

Teaching Practicum in Ghanaian Basic Schools: Exploring the Experiences of Student Teachers in Colleges of Education

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ABSTRACT

The teaching practicum within the context of initial teacher education represents a pivotal medium for effecting the transition of student teachers from theoretical knowledge to practical application in the classroom. Notwithstanding its central role in the professional development of student teachers, empirical evidence on the perceived impact of teaching practicum on student teachers' attitudes, professional skills, and associated challenges is underrepresented, especially in the global south, including Ghana. Using a qualitative study approach, this study draws on a focus group discussion conducted with 120 student teachers in 15 colleges of education in Ghana. The findings showed that student teachers developed positive attitudes towards teaching by recognising the need to respect diversity, act as change agents/role models and promote positive professional relationships. In addition, the participants reported a positive impact of the practicum on their pedagogical skills as well as their leadership and collaborative skills. Despite these perceived positive impacts, student teachers encountered several challenges, which were categorised into three levels: partner school, supervising tutors and mentors. The findings highlight ways in which the challenges could be addressed to maximise the benefits associated with teaching practicums.

KEYWORDS

student teachers, teaching practicum, mentors, initial teacher education, Ghana

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Introduction

Teaching practicums, often situated at the heart of initial teacher education programmes, facilitate student teachers' transition from theory to practice. It allows them to witness the complexities of the classroom, understand the diverse needs of learners and develop pedagogical strategies that resonate with the local educational context (Darling-Hammond, 2016; Zeichner, 2010). Teaching practicum is, therefore, a critical phase in student teachers' development, offering a platform for them to improve their skills, engage with the realities of teaching and establish a strong foundation for their professional journey (Lucero & Roncancio-Castellanos, 2019).

In Ghana, as in many other sub-Saharan African (SSA) countries, there is a great need for well-educated teachers who can provide effective teaching to students. The Ghanaian government has recognised the importance of quality education and has taken several steps to improve the education system. One of the major steps was the introduction of the four-year Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) programme in colleges of education (CoEs) in 2018 to replace the three-year diploma in education (Ministry of Education, 2017). Similar to the three-year diploma, the four-year degree also has a teaching practicum component. However, the current reform places greater emphasis on teaching practicums, with different practicum activities spreading across the entire duration of the programme. This is to create a platform that bridges the gap between theoretical pedagogical knowledge and its practical application in the classroom (Darling-Hammond, 2016). By doing so, student teachers can develop practical knowledge and experiences at each stage of their programme to contribute to quality teaching and learning. However, other studies have reported student teachers' anxiety towards teaching practicums due to some challenges student teachers go through during teaching practicum (Bush & Grotjohann, 2020; Ulvik et al., 2018), such as language barriers in schools' communities, inadequate mentor support, instructional challenges and inadequate preparation prior to off-campus teaching practicum (Denessen et al., 2022). The new B.Ed. programme is purported to address some of the challenges associated with teaching practicums.

Despite preservice teacher education reforms, there remains a significant gap in research exploring student teachers' experiences during practicums. Specifically, there is a lack of understanding regarding how the practicum influences their attitudes towards teaching, their development of professional skills and the challenges they face. This absence of in-depth research limits our understanding of the dynamics of the teaching practicum in Ghanaian basic schools and hinders the development of evidence-based strategies to optimise the practicum experience. Such a gap can adversely affect the quality of teacher

education and, by extension, the broader educational landscape in Ghana.

Thus, providing empirical evidence is the first critical step in understanding issues related to aspects of the teaching practicum. Therefore, this study examines student teachers' experiences of the final year teaching practicum (off-campus) by shedding light on the impact of the teaching practicum on student teachers' attitudes, acquisition of professional skills and challenges they encounter in the teaching practicum process. Ultimately, the insights gained from this study could contribute to the improvement of preservice teacher education practices, leading to the cultivation of competent and motivated educators who are well equipped to nurture the next generation of Ghanaian learners.

