

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

**UNDERSTANDING UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS
PRACTICUM EXPERIENCE: A QUALITATIVE CASE
STUDY OF JIMMA UNIVERSITY**

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the pre-service teachers' perspectives of practicum experience as a tool of learning to teach by using qualitative research methods. Data were collected through interview from twenty four purposively selected information rich participants' ranging in diversity. The data were analyzed thematically by using verbatim quotes. The findings indicated that the participants perceived practicum as an important tool of learning to teach because it promoted the development of teaching experience and prepared them for the real world of work. The analysis revealed that theory practice connection, competency and confidence development and socialization as a successful experience of the practicum program and inadequate budget, assessment centered experience, inadequate support and secondary school student misbehavior as the most stressful experience of student teacher practicum experience. Finally, the finding indicated that provision of adequate fund, close supervision of the program, building strong partnership with the schools are what the participant thought could be improved and given due attention. The need to provide adequate support, rethinking assessment mechanism, provision of adequate fund, strengthening university-school partnership and close supervision are, thus, found to be the dimensions identified as points that need interventions.

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INTRODUCTION

Following the overthrow of the dergue regime in Ethiopia, a number of efforts have been made, aimed at transforming society through education. New goals of access, equity, quality and efficiency have been articulated/ formed at national level in Ethiopian education and training policy of 1994 to reform all aspect of the education system. With in this context the new education and training policy states the general and specific objective of the education, an overall strategy and areas of special attention and prioritized action. Among the areas of special attention and prioritized action one focuses on teacher training and overall development of teachers and other personnel. To facilitate the implementation of the policy in the areas of teacher education a task force was formed to study the problems of quality and effectiveness of the teacher education system in Ethiopia. The study reported that Ethiopian teacher education had multifaceted problems, this in turn led to the preparation of Teacher Education System Overhaul (TESO) document in order to address the serious problems identified in the study.

Accordingly, teacher education institutes (TEIs) are implementing the new teacher

education system overhaul (TESO) program which was initiated by the MOE and intended to bring about paradigm shift in the Ethiopian teacher education system.

According to MoE, 2003:35

A paradigm shift implies change in what is valued in society, and what knowledge society thinks should be learned in schools. Currently Ethiopia is striving to accommodate the development of all nations and nationalities. Teachers are essentially agents for positive societal change. Those adhering to the shift in educational paradigm (that knowledge for example, depends on interpretation) can very effectively work to empower communities that endure a lack of opportunities.

It is beyond the shadow of doubt that teachers are agents of change in a society as they are central to the delivery as well as quality of education. Quality teachers are the single greatest determinant of student achievement. According to the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future [NCTAF], 1997 the impact of a teacher was greater than any other single factors, including class size, parent education, and income and language background. They can also influence the

economic dynamism of the country by imparting skills that translate into innovation and productivity in the workplace (Goldhaber and Anthony, 2004). Teachers clearly play an important role in shaping the future of individuals as well as of entire generations (ibid). In order to play their role in this changing and challenging world, where knowledge based economic is craving more intellectual property, teachers should be provided with a range of knowledge, skills, attitudes and relevant educational experience that enable them to cope up with the challenge of 21st century and work in this new context. To this end, the universities are expected to prepare teachers who are fully appropriate to the needs and realities of today's classroom, and who knows their subject matter and methods of teaching to high standard.

In response to this, the TESO program in Ethiopia making the Teacher Education Institutes (TEIs) the beginning point for the paradigm shift, set out five competences that teachers at all level must exhibit in the professional context. These competences are:

- a) Competent in producing responsible citizens
- b) Competent in subject(s) and the content

of teaching;

- c) Competent in the classroom;
- d) Competent in areas relating to the school and the education system;
- e) Competent in the values, attributes, ethics and abilities essential to professionalism in upholding the professional ethics.

To achieve the aforementioned competences as strategy the TESO document recommended the pre-service teacher education program; the introduction of practicum, professional course and research, academic areas (the combination of content and methods), assessment, certification of teachers, gender balance, life skills and civic course. One of the most notable of these is the introduction of practicum, which, is the most valued component of teacher preparation program (Silberman, 1970), provide a firm foundation for future professional development (MoE, 2003), can help to teach appropriate realities, motivated participants, promote career choice...provide academic stimulation for practicing and prospective professionals (Gehrke, 1981 cited in potthoff and Kline 1995).

