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Teaching Practice Experience for Undergraduate Student Teachers: A Case Study of the Department of Education at Sokoine University of Agriculture, Tanzania

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Abstract
Education is the key to development; however, it is impossible to think the quality of education without having academically qualified and professional responsible teachers. The main objective of this study was to examine the perspectives of undergraduate student teachers toward teaching practice experience as a tool of learning to teach. A qualitative research methods approach using semi - structure questionnaires was carried out to 351 second and third year undergraduate student teachers in the department of education of the Faculty of Science at Sokoine University of Agriculture. The findings indicate that the student teachers perceived teaching practice as an important tool of learning to teach because it promoted the development of teaching experience and prepared them for the real world of work. The results also revealed that teaching practice is sufficiently emphasised and lack of financial support and the mismatch of the teaching practice period with local secondary school calendar were the main challenges. The study recommends provision of adequate fund on time, close supervision, building strong university partnership with the local secondary schools need interventions if not be improved and given its due attention.
Keywords: Practicum experience, Undergraduate, Education students, Morogoro, Tanzania.

1. Introduction

Practice teaching is an important component towards becoming a teacher. It provides experiences to student teachers in the actual teaching and learning environment. 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. Student-teachers also know the value of teaching practice and they perceive it as the important aspect of their preparation for the teaching profession since it provides for the real interface between student hood and membership of the profession (Rakesh Ranjan, 2013).

Teachers in a society are thought to be agents of change as they are central to the delivery of quality education. Quality teachers are the greatest determinant of student achievement and their impact are greater than any other social factors, including class size, parent education, and income and language background (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, NCTAF, 1997). Teachers play an important role in shaping the future of individuals as well as of entire generations. They can also influence the economic dynamism of the country by imparting skills that translate into innovation and productivity in the workplace (Goldhaber and Anthony, 2004). Because of the current changing and challenging world, teachers should be provided with a range of skills, knowledge, attitudes and relevant educational experience that enable them to cope up with the challenge.

Education is expected to play several key roles in an effort of developing country socio-economic and cultural status. However, it is impossible to think of quality education without having academically qualifies and professionally responsible teachers on the schools. Thus, for teachers to play their role effectively in schools there must be a well-designed and successfully implemented teaching practice program for student teachers that aims at producing teachers who are academically qualified, professionally skilled, and attitudinally and ethically committed to their profession. The teacher's character and quality competence are the most significant factors which influence the education quality and its contribution to national development (Kumar and Ratnalikar, 2005).

Given and ideal syllabus and sufficient time for teaching, a teacher will not successful achieve unless he/she is enthusiastic about the work, knows the subject and how to teach, keen, well informed, loves the subject and believes in its values in spite of difficulties and hand carps (Kumar and Ratnalikar, 2005). Teaching Practice (TP) program in Tanzania teachers colleges and universities takes place national wide in implementing teacher education curriculum but with some challenges such as lack of resources, funds and inappropriate teaching practice coordination. Therefore, it is suggested that undergraduate student teachers should attend teaching practice in secondary schools and the government should improve the classroom settings and reasonable

resources. This means that if classroom learning is to be effective, teachers must well be trained and should be ready to assume their professional responsibility. The teachers training program aimed at developing better teaching skills among student teachers. Student teachers in field-based programs have the opportunity to use their teaching practice experiences to regularly apply pedagogical theory and course learning to assist them to develop as a skilful, knowledgeable and reflective teacher (Bell, 2004).

The provision of education has undergone several changes that aim at improving its quality. One obvious move is the improvement of the teaching process to reflect new needs of society. In our context this involved improving teacher training and introduction of competence-based education approaches (Mkonongwa, 2012). Recently in Tanzania, it has been noted that teaching sector (example secondary teacher education) does not attract academically able and professionally motivated students towards teaching carrier. The government has been encouraging many universities to offer teacher training programs which its implementation seem to work properly. However, the problem of teaching practice for undergraduate students' teachers has not been studied.

Therefore, the objective of this study was to explore/understand/describe the perception of undergraduate student teachers to teaching practice experience with emphasis to the education degree program, curriculum content and implementation of the TP and their profession. The results from the current study provide valuable information regarding the TP experience for undergraduate student teacher at the Faculty of Science at Sokoine University of Agriculture (SUA). Besides, the study will not only help education implementers, TP coordinators and administrators will understand better the challenges of the teaching practice program at SUA but also give baseline data set of literature related to TP.

