

ISSUES OF QUALITY IN TEACHING PRACTICE SUPERVISION AMONG OPEN DISTANCE STUDENTS: STUDENT AND LECTURER INPUT

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ABSTRACT: *While Teaching Practice (TP) students are expected to carry out teaching duties as guided by their training institutions and instructions from the school managers, there is need that all stakeholders get involved to improve the quality of the practicum. As such, the purpose of TP supervision is meant to achieve the set of objectives of training and building up a teacher to the level of acceptable standard. This study was conducted with the open distance students who were following up a Post-Graduate Diploma in Education at Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). The study employed focus group method with participants and a few open ended questionnaires were administered. In the study it was established that TP supervision was regarded as effective in some ways such as being timeous but not productive in giving students room to air their opinions as discussions were dictatorial and hurriedly done. The study suggests, among other things, a relook by the University on the minimum numbers of students each TP supervisor should supervise on a given day, especially in remote areas where schools are far apart.*

KEYWORDS: Student, Student Teacher, Teaching Practice, Supervision, Distance Learning

INTRODUCTION

At Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU), the Teacher Development Department operates under the Faculty of Arts and Education. Several teacher education courses are offered in the department of teacher education, among them being: the Post Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE), Bachelor for Early Childhood Development (BECD) and Diploma in Primary Education (DIPED).

All teacher education courses, cannot not be completed without the practicum component. Student teachers' practicum is a critical component in teacher development courses since it is an opportunity to student teachers to gain professional experience and ethics so that they become socialized into the teaching profession. It is an induction into the teaching profession to improve teachers' skills and extend the body of knowledge on effective teaching practices. The ZOU TP model offers a separate block of classroom based teaching. When doing TP students in all teacher development programmes are attached to a school and are expected to carry out all duties of teaching under the guidance of a mentor who is appointed by the school. To facilitate quality in TP, meticulous supervision of students should be done by all the stakeholders. The purpose of TP supervision is to make sure that objectives of TP are achieved. However, it would appear that students at ZOU have had issues in the manner the teaching practice supervision is handled and as such a study was undertaken to understand how the practicum is conducted with the distance students.

Statement of problem

It seemed student teachers had some challenges with the quality of TP supervision rendered to them by University lecturers. Supervision was done hurriedly and post supervision conversations with students were superfluous.

Objectives of the study

The objectives of the study were to;

- ascertain aspects of TP supervision by ZOU supervisors regarded by students and lecturers as being of good quality
- determine variables that contribute to effective TP supervision by University lecturers
- establish weaknesses of TP supervision by ZOU supervisors
- identify variables that contribute to weaknesses of TP supervision by University lecturers
- provide suggestions by which TP supervision by ZOU lecturers could be made more beneficial to student teachers

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following questions:

- Which aspects of TP supervision by ZOU supervisors are regarded by students and lecturers as being of good quality?
- What variables contribute to effective TP supervision by University lecturers?
- Which aspects of TP supervision by ZOU are considered as of not good quality?
- Which variables contribute to weaknesses of TP supervision by University lecturers?
- How could the TP supervision by ZOU lecturers be made more beneficial to student teachers?

Significance of the study

The researchers hoped that the findings of the study would make significant contribution to knowledge within teacher education in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) by providing useful information about practice geared towards quality professional development of student teachers. It was hoped that leaders in Teaching Practice particularly those in ODL could use the study as a platform to reflect on their practices and strategies in heightening quality in Teaching Practice supervision. The unveiling of TP supervision quality-linked challenges could be a basis for addressing them through efforts of stakeholders. The researcher also hoped that insights gained through the study could stimulate further study.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Design

The qualitative design was employed to conduct a case study. The focus of qualitative research is the nature or essence of things. In this study, the researchers purposed to obtain information on the nature of views students and lecturers had on the quality of TP supervision at ZOU. Zimbabwe Open University students in the Midlands province of Zimbabwe who were doing their practicum during the second University semester in 2016 and ZOU TP supervisors were identified for a situational case study.

Sample

The target population was all Zimbabwe Open University students doing TP in the Midlands province of Zimbabwe in the year 2016. Twenty (20) students were conveniently sampled in this study for participation. Students who took part in the study were sampled at the time they were being supervised. The TP deployment list supplied by the TP department was used. Six ZOU full time TP supervisors also took part in the study. These were chosen because the researchers felt that they had first hand information on their operations as TP supervisors.

Instruments

In the study, open ended questionnaires were administered to fifteen students at the time they came to the Midlands regional centre to write end of semester exams. Interviews were held with TP supervisors individually, while one focus discussion was held with five students at one urban school in Gweru at the first week of second school term in 2017.