TESO program requires the would be teachers to spend a significant portion of their pre-service program in schools, observing teachers, schools, classrooms, the school environment and practicing teaching specific subject related to their field of study with the intention to integrate campus experience with school based practicum experience in a meaningful way. Accordingly, the education faculty of Jimma University, like other university in the country, have been sending graduating class students to different secondary schools by assigning a named academic staff to each student teachers placed at particular school to enable each student teacher to achieve levels of competence, experience and knowledge that will qualify him/her for entry into the teaching profession and prepared for the practical realities of the classroom. Therefore, this research study was attempted to uncover student teacher experience of the practicum.

Practicum is the most important and relevant part of the pre-service teacher education program. It enables the student teacher develop some competences that can best be developed and extended during the school based practicum experience. According to MoE (2003) it also allows

student teacher to practice teaching in their respective areas, try out ideas, have the confidence to make mistakes and to reflect and learn from them in order to develop new strategies. Similarly, Kragler and Nierenberg (1999) sated that field experiences need to provide time for pre-service teachers to integrate theory into practice, to reflect on lessons taught, to receive meaningful feedback and to engage dialogue with others regarding their beliefs and experiences. Although practicum is one of the priority area given due attention in the pre-service teachers training program to better prepare learners for the world of work, the success of the program depends greatly up on the quality of experience the students gain to meet an ever increasing demand. Therefore, this study was designed to explore, understand and describe the issue of practicum experience from the student teachers perspectives with the following guiding research question;

- 1, how do student teachers feel about the importance of the practicum program?
- 2, what is the most successful thing about student teacher practicum experience?
- 3, what is the most stressful thing about student teacher practicum experience?
- 4, what can the university do to make the practicum more fulfilling and successful?

Coming to the purpose of this study, it was to explore, understand and describe student teachers perception of their school based practicum experience. It also aimed to forward practical implications that help to improve the program so that the student teachers can have fulfilling and satisfying practicum experience.

As to the Significance of the Study Teacher education program has a critical role in preparing quality teachers for the 21st century schools. To this end, various strategies were designed and implemented by MoE, of which practicum is one. This study was designed to investigate student teachers perception of practicum experience. Therefore, the result of this study might help to improve the school based practicum experience of the teacher education program. Besides, it provides valuable information regarding the practicum from the insider's point of view. The results from this study will also be added to the existing body of literature related to practicum.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Generally speaking the world is full of research methodologies, with no single method applicable/fit to all research

problems. Each research methodology has its own relative weakness and strength. Although each of the approach have their relative strength and weakness (Dawson, 2002) for the purpose of this study, I find that quantitative approach cannot tell me what I want to know and unable to derive meaning from the realities of personal experience and how person feels about the experience (Marshall & Rossman, 1980) in contrast to qualitative inquiry, which aimed at getting a better understanding through first hand experience, truthful reporting and quotations of actual conversation. Having this and the nature of the problem in mind, I adopt the qualitative approach because my concern is to understand about the issue under investigation, seeking understanding or insight of actor's perspectives rather than statistical analysis.

Sample and Sample Selection

The participants of the study were all third year students of the academic year 2008/09 GC in the faculty of education, Jimma University, who undertook school based practicum experience that required prescribes teachers to spend two months at different sites during their third year first semester. Regarding the sample selection, Merriam (1998) asserts that since

generalization, in a statistical sense is not a goal of qualitative research, probabilistic is not necessary or even justifiable in qualitative research. Researchers should locate a group of participants rich in knowledge and experience. Thus, non-probability sampling is the method of choice for most qualitative research. Individuals for this study were selected purposively based on the following criteria; their willingness to participate in the study, their academic background and gender. The samples were selected from Natural Science, Social Science and Language composed of mixed sex. In total 24 students were involved in the study, of which six were females.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interview which is the most common type of interview in qualitative social research (Dawson, 2002) was used to collect data. This process allows the researcher to gain insights into others' perspectives about the phenomenon under study; it is particularly useful for ascertaining respondents' thoughts, perceptions, feelings, and retrospective accounts of events (Goodwin and Goodwin, 1996, cited in Phillips, 2004). According to Patton (2002) the interviewing is "to capture how those being

interviewed view their world, to learn their terminology and judgments, and to capture the complexities of their individual perceptions and experiences". It also provides a way of generating empirical data about the social world by asking people to talk about their lives". Hence, semi-structured interview were used to solicit information that reveals the interviewees' perceptions of practicum experience. The interview process was accompanied by tape record to prevent loss of information.

