# Professional Assessment Or Fault-Finding? Attitudes of Student Teachers On Teaching Practice Towards Supervision In Masvingo Province.

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*Abstract:*

*The main thrust of this research study was to scrutinise the attitudes of student teachers towards the quality of the supervision which they received while on teaching practice in Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe. The humanistic theories of Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow informed the study. The phenomenological research design was employed with interviews and open-ended questionnaires as data gathering instruments. A sample of 80 student teachers on teaching practice comprising 50 females and 30 males was selected using the purposive sampling method. The research participants were selected from three primary teachers' colleges in Masvingo Province. Amid other findings, it was established that a significant number of student teachers at least had something to complain about in connection with the way they were supervised while on teaching practice. They generally expressed the sincere wish to be treated more kindly and more professionally by all those who assessed them. The researchers recommended that seminars and workshops involving student teachers, external assessors, lecturers and mentors be conducted so as to foster relatively healthy relationships among all the parties.*

*Key words*: external assessor, teaching practice, mentor, mentee, humanism, subject specialisation, ECD, assessment**.**

### 1. Introduction

Becoming a qualified classroom practitioner in Zimbabwe is more of a process than an event since one has to go through some phases of training one of which is teaching practice. Maphosa, Shumba and Shumba (2007:296) describe teaching practice as an integral component of teacher training. Kiggundu and Nayimuli (2009:345) further indicate that teaching practice is an integral component of teacher training which grants student teachers experience in the actual teaching and learning environment. According to Marais and Meier (2004:221) in Kiggundu and Nayimuli (2009:345) the term teaching practice denotes a wide range of experiences to which student teachers are exposed when they work in classrooms and schools. Subedi (2009:138) alludes to the idea that student teachers' overall teaching skills can be boosted by the experience and exposure which they get while on teaching practice. Despite being an integral component of teacher training, teaching practice can be quite eventful to all the stakeholders. Perry (2004:4) in Kiggundu and Nayimuli (2009:345) indicates that teaching practice normally triggers a wide range of affective responses which entail anticipation, anxiety, excitement and apprehension in the student teachers especially at the inception of their teaching practice. Specifically, this study explored the attitudes of student teachers towards the quality of the supervision which they received while on teaching practice.

During teaching practice, the student teacher is attached to mentor who is also referred to as a cooperating teacher (Wilson and Saleh, 2000; https://sites.google.com/site/supervisionofstudentteaching/home). Perunka and Erkkilä (2012:635) view mentoring as process by which a less experienced or less skilled individual is nurtured by a skilled or more experienced person for the sole purpose of promoting the mentee's personal or professional growth. Commenting on the role of the mentor, Holloway (2001) and Maphosa, et. al (2007:297) in Kaggundu and Nayimuli (2009: 351) emphasise that the mentor has to assume a multi-faceted role of being a guide, supervisor, counsellor, overseer, coach, teacher, model, supporter, critic and instructor. Perunka and Erkkilä (2012:635) point out that while mentoring has been reported to be professionally lucrative for both the mentor and the mentee, it is generally known to be quite complex and emotionally demanding. According to Feiman-Nemser (2001) in Perunka and Erkkilä (2012:635) mentoring has evolved in the new millennium to incorporate aspects such as encouraging the student teacher to grow professionally through contemplating on his or her practices. Maphosa, et. al (2007:301) in Kiggundu

and Nayimuli (2009 : 351-352) established in their study that some mentors demonstrate unprofessional behaviour much to the chagrin of the student teachers under their professional guidance.

By virtue of having been student teachers and later lecturers at some point in their professional journey, the researchers have witnessed a lot of eye-catching cases regarding the association between mentors and student teachers. While some mentors can be professional parents who go out of the way to render assistance to the student teachers under their guidance, some of the mentors can make the student teachers' life virtually a living hell. For instance, some mentors may compel student teachers to draft schemes of work using a format which is different from the one recommended by the teachers college where the mentee is a student.  Such a phenomenon is likely to throw the student teacher's world into chaos. Moreover, some mentors adopt a spectator approach in which they allow the student teacher to do everything the way he or she pleases without benefitting from the mentor's guidance based on several years of experience. It was with such experiential background that the researchers embarked on the research to explore the attitudes of student teachers towards the way they are supervised while on teaching practice.

