proper partnership between the schools and the tertiary institutions training teachers.

When the school heads were asked whether they were assessing students on teaching practice, nineteen heads of schools indicated that as administrators they had pressure of work and they had no time to supervise the student teachers' and as a result they allocated the student teachers to mentors.

The twenty-five heads of schools also revealed that they were not trained to do mentorship; hence they were not confident to assess or supervise students on teaching practice. All the interviewed heads of schools also raised issue with lack of workshops, seminars and staff development programmes to up-date and guide the school-based mentors with institutions' expectations. According to the heads of schools, this was going to provide an opportunity for the teacher training institutions to clarify their expectations.

3.2 Results from Lecturers' Focus Group Discussions

The group discussions held by lecturers from universities and teachers' colleges revealed a number of challenges their students were encountering during teaching practice, such as the load allocation. It was suggested that in most cases, the student teachers were allocated a full load to teach instead of the stipulated minimum of 12 periods per week. The student teachers were not provided opportunities to observe their school based mentors teaching.

The discussion from the lecturers from universities revealed that the schools were not assessing the student teachers on teaching genuinely, even though the school-based component contributed to the final mark of the students on teaching practice.

The lecturers from both universities and teachers colleges were not satisfied with the assistance the student teachers were getting from the school based mentors.

3.3 Results from Interviewing School-Based Mentors

The interviews held with the school-based mentors indicated that there was lack of communication between the schools and the teacher training institutions. The school-based mentors revealed that there was unnecessary paper work for the students on teaching practice. The lecturers indicated that their curriculum was congested and as a result there was little time to supervise the student teachers or the student teachers observing them teaching.

The school-based mentors revealed that they were operating without the guidelines from universities and teachers' colleges. They also complained that institutions expected the school-based mentors to assist their students in all aspects of teaching, forgetting that the school-based mentors also had their own teaching loads. The school-based mentors indicated that the government, tertiary institutions and the schools were not paying them for assisting the student teachers on teaching practice.

The school-based mentors also revealed that they were not trained to do the mentorship; hence were not confident to assess or supervise students on teaching practice. They also raised the issue that there were no workshops, seminars and staff development programmes held by these training institutions to up-date the school-based mentors with the institutions' expectations.

3.4 Results of Responses from Former Student Teachers' Questionnaire

The following are responses from former and current student teachers on their experiences and preparedness as trainee teachers and school-based mentors during the teaching practice period. The frequencies and percentages of respondents selecting "strongly agree (SA), agree (A), not sure (NS), disagree (D) and strongly disagree (SD)" against the given items are presented in Tables 1, 2, 3, 4. The responses were measured on a five-point Likert-type scale (1-strongly disagree and 5- strongly agree). Strongly agree plus agree to an agreement and strongly disagree plus disagree add up a disagreement. The item numbers in the tables are as they appeared on the original questionnaire administered to the respondents.

The questionnaire to the former student teachers gathered information about the experiences of the student teachers during the teaching practice period as shown in Table 1 and 2.

Evidence from Tables 1 and 2 shows that the responses from the former student teachers trained from both universities and teachers colleges indicate that the students benefited little during their teaching practice. The student teachers revealed that they got very little assistance from the school-based mentors during their teaching practice. In most cases the student teachers were relying on the theoretical aspects imparted during the lectures than assistance from the mentors. The students also indicated that they were having challenges to marry theory into practice.

Questionnaires were also administered to one hundred current student teachers from both teachers' colleges and universities to find out their experiences during teaching practice as shown in Table 3 and 4.

Table 1. Teachers' colleges former student teachers' experiences N=50

Question	SA	%	A	%	NS	%	D	%	SD	%
1 Benefited from teaching practice	35	70	4	8	4	8	7	14	2	4
2 Managed to apply theory into practice during teaching practice	21	42	9	18	5	10	15	30	0	0
3 We were exposed to micro-teaching before teaching practice	36	72	13	26	1	2	0	0	0	0
4 We were exposed to peer teaching before teaching practice	35	70	15	30	0	0	0	0	0	0
5 Adequacy of the teaching practice period	18	36	9	18	10	20	6	12	7	14
6 I learnt something from teaching practice	34	68	6	12	5	10	5	10	0	0
7 Was adequately prepared for teaching practice	16	32	7	14	5	10	17	34	5	10
8 Was assisted by my mentor during teaching practice	12	24	11	22	9	18	11	22	7	14
9 Got support from college lecturers during teaching practice	17	34	9	18	7	14	14	28	3	6
10 Am applying skills that I acquired during teaching practice to teach	14	28	11	22	5	10	14	28	6	12
11 Acquired some skills during teaching practice	22	44	9	18	3	6	12	24	4	8
12 Am confident because of the teaching practice experience	13	26	11	22	6	12	14	28	6	12
13 Faced challenges during teaching practice	32	64	11	22	7	14	0	0	0	0

* Experiences of the student teachers during the teaching practice

Scoring direction

Each item receives a score based on the following points; strongly agree (5), agree (4), not sure (3), disagree (2) and strongly disagree (1).

