

Teaching practice: a make or break phase for student teachers

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Teaching practice is an integral component of teacher training. It grants student teachers experience in the actual teaching and learning environment. We explore the experiences of student teachers in the Vaal University of Technology Post-graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) during their 10 weeks' teaching practice in the Vaal area. In this article we aim to establish the ways in which these experiences influence the student teachers' perception of the teaching profession. Semi-structured interviews with all student teachers were used to collect the data while content analysis was used to identify themes and analyse the data. We established that, despite the positive experiences during teaching practice, student teachers experienced challenges which affected their perception of the teaching profession. Based on the findings of this study, measures are suggested on how to improve teaching practice in order to have a positive influence on the student teachers' perception of, and attitude towards, the teaching profession.

Keywords: experiences; mentors; student teachers; teaching practice

Introduction

Teaching practice is an important component of becoming a teacher. It grants student teachers experience in the actual teaching and learning environment (Ngidi & Sibaya, 2003:18; Marais & Meier, 2004:220; Perry, 2004:2). During teaching practice, a student teacher is given the opportunity to try the art of teaching before actually getting into the real world of the teaching profession (Kasanda, 1995). Student teachers also know the value of teaching practice and as remarked by Menter (1989:461), they perceive it as 'the crux of their preparation for the teaching profession' since it provides for the 'real interface' between studenthood and membership of the profession. As a result, teaching practice creates a mixture of anticipation, anxiety, excitement and apprehension in the student teachers as they commence their teaching practice (Manion, Keith, Morrison & Cohen, 2003; Perry, 2004:4).

Marais & Meier (2004:221) assert that the term *teaching practice* represents the range of experiences to which student teachers are exposed when they work in classrooms and schools. Marais and Meier (2004:221) further argue that teaching practice is a challenging but important part of teacher training, especially in developing countries such as South Africa, where the effectiveness of the teaching practice can be diminished or eroded by a range of challenges, such as geographical distance, low and uneven levels of teacher expertise, a wide-ranging lack of resources as well as a lack of discipline among a wide cross-section of learners and educators. These challenges, if not addressed, may affect student teachers' performance during teaching practice and may in the long run affect their perception of the teaching profession

(Quick & Sieborger, 2005).

Menter (1989:460) notes that there has been a shift in the literature from the concept of teaching practice (associated with an apprenticeship model) to the concept of field/school experience (associated with an experiential model). Lave & Wenger (1991) point out that however way it may be envisaged, the notion of teaching practice is entrenched in experience-based learning initiated by Dewey (1938), Vygotsky's (1978) social cognitive theory, and founded in the premise of situated learning. Consequently as suggested by the South African Norms & Standards for Educators (Republic of South Africa, 2000:12), teaching practice is meant to provide for the authentic context within which student teachers are exposed to experience the complexities and richness of the reality of being a teacher. This process allows the student teacher an opportunity to establish whether the right career choice has been made or not. However, despite its importance, Killen & Steyn (2001) note that teaching practice sometimes becomes a demoralising and sometimes very frightening experience.

Several studies have been conducted on student teacher's experience and anxieties during teaching practice (Ngidi & Sibaya, 2003; Marais & Meier, 2004) to mention but two. However a review of the literature indicates that there are limited studies that have been conducted regarding ways in which students' experiences during teaching practice influence their perception of and attitudes towards the teaching profession

The study examined the experiences of Vaal University of Technology (VUT) Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) student teachers during their teaching practice in the Vaal Triangle. The study was prompted by a class discussion where students were requested to give reasons for choosing the teaching profession. The majority of the students in that class indicated that they were doing the course by default. The students saw it as a stopgap while they waited for better career opportunities in other fields. Most of the students were from other countries and had been offered government bursaries to enrol for the PGCE programme. These students enrolled because they had no alternative, since they were not able to get jobs after their undergraduate qualification and because there was funding available for them to do the PGCE course. The majority of student teachers indicated that they had no intention of teaching after the course. During the year, some students maintained the same attitude while others felt that teaching was "*not such a bad thing after all*". All students had continued with the course until the time they had had to go for teaching practice.

