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Improving the Practical Aspect of Pre-Service Teacher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa: Issues of Conceptualization, Planning and Management

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INTRODUCTION

Teaching practicum, variously called teaching practice, professional practice, professional experience, practical experience, school experience, has always been part of teacher education regardless of the approach taken. The Standard Council of the Teaching Profession (1998, p.10) defines teaching practicum as:

a period of time spent in schools where the prime focus for the trainee teacher is to practice teaching under the supervision of a mentor who should be trained for this job, to spend time with teachers and classes, observing, teaching small groups and whole classes, and undertaking the range of tasks that make up the teacher's role including planning, assessing and reporting.

Some research documents criticize the way teacher education institutions prepare pre-service teachers for teaching (Korthagen, 2001; Nieme, 2002; Stuart & Thurlow, 2000). But other research reports the positive effect of the practical experience in teacher education. This research indicates that during teaching practicum, pre-service teachers learn to teach by means of the personal experience they get in the field (Britzman, 2003; Munby et al., 2001). They fully appreciate the craft, professional demands and dimensions of teaching, learn the realities of day-to-day teaching and simultaneously learn to put pedagogical theory into practice. As the bridge between theory and practice, the practicum also provides the context in which pre-service teachers develop a personal teaching competence (Smith & Lev-Ari, 2005).

According to Feiman-Nemser and Buchmann (1985, p.49), the following three questions address the role of any practicum in learning to teach:

1. What is the pre-service teacher learning in the here and now about being a teacher, about pupils, classrooms, and the activities of teaching?
2. How do these lessons of experience relate to the central purpose of teaching, helping pupils learn?
3. To what extent do these lessons of experience foster the student's capacity to learn from future experience?

In other words, during the practicum, pre-service teachers learn the lessons of experience, which prepare them for the full scope of teachers' role, for accomplishing the central purposes of schooling with all students, and for developing the ability and disposition to keep on growing (Zeichner, 1996). Pre-service teachers' experiences in the schools also shape their conception about teaching, learning and school contexts, and their attitude to their work and to the children they teach (Hodge *et al.*, 2002).

Given the critical role that teaching practicum plays in effective teacher education, it is no surprise that

among pre-service teachers, practicing teachers and teacher educators, the practicum is rated as the most valuable element of any teacher education program and the most effective means of developing practical teaching skills. Specifically, teaching practicum is regarded as the most effective means of preparing pre-service teachers to teach the curriculum that schools are accountable for; of preparing them for assessment, reporting and administrative responsibilities; and for the human relations dimensions required for developing relationships with students, colleagues and parents (Education and Training Committee (ETC), 2005).

Yet, despite the positive perception of the practicum held by those directly involved in it, the general view in many Sub-Saharan African (SSA) countries appears to be that the practicum is merely a time for pre-service teachers to demonstrate things previously learned (Zeichner, 1996). This view is reflected in the way the practicum is conceptualized in teacher education courses, planned, and managed. This paper shares some thoughts about the conceptualization, planning, and management of practical experiences in pre-service teacher education. Using the specific situation in Ghana as a case, the paper takes the view that the curriculum for practical experiences in teacher education in Sub-Saharan African countries needs to be reformed if pre-service teachers are to have positive gains and valuable experiences, thus maximizing the benefits of the practical aspect of their training. The paper is organized in four parts. First, the major conceptual approaches to designing teaching practicum are described. Second, characteristics of practicum models in Sub-Saharan Africa and Western countries are compared. Third, challenges confronting the planning and management of the practicum are described. Finally, some recommendations for improving the practicum in pre-service teacher education in Sub-Saharan Africa are made.

CONCEPTUAL APPROACHES TO THE PRACTICUM

Zeichner (1996) identifies three major conceptual approaches to designing practicum experiences in pre-service teacher education programs across the world. These are the apprenticeship approach, the applied-science approach, and the inquiry-oriented approach. The different approaches reflect different ideas about the source of teaching expertise and respond in different ways to the three key questions posed by Feiman-Nemser and Buchmann (1985).