While on teaching practice, student teachers are supervised by school heads, mentors, their college lecturers and / or external assessors. Thobega and Miller (2008:65) emphasise that the supervision of student teachers during student teaching is a very important exercise in teacher training and development. According to Daresh and Playko (1995:26) in Abdulkareem (2001:15), "supervision is the process of overseeing the ability of people to meet the goals of the organisation in which they work".  In defining supervision undertaken in the education fraternity, the Ministry of Education (1999) in Abdulkareem (2001:15) view supervision as an artistic, democratic, humanistic, and inclusive, leadership exercise which is geared to evaluate and improve all the aspects of the educational process. Alhammad (2000) in Abdulkareem (2001:3) intimates that it has been revealed through research that supervision has been inundated by a myriad of hitches some of which include lack of trust between supervisee teachers and supervisors, weakness in ways of communication, weak relationships between  supervisors and supervisees, lack of cooperation, and  the absence of mutual understanding.  This is backed by Sullivan and Glanz (2000) who posit that the domain of supervision has been suffering from inimical and unstable relationships between supervisees and supervisors.

Apart from being intricate and susceptible to a number of technical difficulties, supervision is also quite diverse in nature. Fritz and Miller (2003a) in Thobega and Miller (2008:66) demonstrated through research that supervision models can be placed on a continuum according to the amount of structure used in each model, that is, from highly structured to relatively unstructured models. Perunka and Erkkilä (2012:635) clarify, "The most traditional conception of mentoring is the so called novice-expert model which emphasizes teaching, the transference of regulations and normative practices, modelling and repetition". Another version of supervision which can be employed on student teachers on teaching practice is clinical supervision. It is usually employed when lecturers visit student teachers at the inception of their teaching practice. According to Thobega and Miller (2008:65) in clinical supervision, a supervisor poses questions before and after supervision which are meant to encourage reflection and self-analysis by the student teacher. Citing the example of the assessment of Vaal University of Technology students who are on teaching practice, Kiggundu and Nayimuli (2009:348- 349) point out that during the school visits, lecturers normally give the student teachers written and oral feedback which highlights positive improvements noted, shortcomings identified and suggestions on how to further improve in areas such as overcoming anxiety, effective using language to enhance their teaching and learning activities and how to blend a variety of strategies to improve their teaching.

The experiences of student teachers on teaching practice have attracted the attention of many researchers in Zimbabwe and beyond. Researchers such as Ngidi and Sibaya (2003), Kiggundu and Nayimuli (2009) and Chireshe and Chireshe( 2010) have delved into research studies pertaining to students teachings on teaching practice. Chireshe and Chireshe (2010) conducted an allied research study in Masvingo Educational Region using questionnaires as data gathering instruments. They used a sample of 180 respondents and the chi-square test was employed. Their study established that the assessment by both college lecturers and mentors was held in high esteem by student teachers on teaching practice since they believed that it was helpful for their professional growth. Given such a background, the researchers felt primed to scrutinise the attitudes of student teachers towards supervision undertaken during teaching practice.

Several variables can determine student teachers' attitudes towards supervision while on teaching practice. Firstly, the relationship between the student teacher and the mentor can either make the student teacher more prepared to be supervised by lecturers or very jittery about being visited by those in authority. If the mentor is supportive, the

professional development of the student teacher is likely to be accelerated, all things being equal. Unprofessional behaviour or a nonchalant attitude on the part of the mentor can instil despair, frustration and anxiety on the part of the student teacher. For instance, Maphosa, et al (2007:301) in Kaggundu and Nayimuli (2009 : 351-352) established in their study that some mentors demonstrated unprofessional behaviour much to the chagrin of the student teachers under their  professional guidance. Apart from the relationship between the student teacher and the mentor, the geographical location of the school where the student teacher is deployed for teaching practice can also determine his or her attitude towards supervision. While most urban schools have reasonable facilities and material resources, some schools in rural areas are virtually depleted in terms of material resources. Operating in an environment with limited resources can retard one's professional development as well as instilling feelings of professional inferiority.