Towards the end of teaching practice, the student teachers were asked about their experiences during teaching practice and whether these experiences may have influenced their perception of the teaching profession.

We argue that, despite the enriching experiences during teaching practice, student teachers experienced challenges, which may have significantly affected their ability to derive maximum benefit from the exercise. An understanding of the student teachers' experiences will facilitate the teacher-training

institutions' awareness of the challenges faced by student teachers, which could militate against a positive teaching practice experience (Marais & Meier, 2004:232) and teacher-training programmes could be reconsidered and reviewed so as to enable student teachers to achieve the desired outcomes from the teaching practice.

We explore student teachers' experiences and how these experiences influence their perception of the teaching profession. We identify both the positive and negative experiences of student teachers during teaching practice and suggest ways of assisting student teachers to achieve the desired outcomes from teaching practice.

A limitation of this study is that a small sample ($n = 24$) of PGCE students from the Vaal University of Technology was used. Therefore the findings of the study cannot be generalised to other student teachers from other teacher training programmes.

We describe and give a justification for teaching practice as a training requirement for teachers. A brief review of how it is conducted at the VUT is done, followed by an account of the methodology and a discussion of findings. Finally suggestions as to how teaching practice could be improved in order to have a positive influence on the students teachers' perception of and attitude towards the teaching profession are presented.

Teaching practice: a teacher-training requirement

Teaching practice is a form of work-integrated learning that is described as a period of time when students are working in the relevant industry to receive specific in-service training in order to apply theory in practice. Researchers such as Marais and Meier (2004:220), Perry (2004:2) and Maphosa, Shumba & Shumba (2007:296) describe teaching practice as an integral component of teacher training. In order to achieve the standards required for qualified teacher status, a student teacher is required to do teaching practice in at least two schools. According to Perry (2004:2), teaching practice can be conducted in a number of forms depending on the institution. Some institutions send student teachers to go for teaching practice once a day each week; others do this over a semester; while others send student teachers in a two- to six-weeks' block. Participants in Quick & Sieborger's (2005:4) study suggested that the traditional PGCE can accommodate a third of the time (11 or 12 weeks) for teaching practice, and that this practice period should be divided into at least two, possibly three, school experience sessions. It should be pointed out that, in whatever form it is done, teaching practice is aimed at inducting student teachers more fully into the professional work of teachers (Perry 2004:2). To this effect the student teacher is expected to fulfil all the responsibilities of a teacher, which according to Perry (2004:2) is exciting but challenging.

Perry (2004:2) also points out that, on the one hand, student teachers should experience the excitement of being a part of a real classroom setting, of getting to know learners, of planning and organising the classroom tasks.

On the other hand, student teachers could have doubts about their ability to cope with unfamiliar situations, controlling and managing learners or establishing a working relationship with the mentor or supervisor. It is such mixed feelings that can contribute to the making or breaking of a student teacher.

Teaching practice at the Vaal University of Technology (VUT)

The Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) is a teacher-training programme being offered in the Department of Communication and Legal services at VUT. The programme is offered over one year (full-time) or two years (part-time). During this time students are required to do at least 12 weeks of teaching practice (TP) as part of the experiential learning programme required for the qualification. Teaching practice is done at South African schools that have signed co-operative agreements with the Department of Education.

Teaching practice for PGCE students at VUT is scheduled for the second semester (fourth quarter) from August to October. During the time of this research, students continued attending lectures at VUT. The teaching practice co-ordinator met with a number of school principals before sending student teachers out to different schools. The objective of the meeting was to establish positive educational and supportive relationships with the School Management Teams (SMTs) from a number of schools in the Vaal Triangle region.

