

**Teaching Practice Experiences in Inclusive Classrooms: The Voices of
University of Botswana Special Education Student Teachers**

Boitumelo Mangope

University of Botswana

Mpho Otukile-Mongwaketse

University of Botswana

Baamphatlha Dinama

University of Botswana

Ahmed Bawa Kuyini

University of New England, Australia

United Arab Emirates University Al Ain, UAE

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Abstract

Teaching practice (TP) remains one critical means of exposing student teachers to actual classroom experiences with a view to equip them with the needed pedagogical skills. The voice of the student teachers is vital in order to understand their experiences in the field as a way to ensure better outcomes for current and future teacher trainees. Using a qualitative research methodology, this study explored the TP experiences of student teachers enrolled in the Special Education program at the University of Botswana. Individual and focus groups interviews were conducted with third and fourth year student teachers on TP in inclusive classrooms. The data was analysed using content analysis. The findings indicated that teaching learners with special educational needs (SENs) was challenging for the student teachers. They (participants) expressed both positive and negative experiences of teaching practice relating to knowledge and skills, mentor relationship and how TP is organised. A key recommendation is that teacher trainers should ensure that student teachers being prepared for entry into the teaching profession are exposed to positive inclusive experiences and equipped with relevant pedagogical skills around inclusive education as they progress through the special education program.

Key words: Botswana, inclusive education, teaching practice, student teachers' experiences

Introduction

The government of Botswana has adopted inclusive education as a strategy to make education accessible to all including children with special needs. Historically, the education of learners with special needs (SENS) in Botswana officially started in segregated special school settings in the 1960s, just after independence (Abosi, 2000; Dart, 2006). These schools were built and operated mainly by non-governmental organizations and not the Government of Botswana, which preferred the mainstreaming approach to the education of learners with SENS (Matale, 2002). The idea of mainstreaming was adopted in the National Education Policy, 1977 (Government of Botswana, 1977), and this allowed students with special needs to attend general schools but without any necessary supports. Following the endorsement of the Salamanca Statement of 1994, the Government of Botswana enacted several key policies around national development and the education of students with SENS, including advocating for inclusion as an endeavour to increase educational services for such learners.

The current inclusive education policy was passed in 2011. It defines inclusion as education that “includes and meets the needs of all, including those with special educational needs, whatever their gender, life circumstances, health, disability, stage of development, capacity to learn, level of achievement, financial or any other circumstance” (Ministry of Education & Skills Development, 2011, p.4). The aim is to ensure that no child is excluded from education. The policy outlines several commitments seeking to enhance the access to education for children and adults from disadvantaged and vulnerable backgrounds. The 10 commitments in summary are that the Government of Botswana through the inclusive education policy commits to ensuring that all learners including those who have never been to school before, those who dropped out and those with special needs and /or risk of failure, will be encouraged and supported to get back to school and access education. The government

further commits that the vocational training mechanisms will be made relevant and responsive to the children's needs and that teachers' skills will also be strengthened for effective teaching of diverse learners. Finally, access to schools will be strengthened through resource intensification that will make school environments user-friendly (e.g. via providing access ramps and paving school grounds) to all learners.

Currently, there are a number of learners with special educational needs in the regular schools (Government of Botswana, 2017). The success of this initiative depends on a number of factors; one of which is the teachers' knowledge and pedagogical skills in teaching learners with special educational needs and exposure to positive practices of inclusion. The way student teachers experience knowledge and skill acquisition at the University lecture rooms and also during teaching practice is an essential part of understanding the potential success of providing effective teaching to learners with special educational needs. This study explored teachers' experiences of teaching in inclusive classrooms in Botswana.

Teaching Practice

Teaching Practice (TP) is an integral component of teacher training and remains one critical means of exposing student teachers to actual classroom experiences with a view to equipping them with needed pedagogical skills. It entails the inculcation of professional practice and conduct (Ambrosetti & Dekkers, 2010), provides an opportunity to beginning teachers to become socialized into the teaching profession (Major & Tiro, 2012) and it is a crucial time when practising teachers get the opportunity to develop their professional competencies in preparation for full time practice. Ngwaru (2013) noted that TP as a socializing experience into the teaching profession involves rigorous professional negotiation that leads to the development of confidence and subsequently learning satisfaction. During the TP period, teacher educators also get the opportunity to gauge and evaluate the efficacy of

their training programs and to identify areas requiring modifications. In relation to building teachers' capacity for implementing inclusive education, reflections on student-teacher teaching experiences are crucial to our understanding of the effectiveness of the current inclusive teaching practice arrangements and how to improve practice and programme effectiveness.

One of the components of training that is receiving close attention currently both globally and locally is teaching in inclusive classrooms. There is an increase in numbers of diverse learners who are entering the regular education classrooms in Botswana, thus compelling the regular education teachers to expand their understanding and implementation of curriculum and pedagogy (Otukile–Mongwaketse, Mangope, & Kuyini, 2016) beyond the traditional known limits. Despite the growing presence of learners with special educational needs in Botswana schools, teachers still experience limited support in terms of resources and exposure to the right models of inclusion practices (Mangope & Mukhopadhyay, 2015). Although strategies to promote inclusion cannot be separated from other dimensions of teachers' pedagogy, the inclusion of learners with special educational needs has consistently proven to be the one that causes concern to most pre-service and in-service teachers (Golmic & Hansen, 2012; Kuyini & Mangope, 2011; Mukhopadhyay, 2013; Mukhopadhyay, 2009).

