Learner support and professional development during teaching practice? Should supervisors be subject specialists or any lecturers?

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Abstract

Teaching practice is a precious period for final learner support. In Malawi, any faculty member could supervise teaching practice regardless of their subject specialty (scrambled model). This qualitative study assessed the impacts of this scrambled model of supervision on the quality of learner support when non-specialist faculty supervised student-teachers. Through 2 different focus group discussions, data were collected from 10 conveniently sampled practicum students, 6 practicum supervisors, and 6 coordinators from 6 purposefully selected higher teacher-education institutions. and data were analyzed qualitatively. The study revealed that student-teachers and faculty were uncomfortable with the scrambled supervision model because it led to (1) inconsistencies in pedagogical and content knowledge, (2) unfriendly environment, and (3) inadequate feedback due to varying needs in varying subject areas demands. However, they justified this model for convenience at the mercy of other constraints. Apart from contributing to the existing body of knowledge, this study suggests best practices to guide institutional policy regarding practicum to facilitate quality learner support.

Background

Adopting EFA and FPA goals had a negative ripple effect (Inoue & Oketch, 2008), flooding primary schools with the learner, hence a severe dearth of quality infrastructure and qualified human resources (Ravishankar et al., 2016). The enrollment levels significantly impacted the high school education subsystem (Ruff, 2010). As a result, teacher education institutions (TEIs) had to train a corresponding high quantity of secondary teachers within the shortest period possible using both conventional and open and distance education modes. Consequently, that acute shortage forced the systems to focus more on quantity at the expense of quality teacher education (Ruff, 2010). Schools and high education institutions experienced an acute shortage of teachers. This affected the duration and mode of practicum. Efficient supervision requires the supervisor to have the necessary skills, content knowledge, and methodology knowledge to mentor, build and support the trainee to become a reflective practitioner (Gürsoy & Kesner, 2016; White & Stephenson, 2000).

In higher education institutions, student-teachers were being supervised by any faculty member during practicum regardless of the supervisors' specialty and experience. In this study, we call this approach to practicum supervision the scrambled model. For example, Computer Studies lecturers could observe French Grammar lessons their zero knowledge of the language abilities. How would such supervisors know whether the student is teaching the wrong content or using the wrong method if the supervisor cannot understand French? How would the supervisor provide concrete advice and support necessary for unleashing the trainee's potential? How would the two have a fair pre- and post-conference in this situation? Learner support is vital for the quality of learning, retention, and transfer of knowledge. Therefore, this paper sought to establish how the scrambled practicum supervision impacted student-teacher support during TP.

The practicum being an indispensable and inextricable component of professional teacher education (Belton & Woods, 2013; Borko & Mayfield, 1995; Mannathoko, 2013; Study & Richardson-koehler, 1984), this study was greatly inspired by the mushrooming of teacher education institutions in the country, leading to the recruitment of secondary school teachers to be lecturers in some of the new institutions. Despite being specialists in one discipline, the faculty members lacked vital TP supervision experience and expertise in other fields. Notwithstanding this, they were involved in the scrambled model of supervision. Before this study, not much had been done on teaching practice supervision as a form of student support for student teachers for a secondary school in the Malawian context.

Problem statement

The current practicum supervision favors quality control and evaluating student-teachers for certification at professional development expense. Not all faculty have adequate experience in TP supervision. However, any faculty members supervise TP regardless of one's specialty and that of the student-teachers. This has a bearing on the quality of feedback and supports the student-teachers get.

Study objectives

The objectives of the study were to;

1. unearth the rationale behind a scrambled model of TP supervision in Malawian higher education institutions
2. explore the perceptions of the student teachers towards the prevalent mode of TP supervision

Theoretical Framework

Garbage in, garbage out! The quality of the trainer determines the quality of the output (trainee). The theory of *Primacy* and *Recency* states that human beings remember more of what they are taught in the beginning and what they hear last. They tend to forget a lot of what comes between the beginning and the final phase of instructional procedures (A. J. Greene et al., 2000). Whatever the students learn last will have a relatively more lasting impact on their careers. Student-teachers will remember and value more what they learn at the beginning and final moments of their teacher education, irrespective of the instruction's quality. The last phase of teacher education is the teaching practice.

Literature Review

Quality teacher education is demanding yet crucial for national development (Bhargava, 2009; Kecik, 2011; Kıldan et al., 2013). Teaching practice (TP) is one of the critical and crucial stages in professional teacher education (Belton & Woods, 2013; Kıldan et al., 2013; Magwa & Ngara, 2018; Matthews & Goh, 2011; Oppong, 2013) as the series of involvements that they go through to initiate and accord them an opportunity to orchestrate theoretical knowledge, skills, and talents into action under expert guidance by faculty members to improve on abilities (Bhargava, 2009; Gürsoy & Kesner, 2016; Karim & Gul, 2020; Kecik, 2011; Mcgee, 2014). The process involves pre-conferencing, presentation and observation, and

post-conferencing (Magwa & Ngara, 2018). One definition of quality of teachers is their "fitness, suitability, effective demonstration of professional competence of available teachers in the appropriate discharge of their teaching job requirements as measured by teacher effectiveness indicators" (Mezieobi et al., 2017).

