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Co-operating Teachers, School Placement and the Implications for Quality

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Abstract: It is widely understood by teacher educators and administrators responsible for the practicum of student teachers that co-operating teachers play a critical role in student teacher development. This research sought to examine student teachers perception of their co-operating teachers during practicum and ascertain the extent to which subject specialisation, gender and school placement influenced their perception. Through the use of a questionnaire, data were collected from 195 student teachers during the final week of their practicum. The results indicated that student teachers had a positive perception of their co-operating teachers and perceived their co-operating teachers to be providing developmental and instructional supervision. Additionally a significant finding was that student teachers perception of their co-operating teachers was based on the type of school at which they were placed. In light of these findings, attention needs to be given to the establishment of policies regarding student teacher placement and training of co-operating teachers as means of positively influencing quality teaching practicum experience.

Key Words: co-operating teachers, teaching experience, teaching quality, school placement, student teacher development, practicum

Introduction

Teacher education programmes within Jamaica are experiencing increased pressure from various stakeholders in education to provide quality teachers to contribute to the development of the nation's children (Kinkead-Clark, 2015; Thwaites, 2015). Quality teachers are needed to contribute to quality student outcomes. Support for quality teaching includes supporting teachers to achieve their purpose and encouraging them in how to support improvements in student learning (OECD, 2012). Furthermore quality teaching involves the ability of teachers to transfer instructional approaches from their training to their classroom practices. Preparing student teachers for classrooms should include providing real world experiences. It is important to provide student teachers with opportunities that are more impacting than reading and talking about new pedagogical theories and practices (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Avalos, 2011; OECD, 2005). The real world experience should enable student teachers to evaluate the applicability of

instructional strategies and their applicability to the various contexts of schools thereby developing innovative and creative teachers who can contribute to quality student outcomes.

In Jamaica, teacher preparation is carried out through three or four year teacher training programmes in teachers colleges and universities. For Practicum student teachers are provided with three to four opportunities for experiencing the realities of the classroom. The first opportunity for practicum includes direct observation of classroom practices conducted by the student teacher for an average of two weeks (40hrs); the second opportunity entails student – teachers directing/conducting classroom instruction and being mentored by the co-operating teacher and supervised by the teacher educator from the training institution. The second opportunity may take the form of team-teaching (usually two student teachers) or an individual student teacher having sole responsibility for classroom instruction for an average of three weeks (80hrs). The final opportunity for practicum entails the individual student-teacher conducting classroom instruction for an extended period of between 6 to 12 weeks (24 hours - 480 hrs).

The practicum represents the opportunity through which student teachers are likely to be exposed to the various sub-cultures in the Jamaican context. These experiences should assist student teachers to hone their teaching skills, develop an awareness of the context within which they will be teaching and modify their expectations of the classroom (Chisholm, 1994). Consequently student teachers will unearth their own beliefs and values thereby developing their own identities as teacher professionals. The teaching practicum is an opportunity for student teachers to learn about and from their practice (Darling-Hammond, 2010). The practicum experience provides student teachers with cognitive resources and performance based practices that should lead to quality students' outcomes (Wang, Lin, Spalding, Klecha & Odell, 2011).

Co-Operating Teachers and Their Supervisory Roles

Experienced teachers play a pivotal role in influencing new teachers work socialization, career satisfaction, philosophies of teaching, instructional practices and sometimes their decision to continue in the teaching profession (Duquette 1994). As student teachers seek to understand the language of the profession and the various facets of teaching, co-operating teachers serve as mentors (Stanulus & Russell, 2000). As the student teacher navigates his/her way through the teaching practicum the co-operating teacher is likely to have a strong influence on the student teachers' decisions regarding the implementation of the curriculum, teaching strategies, classroom management and professional decisions (Anderson, 2007). In order for student teachers to maximize the benefits of learning from the co-operating teacher, it is important for the co-operating teacher to develop a professional relationship which provides opportunities for the student teacher to learn from and with him/her (Ferrier-Kerr, 2009). Furthermore, the experience student teachers gain during practicum represents their initiation into the teaching profession as they tend to emulate attitudes and habits of the co-operating teacher and use these to form their opinion of teaching and the teaching profession. During Practicum, student teachers are provided with opportunities to observe the modeling of best practices by co-operating teachers (Kitchel & Torres, 2007; Glenn, 2006). An important aspect of this relationship involves the student teachers being given space to develop new ideas and activities, review and reinforce techniques, reflect, analyse, and evoke passion and excitement about teaching (Hammon and Romano, 2009). In the context of this study co-operating teachers are those experienced classroom teachers assigned to mentor student teachers to undertake their roles

