

The Effectiveness of Teaching Practice in Improving Student Teachers' Teaching Skills in Tanzania

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Abstract

This article is based on the study which sought to investigate the effectiveness of Teaching Practice in improving student teachers' teaching skills in Tanzania. The study was designed to find how Teaching Practice was organized by the teacher training universities and whether the Teaching Practice was effective in improving student teachers' teaching skills. The qualitative research approach was adopted and the study was conducted in Iringa, Morogoro, Dar es Salaam, and Kilimanjaro regions of Tanzania Mainland. A total of 191 student teachers were involved in the study. The findings indicated that the duration spent for the Teaching Practice was inadequate for student teachers to acquire the skills required for effective teaching. Furthermore, the supervision of student teachers during the Teaching Practice was overall, ineffective as the supervisors were not flexible enough to guide, advise, and discuss with student teachers on the strengths and weaknesses revealed during the teaching. Regarding the effectiveness of the Teaching Practice, 76% of the respondents indicated that Teaching Practice was ineffective in improving their teaching skills. Since the majority of respondents indicated that they did not benefit much from the Teaching Practice, there is need for the responsible authorities to review the procedures for carrying out Teaching Practice in order to improve the quality of teachers.

Keywords: Effectiveness, Teaching Practice, Teaching skills, Tanzania.

1. Introduction

Teaching practice refers to the range of experiences to which student teachers are exposed when they work in classrooms and schools (Marais & Meier, 2004:221). In Tanzania, Teaching practice is an integral component of teacher training. The overall purpose of Teaching Practice is to expose student teachers to the actual teaching and learning environment. During the Teaching Practice, student teachers observe subject teachers at work so as to learn about teachers' skills, strategies and classroom achievements. It is also the time when they evaluate their own teaching experiences through interactions with teachers and lecturers and, through self-reflection, implement a variety of approaches, strategies and skills with a view to bring about meaningful learning. It can therefore be argued that Teaching Practice is envisaged to prepare students for maximum practical and professional training in the field of education by offering them with the following:

- Providing an experience through participation and observation under the auspices of the institutions to which students are attached
- Providing professional skills which are acquired through planned programmes so as to meet and satisfy the needs of the profession as well as the environment to which the students are being prepared for.

Although Teaching Practice is meant to achieve what is stated above, there are dissatisfactions on its effectiveness among education stakeholders. For example, the classroom discussions with student teachers at the Sokoine University of Agriculture where the researchers teach indicated that there were divergent views on the effectiveness of the Teaching Practice in improving student teachers teaching skills. Some indicated that the teaching practice was ineffective while others appreciated that teaching practice was significantly important in improving their teaching skills. Those who indicated that Teaching Practice was ineffective argued that the graduate teachers show ineffectiveness in their teaching even after doing a good number of teaching practice blocks during their training programme. Therefore, the ineffectiveness of the teachers after graduation was attributed to the ineffectiveness of the training programme, including the teaching practice. In the same vein, there are public concerns that the poor performance of secondary school students in their national examinations in Tanzania is linked with the ineffectiveness of the teachers, among other variables.

Literature indicates that several studies have been conducted to investigate different topics on Teaching Practice. For instance, the studies by Ngidi and Sibaya (2003), and Marais and Meier (2004) focused on the student teacher's experience and anxieties during teaching practice. On the other hand, Kiggundu and Nayimuli (2009) did a study whose aim was to explore the ways in which students' experiences during teaching practice influence their perception of and attitudes towards the teaching profession. There are hardly any studies done in the context of Tanzania to investigate the effectiveness of Teaching Practice in improving student teachers' teaching skills. Therefore this study was prompted by such knowledge gap and the concerns by some education stakeholders that teachers who graduate from the teacher training institutions do not exhibit required teaching skills, hence ineffective. The study focused on two key questions:

- How is Teaching Practice organized?
- Is Teaching Practice effective in improving student teachers' teaching skills?

