Examining the Teaching Practicum in Zambia: Strengths, Weaknesses, and Opportunities

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Abstract

The teaching practicum is a critical component of teacher education programs, as it allows pre-service teachers to put into practice the knowledge acquired during their training. This study examined the strengths and weaknesses of the teaching practicum for pre-service primary grades teachers in Zambia. Data was collected through interviews and focus group discussions in three colleges of education and two universities and analyzed thematically. Strengths were identified related to institutional commitment and shared purpose. Gaps included limited preparatory micro-teaching opportunities and weak relationships across teaching practicum stakeholders. We conclude with suggested steps to improve teacher preparation in Zambia.

Introduction

The teaching practicum[1] is the stage of pre-service teacher education in which student teachers are posted in schools to practice teaching and demonstrate the acquired skills and knowledge practically and pedagogically. During this period, the student teachers are mentored, guided, and assessed on the activities they are expected to implement in the classroom (Aglazor, 2017; Kiggundu & Nayimuli, 2009; Mungure, 2016). The teaching practicum is a critical component of a teacher education program as it allows pre-service teachers to have hands-on experiences and practice the knowledge acquired during their training (Downton et al., 2018; Luchembe, 2020; Nguyen & Sheridan, 2016) while strengthening their profile, confidence, and professional identity (Phairee et al., 2008). Therefore, it is critical that teacher training institutions (TTIs) offer a strong teaching practicum that can contribute to the formation of high-quality teachers equipped to respond to the country's educational needs and demands.

Universities and colleges of education (COEs) in Zambia are expected to deliver practical and evidence-based approaches to instruction and graduate teachers with the necessary skills and preparation to teach effectively. The program of studies at these TTIs requires pre-service teachers to complete a six to twelve-week teaching practice, depending on the institution. Some student teachers experience an unsuccessful teaching practicum due to content and methodology knowledge and poor mentoring and monitoring (Manchishi & Mwanza, 2013).

Existing research on the teaching practicum in Zambia is limited. Despite the historical presence of teacher education and teaching practicum in Zambia, few studies exist

[1] We use the terms teaching practicum, school experience, and school attachment interchangeably in this article. While the term practicum is widely used globally, in Zambia it is officially called school experience, and informally often referred to as school attachment.

to conclusively present and discuss critical issues of this exercise such as its purpose, duration, parts of the practicum, student teachers' expectations, daily activities, and behavior of student teachers. Existing studies are focused on the secondary teacher preparation program at one institution (Manchishi & Mwanza, 2013; 2018) and participants are limited to lecturers and administrators (Mutolwa, 2019). Other teaching practicum stakeholders, such as student teachers and mentor teachers, are absent in the existing research from Zambia. To our knowledge, no previous study has examined the teaching practicum in the context of primary grade teacher preparation programs in Zambian TTIs.

In this study, we aimed to understand how the teaching practicum for pre-service primary grade teachers is implemented at TTIs in Zambia. Using qualitative data from interviews and focus group discussions with teacher educators, pre-service teachers and other stakeholders, we identified strengths and pinpointed gaps that hinder TTIs from achieving their goals related to the teaching practicum. By providing empirical insights into these factors, this study contributes to the limited literature on pre-service teacher education, specifically to the body of knowledge related to the teaching practicum in low- and middle-income countries.

The Teaching Practicum

The teaching practicum provides an opportunity for pre-service teachers to exhibit their content knowledge and practice their teaching skills in schools (Yilmaz & Çavaş, 2019; Mendoza, 2004). During the teaching practicum, pre-service teachers are expected to have hands-on teaching experiences in the primary or secondary classroom and the opportunity to

implement their content knowledge and instructional practices with the guidance of a competent teacher and teacher educator (Hamaidi et al., 2014; Marais & Meier, 2004). The teaching practicum is an essential component of a teacher education program (Downton et al., 2018; USAID, 2011; Béteille & Evans, 2019) as it allows the student teachers to experience the school climate and assume multiple roles, including class teacher, learning facilitator, counselor, club matron/patron, and support learners in diverse ways. Akinsola (2014, p.41) stated,

Teaching practice is an important stage in pre-service teachers' teaching lives, for it gives them a good opportunity to practice all that they have learned from the academic, educational and general cultural courses, and they directly face students and live in the school environment with all its internal and external elements.

