PREPARING STUDENT TEACHERS FOR TEACHING: AN EXPLORATION OF FIELD EXPERIENCE IN THREE COLLEGES OF EDUCATION IN GHANA

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Abstract

This study sought to understand the processes of providing practical experience to student-teachers in preparing them for teaching, and how the trainees perceive these. It used the mixed method approach to obtain data from 3 purposively sampled Colleges of Education and 12 schools of attachment in the Central Region of Ghana. Questionnaires were administered to 232 student-teachers; 12 focus group discussion sessions were held with mentees while an interview guide was used to elicit data from 24 mentors. The study found that there were no documented guidelines for the conduct of practicum, which meant uniformity in the approach was lacking; different processes and intensity of practicum organisation occurred in the colleges, and poor mentoring and supervision happened in most schools of attachment. Again, most mentors were untrained for their task, and the elements of partnership between teacher-training institutions and schools of attachment, which normally characterise practicum were not observed. This situation led to little articulation between the college preparation and activities of schools of attachment, and how one informs the work of the other. Moreover, student-teachers received very little professional guidance on how to develop their teaching competencies. Consequently, the study recommended that institutions should develop appropriate teaching standards and guidelines for practicum. Again, colleges should foster a strict adherence to the elements of partnership, while ensuring that qualified mentors are formally appointed, trained, incentivized and supported.

Keywords: Ghana, teaching practice, off-campus, student-teachers, college of education, teacher-educators, mentors.

Introduction

It is becoming increasingly clear that it is not enough to simply make physical access to basic education available to the many children of school-going age in fulfillment of the objectives of Education for All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (Akyeampong, Djangmah, Oduro, Seidu, 2007; Obanya, 2010). If these goals are to have positive social and economic effects, then the education system should ensure that children are equipped with the basic minimum competences in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills that will enable them to benefit from, and contribute to the future of their society. A UNESCO (2008, p.2) report indicates a 'relatively low and unequal learning achievement in language and mathematics' especially in Sub-Sahara Africa (SSA). In Ghana, national standardized examinations such as the National Education Assessment (NEA) and School Education Assessment (SEA) have shown that basic school pupils are 'challenged by both English and Mathematics' (MOE, 2014, p.7). A national Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) which assessed reading skills in 12 Ghanaian languages and English Language, and the Early Grade Mathematics Assessment (EGMA) which assessed the children's basic mathematics skills that need to be acquired in early grades produced similar results. The EGRA results in 2014 showed that "by the end of Primary 2, the majority of public school pupils could not yet read with comprehension – neither in a Ghanaian language nor in English" (Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 11).

Research evidence suggests that there is a relationship between poor quality of teachers' teaching and students' learning output (Pontefract & Hardman 2005; Akyeampong, Pryor, & Ampiah, 2006). Teacher education (both pre-service and in-service training) has been identified as the link between teachers' pedagogical content knowledge and pupils' high learning achievement. Of particular importance to this discussion is the initial training programme that prepares teachers for teaching, and the practicum that exposes trainees to real classrooms. The teacher education literature documents that the central issue in teacher education is how to achieve quality in teaching resulting in different models of teacher preparation competing with each other (Darling-Hammond, 2016; Mevorach & Ezer, 2010; Villegas-reimers, 2003). For example, in the USA, two common

approaches exist. Firstly, teaching as a profession which advocates standards in teaching and in curriculum planning and takes the age of the learners into consideration (Cochran-Smith, 2005). In this approach, student-teachers connect theory and practice by applying what they learn to curriculum planning, teaching application and other performance assessments organized around professional teaching standards (Cochran-Smith, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2010). This approach is consistent with the preparation of teachers in Israel which views teaching as practical-reflective and an ongoing process that involves moving back and forth between practical and theoretical considerations (Mevorach & Ezer, 2010). The other approach is the movement to deregulate teacher education. This approach views the teacher as a charismatic subject and believes that good teaching is not a matter of education and training, but rather is associated with a teacher's personality and inner qualities (Darling-Hammond, 2010, 2016). The first model which views teaching as a profession and teacher training focusing on connecting theory and practice by reflective analysis and field experience is practised in most developed countries (Brouwer & Korthagen, 2005; Sockett, 2008). The preparation of teachers in most SSA countries is consistent with the practical-reflective model practised in developed contexts where training must be 'on the job', during field experience, and must alternate between practical and theoretical considerations over time (Morganlin & Ezer, 2003).

