

Exploring Experiences of Teaching Practice Among Student-Teachers in Tanzania: Opportunities and Challenges of the Host Institutions

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Research Article

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ABSTRACT

A cross sectional survey on the experiences of student-teachers during their first and second academic years of teaching practice as University student-teachers in Tanzania was undertaken. The study sought to explore the challenges of the experiences of student-teachers during their teaching practice in various host institutions in Tanzania. Data collection instruments such as questionnaires, interview protocol and documents review checklist were used. Data were collected from 230 student-teachers and 14 heads of schools in Dares Salaam City, Mbeya City and Morogoro Municipality. The study found that student-teachers mainly received positive mentorship from host institutions that included being oriented on different matters before getting to direct classroom exposure. Moreover, it was found that student-teachers had collaborative working with host institutions and most of them were involved in both administrative and academic activities in their host institutions. On the other hand, student-teachers encountered remarkable challenges associated with limited teaching and learning facilities, limited exposure to the use of ICT as a pedagogical tool and overall limited infrastructural support for their stay at various host institutions. We conclude by arguing that, despite the close supervision that student-teachers receive in their host institutions, challenges such as infrastructural support, limited ICT exposure, and a large number of students in classrooms may undermine their desire to develop their professional experiences as future professional teachers.

INTRODUCTION

Education is considered as the driving force for other sectors of development in any community. Tanzania is among the developing countries with deliberate efforts to invest in education by educating more professional teachers both for primary and secondary education. As the main concern for attaining Tanzania Development, education sector as the gateway for other sectors and community growth, requires enough qualified and professional human resources (teachers).

In the process of learning and becoming a professional teacher, most of universities and colleges of education merge theoretical and practical courses for developing effective and moral professional teachers. Theoretical part is offered on students' campuses while Teaching Practice (TP) is done during practical skills development commonly referred as the Teaching Practice (TP) normally done in schools or colleges. Teaching Practice (TP) is an independent core course for student-teachers who are based on real exposure to practice apart from theoretical knowledge acquired at the university. Student-teachers here referred to, are undergraduate students in universities pursuing bachelor degree in the field of teaching profession^[1-3].

Teaching Practice is an integral part of preparing the student-teachers for actual teaching through effective pragmatic training after their undergraduate studies. Researchers in the field of education believe that practicum experience is one of the cores and central element of Teacher Education Programs (PTPE). Teaching practice aims at enabling student-teachers to connect theoretical knowledge to practical field experiences. Prior to the actual teaching practice, student-teachers are equipped with all the necessary skills and tools that are essential for their effective teaching. Among other necessary skills to them are; how to manage classes, school administration and other extra curricula activities. Doubtless, during the actual teaching practice, student-teachers are expected to learn from subject teachers, fellow workmates, and other experienced teachers and mentors in their host institutions. Consequently, this is meant to enable student-teachers to learn about teaching skills, strategies and classroom achievements.

While most of research has focused on assessing classroom practices with regard to teachers' instructional approaches and its associated challenges, little is known on practical experiences of student-teachers prior to their commencement of the teaching profession. As a matter of fact, practical part that student-teachers get in teaching practices remains unpublished. This denies the opportunity for universities and colleges that prepare teachers to get immediate feedback of their products; hence little improvements can be made to enrich preparation of teachers and for policy implications. As a motivating factor to fill this gap, our study was guided.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Higher learning institutions that prepare teachers have realised the need to integrate practical orientation in addition to theoretical knowledge that student-teachers receive. By addition of practical knowledge to pedagogical content and general knowledge, not only makes a student-teacher get prepared for the future teaching profession but also it makes him/her a fully equipped individual by defining actions of the teaching profession. This being the case, enhancing teaching practice is a key determinant of the future prospects of the quality of student-teachers prepared to integrate skills acquired in their teaching profession. Over decades, researchers in teachers' professional development have stressed that the effectiveness of the teacher depends on the level of academic qualifications and pedagogical skills acquired. Educationists contend that teachers' pedagogical skills are mostly acquired during teachers' preparation programmes which involve teaching practice placement in the host institutions. Earlier studies inform that, teaching practice is among the opportunities for student-teachers to

experience the real teaching expertise in the development of teaching profession. In the same line, Tuli and File observed that teaching practice allows student-teachers to discover their abilities and creativities that help them in their future teaching processes [4].