Practicum supervision plays a crucial role in quality control, being the final opportunity for a formal interaction between the students and faculty (Magwa & Ngara, 2018; Oketch et al., 2011; Özder et al., 2013). The underlying assumption is that the supervisor is an expert in the supervises practiced to become a professional (Magwa & Ngara, 2018). TP supervisors must facilitate effective learning, giving professional and expert guidance in methodology and content before and after the class observation on conducting a better lesson (Özder et al., 2013).

George Fuechsel pointed out that "garbage in, garbage out, implying that "The quality of system output is dependent on the quality of system input" (Garbage In–Garbage: Out retrieved from http://people.sunyit.edu/~lepres/thesis/principles/113_pdfsam_POD.pdf on January 3, 2019). If teachers are ineffective and inefficient, the graduates will reflect the same low caliber. Any wrong decisions, practices, inputs into education systems will produce no less garbage. Poor guidance results in low-quality graduates (Kıldan et al., 2013).

There is a need to resource the curriculum with good quality faculty (Jitka, 2009) because efficient delivery depends on having a sufficient supply of appropriately trained and motivated teachers. …, they inspire and enthuse … and serve as role models in terms of attitudes and social relationships" (Kagwiria, 2013). Teaching practice enables student-teachers to acquire beginning teaching competencies (Jitka, 2009; Mutende, 2017). However, supervisors emphasize assessment than learner support for professional development. Paradoxically, only quality teachers in a particular field can guarantee quality assessment (Jitka, 2009).

Mahmood (2013), cited in Kagwiria and Amukowa (2013), noted that "the trainers' performance should consist of one's academic qualification, quality of teacher training, teaching experiences, pedagogical practices, professional development, structuring the material, … empathy, mentoring, coaching, subject knowledge, dedication, commitment, ability to communicate, … etc." The trainer's role in the process of teacher education is integral and indispensable (Mutende, 2017; Leshkovska and Spaseva, 2017, p. 63). Ayas (2009) highlights supervisors' verbal ability, content knowledge, and education coursework on teaching methods in their discipline as having significant impacts on student achievement (Jitka, 2009).

For meaningful learner support, pre-conference guidance and post-conferencing feedback are essential (Kaplan, 1980; Greene, 1992; Kaplan, 2011). In his research, Koplan (1980) reported that student teachers get concerned about the caliber of their TPSs. The teacher is supposed to create an environment free of fear for the student and that the teacher should be engaged in social learning with the learner through interacting with him (Gürsoy et al., 2013; Kıldan et al., 2013; Sikandar, 2015).

Purpose of the study

The study sought to establish students' perception of the mode of teaching practice supervision by college and university lecturers without regard to TP supervisors' (TPS's) specialization vis à vis learner support. It also sought to establish the TPSs' perception of observing lessons in areas they were epistemologically handicapped as a means of learner support.

Research questions

1. What are the objectives of teaching practice supervision?
2. How does allocating TPSs without regard to major common areas between the supervisors and the supervisees during teaching practice relate to learner support?
3. What are the supervisors' perceptions in supervising lessons in which they were not specialists in relation to student support?
4. How do TP supervision that disregards specialization relate to the quality of teacher education?
5. How comfortable are students and teachers during TP supervision that disregards subject specialization?
6. How comfortable are students and teachers during TP supervision that disregards subject specialization?
7. Is the status quo the best option in line with quality learner support?

Methodology

Design

This study employed a descriptive research design. It used qualitative approaches to allow the researcher to describe the nature of supervisors' comments and responses to understand the extent to which such mode of TP supervision could affect learner support. Researchers sought the student teachers' views about their interaction with supervisors impacted their field experience. The qualitative approach recognizes the diverse interpretations of quantitative assessment during the practicum. The nature of supervisors' comments and the extent to which these would argue with the student teachers regarding specialized instructional technologies and pedagogical approaches were also coded to derive calculations and draw relevant charts and graphs.

Population

Malawi has 6 public institutions of higher education offering degrees of Bachelor of Education. These are spread across the three regions of the country. Each institution runs its practicum independent of the others. Each institution has one practicum coordinator each year. Each institution places its student-teachers in schools convenient for the training institution. However, all institutions place some of their students in the Central Region schools.

Sample Selection

The target sample in this study was the degree-awarding TEIs in Malawi. 6 TEIs were conveniently sampled because part of their practicum timetables coincided with each other. Researchers used TP placement lists and schedules supplied by the TP coordinators from each institution to locate student-teachers, supervisors, and coordinators.

10 student-teachers participated in a focus group discussion on a weekday over lunch. The researchers provided the student-teachers with lunchboxes during the talks to avoid inconveniencing their schedules to have enough time to attend the discussion. 6 conveniently sampled supervisors and 6 coordinators participated through a separate online focus group discussion over a weekend to avoid disruptions to the ongoing practicum supervision. The total sample was three focus group discussions with 22 people altogether.

The former were chosen because they interacted with the students daily, while the latter were the custodians of all operations and information about TP. The FDG with supervisors and coordinators was online because the participants were physically in different TP zones during data collection and from different TEIs, making it grim and costly for an offline discussion. To validate this data, triangulation was ensured at two levels: sourcing data from multiple types of participants and through various instruments (Heale et al., 2013).

