

## HOME ECONOMICS STUDENT TEACHER EARLY SCHOOL EXPERIENCE: A STRATEGY TO EFFECTIVE STUDENT TEACHING PRACTICE

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### ABSTRACT

This study sought to establish the effectiveness of school teaching practices for Mufulira College Home Economics students that were aligned with early exposure to the real school environment before the actual practical application of teaching practice skills. A qualitative case study was conducted to gather experiences from 50 participants who were selected using a purposive and stratified sampling method. The sampled students were divided into two groups based on their school experience. The first group of 25 were sent straight into their actual school experience without any prior exposure to a real-world school setting. In contrast, the second group of 25 students underwent real-school familiarization before embarking on their teaching practice. Data was collected using a focus group discussion guide, an interview guide and direct student observational follow-ups.

A thematic approach was used to analyse the data. Results showed that students aligned with early school familiarization performed far better in their teaching practice than students not exposed. The conclusion was that early exposure of home economics student teachers to real school environment familiarization yielded better results in their practical application of teaching skills than those not exposed. It is therefore highly recommended that student teachers be exposed to real school environments to get them acquainted with real school activities before they are sent for actual teaching practice.

### KEYWORDS

exposure, familiarization, school environment, teaching practice

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## INTRODUCTION

Teacher education is a critical component and cornerstone of any nation's educational system, which requires high standards of commitment and quality. To produce high-quality teachers, we require education of the highest calibre. The attainment of excellent education relies on the expertise of teachers, who undergo comprehensive training that includes hands-on experiences in educational institutions, under strict regulation and demanding instructional standards. School experience, often known as teaching practice, is an important part of any teacher preparation curriculum (Mulenga & Bwalya 2022) that contributes to teacher effectiveness. It serves as a hub for prospective educators' professional development and educational advancement (Mulenga & Bwalya 2022; Johnson & Subban 2018). It is for this reason that O'Connor (2015) emphasises the learning management system (LMS) which will allow students to engage with learning and be able to construct their understanding at a pace that provides better experience. In the same line of thought, Prestigiacomo *et al.* (2020) underscores that it is critical to understand how pre-service teachers align with emerging learning analytics technologies and develop their perspectives on data use in classroom in their initial teacher education programme.

Despite acknowledging school teaching experience as the most significant component and the centre of the teacher development process, a large body of research indicates that teacher education programs fail to adequately prepare students and teachers for the real classroom (Chen & Mu 2010; Rakesh Ranjan 2013; Johnson & Subban 2018). In a study by Nasir and Zafar (2018), student teachers struggled to manage their class time. This included allocating the proper amount of time for each task, checking students' homework, providing instructions, and recording attendance. The study went on to say that some student teachers continued to

behave like college students, expecting school administrators to treat them like students and not teachers. This could have been due to their ignorance of school behaviour and discipline rules (Mulenga & Bwalya 2022).

However, such problems hinder their ability to effectively engage with learners and acquire essential teaching skills, which could significantly impact the quality of their learning experience and their preparedness for a career in education (Mulenga & Bwalya 2022). Understanding these obstacles during students' early exposure to school is critical for creating effective support systems and interventions that ensure student teachers get the most out of their teaching practice experiences (Johnson & Subban 2018). In support with the thought, Ajjawi *et al.* (2019) stresses that educators must help student teachers gain experience in work because this has become an essential feature within and beyond vocationally-oriented courses. All college educators must engage in strategies that help students prepare for effective teaching practice.

Early school experience is a vital component of becoming a teacher (Flores & Day 2006). It provides appropriate experiences for students in the actual teaching environment. Several integrated and connected aspects influence the experiences of student teachers. Such aspects include the type of school in which the practicum will take place, how long it will take, how well the teacher educator mentors the student teachers, the experience of the school-based mentors, and the kind and regularity of feedback from both teacher educators and school-based mentors (Sarçoban 2010; Shaban Aldabdu 2020). All of these modes help to shape the student teacher into an exceptional educator once they strictly adhere to the given instructions (Mulenga & Bwalya 2022). In fact, research suggests that exposure to school environments helps student teachers familiarize themselves (Nasir & Zafar 2018). This, in turn, reduces anxiety

and enhances their preparedness for their student teaching practicum (Johnson & Subban 2018; Mubita *et al.* 2022).