Apprenticeship Model

In the apprenticeship model teaching expertise is believed to reside in the minds of experienced teachers who need only show the novice how to do what they are able to do well. Consequently, pre-service teachers spend their time in school observing an experienced teacher before engaging in their own practical experience (Smith & Lev-Ari, 2005). Zeichner (1996) distinguishes between “sink-or-swim” apprenticeship and “apprenticeship experience”. In the former, “student teachers are essentially turned loose in schools and left entirely in the hands of collaborating teachers” under the implied assumption that good teaching is caught and not taught, that things happen more by accidental fortune than by deliberate design, and that the hall mark of success is the assumption of independent teaching performance” (p. 218). In the latter, “there is more of planned effort by college or university teacher educators to tap into the expertise of experienced teachers and to coordinate practicum work with academic course work” (Zeichner, 1996, p.218). Generally, therefore, in the apprenticeship model what pre-service teachers learn during the practicum depends more on the nature of the school and classroom environment, and the professional expertise of their mentors.

In the Netherlands, Korthagen et al. (2001) advocate the realistic model, which aligns with the “experience” version of Zeichner’s (1996) apprenticeship model. In the realistic model, the practicum starts from the very beginning of the teacher education program. Pre-service teachers are put in schools and they are carefully guided and supported to reflect on their practical experiences. The aim is to help the prospective teacher develop a set of pedagogical competencies. The support and guidance provided help to eliminate the threatening environment associated with the sink-and-swim apprenticeship model.

Applied-Science Model

In the applied science model teaching is studied theoretically and teacher trainees are ushered into teaching by helping them to gradually put the knowledge and theories they have been exposed to in academic courses into practice in the classroom (Smith & Lev-Ari, 2005). Here, the source of teaching expertise is thought to lie outside of the practices of teachers. Rather, it is found “either in a thorough preparation in the academic and foundational disciplines, or in assimilating what is referred to as the knowledge base for teaching – research conducted by university academics on teaching and learning” (Zeichner, 1996, p. 220 -221). Standards of excellence derived from the academic disciplines or from educational research on teaching and learning, are set and pre-service teachers are assessed according to how well they measure up to those standards. Thus from an applied-science perspective, the purpose of the practicum is for the pre-service teacher to develop the ability to act in ways consistent with the ideology of the courses. The practicum becomes essentially a time to demonstrate things learned previously, rather than a time for new learning.

Some have questioned the technical rationality that underlies the applied science approach to the practicum. Schon (1993), for example, points out that in any number of professions, such as architecture and musical performance, the idea of relying on the application of scientific theory has never worked very well in solving the messy problems that practitioners face in the “swampy lowlands of practice”. Zeichner (1996) also disagrees with any position that adopts the technical view of the relationship between theory and practice that is assumed in an applied-science practicum. He cautions:

If we view theory as existing only in the teachers colleges and universities, and practice as existing only in schools, and the task of learning to teach as one of learning how to apply that which is required in colleges and universities to the schools, we are missing out on the vast expertise that resides in the practices of teachers and on the potential to generate theory through teaching practice (Zeichner, 1996, p. 221).

Inquiry-oriented Model

In the inquiry-oriented or reflective model, teaching is viewed as a form of research and teachers as reflective practitioners. Teaching expertise is assumed to lie in the practices of teachers, and the process of understanding and improving one’s teaching in reflection on one’s own experience. Consequently, teacher educators focus on “helping student teachers develop a greater understanding of their own practical theories and tacit knowledge of teaching, and on learning how to develop new knowledge about teaching through their reflection in and on their teaching practice” (Zeichner, 1996, p. 222). The goal is to help prospective teachers to develop the disposition and capacity to take responsibility for their own professional development. Whether the reflection pre-service teachers do

will help them become more capable of taking on full scope of the teacher's role, of accomplishing the central purposes of schooling with all students, and of continuing to grow as teachers throughout their careers will be determined by what they reflect on and how they do so (i.e. their object and method of reflection). The reflective model is gaining wide currency in developed countries (e.g. UK and USA), and Scandinavian teacher education institutions it has become the mainstream (Lauvas *et al.*, 2001).

Each of the three approaches discussed above has something to commend it but at the same time has its weaknesses. It is rare to find a practicum program founded solely on one approach. Teacher education programs in SSA appear to bear more characteristics of the applied-science and apprenticeship approaches and less of the reflective model.

