

QUALITY ASSURANCE THROUGH EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN A DISTANCE EDUCATION CONTEXT: THE VIEWS OF MAJOR STAKEHOLDERS

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ABSTRACT

The quality of experiential learning in distance education is a dominant concern of all major stakeholders and the public at large. Institutions of higher learning which train school teachers at a distance are often blamed for the poor quality of teachers and teaching. The perception among some sections of the society is that teachers trained at a distance are of poor quality compared to those trained via the conventional face-to-face mode. While this perception can be disputed it gives distance education institutions food for thought. Debunking the wrong perception is to ensure quality in the training of teachers at a distance. Students of the University of South Africa (UNISA) are scattered all over the country and beyond and this makes effective and quality organization, managing, supervision, mentoring and evaluation of experiential learning quite daunting. Effective experiential learning cannot be organized and managed effectively without the involvement of key stakeholders. This paper used the qualitative research approach to explore the views of major stakeholders from two Provinces in South Africa on quality assurance of experiential learning for teacher trainees in distance education. The findings indicate that all the major stakeholders involved in providing experiential learning in the UNISA teacher training program support the idea of collaboration as the basis of quality teacher training.

Keywords: Quality, experiential learning stakeholders, Open Distance Learning, collaboration.

INTRODUCTION

The desire for quality education is the aspiration of all citizens although its realisation does not come cheap. The achievement of quality education depends on a number of factors including the commitment, participation and dedication of all major role players or stakeholders such as the government, the community, the school, the home and the learner. When the major stakeholders play their respective roles effectively, learning outcomes can be positive. In today's world, technology has made it possible to provide education in general and teacher training in particular at a distance. For socio-economic reasons, many people who want to become qualified teachers choose the open and distance learning (ODL) mode of education because of its advantage of earning while learning. This puts the quality of teacher education at a distance under the spot light because as a novel aspect of training of teachers, there might be many community members and citizens in general who are only used to traditional ways of training teachers and may often cast doubt on the quality of the distance education mode of delivery.

Institutions of higher learning which train school teachers at a distance such as the University of South Africa are sometimes blamed for poor quality of teachers and teaching. Watts and Allsop (2015) for example, note that several factors, including: (i) the professional education of the teacher; (ii) the resources and environment provided for her/his work; and (iii) the level of support provided by state - and school -level management structures pose serious challenges to Open Distance Learning (ODL) institutions. There are some perceptions among some people that the teachers who are trained at a distance are of poor quality compared to those trained via the conventional face-to-face mode. Such people hold the conservative idea and think that face-to-face teacher education is the only way of training teachers. This perception can be disputed but it is a food for thought for distance education institutions to put their house in order by closing all the possible loopholes not only to avoid public criticism but more importantly to produce quality teachers to ensure quality education. The point of departure in debunking the wrong perception is to ensure quality in the training of teachers at a distance as a whole but with serious emphasis on the experiential learning component. To do this, distance education institutions have to involve all the major stakeholders in education right from community to the national level. The issue of quality in experiential learning in distance education is therefore the dominant concern of all stakeholders- government, providers, practitioners, students, parents and the public at large.

The University of South Africa is a major distance education institution in South Africa and on the continent at large. It trains almost half of the primary and high schools teachers in the country and beyond. It offers initial teacher training for those who like to become teachers and provides further training for underqualified practicing teachers. As part of the requirement to complete courses for a teaching qualification and be admitted to the teaching profession, all teacher education students at UNISA have to undertake experiential or practice teaching for eight weeks in schools or colleges. During the period of experiential learning, UNISA lecturers and some experts in teaching visit the classes of the practicing teachers to evaluate and support their teaching. The evaluation of students focuses on core teaching domains such as content knowledge, teaching skills, assessment and classroom management. This is done to ensure quality in teaching practices of the students who would be certificated or licensed to become qualified teachers in both public and private schools.