Teacher education programs are at the core of high-quality teacher preparation (Darling-Hammond, 2014; Luchembe, 2020; Mannathoko, 2013; Mulenga, 2020). The teaching practice exercise should be a meeting point of three key players: the teacher educator (e.g., lecturer, tutor, professor), the host or mentor teacher, and the pre-service teacher, who address the three major components of the teaching practicum: the practice of teaching by taking up the role of a teacher, the experiences that the school environment provides, and the practical aspects of the program of study offered at the TTI (Marais & Meier, 2004; Mungure, 2016; Stones & Morris, 1972). Therefore, the focus of the teaching practicum is to provide a rich and supportive environment where student teachers practice actual teaching, learn from the school milieu, and receive mentoring and coaching from an experienced and competent teacher, and teacher educator.

Building on this understanding of the teaching practicum's purpose, prior research highlights key elements that contribute to effective school-based experiences for pre-service teachers. Darling-Hammond (2006) argued that pre-service institutions should select good quality, well-run schools as the sites for practicum instead of allowing the pre-service student to choose the schools. The teachers who supervise the students at the schools should recognize that their role is to provide mentorship opportunities to pre-service teachers rather than using trainees as replacement teachers during the practicum period. Supervising teachers have a pivotal mentorship role in which they provide ongoing guidance and feedback to the student teachers. This process should foster strong autonomy to the student teachers, with independence growing over time. Pre-service teachers should not complete their practicum without having opportunities to teach independently practicing planning lessons, teaching, assessing students, and evaluating their own performance (Chan, 2019; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Ronfeldt et al., 2020).

A well-organized teaching practicum contributes to the success of a teacher education program in producing quality future teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2014). In addition, Mungure (2016, p. 212) observed,

The performance during teaching practice provides some basis for predicting the future success (efficacy) of the teacher, for example, during teaching practice, the student teachers get a feeling of growth through experience, and they begin linking theory into practice and also engaged, challenged and even empowered.

Therefore, exposing student teachers to practical experiences of being in the school, taking part in school activities, observing in-service teachers, receiving coaching sessions, getting feedback, and practicing diverse coping strategies are essential in the growth of student teachers. "The more time that student teachers spend with quality practicing teachers, the better prepared they might be for a future role as a classroom teacher" (USAID, 2021, p.4).

Furthermore, student teachers need adequate support from their mentors at the university and school levels. The relationship between student teachers and their mentors is integral to the success of the practicum experience in areas such as satisfaction, efficacy, and performance (Banja, 2019; La Paro et al., 2018). It is suggested that the school-level mentors have academic qualifications and experience in the classroom to be considered as reliable sources for mentoring and assessing student teachers' performance (Merç, 2015). Although student teachers may have valuable support from peer teachers, peer feedback is not sufficient for assessment or evaluation. Student teachers need support in areas such as observation of their lessons, giving oral and written feedback, and checking on their punctuality, attendance, and portfolio keeping. Since student teachers tend to replicate the teaching and learning styles learned from their tutors (Akyeampong, 2017), it is critical that tutors who supervise student teachers during their practicum have not only the pedagogical content knowledge in the subject area but also primary school experience. In addition, to promote student teacher professional development, tutors should acknowledge the value of the mentor teacher's experience and knowledge and include him or her in mentoring conversations to promote the development of good teaching practices (Akyeampong, 2017; Windsor et al., 2020) valuing the knowledge of experienced school teachers who are expected to

support pre-service teachers in their learning in real classrooms.

Equally, college and university supervisors must be very careful at all stages of practice teaching: placing, observing, and assessing student teachers. Assessment criteria need to be internalized by university supervisors because differences in expectations and values could discourage student teachers and affect their final grades (Banja, 2019; Merç, 2015). There is evidence suggesting that the lack of common understanding regarding the nature and role of assessment may affect students' experiences of assessment (Allen, 2011). In addition, the absence of sustained formative assessments does not provide students with opportunities for reflection on what they have learned and what they are implementing in their teaching practice (Aras, 2023). Student teachers' experience in the teaching practice can benefit from an assessment system that is not restricted to lesson observations but uses multiple methodologies and influences student motivation and learning (Mäkipää & Ouakrim-Soivio, 2019).

Study context: Zambia

Zambia's education system includes seven years of primary education (grades 1-7), two years of junior secondary school (grades 8 and 9) and three years of senior secondary school (grades 10-12). Primary grade enrollment is nearly universal, but gross secondary enrollment is just 57% (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2026), indicating that significant

efforts will be necessary to reach national and international goals for the system.