Table 1 shows sample distribution. There were 22 participants in two FDGs; 10 were students from 6 institutions, 6 were coordinators, and 6 were supervisors. TEIs stand for teacher education institutions.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

All higher education institutions not offering teacher education were excluded from the study because they were not falling under the area of interest. All private higher education institutions were excluded from the study irrespective of their academic programs because it was hard to ascertain their accreditation standards. Many of the private institutions in Malawi fell below the National education minimum standards. All institutions that were not offering higher education were excluded because the study only wanted to narrow the scope to the practicum for high school teachers.

Instrumentation

Students' placements were identified through placement lists provided by each TP coordinator. Semi-guided interviews, FDGs were used to collect data. TP coordinators, TP supervisors, and student-teachers placed on TP were engaged in FDGs. The three sources of information were employed to raise confidence levels in the results, as triangulation is necessary for qualitative studies. The questions were standardized and piloted before deploying them.

Research Procedure and ethical considerations

Before each FDG session, participants were made aware of the study's intent. Researchers informed the participants that participation was free and voluntary. Therefore they could withdraw their participation

anytime without getting implicated. Furthermore, they were also told that participation was to be kept confidential.

Researchers provided the online participants with data bundles enough to sustain them online through the session. The FDG protocol was upgraded after a successful pilot phase. Identity labels were assigned to all the participants to conceal the identity of the participants as the fulfillment of the conditions laid in the data collection process.

Audio data and not video were recorded during FDGs to enhance anonymity. The participants were informed that their voices would be recorded for transcription and not distribution with other individuals not part of the research team. Participants were also assured that all voice recordings would be edited by bending the voice pitch before being transcribed to ensure that the transcribers could recognize no particular voice. The research assistant consistently told the participants about the need to help take part in the exercise without coercion and that they would pull out at any point, they could feel so.

Data analysis

To transmit the subjective experiences, after coding, all data was extensively analyzed by focusing on themes and content of the stories. Their meaning as this approach can capture human and personal (supervisors, coordinators, teachers, students, and managers) dimensions of the perception, experience, and relationship between these individuals, especially the supervisors and their supervisees.

Results

To the question about how all coordinators from the six teacher education institutions (TEIs) allocated supervisors involved in this study, they admittedly said that supervisors were assigned based on the convenience of TP schedule, consistent with the available human resources and several teacher-learners in a zone, and not necessarily on their specialization. One of the coordinators had this to say ((COORD = TP coordinator, ST = student-teacher, TPS = supervisor):

COORD: Firstly, we identify the total number of students in a zone and work on the ratios based on the available human resources. We try to allocate a relevant number of lecturers to each site commensurate with the total number of teacher-learners, but usually, supervisors choose where to go. While on the site, any supervisor can supervise any student, depending on the schedule for the day.

Asked about how often the specialist could supervise the students, all student-teachers acknowledged a severe shortfall in this aspect. They indicated that sometimes they get worried by irregular visits.

ST1: A student has no observation by any specialist throughout the period while others have more in the same school.

The team of coordinators justified it this way:

COORD1: Firstly, several factors determine the effectiveness of supervision: funding levels, human resources, transport, school location, school timetables, and school calendar. Some schools are located in the county's interior, way off the main road, and far from each other. A zone may have only two vehicles but four different routes in a day.

COORD2: Within the shortest period allocated to TP, the supervisors must ensure all schools are visited. Some students may not all have classes on the visit along that route.

COORD3: Multiple students may have classes concurrently against one supervisor. So, some students will be missed. There are situations in which students would be supervised by non-specialists all through.

TPS9: Usually, there's no time for the pre and post-conferencing because either we have supervisions back-to-back at the same school, or must rush to another school, or to join their supervisory team vehicle to accommodate other supervisors' schedules far away from the current school.

When the coordinators were asked to comment on the ideal TP setting, they all agreed on the following:

COORD4: Upon deployment, the first visit is supposed to be for general observation and not for evaluation to help the students to polish up the skills of teaching in a real-life situation. This varies from institution to institution, subject to other factors.

4 out of 6 supervisors indicated that they benefited by learning new things in a field in which they are not specialists. One supervisor said that:

TPS7: Supervision should give appropriate feedback to student-teachers to link theory to practice and not primarily for supervisors to learn new content knowledge and pedagogical aspects specific to a particular learning area.

COORD5: TP is the last opportunity students would get expert advice from their lecturers. Ironically, they quickly mentioned that various constraints compromise student support during TP.

Asked about their general perception of the scrambled supervision model, all the 10 learners in the FDG reached a consensus that not all supervisors are conversant with specific approaches and content-specific disciplines.

STA: I wouldn't say I like supervision by non-specialists because I expect a supervisor to advise me thoroughly on content and methodology. The supervisor is not an authority in the field of study and may lack the expert knowledge and advice I need most.

STC: Not all subjects have the same methodologies when teaching. An approach in teaching French may not apply to a Human Ecology lesson. But some supervisors want to force one method onto another discipline.

STB: Sometimes, we even argue on things I'm double sure about, and the supervisor takes it for arrogance when I try to convince him. Others even give very devastating remarks.