Traditionally a learner was considered as an empty vessel to be filled with knowledge. In this context a teacher was considered a pivotal deliverer of knowledge. With the emergence of such learning theories as constructivism, the move has now shifted from content/teacher centred to the competence/learner-centred approach. The introduction of the competency-based curricula by the Tanzania Institute of Education in 2005 was a reflection of world-wide changes aimed at concentrating on the teaching and learning process that emphasizes the real world application of respective course content materials and the reorientation of education to focus on promotion of practical knowledge or required competencies (Mkonongwa, 2012). In an attempt to cope with the new needs in the teaching and learning process, teacher education has tried to adjust itself. Marais and Meir (2004) observed that despite the fact that university lecturers value teaching practice as the bridge between theory and practice, student teachers sometimes found it difficult to relate course content to everyday classroom practice.

The framework for teacher education proposes the preparation process of teachers be done in such a way that it reflects the paradigm shift from the content-based to competency-based approach in teaching and learning (TIE, 2009). Schultz (2005) provides support for the concept of day-to-day problem solving capacity development through practicum learning. The study highlighted the need for teacher preparation to support new teacher inquiry to help teacher candidates use problem solving approaches when they face the day-to-day challenges in a classroom. A study by Brouwer & Korthagen (2005) confirmed the role of the practicum in the overall development of competent teachers. While both classroom theory and practicum experiences were found to be contributors to a new teacher's development, the practicum in a school context was more influential than the course components of the teacher education program on the development of teaching competence**.**

However, the nature of the practicum has also been found to matter when teacher competencies are the desired outcome. In a study by Beck, Kosnik, and Rowsell (2007), researchers identified the need for more focus in the practicum on practical issues related to the daily tasks of functioning in a classroom. In this study, teacher candidates identified six characteristics or skills needed to be provided and developed in their preparation programs to prepare them to teach, including: theoretical understanding, practical knowledge and skills, comprehensive program planning ability, knowledge of what must be done in the first few weeks of school, understanding and skill in assessment and evaluation, and knowledge of how to implement effective group work. It is interesting to note that five of these six characteristics relate to implementation practices that might be expected to develop in teacher candidates during their practicum placements, even though the participants in the study also identified the need to have theoretical understanding.

2. Materials and Methods

The study was conducted in Sokoine University of Agriculture, Faculty of Science, and department of education in January 2015. From a total of 501 undergraduate student teachers, samples of 216 second year and 135 third year students for the 2014/2015 academic year were the subject of the study. The two classes were selected because these student teachers were expected to have better experience and exposure to teaching practice program from their previous year (hence first year students were ruled out). In order to get better representative of the subjects, all student teachers who were willing to take part in this study and had experience with teaching practice (i.e. 2nd and 3rd years) were selected. Self-administered questionnaire were used to collect data given and were filled by the student teacher in a classroom setting under close supervision to avoid influence of one's

results by other subject.

3. Ethical Issue

As to the ethical issue the following ethical and moral concerns were addressed; harms and benefits were assessed for the wellbeing of research participants, informed consent were secured (participant understanding of what it means to participate in the study were ensured), privacy and confidentiality were kept (participants' identities and the data were protected).

4. Results and Discussion

The characteristics of the undergraduate teachers who participated in this study are shown in Table 1. It can be observed that nearly one-third of the second year and one-half of the third year student teachers were males. The number of students teachers were on average similar between subject combination in both gender except for those taking mathematics and informatics.

4.1 Name and Curriculum Contents of Education Degree Program

In Tanzania the name for the degree programs for secondary education teachers is either BSc/BA with education or B.Ed. Table 1 shows the perception of the student teachers on the naming of the BSc education degree programs. About 50% of the respondent strongly agreed to the name BSc with education given to their education degree program and 76% argued that the name BSc with education is an appropriate name referring the actual professional of the individual and also the program prevents secondary schools from loosing teachers. These respondents thought that the name is their identification of the profession. On the other hand 15% of the respondents argued that the name makes no sense as it gives them no chance to join other jobs and also currently the BSc with education degree program is less respected among the society than other non-educational degree programs. These, give less professional satisfaction.

