

A CRITICAL REFLECTION ON STUDENT TEACHERS' CHALLENGES DURING PRACTICUM PLACEMENTS IN RURAL PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN THE KAVANGO REGIONS OF NAMIBIA

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Abstract

This study examined challenges that student teachers placed in rural schools in the two Kavango regions of Namibia encounter during practicum placements. A sample of 15 participants that consisted of five assessors (teacher educators) who had visited more than one of the selected rural schools and ten student teachers (team leaders) from three teaching School Based Studies (SBS) phases were selected using stratified purposive sampling. Semi-structured interviews complemented by data from students' reflective journals were used during data collection. The data was analysed in conformity with content analysis. The identified challenges were grouped into three categories: student related, institution related and school related challenges. The results of the study revealed that student teachers were inadequately prepared by their training institutions to adapt to different school environments. Furthermore, the findings revealed that student teachers were not fully supported by principals and mentor teachers, and that schools were inadequately resourced. Poor infrastructure and under-qualified temporary teachers were reflected by the outcomes of School-Based Studies (SBS) and the quality of the teacher training programmes. As a result, a partnership model to enhance SBS was developed to provide mitigation strategies on how challenges associated with student practicum placements, could be addressed.

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Introduction

While the Kavango has been divided into two regions (Kavango East and Kavango West) after the 2011 Population and Housing Census (National Planning Commission, 2012), the management of education at regional level is still centralised. More than half (58 percent) of its vast population of 222,500 is in the rural area (National planning Commission, 2012, p. 5). The location of the schools reveal similar patterns. Based on the latest fifteenth school-day statistics data, out of the 276 primary schools in the Kavango regions, 262 are in the rural areas and only 14 are situated in urban areas (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2015). With reference to this scenario, Mukeredzi & Mandrona's (2013) coined the concept of 'rurality' that defines a rural setting as "... a geographical region marked by rough topography and other physical infrastructures ... limited educational ... services ..." (p. 142). This definition fits the context of our study setting because the relation between urban and rural primary schools reflects that only 5% of the primary schools in the Kavango regions are in urban areas, whilst 95% are in rural areas (Ministry of Education & Culture, 2015). This revelation poses a serious challenge to the University of Namibia, Rundu Campus, with regard to the placement of student teachers during SBS, given the fact that rural areas where most schools are, have inadequate resources and poor infrastructure to their avail.

Literature review

In conceptualising teacher education programmes, Hamdan (2015) argues that three aspects form a central focus of these programmes: "*content knowledge* - about the specific discipline; *pedagogical knowledge* - about learning, teaching and assessment in general; and *pedagogical-content knowledge (PCK)* - subject-specific methodology for specific school levels" (p. 3). Consequently, Hamdan concludes that both pedagogical knowledge and PCK are key elements of teacher competence. In addition, field experiences are fundamental to teacher-preparation programmes, as student teachers learn more during field experiences, referred to as teaching practicum/practice (Zulu & Lumadi, 2014).

According to Hamaidi, Ibrahim and Award (2014) practicum is, "... the time that student teachers spend at schools and practice their actual teaching" (p. 196). In an educational setting, Zulu and Lumadi (2014) conceptualise the term 'practicum' as a requirement where students are exposed to a teaching experience in a school or learning institution where they get an opportunity to interact with real learners. This period creates an opportunity for student teachers to apply the theoretical knowledge they have acquired and at the same time enable them to test their knowledge and skills in real life situations (Ogonor & Badmus, 2006; Junus, Hashim, Ishak, & Mohamad, 2009). In essence, teaching practice provides trainees the opportunity to gain "practical and professional experience" (Mukeredzia & Mandrona, 2013, p.142), and to

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employ the various teaching methods in actual classroom under the constant supervision of competent and experienced teachers (Ogonor & Badmus, 2006), supervisors (Walton & Rusznyak, 2013) or seasoned experts (Zulu & Lumadi, 2014).

Depending on the discipline, *practicum* is variously known as teaching practice (TP), field attachment (Purdy and Gibson, 2008), School Based Studies (Tuli, & File 2009), internship or clinical training (Junus, et al., 2009). In this study, the terms *teaching practice*, *practicum*, or *School Based Studies (SBS)* were used interchangeably. Arguably, the importance of teaching practicum cannot be overemphasized, regardless of by what "nomenclatures" it is referred to (Zulu & Lumadi, 2014) because research has demonstrated that it is an integral and core component of teacher education programmes (Marais & Meier, 2004) that strives at preparing effective teachers (Zulu & Lumadi, 2014).