Besides, forward five most important functions of teaching practice to student-teachers; 1) develops student-teachers' behaviours and practices in the teaching processes, 2) provides them with educational primary efficiencies and a clear understanding of the context of the school, 3) enables them to recognize the reality of students' learning needs, 4) plays a key role in bridging the gap between theory and practice, and 5) develops their professional and personal competencies.

In Tanzanian context, Komba, Ernest, investigated effectiveness of teaching practice in improving student-teachers' teaching skills in Tanzania. Their findings indicated that student-teachers were not properly supervised and they received limited guidance and advice regarding their areas to improve their practical aspects during their stay in host institutions. On the other hand, investigated professional learning opportunities and challenges among 180 student-teachers in Nyamagana district in Tanzania using questionnaire and interview guides. Findings of their study revealed a significant contribution to student-teachers' professional skills. However, associated challenges such as limited mentorship and orientation, limited skills to handle students with special needs and limited pedagogical approaches among student-teachers were reported from the study.

Teaching practice as one among the components used for assessment of student-teachers while nurturing and assisting them to acquire more knowledge, skills and values of the teaching profession. It is generally the function of enabling beginning teachers to engage themselves and develop proper skills required for success into the teaching profession. This entails that teacher preparatory programmes are a cyclic affair which include acquisition of theoretical and practical skills as one package.

In view of the above, it is conceivable to believe that the nature and support provided by host institutions predicts the final outcome of the whole programme. Although some studies have been conducted in Tanzania to assess effectiveness of teaching practice, little has been narrated in literature regarding the kinds of mentorship that student-teachers get exposed to as well as the areas that still need to be addressed as the country continues to invest in teacher education. Therefore, this study focused on identifying contributions of the host institutions towards developing professional exposure to student-teachers. Additionally, the study had explored the possible challenges associated with host-institutions in hosting student-teachers [5].

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a cross-sectional survey study design to enlist rich information on experiences of student-teachers during TP in their host institutions in Dares Salaam City, Mbeya City and Morogoro Municipality. Simple random sampling was used to obtain 14 schools from the three selected regions of the study. By virtue of their leadership in the selected schools, 14 heads of the selected schools were purposively considered and used for interviews. Among the 14 selected schools, student-teachers were considered as a target population. Out of 342 student-teachers only 230 student-teachers were randomly selected to fill the questionnaires. Nevertheless, only 230 student-teachers equivalent to 67.3% were considered for data analysis due to completeness of their filled questionnaires. This number was considered sufficient and representative of other student-teachers (who did not participate in the study) due to their diversity in their fields of study and college level representativeness.

The study targeted student-teachers from one of the public universities in Tanzania who were in the first and second year of their academic years of studies as these are the ones who are considered for teaching practices (with exception of few third year students who did not get such opportunity in one of their previous academic year of

study). A number of data collection instruments were employed. To be specific, self-administered (in presence of the researchers) questionnaires were distributed. Student-teachers were required to fill the questionnaires and return them physically to researchers. This technique was employed based on its efficiency in collecting data and providing immediate feedback when clarification is required by the respondents. Apart from questionnaires, heads of schools were subjected to face to face interviews for collecting their views about experiences regarding hosting student-teachers in their institutions. Additionally, document review checklists were used for triangulation purpose in which students' portfolios and school syllabuses were consulted. Validity, reliability and trustworthiness were properly considered. For the case of face validity, questionnaire items were validated by a panel of three researchers (authors of this article) and some of the questionnaires' items were revised for content and context reasons. For internal consistency reliability, Cronbach's alpha of coefficient was calculated and the value obtained was interpreted using Nunnally guideline that considers a statistical value equal to or above 0.7 as reliable. Early familiarity with the participants was done to clarify the purpose of the study prior to the actual data collection as recommended by to improve credibility. There was no ethical violation as the participants of this study were contacted for their consent and their names were kept anonymous [6].