Table 1: Characteristics of the students' teachers by subject combination and gender

Subject combination	**Year 2**		**Year 3**		**Total**
	Male	**Female**	**Male**	**Female**	
Chemistry/Biology	39	12	36	21	108
Geography/Biology	25	9	17	18	69
Geography/Mathematics	37	7	11	3	58
Mathematics/Informatics	4	4	11	5	24
Agriculture	32	21			53
Total students	157	59	87	48	351

Table 2 also provide summary of the general attitude of the students' teachers on the current naming of BSc with education by teaching subjects (e.g. BSc (Chemistry/Biology). About, 73% agreed on the naming of the degree program by teaching subject, however, 27% of the respondents disagreed with the naming mainly because it gives no attention to satisfy the needs and interest of the student teachers. It is also pointed out that the new naming system mainly emphasize on producing a greater number of teachers than qualified specific subjects teachers. Moreover, Table 2 indicates that most of the respondents (37%) see the curriculum content of the education degree program emphasis equally on the knowledge of subjects matter, teaching and practical skills approaches. It is argued that a teacher can not address the knowledge of subject matter to the students unless an appropriate teaching method is used. Also having more knowledge of the subject matter is thought to be the base to produce competent technologist. About 20% of the respondents saw that the curriculum content emphasizes more on the teaching skills and experience since it is what is needed during their education training program while 4% noted to emphasize less on the knowledge of the subject matter than practical skills.

Table 2. Student teachers perception about the naming of their degree program and the curriculum content

Response	Y2	%	Y3	%	Total	%
Previous name of the degree program "BSc with Education						
Strongly agree	105	49	70	52	175	50
Agree	90	42	47	35	137	39
Disagree	10	5	11	8	21	6
Strongly disagree	11	5	7	5	18	5
Does the name BSc with Education						
Make sense to you	169	78	98	73	267	76
Makes no sense to you	30	14	22	16	52	15
You are not sure	17	8	15	11	32	9
Current naming the degree program by the teaching subjects						
Strongly agree	79	37	52	39	131	37
Agree	86	40	40	30	126	36
Disagree	32	15	26	19	58	17
Strongly disagree	19	9	17	13	36	10
BSc with Education curriculum (content)						
Emphasize more on the knowledge of subjects matter than practical skills	81	38	49	36	130	37
Emphasize less on the knowledge of subjects matter than practical skills	9	4	6	4	15	4
Emphasize more on the teaching skills and experience	44	20	26	19	70	20
Equal emphasis on all approaches	82	38	54	40	136	39

4.2 Students' Teachers Teaching Professional Plan

Table 3 shows the teaching plans for the undergraduate student teachers for the subject combination available at the Faculty of Science (SUA). It can be seen from Table 3 that about 47% of the student teachers planned and 45% did not plan to be secondary school teachers. These results suggest that the current attitude of the society affects students' teachers not to be interested in the teaching profession. It should be noted that any profession is highly dependent not only on its contribution for societal change and development but also to the income it generates to the individual.

In recent years, Tanzanians have been arguing that being a teacher creates challenges on the individuals some of which are low salary payment, working in remote areas of the country where there is lack of infrastructures and technological advancements and drop up of social respect in the communities. But, in general the results for the student teachers who planned to be teachers show that the undergraduate students' teachers at SUA love their profession while attending teaching practice.

Table 3. Student teachers previous plan to be teachers in specific subject

Teacher	Agric	Bios	Info	Chem	Geo	Maths	Phys	Total	Frequency (%)
Planned	42	81	20	69	52	71	10	345	47
Not planned	10	49	57	38	58	50	69	331	45
Not sure	0	4	18	9	4	7	11	53	7
Total	52	134	95	116	114	128	90	729	100

Agric, agriculture; Bios, biology; Info, informatics; Chem, chemistry; Geo, geography; Maths, mathematics; and Phys, physics

4.3 The Weight and Challenges of Teaching Practice

The teaching practice is an integral part of the curriculum of BSc with education degree program in Tanzania where students' teachers are expected to spend about eight (8) weeks carryout in difference secondary schools in the country. Figure 1 shows the perception of students' teachers on the weight given to teaching practice. The results show that the student teachers concur with the present of TP in the curriculum and 50% of the respondents suggested that the credit hours given for TP is sufficient while 18% argued that TP is given more weight than needed. On the other hand, 32% the students' teachers find that the TP has not been given sufficient credit hours to allow adequate coverage of teaching practical skills and appropriate attention. In conclusion, the results indicate that teaching practice in BSc with education degree program at SUA is emphasized and given sufficient weight in the curriculum as noted by the undergraduate student teachers.

