

Student Teachers' Perspectives on Teaching Practice in the College of Education at Al-Mergeb University

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Abstract. This research article focuses its attention on student-teachers' perspectives on teaching practice in the College of Education at Al-Mergeb University. Semi- structured interview with all student teachers was utilised to collect the data while content analysis was employed to identify themes and analyse the data. This study was done in the academic year 2013-2014 involving 33 student teachers studying in the fourth year level. The findings revealed that, despite the positive experiences during teaching practice, student teachers experienced challenges which affected their perception of the teaching profession. Based on the findings of this study, measures are being suggested on how to improve teaching practice in order to have a positive influence on the student teachers' perception of, and attitude towards, the teaching profession. Furthermore, the findings indicated that student teachers view teaching practice as an important component in their training because it exposes them to the actual teaching and learning environment in which they can contextualise their theoretical knowledge gained during training period.

Key words: Teaching Practice, student teachers, supervision, assessment, experience.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background:

Teaching Practice is considered as an essential subject for fourth year students in order to get Bachelor Degree in the college of education at Al-Mergeb University. This subject grants student teachers an opportunity to train in the actual teaching and learning environment before actually getting into the real world of the teaching profession. Moreover, Teaching Practice is the central activity in testing teaching skills. Student teachers also know the value of teaching practice and as remarked by Mentor (1989:461), they perceive it as 'the crux of their preparation for the teaching profession' since it provides for the 'real interface' between student hood and membership of the profession. As a result, teaching practice creates a mixture of anticipation, anxiety, excitement and worry in the student teachers as they begin their teaching practice (Manion, Keith, Morrison & Cohen, 2003; Perry, 2004:4). Several studies have been conducted on student teacher's experience and anxieties during teaching practice (Ngidi & Sibaya, 2003; Marais & Meier, 2004). However a review of the literature indicates that there are limited studies that have been conducted regarding ways in which students' experiences during teaching practice influence their perception of and attitudes towards the teaching profession. This paper investigates the student teachers' attitudes towards teaching practice. Also, this article tries to answer the following research questions:

- 1- Does Teaching Practice grants student teachers experience in actual teaching and learning environment?
- 2- Does Teaching Practice have positive influence on the student teachers perception?
- 3- What are student teachers' perspectives on the role of the mentor?
- 4- What are student teachers' perspectives on Teaching Practice time?

1.2. Objectives Of The Study:

The purpose of this study was to investigate student teachers' attitudes and concern of teaching practice exercise taking place in the college of education at AL-Mergeb University. Precisely, the study sought to analyse student teachers perspectives towards teaching practice as an exercise for enhancement; assess student teachers' attitudes towards teaching practice mentor and examine student teachers perception towards timing of teaching practice and the facilities available.

1.3 . Limitation Of This Study

A limitation of this study is that a small sample (n = 33) of forth year students from Al-Mergeb University College of Education was used. Therefore the findings of the study cannot be generalised to other student teachers from other teacher training programmes.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. The Concept of Teaching Practice

According to Marais & Meier (2004:221), the term teaching practice signifies the range of experiences to which student teachers are exposed when they work in classrooms and schools. In addition, teaching practice is a challenging but important part of teacher training, especially in developing countries such as South Africa, where the effectiveness of the teaching practice can be reduced or eroded by a range of challenges, such as geographical distance, low and uneven levels of teacher expertise, a wide-ranging lack of resources as well as a lack of discipline among a wide cross-section of learners and educators. These challenges, if not addressed, may affect student teachers' performance during teaching practice and may in the long run affect their perception of the teaching profession.

Menter (1989:460) notes that there has been a shift in the literature from the concept of teaching practice (associated with an apprenticeship model) to the concept of field/school experience (associated with an experiential model). Lave & Wenger (1991) point out that nevertheless way it may be envisaged, the notion of teaching practice is entrenched in experience-based learning introduced by Dewey (1938), Vygotsky's (1978) social cognitive theory, and founded in the premise of situated learning. Consequently as suggested by the South African Norms & Standards for Educators (Republic of South Africa, 2000:12), teaching practice is meant to provide for the authentic context within which student teachers are exposed to experience the complexities and richness of the reality of being a teacher. This process allows the student teacher an opportunity to establish whether the right career choice has been made or not. However, despite its importance, Killen & Steyn (2001) note that teaching practice sometimes becomes a demoralising and sometimes very frightening experience. Several studies have been conducted on student teacher's experience and anxieties during teaching practice (Ngidi & Sibaya, 2003; Marais & Meier, 2004) to mention but two. However a review of the literature indicates that there are limited studies that have been conducted regarding ways in which students' experiences during teaching practice influence their perception of and attitudes towards the teaching profession (Drouin, 1996 in Reed et al., 1998). Hence, the need for teacher-trainees to acquire the said competences demand an approach which can help to assess the degree at which these skills are attained during pre-service teacher preparation the fact which call for effective teaching practice exercise.