CHARACTERISTICS OF AFRICAN VERSUS WESTERN MODELS OF TEACHING PRACTICUM

First, no matter what orientation they represent, practicums in Sub-Saharan African countries are typically of short durations. In Ghana, the University of Cape Coast (UCC) model devotes six hours a week for two full semesters to on-campus (micro) teaching, where pre-service teachers practice the craft of teaching with their peers. But the off-campus where students experience actual classroom teaching lasts only 20 days. The University of Education, Winneba (UEW) and Teacher Training Colleges (TTCs) in Ghana, have an internship model in which students experience a full year of independent teaching in the classroom, but this is perhaps one of the few exceptions in Sub-Saharan Africa. In comparison, western models have longer durations: 45 to 100 days in Australia, 120 days in Denmark, 120 to 160 days in the United Kingdom, and 40/50 days in the United States (Education and Training Committee (ETC), 2005).

Second, most practicums in Africa place pre-service teachers not more than once in real schools and classrooms for five days per week, working under the same teacher for the entire duration of the practicum. Again, in Ghana this is the practice in UCC; although UEW and the TTCs have few days of observation before internship. In general, the focus is more on preparing teachers for work in classrooms than work in schools and communities. It needs pointing out that placing student teachers in a school with individual mentors rather than in schools with a number of different mentors does not provide student teachers with the diversity of teaching expertise they need. For even when the mentor exhibits many of the characteristics and capabilities favoured by the ideology of a teacher education program, it cannot be assumed that the expertise that is exhibited by that one mentor is exhaustively excellent and sufficient to prepare the novice for situations different from the one in the mentor's classroom.

The international trend, however, is toward a tiered model of teaching practicum corresponding to course years. In this model, the practicum begins with occasional visits to multiple sites very early in the course, followed by a few days per week of teaching for a time and finally, a full term, semester or year of independent teaching later in the course. In this way, learning to teach becomes a gradual and cumulative process during which the pre-service teacher progressively takes more responsibility for whole class activities and increasing independence in operations in classrooms and schools.

Third, there is lack of diversity in the practicum experience, a consequence of the block placement described above. Often pre-service teachers do all their practicum in one or the same school setting with the same group of students. Few practicums involve the placement of pre-service teachers in different school settings. The placement of pre-service teachers into particular classrooms and schools

is often made on the basis of administrative convenience rather than on the basis of which settings can provide them the best learning experience. In UCC, pre-service teachers do their 4-week off-campus teaching practice in the same school. This model does not prepare teachers to teach everybody's children but just children like themselves (Zeichner, 1996). In contrast, many western countries have strict requirements relating to diversity of practicum experience. In the United Kingdom, United States and Australia, teaching practicum takes place in at least two different school settings; covers different geographical, cultural and socio-economic settings; involves different grade levels; and provides opportunities for students to focus on the community and its relationship to the school (ETC, 2005).

Fourth, one also observes a conspicuous lack of involvement of schools in the planning, delivery and assessment of practicum, or in determining how coursework fits the aspirations of the education community. In the few cases where school-based supervisors are appointed as in the internship program of UEW and TTCs, they make very little input in determining what is expected of students and the criteria for assessing their performance. The result is that school-based supervisors and student teachers are only vaguely aware, if at all, of the purpose and goals and desired experiences of the practicum and its relationship to the overall teacher education program.

During the 2008 practicum, due to inadequate funds, the Teaching Practice Unit, UCC asked the few collaborating teachers in the schools not to do any work until they were told to do so. Western models of practicum acknowledge that the planning, delivery and assessment of teaching practice "should confirm the obligations and rights of schools and the profession to have a key role in credentialing pre-service teachers, to guarantee that graduates have demonstrated the skills and understanding necessary to begin unsupervised, independent teaching and to enter the profession" (ETC, 2005, p. 143). Accordingly, schools play a greater role especially in the mentoring and assessment of pre-service teachers. The University of Melbourne in Australia, for instance, uses the assessment by collaborating teachers to determine a pre-service teacher's final grade in the practicum.