The literature on teacher preparedness to teach learners with special needs in Botswana suggests that many regular education teachers feel unprepared and fearful to work with learners with special needs in the regular classrooms. As a result, some teachers in Botswana display frustration, anger, and negative attitudes toward inclusive education (Chhabra, Srivastava & Srivastava, 2009; Habulezi, Molao, Mphuting & Kebotlositse, 2016). Equally, novice teachers have reported that their undergraduate education programs do not sufficiently prepare them to respond to the demands of teaching in classrooms with an increased number of learners with special needs (Kuyini & Mangope, 2011; Mangope,

Mannathoko & Kuyini, 2013) especially due to inadequate classroom management and appropriate pedagogical skills which they would not have mastered during their practicum experiences.

Some studies (e.g. in Australia, Canada and Netherlands) also suggest that integrating theory and practice within pre-service teacher education programs has long been identified as problematic (e.g. Korthagen, Loughran & Russell, 2006; Lenz-Taguchi 2010). Some educators and scholars believe that unlike in other professions, pre-service teachers tend to bring to their preparation firm attitudes and beliefs about what comprises good teaching and good teachers from their own prior experiences as school students (Sirotnik, 2001). These types of predispositions have been shown to exert a much stronger socialising influence on pre-service teachers than either their teacher education program or subsequent socialisation into the workplace (Zeichner & Gore 1990).

Accordingly, one of the biggest challenges confronting teacher educators is how to impart theoretical understandings that might go some way, at least, in altering the deeply-held, acculturated views of teaching and learning that prospective teachers bring to their pre-service education (Segall, 2002). In order to meet contemporary challenges facing schools, teacher training institutions should provide a comprehensive and supportive education; one which includes teaching practice opportunities that allow student teachers to ground knowledge and integrate theory with practice for all learners. Such opportunities should provide the basis for predicting the future success of a teacher's practice as well as gauge the success of the training institution's program.

Teaching Practice Program at the University of Botswana

Teaching practice (TP) is an indispensable component of a teacher training program and each teacher training institution has a unique way of providing opportunities for students

to practice and refine their teaching skills, including those skills that focus on learners with special needs. The Teaching practice program in the Faculty of Education at the University of Botswana has evolved over the years. The main aim of teaching practice is to enhance student teacher quality through strengthening their pedagogical and classroom management skills. In order for a student to qualify as a special education teacher at the University of Botswana, the student has to complete a 4-year undergraduate study programme related to teaching. The study programme offers courses in Humanities and Science programmes (languages, mathematics and other related fields) and a teaching practice methodology course. However, this teaching practice methodology course is not offered in the special education program and various lecturers are expected to infuse the theoretical concepts of TP into their courses, in order to support the development of teaching proficiency for special education students.

The teaching practicum is organised in one block of seven weeks usually during the months of June and July. Students are assigned to various schools that have different systems, among which are inclusion, integration and special schools, to perform classroom observations and also teach learners in their classrooms. During the first week the student teachers observe their mentor teachers in a number of lessons, while they also prepare their portfolios. It is also during this time that they may be visited by some of their lecturers to check on the prospects and challenges encountered.

During observation periods the student teachers fill in a variety of observation sheets, which they would have obtained from the University prior to being posted to schools. Observation sheets contain classroom observation tasks, the aim of which is to raise the trainees' awareness about some aspects of the teaching and learning processes. The school experience portfolio file also has assessment form(s) which require(s) that a student-teacher provides names of learners, classes taught, class timetables, syllabi, dates of school

experience and visits by lecturers, and other class information /needed requirements. This information is required /compiled in the first week.

During the second week until the last week, the focus is mainly on the portfolio preparation and actual teaching experiences of the student teachers with the guidance of the mentor teachers that are based in schools and the University lecturers. Student teachers are expected to identify in their classes about three to four learners with some special educational needs and are required to develop some Individualized Educational Programs (IEPs) for these identified learners. This usually includes a list of the names of learners indicating date of birth, gender, primary language, family circumstances or background information, timelines, strengths and weaknesses of the learners, strategies to use, curriculum, classroom, material, and assessment modifications, and how a learner is going to be included in the regular classroom during the teaching and learning processes.

The third section, which focuses on planning, preparation and assessment, requires that students provide a grid of daily teaching and co-curricular involvement. They also prepare one or two lesson plans per day depending on the demands of the timetable and the classes allocated. The student teacher is required to explain how learners will be accommodated in the planned lesson. Also required is the evaluation of lesson plans and teaching as well as the provision of evidence in relation to their involvement in co-curricular activities. The student teacher is also required to reflect critically on learning gained and all the activities he or she would have been involved in.