Therefore, Mufulira College of Education regularly dispatches students to schools to gain an understanding of school operations before they participate in actual teaching practice experiences. They complete the exercise over a period of three consecutive months. This initial practice marks the beginning of their transition from the college's educational environment to the dynamic and diverse school settings. The on-look experience exercise appears to be beneficial in bridging the gap between the theoretical knowledge students learn from lecturers and the practical application they will inevitably encounter in real-world educational settings (Nasir & Zafar 2018). This type of immersion also enables student teachers to comprehend the distinct culture and context of the school. Thus, it eliminates potential problems encountered at the beginning of the teaching experience.

As a matter of fact, the majority of scholars have hinted that the school experience practice functions as a sort of apprenticeship phase in which students receive assistance in gaining professional and practical experience by using the theoretical knowledge they have gained during their training. (Chen & Mu 2010; Rakesh Ranjan 2013; Mulenga & Bwalya 2022; Mubita *et al.* 2022). However, while these studies have provided useful insight into the importance of teaching experience, it appears none have examined practical experience in schools prior to the actual immersion of the school experience.

Hence, there is a paucity of research surrounding the issue which impedes a thorough understanding of teaching practice experiences among the students particularly those pursuing Home Economics courses at Mufulira college of education and of course

other colleges in Zambia (Muzata & Annie Penda 2014; Mulenga & Bwalya 2022). It is against this background that the study was guided by the above theoretical orientation in exploring the perceptions of student's teachers in order to establish the effectiveness of school teaching practices for Mufulira College Home Economic Students (HES) that have been aligned with early exposure to the real school environment before the actual practical application of teaching practice skills.

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Despite the growing emphasis on practical teaching skills and early real-world application in Home Economics (HE) education, there is a gap in understanding the effectiveness of school teaching practices for HES when aligned with early exposure to the real school environment before the actual practical application of teaching practice skills. Existing literature primarily focuses on theoretical frameworks and curriculum design without conducting a thorough investigation into the outcomes of incorporating real-world experiences at an early stage in students' teaching practice programs (Muzata & Annie Penda 2014; Jones & Smith 2020; Mulenga & Bwalya 2022). Worse still, there is a lack of literature, particularly in the College of Education on the Copperbelt of Zambia, on how integrating this early exposure impacts student performance, skill development, confidence levels, and overall readiness for formal teaching practice. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap.

## Aim

To establish the effectiveness of school teaching practices for Mufulira College HES that have been aligned with early exposure to the real school environment before the actual practical application of teaching practice skills.

## Research questions

- 1) How does early exposure to the real school environment before the actual school teaching experience influences HES' performance during teaching practicum?
- 2) What challenges did the HES students face during the exposure and actual teaching practicum?
- 3) What were the HES's perspectives on how to tackle the problems met during the exposure and actual teaching practicum?

## PURPOSE/RATIONALE

The rationale for this study stems from the recognition that HE education is both theoretical and practical in nature, requiring a balance between early exposure to the real school environment and teaching practicum. By introducing early exposure to the real school environment before the actual practice of teaching skills, HES can better connect theory to practice, develop a deeper understanding of teaching methodologies, and enhance their teaching competencies. Understanding the potential benefits and pitfalls of this approach can lead to improved teaching practices, better student engagement, and enhanced educational outcomes in the HE curriculum.

## METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH APPROACH

This study falls within the interpretivism paradigm, which seeks to explain the subjective realm of human experience (Hugly & Sayward 1987). Creswell (1994) defines interpretivism as the study of subjects from an individual's perspective, including relationships with others and historical and cultural settings. Therefore, the study opted for the qualitative method, derived from the interpretive paradigm. Studying students'

school experiences through a qualitative lens, which places an emphasis on subjective understanding, provided a more nuanced and illuminating perspective.

The study used a sample size of 50 participants who were purposively sampled (Palinkas *et al.* 2015) from a single department (Home Economic). The department had a total population of 223 HES distributed across four main categories: Fashion and Fabrics (FF), Food and Nutrition (FN), Home Management (HM), and Design and Technology (DT). Based on the fact that the enrolment levels of each category varied, proportionate stratified random sampling technique was implemented to guarantee that each stratum was equally represented (Boschetti *et al.* 2016) and also to reduce on biasness when obtaining the sample (Sharma 2017). Thus, FF (n 12), FN (n 12), HM (n 16), and DT (n 10) HES interviewees were adopted.

