TP preparation in open and distance learning: Lecturer and student views

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Abstract

For Teaching Practice (TP) to be productive adequate preparation of student teachers is necessary. In Open and Distance learning both practical and theoretical activities can be employed in the preparation of student teachers for TP. At the time students in intake 10 who were studying the Diploma in Education Primary (DIPED) at Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) went to seek for places where they could do TP some school heads were reluctant to offer them places as they questioned the thoroughness with which the students had been prepared for TP in comparison with students at conventional colleges. A study was conducted to determine challenges faced in preparing students for TP and the ways in which TP preparation for DIPED students was perceived as adequate or otherwise by students and lecturers. Data were generated from participants in the ZOU Midlands region only via open-ended questionnaires. The study established that students had adequate and relevant theoretical input on educational foundations and activities linked to TP such as mentoring, whose content was covered in pre-TP modules and tutorials. The one-month home based observation organised for students, peer and micro teaching were viewed as efficient in preparing students for TP although some loopholes were opined in the use of these strategies. Nonetheless, practice in the use of modern technology in the classroom and production and use of media were viewed as inadequately covered for purposes of preparing students for TP. The study recommends the development of student teacher skills in integrating ICT in their TP, inter alia.

Key words: teaching practice, curriculum, preparation

Introduction

Teacher education cannot be considered complete and of good quality if student teachers are not given an opportunity to do Teaching Practice (TP). According to Chiromo (2007), whatever the model of teacher education, the best place to learn how to teach is in the didactic situation with real learners. For this reason it is mandatory that student teachers be prepared effectively for TP so that general goals of practicum in teacher education are realised. A survey was conducted to determine perceptions of lecturers and students on the TP preparations that were made for Diploma in Education Primary Intake 10 students at Zimbabwe Open University, in the Midlands region.
Background to the study

At Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) TP is a common curriculum in all teacher development courses, among which is the Diploma in Education Primary programme (DIPED). DIPED is a three year programme and was introduced for study at ZOU in 2006 mainly to cater for the development needs of temporary teachers in primary schools. However in 2011 the DIPED programme was suspended by Zimbabwe Council of Higher Education (ZIMCHE) for the reason that the programme lacked the study of a main subject by the student teacher and that TP prep for students was not very effective as it did not incorporate activities such as micro and peer-teaching. However, the suspension of the DIPED was lifted in 2015 but the temporal suspension resulted in some people in the education sector having negative opinions about DIPED. Thus, strategies by which student teachers are prepared for TP need to be considered continuously to ensure sincerity and quality about TP and general teacher education. At the time this study was carried out some groups of people still had some doubts on the capability by ZOU to effectively develop primary school teachers through the Diploma in Education Primary programme. It was against this backdrop that this study was conducted.

Statement of the problem

Some school authorities were of the mind that DIPED students at ZOU were not effectively prepared for TP. At the time students in DIPED intake 10 went to some schools to try to get places to do TP, some school authorities expressed their doubts about how effectively students had been prepared for TP, when compared with student teachers at conventional Teacher Colleges.

Purpose of study

The study was conducted to determine opinions of DIPED Intake 10 students’ and lecturers’ opinions on the ways by which students had been prepared for TP.

Research questions

The following questions guided the study:
- Which forms of strategies were employed at ZOU to prepare DIPED Intake 10 students for TP?
- In which aspects were student teachers adequately prepared for TP?
- In which aspects were student teachers inadequately prepared for TP?
- What challenges were there in trying to prepare students adequately for TP?
- How could students in future DIPED intakes be better prepared for TP?

Research objectives

The objectives of the study were to:
- ascertain ways by which DIPED students were prepared for TP
- determine aspects student teachers were adequately and inadequately prepared for TP
- establish challenges presenting themselves in preparing students for TP and
- suggest ways by which future DIPED students could be better prepared for TP.

Significance of the study

It was hoped that an enriched understanding of productive ways of preparing student teachers would make a useful contribution in teacher education through Open and Distance Education (ODL). The researcher hoped that
lecturers involved in teacher education could use the study as a platform to reflect on their ways of preparing student teachers for TP. The findings on TP preparation linked challenges could be a basis for addressing challenges through collaboration of lecturers and stakeholders in teacher education in ODL.

Research methods

Design

The qualitative method which employed the case study design was used in this study. The qualitative research endeavors to understand what is going on for participants in a given setting (Greener, 2008). According to Magwa and Magwa (2015), qualitative studies investigate current phenomena. This study was focused on investigating opinions of students and lecturers on the preparation of DIPED students for Teaching Practice (TP).