The final section requires a summative self-evaluation where students-teachers are expected to provide a reflection of their own teaching strengths, challenges and areas for further improvement. They are also expected to comment on the influences of educational theories that they would have learnt at the University, on their own practice. The journal has to provide evidence and critical reflection about learning in terms of hopes, fears,

expectations, observations, new learning and experiences, teaching ideas, links between theory and practice and growth and development. When planning, the trainees follow the model of the planning process that is suggested by the University lecturers. The lecturers visit /assess students during their practical teaching period. However, owing to geographical distance, time constraints and the sheer number of students registered for teaching practice, lecturers are not able to visit/assess all the students. Mentor teachers assess students who cannot be assessed by the University of Botswana lecturers; therefore the University relies on their commitment, efficiency and co-operation in that regard.

Teachers' Experiences of Teaching Practice

Teacher acceptance or resistance to inclusion has been attributed to the positive or negative experiences they face when attempting to implement inclusive education practice (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Marais & Meir, 2008; Muwana, 2012). Thus, teachers who experience positive results in the inclusion of learners with special needs are more inclined to include such learners and those who experience negative results are less likely to be inclined to include such learners (Kuyini & Mangope, 2011; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2010). The literature on teaching practice shows a diversity of experiences. In general, many student teachers often ask for more time in the teaching practice context to learn and ground their skills. According to studies in Canada, Tanzania and South Africa, some student teachers experience a mix of positiveness, anxiety and stress, and yet others experience inadequate supervision during practicum (Lewin, Samuel, & Sayed 2003; Msangya, Mkoma, & Yihuan, 2016; Schulz, 2005; Wagenaar, 2005).

In a study of student teachers' experiences of teaching practice in South Africa, Wagenaar (2005) reported that "... all of the student teachers experienced practice teaching as being mainly a positive experience, although all the participants had experienced anxiety in

some issues around maintaining discipline. Practice teaching played an important part in their development as teachers by providing a context wherein they could merge theory and practice; find their own teaching and management styles...” (p.1). A Canadian study found that some student teachers experienced some form of school resistance in their practicum settings, these experiences made them feel vulnerable as new teachers, and being overwhelmed by the complex demands of teaching (Schulz, 2005).

In relation to supervision, an important aspect of the student teachers’ experience of teaching practice is their relationships with mentors. Many studies report cordial relationships between student teachers and mentors (e.g. Preston, Walker & Ralph, 2015). However, some teachers often feel let down by mentors (Bukari & Kuyini, 2014). In their South African study Kiggundu and Nayimuli (2009) reported that while student teachers indicated a supportive relationship with the mentors, some were dissatisfied with the relationship between mentors and student teachers, mainly due to being overloaded or not being given enough opportunities to teach /engage with students.

Since novice teachers have reported that their undergraduate education programs do not sufficiently prepare them to respond to the demands of teaching in classrooms (Kuyini & Mangope, 2011; Mangope, et al., 2013) a strong practicum component is essential in teacher preparation (Major & Tiro, 2012). Special education programs and teacher preparation programs need to take into consideration student teachers’ diverse needs, by emphasising inclusive pedagogical classroom practices and management skills in course content and during teaching practice.

The Issue of Study

At the University of Botswana, the current arrangement whereby the teaching methodology is integrated into different courses rather than a stand-alone course appears to frustrate teacher-trainees in the special education stream. This is because the programs fail to comprehensively prepare them for the diverse learners that they are going to meet in inclusive classrooms (Mangope, et al., 2013; Mukhopadhyay, Molosiwa & Moswela, 2009). A study conducted by Mukhopadhyay et al. (2009), of student teachers pursuing the B. Ed - Special Education program at the University of Botswana, concluded that student teachers felt that they needed more exposure to all types of special needs in order to effectively meet the challenges of the inclusive classrooms. Due to the existing structure of the B.Ed. – Special Education program, many student teachers become discouraged and disillusioned with their profession (Mangope, et al., 2013) as well as being uncomfortable with learners with special educational needs (Kuyini & Desai, 2008). It is also clear from the literature that the introduction of inclusive education in the midst of rapidly increasing teacher workload has placed a heavy burden of responsibility on teachers and discharging this type of inclusive responsibility may be a huge challenge to student-teachers who lack experience; this may lead to negative attitudes during teaching practice periods.

The University of Botswana teacher education program has endeavoured to support students on teaching practice in various inclusive settings as outlined earlier. However, as Major and Tiro (2012) assert, an ongoing concern of student teacher educators is how to improve the effectiveness of student teaching at the University of Botswana. Due to increasing enrolments into the Special Education program, geographical distances and availability of suitable field placements, many student teachers are often restricted in their access to quality practicum experiences. Furthermore, even when placements are found and undertaken, there is no guarantee that student teachers will be exposed to exemplary practices or have the opportunity to trial inclusive approaches, particularly those associated with

learners with additional needs that are advocated through their University programs. This is so because most of the mentor teachers do not have adequate knowledge and skills required for teaching learners with special educational needs.