Exploring the Literature

Teaching practicums have attracted and continue to attract a lot of research interest in teacher education across the world (Fazio & Volante, 2011; Foong et al., 2018; Zeichner, 2010). Many studies conclude that the student teaching experience is a strong predictor of future teacher behaviour (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Mtika & Gates, 2015; Pryor et al., 2012). Similarly, the manner in which new teachers learn to teach is a developmental process of learning to address the individual needs of students (Lesley et al., 2009). For example, in their study with teachers in New Zealand, Paris et al. (2010) found that when student teachers are empowered with teaching techniques, strategies, and classroom ethics, they can effectively perform their teaching roles and impart the expected skills to learners during practicum (Arasomwan & Mashiya, 2021). However, concerns such as poor pedagogical skills and inadequate mentor support have been cited concerning student teachers' professional learning from teaching practicums in both developed contexts (Darling-Hammond, 2016; Maddamsetti, 2018) and developing contexts (Akyeampong et al., 2013; Arasomwan & Mashiya, 2021). Akyeampong et al.'s (2013) study and other studies in Ghana (Adu-Yeboah et al., 2016; Kwaah & Palojoki, 2018) looked at student teachers who were in the 3-year diploma in education programme where teaching practicum was limited to practicing teaching only in the final year. This is a gap in the literature since the teaching practicum has been expanded in the current B.Ed. programme. According to Mtika (2011), poorly designed teaching practicums can result in teachers leaving and may also discourage prospective teachers from entering preservice teacher education.

The quality of student teachers' professional development during the teaching practicum is believed to be influenced by a range of factors (Lawson et al., 2015). For example, researchers have noted the importance of mentorship in supporting student teachers in the process of teaching practicums. We see evidence of this in studies conducted in other countries. In studies conducted in the United

States (e.g. Chu, 2021; Maddamsetti, 2018), the authors found that student teachers improved their classroom management, leadership skills and confidence to teach based on collaborative and reflective discussions with their mentor teachers. Similarly, studies in Israel and Switzerland (Hascher et al., 2004; Tsybulsky & Oz, 2019) found that student teachers who had support from mentors developed positive attitudes towards student-centred teaching strategies, becoming more open to learners' responses in class during practicums. Despite the benefits associated with mentorship, there are concerns about school mentorship during teaching practicums and the need to adopt strategies to ensure that student teachers receive optimal support from their mentors. For example, Mulkeen's (2009) study on eight SSA countries noted that although schools express willingness to take student teachers, they tend to lack mentorship structures for them due to, for example, staff shortages and workloads of their staff. The study further found that in both Zambia and Gambia, student teachers were expected to be assigned to an experienced qualified teacher, but in reality, many were assigned to work with unqualified teachers or were given complete responsibility for classes with no cooperating teacher. Additionally, the disconnect between what student teachers are taught in their training institutions and the practice of mentors in partner schools has been highlighted as a key challenge in some student teacher education programmes (Akyeampong et al., 2013; Huu Nghia & Tai, 2019).

The classroom or school environment is another important issue to consider in teaching practicums. In particular, teaching and learning resources are considered critical inputs that enhance teaching, and student teachers need access to these resources for effective teaching practicums. However, contextual realities of partner schools, such as class size and lack of resources, can constrain practicums, as found among student teachers in Malawi (Mtika, 2011). Moreover, other issues related to language and cultural knowledge can enhance or undermine student teachers' ability to teach effectively. For example, in the United States, language barriers and a lack of cultural knowledge were identified as challenges that impeded the effective teaching practicums of student teachers (Maddamsetti, 2018). In addition, student teachers' perceptions of the feedback provided by supervising tutors can either impede or enhance their teaching practices. In line with this, researchers recognise the need for feedback to be objective and constructive, providing a balance in highlighting both student teachers' strengths and weaknesses (Foong et al., 2018).

Social Constructivism Theoretical Framework

This study is premised on the social constructivism theory, in which learning is based on real-life adaptive problem-solving that takes place in a social manner through shared experiences and discussions with others (Vygotsky, 1978). The

shared experiences give birth to new ideas matched against existing knowledge, and the learner adapts to the rules to make sense of the world. According to Vygotsky (1978), social interactions and processes are important in knowledge creation. The process of sharing results in learners' constructing an understanding together that would not be possible alone. By extension, personal meaning-making appears to be linked to the extent of opportunity student teachers must interact with their peers (Fletcher & Kosnik, 2016). This implies that peer discussion in a social constructivist framework, where individuals discuss experiences to learn about theory in practice, should be closely associated with teaching practicums.

A key implication of the constructivist framework for teaching practicums is that student teachers should have the time and encouragement to reflect on their teaching practices through the support and feedback of mentors and supervisors (Foong et al., 2018). When done appropriately, it increases student teachers' knowledge base and offers a rich source of experience relevant to teacher education. In addition to the role of student-mentor/supervisor dialogue, individuals create meaning through interactions with the learning environment (Vygotsky, 1978). While the learning environment can be broadly defined, the availability of learning resources is critical to effective teaching and learning interactions. Along this line, research suggests (e.g. Dewey, 2006) that well-resourced classrooms or schools can have a positive influence on teaching and learning, mediating teacher-child interactions.

