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ASSESSING FINAL YEAR UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT TEACHERS ON SCHOOL BASED TEACHING PRACTICUM AT THE POLYTECHNIC OF THE UNIVERSITY MALAWI: A DUAL ASSESSMENT PROCESS

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Abstract

The present study is an evaluation of assessment of fourth year undergraduate student teachers on teaching practicum in secondary schools. The study was carried out in the Department of Mathematics and Statistics at the Malawi Polytechnic of the University of Malawi. A total number of 18 (14 males, 4 females) mathematical sciences education students of the Polytechnic of the University of Malawi were included in the study. The assessment grades and supervision comments were taken by using instruments – teaching practicum grading form and lesson observation form - designed and approved by the department. All the measurements were taken by observing a student teacher planning and delivering a lesson as part of the requirement of the degree of bachelor of education in mathematical sciences education of the University of Malawi. Obtained data was analyzed and correlation between assessment grade and the supervision comments based on the observed lesson was worked out. A positive correlation of grades was observed with the comments made and that the grade given to each individual student. The assessment grades were lower than what the supervision comments suggests regarding the quality of the student performance. The results raise the question of the validity and authenticity of assessment and supervision conducted by teacher educators. The results of the present study would be useful for teacher trainers/educators involved in assessing and supervising students during teaching practicum.

Keywords: teacher education, teacher training, assessment of student teachers, practicum, supervision of practicum

Introduction

Practicum placements in schools are considered to be a significant component of pre-service teachers' education program (Grootenboer, 2006; Wilson, 2006) and are highly valued by student teachers (Beck & Kosnik, 2002). The practicum experiences help student teachers develop a contextualised understanding of the intricacies of teaching and provide an opportunity to develop competencies across a range of areas including classroom management skills, the fundamentals of lesson planning, awareness of personal teaching style, and the ability to interact with students. According to Grootenboer (2006), practicum experiences offer teacher students a place to "observe and work with real students, teachers, and curriculum in natural settings" (1). During practicum, student teachers apply theoretical knowledge and skills in a real classroom through direct and indirect teaching experiences, including supervised and unsupervised teaching experiences. However, the aim of practicum varies, depending on the view of teacher education which can be seen as cultural practices that serve local needs (Allen & Peach, 2007).

During the university-wide quality reforms, the Polytechnic of the University of Malawi maintained the teaching practicum for undergraduate student teachers. Education students are exposed to 28 weeks of theoretical training each of the first three years and 12 weeks of practicum in the fourth year. The practicum is scored out of 100% and accounts for a total of 10 credit units. Thus, teaching practicum represents an integral part of teacher training to become a teacher. In fact all students' work at college has one single objective, which is to equip student to responsibly and competently pursue students' future role as the educator of the youth in Malawi. For this reason, students need to be given adequate opportunity to:

- (i) learn from school based and classroom teaching experience;
- (ii) apply the knowledge and skills of teaching acquired at college;
- (iii) practice the approaches, skills and techniques recommended in teaching;
- (iv) observe student teachers and their learning, teacher and their teaching and schools and their organization and administration.

Teaching practicum is also the time for lecturers to guide and direct student in mastering the science and art of teaching and in the end to judge where students' strengths and weakness lie and how far students' may safely be left to continue the development of their competence as a full time member of the teaching profession.

Statement of the Problem

Although Belliveau (2007) claim that practicum experience is the most valuable aspect of teacher education programs, some of the approaches employed in assessing and providing teacher support during practicum are questionable. For example, university lecturers at the Polytechnic combine two roles: as assessors and as supervisors. As supervisors, they are expected to observe how student teachers prepare, deliver the lesson and conduct themselves as members of teaching profession and are expected to advise the students on how to improve their teaching skills. As assessors, the lecturers are expected to grade the student teachers by assigning a score based on how the student teacher performs. Considering that assessment grade is summative whereas supervision comments formative (Tillima & Smith, 2009), it is not always possible for a single lecturer to objectively assess the student at the same time provide advice for improvement during the teaching practicum. On the other hand, supervision may influence the assigning of the assessment grade. This dual function of supervision and assessment raises a

question about how the two are related to each other. This study is based on the argument that the dual function of the university lecturers of being both assessors and supervisors may result in focusing on one more than the other to the disadvantage of the teacher professional development. Hence, this study analyses the relationship between supervision in improving students teaching practicum and the consequent assigning of assessment grade to the student by the same lecturer.

Purpose of the Study

This study was aimed at examining the relationship between supervision comments and the assessment grades assigned to students during school based teaching practicum.

Research questions

Specifically, the study sought answers to the following questions:

- (a) What is the nature of comments that supervisors make?
- (b) To what extent do the marks awarded by the supervisor reflect the comments?
- (c) What are student teachers' perceptions of the supervisors' comments on lesson observations?

