

EXPLORING TEACHING PRACTICE SUPERVISORS' EXPERIENCES OF STUDENT SUPPORT IN AN OPEN, DISTANCE AND E-LEARNING INSTITUTION

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ABSTRACT

Teaching Practice is an integral component of Initial Teacher Education, and an accreditation requirement as outlined in the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications policy document in South Africa. Supervisors play an important role in providing professional support and assessing student teachers during their school placement periods. This study explored Teaching practice supervisors' experiences, understanding and provision of student support in an Open, Distance and e-Learning environment. The theoretical framework that underpins this research is the Humanistic Counselling Model framework, which emphasizes a person-centred humanistic approach. This is relevant in the sense that the research focuses on supervisors own reflections of their work as unique individuals, how they experience their roles and how they deal with daily challenges. In-depth, semi-structured interviews allowed supervisors to share their practices, experiences and understanding of student support during Teaching Practice assessment visits. Data was analysed through content analysis. The findings revealed that supervisors' support puts emphasis on lesson planning, lesson presentation, assessment as well as overall classroom management and organization. Evidence gleaned from the study also suggest implications for teaching practice supervisors in relation to support in an Open, Distance and e-Learning environment.

Keywords: Teaching practice, supervisors, student support, experiences, assessment

INTRODUCTION

Teaching Practice aims at preparing student teachers for the real work environment. Through Teaching Practice, students apply the knowledge, skills and values they acquired from theoretical modules into practice. Student support is therefore key during Teaching Practice. The support that supervisors provide is guided by procedures and guidelines stipulated in the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications (MRTEQ) policy document (Department of Education, 2014). Teaching Practice supervisors at the University of South Africa are internal academic staff members as well as externally contracted service providers with relevant experience and qualifications. These supervisors are required to make contact with their allocated students and ensure that their supervision visits are well coordinated and that the students, school management and mentor teachers are aware and well prepared for such visits. The role of the supervisor is to observe the student teach and provide constructive comments and feedback that would contribute towards professional growth of students. Supervisors also serve as liaison between the university, schools and student teachers.

Student support during Teaching Practice school placement ensures that student-teachers are provided with meaningful school-based learning experiences (Claudius & Vincent, 2017), as guided by the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) and the Council on Higher Education (CHE) (Department of Education 2014) in South Africa. Teaching Practice therefore requires that all student-teachers be placed in functional schools (Sosibo, 2017).

The research on which this article is based was conducted with external supervisors contracted by UNISA. The supervision takes place within two programmes offered for Teacher Education qualifications. The Bachelor of Education (B. Ed.) students are required to complete five weeks of teaching practice per year, in relevant phases and age groups as prescribed by the specific modules whilst the Post-Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) students complete ten weeks. Students who register for teaching practice modules are provided with module guidelines as set in tutorial letters, as well as general administrative guidelines from the Teaching Practice Office (TPO).

Formal assessment for the teaching practice modules is through workbooks and assignments, which contain activities and lessons taught during teaching practice periods. Informal assessment takes place through supervisors' assessments of students' lesson presentation and planning, during school visits. The visits are a form of students support and not necessarily formal assessment. The challenge observed with this practice however, is that students see supervisor visits as not important, since the mark does not contribute towards the assessment plan for the module.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The role of the supervisor is to observe students' lesson presentation and provide constructive comments, aimed at supporting the student's professional growth by facilitating the learning to teach process (Kiggundu & Nayimuli, 2009). The supervisor is expected to make comments based on teaching strategies, classroom interactions and the use of resources. It is important for the supervisor to be able to translate observed practices into constructive, formative feedback. The supervisor is also expected to engage with the student's mentor with the intention of exploring effective strategies of supporting the student based on their observation and discussion with the student. Supervisors base their assessment on the following criteria: (a) professional and educational profile of the student teacher; (b) overall organization of the classroom; (c) feedback from the mentor teacher; and (d) overall evidence of lesson preparation, communication, instructional activities, assessment of learners and the use of Learner Teacher Support Materials (LTSM) (Rusznyak & Bertram, 2013). The supervisor allocates marks based on the criteria identified and their own observation of how the student presented the lesson.

