

Assessment on the Implementation of the Pre-service Practicum Program in Teacher Education Colleges (Dessie College of Teacher Education in Focus)

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Abstract

The main objective of this study was to assess the overall effectiveness of the implementation of the practicum programs, the support provided and evaluation techniques used by tutors and mentors, its contributions and challenges. The research type employed was descriptive survey with mixed-design approach. The study site was Dessie College of Teacher Education working the practicum program in collaboration with Dessie town woreda primary schools. 120 student teachers, 66 placement teachers (mentors) and 36 teacher educators (tutors) were sample populations of the study. Student teachers and teacher educators were selected as a sample using systematic random sampling and school teachers (mentors) were selected using purposive sampling technique. Data was collected using questionnaire, interviews, focused group discussion and document reviews and analyzed both quantitatively (i.e. using percentages) and qualitatively (i.e. by the use of narrations and descriptions). The results of the study revealed that there were understanding problems on the conceptualization of practicum and its main functions, the three actors (student teachers, mentors and tutors) were not clearly accomplishing their roles and responsibilities due to lack of coordinated work of tutors and mentors and absence of close follow up and support system. There were various hampering factors affecting the practicum program. Student teachers were not carefully scaffolded.

Keywords: student teacher; placement teacher; practicum; professional experience; teacher educator; teacher education; tutor; mentor.

1.1 Background of the study

Teacher education or development to Hargreaves and Fullan (1992) is a complex, multi-faceted process made up of initial teacher training and in-service training. Loughran (2006) suggests that there is an “enormous array of skills, knowledge, competencies, conceptualizations and practices” that reflect the complexity and messiness of the theories and practice of teaching and learning. Schön (1983) refers to this as the “indeterminate swampy zone” and Labaree (2000) also agrees that such research is complex and messy.

Although a lot has been written about teacher education during the last decade, much of it is based on literature reviews, policy development, government inquiries and understandings of those responsible for the tertiary programs to prepare pre-service teachers. While traditional quantitative methodology and scientific principles (Schön 1983, 1987) provide more predictable, controlled, step-by-step solutions or answers to our research and teaching questions, it is the qualitative researchers’ belief that their methodology is more likely to generate understanding in this complex and unpredictable world of classrooms (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). As Ekiz (2006) suggests, teachers (and student teachers) have to deal with unpredictable courses of action which generally emerge from the immediacy of classrooms. While in a similar vein Labaree (2000, 231) suggests:

If teaching is indeed a practice as difficult as I portrayed ... then there is no form of professional practice that is more demanding except perhaps teacher education. We ask teacher education programs to provide ordinary college students with the imponderable so that they can teach the irrepressible in a manner that pleases the irreconcilable, and all without knowing clearly either the purposes or the consequences of their actions.

Eventually, the more experienced teacher educators and researchers began to temper the solution style discussions with their more informed ideas about teacher education and introduced the theories that underpinned their understandings. The works of Schön (1983, 1987) (practitioner research), Kemmis and McTaggart (1990) (action research) and identity and agency studies (Labaree 2000) were introduced. Views around pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman 1987) and productive and generative learning (Newmann and Associates 1996; Lingard, Hayes, and Mills 2003) were discussed, and the focus returned to pre-service teacher learning and the sense of “becoming” a teacher (Korthagen 2004).

The practicum is a central component of teacher education and has been the subject of discussion among teacher educators internationally for more than a century. Much of the debate has focused on the limitations of the experience and the need for improvement. Issues include the optimum length (Carpenter and Blance, 2001; Kosnik and Beck, 2003); the quality of the supervision and assessment provided by school-

based supervising teachers and college representatives (John, 2001; Laboskey and Richert, 2002); the extent of the links between the school and the college (Long, 1997; Martinez, 1998) and an increasing focus on the teacher as reflective practitioner rather than as competent technician (Clarke, 2006; Coolahan, 2003; Crasborn et al., 2008; Geen and Harris, 2002).

Teacher education programs in sub-Saharan African countries have been faced with more challenges as expansive interventions drive the sector in response to both domestic and international pressures and incentives. In particular, the facilitation of school experience, which is often referred to as supervision and the actual school experience called 'practicum' has increasingly become difficult as the number of student teachers keeps on surging (Chivore, 1992; Lugton 2000).

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Ethiopia, one of the Sub-Saharan countries, has hugely expanded activities in teacher education, so that major challenges have engulfed the sector. Moreover, various institutions have introduced teacher education programs without having adequate preparedness and the knowledge base to implement those programs and quality education is becoming a challenge (Amare, et al, 2006; Anderson, 2002; Leu, 2005). In trying to address the serious problems present in the education system, the Ministry of Education initiated for a complete Teacher Education System Overhaul (TESO) and the three components, the practicum, the teaching methods and professional studies were prioritized and given sufficient time (MoE, 2003).

