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Student Teachers School Experience in Zambia: Experiences and Challenges

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Abstract*:* The purpose of this study was to establish challenges and experiences faced by student teachers during teaching practice in Zambia. The study employed the concurrent embedded design. Data was collected from 280 respondents including 200 student teachers, 30 host school deputy head teachers and 50 lecturers. The study employed a questionnaire, focus group discussion and an interview to collect data from the respondents. The study established some challenges which can serve as learning points for teacher educators and administrators in institutions of higher learning that are running teacher education programs. The challenges include the struggle of maintaining low costs while having a high quality school experience, lecturers hurrying through the supervision process, the tendency to involve non-lecturers to supervise students and students lack of adequate support during the school experience period. The school experience period was adequate and students had a number of benefits from it although some institutions had it at the end of the program. It was therefore recommended that school experience be continually evaluated by both the Ministry of Education and institutions that provide teacher education programs in Zambia and that the length of the school experience period be maintained so as to enhance the benefits that student teacher drew from it. It was further recommended that institutions preparing teachers should make sure that school experience is done during the teacher education period and not at the end of it so that students and their lecturers evaluate the experience before the end of the program.

Keywords: Student Teacher; Teacher Education; School Experience; Practicum; Community of Practice.

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Introduction

Teacher education is one of the most important aspects and pillars of education system of any nation. It is through teacher education that the basis for the provision of quality education can be determined because no educational system can rise above the quality of its teachers (Banja and Mulenga 2019, MoE, 1996 & Bishop, 1985). Among all the aspects of teacher education, school experience or teaching practice is a key component of a teacher education program. It is the central pivot of the professional training and education of a prospective teacher (Gujjar, Naoreen, Saifi & Bajwa, 2010). There is no teacher

education program that can be said to be complete without an effective school experience program. Rigden (1994) argued that real world experiences beat any textbook explanation of the classroom. So, one is not yet a teacher until they are introduced into the teaching profession through school experience. Even though there are other factors that measure quality in teacher education (Huber & Hutchings, 2005), school experience is a vital factor for the education and training of any competent teacher (Nancy, 2007). This may explain why, revisiting the quality of the teaching practicum should be a universal concern by the stakeholders of education.

Despite the fact that school experience is such a vital component of learning how to teach, there seem to be a common misconception among the general public and laypersons as observed by Mulenga (2020) that teaching is a task that most educated people can do even without them having any formal education on how to teach. However, effective teaching goes beyond simply knowing the subject matter or content, having interpersonal dispositions to teaching or a 'bag of tricks'. Effective teaching involves deliberate and calculated ways of creating learning environments in which students are engaged and challenged to fulfil their potential. Teachers' competencies are best acquired through a teacher education program in which school experience is a vital component of it. Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005, p. 103) presented a clever analogy comparing the teacher to the conductor of an orchestra as they noted that:

> There he stands waving his arms in time to the music and the orchestra produces glorious sounds to all appearances quite spontaneously. Hidden from the audience, especially the music novice, are the conductor's abilities to read and interpret all of the parts at once, to play several instruments and understand the capacities of many more, to organize and coordinate the disparate parts and to motivate and communicate with all of the orchestra's members. In the same way, as conducting looks like hand waving to the uninitiated, teaching looks simple from the perspective of the student who sees a person talking, listening and handing in assessment items.

School experience is a kind of apprenticeship stage during which student teachers are sent out to schools to gain practical and professional experience by translating all the educational theories they have acquired or learnt into practice (Fagbulu, 1984). It is a practical teaching activity by which student teachers are given an opportunity in actual and real school situations to demonstrate, test and improve their pedagogical content, knowledge and teaching skills over a period of time (Salawu and Adeoye, in National Open University of Nigeria, 2008). The term school experience has three major connotations: the practicing of teaching skills and acquisition of the role of a teacher; the whole range of experiences that student teachers go through in schools and the practical aspects of the course as distinct to each teaching subject.

