Teaching Experience of Student-Teachers in ODL 
Tertiary Institutions in Zambia

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Abstract

This paper is based on field experiences of the researchers of this article when observing 
student-teachers. The objective of this study was to explore teaching practices of student-teachers 
pursuing their bachelor’s degrees at Zambian Open University, University of Africa and Nkrumah 
University College. A mixed method approach was used. The population of the study included 
all student-teachers who undertook teaching practice at the three universities in 2015. About 
360 student-teachers were sampled from the three universities. Simple random sampling 
technique was used to sample the respondents. Questionnaire and Focus Group Discussions 
(FGDs) were the two main data collection tools used. Descriptive and thematic methods were 
predominantly used to analyse the findings. Data obtained from the discussions was analysed 
in order to extract themes. Key findings of the study revealed the following: firstly, the relevance 
of teaching experience in enhancing understanding of handling teaching-learning; secondly, 
the relevance of teaching experience in improving the teaching-learning environment; and 
thirdly, overcoming challenges that teachers face, and ways of restoring them. The study 
recommends that institutions of higher learning schedule teaching practice twice in their four-
year teacher training programme; and that the government, through standards officers, should 
take keen interest in monitoring teaching practice trends.

Key words: Teaching, teaching experience, students, open and distance learning, Zambia.

Introduction

This paper is anchored on a study that 
emanated from the protracted views of 
student-teachers in ODL about the worthiness 
and efficacy of teaching experience, given 
that they go for the practice once (one term) 
in the four years of their course of studies. 
The long-drawn-out views of student-
teachers moved the researchers to explore 
this phenomenon under study.

Teaching practice is the cornerstone of 
teacher training. Teaching practice is a 
renewal process in itself. As a result, both 
serving teachers (in-service) and those direct 
from school training to be teachers (pre-
service) all take the teaching practice course. 
Changing times necessitate pre-service and 
in-service teachers to undertake ‘teaching 
practice.’

Research points to students’ predicament 
pursuance of their studies through ODL 
and as they embark on their teaching practice. 
Today, education of teachers (both pre-
service and in-service) through the ODL 
mode hinges on many aspects that institutions 
of learning should take into consideration 
(Yassin, 2002; Hammad, 2005; UNESCO
EfA Global Monitoring Report, 2010; Al-Ajez & Hallas, 2011; Maphalala, 2013) For instance, studies indicate that the major differences in ODL models depend on the technology used, the form of learning and interactivity support (Fillip, 2001 cited in Burns, 2011; Samkange, 2013).

Teaching experience is central to moulding skilled teachers. Alluding to this, Dick (1992) contends that by making the situation resemble the one they would find if they were doing it for real, teaching practice can help students learn to “think effectively, reason, problem solve, and develop learning skills.” This also entails that teaching practice supervision and inspection are crucial to teacher education.

Purpose of the study

The overall purpose of the study was to explore teaching practices of student-teachers pursuing their Bachelor’s Degree in Education at Zambian Open University, University of Africa and Nkrumah University College.

Statement of the problem

Teaching practice for students in ODL is partially prepared for and evaluated. This is because students do not have enough time to practice while in residence at the institution. Suffice to say, this residential school is the only contact time students have with their lecturers. The same happens when students finish their teaching practice. They are not given time to discuss their experiences and learn from them. As a result, some students continue to make the same mistakes and are likely to hand them down to upcoming teachers. It is against this scenario that the study explored teaching practices of student-teachers pursuing their bachelor’s degree in education in ODL institutions.

Objective

The main objective of this study was to explore teaching practices of student-teachers pursuing their bachelor’s degree at Zambian Open University, University of Africa and Nkrumah University College.

Sub-objectives

The study’s three sub-objectives were to:
1. Explore students’ perceptions of ‘teaching practice’.
2. Determine aspects affecting students’ teaching practice.
3. Establish how students cope during teaching practice.

Research questions

The research’s three sub-questions were:
1. What are students’ perceptions of ‘teaching practice’?
2. What aspects affect students’ teaching practice?
3. How do students cope during teaching practice?

Assumption of the study

Student teachers who learn by ODL are not adequately prepared for teaching practice.