Zambia has 10 government-funded teacher education colleges that offer programs to prepare new teachers to teach in primary schools. One of the COEs focuses on training pre-service teachers to teach special education students. To be admitted into Zambian teacher training colleges in 2024, applicants must be between 18 and 35 years of age. Additionally, they are required to hold a Grade 12 Certificate with credits in English for pre-primary programs, and in English, mathematics, and science for primary programs.

The three-year Primary Teachers Diploma (PTD) is the current minimum professional qualification for entering primary grades teaching in Zambia.[2] All these teacher education colleges require their students to complete two teaching practices, called school experiences. The first school experience happens in year 2 and the second in year 3. The current practice of teacher educators in Zambia is to visit student teachers in the field for supervision and assessment once students graduate. Previous research on the school experience found that this visit is generally hurried, and focuses exclusively on grading the student's performance, not on offering feedback or guidance (Manchishi & Mwanza, 2013; Mambwe et al., 2019; Luchembe, 2020). Furthermore, these studies revealed that in some host schools, student teachers do not have adequate mentorship from experienced teachers and heads of departments due to limited numbers of teachers handling multiple classes and the negative attitude of serving teachers toward new pre-service teachers. In the end, student

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[2] Serving teachers may instead have a certificate, a lower-level certification that was the previous minimum qualification.

teachers often thrive or struggle on their own. They prepare lesson plans, weekly forecasts, and records of work that are rarely monitored by experienced teachers in host schools. Student teachers often have to teach, manage, and assess huge classes with limited scaffolding from experienced teachers (Manchishi & Mwanza, 2013; Mambwe et al., 2019; Luchembe, 2020). All these factors contributed to the necessity and design of this study.

In Zambia, teacher education starts with universities and COEs where students acquire content and pedagogical knowledge and complete their training in secondary and primary schools where theoretical knowledge is put into practice (Mambwe et al., 2019; Masumba & Mulenga, 2019; Manchishi & Mwanza, 2013). The teaching practicum serves as a linkage between teacher educators in universities and colleges and the industry in primary and secondary schools. Therefore, faculty staff and teacher education programs attach value to teaching practice in Zambia. Despite the presence of this linkage, studies have shown that clear roles, structures, and responsibilities for all parties involved in teacher education are absent (Manchishi & Mwanza, 2013; Mulenga, 2020; Banja, 2019). Over the years, schools where students go for teaching practicums have raised concerns about the students' ability to use instructional methods effectively in the classroom. Studies have shown that student teachers are well-grounded in content but are not well-prepared in pedagogical knowledge as their instructional skills and knowledge are weak in lesson delivery (Mambwe et al., 2019, Masaiti & Manchishi, 2011). The teaching practicum in Zambia is hampered by limited time allocated for the actual teaching practice at primary or secondary schools (USAID, 2021; Banja & Mulenga, 2019; Manchishi & Mwanza, 2013). "Since teaching

practice is a critical factor in the preparation of student teachers, it is crucial to ensure the provision of opportunities for student teachers to have more practice in teaching" (USAID, 2021, p.4). Providing more practice for student teachers in the field have policy implications that govern the school practicum or school experience at the national and institutional level.

Although Zambian education policy (Ministry of Education, 1977, 1992, 1996) clearly states the aim of producing teachers with content and pedagogical knowledge, it does not provide universities and COEs with guidance on the goals and structure of the teaching practicum. Without policy direction, teacher education institutions devise their own teaching practice models, with unique strengths and challenges. While the evidence on the elements for a strong teaching practice experience is growing, to this date, there is no study aimed to examine the status of the teaching practice across several TTIs in Zambia, with particular emphasis on the PTD Program. Hence, the research questions for this study were:

1. What are the existing strengths of the school experience in Zambia's TTIs?

2. What are the weaknesses of the school experience in Zambia's TTIs?

Methodology and methods

Data collection for this study occurred in May 2021 as part of the U.S. Agency for International Development-funded Transforming Teacher Education Activity in Zambia. One of the goals of this activity is to equip pre-service teachers in COEs and universities with the professional skills necessary to deliver quality literacy instruction in primary school. To understand the current

situation of the teaching practice in Zambia, the research team conducted a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis, which aimed to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the teaching practice, opportunities for improvement, and system-related threats or obstacles that hinder the provision of a successful experience for pre-service teachers.

