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# Factors and Challenges Affecting Performance of Student-teachers during their Practicum

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**Abstract**— Teachers’ practicum commonly known as School Practice (SP) forms an integral component of the teacher-training curriculum at Mbarara University of Science and Technology (MUST). SP provides the teacher-trainees with the opportunity to blend educational theory with practice. The present study sought to establish factors affecting student’s performance and challenges faced in their practicum in the various secondary schools where they were posted. Data was collected from 567 second and third year teacher-trainees during the school practice sessions of the period ranging from 2012 to 2014. Analysis was performed using SPSS-17. Significant differences were obtained between performance with different subject combinations offered and year of study, with third year students having better performances compared to second year students. There was a significant difference between school type preference with gender type and students offering different subject combinations. Challenges faced by teacher-trainees during SP included poor social support from school administrators and supervisors from the university, too many students in some schools, poor allocation of teaching load, and being unjustly shifted from their original schools of posting. In conclusion, there is need for improving the mode of supervision by the lecturers and school administrators for proper mentorship of the teacher-trainees at MUST.

**Keywords**-component; School Practice, Teachers’ Practicum, Teacher-trainees

## I. INTRODUCTION

Across all disciplines, supervised practical experience provides a very rich ground for professional development. In teacher education, this on-the-job training in highly valued [1] as it enables student-teachers to enrich their professional wisdom [2]. Teacher’s practicum forms a pivotal component of the curricula in many teacher-training institutions around the world and as such provides teacher-trainees with the opportunity to blend psychological and educational theories with practice. It is during this field-based experience that teacher-trainees put their theoretical knowledge and teaching skills/preparations at experiment in an authentic teaching and learning environment [2]. Practicum ensures a supported entry of the pre-service teachers into the teaching profession and adequately prepares them for the future. In fact scholars (e.g., [3], [4]) suggest that school practice/ practicum weighs more in the teacher’s professional preparation than the theoretical study of teaching methodology. It is an “all sufficient experience” which gives a hands-on experience to teacher-trainees [5] and hence consumes much of the teacher’s professional training in some countries such as the United Kingdom with 80% of the teacher’s professional training taking place in the school settings [6]. School practice enables teacher-trainees to interact with experienced teachers, get exposure to the different areas of the teaching profession and adopt survival strategies that enable them to best cope with the pedagogical and administrative challenges they encounter while in the teaching profession. Practicum not only enables teachers to develop work-related motivation but also better emotional response to their professional challenges. Such high levels of interactions and socialization not only raises the confidence levels of teacher-trainees but also leads to increased levels of satisfaction with their teaching careers and high teacher efficacy [7]. Studies (e.g., [8], [9],) have revealed that student-

teachers self-efficacy increase during the teaching practicum which gives them more confidence to cope up with the demands of the profession. Adequate preparation of teachers who can effectively meet the demands of work can be done by making connections with work required of teachers in the field [10].

Practicum has been studied from different perspectives ranging from preparation, actual implementation and learning outcomes of the teaching practice [11]. This has been done to enable teacher-training institutions to design the practicum so well so that student-teachers may perceive it as having a positive impact on their professional development. This is particularly important because turnover of new teachers seems to be affected by the quality of the first teaching experience [12].

It is therefore important to make the practicum of teacher-trainees as pleasant as possible. A good practicum placement should place a strong focus on teaching climate and mentors [13]. Mentors should be able to recognize and promote the development of student-teachers core qualities, act as role models to student-teachers, provide feedback to student-teachers [14], but this may be of limited value if the mentor has poor practical abilities and hence some mentors might need special training to supervise student-teachers.

Recent studies (e.g., [15], [16], [17]) have revealed lots of inadequacies during student-teachers practicum in different countries. These challenges include poor and inadequate supervision by lecturers which are inconsistent and often rushed [17]. In another study, classroom indiscipline, lack of enough teaching aid, poor motivation skills for student, and organization of school work were highlighted as major constraints to beginning teachers [18]. The Queensland report released by Queensland Education (2002) pointed out that too

little time was allocated to practicum and as such it could frustrate teacher-trainees' abilities as this deprives them of enough practice and exposure to the field [19]. A recent study [11] involving student-teachers in Malaysia revealed four major concerns during practicum that negatively impacted on the teacher-trainees which included classroom teaching (e.g., appropriate use of teaching methodology and strategies, organization of teaching activities etc.); students learning (e.g., understanding of subject matter, affective, emotional and social adjustment to the role as teachers); classroom management and lack of discipline among students.