during the practicum (Atputhasam, 2005). Research indicates that student teachers benefit immensely from co-operating teachers who demonstrate good classroom management and planning skills, knowledge of subject matter, and those who exhibit compassion towards students (Power & Perry, 2004; Osunde 1996). Ganser (1997 as cited by Lane, Lacefield-Parachini, & Isken, 2003) reported that co-operating teachers are also influenced by their professional relationship with the student teacher and this can lead to professional rejuvenation. For this to happen the co-operating teacher needs to examine his/her own beliefs, assumptions and performance as a teacher and a co-operating teacher and be disposed to facilitating experimentation and innovation by the student-teacher (Ferrier-Kerr, 2009; Lane, Lacefield-Parachini, Ishken, 2003; Lortie 1975). Being a good co-operating teacher according to Zeichner (2002) is more than providing access to classroom or modeling a particular practice, it is about mentoring teachers; which is a complex undertaking.

In order to influence quality student teacher development co-operating teachers need to be properly prepared for their supervisory roles. In examining student and co-operating teachers' perceptions of the roles and functions of co-operating teachers, researchers Tannehill and Goc-Karp (1992) and Enz and Cok (1992) concluded that, while effective teaching is an attribute of good co-operating teachers and they have been selected on that basis it does not necessarily translate to good supervision. Pomerance & Walsh (2011) noted that, the selection of co-operating teachers is largely determined by schools without any considerations given to compatibility among student teacher, subject matter, and co-operating teacher. Many co-operating teachers feel that they are inadequately prepared in their roles to mentor and supervise student teachers (Uusimaki, 2013). However these co-operating teachers spend a considerable amount of time supporting and providing feedback and direction to student teachers (Beck and Kosnik, 2010).

In a study on the supervisory effectiveness of co-operating teachers, Killian and Wilkins (2009) found that co-operating teachers who were trained as supervisors, had Masters degrees in teacher leadership, taken courses on observation and feedback were more effective than those who did not receive any such training. Training in effective supervisory practices will likely lead to co-operating teachers carrying out their roles with more confidence and certainty leading to positive perceptions about the modeling they provide (Tok, 2011). Research from as early as 1993 suggested that student teachers were influenced by the perceptions of their co-operating teachers. In a study which examined the influence of the interpersonal behaviour of the co-operating teacher on the student teacher satisfaction during practicum, Kremer-Hayon and Wubbels (1993) found a clear connection between the behaviour of the co-operating teacher and the level of satisfaction student teachers had with their experience. The study found that student teacher satisfaction was positively related with perceptions of co-operating teachers' interpersonal behaviour that were characterized as being helpful, friendly and understanding.

Similarly satisfaction was negatively related with perceptions of co-operating teachers that were characterized as showing uncertainty and being dissatisfied with the student teacher's behaviour. Furthermore Lesley, Chang, Griffith, and Woods (2006) in a study that examined co-operating teachers influence on the quality of student teacher reading instruction found that student teachers during reading instruction utilized reading strategies that were almost identical to those of their co-operating teachers.