This model gives students a loophole to cheat if a supervisor detects inconsistencies between epistemological truths and the instructional procedures. Both students and supervisors indicated that this model creates loopholes for students to scapegoat if a supervisor doubts the authenticity of students' classroom practice. The following were their views to this effect:

TPS1: sometimes, when confronted, students tell us that what we see is what their specialist teachers taught them in college. In some cases, we cross-check with specialists, but sometimes, it's not easy to do so.

TPS2: I opine that supervision is an opportunity for lecturers to get feedback on what works and what doesn't in a real-life classroom. This is instrumental for curriculum reviews. Therefore, assigning a lecturer to supervise a subject they know nothing about is a mockery of college curriculum evaluation procedures.

TPS4: TP should aim at assigning a grade to the students and a curriculum evaluation process in which a supervisor would determine how best to help the student improve in areas where they demonstrated weaknesses.

STD: This approach sometimes serves us because you can easily convince some teachers that what a non-specialist refuses is what a specialist teacher told us in class.

STE: One reason we underperform, because we're already grappling with many challenges impacting our stress levels. Seeing a teacher whose emotional stability I don't know complicates the tension. Instead of taking them as supporters and advisors, we are afraid since there is always an element of measurement attached to the exercise. It's like I'm taking an exam of a new teacher whose test items and question styles you have never seen before.

STG; it is hard to be asked by a stranger who you don't know what they like about how your lesson progressed. You can't discuss freely with a stranger. In some situations, we have hearsays about such supervisors, and when we meet them face to face, the situation just feels tense.

STH: In a tense atmosphere, it's challenging to reach a compromise with the TPS as I felt unsafe. I avoided any justification so that the supervisor didn't feel challenged. The post-conferencing was superfluous as I felt uncertain of the new TP reactions. I was avoiding creating an unhealthy social environment.

Among the coordinators and supervisors, they opined that the current model has the emphases in Figure 1:

Figure 1 reflections of current emphasis of TP. TP emphasized evaluation and assigning grades for certification to student-teachers most, with minimal regard to learner support, lecturers' learning new content and methodologies, and informing the curriculum.

On the preferred frequency of supervision, students and supervisors had divergent views. Coordinators expressed a preference to visit students frequently in the same subject. Students seem not to like to frequent supervisions because they felt threatened by supervisors for the poor support.

STI: Supervision is not always fun. When you hear they will supervise you tomorrow, you wish tomorrow never comes because some come as fault finders with demoralizing remarks. They leave you down instead of uplifting you. Some even get influenced by the grades from a previous observer. Therefore, I always dread getting more times of such torturing experiences. After that, I wish I had been supervised and advised without attaching scores to my observation.

STJ: I want to be observed for feedback, not grading as often as possible. It is haunting to find that all your mates have at least three supervisions, and you only have one lousy observation from a non-specialist. That's when you feel like you are already failing and yearn for more supervision. But if you already have two supervisions, you wish no one else comes to play the devil's advocate.

STK: Before TP, only those lecturers who took us through course work subsequently took us through the micro and peer teaching sessions. I find it very disturbing when suddenly a stranger pops into my class? Wouldn't that frighten me?

On whether students and supervisors think this kind of teaching practice supervision impacts your professional growth, there was a convergence of lines of thought on this argument between students and the lectures: lecturers also indicated that supervision was an excellent opportunity for the subject teachers to take note of the areas in which the students show common weaknesses so that such analysis could help to come up with better instructional procedures for successive students. Students also argued that if teaching practice served the lecturers by providing them feedback on the quality of curriculum (to make appropriate adjustments to the curriculum after that), then it was still a valid argument to say that only specialists should supervise their respective student teachers.

STM: If the one with a pass were to be given expert advice at this last minute, there would be a higher probability of improving classroom practice.

STN: If a supervisor doesn't know what my lecturers taught me in class, how could they track progress, or whether I am implementing theory properly?

On professional development, supervisors agreed that as they are trained to perform their duties professionally, they would act not as supervisors but as human beings.

A tiny proportion of the data showed evidence that some lecturers believed that a TPS who is not good at content in a discipline of some kind would have a very keen eye on methodology during supervision.

Some participants said that some of those TPSs with limited ground in the subject being taught was put off when commissioned to supervise a student from a different discipline. That led to compromises in advising and grading the observed lessons. In fear of failing to justify a failing grade, some lecturers confessed that they could assign a higher score to a lesson than what reality demanded because students had the right to refuse to sign against such failing grades from non-specialists.

Another TP student strongly suggested:

If teacher education is about progression, development, and procedural, then the lecturers who begin with us (theory) should be the ones to finish the race with us." They said that specialists would be the key figures in assessing suggestions during reviews, reforms, innovations, and changes to the curriculum.

According to the coordinators and supervisors, the model has been there for ages because of the following conditions:

TPS3: Each student has to be supervised at least thrice in each zone. Much as each TP zone would have specialists in almost every learning area, field practice forces us to allocate the few lecturers to supervise TP without considering the subject areas of the student teachers. This arrangement isn't our preference but a circumstantial decision. There wouldn't be enough staff allocated to all the students in all zones if specialization was strictly considered.