Data Analysis

Methods used in analyzing data for a case study includes categorization and interpretation of data in terms of common themes, and the synthesis of data into an overall portrait of the case (Leedy and Ormrod, 2005). For present study, the data collected via interview were transcribed verbatim, coded and divided in to categories, as suggested by Guba and Lincoln (1985) in an attempt to discover common themes. Through repeated readings of the transcript, I was able to find themes and patterns. I then began to develop categories- Which involve putting conceptually similar happenings or events under the same group. According to Bogdan and Biklen (1992) analysis involves working with data, organizing it,

breaking it into manageable units and searching for patterns or themes to discover what is important to tell others. Accordingly, data were analyzed in terms of the following major themes: conception of practicum, purpose of practicum, successful experience, stressful experience and what the universities can do to improve the program. My analysis of the data, themes and findings were discussed in the proceeding section.

Ethical Issue

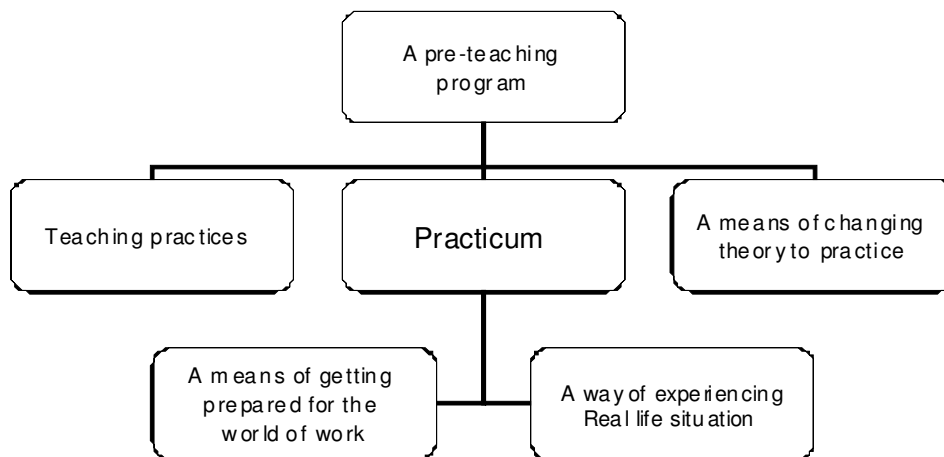
As to the ethical issue the following ethical and moral concerns were addressed; harms and benefits were assessed for the well-being of research participants, informed

consent were secured (participant understanding of what it means to participate in the study were ensured), privacy and confidentiality were kept (participants' identities and the data were protected)

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Conception of practicum

Student teachers were asked to describe and explain practicum with the intention to learn the meaning they attached to it. Through analysis of the interview, I tried to learn how the participants conceptualize



practicum from their perspectives. The respondents give a range of overlapping interpretation to the term practicum. The expressions of most participants are summarized in the following figure.

Figure 1 Designed from interview data

From the above figure it is evident that the study participants perceive the practicum as a means to an end, more specifically, a means for the preparation of the teaching profession.

Purpose of the practicum

When asked to talk about the purpose of practicum during the interview student teachers who participated in this research explained that its main purpose is to develop teaching experience and to examine ones own knowledge in real life situation. The sentiments of most participants are summarized in the following quote:

...the main purpose of practicum was to develop teaching experience such as classroom management skill, pedagogical skills, preparation of lesson plan, development of subject matter knowledge,

understanding nature of student and the school and to examine our theoretical knowledge acquired in the university in real life situation...

Besides, student teachers explained that practicum is the most important part of their pre-service teacher education program which plays a significant role in preparing them for the world of work. The study participants expressed their beliefs that field experience had been very beneficial. This view substantiates the belief that teaching experience is the main means through which teachers learn to teach (Haigh and Tuck, 1999). From the insightful response of the respondent I understood that the goal of student teaching is to integrate course theory with teaching practice and acculturate pre-service teachers to schools.