Tuli and File (2009) assert that "... teachers are agents of change in a society as they are central to the delivery as well as quality of education" (p. 38). By implication, novice teachers should be provided with quality training to thoroughly prepare them for the critical task (Junus, et al., 2009). Other researchers strongly advise:

In order to play their role in this changing and challenging world, where knowledge based economy is craving more intellectual property, teachers should be provided with a range of knowledge, skills, attitudes and relevant educational experience that enable them to cope up with the challenge of 21st century and work in this new context (Tuli & File, 2009, p. 39).

Taking Tuli and File's (2009) advice into consideration, the packaging and delivery of the training programme must be very effective, in order to produce quality teachers. In the case of this study, SBS is an integral part of the teacher training at the University of Namibia, and a core component of the institution's teaching programme (University of Namibia Education Prospectus, 2016).

The participants in this programme are those pursuing a four year Bachelor of Education Honours (pre, lower and upper primary phases). During their four year training period, twenty-two weeks are devoted to SBS/TP (University of Namibia Education Prospectus, 2016), and student teachers are placed at different schools. The twenty-two weeks are divided into three phases: Phase one, which focuses on school and classroom observations. In this phase that lasts for four weeks, student teachers are expected to teach at least two lessons in their major subjects. They are also exposed to the realities in the school classroom situation as well as the teaching and learning processes at primary level. In phases two and three, which last for six and twelve weeks respectively, students are expected to teach a prescribed number of lessons.

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In addition, they are expected to acquaint themselves with the available teaching and learning resources, the general school environment, and the existing policy frameworks (school policies, syllabi, schemes of work, teaching/term units, and class register, to mention a few) (University of Namibia, 2013).

According to Ozdemir and Yildirim (2012), students that go through the SBS process get an opportunity to demonstrate the application of their acquired theoretical and professional knowledge. While student teachers expect to learn from experienced teachers who assume responsibilities as mentor teachers (Ferber & Nillas, 2010; Makura & Zireva, 2013; Thomas, 2014), support teachers (Tok, 2010; Zulu & Lumadi, 2014), cooperative teachers (Ferber & Nillas, 2010), the opposite becomes true, and in some cases very little is acquired, if the process is not well-managed.

Mentoring plays a pivotal role, not only in the work place, but also in a learning experience and the assessment of student teachers (Thomas, 2014). As a result, assigning mentors to student teachers placed in rural schools in the Kavango regions, has been a critical component in the success of the SBS (University of Namibia, 2013). It has been observed that mentor teachers offer valuable support in aspects of teaching, learning and administration as they provide professional advice and feedback (Trent, 2013), and classroom support and guidance (Hamaidi, Ibrahim, & Award, 2014). During SBS, these essential aspects enhance teaching and learning (Trent, 2013), and promote effective professional development and socialisation of new teachers (Mukeredzi & Mandrona, 2013).

Research has revealed that experienced teachers can be a great source of strength in sharing beneficial and constructive suggestions that help to develop a sense of self-efficacy and self-confidence among the novice teachers in their teaching practice (Ngang, Hong, & Chanya, 2014). In complementing the efforts of the mentor teachers in schools, the University of Namibia developed an SBS Manual that articulates the role of teacher educators and assessors (University of Namibia, 2013), university supervisors (Tuli & File, 2009; Zulu & Lumadi, 2014) and academic supervisors (Hamaidi, Ibrahim & Award, 2014). These roles include imparting skills on how to conduct student teacher assessment and how to improve classroom instruction (University of Namibia, 2013).

Noteworthy is the fact that, during the practicum, student teachers are expected to reflect in their journal entries positive aspects as well as shortcomings pertaining to the entire SBS process. Although student reflections in most cases underscore positive aspects, of recent student teachers have realised the consequences of downplaying the challenges encountered during SBS. According to Kiggundu and Niyimuli (2009), despite the enriching experience during teaching practice, student teachers may experience challenges which may significantly affect their ability to derive the maximum benefit from the exercise. They

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further draw attention to the fact that "... there are mixed feelings of uncertainty, excitement and anticipation which student teachers may have vis-à-vis their first encounter with a real classroom environment ... such mixed feelings can contribute to the making or breaking of a student teacher" (Kiggundu & Niyamundi, 2009, p. 348).

Contrary, appreciation of these challenges may assist teacher education institutions to derive mitigation measures (Marais & Meier, 2004; Hamaidi, et al., 2014), and consequently help in revamping the teacher training programme so as to enrich the desired outcomes from the teaching profession (Mukeredzi & Mandrona, 2013).