Limitations

The study was a case study of the Midlands Zimbabwe Open University regional campus and so its findings may not be generalisable to other Open and Distance learning institutions. In addition the sample was rather small. Nonetheless, the picture maybe a replica of what obtains in the minds of University TP supervisors, and student teachers elsewhere in teacher education.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Guijar, Naoreen, Saifi and Bajwa (2010) carried out a study titled, "Teaching Practice: Problems and Issues in Pakistan." The purpose of the study was to determine the issues and problems of Teaching Practice in Pakistan and to obtain information on the perceptions of student teachers on the trends of T.P in Pakistan. The study by Guijar et al (2010) established that supervision was considered to be wanting on the part of College trainers. Evaluation and assessment criteria were viewed as very formal without much meaning being attached. Comments were given such as "Satisfactory, Unsatisfactory, good, very good or just provision of marks or percentages" (Guijar et al 2010:358). Thus, to the students the instrument did not portray teaching as a complex, cognitive practice. In a related study by Rusnyak (2011) titled, "Student Teaching Assessment instruments: Possibilities and Pitfalls for Promoting Professional Development," the research was able to establish that an assessment instrument that portrays teaching as a complex, cognitive practice enabled the lecturers to consolidate and reinforce their formative assessment in a more nuanced way than was possible when using an assessment instrument with a simple checklist design.

Kildan, Ilbert, Pektas, Gydinozu, Incikabi and Ergun (2013) carried out a study titled “Evaluating Views of Teacher Trainees on Teacher Training Process in Turkey”. The purpose of the study was to evaluate the views of the teacher trainees on the process of teacher training in Turkey. The participants were of the view that they were under supervised due to inadequate academic staff and problems caused by the accession system to the faculties of Education (Kildan, et al., 2013).

In a study titled, “Problems of Teacher Education in India”, by Desai (2012) some findings indicated that student teachers faced some challenges which were directly or indirectly engendered by their training institution. Students faced some problems with the supervision of their educators from university or colleges. Supervision before classroom teaching was viewed as ineffective as “lesson plans are checked superficially and no discussion is made by the subject method specialists” (Desai, 2013:56).

Murphy and Butcher (2009) conducted a study on “Student Teacher Voices: Teaching Practice Experiences of the Year One Early Childhood Student Teachers in a Field Based Teacher Programme”, The aim of the study was to generate TP narratives from stage one E.C.D. student teacher. As regards the assessments of the Visiting Lecturers, “nerve wracking experiences were storied within the focus groups” (Murphy and Butcher, 2009). Students viewed the visiting lecturer’s interpretations of the assessments of by visiting lecturers as instrumental to the strong themes of their TP. A study by Chikunda (2008) made similar and related findings. In a study titled, “An Analysis of Challenges and Learning Opportunities Surroundings College – Based T.P. Supervision: The Case of Mutare Teachers’ College”. The purpose of the research was to unearth challenges and learning opportunities associated with college based TP supervision at Mutare. In this study 52% of the students viewed the purpose of visits by college lecturers as fault finding and just giving a mark and 80% of the students described the nature of lecturer visits as frightening and 44% considered interaction between the lecturers and student teachers as being lecturer –centred (Chikunda, 2008).

Oppong (2013) conducted a study on: “Supervisors’ Remarks in Teaching Practice: Perspectives of History Student Teachers” The study sought to examine the perspectives of History student teachers on the remarks given by supervisors who were lecturers from their university during TP. Participants regarded remarks by their supervisors as informative since the remarks focused on areas students did well, such as subject matter or knowledge of the students on the content, questioning skills and general methods used by students, and suggested areas of improvement. The informative and constructive nature of supervisors’ remarks gave students a sense of accomplishment and helped them gain confidence and improve upon their classroom skill (Oppong, 2013, p. 159). The study also revealed that most remarks from supervisors were inconsistent since suggestions by supervisors were contradictory and inadequate as some supervisors did not fully give students light on the way forward. Remarks were different from what students were taught in their methods of teaching class (Oppong, 2013, p. 159). A study by Kourioeos (2012) titled, “The Impact of Mentoring on Primary Language Teacher Development during the Practicum” established that students showed dissatisfaction with their supervisors’ limited knowledge of the subject matter they were supposed to give feedback on. Student teachers were also dissatisfied with lack of constructive feedback from their supervisors.

The findings in the studies referred to in the section above relate to the current study which also sought to determine positive and negative aspects of university based TP supervision in an Open Distance Learning (ODL) institution.

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings are presented and discussed basing on research questions guiding the study.

Q1: Which aspects of TP supervision by ZOU supervisors are regarded by students and lecturers as being of good quality?

There was a variety of responses to the question which required participants to state the forms of good qualities which characterised TP supervision by Zimbabwe Open University supervisors. TP supervision was not a once off activity as was opined by students and lecturers. All the five lecturers and seventeen students who took part in the study gave the view that TP supervision was of good quality because it was a continuous exercise for the period the students were on TP irrespective of the teacher education programme students were studying. In support of this view one lecturer and one student made the following contributions:

L1: Our supervision is continuous, each term we supervise students twice, we keep connected.