The co-ordinator selected suitable schools for teaching practice by visiting the schools, meeting with the principals and teachers, and explaining the reasons why VUT wished to establish a working professional relationship with them. The teaching practice co-ordinator then entered into an agreement with the relevant SMTs that

- the students could do teaching practice at their schools;
- specific teachers would be school-based mentors to the students while in their charge for the duration of the students' teaching time; and
- the SMTs would enhance the teaching practice by allowing students to become 'fully integrated' student teachers where student teachers would have to get involved in all aspects of the school.

The last implied that student teachers would be afforded the opportunity to participate in all school activities. Beside the fact that students were teachers-in-training, they had to be given the opportunity to integrate in a practical way and had to apply the theoretical knowledge and newly acquired teaching skills. Students had to be exposed to, for example, completing class registers, marking learners' books, attending staff meetings, helping with extramural activities, to mention but a few duties. Student teachers were subject to a minimum of two formal class visitations and assessments done by VUT lecturers.

During the school visits, lecturers had to give the student teachers written and oral feedback. Improvements were commended, shortcomings highlighted and suggestions made on how to, for example, overcome anxiety, use non-

verbal language to enhance their teaching and learning activities, and how to apply a variety of strategies to improve their teaching. The educators, or school-based mentors, also had to observe the students' progress, behaviour and attitude at school, and assess the student teachers' practical teaching and learning activities according to specific guidelines given to them by the VUT mentors.

Methodology

The broad aim of the research was to examine the student teachers' experiences during teaching practice in order to establish how those experiences influence student teachers' perception of the teaching profession.

Setting of the study

A qualitative research approach was used in the study conducted at the different public schools in the Vaal Triangle region. The students chose schools in this region because they wanted to be close to the university since they had to attend classes in the evening. It should be noted that most of the students were from other countries, such as Botswana, Lesotho and Namibia, so they were not familiar with the local languages (Sesotho and Afrikaans) whereas the great majority of learners and educators in the schools do not use the language of instruction (English) outside the classroom.

Lecturers visited students during their teaching practice period. This was possible because of the small number of students in the PGCE programme and because all students went to schools in the Vaal Triangle region. All PGCE student teachers at the Vaal University of Technology (VUT) for the year 2006 were included in the sample ($n = 24$). Almost 90% of the student teachers were from other countries so they could not understand the local language. Data were collected, mainly through semi-structured interviews with all 24 student teachers in the PGCE programme from the Vaal University of Technology (VUT), at the end of a 10-week teaching practice period. The participants were briefed on the focus of the inquiry. Interviews were conducted to explore student teachers' positive experiences and challenges faced during teaching practice. The interviewer directed and encouraged dialogue by asking reflective and probing questions.

Data obtained from the semi-structured interviews were analysed thematically. The themes were derived from the key research questions. Literature assisted in identifying the final categories.

Results

Major themes were identified in the data analysis. Each of these themes is discussed in detail in the following section.

Adequate preparation of student teachers/ability to translate theory into practice

In contrast to the findings in the study by Marais & Meier (2004:228) where respondents found a discrepancy between theory of education and reality of instruction, and where respondents indicated that they could not reconcile

the teaching methods as explained during their lectures with those used in schools by teachers, the respondents in this study indicated that they were prepared and able to translate theory into practice and also that they were able to apply the education theory learnt at university into practice during the teaching practice.

When asked whether the course had prepared them for the teaching experience, the respondents answered that they felt that the PGCE course had indeed prepared them for the teaching practice. For example, they had been taught the code of conduct, professional ethics, duties and responsibilities of educators and, based on that training, the students were able to handle themselves in a professional manner and could also judge the professionalism of the educators in the schools.

Most respondents said that they found teaching practice very interesting because they were able to apply what they had studied and they enjoyed teaching because they were conversant with the subject content. They acknowledged the importance of positive reinforcement and of creating a favourable environment for learning, a concept the student teachers had learnt in the Education Theory 4 module.

One student teacher commented thus, "*I discovered that learners became enthusiastic and they actively participated in activities when they were praised and rewarded for their efforts*".

The respondents indicated that they applied the knowledge they had acquired during the Specific Subject Didactics and Professional Studies to plan, prepare and present the lessons and to draw up a timetable.