However, there are concerns throughout SSA countries that, the quality of instruction is poor owing to inadequate preparation of teachers (Mulkeen, 2010; Pryor, Akyeampong, Westbrook, & Lussier, 2012). A synthesis study on teacher preparation in six countries in SSA by the World Bank reveals that training in pedagogical methods in all the countries was often theoretical, making it less likely to have an impact on classroom practices (Mulkeen, 2010). Learning to teach does not only come from textbooks but also from field experience which is a component of teacher-preparation programmes. Practicum offers trainee-teachers the opportunity to develop their pedagogical skills which are likely to make the theoretical material more relevant and meaningful to them (Pryor, et. al., 2012). Mulkeen's study indicated inadequacies in aspects of practicum in the countries studied. For example, in Zambia, Gambia and Uganda, in the context of teacher shortages, student-teachers who were posted to schools of

attachment to work with mentor-teachers ended up teaching full classes for the rest of the period. A multi-site study on teacher preparation in six countries in SAA has also shown that many newly qualified Ghanaian teachers lack the requisite teaching skills needed to promote effective teaching and learning (Akyeampong, Lussier, Pryor, & Westbrook, 2013). The implication is that the initial teacher training programme does not adequately inculcate the required skills and competencies in the trainees. Nevertheless, there are limited post-training professional support and development activities available, a situation which seems to indicate that the initial teacher training is the main training many teachers obtain for their entire career life.

Additionally, recent policy directives for the education sector seem to be targeting the problem of teacher-demand to meet the increasing pupil enrolment more than what actually goes on during the initial preparation of teachers (Ghana Education Service, 2015). It is therefore important to interrogate the initial teacher-education that prepares Ghanaian teachers for teaching, and in particular, the processes of equipping teacher-trainees with the skills they need to teach in basic schools. This paper focuses on the practical component of the initial teacher-preparation programme for basic school teachers in the Colleges of Education (CoE) in Ghana. The study reported here was designed to explore teacher-trainees' experiences and perception of the year-long off-campus teaching practice, and how the processes of mentoring and supervision prepare them for teaching. Specifically, we addressed the following research questions:
1. What kind of preparation goes on before the off-campus teaching practice?
2. How is the off-campus teaching practice supervised?
3. How are the trainees supported in the process of developing their teaching skills during teaching practice?
4. How are mentoring and supervision used to develop trainees' teaching competencies?

The context: Initial teacher-education at Colleges of Education in Ghana
Initial teacher-education is provided at teacher training universities and colleges of education in Ghana. At both levels, the concurrent model of training, which provides both subject content and

pedagogical skills, is employed. Whereas the universities run four-year degree programmes to produce teachers and education officers for the basic and secondary levels, the colleges of education take their clients through three-year programmes leading to the award of teachers' diploma. This study however focused on the diploma-awarding colleges. There are 47 publicly funded and 3 privately run colleges of education in Ghana. The diploma programme in the Colleges of Education was introduced in the 2004/2005 academic year to fulfill a teacher education policy directive that required basic school teachers to possess a minimum professional qualification of Diploma in Basic Education (DBE) (Ministry of Education, 2012). It is a residential programme offered for trainees who have secondary education but have no previous teaching experience.

The structure of the programme is commonly termed 'IN-IN-OUT', which means, trainees spend the first two years in college to study courses in subject matter and pedagogy, and go out to schools of attachment to have a year-long teaching practice as part of their three years training. Akyeampong (2003) revealed that the move could ensure quality education delivery in the country's basic education system where what is taught at college meets up with actual situational demands in real classrooms. In the two-year residential programme, trainees' first exposure to teaching is through the school observation visit in which they observe the teaching practices of qualified teachers in real classrooms during vacations. The second exposure is the on-campus teaching practice (micro/peer teaching) held at the college level. Beyond the two-year residential programme, trainees are engaged in a year-long off-campus teaching practice in the third year at the schools of attachment usually near the location of the college (Ghana Education Service [GES], 2003) which is the focus of this present study.

The out-programme of the Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programme in the colleges of education in Ghana draws on partnership approaches among groups and organisations in the development of teacher-trainees. Key actors in the effective management of the school attachment component are teacher-trainees, mentors (classroom teachers), lead-mentors (head teachers), link-tutors and supervisors (college tutors), principals of colleges of education, district directors of education and opinion leaders/community (Ghana Education Service [GES], 2003). Of these.

actors, the teacher-trainees, mentors and lead-mentors are in the school system, whereas officers from the college and the GES district offices who provide professional support and guidance for trainees are external to the school system. Mentoring and support according to the Teacher Education Division (TED) are to be provided by classroom teachers who serve as role models and mentors for trainees, focusing on issues pertaining to planning of lessons and instructional leadership in the school. The district directorate of education provides support by supplying schools of attachment with needed logistics to facilitate effective teaching and learning. It must be noted that even though specific roles for the key players have been documented in the handbook on mentorship and supervision of teacher-trainees on school attachment (GES, 2003), benchmarks for mentoring have not been clearly marked.