Unlike face-to-face residential institutions, UNISA is a unique context; its students are scattered all over the country and beyond. This unique context poses a huge challenge to the organization, management, mentoring and supervision of experiential learning which is why the need for involvement of all stakeholders is crucial to achieve the desired goal. Kiggundu and Nayimuli (2009) affirm that teaching practice can be challenging but it is important aspect in teacher training in a developing country such as South Africa. In South Africa, the effectiveness of the training of teachers can be compromised by challenges such as geographical distance, low levels of teacher expertise, lack of resources, as well as the lack of discipline among a large section of the teacher and student population in schools. In the light of this fact, the authors argue that effective experiential learning cannot be organized, managed, supervised and mentored without the cooperation and involvement of the key stakeholders in education such as communities, schools, principals, education officials, parents and learners.

The quality of teaching depends on the quality of the teacher and therefore to achieve quality, educational institutions offering teacher education programs at a distance must be innovative by putting mechanisms in place to ensure quality in experiential learning for all teacher trainees. One mechanism and innovative way of ensuring quality in experiential learning at a distance is to engage and involve all major stakeholders in teaching practice activities at all levels - from its organization to implementation and evaluation. It is through collaboration with key stakeholders that the Work Integrated Learning part of teacher training can be successful. This paper used the qualitative research approach to explore the views of major stakeholders in education from two of the nine Provinces of South Africa on how quality can be achieved in experiential learning of distance teacher trainees.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The stakeholder participation theory of whose chief proponent is Edward Freeman (Quezada, 2012) underpins this paper. The theory posits that any individual or group of people who have a stake or interest in a business or organization are said to be its stakeholders. Freeman (1984) defines the concept stakeholder as any individual or group which affects or is affected by an organization. Bryson (2004) adds that stakeholders are individuals or groups that have the direct power to directly impact on the future of an organization. Stakeholders are those groups or individuals without whose support an organization would cease to exist (Freeman, 1984). These may include employers, employees, shareholders, clients, suppliers, clients, communities and state departments. As individuals or group of people with vested interest in an organization, they play major role in maximizing the organization's potential through their active involvement in the day to day activities of the organization. Stakeholders have a say in the management of an organization. Phillips (2003) attests that organizations are dependent on their stakeholders for their successes or failures. The theory is unquestionably the most popular framework for discussing organization or business ethics. From organizational management perspective, stakeholders can be classified into two, namely; - primary and secondary stakeholders. The actors at the coal face of production in organizations are seen as primary stakeholders while people in its broader environment (e.g. suppliers and clients) are regarded as secondary stakeholders. The stakeholders have a common goal i.e. the success and achievement of organizational goals. Thus, management of organization should ensure that the interest of stakeholders is its dominant concern. The Stakeholder Theory is all about how business really works because, for any business or organisation to succeed, it has to create value for its customers, employees, communities and shareholders. The theory is an approach to organizational management and governance that emphasizes the importance of considering organizational stakeholders when making leadership decisions (Freeman, 2009). It is a theory of organizational management and business ethics that addresses morals and values in managing a business or an organization. In short it attempts to address the principle of what or who really counts (Mansell, 2013).

The theory has implications for quality assurance in experiential learning at a distance because it makes a unique contribution to decision-making processes. In organizing a successful experiential learning in the context of Distance Education for teacher trainees, all important stakeholders such as schools, principals, School Management Teams, teachers, education officers, students, parents, community members and department of education should be consulted and taken on board because their involvement can ensure collaborative advantage at all levels of implementation of the program. Through unity of purpose and collaboration, the sense of ownership and '*we feeling*' can be created and nurtured among the major role players for the success and achievement of quality in experiential learning at a distance. By involving major stakeholders in distance education, institutions can dispel the notion of top-down approach to experiential learning.

The Essence of Experiential Learning in Teacher Education

Experiential learning is an important component part of any teacher education program because it offers student teachers with the opportunity for real exposure to the realities of the practice of teaching. There are many student-teachers who have never taught while some others might have taught without any training. Experiential learning gives them the opportunity to learn the skills of the '*trade*'. It is during the practical aspect of learning that students put theory into practice. Du Plessis (2013) affirms that teaching practice should be based on the key features of Work Integrated Learning (WIL) which involves a learning program that focuses on the application of theory in a true, work-based context.