Relationship between learner quality learner support and allocation of TPSs without considering specialization (i.e., mixed allocation)

Efforts to assign TPSs without considering the subject specialization of both the supervisor and the supervisee proved to be both convenient and challenging. However, the setting had more shortfalls than advantages. 5 coordinators and supervisors felt very uncomfortable supervising a student in a new subject area. Figure 2 summarizes supervisors' preference on whether they want to supervise students in their area or a scrambled model.

Figure 2 views about supervisors' preference on whether they want to supervise students in their area or a scrambled model. A majority of faculty preferred matching supervisor's specialty with that of the student-teacher.

Supervision must be holistic

9 faculty agreed that different disciplines and learning areas have other methodology and content knowledge demands. Therefore, they preferred to have specialists supervise the students based on students' specialties. 2 opined that all subject areas have equal and same demands and argued in favor of the scrambled model. One remained neutral. Figure 1 indicates supervisors' views on whether the subject areas had different demands.

Figure 3A summary of whether or not all methods have equal demands irrespective of the subject. 20% thought all subjects had the exact needs. Therefore, anyone can handle any student regardless of their specialties.

Figure 3 shows that more TPSs think different subjects have significantly different demands even in the same method. However, many TPSs said they used the same observation instrument, whether specialists or not. It was argued that even if the TPS were disadvantaged in the lesson's content being observed, the student would be disadvantaged because the TP observation instrument forced TPS to assess the student even in content knowledge. That entailed that such assessment was likely to be redundant and unreliable. That would compromise learner support.

Such coordinators assumed that teaching and learning methodologies are the same irrespective of the subject. On the other hand, others argued that even though we were to think that all disciplines could be taught with similar approaches, say pair work or simulation in Computer Studies, would be identical to pair work or simulation in Physics; it's how these methods are handled in the different subject will vary from subject to another. Much more some methods are more applicable to some subjects than to others. Conversations, a pair at a time, are more suitable to language subjects, especially when exploiting speaking skills than they could be in a Physics lesson.

Discussion

Students felt that they were not getting the best when supervised by teachers who were not specialists. This was because mentoring is a longtime process in which the mentee needs the presence and guidance from an experienced mentor in the same specialty. It is a continuous process in which the mentor needs to know the challenges and strengths of the mentee to offer the most effective advice. Academic tutoring and mentoring demand effective and personalized interventions that increase student learning (Kyriacou, 2007). While some scholars emphasize that the effectiveness of TP supervision depends on the quality and effectiveness of the supervisors and not mere certification (Mcgee, 2014; Rajić et al., 2015), some literature records that it is expected that institutions do not perform an excellent job in teacher education due to insufficient teachers (Kıldan et al., 2013).

At-risk students' prior failures make them want to avoid physically, mentally, and emotionally new situations likely to fail (Bhargava, 2009; Picklo & Christenson, 2005). Suppose an at-risk student cannot trust their supervisors and teachers to respect them as learners. In that case, the student will withdraw effort to avoid self-embarrassment by not trying, thus not failing (Picklo & Christenson, 2005), and will do things just as ordered by the supervisor, at the expense of their will innovative power (Bhargava, 2009). Students will perform their best if they feel that the environment is safe and non-threatening. They feel supported and encouraged to learn from their mistakes without anticipating embarrassment or penalty (M. L. Greene, 1992; Picklo & Christenson, 2005; Rajić et al., 2015). The relationship between the supervisors and the supervisees is crucial for effective TP outcomes (Sethusha, 2014). Studies report that

student-teachers are already anxious about classroom indiscipline and the presence of an unfamiliar supervisor compounds it all, leading to severe underperformance (Preece, 2006).

Due to such a scrambled model, students get confused with conflicting messages between what their lecturer taught them in class and the comments from the supervisors in the field. Only supervisors or teachers with a particular subject matter can provide students with appropriate intellectual challenges, organize the content to help students develop cognitive maps, and differentiate instruction. (Picklo & Christenson, 2005). Similar studies show that some supervisors make superficial comments on the lesson plans during the pre-conference because they lack expert knowledge (Magwa & Ngara, 2018). The success of student-professional development programs depends on the quality of their teachers (Karim & Gul, 2020; Kıldan et al., 2013), teachers, and the student-teachers mindset about the type of person supervising them (M. L. Greene, 1992; Kıldan et al., 2013). Extant literature reflects our findings that TP supervisors provide inadequate feedback through comments that usually contradict what they learned in the university (Gürsoy et al., 2013; Kecik, 2011; Magwa & Ngara, 2018; Mcgee, 2014; Oppong, 2013), yet theory and practice must be inextricably linked through situated and contextualized teaching experience (Belton & Woods, 2013; Özder et al., 2013).

Research indicates that TP aims at assisting the teacher-learners to achieve desired practical skills for delivering effective and efficient lessons (Sethusha, 2014). The central task for the supervisor is to observe student-teachers and offer reflections and feedback on their classroom practices (Sethusha, 2014; Tabot, 2016). Students complaining about the tension due to fear of obtaining a failing grade is plausible because the supervisors tended to forget the equally important role of TP supervision-feedback. Therefore, over-emphasizing assessment for grading purposes should not be prioritized over student support for their professional development (Long et al., 2013). The role of the post-conference is unparalleled for professional development (Magwa & Ngara, 2018; Tabot, 2016).