Successful Experience

Practicum is an activity at which student – teachers are expected to integrate educational theory and knowledge with the practical realities of the classroom. It provides the student teachers an

opportunity to develop their teaching skills and knowledge in classroom setting. From the insightful responses of the student-teachers about the positive aspect of their practicum experiences two sub themes were derived: Theory – Practice connection and competence and confidence development.

Theory – Practice Connection

As pre-service teachers progress through their degree, they are expected to link a university based coursework /theory/to school based practice through practicum. Similarly all students teachers with whom I spoke during the interview session of the data collection process identified connection between theory and practice as one of the positive aspect of their experience. They explained that they have granted an opportunity to narrow the theory- practice gap. In one of such interview I obtained the following quote as evidence:

...it provides us the opportunity to practice the theory we have learnt in university, in real world. I have taken various theoretical courses related to my field of study and professional courses. In practicum I have got

the opportunity to practice the theoretical knowledge provided in the university such as application of different teaching methods, classroom management skills, time management, mastering lesson plan preparation, utilization of different teaching- learning materials...

Likewise, another respondent explained that:

...through practicum I have got the opportunity to test my theoretical knowledge in real school setting. I applied different evaluation techniques. I was able to identify diverse learner, I was able to develop collaboration and team work spirit...

As clearly indicated in the description above, the respondents believe that the practicum program links the theory they have learned with practical experience to practice. These illustrative responses substantiate previous research which-stated as practicum helps pre-service teachers to see theory in practice (Brown, 2008, Ligadu, 2009). Form the description

it can be inferred that the practicum program mediate the theory provided by the university with the school practical experience.

Competency and Confidence

Development

Another positive aspect of the practicum identified from the data was the opportunity it provides the student- teacher to develop their professional skills and knowledge and their personnel confidence. Here is an example of excerpt reported during an in depth interview with informants:

...through practicum I developed the competencies that I learned theoretically in the university. I involved in different activities of teaching, knew what is expected from teachers like school norm, behaviors, dressing style etc. I understood roles and responsibilities of teacher. Through practice I was able to develop confident to act as a teacher...

Correspondingly, another informant explained that:

...practicum is very important for the would be teachers. It enables the student teachers to eliminate fear. It enables us to develop knowledge and skills of teaching by practicing. I was able to share the experience of school teachers. I was also able to develop confidence in doing any activity related to teaching such as standing and talking in front of student, writing on the black board, interacting with the student...

In the description above, it is evident that these participants underscore the development of competence and confidence as an important outcome of practicum experience. This finding affirms what the Jeffery (2008) states as student teaching experience increases teachers' confidence in their abilities and their desire to remain in the profession.

From the above explanation I found that the practicum program was led to the development of confidence and competence. It is true that as the student teacher increase their experience they become more familiar with school routines, procedures and curriculum as well as gain better understanding of themselves in their

new role as teachers. This enables them to feel more confident and hopeful that they become better teachers.

Socialization

Bliss and Reck (1991) define teacher socialization as 'the process by which an individual becomes a participating member of the society of teachers'. In discussing the positive aspect of practicum experience the informants explained that school based practicum is a site for socialization. Maintaining this view one of my interviewee explained that:

...it provides the student teacher the opportunity to live and work with others; like teachers, community, peer, students in real life. It also provides us the opportunity to live in the society with the society since it involve off campus life...

As it is explained in the above quote the student teachers were socialized into many aspects of the teaching profession both inside and outside the classroom during the practicum. This finding confirmed what Zeichner and Grant (1981) have argued that the practicum in individual schools influence the socialization process of pre-

service teachers which includes forming relationships, learning how to teach and all the demands associated with teaching, such as coping with school rules inside and outside the classroom, following the school rules for lesson planning, following or developing curricula, learning the routines of the classroom, and learning how to interact with school authorities and colleagues.

Stressful Experience

In the course of my interview, the interviewees identified the negative aspect of their practicum experience which can be categorized into four sub-themes; low budget, assessment centered, loss of support or inadequate support and disciplinary problem.