Fifth, the quality of supervision or mentoring is generally uneven, despite the existence of examples of good mentoring practices in some programs. Several reasons explain this. The act of volunteering to work with pre-service teachers frequently serves as the sole quality control in the selection of mentors; therefore mentors may not have the qualities desired by college and university teacher educators. Colleges and universities provide little formal training for teachers who want to assume mentorship roles; and when they do, teachers are typically given very little information about, let alone allowed to make input into determining, the teacher education program curriculum. Furthermore, in most cases, collaborating teachers are not given the time and support to perform their roles as teacher educators. They usually do the mentoring work in addition to handling a full teacher's work, but given very little recognition and reward. Likewise, college and university supervisors are not given adequate institutional incentives. Consequently, the lessons of experience for pre-service teachers in the practicum are often determined by the luck of the draw, and not as a planned part of the curriculum (Zeichner, 1996). In fact, the concept of practicum curriculum is not clearly defined in many teacher education programs in SSA.

In these situations, it is probable that the real experiences of pre-service teachers during the practicum would conflict with the aspirations that college and university teacher educators have for them. Also, for the most part, very little deep thinking about teaching and learning goes on in supervisory conferences with pre-service teachers. Collaborating teachers and college or university supervisors appear

reluctant to discuss controversial issues (e.g. what student behaviours were considered inappropriate) or to offer critical feedback for fear of upsetting the delicate interpersonal balance of the triad (Zeichner, 1996). In programs where it is the evaluation from either the collaborating teacher or university supervisor that counts towards the pre-service teacher's final grade, pre-service teachers might ignore the comments of the other supervisor.

Sixth, in many instances, the timing of the practicum does not allow pre-service teachers to experience school settings from the first day of the new academic year. This is common in western models as well. The reasons for this include huge differences in dates for commencing and ending the academic year for schools, colleges and universities; schools finding it challenging to take on pre-service teachers during this busy time; and colleges and universities not prioritizing such opportunities in the timetabling of their courses. Whatever the reasons, the timing of the practicum denies pre-service teachers the invaluable "opportunity to experience the process of setting up a new classroom and how relationships are formed with new groups of school children" (ETC, 2005, p. 147).

Finally, it appears no deliberate attempt is made to link theory and practice in how the practicum is planned and administered. Therefore, pre-service teachers rarely see the connection between the practicum and the theoretical components of teacher education undertaken in colleges or universities. Western models are increasingly requiring a tighter link between theory and practice. The New York State Department of Education, for example, requires that teaching practicum be aligned with individual units of study, to reinforce specific learning (ETC, 2005). To illustrate, pre-service teachers undertaking a course in curriculum development must also work on curriculum development projects in a school during this unit.

CHALLENGES IN EFFECTIVE DELIVERY OF QUALITY PRACTICUM

Perhaps, the inability of colleges and universities to offer quality practicum to pre-service teachers is due to the challenges involved in achieving this. Two key challenges consistently face teacher education providers. The first is the cost of delivery. Within the constraints of limited institutional budgetary allocation for teaching practicum, it has become increasingly difficult to adequately remunerate college/university and school-based supervisors and meet the high administrative costs associated with the practicum. In UCC, the total cost of delivering the practicum (covering payment to schools, university visitations and university-based support services) for the 2007/2008 academic year was estimated to be forty-five thousand Ghana cedis (Gh¢ 45,000). It may be argued that this amount, though substantial, is more than warranted given the importance of the practicum to the preparation of future teachers. But any such argument must be cast alongside consideration of the limited resources of colleges and universities in Africa. Even developed countries face the same problem. In a national study into the organization of teaching practicum in Australia, deans of education faculties complained of inadequate government funding as disincentive to both universities and schools to engage in practicum placements (ETC, 2005). Inadequate resources for the practicum implies inadequate time spent in the schools by college/university and school-based supervisors to provide high quality mentoring.