Diversity in Student Teachers' Learning

Critical to the preparation of teachers is the involvement of other stakeholders outside of the immediate training institution; no one single stakeholder or training institution can effectively prepare teachers for the complexities that come with teaching and learning (Taylor, Emily, Klein & Abrams, 2014). Collaborative partnerships between schools and universities can be seen as one of the means for providing diversity in student teacher learning thereby providing the necessary foundation for the sharing of ideas and concerns relating to teacher preparation (Ng & Chan 2012; Rosenberg et.al, 2005). For example, the necessary foundations in this partnership may include helping student teachers to understand school cultures, the curriculum in use, and how to collaborate with other stakeholders. Furthermore, the partnership may include providing in-service teachers with appropriate means of ongoing professional development.

The teaching practicum is an opportunity for student teachers to operate in diverse educational setting and apply theories and concepts learnt in their university/college classrooms. Zeichner (2002) believes that it is important to place student teachers in schools where they feel safe and supported in honing their practice. Ure (2009) contends that one of the most influential factors in the success of pre-service teacher school placement is the receptiveness of the host school. Student teachers' professional learning is most effective when the philosophy and practices of the host school aligns with the goals of the teacher preparation programme. Securing quality placements however is dependent on the relationship between key personnel in the university and schools (Uusimaki 2013).

While it is widely agreed throughout the literature that the practicum experience affects student teachers development and initiation into the teaching profession (Lu, 2013; Kitchel & Torres, 2007; Glenn, 2006) the literature seems to be lacking as it relates to the connection between the types of schools at which student teachers are placed and how school types affect the quality of the practicum experience or what types of schools lead to the best school placements during pre-service teacher preparation. Levine (2006) noted that the issue of the best placement for student teachers seems not to be given much attention in practicum as placements are often of poor quality with a lack of access to good role models. In a study surveying 3000 teachers, their students and their schools Ronfeldt, (2012) found that learning to teach in easier to staff contexts had positive effects on teacher retention and student outcomes. However, Ronfeldt cautioned that while easier to staff schools have more desirable conditions for professional practice and are better at supporting student teacher learning they may leave student teachers under-prepared to work in schools that are harder to staff. In Jamaica for example schools differ based on their location and classification. Schools located in inner-city contexts are more difficult to staff, and pose challenges for practice (Roofe, 2015). Additionally schools that cater to middle and upper income families are said to be better resourced and easier to staff (Jennings & Cook, 2014).

Research Design

The aim of this study was to examine student teachers' perception of their co-operating teachers during their final practicum experience and determine whether differences exist in perception based on school placement (school type). The study also sought to discuss the implications of the results for quality practicum experiences. This research was carried out by

conducting a survey of student teachers who were completing their final teaching practicum. Data was collected at two selected universities through face-to-face distribution of a questionnaire to all final year student teachers during the last week of the teaching practicum.

Research Questions

1. What are student teachers perception of their co-operating teachers during the practicum experience?
2. What factors influence student teachers' perception of their co-operating teachers?

Participants

One hundred and ninety-five student teachers participated in the study. The data indicated that of the 195 participants who responded to the questionnaire 44 (23%) were males and 151 (77%) were females. The overall age range of the respondents was between 19-57, with a majority (62%) of the respondents being in the 20-25 age group. Four school types were represented in the study. Five (2.6%) of the participants completed their practicum at a primary school, 66 (33.8%) at traditional high schools, 96 (49.2%) at non-traditional, 20 (10.3%) at other schools while eight participants did not respond to this item. Primary schools refer to public government funded schools that cater to children from ages six to 12 years.

Two types of schools exist at the secondary level of the education system in Jamaica; traditional and non-traditional high schools. Traditional high schools existed prior to Jamaica gaining independence in 1962; these are grammar schools. Non-traditional high schools refer to schools which were built post-independence. The children who attend the traditional high schools are usually from the middle and upper social classes while the students who attend the latter are usually from the lower social class (Jennings & Cook, 2014). Student teachers' subject specialisation are as follows: 58 (29%) of the respondents taught general academic subjects such as mathematics, the sciences and social studies, while 126 (65%) of the respondents taught technical areas such as Home Economics, Business Studies, and Industrial Technology. Eleven (6%) of the respondents did not indicate their specialisation.