Population

All full-time and part-time lecturers in the department of teacher development of teacher development and 58 students in intake 10 in the Diploma in Education Primary programme at Zimbabwe Open University in the Midlands region made up the research population.

Sample

Eight lecturers who were involved in preparing DIPED students for TP were purposively sampled for participating and the 20 DIPED students were purposively and conveniently sampled to take part in the study, on the 26th of June, 2016 after they had done microteaching. The DIPED students in intake 10 were in their second semester and were due to go for TP in their third University semester.

Data generation instruments

Lecturers filled in an open-ended questionnaire while the questionnaire for students had some closed and open-ended items.

Ethical considerations

Participants were informed of the purpose and potential benefits of the study and so they consented to taking part after being informed about the study. All contributions from participants were treated confidentially.

Data presentation and analysis

Data were presented and analysed via thick descriptions and were discussed in relation to reviewed literature.

Limitations and delimitations

Findings may not necessarily be generalisable to other teacher development programmes at ZOU or to other ODL teacher development programmes elsewhere. In-spite of this perceived limitation, the current study could make useful contributions to improve TP preparation endeavours for student teachers, especially to teacher development through Open and Distance Learning. This study was carried out to determine student and lecturer views on TP preparation for DIPED students in intake 10 only and at ZOU Midlands campus only.

Conceptual Framework

Essence of teaching practice preparation

Sound preparation is necessary for success in TP. According to Ojoawo (1996) cited by Jekayinfa (2001), the programme of teacher education is two-fold namely theoretical and
practical dimension. The theoretical dimension takes care of the acquisition of theoretical knowledge about classroom practice. In addition to the theoretical activities, micro and peer teaching are some of the key TP preparatory techniques used. Micro-teaching is a teacher education technique which helps the student teacher to master teachers' skills. “Micro-teaching is a teacher training technique which provides student teachers an opportunity to perk up their teaching skills by improving the various simple tasks called teaching skills” (Remesh, 2013, p 158). Micro-teaching helps to “develop skills to prepare lesson plans, choose teaching objectives, speak in front of a group, use questions and evaluation techniques” (Kilic, 2010, p. 82).

“Peer teaching is a two way reciprocal learning activity. It can be described as a way of moving beyond independent to interdependent or mutual learning” (Boud, et al., 2002, p. 1). It involves sharing of knowledge, ideas and experience between participants. It is not a single practice and it covers a wide range of different activities each of which can be combined with others (Boud, et al., 2002).

“The central task of pre-service preparation builds on current thinking about what teachers need to know, care about and be able to do in order to promote substantial learning for all students” (Feiman-Nemser 2001, p. 1016). Sound professional preparation is necessary for success in teaching practice. TP preparation is the initial ground vital for developing skills, attributes and understanding the profession of teaching (Jekayinfa, 2001 citing Adehiran, 1996). Critical skills that need to be understood by student teachers before they go for TP include lesson planning, implementation or teaching and classroom management skills. There are obstacles to effective preservice TP preparation. Obstacles are legion and they include “low status of teachers and teacher educators, over regulation of preservice programs by the state, weak leadership, limited resources and a lack of imagination on the part of teacher educationists” (Feiman-Nemser 2001, p. 1021).

Review of related literature

In a study titled, ‘Listening to the Concerns of Student Teachers in Malaysia during Teaching Practice’ participants revealed that they had not been prepared adequately in maintaining order and pupil cooperation to prevent problems from arising (Goh, & Matthews, 2011). Student teachers training did not prepare them in managing science practical sessions and dealing with disrespectful pupils and dealing with difficult questions from pupils. The study established that the University of Sunderland’s secondary Initial Teacher education had the arrangement that the first two years “are wholly University based, covering the subject itself up to degree level with very little “education” input. Students of the programme commented that while they were on the education programme they had no “practical education” input until the Block School Experience work began in their 3rd year (Goh, & Matthews, 2011).

In a study titled, “Are they Ready? Final Year Pre-Service Teachers Learning about Managing Student Behaviour,” the findings suggested that student teachers were ill prepared in dealing with responding to the diversity of student backgrounds, working with a range of stakeholders other than mentor teachers and engaging all learners, (Peters 2012, p. 33). In a study titled, “Achieving the Impossible? Teaching Practice Components of a Pre-Service Distance English Language Teacher Training in Turkey”, it was found out that at initial stages student teachers had problems in determining learning outcomes, some lesson objectives were vague and others were not related to English language learning processes and so students were ill prepared in this aspect of lesson planning (Kecik, 2011, p. 77).
In a study titled, “An assessment of the efficiency of the tripartite student teacher mentoring scheme in Zimbabwe’s Masvingo Region” by Chauraya (2006), among other things the findings of the study showed that the students and mentors who were involved in the study expressed the view that student teachers were adequately prepared for Teaching Practice in the areas of scheming, planning, preparation of media and their use. Nonetheless the same study found out that college preparation was not adequate on class control or classroom management strategies (Chauraya, 2006).