Practical teaching experience of initial teacher training in CoEs
Practical experience, also known as teaching practice or field experience in some contexts as a form of experiential learning, is valued internationally in many teacher-education institutions. However, managing it in the course of the ITE programme is a daunting task fraught with a lot of challenges as evidenced in developing contexts as well (Sweitzer & King, 2004). In most successful teacher education programmes, fieldwork involves an agreement between the teacher-education institution and the partnering institution (Reilly, 1992). The institution undertaking the teacher-education programme normally documents guidelines for conducting teaching practice; including the individual roles, responsibilities and modalities for the partnership with the partner schools (e.g. University of Sydney, 2012). The nature, intensions, values, and procedures of the field experience to the institutions in the partnership are usually documented. The level of expected cooperation between the staff, students and partner institutions are also normally documented clearly (He, Means, & Lin, 2006; NCATE, 2010).

Some teacher-preparation institutions also involve community groups and local businesses in the training process. The involvement of these other partners brings about proactive teachers who have the potential of supporting pupils at the school level to achieve to the best of their ability (Sweitzer & King, 2004; NCATE, 2010). The Whole

School Development (WSD) project in Ghana, according to Akyeampong (2004), inspired a strategy for enhancing the involvement and participation of partners in the community in planning and decision-making, including those that affect the conduct of off-campus teaching practice. The WSD Training Programme Handbook (1999, p.4) notes that the 'process of effecting positive change in the classroom to be owned by head teachers, teachers, and the community' should remain an indispensable part of the process of teacher-trainees' professional development agenda. Mulkeen's (2010) study found that the integration of the period of teaching practice with campus-based training was poor and weakened by issues of timing, supervision and assessment. For example, in many of the countries students completed campus-based training first, followed by field experience which made it difficult to bring classroom experience into the taught course (Mulkeen, 2010).

Another issue worth noting is that the approach to organizing teaching practice at the school level makes teacher-educators more responsible although that does not often match the kind of preparation and support student-teachers need (Valencia, Martin, Place, & Grossman, 2009). The assumption in most cases is that what student-teachers need to learn during teaching could be learnt on the job as they progress through their career. The time that student-teachers spend in schools of attachment is often not carefully planned and many still do not have frequent opportunities to observe teaching or to receive feedback on their own teaching (Zeichner, 1996). Additionally, the opportunities student-teachers have to tap into the expertise of experienced mentors were found to be derailed by other engagements that inadvertently have become part of the teaching practice. Literature on the organization of this practical component of initial preparation is silent on these crucial details in Ghana, thus making an area worth studying.

Supervision of trainees' teaching
Supervision of student-teachers' classroom instruction is important for evaluating their effectiveness. This generally involves supervisors observing and evaluating trainees' lessons in a classroom setting, documenting the trainees' performance and sharing suggestions for improvement with the trainees (Fullan, 2001; Holland, 2004). The task of the supervisor includes developing professional learning

communities for groups of trainees that do not only acquire new knowledge and skills, but also learn how to study and respond remarkably to their usual workspace and learning environments (Fullan, 2001). During teaching practice, college tutors from the teacher training institutions, who are also connected with trainees' study department or course of study, assist mentors to interpret teacher-trainees' practices and to offer support when called upon (Gopee, 2011). According to Bouchamma (2006), it is assumed that the supervisor knows much of what the teacher-trainee should do in order to provide effective teaching. Tang and Chow (2007) view teaching practice supervision as a form of 'teaching' that helps trainees to learn to solve pedagogical problems.

In supervision, the supervisor observes, assesses and comments on teaching quality, critiques teacher-trainees' teaching, commends, and sometimes condemns the students' efforts. In this connection, Holland (2004) advances three factors that shape teaching practice supervision namely: the perceived purpose, the relationship between the teacher candidate and the supervisor; and how the information about the trainees' performance is used after practice. Tang and Chow (2007) on the other hand highlight two main purposes of teaching practice as (1) formative assessment for informing personal decisions and enhancing professional learning of the teacher trainee, and (2) summative assessment for certification or institutional decisions on the teaching work output of the teacher-trainee. The two paradigms of assessment that are carried out during supervision do not fully address issues of teacher-trainee supervision, especially so, when student numbers are large.