Among these components, practicum is a key aspect and the heart of teacher education program (Kennedy, 1993; MoE, 2003; Zeichner, 1996). It was designed to ensure that student teachers have as much supported school experience as possible before they enter the classroom as a qualified teacher (MoE, 2003) and it makes stronger connections between theory and practice with more emphasis on experiences in the community and school settings ((Ben-Peretz, 2000; Livingstone, 2001; Schon, 1983; 1987). The practice of practicum as a new paradigm shift was associated with the emergence of constructivism philosophy and owes much to works on the 'reflective practitioner' (Schon, 1983, 1987). It was designed with the assumption that learning takes place when the learner has to make sense of things that confront them-the idea that development comes through the individual's construction or invention of knowledge (Livingstone, 2001). Even though practicum was an important component of teacher education program (MoE, 2003), there has been a great deal of challenges colleges and universities faced during its implementation. Lack of uniformity of the course offering situation, lack of coherence of courses, lack of clarity of the activities of the practicum, lack of clear assessment methods, costiness of the program and lack of full involvement of the mentors in the program were the main challenges (MoE, 2007).

As a result, rearrangements have been made at national level by the Ministry of Education in terms of the duration of time, assessment and the amount of credit hours allotted to the course for both the linear and cluster programs. Generally the practicum counts about 11% of the training time (MoE, 2007) and has a three-part structure: preparation in the college, activity in school and reflection and analysis in the college (MoE, 2003) and played by a triad of players-teacher educators (tutors), placement teachers (mentors) and student teachers (MoE, 2003; Tadesse, 2006). During the placement program, student teachers being supported by experienced teachers (mentors) and teacher educators (tutors) need to have practical experience of the realities of school life and the classroom (Livingstone, 2001).

In Dessie College of Teacher Education too, the practicum under four phases (practicum I- school observation; practicum II- working under the mentor; practicum III- supporting the mentor and practicum IV-independent teaching) were implemented for the 10+3 diploma linear and cluster programs. During the implementation of the four phases of the program, different controversial issues concerning its implementations were raised and these issues triggered the researcher for further investigation. Therefore, the study tried to assess the overall effectiveness of the implementation of the four practicum programs, the supporting mechanisms, assessment techniques applied by teacher educators (tutors) and placement teachers (mentors) and its contributions and factors affecting the practicum. More specifically, this study was intended to:

- Assess the practices of the student teachers and their challenges in the four phases of the practicum programs.
- Analyze the support and assessment mechanisms made by teacher educators (tutors) and school teachers (mentors) for the student teachers;
- Pinpoint the main contributions and factors affecting the practicum program.

2. Methodology

2.1. Population and Site

For this study descriptive survey research was employed and the study site was Dessie College of Teacher Education working the practicum in collaboration with Dessie town woreda six general primary schools (Etege Menen, Dawdo, Tigilfrie, Robit, Merhatibeb and Addisfana). The student teachers, placement teachers (mentors), teacher educators (tutors), the x-college practicum coordinators and pre-service TDS co-coordinators

were the target population for this study.

2.2. Study Design and Sampling

The study was descriptive survey type and the six primary schools that accommodated large number of student teachers were selected using purposive sampling. From 358 assigned third year student teachers in each school for practicum, about 120 of them were selected as a sample using systematic random sampling. 36 teacher educators who have long experiences in the college were chosen from each department using simple random sampling. 66 placement teachers that were assigned as mentors were selected as a data source using simple random sampling technique. The x-college practicum coordinators and pre-service Teacher, Directors and Supervisors (TDS) coordinators were also selected as a sample using snowball sampling technique.

2.3. Data Collection and Analysis

The main data gathering instrument for this research was the questionnaire. A 5-likert scale questions from the four phases of the practicum were prepared and distributed to placement teachers, student teachers, teacher educators and practicum coordinators. The questions were adapted from the Ministry of Education practicum guide and developed into the context of Amhara Region Teacher Education Colleges. Finally, pilot tests of the questionnaire were made to test the reliability and validity of the questionnaire. Based on the pilot study, some items were excluded and some added. Additionally, the items of the questionnaire were checked and rechecked by colleagues for their face validity and those items that seemed vague for teachers were modified and rephrased. The reliability coefficient of the subscales of the improved questionnaire was computed using Chronbach alpha as .82.

Besides, for the purpose of triangulation semi-structured interviews and focused group discussions with pre-service TDS practicum coordinators, x- practicum coordinators, school teachers, student teachers and teacher educators were made. Document reviews (the assessment results and assessment formats of mentors and tutors) and student teachers' portfolios had also been used as an additional tool. The collected data was organized, analyzed and interpreted using both a quantitative and qualitative data analysis techniques. The quantitative data was analyzed using percentage and the interview and focus group discussion data were analyzed qualitatively using descriptions and narrations.

3. Results

This part deals with the analysis of the data gathered through questionnaire, interviews and focus group discussion about the practices and challenges of the four phases of the practicum program (practicum-I: observing the school environment, practicum-II: working under the mentor, practicum-III: assisting the mentor and practicum-IV: independent teaching).

Table-1: Responses of student teachers and teacher educators on student teachers practice of practicum-I (observing the school environment)

<i>Items</i>	<i>Student teachers' responses (N=120)</i>						<i>Teacher educators responses (N=36)</i>					
	High		Average		Low		High		Average		Low	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Awareness about the program	18	15	37	30.83	65	54.16	12	33.33	16	44.44	8	22.22
Ability of preparing portfolio	23	19.16	26	21.66	71	59.16	7	19.44	10	27.77	19	52.27
Ability of reflecting portfolio	8	6.66	20	16.66	92	76.66	7	19.44	9	25	20	55.55

In the table-1 above, about practicum-I, 65 (54.16) student teachers rated that they have low awareness on the practice of the first phase of practicum. The responses of both teacher educators and student teachers indicated that student teachers' ability of preparing the portfolio by observing the school and classroom environments and reflecting that portfolio without difficulty was found to be low. Even most of the prepared or copied practicum was the 'fictitious' works of some one.