It is therefore crucial to investigate how student teachers perceive teaching practice as currently provided by the University of Botswana because their performance can help predict the future success or failure of the teacher-training program at the UB. This study intends to fill this gap by investigating novice teachers' experiences, which in a way impact on their practice. Such information is critical in Botswana as inclusive education has been practised for quite some time and yet information on what student teachers at the University of Botswana are experiencing during teaching practice (in their efforts to include learners with special needs) is missing. In light of the above, the study sought to hear the voices of student teachers in inclusive schools during teaching practice.

Aim of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the teaching practice experiences of the University of Botswana special education student teachers, with the aim to understand the challenges they experienced in the teaching of learners with special needs in inclusive Botswana secondary school classrooms. This is needed to inform planning of teaching practice and to refocus the content of inclusive teaching pedagogy in order to fully prepare novice teachers with skills and knowledge needed to teach diverse learners.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the experiences of the student teachers in relation to teaching in inclusive secondary schools' classrooms?

2. How do these experiences impact their beliefs and attitudes (toward) about the teaching practice program at the University of Botswana?

Methodology

A qualitative research approach was considered suitable because this research is an exploratory study aimed at gaining understanding of student teachers' experiences during teaching practice in inclusive classrooms. Given the focus on student teachers' views and experiences, it was possible to construe the methodological approach of the study as *phenomenological* in nature. In general, phenomenological research aims at clarifying individuals' situations in everyday life (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003).

In this study, the specific aspects of everyday life that were of interest to the researchers were the student teachers' experiences of inclusive education. Using this approach enabled the researchers to explore the perspectives of participants and to examine their experiences in the contexts in which they occurred. This was also to describe how the student teachers' experiences influenced or affected their beliefs and attitudes about the teaching practice program at the University of Botswana. This methodology was selected for this investigation because of its unique suitability in meeting the purpose of this research, that is, to hear the voices of the student teachers. Miles and Huberman (1994) argue that this methodology focuses on the lived experiences of the participants, and in this case, it is that of the student teachers.

Research Settings

Schools in Botswana are grouped into various administrative regions. This study was carried out in selected junior secondary schools located in the Southern region. The junior

secondary schools were chosen because this particular cohort of student teachers was the first group of pre-service teachers being purposely prepared to teach in junior secondary schools. No research about pre-service TP has focused solely on this group before.

A purposive sampling technique was used to select schools that were regarded as “inclusive”. The aim was to have information-rich cases, which could provide meaningful insights. Bearing in mind that there were no formally accepted criteria for “inclusive schools” in Botswana, a six-member panel of experts consisting of two special education government officials, two special education teacher trainers from the four colleges of education and two special education lecturers from the University of Botswana were involved in the selection of the schools which they perceived as being “inclusive”. Among the panel members, a strong consensus emerged and a list of six schools was provided as being inclusive. Four of the six schools were selected.

The sampled schools were homogeneous in terms of the fact that they had learners with special needs who transited from various primary schools with special units classrooms and were now included in the regular secondary school classrooms. Two schools were located in urban and the other two schools were located in semi-urban settings. The four schools had been practicing inclusion for more than three years. All selected schools had student populations of about 600 students, with an average of 2-3 learners with special educational needs in each classroom.

Sampling of Participants

The participants for the present study consisted of 23 student teachers in the third and fourth year of the special education program purposively drawn from the four schools in the southern region of the country. They were all enrolled in the B. Ed Special Education program with specialisation in Intellectual Disabilities, Learning Disabilities, Visual and

Hearing impairments (Please see Table 1 for demographic information). The researchers engaged third -year and fourth - year students because they had been engaged in continuous teaching practice in inclusive classrooms for more than a year and were therefore likely to provide more informed and considered responses to the questions.

Table 1: Participant Background Characteristics

Background Characteristics	Number	Percentage
Gender	Male = 9	39%
	Female = 14	61%
Age	21 years = 9	39%
	22 years=5	22%
	23years=3	13%
	24 years=3	13%
	25 years=3	13%
Year level	3 rd year - 13	57%
	4 th year - 10	43%
Specialization	Intellectual Disability =5	22%
	Learning Disabilities =11	48%

Visual Impairment =3 13%

Hearing Impairment =4 17%

Instruments and Data Collection

Following informed consent and reassurance of confidentiality and anonymity, data were collected through in-depth semi-structured face-to-face interviews and two focus group discussions. Both the individual and group interview questions focused on student teachers' experiences of teaching practice, particularly in inclusive classrooms and how such experiences impacted on their attitudes and beliefs about the TP program at UB. The interviews lasted between 45 to 60 minutes, while focus groups lasted between 1 and 1.5 hours each and were audio taped and later transcribed verbatim. The interviews aimed at eliciting student teachers' personal views on the teaching practice as a learning experience and to give suggestions for improving this practical activity. They were also asked questions about the TP at UB. The specific interview and focus group questions centred around experiences about organising and teaching during TP, their feeling about how the TP program is organised, how adequate is their preparation, and if the processes should be maintained or changed.