Mentoring

Mentoring is described as a mechanism where one individual acts as a positive role model and adviser to another, drawing on personal experience and facilitating improved performance, learning or development of the other (McKimm, Jollie & Hatter, 2007). It is the process by which an experienced person provides advice, support and encouragement to a less experienced person. Seen another way, it may be a structured programme that pairs a mentor with a trainee who is either new to the profession or new to the school in order to provide orientation, training, support and assistance (Parsloe & Wray, 2000).

Research has shown that if structured well, mentoring has the potential to reform the education system, especially with the current accountability demands by the state, agencies and industry towards enhanced worker productivity. Murray and Owen (1991) reported increased productivity, cost effectiveness, improved recruitment efforts, improved organizational communication and understanding associated with mentoring. In addition, mentoring brings about motivation for employees, enhancement of services offered by the organization, and improvement in strategic and succession planning as a result of the mentoring that new employees receive.

Discussing the features of mentoring, Stone (1999) mentions that mentoring has the tendency towards faster learning curves; increased communication of professional values; increased loyalty; improved one-on-one communication and a sense of team spirit within the workspace, as well as increased employee productivity and so on. The benefits that Stone recounts have a connection with the teaching profession. Nonetheless, the good side of mentoring does not automatically cancel out possible threats that mentoring programmes have on a system, if not properly managed. It could be an ineffective avenue when it does not encourage newly qualified teachers especially to remain in the teaching profession and in persuading new teachers to adopt pedagogical beliefs and techniques that are felt to be vital in the classroom (Whitaker, 2000; Moore, 2001).

The literature indicates that good quality initial training leads to good quality beginning teachers (Akeampong, et al., 2013; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Zeichner, 1996). By inference, a good quality teacher practicum can be said to be crucial to the type of training experience trainees receive to meet the demands of teaching in real schools. The indicators of such a system can be gleaned from the inputs and processes of the programme. The framework for a quality practicum of a teacher education programme should therefore focus on the structural and operational design of the teaching experiences provided to trainees. Firstly, there should be a variety of practical activities (college/school-based) between the training institution and partner schools, which should be spread over a stipulated period of time. Ideally, trainees should be exposed to different community/school types and grade levels. Secondly, a strong partnership between the college and partner schools should be nurtured in a spirit of collaboration and complementarity throughout

the processes of planning, implementation and monitoring/evaluation cycle of the programme. Lastly, the various actors (e.g. teacher-educators, link tutors/supervisors, mentors, etc.) involved in the cycle should be identified and resourced to facilitate trainees' learning and development in the course of their training.

Methodology
The study employed the mixed method approach to explore how the off-campus teaching practice is conducted in colleges of education in Ghana. The approach was used for the purposes of triangulation and for obtaining a deeper understanding of the processes of providing practical experience for teacher trainees. Three colleges in the Central Region and their schools of attachment out of the 47 public colleges in Ghana were selected for the study. The selection of 3 colleges was meant to provide snapshots of the cases of the three colleges rather than a generalization of what pertains in all the colleges of education in Ghana. The small sample notwithstanding, the findings of the study were expected to provide information on the kind of exposure teacher trainees are given in actual schools and the teaching practice that they undergo before they graduate, thus providing a critical justification for the use of a limited number of isolated cases. Furthermore, the choice of three colleges has implications for diagnosing the practicum of the colleges of education that may have similar operational contexts.

Two instruments (questionnaire and interview guide) were designed to help obtain data from trainees who were in the third year of the initial training programme who were on teaching practice. The questionnaire sought information on how the college prepared them for the off-campus teaching practice, the conduct of monitoring and supervision, and the trainees' perception of the teaching practice processes. Interview guide for mentors and focus group discussion with trainees sought information on the processes involved in the preparation and conduct of the off-campus teaching practice, trainees' experiences and perception of the programme. The instruments were tested on 50 teacher trainees in one college of education in the Western Region in April 2013. Some of the items were subsequently modified before the final instruments were used for data collection. Data was collected in the months of May and June 2013.

In each college, the trainees were allocated to schools of attachment within districts closest to the college. Four (4) schools of attachment were selected from each college district, making a total of 12 schools. Sampling was mostly based on proximity and clustering (i.e. two or more schools on the same compound or close to each other), and whether the schools of attachment had both primary and junior high schools under one head teacher. This was done to obtain a minimum of 30% of the total population (270, 304 and 294 in the three colleges) of trainees for each college. Consequently, 232 trainees and 24 mentors (that is, the head teacher and one other mentor in each school) were sampled for the study. The total of 232 trainees who responded to the questionnaire, 150 (64.7%) were females and 82 (35.3%) were males. There were more females in this study because one of the three colleges for the study was a female-only institution. The majority of the trainees (79.3%) were in the age range of 22-25 years and a little over 10% had their ages within 26-29 years with only two of them (0.9%) having attained age 30 years and above.

