Zimbabwean University Student Teachers' Workplace Professional Learning During the Covid - 19 Pandemic Period: Challenges and Opportunities

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ABSTRACT

While Covid – 19 created many challenges for student teachers on work – related learning, it opened new learning opportunities for them. The study was conducted during the Covid – 19 pandemic period with the purpose of exploring challenges and opportunities encountered by university student – teachers on teaching practice. The study used a multi – case study design with two primary and two secondary schools in Masvingo province which hosted the students during their teaching practice. The purposefully selected sample was of eight students and their mentors. The data collection instruments were open - ended interviews and non – participant observation of lessons. The study revealed that student teachers lost a lot of professional practice opportunities due to the Covid - 19 pandemic. The findings revealed that the university made limited visits hence making little contribution to the professional development of the student teachers. Schools also had difficulties in helping these trainee teachers to process new teaching skills. However, all was not gloom as student teachers had the opportunity to update their technological skills. Generally, the study concluded that during the pandemic, teacher workplace professional learning took a serious knock. The student teachers were not adequately prepared and initiated by mentors and the university into the teaching profession because of Covid – 19 pandemic. The study recommends that the students' teaching practice stint be prolonged with the easing of Covid - 19 and the availability of vaccines. This would enable them to emerge from the schools with the right set of knowledge and skills to practice as professional teachers upon completion of their studies.

Keywords: Covid – 19 pandemic, workplace professional learning, student teacher, teaching practice, work related learning

INTRODUCTION

Workplace professional learning for university student teachers during the Covid – 19 pandemic period was a unique experience given the health fears associated with the virus. The school and the classroom contexts required both student teachers and their mentors to consider strong adaptation measures that would enable student teachers to obtain maximum professional benefit from the environmental constraints imposed by the pandemic. Ideally, student teachers on teaching practice learn teaching skills in real life contexts where they experiment with ideas and strategies in the classroom ably assisted by their mentors. These spaces to demonstrate and showcase their conceptualization of the content, skills and general instructional practices were closed as result of the pandemic. However, the disruption of the traditional face to face classroom settings created opportunities for both student teachers and mentors to think outside the box by adjusting to other strategies to ensure continued professional learning while on teaching practice.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Education remains the biggest industry in many countries and the significance of teachers in this industry cannot be over - emphasized (Kang, Cha & Ha, 2013). Teacher education the world over invariably has a teaching practice component. The concept of teaching practice is variously termed as practice teaching, practicum, school based experience, workplace professional teacher learning, among others. All these terms are used to describe that period during the training of teachers when trainees are given an opportunity to try out, develop, sharpen and improve their skills, knowledge, and attitudes using real pupils in a real classroom contexts. Student teachers' preparation through workplace professional learning lies at the heart of teacher development discourses.

Workplace professional learning is about the student teacher to gain professional knowledge and understanding, professional skills and abilities. Teaching is the work of a teacher, and as such it is a very important activity. Teaching is a multifaceted process encompassing a variety of activities which are all aimed at promoting some learning in pupils. Teaching refers to various deliberate and conscious activities undertaken by qualified, knowledgeable, trained and experienced individuals in order to enable others to learn (Onwuka, 1981).

Teaching is a very noble profession which needs to be given due respect. For the teaching profession to be given that respect there is need for a proper system of training teachers who provide the necessary teaching service. Kasambira (1995) says that the purpose of teaching practice is to give the student teacher under guidance, the opportunity to develop and assess his or her competencies and attitudes in the major areas of school activities. The student teacher on teaching practice should acquire knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that empower them to make meaningful professional teaching and learning decisions in the classroom based on set standards. The Zimbabwean Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (2015: 8) produced a template for teacher professional standards which reports on a number of skills teachers need to possess for effective classroom curriculum implementation namely:

- Knowledge and understanding in interpreting curriculum documents, planning coherent and stimulating lessons
- Communicate effectively, including use of teaching – learning media

- Use of a variety of teaching strategies including ICTs
- Cater for learner individual differences including strengths, weakness, needs and challenges
- Collaborate with colleagues in using a variety of data to evaluate the outcomes of teaching and learning contexts
- Organize and manage classes effectively using approaches which are appropriate to learners' needs
- Maintain meaningful and informative records
- Prepare learners for both formative and summative assessments in relevant curriculum areas.