The second major challenge is the increasing difficulty in finding quality practicum placements for pre-service teachers, due to unwillingness of some schools to take on pre-service teachers. The result of this is that some pre-service teachers are either placed at levels other than the ones they are training for, teach their minor subjects instead of their majors or defer their practicum to the next year. In Ghana,

the problem of finding placement for pre-service teachers became exacerbated in the 2007/2008 academic year. This was because a new education reform had just been launched which required that first year students in senior high school (year 10) study only core subjects. The third year students had also finished their final examination and vacated. This limited the capacity of schools to take on many pre-service teachers, as those who taught elective subjects had only second year students to teach. It also meant that some pre-service teachers had less than the minimum number of teaching periods. Accommodation problems may also necessitate placing some pre-service teachers in communities and schools other than where they would have had the most rewarding experience. It is probable that with the gradual increase in the number of private universities with education departments and the trend towards internship models of practicum (which usually take longer periods), finding practicum placements for pre-service teachers would become more difficult, if there is no corresponding increase in the number of schools.

In sum, the structural and institutional contexts in which the practicum exists and the challenges which confront African countries in its planning and management make the program unable to provide acceptable answers to Feiman-Neimser and Buchmann's (1985) three questions referred to above.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REFORM

The following recommendations are made for improving the practicum so that it prepares pre-service teachers for the full scope of teacher's role, helps them accomplish the purposes of schooling with all students, and develop the capacity to learn from further experience.

Re-conceptualize the Practicum

There is a need to re-conceptualize the practicum, first, by giving it equal attention as any other course in the teacher education program. The practicum should have a curriculum that articulates a well-thought out pedagogical philosophy, specifies the kinds of experiences pre-service teachers are expected to have in the classroom, in schools and in communities, and the competencies they need to meet these experiences. This means that courses in curriculum and pedagogy taught in teacher education programs should be driven by the same pedagogical position. It also means that in places where a centralized administrative body, such as the Teaching Practice Unit of the University of Cape Coast, coordinates practicum for many different subject areas, the departments which teach those subjects should be involved in the planning of the practicum.

The re-conceptualization should also have a broader view of the pre-service teacher's work so that pre-service teachers are prepared not only for work in classrooms, but also for collaborative work in schools as part of learning communities, and for developing positive relationships with the external communities served by schools.

The importance of practicing teachers as collaborators in the training of pre-service teachers should be acknowledged in all teacher education programs and, particularly, in every phase of the practicum. This would make it easier to assign practicing teachers appropriate roles in planning and delivery of the practicum.

In view of the changing nature of teachers' work in the current information and knowledge society, any model of practicum adopted in teacher education must be oriented towards an image of the teacher as

a 'reflective practitioner' rather than a 'technician' (Schon, 1983). Increasingly, teaching is becoming a complex activity, requiring teachers to develop creative responses to the challenge of circumstance. The ability to do this lies in critical reflection.

Restructure the Practicum

African teacher education institutions would need to consider increasing the duration of teaching practicum according to program and pre-service teacher background. For pre-service teachers without supervised teaching experience and doing 3-year or 4-year diploma or undergraduate programs a duration of one year such as that of UEW and the TTCs in Ghana is recommended. For one-year programs involving postgraduate students with some supervised teaching experience, 8 to 10 weeks of teaching practicum is recommended. This would, no doubt, involve additional costs but it would yield immeasurable dividends in terms of teacher effectiveness and student achievement. But the entire period should not be devoted to one block placement toward the end of the program, as currently happens in Ghana. Again, pre-service teachers' background should provide a guide. Pre-service teachers with strong preparation in their subject areas, should be introduced to curriculum and pedagogy courses early in their program and thereafter start the practicum. Those without adequate preparation in their subject areas should have some subject content and pedagogy courses before embarking on the practicum. In all cases, there should be a tiered model of practicum corresponding to course years. This means there is a beginning practicum featuring occasional visits to multiple sites very early in the program, a mid-practicum comprising a day or two per week over a period of time, and a full term or semester of independent teaching later in the year. The final placement should provide opportunities for students to focus on the community and its relationship to the school. A tiered practicum model makes it possible to place students in a variety of school settings, including schools in rural areas or serving poor children, so that the practicum helps prepare teachers to teach everybody's children, and not just children like themselves (Zeichner, 1996).

