

## EMPOWERING STUDENT TEACHERS FOR PRACTICUM: LECTURER AND STUDENT OPINIONS

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### ABSTRACT

Practicum is generally regarded a key component in teacher education. If properly done, Teaching Practice (T.P.) is there to develop student teacher-teaching skills so that they begin collecting experiences to enrich their professional growth. While doing T.P student teachers need to survive in the classroom, they need to display baseline teaching skills. For this to be possible student teachers require proper and adequate empowerment before they go for T.P. While doing T.P some students at Zimbabwe Open University did not do well in their assessment or did not perform impressively. A case study was conducted to determine lecturer and student opinions on the adequacy of the strategies that are used to empower student teachers for T.P at the Zimbabwe Open University in the Midlands region. Participants were sampled purposively and conveniently. An open ended questionnaire was self-administered to full time lecturers and students teachers who had gone through T.P. or were doing T.P. at the time the study was conducted. A focus group discussion was held with part time tutors in the faculty of education. Generated data were analysed across respondents and questions guiding the study. The study established that some appropriate strategies were in place to empower students for T.P. Among these were provision of T.P related modules; tutorials and T.P preparation sessions. However in trying to empower students before going for practicum, the main challenge opined was non-attendance by some students for tutorial and T.P prep sessions. The strategies were also found not to be comprehensive especially in the area of ICT as the department did not train student teachers to use ICT in their teaching while doing T.P. Among other things, the study recommended student teacher attendance for T.P. prep sessions and widening of the ICT curriculum

**Key words:** Teaching practice, baseline teaching skills, student teachers

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### 1.1 Introduction

a) Teaching Practice is a common course in all teacher development programmes at Zimbabwe Open University. The teacher development programmers include the Bachelors' degrees in Early Childhood development and Secondary Education and Diploma courses in Primary Education and Post Graduate Education. At Zimbabwe Open University there are two categories of Teaching Practice .One involves student teachers with full teaching responsibility while the other involves a student teacher who is attached to a mentor for the period during which one would be on T.P. In the first case the student teacher is actually a temporal teacher without the necessary pedagogical qualifications but having full responsibility of a class.In the second case, the student teacher is on attachment or what one would call internship and is a mentee to some mentor. In both cases,however, student teachers will be undergoing pre-service teacher training and during some specified semesters student teachers register to go on Teaching Practice. Teaching Practice is one of the critical components of Teacher Education programmes since it serves several important purposes.Giving student teachers the opportunity to try out the theory they would have learnt and giving student teachers the opportunity to get supervised on the job experience are some of purposes served by Teaching Practice.Since T.P is critical in teacher training, it becomes mandatory for training institutions to adequately prepare students for practicum so that Teaching practice becomes productive for trainees. Due to the nature of Open and Distance Learning there seemed to be challenges that militate against effective empowerment of student teachers for productive Teaching Practice. Some student teachers scored marks below 50% in their first practicum assessment.Some lessons which student teachers delivered lacked some lesson phases such as the introduction or conclusion. Furthermore, in some lessons student teachers failed to apply principles in the use of interactive methodology.It was against this background that this study was conducted.

### 1.2 Statement of the problem

While students were doing Teaching Practice, some of them did not pass in their assessment and some failed to display some baseline teaching skills.

### 1.3 Research questions

Which strategies are used to empower student teachers at Zimbabwe Open University before students go for Teaching Practice?

In which ways are the empowering strategies effective?

In which ways are the strategies not effective?

What challenges are faced in empowering teacher trainees for Teaching Practice?

How could student teachers be efficiently empowered for Teaching Practice in Open and Distance learning?

#### 1.4 Research objectives

The objectives of the study were to:

- ascertain the forms of T.P. preparation strategies used at ZOU in empowering student teachers for Teaching Practice.
- determine the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of T.P. preparatory strategies in empowering trainee teachers for Teaching Practice?
- establish challenges presenting themselves in empowering students for Teaching Practice and
- suggest ways by which the empowering of teacher trainees for productive Teaching Practice could be made more efficient.

#### 1.5 Significance of the study

It was hoped that the enriched understanding of effective ways of empowering student teachers for practicum would make a significant contribution in teacher education especially in Open and Distance learning. In addition, it was hoped that the findings of this study could be used as a platform by teacher trainers in ODL to reflect on the ways they prepare teacher trainees for Teaching Practice. The researcher also hoped that findings made in this study could motivate other researchers to conduct studies germane to this current study.

