

Teacher Trainees' Experiences and Challenges in Project Work at Colleges of Education in Ghana: The Case of a College in Southern Ghana

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Abstract

Project work plays a key role in the training of teachers because it prepares them to be able to research their practices to improve teaching and learning. This case study explored teacher trainees' experiences and challenges in doing project work using the views of a cross section of trainees from one College of Education in southern Ghana. Twenty-two Diploma in Basic Education teacher trainees who completed their programme from 2017 to 2020 participated in the study. The data was collected through an open-ended online questionnaire. The data collected were analysed qualitatively and presented as narratives with some illustrative examples. The results from the study revealed the trainees reporting that their experiences working with supervisors were generally good. They however reported a number of challenges, with financial challenges associated with the cost of traveling to their colleges to see supervisors being the most common. The study recommended among other things, the need for the management of the Colleges of Education to ensure that trainees would not have to travel frequently to colleges to meet supervisors to save cost and equip the trainees to ensure that their experiences through project work build their core skills.

Keywords: teacher trainees; experiences; challenges; project work

Introduction

This presentation focuses on teacher trainees' experiences and challenges as they embark on project work at colleges of Education in Ghana. Project work has attracted a great deal of study and continues to draw worldwide interest (e. g. Korthagen, et al., 2006; Pitfield & Morrison, 2009; Zeichner, 2010). Research projects undertaken by teacher trainees has been identified as one of the most important elements of teacher training (Zeichner, 2010). The need for a well-designed research project course for prospective teachers to ensure that high quality educators are trained by training institutions is emphasized in the literature (Zeichner 2010).

Until 2018, the Colleges of Education in Ghana were running a 3-year diploma

programme in Basic Education for prospective primary and junior high school teachers. This programme was carried out over six semesters. Trainees used the 6th semester for their off-campus teaching practice in schools. As part of their practical teaching experience, they are also expected to identify a problem in their schools of practice and explore it through action research, under the supervision of their college tutors. This activity constitutes what is referred to as project work in this paper.

The project work is mainly based on action research. It is necessary for the student teachers to identify school or classroom problems and help improve the situation through their research work. Kumar (2018) defines action research as a step-by-step enquiry which is done by teachers, administrators, counsellors and others with

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the interest in teaching and learning activities with the aim of putting information together about how they teach and how their students learn. Other authors look at action research as research that is done by the teachers for themselves (Johnson, 2008). Action research has been the focus of the project work done at the Colleges of Education because it gives immediate feedback to the trainees' classroom practices, enabling them to improve that practice and thereby enhance their professional development.

Despite the important role that research projects play in the preparation of competent teachers, literature suggests that student teachers are still confronted with a number of issues when writing projects. The most common issues that students face include their inability to understand how they would write a good introduction and conclusion. Furthermore, the prospect of researching a subject can make students feel daunted and uncertain how to begin (Zeichner, 2010). Apart from Ampiah, Davis and Kuupole (2013), whose study attempted to document mentees' experiences and challenges in the off-campus teaching practice programme for the final year students at the Colleges of Education in general, no study in Ghana has yet investigated and documented teacher trainees' experiences and challenges in carrying out their project work. It is against this background that this pilot study was designed to investigate teacher trainees' experiences and challenges in carrying out their project work.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this case study was therefore to explore the experiences and the challenges teacher trainees go through as they carry out their action research. The main research questions that guided the pilot study were: "What are teacher trainees' experiences in the conduct of their action research project in their schools of

practices?" and "What challenges do they face in the conduct of their action research project?"

Methods

The study employed an exploratory survey to explore the teacher trainees' experiences and challenges using an open-ended online questionnaire which required the participants to document their experiences and challenges. The population consisted of four-year groups of trainees from a mixed College of Education in the southern part of Ghana, admitted over the period 2017-2020. The link to the questionnaire was sent to the respondents through their various WhatsApp platforms. Twenty-two out of 120 of them filled in the questionnaire. The return rate was therefore 18.3%. The data obtained were analysed qualitatively by going through the following steps: organising the data by printing them out; reviewing and exploring the data to get a sense of what it contains; creating initial codes to help categorise the data; reviewing those codes and revising or combining into themes. The themes were presented in a cohesive manner using illustrative examples and frequency counts. In presenting the results of the study, the letters T₁, T₂, T₃, ... were used to represent the response from teacher trainee one, two, three and so on.

