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Nathalis Wamba

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MZUZU UNIVERSITY STUDENT-TEACHERS EXPERIENCES: A CASE STUDY

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This paper is an investigation of the practicum experiences of a group of student-teachers from Mzuzu University. Using document analysis and informal ethnographic interviews, five main themes emerged from student-teachers experiences: 1) absence of a collaborative agreed-upon memorandum of understanding between cooperating teachers and student-teachers; 2) questionable ethics and lack of professionalism on the part of several cooperating teachers; 3) cooperating teachers working conditions; 4) issues of trust and cooperating teachers' perceptions of student-teachers as relief teachers rather than as trainees and; 5) lack of supervision and in-service training for cooperating teachers. The authors derive a variety of interpretations from the findings and recommend that the practicum be restructured in pre-practicum, practicum and post-practicum.

Introduction

In-service teacher education at Mzuzu University requires a teaching practicum before students graduate. Students do their teaching practicum once they have completed a number of courses including foundations of education, subject methodology and others. In preparation for the practicum students engage in micro-teaching, a practice during which they conduct a sample lesson with their colleagues serving as students. Following the micro-teaching, students are assigned to various secondary schools to teach for 14 weeks. This is an opportunity for student-teachers to put into practice what they have learned, to interact directly with students and to work with experienced teachers who have been in the trenches for several years.

The teaching practice coordinators oversee the student-teachers placement and their practicum. They do their best to match the student-teacher and the cooperating teacher. Ideally, the cooperating teacher is experienced, skilled and qualified. The student-teacher has a preparatory phase of two weeks during which he works collaboratively with the cooperating teacher. The cooperating teacher is expected to share all the necessary documents particularly schemes of work so that the student-teacher has a sense of what is taking place in the classroom. The cooperating teacher must allow the student-teacher to observe him/her teach for as many times as is possible before he or she begins to teach. The two are supposed to debrief after each lesson and make constructive remarks (Maphosa, Shumba & Shumba, 2007).

This preparatory phase is followed by teaching practicum by the student-teacher. During the practicum, the University supervising lecturers visit them at least three times to observe their teaching, offer advice and feedback and suggest improvements where needed.

However, it is always a challenge whether the cooperating teacher and the student-teacher will pass 'the goodness of fit' test (Bozeman & Feeney, 2008). "The goodness of fit" concept outlines the basic elements of the mentor-protégé match, viewing the relationship as a social exchange. The 'goodness of fit' is essential because the better suited the mentor and the mentee are to each other, the greater the chance that the mentoring process will be beneficial to both of them.

Thus the purpose of this study is to examine the practicum experiences of a group of student-teachers from Mzuzu University in schools in Malawi.

Conceptual Framework and Review of Literature

We used the Attachment Theory developed by Bowlby (1979) and the apprentice model to make sense of the relationship between the cooperating teacher and the student-teacher. The relationship between a mentor and mentee has been compared to a parent-child attachment because of the closeness between the two people who are at different stages of development (Ragins & Cotton, 1999). The term 'mentor' has many definitions, depending on the discipline where it is applied (Nicholls, 2006). Although many of the definitions do not specifically refer to the field of education, they still make sense when they are applied to education, in general, and to the relationship between the student-teacher and the cooperating teacher, specifically.

Although the Attachment Theory originated from observations between a parent and a child, Miles (2011) believes that it can be applied to relationships between adults who are independent, including the cooperating teacher and the student-teacher. The theory emphasises that the mentor should respond sensitively and appropriately to the needs of the mentee (Ragins & Cotton, 1999). Trust is the hallmark of this relationship (Quinn, 2000). If mentors and mentees are to trust each other and to develop a sound working relationship, they need to co-create a memorandum of understanding or a contract (Zerzan, Hess, Schur, Phillips & Rigotti, 2009) that will bind both parties to commit to the process.

