Adapting Innovative Cost-effective Student Mentorship and Practicum to Enhance Quality Teacher Education Programmes: A Case of Kenyatta University, Kenya

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Abstract

At the turn of the 21st Century, Kenyatta University (KU), whose niche is teacher education, had realised that the traditional Teaching Practice (TP) was becoming inadequate in the preparation of its student teachers. Firstly, was the problem of matching the fast-growing student population in education programmes with the declining staff population qualified to supervise them during TP. Secondly; the trend of rising related costs was posing considerable challenge. It was therefore necessary to interrogate the situation systematically through action research with the aim of developing innovative interventions that would help cut down financial costs and enhance quality of the TP. Literature review in this area indicated that TP could be greatly enhanced through teacher-mentorship programmes that addressed quality of graduate teachers in cost-effective ways. Consequently, in Year 2012, Kenyatta University Management mandated the Directorate of the then Teaching Practice and the Office of Dean, School of Education, to explore the viability of transforming the traditional TP through innovative approaches that entailed teacher-student mentorship programme. A pilot study was designed within the framework of Action Research and historical approaches. The pilot study was organised within partnership of KU and its TP participating schools. It was conducted in 6 purposively sampled TP zones. There were 34 duly recruited teacher mentors and their school principals as well as the KU students posted to those schools. The results of the pilot study strongly supported the intended transformation thus allowing KU to successfully implement the current Teaching Practicum and Mentorship programme.

Key words: Teaching Practicum, teacher mentorship, twenty first century teacher

Introduction

Kenyatta University College (KUC) was established as a constituent college of University of Nairobi primarily to train Secondary School teachers. The College admitted its first group of two hundred students for a three-year Bachelor of Education (B. Ed.) programme in 1972 (Kenyatta University, 2016). This cohort graduated in 1975. From this humble beginning, the college grew steadily in terms of student population and academic staff over the years. In time, the University College became famous as a leading teacher education institution not only in Kenya but in the whole of East African Region. In 1985, the institution was

inaugurated to a fully-fledged university through an act of Parliament, known as the Kenyatta University Act (Kenyatta University Strategic and Vision Plan, 2016-2016, p. 1).

As a premier institution in teacher education, Kenyatta University has been on the forefront in introducing innovative strategies to meet emerging challenges in the growth of teacher education. For example, from the time of the introduction of B. Ed. degree programme, till 2007/2008 academic year, student - teachers grades in teaching practice were not included in the classification of the B. Ed. degree classification. Teaching Practice (TP) assessment was merely expressed as “pass’ or “fail” without recognizing distinguished performance. It was therefore not necessary for student teachers to seek excellence in the practical aspect of their training as much as they did with the other course units that were graded accordingly. This method of grading student teachers was changed to give TP the same status of importance as other subjects. Currently, TP is an enhanced activity that is equated to two course units and the grade awarded is included in the degree classification. By the turn of the 21st century, Kenyatta University, through its School of Education and Directorate of Teaching Practice, conducted a study on the quality and cost effectiveness of TP whose findings formed the basis of the introduction of yet another innovation in the form of “student - teacher mentoring programme”. This innovation is the core subject of this paper.

Background and context of the student-teacher mentoring programme

The attempt by the School of Education to improve the quality of Teaching Practice Supervision has a long history. In the 1990s, the then Faculty of Education introduced a partnership with secondary school teachers for the supervision of student teachers. The Faculty put up an advertisement for training of university graduate secondary school teachers who were requested to apply to become supervisors/mentors of Kenyatta University students during Teaching Practice. Applicants were interviewed and successful ones were invited to the University for a two week Teaching Practice Supervision course. After completing the course the school teachers were certified and defined as “teacher tutors”. These secondary school teachers were considered qualified enough to partner with University lecturers in supervision of Kenyatta University students on Teaching Practice. However, despite this initial acclaimed successes, the programme was abandoned when Kenyatta University failed to meet its financial obligation to the teacher tutors, apparently due to the absence of legally binding Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) and structured ways of bonding the partners.