Previous studies in teaching practice have focused on experiences of student teachers and mentor teachers (Mapolisa & Tshabalala, 2014; Claudius & Vincent, 2016; du Plessis, 2013 & Kelly & Tannehill, 2012), with fewer studies exploring how teaching practice students are supported by supervisors, to ensure that they emerge as good quality teachers. Other South African studies (Meegan, Dunning, Belton & Woods, 2013 & Chambers & Armor, 2011) focused on overall challenges experienced during teaching practice. Consequently, the role played by university supervisors in the teaching practice process remains crucial, as this kind of

support can make or break the student teachers (Kiggundu & Nayimuli, 2009). The role of the university academics is to conduct research to help develop understanding and knowledge of what quality support is for student teachers.

During teaching practice school placement periods, students are provided with opportunities to gain practical teaching experience as they become immersed in a school environment. During this time, realities regarding the art of teaching are encountered (Hamaidi, Al-Shara, Aroui & Awwad, 2014). It is important that students get time in real school settings to understand the intricacies of teaching and learning. During teaching practice, theoretical and practical knowledge are integrated through situated and contextualized experiences of teaching (Korthagen, 2010). Teaching practice is therefore an embedded component within successful teacher education programmes.

It is important for institutions to clarify roles of supervisors during the teaching practice process because the supervision of student teachers play an important role in the teaching practice process. The role of the teaching practice supervisor is multi-faceted and complex. They strive to establish links and working relationships between the university, the students and schools, as well as the mentor teachers, and still maintain the integrity of the teaching profession (Frick, Carl & Beets, 2010). The role of the supervisor is that of guidance and support, however, challenges associated with the supervision process can compromise effective support to students. Various studies have emphasized the importance of teaching practice in teacher education programmes and on mentoring (Kelly & Tannehill, 2012; Cummins & Persad, 2014) and not much has been done on the kind of support supervisors provide to students. Various efforts have been made to bridge the gap between supervisors and students in an Open, Distance and e-Learning environment, and challenges need to be attended to in ensuring that effective teaching and learning takes place.

Supervisors represent the institution and are often seen as assessors and not as providers of student support (Sosibo, 2017) This leads to them being received and seen in a negative light by both mentor teachers and students. This is because schools are often considered as territorial places and students are expected to enter such spaces and ensure that they learn and experience the art of teaching (Kenrick, 2010). Supervisors are required to assume their support roles and ensure that students understand the reasons why they need to be assessed. Often supervisors experience challenges that may affect their functioning and these need to be addressed with the Teaching Practice Office. Supervisors therefore need to be provided with opportunities to reflect and discuss supervisory practices, university expectations and goals as expected by the institution.

Supervisors often face the dilemma of balancing obligations; trying on one hand to assist the student teacher, while at the same time feeling a strong commitment to assess the future teacher (Cuenca, 2012). Supervisors are required to assign grades for each students, and this is the reason why students see teaching practice visits as assessments rather than support. In supporting students, supervisors need to clearly define the vision, mission and goals of teaching practice and at the same time clarify their role in the teacher education programme. In order to be able to do their tasks, supervisors need to be abreast with latest developments in the education system. Supervisors are expected to demonstrate an understanding of current practices in the education system. These include the use of Integrated Communication Technology (ICT) in light

of new knowledge related to learning to teach, collaboration and reflective practice (Frick, Carl & Beets, 2010).

UNISA TPO ensures that all students doing teaching practice are placed and supported in schools. Students are expected to provide the TPO with information that will ensure that they are placed in relevant and functional schools (Sosibo, 2017). Such support requires effective communication between all role players involved. There are still instances where school based mentor teachers do not know what to do with students and how to support them. This requires intervention by academics and the TPO. Some mentor teachers agree to mentor students with no consultation with the institution and in some cases they are left to construct their own roles during teaching practice. This creates a gap in the level of interaction between student teachers, mentor teachers and university supervisors.

Supervisors hold positions in teacher education that are crucial for professional preparation of teachers (Cuenca, 2012). They are expected to support students in ways that encourage them to be fully immersed in classroom situations and school contexts. Supervisors are also expected to provide students with a variety of opportunities to develop new skills, knowledge and comprehension of teaching pedagogy, subject content matter, students, and the social environment of the schools.

Teaching practice is a critical stage in the preparation of prospective teachers as it is aimed at producing good future teachers. In order to make TP even a more beneficial experience, all students must be supervised and supported in functional schools. Supervision and assessment are an indispensable tool in assuring quality in teacher training (Ngara, Ngwarai & Ngara, 2013).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework adopted for this study is the Humanistic Counselling Model. This framework emphasizes a person-centred humanistic approach (Bowers & Lemberger, 2016), which revolves around the supervisors own reflections of their work as unique individuals, how they experience their roles and also how they deal with daily challenges.