These skills are learnt in practice by student teachers as they set themselves on the correct professional teaching path. Thus, workplace professional learning becomes a critical and essential strategy to train teachers for the Zimbabwean primary and secondary schools. It is, therefore, necessary to handle it with appropriate educational response even during the Covid – 19 pandemic period.

Discourses on professional teacher development has increased in recent years given the knock – on effect it has on schools, teacher practice and learners' academic achievements (Kang, Cha & Ha, 2013, Postholm, 2012). Chikezie (2017) observes that a sound professional preparation is necessary for successful teaching profession. In addition, teaching practice constitutes an important and indispensable component of the process involved in the adequate preparation of professional teachers. For effective teaching to take place there is need to have a well-trained teacher. According to the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (2015) teacher effectiveness has a powerful impact on learners since the quality of the teacher is the most single most important in – school factor influencing learning achievement. This can only be achieved if there is proper supervision of that teacher during training. Preparing student teachers and have relevant experiences to take them to a level where they are ready and confident to face the challenges of classroom practice may be a taxing process. The process describes the multilayered and complex interactive ways within the context of teacher professional learning (Becker, 2015). Reimers (2003) in Alene and Prasadh (2019) identified the interplay among conceptual, contextual and methodological factors as critical in work - related teacher professional learning. Kwakman (2003) generally believes that personal, task and work environment factors contribute significantly to successful workplace professional learning especially for student teachers given that they are still learning the skills of the trade.

There is growing evidence to suggest that student teachers' workplace professional learning can only develop in collegial interaction and environments. Timperley (2008) observes that for student teachers in professional learning to develop effective practices, they need multiple opportunities to learn about the curriculum, effective teaching and assessment, to revisit partially understood concepts as they try them out in real everyday teaching contexts. In the same vein, Fullan (1991) in Mswazie (2013) says that novice student teachers need knowledge and skills, subject matter, general management and instructional pedagogy and ability to diagnose and evaluate outcomes.

These skills are developed alongside their application in practice where experienced professional teachers model, give support and guidance complemented by supervision from the parent university. Limited and insignificant assistance in this regard may lead to lack of proper professional learning. Davidson (2005) says that teacher workplace professional learning

is a system where teachers in training are exposed to a systemic exposure and learn teaching skills through actual classroom experiences. During this period, the student teacher has to learn how and when to display the skills, knowledge and intellect in the classroom environment. The authors argue that student teachers lost a lot of these practice opportunities because of the Covid 19 pandemic which may impact negatively during their teaching careers. Given that the pandemic took everyone by surprise, there were few opportunities realized by the student teachers.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Covid – 19 pandemic has disrupted the world order in a big way and education remains one of the most affected. One area in education that has suffered is teacher preparation through workplace professional learning commonly referred to as Teaching Practice (TP). While university student teachers on teaching practice have experienced a number of challenges, the situation has also opened up a number of innovative and creative opportunities in order to satisfy and meet professional teacher training requirements. It against this backdrop that the study was undertaken to explore the challenges and opportunities university students on TP experienced which were induced by Covid – 19 pandemic.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study sought to answer the following research questions:

- What Covid – 19 pandemic related challenges did the university student teachers face while on teaching practice?
- What opportunities were created because of the Covid - 19 pandemic for student teachers on teaching practice?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SOCIOCULTURAL THEORY

The theoretical framing that underpins this study is sociocultural theory propounded by Vygotsky in 1978. Critically important about the theory is its major construct that social interaction is involved in human consciousness and cognition. The perspective is that knowledge is socially and contextually constructed with communities of like – minded peers (Bruffee, 1986 in Bargate & Maistry, 2015). The theory was used in this study to analyse the challenges and opportunities experienced by university student teachers on teaching practice during the Covid – 19 pandemic period. The student teacher does not learn in isolation, but learning is achieved in a social group where the group develops the student, and the student also enriches the group thus having a symbiotic learning relationship. Learning, according to Bargate and Maistry (2015), is not context – free but is seen as knowledge construction upon students' unique circumstances. The schools, thus, create a social learning environment where students are mentored by experienced teachers to grow their professional learning. Sociocultural theory becomes relevant in this study in shaping and influencing educational experiences of students during their teaching practice stint.

Muthivhi (2008) recognises that sociocultural theory helps universities to understand not only knowledge about the teacher, but the way knowledge is organised, packaged and how it enlightens the student teacher's practice. At workplace, and in the context of sociocultural theory, the student teachers acquire knowledge, skills and values, methods and materials effective in the teaching - learning contexts and for success in their professional lives. According to Vygotsky (1978) the student teachers' knowledge about teaching has some gaps.