A mismatch between a student teacher's subject specialisation and that of the lecturer can be a bone of contention during supervision. Teacher education in primary teachers' colleges is composed of two broad areas which are the general course and Early Childhood Development (ECD).  Each student is required to choose an academic subject to make an in-depth study in it. Specialisation is therefore a necessity. There are specific lecturers who specialise in teaching ECD and others who specialise in teaching the general course. During teaching practice supervision, lecturers are expected to supervise any student despite the area of specialisation. Furthermore, every lecturer is expected to supervise any subject being taught by the student teacher.  It remains arguably true that if a lecturer majoring in a particular subject supervises a student teacher teaching that subject, the student is bound to receive professional guidance from the lecturer.

Another variable which was found to have an impact on the students' attitudes towards teaching practice supervision is the visit by external assessors. The Department of Teacher Education of the university to which the studied teachers' colleges are affiliated work with other lecturers from different teachers' colleges during external assessment. The teaching practice supervision instruments used by external assessors are sometimes different from the instruments used by colleges. The colleges are given the autonomy to come up with their own teaching practice supervision instruments resulting in each college developing a different set of instruments. The use of different instruments was found to have a negative influence on student teachers' attitudes towards external assessment. A research study conducted by Chireshe and Chireshe (2010) established that student teachers proposed that external assessors should visit all the student teachers

on teaching practice and desist from selectively focusing on distinctive or poorly performing students. Kiggundu and Nayimuli (2009: 345) summarise the above-mentioned challenges by saying, "some of the obstacles encountered by student teachers while on teaching practice entail geographical distance, low and uneven levels of teacher expertise, a wide-ranging scarcity of material resources as well as a lack of discipline among a wide cross-section of learners and educators"

Student teachers have different expectations and experiences as far as their teaching practice supervision is concerned. They develop some views and perceptions, be they real or imaginary, progressive or retrogressive, fruitful or harmful, positive or negative in connection with teaching practice supervision. Challenges such as being supervised by lecturers of a different sex, sexual advances by mentors or lecturers and being supervised using different instruments from a different college can sometimes create ambivalence towards teaching practice supervision on the part of the supervisees. Moreover, it is an expectation that the first teaching practice visit is for clinical supervision. The intention is to have ample time with the student teacher and give maximum assistance. Due to limited time, sometimes this is done hurriedly. Therefore, the extent to which the student teacher benefits from the college lecturers is limited. The inadequacy of the supervision procedures is in partial agreement with the views of Mashau (2012:55) who argues that the lesson plans, teaching lessons and classroom management which student teachers on teaching practice have the freedom to embark on are insufficient for their holistic professional development. This can negatively impinge upon their attitudes towards teaching practise supervision. It was against this background that the researchers embarked on a study in an endeavour to explore the attitudes of student teachers towards teaching practice supervision.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

The views of Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow, two prominent humanists, informed the research study. Humanism is a psychological school of thought which was developed in the 1950s in reaction to the deterministic and mechanistic attributes of psychoanalysis and behaviourism respectively (Bergh and Theron, 2009:240). Basically, humanists believe in the goodness of human beings and it emphasises a human being's ability to freely choose his or her own course of action in an inherent bid to maximise his or her potential (Feldman, 2009: 465).

Rogers developed the person-centred self theory which focuses on principles such as empathy, unconditional positive regard, genuineness and freedom of expression. In this study, the researchers used empathy and unconditional positive regard to interpret some of the research findings. According to Feldman (2009:466) unconditional positive regard is, "an attitude of acceptance and respect on the part of an observer, no matter what a person says or does". In essence, unconditional positive regard is recognition, love, warmth and acceptance which are given to someone regardless of his strengths, weaknesses, age, sex, intelligence and even race. It is simply accepting someone as he or she is without imposing conditions of worth. Feldman (2009:466) remarks that it is through receiving unconditional positive regard that people evolve and develop cognitively and emotionally coupled with developing well-polished self-concepts. Empathy is simply interpreting someone else's situation after analysing from his or her point of view (Thompson and Henderson, 2007:165). Empathy is popularly described as putting yourself in someone else's shoes.