All the trainees in each sampled school were recruited to respond to the questionnaires. In each school, two researchers gathered data at a time. While one administered questionnaire to trainees, the other conducted interviews with the mentors (the head teacher [lead-mentor] and one other mentor, selected with the help of the head teacher). After obtaining the questionnaire data, the researchers assembled all the trainees in each school of attachment for a focus group discussion. This procedure was used to enable the researchers to probe into some of the responses the trainees provided in the questionnaire. Permission was obtained from the head teachers (and colleges concerned) before scheduling appointments with the respondents. The questionnaire data collected were analysed using simple frequency counts and percentages. Opinions and perceptions of respondents that were expressed in both interviews and focus group discussions were put into themes and textually reported. This was done by employing a thematic analysis method to examine the assessment records of mentees' teaching against the benchmarks indicated on the assessment forms.

Results and Discussion
The findings of this study were reported under the following sub-headings: preparations that occurred before the start of off-campus teaching practice; how the teaching practice was supervised; how the teacher trainees perceived the monitoring and support provided them during the teaching practice; and how mentoring and supervision were used to develop their teaching skills and competencies.

Preparation for off-campus teaching practice
The trainees described the academic and professional preparation that occurred before they embarked on teaching practice. Their perception of how the colleges prepared them to carry out teaching practice was surveyed, as presented in Table 1. Results in Table 1 show the distribution of the proportion of trainees who showed levels of agreement or disagreement on the preparation they received. They perceived that they had high levels of academic and professional preparation before they embarked on off-campus teaching practice. For instance, altogether, 98.3% of them agreed that they were well informed about the importance of on-campus teaching practice as part of the preparation for off-campus practice.

Table 1: Trainees' Perception of the Preparation for Off-Campus Teaching Practice

	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Preparation for teaching my elective subjects was adequate	98	42.2	115	49.6	15	6.5	4	1.7
Preparation for teaching my core subjects was adequate	109	47.0	116	50.0	7	3.0	0	0.0
Tutors' practical demonstration of how to teach elective subjects was adequate	90	38.8	125	53.9	17	7.3	0	0.0

Tutors' practical demonstration of how to teach core subjects was adequate	94	40.5	125	53.9	11	4.7	0	0.0
Students were educated on the importance of on-campus teaching practice	176	75.6	52	22.4	4	1.7	0	0.0
Training in TLM preparation was adequate	117	50.4	99	42.7	15	6.5	1	0.5
Training in use of TLM was adequate	147	63.9	75	32.6	7	3.0	1	0.4
Training in lesson notes preparation was adequate	179	77.2	48	20.7	5	2.2	0	0.0

Source: Field Data, 2013

A further 97.9% agreed that they received adequate training in lesson notes preparation. Similar proportions of agreement were received from the trainees on how adequately they have been prepared to teach core subjects and also on how to carry out practical demonstration of lessons. This finding reflects an assumption that college preparation is by default 'adequate' and student-teachers have little or no criticism of it. It could also mean student-teachers will go into teaching field uncritical of the college training therefore may not look back to question the effectiveness of the training.

The teacher-trainees also reported varied frequency of occurrences of other activities in the on-campus teaching practice that helped them during the off-campus teaching practice (see Table 2). These included exposure to real classroom experiences before off-campus teaching practice, which occurred almost always for over 26.3% of them (see Table 2). However, a few (17.2%) of the trainees admitted that this situation did not occur before the off-campus teaching practice.

Table 2: On-Campus Teaching Practice as Preparation for Off-Campus Teaching

	Almost Always	Very Often	Often	Almost Never
Students are exposed to real classroom experience before on-campus teaching practice	26.3	22.0	34.5	17.2
Tutors' suggestions during on-campus teaching practice are relevant for off-campus teaching	56.9	31.5	11.2	0.4
Tutors' suggestions during on-campus teaching practice were adequate for off-campus teaching	45.3	34.1	19.8	0.9
Tutors' responses to trainees' concerns during the on-campus teaching practice were helpful for off-campus teaching	50.4	34.5	13.8	1.3
Tutors use on-campus teaching practice assessment marks to address trainees' teaching related difficulties	46.6	30.6	15.1	7.8

Table 2 further shows that trainees (56.9%) found the tutors' suggestions during the on-campus teaching practice almost always relevant and (31.5%) very often relevant for their off-campus teaching practice. The high percentage (98.4%) of trainees who highly rated the occurrence of this phenomenon shows the strong influence of tutors' suggestions on their practice. This could explain their feeling of confidence when it came to teaching in real classrooms. For example, in the focus group discussion, one trainee recounted that:

