

Teaching practicum reflective practices and identity construction among student teachers

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Abstract

This study explored how reflective practices during teaching practicum influence student teachers' identity construction. Teaching practicum (TP) is an essential element within teacher education which gives student teachers an opportunity to apply the theories into practice by exercising the acquired theories into actual school and classroom teaching environment. During TP, student teachers are learning to teach through which they have to reflect their daily practices as part of their practice-based professional development for their better positioning in teaching and identity construction. This study adapted a qualitative research approach using face to face semi-structured interviews and observation as methods of data collection. Through observations, interviews and TP assessments the study found that; reflective skills during teaching practicum improve interpersonal, interactional and collaborative skills, knowledge and performance to student teachers. However, most of student teachers were found to be lacking practical reflective skills in their practicum, which limits their identity construction and lowers their self efficacy. Therefore, the study has implications for teacher training programs to include reflective practice training modules as part of their course work for refining their practicum and developing deep understanding of reflective practices among teacher educators and student teachers in particular.

Key words: teaching practicum, reflective practices, identity, student teachers

1. Introduction

Teacher education plays a key role in improving the quality of education system of any country, the quality of teachers and their training. Teaching practicum (TP) is an essential component within teacher education which gives student teachers an opportunity to apply the theories into practice (Mannathoko, 2013) by exercising the acquired theories into actual school and classroom teaching environment. Thus teaching practicum is bridging the gap between theory and practice. De-ville (2010) defines teaching practice as an internship experience, a part of formative training process for student teachers in skills development. In the context of this paper it is a field experience for student teachers' professional development. Several studies from around the world have shown valid importance of teaching practicum in developing the well being of future teachers (eg. De Coury, 2011; Gillet-Swan & Grant-Smith, 2017; Lerseth, 2013). During teaching practicum, student teachers are in the course of learning to teach through which they have to reflect on their practice-based professional development (Ho, 2012).

Reflective practice is an experiential tool for student teachers to explore themselves, their teaching, learning to teach and student learning and understanding (Nwizu, 2011). It is an active inquiry which base on constructivism and problem solving aiming at making meaningful conclusion to inform future actions (DeVile, 2010). Reflection in teaching is a learning process through questions, investigations and continuous assessment of the teaching and learning processes and

actions. The sole purpose of reflection in teaching is therefore to improve future teaching and professionalism and basically for effective students' learning (Oyekan, 2000).

The process of teaching requires teachers to enquire their beliefs, practices, actions and experiences as part of their professional growth (Kasula, 2015; Ulla, 2016). "A key rationale for reflective practice is that experience alone does not necessarily lead to learning; deliberate reflection on experience is essential (Mathew, Mathew & Peechattu, 2017, pg. 126)". When student teachers involve in an inquiry of their learning to teach and development during their teaching practicum they develop a better positioning and image or identity for themselves (Trent, 2010). The developed identity is crucial for their professional development and students' learning which is the central focus of the whole education process.

Theoretical and empirical literatures provide that; teacher identity is constructed over time and through various processes (Ulla, 2016), among them being teaching practicum reflective practices for student teachers. Teacher identity construction is among the current burning issues in teacher education and educational empirical studies (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Teacher identity as a kind of teacher in a given context is a result of an active process of creation and recreation, formation and transformation of learning to teach, by having past experiences, using the present context to determine the future (Day, 2011; Davey, 2013; Trent, 2010; Wenger, 1998; Ye & Zhao, 2019). Teacher identity is the creation of self or group image from the process of being to the process of becoming a certain kind of a teacher or teachers. Teacher education programs and teacher educators are therefore obliged to prepare student teachers with lifelong values and skills for effective teaching and learning (Neal, et al, 2013). They are also responsible in maintaining, nurturing and developing the beliefs, dispositions and identity on the kind of teacher that student teacher wants to be (Mannathoko, 2013; Trent, 2010).

Reflective practices are vital for learning to teach by bridging the gap between theory and practice; student teachers see their images by looking back to their actions, efficacy, events, emotions, responses and experiences. Their previous dispositions and experiences are therefore used to cement on the existing knowledge and develop new expectations for the future (Loughran, 2002). Reflective teaching has a wider impact in the long run of lifelong teaching practices and identity as embodied in their professional development. Teaching practicum is a practical site that exposes student teachers to reflective teaching by; thinking over their teaching practices, analyze how they perceived teaching from theories and how the actual practice is to be improved or changed for better students' learning outcomes. The key points for a reflective student teacher are; "who am I, How do I teach, and how well should I be and do to make sure my students are effectively learning" (Mathew, Mathew & Peechattu, 2017).