Results

The results are presented under two broad themes namely trainees experiences and challenges.

Trainees Experiences

In this section, the results of trainees' overall experiences and the experiences they had executing their project work are presented.

The majority (14 out of 22 representing 64%) of the trainees indicated that their overall experiences were positive, while seven (32%) indicated that their experiences were not that positive. Only one indicated that the experience was neither positive nor

negative “it was good although a little stressful” (T 13)

Those who had good supervision attributed it to the personality characteristics of the supervisor, the supervisor correcting their mistakes, ensuring that the right things are done and the supervisor being available when the students needed them. Some of the typical positive experiences expressed by trainees included:

“My supervisor was a great person in general. With regards to the project work supervision, she actually discusses and explain things to our understanding and in the end correcting your mistakes becomes easy for you. She made herself available countless times and that helped me to finish on time. (T8)

“My supervisor did well. Any mistake she drawn my attention” (T1)

“It was extremely good. The supervisor made sure I do the right and best project work” (T5)

Those who had bad supervision experience had to travel long distances to meet supervisors, had to do corrections several times before they moved on or had limited access to their supervisors. Some of the typical responses from the trainees who indicated that they had negative experiences included:

“Supervision was difficult since I have to travel afar to campus to meet my supervisor on time since she was not staying on campus ...” (T12)

“[Supervision was] annoying, she keeps referring me to do it again” (T14)

“Supervision was held only when my supervisor called for me” (T15)

As part of exploring trainees’ experiences in carrying out their research project, they were requested to indicate their experiences in going through the various phases of the project execution (i.e. development of intervention, research instruments, data collection, and writing of the project report).

The results from the study revealed the trainees indicating that their supervisors instruct them as to what they have to do at each point in the process and in some cases do it for them, instead of allowing the trainees to play the role of lead investigators with the supervisors providing support for them. Some of the typical responses the trainees gave included:

“[Execution of the project] was under the supervisor’s specification and direction” (T 8)

“[Execution of the project] was under supervisor’s instructions. Sometimes options are provided” (T 6)

“[Execution of the project] by supervisor” (T17)

The trainees were finally requested to share their experiences on typing and printing their project work. The results from the study indicated that the majority (15 representing 68%) of the trainees indicated that either their supervisors or commercial typist type their written project for them. Some of the typical response from the trainees included:

“My supervisor helped me with the typing since we were left with few days to write our final papers, we had to learn” (T1)

“My supervisor assisted me in the typing to avoid any mistake” (T8)

“[typed the project work] by the help of a typist” (T4)

“Because I was not having personal computer, I had to travel to a printing press to get it done” (T7)

Very few (32%) of the trainees typed the project work by themselves. A number of the trainees also indicated that binding of their project work was also done by their supervisors “she also [helped] me in printing and binding of the project work” (T9).

Challenges Trainees Faced in Carrying out Their Project Work

The majority (19 out of 22, 86.4%) indicated that they had one form of challenge or another executing their project work. Only a few (13.6%) indicated that they had no challenge. The challenge could be grouped into three, namely finance/cost associated with traveling and execution of the project work, unavailability of internet and others. Finance was the most frequently cited challenge followed by others. Some of the typical responses given under each of the three main themes are provided below:

Finance/Cost

"Movement from my station to campus for vetting, administration of questionnaire and money for traveling and final printout" (T 2)

"Time, money, and resources to gather information" (T11)

"Transportation from my place of research and abode to my supervisor at the college was very costly and tiresome" (T 14)

"Lorry fare was my challenge" (T5)

Unavailability of Internet

"Corona virus came in so I have to use email to send and receive feedback. Sometimes the network will not be working" (T 3)

"Where I was posted to, the network was working once in a blue moon" (T2)

"Network problem by doing research" (T16)

Others

"Risk of taking transport in and out" (T 14)