Significance of the Study

This study adds to international debate on teaching practicum placement in schools in a number of ways. First, it examines the practicum in a framework of principles of effective supervision and assessment as a dual process in practicum. Second, it contributes to debates about the balance between supervision and assessment and in particular the place of the practicum in assisting preservice teachers to close a perceived gap between formative and summative assessment of teaching practicum (Tillima & Smith, 2009). Third, the study might help to improve the assessment and supervision of student teachers during the school based practicum of the teacher education program. Besides, it provides valuable information regarding the objectivity of the assessment of student teachers during practicum. The results from this study also add to the existing body of literature related to the conduct of practicum.

Literature Review

A practicum is a graduate level course, often in a specialized field of study, that is designed to give students supervised practical application of a previously or concurrently studied theory (Rowlins, 2011; Smith, 2010). Practicums are common for education majors. A practicum is the experience of working in-school placements. In addition to providing direct experience and an opportunity to apply newly acquired skills and knowledge, the practicum placements are a major source of curriculum in the sense that they bring students face to face with concrete situations. The underlying assumptions of this approach are that teaching can be considered as a form of problem solving and that teacher students learn best within cohesive academic and practical situations that allow them to understand and to master their environment. Practicum refers to any early field experience in the classroom in which students' progress towards the student teaching semester (Rawlins & Starkey, 2011).

The practicum enables student teachers to acquire beginning teaching competencies and is a core component of the Initial Teacher Preparation program in Malawi (Mtika, 2010). The purpose of the practicum is to help prepare student teachers for the realities of student teaching by providing them with a clear understanding of the contexts for schooling. The practicum plays

a major role in bridging “theory and practice”. Further, it offers the context for student teachers to develop their personal teaching competence (Smith & Lev-Ari, 2005) and to acquire and develop the knowledge of teaching and professional content knowledge of teachers. It is through the practicum experience that student teachers develop important professional knowledge such as knowledge of people, knowledge of themselves, self-control and inter-personal sensitivity - all of which are important traits that would see them through their professional lives (Yan & He, 2010). In addition, practicum teaches skills such as independent problem-solving, working collegially with fellow teachers and developing professional values and attitude. During practicum, student teachers are supported through systematic observations, assistance and advice. Students have opportunities to become involved with, and actively participate in all aspects of the school’s activities. Through these experiences they learn to link theory and practice, and to acquire the understanding and skills necessary for teaching effectively in a range of classroom situations.

Assessment of teaching skills or competences constitutes an area of debate and development (Smith, 2010; Haigh & Tuck, 2000). This is because of the widespread dissatisfaction with the professional assessment procedures that are being used (Mattsson & Rorrison, 2011). Furthermore, Mattsson & Rorrison (2011) noted that many problems surrounding assessment practices arise out of an inability to reconcile traditional assessment practices with the kinds of learning outcomes that might be expected from the practical. Traditional-based modes of assessment such as written examinations which are still predominant in developing countries tend to favor assessment of pre-determined knowledge and competences at the expense of application and resourcefulness. However, even when the practicum offers students opportunity to apply knowledge, test theory and consequently modify their understanding (Rennert-Ariev, 2005), insights and understandings of the nature may be difficult for them to express and for supervisors to assess.

The problem surrounding assessment of practicum has led to various efforts by teacher education institutions to improve it. Such efforts focus on teacher knowledge and skills, but also on ways of sensitively documenting the personally and contextually complex world of teaching. They require supervisors to gain the pedagogical and personal principles that underpin teachers’ work (Starkey & Rawlins, 2012). The improvements include increasing the length of the practicum, making practicum more school than university-based, and diversifying the assessment strategies. Efforts to improve assessment stemmed from a growing sentiment that more powerful and authentic assessment strategies are needed to target the complexities of the knowledge that teachers bring to bear in their teaching and the subtleties of innovative teaching practicum (Rennert-Ariev, 2005). According to Darling-Hammond (2000), authentic assessments:

- 1) sample the actual knowledge, skills and dispositions of teachers in teaching and learning contexts;
- 2) require the integration of multiple types of knowledge and skills;
- 3) rely on multiple sources of evidence collected over time and in diverse contexts; and
- 4) are evaluated using codified professional standards.

Darling-Hammond (2000) further observes that authentic assessment needs to reflect the intellectual work of supervisors, as well as students’ active engagements, explorations and enquiry. Such assessment has value beyond success during practicum in that it nurtures beginning teachers to personally take care of their own professional growth with minimal

supervision. Authentic assessment evokes grounded theory which gives insights into teaching processes (Morse, 2003). Methodologically, such theory enables supervisors to generate concepts that explain and derive meaning about students actions during practicum

Teaching practicum requires a philosophy to give directions to values and actions. The philosophy is needed for the development of a reflective and reflexive learner who learns through situational analyzing, theorizing, hypothesis-testing, inquiring, experimenting, and justifying. Such development has to be built around the searching and identification of oneself as a teacher based on one's personal theory of teaching and learning. While supervisors can help by engaging in dialogues and interrogation with student teachers, they need also to carry out a personal reflection on their own self as a person of feelings, emotions, values and beliefs so as to embark on a transformation of their vision of what sort of teachers they would like to be.