By exploring what is going on in their daily classes, they come to identify and position their own practices and develop reasons for their beliefs, behaviour, relationship and practices and make improvement in each aspect reflected. Reflective practices during teaching practicum have paramount benefits to both student teachers and in-service teachers for their lifetime career (Garza, 2017; Larseth, 2013; Nguyen, 2017). The fore and most important basis for professional growth is the teachers' own reflection on daily school and classroom practices. Thus, there is a need for every teacher to have a self reflection on how he or she is executing the assigned obligations and how one uses the previous and current knowledge and understanding about the profession to develop the future being (Lin, Wu, Wang & Yang, 2019). The purpose of this study is therefore to explore: How

reflective practices during teaching practicum influence student teachers' identity construction in Tanzania?

2. Literature review

2.1. Teaching practicum (TP) in Tanzania

Tanzanian secondary school student teachers are to attend TP twice within three years of study; the first TP takes place at the end of first year of study for 56 days; and the second is conducted at the end of the second year for 56 days too. During TP student teachers are exposed to teaching of two subjects of their specialization and assigned duties like; teachers on duty; teachers for sports and games', health care, environmental or discipline teachers, and they take charge of these duties under mentorship of in-service teachers. Heads of institutions are requested to assess each student teacher in one or two subjects, discuss it with the student-teacher and give the necessary guidance to improve the teaching exercise (Chambulila, 2013).

The concern to be put in place is on how TP is as sites for learning to student teacher prepare him or her as a decision maker, consultant, curriculum developer, analyst, activist and school leader through identity-in-practice which is an action oriented approach of identity construction (Trent, 2010; Wenger, 1998) through belonging, imagination, direct engagement and alignment into the teacher to become (Wenger, 1998). Ulla (2016) stresses on student-teachers getting time to evaluate and be evaluated on what is desirable or undesirable, useful, good or bad and how they commit themselves to fulfill their duties and position themselves in different context; and TP can play an important role in fulfilling these goals.

2.2. Reflective practices during teaching practicum

During teaching practicum student teachers have to apply the learned theories and pedagogies into an actual classroom setting. Though reflective practice is important at both the pre-service and in-service levels of teaching, however, student teachers have been evidenced to require more coaching or mentorship assistance and peer involvement for their professional development because they are less experienced to the actual school and classroom setting (Prabjandee, 2019). Reflective practices for student teachers during teaching practicum are vital basing on the fact that; pre-service teachers are used to have high self-efficacy, strong beliefs and expectations during their enrollment to teacher education, however, their efficacy faces "reality shock" when they go for teaching practice due to the challenges they face in the field, as a result their efficacy become lower during their graduation and as beginning teachers (Lampert, 2010; Pandergast et al, 2011) which might have impact to their retention in the teaching career. A poor reflective practice among student teachers during teaching practicum is therefore a warning sign to high turnover rate of teachers once recruited.

The goal of teaching practicum is to expose student teachers to actual classroom teaching, under guidance and collaboration with experienced teachers. Student teachers are obliged and charged with classroom teaching and assistance in other teacher duties out of class. The mentor teachers and teacher educators are responsible in guiding and assisting student teachers to accomplish their duties, and making sure the course goals are achieved (Teng, 2017). Student teachers in turn have time to make their reflections from their expectations, experiences, observations and modelling from experienced teachers as mentors and teacher educators as teaching practicum assessors through.

2.3. Reflective practices and identity construction

Reflective practices assist student teachers to identify their strengths and weaknesses and awareness of their understanding and performance (Ambady, 2018). In teacher education and teaching practicum in particular it stimulates and develops skills in decision making, logical thinking and self assessment (Goodley, 2018) for learning to teach and professional development. In Pakistan for example, Azeem (2011) revealed that teacher education institutions have not yet managed to train properly the student teachers about their first class experiences in teaching practice. As a result of such poor training most student teachers and in-service teachers were lacking reflective teaching skills and were unable in reflecting their lessons and teaching practices. Azeem, further suggests teacher education programs and universities to introduce a special subject of 'reflective practice' to equip students with these skills.