Research has shown that numerous studies have been conducted on a global level on the challenges experienced by student teachers during practicum placements (Marais & Meier, 2004; Kiggundu & Niyamundi, 2009; Junus, et al., 2009; Tuli & File, 2009; Ferber & Nillas, 2010; Mukeredzi & Mandrona, 2013; Thomas, 2014; Ngang, Hong, & Chanya, 2014; Zulu & Lumadi, 2014, Hamaidi, et al., 2014; Hamdan, 2015). Whilst a rich vein of available literature on a global level provided a general background to this study, there is scant literature within the country on student teachers' challenges during practicum placements in schools in the Kavango regions of Namibia. In order to bridge the gap in the existing literature, researchers embarked on an in depth investigation on the subject.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopted Vygotsky's *Social Constructivist Theory* (Fasokun, Katahoire, & Oduaran, 2005), which views "... knowledge construction to occur in social contexts as learning activities are socially and contextually bound" (Mukeredzi & Mandrona, 2013, p. 143). Within this framework, the context is the school, viewed as a community. It is important to note that emphasis is placed on the interaction between the peers and the context/environment. Billet (2008), cited by Mukeredzi and Mandrona (2013, p. 143), upholds that "... learning is an active meaning-making process of transforming understandings in interaction, where the student teacher assumes an active role". In the process of constructing their practical knowledge, prior knowledge and learning from knowledgeable others is critical. In the context of this study, student teachers learn from peers, mentor teachers, other teachers, and lecturers involved in the facilitation of the process during practicum placements. The school environment and availability of teaching and learning resources play an important role in the knowledge-making process, as it complements students' theoretical knowledge. Through socio-constructivist theory, the study sought to critically examine the challenges student teachers experience during SBS/practicum placements, and how these challenges could be mitigated to enhance the knowledge gaining and making process.

Research purpose

The purpose of this study was to critically examine challenges that student teachers placed in *rural* schools in the two Kavango regions of Namibia encountered during practicum placements, and to devise strategies on how these challenges could be mitigated. In this study, we adopted Mukeredzi and Mandrona's (2013, p. 142) definition of "rurality as geographical regions marked by rough topography and other physical infrastructures, low population density, limited educational and economic opportunities and services like water, sanitation, electricity, health care, and recreation".

Research objectives

The study was framed within the following objectives:

- To identify the challenges experienced by student teachers at selected rural schools during practicum placements;
- To explore the student teachers' challenges as perceived by the teacher educators
- To suggest/device strategies how these challenges could be mitigated.

Methodology

Research design

The study adopted a qualitative research design within an interpretive paradigm in order to obtain a deeper understanding of the challenges experienced by the Bachelor of Education (lower and upper primary) student teachers of the University of Namibia during practicum placements at selected rural schools in the Kavango regions. As Denzin and Lincoln (1994, p. 192) explain: Qualitative research "... is multi-method in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter". In the context of this study the interpretive paradigm enhanced the researchers' understanding of the student teachers' experiences in the local settings, the Kavango rural schools.

Sampling

In selecting participants, the study employed stratified purposeful sampling. The purpose of stratified purposeful sampling is 'to capture major variations' even though "a common core ... may also emerge in the analysis" (Patton, 2002, p. 240). Significantly, the logic and power of purposeful sampling involve the selection of "information-rich cases" for in-depth study (Patton, 1990, p. 169; Patton, 2002, p. 46; Suri, 2011, p. 6). Information-rich cases require key informants "from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research, thus, the term *purposeful* sampling" (Patton, 1990, p. 169; Patton, 2002, p. 47). The participants consisted of ten student teachers who were selected on the basis of their role as team leaders at each of the selected schools during SBS phase 1, 2 and 3. These were

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novice student teachers - student teachers who have never taught before. The five teacher educators were selected on the basis that they were key players during practicum placements, and had visited more than one of the selected rural schools. In addition, the selected teacher educators were members of the SBS committee and were well-acquainted with the SBS process.

Instruments

In this study data were gathered through a semi-structured interview guide, which was administered to selected teacher educators and student teachers. Interview data were complemented by data from student teachers' reflective journals. These reflective journals, which served as additional data collection instruments, also required student teachers to propose mitigation strategies to address challenges they encountered during SBS. Reflective journals were used by student teachers to reflect on their SBS experiences on a daily basis, focusing on strengths and shortcomings of the process.

Data analysis

The data collected through interviews from teacher educators and selected student teachers were analysed in conformity with content analysis. The content analysis (Creswell, 2012) enabled the researchers to group responses into categories and themes for easy analysis. In addition, document analysis was used to analyse information from relevant documents, the University Prospectus, the SBS Manual, and feedback from student reflective journals.