Data Analysis

The data was analysed using content analysis of transcribed textual data. This was done in stages. In the first stage the researchers transcribed data from all the audio-tapes verbatim. Data were then consolidated into three broad categories, namely 'positive experiences', 'negative experiences' and 'impact on the attitudes'. During the second stage, the researchers read through the transcribed interviews to familiarize themselves with the transcript contents. In the third stage, researchers identified, classified, organized, and

encoded sections of the interview that were identified as major themes. In the fourth stage, data were synthesized in order to identify commonalities within similar units of meaning identified within each theme (Merriam, 1988).

In the last stage of analysis, themes were compared in relation to positive and negative experiences, impacts on attitudes, and connections were drawn between them in order to gain a holistic picture. Member checking was used to ensure the trustworthiness of the information gathered from participants (Merriam, 1998). In this case, participants were given access to the data analysis records and asked to give feedback, rectify any errors or provide more information in instances where they felt they were misrepresented. This process helped to confirm or disconfirm the consistency of the interpretations derived from the data (Merriam, 1998).

Findings and Discussion

The following major themes emerged from the data analysis: Exposure to real life situations, limited skills and pedagogical knowledge, mentor teachers' negative attitudes, relevance of the portfolios, and large class sizes. These findings are discussed under two themes: *Positive Experience* - exposure to real situations and *Negative Experience* - Limited skills and pedagogical knowledge. The effect of the TP experiences on attitudes and beliefs (as relating to research question 2) are subsumed under these themes.

Positive Experiences: Exposure to Real Life Situations

When asked about their teaching practice experiences in the inclusive classrooms, student- teachers expressed varied experiences and feelings about the process. However, most of the student teachers expressed more negative experiences as opposed to positive ones. For

the purposes of confidentiality, pseudo names have been used instead of the actual names of the participants.

Student teachers testified that their interaction with learners with special educational needs in the classrooms though terrifying at first, was ultimately a wonderful experience. That is, teaching practice had given them exposure to real life situations that they had heard of only in their lecture classes. One of the student teachers remarked: “Madam, your children that you always talk about in class are real; I used to think it was just talk, talk, and talk, in class. It is really interesting to know that they are here in our classes”. Another student teacher Judith added; “I was seeing some disabilities for the first time and was a bit apprehensive, but this taught me a lot, this indeed was an exciting experience for me”

Some indicated that, having learners with special needs in their classrooms made them to plan thoroughly before going to class, and this is what Batho said;

These classrooms make me sweat. I cannot just go without proper planning because these learners bring different challenges every day, madam, so you cannot predict what the situation is going to be like today or tomorrow.

This scenario shows that teaching in inclusive classrooms helps teachers to work harder and read and plan for the lessons in a systematic manner. Batho further said; “I am not used to reading much but these children are making me work even harder.”

Moreover, some student teachers indicated that as a hands-on activity, teaching practice was an appropriate exercise. A third-year student (Zephaniah) said:

Initially, TP had really frightened me. I didn't expect to see the kind of disabilities I saw. Even when lecturers talked about such disabilities, I just thought we in Botswana could not have such children. TP has really opened my eyes and I now know that these things are there and they are real as I had a learner without both the upper and lower limbs in my class.

Another third year student Sarah during focus group discussion added that

TP has made me to understand better some of the things that I used to hear and thought were just imaginations. So ...I will be able to apply what I have experienced in the field to what I learn in class. I mean I will understand better most of those things and will be better positioned to know what I will be dealing with. For example, I saw that inappropriate furniture does impede learning as a learner who was extremely short was made to use the normal furniture.

On the whole, student-teachers reported that teaching practice allowed them to gain invaluable experiences, which books could never provide. It is clear from the above statements that student teachers are deeply motivated by positive experiences. This is an encouraging finding in the sense that the government of Botswana is in its early stages of implementing inclusive education policy, such positive experiences will therefore help direct policy implementation. Other studies (Lewin, Samuel, & Sayed 2003; Msangya, Mkoma, & Yihuan, 2016; Wagenaar, 2005) have reported similar results whereby student teachers feel empowered /enriched through teaching practice.

Negative Experiences: Limited Skills and Pedagogical Knowledge

A small but reasonable number of student teachers viewed the TP experience differently since they felt that their exposure to learners with special needs in inclusive classrooms was a bad experience. This mainly came from the fourth year students who were in their third year of experience and this attitude could have been due to their comparison of the present teaching practice to the previous ones. Though this TP was their third one, they believed that they were not prepared in terms of the knowledge and skills to use / apply in managing inclusive classrooms. One of them, Kabo, said; “Honestly madam, I wish I was

never brought to this type of school. Imagine, I am not trained for this type of disability, so what am I supposed to do?” Another student Simon said; “This is a disaster, I feel like I am the one who is failing the students. Madam, I know nothing about this type of child. The child is clearly autistic, so what do I do?” Another interesting comment by Becky in her fourth year at UB said that:

Whenever I know that I am coming to this class, my whole morale goes down. I have not been trained for hearing impairment but I have a learner whose hearing impaired and another one with ADHD. Just imagine what goes on in that class! Honestly, tell me, why you didn't prepare us for this, why make us specialise when you know that the world out there is about inclusive classrooms?”