#### 1.6 Research methodology

##### Design

To carry out the study, the qualitative design was used. One of the characteristics of qualitative study method is to investigate the current status of phenomena. It was the primary goal of this study to investigate the essence and effectiveness of strategies used to empower student teachers at Zimbabwe Open University before students go for Teaching Practice. The study was a case study since it involved lecturers and students at the ZOU Midlands regional campus only.

### Population of the study

The target population for this study was all the full time lecturers and part-time tutors in the department of Education at the Midlands Regional Campus and ZOU students who had completed their T.P. in the previous semester and those who were still on T.P. at the time the study was conducted.

### The Sample

Ten lecturers, six of whom were part-time tutors were purposively sampled to take part in the study. Fifteen students took part, five who had completed their T.P. in the previous semester and ten who were still doing T.P. in the first semester of 2015.

### Data gathering instruments

The instruments for data collection were an open-ended questionnaire for the students and full-time lecturers and focus group discussion with six part-time lecturers. Students and full-time lecturers completed an open-ended questionnaire which had questions designed in a similar fashion with the focus group guide which was used with part-time tutors. Participant and instrument triangulation contributed to the trustworthiness of the study.

## 1.7 Conceptual framework and literature review

### 1.7.1 The concept empowerment

According to Scribner et al (undated, p.68) "Empowerment is the process of providing tools necessary for others to be efficient and effective in the desired outcome." Gutierrez et al, (1991) define empowerment as the process that allows one to gain knowledge, skill-sets and attitude needed to cope with circumstance in which one lives. Teacher empowerment is

investing teachers with “the right to participate in the determination of school goals and policies and to exercise professional judgement about what to teach and how to teach” (Bolin,1989 p.82). Hobbs and Moreland (2009) identify empowering as happening in the following phases namely, initiating-which happens with teachers in their 1-3 years as they struggle to prepare lesson plans and practice in the classroom increasing which takes place as teachers learn about opportunities to grow and sustaining which happens when teachers feel a high level of self-efficacy. According to Lichtenstein et.al (1991) knowledge that empowers teachers is categorised into knowledge of professional community, knowledge of education policy and knowledge of subject area. Although it might be true that knowing about a subject makes it easier to teach it some very good scholars have difficulty communicating what they know to students. This implies that knowledge in the art and science of teaching is another form of knowledge which empowers teachers. In this study the concept empowerment was taken mean the process that allows student teachers to gain knowledge, skill-sets and attitudes necessary for student teachers to display expected levels of efficiency when doing Teaching Practice.

### 1.7.2 Review of related literature

In a related study titled “Structural antecedents and psychological correlates of teacher empowerment”, Dee et al (2003) showed that teamwork may differentiate empowering from non-empowering site-based management. The same study suggested that school leaders interested in developing a personal strategy to enable teacher empowerment, should devise ways to model empowered behaviours for teachers, in order to encourage cooperative behaviours among teachers and most critically to demonstrate firm trust in school personnel. The same study led to the conclusion that empowered teachers with increased task motivation and strong organizational commitment are the foundation of a dynamic school technology.

Wall (2012). carried out a study titled, “An exploratory study of teacher empowerment and technical education in Kentucky”. The purpose of the study was to examine the relationship between teachers’ perceptions of empowerment and principal use of power within career and technical education. In the study some participants opined that they were empowered in self efficacy and status. However teachers felt there were barriers to teacher

empowerment as teachers did not perceive to be empowered in decision making, status, autonomy and professional growth. Teachers indicated that there was no collaborative decision making and they had just to do the job. The participants indicated that it was difficult to share knowledge with students when they were unprepared mentally or physically to learn. Low levels of empowerment were perceived by Career and Technical education teachers as they felt a lack of respect and appreciation since they were employees of an Area Technology Center and the schools at which they worked were operated by the State and not by local districts. Career and Technical education teachers gave the view that they had little control over students they received, time for planning and limited money to purchase items for classroom learning.

According to Bolin(1989) computer empowered teachers have an appropriate infrastructure, use of technology they master and use of pedagogical strategies where computers are productive. According to Lichtenstein et.al,(1991) knowledge that empowers teachers is divided into three categories namely, knowledge of subject area, knowledge of professional community and knowledge of education policy. In her work, Yonemura (2011) explored three ways in which she worked to empower student teachers in teacher training, namely through the invention of the curriculum, through on going peer relations and through child study. Yonemura (ibid.) emphasised that human beings can and must shift education perspectives in the direction of emancipation.

The studies referred to above are linked to the current study since the concept of empowerment was central to the referred studies and the current study. While Hobbs and Moreland as cited by Wall (2012) identified teacher empowerment as happening in the initiating, increasing and sustaining phases of teaching, the current study's focus was on the empowering of student teachers before going for practicum.