The sampled students were then divided in two equal categories using a simple random sampling procedure. In this regard we sent 25 of the 50 students for their actual school experience, without providing them with early exposure to a real-world school setting. On the other hand, we aligned the remaining 25 students with real-school familiarization before sending them for teaching practice. We divided the experiment or study period into two terms, using the first four weeks of the first term for familiarization or early student exposure to school experience. In the second term, all the sampled students were engaged in their actual school teaching practice and received marks based on their performance. The researchers also designed an interview guide and a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) to initiate discussions which were recorded using specialised devices. Subsequently, the researchers made direct observational follow-ups. Data that was obtained were analysed using thematic approach.

Ethical issues are the most important factors that a researcher must consider when conducting research, and it is the researcher's responsibility to guarantee that no harm is done to the participants who help provide complete information for your study (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill 2007). In order to guarantee confidentiality, all the fifty participants were identified using initials. For instance, participants who participated in interviews were identified as participant 1 2, and so on, while those discussants who attended FGD were labelled as FGD 1 2, and so on. This format of identifying participants was used in order to ensure confidentiality and anonymity among participants. Equally, participation in the study was voluntarily and unpaid.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

HES teachers were asked to review their experience on the significance of their exposure to real-life schools prior to engaging them in actual teaching experiences. The interviews yielded a variety of opinions to the following questions.

### **Question 1: How does early exposure to the real school environment influenced HES' performance during teaching practicum?**

After comparing the data from the two categories (exposed and those not exposed), it appeared that the discussant's (FGD) and interviewee's perspectives remained consistent regarding the influence of early school exposure on HES performance in teaching practice. For instance, the feedback from the exposed individuals revealed a sense of immersion in the industry, exposing them to the latest technologies and teaching strategies in the field of learning and teaching. Equally, the blend of early exposure and real-world practicum boosted students' confidence,

deepened their understanding of ethical standards within the system, strengthened their self-efficacy, and guided them in practical or hands-on lessons. The following responses are examples of extracts from interviewees and discussants that serve to substantiate the preceding views:

*"Early exposure to real school settings improved my understanding of the 21st century's teaching strategies, new technology, classroom dynamics, and student behaviour, making me more prepared for my actual teaching practicum about to come"* (Participant 2).

Supporting the preceding views, a discussant who was exposed hinted,

*"being in schools before the official practicum provided me with a head start on how to create relationships with students and grasp the role of a teacher in a practical way"* (FGD 2).

In a similar vein, a different interviewee stated,

*"the transition from observing real classrooms to taking on real teaching responsibilities felt smoother due to my early exposure; this reduced the initial stress and anxiety"* (Participant 7).

Another interviewee said,

*"I really appreciated how my regular teacher integrated new technologies into her teaching methods; I gained a lot of knowledge from that experience"* (Participant 7).

HES acknowledged numerous benefits that enriched their performance during the teaching practicum as a result of early exposure to real school environments. Most notably, the program enhanced the

development of strong teacher-pupil relationships that build trust and promote positive behaviours (Nasir & Zafar 2018). Building strong relationships empowers students to enhance their independence and encourages the free flow of ideas, fostering an environment that supports engaging in creative, imaginative, and innovative activities in school (Shaban Aldabbu 2020). This, in turn, contributes to improved performance during teaching practice.

Subsequently, student teachers with early school experience felt as if they were in an industry where things were happening according to reality. They saw how teachers creatively interacted with learners during practical lessons. In fact, other scholars from outside the country supported the use of new innovations in practical lessons, a prominent feature that helped students enhance their performance during the actual teaching practicum (Koross 2016).

Thus, early exposure helps student teachers to be very imaginative, innovative, creative, and critical thinkers in their information delivery—so to speak, early exposure to school experience helped student teachers to acquire the important 21st century skills that enhance good performance (Koross 2016). With early exposure and the acquisition of necessary 21st century skills, student teachers are able to create an environment that promotes positive behaviours and builds trust and connection between student teachers and learners.

However, the majority of students who did not receive this exposure claimed that the pressure and demands of the unknown negatively impacted their performance. They experienced burnout as soon as they began their teaching practicum. Responses about the felt pressure were recorded, and a sample of such responses has been presented as follows:

*“My practicum experience created a gap that caused me to forget crucial classroom management strategies learned at college. This impacted my performance and confidence levels”* (Participant 16).