The Attachment Theory fairly represents the dependence of the student-teacher on the cooperating teacher but appears not to reflect the need for the student-teacher to emulate the cooperating teacher. For example, Furlong and Maynard (1995) learned that

student- teachers tend to model their teaching strategies and class management after the teacher they observe. Ragins and Cotton (1999) agree that mentees become replicas of mentors, and uncritically accept their cultural norms and values.

It is for this reason that the Apprentice Model is included. The model advances the view that some skills, including many that are difficult, complex and of high moral and cultural value, are best learned by the emulation of experienced practitioners and by supervised practice. The role of the mentor in this model is to have the mentee experience real situations. For example, student-teachers need to interact with students, encounter various teaching situations, and develop efficient classroom strategies, among others (Nicholls, 2006; Furlong & Maynard, 1995).

Carmin (1993) manages to bring out both senses of formal and informal interactive nature of mentoring. He states:

“Mentoring is a complex, interactive process, occurring between individuals of differing levels of experience and expertise which incorporates interpersonal or psychosocial development, career and/or educational development, and socialization functions into the relationship--- To the extent that the parameters of mutuality and comparability exist in the relationship, the potential outcomes of respect, professionalism, collegiality, and role fulfillment will result. Further, the mentoring process occurs in a dynamic relationship within a given milieu”. (p. 10)

The definition presents the student-teacher as an active participant in what the mentor is doing. It also considers him/her as a being that must develop professionally but also as a social being that expects his/her social needs to be addressed. For example, the psychosocial needs may include the need to be loved and respected, among other needs (Maslow’s hierarchy of needs).

Although the above definition, in many ways, serves the interest of this article, it remains deficient in as far as representing the full sense of the term with regards to a complex discipline of education is concerned. The complex nature of the mentoring is also reflected in how Anderson and Shannon (1995) present the five characteristics of the mentoring. On face value, the characteristics do not appear to be related to Carmin’s definition of mentoring. The variation in understanding the same term is an indication of its complex nature. Their understanding of the term is reflected in what they consider to be the characteristics of ‘mentoring’. The term includes the following functions of mentoring:

- Teaching means the basic behaviours associated with teaching, including; modelling, informing, conforming/ disconforming, prescribing and questioning
- Sponsoring means a kind of guarantor, and involves three essential behaviours: protecting, supporting and promoting.

- Encouraging is the process that includes the behaviours of affirming, inspiring and challenging.
- Counselling relates to the problem-solving process and includes behaviours such as listening, probing, clarifying and advising.
- Befriending involves two crucial elements that of accepting and relating.

The five identified functions of a mentor should be seen as mutually inclusive, that is, a mentor should be able to demonstrate and engage with all five aspects as and when required.

Basic to mentoring is a relationship that views the mentor as a role model, who cares and nurtures.

Research Methods

Document analysis and informal ethnographic interview

We conducted a document analysis (an examination of student-teacher journals) and interviewed a selected number of students. There are two traditions of document analysis: authenticity and portability/transferability. Authenticity focuses on truth-value, trustworthiness, credibility and the ability to provide a believable interpretation of the meaning found in the documents (Richardson, 2002). Authenticity relies on the subjective evaluation of the readers as opposed to being based on some objective standards (Krippendorff, 2004). Portability or transferability is the ability to offer insights extending beyond the specific cases under study (Bryman, 2004). As is the case in authenticity, the researcher relies upon his or her readers to assess the broader applicability of the lessons drawn from findings.

In addition to the two traditions, precision of the analysis as well as impartiality must be established. The precision of analysis also known as dependability suggests that the research has been conducted in a transparent manner. A reader may assess the accuracy of interpretation by asking him or herself “Would I have reached a similar conclusion, had I read the same document under similar conditions?” Impartiality is unprejudiced knowledge about the social world through findings that reflect reality rather than their own predetermined beliefs (Marshall & Rossman, 1989).