RESULTS

This study focused on assessing student-teachers' views on different matters pertaining to their teaching practice experiences. From this context, we present findings on opportunities and lessons learned from the host institutions in which student-teachers were allocated for fieldwork. Student-teachers, as noted earlier, were selected from diversity of their teaching subjects that included natural sciences, art and business subjects to constitute a relevant representation of the sampled participants. Student-teachers who were allocated in primary, secondary and Teachers' Colleges (TC) were all involved that included both public and private institutions. (See Table 1 for detailed demographic information).

Student-teachers' experiences at the host institution

Student-teachers were subjected to different questions that sought to explore issues related to their orientations on teaching responsibilities focusing on ways of preparing lessons, guidance from the host institutions as well as participation in the decision making when they were in the teaching institutions. Findings revealed that most of the student-teachers received orientation on different matters regarding their stay at their teaching host institutions. For example, only 5.3% and 2.6% of all the respondents strongly disagreed and disagreed respectively, that they did not receive orientation before the actual engagement to teaching duties. On the other hand, over 80% of all the respondents indicated agreement of receiving orientations from the host institutions [7].

With regard to collaborative lessons preparations, most of the student-teachers agreed to have a collaborative lessons preparation with their host teachers (38% agreed and 36.7% strongly agreed) with a just few of them indicating disagreement on this aspect (about 23% or 53). Furthermore, when student-teachers were asked whether they received guidance from the host teachers, over 80% of all the respondents were in agreement denoting that they were guided by the host teachers on different aspects regarding their teaching practices. Besides, over 80% of the respondents indicated to have their lessons checked by their host teachers.

In view of the above, therefore, it was inferred in this study that, prior collaboration between student-teachers and the host institutions was a necessary fundamental aspect to expose student-teachers to the fundamental values to teaching as an important link to their theoretical knowledge. Nevertheless, not all of them (23.5% or 54 did not) received such an important exceptional entity although the overall responses are substantial to argue that they had a good support prior to their actual class activities in their host institutions. Besides academic teaching, student-

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teachers indicated to have been assigned some administrative duties to perform. In addition, they had opportunity for their work to be reviewed in terms of lesson preparations and implementation, over 85% of all the respondents agreed to have their lesson plans and teaching notes reviewed by the host teachers. This was quite imperative to have student-teachers receiving such a useful aspect and guidelines in their host institutions as a way towards their academic maturity to become fully professional teachers. Nonetheless, resources availability and fully utilization was another potential question that researchers were assessing to explore the extent to which they were fully integrated in student-teachers' teaching at their host institutions. The findings on this are presented next shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Information of Respondents (N=230).

Variable	District/participant characteristics	N	%
Regions of study	Dar es Salaam	124	53.9
	Mbeya	42	18.3
	Morogoro	64	27.8
	Temeke	50	21.8
Districts of study	Kinondoni	74	32.3
	Ilala	1	0.4
	Moro Municipal	64	27.9
	Mbeya City	41	17.9
	Art teaching subjects	142	61.7
Teaching subjects	Science teaching subjects	83	36.1
	Business related subjects	5	2.2
	Religious	0	0
	Year of Study	First year	124
Ages of the respondents	Second year	98	43.4
	Third year SP**	4	1.8
	Below 20 years	10	4.4
	21-30 years	168	74
Programme registered for	31-40 years	45	19.8
	41 and above years	4	1.8
	Diploma	13	5.8
	Bachelor degree	162	72
Professional experience	Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE)	50	22.2
	fresher Student-teachers	184	80.7
	In-service student-teachers	44	19.3
The type of TP station	Primary school	5	2.2
	Secondary school	181	79.4
	Teacher College	42	18.4
The nature of TP station	Public institution	192	86.9
	Private institution	29	13.1
Note: SP**= this denotes third year students with special consideration as they did not have opportunity of doing their teaching practice in either first or second year of their academic study.			