Maslow advanced a hierarchy of needs in which the needs are arranged in such a way that lower-order needs have to be attended to first before higher-order needs are considered. Feldman (2009:319) explains, "To activate a specific higher-order need, thereby guiding behaviour, a person must first fulfil the more basic needs in the hierarchy". Lahey (2009:373) interprets the hierarchy of needs as, "The concept that more basic needs must be met first before higher level motives become active". At the bottom of the hierarchy, which can be in the form of a pyramid, are physiological needs, followed by safety and belonging needs, which are followed by cognitive and aesthetic needs with self-actualisation and transcendence at the top (Feldman, 2009:320).

According to Wang and Odell (2002) in Perunka and Erkkilä (2012:636) the humanistic perspective applied to supervision focuses on the development of a learner's self-esteem and confidence in learning through a counselling process. In essence, the cooperating teacher assumes a counselling role and attempts to assist the student teacher who is to some extent a novice, to identify and resolve personal conflicts, redefine his or her professional needs as a teacher and to be imbued with confidence to teach. This is likely to be achievable if the mentor or any other supervisor gives the supervisee unconditional positive regard and empathy.

### 3. Guiding Research Questions

The research study was guided by the following research questions:

- How helpful are college lecturers to the student teachers when they come for teaching practice supervision?
- What are the student teachers' experiences when being assessment by a lecturer from a different course or subject area?
- What are the student teachers' attitudes towards external assessment?

## 4. Methodology

*4.1 Research Design*

The phenomenological research design was employed by the researchers. Groenewald (2004:44) in Kufakunesu, Ganga and Chinyoka (2012) elaborates, "the phenomenologists are concerned with understanding social and psychological phenomena from the perspective of people involved". Chilisa and Preece (2005:142) posit that the phenomenological approach to research directs energy at studying people's experiences in an endeavour to glean the meticulous details of their social circumstances. This is backed by Maypole and Davies (2001) who posit that in phenomenological research, the lived experiences of those who are taking part or those at one time participated in the situation or subject being explored are examined (Kufakunesu, et al, 2012). The phenomenological research design was chosen because it accorded the researchers the opportunity to explore the attitudes of student teachers who were practically on teaching practice towards the quality of supervision they received from their various supervisors.

*4.2 Population, Sample and Sampling Procedure*

From a population of approximately 800 student teachers on teaching practice, a sample of 80 respondents was chosen using the purposive sampling method. According to Chiromo (2006:18) purposive sampling, which can also be referred to as judgemental sampling, is a non-probability sampling method in which the researcher uses his or her judgement to select respondents on the basis of their typicality. Purposive sampling is quite useful in qualitative research studies. The research participants were selected from three primary teachers' colleges in Masvingo Province. Of the 80 student teachers who participated in the research study, 50 were female while 30 were male. 40 respondents were deployed in the rural areas while the other 40 were deployed in the urban areas.

Demographically the student teachers had a mean age of 30.7 years and a standard deviation of 11.2 years.

### 5. Data Gathering Instruments

As a form of instrumental triangulation, open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were used for data collection. Nyawaranda (2003) in Kufakunesu (2011:31) defines a face-to-face interview as a conversation between a researcher and a research participant in which the researcher gathers information for research. Semi-structured interviews were opted for as they enabled the researchers to pursue any relevant leads which cropped up during the conversations (Kufakunesu, 2011: 31; Nyawaranda, 2003). This enabled the researchers to remain focused on pertinent issues while simultaneously pursuing any relevant lead which emanated from the interview sessions. A questionnaire is a data collection instrument which is in the form of a document which contains relevant questions that the researcher intends to pose to the research participants (Chimedza, Chipoyera and Mupambireyi, 2003 in Kufakunesu, 2011:34). The researchers decided to use questionnaires because the respondents were literate by virtue of being student teachers.

### *5.1 Ethical Considerations*

Chiromo (2006:10) says, "Research ethics are the principles of right and wrong that guide the researchers when conducting their research". Informed consent and anonymity are the main ethical principles which were considered. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011:77) and Keenan (2002:66) define informed consent as an agreement by research participants to take part in a research study based on a full understanding of the nature of the entire research study. Anonymity is the ethical principle which stipulates that the names of the research informants should not be divulged especially during data analysis and discussion (Kufakunesu, 2011:39).To ensure anonymity, the researchers used pseudonyms of numbers ranging from 1 to 80 inclusive; for example, Student Teacher 15.