Many supervisors opined that the teaching practice period is too short to assist the students adequately. There is adequate research justifying supervisors' call for more time allocated. Studies indicate that repeated chances to practice the new material correctly and meaningfully make it more likely for the student to remember and re-use it (M. L. Greene, 1992; Picklo & Christenson, 2005). Our results agree with previous studies indicating that brief TP period, limited pre-and post-conference time, inadequate invaluable feedback (Mutende, 2017), and the limited frequency of observations are deleterious to professional development (Belton & Woods, 2013; Borko & Mayfield, 1995; Study & Richardson-koehler, 1984; Tabot, 2016), and this adversely impacts student- experience (Bhargava, 2009; Gürsoy et al., 2013; Gürsoy & Kesner, 2016; Özder et al., 2013).

If students cannot discuss freely with supervisors for fear of being misconstrued for arrogance, they will not voice their opinions when teachers question or reprimand their actions. This finding agrees with previous researchers: being under observation for evaluation and rewarding marks brings too much pressure and anxiety among student-teachers (Bhargava, 2009). Students prefer supervisors v. Yet studies show that the nature of criticism student-teachers receive from such supervisors outweighs all the

student's positives in lesson delivery (Oppong, 2013). Our findings concur with Belton, who found that supervisors "may in response be perceived by student teachers …. as uninvited guests in their professional space" (Belton & Woods, 2013). Besides, UNICEF (2000), as cited in Leshkovska and Spaseva (2017, p. 45), alludes to the fact that the atmosphere plays a crucial role in learning. Gujjar (2010) says that teaching practice aims to provide student teachers with an opportunity to evaluate teaching and gain from the benefits of constructive criticism. Byrd and Fogleman (2012) in Gürsoy (2016) argue that problems in the teaching practice end up with the inevitable loser being the student-teacher.

Research by Gürsoy, Kesner, and Salihoglu (2016) showed that student teachers valued the competence of their supervisors to offer professional guidance; their ability to build a relaxed free-speaking environment for a mutual exchange of ideas, and the way they check the teacher trainers' work and provide feedback on their performance (Löfmark et al., 2012). "For any meaningful learning to occur, the environment must be conducive for such learning. Three principal elements constitute a learning environment. They are the physical aspect, the psychosocial and service delivery elements" (Eze, 2009, p. 4). Besides, it was found that teacher-learners had severe concerns about the qualifications of the TPs whose expertise was in another field of study and questioned their effectiveness in giving field-specific feedback. Regarding teacher education institutions (TEIs), capacity and systems development call for the deployment of specialized educators into their appropriate areas of specialization and coming up with systems that would ensure that TP observation, monitoring, supervision, and scoring are based on expertise.

Fayol records that 14 principles form the basis for efficiency and effectiveness in formal organizations. The first of these principles calls for labor division based on specialization. He contends that division of labor must be based on specialization because such a scenario provides the perfection of skills and expert knowledge. Thus, all other factors held equal; the researchers hypothesized that the quality of the end product of the practicum and the student-teacher depends on the nature of specialization of the individuals who supervise them during the teaching practice, which is the very last time for face-to-face contact with faculty members on academic issues.

Conclusion

There is a lack of appropriate learner support during TP in the Malawian teacher education system. This could be attributed partly to the lack of harmonized policy regulating teaching practice. Non-specialist would do more harm to the primary purpose of the exercise than if specialists were to do the supervision. Some TPSs would go straight to lesson observation without any pre-conference to build a rapport first to understand the student-teacher and offer prior advice. Yet, this could be the prime time the students need so much final support from faculty members. TEIs must realize that their most incredible pride is to produce teachers who can represent them academically and professionally through a standard process. Investing in quality teacher education must be the primary aim of every developing nation.

TP is as important as any stage in the process of teacher education. Therefore, institutions of higher learning must prepare adequately for this equally important phase in teacher education long before the exercise is due. Much as life may be full of tradeoffs, stakeholders must bear in mind that quality must not be compromised for the scarcity of resources, and quantity should not be in any way a substitute for quality. Proper resource mobilization, allocation, and appropriation must be an everyday practice in institutions of higher learning, so that core business is given the attention it dearly deserves. Much as TP can serve as feedback to the curriculum implementation process, it must be remembered that TP supervision is the only time remaining for a student teacher to access the last advice from faculty members. If TP is an opportunity for lecturers to improve their teaching skills in college, then such TP sessions must not be assigned a grade that would determine the student's award.

Developing countries must allocate more resources to education and ensure an appropriate investment that purposely uses it. With the advent of COVID 19, it is worth venturing into virtual classroom observation. This will minimize the chances of transmissions as the supervisors will not be moving from one school to another as a carrier agent. It will also enhance standardization of observation and feedback as groups of supervisors will collaborate for every observation. Though this may not be feasible soon, considering the levels of electrification in most Malawian rural secondary schools, long-term goals are worthwhile planning.