> *Micro-teaching has helped us a lot. For me it has boosted my confidence in teaching because it has exposed me to how pupils behave in class and how to control them so it became a normal thing for me here (Trainees' FGD)*

Though the on-campus teaching practice employed the peer-teaching approach in the college setting and not real classrooms, the

trainees thought that it was a semblance of what they were likely to encounter in real classrooms. The tutors also used assessment suggestions to address the trainees' teaching difficulties, which according to the trainees occurred almost always (46.6%), very often (30.6%) and often (15.1%). The tutors hinted that the on-campus teaching practice did not count towards the trainees' final grading and certification. Nevertheless, they used the scores internally to make the trainees attach some importance to the exercise, and also to help them work on their teaching deficiencies. Practicum has a range of goals, primarily among them is to develop in student-teachers the ability to think critically on the relationship between procedures and principles of teaching (Ochieng & Borg, 2011). The finding resonates studies that have shown that teacher-training with focus on practicum connect theory and practices through reflective discussion among tutors and student-teachers (Brouwer & Korthagen, 2005; Mevorach & Ezer, 2010). Aside preparing trainees academically and professionally for the off-campus teaching, the colleges also identified partner schools in consultation with the head teachers. The colleges and partner schools and their Parent-Teacher Association (PTAs) also collaborated to arrange accommodation for the teacher trainees. Depending on the kind of arrangement, the colleges made with the schools, the trainees paid the utility bills and/or the accommodation. For example, a mentor revealed:

> *When they (the mentees) come, we find them the*
> *accommodation and then they feed themselves and*
> *pay for their light and water bills (Mentor's*
> *interview).*

For the mentoring arrangement however, the only form of preparation given to the mentors was an orientation on school-community relationship and how to supervise trainees to be involved in community activities, with less emphasis on how mentors should guide trainees in their teaching. However, this orientation was not a regular feature of the college's programme, as some mentors indicated that they were not given any orientation in the year in which this present study was conducted.

Mentoring during the off-campus teaching practice
Focus group discussions (FGD) with the trainees revealed that many of them left the year-long teaching practice with very little

engagement with their mentors. Many of them reported that some mentors were very often absent from school, and even when they were present, they left trainees on their own without mentoring and monitoring. The implication is that, the trainees did not receive adequate mentoring since the mentors made very little input in their pedagogical skill development. Some of the experiences they described include the following:

> *We were asked to do off-campus teaching practice so that experienced teachers will mentor us, but what we are experiencing is nothing compared to mentoring. We almost do everything on our own and this does not make it an engaging study relationship (Trainees' FGD).*

A trainee in another college shared similar sentiments:

> *When I came into my current class my mentor was not around. I was having a national service person in my class. My issue is, who indeed is my mentor? Besides, the class teacher comes to school only sparingly. In my case I can say for the whole of the first two terms I did not enjoy enough of a mentor's support (Trainees' FGD).*

Most of the mentors had no knowledge on the benchmarks against which the trainees were graded. Some mentors figured that pre and post-supervision conferences with the college tutors and trainees would have offered them the opportunity to understand what their role in the process was, but that rarely happened.

The findings of this present study reveal some lapses in the preparation for off-campus teaching practice. For example, the orientation given to the mentors did not seem to adequately address the procedures and processes involved in mentoring of trainees on teaching practice. Also, the practice of selecting schools of attachment in consultation with only the head-teachers and not the district education offices hampers the effectiveness of the teaching practice exercise, given that the district education offices have useful information on the types of schools to use for the exercise. Besides, the selection of schools of attachment for the exercise did not seem to take into account the availability of experienced teachers whose capacity have been built to undertake mentoring, and at the same time

who are willing to mentor the teacher trainee. The choice of a school with the right caliber of teachers is of utmost importance to the success of the off-campus teaching practice. The inadequate support by mentors to student-teachers found in this study compliments the findings of Mulkeen (2010) who found that in some SSA countries, a great number of student-teachers were made to fill teaching vacancies to teach full classes for the whole practicum period with no mentorship. It also means that student-teachers do not get access to thinking and decision-making processes of their experienced mentors who are usually poorly motivated for mentoring prospective teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2009; Zeichner, 2010).

As has been highlighted in the literature, mentoring has the tendency to increase communication of professional values, loyalty and employee productivity, and above all is able to reform an education system (Murray & Owen, 1991; Parsloe & Wray, 2000). However, since this study reveals inadeqacies of mentorship during practicum in schools of attachment, it supports the work of Whitaker 2000 and Moore, 2001 who argue that mentoring could be ineffective in achieving its purpose if improper arrangements are done for its implementation. This could widen the gap between the connection between campus courses and field experiences which is regarded as Achilles heel of teacher education (Darling-Hammond, 2009).