However, it should be noted that the respondents in this study reported that, despite the thorough teacher preparation, they found that it was not easy to teach because the learners were not co-operative, they did not do assignments, were noisy and were not actively involved in classroom activities. Moreover there was a language barrier. "*Learners could not communicate in English while I could not communicate in Sotho*," commented one respondent. This affected the student teachers' performance during teaching practice and their perception of the teaching profession in general.

Timing of the teaching practice

All respondents pointed out that teaching practice started too late in the year when most teachers had almost completed their syllabus and were busy doing revision in preparation for the end-of-year examinations.

Student teachers had to continue attending classes at VUT, which was very inconvenient since they had to prepare for their lessons at school, complete assessment of learners' work, while at the same time they were required to do their own assignments for the fulfilment of their academic qualification. It was a challenge having to do both at the same time.

Relationship between mentors and student teachers

Each student teacher was assigned to a qualified and experienced classroom

teacher. This classroom teacher had to assume a multi-faceted role of being guide, supervisor, counsellor, overseer, coach, teacher, model, supporter, critic and instructor (Holloway, 2001; Maphosa, Shumba & Shumba, 2007: 297). The overall impression of the mentors given by the student teachers was fairly positive. Respondents indicated that the mentors were supportive and always willing to help. They said that the mentors gave the student teachers valuable advice and shared their skills and experiences. One respondent intimated thus, "*We were working together with the teacher. She was a nice lady and easy to work with*". The respondents appreciated the positive attitudes displayed by their mentors which made them feel part of the school.

The findings from the study revealed that student teachers became motivated to take up the teaching profession after teaching practice because of the "*constant guidance*" they received from their mentors. One student teacher had this to say about his mentor:

I am indebted to my mentor. She dedicated her time to ensure that I did the right thing and gained good experience in the process. She inspired me and helped me translate the theory I learnt into practice. She enhanced the skills I acquired during the course, for example preparing a lesson plan. I saw her as a role model and I enjoyed her teaching style.

Student teachers appreciated mentors who treated them with respect. One student teacher commented about the mentor thus:

My mentor respects me a lot and she is guiding me very well ... She is one of the reasons I have enjoyed the teaching practice. I never thought I would pursue the teaching career, but I am now seriously considering venturing in the real teaching world.

Another one affirmed thus:

We worked very well with the class teacher. She assisted me on how to make a lesson plan, and disciplining learners. The teacher sits in class whilst I am teaching and this helps to maintain discipline.

To these student teachers, teaching practice had given hands-on experience in schools and it helped them to make the decision to become teachers.

Despite the above positive remarks by the majority of respondents other respondents expressed negative experiences regarding their mentors. These respondents indicated that they did not get any support from the school-based mentors. Some respondents as noted by Ralph (in Marais & Meier, 2004:222) saw it as exploitation and abuse by the mentors who imposed exorbitant demands on student teachers in terms of workload. One respondent commented thus:

He is just enjoying himself, he is a free man, he does not come to class, he just gave me the textbook, showed me where he had stopped and that was all. I feel that teacher should still take responsibility of his class and not throw everything at me. I don't have a problem but I strongly feel that as a class teacher, he should be available to provide the support and guidance because I am still learning.

Similar responses were noted in the study conducted by Maphosa *et al.* (2007: 301) where respondents noted that some mentors exhibited unprofessional

conduct and engaged in unprofessional acts like absenting themselves from duty, reporting late or sending pupils on personal errands even during lessons.

Such unprofessional behaviour is contrary to the role of mentors as described by Holloway (2001) and Maphosa *et al.* (2007:303) whereby a mentor would be required to guide and lead the student teacher all the way, advising on shortcomings, appraising on strength and encouraging until the student teacher is able to present lessons effectively.