Practicum in teacher education is dealt with in different ways at different universities. Different models are applied depending on different national, regional and local contexts (Ure, 2009). Even if they overlap, different models can be identified. They emphasize different ideas, aspects and qualities. They have different historical roots and they represent different views on how professional practice knowledge is best nurtured. Different resources are allocated in terms of people, time, equipment and economy. Curricula differ and the procedures for assessing professional practice knowledge also differ. Sometimes the local supervisor has a final say about preservice teachers who may pass or fail. Often these decisions are taken by university based teacher educators. Practicum is generally part of a particular educational system and should be discussed in relation to that specific system.

The Polytechnic of the University of Malawi, the site for the study, uses the integrated model for teaching practicum. The Integrated Model is practiced by universities and communities who have agreed to share responsibility for a teacher education where practicum serves as an integrative element. Local authorities may be in charge of certain educational arrangements, for example introducing preservice teacher to the field of practice. The university may be in charge of certain aspects, for example assessment of practicum learning. This model is based on the idea that preservice teachers should learn from a variety of schools and teachers that may differ a lot in quality.

Even though the model is described only briefly here, it indicates that teacher education and practicum could be organized and structured in certain ways to promote practicum learning. However, it seems that practicum is often left to chance and that there is a need for improved models, principles and practices to ensure that preservice teacher learning during practicum is supported. Rorrison (2008) maintains that there is a need to ensure that the practicum is a valuable professional learning experience. It should not be left to chance and learning opportunities must be enhanced. It seems evident that the practicum is often a time of tension, frustration, misinformation, confrontation, compliance and poor communication (Murray-Harvey, Slee, Lawson, Silins, Banfield, & Russell, 2000).

Rorrison (2008) emphasizes that many learning opportunities are wasted because they are not based on a clear model. Research about models of practicum is often neglected. One reason for this state of affairs might be a historically rooted disregard among universities for practice knowledge and a historically rooted disregard among many school teachers for knowledge based on research. Whatever practicum model is applied, teacher education institutions should allocate proper time, economy, personal and material resources for practicum. Research about professional practice should be encouraged.

Theories of Practicum Learning

This study draws its framework from theories of learning. Supervision of practicum learning requires that the practicum model is grounded in theories of learning. Productive and transformative practicum should be linked to theories of learning, be clearly constructed, and the related teaching experiences are a careful scaffold for preservice teacher learning during the practicum. Unfortunately, productive and transformative theories of learning are not well scaffolded for novice teachers during practicum (Grootenboer, 2006). A deep understanding of learning theories is critical for continued teacher professional development beyond preservice training. Whether these are personal and pedagogical theories constructed through reflection and experience or theories introduced through association with major educationalists like Vygotsky, Piaget, Dewey or Schön, this writer contends that preservice teacher engagement should be supported through a scaffold learning method.

Dual Function of University Supervisors

The challenge of conceptualizing the practicum goes hand in hand with the challenge of reconceptualizing the supervision of student teachers. Ideally the practicum should be an opportunity for teacher educators and experienced school teachers to partner with each other in supporting and supervising student teachers (Starkey & Rawlins, 2012). In reality, this is seldom the case and this results in inadequate supervision. For example, most of the student teachers taking part in Zimbabwe's Integrated National Teachers Education Course (ZINTEC) believed that inadequate field supervision was the most crucial problem (Anderson, 1997). This evaluation also noted that the supervision which did exist seldom involved supervisors helping students make connections between theory and practice. Similarly, Anderson (1997) describes the situation as even worse in Malawi where supervision is "substandard, if indeed, it takes place at all" (MOESC 2000, 4). Attempts to improve supervision remain a tall order to fill. This is partly due to the huge number of students against a diverse social economic context. In addition, Ulvik & Smith elaborates further that "supervisors are less concerned with teaching skills and value theory even in the field of practice" (2010, 528).

The problems of supervision are compounded by the lack of an effective working partnership between training institutions and schools. This, in turn, may widen the gap between theoretical studies and practical teaching experience (Allen & Peach, 2007). In considering some alternatives approaches to supervision, Allen & Peach, 2007 argues in favor of reconceptualizing the roles of the university supervisors and the mentor teacher. This reconceptualization entails empowering the mentor teacher with the responsibility for the training of the student teacher. The mentor teacher in turn would be supported by the university supervisor whose role would be focused on providing liaison teacher education between the teacher training institutions and the schools. This reconceptualisation of supervision would ensure that supervision stand out separate from assessment which is another function of the supervisors (Smith, 2007).