They are in a state of formation and just beginning to mature. The workplace learning should scaffold these student teachers to new teaching experience levels. Using the theory, and according Okeke, Abongdia, Adu, van Wyk & Wolhuter's (2016) observation students should develop new set and variety of developmental experiences and meaning through strategic guidance and aid from mentors. The theory would lessen the theory – praxis gap (Roth & Lee, 2007 in Ritchie 2008). The workplace professional learning should prepare university student teachers through exposure to real life school context for entry into new and demanding classroom challenges.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Teaching practice involves understanding and developing effective critical knowledge, skills, and relationships to accomplish activities with others in a well-defined school and classroom context (Grossman, Compton, Igra, Ronfeldt, Shahan and Williamson, 2009; Temperley, 2008). They further argue that teaching practice should be understood in terms of its goals, activities and its historical tradition developed by others over time. In the same vein, Westbrook, Durrani, Brown, Orr, Pryor, Boddy and Salvi (2013) observe that there are factors that enable and disable student teachers to acquire these important professional skills which include how the student is initiated into the profession, the support services available for the student, resources among others. Thus, Temperley (2008) concluded that effective student teachers' professional learning is strongly shaped by the context in which the practice is done.

While on teaching practice, student teachers learn professional procedures and routines in ways that offer simulated situations related to actual practice (Grossman et al, 2009). According to them, the following three key concepts and processes are critical for understanding the pedagogies of teacher professional learning and practice (Grossman et al, 2009: 2056):

- Representations of practice – the different ways that practice is represented in professional education and what these representations mean to trainee teachers on teaching practice.
- Decomposition of practice – breaking down practice into its constituent parts for the purposes of teaching and learning.
- Approximations of practice – these are opportunities to engage in practices that are more or less to the practices of the profession.

What this implies is that successful workplace professional learning is done in field settings where novice trainee teachers get assistance from mentors to build and grow their knowledge, skills, develop and construct appropriate professional habits. Maphosa an Ndamba (2012) consider the role of mentors in student teacher professional learning as to supervise them through well-conceived expert advice, guidance, and scaffolding by exposing them to a variety of stimulating teaching methods and worthwhile alternatives. In addition, Coe, Aloisi, Higgins and Major (2014) discuss the important attributes that mentors need to grow in their mentees such as strong content knowledge, quality of instruction, creating a conducive learning environment, effective classroom management styles and modeling appropriate professional behaviors. The view is supported by Grossman et al (2009) who write that successful workplace professional learning by student teachers is contingent upon how student teachers and mentors maintain, cultivate and build a productive professional relationship. This relationship is motivated by need to understand that student

teachers lack the knowledge of the complexity and familiarity of the teaching profession and for the mentors to minimize challenges, uncertainties, and anxieties during workplace professional learning. Westbrook et al (2013) are much more concerned with student teachers being assisted by mentors to experiment with ideas in the classroom through lesson observations, joint search for teaching – learning resources, joint scheming, planning and assessment and all these done in authentic teaching – learning contexts.

What has been presented above is the ideal scenario in a normal student teacher professional learning context. Covid – 19 pandemic created abnormal school and classroom situations with the restrictive measures meant to minimize the spread of the virus and limit deaths. The idea was that schools should not become transmission sites. According to Mufanechiya, Mufanechiya and Mudekunye (2020) Covid – 19 pandemic caused major disruptions to traditional teaching and learning modes opting for those methods that ensure World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines are observed. A recent study by Mahyoob (2020) in Saudi Arabia on challenges of e – learning during the Covid – 19 pandemic concluded that the pandemic reshaped the way tertiary education was provided by quickly moving to online mode of teaching providing new opportunities for teachers to be technologically correct. However, this learning mode could not be effectively applied to student teachers' workplace professional training as this required a more practical approach. The situation was exacerbated by the fact that most student teachers were not adequately supervised by university tutors given the physical distances between the university and the schools that hosted the students. Cahapay (2020) in his analysis of the Covid – 19 pandemic situations in schools suggests that there is a need to reconsider the provision of education in general and the teacher workplace professional learning in light of the emerging challenges and opportunities to avoid losses.