Presentation and discussion of findings

Q1: Which forms of strategies were employed at ZOU to prepare DIPED Intake 10 students for TP?

Information generated from the 28 participants regarding their views on the forms of strategies which were employed at the ZOU Midlands regional campus to prepare DIPED students in intake 10 for TP was as is represented in Fig. 1.

All 28 participants stated micro teaching as one of the ways by which students in DIPED intake 10 were prepared for TP. In support of this opinion one student made the following comment:

S19 Micro teaching done at Stanley school gave us the feel of what it means to teach actual pupils.

Twenty four times it was opined that modules and tutorials were each a strategy that was employed at the Midlands regional campus to prepare students for TP. One lecturer made the following contribution:

L3 All modules covering foundational courses in education and interactive methodologies in the learning of primary school subjects and weekend school tutorials all gave good prep for TP.

Twenty three out of the 28 participants were of the mind that the TP preparation workshop which was run at the Midlands regional campus was one way by which DIPED students had been prepared for practicum. The TP prep workshop programme which the researcher laid hands on was run on Sunday 26 June and presentations made by the Midlands regional TP team members covered the following aspects critical to classroom practice: catering for special needs of learners, class and classroom management, media presentation, scheming and lesson planning, records kept by a primary school teacher, questioning...
technique, marking pupils’ work, mentor-mentee relations and teacher professionalism. One lecturer made the following contribution in support of the proceedings at the TP prep workshop:

L2 Students got RPCs input on all aspects of TP at the regional campus.

Twenty two out of 28 participants conceived that peer teaching was one of the procedures by which DIPED students were groomed for TP. One participant confirmed the use of peer teaching as one approach by which students were prepared for TP by giving the following statement:

L4 Each student had a chance to peer teach.

Twenty participants gave the mind that Home Based School Observation (HBSO) was one mode by which DIPED students in intake 10 were prepared for practicum. Some participants endorsed this opinion by giving the following statements:

L3 Students did home based school observation from 10 May to 10 June, 2016.

S7 HBSO was an eye opener; we learnt about school organisation plus all types of school docs kept by a teacher

The modes through which DIPED students were prepared for TP at the ZOU Midlands Region were in support of Ojoawo (1996) cited by Jekayinfa (2001), who says the programme of teacher education is two-fold namely theoretical and practical dimension. The theoretical dimension took care of the acquisition of theoretical knowledge about classroom practice via modules, tutorials and TP prep workshop presentations. Micro and peer teaching and home based school observation were the practical modes by which DIPED students were groomed for TP. Micro-teaching helps to “develop skills to prepare lesson plans, choose teaching objectives, speak in front of a group, ask questions and use evaluation techniques” (Kilic, 2010, p. 82). The finding made in this study that peer and micro teaching were done to prepare students for practicum contradict findings made by Goh and Matthews (2011) whose study established that student teachers had no practical education input until their TP began.

**Q2: In which aspects were student teachers adequately prepared for TP?**

In response to a question which required participants to state elements in which student teachers had obtained good understanding of concepts and skills necessary for them to embark on TP, participants’ summary of views were as is presented in Table 1 below:

**Stated aspects in which student teachers were adequately prepared for TP?**

Data in Table 1 shows that twenty four times it was indicated that scheming and lesson planning were each skills in which student teachers were adequately prepared for TP. In line with this view some participants gave the following contributions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stated aspects in which student teachers were adequately prepared for TP?</th>
<th>Number of participants out of 28</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scheming</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson planning</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class management</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marking of pupils’ work</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson evaluation</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioning technique</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Handling pupils with special needs</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Record keeping</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentor-mentee relationships</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher professionalism</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self evaluation</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
S13 Scheming was covered in the Professional Studies module, peer and microteaching.

S16 Lesson planning and scheming covered at the TP prep workshop and in peer teaching.

Class management and marking of pupils’ work were stated as areas in which students were adequately prepared for TP by 23 and 22 participants respectively. One participant simply put it this way:

S9 Principles of effective marking and class management were made clear.