Supporting students using the humanistic approach provides them with an opportunity to expand and explore their creativity, to focus on their personal growth and self-development, as well as acknowledging that they have variety of choices that affords them opportunities to make decisions. The students develop positive self-image and acquire a deeper understanding of who they are, what they feel and the opportunity to explore the possibility of creating personal choices. The approach encourages self-awareness, self-realisation and self-actualization.

Students are encouraged through the humanistic framework, to focus on their unique character and develop potential, using opportunities available to them. This approach then suggests that supervisors must strive to encourage and maintain healthy relations with the students they supervise. Supervisors need to identify student weaknesses and suggest ways in which these can be mediated. Supervisor support entails support in lesson planning and presentation, classroom management and control, assessment of learners, professionalism, subject content knowledge as well as teaching strategies and the use of teaching and learning resources.

The relevance of this framework to this study is that supervisors create working relationships with students which are characterised by genuine and supportive engagements, thereby contributing towards the students' professional growth. The supervisors strive to understand personal experiences of students and consider them as creative and unique individuals. Supervisors therefore provide opportunities for students to engage through reflecting on their work and this leads to greater fulfillment and productivity.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Paradigmatic assumptions

Interpretive Paradigm

This research is situated in an interpretive paradigm, which was used to describe and explain what the supervisors shared during interviews in searching for deeper insights into the kinds of support that they provide to students. The supervisors shared their own realities and the researcher was able to understand these by interacting and engaging with them. Based on this interpretive lens, the researcher was able to represent the supervisors' narratives in obtaining deeper insight into their practices (Creswell, 2014).

Research Method and Design

The guiding methodological strategies that relate to the paradigmatic stance adopted in this research are interpretive and qualitative in nature. The qualitative research design allows for interpretations, in this case how supervisors support students during teaching practice. The interpretive and constructivist paradigm assumed in this study allowed for the use of a case study. This case is about a group of supervisors, whose experiences were explored in terms of their real life experiences as well as their own subject experiences (Cohen and Manion, 2016).

Participants

Participants in this study were external teaching practice supervisors contracted by the Teaching Practice Office (TPO) at the university. Ten supervisors who were actively involved in the supervision programme for the year participated in the research study. These supervisors were selected from different areas in the country. The supervisors were contacted and appointments scheduled based on their availability. These supervisors were engaged in supervision of students during their school placement periods, participated in school based mentor and supervisor reflection workshops, and also in quality assurance activities as set by the TPO. Each one of the supervisors had visited more than 50 students during the year. The supervisors were retired teachers, who had indicated their availability to visit students any time. Their qualifications and experience in the teaching field rendered them suitable to conduct teaching practice supervision for university students. These external supervisors were recruited through interaction with

academics as well as administrative staff at the university and had also shown interest to participate in the teaching practice supervision process.

Data collection

In-depth semi structured interviews were conducted with the supervisors. These were appropriate because participants shared their experiences on the support they provide to students. The interviews took place at the participants' preferred venues and lasted for 45 minutes each. Participants were provided with the background and explanation regarding the study, and supervisors signed consent forms and were also informed that their responses would be recorded. The researcher guided participants towards understanding the questions, asked probing questions and encouraged engagement from all participants. The researcher also took notes, and identified key ideas that the supervisors presented, while recording nuances presented by the supervisors.

The following research questions guided the research;

- What kind of support do teaching practice supervisors provide to students?
- How do supervisors understand their roles?
- What are the experiences of supervisors towards student support during teaching practice?

Data analysis

Data was analysed using content analysis. Themes were extracted from the transcribed data as highlighted by Creswell (2014). Coding was done explicitly, in accordance to qualitative data analysis. The researcher noted what the data revealed, and identified patterns within the data. The analysis followed an interpretive process, focusing on discourses emanating from the data. The focus was on supervisors' constructions of meaning, how their understanding of student support enables or constrains their practices. The researcher transcribed the data into readily identifiable, readable and structured format and identified key points that were used to identify patterns. Data trustworthiness, member checking and peer examination was implemented (Merriam, 2009). Member checking involved the researcher discussing the findings and key themes emerging from the interviews with the participants to verify that they were accurate and true reflections of what was shared. Participants were asked to provide additions to the findings. The use of in-depth description allowed for transferability by the reader, thus enhancing external validity. Rich, thick descriptions were provided through direct quotes from university supervisors regarding their experiences and perceptions of the student support.