With the increase in the number of colleges of education and universities providing teacher education in Zambia, teacher preparation landscape seems to have changed tremendously. Studies have been carried out in Africa addressing issues of beginning teachers (Akyeampong and Lewin, 2002; Akyeampong and Stephens, 2002; Hedges, 2002; Indoshi, 2003; Lefoka, Mantoetse, Moeti & Stuart, 2000). While studies have shed light on the process of teacher education, the need for studies in Zambia is without doubt overwhelming. The preparation of teachers in Zambia has changed, given the massive teacher education colleges and universities resulting in increased production of teachers.

A Snapshot of Teacher Education Institutions in Zambia

Zambia's formal education system was born out of the works of early Christian missionaries, notably the Brethren missionary Fredrick Arnot who in 1883 opened the first school (Snelson, 1974). This was later followed by a number of other missionaries such as the Paris Evangelical Mission, the London Missionary Society and other Catholic missionaries (Carmody 2004). The main purpose of the early schools was to teach literacy skills so that local people could read the bible and write. The early schools needed teachers for pastoral work and this led to the provision of teacher education facilities by the missionaries. With time, the government established some colleges to prepare teachers for the many schools that had been established around the country. By the time the country had attained its political

independence in 1964, Zambia had over five well established colleges of education. By the year 2000, the country witnessed an enormous increase in private universities and colleges of education which provided teacher education programs to the extent that at the time of this study, there were over 50,000 teachers who had not yet been employed into the main education system.

Theoretical Underpinnings

This study was informed by the situated learning theory which was developed by Lave and Wenger (1991). The theory suggests that learning should be understood as a process of participation which helps student teachers become involved in a community of practice that embodies beliefs, values and behaviors to be acquired. From this perspective, teacher training is considered as enculturation of social practices associated with teaching and learning but also is a dynamic process of reconstructing and transforming those practices to be responsive to both individual and local needs (Johnson, 2009). Framing teacher preparation as a situated practice focuses attention on the relationship between participation and the context of learning (Ovens & Tinning, 2009). This study attempted to establish challenges and experiences student teachers faced during the teaching practice in Zambia.

Review of Literature

In Zambia, the need to improve the provision of education has been manifested in various policy directions such as the free primary and secondary education and the increase in the number of teacher education institutions. However, all efforts towards improved standards of education would be meaningless if due attention is not paid to the experiences teachers in training face during practicum which is the culmination of their preparation.

Novice Teachers Initial School Experiences

Teacher education scholars and researchers contend that the first year of teaching is sometimes marked by doubt, frustration, anxiety, anger and withdrawal where novice teachers may attempt to integrate their idealistic assumptions about teaching with classroom realities (Lacey, 1977; William, 1986, Dow, 1979, Fullan, 1982). Sometime novice teachers would like to develop a role identity that may not fit with previous beliefs (Tardif, 1984). Consequently, first time teaching is considered to be cardinal to teachers' future practice and to their longevity in the teaching profession (Ryan, 1986; Rust, 1994). Scholars such as Fuller (1969) and Katz (1972) considered the first year of teaching as the 'survival stage' in teacher development. Mulenga (2018) referred to this situation as 'sink or swim' for the new teachers, depending on how they were prepared for teaching and how they experienced the teaching practice.

School Experience: A link between Theory and Practice

Studies show that the practice of teaching in schools remains much as it has always been in terms of content; examination oriented aspect, teacher-centeredness, authoritarian approach as well as mimetic and recitative approaches (Applebee, 1981; Cuban, 1993; Goodlad, 1984). According to Zeichner (1996), new conceptions of teaching and learning such as constructivist views have developed and these developments are opposed to the traditional practices in teacher education. Other authors such as Zeichner and Tabachnik (1981) argued that pre-service teachers never adopt the values and practices promoted in teacher colleges and universities, thus posing the assumption that pre-service teachers accept the values of teacher education programs only to abandon them in the school culture.