Research provides the best avenues for understanding challenges faced by the student-teachers in Uganda. Unfortunately, no literature exists with regards to the factors affecting performance and challenges faced by student-teachers in Uganda. In fact, when we conducted a google search using the terms "Challenges AND Teaching Practicum AND Uganda," we got no hint as the search didn't match any document.!!! Lack of research in this aspect has left teaching practicum lacking in many aspects which might negatively impact on the quality of teachers produced by the teacher-training institutions.

This study was therefore conducted to establish factors affecting performance of student-teachers of MUST in their practicum, factors related to posting of student in different secondary schools and identification of the challenges faced by these student-teachers while on their practicum. Since in the teaching profession, the theoretical facets are inseparable from practice [5], challenges faced by teacher-trainees during their practicum should be given more attention by their respective institutions to enable better preparation of professional teachers.

#### A. *The overview of the school practice at MUST*

At MUST, student-teachers are posted for their practicum in the second week of June of every academic year (during the second semester). Students in second and third year offering Bachelor of Science with Education (BSc. Ed.) program always participate in this exercise. Around April, selected lecturers survey the participating secondary schools to assess among other things, the teaching-learning environment in such schools, distance from the main trading centers, availability of utilities like water and availability of scholastic materials in the participating schools. School administrators always indicate on the "commitment forms" the number of students they wish to host, their gender and subject combination preferences of the teacher-trainees to be posted in their schools. It is on the basis of this obtained data that the school practice coordinator pins up lists on the faculty of science notice board with a call for students to select their preferred schools. A student is not allowed to have his/her school practice in the same school for his/her second and third year. Student-teachers then submit their school preferences to the school practice office and after two weeks (around second week of May) a final list is pinned on the students notice board indicating schools where students have been posted.

A week before they report to their selected schools, the school practice office organizes a "sensitization workshop" in which teacher-trainees are briefed on what is expected of them

(e.g., behavior, conduct at school etc.) during their practicum. The workshop is also attended by the lecturers/supervisors. In the same week, students are given their facilitations which include transport money, rent funds, and other funds to cater for utilities like electricity and water bills. Students are also given other scholastic materials such as lesson plans books, schemes of work books, notes books, and manila papers among others. Lecturers also gather for a "supervisor's workshop" to guide them on the supervision process before supervision starts.

The school practice period runs for 8 weeks. The first week of this practicum often called "orientation week" is always utilized by the student-teachers to draw schemes of work, familiarizing themselves with the school environment and learning the various school and class dynamics. There is no supervision of students during this first week. Supervisions start during the second week and at least every student is supervised twice in any given week (with at least one supervision per subject of specialization). During supervision, the student-teacher enters class with the supervisor; the supervisor takes a seat at the back of the class and observes the lesson taught for the whole lesson duration. After the lesson, the lecturer interacts with the student-teacher where they discuss the strengths and weakness of the lesson taught.

Supervisors always meet at the end of every week at the university where they submit marks for students and share their experiences in the field during the week. The last two weeks of the practicum are for "external examination" where supervisors from other universities and other participating institutions supervise teacher-trainees. MUST cooperates with the Education Standards Agency (ESA), Secondary Science and Mathematics Teachers' (SESEMAT) coordinators, Makerere University, Kyambogo University, and Busitema University in supervision of students during the practicum.

## II. METHODS

A survey using a questionnaire was used to collect data from 567 students in second and third year teacher-trainees during school practice sessions ranging from 2012 to 2014. The study was conducted amongst teacher-trainees of MUST offering BSc. Ed. Program.

There are three subject combinations offered by these teacher-trainees including Biology/Chemistry (B/C), Physics/Mathematics (P/M), and Chemistry/Mathematics (C/M). Student-teachers of MUST are posted to secondary schools in the following districts of Uganda including Mbarara, Ibanda, Bushenyi, Ntungamo, Kabale, Rukungiri, Kisoro, Kalungu, Masaka, Kanungu, Rakai, Isingiro, Lwengo, Kasese and Fort portal. For this study posting regions were classified into four; Region 1 (Mbarara, Ibanda, Bushenyi and Isingiro); Region 2 ( Masaka, Rakai, Kalungu and Lwengo); Region 3 ( Ntungamo, Kabale, Rukungiri and Kisoro) and Region 4 ( Kasese and Fort portal)

Schools status in this study was defined as to whether the school is single boys (SB) - (for boys only); single girls (SG) - (for girls only) or Mixed (for both boys and girls).

Performance of these student-teachers was taken from the final mark/score (out of 100%) that was computed by the school practice office.

