

## Challenges Experienced by Teaching Practice Supervisors in an Open and Distance Learning Environment

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### Abstract

*The teaching practice programme plays a vital role in effective preparation of student teachers in teacher education institutions including the University of South Africa (UNISA). This article examines the way teaching practice supervision is conducted at UNISA, particularly focusing on the challenges experienced by supervisors in ensuring effective support to students. The article discusses the concept of supervision and the supervision process, roles and responsibilities of supervisors as well as teaching practice for professional growth. Challenges identified include students' level of preparedness, school placement, school based mentors who are not trained to support and guide students, as well as lack of orientation programs for teaching practice. It concludes that emphasis must be on quality assurance in the supervision of teaching practice programme, to ensure that students are well prepared for the world of work.*

**Keywords:** supervision, teaching practice, school based mentors, assessment, work intergrated learning

### 1. Introduction

Teaching practice is an integral part of Teacher Education (TE) and an obligatory requirement of the Council of Higher Education (CHE) and the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) in South Africa. In the Guide for Higher Education, Work Integrated Learning (WIL) highlights the importance of work place learning, assessment and partnerships. The HEQC further emphasizes that university teachers have a responsibility of ensuring that upon graduation, students are thoroughly prepared for the world of work. Students enrolled for the Bachelor Degree and the Post Graduate Degree in Education at the University of South Africa (UNISA) are required to spend five and ten weeks respectively in schools in order to comply with WIL requirements. The Teaching Practice Unit (TPU) has a responsibility of ensuring that all students are placed and supported in functional schools across the country and also in the Southern African Development Community (SADC), as guided by the HEQC/CHE requirements. Academics in the TPU at UNISA conduct workshops aiming at assisting supervisors to understand their role in supporting students during teaching practice periods. Currently supervisor workshops are conducted in all nine provinces in South Africa as well as the SADC regions. The main purpose is to emphasize the important roles that supervisors are expected to play as well as guiding them to efficiently and effectively support students. The relationship between UNISA TPU, the supervisors, school based mentors and students is important in enhancing effectiveness of teaching practice. It is important that teaching practice be seen as a discipline and not merely as a technical process where supervisors fill in assessment forms and checklists. Supervisors are therefore expected to use creative ways of engaging students in professional discussions during visits. The support offered by supervisors plays a key role in students' professional growth. Teaching practice is therefore a process of instructional inquiry (Taylor & Billrey 2011), which is an important aspect of teacher education.

As a supervisor and an academic in the TPU at UNISA, I have noted with concern that supervisors experience challenges when they have to arrange for supervision and during the actual teaching practice supervision period. It therefore remains important to investigate and understand what these challenges are, how they influence effective supervision and more important how supervisors deal with such challenges.

### 2. Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

#### 2.1 The role of the supervisor in teaching practice

The supervisor's role in practice teaching is that of a resource person, adviser, interpreter of feedback, evaluator and

assessor. The supervisor's duty is not only to assess teaching practice lessons, but to use his/her abilities to make the teaching practice experience learning oriented (Yee Fan Tang & Wai Kwan Chow; 2007). It is important that the supervisor plans for the visit beforehand. This requires informing students of the visit, having discussions with the mentor teacher and the principal of the school, and providing constructive feedback to the student (UNISA, CEDU; 2012). The supervisor is expected to serve as the student's role model and to share his/her craft knowledge and philosophy of teaching with the student. The supervisor needs to be seen to engage student teachers in instructional dialogue with the aim of improving effective teaching and learning and also increasing the students' performance (Ayodele & Oyewole; 2012).

According to Long, van Es and Black (2013) the supervisor assumes three important roles which needs to be balanced, even though the central task is to observe student teachers and to provide reflections and feedback on their classroom practices. Long et al (2013) identified the supervisor roles as mentoring, evaluating, and managing. Similarly, Fayne (2007) highlights the mentor/supervisor as responsible for assisting student teachers develop the behaviors and practice of good teaching, evaluators as responsible for determining the fitness of their student teachers and managers as responsible for working with school based mentors.

Consequently, the supervisor should not only focus on paper work, classroom management, lesson plan and observation of other aspects of teaching but also on challenging the student teacher's existing beliefs and practices towards development of a professional view in teaching.

## 2.2 *Teaching practice for professional growth*

Teaching practice plays a key role in the professional development and preparation of initial pre service teachers. Throughout the teaching practice duration, supervisors and school based mentor teachers strive to enhance the development of student teachers by providing assistance, and ensuring that students receive effective supervision. Literature suggests that an effective supervisor typically assists the pre-service teachers' progress by providing feedback in written form and in line with the institution's criteria for evaluation whilst at the same time encouraging student teacher's self-reflection (Rayford; 2010 & Snow-Gerono 2008).