Initial Teacher Education in Ghana

The importance of initial teacher education in preparing future teachers with the necessary knowledge and skills to perform their duties has been widely recognised. Ghana currently has 48 teacher training institutions, affiliated with six mentoring public universities, comprising 46 public and two private institutions, collectively referred to as colleges of education (CoEs). From 2004 to 2017, CoEs offered a three-year six-semester programme, awarding the Diploma in Basic Education (DBE). However, the DBE curriculum, in particular, was criticised for inadequately preparing teachers for teaching in Ghanaian basic schools (NTC/T-TEL, 2018), with teaching often viewed as too theoretical. In addressing this problem, a four-year B.Ed. curriculum was introduced in CoEs in 2018 as part of the Transforming Teacher Education and Learning reform by the Ministry of Education, which began in 2015. The B.Ed. programme is based on a National Teacher Education Curriculum Framework and National Teachers' Standards, which aim to prepare teachers to become engaging and creative, as well as be equipped with the essential skills, knowledge, and understanding required for a good teacher (Ministry of Education, 2017). The T-TEL-funded reform also emphasises participatory and active learning, using teaching and learning materials as well as tools to foster

learner-centred pedagogy, with the aim of improving the quality of practicums (NTC/T-TEL, 2018). The reforms put much emphasis on teaching practicums that start from the first year to the final year. The teaching practicum for the 4-year B.Ed. programme has been structured to span the four years of initial teacher education, as shown in Figure 1. Our study focuses on the teaching practicum in schools in Year 4.

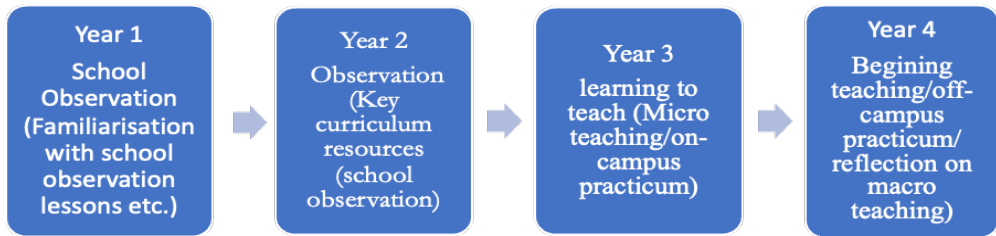


Figure 1: *Structure of Practicums in Colleges of Education (Eight Semesters; Each Year has Two Semesters)*

As seen in Figure 1, *Year 1* focuses on school observation that creates opportunities for student teachers to familiarise themselves with the school environment and all that goes on in the school, such as sanitation within the school compound, conduct of assembly, administration of learners' register, classroom organisation and management and lesson delivery by mentor. *Year 2* exposes student teachers to key curriculum resources, such as textbooks and e-resources. *Year 3* gives student teachers the opportunity to undertake problem-based teaching in partner schools through co-planning and co-teaching with their mentors and colleague student teachers. *Year 4* comprises one semester of off-campus teaching practicum and another semester of reflection on the off-campus teaching practicum on the college campus. This study focuses on the off-campus teaching practicum in partner basic schools.

The Present Study

The research presented here examines the experiences of student teachers at CoEs in Ghana. It is worth noting that our study focused on the first batch of the four-year B.Ed. programme, which was completed in 2022. Data were collected from students at the end of their off-campus teaching practicum, which took place in the first semester of their final year. Using a qualitative approach, we aimed to understand student teachers' experiences in relation to the impact of the teaching practicum on their attitudes towards teaching, their development of professional skills and the challenges they encountered. Findings from the present work can shed light on the benefits of the teaching practicum on the one hand and issues that may hinder an effective teaching practicum on the other hand in the current

implementation of the B.Ed. programme in the CoEs.

Participants and Procedure

A total of 120 final-year student teachers enrolled in CoEs in Ghana were involved in this study. Final-year students were selected because they are the first batch of students to complete the four-year B.Ed. programme introduced at the CoEs in 2018. Based on five regional zones (Northern, Volta, Western/Central, Eastern/Greater Accra and Ashanti/Brong Ahafo), we randomly selected 15 CoEs. Following this, we purposively selected eight students (four males and four females) in each college – yielding a total of 120 student teachers in the selected colleges.