Study design

A SWOT analysis is a qualitative and descriptive approach useful to evaluate a program and initiate meaningful change for improvement (Orr, 2013). The study adopted a qualitative approach due to its exploratory nature. According to Myers (2015), qualitative research methods help researchers understand people and the social and cultural contexts within which they live based on everyday experiences in their practice. In addition, a qualitative approach as an inductive approach can be effective in determining the deeper meaning of experiences of human beings and in giving a detailed description of the specific phenomena being investigated in terms of the actual conduct of different actors of school experience in the Zambian context.

Site

Zambia is a landlocked country in Southern Africa with a population of approximately 19.5 million, concentrated mainly around Lusaka (The World Bank, 2023). A former British colony, Zambia has seven official languages, which, in addition to English, are the languages of instruction, although many other languages are spoken throughout the country. The Ministry of Education (MOE) oversees the delivery of a standardized national teacher education curriculum in 12 public COEs responsible for training pre-service teachers. Ten of the 12 COEs offer the PTD, a three-year program that includes two teaching practice deployments. In addition, there are six public universities training teachers in various subjects at the bachelor's degree level.

Most institutions allow their students to undertake school experience placements for the entire term, which typically lasts 13 weeks, while some universities place their students for shorter periods, between six and eight weeks. Although all institutions offer primary grades pre-service teacher education programs that are guided by the same government-approved curriculum, they differ in a number of ways. Universities offer four-year Bachelor's degree programs in addition to master's degree and Ph.D. programs. There are differences in the academic qualifications of faculty at the university and college levels as well as of pre-service teacher education students. This variation provides opportunities for comparison across the sites, which represent the range of pre-service teacher preparation programs available in Zambia.

Sample

The data for this study were collected in three COEs and two universities purposively sampled to participate in the study. Solwezi College of Education (Solwezi) is in the North Western Province, and Kitwe College of Education (Kitwe) is in the Copperbelt province, and Zambia Institute of Special Education (ZAMISE) is in Lusaka, the capital of Zambia. Chalimbana University (CHAU) and the University of Zambia are in two different districts within Lusaka Province. We followed a purposeful design to sample participants in each

institution. At each institution, the Principal, Teaching Practice Coordinator, one Teaching Practice supervising lecturer, and pre-service teachers who completed the teaching practice participated in the study. The head teachers and mentor teachers from the demonstration schools attached to the teaching training institution and experienced in mentoring pre-service students during their teaching practice were also included. We sampled officials from the MOE at the national and district levels who have involvement in or oversight of the COEs' teaching practice. Fifty-five subjects participated in the study.

Table 1

Participating stakeholders across teacher training institutions

PARTICIPANTS	UNZA[a]	CHAU[b]	ZAMISE COE	KITWE COE	SOLWEZI COE
DESO	N/A[c]	N/A[c]	N/A[c]	1	1
School Experience Coordinator	1	1	1	1	1
Supervising Lecturer	1	1	1	1	1
Mentor Teacher	4	1	4	4	4
Student Teacher	4	4	4	4	4
Primary School	0	1	0	1	1
MOE Officials	3[d]				

University of Zambia. [b] Chalimbana University. [c] The MOE does not have DESO officials assigned to these institutions. [d] The MOE officials serve all the institutions that participated in the study.

Data Collection

The data for this study were collected in person in May 2021. At each institution, focus groups were conducted with student teachers who had completed the school experience and with primary level teachers who had served as mentors for student teachers during their school experience. Interviews were conducted with each institution's Principal, Teaching Practice Coordinator, and one lecturer who had a supervisory role in school experience. The team interviewed each District Education Standards Officer (DESO) responsible for monitoring and enforcing the education standards in the district where the participating institution is located. The last interviews were conducted with three MOE officials with roles related to the school experience. Before conducting the interviews or the focus group discussions, the research team received informed consent from the participants. The participants received a copy of the questions to facilitate understanding, and prompts and follow-up questions were used as needed. All data collection was conducted in English, recorded, and later transcribed for analysis.

Measures

The research team jointly developed all the tools for data collection based on the aim of the study and after a desk review of the processes for practicum established by the MOE. The team developed two Focus Group Discussion protocols, one for the mentor teachers from the demonstration schools and another for the student teachers. Also, the researchers developed five interview protocols: one for the COE Teaching Practice Coordinator, one for the Supervising lecturer, one interview for the Demonstration School Head Teacher, one for the DESO, and one for the MOE officials.