According to the Manual for Supervisors and Mentors (UNISA, CEDU; 2012), the role of the supervisor involves observing student teachers' lesson presentations, advising on classroom management and organisation; evaluating a student teacher's performance in practice teaching situations and discussing his/her progress with him/her and providing feedback to the institution and the student teacher regarding the student teacher's development. Teaching practice supervisors have a professional and moral obligation (Rogers & Keil 2007) to ensure that their feedback to student teachers is aimed at building the students to become better teachers. Consequently, supervisors need to ensure that they identify areas of concern to the student teacher and to provide the best possible opportunity for improvement in their performance. In this way, they support professional identity of student teachers, as Ayodele and Oyewole (2012) posit, supervision offers diversified perspectives and challenges student teachers to reflect on their professional practice, personal strengths and personal challenges. Through reflection and feedback, student teachers are able to develop increased professional competence.

## 2.3 *The supervision process*

It is important for teaching practice to clearly link theory to practice. Teacher education programs in institutions of higher learning must facilitate the process of making theory-practice linkages explicit (Joseph & Heading; 2010). The major role of supervisors and lecturers is to facilitate the process of learning to teach in a way that requires student teachers to provide a critical reflection on their teaching practice, the kind of reflection that will connect theory to practice in a classroom setting. This connection often proves to be a challenging task to student teachers. Student teachers are expected to implement what they have studied in their theoretical courses and supervisors need to support them in incorporating innovative methods into practice (Snow-Gerono; 2008).

Teaching practice requires that supervisors outline upfront what student teachers can expect during visits. Supervisors therefore communicate when the visit will take place, what the requirements are, and how the visit will be structured. It is important that student teachers are briefed before the commencement of the lesson evaluation about what is expected. After the evaluation or lesson observation a reflection session needs to be conducted in an environment that is conducive for both the supervisor and the student teacher.

During the lesson observation the supervisor assesses the lesson by providing constructive comments about various aspects of the lesson. These often include linking new content with learners' prior knowledge, lesson objectives,

instructional activities and resources used and their relevance to the lesson, assessment activities provided, including assessment strategies used and enrichment activities.

### 3. Research Strategy

The overall aim of this research was to explore and understand the challenges that affect supervisors during teaching practice. The following questions were explored:

- (1) *What kinds of challenges affect supervisors during teaching practice?*
- (2) *How do supervisors address the challenges that they experience during teaching practice supervision?*
- (3) *To what extent do the challenges influence effective supervision?*

A qualitative design was used to explore the diversified and underlying challenges of supervisors. This design enabled me to uncover their supervision practices and to reveal the challenges they encounter during school visits. Qualitative research method provided an understanding of the challenges through the eyes of the participants because they were able to reveal how they arrange the visits and communicate with student teachers, what they do during such visits, how they provide comments and all these were aimed at sharing their practices and experiences.

I adopted a narrative case study design within the qualitative approach to explore and provide a detailed description of the challenges facing supervisors and their experiences and practices of teaching practice supervision. The characteristics of a group of supervisors were explored within their real life situations, as well as their individual subjective experiences (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007).

I selected four external supervisors from three provinces in South Africa (Gauteng, Mpumalanga and Western Cape) in order to provide rich narrative descriptions of their experiences regarding teaching practice supervision. The supervisors selected were contracted by UNISA TPU to assist in teaching practice supervision and careful consideration was taken to ensure that they are relevant to this task in terms of their content knowledge and experience in the South African education system and curriculum.

This research investigated challenges facing supervisors during teaching practice periods. Emphasis was put on how these challenges influence effective supervision and provision of support. Strategies on how supervisors dealt with the challenges on a day-to-day basis were explored. In-depth semi-structured interviews were used, as well as the relevant documents that supervisors use for their teaching practice visits. I involved supervisors as participants and ensured that the procedures used to collect data were ethical. I requested written permission from the supervisors who participated in the research. Issues relating to informed consent, privacy and confidentiality were taken into account. Prior to seeking informed consent from the participants, I informed them of the nature and the consequences of the research (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Creswell, 2007) as well as the aims and objectives. Content analysis as outlined by Schreier (2012) was used to analyze data, with communication and content classified and categorized.

### 4. Findings and Discussion

In view of the literature and conceptual framework on the challenges affecting teaching practice supervision, this article presents evidence of challenges experienced by supervisors in an open and distance learning institution.