3.5 Results of Responses from Current Student Teachers' Questionnaire

The questionnaire on the current student teachers was meant to capture the experiences of student teachers on teaching practice

As shown in Tables 3 and 4 students from both universities and teachers colleges revealed that they were benefiting from teaching practice, however, they complained that they were getting little assistance from the school-based mentors. The current student teachers from both teachers' colleges and universities agree with the former university students that not

much was done as far as micro-teaching and peer-teaching was concerned. The respondents revealed that they were encountering difficulties during their teaching practice.

Table 2. Universities former student teachers' teaching practice experiences N=50

	Question	SA	%	A	%	NS	%	D	%	SD	%
1	Benefited from teaching practice	30	60	5	10	4	8	8	16	3	6
2	Managed to apply theory into practice during teaching practice	18	36	7	14	8	16	15	30	2	4
3	We were exposed to micro-teaching before teaching practice	20	40	10	20	10	20	10	20	0	0
4	Were exposed to peer teaching before teaching practice	15	30	5	10	12	24	22	44	6	12
5	Adequacy of the teaching practice period	16	32	6	12	10	20	12	24	6	12
6	I learnt something from teaching practice	27	54	8	16	5	10	10	20	0	0
7	Was adequately prepared for teaching practice	11	22	9	18	8	16	18	36	4	8
8	Was assisted by my mentor during teaching practice	13	26	10	20	11	22	11	22	5	10
9	Got support from university lecturers during teaching practice	19	38	6	12	10	20	9	18	6	12
10	Am applying skills that I acquired during teaching practice to teach	11	22	13	26	4	8	16	32	6	12
11	11. Acquired some skills during teaching practice	18	36	11	22	5	10	10	20	6	12
12	Am confident because of the teaching practice experience	10	20	9	18	7	14	17	34	7	14
13	Faced challenges during teaching practice	37	74	7	14	6	12	0	0	0	0

**Experiences of the student teachers during the teaching practice.*

3.6 Results from Content Analysis

The results from an analysis of the official documents at the universities and teachers' colleges showed that teaching practice guidelines, policies and module outlines were available. These documents are given to students before they go on teaching practice. In schools, the indication was that these documents were found in the students' files although the schools were not given these documents by the training institutions. The school-based mentors were employing the scheme-cum plan whilst the students were expected to use the schemes of work and daily or detailed lesson plans. There were some differences in the structure of both scheme-cum plan used by the school-based mentors and the schemes of work used by the student teachers.

3.7 Discussion

The interviews from school-based mentors and student teachers' questionnaire revealed that the school-based mentors were using scheme-cum plan whilst student teachers were expected to use both schemes of work and daily or detailed lesson plans. There was need

for both the universities and teachers' colleges to agree on the model of scheming when students are on teaching practice. The documents used by student teachers during teaching practice should not be completely divorced from what the schools are using and even what they will use after completing their courses or degrees. Gadzirayi et.al [1] assert that current teaching and supervision practices are segmented and isolated. Universities and Teachers' colleges 'dose' students with theories of teaching based on written literature that is divorced from the classroom environment during and after teaching practice. The school-based mentors revealed that there was a lot of paper work students do during their teaching practice.

**Table 3. Teachers' colleges current student teachers' teaching practice experiences
N=50**

	Question	SA	%	A	%	NS	%	D	%	SD	%
1	Am benefiting from teaching practice	31	62	7	14	3	6	5	10	4	8
2	Am applying theory into practice during teaching practice	33	66	17	34	0	0	0	0	0	0
3	I am learning new things from teaching practice	36	72	7	14	3	6	4	8	0	0
4	We were exposed to micro-teaching before teaching practice	38	76	12	24	0	0	0	0	0	0
5	We did peer teaching before teaching practice	40	80	8	16	2	4	0	0	0	0
6	Was adequately prepared for teaching practice	29	58	11	22	3	6	7	14	0	0
7	Am using the knowledge I acquired from the theoretical modules to teach	27	54	13	26	1	2	7	14	2	4
8	Am acquiring new skills during my teaching practice	36	72	5	10	7	14	2	4	0	0
9	Am being assisted by mentor in my teaching	18	36	16	32	5	10	9	18	2	4
10	Am getting support from my college lecturers	17	34	18	36	7	14	8	16	0	0
11	Am facing challenges with my teaching practice	34	68	12	24	4	8	0	0	0	0

**Experiences of the student teachers during the teaching practice*

The lecturers indicated that their curriculum was congested and as a result there was little time to supervise the student teachers teaching or the student teachers observing them teaching. This was also echoed by the heads of schools when they revealed that due to pressure of work they were not able to assess students on teaching practice. This contrast with assertions of the following authors who argue that a mentor is an experienced teacher who takes care of an inexperienced student teacher in order to assist him or her learn how to teach [5, 6, 7, 8].