Since the introduction of competence based curriculum in 2006 in Tanzania, reflection in teaching has become an important component of the lesson and practices that all teachers have to implement in and out of classrooms. Teacher educators in both colleges and universities are required to train and produce reflective teachers for enhancing the future teachers' images and being (Komba & Mwandangi, 2016; Makunja, 2015). The student teachers should be equipped with theoretical and practical reflective practices in inquiring their beliefs, expectations, teaching and learning in different perspectives to improve their day to day real lives. Incorporating the reflection into teacher training, prepares teachers for a lifetime reflection best practices that impact student achievement (Ambady, 2018) and educational outcomes. Teachers and teaching standards, assessment of self and group feeling and thinking about identities are crucial aspects to student teachers' learning to teach and daily practices (Zeicher & Liston, 2014).

2.4. Theoretical framework

The evolution of reflective practices in teaching and teacher education and how teachers use reflections to determine their personal and professional experiences and images can be traced back to John Dewey. For him, reflection involves self active, persistent and careful consideration (Dewey as cited in Sweigard, 2007). Attached to reflective practices, issues of teachers' identity are dependent on interaction and interpersonal relations among teachers and with students; and engagement in professional learning communities. Wenger (1998) focuses on teacher identity as experience derived from; negotiated experiences, identity community membership, identity as learning trajectory, and identity as nexus of multi membership. While Gee (2000 cited in Lerseth, 2013) sees identity through the four analytical lens namely; nature which deals with how the individual teacher looks him or herself, the institutional eye which focus on how the team or co-workers perceive the teacher positively or negatively, the discourse eye focusing on how teachers see and call each other and the way people see teacher's individual traits achievements and attributes and value them; and the affinity eye which deals with the identifying groups with whom one shares a common interest or experience; thus student teachers' identities are to be nurtured and developed influence their practices in and out of classes.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research approach using face to face semi-structured interviews and observation as part of data collection and not the method of inquiry, which are flexible and allowing collection of rich narrative accounts of thoughts, feelings and perspectives of the social contexts. The study focused on third year student teachers in Bachelor of education (BAED)

program in one University of Tanzania; these are prepared to become secondary school teachers. In this program and context all BAED students take their teaching practicum twice; 56 days during the end of their first year and second year respectively. Third year student teachers had had the teaching practicum twice already, so back from the field they were expected to have crucial inputs for this study. The participants were selected purposively by snowball technique. The researcher collected data from ten (10) student teachers. The ten participants were not the only significant ones to become sample of this study but their accessibility and experience from their teaching practicum was pivotal. The participants were labeled with pseudonyms as part of ethical consideration in hiding their identification.

Data analysis of this study followed the following flow: First, the transcripts noted through observation and recorded in each interview were read repeatedly to get the details of each. Key concepts from interviewees received special attention in developing concrete study data which were then analysed thematically by; grouping them into themes, reviewing the themes, defining and naming the themes, and finally producing a final report. Some direct quotations were also used where necessary to show the natural sense of responses. Confidentiality and anonymity were highly assured and considered for all the characters mentioned in narratives, all the names of participants were well covered.

4.0. Study findings and discussion

4.1. Reflective practices strategies

The findings of the research on reflective practices helped the researcher to identify different strategies that can be practised in the pre-service training programme, teaching practice and teacher professional development. The strategies for the process of reflection involve gathering of information and analysis of data, which later develop an understanding on the meaning of their career and professional continuing practice (Lawson et al, 2015). The study found that; strategies for development of reflective skills include: writing reflective journals; interaction among the teacher; peer coaching and observation; teacher educator's feedback; mentor teacher feedback; student feedback; using facilitated seminars and discussion; employing action research and developing as teacher-researchers. Student teachers engaged in these practices frequently.

Reflective journals or diaries; the easiest and personal reflection is writing down in a notebook or diary each teaching activity or practice encountered in the classroom, school and community settings. Student teachers as part of their course requirements prepared and used portfolio, in which they accumulated discipline of understanding and reflection of their progress, and through portfolios they had an opportunity to describe about their reactions and feelings.