Data were collected in person, and access to participants was given by the principals of the CoEs. The selected participants consented to be part of the study through the written consent form included as part of the participant information sheet. The participants were also informed of the anonymity of their identities and the confidentiality of their responses.

Data Collection

A focus group discussion was conducted with the participants. There was one focus group discussion in each college comprising eight student teachers with a mixture of four males and females in each group. The participants were asked to discuss their experiences of the practicum in terms of its effect on their attitude to teaching, professional skills, and challenges encountered. An initial broad question, “Can you share some of your experiences during practicum?”, was used to elicit participants’ views. Follow-up questions were used to fully understand the participants’ responses. The focus group discussions ranged from a minimum of an hour and a half to a maximum of two hours. The discussions were audiotaped with the participants’ permission.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data following the principles of both deductive and inductive analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Deductive coding was done using predetermined categories (e.g. attitude to teaching and challenges). Inductive coding, as used in grounded theory, was used to generate individual codes focusing on similarities and differences. Codes were reviewed and related codes were grouped into sub-themes.

Findings

In this section, we first present findings related to the effects of teaching practicums on student teachers’ attitudes towards teaching. We then move on to address their perspectives on the practicum about their professional skills. Finally, we conclude by addressing the challenges related to the teaching practicum.

The Impact of the Teaching Practicum on Student Teachers' Attitude to Teaching

Three themes emerged from analysis of the data regarding the impact of the practicum on student teachers' attitudes towards teaching: Respect for diversity; awareness of teachers as change agents and role models; and improvement in professional relationships.

Respect for Diversity

The findings indicate that the inclusion of practicums with extended guided teaching periods in the new curriculum for preservice teacher education has fostered a sense of diversity in student teachers through the development of a greater understanding of the importance of valuing individual learner differences and perspectives. When asked about how the practicum experience has impacted student teachers' attitudes towards teaching, participant A02, for example, expressed, '*It [has] taught me to be calm in accepting all diverse views from learners*'.

Almost half of the participants recognised that through the practicum, they learned that effective teaching needs to take into account the various backgrounds of learners, equal treatment, and the use of inclusive approaches to meet all learning needs.

I now understand that I have to respect every learner irrespective of their background and also to avoid being bias with my learners. (L03)

I've realized that not all the pupils will understand a method used in teaching the same way. So, I would have to try different methods when teaching. (S09)

It has taught me that each learner is unique in his/her own way especially with regards to learning. So, as a good teacher I should know how to relate with learner according to their uniqueness. (K07)

Relatedly, the participants noted that respect for diversity not only focuses on learners but also extends to other education stakeholders, including community members. Having stayed in different communities during the practicum, the participants acknowledged that schools do not exist in isolation but within the larger sociocultural community and that their experiences in these communities have had a change in the way they accept the views of other people and an appreciation of different cultures:

I have noticed that the community at large helps to bring up a child and so as a professional teacher, I need to respect all the people in the community regardless of their status. (E04)

I developed respect for other people's culture. (M07)

The practicum has taught me not only how to handle children of

individual differences but also how to relate with people from different walks of life. (N06)

Awareness of Teachers as Change Agents and Role Models

In their discussion on the impact of the practicum experience on their understanding of the role of teachers, the majority of the participants indicated that the practicum had shaped their understanding of the role of the teacher beyond imparting knowledge to learners to acting as agents of transformation for the society and development of the community. This is premised on the fact that teachers not only need to demonstrate passion for the profession but also need to ensure that they contribute to positively changing communities and the country as a whole:

My love for the profession was boosted on the field during the practicum as I saw myself as a change agent. (B05)

I have now seen that I am an agent of change, so I have to help the society and the country as a whole. (J04)

It has changed my attitude to act as an agent of change to the society in general. I need to contribute towards this development through my teaching. (C05)

Closely linked to their awareness of teachers as change agents is their understanding of teachers as role models. They indicated that they had become aware that teachers need to exhibit good behaviour and set good examples since both the learners and society look up to them in many ways, as illustrated by the following quotes:

It has made me aware that as a professional teacher, you need to be a role model to the learners and the community at large. (H03)

I have learnt that the teaching profession is a noble profession and with that I have to behave well since the learners emulate our way of doing things. (E06)

As role models, the participants identified certain attributes they must possess and exhibit, highlighting how these attributes are reflected in the lives of their mentors. They identified the need for teachers to conduct themselves well by adjusting their values to conform to the code of ethics of the profession, such as being punctual and regular at school and dressing appropriately.