Limitations

A possible limitation of the study is that its findings could not be generalised to other student teachers from other training programmes offered on other campuses due to the small sample and the use of purposeful sampling. Notwithstanding this limitation, the exploratory nature of the qualitative research approach provided an in-depth understanding of the challenges the student teachers faced in rural schools in the Kavango regions during practicum placements.

Ethical considerations

All respondents consented to voluntarily participate in the study. Moreover, the respondents were assured of the confidentiality of the information provided, since the collected data was only used for the purpose of the study. To maintain anonymity of the respondents' identity, no actual names and titles were used. Instead, phrases such as respondent 1, 2, and 3, were used in reporting the results of the study.

Results and discussion

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The results of the findings were grouped under three categories: student; institution; and school related challenges. These categories were instrumental in enabling the researchers to draw sound conclusions and recommendations based on the gathered and analysed data.

Student related challenges

This category of challenges deals with the personality, competence and social economic background of the student teachers, and sometimes teacher training institutions have little control over them. Responses to this category of challenges emanated from the interviews with student teachers and teacher educators, complemented by data from student reflective journals.

When asked whether the teacher training has provided them (student teachers) with useful skills, all teacher educators agreed that, *"although teacher training aims at providing students with skills to be able to understand curricula issues, challenges experienced by students are too complex."* They identified the following challenges as topping the list:

- *Lack of confidence*
- *Poor communication skills*
- *Lack of student teachers' accommodation and transport*
- *Inadequate student teachers' funding*
- *Delay in student teachers' reimbursement*
- *Student teachers' absenteeism*
- *Poor support from mentor teachers.*

The majority of the student teachers interviewed indicated that, while they would prefer to be placed in urban schools, a lack of financial resources do not permit them. As a result, they opted to be placed at schools near their home villages where transport and accommodation may not be an issue.

While we do not solely support the placement of students in urban schools only, given the country's population distribution pattern, which is 58 per cent rural and 42 per cent urban, (National Planning Commission, 2012), the majority (262 representing 95 percent) of the schools in the Kavango regions are in the rural areas (Ministry of Education & Culture, 2015).

In commenting on student teachers' absenteeism as a challenge that has hampered student assessments, teacher educators had the following to say: *"Sometimes we go to schools to evaluate the students and they are not there"*. The absence of student teachers from their placement schools has been attributed to several factors, of which some of them could be blamed on the manner the training institution has honoured its responsibility. One of the reasons why student teachers are sometimes absent from school is

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the lack of transport money. The teacher-training curriculum makes provision for students to be reimbursed a certain amount from their SBS tuition fee which could be used by students during their practicum placements (University of Namibia, 2013). Although this amount is meant for student teachers' up-keep, in most cases the reimbursement is received after students have returned from SBS, which serves no purpose.

While absenteeism in all its forms is regarded as a serious misconduct by both the schools and the training institution, this has never been unavoidable due to the lack of proper planning by the training institution.

It should be mentioned that the imperatives of the quality of a teacher training programme include: good subject content, selection of good instructional material and planning (Tok, 2010); adequate infrastructure and facilities in schools (Mukeredzi & Mandrona, 2013); mentor teachers' knowledge of the mentoring process (Jaspers, et al., 2014); student teachers' preparedness; and teacher educators' assessment strategies (Matoti & Odora, 2013).

School and institution related challenges

These challenges emanated from the analysis of the data gathered from the student teachers and teacher educators regarding the SBS or practicum placements. While good preparation and availability of basic infrastructure (electricity, well equipped classrooms, chalk boards, sufficient desks) is imperative for effective teaching and learning to take place (Mukeredzi & Mandrona, 2013), many rural schools in the Kavango regions do not have access to such facilities.

The analysis of the student teachers' reflective journals entries indicated that the common challenge reflected upon by all students was the poor preparation of student teachers for the harsh realities that await them in rural schools. In addition, student teachers complained about how difficult it was to teach learners in temporary structures, without even chalkboards. This state of affairs limited the integration of technology in teaching and learning due to a lack of facilities. Respondent one among the student teachers described the experience as follows:

It is difficult to apply the knowledge one learnt from University in schools, since there are no basic infrastructure such chalkboards, and chalks. One cannot even dream to talk about Overhead Projector, since there is no electricity in some schools while other schools do not have any of these facilities. It seems as if what we learn from University is of no value when we go for SBS.

The implication is that, while student teachers are excited to go to schools, the unexpected experiences are so overwhelming that they find themselves not being well-prepared by the university to adapt to the

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realities in rural schools. Indications are that without proper early preparation, organisation (Ferber & Nillas, 2010), and proper orientation on the availability of teaching resources, infrastructure and the general setup of rural schools, student teachers would always be at the receiving end. Respondent 1 and 2 of the student teachers remarked: *"It seems what we learn at University is divorced from reality, apart from the mastering of the theoretical knowledge, it is difficult to teach in such environments, while teachers and learner expectations are very high"*.