### 1.8 Data presentation and discussion

**Question 1: Which strategies are used to empower student teachers at Zimbabwe Open University before students go for Teaching Practice?**

All full time lecturers gave the mind that micro and peer teaching and provision of modules with T.P related content were ways by which Zimbabwe University empowered students in

the teacher development programmes for practicum. These strategies were also opined by eight out of the fifteen students who completed the questionnaire. In support of the use of these strategies some tutors who took part in the focus group had the following to say:

*Peer and micro teaching are the practical ways by which students are empowered for T.P. These contribute greatly to student teacher competence*

*If properly read and understood all the modules that students study and are given contribute immensely to empowering students for practicum. Modules cover all teaching and learning related content...levels of planning are covered, educational management, all subjects in educational foundation courses to just to mention some areas.*

*Modules empower students with knowledge on the science or art of teaching and specially the science of teaching their subjects of specialisation.*

Face to face tutorials were given by all the six full-time tutors while only six out the fifteen students stated this strategy. Probably only a few students expressed the view that tutorials were a way by which students were empowered for T.P for the reason that some students do not attend tutorials. The view that tutorials were a means by which students were empowered for T.P. was expressed in the focus group and some participants had the following statements to make:

*In tutorials all content linked to the practice of teaching is covered and any misconceptions are clarified, including issues of mentoring, use of diverse of teaching. Tutorials are very handy in empowering students for practicum. Practical examples related to subject areas of students are discussed and this helps students when it comes to doing their practicum.*

Assignments which were linked to students' T.P. were given by participants as a strategy by which students were empowered for T.P. by four tutors and six students. In the focus group this idea was also reinforced and one participant had the following to say:

*The substance of pre- practicum assignments which students write link very well with practicum matters.....students can write assignments on the application of methods*

*of teaching, educational planning that is to say scheming, planning....and many ... many other things*

Only two students and two full time lecturers opined that T.P. supervision was a strategy by which students were empowered for practicum. Probably use of supervision as being separate from assessment could be effective in empowering students for the rest of the practicum time, once the first supervision is done early. That only four participants stated T.P. supervision as one strategy by which students are empowered for practicum could be attributed to practice of combining supervision and assessment when trainers visit students.

However some views given by participants that the use of appropriate modules and practical activities such as peer and microteaching, among other strategies, empowered trainees for T.P are in support with findings made by Lichtenstein et.al (1991) who in their study found out that knowledge that empowers teachers is knowledge of subject area. Related to this finding, in this study participants were of the mind that knowledge gained about the science of teaching student teachers subjects in the school while doing T.P. empowered the students for practicum. According to Wall (2012), self –efficacy is one areas teachers really want to be empowered in. In this study practical activities in which student teachers were involved were perceived by participants as contributing to trainee competency before students went to do T.P.

**Question 2: In which ways are the empowering strategies effective?**

All the six lecturers and twelve students viewed strategies by which trainees were empowered for T.P as being efficient in adding confidence to trainees, equipping students with knowledge relevant for use in the didactic situations while students were doing T.P. Nonetheless three students went on to quickly point out that that strategies used were not efficient enough to empower student teachers for T.P. Their views were represented under research question 3. In the focus group participants had different views on the ways in which the strategies used to empower student teachers were efficient. Among those who felt



that the ways by which student teachers were empowered for T.P were efficient, some made the following statements:

*Practical sessions like... micro and peer teaching if done according to principles, are really efficient student levels of confidence are heightened...knowledge is gained about principles of teaching and learning students are initiated into reflective practice as they take part in microteaching teaching.*

*ZOU modules are like bibles of the teaching profession... all foundations of education are covered----uses of media and technology modern trends in education ..... ah you name it*

That participants in this study viewed strategies that are used in empowering students for practicum as efficient in developing trainees' self-efficacy and in equipping them with knowledge and skills necessary for productive practicum supports findings by Lichtenstein et al (1991) and Wall (2012) who in their studies established that participants appreciated models of empowerment which increased their knowledge in their subject areas and which increased their competence, respectively.