Low/ Inadequate Budget

The inadequacy of fund / budget allocated for student teacher for practicum purpose was very well articulated by the respondents. As student teachers go to practicum site they paid some amount of money by the university so that they can cover their expenses. However, all the informants expressed their dissatisfaction

with the amount of money they provided for practicum. The following quote is reflective of this view:

...the university sent us to the school/ practicum site/ by paying us some amount of money to cover all our living expense. However, with the present inflation observed in our country the money we paid doesn't cover our expenses. So we finished the money before the practicum end. This should need due consideration. We do not have to worry about what we eat, drink and where we live...

The above mentioned quotation entirely seems to have indicated that the respondents were unanimously felt discomfort with the money they paid during the practicum period. It is evident that the provision of adequate fund was an area that deserves attention to provide authentic opportunities for student teachers to be exposed to the full range of work demands and complexity that they will encounter in real world of work. As the respondents explained Jimma University offered 30 birr per diem for each student, 18birr from the government fund and 12 birr from other sources.

Assessment Centered

Though the practicum is designed to ensure that student teachers have as much supported experience as possible before they entered the classroom as a qualified teacher all participants of this research explained that the practicum experiences end up coping with it as an assessment. Maintaining this view one of my interviewee sums it up in the following quote:

...We came to practice what we have learned theoretically in the university. This is very important for us especially for our future work since we develop the experience of becoming a teacher but, the problem is it emphasizes the evaluation rather than helping us to become better teacher. Supervisors are there to evaluate us not to help us. We are observed only once or twice in two month by our supervisors which indicated that they came to evaluate. Owing to this student teachers developed a fear of getting low grade and found the experience stressful...

It was believed that supervisors have helped the student teachers to identify their weakness and strengths, guide them to be competent professionals and enable them feel successful. However, to the contrary, an insightful response shared by the participant revealed that the whole practicum was simply an assessment of learning where they are expected to follow the direction of their supervisors and distraught with fear of failing the practicum. This finding justifies what Haigh and Tuck (2000) stated as the assessments of students' competence during practicum remain problematic and a number of issues remain continuous. Macdonald (1993) research identified inconsistencies in the way student were evaluated by teachers, varying expectation of student performance and conformity between teachers and marked variation in the quality of feedback given to student by supervisors as a source of stress for student teachers.

Inadequate Support

To be more effective in promoting prospective teachers' inquiry into teaching and learning, university supervisors should provide regular formative feedback, have strong interpersonal skills, be integrated with school communities, collaborate

closely with cooperating teachers, and have strong university affiliations (Glickman and Bey, 1990 cited in Jeffery, 2008). Support for student teachers was an essential component of the practicum program. However, report from the respondent indicated that their respective supervisors fail to do so as evidenced in the following quotes:

...majority of the student teachers were disappointed about their supervisors of the practicum. Every student teachers need encouragement and constructive feedbacks instead of destructive criticism and discouragement. However, we felt that the support given to us was very low. The supervision do not start on time, conducted maximally once or twice which was insufficient, the feedback given to us from the major area supervisor and minor area supervisor including the grade given was inconsistent, the feedback given was insufficient, not continuous, more of critique and discouraging...

A substantive explanation by informant in the above quotes indicated that the support

they provided is not as they hoped and inadequate to brought them the experience they expect from the practicum. The finding seems to confirm what Clary (1991) argued as increased supervision helps in determining if field experience generate the desired results and what Goodman (1985) believes the quality of field experience improves when supervisors are more involved. In the same vein Jeffery (2008) stated that more frequent feedback from university supervisors is related to greater student teacher confidence and desire to remain in the teaching profession which contradicts with what the respondents reported as they often receive conflicting and insufficient feedback from university based supervisors.

During the interview session few student teacher also expressed their dissatisfaction about the support provided by the school teacher. They explained that the school teacher gave full responsibility for the student teacher and left the school. Owing to this they face a problem when they need help from the subject teacher as they are practitioner. The following quote is a reflective of this view:

...we are practitioners not experts...we are new to the school and to the

environment...we need support from the school teachers to gain the entire in-school experiences, we need also their help to practice effectively and better understand teaching. However, there is no meaningful support given to us from the subject teacher instead they told us the grade level and section we are expected to teach and left the school by giving all the responsibilities. They see the period of practicum as a break...

The description above clearly indicated that the student teachers did not get proper support from the school teachers. These illustrative responses substantiate previous research done by Ligadu (2009) which stated that during practicum there is no systematic mentoring system at school.