Involvement of Student-teachers in different activities

With regard to student-teachers' involvement in different activities when they were at the host institutions, findings indicated that they were highly involved in different tasks. For example, 217 student-teachers out of 230 or 94.4% indicated to have been involved in setting assessment tools for their students in schools. The tools that were set by student-teachers included but not limited to quizzes, tests and examinations. Therefore, this informs that student-teachers were exposed to different techniques of setting tools for students' assessment and evaluation. In connection to this, student-teachers also noted to have been involved not only in setting tools of assessment but also marking of examinations. Specifically, 216 out of 230 student-teachers (93.9%) declared to have been involved in marking examination task. It is therefore important to argue that, student-teachers in most of the host institutions were exposed not only to assessment and evaluation theoretically, rather, they also experienced practical aspect needed for their students' assessment and feedback provision [8].

For professional guidance and counselling, student-teachers were asked whether they had time to meet their students outside the classroom for supervision and consultation. Findings revealed that majority of them (196 or 85.2%) had an opportunity to meet with their students outside their classrooms. This indicated that they had opportunity of assisting students on different aspects for improving students' learning. Similarly, some of them (83 or 36.1%) had opportunity to meet with students' parents in schools. Regardless of low representation (36.1%) compared to overall student-teachers who participated, available data inform about the potential opportunity the participants obtained to meet with parents to discuss matters related to students' learning improvements.

With regard to student-teachers' involvement in meetings for decision making, 140 or 60.1% indicated to have been given opportunity of being involved in the meetings. On the same aspect, 75 (32.6%) student-teachers did not have such opportunity. Some other student-teachers (23 or 10.1%) were undecided about this while the remaining proportion did not respond to the question that required them to indicate the extent of their involvement in decision making in meetings held in their host institutions. As a matter of fact, it is useful to note that student-teachers' opportunity of getting involved in decision making activities provides them with practical skills required for administrative tasks which can be used when they are still in colleges or later in their teaching profession and when they get opportunity of working as education institutional leaders.

Student-teachers' views on improving teaching practice

Considering the potential contribution of teaching profession, researchers were interested in exploring ways of improving teaching practice in the subsequent years. Therefore, when student-teachers were asked about the issues which they thought were required for subsequent improvement of TP, they had a lot of information to give. Specifically, student-teachers recommended the need to improve infrastructure in host institutions in which teaching practice takes place (25.4%), to ensure sufficient teaching and learning facilities (39.8%), consideration of TP institutions which provide accommodation (22.9%) and sufficient orientation in colleges on TP (20.9%) before they embark on actual fieldwork exposure. Some other recommendations as they are detailed on Table 6 included but not limited to; improving effective cooperation among and between student-teachers and host teachers, provision of remuneration for extra activities, increase TP host institutions to avoid large number of student-teachers in one centre and many others just to mention few. Some of these student-teachers' recommendations were consistent with some heads of schools' views about TP improvement. Results from interviews indicated the following; we receive many student-teachers for teaching practice from different higher learning institutions. Sometimes, it becomes difficult for our school to allocate academic duties to all of them especially those who teach

social science subjects. I would suggest that, schools and universities work collaboratively so that duration of teaching practices should be different to allow easy accommodation of student-teachers.

The school receives student-teachers every year, but the main challenge is related to teaching facilities. The government has expanded students' enrolment in schools that has, on the other side, resulted to limited human and physical resources to support interactive learning. I can therefore, suggest the need for few student-teachers to be allocated in each school. In view of student-teachers' allocation, one head of school recommended most of them to be taken to remote areas where there is an acute shortage of teachers. In most of the urban schools, there is no shortage of teachers. It would therefore, be useful if most of the student-teachers are allocated in rural areas in which shortage of teachers is real a critical challenge to mention. In view of the above, it is evident that both student-teachers and heads of schools are in support of the teaching practice as a potential exercise^[9]. Nevertheless, working on the challenges would be one of the most notable efforts to make the exercise more productive and sustainable.