The criterion for assessment in document analysis is trustworthiness. Trustworthiness requires being explicit about the process by which the evidence is interpreted and also providing access to the data collected so that the findings can be verified. It gives to the analysis credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability.

The document analysis was followed by informal ethnographic interviews with a selected group of student-teachers to obtain additional information. An informal ethnographic interview is a little more than a casual conversation that allows the researcher, in conversation style, to inquire into something that has presented itself as an opportunity from which to learn. Student teachers were asked about the “5Ws and H”: who, what, where, when, why, and how. These interviews were conversations with a purpose where students disclosed further insights that they might have excluded from their journals. It was also an opportunity for them to reflect on their overall teaching experience.

Sample

We selected a purposeful sample of forty student-teachers who participated in the practicum. These student- teachers were from the G department. They spent 14 weeks teaching in rural and urban schools. One of the authors visited them three times during their internship and provided guidance and feedback on their teaching practicum.

Data Collection and analysis

We collected the student-teacher journals, field logs and samples of artifacts such as course preparations, assignments administered to the students and attendance lists. We also conducted interviews toward the end of their practicum to collect additional data. To ensure trustworthiness, we took the following steps.

We carefully read all the documents that we collected. We took a broad view searching for general themes. We conducted axial coding, reviewing all documents, and tagging specific passages belonging under various themes-categories identified in the initial phase of the coding. This process was then followed by “selective coding” when we combed through the documents in search of mis-coded passages and discrepant evidence. We conducted this process till we reached a saturation point.

A qualitative analysis as well as a quantification of the findings followed. We assessed how often a particular theme appeared in the text following a more quantitative analytical approach (Hersie-Biber & Levy, 2006). We then checked our understanding of the documents when we conducted the interviews with the student-teachers. This was a process of verifying the authenticity of the findings. It also was a safeguard to our own interpretations of the text under analysis. We also provided ourselves with an audit trail of any discrepant evidence that may have challenged the findings we came up with.

Findings

Five main themes emerged from the data analysis. These were: a perceived lack of a collaborative enforced memorandum of understanding between the student-teacher and the cooperating teacher; questionable ethics and professionalism on the part of cooperating teachers; cooperating teachers' working conditions; trust between student-teacher and the cooperating teacher; lack of supervision from the cooperating teacher and lack of in-service training for cooperating teachers.

A. Absence of a collaborative agreed upon and enforced memorandum of understanding between cooperating teacher and student teacher.

Perhaps the most significant finding disclosed by student-teachers was what they perceived as the lack of collaborative and agreed upon memorandum of understanding between the university and the schools where they were placed. There was a total lack of understanding as to how student- teachers and cooperating teachers needed to interact. Despite the fact that the Teaching Practicum Committee of Mzuzu University has developed a teaching practicum handbook that describes the practicum, this document is seldom enforced. This document outlines the involvement of teaching practicum coordinator and deputies, supervising lecturer, headteacher, cooperating teachers and their roles and duties vis a vis the student-teachers. Austin and Baldwin (1991) remark that effective collaboration involves the recognition of common goals, coordinated efforts, and outcomes based on shared responsibilities. However, enforcing such guidelines presents a number of challenges. In this case-study the main obstacle to enforcement was the lack of any compensation or incentive for cooperating teachers to dedicate the extra time and energy to mentoring responsibilities. The fact that the cooperating teachers were over burdened by their teaching tasks compounded the problem of lack of incentives.

Students-teachers report that cooperating teachers never took the time to observe them; they never handed over the work schemes, nor did they supervise or check their lesson plans. Some student-teachers alleged that cooperating teachers would not allow them to observe them teaching nor even introduce them to the students.

B. Questionable ethics and lack of professionalism on the part of cooperating teachers

Student teachers claimed that cooperating teachers displayed questionable ethics and lack of professionalism. Several quotes by students suggest that this was a prevalent problem in many schools. Teachers came in late. In some instances students would complain to the student-teachers about their teachers' constant lateness. Not only did they come late, some of them came to school unprepared. One student-teacher was

told by a cooperating teacher “Seasoned teachers do not prepare.”

