Trainee Teachers' Experiences of Being Observed Teaching while on Teaching Practice: A Case of a Rural-Based University in South Africa

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Abstract

Teaching Practice (TP) is an important component of teacher training as it affords the trainee important practice before joining the world of work. The present study sought to gather student teachers' experiences regarding how they felt when being observed while teaching, i.e. when they were on teaching practice, and implications of the findings on the enhancement of teacher preparation programmes. The study adopted a qualitative case study design in which a purposeful sample of twenty-five final-year Bachelor of Education students participated in the study. Data was collected through an open-ended questionnaire. Data were analysed for content thematically after coding. The study found that, under observation, trainee teachers felt nervous, fearful, unable to control learners, and feared being reprised by the observer. In some instances, they felt excited to teach and improved on practice over time. The study concludes that there were a plethora of challenges in participants' experiences in teaching under observation. Recommendations for the improvement of the teaching practice component of teacher training are given.

Keywords: teaching practice, teaching, Foundation Phase, student teachers

1. Introduction

Teaching is a profession that requires dedication on the part of the teacher. Therefore, it is seen as the cornerstone for the process of teacher training at any level. It is also demanding, as there is a lot of preparation before the teacher goes to the class. Most of the researchers confirmed that most Foundation Phase teachers have some problems in teaching effectively. Successful classroom management is essential for effective instruction and a teacher's belief in his or her ability to positively facilitate student learning may affect classroom management behaviour (Henson, 2001). That being the case, student teachers should be well prepared to be able to integrate theory and practice during real-classroom settings. This means that by the end of the degree programme, student teachers should have been equipped with different teaching methods, management skills and the correct use of teaching and learning strategies. Although pre-service teachers take theoretical modules about teaching and learning in their classes, they seem to be confused when confronted with the realities and complexities of the teaching task. Foundation Phase teachers' attitudes and beliefs about teaching and learning and the pedagogical knowledge gained from classes and fieldwork play a critical role in shaping their patterns of instructional behaviour (Thompson, 1992). However, the teachers seem to lack the integration skills of putting theory into practice when they are in the classrooms.

Teaching practice provides an opportunity to gather information about pre-service teachers' personal capabilities for teaching and to have their beliefs tested (Katrina, 2004). Barry and King (2002:35) note that, teaching practice provides the opportunity to apply the principles of teaching and learning that have been studied during coursework. In addition, the experienced teachers or mentors in schools play a pivotal role in student teachers' professional growth. Based on the above, the teaching practice session has the power to shape the student teachers' perception and understanding of teaching and learning. The teaching practice session is a period during which student teachers are given an opportunity to perform teaching practice in a school situation. Students are expected to apply the theory acquired in their classes into practice and, by so doing, develop a deeper understanding of educational principles and their implementations for learning (Farauta & Amuche, 2013). This means that teaching practice is the integral part of the teacher training programme. The aim of this paper is to explore the trainee teachers' experiences of teaching practice stints by establishing the nature and extent of challenges encountered.

1.1 School-based mentoring

While on teaching practice, trainee teachers are often attached to mentors, whose role is to nurture and develop trainee teachers into full-fledged teachers. In line with socio-cultural perspectives to learning (Rogoff, 1995), school-based mentoring provides opportunities for social participation. Edwards and Collision (1996:27-28) observe that, through such social participation, learning opportunities are made possible by:

> … listening to students; modelling teaching and general classroom management; analyzing and discussing (their) own practice; observing students; negotiating with students, their own learning goals; supporting students while they teach; … providing constructive criticism …

It is clear from the above views that trainee teachers on teaching practice are simply learning the art of teaching and require a lot of support. Such support should come from mentors who work directly with trainee teachers. Watkins and Whalley (1995) posit that trainee teachers working with mentors require support at specific stages of their professional formation. Such stages include before arrival, on arrival, during the introduction phase, during the main work phase, on later phases, and at the exit stage. It is imperative for mentors to be adequately prepared for their mentoring roles in order to effectively assist trainee teachers.