Each tool included questions to obtain information about challenges and areas of improvement. The tools had questions to capture the processes and procedures related to the practicum, such as lesson observation, post-observation discussion, and assessment. The tools had questions to explore the level of collaboration across all actors. For example, one of the interview questions for the Supervising Lecturer was: How do you engage the knowledge and experience of the mentor teacher when supervising and providing feedback to the student teacher? The protocols designed for the DESO and the MOE officials included system-related questions to gather information about the guidelines established by the MOE for the practicum, implications of the practicum for teachers' certification, and the roles of the MOE and partnerships between the MOE at the different levels to support the practicum. After developing a final draft of the tools, a qualitative research expert and the second author reviewed all the questions for content validity.

Data Analysis

After completing data collection, the team used a thematic analysis approach (Nowell et al., 2017) to analyze the data from the interviews and focus group discussions based on prior categories determined by the research questions. Using a thematic analysis approach allowed us to explore the perceptions of the different stakeholders regarding the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats related to the teaching practicum, as well as get unanticipated insights. Throughout the analysis, the perspectives and concerns of different stakeholders from the data collection sites were considered. The interviews and focus group discussion data were transcribed into an Excel worksheet and then manually coded based on

the four themes. After completing the thematic analysis, the team presented and discussed the results with different stakeholders to strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings.

Results

The primary purpose of this study was to determine the strengths and weaknesses of the teaching practicum implemented at selected universities and COEs in Zambia. The results are organized by research question.

RQ1. What are the existing strengths of the teaching practicum in Zambia's TTIs?

One of the strengths identified at the universities and COEs that participated in this study is related to the **institutional commitment** to engage in the teaching practicum. This commitment is reflected by the lecturers' and administrators' efforts to monitor the student teachers as assigned. The lecturers interviewed reported having a full teaching load each term, sometimes teaching as many as seven courses. Despite their busy schedules, they visit the student teachers at the practice schools and conduct the observations as scheduled by the School Experience Coordinators. One lecturer explained,

I teach music from preprimary to secondary, and the last time I supervised 12 student teachers. Because of the distance, I could only spend one hour observing and providing feedback. I do not have enough time to spend with the students, but I want to help them appreciate how the school functions and help them understand how the learners should be taught in the school.

In addition, to minimize costs, student teachers generally choose to complete their school experience at schools located close to their family homes. Consequently, the lecturers must travel long distances using public transportation to visit the student teachers. Though in many cases the funds provided by the universities and COEs to cover the supervising lecturers' transportation and lodging expenses were reported to be insufficient, lecturers generally fulfilled their supervisory responsibilities.

Another strength identified is related to the **relative uniformity in structure and procedures** of the school experience procedures across the institutions that participated in this study. For example, a structural element common in the five participating institutions is the presence of a School Experience Coordinator tasked to manage and plan the school experience. The School Experience Coordinator is a lecturer who has been appointed to this role in addition to executing their teaching responsibilities. Four of the five Coordinators interviewed for this study reported having a committee that "helps prepare the school experience schedule and plan the student teacher orientation to discuss the purpose and what is expected of them." The School Experience Coordinator, with the support of the committee, schedules the lesson observation visits, assigns the supervising lecturers to the student teachers, and oversees the budget established by the university or COE to cover the supervising lecturers' transportation and lodging expenses.

The School Experience Coordinators reported that all the student teachers should be observed once a term by a supervising lecturer and as many times as possible by a mentor teacher from the primary school. In addition, at the end of the school experience, each student teacher submits a teaching file. In this file, the student teacher compiles documents related to the school experience, such as the class syllabus, schemes of work, weekly forecast, lesson plans, samples of learners' work, and evidence of participation in continuous professional development or after-school activities at the primary school. The student teachers and lecturers reported that all the documents included in the file must be stamped by the Deputy Head Teacher to be accepted for grading.

Having a **shared purpose** for the school experience across the two universities and three COEs is another strength identified in this study. All the student teachers acknowledged the critical purpose of the school experience of providing opportunities to put into practice what they learn in their classes. One of the lecturers reported that "the goal of the school experience is to give the student teachers the opportunity to teach in a real school environment and take part in all the activities happening in the school." The host schools equally share this purpose. The two university administrators who were interviewed highlighted the role of the school experience in providing the institutions with feedback on their courses' pedagogical content. The feedback mentor teachers shared with the supervising lecturers on the student teachers' performance informs the gaps their courses should address. In addition, all the mentor teachers who participated in the focus group discussions reported their desire to participate in university- and COE-facilitated training to better support the student teachers during school experience and consequently, be effective mentor teachers. Without hesitation, all the mentor teachers affirmed that "regardless of the challenges, we would accept another student teacher for school attachment."