Just as a learner-driver needs to pass a practical driving test before being awarded a driving license so should a student teacher pass the practical component of the training to ensure that s/he has acquired teaching skills to impart knowledge to learners. It is a common knowledge that quality teaching is one of the ingredients of academic success in schools.

Thus, how well a teacher is grounded in both content and pedagogical knowledge has a positive impact on students' academic achievement. Quan-Baffour & Arko-Achemfuor (2009, p.125) affirm that one of the ingredients of better learning outcome is quality teaching and this can only be achieved when the teacher is quality one.

Citing Perraton (2000), Chukuya (2007) attests that the purpose of distance learning in teacher education is to address the problems of teacher shortages and as well as taking care of national teacher upgrades. Teacher education at a distance however is bedeviled with some challenges. As Du Plessis (2013) affirms, the organization of teaching practice poses serious organizational, logistical and educational challenges for distance education institutions. To achieve quality in experiential learning, UNISA must put some support systems in place in an integrated manner to enhance the experiential learning of student teachers (Du Plessis 2013). About a quarter of the total UNISA student population are enrolled in teacher education programs and have to undergo a successful experiential learning in addition to content knowledge courses before they can become professional school teachers. Without passing the experiential learning aspect of the program, students cannot be certified as professional teachers. In view of its strategic importance, the University must provide experiential learning organizers with enough resources to enable them involve all the major stakeholders as a strategy to ensure quality in the practical aspect of teacher education. Schools are established in communities to provide education to the future generation which is why it is the business of all stakeholders - school management teams, principals, parents, community members, education officials, the government and the tax payer - to be involved in the training of teachers for the realization of educational goals.

RESEARCH METHOD

The phenomenological research approach was used in gathering data from the major stakeholders in teacher education for this qualitative study. This approach of data collection was deemed appropriate because it offered the participants the opportunity to describe and interpret their experiences of the phenomenon as being lived (Polit & Beck, 2012). It also enabled them to reflect on and examine human experience through the descriptions provided by the people involved (Brink, 2006) in the investigation.

Participants

The target population for the study was all major stakeholders in experiential learning at a distance e.g. lecturers, part- time tutors, schools, School Management Teams (SMTs), Principals, parents, learners, teacher education students, School Governing Bodies (SGBs), community members and education officials (Department of Education).

Sampling Procedure and Recruitment of the Study Sample

The study involved 30 stakeholders from three [3] education districts in the North West and Free State provinces of South Africa. The researchers used the purposive sampling technique (Polit & Beck, 2012) to recruit the stakeholders from each of the major group of stakeholders that constituted the population for the study. i.e. school management teams (SMTs), principals, school governing bodies (SGBS), tutors, parents, education officials, teacher education students, learners and community members. The 30 participants were deemed information rich because as major stakeholders in education their views were important for the organization and implementation of teaching practice at a distance. The participants were selected on the basis of the stake they have in education and experiential learning for that matter. It was assumed that the participants' views and interest in the phenomenon under study could make them to provide objective information which could make experiential learning effective and produce quality teachers.

Data Collection

With the kind assistance of a staff from the Teaching Practice Office at UNISA, three districts from the two provinces were identified for the study. Using the snowball approach three [3] stakeholders of experiential learning from each of the designated groups were

traced to their homes and work places for interviews. The informal in-depth interviews centred on how stakeholders can contribute to the achievement of the goals of experiential learning. The interviews were conducted during the last school term of 2015. The researchers made appointments with the identified stakeholders to ensure their availability for the discussion. Permission was obtained from the stakeholders to tape-record the interviews. The researchers kept journals in which field notes were recorded during the interviews.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The interviewees were requested to provide their views on experiential learning in the schools in their communities. To this item most of the participants concurred in their responses that experiential learning exposes the student teachers to the real act of teaching. A few others were of the view that experiential learning enables learners, teachers, community members and the student teachers to understand themselves as citizens with a common educational goal-realization of quality teaching. Most of the responses from the participants indicated the important role experiential learning is to the stakeholders. It is important to stakeholders because teaching practice offers student teachers with a holistic exposure to the teaching career-classroom management, learner discipline, motivation, parents and community support. As one student-teacher said;