1.2 Learning the art of teaching

In their route to professional growth, trainee teachers move 'from concerns about self to concerns about situation and task, and then to concerns about students they teach and the impact of teaching' (Conway and Clark, cited in Rice (2004:8)). This shows that the initial stages of taking control of classes are marked by students' feelings of whether or not they will do well; hence, the need for mentors to adequately prepare students for this. It is only when trainee teachers develop into being more concerned about the impact of their teaching that they would have grown positively in professional terms. Similarly, Berry and Loughran (2002) observe that, in the early stages of professional growth, trainee teachers could be more concerned with the actual content of what they will teach and not on pedagogies. The purpose of nurturing professional growth is to ensure that trainee teachers grow into making decisions about pedagogical approaches, critique own approaches, and improve facilitation of learning. Boikhutso (2010) further observes that, on teaching practice, trainee teachers often face the dilemma of putting theory into practice. Most of the courses dealt with at universities deal with theory, which students need to turn into practice when confronted by real-classroom situations.

Marais and Meier (2004) note that, while on teaching practice, trainee teachers are exposed to a wide variety of experiences, and this makes teaching practice challenging. Kiggundu and Nayimuli (2009) state that teaching practice is a make or break phase for student teachers. During their learning the art of teaching, trainee teachers are observed during the teaching process by mentors and university lecturers who visit them for supervision. Bhargava (2009) identifies a number of anxiety-inducing areas and concerns for student teachers on teaching practice; these include lesson planning, classroom management and evaluation by supervisors. Similarly, in a related study, Capel (1997) found that student teachers had 'evaluation anxiety' and felt nervous when being observed. Students feel the pressure of having to do things correctly or risk failing the assessment. This contributes to tension.

1.3 Role of mentors

Mentors have a critical role in nurturing and developing student teachers. Of importance is constant communication between mentor and mentee in order to ensure that the mentee understands requirements and puts them into practice. To this end, Kumaravadivelu (1999:35) advocates:

> … the primary responsibility of the expert is not to provide the teacher with a borrowed voice but to provide opportunities for dialogic construction of meaning out of which an identity or voice emerge … It therefore becomes necessary to conceive of teacher education not as the experience and interpretation of pedagogic practice, but rather as a dialogically constructed entity two or more critically reflective interlocutors.

The need for mentor-mentee relationships that result in critically reflective practitioners is tremendously important. Such practitioners challenge issues and always seek to improve practice.

1.4 What is teaching practice?

Koc (2011) states that teaching practice assists trainee teachers to develop teaching skills according to the discipline and levels that theory will be teaching. Koc (2011:1983) points out:

> *In teaching practice, prospective teachers prepare themselves for the teaching profession and improve their professional perspectives through such activities as practice preparation, observation in the practice school, participation in the missions of the practice teacher, the participation in education/management and in out of classroom activities, and assessing practice works.*

It is clear from the above observation that, during teaching practice, the trainee teacher has to be wholly involved in life in and out of the classroom and that learning also takes the form of observing what the qualified teachers do. Similarly, Ferrier-Kerr (2009) observes that teaching practice affords trainee teachers the opportunity to gain insight into how qualified teachers operate in their classroom practice. The most important aspect of teaching practice is professional socialisation (Putnam & Borko 2000). Trainee teachers are prepared for the actual world of work by interacting and learning from well-established teachers.

In underlining the importance of social interaction among teachers in ensuring teacher professional development, Wenzlaff and Wieseman (2004:114) posit:

> *For teacher learning to occur, teachers need opportunities to participate in professional communities that discuss learning theories and various teacher materials and pedagogy.*

In a school set-up, trainee teachers are brought in an environment where they interact with teachers in a real-life work environment. This, then, provides them with opportunities to learn from others on different issues regarding teaching and learning. However, trainee teachers require a lot of support while on teaching practice to ensure that they learn from experienced teachers and are adequately nurtured to become full-fledged teachers (Ucar, 2012).