Instrument

The questionnaire sought to ascertain student teachers' perception of their co-operating teachers during the practicum experience. The literature and the researchers' experience as teacher educators informed the development of the instrument. Questionnaire items were therefore derived from literature assessing the roles of the co-operating teacher (Atputhasamy, 2005; Ferrier-Kerr, 2009; Lane, et. al., 2003; Ure, 2009; Zeichner, 2002). Additionally, information was gathered from practicum manuals from various tertiary institutions (Broward College, 2012; Texas State University, 2015-2016; University of Technology 2012-2013). The main theme of the questionnaire focused on the *role of the co-operating teacher during practicum* with the following subthemes: professionalism, content knowledge and instructional practices.

The questionnaire was divided into two sections. Section A entailed four items for demographic information while section B entailed a 12 item rating scale for obtaining information about student teachers' perception of their co-operating teachers based on the abovementioned subthemes. The response formats for the likert-type items were, strongly disagree, disagree, undecided, agree, and strongly agree. The instrument was piloted and yielded a Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficient of 0.888; indicating that the instrument is consistent in the measuring the dependent variable - student teachers' perception of their co-operating teachers (Bastick & Matalon, 2004).

Data Collection

Copies of the questionnaire were administered to 207 student teachers from the two participating universities. One hundred and ninety-five copies with responses were returned which yielded a response rate of 94%. Data was collected at the end of the practicum period when student teachers attended a practicum seminar that facilitated reflection on their practicum experiences. The co-ordinator of the practicum seminar (who is not one of the researchers) was asked to administer the questionnaire to student teachers. Participants were told that answering the questionnaire was optional and their names were not required. Permission for administering the questionnaires was granted by the leadership of the faculties involved.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was guided by the research questions. Descriptive statistics was generated to ascertain the levels of student teachers perception of their co-operating teacher and the rating of the supervisory roles they performed while two way ANOVA was applied to obtain differences in student teachers perception based on school type and subject specialisation. Following significant main effects, Tukeys HSD was used to ascertain the comparison between the different independent groups (pair wise differences). Further analysis was carried using T-test to obtain differences in student teachers perception of co-operating teachers based on student teachers gender.

Results

The presentation of the results are guided by the research questions.

Student Teachers Rating of their Co-Operating Teachers

The results indicated that the student teachers gave the co-operating teachers a moderate rating with a mean score of 38.4 and a standard deviation of 6.5. This suggests that the student teachers were moderate in their perception of their co-operating teachers.

N	Valid	163
	Missing	32
Mean		38.3804
Std. Deviation		6.48760
Skewness		-.569
Std. Error of Skewness		.190
Minimum		18.00
Maximum		48.00

Table 1. Student Teachers' Perception about their Co-operating Teachers Supervision

Student teachers rating of supervisory roles of their co-operating teachers as indicated in table 2 shows a maximum mean score of 3.57 for the item *My co-operating teacher willingly offered suggestions on how I could improve* and a minimum mean score of 2.79 for the item *My co-operating teacher provided me with clear guidelines about the expectations of the practicum experience*, with each item having a Standard Deviation of less than one.

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
My co-operating teacher willingly participated in the process of being a co-operating teacher	192	1	4	3.52	.647
My co-operating teacher demonstrated that he/she understood his/her roles as a co-operating teacher	194	1	4	2.86	.891
My co-operating teacher provided me with clear guidelines about the expectations of the practicum experience.	192	1	4	2.79	.964
My co-operating teacher willingly offered suggestions on how I could improve	193	1	4	3.57	.618
My co-operating teacher provided ongoing feedback on my teaching	188	1	4	3.51	.690
My co-operating teacher dressed appropriately for the school context	184	1	4	3.16	.758
My co-operating teacher created opportunities for me to communicate with him/her and reflect on my teaching	193	1	4	3.49	.722
My co-operating teacher shared with me curriculum materials and textbooks available for use	194	1	4	2.97	.916