The nature of practicum support is an important factor in new teacher development. The guidance, mentoring and feedback that student teachers receive from their school and university supervisors play a critical role in their learning and development. However, compared to the number of pre-service teachers, university supervisors were scarce in number and

failed to optimally support student teachers since they were overloaded.

turn de-motivates the student teachers. Hence, we are discouraged to teach and make all the students learn...

High school Students Misbehavior

Students and teachers have the right to learn and work in a safe environment that encourages academic achievement. To this end, supportive and focused classroom that allow students the opportunity to learn and grow is crucial. However, student teachers with whom I spoke during interviewee session of the data collection reported that student's disciplinary problem was headache and discouraging to them with this regard the respondent explained:

... students in secondary schools do not follow attentively the instruction, move without permission in the class, talk to each other and disturb the class. They do not come to school on time...

Adding to this another interview offered an account:

...students do not recognize the would be teacher as teachers because of this they do not respect us. They do not follow the lesson attentively which in

The above description of the participant showed that student misbehavior in school was a de-motivating and discouraging for student teachers to accomplish their task effectively. From the response of the participants I understood that lack of respect for student teachers were undermining their ability to provide students quality instruction.

What can the university do?

University provides the theories, skills and knowledge through coursework and student teachers participated in practical experience through practicum in the schools with the intention to link the theory to real world of work. This component of teacher education program requires focus, coherence and institutional commitment. It is, therefore, designing effective practicum program that will allow student teachers to develop skills required for teaching and gain successful experience from the program is crucial. With this regard, the participants offered

their opinions on what they thought could be improved.

Providing adequate fund

During the interview session of the data collection all the participants complained the inadequacy of money given to them for practicum purpose. Here is an example of excerpt given by the respondent.

the program include off campus life by which we are required to live independently by renting house, preparing food etc. Though the university provides us some amount of money it is inadequate to cover all our expenses with the current inflation seen in our country. So, this need due attention because we don't have to worry about what we eat, what we drink, where we live, by going away from the university. Hence, the university should reconsider the budget allocated for the (practicum) program.-

Follow up

The university have a significant role in designing meaningful practicum program that will make student teachers feel highly

prepared for their world of work (Gold,1996) against this truth most participant who participated in the study voiced the concern that the university should closely follow up the practicum activity from the beginning to the end. The following quote summarizes the sentiments of most participants:

practicum was an opportunity for students to practice the skills and knowledge of teaching in school. The program includes/involves different bodies like university teachers, student teachers and school teachers. Hence, the university practicum organizer should follow each and every practicum site for the effective implementation of the practicum program. Especially the supervisors should be checked/inspected so that they can supervise student-teachers genuinely

The above mentioned quote indicated that there is a gap in implementation of the practicum program and strongly remarked the need to follow up /for close supervision/.

Building Strong Partnership with the School*implementation of the program...*

From the interview held with the student teacher I came to realize that they strongly underscore the importance of building strong partnership. The sentiments of participant interviewed can best be summarized in the quote below:

...Schools are the place where we are practicing our skills of teaching. Hence, the university should build strong relation with the schools for the effectiveness of the program. The reason for this the schools are not fully cooperative except allowing us to enter school compound. School teachers were not supportive as we expect. Some thought as if we came to school to waste their time while the others gave the whole responsibility to us and left the school. This might emanates from the inadequate awareness they have about the program. Therefore, Workshops and training should be organized for teachers and principals so that they can have basic knowledge of practicum and facilitate the

From the response of the participant, it is evident that they were not satisfied by the conditions which exist in the school. The participants described that the school teachers failed to discharge their roles and responsibilities in practicum. This finding contradicts what MoE (2003) clearly stated as “the class teacher is in the best position to advise on planning and class management and to provide on-going daily feedback to the student teacher... Because of their daily contact with the student teacher they are also in an excellent position to discern areas of relative strength and needs for further development” (pp21). Owing to this fact the respondents recommend the establishment of strong partnership between the schools and universities to design and implement effective learning opportunities for these pre-service teachers. This confirms what Jeffery (2008) stated as Universities and schools should be collaboratively organize the practicum to ensure that student teachers’ progress is optimally supported by the school context. It is true that to implement the practicum program effectively there must be partnership between different stakeholders. In fact

strong link between the University and School made them to have a common understanding about the program, and design cooperatively quality and meaningful practicum experience for the student teacher.