In Singapore, supervisors are "seen" to be assessors and evaluators of the students' performance rather than coaches and mentors to nurture and enculturate them into the profession (Nam & Hwee, 2011). Moreover, the teaching practicum is a process of formative assessment rather than summative assessment where all stakeholders are responsible for the teacher learning during the practicum and are required to intervene and coach students when needed to succeed in their role as teachers (Tillima & Smith, 2009). The assessment role is more on assessing the willingness and degree of learning of the students from the coaching, guidance and direction of the experienced supervisors (Chia & Kee, 2010).

Assessment of students on teaching practicum is, essentially, assessment of work-based learning, which differs from assessing learning in an academic context. According to Brodie & Irving (2007), knowledge that is required to assess work-based learning takes on three main forms, declarative knowledge, which characterizes of the learning product, procedural knowledge which informs about the practical application of the knowledge, and finally, conditional knowledge which relates to knowing when to do what in the best possible manner. Assessment of work-based learning is similar to the assessment of experiential learning (Kolb, 1998) in the sense that critical reflection on own practicum is likely to lead to a deeper insight into and new understanding of practicum which often initiates professional growth. Later, Kolb (1998) expanded his experiential model of learning by introducing the concept of reflective dialogue which emphasizes the importance of discussing personal experiences with others. During the practicum the students are at the entrance gate of the professional practicum and for them the dialogue with the supervisor becomes crucial to their professional development as the students learn the very complex task of teaching.

A major role of assessment in the practicum is to enhance students' continuous learning, development and professional growth. Several researchers (Sadler, 2009; Shute, 2008; Hattie & Timperley, 2007) argue that in relation to formative assessment, the quality of feedback the learner receives is a core factor in promoting learning. During the practicum students seek feedback mainly from the supervisors, a form of feedback which can take them forward, feed forward (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Supervisors give feedback in two forms: face to face comments or written comments. Each of these has its advantages and disadvantages in so far as students perceive and interpret the quality and motive behind the feedback.

Formative assessment serves the main function of assessment during the practicum. Yet, there is an additional function, the summative, a gate keeping function, as the best suitable student teachers are to be selected in order to protect the profession from incompetence (Smith, 2010). Smith (2006) has discussed the various roles of assessment in teacher education, and she claims that the two contradicting functions, the formative and the summative, the feed-forward and the judgmental role, increase in complexity when both functions of assessment are carried out by the same person. It can be stressful to have the role of supporter and judge at the same time, even though the final decision is placed with the university. Smith's (2006) argument point to the fact that assessment of the practicum is a complex issue which has not been given sufficient attention in the research literature, and the intention of the current study is to add to our understanding of underlying dual agenda, supervision and assessment of students during practicum.

The underlying assumptions for this study are further supported by activity theory (Tsui & Law, 2007). Supervision and assessment during practicum can be explained through activity theory because they both focus on students' actions. Tsui & Law (2007) refer activity theory as a belief that individual or group actions are embedded in activity systems which are collective and social in nature. The motive for an activity is the object, and activities are realized by goal directed actions that are subordinate to motives (Tsui & Law, 2007).

In the practicum, the student's learning how to teach is the object, and the teaching, observation, supervision and assessment are all activities, or mediating tools. When the student comes to school he/she meets a system of norms, rules and regulations within the community, the school, of which the supervisor is a member. In the specific context of the practicum, the roles of the university supervisor, the student teacher and the pupils are quite clear. Two different

systems, or actors are involved (student and supervisors), and they bring different knowledge, perceptions, understandings into the activity. The student is, at this point of the education, absorbed in the academic world, which has a rather theoretical focus. The supervisor is, above all, a practitioner whose focus is on the daily teaching of pupils, and that is also where her/his current expertise lies. It is likely that representing two different worlds, the supervisor and the student will not always see challenging situations eye to eye. Both parties will have to cross boundaries by engaging in dialogues and interaction with an open mind in order to understand the other. Daring to cross the boundary of one's own culture leads to the creation of new knowledge and better understanding of teaching.

This new knowledge entails elements from both cultures. The actors have developed insights of which they were probably unaware beforehand. The interlocutors are crossing boundaries, and in a way we can say that when the interaction between the two, the supervisor and the student, initiate new activities, the boundary crossing becomes a lever for change and innovations. Thus, boundaries are being crossed and new understandings are being developed, which, in light of the model of experiential learning (Kolb, 1998) often leads to changed practicum.