Statement of the problem

In the context of failed attempt at improving teaching practice through partnership with teacher mentor schools, the turn of the 21st Century found Kenyatta University (KU) still struggling on how to manage the TP in terms of increased growth of student numbers, whereby the school of Education had grown from over 10,000 registered students and increasing steadily annually. Towards the end of the first decade of this century, KU introduced admissions during the May semester which is traditionally the TP semester, thus creating a competition for lecturer time in between teaching and TP supervision. Clearly, while this innovation of a third semester of teaching effectively boosted student enrolments, it also posed challenges in terms of engaging the same academic staff who were supposed to go out and supervise students in

their TP. In addition, to this challenge, a relatively high rate of increase of student population from approximately 13,000 in 2005 to over 20,000 in 2010 had notable implication on the costs of managing the TP with students being allowed to do TP in any school of their choice countrywide. It is also noteworthy that the growth in student numbers was not in tandem with growth in university-based supervisors who had to not only supervise TP but also be available on campus to teach classes during the May semester with workloads similar to any other semester.

Based on the challenges cited above, in 2012, Kenyatta University, through the School of Education made yet another attempt to partner with secondary schools in enhancing the quality of supervision of Teaching Practice. This time around, the University commissioned an action research on Teacher-Supervisor-Mentors (TSMS) model of Teaching Practice to inform the possibility of rolling out a revamped programme that would not only help in improvement of quality of TP supervision but also provide a model that was financially cost-effective to the institution.

Insights from related literature

Contemporary thought that gravitates around 21st century education underscores the need for educators to manifest creativity, cultural awareness, problem solving, civic engagement, communication, productivity, collaboration, accountability, and an exploration that makes classrooms as dynamic as the world around them. Logically, then, the 21st century teacher must be well-prepared for the 21st century education in which 21st century students engage within and outside the schools. Approximately 100 years ago, John Dewey had cautioned that “*if we teach today’s students as we taught yesterday’s, we rob them of tomorrow*” (Dewey, 1915, p. 18-20). This caution remains true today as it had been during Dewey’s time. If schools and school teachers do not reinvent themselves to engage effectively with today’s students and train them for skills needed for future occupations, it will be difficult for the graduates to become competent in the global economy. It is imperative that the 21st century teachers be educated, trained and capacitated to become innovative, motivational, illuminative, and catalytic of children’s and youth learning. This can only happen if the student teachers themselves are given continuous hands-on experience in which well-informed and committed mentors who are also knowledgeable and experienced play their role in the development of teachers who are not only knowledgeable but also skilled and competent to work with children and youth within educational contexts.

Available literature indicates that for educators to become effective 21st century teachers, they need to begin by acquiring 21st century skills. These include of what is popularly referred to as the “four Cs”; namely, **communication** skills characterised by effectiveness in sharing thoughts, questions, ideas, and solutions; **collaboration** which is an enabler of working together to attain specific goals; **critical thinking** that entails looking at problems in new ways, and finally, **creativity** that is manifested in trying using new approaches to attain best results. Rotherham and Willingham (2009) argued that in order for educators to function effectively, “*the 21st century skills movement will require keen attention to curriculum, teacher quality, and assessment*”. Consequently, there is need to revamp the ways in which educational institutions think about human capital in education—in particular how teachers are trained. As part of the 21st century skills movements, there is call for greater collaboration among teachers through which experienced ones can have time to share their expertise with the novices (Rotherham

and Willingham). Kenyatta University recognised the veracity of these arguments focusing not only on implementation of curriculum delivery during TP *per se* but also on the quality of how teachers were being trained.