Theoretical framework

This study was informed by the social constructivist theory popularised by Vygotsky (Vygotsky, 1978). This was fitting primarily because it helped bring out students’ perceptions of ‘teaching practice’; aspects affecting students’ teaching practice; and how students cope during teaching practice. These were teased out and linked through three core areas of the theory, namely:
1. Knowledge is constructed by learners – this was in respect of student teachers who were either pre-service or in-service,
who shared their knowledge and expertise during their teaching practice;
2. Learning involves social interaction – this took place between student teachers, learners, supervisors and lecturers; and
3. Learning is situated – this took place in two places, in and outside classrooms.

Methodology

Research design: A qualitative research method, employing a case study approach was used.

Population: The population of the study included all student-teachers amounting to 1200 who undertook teaching practice at the three universities in the years 2012 up to 2015.

Sample size: 360 student-teachers were sampled from the three universities, 120 from each one of the three universities; 30 lecturers, 10 from each one of the three universities; 10 Education Standards Officers from Lusaka (Lusaka Province) and Kabwe (Central Province); and 10 school administrators.

Sampling procedures: Simple random sampling and purposive techniques were used to sample the respondents. The sample was drawn by obtaining an exhaustive list of student-teachers at each one of the three universities and lecturers and then selecting, at random, a certain number to comprise the sample. In the exercise, every member of the populations targeted had an equal chance of being selected. A manual lottery method was employed to sample, were each member of each population group (student-teachers; lecturers) was assigned a number, then numbers were drawn at random to comprise the sample group. Purposive sampling technique was used to sample the educational standards officers and the school administrators since they were the only ones holding the strategic positions that had a direct bearing on the area of study.

Data collection tools: Interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were the two main data collection tools used. Interviews were held with educational standards officers and school administrators, while FGDs were held with student-teachers during the residential school. Focus group discussions provided an easy way of meeting many student-teachers at the same time, at short notice during their time in residence (during their 10-day residential school) and a quick way of collecting data. Through interviews, it was easy to collect data from the ever-busy education standards officers and school administrators.

Findings and discussion: Descriptive and thematic analysis methods were predominantly used to analyse the findings. Information obtained from the interviews was individually analysed in order to extract themes.

Findings and discussion

Students’ perceptions on teaching practice

All student teachers perceived teaching practice as a necessary platform for learning which provides hands on experience; enables them to learn from others (e.g. mentors and peers); and moulds them into teachers since theoretically they cannot grasp everything. These findings corroborate with viewpoints of the majority of lecturers (87%), Education Standards Officers (70%) and school administrators (71%) regarding student teachers’ perception of teaching practice.

On the contrary, the majority of students (83%) perceived teaching practice as an involving exercise demanding them to plan and scheme to satisfy two masters, the school and the university, which required them to have two teaching files; they have to be involved in extracurricular activities despite their heavy loads; and those already practicing (diploma holder student teachers) they have
it rough especially if they remain at their stations for teaching practice, they have to handle multiple roles in that they may not necessarily be relieved of their usual duties.

However, the majority of student teachers (83%) from Zambian Open University liked the University’s policy on ‘Teaching practice’ that allows them to undertake it at their places of work.

Another perception of ‘teaching practice’ held by the majority of students (85%, from the three universities) is that it is an expensive venture financially and in kind. It was revealed by 10 percent of the students (from one university) that they were charged for practicing in schools (money used to pay their mentors). Meanwhile, 7 percent of the students (from another one university) complained of providing extra materials for teaching and for teaching files which they said were expensive.

**Observation time**

Sixty-four (64) percent of the students from the three universities noted that they were not given adequate attention by their lecturers. They said that the time the lecturers spent on observing them was hardly enough to adequately attend to students’ needs during teaching practice. The students further reported that they were observed in two teaching subjects. This means that they needed to have ample time with the lecturer before and after each of the lessons to discuss the lesson. As things were done, some lecturers just hurried through and left the students still teaching. The students further indicated that they wanted more time to be spent on observations and the need for lecturers to visit them more than once. They wanted to learn from the lecturers and show that they had improved in weak areas.

Additionally, all the students, from the three universities, unanimously preferred having teaching practice twice during their time of study to having it once. This viewpoint was also expressed by three quarters of school administrators (80%). According to them, having teaching practice twice would enable student teachers to learn from their previous experiences.