RQ2. What are the weaknesses in the school experience in Zambia's TTIs?

One of the gaps identified in this study is that the country's MOE has not provided **guiding resources and materials** specifically for the school experience. The school experience is a required course for the PTD Program at the COEs and for the Bachelor's in Primary Education and Early Childhood Education at the universities. One of the administrators shared that "…we don't have a clearly published course outline on school experience, except the pamphlet of two pages that we developed, which is given to students going on teaching practice." Although two COEs provided evidence of self-developed written guidelines for the student teachers, the five participating institutions reported not having a shared set of written guidelines for student teachers, supervising instructors, and mentor teachers, which might contribute to the variation in the school experience implementation. For example, one COE reported providing the student teachers with opportunities for micro-teaching at the demonstration schools before the school experience. Other COE staff reported that the students do not go to the demonstration school, but instead do peer-teaching at the TTI. Although all the participating institutions have a lesson evaluation form that the supervising lecturer uses when conducting the observations, each form has a different format and measure different constructs. A common thread in the lesson evaluation forms, however, was the lack of instructions for the observer and the absence of a rubric that could help the supervising lecturer rate or grade more objectively and consistently.

Another weakness is related to **time and timing.** Time refers to the length of the school experience and timing to the point at which it happens within the teacher training program. There is variation in the duration across institutions. At the COEs, the school experience runs for the entire 13-week term, while at one of the universities, it is only six weeks. One of the administrators stated, "One of our biggest challenges as a university is that the time allocated to Teaching Practice is not sufficient." The COEs require that the students complete two school experiences, one in the second year (before the Methods class) and the second in the third year. The fact that the students have not been taught instructional strategies *before* reporting for their first school experience results in most student teachers spending a significant amount of the term trying to determine the appropriate activities for the assigned teaching lessons.

The **mentor teacher-student teacher relationship** is critical to a successful school experience. Some student teachers reported being fortunate to have mentor teachers who generously spent time guiding them and sharing materials. Other student teachers were left alone with a group of at least 50 primary learners without the support of a mentor teacher. Two student teachers mentioned that since their host schools had a shortage of teachers, they were assigned to a class that needed a full-time teacher. Another student teacher who was alone in the classroom after the mentor teacher went on maternity leave said: "I went to another teacher to receive feedback on the lesson plans because I was alone in the class." In some cases, the lack of school supervision impacted student teachers' ability to access the primary curricular materials. One student reported that since the teacher was not in the school, "I had to improvise, get creative because I did not have the teacher's guide." Most students who did not have support from a

mentor teacher were only observed by their supervising lecturers during the school experience.

Several participants reported challenges related to maintaining **student teacher motivation** during the school experience. Mentor teachers at one COE noted that "the student teachers' commitment and effort to teach reduces after the supervising lecturer completes the lesson observation." This decline is reflected in increased student teachers' absenteeism, lack of preparation, and in some cases, failure to return to the primary school. Mentor teachers attributed this pattern to the limited frequency of supervision, since the lecturers typically visit the student teachers once during the school experience. They suggested that more frequent observations could help sustain student teachers' motivation and engagement throughout the term.

Although the participating colleges and universities provide opportunities for peer-teaching, there are almost **no opportunities for micro-teaching experiences** before the school experience. Micro-teaching is the practice of teaching other teachers or students to receive feedback on instructional strategies and build confidence (Fischetti et al., 2022). One of the student teachers shared, "We had very limited time to practice as student teachers in the college. We would have loved to be given more time for peer-teaching since micro-teaching does not happen in this institution." From the visits to the institutions, it was concluded that only one college regularly involves the student teachers in micro-teaching. This college has built strong relations with five nearby primary schools, which provide the student teachers with the opportunity to teach a lesson in a classroom for a week. The other institutions engage the student teachers in peer teaching, with some of them providing this experience only on a

voluntary basis. This results in deficiencies in lesson teaching practice at the time of entry into the school experience. Although peer teaching can help build confidence, micro-teaching experiences with children are likely to be more powerful in developing teaching skills and preparing students to benefit from the school experience.