In a study carried out at Midlands State University in Zimbabwe, [11] reveal that the school-based mentors were not helpful in assisting the student teachers in developing teaching or

pedagogical skills. This revelation means that student teachers on teaching practice were receiving very little guidance from the school-based mentors.

Table 4. Universities current student teachers' teaching practice experiences N=50

	Question	SA	%	A	%	NS	%	D	%	SD	%
1	Am benefiting from teaching practice	29	58	11	22	2	4	6	12	2	4
2	Am applying theory into practice during teaching practice	31	62	19	38	0	0	0	0	0	0
3	I am learning new things from teaching practice	40	80	3	6	2	4	5	10	0	0
4	We were exposed to micro-teaching before teaching practice	12	24	10	20	9	18	19	38	0	0
5	We did peer teaching before teaching practice	11	22	6	12	8	16	19	38	6	12
6	Was adequately prepared for teaching practice	22	44	9	18	8	16	7	14	4	8
7	Am using the knowledge I acquired from the theoretical modules to teach	24	48	11	22	4	8	6	12	5	10
8	Am acquiring new skills during my teaching practice	37	74	4	8	5	10	4	8	0	0
9	Am being assisted by mentor in my teaching	14	28	16	32	7	14	7	14	7	14
10	Am getting support from my university lecturers	13	26	16	32	9	18	9	18	4	8
11	Am facing challenges with my teaching practice	39	78	3	6	8	16	0	0	0	0

**Experiences of the student teachers during the teaching practice*

The school heads and school-based mentors indicated that they were operating in schools without proper guidance or documentations from teachers' colleges and universities that spells out the expectations of the institutions. The document analysis indicated that there were schools which were operating without both the national syllabi and school syllabi. There were a number of teachers with academic degrees but with no professional qualifications who were assigned by the heads of schools to supervise student teachers on teaching practice. If students on teaching practice are to receive proper guidance they should be supervised by professionally qualified school-based mentors.

The group focus discussion with the lecturers from universities revealed that the schools were not assessing the student teachers on teaching practice genuinely, even though the school-based component contributed to the final mark of the students on teaching practice. This was also supported by [11] who asserts that school-based mentors lacked confidence and preparedness in supervising student teachers on teaching practice. Very little was being done on student teachers observing school based mentors or vice versa. Something has to be done in order to improve the way student teachers are supervised when on teaching practice. The students need proper guidance before and during teaching practice if they were to benefit from the process.

The school-based mentors also revealed that they were not trained to do the mentorship; hence were not confident to assess or supervise students on teaching practice. They also raised the issue that there were no workshops, seminars and staff development held by training institutions to up-date the school-based mentors with the institutions' expectations. The school heads suggested that workshops organised by the universities and teachers' colleges should be held with heads and school-based mentors. This was also supported by [1,7,8,11] who suggest that universities and teachers' colleges should organise workshops with the heads of schools and mentors in all the districts in Zimbabwe so that they explain their institutions' expectation in as far as the concept of teaching practice is concerned.

4. CONCLUSION

Teaching practice is an important component of becoming a teacher. The student teachers are granted experience in the real teaching and learning environment. The study established that despite the positive experiences during teaching practice, school-based mentors experienced challenges in supervising student teachers on teaching practice. The school-based mentors were not prepared to supervise student teachers on teaching practice. The school-based mentors lacked confidence in mentoring student teachers on teaching practice. The way student teachers were supervised was not adequate to equip the student teachers with all the pedagogical skills necessary for training teachers. There was no collaboration between the schools and the teacher training institutions and this reflected ineffective mentoring practices and mentoring relationship.

Based on the findings of this study recommendations are made on how to improve teaching practice in order to have a positive influence on the school-based mentors' supervision and attitude towards the teaching profession and teacher- development programmes. The universities and teachers' colleges should organise workshops with the heads of schools and school-based mentors in all the districts in Zimbabwe so that they explain their institutions' expectation in as far as the concept of mentoring is concerned. Such professional meeting will create a forum for the institutions to clarify their teaching practice guidelines and school based assessment criterion.

There is need by universities and teachers' colleges to integrate theory and practice in order to assure effective mentoring. By incorporating early field experiences into all of the teacher education courses, student teachers can be better prepared for what lies ahead in classroom during and after teaching practice.

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CONSENT

A letter of informed consent was sent to every participating subject before taking part in the research. All participants signed a consent letter.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

The author declares that approval to carry out this study was obtained from the Provincial Education Offices and institution ethics committee. A written communication to this effect is available.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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