2.2. The ways of conducting Teaching practice

Teaching practice is a form of work-integrated learning that is described as a period of time when students are working in the relevant school to receive specific in-service training in order to apply theory in practice. Researchers such as Marais and Meier (2004:220), Perry (2004:2) and Maphosa, Shumba & Shumba (2007:296) describe teaching practice as an essential component of teacher training. In order to achieve the standards required for qualified teacher status, a student teacher is required to do teaching practice in at least two schools. According to Perry (2004:2), teaching practice can be conducted in a number of forms depending on the institution. Some institutions send student teachers to go for teaching practice once a day each week; others do this over a semester; while others send student teachers in a two- to six weeks' block. It should be pointed out that, in whatever form it is done, teaching practice is aimed at inducting student teachers more fully into the professional work of teachers (Perry 2004:2). To this effect the student teacher is expected to fulfil all the responsibilities of a teacher, which according to Perry (2004:2) is exciting but challenging. Perry (2004:2) also points out that, on the one hand, student teachers should experience the excitement of being a part of a real classroom setting, of getting to know learners, of planning and organising the classroom tasks. On the other hand, student teachers could have doubts about their ability to manage with unfamiliar situations, controlling and managing learners or establishing a working relationship with the mentor or supervisor. It is such mixed feelings that can contribute to the making or breaking of a student teacher.

2.3. Teaching practice in the college of education at Al-Mergeb University

In the college of education at AL-Mergeb University, teaching practice (TP) as a part of the experiential learning programme required for the qualification. Teaching practice for fourth year students in the college of education at AL-Mergeb University is scheduled for two weeks from 08/02/2015 to 21/02/2015. During this period, students stopped attending lectures in the college. The teaching practice co-ordinator met with a number of school principals before sending student teachers out to different schools in order to establish positive educational and supportive relationships with the School Management Teams from a number of schools in Al-khoms region. The co-ordinator selected suitable schools for teaching practice by visiting the schools, meeting with the principals and teachers, and explaining the reasons why the college wished to establish a working professional relationship with them. The teaching practice co-ordinator then entered into an agreement with the relevant the School Management Teams that the students could do teaching practice at their schools; specific teachers would be school-based mentors to the students while in their charge for the duration of the students' teaching time; and the School Management Teams would enhance the teaching practice by allowing students to become 'fully integrated' student teachers where student teachers would have to get involved in all aspects of the school. The last implied that student teachers would be afforded the opportunity to participate in all school activities. Beside the fact that students were teachers in-training, they had to be given the opportunity to integrate in a practical way and had to apply the theoretical knowledge and newly acquired teaching skills. Students had to be exposed to, for example, completing class registers, marking learners' books, attending staff meetings, helping with extramural activities, to mention but a few duties. Student teachers were subject to a minimum of two formal class visitations and assessments done by college of education lecturers. During the school visits, lecturers had to give the student teachers written and oral feedback. Improvements were commended, shortcomings highlighted and suggestions made on how to, for example, overcome anxiety, use non-verbal language to enhance

their teaching and learning activities, and how to apply a variety of strategies to improve their teaching. The educators, or school-based mentors, also had to observe the students' progress, behaviour and attitude at school, and assess the student teachers' practical teaching and learning activities according to specific guidelines given to them by the mentors.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Study area and design

The study was carried out at AL-Mergeb University College of Education. The area was selected purposively as it is the working station of the researcher that made easy for data collection. Student teachers from AL-Mergeb University College of Education were used to capture information of students' perception on teaching practice and supervisors in a sense that during teaching practice students assigned to a school and assessed randomly by supervisors from the College of Education at Al-Mergeb University. Descriptive survey design was employed to investigate student teachers perspectives toward three variables highlighted in the objectives of the study. Descriptive studies are concerned with behavioural attributes like opinions held, processes and effects (Best and Kahn, 2006; Mugenda, 2008).