The questionnaire used included items asking student-teachers about their district of posting, sex, registration number, subject combination offered, year of study, status of school posted to and open ended items about challenges faced during their practicum. These questionnaires were collected by the supervisors in the last week of school practice as they collected the confidential forms. Confidential forms bear the schools' own assessment of the student-teacher.

Data was analyzed used SPSS – 17 and qualitative data was analyzed using content analysis to identify the resulting themes out of this data.

### III. RESULTS

#### A. Demographic characteristics of the respondents

A greater percentage of respondents (63.9%) were in third year. The sample comprised of 494 males (87.1%) and 73 (12.9%) females. A greater percentage of the respondents (48%) were offering Biology/Chemistry; followed by 38.1% who were offering Physics/Mathematics subject combination.

Many of the respondents (67.7%) were from Region 1 followed by 108 students (19%) from Region 2 and 74 students (13.1%) from Region 3. The total number of students in mixed schools were 409 (72.1%); 73 students (12.9%) from single boys schools and 85 students (15.0%) from single girls school.

#### B. Factors related to the performance of student- teachers of MUST in the practicum

Significant differences were obtained between performance as (indicated by the final mark) with different subject combinations offered ( $p = 0.002$ ); year of study ( $p = 0.038$ ) with third year students having better performances ( $M = 78.01$ ) than second year students ( $M = 77.16$ ).

No significant differences were realized between academic performance with gender type, region of posting, and school type.

#### C. Factors related to school type preference by student-teachers

School type preference differed significantly with gender type ( $p = 0.001$ ) with male students preferring more of mixed and single boys schools while female students preferred mixed and single girls schools. School type preference also differed significantly with subject combination offered ( $p = 0.015$ ). No significant differences were obtained between school type preference with year of study and region of posting.

The matrix below shows that challenges faced by student-teachers have two origins; from the university (i.e., university administrators and supervisor/lecturers) and the participating secondary schools (i.e. school administrators and teachers) where the teacher-trainees are posted.

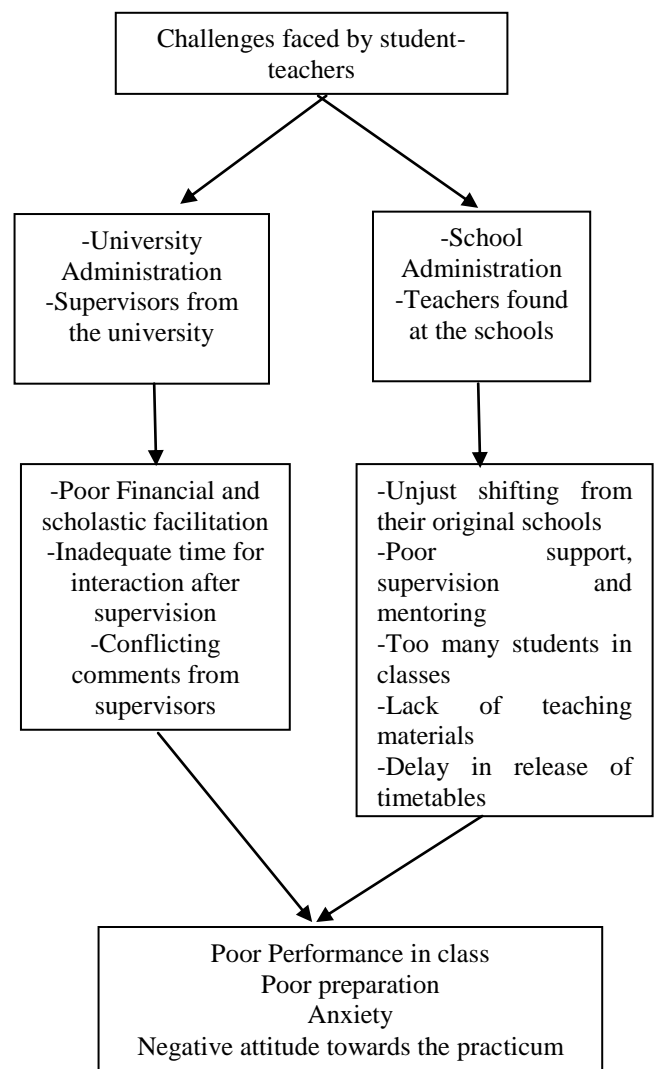


Figure 1. Challenges faced by teacher-trainees during practicum

TABLE I. DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

Demographic Character		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	494	87.1
	Female	73	12.9
Subject Combination	B/C	272	48.0
	P/M	216	38.1
	C/M	79	13.9
Region of Posting	Region 1	384	67.7
	Region 2	74	13.1
	Region 3	108	19.0
	Region 4	1	0.20
School Status	Mixed	409	72.1
	SB	73	12.9
	SG	85	15.0