"It was difficult for me collecting data" (T4)

"Data collection was difficult because of absenteeism of students" (T3)

"It was quite challenging since it was new" (T20)

"I felt tied to even continue at some point, of which I wanted to change my topic" (T 22)

Discussion

This case sought to explore teacher trainees' experiences and challenges as they embark on their project work/action research, which forms an important part of their training because they need to pass it in partial fulfilment of their award of diploma certificate. The results on trainees' experiences show that the majority of them viewed their experiences as being generally good and attributed it to personality characteristics of the supervisor such as the supervisor being a good person "my supervisor was a great person..."(T8), the supervisor correcting their mistakes "Any mistake she drawn my attention" (T1), ensuring that the right things are done "The supervisor made sure I do the right and best project work" (T5) and the supervisor being available when the students needed them "she made herself available countless times and that helped me to finish on time." (T8).

The results show that trainees who spoke well of their supervisors appear to be those who had their supervisors instructing them as to what they had to do at each point in the process and in some cases do it for them, instead of allowing the trainees to play the role of lead investigators with the supervisors providing support for them. Teacher trainee (T8), for example, said "[Execution of the project] was under the supervisors' specification and direction" (T 8). Working under the specification and direction of supervisors clearly shows that student initiative and creativity appears to be irrelevant in this encounter.

Apart from trainees having limited opportunities to develop their creativity skills, other soft skills such as development of ICT skills appears to be suffering because

just about a third (32%) of the trainees indicated that they either ask their supervisors or professional typist to type their project work for them. For example, Teacher Trainee 1 said “my supervisor help me with the typing since we were left with few days to write our final papers, we had to learn.” Preparation to write examinations should not be a good reason for trainees to engage tutors/supervisors to type their project work for them. Trainees are expected to start typing and formatting their work project right from the beginning of the project and go online to search for information to inform the writing of their project. All these activities will go a long to build the creativity, communication and ICT skills of the trainees if well carried out.

The trainees who said they had negative experiences had to travel long distance to visit their supervisors (T12), went through the frustration of writing chapters over and over again (T14) and availability of the supervisors (T15). Indeed, traveling afar to meet supervisors, writing chapters over and over again with a clear academic writing point as to what should change and see the supervisors for supervision sessions only when the supervisors are ready will definitely frame the experience of the trainees negatively.

The results from the study showed that trainees’ challenges could be grouped into three with cost of doing the project being the highest followed by others such as risk from frequent travels from the schools of practice and the college and challenges associated with data collection and the third being unavailability of internet. It is not surprising that the majority of the trainees identified cost of doing project work as their major challenge. Frequent traveling from schools of practice to colleges to meet supervisors, the use professional typist and tutors to type, format and print their project work adds to the cost of doing the project work. It is therefore not surprising that trainees complained about the cost of doing project work. These findings confirm and extends

the findings of those reported in the literature (Zeichner, 2010; Ampiah, Davis & Kuupole, 2013).

Conclusion and Recommendation

The study revealed that while the majority of the students generally reported that their experience working with their supervisors were generally good, they also reported a number of challenges, with financial challenges associated with the cost of traveling to their colleges to see supervisors and the risk associated with frequent traveling to the College being the most common. The study revealed that a number of trainees' experiences through the action research did not help them to build cross cutting skills such as ICT skills. Some reported that they paid money to their supervisors to type, format and print their project work for them.

It is recommended that arrangement should be made to ensure that trainees would not have to travel frequently to colleges to meet supervisors. Tutors could be made to supervise students’ project work while on supervision to reduce the cost associated with project work writing. Students should be encouraged and supported to go through the whole process of project supervision including typing and formatting of the project work by themselves so that the exercise builds the trainees inquiry skills, critical thinking skills and ICT skills. This study has shown that the participants of the study had limited opportunities to develop their soft skills.

Limitation of Study and Future Study

This study was carried out in only one out of the 46 public colleges of education and therefore the finding may not reflect those of all the colleges in the country. However, the findings and conclusions may reflect what might be happening in other colleges. Future study would involve trainees from at least 5% of the 48 private and public Colleges of Education in Ghana.

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