The compelling question is how universities can train teachers on teaching practice during this constraining Covid – 19 pandemic period without compromising the quality of the product? Without careful considerations and planning, it appears student teachers may emerge from the workplace training environment with more challenges than opportunities to grow relevant teaching skills. They need to develop relevant knowledge and skills by engaging in interactive practice.

RESEARCH DESIGN: MULTIPLE CASE STUDIES

The study reports a qualitative multiple case study design in which four schools comprising two rural day primary and two rural day secondary schools in Bikita and Zaka districts of Masvingo province were used. The schools were chosen to represent different learning environments and contexts. The multiple case study sometimes referred to as collective case studies provided insights and comprehensive in-depth understanding of a relatively small number (Zach, 2006) of student teachers on workplace professional learning and the challenges situations and opportunities they experienced during the Covid – 19 pandemic period. The design enabled the researchers to study in detail, get a rich and detailed description of the professional challenges and opportunities within the context in which they occurred (Lehman, 2007). Further the design assisted the researchers to particularize and make comparisons between cases and concepts (de Vos et al., 2012) in the districts thus taking the research into the world of participants (Zach, 2006). By using the design, the researchers collected as much data as possible to record the workplace learning

challenges and opportunities the university students experienced during the Covid – 19 pandemic period.

THE SAMPLE

The study used purposeful sampling. The four (4) schools were purposefully chosen to represent the different workplace learning environments in which the university students operated in during the Covid - 19 pandemic period. The small sample, consistent with case study design, allowed the researchers to have a detailed appreciation of the challenges and opportunities experienced by university student teachers on teaching practice because of the Covid – 19 pandemics. Teaching practice was done at different schools' contexts and the sample provided evidence of how the student teachers acquired the necessary set of professional knowledge and skills in those various situations during the Covid – 19 pandemic period. The researchers chose eight (8) university student teachers who were on teaching practice at these schools and their mentors.

DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS

The study used open – ended interviews in respect of student teachers and observation of the school environments and the classrooms where the student teachers taught. Access to schools and the student participants was done through contacts during teaching practice visits when the pandemic had shown a flat carve. The students showed willingness to contribute their lived experiences of workplace professional learning during the Covid - 19 pandemic period. The face-to-face interviews were conducted in accordance with the World Health Organization guidelines and procedures of social distance, sanitizing and mask wearing. These data collection instruments enabled the researchers to discover and uncover several challenges the students faced. The challenges related to environmental factors that militated against proper workplace professional learning for the students and the opportunities realized were recorded.

DATA ANALYSIS STRATEGIES

Interview transcripts were done using content analysis with emerging themes identified. There was comparison of data from the interview transcripts and that from the non – participant observation. The researchers observed how the student teachers managed the teaching – learning environment, triangulation of teaching methods and implementation of WHO Covid – 19 guidelines among others. The two data gathering strategies enabled the researchers to get categories of meaning and patterns of the challenges encountered by university students on workplace learning and professional development. The data collected was organized to support explanations about the nature of the challenges and opportunities the students' teachers faced while on teaching practice during the pandemic period. This allowed triangulation to take place.

RESEARCH ETHICS

The research dealt with university pre-service students on teaching practice. In this regard, there was need to reduce a sense of obligation on the part of the students by establishing mutual trust, cooperation, and acceptance. In the research, the researchers considered three key ethical considerations namely, informed consent and voluntary participation, confidentiality, and beneficence. Before collecting data from the participants at each of the sampled schools, the researchers de –rolled and disclosed the full information concerning the purpose of the study to help the students and their mentors to decide consciously and deliberately to participate in the study. Part of

the disclosure was the benefits that would accrue because of the study that teacher professional preparation was critical as products would model appropriate professional behaviours upon completion of their studies. Further, the researchers gave commitment that the collected data would not be repeated or 'offloaded' without their permission (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011) hence would be kept confidential. To protect the information given by participants and hide their identities, pseudonyms were used. Anonymising the participants was the researchers' professional responsibility to ensure that they were protected from harm and that the data would not be traced to them.

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The discussion was organised according to themes consistent with the content analysis frame used in this study.

The study tackled Covid – 19 pandemic induced complex and multifaceted challenges faced by university student teachers on teaching practice. The findings revealed that the university and the host schools made limited and insignificant contribution to the professional development of the student teachers. Schools particularly had difficulties in helping these trainee teachers to process new professional teaching skills. Lugalla and Ngwaru (2019) say that schools and universities are important system actors in student teachers' professional development and should share a common vision of what constitutes an effective workplace teacher training. The lack of support from critical educational stakeholders to professional teacher development during this pandemic period had negative implications on the quality of the teacher product. The need for consensus among these stakeholders to strengthen and reshape professional workplace learning for student teachers in response to the Covid – 19 pandemic cannot be over emphasised.