S4: TP supervision by ZOU staff is adequate. We are sufficiently supervised.

While in this study the majority of participants gave the views that students were sufficiently supervised by ZOU TP supervisors, in a study carried out by Kildan et al (2013), there was indication that students were under supervised when doing TP.

Thoroughness in conducting TP supervision was regarded by participants as a positive attribute of TP supervision by the participants. This view was given by four (4) lecturers and fifteen (15) students. In support of this view ten students pointed out that supervisors closely scrutinized their TP documentation. One student had the following contribution to make;

S5: Detailed comments provided by ZOU supervisors are an indication of thoroughness by supervisors. Most of us often refer to the useful comments for professional growth.

The finding made in this study are that ZOU TP supervisors were thorough in their supervision and this is consistent with the findings made in Oppong's study which established that participants regarded remarks by their supervisors as informative since the remarks focused on areas students did well in, such as student subject matter knowledge, questioning skills and general methods used by students, and suggested areas of improvement but the same finding contradicts findings made in a study by Desai et al (2013) which indicated that TP supervision of students in India was not thorough as checking of lesson plans was superficial.

Use of supervision forms which cover all critical skills in teaching was viewed as one good quality aspect of ZOU – based TP supervision by four out of the six lecturers and all the five students in the focus group and seven others who responded to the questionnaire. In support of this view one lecturer gave the following opinion:

L2: Supervision guides which we use cover relevant aspects to effective teaching---- schemes, lesson planning, lesson delivery, class and classroom management, records and personal dimensions ---- but mark allocation on these aspects need to be broken down to minimise variances in mark allocation by supervisors.

This finding contradicts a finding made by Desai et al (2013) that to the students the supervision instrument did not portray teaching as a complex, cognitive practice.

Use of after- lesson observation discussions was given as aspect of good quality TP supervision. Eight students pointed out that supervisors were not dictatorial in approach and three lecturers also expressed this view by pointing out they always entertained student input and justifications for doing some things in certain ways. The following contributions were made by participants in support of the view that democratic after-lesson-observations were conducted by supervisors with students and these promoted reflective practice by students.

S3: Supervisors invite us to make a brief evaluation of our lessons and that promotes deep thinking.

S2: Supervisors give us chance to support what we would have done, which ordinarily would not be quite in line with common procedures.

S1: I like it when supervisors give ear to what I would be saying as they discuss with me.

L2: When we go out there we do not just impose our ideas on students, we listen to their voices as we discuss their performance.

The finding that post lesson observation dialogical pep talk was a good quality aspect of TP supervision used by ZOU supervisors was contrary to findings by Desai et al (2013) and Chikundi (2008) who in their studies established that no discussion was made by the subject method specialists with students and that post lesson discussions were not dialogical respectively.

General TP supervision practices and policies followed by ZOU TP supervisors were considered as aspects depicting good qualities of ZOU TP supervision. The view that no student is supervised more than once by one and the same supervisor and the ability by ZOU supervisors to supervise all students no matter how far the schools at which they were doing TP were from the regional centre was opined by seven participants in each case. These two findings are not in line with findings of other studies which were reviewed for the purposes of this study. However, some of the participants who expressed these views made the following contributions:

L6: No lecturer supervises the same student more than once in any given semester. This broadens students' views about the concept of effective teaching.

L2: Students appreciate ZOU supervisors' ability to supervise all students in each of the semesters.

Eleven students (11) and three (3) lecturers were of the view that ZOU TP supervisions were well timed and second supervisions premised from the weaknesses pointed out in the previous assessment by some other lecturer. In support of these views some participants made the following statements:

L4: TP supervisions are generally well time-----usually starting in the 3rd week into school term---- students would have done some substantial work upon which meaningful supervision can be done.

S5: I appreciate the practice by supervisors, in the second round,-- to start checking if I have improved on weak areas pointed out by first supervisor ----makes my TP experience quite developmental.

Q2: What variables contribute to effective TP supervision by University lecturers?

When participants were asked to state factors which they thought contributed to the perceived good qualities of TP supervision by ZOU staff, sixteen of them were of the view that the TP supervisors' high qualifications and experience in supervision contributed to the good quality performance as supervisors.

One lecturer simply stated:

L2: Nothing is questionable about the academic and professional qualifications. All supervisors are seasoned teachers and all hold Masters' qualifications in relevant disciplines.

All the six lecturers attributed good quality aspects of TP supervision by ZOU supervisors to TP supervision workshops which are conducted at Regional centre before embarking on supervision each of the university semesters. In line with this thought one lecturer made the following contribution:

L3: TP supervision workshops are just instrumental in making our supervisions of high quality-----all modern procedures in effective supervision are covered---- so supervisors go out fully armed.