Some respondents felt that mentors did not have any confidence in them. The following remarks were captured from a response:

Despite the fact that my mentor respects me a lot and she is guiding me very well, she does not trust me. When she is not at school she cannot entrust the class in my care. I can only teach if she is around. At first I appreciated the fact that she sat in my classroom when I taught because she helped to control the class but as time went on I realised that she did not think I was capable of handling the class on my own. I feel mentors should have confidence in us because we feel we have got appropriate training and we can handle the classes on our own. I have only taught once because the teacher thinks that I will delay her.

The issue raises questions as to how student teachers were supposed to learn and build up the confidence to go out and teach without having been given a chance to try out. Such unprofessional conduct could have demoralised the student teachers and could have affected their preparedness and willingness to venture into the real teaching world.

Student teachers induction into the school

Respondents from three of the schools noted that there was no general initiation in place when they first arrived at the schools. They were not introduced to staff members, as attested to by the following statement: *"They do not have staff meetings so we were not introduced formally. Other educators and learners just see us there."*

Some respondents felt a sense of alienation. One student teacher remarked: *"We were never introduced to staff. This affected us psychologically because we felt like strangers. We never felt that sense of belonging"*.

Such feelings of alienation resulted in panic and a lack of self-confidence, which in turn reduced the effectiveness of teaching practice and negatively affected student teachers' attitude towards the teaching profession.

On the other hand, a good reception from the headmasters and teachers contributed to a positive attitude towards teaching, as confirmed by the statement by one of the student teachers, who had received a good reception:

We were introduced to the staff. They took us to the classes and we introduced ourselves to the learners. Learners were told to respect us. We were introduced as teachers not as student teachers and this to a certain extent influenced the way other teachers and learners related to us.

Another student teacher affirmed thus:

I was given a warm welcome. I feel as if I have been there for a whole year.

All teachers as well as administrators treat me like a permanent teacher and not as a student teacher. They have made my stay at the school the most exciting experience that I could ever have in my life.

Attitude of other educators in the school

Respondents intimated that other staff members who were not mentors did not make them feel welcome and they did not respect them.

We are not respected as their colleagues. They just order us around. They treat us like errand boys. Someone ordered me to supervise her class while she went to fetch her child. I would have appreciated it if she had asked me in a collegial manner and not ordering me around like a small kid. I did it but I did not appreciate the manner in which I was ordered.

The language was also a challenge, especially for those coming from other countries who did not understand the common languages of communication used in a particular school. One student teacher lamented thus:

I felt left out because I did not understand the language used by other teachers. During the morning meetings I would just sit and watch them talk but would not know what they were talking about and sometimes they would laugh and I would feel left out and a bit idiotic. For example, there was a day they were informed in Afrikaans that the following day was a casual day and because I did not understand the language I came the following morning dressed in a formal wear while the rest of the staff were dressed casually. I felt stupid.

Another student teacher felt that the educators were unprofessional and were taking advantage of student teachers. One student teacher had this to say:

I felt that other teachers were taking me as a cheap tool of convenience [personal assistant] as they would just send me to do things such as taking cups to the staff room and controlling learners in the corridors. The teacher would shout at me in front of learners, which I found very demeaning. I found that particular teacher to be unprofessional. He was never prepared for his class and he was always late. That demoralised me.

In relation to the educators' unprofessional manner, another respondent intimated that

The teachers took advantage of the student teachers and they kept them in the computer centre to type educators' work ... Some teachers give us personal assignments ... Most teachers in this school are lazy, they absent themselves from duty for no apparent reason and they abuse alcohol. These teachers are a disgrace to the profession and given choice I will opt for another profession other than teaching.

Involvement in other school activities

Teaching involves many experiences, and student teachers are required to get involved in all aspects of the school. In this study despite the fact that the SMTs had been requested to provide student teachers with the opportunity to become "fully integrated" teachers by allowing students teacher participation in all school activities, the student teachers were limited in their parti-

icipation in the school activities. They were treated as termed by one student teacher, as “*second class citizens*” in the school. The majority of student teachers echoed this thought:

We are not invited for staff meetings so we never know what takes place in the meetings. We would like to be involved and attend those meetings because we believe that we can give some valuable input.