According to Becky “Being dumped into a class of learners with different special educational needs has dampened my spirit of ever going back to teaching”.

As if that was not enough, in frustration Teko said:

You see! This is just a circus. Just look at this class, there are 47 learners and in addition to these, there are those with special needs, yet my area of specialization is intellectual disability and not this. There is this child in my class, and I tell you this child has hearing impairment problems and I can't communicate with him. Madam, you do not train us well at UB. We badly need inclusive education in our program.

Effect of Experience on Attitudes and Beliefs

The quotes above indicate that the student teachers' experiences contributed to the development of negative attitudes among some teachers. Generally, student teachers who were complaining about their teaching practice were indicating that the B.Ed. program at UB had not equipped them with the appropriate knowledge, skills and techniques to deal with

inclusive education challenges. They felt helpless and less keen to teach students with SENs. The training program at UB provided narrow knowledge/skills about a single type of disability, which is either intellectual, learning disability, visual or hearing impairment. One student teacher from a focus group discussion summed up the concern of the student teachers regarding their training program when he said:

It does not prepare us to meet real classroom situations. Here children are mixed, so you do not know what kind of children you are going to meet. Our program should prepare us for inclusion; otherwise we just have to abandon teaching.

This clearly indicates that the areas of specialization in the SPED program have been a limitation in the students' ability to handle different types of disabilities.

When they were asked to comment on what they thought could be a better approach to the situation, most of the student teachers suggested that they should not be made to specialize in one subject area. They argued that they should be taught about how to teach students with all types of special needs or with diverse learning needs. One of them, Messi said "Honestly speaking madam, why do you make us specialize, I mean what's the point when you know that we will be in this type of classroom set up". Pule summarized the concern by saying; "Your program needs an overhaul, otherwise you are going to frustrate us and we are not going to stay in teaching".

It can be arguably inferred that student teachers are deeply concerned about the issue of specializing on one category of a special need but would rather prefer to be fully taught inclusive education as specialization on one type of a special need limits their ability to attend other learners with a different type of a special need. The finding indicates that limited knowledge and skills in dealing with such diverse situations had a negative effect on the participants' attitudes towards working with learners with SENs. Studies elsewhere (e.g. Lewin, Samuel, & Sayed 2003; Schulz, 2005; Wagenaar, 2005) that have reported negative

experiences about teaching practice, have often linked the negative feelings/ attitudes to lack of knowledge and skills as reported here. But other studies have also linked the negative experiences to lack of support from mentors, lack of resources and limited administrative support, among others (Bukari & Kuyini, 2014; Preston, Walker & Ralph, 2015).

Mentor teachers and TP experiences of student teachers

Another group of comments concerned the mentor teachers' attitudes toward learners with special needs in their classrooms and the student teachers, as well as their understanding of the mentoring role and inclusive education. The student teachers complained mostly about mentor-teachers who neglected weaker pupils during classroom interaction. According to some of the student teachers, their bad experiences were exacerbated by the mentor-teachers' attitudes as expressed by Teko, a third-year student: "Madam, these people don't care about these kids. They just ignore them as they teach in their classrooms". Teko further expressed his concern by wondering if special education mentors in schools studied this discipline when he said; "Didn't these people study special education during their training?" A similar observation was made by another fourth-year student teacher, during a focus group discussion when he said; "The mentor teachers do not help weak children, and they seem to be worse than us. They just don't even bother – they do not care at all about these children". This suggests that mentor teachers in the schools might still be unfamiliar with inclusive education, which then puts pressure on the student teachers as they are supposed to receive mentorship from these teachers. The issue of mentors lacking knowledge of inclusion is certainly going to affect student teachers' experience of TP and the mentoring process (Bukari & Kuyini, 2014).

Furthermore, several student teachers expressed their disappointment about mentors who were not being cooperative and not providing required support to them. Most of the

student teachers testified that mentor teachers did not always devote enough time and attention to them. A general remark in this regard was that the “teacher did not give me a minute of her time to talk to me about my presentations or look at my lesson plans”. One fourth year student-teacher, Simone, during focus group discussion argued, “Mentors were just looking forward to student-teachers to relieve them of their classes; and they also select problematic classes which they give to us”.

According to the student teachers, once mentees were allocated classrooms, the mentors abdicated their positions, leaving mentees on their own without guidance. Sarah, a third-year student expressed her disappointment with mentor-teachers when she said: “There is no guidance whatsoever, even when you ask them, they will tell you that they don’t know anything about special education and that we ourselves should know better since we have been trained at the UB”.

Student teachers were also unhappy regarding the mentors’ feedback, which was always positive even in instances that they knew that they had not performed well. In relation to this, Sarah said: “You will find all, ‘good, good’, throughout even where I know that my lesson was not good at all”. According to Sarah, the mentor-teachers’ remarks were not honest. She continued thus:

Madam, these people do not even listen or pay attention when observing us. That is why they never know what to say after the lesson. For example, some will be reading novels or newspapers, while the mentees are struggling with the learners.