The use of mentor teachers has been deemed key in supporting novice teachers and student teachers acquire the relevant professionalisms through field practice. A study conducted in USA at the turn of this century foregrounded the purpose of implementing innovative practicum and mentorship as the “game-changer” in improving teacher education. Accordingly, models in the concurrent teacher education programmes must be charged with the responsibility of:

providing the candidates with the experiences that have potential to develop knowledgeable, culturally aware, collaborative, resilient and resourceful professionals. These skills and dispositions were believed to support graduates in becoming increasingly competent and employable in education-related career settings (Cantalini-Williams *et.al.*, 2014).

Cantalini-Williams *et.al.* (1914) contend that through TP, student teachers are expected to gain the practical skills and dispositions that are believed to support them in becoming increasingly competent and employable in education-related career settings. Arguably, educating and training teachers entails a complex process that combines theoretical and practical aspects of professional development (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). While there are hardly any studies on teacher mentorship conducted within contexts of higher education in Africa, research conducted elsewhere shows that teaching practicum that embraces mentorship component is an integral part of teacher education (Cohen & Ball, 1999). It is further observed that teaching practicum placements are essential for promoting cohesion between theory and practice in teacher education programs (Falkenberg & Smits, 2010). Theoretically and in practices, it is through TP that student teachers can be mentored on the reality of the profession to which they aspire to build their careers. This paper therefore considered the combination of TP with mentorship component as an innovative way for KU to foster the opportunity for its students to not only work in real schools but also to learn how best to work in collaboration with serving teachers who also have official responsibility to guide and help them grow on a daily basis (see Cooper and Orrell *et. al.*, 2010).

With these insights from related literature, KU found it imperative to embrace innovative TP supervision and models of assessment that would provide space for more experienced teachers to use their experience to mentor its student teachers. KU realised that what its education student teachers needed was a re-casting of the more theoretical residential training coupled with the touch-and-go type of TP supervision to explore the more collaborative TP and mentorship programme that allowed systemic and holistic support of peer teachers and more experienced and dedicated teachers who were available in schools daily during the TP session. To make this shift of thought, practice and policy, KU needed to generate contextual evidence through pilot action study that would inform any intended transformation in its teacher education and training.

Method of the study

The KU commissioned study was designed in the form of a pilot/feasibility study that was carried out in four phases as follows:

Phase

1-

Sampling

Candidates to be trained as mentors

The selection of TP mentors began with press advertisement of the programme inviting applicants for induction of the same. A short-listing exercise of candidates was conducting from among applicants who had expressed their interest in being trained as mentors. The criteria for selection entailed the following:

- Minimum academic qualification (B.Ed.)
- Minimum teaching experience (5 years)
- Maximum age (50 years)

Teaching practice zones

Using above-cited criteria, the following 5 zones were sampled based on national distribution of choices that the TP student s traditionally made for their posting:

1. Machakos/Makueni (Eastern Province)
2. Kitui (Eastern Province)
3. Kiambu (Central Province)
4. Mombasa (Coast Province)
5. Nairobi (Nairobi)
6. Meru (Eastern Province)

Sample size

From these areas, 67 applicants were shortlisted for interview and contacted by sending them text messages or calling them directly on their personal or school phones. Out of 67 contacted applicants, 51 confirmed they would attend the interview for training as teacher mentors.

Phase 2- *The interview process. (26-27 February 2013)*

The main aim of the interview was to select the best secondary school teachers who would be tasked with mentoring KU student teachers during their Teaching Practice. This was to be determined by explicit expression of **first**, interpretation of the role of a teacher mentor, **secondly**, their expression of commitment to the teaching profession and to support and guide younger teachers in the profession. **Finally**, the interviewee was required to demonstrate familiarity with areas of mentorship that they would employ on our students e.g. the lesson planning, classroom teaching and discipline, following the syllabus, participating in out of classroom activities.

The interview panel was composed of eight (8) persons drawn from the University senior management, including the Dean of School of Education; Directorate of Teaching Practice and the Department of Education Communication and Technology. This panel was chaired by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic). Each panellist scored the candidates and the final score for each applicant was arrived at from taking the average of all scores given by panellists. Out of the 51 interviewees, 43 (84%) applicants were successful and hence were enlisted for the induction and training on how to supervise and score students on TP.