Cooperating teachers seldom made themselves available to student-teachers when they needed help. They never supervised them nor checked their lesson plans or schemes; they discouraged them from giving students a lot of work. They seldom wrote lesson plans. Indicative of some cooperating teachers’ beliefs that they may do as they please was one comment made to a student-teacher by a head teacher “When you graduate, this is the way you will be enjoying working in the government.”

In many school departments, there were no meetings. On rare occasions when a meeting would be convened, it was likely to be held at the end of the term. The meeting would focus on the preparation of the end of term examinations, leaving out important academic and pedagogical matters focusing instead on menial problems encountered within the department.

C. Cooperating teachers working conditions

In many schools in Malawi, teachers are predominantly male (UNICEF, 2010). Most teachers are not trained. Schools are also understaffed. Availability of teaching and learning materials varied from classroom to classroom and from school to school. All student-teachers mentioned the shortage of teaching and learning materials, including textbooks, stationary, rulers, chalk, writing boards etc.

The school facilities were equally poor. There were no laboratories or resource rooms. Since teaching and learning resources were in short supply, cooperating teachers seldom used them. It was also unclear how familiar cooperating teachers were with teaching and learning aids.

These are the conditions under which cooperating teachers have worked for so many years making it difficult to develop good ethics and behave professionally. This is not meant to excuse the apathy of cooperating teachers nor their behavior, but rather to shed light on some of the realities under which these teachers are working. Whether this lack of decent working conditions fuels the apathy, the lack of professionalism and ethics reported by student teachers will be the subject of another study. What is certain is that this cluster of factors has a significant impact on the training of upcoming teachers.

D. Mutual lack of trust and cooperating teachers’ perceptions of student teachers as relief teachers

Although specifying the tasks, the objectives and the goals of a project and establishing policies and guidelines for collaboration is essential, trust is not necessarily

the result of these policies or guidelines. The absence of ongoing communication between student-teachers and cooperating teachers created a poor working environment where trust could not thrive. Student-teachers complained that cooperating teachers were uncomfortable sharing classes with them. Cooperating teachers argued that student-teachers tended to delay the syllabus and this was likely to create problems for them once the student-teachers have left.

Student-teachers interpreted the behaviour of cooperating teachers as a lack of trust. This could also have been interpreted as fear or resistance mechanism on the part of cooperating teachers especially if they felt that they were less educated than the student-teachers.

On another note, some cooperating teachers took advantage of student-teachers. Student-teachers allowed them relief from their daily jobs. Although they were expected to supervise, guide and train these new teachers, they chose not to. A student-teacher explained that she expected to be supervised at least three times by the cooperating teacher or any member of the department during her teaching practice. Unfortunately, the cooperating teacher never did. On one rare occasion when the cooperating teacher paid her a visit, he sat in the back of the classroom and disappeared after few minutes without giving any comment. When she tried to follow up about the lesson she had conducted, the cooperating teachers said, "It has been a good lesson." "This did not go well with me and I did not like it," was her answer.

E. Lack of supervision of and in-service training for cooperating teachers

We noted that Mzuzu University has developed a handbook for student-teacher practicum. Nowhere in this handbook were criteria mentioned for the selection of schools, cooperating teachers or provision for their orientation and training to supervise student-teachers. More importantly, it was unclear who should supervise the cooperating teachers. Instead it focuses exclusively on the tasks of student-teachers during the teaching practicum and the role of the cooperating teacher.

Several student-teachers complained of not being introduced to the students. Often cooperating teachers were not informed of their arrival or their role in the school. Introducing these student-teachers to the faculty, staff and students would have been the right thing to do. Unfortunately, this never happened for most of the student-teachers.