**Q3: In which ways are the empowering strategies not effective?**

Participants gave the views that not all students benefited from the intentions of empowering activities. According to eight students and all the six full time lectures, some students did not attend tutorials and so could not benefit from the empowering strategies such as tutorials and peer and micro teaching that were organised by the training institution. According to two students teaching peers only and not actual learners made microteaching rather ineffective. This opinion might have been expressed by students who before their practicum were not practising teachers and so felt the need to teach real pupils in microteaching sessions. Five students and two tutors expressed the opinion that use of modules was not effective since there was insufficient supply of modules. This ineffectiveness was perceived by fairly few participants and could be attributed to sharp

increase in the enrolments of students in the department of teacher development at ZOU. Similar views were also deliberated in the focus group. According to one participant:

*One can't benefit from some empowering strategies like peer teaching and tutorials, let alone T.P. preparation sessions. Some students go for practicum while they are very ill prepared for it. Some things, like preparation of e-e-students for T.P just can't be done while students are at a distance.*

According to nine students, ZOU trainees were not fully empowered to use modern technology while doing T.P. This opinion was also given by two lecturers and participants in the focus group. Some participants had the following to say

*Our peer and microteaching aren't effective. Lecturers do not give any demos of good practice. Some principles aren't just followed.*

*As regards the PGDE 112 Introduction to media and technology course coverage of work is just theoretical. trainees do not do hard practicals in this course.. A simple example is not equipping students with skills to use ICT even powerpoint in their teaching when doing practicum*

**Q4: What challenges are faced in empowering teacher trainees for Teaching Practice?**

The absence of teacher trainees for tutorials, microteaching, T.P. preparation sessions was given as main hurdle in trying to effectively empower students for practicum. All the six full time lecturers and twelve students expressed this view. In the focus group the challenge of non-attendance in activities organised by the department to empower trainees was also opined. In support of this view one of the participants made the following statement:

*Non- attendance by students is a challenge. Students do not just attend tutorials and peerteaching, of course to their own detriment.*

*Maybe students in the teacher development programmes assume that practicum can be done by distance education, in some aspects this can't work in the preparation of students for practicum.*

Dealing with large groups in tutorials, microteaching and T.P. preparation sessions was viewed as a challenge in trying to effectively empower students for practicum. This view was expressed by all participants. This feeling by all participants could be linked to the fairly large intakes in the teacher development department at ZOU at the time this study was conducted. One participant had the following statement to make:

*Due to the large groups of students it is difficult to hold tutorials in the true sense of the word students can't get individual attention, there is temptation to lecture to students even if the time to do so is short.*

At ZOU the tutorial mode is generally more attractive to students since the times they meet face to face with tutors is short.

*In microteaching, many do not even get the first chance to teach and this renders microteaching as a strategy of empowering students for practicum, ineffective.*

Participants viewed the inadequacy of time as a challenge in empowering trainees for T.P. This opinion was expressed by all tutors and lecturers in the focus group and seven out of fifteen trainees. One tutor simply wrote:

*Time is not adequate to make the process of empowering student teachers for practicum efficient.*

The findings made in this study that participants perceived that there were challenges in trying to empower students for practicum corroborate a finding in Wall's study (2012) which also established that there were challenges to teacher empowering. Nonetheless Wall's study indicated challenges of teachers not being empowered in decision making, status, autonomy and professional growth while in this study challenges were given as time constraints, and dealing with large groups of students.

**Question 5: How could student teachers be efficiently empowered for Teaching Practice in Open and Distance learning?**

Seventeen participants among the participants who completed the questionnaire proposed use of decentralised tutorials to encourage student attendance and adequate peer teaching

before students go for practicum. These suggestions were also made by participants in the focus group. One participant made the following statement:

*No doubt tutorials which are run at district centres and attendance by all student will go a long way in equipping teacher trainees with basic teaching skills and knowledge that can empowers for practicum.*

While suggestions which were made by participants were sound, some of the suggestions if taken on board would have monetary implications on the university. Running tutorials at district level would require some extra financial input.

### 1.9 Conclusion

The study established that a variety of strategies were in place at ZOU to empower student teachers for practicum. In some ways the strategies were viewed as efficient and in other ways as inefficient. Time constraints and dealing with large groups of students were viewed as some hindrances to the effectiveness of empowering strategies for practicum.

### 1.10 Recommendations

The researcher recommends the following:

- ✚ Allocation of more time to practicum preparation of students
- ✚ Making it crystal clear to trainee teachers on the need to physically attend all T.P. preparation activities which are organised by the department of teacher education
- ✚ Incorporation of practical activities in the use of modern technology to help students to acquire the necessary skills for them to efficiently use modern technology in their teaching while doing practicum
- ✚ Application of microteaching principles in a bid to help students benefit from it.
- ✚ Dividing students into manageable groups during tutorials and peer teaching
- ✚ Organising microteaching which involves actual pupils for trainee who would not be practising teachers before doing the University practicum

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