Student Teacher Mentoring

Mentoring has been considered to be one of the most effective ways of helping and supporting students and novice teachers in initial school experiences. It is one of the major sources of professional development for student teachers during initial teacher education. A teacher who takes on the role of a mentor is expected to have up to date competencies in order to guide a less-skilled student teacher. Hobson (2002) suggested that mentors ought to be competent in subject knowledge and modern pedagogy; they should be available, approachable; they should have tact and empathy, should not be too directive, should be good listeners and should give constructive criticism and guidance.

Conceptual Aspects of Student's School Experience

Tang (2003) explained that the teaching practice context is conceptualized as consisting of three major aspects. Eraut (1994) described the classroom aspect while McNally, Cope, Inglis and

Stronach (1997) and Slick (1998) explained the socio-professional and the supervisory aspects respectively. These aspects are some of the key areas that this study was interested in as they have been explained in the subsequent sections of the literature review. The experiences of student teachers in these contexts during their school experiences are crucial. These aspects can be clearly linked to perspectives of situated learning and sociocultural theory of learning which supported this study.

Classroom Context

Some scholars have noted that student teachers' experiences in the school may be chiefly confined to classrooms rather than exposure to the full range of responsibilities of full-time teaching which incorporate co-curricular activities as well (McCulloch and Lock, 1992; Stones, 1987; Turney, 1988; Zeichner, 1996). It is for this reason that in some teacher education programs this period of attachment to schools is referred to as teaching practice instead of school experience. In the classroom, pupils are a very significant factor that students need to handle with maturity and professionalism as noted by Moobola and Mulenga (2020). Pupils play a formidable role in the classroom environment in the sense that they enter a reciprocal relationship with the student teacher (Cochran-Smith, 2003). Nias (1989) argued that pupils could validate student teachers' professional competencies by making them feel either technically inadequate or competent. The student teacher's level of understanding of the pedagogical content knowledge is very essential.

Social-Professional Context

Within the socio-professional context, student teachers interact with various agents, such as teachers, fellow student teachers, college lecturers and other personnel in the wider school life. These contribute to their construction of teachers' self. However, Reynolds (1992) found that student teachers may be afraid to ask for help because they may feel that they have nothing to give in return and that veteran teachers may be willing to help, but do not want to interfere. These predicaments mean a lot for the student teacher in terms of how they progress during school experience at school level. If this is the case, such students may turn to their peers for support in cases where there are other student teachers on school experience. It has also been noted that school teachers may often view student teachers as threats to existing conventions and to comfortable routines. As a result of this conflict, school teachers may try to protect themselves against the influence of student teachers by emphasizing the marginality of student teachers and rebutting their suggestions in their professional interactions. It is for this reason that supervision from their lecturers and allocation of a mentor from within the school is of help to the student teacher (Sabar, 2004).

Supervision Context

The other aspect of school experience is the element of supervision. While student teachers engage in ongoing interactions with the classroom context and socio-professional context during their school attachments, they come into contact with supervisors from their teacher education program and from the school. Student teachers have expectations of their college supervisors. Equally, the supervisors have certain expectations of student teachers. However, there may be occasions when the expectations of the two groups contradict each other. This may affect the relationship between the student teachers and college supervisors and may affect the experiences of student teachers during teaching practice. Focusing on the significance of school experience, Wilson, 2006), Lyle (1996) and Stones (1987) stressed that supervision during this period facilitates student teachers' professional learning by bridging the gap between theory and practice in the sense that students are at this point in time expected to put all that they had learnt in the lecture room to tangible practice.

Research Methodology

Research Design

The study employed a longitudinal concurrent embedded design of the mixed methods approach. According to Creswell (2012), this design enables researchers to collect and analyze quantitative and qualitative data concurrently, one form of data supporting the other.

Population and Sampling

Out of twelve public colleges and six public universities from ten provinces in Zambia, six colleges of education and four universities that prepared teachers were sampled using the simple random sampling approach. Therefore, a total of ten institutions participated in the study.