1.5 The Apprenticeship model of organising teaching practice

The most common way of organising teaching practice is assigning a trainee teacher to work under a mentor. A mentor is a trained and qualified teacher who assists in nurturing and developing the mentee. There are instances where mentors may fail to adequately assist mentees, owing to numerous problems associated with how a mentoring programme is organised (Maphosa, Shumba & Shumba, 2007; Shumba, Shumba & Maphosa, 2012). For a mentoring programme that will allow student teachers to succeed, there should be close cooperation and understanding of roles and responsibilities of student teachers, college officials and mentors (Darling-Hammond & Baratz, 2007). This, therefore, implies that nothing should be left to chance, and all key stakeholders in the mentoring exercise should be adequately prepared for their roles.

1.6 First-time teaching experiences

There are numerous challenges associated with first-time teachers. Jensen et al (2012) advance the view that first-time teachers have a lot of anxiety regarding how they will perform in classrooms. Meanwell and Kleiner (2013) state that there is a range of positive and negative emotions experienced by first-time teachers. Teaching in real-classroom contexts will be a new experience, hence, the development of feelings of uncertainty, resulting in anxiety. Jensen et al (2012) further observe that anxiety is derived from anticipated challenges in classroom management. Teachers become master classroom managers through experience.

Schweizer (2009) states that, teaching under observation is made more difficult because of the 'observer effect', where the presence of an observer changes the course of events in a classroom. Bowring-Carr (1993) states that, the observer, in any situation, being an unfamiliar presence, will alter the thing being observed. Teaching in the presence of an observer is different from teaching when there is no observer (Richards, 2003). It is made worse when the student teacher is conscious of the presence of the observer and how the observer could be noticing areas of weakness in teaching and learning.

2. Theoretical Framework

The study draws from the cognitive apprenticeship model of learning. Apprenticeship learning is described as learning by watching, imitation learning, or learning by demonstration (Abbeel & Ng, 2004). The learner is attached to a more experienced professional whose responsibility is to nurture and develop the learner in the mastery of skills.
Guile and Young (1999:112) observe that apprenticeship:

> … offers a way of conceptualizing learning that does nor separate it from production of knowledge or tie it to particular contexts. It can therefore be the basis of a more general theory of learning that might link learning at work and learning in classrooms, rather than see them only as distinct contexts with distinct outcomes.

Teaching practice for student teachers draws from the apprenticeship model of learning as student teachers learn from mentors while on the job. Hargreaves (2004) notes that the apprenticeship model of learning gives pre-eminence to mentoring and coaching. Student teachers are given guidance by experienced teachers who work as mentors. In modelling, the expert sets the example. It is this set example that the apprentice should follow. In coaching, the apprentice practices skill while the expert offers feedback and advice. It is through feedback and advice that the apprentice is able to perfect the skill being learnt.

Cognitive apprenticeship is a process by which learners learn from a more experienced person by way of cognitive and metacognitive apprenticeship. Collins, Brown and Newman (1987:457) state:

> Cognitive apprenticeship focuses on "learning-through-guided-experience on cognitive and metacognitive skills and processes" instead of the physically concrete craft or trade that is the focus of traditional apprenticeships.

Ghefaili (2003) asserts that cognitive apprenticeship is a theory of the process where a master (mentor) of a skill teaches that skill to an apprentice, in this case, a student teacher. This model is supported by Bandura's (1997) theory of modelling, which posits that, in order for modelling to be successful, the learner must be attentive, must have access to and retain the information presented, must be motivated to learn, and must be able to accurately reproduce the desired skill.

Abbott (2005:1) also states:

> Cognitive apprenticeship is a method of teaching aimed primarily at teaching the processes that experts use to handle complex tasks. The focus of this learning-through-guided-experience is on cognitive and metacognitive skills, rather than on the physical skills and processes of traditional apprenticeships.

In order to promote the role of teachers as life-long learners, apprenticeship learning gives student teachers the opportunity to use their reasoning with unique models and cases, act on authentic situations and resolve complex, ill-defined problems in their different classroom contexts. This implies that student teachers become more knowledgeable and confident in their practice; thus, it is desirable that they perfect the art of teaching before joining schools as qualified teachers. This learning is typically negotiated rather than prescribed, and it is more effective because concepts "… continually evolve with each new occasion of use, because new situations, negotiations, and activities inevitably recast it in a new, more densely textured form and therefore needed for the 21st century" (Abbott, 2005:2).