My co-operating teacher referred me to resources that will enhance my delivery of content	193	1	4	3.10	.963
My co-operating teacher assisted me in maintaining a classroom that is well managed and organized	191	1	4	3.07	.877
My co-operating teacher assisted me in learning about all students in the specified class	190	1	4	2.87	.888
My co-operating teacher shared models of effective assessment for students and how to use the results to design lessons	193	1	4	2.98	.901
Valid N (listwise)	163				

Table 2. Mean Scores and Standard Deviation of the Items in the Scale on Perception of Co-Operating Teacher

Student Teachers' Perception of their Co-Operating Teachers Based on School Type, Subject Specialisation and Gender

The factors examined were school type, subject specialisation, and gender to ascertain their influence on student teachers' perception of their co-operating teachers. Results are presented accordingly.

The interaction effect between school type and subject specialisation was not statistically significant, $F(7, 171) = 1.220, p=0.294$. There was a statistical significant main effect for school type $F(2, 171) = 55.295, p < 0.05$; the effect size was large (partial eta squared=0.393). This suggests that 39.3% of the variance in pre-service teachers' perception of their co-operating teachers is explained by school type (see table 4). Post Hoc comparison using Tukey test indicated that the mean score for traditional schools ($M=42.380, SD=74.08$) was significantly different from the mean score for non-traditional ($M=34.153, SD =5.81$) and primary ($M=26.125, SD =8.15$) (See table 5).

The main effect for subject specialisation $F(4, 171) = 1.757, p=0.140$ did not reach statistical significance (See tables 3 and 4).

Student Teacher Subject Specialisation	School Types	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Business Studies	Primary	28.5000	7.77817	2
	Non-traditional	35.8077	5.39644	26
	Traditional	43.0000	3.80058	19
	Total	38.4043	6.29237	47
Science	Non-traditional	33.0000	3.85861	10
	Traditional	39.2500	6.84957	4
	Total	34.7857	5.45159	14

Home Economics	Primary	25.5000	17.67767	2
	Non-traditional	31.4211	4.86844	19
	Traditional	42.3750	5.31507	16
	Total	35.8378	8.21757	37
Technical Subjects	Primary	31.0000	.	1
	Non-traditional	36.5000	5.68833	22
	Traditional	42.0526	3.35780	19
	Total	38.8810	5.54451	42
General Academic Subjects (e.g. History, Maths, Geography etc.)	Primary	23.3333	4.04145	3
	Non-traditional	32.6667	6.75524	21
	Traditional	42.7143	3.33381	21
	Total	36.7333	7.98408	45
Total	Primary	26.1250	8.14928	8
	Non-traditional	34.1531	5.81032	98
	Traditional	42.3797	4.08344	79
	Total	37.3189	7.01248	185

Table 3. Descriptive: Dependent Variable, Students' Perception of Co-Operating Teacher

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	4511.947^a	13	347.073	13.083	.000	.499
Intercept	60640.385	1	60640.385	2285.927	.000	.930
Subject specialisation (Q3)	186.468	4	46.617	1.757	.140	.039
School Type (Q6)	2933.715	2	1466.858	55.295	.000	.393
Q3 * Q6	226.537	7	32.362	1.220	.294	.048
Error	4536.236	171	26.528			
Total	266698.000	185				
Corrected Total	9048.184	184				

a. R Squared = .499 (Adjusted R Squared = .461)

Table 4. ANOVA: Students' Perception of Co-operating Teacher

(I) School Types	(J) School Types	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Primary	Non-traditional	-8.0281*	1.89385	.000	-12.5057	-3.5504
	Traditional	-16.2547*	1.91096	.000	-20.7728	-11.7367
Non-traditional	Primary	8.0281*	1.89385	.000	3.5504	12.5057
	Traditional	-8.2267*	.77877	.000	-10.0679	-6.3854
Traditional	Primary	16.2547*	1.91096	.000	11.7367	20.7728
	Non-traditional	8.2267*	.77877	.000	6.3854	10.0679