In support of the foregoing argument, Matoti and Dora (2013) claim that "... with increased expectations, precautions must be taken to ensure that pre-service and beginning teachers are adequately prepared for the realities of teaching in the twenty-first century" (p. 127). There is an immense value when theory informs practice in the meaning-making process (Mukeredzi & Mandrona, 2013). Teaching and learning then becomes meaningful because instruction delivery is facilitated by the effective application of the knowledge learnt from the university into a classroom situation.

In the context of the University of Namibia curriculum, student teachers are trained to embrace technology and integrate this in their lessons in order to enhance teaching and learning (University of Namibia, 2016). However, unavailability of such facilities in schools has made it difficult for student teachers to function effectively. Respondent 1 of the teacher educators stated:

The knowledge that our students are equipped with is not put to good use as most of the schools lack basic teaching and learning facilities. Therefore, student teachers resort to alternative methods not emphasised or recommended during their training, for instance reading content from the textbook to students.

Reflecting on the foregoing observation, there seems to be a mismatch between the modern trends in teacher training institutions and the practices in rural schools. As a result, students felt helpless when they were told to be creative and learn to improvise because they did not understand how improvisation could help them overcome the numerous challenges that relate to the lack of infrastructure and shortage of basic facilities to support the use of information technology in rural schools. As a result, the general observation from student teachers was that they were placed in situations where they were forced to either 'sink or swim'.

Compounding the situation, was that the mentor teachers who were given responsibility to guide student teachers, were found not to be very helpful or supportive. Evidence from student teachers on the roles of mentor teachers strongly collaborated with the views of respondent 2 of the teacher educators, who claimed:

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Student teachers are not fully supported by their mentor teachers due to various reasons. Some of them do not understand their roles as mentors while others are just not qualified to handle such responsibilities. There are a number of un- and under qualified teachers who feel insecure to support student teachers on SBS. Such experiences are polarising to students, for lack of a better expression.

This observation is not unique to the rural primary schools in Namibia, as Jaspers, Meijer, Prins and Wubels (2014, p. 114), in their study on *Mentor Teachers: Their Perceived Possibilities and Challenges as Mentor and Teacher*, suggested: "... Mentor Teachers (MTs) merely facilitate training of Student Teachers (STs) by giving them their class and letting them teach as much as possible ... that MTs often think that mentoring means nothing more than providing a place for STs to practise their teaching and offering a little support".

It should be understood that the inability of mentor teachers to provide needed support to student teachers on SBS was based on various factors, including, failure to understand their roles and lack of mentoring knowledge (Jaspers, et al., 2014) which needs to be addressed. According to Mukeredzi & Mandrona (2013), if plights of rural school teachers are not addressed, student teachers' experiences during SBS can turn into a vicious cycle.

Another challenge expressed by student teachers and teacher educators was the inability of students to use (write on) the chalkboard, given the fact that the oldest and readily available resources in rural schools is the chalkboard. The advent of modern technology seems to supersede the use and availability of the chalkboards at tertiary institutions. Respondent 4, among the teacher educators remarked, "*At University students are not often given the opportunity to practice their writing skills on the chalkboard as emphasis is placed on the use of modern technology such as projectors, smart boards, white boards*", an opinion that Matoti and Odora (2013) concurred with. Respondent 6, among student teachers observed that, "*even good SBS grades depend on students' ability to use these modern gadgets*". Whilst Matoti and Odora (2013) agree that the use of projectors in rural schools is a very rare phenomenon, this makes student teachers' assessment a complex issue, since the use of new technology contributes to student grades. Implication that poor grades may not constitute a true reflection of the student teachers' inability to deliver classroom instruction, but rather the failure to do so without being assisted by new technology.

From the perspective of the teacher educators, placement of students in schools has also been a critical challenge. The findings show that the University of Namibia has very little control on the placement process, given the capacity that schools are able and/or willing to accommodate. Through interviews with

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teacher educators it was revealed that some schools are willing to accommodate more students, despite their capacity to absorb them, while others have restricted numbers. Respondent 4, among the teacher educators claimed that, *"placement is a challenge as most of the student teachers opt for urban schools but these schools cannot accommodate all the students, so the rest are compelled to do their SBS in rural areas"*.