Teaching practice program has a lot of challenges that create a negative impact on the time management of the program and on the academic knowledge of the student teachers. Table 4 shows some problems as perceived by the student teachers during their previous teaching practice. As can be seen from the Table 4, 30% of the respondents pointed out that lack of financial and materials support together with mismatch of TP with the secondary schools calendar were the major problem during teaching practice. The problem of negative attitude of fellow in-service teacher in the local schools and even secondary school students was also seen as challenge to the student teachers. The other challenges that the respondents report were inadequate supervision (8%) and insufficient time for TP (6%).

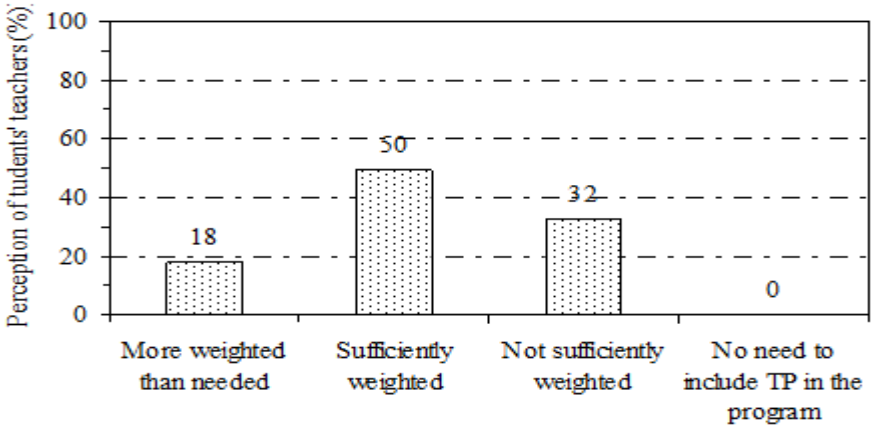

Figure 1. Perception of students' teachers on the weight given to teaching practice

Table 4. The problems of teaching practice for students' teachers at the Faculty of Science (SUA)

Response	Respondents	Frequency (%)
Inadequate supervision	66	8
Insufficient time for practice	48	6
Time mismatched with schools calendar	205	26
Lack of financial and material support	233	30
Theoretical knowledge has no relation teaching practice	55	7
Negative attitude of local school teachers and students on TP teachers	172	22

Moreover, student's teachers are relatively less interested to learn more than passing examinations, instructors over load the learners at the end of the semester, cover one chapter in a single period and others fail to cover relevant chapters of the course. Most examinations are always prepared in a way that encourage the student teacher to write memorized lecture notes and handouts than critical thinking on the concept. Instructors are overloaded and some of them are forced to handle courses in which they are not specialized. There is a large number of student teachers with a shortage of relevant reference materials. Mostly the withdrawal and complete dismissals are female students. The study indicates that there is a problem of late beginning of teaching practice and TP supervisors are unable to manage the large number of student teachers due to lack of coordination and follow up of problems. Teaching practice program gives no attention to satisfy the needs and interest of the student teachers and supervisors.

5. Conclusion

The perception voiced by the student teacher regarding their teaching practice experience indicated that the program has some deficiencies that make the experience stressful. Issues related to inadequacy of budget allocated for the students during the Teaching Practice, assessment problems, inadequate support and secondary school students' disciplinary problems emerged as themes from student teachers response. It is clear that student practical experience is vital to the preparation of qualified teachers. The effectiveness of the Teaching Practice program is highly linked to its quality components. Therefore, it is imperative that the concerned bodies must ensure the quality of the teaching practice so that the students can find it educative and supportive. However, to the contrary the finding revealed that the program has deficiencies that put question marks on the quality of school based practical experience of student teachers. The insightful response of student teachers about their practicum experiences are very much important and must be acted up on to make the experience fulfilling and satisfying. Another important issue voiced repeatedly by student teachers was the steps that must be taken by the university to make school based practical experience adequate and fulfilling so that the student teachers were easily acclimatized to the teaching profession.

The suggestions emerged from the study regarding what the university should do were provision of adequate fund, continuous follow-up of the program, building strong partnership with the school and provision of effective supervisors. The teaching practice is emphasized than needed and create a negative impact on other relative courses. The BSc with education curriculum content gives equal emphasis on both knowledge of the subject matter and method of teaching is more preferable by most of the student teachers. Lack of sufficient facilities is the most serious problem influencing Teaching Practice implementation. Lack of financial and material support and inadequate supervision are the major challenges of teaching practice. Nearly equal percent of the student teachers interviewed planned and did not plan to be teachers but they do love their profession somehow.

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