The results of data analysis indicated that there were major challenges faced by student teachers on teaching practice during this Covid - 19 pandemic period. These included lack of inadequate supervision visits by their parent university assessors, location of teaching practice schools during this time of the Covid - 19 when movements are limited, finances, extra workload given to student teachers by heads of departments, lack of infrastructure and poor assessment from their institutions of learning. From the interview discussions with student teachers in primary and secondary schools in Bikita and Zaka, several challenges were articulated. These challenges varied with most of the students interviewed concurring on the lack of supervision visits by their university lecturers. In addition, there was reluctance on the part of school-based mentors to supervise those student teachers citing fears of contracting the disease. The Covid – 19 pandemic fears and anxieties among mentors and the student teachers impacted negatively on their workplace professional learning. For example, among the interviewees, one said;

As a result of the Covid – 19 pandemic lecturers took long to come for supervision visits as we were not too sure about how best we were supposed to go about our work.

Another student teacher interviewee observed;

Our mentors are not willing to help us because they are not remunerated for the service they render to us. They claim that they are exposed Covid – 19 pandemic a lot these days with no compensation.

One mentor said,

'As much as we would have wanted to help these student teachers, we could not carelessly put our lives at risk in order to help

these trainee teachers. Further we needed some orientation from the university assessors on how best we can tutor their students during this Covid – 19 pandemic period because expectations vary from one university to the other.'

Such sentiments expressed by the participants were also common at all the stations visited by the researchers. Under normal circumstances first visit to students on teaching practice was usually done in the first week of the opening of schools. The main purpose for that visit was to give guidance to the student teacher and no assessment was done during this visit. Due to the Covid – 19 pandemic and contrary to this usual norm, the students were visited once and were assessed at the same time, yet they had no clue as to what was expected of them. In line with the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education's (2025) professional standards protocols supervisors, both school and externally based, need to assess, evaluate and mentor student teachers effectively continuously. The students' concerns were totally justified as was evidenced by the confusion which was displayed by some of the participants during assessment. Under normal circumstances teaching practice is meant to help reduce the potentially devastating feelings normally associated with teaching practice especially if the student is left to do it alone like what was happening during this Covid – 19 pandemic period. The student teacher is supposed to tutored to be more confident in his or her presentation during work. The perceived mysteries of classroom teaching normally held by those who have not taught before, are supposed to be erased by a well-structured teaching practice experience**.**

The statement from one of the mentors' concurred with what Chikezie (2017) who stated that, the school-based mentors should be given incentives so that they can help these student teachers. Ngada (1992) is also of the view that inadequate funding of teaching practice programme in terms of supervisors' allowances can affect their level of supervision with regards supervision exercise. Teaching practice is expected to provide a practical transition from the role of student teacher to that of a full-time teacher. This transition period is meant to provide opportunities to the student to grow in the desired direction and the lecturer is there to monitor and help nurture that growth. Given the Covid - 19 restrictions which compromised the visits by lecturers, this transition was very traumatic to most of these student teachers if the sentiments from the student teachers are anything to go by. The visits by lecturers are meant to reduce the potential traumatic effects of teaching practice and assist the student teacher to go through the period of teaching practice so that they go through the period safely and maximize the benefits of the transition. With the limited visits to students by the lecturers, the final mark for supervision greatly compromised the quality of the student teachers' delivery of lessons the key practice which need close monitoring, thorough supervision, and guidance.

Data gathered from student teachers also indicated that lesson delivery was compromised since other teaching methods were no longer safer to students due to the Covid -19 social distancing requirement. For example, one interviewee said;

I could not do group work during my lessons as per plan because it did not comply with the requirements of social distancing, hence, I could not execute my lessons effectively.

Covid -19 restrictions at schools required learners to maintain social distance at all costs to avoid schools becoming transmission sites. This meant that group discussions could not be used as a teaching

method. Yet, group work promotes dialogue or exchange of ideas and opinions among children. Group work enables pupils to engage in cooperative rather than competitive learning, what Gwarinda (1995) calls the 'socialist spirit' of learning. During group work pupils are usually actively engaged in the process of acquiring knowledge instead of being passive listeners. This can be achieved if the groups are small so that every individual has the opportunity to participate during the discussions.