Another respondent commented that they were made to feel insignificant:

Every morning briefing takes place around the table in the staff room; however as student teachers we are excluded from the table. We are given a small table in the corner of the staff room and we don't feel like we are part of them. We are doing the same work yet we are excluded from the staff meetings. After the briefing we are expected to take on the responsibilities.

One respondent remarked that they were even excluded from sport activities. When they voiced their concern to the headmaster he just shrugged his shoulders and moved away.

Learner discipline

Similar to findings by Marais & Meier (2004:229), where respondents experienced a deterioration of moral values in schools and a neglect of discipline, the majority of respondents in the present study also noted that discipline was almost non-existent in most schools. One respondent remarked,

Learners were very unruly because there were no effective disciplinary measures taken against misconduct. Learners were allowed to use cell phones in class which I found very disruptive.

Another respondent indicated,

Learners gave an impression that we are their age mates so they don't respect us. There is no discipline at all. Learners are rude. It is not easy to control the class. Even when the teacher is there, learners would be playing cards and eating in class.

In contrast to the above negative responses, respondents from one school said that learners were well behaved and that they actively participated in the class activities: “*Learners respect us as teachers, though there are some who think that since we are student teachers, we don't have the power/authority to punish them.*”

Implementation of Outcomes-based Education (OBE)

All respondents admitted that they found it very difficult to implement OBE effectively because of the lack of learner support materials (LSMs) in all schools, the large numbers of students in class, poor learner discipline and the time limitation.

Overall, respondents indicated that the time allocated for the lessons was very limited, at most 45 minutes. One student teacher remarked.

When you really want to engage students in group work it is difficult to put them into groups because of the limited time ... Moreover, there is also limited space for the educator to move around checking the progress of the learners as they worked.

Resources to facilitate teaching and learning

The results obtained from the respondents with regard to resources revealed that the schools did not have resources to facilitate the teaching and learning process. Learners did not have textbooks, which made teaching difficult. One respondent remarked that his school did not have a library and there was a shortage of textbooks. It was also revealed by the majority of respondents that students had to share textbooks in class. This was felt to be time-consuming and learners ended up making noise. *“The few books available are kept in a storeroom; learners are not allowed to take them home so it becomes problematic when you give them homework.”*

Respondents indicated that they did not have access to the photocopying machine when they wanted to make copies of worksheets and other LSMs for learners; they had to seek the assistance of the school secretary who in most cases was unwilling to make copies for student teachers.

Discussion

Generally, the respondents in this study indicated that they had benefited from the PGCE course. However, all respondents felt that in as much as the theory acquired during university lectures provided them with enough information on how to teach, it was the teaching practice that introduced them to and gave them the exposure into the experiences of the real teaching world. This is in support of arguments by researchers such as Buchner & Hay (1999:320) who asserted that teaching involved many experiences that simply could not be replicated in a non-school environment. However, teaching practice provides student teachers with the opportunity to integrate the theory of education with that which they are experiencing at first hand.

To this effect, Perry (2004:4) also points out that, although students gain much specialised knowledge by attending lectures and doing assignments, teaching practice adds meaning to this knowledge when a student teacher comes into contact with the real classroom situation. It is during teaching practice that knowledge is affirmed.

The findings in relation to the influence of the mentors in the present study varied from student teacher to student teacher. Some mentors effectively fulfilled their role of guiding student teachers. They offered student teachers under their supervision guidance and showed them what to do. Some student teachers echoed the description by Marais and Meier (2004:230) of mentors as being exemplary role models who set a worthwhile example to follow.

Although some student teachers indicated a supportive relationship with the mentors, some respondents were dissatisfied with the relationship between mentors and student teachers. They experienced feelings expressed by Maphosa *et al.* (2007:300-303) that the mentors saw student teachers as relief teachers, who ended up taking full loads while mentors took a back seat. This disheartened the student teachers because such behaviour is contrary to the concept of mentorship as described by Maphosa *et al.* (2007) in which the mentor operates normally in his or her classroom with the student teachers

observing and learning and not given full charge of classes when they would still be learning the trade.