It has made me realise I am a role model for students and that I must have a good conduct and be ethical. (P04)

My mentor was always in school and punctual. It has impacted my attitude professionally by improving my punctuality and regularity to school. (D07)

It has helped me to know that I should dress well and dress decently so that the learners will emulate. Because my mentor was always well dressed. (J05)

In addition, they indicated that as role models, teachers are expected to be kind, patient, and calm both within and outside of their classrooms.

I now know that dealing with human especially children requires one to be patient and kind. This has been of great help to me. (G04)

The practicum has really mentored my attitude. It has made me know that I have to be calm in and outside of the classroom. (F02)

Improvement in Professional Relationships

Improvement in professional relationships was also a prominent finding from the analysis of the data. The majority of the participants indicated that the practicum experience had a positive impact on their professional relationships in three different ways. The first was teacher–teacher, recognising how it fosters a positive school climate. For example, one participant noted, ‘it has improved my attitude in the aspect of my relationship with other teachers and makes it easier and comfortable to work with them’ (J07). Another participant echoed this, saying, ‘I have learnt the importance of relating well with other teachers. It helps provide a cordial school atmosphere. I can now relate or socialise well with my colleagues’ (B05).

The second was the teacher–community relationship. The participants acknowledged the critical role of the community in the education of children, highlighting the importance of establishing good relationships with parents and other community members. In describing this relationship, some participants reported that the experience helped them ‘readjust their attitude towards people’ (E03), and they learned to interact positively with other people, as illustrated by the following quote: ‘My relationship with different people has changed positively. The way I talk to people and respect for other people has improved’ (H01).

Third, the participants indicated that the practicum experience enhanced their understanding of the learner–teacher relationship. In particular, they recognised that building such relationships helps promote effective teaching and learning. For example, ‘it has helped to understand the various relationships with learners that will foster positive teaching and learning. It also helped me to know how to relate to learners with special needs (G02)’ and ‘it has helped to identify

strategies that can improve how I interact with learners during delivery of lesson' (D04).

Impact of Teaching Practicum on Student Teachers' Professional Skills

The findings on the impact of the teaching practicum on student teachers' professional skills are categorised into two themes: Pedagogical skills; and leadership and collaborative skills.

Pedagogical Skills

Almost all the participants recognised the role of the practicum in improving their pedagogical skills. In particular, some participants referred to their improved ability to plan schemes of work and lessons, as one participant stated, 'it has given me experience of real preparation before class, and preparation of lesson notes' (K01). Another participant echoed this: 'My planning skills have very much improved. Particularly, how to prepare lesson notes and plan the scheme of work' (K03).

The participants acknowledged the importance of the practicum experience in enhancing their understanding of the diverse learning needs of children and their ability to effectively manage these needs during teaching. For example, 'it has had a positive impact on me in the sense that I have learnt how to deal with the diverse learning needs of learner and how to deal with the different ability level of learners' (F05) and 'I have developed much confidence in teaching and how to manage learners with different learning needs' (L07).

Closely related to managing diverse learning needs is the participants' perceived improved ability in classroom management. The participants mentioned their ability to adopt positive discipline strategies and to provide constructive feedback on learners' answers or responses, as illustrated by the following quotes:

I have acquired numerous strategies in ensuring proper classroom management. I can now better handle certain misbehaviour without using the cane. (F04)

I have developed better classroom management skills. For instance, I feel much comfortable addressing learners' behaviours in a positive manner, such as communicating politely and giving constructive feedback to learner. (A08)

Leadership and Collaborative Skills

Another issue of importance raised by the participants was their leadership and collaborative skills. In describing the impact of field experience on their leadership skills, the participants recognised the importance of upholding certain leadership qualities, such as honesty and trustworthiness, in ensuring effective teaching and learning. For example, Participant P02 explained, 'it has helped me to understand

leadership role and how important it is for a teacher to have leadership values such as honesty, be trustworthy and loyal. This way, you can promote these skills among learners.’ In echoing this view, another participant talked about how these leadership qualities learned from the field are reflected in the national teacher professional code of ethics: ‘It has improved my leadership qualities and skills, I have learnt how to motivate learners and communicate well as a teacher. These are part of the code of ethics expected of me as a professional’ (C05).