2. Theoretical Underpinnings

Teaching Practice is an integral component of any teacher training programme because it provides student teachers with experience in the actual teaching and learning environment. According to Taneja (2000) Teaching Practice is referred to by a number of terms. These include practice teaching, student teaching, field studies, infield experience, school based experience or internship. Regardless of the way it is expressed, Teaching Practice is used to refer to all the learning experiences of student teachers in schools. Stones and Morris (1977) identify three major implications of teaching practice as: the practicing of teaching skills and acquisition of the role of a teacher; the whole range of experiences that students go through in schools; and the practical aspects of the course as distinct from theoretical studies. Ideally, the entire process of the Teaching Practice ought to include class observations, preparation of the lesson plan, actual classroom teaching, discussions with the supervisors, and documentation of the teaching experience. In addition, it is envisaged that the student teachers should conduct mini researches on the teaching and the teaching environment.

2.1. Teaching Practice as Part of the Teacher Training Programmes in Tanzania

In Tanzania, student teachers are obliged to attend teaching practice blocks as part of training in the teacher training programmes. The duration of the Teaching Practice varies according to the level of teacher training programme. For example, student teachers at certificate and diploma in education level attend the Teaching Practice for 4-5 weeks.

This study focused on the university student teachers. These attend the Teaching Practice for eight weeks. Although the purpose of Teaching Practice is the same regardless of the year of study of the student teachers, there are different angles upon which the Teaching practice is hinged, basing on the year of study. For example, at the University of Dar es Salaam, the purpose of the first year Teaching Practice is to expose students to the real educational environment and apply theories learned during different education courses such as educational foundations, educational psychology and philosophy of education. While it is so for the first year students, the second year students do classroom Teaching Practice based on theories and principles of curriculum development and evaluation, and on the theories of instructional technology as well as on the subject methods taken during the year. In addition, these students do classroom teaching with emphasis on pupils' learning processes, identifying and dealing with learning difficulties, and on the organization of the lessons to achieve the learning objectives. The third year students of the University of Dar es Salaam do not go for Teaching Practice. This is also typical for all other universities, except the Sokoine University of Agriculture.

Unlike the university of Dar es Salaam where student teachers attend Teaching Practice twice (during the first and second year of study), at the Sokoine University of Agriculture, student teachers attend Teaching Practice in all the three years of teacher training programme. This shows that the teacher training programmes in the Tanzanian universities have not been harmonized.

Usually, the first year Teaching Practice is preceded by a week or two (depending on the university's arrangements) for Teaching Practice Orientation Programme. This is a residential training programme done at the university as part of the Teaching Practice. At the Sokoine University of Agriculture, the orientation programme for first year student teachers is meant to inculcate a sense of awareness among the student teachers on what Teaching Practice is in its broadest sense. Considering that some of them have never taught in the classroom, the programme is also intended to acquaint students with skills required in the teaching profession, such as preparation of schemes of work, lesson plans and teaching aids, control and management of classroom situations and the delivery of the lesson so as to arrive at logical presentations and critical evaluation of the

same. In meeting the objectives of the programme, a number of topics are covered. These include, teaching/learning as a process, key component of the teaching/ learning process, the role of Teaching Practice, questioning techniques, classroom management, motivation techniques, and socialization, professionalism and ethics, to mention a few. It is envisaged that after they have been introduced to these, the first year student teachers can conduct their Teaching Practice without problems.

With regard to the evaluation of the Teaching Practice, different levels of student teachers have different items to be evaluated. For example, the first year students at the Sokoine University of Agriculture are evaluated in the following abilities: ability to prepare lesson plans, ability to make presentations of subject matter, including appropriateness of teaching methods, effective use of teaching and learning resources, ability to conclude lessons, and ability to manage classrooms. In addition, personal factors such as appearance, confidence, and gender sensitivity are also evaluated. On the other hand, second and third year students are assessed in all the items as those of first year students plus and more others. These include ability to relate the lesson plan to the overall objectives and structure of the scheme of work and the syllabus, ability in arousing and sustaining interest during the lesson, ability to promote full participation of all the students through group work or other procedures, ability to arouse and handle students' questions, and the student teacher's attitude towards students. Thus, while the first year Teaching Practice evaluation form has a few items to be evaluated, the second and third year teaching practice evaluation form has many items for evaluation. This is not only typical at the Sokoine University of Agriculture, but also other universities training teachers. Regarding the number of evaluation, the student teachers at the Sokoine University of Agriculture are required to be evaluated not less than twice within a Teaching Practice block. At the University of Dar es Salaam, the minimum number of assessments is four. This is also an indication that different universities have different modalities for conducting Teaching Practice.