The questioning technique was considered as adequately covered for purposes of TP readiness by 20/28 participants while 19 participants conceived that the handling of pupil with special needs, mentor-mentee relationships and general issues on teacher professionalism were aspects of teaching in which student teachers were given good understanding at the ZOU Midlands region in preparation for their practicum. The concept of lesson evaluation was believed to have been adequately covered for purposes of practicum preparation by 21/28 participants and 17/28 participants opined that the theory of self evaluation was adequately covered for TP preparation. In support of these opinions one of the participants wrote:

L5 Lesson and self evaluation were clarified in the practical activities done at ZOU.

The views given by participants that DIPED students were prepared for TP in many ways linked to actual teaching are in support of (Odehiran, 1996) who says TP preparation is the initial ground vital for developing skills, attributes and understanding the profession of teaching. The finding made in this study that student teachers were adequately prepared in scheming and lesson planning corroborates Chauraya (2006) who also found out the same in his study.

Q3: In which aspects were student teachers inadequately prepared for TP?

Participants’ views on areas in which DIPED students in intake 10 were ill prepared for TP were as is summarised in Table 2.

The use of computers during instruction was an area which 23/28 participants felt students were ill prepared for TP. One participant made the following statement in support of this view:

S12 We had no live demos on the use of computers during lessons. It's a grey area.

According to 16/28 participants students were ill prepared for TP in the area of writing on chalk/white board and labeling charts. Four participants gave the view that students had no adequate knowledge on using the Nelson script which is essential in teaching primary school learners to write. Six participants were of the mind that the ZOU Midlands region had not equipped students with basic knowledge on Progress Lag Address Programme (PLAP) record keeping. That only six participants conceived that students were not made knowledgeable about PLAP record keeping could be attributed to the fact that PLAP was a newly introduced programme in Zimbabwean schools at the time this study was carried out. The findings made in this study on areas that the ZOU midlands campus had not adequately prepared DIPED students for TP do not corroborate any of the findings made in the studies reviewed in this study.

Q4: What challenges were there in trying to prepare students adequately for TP?

Participants’ views on what they perceived as challenges to effective student teacher preparation by ZOU Midlands regional campus were as is presented in Fig.2.

Twenty- one out of 28 participants were of the mind that limited contact time was a challenge the ZOU Midlands region faced in

Table 2: Participants' views on areas in which students were ill prepared for TP

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Areas in which students were ill prepared for TP</th>
<th>Number of participants out of 28</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Using computers during lesson delivery</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing on chalk/white board and charts</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progress Lag Address Programme (PLAP) record keeping</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using Nelson Script</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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trying to adequately prepare students for practicum. One lecturer made the following contribution:

L5 Shortness of contact time is a hindrance.

None use of modern technology in peer and micro teaching was viewed by 11/28 contributors as a challenge to effective TP preparation of students while 9/28 opined that student absenteeism contributed to ineffective TP readiness of students. The finding that there were challenges to effective TP confirm findings by Feiman-Nemser (2001) who says that limited resources are among a challenge to effective TP preparation.

Q5: How could students in future DIPED intakes be better prepared for TP?

When participants were asked to give their views on how students in future DIPED intakes could be better prepared for TP, 21/28 suggested provision of more contact time for TP prep, 11/28 proposed use of video equipment in practical activities such as micro teaching while 3/28 participants recommended the covering of skills and concepts critical to teaching at TP prep workshops run at the ZOU Midlands region.

Conclusions

At the Midlands regional campus, students were prepared for TP via a number of activities among which were: peer and micro teaching, HBSO, and a TP prep workshop which was run at the region. These activities were useful in preparing students in as far as some teaching skills are concerned e.g. record keeping, planning for teaching and dealing with learners with special needs. Due to some challenges such as time constraints students were ill prepared for TP in some important skills such as use of modern technology in lesson delivery.

Recommendations

The researcher recommends the following:
- Accordance of more contact time outside the tutorial time table for purposes of effective TP prep by the Midlands region
- In-cooperating all key teaching skills such as production and use of media and PLAP record keeping in the presentations by regional team at the TP prep workshops
- Tutors who handle the teaching media and technology aspects or modules should meaningfully cover and demonstrate use of modern technology in the classroom
- Use of video and audio apparatus by lecturers in micro and peer teaching to promote useful evaluations of presentations through replays and
- Giving DIPED students practical assignments such preparation of TP file, scheming and preparation of media by the Teacher development department at ZOU.

References