In addition to leadership skills, the participants highlighted the impact of team teaching on their collaborative skills. One participant said, ‘I really liked the idea of team teaching with my colleagues. It exposed me to the philosophies underpinning the basic school curriculum and helped to work collaboratively with my colleagues and effectively address any problems we encountered’ (D01). Similarly, another participant explained, ‘I have developed how to work with a team. When I work with others, I’m able to communicate ideas and see the bigger picture of how my work will be, that is, the outcome of the decision that I take’ (F03).

Challenges Encountered During Practicum

We also asked the student teachers to share their views on the challenges they encountered during the practicum. From the data, we identified challenges at three levels: partner school, supervisor and mentor levels.

Partner School-Related Challenges

Challenges at this level included a lack of or inadequate teaching and learning resources and a language barrier. Some participants indicated that teaching and learning resources were lacking or inadequate. In particular, they reported the lack of tables, chairs, textbooks, teaching facilities and the internet in their partner schools, as illustrated by the following quotes:

There were very few textbooks for learners. Also, teaching and learning facilities such as library, ICT were not available. (B07)

Some schools were in remote areas with no network to even download things from the internet. This made it difficult to access information online to support teaching. (S04)

There was no network at where I was posted. So, I was not able to do any research on the topics I was assigned to teach. (A06)

In cases where teaching and learning resources were available, they were reported to be inadequate, compelling some participants to buy their materials, as expressed by one of the participants: ‘Teaching and learning materials were inadequate in my partner school. I had to finance my own teaching and learning materials in order to enhance teaching’ (N08). Another participant said, ‘I bought

my own teaching and learning materials instead of the school providing them' (F05).

The language barrier was also a major challenge for the participants in their partner schools. The challenge was twofold. On one level, the participants did not understand the mother tongue of the pupils, and on the other level, the pupils were also not fluent in the English language. This not only made teaching and communication difficult for the participants but also limited learners' engagement and interaction with participants:

My number one problem was communication between the pupils and me. Since mother tongue is necessary in learning and I did not understand the learners' common language I found it difficult to communicate and teach. (H08)

Some learners could not express themselves in the English Language, hence making instructional time and lesson delivery difficult. (M05)

I used English Language only as a medium of instruction during lesson delivery since I did not understand the native language of the pupils. Learners were therefore reluctant to participate in some of the selected teaching methods like role playing which would have made it easy for them to understand. (J01)

Supervisor-Related Challenges

Regarding supervisor-related challenges, the findings showed that the participants were mainly concerned about the supervision they received during the practicum. Some participants expressed dissatisfaction with the unconstructive nature of the feedback received from supervisors. For example, 'some supervisors' comments discouraged us too because we were not given any satisfactory comment' (G04) and 'some of my supervisors were harsh in their comments during my classroom teaching' (E05). Another participant supported this, saying, 'During our paired supervision, the tutors involved humiliated us' (E07).

There were also concerns about inconsistencies in the feedback the participants received from supervisors. Many participants indicated that the feedback provided by one supervisor differed from that provided by another. According to them, this created difficulties for their teaching, given that the supervision was structured to enable the participants to progressively build upon their practice. The following quotes exemplify this issue:

There were inconsistencies in the feedback and comments of supervisors who came from campus. It seems every tutor has his own ideology about the lesson planning and method of delivery. (D05)

Since we were being supervised three different times by our tutors, some comment by them seemed contradicting. Because one will tell you to do this and another one will come and also say we should not do that. (P06)

The different supervisors for student teachers brought differences in their teaching. One supervisor's decision conflicts with the other supervisor. (G04)

The comments provided by one supervisor are used for the next supervision. But the next supervisor will tell you that the previous one is not correct. (F06)

Mentor-Related Challenges

The findings also showed that the participants had issues with their mentors in their schools of practice. These concerns ranged from support, mentor's subject matter and curriculum knowledge to relationship with mentors. With support, the participants were dissatisfied with the level of support they received from their mentors. In particular, this was because mentors were not regular at school, which meant that the participants had to handle their classes. By so doing, they missed out on the teaching support and guidance they should have received from their mentors:

My challenge was with my mentor, he was not always available for me in terms of need. He can even not come to school for the whole week thinking I am available, meanwhile I need help and assistance from him. (C01)

My mentor at most of the time come to school in the morning go back home leaving the class for myself and my co-mentee. (E05)

Some mentors left the class for his or her mentee without going to check if he or she was doing the right thing or using the appropriate approach or strategy in the teaching. (K06)

Another issue of concern was the mentors' subject matter and curriculum knowledge. In terms of subject matter knowledge, it was found that some mentors were teaching subjects in which they were not trained to teach. Therefore, they had limited knowledge of that subject, making it difficult to support their mentees, as explained by one participant: 'My mentor was not a language student during his degree programme but later switched to teach language so he had no content knowledge about my area of practice so he could not do discussions with me.'