Participants were also concerned about travel restrictions imposed by the pandemic. These restrictions affected them when going to town to buy some materials to use as teaching aids for enhanced teaching and learning. The participants indicated that the schools had resource challenges to help them with the much-needed stationery to create conducive classroom teaching- learning environments. One student teacher participant said;

As student teachers we normally want to use teaching aids in our lessons but due to movement restrictions of late we have unable to frequent town to buy teaching material such as charts and this has compromised our lesson delivery to a larger extent. There was fear that using these teaching aids would spread the virus to all of us.

. This is a challenge common in schools even across the continent even in the absence of the pandemic. Adeyanju in Chikezie (2017) did similar research in Nigerian schools and found out that some schools did not provide enough facilities required for teaching practice. Such a scenario cripples the student teacher, hence, compromising even his/her teaching practice grades because the area of lesson delivery is the core aspect of teaching.

The Covid - 19 periods also meant that contact with pupils was limited as the government recommended teaching using online platform. This further complicated the lives of student teachers as most of them were deployed at rural schools without internet facilities.

One participant expressed his frustration with this knew mode of teaching when he said;

At this station there is no internet facility yet I am expected to cover the syllabus. The learners do not have the necessary online resources given that most rural communities are poor and cannot afford these gadgets like laptops and smartphones.

Three of the schools had no internet connectivity. In one school instance where internet was there, the learners did not have advanced cell phones or computers to make use of this internet. Such a scenario affected the student teacher in executing his or her duties effectively. They failed to deliver lessons and ended up failing to complete the syllabi on time.

Teachers in general are expected to be resourceful for adequate lesson knowledge. This wasn't the case with visited student teachers. One student teacher noted;

Due to Covid -19 restrictions, I was not able to prepare adequately for these lessons like what my mentor was doing because the library was closed. I did not have money for bundles. There were so many power cut hence poor internet connections

To make matters worse students could not afford the airtime bundles to access online resources since the school did not have internet services. This compromised the quality of his lessons with very limited research.

Student teachers teaching practical subjects had their practice compromised

during the Covid– 19 pandemic. Their syllabi expected them to teach both theory and practical. However, they ended up teaching theory only. Learners were not allowed to group as should be the situation in practical lessons.

One Physical Education student teacher said;

Teaching Physical Education during the Covid – 19 pandemic period when learners were not allowed to group and compete made these lessons more theoretical.

This was so a challenge because Covid - 19 had restrictions did not allow all sporting activities. There were supposed to have social distancing and minimize conduct among learners.

Besides classroom practice, student teachers are expected to be active in co-curricular activities and community engagement which is believed to widen the understanding of the learners' world. The move to stop co-curricular activities and minimize gatherings in communities due to the pandemic affected all student teachers. On assessment their records had very few entries of activities done at school such as cleaning the classroom and school yard and leading assemblies. These are important but did not give the student teachers enough exposure and training in outside classroom participation as is expected of a teacher. This implied that training in the area of co-curricular activities and community engagement was compromised.

The participants also raised the issue of reduced days of contact with the students due to the phased approach in terms of days for classes to come to school. On this one participant has this to say;

My classes come to school on Mondays and Thursdays a week and this compromises my coverage of the syllabus.

Upon viewing the participant's files the researchers also noted that the participant was lagging behind the syllabus considering that the term was almost coming to an end.

All the student teachers who participated in this study mentioned financial challenge since they are not given government grant which is given to their counterparts in other teachers' colleges. They said that due to this challenge at times they will not look presentable thereby compromising their status before the pupils they will be teaching. A teacher is supposed to be decently dressed but due to lack of support from government they end up coming to work dressed in whatever they can afford. They did not have money to buy teaching materials and as such in some cases student teachers would teach without teaching aids. This would compromise the sizes for charts to save material and this compromised their lesson delivery. Ngada (1992) says that lack of allowance giving to student-teachers to help them in acquiring materials for the exercise is a major challenge faced in many countries. Student teachers just like other teachers also need money to foot their daily expenditures. Before Covid - 19, most teachers and student teachers used to supplement their salaries by selling items from South Africa to local people. All international boarders were closed because of Covid - 19 and all cross boarders activities were stopped. Student teachers were also among the cross borders given that the government was not paying them a Teaching Practice allowance as was the case with student teachers from teacher training colleges. Failure to provide them with financial aid meant that they were not able execute their duties effectively.