Collaborative learning; through interaction and collaborative learning, student teachers reflected their practices and decided how to position themselves in teaching. Collaboration with peer members increased the probability of their successfully reflective and more confidence in their professional development. When discussing their experience with peers, they also checked, reframed and broadened their own theories of practice for future uses.

Peer coaching and observation; in this student teachers invited peer members to observe their classes and collect information about the lesson. Some aspects for focus were on; students' classroom attentiveness, participation, interaction and contribution. The information gathered was then discussed and used for reflection of their classes and professional development. One student teacher said:

I invited my colleagues to come and observe my class... for sure it was like a mini-assessment and after their observation they gave me feedback. Mostly, before the university assessors came we practiced peer assessment by our fellow colleagues and had feedback for future use.

Teacher educator's feedback; during assessment, the feedback from the teacher educators also helped the student teachers to reflect upon their lesson in classroom or other teaching and learning activities conducted in the institution and develop in a directed way.

Mentor teacher feedback; mentor teachers are the model to student teacher during the teaching practicum placement, and through good mentor-mentee relationship the mentorship can turn to be lifetime mentoring. The practical kind of a teacher one is a part of the mentorship he or she received. This study's experience proves that the characters of student teachers after TP placement are practically aligning to their mentor teachers' feedback.

Student feedback; the student teachers also asked their students about what was going on and how the classroom was. Students' opinions, reactions and perceptions added a different and valuable perspective to student teachers. One participant said:

Using the experience of university course evaluation forms, I developed class evaluation forms and administered it to students at the end of the teaching practicum. Their valued information I got from them is a feedback that will be used to improve my interaction and teaching in future.

Action research; student teachers also employed action research and through this they were developing as teacher-researchers. They used a progressive problem solving process led by themselves in TP sites in order to understand their practice and improve the way they address issues and solve problems. Through this, student teachers identified common problems such as how to teach the so called "difficult topics" and hypothesised the possible causes and solutions and attempts to apply an action plan. Student teachers recorded what is actually going on in their classrooms, then critically thought, talk, read, asked and observed about the information they have collected and found ways to overcome. Through this student teachers automatically found a significant change in the behaviour and developed an identity as teacher-researchers.

4.2. Teaching practicum reflective practices' and identity construction

Student teachers normally learn more about their professional practice and the actual status and meaning of their career during teaching practicum placements from their mentors in the actual school situation than they do in their university classes (Goh & Matthew, 2011) from which more theoretical part is learnt. During teacher training Tanzanian secondary school student teachers are to attend TP twice within three years of study; 56 days at their end of first and second year respectively (Binde, 2010; Chambulila, 2013). During TP they are exposed to teaching of two subjects of their specialization and assigned duties like; teachers on duty; teachers for sports and games, health care, environmental or discipline teachers, and they take charge of these duties under mentorship of in-service teachers. The student teachers do develop various interpersonal, administrative and leadership skills on the assigned duties. One of the student teacher interviewed had this to say:

At first, before teaching practice I used to know that my major role is just classroom teaching. However, my TP experience extended my understanding as a future teacher. A teacher is a researcher, leader, consultant, counselor, doctor, judge. In general a teacher is charged with a lot of roles and services to students and the community. A teacher is a role model to students and the entire community.

Issues on teaching practicum which have strong connection to student teachers' identity construction include; teaching practicum experience and self efficacy issues, action research, and mentoring during teaching practicum. However, experience reveals that, there have been limited cases and consideration among teacher educators and mentor teachers about teaching practicum reflective practices in association to student teachers' identity construction (Teng, 2017) which is very influential in developing future teachers. Reflective practices during teaching practicum are avenues for student teachers to test and negotiate their prior expectations, beliefs, efficacy or dispositions to the actual teaching situation while mediating and making meaning of their images for consolidation of their future identity. One student teacher shared this:

Teaching practice for me is an influential path way to acquire and review necessary competences in my teaching professional development. It gave me chance to cooperate and interact with experienced teachers which was a valuable opportunity to reflect on my actions in the classroom, school and community and acquire skills, knowledge and attitude on the kind of teacher I want to become. Now I can conceptualize myself who am I and who I want to become in the future. Knowing teaching is not an easy task and needs pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), sound ethics, social and life skills.