I came to realize from the experiential learning I had at the school that theory is completely different from practice. I came face to face with teaching learners from different backgrounds with different behaviors and attitudes. The time I spent at the school has helped me to prepare well and have the confidence to go to the classroom when I complete my studies.

One of the school principals collaborated similar observation to what the student teacher said above that;

Experiential learning is very important for novice teachers because it gradually boosts their confidence as they practice more and more. You can pity them the first time they stand in front of a class to teach. They are very nervous and make simple mistakes but the more they have the chance to teach, the more you see how good most of them can be. By the end of their experiential teaching one is able to note that most of them can be good teachers.

The remarks from the student-teacher and the school principal above confirm the role and importance of experiential learning for new teachers by giving them the opportunity to experience the real school and classroom environment. In addition, Experiential Learning helps in boosting the confidence of the novice teacher through the guidance and support of more experienced colleagues in the field. Citing Carnoy et al., (2010) and Reeves (2005), Shepherd (2015) confirms that teacher quality and opportunity to learn were estimated to have positive and significant effects on learner gains in mathematics test scores. The importance of experiential learning through teaching practice is further affirmed by Kiggundu and Nayimuli (2009) that teaching practice can be challenging but important aspect in teacher training for the fact that, if it is not done well to equip students, the effectiveness of the training of teachers can be compromised most especially in the Open Distance Learning context.

Regarding who should be involved in the organization, management and implementation of experiential learning, an overwhelming majority of the participants corroborated in their responses that all the major stakeholders in education like the university, part-time tutors, principals, school governing bodies, school management teams, learners, and the officials from the department of education should be involved in experiential learning. It is only few of the respondents who said that in their views, the involvement in experiential learning

should be limited to the university and the schools because they have the direct responsibility to organise and manage it.

Most of the respondents were of the view that the organisation and implementation of teaching practice is a very huge task that cannot be left to only one or two stakeholders. As one SMT member put it;

We all have a role to play in ensuring quality and success of experiential learning at a distance in our schools. Teacher education is everyone's business. As teachers in the school, we can provide student teachers with basic teaching and learning resources like textbooks, writing materials and accommodation. We can also accompany them to class to ensure that learners do not misbehave during lessons.

The above response is relevant to this study because it sums up the role of the school - SMT, Principal, teachers, SGB and learners- in ensuring the effective implementation of experiential learning in the school. It also affirms the general view that teacher education is everyone's business hence the school as an organization in a community and its members are key stakeholders in experiential learning. They should play active role in the organization and implementation of teaching practice, at least at the local level to ensure quality in the training of teachers for schools in the communities. The need for collaborations and stakeholder involvement is noted by Hart, Diercks-O'Brien and Powell (2009) that the involvement of educational advisers results in some consistency of process and improves the quality of information available for sharing the learning from projects more widely. The researchers argue that teacher training and experiential learning involve many stakeholders who have to collaborate well for it to be successful. In experiential learning in the ODL context, some of the stakeholders are the ODL institutions, SGBS, SMTS, student teachers, learners and communities the Department of Education and its officials.

In stressing how stakeholders can collaborate to make experiential learning by student-teachers a success, an SGB member who was a retired school principal had this to say,

In most of our communities we have experienced teachers who can be requested to do class visits, guide and evaluate student teachers for free or at minimal cost. This can contribute to quality of the program.

Thus, the need to involve the communities and schools to identify expertise for supervision of teaching practice is emphasized by the above view point from a participant. The response affirms the important role stakeholders can and are willing to do to make experiential learning more effective and successful. The view was supported by most of the participants who agreed that the university must be supported by all schools and communities during the practical training session of teachers. The stakeholders of an organization, as Philips (2003) attests, comprise all the elements organizations are dependent on for their successes or failures. In supporting student teachers in experiential learning as indicated by the retired school principal above, the stakeholders have many and diverse roles they can bring to the table to support one another.