Provision of effective supervisors

Supervisors are one of the key people in practicum learning environment. They are competent teachers who are able to make decisions about the teaching process based on established rules and patterns using the wisdom of the context of teaching. In this regard the participants strongly remarked that the university should provide effective supervisors to make the program more fulfilling and satisfying as evidenced by the following quote:

...the practicum organizer should assign effective supervisors, who are supportive, experienced, knowledgeable and able to provide constructive feedback, for the program. Organize training to make them understand the purpose and need of the program and to enhance their pedagogical skills, we are student teacher not experienced teachers. They don't have to expect perfection

from us they have to understand this and support us through different ways rather than come to school for evaluation purpose.

Since school based practical experiences are powerful and important for the teachers professional development, teacher education programs need to provide more support for these program components. One of such support is the provision of effective supervisors as evidenced in the aforementioned quote. The provision of effective supervisors led to careful supervision that help student teachers to well integrate their field experience with coursework which in turn resulted in production of well-prepared teachers. This view affirms what Darling-Hammond and Baratz-Snowden's (2007) as quoted in Jeffery (2008) stated as student teachers are better able to connect theory to practice, are more confident, and are better able to develop teaching skills when they are "well-supervised." According to the participants, supervisory training should also be organized to help clarify the goals, roles, and responsibilities, and to facilitate the program smoothly. In addition, as Glickman and Bey (1990) cited in Jeffery (2008) described the purpose of

supervision should be made clear to student teachers if they are to benefit from it, since it is otherwise “difficult to develop the supportive relationship between supervisor and teacher that is critical to success” .

CONCLUSION

Societal pressure of the 21st century will result in great demands being placed on the teaching profession. In response to this, the teacher education program must aim to develop the knowledge, skills and attributes of pre-service teachers to prepare them to teach effectively in the schools systems. The big challenge to educator in this case is “how to produce effective teachers?” who able to cope up the changes and challenges of the 21st century schools/classrooms. In this regard the (MoE, 2003) stated that the best way to educate teacher’s is to give them real experience of the schools and students. This in-turn led to the introduction of the practicum, which was seen as a site which would allow students to investigate current work place conditions, internal and external factors influencing current structural/organizational features and the impact of school planning processes on classroom practices in relation to curriculum, evaluation and pedagogy (Groundwater-smith, 1996). It provides

pre-service teacher an opportunity to become better teachers by articulating their purpose, choosing appropriate classroom management strategies and understanding high school students social and cognitive background (Liston and Zeichner, 1991), and an opportunity to learn in context from first hand experience (Arnett and Freeburg, 2008). To this end, the Education Faculty of Jimma University have been sending out 3rd year pre-service teachers to schools for two months so that the student teachers came to understand the nature of school and school teaching and develop their teaching expertise.

In this paper I have examined how third year student teachers in the faculty of education perceive their practicum experience with the aim to understand the issue from their perspective by using semi-structured interview, which allowed for the emergence of details and thick descriptions of the phenomena understudy.

The study clearly indicated that student teachers construction and understanding of practicum were surprisingly similar and resemble with what is stated in the literature. Given this, I would say the participants understood the term practicum well.

Over the course of the study the participants commented on the positive and negative aspect of the practicum program which they experienced during their stay at school site. With regard to the positive aspect, theory practice connection, competency and confidence development, and socialization were found to be the most successful experience gained through practicum. These emergent themes to the positive aspect of the practicum emphasize on the technical skill model focusing on skill development, mastering lesson plans classroom management etc. Although these are an important component of the practicum, researchers/scholars question the adequacy of this technical model to sufficiently or successfully prepare a teacher. Rather they underscore the need for change to a practicum that has a broader educative focus. Schulz (2005) sees a need for change towards a practicum experience that provide teacher candidates with opportunity for inquiry, for trying and testing new ideas with in collaborative relationships, and for talking about teaching and learning in a new ways. In the same vein instead of merely demonstrating things already learned, Zeichner (1996) suggested that practicum should be a time for growth and learning where pre-service teachers come to understand the full scope

of a teachers role, develop the capacity to learn from future experiences and accomplish the central purpose of teaching: to help children learn.