An orientation of participants would have specified the role of student-teachers, the headmaster and cooperating teachers and the supervisor from Mzuzu University. Student-teachers report that cooperating teachers were not being supervised

and did not seem to be accountable to anyone. It also became evident overtime that they never received any kind of training in terms of supervising and guiding student-teachers.

Few positive statements counter-balanced this overall negative picture of teaching practicum presented by student-teachers. Following are a few exceptions we collected from their journals;

I cherished and valued the rare professional and academic assistance I got from Mrs. XXX. As a teacher who has never taught geography in senior classes, I relied on her assistance. Whenever I encountered problems, she quickly came to my rescue.

There was a team spirit in the geography department. The teachers easily offered to help whenever a need arose.

Another student writes:

However, with the help of my cooperating teacher, and other members of staff from the geography department, I was able to source learning materials and even make some myself from locally available materials, which helped a great deal in the delivery of my lessons.

These two statements are the exception rather than the rule. After all what is a rule without exception?

Discussion

In this section we attempt to answer the question “What does it all mean?” Mzuzu University Teaching Practicum handbook (2007) remarks “ It is important to note that the quality of an educational system depends first and foremost on what happens inside the classroom.... in this respect the Teaching Practicum is therefore the single most powerful activity in a teacher’s professional preparation. Supervision could be considered to be the single powerful process in such an activity. “ (p. ii). The overall negative picture portrayed by the students who participated in this study and undertook their teaching practicum suggests that there is more to be done to improve the teaching practicum if we want to make a positive difference on what actually takes place inside the classroom.

There are several interpretations to derive from what appears to be an overwhelmingly negative teaching practicum experience. First, is the failure of Mzuzu University faculty members to help student-teachers learn how to make sense of their teaching practicum. Student-teachers never received an orientation on how to make sense or reflect on their teaching practicum experience; how to process a negative practicum experience and turn it into an opportunity to learn; what can be learned from positive and negative situations encountered in a school setting e.g., what can one learn

from cooperating teacher apathy? What does it mean to be a good teacher? In absence of such reflection the student-teachers have developed a laundry list of complaints reducing the whole practicum experience to two words; good or bad.

Second, Mzuzu University has a limited history working with primary and secondary schools except maybe for teaching practicum. Creating partnerships is one way of becoming acquainted with schools and developing social capital. Collaborating with primary and secondary schools gives the university and especially faculty members involved in teaching practicum a realistic picture of the schools outside the ivory tower; the teaching and learning conditions, the resources available, the physical environments, the facilities, and the students and the parents. Familiarity with schools can help faculty in charge of teaching practicum better prepare the student-teachers to handle situations they are likely to face when they engage in teaching practicum. As it appears now, the teaching practicum is an ad hoc activity that is likely to be perceived as an intrusion into teachers' activities rather than a contribution to the school and to the student-teachers.

Third, Mzuzu University Teaching Practicum Handbook (2007) makes a long list of demands on cooperating teachers and headteachers and has very little or nothing to offer them in return. We counted close to seven tasks for the cooperating teacher including: orient the student-teacher (ST); advising and supervising the ST; arranging observations of lessons; prescribing work for the ST; evaluating 50% of the ST individual lessons; coordinating the contributions of the ST and the University staff for the efficient fulfillment of the TP programme and; attending to some queries and other issues as they arise. These tasks require advisory, supervisory and observation skills, knowledge of content matter and instructional delivery, classroom management and professionalism. They amount to a full-time job. Why would a teacher who already has to deal with an overcrowded classroom with one hundred and plus students, lacks resources and lives in harsh conditions take on additional duties especially when there is no incentive to do so?

Teaching practicum needs improvement but requires a prerequisite. The prerequisite is for Mzuzu University to develop partnerships with surrounding schools. This will allow the university to create an education micro laboratory where faculty and their students can observe teaching, work with primary and secondary school students and teachers, attend professional development meetings, conduct research and teaching practicum. Participating in these school activities will give the student-teachers a realistic

picture of what takes place in a school environment and prepare them accordingly for teaching practicum.