Table-2: Student teachers' and school teachers' responses on the practice of student teachers in practicum-II (*Working under the mentor*)

Items	Student teachers' responses (N=120)						School teachers' responses (N=66)					
	High		Average		Low		High		Average		Low	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Commenting mentor's plan	28	23.33	68	56.66	24	20	10	15.15	40	60.60	16	24.24
Preparing lesson plan	68	56.66	28	23.33	24	20	7	10.60	37	56.06	22	33.33
Preparing & using teaching aids	23	19.16	30	25	67	55.83	11	16.66	5	22.72	40	66.60
Co-curricular activities	85	70.83	22	18.33	13	10.83	35	53.03	29	43.93	2	3.03
Textbook evaluation	6	5.00	10	8.33	104	86.66	13	19.69	10	15.15	43	65.15

NB:-School teachers do not have a significant role in practicum-I, so their response is not included.

From table-2, student teachers' ability of commenting the mentor's annual plan was average as 68 (56.66) of the student teachers and 40(60.60) school teachers rated. Student teachers' responses regarding their ability of preparing activity oriented lesson plan was high but school teachers rated average. For about 67 (55.83) student teachers and 40 (66.60) school teachers, student teachers' skill of preparing teaching aids from locally available materials and using in the class was low. Similarly, their ability of evaluating textbooks as 104 (86.66) of student teachers and 43 (65.15) school teachers replied was low. Nevertheless, their participation in co-curricular activities was high.

Table-3: Responses of teacher educators about the student teachers' ability in practicum-II

Items	Responses of teacher educators (No.=36)					
	High		Average		Low	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Their ability of preparing portfolio	8	22.22	20	55.50	8	22.22
Reflecting their portfolio in English properly.	2	5.55	10	27.77	24	66.66
Evaluating textbooks per evaluation criteria	6	16.66	8	22.22	22	61.11

Out of 36 teacher educators, 20 (55.50) of them rated that student teachers' ability of preparing a portfolio of practicum-II was average but reflecting it properly was found to be low. Similarly, student teachers' ability of evaluating textbooks per the evaluation criteria was low. The interview result of both the student teachers and teacher educators also revealed that they do not have any concept regarding how to evaluate textbooks since there was no course that provides them to do so.

Table-4: Responses of student teachers and school teachers about the ability of student teachers in practicum III

Items	Student teachers' responses (N=120)						School teachers' responses (N=66)					
	High		Average		Low		High		Average		Low	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Identifying causes of disruptive behaviors	44	36.5	62	51.66	14	11.66	18	27.27	39	59.09	9	13.63
Preventive/corrective measures	29	24.1	72	60	19	15.83	10	15.15	18	27.27	38	57.57
Assisting mentors by correcting activities	112	93.3	8	6.66	-	-	49	74.24	9	13.63	8	12.12
Helping mentors in lesson delivery	105	87.5	10	8.33	5	4.16	52	78.78	10	15.15	6	9.09

In table-4 above, the responses of 62 (51.66) student teachers and 39 (59.09) school teachers rated average for the ability of the school teachers in identifying the causes of students' classroom disruptive behaviors. But they lack taking corrective measures for disruptive behaviors as the majority of school teachers responses designates.

On the other hand, 112 (93.33) student teachers and 49(74.24) school teachers rated that their support for mentors in correcting class works, home tasks and tests was a high. On the same vein, their support to their mentors by preparing lesson plans, teaching aids and controlling the students' behavior was high.

Table-5: Responses of teacher educators on the practice of the student teachers in practicum- III

Items	Responses of Teacher educators (No.=36)					
	High		Average		Low	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Their ability of identifying causes of disruptive behaviors	5	13.88	21	58.33	10	27.77
Use curative & preventive measures	4	11.11	8	22.22	24	66.66
Their support to mentors in correcting tasks and preparing plans	26	72.22	7	19.44	3	8.33
Reflecting their portfolio properly	3	8.33	10	27.77	23	63.88

In the above table, as 21 (58.33) teacher educators rated that student teachers have average understanding the causes of students' disruptive behaviors. However, their mechanisms of handling such misbehaviors were found to be low. In practicum-III too, their ability of reflecting the portfolio with confidence is not improved so far and remained low.