3.2. Participants of the study

Participants of the study comprised of 33 forth year student teachers who conducted their 2012/2013 academic year teaching practice in 14 schools in region of Al-Khoms. The students chose schools in this region because they wanted to be close to their houses and they did not have lectures in the college for two weeks. Also, nine of them chose primary schools and 5 of them chose secondary schools. These respondents were randomly sampled including 20 were females and 13 were males. Analytically, all the participants were teaching English Language as a general subject. The study was conducted at the middle of the academic year 2013/2014 therefore, first, second and third year students were excluded as they have yet to participate in teaching practice.

3.3. Instruments and procedures

Data were collected, mainly through semi-structured interviews with all 33 student teachers in the college of education at Al-Mergeb University. Interviews were conducted to explore student teachers' positive experiences and challenges faced during teaching practice. The interviewer directed and encouraged dialogue by asking reflective and probing questions. Data obtained from the semi-structured interviews were analysed thematically. The themes were derived from the key research questions. Literature assisted in identifying the final categories.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

Major themes were identified in the data analysis. Each of these themes is discussed in detail in the following section.

4.1. Student teachers/ability to translate theory into practice

The respondents in this study indicated that they were prepared and able to translate theory into practice and also that they were able to apply the education theory learnt at university into practice during the teaching practice. In contrast to the findings in the

study by Marais & Meier (2004:228) where respondents found a discrepancy between theory of education and reality of instruction, and where respondents indicated that they could not reconcile the teaching methods as explained during their lectures with those used in schools by teachers.

Most respondents said that they found teaching practice very interesting because they were able to apply what they had studied and they enjoyed teaching because they were conversant with the subject content. They acknowledged the importance of positive reinforcement and of creating a favourable environment for learning, a concept the student teachers had learnt in the Education Theory 4 module.

One student teacher commented thus, *"I discovered that learners became enthusiastic and they actively participated in activities when they were praised and rewarded for their efforts"*.

The respondents indicated that they applied the knowledge they had acquired during the Specific Subject Didactics and Professional Studies to plan, prepare and present the lessons and to draw up a timetable (all of these in Teaching Methodology Subject). However, it should be noted that the respondents in this study reported that, despite the thorough teacher preparation, they found that it was not easy to teach because the learners were not co-operative; they did not do assignments, were noisy and were not actively involved in classroom activities. Moreover there was a language barrier. "Learners could not communicate in English whereas they insisted to translate all the lesson with their first language which is Arabic," commented one respondent. This affected the student teachers' performance during teaching practice and their perception of the teaching profession in general.

4.2. Timing of the teaching practice

All respondents pointed out that teaching practice started too late in the year when most teachers had almost completed their syllabus and were busy doing revision in preparation for the end-of-year examinations. So the majority of respondents were not satisfied on the timing of the teaching practice.

4.3. Relationship between mentors and student teachers

Each student teacher was assigned to a qualified and experienced classroom teacher. This classroom teacher had to assume a multi-faceted role of being guide, supervisor, counsellor, overseer, coach, teacher, model, supporter, critic and instructor (Holloway, 2001; Maphosa, Shumba & Shumba, 2007: 297). The overall impression of the mentors given by the student teachers was fairly positive. Respondents indicated that the mentors were supportive and always willing to help. They said that the mentors gave the student teachers valuable advice and shared their skills and experiences. One respondent intimated thus, *"We were working together with the teacher. She was a nice lady and easy to work with"*.

The respondents appreciated the positive attitudes displayed by their mentors which made them feel part of the school. The findings from the study revealed that student teachers became motivated to take up the teaching profession after teaching practice because of the "constant guidance" they received from their mentors. One student teacher had this to say about his mentor: *I am indebted to my mentor. She dedicated her time to ensure that I did the right thing and gained good experience in the process. She inspired me and helped me translate the theory I learnt into practice. She enhanced the skills I acquired during the course, for example preparing a lesson plan. I saw her as a*

role model and I enjoyed her teaching style. Student teachers appreciated mentors who treated them with respect.

One student teacher commented about the mentor thus: *My mentor respects me a lot and she is guiding me very well ... She is one of the reasons I have enjoyed the teaching practice. I never thought I would pursue the teaching career, but I am now seriously considering venturing in the real teaching world.*

Another one affirmed thus: *We worked very well with the class teacher. She assisted me on how to make a lesson plan, and disciplining learners. The teacher sits in class whilst I am teaching and this helps to maintain discipline.* To these student teachers, teaching practice had given hands-on experience in schools and it helped them to make the decision to become teachers.