*“The lack of real-life classroom experience earlier in my teaching practicum left me feeling overwhelmed. This college did not fully prepare me for the emotional toll and personal boundaries required in the classroom, circumstances that hampered my teaching practice performance”* (FGD 3).

*“Not aligning teaching practices with early exposure to real school environments created a mismatch between theory and classroom reality, leaving me ill-prepared and confused during my teaching experience”* (Participant 1).

*“I was very confused and disoriented when I reached the school I was sent to. My department head was something else. She just told me that I had all the necessary skills to begin the practice immediately”* (Participant 2).

Given this background, we can conclude that a lack of early exposure to schools could impede students' ability to apply efficient teaching strategies, connect with students, and establish an optimal learning environment, thereby obstructing their progress in their teaching practice. Moreover, a lack of early exposure to schools can leave students feeling lost and uncertain about their teaching abilities (Nasir & Zafar 2018), resulting in self-doubt, decreased confidence, and a negative perception of their teaching competencies (Mulenga & Bwalya 2022). This is because, when compared (note aligned), their performance was far lower than that of the students exposed to early school

experiences. This study clearly shows that the lack of early school exposure results in significant uncertainty for many students. Therefore, any educational institution that trains future teachers should not underestimate the importance of introducing students to schools at an early stage prior to the actual teaching practice.

### **Question 2: What challenges did the HES students face during the exposure and actual teaching practicum?**

Regardless of the new experience student teachers acquire through early familiarisation of school teaching and the actual practice, they saw challenges that affected the teaching of Home Economics as a subject. A variation in the way permanent teachers were planning and handling the lessons was observed. Regrettably, some permanent teachers were too bookish, lacked initiative and creativity as they interact with learners. It was also observed that some student teachers helped in many cases using their new experience to plan for the success of the practical lessons. Equally, some discussants shared their frustrations, mentioning how some permanent teachers would often abandon their classes, requiring student teachers to step in as replacements. This was substantiated by various quotes, as presented below:

*"I saw a mismatch of what was taught at college and what was on the ground. The way permanent teachers approached the learning outcome was radically different. In several instances, the rationale was omitted, this was quite confusing"* (FGD 2).

*"Most of the time my mentor expected me to use recent college techniques because he assumed I had brought some of the most recent stuff from college. Truly speaking I did not learn much from him"* (FGD 1).

*"I felt disoriented throughout the lesson observation because the permanent teachers were not very creative some relied on old ways, others did not explain why the pupils were learning what they were learning in their lesson plans. Having a teaching rationale would have supplied valuable context"* (Participant 4).

*"My permanent teacher thought I was her saviour she took advantage of me by abandoning her class unnecessarily leaving me to stand in for her, this situation used to upset a lot"* (Participant 9).

Furthermore, challenges arose for HES students due to difficulties in establishing effective rapport, daily checking of permanent teacher's preparations, limited interaction between mentors and students, nervousness towards lecturer monitoring, and insufficient practical experience resulting from short-period exposure to varied classroom settings during early school visits. The following two responses are examples of extracts from the interviewees.

*"The time designated for school exposure was insufficient as students were tasked with numerous responsibilities, such as understanding how learners interact, checking how permanent prepare, and comparing what is taught at college and how it is done in real life in schools"* (Participant 16).

*"Building rapport with learners in the actual teaching experience impacted my performance negatively, as if I were not part of the group that was interacting with learners prior to the actual teaching practicum"* (Participant 10).

*"The first month of my actual practice was horrible; I only interacted with the Head of Department once, and I did not even know if the mentor was there or not. When I asked one permanent teacher from the department about how they prepare lesson plans, she answered very rudely, and then I developed a fear of everyone around the department. I kept worrying that my lectures would catch me napping one day. To be honest, I struggled with the overall school operations"* (FGD 3).

*"Transitioning from early school exposure to the actual teaching practicum posed challenges on my part, especially when it came to time management, juggling responsibilities, and maintaining work-life balance, resulting in increased stress"* (FGD1).

This background provided evidence that students were not immune from experiencing challenges during the practicum. More importantly, problems arise because there is a discrepancy between the college and the schools of practice. Similar to previous studies, researchers found that some permanent teachers' strategies and mentorship did not significantly aid in their learning and lesson delivery (Rakesh Ranjan 2013; Muzata & Annie Penda 2014; Mulenga & Bwalya 2022). There were circumstances that created a disconnection between theoretical knowledge and practical application. For example, in terms of teaching methodologies, a mismatch was observed. Some of the teaching methodologies that the old teachers received during their training did not align well with the current methodologies that the students are learning.