3. Goal of the Study

The purpose of the study was to establish trainee teachers' experiences of being observed teaching while on teaching practice in a rural-based university in South Africa; the purpose was also to assess measures that could be put in place in order to better prepare student teachers for teaching practice.

4. Research Methodology

Research paradigm: The study adopted a qualitative research paradigm. Patton and Cochran (2004:2) state:

> Qualitative research is characterised by its aims, which relate to understanding some aspects of social life, and its methods which generate words, rather than numbers, as data for analysis.

It was the purpose of this study to understand student teachers' experiences of being assessed while teaching and

also observing others teach. Patton and Cochran (2004) further maintain that qualitative researches are suitable in answering 'what', 'how' or 'why' questions about a phenomenon, as opposed to the 'how many' and 'how much' questions, which are answered by quantitative studies. Frankel and Devers (2000) also state that qualitative studies are suitable for participants' meanings and experiences in particular situations. Babbie (1986) contends that a research methodology is used for its appropriateness for purpose. The qualitative research paradigm was considered appropriate for the study.

Research Design: A case study design was utilised in this study. Gerring (2004:241) asserts that a case study is:

> … an intensive study of a single unit for the purpose of understanding a larger class of (similar) units.

The present study sought to engage in an in-depth study of the teaching practice experiences of a group of Bachelor of Education students training to be teachers in the foundation phase. Understanding such experiences was deemed necessary to provide insight into experiences of students in a similar capacity. Baxter and Jack (2008) further observe that qualitative studies provide the means to study complex phenomena within their contexts. In the present study, trainee teachers participated in the study while on teaching practice. Yin (2003) also argues that a case study approach is suitable for a study whose focus is to answer the 'how' and 'why' questions; hence, it was considered suitable for this study.

Research Participants: Twenty-five purposefully selected Bachelor of Education students participated in the study. Students were on a teaching practice stint. Purposive sampling was used to select participants. Tongco (2007:147) stated:

> The purposive sampling technique, also called judgment sampling, is the deliberate choice of an informant due to the qualities the informant possesses. … the researcher decides what needs to be known and sets out to find people who can and are willing to provide the information …

In this study, final-year students who were on teaching practice were selected to participate in the study by virtue of their involvement in teaching practice. They were in a position to provide information required for the study.

Data Collection Instrument: An open-ended questionnaire was used to collect data from the participants. The researchers distributed the questionnaire to the students and explained the purpose of the questionnaire to them. Popping (2008) observes that open-ended questions are unstructured questions in which possible answers are not suggested. Respondents answer in their own words. In this study, participants were asked to reflect on their teaching practice experiences by reflecting on five questions on how they felt about being observed while teaching, what they learnt by observing others teach, how helpful the mentor was to them, how lecturers were useful to them, and suggestions for improvement.

Data Analysis: Content analysis was used to analyse data. Hsieh and Shannon (2005:1278) define qualitative content analysis as:

> … a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns.

Through identification of core consistencies and meaning (Patton, 2002:453), data was reduced in an attempt to make sense of participants' views.

The thematic text-analysis approach was also used to analyse qualitative data collected from the reports provided by participants in answering the questionnaire. Roberts and Popping (1993) state that thematic text-analysis looks for the occurrence or co-occurrence of themes. Data was coded and analysed.

Trustworthiness: In line with the demands of a qualitative study, several measures were taken to enhance the trustworthiness of results. Peer debriefing and member checking were employed to enhance credibility. Verbatim quotations and use of thick descriptions were used to ensure transferability of findings to other contexts whilst a thorough audit of the research process and findings ensured dependability.

Ethical Issues: All issues regarding ethics were considered in this study. Informed consent was sought from and granted by participants after the purpose of the study was explained to them. Confidentiality of participants' responses was guaranteed, and participants were informed that their participation was voluntary, and they could withdraw from the study at any stage regardless of the reason.