Phase 3- *Induction seminar (29-30April at Kenyatta University Conference Centre).*

The purpose of the induction seminar was to equip the selected secondary school teachers with mentoring skills through skills training and knowledge sharing that would enable them to assist Kenyatta University lecturers in supervising students on TP effectively and sustain

quality. During their training which was residential, the school teachers were inducted in among other skills, how to score specifically,

- Lesson preparation
- Presentation of lessons during classroom teaching
- Classroom participation and management
- Observation of professional code of ethics and
- Practicing general principles of cooperation and mutual respect
- attending to school duties, etiquette, grooming etc

To proceed to participate in the actual study phase, a prerequisite requirement for the selected teacher mentors was to demonstrate that their school had enlisted minimum one KU student teacher for Teaching Practice with who the mentor would work. Our analysis of the qualifying teacher mentors revealed that 5 of them did not have student teachers in their schools; hence they were excluded from the study phase. One other teacher withdrew from the programme while two (2) others were disqualified since they had administrative issues with their employer the Teachers Service Commission (TSC) which would not allow them to participate in the project. Finally, thirty-six (36) selected teachers attended the induction seminar which was successful in ensuring that all participants qualified to become teacher mentors. Kenyatta University Management commissioned the qualified secondary school teacher as mentors and awarded them certificates at the end of the seminar. Their schools were also enlisted to partner with KU through the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) after which they were presented with a certificate of partnership.

Phase 4: *Evaluation of the student-teacher mentorship programme (May-August 2013)*

To appraise the performance of implementation of the programme an evaluation was conducted towards the end of the Teaching Practice period - May to August 2013. There were 15 KU evaluators allocated in the selected TP Zones of study. These were, Machakos/ Makueni, Kitui, Kiambu, Mombasa, Nairobi and Meru. The focus of evaluation was the 36 teacher mentors and the KU student teachers (mentees), school principals /head teachers and their deputies. The instruments for evaluating the programme were: semi-structured questionnaire for the students, interviews with mentors, school principals or their deputies, focus group discussions with KU student mentees and classroom observation from the KU supervision sessions and the teacher mentor supervision form. Data analysis was done thematically as the sample was relatively small and qualitative in nature.

Study findings

Evaluators general comments about the mentoring program.

The following are highlights of the evaluation study findings. The majority of the 15 evaluators reported that **firstly**, the average number of times that each student teachers in the study was supervised had increased 4 to 16 (400%) in two subject areas. Secondly, the student teachers reported that qualitatively the increase in supervision allowed them relatively more opportunities to reflect, receive continuous guidance and mentorship for improvement of their practice to a greater degree than would have been the case in the traditional TP. **Thirdly**, the student teachers

benefited from the mentorship outside the actual classroom teaching to include areas such as co-curriculum activities where each one of them received supervised participation in being club patrons, championing competitions during festivals of drama and music, being coaches during games and sports, taking up scheduled school duties among other out of classroom activities. **Fourthly**, the teacher mentors, almost exclusively provided positive reports of the KU student teachers as being exemplary in classroom teaching, commitment to duty and overall cooperative and respectful. **Finally**, all the participating principals/reported that the behaviour of KU students demonstrated a disciplined cohort both within and outside the school compared to previous non-mentored students as well as students from other universities who reportedly engaged in unethical activities. These included missing classes, avoiding co-curricular activities and engaging in unprofessional behaviour drunkenness, being late for lessons, poor lesson preparation, dressing 'indecently' (e.g. distractive body exposure among both female and male students) plus being implicated in engaging intimately with the learners they taught. The successes notwithstanding, challenges were also recorded that required redressing and adjustment in the programme. For instance,

- incentivising the mentors and school principals through remuneration of mentors which required signing of memorandum of understanding
- establishing ratio of mentors to mentees to ensure cost-effectiveness based on the ideal number of students that one mentor would be expected to mentor
- aligning mentors' subject areas to the student mentees' teaching subject.
- clarifying the validity of the mentor's grading of the student considering the mentor is not an employee of Kenyatta University.
- Specifying the proportion of the mentor's contribution to the grading of a student teacher's final TP grade?
- responding convincingly to the concerns raised among teaching KU staff who questioned the merits and demerits of allowing secondary school teachers to mentor and grade university student teachers.