Table-6: Student teachers' and school teachers' responses up on the practices made in practicum IV (independent teaching)

Items	<i>Student teachers' responses (N=120)</i>						<i>School teachers' responses (N=66)</i>					
	High		Average		Low		High		Average		Low	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Lesson plan preparation	15	12.50	28	23.33	77	64.16	10	15.15	16	24.24	40	60.60
Understanding their subject matter	20	16.66	71	59.16	29	24.16	12	18.18	16	24.24	38	57.57
Use active learning methods	35	29.16	75	62.50	10	8.33	37	56.06	21	31.81	7	10.60
Classroom management	29	24.16	70	58.33	21	17.50	15	22.72	36	54.54	15	22.72
Use various assessment tools	21	17.50	73	60.83	26	21.66	8	12.12	18	27.27	40	60.60
Conduct case study	25	20.83	35	29.16	60	50	10	15.15	36	54.54	20	20.30

From table-6, most student teachers 77 (64.16) and school teachers 40 (60.60) filled that they have low ability of preparing the lesson plan comprising three domains. The interview results highly explicated that the cognitive domain was the most widely applied one. Most student teachers (59.16%) filled that their understanding of the subject matter was average but the rating of most school teachers (57.57%) indicated low. On the other hand, 75 (62.50) student teachers rated that their use of different active learning methods was average whereas, 37 (56.06) school teachers replied high. The focus group discussants (school teachers) further elucidated that though student teachers lack the subject matter knowledge, they were good in applying different active learning methods. Both the majority of student teachers and school teachers expounded that the use of different classroom management techniques by student teachers was average, Nevertheless, their application of various continuous assessment techniques (both formative and summative) and skill of conducting case study up on the existing problems of the students was low.

Table -7: Teacher educators’ responses about the performance of student teachers during practicum IV
Practicum IV (Independent teaching)

Questions	Teacher educators responses (No.=36)					
	High		Average		Low	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
a. Lesson plan: preparing lesson plans having SMART objectives	4	11.11	8	22.22	24	66.66
Integrating objectives, activities, methods, media and assessment techniques in the daily lesson plan	4	11.11	10	27.77	22	61.11
b. Teaching-learning: their knowledge of the subjects they taught	7	19.44	8	22.22	21	58.33
their introduction, presentation, conclusion & evaluation skill clearly& orderly	8	22.22	10	27.77	18	50
use of different active learning methods	10	27.77	20	55.55	6	16.66
c. Instructional media: their ability to use appropriate teaching aids for the lesson	2	5.55	10	27.77	24	66.66
Their ability to make teaching aids from locally available materials	6	16.66	10	27.77	20	55.55
d. Assessment techniques: their ability of using different assessment techniques	2	5.55	14	38.88	20	55.55
e. Classroom management: skill of arranging seats and managing the class	3	8.33	26	72.22	7	19.44

During practicum IV, teacher educators have made classroom observations and assessments about the independent teaching skills of the student teachers. Thus, 24 (66.66) of the teacher educators rated that student teachers have low ability of preparing SMART objectives consisting of the three domains. Their ability of integrating objectives, activities, teaching methods, appropriate instructional media and assessment techniques in their daily lesson plan was also low as most respondents rated.

Similar to the school teachers’ responses, most teacher educators (58.33%) also gave eye-witnesses up on the low subject matter mastery of the student teachers. However, 20 (55.55) teacher educators assured that student teachers have average ability of using active learning methods during their evaluation time. Their classroom management skills were also average. Nevertheless, their application of the four didactic elements (introduction, presentation, summary and evaluation) in a more mesmerizing manner and both the production and application of appropriate teaching aids for the given lesson was low. All the same, to improve learning, the use of different continuous assessment techniques (class work, homework, quiz, and group work) during and after the lesson was low.

Table-8: Student teachers’ responses about their mentors and tutors support in the four phases of practicum

Items	Student teachers responses (N=120)					
	High		Average		Low	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Your mentor’ s interest and commitment to support you & share experiences in practicum	15	12.5	30	25	75	62.50
Your mentor’s ability of supporting and commenting your practice properly	5	4.16	20	16.66	95	79.16
Your mentor’s commitment to give proper assessment and feedbacks continuously	10	8.33	13	10.83	97	80.83
The college’s &tutors’ commitment to support you at schools and in the college	31	25.83	27	22.50	62	51.66
Your instructors’ ability of giving appropriate assessment (grades) to your evaluation at practicum levels	14	11.66	24	20	82	68.33

In table-8 above, student teachers were asked about the support they gained from school teachers (mentors) and teacher educators (tutors). Therefore, 75 (62.50) of the student teachers rated that mentor’s interest and commitment to support student teachers and share their experience to them in the various stages of practicum was low. The reasons explained during the discussion times with some student teachers were because some mentors were careless, some were authoritative, and some lack the knowledge and skills of mentoring and others lack incentives for their tasks as mentors. School teachers’ (mentor’s) ability of supporting, commenting and following the practice of the student teachers regularly and properly, as 95(79.16) of them rated, was low. The

highest number of student teachers (80.83%) also filled that mentor's commitment to give proper assessment and constructive feedbacks continuously for our improvement was low. A focus group discussion with school teachers (mentors) also indicated that much attention was not given to the proper assessment and follow up of the student teachers. Furthermore, as it was also analyzed from the grade reports of the student teachers through document analysis in different departments, nearly 97- 98 % of the placement teachers (mentors) gave full marks for their assigned student teachers in the different stages of the practicum assessments.

Regarding the supports made by the college, about 62 (51.66) of the student teachers rated that the support they gained from the college and their instructors(tutors) during the four practicum programs was low. About 82 (68.33) student teachers also rated that teacher educators (tutors) ability of giving appropriate assessment (grades) by using different evaluation criteria of the practicum was low.