Based on observed means.
The error term is Mean Square (Error) = 26.528.
*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

Table 5. Multiple Comparisons: Student Perception (Turkey HSD)

Independent samples t-test was conducted to compare students perception of their co-operating teachers based on gender. However there was no significant difference in scores for males (M=37.20, SD = 6.60) and females (M=37.19, SD=7.32; t (193) = .016, p= .988). This showed that there was no significant difference in the perception of students of their co-operating teachers based on their gender (See tables 6and 7).

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Student teachers' Perception	Male	44	37.2045	6.60366	.99554
	Female	151	37.1854	7.32066	.59575

Table 6. Descriptive: Students teachers' perception and gender

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Student teachers' Perception	Equal variances assumed	.550	.459	.016	193	.988	.019	1.228	-2.403	2.44
	Equal variances not assumed			.016	76.5	.987	.019	1.160	-2.291	2.33

Table 7. Differences between Students Teachers' Perception of Co-operating Teachers based on their Gender

Discussion

The findings from this research indicated that the student teachers who participated in this study had a moderately positive perception of their co-operating teachers' supervision (M= 38.4, SD= 6.5). A positive perception of co-operating teachers should allow for the development of a nurturing relationship between co-operating teacher and student teacher, thereby impacting their development as professional teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2006). This can ultimately

influence a student teacher's decision to remain in the teaching profession (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

Further analysis of the student teachers' perception of their co-operating teachers indicated that items receiving the four highest mean scores were; *my co-operating teacher willingly offered suggestions on how I could improve* ($M=3.57, SD=.62$), *my co-operating teacher willingly participated in the process* ($M=3.52, SD=.65$), and *my co-operating teacher provided opportunities for communication and reflection* ($M=3.49, SD=.72$). Given these positive ratings of co-operating teachers one can infer that the student teachers in this study valued the contribution the co-operating teachers were making to their learning. As articulated by Darling-Hammond, (2010) and Ferrier-Kerr, (2009) the teaching practicum is an opportunity for student teachers to learn from experienced teachers through mentoring. For these student teachers they learnt through their co-operating teachers making suggestions about how they could improve, showing willingness to participate in the practicum process, and allowing opportunities for the student teachers to reflect. Furthermore this suggests that the mentoring student teachers received during practicum was through collaborative engagement. Studies have shown that collaboration allows for a shared understanding of teaching approaches and where there is no active participation of the co-operating teacher there is no productive learning which may lead to the student teacher developing negative practicum experiences (Farrell, 2008; Graham 2006).

Student teachers also rated the co-operating teachers the lowest on the following items; *my co-operating teacher demonstrated knowledge of his/her roles* ($M= 2.86, SD = 0.89$) and *my co-operating teacher provided clear guidelines about the supervisory process* ($M=2.79, SD= 0.96$). These results suggest that the educational institutions from which the student teachers are sent need to provide clarity on the expected roles of the co-operating teachers as they supervise student teachers during practicum. This lack of clarity as perceived by the student teachers perhaps inhibited the co-operating teachers' ability to provide adequate practicum supervision. Uusimaki (2013) study provides support for the student teachers perception, as he indicated that co-operating teachers feel that they lack clarity about their roles and are inadequately prepared in their roles to mentor and supervise student teachers.

In addition to learning about the teaching and assessment of lessons, research on practicum suggests that student teachers benefit immensely from practices of the co-operating teacher that show evidence of good organization, establishing daily routines, and class management (Perry & Power, 2004; Osunde, 1996). Beck and Kosnick (2010), note that though many co-operating teachers lack clarity on their roles they spend a considerable amount of time supporting student teachers. In the authors' context there have been adhoc attempts at training co-operating teachers but there are no structured formalized pre-requisite for co-operating teachers to be trained prior to undertaking mentoring of student teachers. Killian and Wilkins (2009) found that co-operating teachers who were trained as supervisors, had Masters degrees in teacher leadership, taken courses on observation and feedback, were more effective than those who did not receive any such training.