Coordinate Subject-Matter and Pedagogy Courses

The effectiveness of the practicum must be seen to have its roots in the way subject matter and methods courses are organized and taught. It is important that academic faculties help student teachers understand the key concepts in their disciplines rather than just memorizing lots of information. They must also become more concerned about the pedagogical implications of the subject-matter knowledge they teach to prospective teachers. The teaching of subject-matter knowledge and courses on teaching and learning to prospective teachers needs to be properly coordinated. One way in which this coordination can occur is through the development of new partnerships that involve team teaching of subject-matter and methods courses by academic and education faculty. This way, student teachers would see how theory and practice are related.

Encourage Reflection on Personal Practice

On the one hand, pre-service teachers should be encouraged to learn from the thinking and practices of their collaborating teachers, from the wisdom of educational research, and from the academic disciplines. On the other hand, they must be helped to become clearer about their own personal and practical theories, which inform and are informed by their practice, and to establish themselves as researchers and reflective practitioners. This will help them be selective and critical about how they use externally generated theories and knowledge. Ideally, this reflection about teaching should take place in

collaborative settings so as not to contribute further to the isolation of teachers from their colleagues. Paired placements and peer supervision can be used to help build the disposition and skill to work collaboratively. The criteria for assessing the practicum should necessarily include the student's personal reflection and evaluation.

Restructure the Institutional Context

None of these things discussed above can be accomplished very well without major changes in the current institutional context of the practicum. A number of measures can be adopted. First, collaborating teachers should be involved in the development of program-wide requirements and the evaluation criteria for the practicum. This way, collaborating teachers would see themselves as owners, colleagues, teacher educators and equal participants in the practicum and not as people who are called in as mere window shoppers. They would also be better positioned to provide good mentoring to student teachers.

Second, government bodies responsible for teacher education (e. g. Teacher Education Division in Ghana) must recognize the special status of collaborating teachers on the promotion ladder and in the definition of their work. Collaborating teachers should be given time to do the important work of mentoring and accorded the status and recognition they deserve for doing this work. This support should include some released time to meet with pre-service teachers and some formal preparation and continuing support for mentors. Teacher education colleges and universities can reallocate some of their existing resources, for example, a portion of the tuition money paid by pre-service teachers, to the schools where their students practice, to provide some released time for collaborating teachers. These efforts should be supplemented by the government bodies responsible for teacher education.

Thirdly, it would be helpful to situate the practicum within new institutional partnerships, created in schools that have adopted teacher education as a central part of their missions. I refer here to arrangements similar to professional development schools (PDS) – also called professional practice schools or partnership schools, which are common in North America. These schools are usually part of the public school system and are often jointly managed by school authorities, and colleges and universities. They have a special commitment to the preparation of teachers and to the learning of all adults who work in them. There is some evidence in the literature that PDSs adopt a distinct philosophical approach to the practicum, and evolve particular practices that address obstacles to teacher learning (Darling-Hammond, 1994). Teitel (1992, p. 80) argues, for instance, that PDS partnerships “represent a philosophical approach that values lessons of practice, and invites experienced teachers to help prepare aspiring teachers, both on site and at the college”. In PDSs, pre-service teachers are typically placed with teams of teachers rather than individual collaborating teachers, thus addressing some of the problems of single class placements. Zeichner (1996) has argued that professional development schools offer much promise in addressing some of the enduring problems of the practicum; have the potential to raise the status of practicum work both in schools and teacher education institutions; to give school personnel a greater role in the total teacher education program; to create greater coherence in the teacher education curriculum, and to create a greater role for mentoring.

As a result of resource constraints in Africa, not all countries can establish PDSs within the short-or medium term period. But clearly, all countries can have college/university-school partnerships that provide a distinctive practice-theory orientation to professional and pre-service teacher education. With

stronger partnerships, it should be possible for colleges and universities to have longer periods of practicum and pay their partner schools for part of the period. Payment for the other days could be in the form of colleges and universities organizing professional development for the schools or compensating them in some other ways.

Finally, it is important that every country has a national teaching body that will develop a set of common standards governing the design, management and assessment of practicum programs applicable to all teacher education providers and users. In Ghana, the national teaching council proposed in the Education Act of 2008, when established, should see the development of guidelines for teaching practicum as an important role.

NOTE

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