The student participants (96%) further revealed that authorities from schools observed them. They also indicated that some supervisors did a good job, while others did not. This is evident in the words of the student teachers:

*I was only observed by the deputy head teacher once in all the teaching practice period at the school I was attached to* [Male student, ZAOU student].

The senior teacher observed me twice and thereafter never came again. Despite submitting my schemes and records of work periodically like all other teachers at the school, they were rarely marked or checked. School administrators are always out attending meetings and other work-related activities but devoted very little time to student teachers [Female student, Nkrumah University].

The lecturer from the University who came to observe me during teaching practice was very casual and lacked knowledge and skill in what he was doing. I never benefited anything; he never commented on whatever I taught apart from merely showing me the score sheet and how I fared (the marks) [Male student, University of Africa].

**Frequency of observation per subject**

The majority of student teachers (88%) and all school administrators revealed that supervisors (both within the school and from the universities) did not give adequate attention to student teachers when observing them. According to all the education standards officers, the time lecturers spent on observing students was hardly enough to adequately attend to (their) needs during teaching practice. The ideal situation would be that assessment of student teachers’ engagement should show that supervisors...
regard observation lesson as both a test and a means for reflection and professional development” (Leshem & Bar-Hama, 2008: 264).

Student participants (50%, from the three universities) further contended that they were observed in two teaching subjects while the rest of the subjects were not. They unanimously revealed that lecturers who came for observations just hurried through and left them still teaching. This corroborates the finding by Parker and Volante (2009) who advocate for authentic evaluation of student teaching practice.

The revised curriculum requires a teacher to take two teaching subjects. The standards officers noted that a teacher is supposed to be adept and skilful in two teaching subjects (This is in line with the revised curriculum, MoE, 2014), failure to observe student teachers in both subjects disadvantages them. Unanimously, students demanded for ample time with the lecturer before and after each of the lesson observations to discuss the lesson(s). Below is a unanimous revelation:

We want to learn from school administrators and lecturers who come to observe us during teaching experience. We want them to show us where we are doing well and needy areas which have to be improved [Students from ZAOU, Nkrumah University and University of Africa].

**Aspects affecting students’ teaching practice**

**Theory and practice**

The three universities hold teaching practice in high esteem just like student teachers. Student teachers described it as “a platform for learning.” Standards officers also noted that teaching practice provided hands on experience and learning from others. This finding is in agreement with Tang (2003) who reported that the experience contributed to students’ professional learning.

Findings of the study further indicate that most of the students described teaching practice as an experience which moulded them into teachers. To the contrary, half of the school administrators contended that often times, close to half of student teachers on teaching practice failed to blend theory and practice until after a month of their attachment. According to the administrators, student teachers still teach following textbooks word for word (verbatim), an indication of non-comprehension of teaching skill, if not lack of knowledge of subject area too. This explains why researchers like Sedumedia and Mundalado (2012) concluded that some teacher education practices, especially pre-service assessment of the practicum required revision; and “both the theoretical aspect especially subject matter knowledge and the pedagogical aspects in practical teaching need to equally contribute to the total determination of assessment outcomes.”

**Student teachers’ relation with learners of diverse background**

The study found that student teachers needed to learn more on how to relate with and teach learners from diverse backgrounds. It further established that teacher training institutions (universities) should emphasise on: monitoring and evaluating learner progress, implementing the homework policy, how to motivate and retain learner interest, assessing learners of diverse background and above all providing feedback effectively. All these critical areas were also proposed to be key in assessing and evaluating the competencies in teaching performance by Good and Weaver (2003). This is evident by the revelations made by student teachers:

I lacked orientation on how to handle learners with special education needs. I was embarrassed...
when I came face-to-face with such children [Male student, ZAOU; Female student, University of Africa].

Universities should emphasise more on inclusive education...it can help us student teachers know effectively pupils with different needs [Female student, Nkrumah University].

How students cope during teaching practice

Teaching practice environment

In addition, 50% of the students said that infrastructure, furniture and books for pupils to use were not available. According to the student participants, they often improvised teaching and learning materials and made-do with what was available.

Such a situation caused some students to spend their own money providing materials for teaching and learning during teaching practice [Male student, Zambian Open University].

Some classrooms not conducive, too small, untidy [Female student, University of Africa].