5. Results

The section that follows presents the results of the study after analysis of open-ended questionnaires. The findings are summarised in Figure 1.
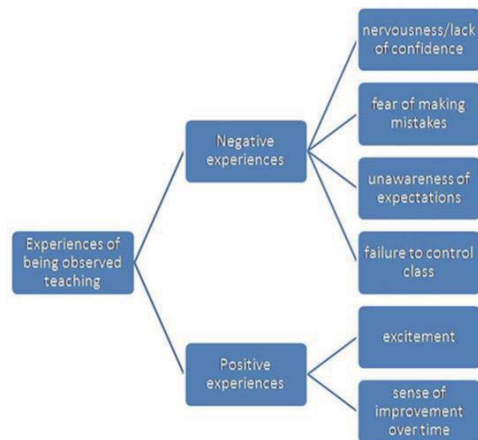

Figure 1: Summary Of Findings

5.1 Experiences of teaching under observation

There were several issues that participants raised on how they felt when being observed while teaching.

5.2 Nervousness

> First, it was difficult for me because it was my first time to stand in front of learners. (QR 1)
> When the experienced teacher observed me, it was difficult for me; I had no idea as to what to do to show good teaching. (QR 2)
> When I stood in front of learners for the first time, I had stage fright. I thought I was not prepared enough. (QR 3)
> I was nervous as I was not used to teaching in front of an observer … (QR 7)
> Being observed while teaching poses some challenges to the teacher under observation. (QR 17)

5.3 Lack of confidence

Participants revealed lack of confidence in the initial stages of being observed while teaching as shown in some of the excerpts below:

> Although the learners were young, I had lost my confidence. (QR 1)
> Being observed by a peer is much easier than being observed by an experienced teacher or a lecturer. (QR 7)
> I knew that my mentor had a lot of experience in teaching, so I was not confident. (QR 10)
> At first, when observed teaching, I felt inferior. I was not free at all. (QR 14)

Such statements from the research participants showed the lack of confidence that they experienced under observation.

5.4 Fear of making mistakes

The issue of fear of making mistakes when teaching under observation was another experience revealed by participants.

> *I was afraid of making mistakes in the presence of my mentor. (QR 1)*
> *The main problem I had was fear that the knowledge and skills I had in teaching would not be good enough. (QR 3)*
> *I was afraid of being undermined by the observer. (QR 3)*
> *I worked hard to try and please my mentor. (QR 8)*
> *At first, I was concerned as to whether I was doing the right thing or what was expected by my mentor. (QR 19)*

The above verbatim quotations attest to the revelation in the study that trainee teachers experienced fear of making mistakes.

5.5 Unawareness of expectations from mentor/supervisor

Participants also revealed a lack of awareness of expectations from lesson observers as a negative experience of teaching under observation.

> *… first, it was a headache because I was not aware of her expectations from me. (QR 6)*
> *Whenever my mentor observed me teaching, I just felt like I was not doing it well. (QR 9)*
> *The only problem that I encountered when being observed was that I didn't know what was expected of me. (QR 12)*
> *I did not know where to start from. (QR 16)*
> *I did not know what to prepare and what the observer was expecting from me. (QR 18)*

What could be gleaned from such a finding as shown by excerpts above could be a lack of communication between student teachers and lesson observers. Such communication, which may include joint lesson planning, would assist trainees in understanding what was expected of them.

5.6 Excitement

One of the positive experiences by research participants was excitement in teaching for the first time. This is shown in verbatim quotations below:

> *… I was overjoyed. I literally could not stop smiling seeing myself in front of the whole class teaching. (QR 6)*
> *I enjoyed teaching in her presence (lecturer) because I was ready and well prepared. (QR 8)*

The above excerpts show how some participants enjoyed teaching, which is a very important factor in learning a trade in which one has interest.

5.7 Sense of improvement over time

Participants showed that they had a sense of improvement of their teaching as a result of teaching under observation as shown in the verbatim quotations below:

> *I made mistakes and later corrected my mistakes. (QR 6)*
> *My mentor corrected my mistakes, and I improved on my weaknesses. (QR 9)*
> *… I later gained confidence and gave all my best … (QR 9)*
> *Being observed helped me to gain a lot of confidence, and I improved my teaching. (QR 10)*
> *The problems that I encountered were later solved. (QR 14)*
> *My mentor guided me on everything I was doing, and I improved over time. (QR 19)*

This shows that teaching practice as a learning process resulted in improved practice, which is the very purpose of such an exercise.