The study purposely sampled one lecturer from each of the ten learning institutions who was a school experience coordinator to provide in-depth understanding and experiences regarding school attachment programs. Additionally, four lecturers from among those who had been in the learning institution for more than six years and had been taking part in the supervision of student teachers were purposively sampled from each institution, giving the total of fifty educators as participants.

Ten student teachers from each of the ten institutions were sampled giving the study a student sample of one hundred as participants from each of the two cohorts. Since two cohorts were used for two consecutive years, 2020 and 2021, the study had a total of two hundred (200) student teachers as participants.

Using simple random sampling thirty deputy head teachers were sampled from 200 hundred host schools where student teachers did their teaching practice. Deputy Head teachers were preferred because they are the ones who are in charge of the academic and supervision of teachers in schools in the country. This then gave the study a sample of two hundred and eighty (280) participants.

Data Collection Procedures

Due to COVID 19 Pandemic, data was collected using digital communication means. Online questionnaires were used to collect information from student teachers by sending them to their email addresses. Telephone interviews were used to collect information from the deputy head teachers. School experience coordinators and lecturers were grouped in ten groups and data was collected using focus group discussions through online google meetings which lasted for about twenty minutes.

Validity and Reliability

The use of multiple instruments such as interview guide, focus group discussion guide and a questionnaire helped to triangulate the data. The questionnaire was piloted to 40 students from one college and one university of the 2019 cohorts and the information was analyzed using the SPSS, yielding the Cronbach's Alpha of 0.7 and above which means the questionnaire was reliable.

Results and Discussion

The analysed data was guided by two research questions which generated six themes around which the participants expressed their views in relation to the experiences that they had.

Research Question 1: What type of challenges did teacher educators and student teachers experience during the school experience period?

This question sought to establish challenges experienced by students and educators during the teaching practice period.

Quality versus Cost

One notable finding which came out as a challenge and impediment to the provision of quality school experience was that the cost of carrying out this exercise made college and university administrators dictate some parameters for carrying it out instead of following what education experts in the college or school of education in the university suggested. During the practicum, student teachers are scatted throughout ten provinces in the country. To reach the students, lecturers are paid night allowances for the number of days spent round seeing the students. They are also given transport and communication funds which they account for upon returning. Thus, some Principals and Vice Chancellors found it costly for their institutions. A coordinator from one university had this to say:

> Because people at the central administration of my university are not specialized in education, they do not understand what it takes to produce a competent teacher. They have been asking us to involve schools to supervise our students instead of us who teach the students so as to cut off the cost of supervising our students. In their thinking they view supervision of teaching as something that can be done by those in host schools, forgetting that to teach in a university one needs a specialization.

Another coordinator confirmed that:

> Each time we draw up a budget for this exercise, approving it by our administrators is a big battle. They even go to the extent of suggesting that we ask teachers in the respective schools where the students teach to supervise the students and then send us the grades. What they do not know is that school experience supervision is also

> part of our teaching and is a learning exercise for us lecturers on how well we prepare our students. It is an effective feedback to us and not just a matter of allocating grades.

During the interview, lecturers from one institution expressed surprise and dismay with the practice that their institution's administrators came up with in relation to supervision of student teachers. One of them emotionally stated that:

> In my institution, we have a very strange practice for the past two years. We as lecturers are asked to recruit new students as we go round the country to supervise student teachers. What is not acceptable about this practice is that if one does not bring a certain number of applicants, then part of their night allowance which was given is deducted from the monthly pay of the following month. This is done as a way of reducing the cost of going for school experience.

In response to this experience, one respondent expressed that "the cost of doing school experience should not be the determining factor of who does the supervision to the extent that school teachers are to replace college or university lecturers in this vital exercise."