### 6. Research Findings

The following are the findings of the research study:

- Twenty-five out of 40, that is, 62.5%, of the student teachers deployed in urban areas expressed favourable attitudes towards teaching practice supervision. Various reasons were given for such favourable attitudes.

- Eighty percent (64) of the students felt more comfortable to be assessed by lecturers from their area of specialisation

- Student teachers majoring in Early Childhood Development were particularly not comfortable with being assessed by lecturers of general courses

- Sixty out of the 80 research participants proposed that lecturers should reserve more time for discussions after the classroom supervision. Such a post-supervision discussion, if properly conducted, would help them to grow professionally

- Ninety percent of the student teachers admitted that they were haunted by the prospects of being supervised by external assessors.

### 7. Discussion Of Findings

The attitudes of student teachers who were deployed in the rural areas were to some extent different from those based in urban areas. While 28 out of the 40 student teachers (70%) based in the rural areas openly expressed their fear of being visited by college lecturers for any form of supervision, 25 out of 40 (62.5%) of the student teachers deployed in urban areas expressed favourable attitudes towards teaching practice supervision. In defence of their attitudes, the student teachers based in the rural areas ascribed their fear of supervision visits to the insufficient material resources in their schools. This partially resembled the challenges mentioned by Kiggundu and Nayimuli (2009: 345). Moreover, they indicated that the settings in which they were operating were not very conducive for them to feel fully prepared and be confident for supervision especially during the first visits by the lecturers. Student Teacher 23 who was based in rural areas gave the following remarks:

- My physiological, security and belongingness needs are not being adequately met in these rural settings. Therefore, I cannot be expected to excel in my teaching practice.

The above remark was an allusion to Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Lahey, 2009:373). On the other hand, student teachers based in urban areas indicated that they were mostly ready for their lecturers' visits. The material resources required by students on teaching

practice were reasonably available. Nevertheless, 10 % (4) of the students based in the urban areas complained that there was too much entertainment in the urban areas which can easily distract their attention on preparing for supervision.

Sixty percent (48) of the research participants acknowledged that supervision by their college lecturers was quite helpful in moulding them as future competent classroom practitioners. Such students particularly emphasised how they greatly benefited from the clinical supervision which they received was quite informative, hortative and humanistic. This contradicts the views of Mashau (2012:55) who posits that the experiences which student teachers on teaching practice are exposed to are inadequate for their holistic professional development. The students felt encouraged to believe in their own abilities to become seasoned teachers with the passage of time. However, some student teachers conceded that being supervised was generally anxiety- provoking just as cited by Ngidi and Sibaya ( 2003) as well as Kiggundu and Nayimuli (2009:346). Student Teacher 43 remarked:

- The idea of having someone in authority monitoring how you conduct a lesson normally sends shivers down your spine. One may even underachieve as a result of the any supervisor's presence in the lesson.

Furthermore, 30%(24) of the student teachers viewed teaching practice supervision by college lecturers as a fastidious fault-finding mission in which one's weaknesses are exaggerated while one's strengths are minimised. They argued that some lecturers were not sensitive to their circumstances, that is, they accused their lecturers for lacking professional empathy (Thompson and Henderson, 2007:165). Moreover, the student teachers argued that lecturers should give student teachers unconditional positive regard, that is, they must accept all students and treat them fairly regardless of sex and gender, among other things (Feldman, 2009:466).

The issue of areas of specialisation was also topical among the respondents. Eighty percent (64) of the respondents pointed out that they preferred being supervised by lecturers from their respective subject specialisations. Most of the respondents who backed this notion argued that they stood a better chance of being fairly assessed if lecturers who really understood what they were doing supervised them. They argued that it was much easier for lecturers in their subject areas to show them empathy as theorised by Carl Rogers (Thompson and Henderson, 2007:165). Student teachers majoring in Early Childhood Development were fervently vocal about this issue. They argued that the peculiarity of Early Childhood Education issues sometimes eludes some lecturers

from the general courses. The technical aspects of ECD such as the importance of play can be viewed as trivial by some lecturers who did not major in ECD. Such an experience is likely to disadvantage the ECD student teachers.