Feedback is another concept whose importance in the instructional encounter (Smith, 2010), the meeting point between learning, teaching and assessment, is becoming a major issue in research on assessment for learning (Smith, 2007). Feedback is currently seen as the heart of assessment for learning. Feedback is one of the most powerful influences on learning and achievement, but this impact can be either positive or negative (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Quality of feedback is not just the structure of the feedback but also its accessibility to the learner, its catalytic and coaching value, and its ability to inspire confidence and hope (Sadler, 2009). Useful feedback which carries a positive impact on students' learning is not just a grade or a general statement to the learner, but as detailed meaningful information essential to the learner and the supervisor when planning future steps in the learning process.

According to Hattie & Timperley (2007) feedback serves multiple functions. First, it is a kind of careful description of the current status of learning based on performance. The student becomes aware of strengths and weaknesses by engaging in dialogue with the supervisor. Second, it reduces the discrepancy between current knowledge and the learning goal and improves teaching performance. There are two actors in this process, the supervisor and the student. The latter needs to be open to receive and accept feedback, and he/she needs to know how to apply it when planning and executing future performances. Affective as well as cognitive learning strategies play an important role in the process, and the order of presentation is mindfully chosen. The affective strategies have to be in place before the student is ready to apply cognitive learning strategies in deciding how to proceed.

The supervisor's task is to ensure that challenges are optimal, that the dissonance between where the student is and what the next goal is, creates a positive dissatisfaction. If the gap between the current level of performance and the desired goal is too wide, the student is likely to give up. The supervisor needs the competence to provide clear feedback on the current status of competence and to give constructive feed and forward to the next achievable goal, and to be able to adjust this to the level and personality of the individual student (Brookhart, 2008).

In conclusion, supervision and assessment of student teachers on practicum is a complex, creative profession and have an expectation that supervisors should support the reflexive, possibility-thinking and risk-taking creative endeavors of the student teacher. Although there is considerable good intent within the supervising and assessing student teachers concurrently, the

situation has been shown to be less than ideal for both the supervisors and the students. Supervision is central to preservice teacher education. However, supervision must be more than the mere provision of a set of comments incongruent with student teachers work. A practicum supervision and assessment should provide professional experiences for students as they link theories of teaching.

To be more effective in promoting practicum 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 (Jeffery, 2008). It is evident from the literature reviewed so far that support for student teachers is an essential component of the practicum program. However, study findings indicate that their respective supervisors fail. Instead, the support students receive is inadequate to bring them the experience they expect from the practicum. 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. The nature of practicum support is an important factor in new teacher development. The guidance, mentoring and feedback that student teachers receive from their university supervisors play a critical role in their learning and development. However, the dual function of supervision and assessment appears to be challenging and university supervisors may fail to optimally support student teachers since they are overloaded.

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive research design and utilized both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Qualitative approach enabled the researcher to describe the nature of supervisors' comments in order to understand the meanings and values students attach to them. Using the qualitative approach, the researcher sought the views of the student teachers about the supervisors' comments and how the comments help them to improve their teaching skills. The qualitative approach is in recognition of the diverse interpretations of quantitative assessment during the practicum. The nature of supervisors comments and the extent to which marks awarded reflect comments were also be coded in order to derive percentages, hence the use of quantitative approach. The assessment grades which the supervisors awarded to the student teachers constituted the quantitative data.

Sample. A total of 18 students on teaching practicum in 2011 academic year participated in this study. Their assessments forms and lesson observation forms were used. These forms were completed by all supervisors involved in the assessment of the students on teaching practicum. These students were in their final year of their bachelor of education degree program. These students were selected because they were the only group on the program that has participated in the practicum in the department.

Data collection. Cresswell (1997) suggested that a mixed-method approach is useful when trying to monitor and describe a phenomenon, so both qualitative (interviews, writing) and quantitative (questionnaire) methods were employed. Data were collected from supervisors' assessment and supervision forms. The students were asked about the usefulness of written comments and conferencing in improving their ensuing practicum. In addition, preliminary findings were presented in a staff seminar to supervisors and school practice administrators where further comments were captured. Data on the nature of comments supervisors made when supervising students during teaching practicum were obtained from supervisor' supervision

forms while data on the marks awarded by the supervisors were obtained from the assessment form.

Data analysis. Data analysis involved reading and coding supervisors' written comments by assigning a number to each category as 1 = very poor; 2 = poor; 3 = good; 4 = very good; and 5 = excellent. The SPSS was used to explore the relationship between students' assessment grades and the supervisors' written comments (Field, 2000). The views of the student teachers on the quality of supervision were typed in word perfect and categories were developed in order to develop themes for discussion. The qualitative data were examined using thematic analysis. Informed by Huberman and Miles's (2002) three-step content analysis procedure, responses to each open-ended question were first coded or grouped by question with the researchers reading across all responses to identify macro-level themes. This step was followed with a micro-level reading of each case to identify less pervasive themes and gaps in the data. This step was undertaken with the intent to understand and ultimately enhance pre-service teachers' experiences of rural practicum.