Recommendations

Educators in higher education institutions should try to build an academically healthy environment as they interact with their students daily. A well-articulated formal policy needs to be framed to moderate and harmonize TP across all education institutions in Malawi and align academic practice with local and international conventions. Recruitment and deployment of faculty should provide conditions that minimize attrition rates to ensure that adequate specialists are available for supervision. Supervisors must build a rapport before actually going to class with their students for supervision, after which they must give expert advice to the supervisees. All TPSs should ensure they are thoroughly conversant with pedagogies and content knowledge concerning the area in which the targeted student is practicing. For fairness and efficiency, new and inexperienced faculty should be inducted well and involved in clinical supervision before supervising student-teachers in the final school-based TP. Only specialists should supervise students for adequate feedback in all areas of supervision.

Declarations

Conflict of interest

No researcher in this study had any conflict of interest

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Garbage In–Garbage Out. The quality of system output is dependent on the quality of system input. http://people.sunyit.edu/~lepres/thesis/principles/113_pdfsam_POD.pdf

Table 1

Table 1 shows sample distribution. There were 22 participants in two FDGs; 10 were students from 6 institutions, 6 were coordinators, and 6 were supervisors. TEIs stand for teacher education institutions.

Catchment area	Category of clients	Sample	Total
6 TEIs	TP coordinators	1 per TEI	6
	TP students-teachers	10 mixed from 6 institutions	10
	TP supervisor	1 from each TEI	6
	Total participants		22

Figures

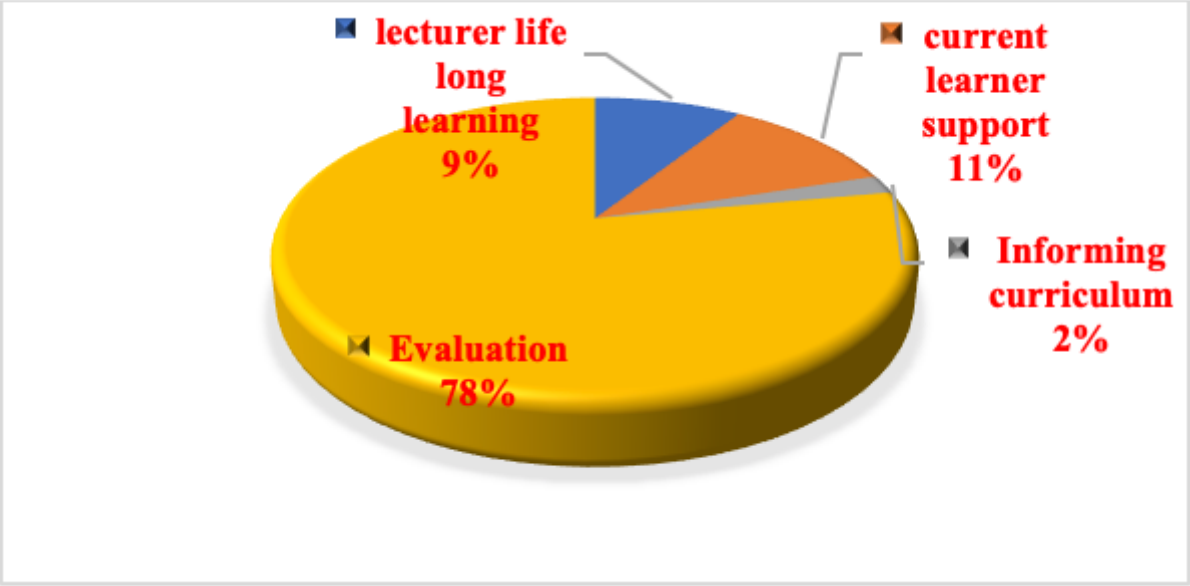

Figure 1

reflections of current emphasis of TP. TP emphasized evaluation and assigning grades for certification to student-teachers most, with minimal regard to learner support, lecturers' learning new content and methodologies, and informing the curriculum.