Teaching practicum acts as a site for developing qualified teachers with reasonable values and norms, behaviours and competencies. Through effective mentoring during teaching practicum student teachers adhered to the institutional and teachers' ethics, rules and regulations which developed their personal and shared characters and behaving in acceptable manner within their community of practice. This is in line with Sedumedi and Mundalamo's (2014) argument that, through teaching practicum student teachers are able to evaluate their prior expectations, beliefs and values into new understanding of their identity. Mentor teachers for example, instill several kinds of behaviour and characters together with the actual meaning and kind of a teacher one is and wants to be in future.

The kind of a student teacher developed after teaching practicum is more dependent on the characters of the mentor teacher assigned to. Mentorship process for student teachers relies much on interaction pattern with their mentor teachers (Rose Ragins & Kram, 2007) relying much on the nature of their interpersonal relationship. Mentorship and reflective practices have been evidenced to increase teacher retention and collaboration among them. Through mentorship, student teachers got feedback on their progress, developed their confidence and practice. Reflective practices also developed strong self-efficacy among student teachers and interaction as a social process of meaning-making and interpreting of their career. Mentorship also gave room for reflection of daily classroom instructions, relationships and commitment in accomplishing tasks or teaching assignments, and the influence to the present and future beings

Reflective practices help student teachers to negotiate, reflect and develop professional qualities. Positive work and living relationships with welcoming interpersonal interaction pattern developed in teaching practicum fields. A successful TP is the one that student teachers are exposed to supportive teaching practices on learning to teach that help them acquire and develop sound professional and practical skills. Supportive teaching practice site allow student teachers to collaboratively develop their teaching efficacy for their the lifelong teaching practices and lives, it also influences student teachers' beliefs, behaving and works in schools, classrooms and society at large.

How a student teacher develops and become sociable or as teacher-researcher is dependent on three levels or types of pedagogical interaction namely; imitation, approximation and scaffolding models of social interaction (Granott, 1993); developed during mentor-mentee collaboration and interpersonal relationship. Through imitation, student teacher develops own character by observing

and imitating the mentor teacher. In approximation, a mentor teacher guides and treats a mentee as an apprentice and actively engaged in observing and evaluating ones learning to teach. Through scaffolding, the mentor and mentee teacher collaboratively select goals then work and assist one another in achieving the expected outcomes.

For effective teacher identity construction, participants pointed out that; it is vital to consider and work on the challenges that student teachers may encounter in executing reflective practices in their professional development. The following have been said to be among the challenges; time limitation for reflection; poor training on reflection; and poor analytical and reflective skills among student teachers; lack of support from teacher educators and mentor teachers; centralized decision making among teacher educators and mentor teachers; conservative behavior or outdated beliefs of some teacher educators and mentor teachers. Some of the common factors that were evidenced to have influence on reflective practices included; interest or expectations, friendly communication network, trust or lack of trust and appreciation which affect a teacher to have good or bad interaction and behaviour. Also the nature of learning, institutional rules, culture and regulations may have influence on the reflective practices. In efforts to have enhanced reflection, it was suggested setting courses and ground rules in teacher training programs, and collaborative discussion of the common goals to be achieved by counter parts.

5.0. Conclusion and implications

Reflective teaching practices are among the prominent professional development strategies to be adopted for improving the teaching and learning competences and professional identity. They entail a cyclic process, because reflection significantly adapts positive changes and evaluation which determine how and why a student teacher is doing and behaving in a given way. In executing his or her duties after reflection, a student teacher using reflection develops ability to identify and react to new problems encountered as any new experience creates room for new challenges and solutions for problems which bring another room for new cycle of reflection. The role of teacher reflective skills is to enable a teacher deal with needs of learners as part of their professional excelling. To deal and survive in their professional field, the student teachers need to grow and bring changes in in the understanding of their behaviour, relationship, interaction, communication and style of life and teaching practices and career. Reflection is a flash back of experiences that the teachers need to mediate for their “selves” development.

During teaching practice, reflective practices enhance and improve student teachers’ qualities and skills on; lesson planning, teaching and learning to teach, decision making, collaboration, communication, interpersonal relation, and educational problem solving. Therefore, this study has implications for teacher training programs to include reflective practices intensive training modules as part of their course work for refining their practicum and developing deep understanding, critical thinking and skills of “reflective practices” among teacher educators and student teachers for their professional development and identity construction in particular.

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