Results

Qualitative data which consisted of comments from supervisors on the quality of the lessons was written in word perfect and similar comments were classified together to develop categories. This process was important because supervisors used different words to qualify student performance during practicum and meanings of these terms could only be classified by approximating their meanings to very poor, poor, good, very good and excellent. Data on the teachers' comments and frequency of making such comments were coded into numerical values which were then computed into percentages. These were then matched with the score each student got from assessment forms. The two sets of scores were compared by computing a regression line using SPSS. The results are presented in Figure 1.

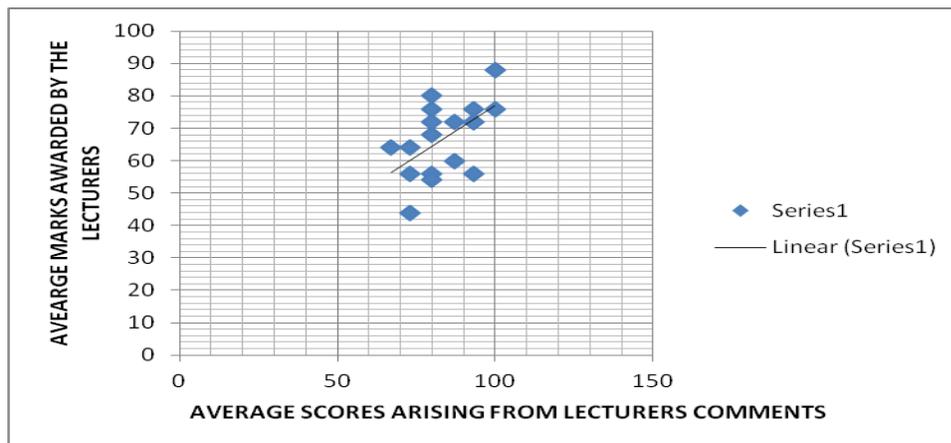


Figure 1. Relationship between Averages Scored by Lecturers and Comments to Students

It was noted that there was a strong correlation between the grades that lecturers gave students and the comments they made on the teaching of students. Those students who got low grades also received relatively poor comments and visa versa. This correlation suggests that supervisors were consistent in applying the set of criteria for providing feedback through face to face comments and written comments on teaching practicum.

However, the results in Figure 2 indicate that the marks which lecturers gave the students were consistently lower than the comments they gave the students. This finding suggests that supervisors were sympathetic in supervising students when in the actual sense they regarded the quality of teaching as relatively low. This is not surprising when you consider that the role of supervision is formative, giving the student benefit of double to correct and improve the skills whereas assessment grade was meant to be summative, the description of the performance as seen at that particular time. Similar findings were reported by Tuli (2009) where students teachers indicated that there was inconsistency between assessment grade and supervision comments which supervisors (lecturers) gave to students teachers. This finding highlight professional dilemma in the university lecturers between supervising and assisting students to improve their teaching skills and assigning a final grade as required by the university. This might also be due to human element of subjectivity versus objectivity. There is subjectivity when making comments during supervision as the meanings students' performance are negotiated whereas the assessment grade is a personal reflection on the part of the supervisor (Smith, 2010). You may wish to know that the assessment grade is never discussed by the two parties. It also reveals the arbitrary nature of qualitative grading even when such grading is guided by rubrics (Rawlins, 2011).