Unconfirmed findings from the participants on the methods of permanent teachers show a lack of familiarity with the use of appropriate teaching domains (Mallillin *et al.* 2021), a situation that calls for appropriate studies.

However, we can assume that some permanent teachers did not understand the four domains (planning and preparation; classroom environment; instruction; professional responsibilities) and how to instill them in 21st-century learners. This detrimental circumstance serves as an alert to school authorities to pay particular attention to this issue during student teaching practice.

Mentors should provide constructive supervision to student teachers, enabling them to make necessary corrections and adjustments to their professional abilities (Mosas 2019). Mentors should provide constructive supervision to student teachers to assist them in making necessary changes and adjustments to their professional abilities (Mosas 2019). However, some of the interviewees complained about a lack of sufficient mentoring. In many cases, the mentors frequently had to put undue strain on them by abandoning classes. This is consistent with research showing that some supervisors barely have time to have a conversation with student instructors about their observations and suggestions (Sarçoban 2010; Shaban Aldabbu 2020; Mulenga & Bwalya 2022). As a result, it is imperative to consider the effective mentorship of student teachers as they engage in early exposure and actual practice teaching. This scenario identifies areas for improvement in teacher preparation programs.

### **Question 3: What were the HES's perspectives on how to tackle the problems met during the exposure and actual teaching practicum?**

Taking into account the challenges students encountered during their exposure and actual teaching practicum, several solutions were proposed. For example, many students shared that the implementation of a comprehensive mentorship program and encouraging mutual model teaching are essential models in students' teaching



experiences. On this aspect, two discussants summarized it as follows:

*“Comprehensive mentorship programs should include regular meetings between mentors and mentees to discuss goals, challenges, and progress in a supportive and constructive manner”* (FGD 2)

*“Pairing experienced mentors with mentees based on their teaching goals, subject areas, and interests can ensure tailored support and guidance throughout the teaching practice period”* (Participant 7).

In addition, the majority of the participants also commented on providing peer feedback, as narrated by one participant.

*“Providing opportunities for peer feedback and observation can help students gain new perspectives and refine their teaching practices to overcome challenges in the classroom”*.

Another one said that

*“it is important to create a supportive community of practice where HES students can share experiences and resources and come up with strategies that can enhance collaboration, professional networking, and mutual learning”* (FGD 1).

Subsequently, the majority of the participants also narrated that encouraging reflective exercises in teacher preparation programs, collaborative lesson planning, and action research projects can help HES cement the gap between the old way of lesson presentation and new ones. For example, two discussants commented on the following:

*“students and mentors should be involved in interacting with the lecturers so as to be up to date with varying educational strategies”* (Participant 11).

*“Lectures and students must conduct a critical review of the school experience after completing the exercise”* (FGD 2).

In an effort to curb the notable challenges, this study has highlighted the importance of providing a comprehensive mentorship program, the provision of mutual practice, peer observation, reflective practices, and collaborative learning and teaching (Shaban Aldabbu 2020; Mulenga & Bwalya 2022). It is also significant for colleges and schools to create a supportive learning environment where students can collaborate, share experiences, and seek advice. Thus, another crucial issue to consider is raising school awareness about the significance of the early exposure program and providing them with all the assistance they need to support the trainees. Both the mentor's and the teachers' roles need to be re-evaluated and clarified.

## CONCLUSION

The study explored the impact of early exposure to real school environments on home economics student teachers at Mufulira College HES. Overall, results indicate that students who experienced early school familiarization demonstrated improved practical teaching skills compared to those without exposure. Such exposure enhanced their competitiveness, cooperation, communication, and critical thinking in lesson planning, preparing them for future challenges in the teaching profession. This study has also established that if teaching approaches do not align with early exposure to real school environments, a gap between theory and actual content delivery develops, leaving students unprepared and confused during

their teaching sessions. Such circumstances can hinder appropriate teaching, practice, and execution.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- All colleges and universities should embrace students' early school experience as a strategy for effective student teaching practice.
- Schools and colleges should work together to improve students' performance during early exposure and during actual school teaching practice exercises.
- Teacher education and specialized services through the Ministry of Education (MoE) and its standards officers to enforce student teacher early school experience in colleges.

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