Although there is evidence in the literature as demonstrated in this paper that school experience is the culmination of the teacher education aspects that should be put into practice during this period, what we seem to see in the findings of this study is that school experience is laden with a number of serious challenges. While lecturers of education know exactly what should be done and put in place in order to produce an effective teacher, their leaders seemed to focus on cutting costs even if it means compromising the quality of the teacher to be produced. What Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005) noted in their analog that has been presented in the earlier sections of this paper is actually being confirmed here. Most people seem to think that teaching is such an easy task that any educated person can do even if they have no specialization in the teaching methodologies of a particular subject at the level of a teacher educator. The notion of involving primary and secondary school teachers in the supervision of students as a way of replacing lecturers is a contradiction of the qualifications that one should have in order to teach in a college or university.

Hit and Run Lecturer Supervision

Although lecturers visited their students during school practice as a way of supervising, students and school authorities were unsatisfied with the quality and duration of the supervision due to the frequency of their visits which was only done once and the hurriedly nature of their interaction with the students. As it is a known fact that the supervisor has an important role in teaching practice as a resource person, an adviser, a morale booster and an assessor, University supervisors should work closely with the school to support the student teachers and visit the school sites often (Slick, 1998). The role of supervisors is of great importance in ensuring quality of school experience, just as it is vital for the whole teaching fraternity (Mooya and Mulenga, 2021).

When students were asked to indicate how many times supervisors visited them during the school experience period, almost all the students indicated that they were visited only once and for a very short time. One of the students said:

> I was only visited once by a lecturer who is not even a specialist in the subject area that I was teaching, Mathematics. As if that was not enough, the lecturer only spent less than twenty minutes with me before we went in class and left immediately, giving me feedback in less than thirty minutes.

Another student mentioned that;

> These lecturers are so much in a hurry when they visit us. We were six in the school where I was doing school experience and the experience for each one of us was almost the same. The lecturer who came to see me made me arrange for a lesson at the time I was not scheduled to teach and then demanded that I teach only a single period of 40 minutes. Though the feedback was useful, I would have appreciated it more if I was seen another time and given more feedback whether I had improved or not.

A deputy head teacher at one school also mentioned during the interview that:

> Colleges and universities need to change their approach to supervision. They need to

> invest more time and resources in ensuring that students are visited more often and given enough time during the visit. It seems they are in a hurry to seeing more students in a single visit that they make than in providing quality guidance. I wonder what is really going on.

This view was shared by five other deputy head teachers who thought students were not given enough attention by their lecturers during supervision visits. While students were asked to indicate on a table the duration that lecturers spent with them during supervision, figure 1 gives a summary of the analysed responses. According to table one, 87 students in each cohort of 100 had less that one hour of interaction with their supervisors while about 10 in 2020 and 12 in 2021 had at least an hour and the rest had about two hours. From the figure, none of the supervisors spent half a day or the whole day with the students in any host school.

Table 1: Time Spent by Supervisors

Time Spent by Supervisor	2020	2021
Less than one hour	87	76
One hour	10	12
Two hours	3	6
Three to four hours	0	6
Half a day	0	0
The whole day	0	0
TOTAL	**100**	**100**

Table 1 confirms what students and school authorities mentioned regarding the duration that lecturers spent with students that it was short and not adequate for effective supervision. While one may argue that unless we unpack the content of the meetings that is when we can judge their quality, data from this study is pointing to the fact that lecturers are mostly in a hurry to see the students and this is likely to compromise the quality of their supervision.

The findings imply that the cost of the practicum seems to determine how the exercise is organized and executed. One would easily conclude that this exercise seems to be done mostly to fulfil a program requirement rather than giving a chance for students to put their educational theory into practice in real school environments. This exercise seems to be plagued with a number of challenges from which institutions of higher learning in Zambia can learn.