Regarding curriculum knowledge, the participants indicated that they were concerned about what had been taught to them in colleges and the practices of mentors. The most frequently expressed concern here was lesson planning. It

emerged that most mentors were still using the old curriculum and therefore had difficulties assessing the lesson plan mentees prepared to follow the guidelines of the new curriculum. Consequently, the participants were compelled to follow the lesson-planning guidelines of mentors in partner schools rather than what they were taught in their colleges:

Because we used the new curriculum, our mentors were finding it difficult to assess us especially the lesson plan. (A07)

Some mentors were not familiar with the new curriculum. They had challenges with the new lesson plan and this affected us. (L05)

The mentors didn't have much knowledge about the new lesson plan. The teachers were teaching with the old lesson plan and we were using the new lesson plan. (N01)

The preparation of lesson plan was different from what I was taught in my college. We were forced to use the structure of the old curriculum instead of the new curriculum as taught in college. (B07)

The lesson plan was a challenge because what we were taught in [college] was a little different from what our mentors were using and so posed a challenge to us. (C03)

Finally, some of the participants indicated that mentor–mentee relationships were poor, and this did not afford a good platform for support and guidance. For example, one participant recalled his inability to receive assistance due to poor relationships: ‘My school was full of unfriendly teachers who were not ready to mentor or assist me’ (L06). Other participants shared similar views: ‘Some mentors were uncooperative and unwilling to assist us in doing anything’ (F05) and ‘My mentor was sometimes unfriendly and uncooperative’ (C04).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore how student teachers perceive their experiences of teaching practicums during their final year of study. We found that student teachers had positive experiences with the teaching practicum regarding their attitude towards the teaching and professional skills. For example, concerning attitudes, they expressed the importance of valuing individual differences that emanate from learners’ sociocultural backgrounds (Hodkinson et al., 2008). Teaching practicum as a platform not only offers student teachers the opportunity to experience real classroom situations but also to experience school–community relationships. In line with this, the findings indicate that student teachers saw themselves as “change agents” and “role models”, which reflect a positive

attitudinal development for student teachers during the teaching practicum. This recognition is of significance, given that teachers are well placed to contribute to societal change and shape learners' development through the modelling and nurturing of positive characters and behaviours. Such an attitude can reinforce teachers' ability to influence their learners in more positive ways (Priestley et al., 2012).

With regard to professional skills, the findings indicate that student teachers perceived an improvement in their pedagogical skills, including planning of lessons and classroom management skills, especially managing children's diverse learning needs. These findings corroborate other studies (Bailey & Douglas, 2019; Lucero & Roncancio-Castellanos, 2019; Maddamsetti, 2018) that have found that teaching practicums give student teachers opportunities to improve their pedagogical skills. We also found that student teachers considered the practicum an opportunity to develop and improve their leadership and collaborative skills. Reflective of the social constructivist framework, interactions among student teachers, their peers, mentors and learners during teaching practicums offer student teachers opportunities to build and enhance their leadership and collaborative skills while improving their confidence to teach learners with diverse learning needs and backgrounds (Chu, 2021; Maddamsetti, 2018). These findings corroborate the findings of Kim and Choi's (2019) study conducted in the United States, where Korean student teachers' participation in an international teaching practicum improved their leadership skills and self-efficacy in participating in the teaching and learning process.

Despite these opportunities for student teachers to improve their professional skills, the participants in our study also reported different levels of challenges they encountered during the practicum session. The first is the challenges related to the partner schools. Consistent with other studies conducted in Africa (Moon & Wolfenden, 2012; Mtika, 2011), our findings revealed that contextual realities, including the lack of resources and language barrier, posed multiple complexities for student teachers teaching as part of the practicum. While the lack and unavailability of teaching and learning resources in Ghanaian schools is not new, continued concern about resources could cause student teachers to develop unfavourable perceptions about the profession and push them out, creating a workforce shortage. While student teachers are trained to develop low-cost teaching and learning resources, their ability to do so depends on the availability of materials. Hence, there is a need for broad discussions on how best to adequately support basic schools in Ghana with relevant and appropriate resources.