Contributions of Practicum

The data gathered from the student teachers, school teachers and teacher educators through the open ended questions, interviews and focused group discussions clearly indicated that practicum has many contributions for the triad of actors(student teachers, placement teachers and teacher educators). As the data implied, the practicum program helped the student teachers to: identify the weak and strong sides of them in the actual setting,; share various experiences from placement teachers; relate the theory they learnt in the college with practice in the actual setting; develop their confidence in expressing their ideas in front of the students, placement teachers and teacher educators. The practicum program also helped the school teachers: to get support in the lesson delivery in preparing lesson plans, correcting students' class works and home works, preparing teaching aids, working in co-curricular activities and controlling students' misbehaviors. It also helped the college instructors to see the real context of the schools and enabled them adjust their training in line with the actual play ground.

Factors Affecting the Practicum

Student teacher's experience of the practicum can be affected by a number of aspects of the school and college environments.

Table-9: Responses of teacher educators, student teachers and school teachers on factors affecting the implementation of practicum (N=147)

Factors affecting the practicum program	Extent of influencing factors or challenges				
	Very high	High	Average	Low	Very low
Lack of continuous follow up and support by mentors	62	40	25	20	-
Lack of clear coordination of the school teachers and teacher educators during student teachers evaluation	20	51	31	38	7
Lack of subject matter knowledge of the student teachers	10	48	65	30	2
Student teachers' lack of methodology and professional ethics	18	13	40	59	17
Engaging large number of student teachers in one school	14	33	42	30	28
Lack of continuous follow up and support by teacher educators	59	43	30	15	-
Duplications of some one's portfolio by the student teachers	14	53	56	24	-
Fear and anxiety on student teachers during their evaluation	15	36	72	21	3
Lack of stationary materials in schools	10	64	31	22	10
Lower respect and attitude for the student teachers	75	37	12	18	5
lack of interest to share experiences for the student teachers	8	39	58	30	7
Lack of clear guideline & orientation about practicum	20	51	46	30	-

As table-9 above shows, lower respect and lower attitude for the student teachers by students, school teachers and principals in the schools (76.19 %); lack of continuous follow up and one term assessment mechanism by teacher educators (69.38%), lack of continuous follow up and support of the mentors (69.38%), lack of clear

coordination of the school teachers and teacher educators during student teachers evaluation (48.29%) and lack of clear guideline and orientation about the four phases of practicum from the college (48.29%) are rated as the highest factors that are affecting the implementation of the practicum program. The other factors include: : lack of up-to- dated guideline prepared at Regional Education Bureau (REB) level that clearly shows the roles, duties and accountabilities of different stake holders; lack of clear know-how and mutual understanding about the main activities to be done in the four practicum programs by student teachers, school teachers and teacher educators; duplications of the practicum portfolios by many student teachers and course rearrangement problems in the college, weak college-school links and no strong convincing agreements reached or signed between the college and the school principals that make school teachers (mentors) more accountable and responsible for the practicum program and English language problem for portfolio compilation and reflection and actual teaching and lack of subject matter knowledge.

4. Discussions on results

Practicum –I (School Observation)

Practicum is suggested as the most important component of teacher education program (Carpenter and Blance, 2001; Kosnik and Beck, 2003; Livingstone, 2001). It is the actual school experience made by the beginner student teachers to develop their actual practice of teaching (MoE, 2003). It is designed to ensure that student teachers have as much supported school experience as possible before they enter the classroom as a qualified teacher (MoE, 2003).

In the Amhara Region Teacher Education Colleges too, practicum was implemented in four phases as: practicum I- school observation; practicum II- working under the mentor; practicum III- supporting the mentor and practicum IV-independent teaching. Thus, in order to make beginner student teachers made them prepared and develop the actual practice of teaching they were first placed to the actual observation of the school environment since it is an important component of a professional preparation program (Kennedy, 1993). School observation enables beginner student teachers to analyze the contexts of the schools' settings. This actual observation enables them to realize the actual setting in the schools as compared to the theories they gained in the college. In line with this, Ben-Peretz (2000); Livingstone (2001); Schon (1983; 1987) argued that practicum makes stronger connections between theory and practice with more emphasis on experiences in the school settings and community.

After the student teachers observed they are expected to prepare a portfolio regarding the experiences they gained and the challenges faced and reflect in the college. However, during practicum-I(actual school observation), the majority of student teachers were unable to compile their portfolios independently and most of the prepared portfolios were copied from the works of others. Even reflecting the portfolios prepared in English was again the main challenge of the student teachers. However, considerable emphasis is placed on reflective practice one does not learn through experience, but through reflection on experience and through interaction with others (Korthagen, Loughran and Russell, 2006). Opportunities are created for them to begin to begin to see things differently in schools (Korthagen, Loughran and Russell, 2006) and to critique the teaching of their teacher educators (Berry and Loughran 2002).

To improve this, student teachers need to be supported both in-school and out-of-school support by the colleges and schools (Livingstone, 2001; MoE, 2003). The central role of teacher preparation programs is creating an effective teacher workforce by facilitating for teacher candidates challenging and authentic learning experiences (Perry and Power, 2004).