The themes that emerged were as follows:

- The roles of the supervisors
- Lesson planning
- Lesson presentation
- Assessment
- Classroom management and organization

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are discussed under the following themes;

The Role of The Supervisors

Supervisors were asked to reflect on their roles. This was done in order to understand how they perceive their role in supporting students during teaching practice. Supervisor 1 reflected as follows;

My role is to support students as much as I can. I ensure that they know what's expected of them. Usually I communicate with them and offer my help if they encounter problems. I know that in most schools, teachers feel uncomfortable to be mentors. I help whenever I can. I also encourage students to communicate by emphasizing my role, which is to support them in what they are doing, to love the profession they choose and make a mark by producing future responsible citizens of our country that will boost the image of the country and their work being appreciated by all stakeholders in the education system. This will make them proud and want to do more by improving their qualifications to be on par with the new inventions. They will also bring innovations, creativity and sustainability. I ensure positive feedback to make them feel appreciated for the effort they put and offer my help if they need me.

Supervisor 2 shared as follows;

My main role as supervisor is to give support to the student teachers, to show them how to contribute towards effective teaching and learning. In fact I start from dress code, behavior in classroom. As an educator it is important to be friendly with your learners but at the same time not too friendly because they will take advantage of that as a result they will be no proper teaching and learning.

The supervisors' reflection above emphasize support to students. Supervisors are aware of their roles, which emphasize the development of required skills and competencies in student teachers, to enable them to be the best teachers as expected by teacher education institutions. Aglazor (2017) supports this by emphasizing that student teachers must be allocated to competent, knowledgeable and committed supervisors to assist them in acquiring skills and assuming full range of activities that are required of a teacher.

Lesson Presentation

One of the interview questions was based on supervisor support to students regarding lesson presentation. Supervisors are required to observe students teaching and provide feedback after the lesson. The student needs to present the lesson plan to the supervisors and engage in a pre-conferencing discussion with the supervisor before the lesson presentation. The supervisor observes the lesson presentation and provides feedback on the lesson presentation and the lesson plan. The excerpt below shows Supervisor 3's comments regarding lesson presentations;

You are expected to link the new content with the previous knowledge and to attract students' attention at the beginning of the lesson. Also, ensure that you give authentic examples to students and ensure that you have maximum participation of learners.

Supervisor 4 advised the student as follows;

I comment about the introduction: what methods are used to attract the learner's attention. For example, the questions asked, are they well-structured and relevant to the theme and also guiding to be easy to introduce the new content. The main part: were more examples given to ensure effective teaching and learning. Did the learners get a chance to ask questions for clarity after oral activities in preparation for the written activities? Did they participate effectively to show understanding? Were all learners reached according to their abilities and levels? The conclusion: was there productive feedback, misunderstanding clarified and homework given explained to guide the learners.

The above supervisor comments reveal that the supervisors are able to guide student teachers to reflect on strength and challenges after the lesson and to modify their subsequent lessons. The supervisors highlight the importance of lesson plan and guide students with regard to the different phases in a lesson. According to Fry, Ketteridge and Marshall (2009), the structure of each phase of the lesson is informed by learning phase requirements as well developmental age of learners. Often, the delivery is linked to the aim and objectives as stated in the planning. The introduction provides an opportunity for student teachers to communicate purpose and intention of the lesson to the learners. It is important for students to understand that the introduction forms a link between learner frame of reference and the new content. Therefore, the introduction phase of the lesson needs to be interesting so as to set the tone for further learner interaction with content. The choice of question mix is important to facilitate learner engagement with content and intention. With the exposition of new content the student has to be guided by aims and objectives set as well as expected outcomes. The CAPS document is key in guiding the student to relate to the skills, knowledge, values and attitudes to outcomes (Department of Education, 2017). The role of the student in the exposition of new content is assessed in relation to quality of learner involvement in the learning process. It is important for the student to understand what learning as a process entails. In as far as the conclusion is concerned, the student teacher must reflect on the resources used to effectively conclude a lesson and also on the assessment component.

Lesson planning

A lesson plan provides a road map for the teacher, it gives a detailed description of the purpose of the lesson, teaching strategies, assessment activities, teacher and learner activities as well as more guidance on how the lesson is expected to unfold. The components of lesson plans often vary, and these are dependent on individual teacher preferences, subject content coverage, as well as individual needs of students. One of the interview questions focused on how supervisors support students during teaching practice. Supervisor 5 reflected as follows;

I normally give them clear feedback. A lesson plan must clearly show all the activities that will be done in classroom. I always tell them, a lesson plan is like

when one prepares to take a journey. You cannot wake up and say I'm going overseas. You must plan your trip beforehand.