The perception voiced by the student-teacher regarding their practicum experience clearly indicated that the program has some deficiencies that make the experience stressful. Issues related inadequacy of budget allocated for the students during the practicum, assessment problems, inadequate support and secondary school students disciplinary problems emerged as themes from student-teachers response.

It is clear that student practical experience is vital to the preparation of qualified teachers. The effectiveness of this program is highly linked to the quality of the practicum program/ component. Therefore, it is imperative that the concerned bodies must ensure the quality of the practicum program so that the students can find it educative and supportive. However, to the contrary the finding revealed that the program has deficiencies that put question mark on the quality of school based practical experience of student teachers. The insightful response of student teachers about their practicum experiences are very much important and must be acted up on

to make the experience fulfilling and satisfying.

Another important issue voiced repeatedly by student teachers was the steps that must be taken by the university to make school based practical experience adequate and fulfilling so that the student teachers were easily acclimatized to the teaching profession. The suggestions emerged from the taped interview of the participant regarding what the university should do were provision of adequate fund, continuous follow-up of the program, building strong partnership with the school and provision of effective supervisors.

Implication for Practice

The findings of this study are believed to have some practical implication which might show areas of intervention to improve practicum in teacher education program. To this end some of the major implications to address are presented.

The first implication associated with the findings of this research is the need to provide adequate support for student teachers. Although other stakeholders can play their part in practicum, supervisors support plays a tremendous role in assisting student teachers to be prepared for today's world. Therefore, to promote the

integration of theory and practice, the supervisors must abandon the title of expert with supervision and becomes an advisor one who brings additional vision and insight to the situation and work collaboratively with student teachers.

A second implication associated with the finding of this research study is that of rethinking the evaluation mechanism of the practicum. Many scholars agreed that practicum is important opportunities for growth and learning rather than demonstrating things already learned and argue for teacher education program that went beyond building immediate class room proficiency skills for teachers (e.g., schulz, 2005). Accordingly the assessment mechanism will be moved away from outcomes based technical summative assessment against predetermined specific criteria towards assessment for learning (the learning that occur during the practicum) and students' growing understanding of teaching. Therefore, we need to shift our focus from evaluating to educating.

A third implication in the need to strengthen University-School partnership. Teacher education institute are committed to prepare teachers who are knower's, thinkers, leaders researchers of their own

practice and change agents. This mission will be achieved by involving various stakeholders (the university, the teacher educator, the school, the school teacher and the student). One of such stakeholders' is the school, place where student teachers are provided with real life experience and accomplished the central purpose of teaching. Therefore, TEIS need to established strong and mutually beneficial links with the school for the development of teacher educators knowledge and understanding of the type of school for which the student-teachers are being prepared and understanding of the full scope of teachers role.

The school teachers are also the key to the success of the practicum. Therefore, they should be made to understand the practicum and its educative value through different ways such as workshops, short-term training so that school teachers can assist student teachers to assume teaching role. Unless there is strong partnership with the school the university's effort to produce well qualified and well prepared teachers are likely to be eroded.

The fourth implication is that the need to closely follow up the practicum. As the practicum is the most valuable component

of teacher education program that provide student teachers with first hand experience and knowledge of school environment and an opportunity to learn in context. University practicum coordinating office need to ensure that the student teachers have meaning full and satisfying experience. It is true that tertiary classroom don't replicate real life situation. Therefore, the office need to support and monitor closely the whole program through different means such as provision of supervisors who better understand the practicum and show strong commitment for the success of the program, and develop closer ties with the school teachers, supervisors, students-teachers and work more collaboratively with stakeholders. The office should also evaluate the program to maintain the strength and eliminate the weaknesses through close supervision.

The last but not least implication associated with the finding of the study is that the need to provide adequate fund for the practicum. The finding of this study indicated that the students were unanimously complained about the per diem they paid during the practicum. As the major funding provider for the university, the Government has a responsibility to fund

the professional experience component of teacher education adequately. University's on the other hand needed to consider a fundamental re-allocation of priorities and resources of their teacher education courses to give proper attention to the professional experiences component. Since practicum has paramount importance in the preparation of good school teachers who in turn will be able to produce competent university entrants, it should be enhanced by allocating adequate funds which balanced the current expense rate so that student teachers can cover their living expense while they were in the school site without worry.

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