Practicum-II (Working under the Mentor)

During practicum-II student teachers are expected to perform different tasks in the school under the direct guidance of the school teacher- assigned mentor. Thus, their ability of commenting their mentor's annual plan and preparing a lesson plan was good. One of the best qualities of an ideal teacher is guided by a plan. Research into quality teaching (Entwistle, 2000; Shuman, 2002 in Reece and Walker, 2003) illustrates that quality teaching involves instructional planning and managing learning effectively. On the other hand, about 67 (55.83) student teachers and 60.60% school teachers also rated that their skill of preparing teaching aids from locally available materials and using in the class was low. On the same vein, Mukalel (1998) stated that most teachers shrink away from the use of instructional media chiefly because it has unique problems- costly, needs skill and cumbersome maintenance.

Their ability or knowledge of evaluating textbooks per the evaluation criteria for 104 (86.66) student teachers, 43 (65.15) school teachers and 22 (61.11) teacher educators was rated low. Before assigning to evaluate text books student teachers should be familiar to this new issue. When they have good awareness about it they became highly motivated to do it. Otherwise, when the student teachers did not get good grades based on their own efforts, they will be demotivated to do more. Similar to this, Janssens et al (2002) suggested that when student teachers did not get good grades for their portfolios less effort were made to construct it.

Under practicum-II, student teachers were assigned to practice the teaching- learning tasks in the actual context under the direct guidance of the school teacher or assigned mentor. Nevertheless, the interest and commitment of the school teachers (mentors) to support the student teachers in practicum-II was low. In contrast to this, the research result of Pollard et al.(2002) implied that beginner student teachers need to be motivated, supported, commented and assessed continuously. The school teachers' assessment and continuous follow up of for the student teachers was also low. The research works of Bowers et al.(1983) supported that teacher preparation had not paid enough attention to the psychological 'readinesses' of the student teachers. Much placement in schools appeared ad hoc than designed to ensuring a good practice (Lewin, 2004). Thus, the practices of the student teachers are simply superficial and heavily depend on duplication of efforts. As a result of duplication of effort by copying each other, both teacher educators and student teachers perceived that providing grades for practicum-I and II was not considered as important for the student teachers.

Practicum-III (Assisting the mentor)

Under practicum-III student teachers are expected to assist the school teachers- assigned mentor in the class room activities and monitoring students' behavior. Therefore, 62 (51.66) student teachers, 38 (57.57) school teachers and 17 (47.22) teacher educators rated average on the ability of the student teachers in identifying the causes of students' classroom disruptive behaviors. Their ability of taking corrective measures for disruptive behaviors, as 72 (60) of the respondents filled was also average. However, most student teachers 74.16 % rated that participating all students in the learning process while assisting the mentor was low. In this regard, some student teachers, during interviews, reflected that students' lack of interest for learning, disturbing in the class, lack of back ground knowledge for the subject and lack of future vision was the main causes for their low participation in the class.

As 87.5 % student teachers and 52 (78.78) school teachers filled, their support to their mentors during assisting the mentor in preparing lesson plans, teaching aids and controlling the students' behavior was high. Besides, most (93.33%) student teachers and 49 (74.24) school teachers filled that their support for mentors in correcting class works, home tasks and tests during classroom tasks was also high.

Whereas the support the school teachers (mentors) providing for the student teachers in every aspect (following, commenting, providing feedbacks, etc) was found to be low. Mentors were not played what is expected from them in this regard. Different scholars (Rhodes et al., 2004; Pollard et al., 2002) have proved that mentors provide vision as well as support, validity, avocations, empathy and challenge to facilitate growth of student teachers. Pollard et al. (2002) further suggest that the role of the mentor is: working as planner, organizer, negotiator and inductor; working with the student teacher as host, friend and counselor; and working with the student as trainer, educator and assessor. Mentors act as motivating, raising awareness, providing feedback and advice and link the person between the school and the college tutor (Fletcher, 2000).

Practicum-IV (Independent Teaching)

In practicum-IV, student teachers are expected to perform independent teaching by applying the necessary obligations (preparing a lesson plan, imparting active learning, utilizing different instructional media and using different continuous techniques). Nevertheless, most of the student teachers lack the ability of preparing SMART objectives comprising the three domains. Their subject matter knowledge was also low. Beginning teachers are expected to bring to classrooms a basic set of pedagogical knowledge and skills. They will require a good knowledge of their teaching subjects, good planning, a confident grasp of a range of teaching methods and sufficient knowledge of child development and school for an effective start to their teaching careers (Kervin & Turbill, 2003).

In their block teaching, many student teachers tried to apply different active learning methods, and different classroom seating arrangements but their application of different assessment techniques (mainly formative continuous assessment) during and after the lesson was low. Besides, they lack giving preventive or curative actions up on the misbehaved students in their classes.

Student teachers were asked about the support they obtained from school teachers (mentors) and teacher educators (tutors). Therefore, 75 (62.50) of the student teachers rated that mentor's interest and commitment to share their experience to them in the various stages of practicum was low. The reasons explained during the discussion times with some student teachers were because some mentors were careless, some were authoritative, and some lack the knowledge and skills of mentoring and others undermine them. Such acts of the school teachers hinder the student teachers not to gain good experiences and made them frustrated.