Free for all Kind of Supervision

School experience supervision is an extension of the teaching methodology course that student teachers do in the college or university and thus, those who supervise students must have a specialized pedagogical content knowledge of the subject to be supervised. On the contrary, the learning institutions seem to have been involving anyone in the supervision of student teachers. One university lecturer noted that "I do not support the practice that I see going on with regard to supervision of student teachers where lecturers are allocated to observe any lesson without regard to their area of specialization." Another lecturer confirmed that

> I find it very difficult to give specialized feedback to students when I supervise them in a subject area that I do not teach. I know there is this common view that as long as one has taught methodology courses, then they can provide guidance to a student in any subject. This is a fallacy and is fraudulent. Lecturers who think that it is fine to do such a thing do it out of ignorance and lack of knowledge.

Four coordinators also complained that when it comes to allocating which lecturer goes to supervise which students, they get a lot of demands and pressure from members of staff, some of who do not even teach methodology courses but are in administration. One coordinator commented that:

> In my institution, the time for school experience supervision is regarded by some staff as a time to make money through allowances. Each time I have to allocate colleagues to supervise, I get demands and sometimes directives from bosses in administration that they need to take part in the exercise. This is unfortunate because I wonder what they tell students each time they give them feedback since they do not teach any subject methodology.

Commenting about involving host teachers to supervise student teachers, most lecturers supported by the coordinators mentioned that the grades that they get from host teachers are most of them too inflated and do not depict the performance of the students whom they say they know so well through peer teaching. One coordinator mentioned that:

We have a problem considering the grades that we get from host teachers about the performance of our students during school experience. These grades are most of them in distinction brackets and yet these are students whom we know as not being in that performance bracket. Of course there are students who perform exceptionally well but most of them are not at the distinction level as portrayed by the host school assessment reports. This is what makes a difference between one who teaches a methodology course and one who does not. Those who teach methodology courses know exactly what should constitute a good lesson and quality teaching performance.

The situated learning theory developed by Lave and Wenger (1991) suggests that learning should be understood as a process of participation in a social context. In this case, the context is the school where supervisors make a significant contribution to the learning process of the student teachers. Given the findings that have been presented in this section, one would easily conclude that student's learning was short changed for mediocrity due to the use of supervisors who were not competent enough to provide guidance and extend the students' teaching developments. It is not excusable for institutions to compromise the quality of supervisors because this is as good as not having supervision at all. The expectations of students about the feedback from the supervisor are so high and they look forward to learning from their lecturer's immense experience in the particular area of study.

Sink or Swim Experience

Student teachers were asked to indicate on a five point Likert scale how much they were supported by the schools and their learning institutions at the time of their school experience. The result show that most of the time, students were on their own. They had to find their way on how to survive or they were not to benefit from the experience at all. It was a matter of sink or swim kind of experience as reflected in Table 2.

Table 2: Students' Learning Experience (n = 200)

Learners Learning Experience		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Teachers gave me advice and help when they noticed that what I was doing was not correct	f	120	20	13	41	6
	%	60	10	6.5	20.5	3
I received adequate support from the school where I was teaching and from my institution	f	103	62	0	20	15
	%	51.5	31	0	10	7.5
Some teachers made discouraging remarks about my commitment to lesson preparation and teaching	f	69	26	0	80	25
	%	34.5	13	0	40	12.5
I was asked to do new and difficult tasks without being guided	f	62	100	0	20	18
	%	31	50	0	10	9
My college / university was in constant touch with me during my school experience	f	170	26	4	0	0
	%	85	13	2	0	0
I had a mentor allocated to me during the period of school experience	f	150	30	0	14	6
	%	75	15	0	7	3
Experienced teachers were willing to help me when I sought for help	f	135	47	8	4	6
	%	67.5	23.5	4	2	3

Most of students, over 70%, indicated that they were not given advice and support by host teachers and their institutions had no mentor allocated to them. Furthermore, none of the students was in constant touch with their institutions. Findings further indicate that over 47.5% of the students received discouraging remarks from teachers about their commitment

and were asked to do difficult tasks without being guided. What is presented in table 2 relates with what the school respondents and lecturers revealed in the interviews. For instance, according to one lecturer, ”for all the period of the school experience, we only met the students when we visited them in school and we spent very little time with them.” This view was shared by almost all the lecturers during the focus group discussions.