It is important to stress that while the University has tried to fulfill its curricula requirements, of placing students in urban and rural schools that have at least basic facilities there are shortcomings in the process. There are circumstances beyond the control of the institution compelling it to place students at rural schools which they do not prefer due to lack of basic facilities. The training institution's aim is to prepare students to adopt any working environment given the fact that 95 per cent of schools in the Kavango regions are in the rural areas. Matoti and Odora (2013) caution that poorly chosen placements result in feelings of inadequacy, low teacher efficacy, and an unfavourable attitude towards teaching.

There are other variables that have posed challenges in the planning and implementation of the SBS in the Kavango regions. We discovered that the school context in which teachers and student teachers operate can result in gaps in the quality of teacher education offered by teacher training institutions, bearing in mind that practicum is the most important and relevant part of the pre-service teacher education programme (Tuli & File, 2009). These variables are highlighted below:

First, teacher educators were more concerned about logistical issues such as, transport and time spent in visiting placement schools. The majority of the respondents among the teacher educators agree with the sentiment that *"... visits take up a lot of our teaching time since we have to leave our students on campus for days and even weeks to evaluate students in different regions. There are times when we are frustrated because transport is just not availed on time"*.

In support of the respondents' observations, Fraser, Killen, and Nieman (2005) assert that reluctance of teacher educators to visit student teachers in rural schools is mainly due to the remoteness of the schools, the time and cost involved.

It goes without saying that, although teacher training institutions have the mandate to adequately prepare students to cope in the rural settings, the apparent lack of basic facilities in these schools have prompted teacher training institutions to rethink developing partnerships with key stakeholders (Du Plessis, 2013). This implies that stakeholders in the partnership will understand their roles in relation to student expectations and will also build a strong network to support student teachers.

In addressing specific questions on school related challenges, consideration was given to the challenges associated with the school settings, for example, school management, school environment, placements of student teachers in schools, qualification of teachers, availability of resources, and support from mentor teachers. It was revealed that, even in those schools where students are accepted, there were challenges that student teachers and teacher educators observed, for example, school principals' and teachers' unwelcoming behaviour and their lack of cooperation; lack of support and supervision from mentor teachers; low teacher qualification levels resulting in poor teaching; teachers' lack of understanding of the syllabi; lack of resources in schools; teacher absenteeism; lack of training on mentoring, and a shortage of teachers.

While we acknowledge that these overwhelming challenges could result in severe long-lasting negative impacts on the teaching profession of student teachers, these are the realities that any teacher training institution should adequately prepare student teachers to face. Although these challenges seem to be insurmountable, Trent (2012) affirms that these could be reduced through collaborative endeavours.

It should be emphasised that the success of a teacher-training programme also depends on proper coordination between the key stakeholders, with schools being the critical role players in the path towards success. Trent (2010) advises that a lack of principals' and mentor teachers' understanding of their roles calls for regular training workshops for them in order to attain shared understandings of all stakeholders in this exercise. Despite the fact that the SBS Manual and written communications are sent to schools, mentor teachers and principals do not fully understand the roles they are expected to play. As a result, student teachers are sometimes given roles which do not correlate with their SBS requirements. Consequently, phase 1, in which student teachers are expected to observe their mentor teachers and learn from them, often turns into the actual teaching exercise. A reflection in one of the phase 1 student teachers journal entries indicated the following sentiments: *"I was given the entire teaching load to teach with little or no assistant on how I go about handling the subject"*. Most rural schools treat these student teachers as relief teachers due to the shortage of teachers, placing them in a classroom before they are provided with an opportunity to observe the actual teaching process. These actions taken by some schools defeat the imperatives of the of the practicum placements, which is summarised as follows:

... to provide opportunities for student teachers to integrate theory and practice and work collaboratively with and learn from the teachers; to prepare a competent, effective and efficient teacher; and to promote ongoing professional development and induction into the teaching profession (Matoti & Odora, 2013, p. 140).

From the findings of the study, it is reasonable to argue that, apart from Kiggundu and Nayimuli's (2009) claim that such experiences could lead to panic and lack of self-confidence, the quality of teachers produced is compromised. Further evidence shows that skipping the observation phase can have negative repercussions in the student teachers' teaching careers. In some instances, student teachers that are in phases two and three (who are required to teach) even end up taking over the mentor teachers' entire teaching loads, instead of the proportional number of lessons they are required to teach.

Another school related challenge that deserves attention is the *lack of the resources* in rural schools when compared to urban schools. While the consequences of this are self-evident, there are serious discrepancies in competency between the two groups of students teachers. We found that the support received by student teachers placed in rural schools (where there are high numbers of temporary teachers – though mostly under-qualified) is very low. In support of the findings, Mukeredzi and Mandrona (2013) remind that "... rural school communities remain plagued by significant challenges related in part to, lack of qualified teachers and reduced access to resources". As a result, placement of student teachers under the care of under-qualified teachers poses serious challenges to the purpose of SBS.