Similarly, as Geen and Harris (2002) reported in their study, what pre-service teachers identified as difficult were interventions which seemed to be undermining. Kennedy (1993) also forwarded that some supervisors or mentors may be authoritative, over- critical and personally judgmental, never listening to the trainees, blaming them, ignorant of the context and as a result confusions will be made. It is imperative that the staff in school takes some part in supervision, guiding and assessing the student teachers (Tadesse, 2006). But when this help

came in the form of excessive interruptions and interjections, it was seen as damaging (Beck and Kosnik, 2002). The highest number of student teachers (80.83%) also filled that mentor's commitment to give proper assessment and constructive feedbacks continuously for their improvement was low. A focus group discussion with school teachers (mentors) indicate that much attention was not given to the proper assessment and follow up of the student teachers. In relation to the finding, Pollard et al. (2002) explained challenges of mentoring as lack of mentoring skill, large number of mentees, work load and lack of commitments. Lack of close partnership and close collaboration was also a problem (Rhodes et al. (2004). As it was also analyzed from the grade reports of the student teachers through document analysis in different departments, nearly 97- 98 % of the placement teachers (mentors) gave full marks for their student teachers in the different stages of the practicum assessments.

Similarly, the college's and teacher educators' support and continuous follow up in the four practicum programs was low. Besides, teacher educators (tutors) were not conducting proper assessment per the evaluation criteria of the four phases of practicum. The evaluation results provided by them were not in consultation with the school teachers. Both of them evaluate the same thing differently and it was not consistent. Of course, the evaluation of teaching is highly problematic, with lack of consensus between evaluators possibly stemming from differing ideas on what constitutes good teaching (Gleeson and Moody 2007). Many researchers also found significant lack of agreement (Moody, Geary and Pidgeon, 2004) and lack of consistency (Haigh and Tuck, 1999) between evaluations by supervising teachers and by university/college representatives. When this help came in the form of excessive interruptions and interjections, it was seen as damaging (Beck and Kosnik 2002). Most teacher educators focused on final evaluations than providing continuous feedbacks. The research finding of Lewin (2004) also stated that sustained formative feedback geared to the student's own development does not generally occur and the focus is on final grading. This could never enhance student teachers' learning.

In order to support the student teachers properly, ample and frequent time should be given for teacher educators in order to focus on improving student teachers' learning than final grading. The assessment of the practicum experience should be seen as an on-going developmental process where student teachers receive feedback on their strengths and the areas they need development (MoE, 2003). Besides, to carry out the delivery properly, the necessary facilities like transport access and resources should be fulfilled. If there was logistic problems and shortage of time for tutors to provide practical support for large number of student teachers placed in different schools, tutors' visits tended to be badly timed, rushed, irregular, and mostly oriented to final assessment (Lewin, 2004).

As far as the contribution of practicum was concerned, practicum was played by a triad of actors-student teachers, teacher educators and placement teachers and has many contributions for them. Based on the findings, the practicum program helped the student teachers to: understand the real school environment, share experiences with placement teachers and teacher educators; identify the weak and strong sides of them; relate the theory they learnt in the college with practice in the actual setting; develop their confidence in expressing their ideas in front of the students, placement teachers and teacher educators.

The practicum program also helped the school teachers: to get different support services (preparing lesson plans, correcting students' class works and home works, working in co-curricular activities and controlling students' misbehaviors) from student teachers. Teacher educators also gained from this program in understanding the contexts of the primary schools and enabling them to adjust their teaching-learning process by perceiving the primary schools contexts.

On the other spectrum, student teachers experienced a number of challenges during the implementation of the four phase of the practicum program. A number of factors were affecting its implementation at different levels. Low attitude for the student teachers was the first factor. When student teachers received low attitude from the school teachers and the students they will develop a negative attitude for the practicum program in particular and the teaching profession in general. A positive practicum is likely to impact on their self-confidence, their attitudes towards teaching and learning and their willingness to enter the teaching profession (Janet Moody, 2009).

Lack of continuous follow up and support by tutors and mentors was another factor. During their placement in schools student teachers are expected to get close follow up and support from their mentors and tutors. Lack of clear coordination of the school teachers and teacher educators during student teachers evaluation and lack of clear guideline and orientation about the four phases of practicum from the college are rated as the highest factors that are affecting the implementation of the practicum program.

5. Conclusions and Implications

5.1 Conclusions

In Practicum I, observing both the physical environment and classroom environment and preparing the portfolio was the first task of the student teachers. Therefore, during the actual observation, as the majority student

teachers rated, the necessary awareness was not significantly carried out by the college regarding the classroom and school environment observation. As a result, preparing the portfolio independently by observing both the physical environment and classroom environment was found to be low and duplicating one's own portfolio by the student teachers was a serious problem observed. Reflecting the portfolio by understanding the main ideas per the stated criteria in English was also found to be low.

Concerning practicum II (Working under the Mentor): student teachers' ability of commenting the mentor's annual plan and preparing activity oriented lesson plan was found to be encouraging. Their participation in different co-curricular activities was high. Nevertheless, their skill/ability of preparing teaching aids from locally available materials and using it in the class and evaluating textbooks using different evaluation criteria was low. Besides, school teachers' interest and commitment to support the student teachers and comment their weaknesses was low. Similar to Practicum-I, student teachers' ability of compiling the portfolio and reflecting it properly was also low. Therefore, the practical importance of the two practicum programs (practicum-I and II) for the student teachers was not seen as very crucial since they were heavily relying on 'fictitious' portfolio preparations.