#### 4.1 Student orientation programs

Supervisors highlighted a need for students' orientation programs immediately after registration, that UNISA conduct these orientation sessions to prepare students for work integrated learning. In the past, UNISA organized and conducted teaching practice orientation programs, but these were discontinued. Supervisors reflected that the students that they visited expressed the need to see academics on a face to face basis in order to address their challenges with teaching practice. Some of the supervisors had taken it upon themselves to conduct pre-visits to schools and their observations were that these visits were very helpful in ensuring that student teachers and mentor teachers know what to do during teaching practice. Another observation was that student teachers confidence improved when they were made aware of what to expect before the evaluation took place. In making arrangements for school visits, supervisors contacted students telephonically and they highlighted that this method of communication was not cost effective. One of the supervisors expressed the challenge in the following manner;

*"Talking to student teachers over the phone on the expectations before assessment is important but it is very expensive. I often find myself sending text messages explaining the whole processes of the lesson plan presentation, this is useful,*

but very demanding”.

#### 4.2 School placement

Supervisors highlighted that student teachers change schools at any time, without informing UNISA TPU and the supervisor. As one supervisor reflected;

*We get lists from UNISA TPU which comprises of students that we are expected to visit, the schools where they are placed, and the period when they are actually supposed to be at school. When I call students to make the necessary arrangements for the visit, I am very often confronted by the challenge that they have decided to switch to another school. They do this without informing the TPU. This is an inconvenience because I always cluster my visits according to areas that are closely located to each other.*

#### 4.3 Mentor role and responsibilities

After placing students in schools, the TPU requests principals of those schools to appoint mentor teachers for students. These school based mentors are expected to be experienced teachers in the phase where the student will practice and observe lessons, The mentors are required to engage with students, orientate them to school policies, curricular and extra-curricular activities and ensure that student acquire knowledge about overall management and organization in the school context. Mentors are also expected to organise lesson observations for the students, support lesson planning as well as practical teaching of lesson. According to supervisors interviewed, there are challenges towards this aspect;

*Some mentor teachers do not assist students at all. When we visit students, we are required to have discussions with the school based mentors. One mentor teacher told me how “ill prepared” UNISA students are in comparison with other students. She mentioned that they do not know what to do, and that it appears as if they have very little guidance from their lecturers. However, other mentors are very supportive, and they even request to sit in during the student’s assessment by the supervisor.*

School based mentors need support from UNISA as they work closely with student teachers, offer assistance, equip them with necessary skills and knowledge so that they are in a position to help the student teachers. It is imperative for UNISA to ensure that school based mentors are properly trained and supported in order to guide students appropriately.

#### 4.4 Student preparedness

Some students are not better prepared for classroom evaluation, as one supervisor highlighted;

*Sometimes I am told at the eleventh hour not to come to a school because learners are busy with a concert, show, and excursion whereas prior arrangements had been made. I received this excuse as I was driving to the school and decided that I will visit the student in any case. When I arrived she informed me that the event has further been postponed. I conducted the assessment with the student and it was very evident that she was not prepared.*

Another supervisor shared the following;

*“Sometimes student teachers provide wrong contact numbers. I often call the school in this regard and address the student through the school secretaries. There was an instance where I could not get hold of the student and when I enquired from the school I was told that they do not know such a student. Some student teachers claim to have enough teaching experience and as a result do not see a need to be visited by supervisors”.*

It is evident from the above quotes that some students do not see a need to be visited and assessed by supervisors. In certain instances students claim to have been exempted from doing teaching practice. The students assume that teaching practice visits are not important as the assessment does not contribute towards any mark for their teaching practice module.

#### 4.5 Conflicting information from lecturers and the teaching practice unit

It is important that there is uniformity in teaching practice activities from the institution. Teaching practice information is

well communicated to students when they register. However, it is evident from the following quote that there might be conflicting information from the institution;

*"I contacted one student to schedule a visit. She indicated that she already submitted assignments and the lecturer told her that the supervisor visit is not necessary".*

The statement above is not in agreement with the vision and mission of the Teaching Practice Unit and the HEQC framework for work integrated learning. It is important that students are visited in schools in order to fulfil the requirements for qualifications and accreditation by the HEQC. Students need to acquire work integrated learning in functional schools.

## 5. Limitations

This research was conducted with external teaching practice supervisors at the University of South Africa and only four supervisors were selected from three provinces. Therefore, the challenges might not necessarily reflect those of other provinces and other teacher education institutions. Data was also collected through interviews and supervisors' narratives. The use of other data collection methods could provide different data to the research

## 6. Concluding Remarks

The findings from this research reveal that supervisors experience challenges which impede their supervisory practices and that they use meaningful strategies to overcome these challenges, and support students to the best of their abilities. There is a need for academics in the teaching practice unit to conduct quality assurance visits to ensure that all students are effectively supported in work integrated learning, School based mentors require adequate training in order to successfully guide and assist students. It is imperative that student teachers also take responsibility for their own teaching practice by communicating their challenges and uncertainties to the teaching practice unit. Student visits need not be once off events. Follow up visits, especially for final year students can ensure that students are ready and well prepared for the world of work.

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