DISCUSSION

There is a general consensus that teaching practice occupies a key position in any profession development programme for teachers. It provides an authentic context within which student-teachers are envisaged to observe the complexities and richness of the reality of being a teacher. Obviously, during the teaching practice is when student-teachers get opportunities to interact with learners and reflect back to all that they had learnt in colleges. Our study aimed at exploring the kinds of support that student-teachers receive and the perceived challenges that encounter during their TP in the host institutions in Tanzania.

The findings indicated that student-teachers mostly, received good mentorship from the host institutions that included being oriented on how to hand different academic matters, setting assessment tools and involved in administrative duties. Which revealed limited mentorship and ineffective supervision of student-teachers. Nevertheless, we found consistent findings in the current study that concur with other previous research that include limited teaching facilities, large number of students in the classroom, limited interactive classroom activities and limited pedagogical approaches among student-teachers. In terms of class size, also reported that overcrowded classrooms are the major challenges that teachers in Tanzania's schools face for them to provide effective classroom instruction.

In host institutions, student teachers participated in different activities such as teaching, staff meeting and supervision of extracurricular activities. These observations aligned with Perry who pointed out that, although students gain much specialised knowledge by attending lectures and doing assignments, teaching practice adds meaning to this knowledge when a student-teacher comes into contact with the real classroom situation. This is because, it is during teaching practice that knowledge is affirmed and the link between theory and practice are compared as an added advantage to pedagogical content and general knowledge. The situations in which the available teaching resources fail to suffice the needs for effective teaching as observed in our study align with who argues that most governments do not spend much in resource allocation to educate their people. In this study we argue for the need of the government of Tanzania in collaboration with other education stakeholders to play an effective role by allocating enough funds in education to improve both infrastructural and human resources challenges.

CONCLUSION

From the findings of our study we conclude by arguing that most of the student-teachers receive positive attention regarding their arrival, lesson preparation, implementation and guidance from the host institutions during their teaching practice. This means, they normally have opportunity for collaborative working with host staff members that is a good indicator for improving their practical skills in their teaching practices as they prepare to become professional teachers. However, this good practice that has been observed in this study is likely to be hampered by malpractices of both infrastructural and human resources settings in the host institutions. Particularly, teaching in a poorly resourced environment with large number of students denies opportunity for student-teachers to have effective engagement of their skills and therefore, difficulty to help students develop innovative and critical thinking which might be useful for the nation.

By reflecting on the findings of our study and other previous studies, we suggest the need for the universities and other institutions that prepare teachers to work collaboratively with the host institutions that accommodate student-teachers during TP on the appropriate time for teaching practice. This not only may avoid many student-teachers to be allocated in few institutions at a time but it may also control and allow easy allocation of the few available resources such as teaching materials and office for student-teachers to have friendly environment for their teaching practice. To catch-up with the current growing of science and technology, there is a need for the government to enhance the use of ICT in all educational institutions as a means towards improving ICT literacy not only for teaching but also for emphasizing technological knowhow towards achieving collective national goals of middle-income economy and global sustainable development goals. The policy statements are not adequate if there are no deliberate efforts to invest in practical aspects for teaching and learning.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Our study employed a questionnaire that has not been sufficiently tested in other studies to achieve the stable standard gold required for psychometric measures. It is therefore, assumed that future research will focus on using the same items to explore the dimensionality and the structure of the constructs that are not clearly defined in our study. In addition, the study was conducted in three regions of Tanzania mainland which might not be a good representative of other areas which were not reflected in our study. Therefore, our findings should be interpreted with cautions when one wants to generalize to other parts of the country. Nevertheless, our findings provide a useful contribution to the field of the study as far as the systematic methodological approaches were properly considered and findings emanating from them are relevant and useful to knowledge contribution in existing field under study.

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DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors

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