The absence of clear guidelines stipulating the number of students each school should admit for SBS is a further weakness that has negative consequences to both the schools and the student teachers. While some school principals use the loophole as an excuse to deny students access to their schools, others take few, or more than they could mentor, and use them as relief teachers. We observed that, in both cases, the quality of teaching and learning, and the practical knowledge student teachers should acquire, were adversely affected (Matoti & Odora, 2013). Given the complexity of these issues, Mukeredzi and Mandrona (2013) advise teacher training institutions (including the University of Namibia) to pay attention to the classrooms or different school contexts in which student teachers operate. In addition, teacher training institutions should revise their policies to provide clear guidance on the roles of the key stakeholders (training institutions, schools and student teachers).

Strategies to address student teachers' challenges during SBS/Practicum placements

One of the major challenges revealed in this study, is the lack of collaboration and partnership between the schools (and the Ministry of Education and Culture), training institution (University of Namibia), and communities. While the University of Namibia is tasked with the mandate to train both primary and secondary school teachers as per the amended *University of Namibia Act No. 18 of 1992* (Government of the Republic of Namibia, 1992), it seems the Ministry of Education and Culture has not realised the need for resourcing schools to create a conducive environment for effective practicum for student teachers to be

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realised. The findings further revealed that, whilst the training institution has an SBS Manual that outlines the roles of mentor teachers it is difficult for the training institution to enforce these roles without the buy-in from schools and the Ministry of Education and Culture. Given these complexities, the partnership model below (Fig. 1) with the aim to enhance SBS that outlines strategies under which partnerships could be conceptualized, and challenges associated to student practicum placement could be mitigated, has been develop and proposed by the researchers.