When asked about allocation of a mentor to student teachers, a deputy head teacher had this to say:

> Teachers already have a lot to deal within the school and thus giving them an extra duty of mentoring student teachers will be over loading them. Moreover, we have a lot of student teachers coming for school experience nowadays and thus we cannot manage to have a teacher doing the mentoring duty each and every term.

This position was shared by other school deputy head teachers who though appreciated the significance of helping student teachers, they did not see the need for giving mentorship roles to their teachers. From the student’s experiences, and as indicated in table 2, it is clear that students did not receive enough support from the schools and from their institutions of learning. For instance, majority of students (90%) mentioned that they did not have a mentor allocated to them.

Furthermore, over 91% of students did not receive help from experienced teachers. According to Maphosa, Shumba and Shumba (2007) support from experienced teachers enhances students’ opportunities to learn how to teach more effectively. Therefore, student teachers who took part in this practicum missed out on the opportunity to learn from the vast experience of veteran teachers. It would be significantly important that institutions preparing teachers take advantage of the time that students spend in schools by them learning from experience teachers.

Research Question 2: How was the length of the school experience and what benefits did student teachers get from the practicum?

The length of the school experience and benefits that students had gained form it also came out strongly as an aspect that provided learning points for the school experience among student teachers in colleges and universities in Zambia.

School experience period is the most important component of initial teacher education, contributing to student teachers’ professional development (Ben-Peretz, 1995). But results indicate that students did not have enough time to gain practical experience from their supervisors.

Coordinators from colleges indicated that their students had an equivalent of six months which was divided into two terms taken in the second terms of second and third years of the program while those in universities had only three months taken mostly in the third year by three universities while in one university, it was taken at the end of the study program before the students graduated. For instance, a coordinator from a college mentioned that;

> Like in all the colleges of education in the country, our students go for school experience twice during a three years study program, in the second terms of their second and third year of study in which case they spend three months for each of the times they are on school experience.

On the other hand, a coordinator from one university explained that “as for my institution, we organize a three months school experience in the third year of the student’s program which is a whole term of the public host schools calendar. This is only done once.”

A coordinator from another university however responded that:

> In our university, things have just improved. School experience was one of the most difficult to organize for a number of years. It was a pity that we reached a point where school experience was as short as four weeks which students did at the end of their third year before coming back for the final year of study. But now our students take it at the end of fourth year for a period of three months which is a whole term of the public schools’ national calendar.

From what coordinators mentioned, it is clear that colleges of education actually give their students more time for school experience than universities.

It would be interesting to further find out what the implications of this difference could have been. However, this study did not go into those details. All one would conclude is that colleges provided more learning experiences for their students than universities.

On the other hand, the trend of having school experience at the end of the program than during the program seems to ignite some debate among teacher education scholars. While holding school experience after student teachers have had enough educational and subject matter understanding is the logical thing teacher educators should do, having it at the end of the program when students will have no time to make follow ups of their experiences with their lecturers is not well supported by research. According to Tom (1997) for instance, the location of teaching practice towards the end of the program has been blamed for 'underplaying the complex nature of the knowledge learned.

Ghani (1990) applauded programs that offer a continuous teaching practice by noting that: 'if teaching practice occurs at the same time that theory is being learned, its relevance may more easily be seen, learned and applied. This approach has been supported by neurological research which shows that the more links and associations one's brain creates, through connected and relevant learning, the more neural territories involved and the more firmly the information is integrated (Jensen, 1998, p. 92).

Students were also asked to indicate in their questionnaire what they actually learnt during school experience from a general point of view. Figure 3 provides a percentage description of the benefits that students got from the school experience. The results show that over 80% of students felt they had started becoming masters of their own subject areas, learnt how to assess learners, improved on classroom management skills and learnt how to use different teaching methods. This revelation is encouraging for it shows that students found the school experience period beneficial. It is worth noting that if students are able to make their own self-assessment, it shows a level of professional maturity.