In the view of two (2) lecturers, application of research findings and recommendations by researchers contribute to TP supervision effectiveness.

Q3: Which aspects of TP supervision by ZOU supervisors are considered as of not good quality?

Little time that ZOU TP supervisors accorded between student initial and second supervision was regarded by five students and two lecturers as an aspect which rendered TP supervision ineffective. In support of this view some participants made the following contributions:

L2: Very little time given between two visits does not give students ample time to adequately attend to weaknesses raised in the first supervision ---- that way professional development is compromised.

S1: My second supervision was done just one and half weeks after the first supervision and the second supervisor found me not having made some amendments in schemes which the first supervisor had told me to do. I felt bad.

According to four (4) students and two (2) lecturers failure by some lecturers to make post lesson observation discussion dialogical was an aspect indicating poor quality TP supervision by ZOU supervisors. In line with this finding some participants pointed out the following:

L6: Sometimes lecturers just point out strengths and weaknesses of student lesson delivery without giving students any room to give their opinions. This happens when we are rushing for time, usually to meet the ZOU target of supervising at least three students even in remote places where schools are long distances apart.

S16: Some are often in a hurry, students do not get chance to have meaningful dialogue with supervisors.

The finding made in this study that students are not afforded dialogical discussions with supervisors is in support with Chikunda's study (2008) which established the same.

Three (3) students who were studying the Diploma in Education Primary (DIPED), gave the opinion that DIPED students were over supervised by the University and was an indication of poor quality of the supervision by ZOU as supervision lost its essence in terms of value. In support of this opinion two of the students made the following contributions:

S20: We are being supervised twice each of the three semesters during which we will be doing TP. Supervision can easily lose its importance.

S9: DIPED students are being over supervised, we lose motivation when it is overdone.

The finding which was made in this study that students were over supervised contradicts findings made by Kildan et al (2013) whose research indicated that under supervision of students rendered TP supervision of poor quality.

The assigning of TP scores before conducting a post mortem with students was given as an aspect of poor quality of TP supervision by some ZOU supervisors by seven students. None of the lecturers shared this view. Some contributions made by the participants were as follows:

S3: Lecturers are too quick to give scores. Scores cannot be altered even where lecturer would have made wrong assessments or conclusions of the student's conduct.

S14: Scores given before discussion cannot be altered even if a student gives justifications of actions which are valid-----supervision becomes unfair.

In the opinion of eight (8) students some supervisors were unrealistically not generous with marks and this practice somewhat demotivated the students.

S3: Giving of very low marks even if students would be doing fairly well contributes to poor quality of supervision--- after the hard work the student is deflated.

Q4: Which variables contribute to weaknesses of TP supervision by University lecturers?

Participants were of the view that rushing of time by TP supervisors negatively affected the quality of TP supervision. In some cases too high expectations by supervisors also rendered the supervision somewhat problematic. All the six lecturers expressed the view that the ZOU TP supervision policy which requires each supervisor to supervise a minimum of three students in a day, even where conditions such as in remote places are difficult, forced supervisors to compromise on quality of supervision.

Q5: How could the TP supervision by University lecturers be made more beneficial to student teachers?

All lecturers were of the opinion that ZOU needs to revise some of its policies on TP supervision so that the quality of supervision is not compromised. Three DIPED students made a suggestion that the number of University based supervisions be reduced to one per each of the three semesters

CONCLUSION

The study made indications that in many respects TP supervision by ZOU was of good quality. Among other things, ZOU had in place TP supervision policies which rendered the activity effective. Proper timing and thoroughness in the supervision of students were good quality aspects of TP supervision. Some factors such as high staff academic and professional qualification, frequent TP supervision workshops which are run at the Midlands campus and application of research findings and recommendations contributed to good quality aspects of University- based TP supervision. The application of ZOU TP policies and the rush for time were some variables which made supervisors fail to be thorough and to hold dialogical discussions with students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Basing on the findings made in this study the following recommendations are proffered:

- A relook by Zimbabwe Open University on the requirement that supervisors must supervise a minimum of three students regardless of where students are doing their TP, even in remote areas of Zimbabwe where unfavourable conditions obtain. The minimum number of students a supervisor should see could be reduced in remote areas.
- A reduction of TP supervision times of DIPED student from two times each of the three semesters during which they will be doing TP to avoid over supervision since supervision of students is also done continuously at school by mentors and school administrators.
- Taking on board all principles of effective TP supervision by ZOU TP supervisors so that quality of supervision is not compromised.
- Continual running of TP supervision workshops by Midlands region so that good quality TP supervision can be upheld.
- Conducting of a study by ZOU TP supervisors on school based TP supervision of ZOU students as this will generate knowledge about strengths and areas of weakness in this activity which contributes immensely to the professional development of their students.

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