Supervisors understand that their roles focus on assisting students with lesson plans, as is evident in Supervisor 6's response below;

Lesson plan must show, what is it that you want to achieve at the end of your lesson. We don't teach to make learners pass to the next phas, but we equip them with knowledge which they will apply in future. That is why it is important to plan.

The Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) (Department of Basic Education, 2017) emphasizes the importance of planning for teaching and learning and that lesson planning is key for effective teaching and learning. Student teachers need to understand how to adapt lesson plans to respond to their individual student's needs and supervisors and school based mentor teachers are important in this regard. Mapolisa and Tshabalala (2014) concur with this and argue that lesson planning is key for effective teaching and learning and that supervisors must continuously provide guidance and feedback relating to lesson planning.

Assessment

Supervisors are a source of support, assistance and knowledge provision for the student teachers. One of their roles is to observe and assess student teachers objectively. This means therefore that they are expected to advise student teachers on matters relating to learner assessment in the classroom. Supervisor 7 understood this component as follows;

I advise students to focus on baseline assessment, which mostly happens during the introductory phase of the lesson. This is where the student checks learners' prior knowledge. The students are guided to use formative assessment to monitor and support teaching and learning in the exposition of content. Students are also made aware that summative assessment is used to define the overall learner progress and the effectiveness of the teaching learning process.

Assessment is an integral component of teaching and learning. It is therefore important for student teachers to understand different assessment strategies and to learn how to assess learners. Supervisor 8 shared how she supports students on this component;

I assist the students to understand the difference between formative and summative assessments, where formative depicts ongoing or continuous assessment. This assessment is done regularly to ensure that learners understand what they have been taught. Summative assessment sums up what has been learned. It establishes whether the learner has achieved the required standards as well as the outcomes.

Assessment is generally the most challenging area of a student teacher's work, as argued by Mokoena (2017). It also remains a critical aspect in the teaching and learning process. Student assessment emphasizes reflective teaching, which is an essential part of teacher development and enhancing the learning experience of students (Schoeman & Mabunda, 2012). Assessment is important as it links student learning to specific teaching and learning objectives, and allows for the provision of feedback regarding student performance and progress (Sethusha, 2014).

Classroom Management and Organization

Supervisors support students in as far as classroom management and organization is concerned. In this theme, supervisors referred to the following; teaching and learning strategies, the use of learner teacher resource materials, discipline, time management as well as subject content knowledge. Supervisors see this as an important contribution, as Supervisor 9 shared;

Most students tend to focus on the lecture as well as question an answer methods. They do not use discussions, problem solving, role play and project methods. I think it is because they adopt what their mentor teachers do and do not explore other teaching and learning strategies.

Supervisor 10 presented as follows;

After observing the student's lesson, I comment on the use or resources. I advise students to select appropriate support materials and how to use them effectively. I also suggest ways in which they can develop their own resources and modify materials to be developmentally and age appropriate for learners.

Classroom management and organization also requires students to be punctual, disciplined and know their subject content. Supervisor 1 emphasized the importance of this;

I advise students on matters of professionalism as well. I speak to them about professional conduct, dress code, time management and emphasize that they must know the content of the subjects they teach. This is a challenge, most students are struggling to cope.

It is evident from the above reflections that students still experience challenges in some components of teaching practice, and that supervisors must be equipped to assist them fully (Kaldi & Xafakos, 2017). Classroom management and organization includes discipline as a crucial component of teaching and learning. A disciplined classroom makes it easier for effective teaching and learning to take place and effective classroom management paves the way for discussions as well as maximum learner interaction. As Korpershoek, Harms, de Boer, van Kuijk and Doolard (2018) posit, effective classroom management strategies contribute towards students' academic, behavioural and motivational outcomes.

CONCLUSION

The findings revealed the kind of support supervisors provide during teaching practice. As indicated in their reflections, supervisors understand how they are expected to support students, and this support is aimed at preparing them to be good future teachers. Teaching practice supervision aims at providing students with support, assistance and guidance towards their professional growth and development. In their support to students, supervisors emphasized feedback as extremely important. This refers to feedback on their side as supervisors and on the side of students, where best practices are shared and discussed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Quality assurance measures are required to constantly evaluate the work that supervisors do. This requires availability of academics to monitor supervisors and school based mentors from time to time. These frequent monitoring sessions will assist supervisors in further supporting students' professional growth. Student support is critical in an Open, Distance and e-Learning environment to ensure satisfactory throughput.

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