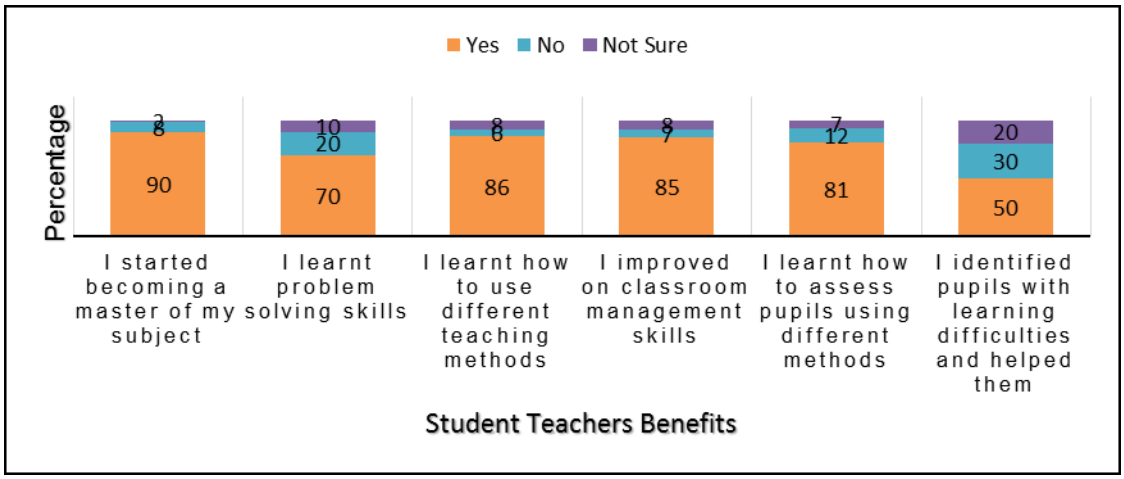

Figure 3: Student Teachers Benefits during School Experience

The lowest scored item was about whether student teachers identified pupils with learning difficulties and helped them whereby only 50% agreed. This may be explained by two reasons. First, to have this kind of ability requires a lot of experience and support from the rest of the school such as the counselling section. Secondly, student teachers needed to have developed some level of friendship with the pupils before they could move in to provide this kind of help, given the fact that the time spend during the teaching practice was limited.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Findings of this study provided a glimpse into student teachers' and their lecturer's complex, multifaceted teacher education school experience program and contribute to the existing literature in several ways. First of all, from a theoretical perspective, the study demonstrated that school experience takes place in a community of practice supported by the college, university and the host school. It is in this community of practice that student teachers' professional growth is initiated through a practicum of school experience.

It is concluded that the teaching practice exercise is plagued with a number of challenges that need attention if students are to have maximum benefits from it. These challenges led to a conclusion that administrators in institutions preparing teachers in Zambia seem to be concerned with the cost of doing the teaching practicum at the expense of quality, which eventually make supervisors rush through the supervision exercise so as to see as many students as possible in the provided time. They sometimes may want to engage unqualified personnel to supervise students on behalf of the college or university. It is therefore recommended that the Directorate of Teacher Education in the Ministry of Education in Zambia together with institutions that provide teacher education programs, should continually evaluate the school experience exercise and constantly provide solutions to these challenges.

Furthermore, there seem to be an adequate school experience period. It is therefore recommended that the existing tradition of an adequate length of a school experience should be taken advantage of to enhance quality so as to increase the benefits of the practicum. It is furthermore concluded that the benefits that students pinpointed are a sign that this experience is of significance to student teachers.

The preparations that a student teacher goes through during the college or university years are all judged by the teacher's effectiveness in the classroom. Therefore, the length of the school experience should be maintained but all institutions should make sure that it is done during the teacher education period and not at the end of it so that students and their lecturers may have time to evaluate the experience before the end of their program.

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