In the view of student teachers, the mentors and UB lecturers should have assisted them in the various teaching aspects which are a concern to them such as thorough lesson preparation, respect for time, and dealing with nervousness that is often caused by stage fright. They believed that the school-based mentors and some UB lecturers did not support them to master the most important aspects of TP.

Additionally, student teachers reported on mentors' understanding of the mentoring role and how TP is organised. They indicated that the TP program is not well organized as mentees had no adequate orientation and mentor-teachers seemed not to know what to do in terms of mentoring role. With regard to this, some participants reported that in some schools, they had not been introduced to the staff members and there was no induction procedure in place when they first arrived at the school. The following statement from a participant elucidates this problem: "I spent the whole month identifying who were who and the classes I had to attend." In terms of the inadequacy of the mentor role, Batho in a focus group discussion said: "They leave us to handle classes alone, and yet we are just student teachers!"

Some student teachers expressed similar sentiments about some UB lecturers who seemed not to understand the TP process and special needs. Students complained about lecturers who come to visit them but did not know anything about special needs. In relation to this, Zebulon said:

"When you ask them about concepts of special education like IEPs, adaptations, they would give you no answer. So what's the point of them coming to see us? Sometimes these lecturers also give us conflicting information. I think the TP office needs to organize itself"

The mentor relationship is critical to student teachers building competence and having a positive feeling about teaching practice. Studies such as Kiggundu and Nayimuli (2009) and Preston, et al. (2015) have reported that student teachers indicated both positive and negative feelings about the mentoring relationship. In Kiggundu and Nayimuli's (2009) study, some student teachers were dissatisfied with the relationship with their mentors mainly due to being overloaded or not being given enough opportunities to teach /engage with students. This is mirrored in the current study whereby the student teachers had the perceptions that teacher mentors had negative attitudes towards them. This calls for UB to provide some training for

mentors and also require them to meet some particular standards that can guarantee a minimal level of success for all student teachers on teaching practice.

Irrelevance of the portfolios

Participants were asked about their most important concern of the teaching practice. According to the student teachers, the maintenance of a portfolio occupied too much space during TP to the point where even the mentors did not have time to assist their mentees. One fourth-year student, Kaiser, had this to support that claim:

“The portfolio that we have to keep, takes up a lot of time, and most of it is irrelevant. Having to prepare lesson plans every day on its own is time consuming; now the portfolio is making the problem worse”.

Another fourth-year student Simone added:

Goodness me! What is the relevance of the portfolio during teaching practice? Even you, madam, haven't you seen that this is taking too much of our time, and when we should be researching for our lessons, we are busy about the 'philosophy', the 'reflective journal', and this and that.

Many student teachers reiterated this sentiment during focus group discussions and teacher Boiki, put it more eloquently when she said;

Even University lecturers do not even observe us in class; they don't know how we teach because they also spend too much time checking the files. We need you lecturers to see what we are facing in these inclusive classrooms, so that you can appreciate our challenges when we say teach us proper issues on inclusion at the UB.

When asked if the portfolio should be maintained or phased out, most of the students felt that the portfolio should be phased out. One fourth year student Kabo adamantly said “Let us phase out this portfolio thing, it makes us lose focus on the real thing”. Sarah, a third-year student, also supported this by indicating that; “We need teaching practice and not filing and filing every day, we are always worried about the file and not what and how we are going to teach.” Another interesting issue raised by Zebulon a fourth-year student teacher was; “Just tell me madam, how do you award marks by just looking at a portfolio? We better call our program portfolio practice and not teaching practice”. Another fourth-year student Simone, echoed these concerns during the focus group discussion when he said:

What we are taught at varsity is not relevant to teaching practice because we are never taught about portfolio and yet it takes too much of our teaching practice. It even becomes worse now when your classes have learners with special needs, I think we should go back to the old system.”

The point was eloquently articulated by Belinah a third-year student when she said; “There is so much that goes into these files and at this level where we have other expectations of developing IEPs, adapting curriculum and so forth, and so much time and effort goes into these files.” The general feeling amongst student teachers about the use of the portfolios is that they should be phased out as they are not adding any value to their teaching, if anything they are a hindrance to real teaching practice experiences. Such sentiments still point to the need for teaching practice program review.

Large class sizes

Student teachers were also uncomfortable with the large classes during their practicum, which they said overwhelmed them. In addition, they indicated that the classroom

setup was not convenient / conducive for a diverse learning environment where some pupils had physical challenges. For example, the desks and tables used in schools were not suitable for some pupils with physical challenges. Pointing at one of the pupils in a wheel chair at a distance and in frustration Kabo said; “Just look at this child on a wheel chair. She does not have any access because the tables are too small. What are we really expected to do?” Large class-size has been reported as a problem for teachers in inclusive classrooms elsewhere (Kuyini & Desai, 2008). In Botswana, Mukhopadhyay, Nenty and Abosi (2012) emphasized its impact on teachers’ capacity to deliver effective instruction.