The willingness to establish strong **collaborative relationships** between all the actors involved in the school experience (e.g., primary schools, MOE, universities, COEs) is critical to support the student teachers and ensure they have a successful practicum experience. Yet, we observed only limited efforts to establish a mechanism to provide a coordinated and efficient school experience. Assessing the student teachers is one of the aspects that is affected by this lack of collaboration. For example, one of the mentor teachers shared that "When supervising lecturers come to observe the student teachers, they only end up in the head teacher's office without consulting with the Head of Department and mentor teachers." A mentor teacher who has been continually engaging with a student teacher can certainly provide valuable information to the supervising lecturer. Although the mentor teachers from three institutions reported meeting with the lecturers only "when they come to observe the student," they acknowledged the importance of establishing strategies to promote more communication between the lecturer and the mentor teacher to better support the student teacher.

Due to the absence of cooperative relationships, schools, universities, and colleges are unaware of curriculum changes, new teaching and learning materials, and capacity-building experiences that could benefit mentor teachers, lecturers, pre-service students, and administrators. A strong collaborative

relationship provides opportunities to all those involved to share expectations, effectively troubleshoot, and identify sites that are not providing meaningful school experiences to provide the necessary support. In one of the COEs, all the mentor teachers expressed their desire to be included in the school experience orientation meetings to get to know the student teachers before they report to the primary schools. Their participation in the orientation meetings would allow the mentor teachers to "talk about the do's and don'ts of teaching primary students during the school experience." At the school level, some mentor teachers participate in meetings with the supervising lecturers to discuss the student teacher's performance, while others reported not having any interaction with the lecturer.

Mentoring student teachers is one of the weaknesses identified in this study. One of the contributing factors for an **ineffective mentoring** experience identified during the visits is related to the structure of the school experience. Supervising lecturers are assigned an average of eight student teachers per term to observe, and these student teachers are often completing their school experience in distant locations around the country. Since the supervising lecturer has a limited time to complete the observations, the visits are conducted "in a hurry" and lecturers do not give adequate feedback to student teachers. One student teacher commented "My supervising lecturer just observed my class for 30 minutes, then we discussed for less than five minutes, and he left." Another issue was that some participating primary schools had shortages of teachers. In these cases, student teachers were sometimes assigned to a classroom to teach alone, without supervision. These student teachers did not have a mentor teacher who could provide guidance or helpful feedback

regarding lesson preparation, teaching approaches, and classroom management. One student teacher reported "My mentor teacher just observed my lesson twice and left me alone to teach since he was also busy with other classes." While student teachers in this situation are at least getting some real teaching experience, this is not what the school experience is designed to be within the PTD program, nor what it should be according to the literature on the practicum's role in pre-service teacher education. It is also likely detrimental to the learners in those classrooms.

Finally, the universities and COE reported the **lack of incentives or recognition** for the mentor teachers. Monetary contributions were provided by the universities and COE to the mentor teachers in the past. This practice was discontinued due to financial limitations. Three lecturers reported that some mentor teachers are requesting from student teachers a one-time 100 kwachas (~USD $5.25) payment for their involvement in the school experience. Otherwise, they refuse to mentor the student teachers. However, several mentor teachers and the MOE recognized that capacity building opportunities and certificates of appreciation are incentives that could be offered and would be beneficial for mentor teachers' professional development and advancement. One of the lecturers from a COE expressed that "I also need training as a mentor teacher, especially from the colleges and universities so that we harmonize our thinking." For mentor teachers to be effective, consideration of personal and professional incentives is critical.

Discussion

The teaching practicum is an integral part of the teacher education process that places

student teachers in real schools to interact with learners, experienced teachers, school activities, and anything the school milieu has to offer them. This study was driven by two research questions. The first question aimed to explore the existing strengths of the teaching practicum in Zambia's TTIs, and the other question aimed to examine the weaknesses.

One of the strengths identified was the institutional commitment to implementing the teaching practice. The COE administrators and lecturers, despite their multiple tasks and teaching load, conduct their visits as scheduled to observe the student teachers. Although the lecturers are aware that reimbursement of transportation and lodging expenses may not be processed in a timely manner, they visited the student teachers as planned. We observed that having a committee to support the School Attachment Coordinator plan and schedule the supervising visits appears to contribute to a successful implementation. It is important, however, to acknowledge the need to streamline the timely refund of expenses.