Notwithstanding the variations in the modalities, it is expected that the student teachers involved in the Teaching Practice will acquire the teaching skills and become effective teachers after graduation.

3. Methodology

This study adopted the qualitative research approach. The study was conducted in Iringa, Morogoro, Dar es Salaam, and Kilimanjaro regions of Tanzania Mainland. These regions were purposively chosen because they have many secondary schools in which student teachers from different universities are attached for their teaching practice. The composition of the sample by region and sex was as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Sample composition by region and sex

S/N	Region	Males	Females	Total
1	Iringa	15	17	32
2	Morogoro	32	22	54
3	Dar es Salaam	29	26	55
4	Kilimanjaro	19	31	50
	Total	95	96	191

Source: Field Data 2011.

The study was conducted from July to September 2011. This was the period when student teachers from different universities were doing their teaching practice. The respondents were from eight universities and university colleges as indicated in Table 2.

Table 2: Percentages of respondents from different institutions

S/N	Institution	Percentage of respondents
1	University of Dar es Salaam	13%
2	Dar es Salaam University College of Education	13%
3	Tumaini University	8%
4	Mkwawa University College of Education	11%
5	Mzumbe University	10%
6	Sokoine University of Agriculture	14%
7	University of Dodoma	16%
8	Mwenge University	15%
Total		100

Source: Field Data 2011.

The data collection was done through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with all 191 student teachers in the schools where they had been posted for their teaching practice. The analysis of the data was done thematically on the basis of the research questions advanced for the study. Some direct quotations from the respondents have been reported in this article.

4. Results

The results are presented according to themes derived from the key research questions of the study as follows:

4.1. The organization of Teaching Practice

The Teaching Practice can be conducted in a number of forms depending on the institution. Most of the teacher training institutions in Tanzania send their students for Teaching Practice during the end of academic year, from July to September. These include the Sokoine University of Agriculture, University of Dar es Salaam, University of Dodoma, Dar es Salaam University College of Education and Mkwawa University College of Education, to mention but a few. However, few institutions, including the Jordan University College, carry out the Teaching Practice in the months of January to March. It should be noted that the duration for teacher training at degree level in Tanzanian universities is three years.

The key issues which were investigated regarding the organization of the teaching practice included duration, supervision and assessment procedures for the Teaching Practice. These are presented in the following sections.

4.1.1. Duration for the Teaching Practice

Results of the interviews with all students who were involved in this study indicated that the duration for Teaching Practice was eight weeks. The first week was usually for settling, including preparation of schemes of work, lesson notes, lesson plans, and teaching timetables. When the student teachers were asked whether the duration for the teaching practice was adequate for the acquisition of the teaching skills, 72% of the respondents indicated that the duration spent for the Teaching Practice was not enough. For example, one respondent had this to say:

The eight weeks we spend in the field are not helpful enough to make us acquire good teaching skills. After all, the actual teaching weeks are only six. I spent the first two weeks to settle, including looking for accommodation. The schools to which we are attached do not guarantee accommodation. We are 60 student teachers in this school from different institutions. How can the head of school provide accommodation to all of us?

In the same light, the other respondent remarked:

We spend a very short time for our teaching practice. As you can see, we are many student teachers here! Some of us go to the classroom to teach only when our lecturers come for assessments. We are too many to have permanent classes to teach for all of us. If the teaching practice duration was long, we would have adequate opportunities to interact with our students and develop our teaching skills.

The two extracts indicate that the teaching practice duration was inadequate for student teachers to acquire the skills needed for effective teaching.

4.1.2. Supervision and assessment procedures

As pointed out earlier in this article, teaching practice is an integral part of the teacher training programme and therefore, it is bound to supervision and assessment procedures. During the Teaching Practice period, students are visited by examiners from their respective institutions.