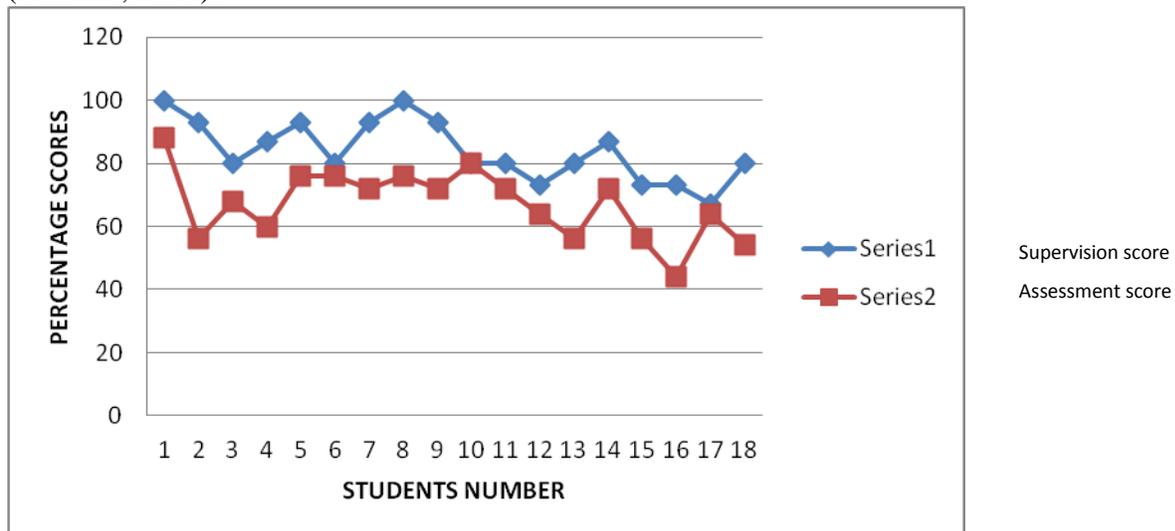


Figure 2. A Comparison: Assessment Score and Supervision Score by Student

Another source of discrepancy between supervision comments and assessment grades is in the structure of the instruments used for the two activities (Genc & Buyukkarci, 2013). The supervision form is less structured allowing for free comments. It does not provide key words to guide the supervisor to use when making comments. On the other hand, there are distinct aspects of teaching which an assessment focuses. These include personal factors (1), class management (2), lesson preparation (3), lesson presentation (4), students' participation in the lesson (5), and of general comments (6). Lecturers distributed marks among these aspects of teaching. The results which are summarized in Figure 3 indicate that students were better on personal factors and lesson presentation. These two aspects of teaching tended to push up the score for general comments.

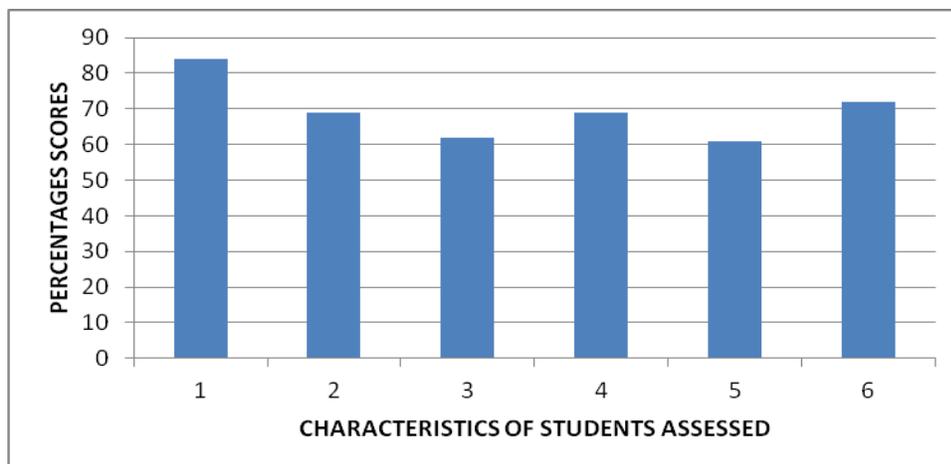


Figure 3. Aspects of Teaching Assessed during Teaching Practicum

(1= personal factors, 2=class management, 3=lesson preparation 4=lesson presentation 5=students' participation in the lesson, and 6 = course general comments)

The results in Figure 3 show that the student teachers were doing very well on personal appearance such as not in questioning techniques and in concluding a lesson. Poor questioning techniques may imply that student teachers did very little to engage learners in thinking through the tasks through discussion. Asking questions helps teachers to engage learners in meaningful discussion of the content to be learnt. Similarly, poor techniques in concluding the lesson means that the student teachers did very little to recap the major concepts meant to be learnt. They did very little to remind the learners what they were supposed to learn and how it would link to the next lesson. Poor conclusion of a lesson may lead to disjointed lessons which lack connectedness and continuity. The use of a highly structured assessment form meant that supervisors were more objective in assigning grades. They were guided in being focused as to what aspects of teaching were to be assessed.

Discussion

Assessing students while giving them advice on areas needing improvement during the practicum is challenging for lecturers as reflected in inconsistencies between the two variables. The quality of assessment made differed from one assessor to another. Two extreme types of the assessment used by assessors were identified. These were the stage by stage grading accompanied by written comments and the penultimate-stage grades without accompanying written comment. The majority of supervisors practised penultimate grading as opposed to stage by stage grading. The penultimate stage grading seemed acceptable if everything was correct but not very informative when something was incorrect. In contrast, stage by stage grading showed the mistake, where it was made and how it could be corrected. Thus, a supervisor would give a grade 2 out of 5 against class management and explain why a student performance deserves a 2 on that aspect.

In addition to being only interested in the final grade, the majority of lecturers seldom accompanied their marks with written comments to guide or encourage their students. There were some lecturers, although in the minority, who wrote negative comments about their students' work; they yet gave good grades. Lecturers generally did not look up on their written

advice and instructions to students in order to derive a grade based on the observable student teaching performance.