On the side of the university, students complained of poor financial and scholastic facilitation, poor supervision on the side of the supervisors, and conflicting comments from supervisors. Regarding poor financial facilitation, one student wrote; “the university is poorly funding this exercise; imagine I used all the funds given to me in the first three weeks of school practice, so I spent the rest of the weeks gambling about. I couldn’t even cater for my transport dues and could skip some meals which greatly impaired my overall performance”. Students complained that the university was underfunding the practicum, for example a student posted to Masaka (a district about 110 kilometers from the university) received a facilitation of Ugandan Shillings 310,000/= (about 115 dollars) to cater for daily transport costs, meals, electricity and water bills among others which was inadequate to push them through the two months allocated for SP. In order to cope up with this inadequate facilitation, some students resorted to part-time jobs in the nearby schools which negatively impacted on their general performance at the school. The issue of inadequate scholastic materials was also key in their arguments. Students complained about lesson plan books getting used up and the supervisors delaying to deliver other books in time. Other materials like manila papers used in preparation of teaching aids could not carry them through the whole practicum.

Some supervisors were reported not giving enough discussion time to the students after supervision. One student wrote,

“Supervisors should be considerate and give us enough time to discuss with us. I had this supervisor leaving before the end of the lesson to catch another lesson in a nearby school, only to come back in the late evening, combined all the student-teachers at that station for the discussions....!!! This was unbelievable”. Other students reported that supervisions were rushed and poorly conducted in some schools. One student wrote “You cannot imagine, a lecturer came and told me to organize a lesson when I was not timetabled that day, I found this uncomfortable but I could not resist since this was my lecturer requesting”. In some schools, lecturers reported to classes late (as late as 20 minutes after the lesson had started) and this was inconveniencing to some student-teachers.

Further to this, supervisors gave “contradicting comments” to student-teachers which left them in total confusion. One student reported “you get this supervisor support a given teaching methodology, only to be condemned by another lecturer on the next day when teaching the same concept to a different class”.

On the side of school administrators, some students were unhappy with the way they had been unjustly shifted from their original schools of posting to other schools. In some schools the school administrators denied the fact that they had requested for such students on the commitment forms. However upon crosschecking with the School practice(S/P) office, records indicated they had done so. This meant that students had to be reallocated to other schools which impacted on their finances and initial preparations.

In other schools with few teachers, student-teachers indicated that there were overloaded with teaching lessons thereby denying them enough time for lesson preparation. In

some schools, students were allocated as many as 18 periods instead of the recommended maximum of 12 periods by the S/P office. Other schools had very many resident teachers and this lead to under loading of the student-teachers to an extent that a student couldn’t get the minimum 8 periods per week. This meant that they could get little supervision which impacted on their professional development. Additionally, school administrators didn’t provide enough professional support to the student-teachers and as such could not adequately handle some pedagogical and administrative challenges at their stations. I quote one student, “My school did not give me emotional and social support to easily adapt to their school environment. We were not given orientation and as such we did not know some of the school administrators and the exact location of some classes. I believe this impacted on my social adjustment and definitely overall performance during this school practice”.

Lastly students also reported lack of enough teaching materials/aids such as chemicals and apparatus to be used in practical lessons (mainly in Biology, Chemistry and Physics) and demonstrations which affected their performance. In some rural schools, even the basic laboratory chemicals such as mineral acids (like hydrochloric acid, sulphuric acid and indicators) and apparatus (such as pipettes, burettes, conical flasks, rulers, among others) were not available. This was coupled with many students in classes mostly in Universal Secondary Education (USE) schools which provided the teacher-trainees with challenges of classroom control, indiscipline, motivating students and poor assessment of students. Generally, from the student-teacher’s point of view and referring to the above matrix, many of the challenges faced by students originated from the institutions (secondary schools) where students had been posted. According to the student-teachers such challenges led to poor performance in class during teaching, created anxiety and led to negative attitudes towards practicum.

#### IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The need for well qualified science teachers in Uganda with a firm foundation in subject knowledge and other pedagogical skills in their areas of specialization is vital to the progression of the education sector and the overall national development. This is because societal problems are always addressed by curricula in schools with the teachers as the key implementer of educational policies aimed at eliminating such problems. It is therefore important that teacher-training institutions invest dearly in preparation of teachers. Teacher educators must realize the challenges faced by student-teachers during their practicum and have them addressed to reduce the anxiety felt by students. This present study has revealed that most challenges faced by student-teachers of MUST originate from the institutions where they are posted for their practice. Amongst the most cited challenges were lack of support from school administrators and teachers, big classes, and lack of enough support from the supervisors. It is also worth noting that studies elsewhere revealed quite similar challenges as those have faced by student-teachers of MUST.