While there was no statistically significant difference in student teachers' perception of their co-operating teacher based on subject specialisation or gender further results from the study revealed that student teachers' perception differed based on the type of school at which they were placed for practicum. The results indicated that the mean score for traditional schools ($M=42.380, SD=74.08$) was significantly different from the mean score for non-traditional ($M=34.153, SD =5.81$) and primary ($M=26.125, SD =8.15$) suggesting that school type is an important component in the practicum experience. Within the Jamaican context traditional

schools represent schools that are better resourced and easier to staff and this may have influenced the student teachers' perception. There is not much literature surrounding the connection between the types of schools at which student teachers are placed and how this school placement affects their experience (Levine, 2006). In a study surveying 3000 teachers along with their students and their schools, Ronfeldt, (2012) noted that easier to staff schools have more desirable conditions for professional practice and are better at supporting student teacher learning. In Jamaica, schools located in inner-city contexts are usually non-traditional schools, are more difficult to staff, and pose challenges for student teacher practice (Roofe, 2015). It is widely agreed throughout the literature that the practicum experience affects student teachers' development and initiation into the teaching profession (Lu, 2013; Kitchel & Torres, 2007; Glenn, 2006). Consequently the above factors are likely to influence how student teachers develop and learn from their practice.

Implications for Quality Practicum Experience

Based on the findings of this study there are two issues that have implications for improving the quality of student teachers' practicum experiences. The first issue relates to student teachers' perception of co-operating teachers' competence in communicating the expectations and guidelines of their supervisory roles during the practicum. The item concerning co-operating teachers providing clear guidelines about what their supervision would entail was rated the lowest by the student teachers. This raises questions about how co-operating teachers are prepared for their roles. Within the context of the two universities under study there is no formalized ongoing system of training for teachers who serve as co-operating teachers. However within one of the university settings attempts are made through seminars for co-operating teachers. Given the international discourse regarding improvement in teacher quality, there needs to be a deliberate attempt in preparing co-operating teachers to undertake their roles (Killian & Wilkins 2009). In the context of the two universities under study co-operating teachers are selected on the basis of their availability to participate in the teaching practicum with little or no training for their supervisory roles. Pomerance & Walsh (2011) expressed concern for the laissez-faire approach to the selection of co-operating teachers. These authors noted that co-operating teachers should be selected on the basis of their compatibility with student teacher and subject matter.

The second issue that has implication for improving the quality of student teachers' practicum experience relates to the type of school at which student teachers are placed. The findings of this research suggest that school type influences student teachers' perception of their co-operating teachers; student teachers who were placed in traditional schools rated their co-operating teachers the highest (See tables 2 and 3). Since traditional schools are better resourced than non-traditional schools, training of co-operating teachers who work in non-traditional schools should be contextual thereby providing co-operating teachers with skills needed to respond to the peculiarities of this context as they mentor student teachers who are placed in these schools.

As stated by Magaya and Crawley (2011) a practicum driven by quality field experiences cannot be accomplished without a co-operative partnership with schools. This partnership is needed to support training of experience teachers who serve as mentors thereby leading to quality practicum experiences for student teachers.

Further Study

The quantitative findings reported in this study have presented an opportunity for further research aimed at exploring the reasons underlying the statistics. Further research is needed to explore co-operating teachers' perceptions of the roles they perform in supporting student teachers and their perceptions about how they are prepared for their roles as co-operating teachers. Additionally, a qualitative study will help us to understand the nature of collaborative engagement from the perspective of the co-operating teachers. Given, that the findings from this study indicated that school type influenced student teachers' perception, it is critical to explore the reasons for this so that solutions towards providing quality practicum experiences can be derived.

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