It is evident from this study that though the practicum is designed to ensure that student teachers acquire experience before they qualify as teachers, the findings of this study indicate that the practicum experiences end up coping with it as an assessment. Supervisors were able to make encouraging comments which would help students to identify their strengths and weaknesses thereby guiding them to be competent professionals and enable them feel successful. However, study revealed that the supervisors gave grades which did not reflect the comments made about the teaching performance. For example, grades were consistently lower than the good comments made about students' performance. This phenomenon highlights a mismatch between supervision and assessment and this might cause the whole assessment procedure less credible. This finding justifies what Haigh & Tuck (2000) stated as the assessments of students' competence during practicum remain problematic and a number of issues remain continuous. They identified inconsistencies in the way students were evaluated by teachers, varying expectation of student performance and conformity between teachers and marked variation in the quality of feedback given to students by supervisors as a source of stress for student teachers.

From the questionnaire, students indicated that they found step by step marking helpful and positive comments by their teachers encouraging. It was established that student teachers felt that instructional and content-related comments gave them guidance on what was needed to be done and how it could be done. Student teachers disliked negative comments and found them to be discouraging. This finding is similar to those reported in a study by Stark & Rawlins (2011) who found that university supervisors gave less effective comments (feedback) to the students. The study, therefore, recommends that assessment should match the comments on areas needing improvement and meaningful accompanying comments should be made to guide student teachers in the desired directions, encourage student teachers to try harder or to give credit for work done well. The researcher felt that it is better to give assessment grade which are consistent with the supervision comments. If this is not possible, then the two functions, assessment and supervision must be separated by time or persons to do them.

By combining the dual role of being supervisors and assessors, lecturers met challenges in fulfilling the two equally demanding roles. As supervisors, lecturers seem to be sympathetic about the students and used soft words to encourage them to improve in their teaching. No wonder that they described the student work as better when in fact the opposite might have been true. In contrast, as assessors, lecturers assigned grades to students which constantly were lower than comments given during supervision. This difference can be attributed to the problem of arbitrary commenting on students' performance without being clear on the measures being used. In addition, the majority of lecturers seldom comments about their students' work to justify the grades given.

Students indicated that they found supervision comments useful and helpful and encouraging. It was established that student teachers' comments gave them guidance on what was needed to be done and how it could be done. However, student teachers disliked negative comments and found them to be discouraging. According to Speck (1996), as adults, student teachers want to be the source of their own learning and will resist learning activities that confront their competence. Thus, supervision comments need to give student teachers some power over their learning. Supervision needs to be structured, to encourage collaborative learning and to reduce anxiety during learning.

In transformative practicum learning, students need to have a responsibility for creating the learning atmosphere by taking an active role in their learning process. According to Mezirow (1997), transformative learning can take place in a welcoming environment in which the learners have adequate information, are free from intimidation, have equal opportunity to take up various roles in an institution, can become critically reflective of assumptions, are empathetic, are good listeners, and are willing to search for common goals. Thus, the environment in which adults have to participate in learning is a critical factor in transformative learning.

As in theories of learning, there are some fundamental guiding principles in fostering transformative practicum learning. For example, supervisors have to demonstrate qualities such as trust, empathy, care, authenticity, sincerity and a high degree of integrity; feed-back and self-assessment are important to the learners (Taylor, 1998). Therefore, it is recommended that lecturers must be oriented on how to supervise and assess student teachers during practicum. Such action may help in ensuring that there is a close match between supervision comments and assessment grades awarded to the students teachers.

When the activity theory is applied in the analysis of the findings of this study, it appears that supervision of students during practicum requires that supervisors and students cross the boundaries of each other. The students required to understand the purpose of supervision and the activities of the supervisors; to assist the students to improve the teaching skills. They are also required to acknowledge the complementary activity of assessment. Other the other hand supervisors were required to appreciate the activities of a student – to teach according to the school standards and to demonstrate that they are learning to become teachers. It appears from this study that there was disparity in degree of crossing the boundaries between students and supervisors during supervision and assessment. It is possible that supervision focused on some students' activities different from those being assessed. That is why supervision comments were different from assessment grades.

Conclusion

Overall, supervision during teaching practicum contributes to pre-service teachers' education. The supervision of school based teaching practicum provides realistic experiences for pre-service teachers and helped them overcome preconceptions of work life. There seems no doubt that if one crucial element was to be identified from the preceding discussion, it is the people factor. Based on these findings, it is understood that the dual function of university lecturers of being supervisors and assessors at the same time have the potential to give contradictory feedback to the students about their performance. Evidence suggests that supervisors' comments are relatively positive and encouraging to guide student into areas needing improvement. On the other hand, assessment grades were consistently lower than what the supervision comments perhaps because they were meant to capture the momentary student performance. While further work can be done to explore the relationship between supervision comments and assessment grades on a larger scale, the data discussed in this article highlight some considerations for how supervision and assessment of teachers during school based practicum can be improved.

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