While the programme has increasingly gained favour among participating schools that have increased from just a handful to over 1,600, it is important to note various emergent issues and challenges that continue to present themselves. This calls for KU to periodically review the programme in order to make it consistently responsive to the changing needs of the student teacher and the schools in which they practice, not in the least sustain quality and cost-effectiveness

Post study impacts:

Cost-effectiveness

Based on the qualitative effectiveness of the study over a period of three years, since 2013, a cost analysis review has revealed that the TP costs have gone down by more than one third of the traditional budget. Indeed, it is projected that once the programme is fully rolled out by year 2017, the cost-cutting measures will have attained by half of the traditional budget. This would make the programme innovation TP mentorship programme a considerable success, not just in terms of quality but also in terms of the quantity of cost-cuts. For instance, based on the semester of May 2016, KU established that in order to supervise a group of 2,400 students it needed a

total of KSH12, 400,000 while the same number of students would cost KSH24, 400,00 under exclusively KU supervisors. This is nearly double the cost for use of mentors. Logically, then, a combination of both mentors and KU supervisors helped reduce the costs by more than one third. By employing this strategy of collaboration with school mentors, Kenyatta University is able to retain enough lecturers on campus to teach during the TP Semester and have a section of them partner with school mentors in supervising and assessing student teachers. With the increase in student numbers, KU will be able to schedule several TP sessions in one year without undue challenge to the adequacy and quality of supervision or on the adequacy of the teaching on campuses which happens throughout the year (all semesters and sessions).

Enhancement of quality

The programme was found to be effective in enhancing quality of supervision and student performance in the sense that **firstly**, it made it possible for student teachers to be monitored on daily basis in the school compared to the occasional traditional visit by university-based supervisors. **Secondly**, the fact that a student teacher was constantly under watch by both teacher mentor in the practicing school and the university lecturers contributed to the overall improvement of the student performance during TP. **Thirdly**, this programme explicitly assisted student teachers to integrate into the school cultures where they were posted. **Fourthly**, an increase in the number of times students were supervised in their two teaching subjects led to the improvement of student teacher classroom teaching and management. Reports from teacher mentors and school principals

Apart from a few instances of poor reports, the principals and mentors provided positive accounts about the KU students under the mentorship programme. They described them as focused in their practices, punctual, active, friendly, respectful, and well-prepared in their lesson planning and following their schemes, doing well in classroom teaching, well-behaved, well-groomed and decently dressed among other positive remarks. Also, the majority of the KU students under the mentorship programme spoke positively about their experiences. They described the mentors and principals as helpful in enhancing their performance in classroom teaching as well as acculturating them into the school professional cultures throughout the TP session. Notably, students reported that in some instances, the mentors organised for our students to observe lessons being taught by the regular teachers in their specific subject areas.

Conclusion

The Kenyatta University mentorship programme was found to be potentially effective and beneficial to all stakeholders thus supporting the intention of rolling it out fully and making part of the institutions identity in teacher education. The successes attained through collaboration with teacher mentors, their school administration and KU helped to demonstrate improved of quality in TP supervisors which had progressively posed challenges to the traditional supervision methods. In conclusion, it was evident that these successes informed the intention of rolling out the KU TP mentorship programme in a more structured and systematic manner. The fact that the new strategy of engaging teacher mentors was endorsed by both Kenyatta University, the teacher employers (TSC), the teacher unions (KNUT and KUPET) as well as the KU student teachers also added the confidence required in for roll out the programme to attain best results in the teacher education programme.

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