Fifteen out of the 50 female respondents alleged that it was better to be assessed by male lecturers than by female lecturers. In defence of their opinions, the female respondents argued that male lecturers were to a large extent fatherly when they supervised them. They accused some female lecturers of being cheeky and supercilious to the extent of treating them as trash, thereby stifling their efforts to gravitate towards professional maturity. However, 6% (3 out of 50) of the female student teachers lambasted some male lecturers for attempting to trade marks for sexual favours. They intimated that some unprofessional and unethical practices as mentioned by Maphosa, et al (2007:301) in Kaggundu and Nayimuli (2009: 351-352) rendered their teaching practice quite difficult and horrific.

It came to the researchers' attention that most student teachers were zealous to be given as much constructive feedback after supervision as possible. Sixty out of the 80 (75%) of the student teachers who took part in the study suggested that lecturers should reserve more time for discussions after the classroom supervision. Such post-supervision discussions, if properly conducted, would help them to have more confidence in their professional operations. Moreover, the student teachers indicated that constructive feedback after supervision would go a long way towards insulating them from repeatedly making the same mistakes (http://www.newteachercenter.org/services/improving-student-achievement-through-supervision-best-teaching-practices).

Sixty-five percent of the research participants (52 out of 80) reported that their mentors were quite supportive and understanding (https://sites.google.com/site/supervisionofstudentteaching/home). This agrees with the views of Edwards and Briers (2001) who indicates that mentors are very crucial in the professional welfare of student teachers. However, the remainder of the student teachers blamed some of the mentors either for being too crude when supervising them or for professionally neglecting them, that is, leaving them to have everything their own way without any professional guidance.

Regarding being assessed by external assessors, the generality of the respondents, 90%, admitted that they were haunted by the prospects of being visited by external assessors for formal supervision. They consistently expressed an aura of fear at the thought of

being supervised by external assessors who are notoriously known for being stricter than the lecturers from the student teachers' respective colleges. Student Teacher 74 gave the following response:

- It is my secret wish not to be visited by external assessors. I have gathered that they can really be merciless and ruthless in their assessment.

Another issue raised by student teachers against the visits by the external assessors was the idea that they normally visit students who are either doing very well or whose teaching practice performance is causing concern. This tallied with the findings of Chireshe and Chireshe (2010) who established that student teachers proposed that external assessment should not be selectively done. According to the student teachers, this phenomenon was further compounded by the possibility of being assessed using supervision instruments different from those used by college lecturers. The issue of lack of homogeneous supervision instruments has been a talking point in many allied research studies since teaching practice scoring normally varies from one institution to another (http://www.tessafrica.net).

## 8. Conclusion

While the sampled student teachers on teaching practice at least had something to complain about in connection with the way they were, it was pleasing to note that they were also happy about some of the proceedings. The fact that more than 50% of the respondents acknowledged the utility of the clinical supervision which they received is quite encouraging. The differences between rural and urban schools are difficult to reconcile and are likely to remain a challenge for a considerable period of time. The student teachers generally expressed some misgivings in being supervised by lecturers from different areas of academic specialisation. Generally, the student teachers appeared to be shell-shocked at the possibility of being supervised by external assessors.

## 9. Recommendations

On the basis of the researchers, the researchers made the following recommendations:

- Early Childhood Development student teachers should be supervised by Early Childhood Development lecturers while the students in the general programmes are supervised by their respective lecturers.

- Workshops involving student teachers, mentors, college lecturers and external assessors should be conducted so as to deliberate on how best to assess student teachers on teaching practice.

- All those who supervise student teachers on teaching practice should show empathy without lowering the standards.

- As established by Chireshe and Chireshe (2010), external assessors should consider supervising all the student teachers on teaching practice.

- External assessors should use supervision instruments that resemble or are almost the same as those used by college lecturers so as not to confuse the student teachers.

- Future researchers are challenged to replicate this research study with a sample of secondary school student teachers from colleges in other Zimbabwean provinces other than Masvingo Province.

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