Regularity of teacher educators' visits to schools of attachment
A high proportion of the trainees (63.5%) reported that they had less than four (4) supervision visits having been on teaching practice for about nine months, which suggests that this aspect of the teacher-educators' role was given relatively less attention. Specifically, 23.11%, 40.44% and 28.44% of the trainees had received 2, 3 and 4 supervisions respectively about six weeks to the end of the teaching practice. Less than 10% of the trainees said they had more than 4 supervision visits. Interviews with college tutors however revealed that ideally, each trainee was supposed to receive at least six supervision visits.

Obtaining little or no opportunities for supervision could affect the teacher trainees' pedagogical skills development in a number of ways. First, by the end of the practice, trainees may not have had the chance to be supervised and guided in all the subjects they were assigned to teach during the period. Again, if the supervisions were

conducted at the onset of the programme when trainees were teaching for the first time, it would be important that follow-up visits are made to ensure that suggestions made regarding teaching challenges are adequately addressed in subsequent engagements. Otherwise, the benefits to be gained from the whole process of supervision would not be obtained. This finding implies that student-teachers view their tutors as playing important role in their learning process and of course their marks during the off-campus teaching practice which adds up to their final grade. However, college tutors may not be the only supervisors responsible for guiding students during practicum. In other contexts, the key driver of learning to teach is the mentor and teacher-educators who work closely with school-based mentors to develop strategies for supporting student-teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2009; Ochieng & Borg. 2011).

Processes of supervising teaching

In principle, student teachers on teaching practice should normally obtain clinical supervision at the start of the exercise and be supported to address identified weaknesses before they are assessed. In this study, a majority (77.2%) of the trainees indicated that the teacher-educators' visits were mainly for assessing their teaching. The 19.4% who said that scoring of their teaching occurred only either sparingly or rarely (2.6%) is in itself indication that the link tutors' visits were mainly for supervision and scoring of mentees' teaching rather than for other reasons such as social, academic or professional support. For supervision of teaching to be effective, it is important that supervisors hold pre-supervision, supervision and post-supervision conferences with the student-teachers on practice to improve upon their teaching (Fullan, 2001; Holland, 2004). However, most supervisors went straight into trainees' classes, took their lesson notes and started observing and scoring trainees' teaching. Sometimes, supervisors interjected in the course of the lesson instead of writing down comments for discussion in the post-conference meeting, apparently because they did not devote time for the post-supervision conference. On some occasions, supervisors hurried through the supervision, and sometimes did not sit through to the end of the lessons to provide feedback. In all three colleges, trainees' focus group discussions revealed similar sentiments:

We prepare our lesson notes for seventy minutes and the introduction is ten minutes. Therefore, when the tutor supervises for ten minutes and goes away, he/she is not able to get to the core of the lesson but eventually he will get grade and even comment up to the conclusion. I feel this is not a good practice' (Trainees' FGD)

I was teaching triangles. Immediately I was about to cut the triangle the tutor said it is okay and he left (Trainees' FGD)

These results reflect the conception of learning to teach which focuses much on meeting standards in assessment instruments rather than supporting teachers to reflect on their field experience in relation to the theories learnt in college (Mevorach & Ezer, 2010). Data from this study further show that sometimes, supervisors who sat through the lessons did not carry out the supervision exercise conscientiously. In one college for example, there were instances where according to one trainee, a supervisor left the class mid-way to pick up a telephone call:

... there was one tutor who came to supervise me who was virtually not seated in my lesson for the whole period, then in my comment sheet he had no name of school, no name of class, etc... Surprisingly, he was able to get comments to pass on my strengths and weaknesses. I sometimes wonder whether they were comments meant for someone else or mine' (Trainees' FGD).

Instances like these create doubts in the minds of trainees' on the supervision exercise, and that may result in supervisors of the off-campus teaching practice not being taken seriously. It was found that there were some supervisors who pretended to be very strict, who were most of the time unfriendly and wore no smiles while on supervision duties. For example, one mentee had this to say:

Some of the link-tutors are very timid whereas others are callous. They seem not to be satisfied with just any amount of effort one puts into teaching. Yet, some of the link-tutors, although you will teach very well, will either pretend not to be satisfied and on very rare instances tell

management of Teaching and Learning Materials (TLMs) and methods of presentation.