Studies (e.g., [20], [21]) have revealed that teacher-trainees required a lot of emotional and professional support during



their field experience mostly from their cooperating teachers they find at their stations. With such, their appearances become rather interesting, less frustrating and enhance their integration into the school system which enhances their performance. More so, administrators and other cooperating teachers provide models to be emulated, provide immediate feedback regarding the student-teacher lessons conducted and guidance. Lack of mentorship poses great problems to the teacher-trainees [22]. So many reasons have been advanced for lack of support, mentorship and guidance by teachers and school administrators. A study revealed that some school administrators in Japan thought that student-teachers did not have enough knowledge in the subjects they taught such that after they had left schools, the resident teachers had to re-teach the content that had been taught to their students by the student-teachers. Another study revealed that student-teachers could not communicate with experienced teachers found at their schools because the former were too busy and as such could not provide the need help by student-teachers [23].

A study to investigate the factors related to professional preparation of beginning teachers in Fiji ranked assistance from associate teachers as having the most positive influence on their preparation and as such one student asserted "The associate teachers are indeed very helpful, always guide us throughout our practice and also improve our weakness". Another participant in the same study asserted, "The associative teachers provide a lot of help as far as the teaching career is concerned". It therefore implies that the role of support from experienced teachers and school administrators should not be undermined. There is need for the school practice office to proactively engage school administrators of the cooperating schools by organizing sensitization workshops for them before the start of practicum exercise. In such workshops, they should be educated about their roles in provision of moral, emotional and professional support to the student-teachers posted to their schools.

The issue of classrooms with large numbers of students seemed common to many student-teachers mostly those in rural USE schools. I quote one student-teacher "You cannot imagine having your first lesson in a class of 90 students compacted together with even no breathing space". In this students' own view, such a large class did not only present classroom management challenges but also led to discipline problems and lack of enough teaching materials. It was hard for such beginning teacher to closely monitor the discipline of each student in class and as such, the lesson was full of disruptive behaviors most especially by students at the back of the class. The challenge of classroom management and student discipline not only affects large classes but also smaller classes; however the challenge is more pronounced in the latter than the former because of ineffective supervision of each student in class. An investigation of the challenges faced by student-teachers from Sultan Idris Education University, Malaysia, ranked classroom management and student discipline highly among the challenges that were faced by student-teachers from this university. One student was quoted "I did not feel confident in my teaching as I felt unable to control some of the student in my classroom" [11]. This study revealed that poor classroom management and undisciplined students could pose a

traumatizing practicum experience for some student-teachers. I quote another student from the same study; "I cried in the first week of my practicum because I failed and worried that I could not control my class which led to loss of self confidence". Because it is one of the most common problems experienced by teacher-trainees, teacher instructors mostly those handling psychology modules at MUST should adequately equip these student-teachers with skills of handling problem behaviors in class.

Supervisors were also reported not to give enough support, guidance and time to the teacher-trainees. One student wrote about a supervisor who left the classroom thirty minutes before the end of the lesson to catch another lesson in a nearby school. Other students reported that supervisors gave them contradicting comments on their evaluation forms which left them in total confusion. A study conducted in Malaysia categorized this challenge under "conflict" whose sources include difference in practice and reality, advice given by the university supervisor and the school teachers among others. On the former cause, one student-teacher claimed, "When we start teaching in English, then they (teachers at the station) will say, "no, you have to mix with Bahasa (local language) but our supervisors did not allow doing that. He said that "don't you spoil them with Bahasa" [22]. In our view, there is need for the school practice office at MUST to come up with a school practice manual stipulating the university's position on how supervision should be conducted so as to eliminate such contradictions.

In conclusion therefore, there is need to attend to the challenges faced by student-teachers at MUST during their practicum if it is to have a positive impact on the pre-service teachers professional development. There need for concerted efforts by all the participating bodies including the university administrators, participating secondary schools and the student-teachers themselves. Since many of the challenges faced by student-teachers originate from the schools where they are posted, there is need for school practice office to clearly stipulate the basic requirements that the participating schools should meet in order to host pre-service teachers. This will guide lecturers during the survey exercise to choose schools that will provide at least the basic working conditions for the teacher-trainees. The university administration needs to lobby more funding from the government and other sources such as private sector in order to raise the facilitation given to students. Also worth noting is the need for much research into the factors that affect performance of student-teachers in their practicum and how they cope up with such challenges.

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