While some mentors overloaded student teachers, other mentors did not have confidence in the student teachers and consequently they would not leave their classes in the student teachers' care. Others would not let student teachers teach at any time because they felt that student teachers were delaying and wasting learners' valuable time and they had to finish the syllabus before the end of the year. This resulted in the student teachers getting discouraged and experiencing feelings of inadequacy and loss of confidence in their ability to teach. Such feelings of inadequacy could have negatively influenced student teachers' perception of the teaching profession.

The way in which student teachers were received and treated varied from one school to another. The majority of student teachers in the present study attested to the fact that they were not well received and introduced at their schools of placement and that resulted in other teachers and learners not respecting them. This significantly influenced student teachers' performance during teaching practice and negatively influenced their perception of the teaching profession in general.

Learner discipline was a serious restraint for the student teachers. The teaching environment did not allow student teachers to execute what they had learnt at university. There is a possibility that student teachers had not been fully prepared for the real environment in which they were supposed to teach. Most student teachers, having originally come from other countries, must have experienced a cultural shock, which might have sent them into a state of mental paralysis.

Conclusion and recommendations

The findings indicate that student teachers view teaching practice as an important component in their training because it exposes them to the actual teaching and learning environment in which they can contextualise their theoretical knowledge gained during training (Marais & Meier, 2004; Perry, 2004; Quick & Sieborger, 2005). It also affords student teachers an opportunity to determine whether the appropriate career choice has been made or not. Student teachers felt that the PGCE course had prepared them for the teaching practice. However, despite the thorough preparation, students were faced with challenges which significantly affected their ability to accrue maximum benefits from the teaching practice. These experiences also negatively influenced the student teachers' perception of and attitude towards the teaching profession.

In the first instance, the timing of the teaching practice at the end of the year was inappropriate. Class teachers view this period as critical for their learners; consequently they are reluctant to relinquish their classes to inexperienced student teachers thus defeating the purpose of teaching practice. Moreover, student teachers had to play a dual role of being teachers in schools and students at university. This put tremendous pressure on the student teachers and rendered them ineffective both as teachers and as

students. It is therefore recommended that the teaching programme timetable should be designed in such a way that it does not coincide with key school terms such as towards or during the months of June and October when teachers are preparing students for crucial examinations (Kiggundu, 2007).

While some respondents indicated that the mentors were supportive and always willing to share their valuable advice and skills, others felt exploited and unsupported by the mentors. The study therefore recommended that teacher-training institutions should work hand in hand with the schools and organise workshops to empower and support mentors. On a similar note, Maphosa *et al.* (2007:305) suggested that mentors should be constantly empowered through workshops, to work effectively in leading and guiding student teachers.

Furthermore, student teachers were not always made to feel welcome and were not generally respected by other staff members. Student teachers were often excluded from many school activities and were made to feel insignificant which greatly demoralised them. On this note Kiggundu (2007:34) suggested that before and during each teaching practice session there should be thorough public relations groundwork undertaken by the institution in order to maintain good relations between the student teachers and all relevant role players. To minimise the problem of student teachers going to schools where they are made to feel excluded and insignificant, the higher education institutions should have a profile of each school which should be made available to the student teachers so that it could give the student teachers an idea about the school and assist them in selecting the appropriate schools for teaching practice. Schools with a high number of untrained or under-qualified teachers should be avoided at every opportunity as these may create untenable conditions for the training student teacher who could be perceived as a threat to the unqualified teachers in practice.

We have attempted to highlight some of the factors which impact on a final decision by student teachers to decide either to stay in the profession or opt out. Some of these influences may not manifest themselves immediately but may account for the continued shortage of teachers as a result of teachers leaving the profession. It is thus essential that teacher trainers be mindful of the aspects that affect student teachers' experiences during teaching practice so that they may be able to assist student teachers to achieve the desired outcomes from teaching practice.

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