Despite the above positive remarks by the majority of respondents other respondents expressed negative experiences regarding their mentors. These respondents indicated that they did not get any support from the school based mentors. Some respondents as noted by Ralph (in Marais & Meier, 2004:222) saw it as exploitation and abuse by the mentors who imposed exorbitant demands on student teachers in terms of workload. One respondent commented thus: *He is just enjoying himself, he is a free man, he does not come to class, he just gave me the textbook, showed me where he had stopped and that was mall. I feel that teacher should still take responsibility of his class and not throw everything at me. I don't have a problem but I strongly feel that as a class teacher, he should be available to provide the support and guidance because I am still learning.*

Similar responses were noted in the study conducted by Maphosa et al. (2007: 301) where respondents noted that some mentors exhibited unprofessional conduct and engaged in unprofessional acts like absenting themselves from duty, reporting late or sending pupils on personal errands even during lessons.

Such unprofessional behaviour is contrary to the role of mentors as described by Holloway (2001) and Maphosa et al. (2007:303) whereby a mentor would be required to guide and lead the student teacher all the way, advising on shortcomings, appraising on strength and encouraging until the student teacher is able to present lessons effectively.

Some respondents felt that mentors did not have any confidence in them. The following remarks were captured from a response: *Despite the fact that my mentor respects me a lot and she is guiding me very well, she does not trust me. When she is not at school she cannot entrust the class in my care. I can only teach if she is around. At first I appreciated the fact that she sat in my classroom when I taught because she helped to control the class but as time went on I realised that she did not think I was capable of handling the class on my own. I feel mentors should have confidence in us because we feel we have got appropriate training and we can handle the classes on our own. I have only taught once because the teacher thinks that I will delay her.*

The issue raises questions as to how student teachers were supposed to learn and build up the confidence to go out and teach without having been given a chance to try out. Such unprofessional conduct could have demoralised the student teachers and could have affected their preparedness and willingness to venture into the real teaching world.

4.4. Student teachers induction into the school

Respondents from three of the schools noted that there was no general initiation in place when they first arrived at the schools. They were not introduced to staff members, as attested to by the following statement: *"They do not have staff meetings so we were not introduced formally. Other educators and learners just see us there."*

Some respondents felt a sense of alienation. One student teacher remarked: *"We were never introduced to staff. This affected us psychologically because we felt like strangers. We never felt that sense of belonging"*.

Such feelings of alienation resulted in panic and a lack of self-confidence, which in turn reduced the effectiveness of teaching practice and negatively affected student teachers' attitude towards the teaching profession.

On the other hand, a good reception from the headmasters and teachers contributed to a positive attitude towards teaching, as confirmed by the statement by one of the student teachers, who had received a good reception: *We were introduced to the staff. They took us to the classes and we introduced ourselves to the learners. Learners were told to respect us. We were introduced as teachers not as student teachers and this to a certain extent influenced the way other teachers and learners related to us.*

Another student teacher affirmed thus:

I was given a warm welcome. I feel as if I have been there for a whole year. All teachers as well as administrators treat me like a permanent teacher and not as a student teacher. They have made my stay at the school the most exciting experience that I could ever have in my life.

4.5. Attitude of other educators in the school

Respondents intimated that other staff members who were not mentors did not make them feel welcome and they did not respect them. *We are not respected as their colleagues. They just order us around. They treat us like errand boys. Someone ordered me to supervise her class while she went to fetch her child. I would have appreciated it if she had asked me in a collegial manner and not ordering me around like a small kid. I did it but I did not appreciate the manner in which I was ordered.*

Another student teacher felt that the educators were unprofessional and were taking advantage of student teachers. One student teacher had this to say:

I felt that other teachers were taking me as a cheap tool of convenience [personal assistant] as they would just send me to do things such as controlling learners in the corridors. The teacher would shout at me in front of learners, which I found very demeaning. I found that particular teacher to be unprofessional He was never prepared for his class and he was always late. That demoralised me.

In relation to the educators' unprofessional manner, another respondent intimated that *The teachers took advantage of the student teachers and they kept them in the computer centre to type educators' work ... Some teachers give us personal assignments ... Most teachers in this school are lazy, they absent themselves from duty for no apparent reason.*

4.6. Involvement in other school activities

Teaching involves many experiences, and student teachers are required to get involved in all aspects of the school. In this study, despite the fact that the School Management Teams had been requested to provide student teachers with the opportunity to become “fully integrated” teachers by allowing students teacher participation in all school activities, the student teachers were limited in their participation in the school activities. The majority of student teachers echoed this thought:

We are not invited for staff meetings so we never know what takes place in the meetings. We would like to be involved and attend those meetings because we believe that we can give some valuable input.