Implications

There are a number of implications of the study findings. First, the finding with respect to exposure to real life situations showed that student teachers expressed positive and negative experiences and feelings about the process. In particular, the limited exposure to inclusive classrooms before teaching practice, created anxiety in student teachers, potentially culminating in diminished interest in teaching. The implication is that the TP program is not providing all students the opportunities they need to develop basic dispositions and/or teaching competencies and some reform is required with regard to acquaintance with special needs students prior to TP.

Some students viewed the TP experience as a bad experience because the B.Ed. program at UB had not adequately prepared them in terms of the knowledge/ skills to manage inclusive classrooms. They believed that the inadequacy of their preparation was due to the requirement that students specialise in one area of disability/ special needs. This finding implies that students going through the UB program, as currently designed, will be unable to serve the inclusive education agenda in Botswana. As the student teachers highlighted, there is need for a Special Education Degree Program that looks more at inclusive education, which

will provide students with some reasonable knowledge/ skills with regard to the different types of special needs.

Mentor teachers were found to have limited familiarity with or understanding of inclusive education and this affected the student teachers during TP. Most participants reported that some UB lecturers and the mentors provided little support in respect of inclusive education during TP and concluded that lecturers and mentors did not live up to expectation. This finding regarding the performance of some UB lecturers and the mentors has implications for the future of TP and the entire inclusive education agenda. First, one wonders how these teachers can mentor others if they don't understand inclusive education themselves. Second, the finding implies that many teachers passing through training into the profession are not going to be able to support the inclusive education agenda. The mentor relationship is critical to student teachers' ability to develop the requisite competencies and positive feeling about TP and the tenuous relationship found in this study, implies the need for capacity building among mentors. This calls for UB to provide some training for mentors and require them to meet some particular standards that can guarantee a minimal level of success for all student teachers on teaching practice.

The student teachers held the view that the use of portfolios during TP had a negative effect on their teaching experiences and called for a review of the TP program. The student teachers were unanimous in their belief that the portfolios did not add any value to their teaching. Rather, they are a hindrance to real teaching practice experiences. However, portfolios are part of the documentation of practice and the view held by the students implies that the University has not adequately explained the essence of teaching portfolios.

Limitations

The key limitation is that only student teachers were interviewed. It would have been useful to explore the views of University lecturers and school mentors as this could have provided a more comprehensive view of the experiences of all stakeholders.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of this study suggest that student teachers are not sufficiently served by the current curriculum and approaches to teaching at UB. Together, these experiences speak to how best to fulfil the whole-schooling principles such as creating spaces for all learners, supporting learning and using multilevel instructional strategies. There is need for an alignment of curriculum content and pedagogical approaches to the reality of inclusive education demands in Botswana.

As Otukile-Mongwaketse and Mukhopadhyay (2013) point out, preparing teachers for TP requires that emphasis be placed on exposing students to the situations they will face when they get into the actual teaching space. This appears to be lacking in the current teaching and learning space as exemplified in the fact that the range of disabilities in inclusive classrooms are not the same as in special schools. The study recognizes that in the teaching of learners with SENs, there are several specific aspects of inclusive education practices (e.g. classroom management skills, types of knowledge and competencies) that student teachers should master in order to teach effectively. The lack of skills related to those aspects, on the part of the student teachers, are likely to militate against quality inclusive instruction, and serve to diminish the possibility of linking theory to practice (Korthagen, Loughran & Russell 2006; Lenz-Taguchi, 2010).

In the context of inclusive education, the study provides deep insights into the experiences of student teachers practicing in inclusive classrooms. The findings call for some

changes to the teacher-training program at UB, including the way TP is organised/delivered. First, the special education and TP programs need to be revised to be more “*inclusive*” in approach as opposed to “*special*” in order to fully prepare the teachers to teach diverse learners. Secondly, the TP department needs to look into the portfolio requirement and align its demands to the needs of the student teachers; giving more weight to “*classroom exposure*” as opposed to the current over emphasis on “*portfolio development*”. Finally, while effort is being made to equip student teachers with the relevant knowledge and pedagogical skills around inclusive education, attention should also be given to how the mentors can become more proactive in supporting students’ skill development during TP, as part of their journey towards independent professional practice.

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APPENDIX 1: STUDENT TEACHERS' INTERVIEW GUIDE

Demographic Background

Gender_____ Age_____

School_____ Areas of specialization_____

Level_____

Key Questions

- What are your experiences of teaching in inclusive classrooms?
- How well do you think the UB TP program is organized to allow you to learn the practical skills?
- To what extent do you think the time allocated for TP is enough to help you gain experience?
- How do you feel about the support given to you by your mentor teachers? What about the support by UB supervisors?
- What are your experiences about the assessment tools used in TP?
- What about the use of portfolios- how do you feel about the portfolios?
- Tell me how well you think the UB teaching program has sufficiently prepare you for teaching in inclusive settings?
- What do you think can be done to strengthen the TP program at UB?
- What was interesting and challenging about delivering instruction in the inclusive classrooms?
- What are the issues creating the instructional challenges?
- How have these experiences affected your attitude towards inclusive practice and the UB program?
- If you were someone with the power to make changes in your role as a student teacher, what changes would you make?
- What suggestions for resolving these challenges can you offer?