One way to reorganize teaching practicum is to divide it in three stages: 1) the pre-practicum; 2) the practicum and; 3) the post-practicum.

1. Pre-practicum

The pre-practicum is the period before teaching practicum. It includes coursework, fieldwork, and microteaching. One of the key components of this stage is the fieldwork. Its purpose is to familiarize students with diverse school environments, develop critical observation skills and awareness about the realities of teaching in schools. Students get a real exposure to the school environment through school visits, teaching observations, participation in professional developments activities to name a few.

Other pre-practicum activities must include the selection of cooperating teachers using specific criteria e.g., academic degree, years of teaching, teaching evaluation, willingness to work with student-teacher, letters of recommendation etc. Upon completion the Teaching Practicum Committee must organize an orientation session for selected teachers and also offer an incentive e.g., college credit, monetary stipend, teaching and learning resources etc. At the orientation a draft memorandum of understanding and mechanisms of enforcement must be developed collaboratively so that each stakeholder agrees and knows what to expect and be accountable for.

2. Practicum

Practicum is the teaching practice period and starts the day the student-teacher is placed in a school. The student-teacher should be accompanied whenever possible by his or her faculty supervisor whose role is to introduce him or her to the Headmaster and the cooperating teacher. This arrangement should be discussed in advance preferably during the orientation so that it does not come as a surprise to the headmaster, the cooperating teacher, the staff and the students in school.

The teaching practicum handbook dedicates five pages regarding the records to be kept by the student teachers (11 items), the guidelines (10 items) to follow and the checklist (26 items) for preliminary visit and orientation day. To make improvement on what happens inside the classroom, we must focus on four items: course planning and preparation, classroom environment, instruction and professionalism (Danielson, 1999).

a) Planning and preparation

This component explains how a teacher organizes the subject matter that the students learn. It involves a demonstration of the knowledge content and pedagogy; knowledge of the students; the ability to select instructional goals; a demonstration of knowledge of the resources and; the ability to design coherent instruction and; the skills to assess student learning.

b) Classroom environment

The classroom environment consists of interactions that occur in a classroom. The teacher must create an environment of respect and rapport; establish a culture of learning; manage classroom procedures and student behaviour and; organize the physical space.

c) Instruction

Instruction is the heart of teaching. It involves communicating clearly and accurately the content of the subject matter using various pedagogical strategies including questions and discussion techniques, engaging students in learning, providing feedback and demonstrating flexibility and responsiveness.

d) Professionalism

Professionalism encompasses roles assumed by the teacher inside and outside of the classroom. Students are often not aware of these activities but parents and the larger community pay attention to what teachers do. Professionalism amounts to reflection on teaching; maintenance of accurate records; communicating with families; contributing to the school and the surrounding areas; growing and developing professionally.

3. Post-practicum

The post-practicum is the participatory evaluation and reflection time. It should involve the student-teacher, the cooperating teacher, the school headteacher, and the university faculty supervisor. Post-practicum is a conversation on practice. The student-teacher should prepare a formal presentation where he/ she discusses how he/ she taught, how he/ she translated theory into practice, and how he/ she dealt with the challenges and opportunities offered by the teaching practicum and more importantly what he/ she learned from the teaching practicum experience. The student-teacher should also reflect on how his/ her coursework prepared him/ her for the teaching practice; what was missing, what could be improved and what could be done differently. This is an

Conclusion

The researchers looked at the teaching practicum experiences of the Mzuzu University student teachers. The study revealed that the student teachers underwent a range of challenges; from limited resource availability to poor mentorship. To a large extent, it is questionable if many of the student teachers received the expected professional preparation before they are declared fit to teach. The findings should serve as a starting point for Mzuzu University to re-examine the teaching practicum exercise.

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