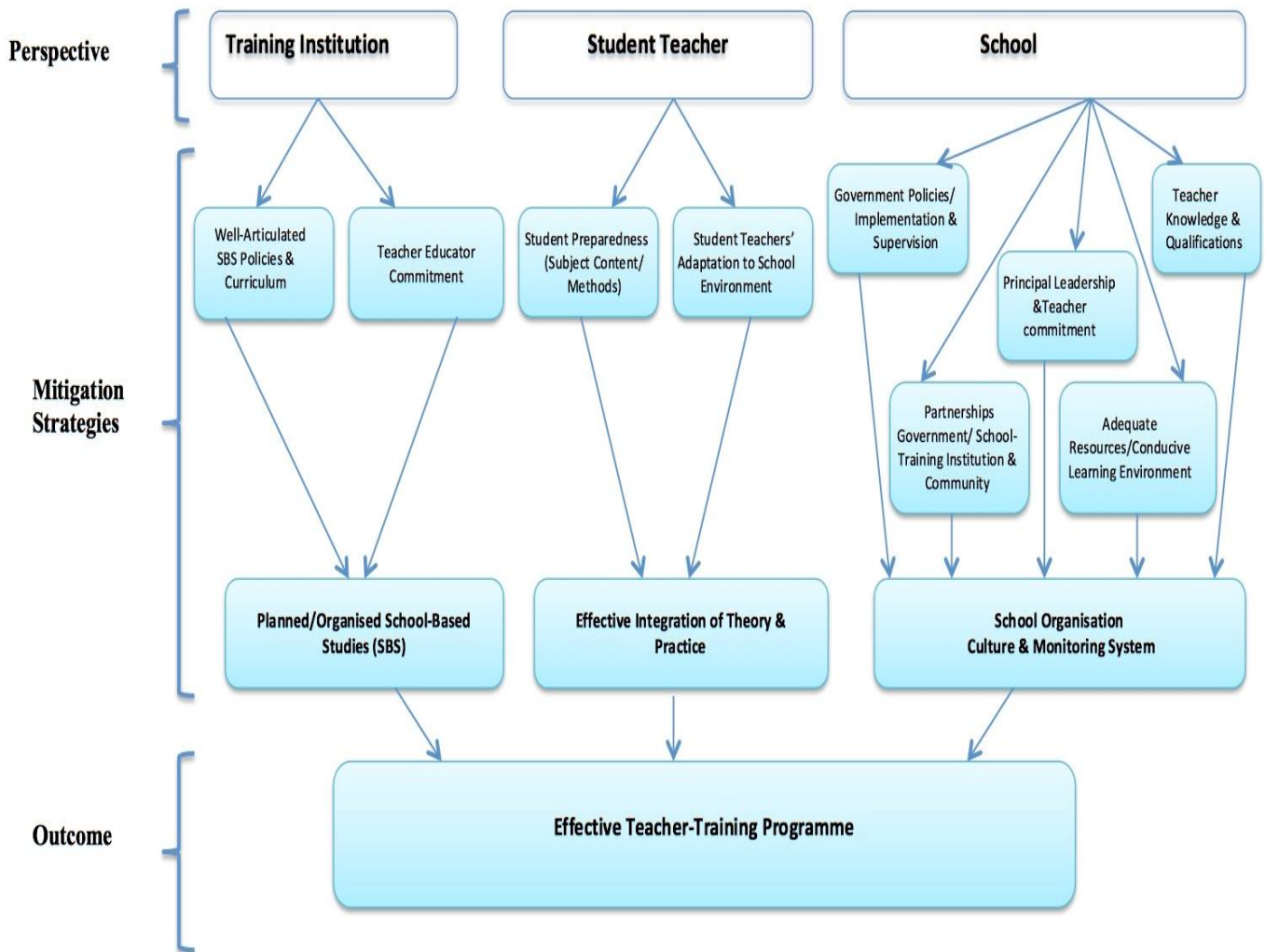


Fig.1 Partnership Model to Enhance School-Based Studies (SBS)

Source: Model developed by the authors

The partnership model (Fig. 1) groups the mitigation strategies into three perspectives: The Training Institution; Schools, and Student Teachers. In the first perspective ‘*Training Institution*’, it is demonstrated that organised and planned school-based studies require well-articulated SBS policies and curricula. The policies should clearly outline the roles of the training institution, student teachers, mentor teachers and schools, including the Ministry of Education and Culture. The second perspective, the ‘*Student Teacher*’, articulates that for effective integration of theory and practice, student teachers are required to demonstrate preparedness, knowledge of the subject content, and teaching methods and adaptation to the school environment.

The third perspective, the '*School*', illustrates that to have a proper school organisation culture, and a monitoring system, strategies such as development and policies on teacher mentoring and school supervision; principal leadership and teacher commitment; teachers' knowledge and qualifications; adequate resources, infrastructure and creation of a conducive environment; and partnership between the Ministry of Education and Culture, training Institution and community should be well-coordinated and enhanced.

It is worth noting that any shortcoming in one of the perspectives may poorly affect SBS planning and organisation. As a result, the intended outcome 'Effective Teacher Training' may not be achieved. Matoti and Odora (2013) have advised that the purpose of SBS is to provide opportunities for student teachers to integrate theory and practice. For this aim to be realised, they further argue that "... working collaboratively with and learn from the teachers; to prepare a competent, effective and efficient teacher" (p. 140) are ingredients of an effective teacher training programme.

Conclusion and Recommendation

In our attempts to critically reflect on the challenges student teachers experience during practicum placements at rural primary schools in the Kavango regions, three categories were identified: student, school, and institutional challenges. It should be stressed from the onset that this study has made significant contribution to knowledge, as its findings are congruent with wider debates/literature on the experiences of student teachers during their teaching practice. Pertinently, the study presented significant information on the experiences of student teachers within an under-researched area in the rural primary schools in the Kavango regions of Namibia.

The findings of the study revealed that while rural schools lacked proper infrastructure, material resources and facilities, they are also populated by under qualified teachers. Due to lack of adequate space in fairly resourced urban primary schools the majority of student teachers are placed in under-resourced primary schools. The adverse effect of such a consequence is that there is very minimal integration of theory and practice (Matoti & Odora, 2013), which compromises the quality of teacher training and professional development.

While the training institution has a School Based Studies manual that guides the practicum placement process, a lack of clear guidelines on the number of student teachers that should be placed or/and a school should admit, coupled with the lack mentor teachers' and principals' knowledge of their roles, have adversely affected practicum placements. In addition, planning, organisation, and a lack of cooperation and collaboration between key stakeholders, including the lack of the training institution's understanding of the school contexts and environment (Mukerezi & Mandrona, 2013), have limited the training institution's

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capacity to effectively guide the practicum placement process. Furthermore, the findings have also revealed that most of the school related challenges, such as the lack of resources, the lack of qualified teachers, and policies are directly linked to the Ministry of Education and Culture, and require critical attention.

In the light of the various challenges experienced by student teachers during SBS, this study makes one critical recommendation: We recommend that the proposed partnership model to enhance SBS that highlighted the three perspectives on how to address challenges experienced by student teachers, should be adopted by the training institution, the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture, and schools. These perspectives, among others, proposed the need for well-articulated policy frameworks to guide SBS from the training institution's, school's, and student teachers' perspective.

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