5.8 Failure to control class

Participants also revealed that classroom management was a challenge as shown in the excerpts below:
> *Learners were making noise, and the mentor asked me if I had not been taught to control learners in class at university. (QR 4)*
> *Some learners were hyperactive and could not keep quiet or sit down; they always wanted to go up and down in the*

classroom. (QR 5)
Applying discipline on learners was a problem in the presence of an observer. (QR 9)
Some learners – big boys – were too noisy. I was unable to discipline them. (QR 13)
Discipline was one of the biggest problems. Learners were out of control. (QR 14)

The verbatim quotations show that the issue of managing learner discipline was actually a challenge.

5.9 Failure to apply some theoretical knowledge to practice

There was also a concern of failing to apply theoretical knowledge to practice.

I tried to make learners participate in learning, but they were just passive. (QR 17)
Some style of teaching learnt in the university could not just work. (QR 23)
I ended up using teacher-centred approaches in some cases. (QR 3)

Such observation really showed the challenge of applying some theoretical knowledge in practice.

6. Discussion of Findings

It emerged from the study that participants were nervous when they taught under observation. This finding corroborates findings in a similar study by Jensen et al (2012) that first time teaching experiences brought a lot of anxiety to student teachers. This also shows that, while feelings of anxiety are normal for first-time teachers, there is a need to adequately prepare such teachers for their initial teaching experiences in order to minimise anxiety.

The study further established that student teachers experienced feelings of fear of making mistakes when they taught in the presence of observers. This finding confirms Schweizer's (2009) view of observer effect in teaching. The very fact that one teaches in the presence of an observer who is bound to take note of all flaws committed by the teacher, results in a tense classroom environment. Because of lack of freedom and teaching in a relaxed atmosphere, the student teacher is bound to make errors in an attempt to avoid them.

It also emerged from the study that in teaching under observation, participants had challenges in classroom management. This finding corroborates a view by Jensen et al (2012) that new teachers happen to have some challenges in controlling learners who misbehave in class, more so, in the presence of an observer. In instances where students are adequately prepared to deal with learner indiscipline, such may be dealt with easily.

The revelation in the study that student teachers were not generally aware of expectations from lesson observers such as school-based mentors and college lecturers is inconsistent with the requirements of cognitive apprenticeship and clinical supervision. In a true mentoring relationship, the mentor should explain all expectations to the mentee (Edwards & Collision, 1996). This will assist the student teachers to understand the demands of every task at hand. The mentor should also demonstrate skills in line with the requirements of modelling. Supervision by visiting university lecturers should not be a fault-finding endeavour. The supervisor's expectations should be clarified to the student.

The study also established that, despite earlier challenges regarding fear and nervousness, participants felt they had a sense of improvement over time. This finding is consistent with Lave and Wenger's (1990) view that new entrants in a profession start at the periphery and through guidance and practice eventually learn the tools of the trade and become acceptable members of the profession. Initial challenges and mistakes that student teachers commit in the beginning are understood and appreciated in the context of learning.

7. Conclusion

It is concluded from the findings of this study that teaching under observation has positive and negative experiences. There are numerous challenges, and these have serious implications on the way teacher preparation is done at university, relationships between student teachers and mentors as well as between student teachers and supervisors.

8. Recommendations

Against the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:
- Thorough training in lesson planning should be given to student teachers before they go out on teaching practice.

- Student teachers should be exposed to a lot of teaching while in the university by way of peer teaching sessions.
- Home teaching, where student teachers teach in schools close to their home areas is also important in building trainee teachers' confidence before they go on teaching practice.
- Mentors should be trained for their role as mentors in order to adequately assist student teachers in their professional growth.
- There should be detailed and clear guidelines for mentors and mentees to ensure that student teachers are made aware in advance of expectations from lesson observers.

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