According to the supervisors at schools, ‘teaching practice’ did not provide a relaxed atmosphere for some students. They were ever expectant of being observed.

All of the participants made reference of this. Grade teachers (mentors) appeared to have served a little function. Findings also reveal that student teachers rarely acknowledged receiving help from grade teachers (assumedly mentors) on how to cope in the classroom. They also said that grade teachers hardly offered support to them. Bemoaning student teachers’ predicament, standards officers and school administrators mentioned this missing link for student teachers. According to them, records clearly show the role of a grade teacher (mentor), which are unfortunately not adhered to. They hinted that grade teachers have a supervisory role, observing proceedings and appraising student teachers in various learning areas. The host teacher thus plays a vital role in how the student teacher experiences practice teaching. This corroborates with the revelation by Gan (2014) that during the teaching practicum, student teachers basically benefit from lesson observation, the cooperating teacher and practicum school, university supervisors’ supervision, communication with other school members, and the peer teachers.

Multi-tasking

Student teachers as well as supervisors described ‘teaching practice’ as hectic. According to the majority of the students, they often had a myriad tasks to do, which included writing school assignments (university work), exams, preparing teaching-learning materials (TLMs). Almost all student participants described ‘teaching practice’ as time consuming in preparing TLM, if available could cut on time. Detailed insight is captured below:

This collision of teaching practice and examinations caused some students to delay commencement of their practice [Students at Zambian Open University; School Administrator, Kabwe and Lusaka].

Close to half of the students were found still not ready for observation when supervisors called up on them. They also felt uncomfortable to be observed when they were not really ready [School Administrator, Kabwe and Lusaka].

‘Teaching practice experience’ is involving: prepare lesson plans, schemes, records of work, annual plan [Students at Zambian Open University; University of Africa; and Nkrumah University].
Weaknesses of ‘teaching practice’

Sixty-six (66) percent of the students described mentoring as inadequate. Despite such a revelation, literature holds that mentors are generally effective teachers with experience and expertise in key areas (Brooks & Sikes, 1997; Maphalala, 2013).

The findings reveal that 63 percent of student teachers said that ‘Teaching practice’ lacked a platform for students to share their experiences; they (students) took ‘teaching practice’ as a course which ended immediately they completed the practice (abrupt ending); and were accorded limited time to share experiences with classmates and or colleagues. These revelations by student teachers are contrary to the findings by Ngoepe (2014), who established that student teachers spend a lot of time observing mentors teaching, preparing lesson plans. They have a platform to share and learn through practice.

Findings of the study indicate that 35 percent of the students were observed by a lecturer with a different specialisation; and had course contents that did not respond to current changes in Curriculum (Static teaching practice subject content). Interestingly, half of the education standards officers consented to having recorded the similar complaints from schools they monitored for the past two years.

Furthermore, students from University of Africa (UoA) complained of being observed by unspecialised teachers, who did not critique or add value to their ‘teaching practice’; while students from Nkrumah University (NU) complained of being observed too early, say second or third week of a term. Students from ZAOU had teaching practice and examinations during the same period. Meanwhile, education standards officers revealed that the Ministry of Education (MoE) had learnt that institutions of higher learning held examinations and residential schools when schools (primary and secondary) were open, thereby affecting learners. To overcome this, the MoE intervened and directed institutions of higher learning to reschedule and re-program their calendar activities so that they hold residential schools and examinations during school recess time.

Conclusion

Student teachers from all the three universities highly rated the course ‘teaching practice’. However, issues regarding supervision of the practical course and its actual execution by students leave much to be desired. Arising from the weaknesses observed in executing ‘teaching practice’, it becomes imperative that universities and the Ministry of Education must take keen interest in improving the course.

Key findings of the study revealed the following three: firstly, the relevance of teaching experience in enhancing understanding of handling teaching-learning; secondly, the relevance of teaching experience in improving the teaching-learning environment; and thirdly, overcoming challenges that teachers face, and ways of restoring them.

Recommendations

The study recommends that:
1. Institutions of higher learning should schedule ‘teaching practice’ twice in their four-year teacher training programme.
2. The government, through standards officers, should take keen interest in monitoring teaching practice trends.
3. Specialised lecturers should observe students on ‘teaching practice’.
4. Lecturers should have ample time before, during and after the lesson observation.
References