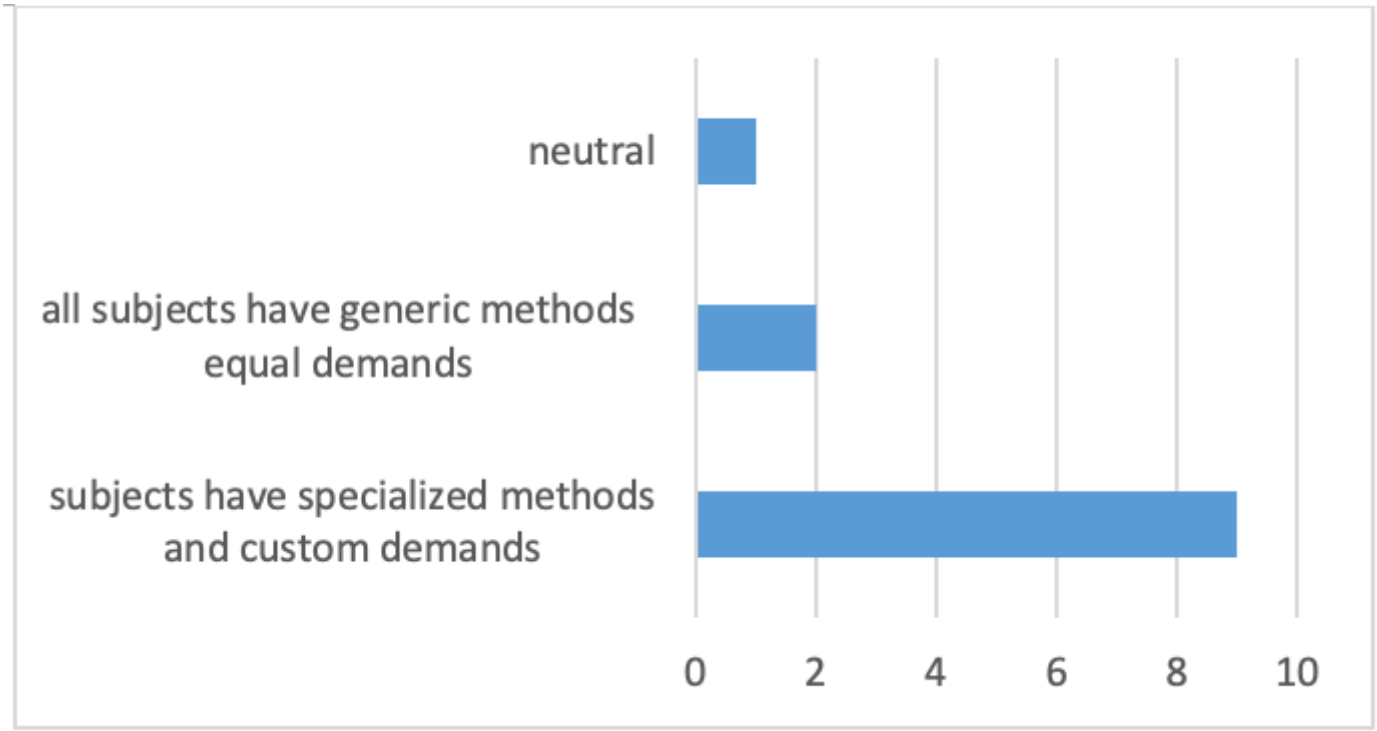

Figure 2

supervisors' preferences on whether they want to supervise students in their area or in a scrambled model. A majority of faculty preferred matching supervisor's specialty with that of the student-teacher.

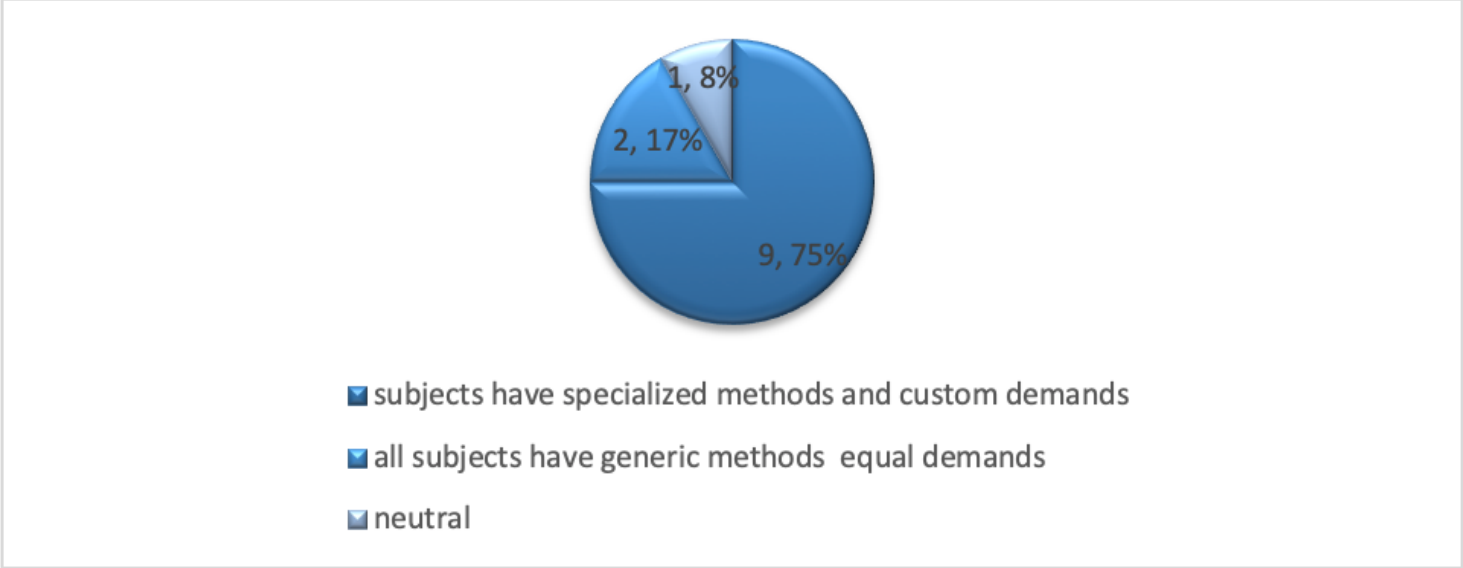

Figure 3

A summary of whether or not all methods have equal demands irrespective of the subject. 20% thought all learning areas had the same demands; therefore, anyone can handle any student regardless of their specialties.

Supplementary Files

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- Qualityoflearnersupportduringschoolbasedscrambledteachingpracticeappendix1.docx