On the benefits of experiential learning to the stakeholders, one participant, an education official said;

After all it is the community that stands to benefit from quality experiential learning in both long and short terms. The learners in these community schools may receive quality education when teachers are well trained.

Truly, it is the community which benefits first and foremost. For example, in the short term the presence of student-teachers can assist the schools which lack enough teachers. Again the good student-teachers who might not be employed at the time of the experiential

learning could be identified for employment in the near future. Thus the communities could benefit from the programme hence every stakeholder should be involved to get the best out of experiential learning. One school principal collaborated the view of the education official above when he said;

Those student-teachers who do their experiential learning at our schools and prove themselves as potentially good teachers can be hired after their training. Since I arrived here as the principal four years ago, I have recruited three teachers who had their teaching practice in this school and they have proven to me that we did not make a mistake in offering them the opportunity to work here.

The need for collaboration of stakeholders in teaching practice or Work Integrated Learning as per the responses of the stakeholders and the benefits thereof are immense. For example, Mubika and Bukaliy (2013) point out that all stakeholders in the training of teachers should be considered in all the aspects of teaching practice. Some of the key stakeholders include the training institution, the school offering facilities for teaching practice and the Ministry of Education as the prospective employer who may derive certain benefits in the long and short run.

When asked how they think experiential learning could be organized and implemented to ensure quality, all the participants corroborated in their responses that, although the university is the institution that trains teachers and places student teachers, all stakeholders must provide some input to ensure quality and success in its implementation. One participant who happened to be an online part time tutor and supervisor of experiential learning pointed out that she has observed and learnt through experience that in order to continuously ensure quality in experiential learning the university should lead to conscientise the communities on their role in the project. She suggested that one way of doing this could be an invitation of a university staff who are involved in the organization of experiential learning to address teachers and community members when there is a meeting in the communities or districts.

Providing views on the experiences of experiential learning most the participants agreed that it is a very good way of equipping student teachers with teaching skills. The respondents however added that they have observed situations where practicing teachers (placed for experiential learning) are abandoned by [subject] teachers. Some teachers leave student-teachers alone to go to class without sitting in the class to assist where necessary. As experienced teachers in the school, their presence could contribute to the experiential learning of student teachers. Thus the opportunity for student teachers to learn from them is often wasted perhaps because such teachers do not know they have a role to play in the program. The indifference among some school teachers could be reduced if they are made aware of their role in the training of teachers.

CONCLUSION

The findings from the study affirm one very important issue in education i.e. the need for collaboration and involvement of all stakeholders in ensuring quality in experiential learning because of the fact that teacher education is every citizen's business. As everyone's business ways and means must be found to engage every stakeholder right from the university to the community. The conclusion that can be drawn from the findings is that experiential learning as the practical aspect of teacher education should not be left on the shoulders of the university staff alone. Although all stakeholders in education must be involved in the Work Integrated Learning component the onus is on the University to provide the program with overall administrative function to regularly and systematically record and monitor its implementation, content and progress for the purpose of achieving quality.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In line with the findings the researchers made the following recommendations to improve the quality of teaching practice at a distance:

- The organizers of teaching practice should liaise with schools and local education offices to find out the available resources, expertise and the programs of local schools before placing student teachers in the local schools.
- Local education district offices should assist the university to identify well qualified and experienced teachers, principals and retired educators who have the expertise to be involved in the implementation of experiential learning in the community schools. This will be economical in an era of cost cutting because the university might not need to send out many of its own staff to the districts or schools.
- In case of student teachers without teaching posts the teachers of the host schools should be requested to support them. They should accompany them to class, guide and support the student teachers.
- Further research should be done in the field of experiential learning at a distance regarding the involvement or support from subject teachers in schools where teaching practice takes place.

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