The second important issue is the feedback provided by supervising tutors.

Of particular significance are student teachers' perceptions of the quality of the feedback provided during the teaching practicum. In the social constructivist framework, feedback is an important element and a basis for dialogue between student teachers and supervising tutors towards improving student performance and practice (Smith, 2010). Moreover, feedback is more effective when it is objective and targets student teachers' strengths and weaknesses (Smith, 2010). However, in our study, we found that student teachers expressed dissatisfaction with the nature of feedback they received and the lack of consensus on the part of different supervising tutors, which could have made it difficult to clarify student teachers' concerns and influence positive changes in their teaching practice. Therefore, it is important that mentoring universities provide professional development activities for supervising tutors and provide opportunities for them to practice and integrate constructive feedback sessions into their teaching and learning activities.

The participants also indicated challenges with their mentors during the teaching practicum. For instance, while mentors form part of the formal structure of support and collaborative relationships for student teachers, some participants in our study were left with the full responsibility of teaching and managing classes. This situation is consistent with findings from other studies, for example, in England (Boyle, 2009), South Africa (Marais & Meier, 2004) and Malawi (Mtika, 2011). However, this could be damaging to the professional learning of student teachers who are supposed to use the teaching practicum as a learning opportunity to teach. In addition to full class responsibility, some student teachers in our study raised concerns about being paired with mentors with no background in their subject areas. They also emphasised the mismatch between what was taught in colleges and the practices of mentors, especially with lesson planning. In 2019, the Ghanaian Ministry of Education introduced a new curriculum for basic education, with a recommended format and elements for lesson planning. Our findings, however, suggest that these practices are not being followed by teachers. This raises questions about the extent to which curriculum requirements are being adopted in schools across the country. Taken together, these findings point to the need to critically assess the role of mentors and the ways in which they can be supported to enhance their roles. In its current form, teaching practicum preparation involves the organisation of orientation and workshops for mentors. However, the extent to which this is done remains an open question. We therefore suggest that mentoring institutions should ensure that this is done to adequately prepare mentors for the uptake of their roles, highlighting the importance of their support for improving student teachers' practice.

Conclusion

Teaching practicum is valued as a key aspect of initial teacher education and provides an avenue for student teachers to develop their professional skills. In recognition of this, the current Ghanaian teacher education landscape places much emphasis on teaching practicums for student teachers to acquire more learner-centred pedagogical skills to address persistent learning crises among learners. Although our findings indicate student teachers improving some aspects of pedagogical skills, there are some concerns that, when taken into account and addressed, could enhance the benefits associated with this element of professional development. In particular, the availability of teaching and learning resources not only plays a crucial role in the daily teaching activities of teachers but also provides opportunities to develop the pedagogical skills of student teachers. Moreover, mentors and supervising tutors are key actors in shaping student teachers' professional identities and development (Mulkeen, 2009; Zeichner, 2010). Thus, there is a need to focus attention on the difficulties student teachers face as a result of the actions and inactions of mentors and tutors. Therefore, it is important for teacher educators and policymakers in the teacher education landscape to engage in concerted efforts to address the opportunities and challenges associated with teaching practicums, as revealed in this study. This could be done by reviewing the curriculum and strengthening the organisation of professional development sessions for college tutors. Additionally, continuous mentor training and the need to align the basic school curriculum with the initial teacher education curriculum should be a matter of urgency for policymakers. Finally, our findings provide a platform from which future studies can be conducted to examine how these issues persist.

Limitations

This study engaged student teachers from CoEs. Future studies can include students from universities, which will provide a platform for comparing findings across different types of institutions. Furthermore, this study employed a qualitative approach using focus group discussions. Future studies could build on this by adopting quantitative surveys that could lead to drawing generalisable conclusions. In addition, this study focused only on the off-campus aspect of the teaching practicum. Therefore, we suggest that future studies should explore other facets of teaching practicums in CoEs (such as school observation and on campus) to provide a more holistic perspective on teaching practicums. The study also did not involve other stakeholders, such as mentors, college tutors, or headteachers. Hence, future studies could explore the views of such stakeholders on the teaching practicum in its current form to inform policy and practice.

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