Regarding Practicum III (Assisting the mentor): the student teachers' ability of identifying the causes of students' disruptive classroom behaviors and taking preventive or curative measures was average or encouraging. Their ability of assisting their mentors by preparing lesson plans and teaching aids, controlling the students' behavior, correcting the students class work, home work, tests and exams was high. Regardless of their contributions to the schools and school teachers, there were low attitude and low respect for the student teachers by most school teachers, school principals and students of the different primary schools.

Concerning Practicum IV (Independent teaching), student teachers' ability of preparing the lesson plan comprising the three domains with SMART objectives and their subject matter knowledge was low. Though they were trying to use different active learning methods, the discussion method was the most widely applied method. During their block teaching, utilization of instructional media for the appropriate lesson and utilization of different continuous assessment mechanisms was low. However, they were good at applying different classroom management techniques during lesson delivery.

The practicum program helped the student teachers in sharing experiences with school teachers, handling the different behaviors of the students, analyzing the weak and strong sides of themselves, relating the theory they learnt in the college with practice in the actual setting. It also helped the school teachers to gain experiences about lesson plan preparation and active learning methods from the student teachers and to be supported by them in preparing lesson plans, correcting students' activities and controlling their misbehaviors. The program further helped teacher educators to understand the student teachers' ability in teaching methodology and subject matter mastery in the actual setting and realize the primary school curriculum.

Though the practicum program has many contributions to different actors, it has many challenges. The key factors affecting the implementation of the practicum program were: lack of up-to-date guideline prepared at Regional Education Bureau (REB) level that clearly shows the roles, duties and accountabilities of different stakeholders; the absence of continuous support, follow up and assessment by the college tutors and school mentors; lack of clear know-how and mutual understanding about the main activities to be done in the four practicum programs by student teachers, school teachers and teacher educators; attitudinal problems (i.e. considering the student teachers as teachers rather than trainees (by school teachers) and trainees rather than teachers (by the school students); duplications of the practicum portfolios by many student teachers and course rearrangement problems in the college. Furthermore weak college-school links and no strong convincing agreements reached or signed between the college and the school principals that make school teachers (mentors) more accountable and responsible for the practicum program. On the other hand, English language problem for portfolio compilation and reflection and actual teaching and lack of subject matter knowledge were also obtained as the other factors affecting the effectiveness of the practicum program.

5.1. Implications

Based on the above conclusions the researcher has recommended the following points for the concerned institutions and personnel:

To Regional Education Bureau (REB): Practicum is conducted by the positive will of the schools. No clearly stated guideline that enforces schools to work on the practicum program. Therefore, the REB should set clear and up-to-date practicum guidelines that show the accountabilities, duties and responsibilities of all stakeholders involved in the program (Teacher education colleges, woreda education offices, schools and school teachers).

In practicum I and II, much of the student teachers' work was based on portfolio preparation. Most of the portfolios were either copied or their fictitious works. The practical relevance of the two practicum phases for the student teachers (having 7 credit hours) was not seen as very crucial. Therefore, the REB together with Teacher Education Colleges should either reduce the credit hours given for practicum-I (4 credit hours) and practicum-II (3 credit hours) or much emphasis should be given for the practical applications mainly for practicum -III (assisting the mentor) and practicum IV (Independent/ block teaching).

To the Teacher Education Colleges: The colleges together with REB should prepare continuous awareness creation programs to practicum coordinators, school principals and school teachers (mentors), teacher educators and student teachers about the implementation of the four practicum programs. During block teaching, the necessary support and feedbacks for the student teachers' improvement should be given at least twice (esp. for prac.III & IV) instead of giving final grades by one period of block teaching observation and one term reflection. The practical application of various active learning methods, the production and utilization of instructional media and the preparation of SMART lesson plans comprising three domains was still a challenge. Thus, the professional studies department and subject methodology providers should pay due emphasis in this regard during their training in the college. The college (the concerned departments) should devise additional mechanisms to fill the student teachers' gap in text book evaluation and subject mastery problems. Strong efforts and continuous follow ups should be made by practicum coordinators of the college to make teacher educators (tutors) and school teachers (mentors) to work and discuss together (share jointly the overall practice of the student teachers) during their support and evaluation periods.

For the betterment of the program, the college-school links should be strengthened colleges should made frequent supervisory activities and the necessary supports to the schools. Besides, moral or material rewards should be provided for school teachers who did better in their mentoring. Furthermore, strong convincing agreements should be signed between the college and schools that made schools more responsible and accountable to the practicum program. A clear tutoring and mentoring guidelines should be produced and different cross- checking mechanisms should be developed to minimize the student teachers' duplication of the portfolio.

To the placement schools: Placement teachers (mentors) should properly and continuously support, follow and assess the student teachers and provide appropriate results based on their performance rather than giving uniform results to the student teachers. School teachers and principals should be open-minded to share proper experiences of their own and also to share from the student teachers and college teachers.

To the student teachers: Student teachers should avoid copying some ones' portfolio and writing 'fictious' reports of the portfolio. They should also improve their subject matter and language problems through further and continuous readings, practices and experience sharing with work colleagues. Student teachers should respect the professional code of ethics (styles of clothing, hair combing and time management) during their practice in the different phases of the practicum program.

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