Interviews with the respondents revealed that a minimum of four visits are required in each teaching block. It was also stated that after every visit, the examiners are required to provide the students with feedback on the lessons and fill in record and evaluation sheets. In addition, the examiners are also required, by regulation, to discuss the students' performance immediately after the end of the lesson.

Regarding the number of visits by lecturers, 72% of the respondents reported that they had been visited in the schools once during their previous Teaching Practice while 19% had been visited twice and only 9% had been visited thrice. None of the respondents had been visited four times which is the minimum number of the required visits. For example, one of the respondents had this to say:

The supervision of teaching practice is not effective. For instance, last year when I was doing my first teaching practice, I was visited by my lecturer once. I was assessed twice during the same visit and thereafter none paid another visit to the school I was posted.

This is an indication that the supervision of student teachers during the Teaching Practice was ineffective. In the same vein, another respondent stated:

This is the 7th week since I started doing my Teaching Practice. I still have a week before leaving this school. However, I have not been visited by any of my lecturers. I do not know whether it will be possible for the remaining week to be visited four times and have the needed assessments.

The researchers were also interested to find whether the visiting lecturers were discussing with students on the strengths and weaknesses revealed during the teaching. The results indicated that 92% of the respondents did not discuss with their lecturers after the lessons during their previous teaching practice. On the other hand, only eight percent reported to have had discussions with their lecturers after teaching. On this matter, one of the respondents stated:

I did not discuss with my lecturer about the lesson taught. Before we left the university for our teaching practice, the Teaching Practice Coordinator told us that every after a lesson, we would have discussions with the lecturers. I have already been assessed once and the lecturer left without discussing with me.

When the respondents were asked to explain whether the lecturers were friendly when conducting assessments, 78% reported that the lecturers were not friendly. On the other hand, 22% of the respondents indicated that the lecturers were friendly. One respondent had this to say:

The lecturers are not friendly when they visit us. They are very intimidating. For example, there was a day when one of my lecturers ambushed me for assessment. I requested permission to go to my room to collect my lesson plan as I did not have a period to teach on that day. Despite my explanation, he refused to allow me and forced me to go to the classroom without the lesson plan. I did not enjoy the teaching.

4.1.3. Effectiveness of the Teaching Practice in improving student teachers' teaching skills

Apart from the organization of the Teaching Practice, the researchers were also interested to examine student teachers' views on the effectiveness of the teaching practice. The student teachers were asked to respond to the question "Do you feel that teaching practice is effective in improving your teaching skills?" 76% of the respondents indicated that Teaching Practice was ineffective in improving their teaching skills. This is an indication that the majority of the student teachers were not satisfied with the way the Teaching Practice was being handled. For example, one respondent had this to say:

No! Teaching Practice is not effective at all in improving our teaching skills. How can it be effective when we are not supervised the way it is recommended? We do not receive the required number of assessments and there are occasions when some of us are not assessed during the whole Teaching Practice period.

Also, another respondent remarked:

How can you expect effectiveness in Teaching Practice while the supervision is poor? It is not effective.....and to me it looks like wastage of the taxpayers' money. For example.....let me tell you one

thing...when the lecturers come for assessments, most of them do not stay with us in the classroom throughout the lesson. Some stay for only five minutes while it is a forty minutes lesson. How can we be effective in such situations?

When these quotations are carefully evaluated, it is clear that there were feelings among the student teachers that the Teaching Practice was not effectively organized.

5. Discussion

There is a general consensus that Teaching Practice occupies a key position in the programme of teacher education. According to Furlong et al. (1988), it is a culminating experience in teacher preparation. This is particularly important as it provides opportunity to beginning teachers to become socialized into the profession. More importantly, it is during the Teaching Practice when student teachers are envisaged to observe subject teachers at work so as to learn about teaching skills and apply them when they get opportunities to interact with the learners. Not only that, the teaching practice also provides avenues for student teachers to evaluate themselves on their teaching experiences through discussions with regular teachers and lecturers and, through self-reflection.