This research showed that shortage of decent accommodation at various schools where they were stationed during this Covid - 19 period was a major challenge raised by most of the students. One female participant said:

We are three student teachers here sharing one room but Covid – 19 pandemic calls for social distancing and one person per room. This led to some students seeking accommodation out of the school premises. For us to stay separately was a challenge financially since we are not getting any grants from the government like our fellow students teachers from teachers' colleges. Together we would share expenses and assist each other with teaching practice work.

Student teachers need financial and material support as well as a conducive working environment to enable them to effectively execute their professional duties. According to Ebene & Chikezie (2017) teaching practice exercise should take place in an environment where the student teachers are comfortable.

The student teachers also complained about being given too many loads. One of the participants observed;

I can't prepare my lessons adequately because I teach this subject from form one up to form four. This means that I will be more exposed to nearly all learners at this school and there by expose them to the pandemic.

When the researchers inquired from the participant, they actually realized that the participant had four schemes of work a situation which they also accepted that it was not manageable at student level. Despite having teachers who were trained in the same subject which the participant was teaching, it came out that the trained teachers just opted to off-load some of their classes to the participant because they regard student teachers as load relievers.

One student teacher also stated that they did not get enough TP orientation at university. She observed;

We did not even understand the link between the school and university. We did not get proper orientation when we joined this school. We were oriented separately because of Covid - 19 and the mentors are taking us as load relievers not teachers on training.

Most of the semesters lessons where conducted on line which did not cater for peer teaching. The face-to-face sessions were too short for student teachers to participate on peer teacher. As such only one person per group of eight presented and only schemes, plans and one topic per subject were taught during peer teaching.

While there were all these challenges that were Covid- 19 induced, there was a silver lining in that student – teachers were forced by the circumstance to learn how to use technology for teaching and learning purposes. One student reported;

We were used to use our smartphones for other purposes and not as a tool for research and aiding teaching and learning. The data we could afford, and because of Covid – 19 pandemic, we could maximise it to do research and send homework to students. We discovered the value and benefits of technology in the absence of literature from the library.

It was refreshing that all was not gloom because of Covid – 19 pandemic. Students quickly adopted innovative methods that could work in their situations which they had not thought before. This is consistent with Westbrook et al's (2013) observation that context specific approaches promote practices that assist teachers to use locally adapted applications. With the pandemic still with us the hope is that student teachers would learn more of how to adapt and adopt

creative and innovative measures that keep them safe from the virus at the same time continuing with their workplace professional learning.

CONCLUSION

The study concluded that as a result of the Covid - 19 pandemic, teacher workplace professional learning was disconnected from the real training protocols. As a result, the student teachers were not adequately prepared and initiated into the teaching profession as their training and learning needs were not met. Professional contact should be regarded as a powerful weapon that shapes and gives a whole different dimension to the understanding of how to learn to teach. The study further concluded that the Covid – 19 pandemic period was a very difficult time for the student teachers on workplace professional learning with the consequence of losing trust in the teacher product. It was clearly evident that the impact of minimal or no – contact with students during this period and the absence of entire support network to professional teacher development had negatively affected the university student teachers. This research established that university students on teaching practice faced a number of challenges which impact negatively on their professional learning. Thus, the research noted that a good working environment is conducive for professional teacher learning as it connects them to classroom realities. It should therefore be understood that failure to professionally develop and train teachers results in failure to develop a nation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The study recommends that the students' teaching practice stint could be prolonged given the easing of Covid - 19 and the availability of vaccines. This would enable them to emerge the schools with the right knowledge and skills to practice as professional teacher upon completion of their studies.
- Provisions of incentives for mentors at schools where student teachers will be stationed.
- Orientation of teaching practice supervisors. Thus, there is need for adequate orientation, seminars, workshops should be organized for both student teachers and school-based mentors.
- Provision of a grant for university students on teaching practice. If possible, the government should support student teachers by paying allowances for their upkeep just like what they are doing to student teacher on teaching practice from teachers' colleges.
- Increasing the number of supervision visits by university mentors. Persistent evaluation should be encouraged since this enables students on teaching practice the opportunity to ask their lecturers problems they will be encountering with regards to their teaching.
- Co-operation of the university, schools and school mentors to help student teachers in their areas of difficulties

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