Another finding was related to the relative uniformity in procedures and structure of the teaching practice. The institutions that participated in this study reported following the same calendar and structure when implementing the different elements related to the practicum. For example, all the institutions reported conducting a student orientation in the first week of the practicum term. As a system of TTIs, it is expected to see each college as a separate entity yet all of them as interrelated units following a common calendar and procedures, although facing context-specific issues. Research shows that a well-organized teaching practicum may predict the success of a teacher education program in producing quality future teachers (Béteille & Evans, 2019). The results revealed that the universities and COEs

that participated in the study have a shared purpose. Institutional shared purpose reflects a widely shared commitment to the organization's primary role. It can act as a powerful driver of performance, encourage motivation, and provide a sense of direction to all involved. In the context of the school experience in Zambia, this shared commitment could be leveraged to streamline and strengthen processes to ensure the success of the student teachers. This shared purpose demonstrates that, despite the differences in specific procedures, funding available, number of student teachers, and other factors, there is an institutional connection to the mission of the school experience.

The second research question aimed to explore the weaknesses of the teaching practicum in Zambia's COEs. One of the weaknesses identified from the data was related to the limited presence of guiding resources and materials specifically for implementing the teaching practice. Hence, we suggest that the MOE facilitates the development of a Handbook for the School Experience to guide the planning and implementation of the school experience across the COEs. Ideally, representation of the COE administration and teaching teams should be included in the development of the materials to ensure it responds to the reality in the field. Having adequate and uniform guiding materials that are contextually relevant for all those involved in the practicum will likely contribute to ensuring the provision of a successful experience for the student teachers.

Another weakness is related to time and timing. In this study, time refers to the duration of the teaching practice. One of the four institutions that participated in the study reported that the teaching practice is 6 weeks long while at the other institutions it is 13 weeks long. Evidence from the U.S. showed a positive association between the length of the teaching

practice and new teacher's feelings of preparedness (Ronfeldt et al. 2020). This suggests that extended teaching practice may provide student teachers with more opportunities for instruction, which may contribute to feeling significantly better prepared to teach. We suggest maintaining the 12-13 week length to ensure that the student teachers have enough time to develop the pedagogical skills and have a successful practicum experience. Advance planning by all stakeholders to minimize logistical challenges at the start of the term can help ensure that student teachers benefit from the full school term in the classroom.

Timing refers to the location of the teaching practice within the program of studies. Ideally, student teachers would complete the Teaching Methods course/s before being deployed to the teaching practice. In fact, it seems counterintuitive to expect student teachers to connect the content acquired during the course work and apply instructional strategies if they have not learned that content before doing their teaching practice. The fact that the students have not been taught instructional strategies before reporting for their first teaching practice results in student teachers spending a significant amount of the term figuring out the appropriate activities for the assigned teaching lessons. This inefficient use of time could be avoided if the students are exposed to teaching methodology before going to primary schools for practice. This calls for a revision of the program of studies to ensure that the course sequence responds to the student teachers' content and pedagogical needs and better prepare them prior to being deployed to the teaching practice.

The relationship between the mentor teacher and the student teacher is a foundational element for a successful practicum. The results

from this study revealed that student teachers are rarely assigned to non-supportive mentors who leave them alone in the classroom and do not oversee the student teacher's performance, though a few such cases were observed. Such behavior among mentor teachers could respond to a lack of motivation or ineffective supervision. Since many Zambian teachers are delivering instruction in large size classes with scarce teaching and learning materials, having the responsibility of supervising a student teacher may represent an additional burden. Education officials might consider not only strategies to address the causes of large size classes in Zambia and the availability of instructional materials, but also incentivizing teachers to support student teachers. These incentives can be in the form of points for promotion, certificates of recognition, or events to recognize their contribution to pre-service education. Effective mentorship has been linked to the development of student teacher's professional identity, sense of teaching efficacy, and commitment to teaching (Moulding et al., 2014; Zhao & Zhang, 2017). It is imperative to identify teachers who apply evidence-based pedagogy in the classroom but also have the disposition and commitment to undertake this important mentoring role in order to support the formation of competent student teachers.

This study has several limitations to consider. First, the data were collected from a small number of institutions which limits our ability to generalize the findings across all COEs and universities in Zambia. While one key finding highlights a degree of uniformity in procedures and structure among the participating institutions, including all the COEs may have revealed variations that could influence the results. The study's time constraints did not allow for additional data collection strategies, which could have produced

useful information. For example, it would have been enlightening to observe student teachers while teaching during the school experience as well as the post-observation meetings facilitated by the mentor teachers or the tutors. In future studies, it would be valuable to examine whether the strategies used by the mentor teachers and/or tutors to discuss the observation with the student teacher encourage reflective practice or if the discussion centers exclusively on the notes taken by the observers. Despite these limitations, the results of this study significantly contribute to the understanding of the teaching practicum in COEs in Zambia.

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