The findings of this study have revealed that the organization of the Teaching Practice is faced with a number of challenges. Firstly, it has been found that the duration spent for the Teaching Practice was not enough. It has been a tradition for quite a long time now that student teachers from the universities in Tanzania have to attend an eight week Teaching Practice block at the end of each academic year. The assumption behind this arrangement was that the eight weeks were adequate for student teachers to practice the profession in the field. On the basis of the views from student teachers, it seems that there is need to review the duration of Teaching Practice in order to make it produce the desired outcome.

Regarding the supervision during the Teaching Practice, the respondents expressed concerns which indicated that the current supervision was ineffective. For example, it is ideally expected that the supervisors of the Teaching Practice have the role of guiding, advising and helping the student teachers in the acquisition of the intended teaching skills. However, this study found that the supervisors were not flexible enough to guide, advise, and discuss with student teachers on the strengths and weaknesses revealed during the teaching.

The fact that lecturers could not discuss with the majority of student teachers after lessons could be attributed to a number of reasons: Firstly, it was possible that the supervisors were not well informed of their roles as Teaching Practice supervisors. This calls for the responsible authorities to ensure that the supervisors are coached on their roles before visiting their students for assessments. Secondly, the phenomenon could also be attributed to the limited number of lecturers who are always in a rush to assess large numbers of students in the field, especially at this time when the students' enrolment rate in the Tanzanian universities has increased. Thirdly, it could also be linked with the limited number of days the supervisors had to spend in the field, which is also attributable to limited financial resources. The current situation reveals that the higher education sector in Tanzania, and for this case universities, receive inadequate financial support from the government for their recurrent and development budgets. For instance, while the university of Dar es Salaam requested from the government a total of Tshs. 44,761,130,200 for its 2004/2005 Recurrent Budget, the later approved a total of Tshs. 26,112,112,100 which is equivalent to only 58% of the requested amount (UDSM, Facts and Figures, 2004/2005). A similar situation is also typical in other higher learning institutions. Therefore, it is not surprising that the budgets set aside by the universities for carrying out Teaching Practice are also affected.

It is also worth noting that the timing of the Teaching Practice at the end of the year by all teacher training universities was inappropriate. For example, in one of the surveyed schools, there were sixty (60) student teachers from different universities who had been posted for their Teaching Practice. Because of their large number, they could not get the required teaching load for them to practice teaching skills. This implies that the acquisition of the intended teaching skills among student teachers was adversely affected considering the limited number of weeks they had to spend in the field.

It is worth noting that quality education plays a significant role in the development of any nation. This is because it is easier to mobilize educated people to take part in the national development process than those who are not educated. This assertion is supported by Carnoy (2006) who argued that one of the largest expenditures a modern nation could make was on the education of its people. This means that education plays a significant role in determining the welfare of nations, as the sum of micro-level individual educational experiences has important implications for macro-conditions in the society as a whole. However, quality education can not be achieved if a nation does not have quality teachers. Although Teaching Practice is generally accepted as an important

contributing factor towards the quality of teacher education programme, the findings of this study have revealed that it is difficult for Tanzania to obtain quality teachers, given the prevailing conditions.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

It is beyond reasonable doubt that Teaching Practice can play an important role in the preparation of teachers. However, the majority of respondents in this study have indicated that they did not benefit much from the Teaching Practice. Since Tanzania needs quality education for its people, there is need for the responsible authorities to review the procedures for carrying out Teaching Practice in order to improve the quality of teachers. Specifically, it is recommended that the timing of Teaching Practice should not be the same for all universities. If the timing is varied, it would be possible for student teachers to have adequate time to practise teaching skills. In addition, the duration for Teaching Practice should be increased. Regarding the students' assessments, the responsible Teaching Practice organizers should organize seminars for all supervisors before visiting the student teachers. In the schools where student teachers are posted for their Teaching Practice, heads of schools should be encouraged to do a continuous evaluation of student teachers throughout the Teaching Practice block. Also, it is important for teacher training institutions to strengthen microteaching, apart from Teaching Practice blocks, in order to make teaching practice more effective. Lastly, the government should invest more in the training of teachers for the betterment of the nation.

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Notes

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