In the schools and communities, the support-student teachers received was mainly in the form of accommodation. The accommodation in this case was normally provided through the school's Parents-Teachers Association (PTA) in conjunction with the community. In some communities, the student-teachers paid for the utility bills while in others, they did not. Additionally, in some schools, the community members had been sensitized about the need to provide the student-teachers with certain basic needs. This study gathered that these were presented in the form of money, foodstuffs that were given to the trainees at the end of each school term or academic year. In few cases, the trainees were allowed to borrow TLMs from the schools, if only the former had them, as examples of school-based support received. However, the student-teachers did not comment on support received in terms of building teaching competencies that they were expected to get from their mentors in the schools of attachment.

Conclusion
The evidence available from the findings of this study provides a basis for a number of conclusions. First, there appeared to exist some form of structure for community, inter-institutional and school level support for off-campus teaching practice. However, these structures were not in any policy documents for training basic school teachers. The implication is that the stakeholders in teacher training worked with verbally transmitted information on their expected roles and responsibilities, be they well-defined or not. Thus, there is a high tendency for low mentor output and lack of accountability. This could also result in disjointed coordination between the Colleges of Education and the schools of attachment with regard to the performance of their roles.

Besides, it was found that the professional support the student-teachers received on campus were more intense than what they received while on off-campus teaching practice. Some explanations can be gleaned from this finding. Again, there were low and inadequate opportunities for orientation, and almost non-existent capacity building and certification avenues for the key actors (mentors) of the off-campus exercise. For example, no orientation was

conducted in most of the colleges for the year when this study was conducted. Therefore, lacking training and motivation for the exercise, mentors would consider the mentoring as an additional responsibility for which there would be no remuneration. Moreover, since there was no formal partnership agreement between the colleges and the schools of attachment in the study region, there could be no support from other agencies of teacher professional development in the districts where the mentees practised. This brings up the question of how the responsibility of student-teachers' mentorship should be shared between teacher educators and school-based mentors which is non-existent in the Ghanaian context.

Lastly, we conclude that the fact that student-teachers in Ghana are given a considerable length of time (about one year) to learn teaching in real classrooms does not necessarily mean they receive adequate preparation for teaching, since the time is not meaningfully utilised by the key stakeholders concerned. Student-teachers have limited access to engage in practical-reflective activities which help student teachers to function effectively in real classroom situations (Mulkeen, 2010). The practical training given to prospective teachers focused much more on meeting discrete teacher behavior as outlined in the assessment instrument which is more of summative than formative assessment of student-teachers teaching. Mentoring and supervision of the student-teachers' teaching, which together go to support their gradual and systematic learning about teaching, have lapses that must be addressed. These might account for the claim by Akyeampong et al. (2013) that newly qualified teachers in Ghana lack the requisite teaching skills needed to promote effective teaching and learning.

Recommendations

This paper upholds the point that the initial preparation teachers receive prior to the start of their professional life plays a crucial role to influence what goes on in their classrooms and determines how much learning takes place (Brouwer, Niels and Korthagen, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2010; UNESCO, 2014). This is in consonance with Akyeampong et al.'s (2013, p. 280) argument that initial-teacher education is 'the most powerful influence on the practice of teachers in the early part of their career' as it provides the knowledge and

understanding that they fall back on to justify and generate their classroom practice. As the data in this study reveals, there is the need to refocus on the processes involved in gradually and systematically guiding teacher-trainees to develop their teaching skills while they are learning how to teach. In this connection, we make the following recommendations that connect with our findings.

First, it is important that the Ghana Education Service, Teacher Education Division, National Teaching Council and other stakeholders in teacher training reschedule teaching practice in the early year of training to experience teaching for number of weeks. The CoEs calendar needs to alternate with longer periods in schools with periods to discuss problems arising from teaching practices in the colleges rather than having teaching experience concentrated in one block at the end of their training. Ghana Education Service in collaboration with the CoEs should select experienced teachers whose practice is considered effective to serve as mentors as key drivers in the professional learning process of student-teachers. We also recommend that mentors should be certificated for the service they render as partners in the training of teachers and given due recognition in the course of their career growth and promotion. This way, a lot more seriousness may be attached to the exercise.

The structural arrangement of the teaching practice activities should also be reviewed. By this, we suggest that stronger partnerships should be forged between the Colleges of Education and the schools of attachment, as well as other analogous systems. This should enable the individual roles, responsibilities, modalities and the expected outputs of the mentors, supervisors, students and partnering institutions to be agreed, documented and enforced. Such formal arrangement should also bring about the formal appointment and training of mentors in accordance with their qualifications and expected outputs. We believe that our recommendations proffer some workable solutions to the identified weaknesses in the· provision of teaching practice activities which, when applied may help to produce competent teachers that can bring about change in the low learning achievement of Ghanaian basic school children.

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