Another respondent commented that they were made to feel insignificant: *Every morning briefing takes place around the table in the staff room; however as student teachers we are excluded from the table. We are given a small table in the corner of the staff room and we don't feel like we are part of them. We are doing the same work yet we are excluded from the staff meetings. After the briefing we are expected to take on the responsibilities.*

One respondent remarked that they were even excluded from sport activities. When they voiced their concern to the headmaster he just shrugged his shoulders and moved away.

4.7. Learner discipline

Similar to findings by Marais & Meier (2004:229), where respondents experienced a deterioration of moral values in schools and a neglect of discipline, the majority of respondents in the present study also noted that discipline was almost non-existent in most schools. One respondent remarked, *Learners were very unruly because there were no effective disciplinary measures taken against misconduct. Learners were allowed to use cell phones in class which I found very disruptive.*

Another respondent indicated, *Learners gave an impression that we are their age mates so they don't respect us. There is no discipline at all. Learners are rude. It is not easy to control the class. Even when the teacher is there, learners would be playing cards and eating in class.*

In contrast to the above negative responses, respondents from one school said that learners were well behaved and that they actively participated in the class activities: *“Learners respect us as teachers, though there are some who think that since we are student teachers, we don't have the power/authority to punish them.”*

4.8. Implementation of Outcomes-based Education

All respondents admitted that they found it very difficult to implement Outcomes-based Education effectively because of the lack of learner support materials in all schools, the large numbers of students in class, poor learner discipline and the time limitation. Overall, respondents indicated that the time allocated for the lessons was very limited, at most 45 minutes. One student teacher remarked. *When you really want to engage students in group work it is difficult to put them into groups because of the limited time ... Moreover, there is also limited space for the educator to move around checking the progress of the learners as they worked.*

4.9. Resources to facilitate teaching and learning

The results obtained from the respondents with regard to resources revealed that the schools did not have resources to facilitate the teaching and learning process. One respondent remarked that his school did not have a library. However, the majority of respondents remarked that all the learners have textbooks so they can prepare and study in their books also the school gave us teacher's book to prepare our lessons perfectly and effectively.

5. DISCUSSION

Generally, the respondents in this study indicated that they had benefited from the Teaching Practice program. However, all respondents felt that in as much as the theory acquired during university lectures provided them with enough information on how to teach, it was the teaching practice that introduced them to and gave them the exposure into the experiences of the real teaching world. This is in support of arguments by researchers such as Buchner & Hay (1999:320) who asserted that teaching involved many experiences that simply could not be replicated in a non-school environment. However, teaching practice provides student teachers with the opportunity to integrate the theory of education with that which they are experiencing at first hand.

To this effect, Perry (2004:4) also points out that, although students gain much specialised knowledge by attending lectures and doing assignments, teaching practice adds meaning to this knowledge when a student teacher comes into contact with the real classroom situation. It is during teaching practice that knowledge is affirmed.

The findings in relation to the influence of the mentors in the present study varied from student teacher to student teacher. Some mentors effectively fulfilled their role of guiding student teachers. They offered student teachers under their supervision guidance and showed them what to do. Some student teachers echoed the description by Marais and Meier (2004:230) of mentors as being exemplary role models who set a worthwhile example to follow.

Although some student teachers indicated a supportive relationship with the mentors, some respondents were dissatisfied with the relationship between mentors and student teachers. They experienced feelings expressed by Maphosa et al. (2007:300-303) that the mentors saw student teachers as relief teachers, who ended up taking full loads while mentors took a back seat. This disheartened the student teachers because such behaviour is contrary to the concept of mentorship as described by Maphosa et al. (2007) in which the mentor operates normally in his or her classroom with the student teachers observing and learning and not given full charge of classes when they would still be learning the trade.

While some mentors overloaded student teachers, other mentors did not have confidence in the student teachers and consequently they would not leave their classes in the student teachers' care. Others would not let student teachers teach at any time because they felt that student teachers were delaying and wasting learners' valuable time and they had to finish the syllabus before the end of the year. This resulted in the student teachers getting discouraged and experiencing feelings of inadequacy and loss of confidence in their ability to teach. Such feelings of inadequacy could have negatively influenced student teachers' perception of the teaching profession.

The way in which student teachers were received and treated varied from one school to another. The majority of student teachers in the present study attested to the fact that they were not well received and introduced at their schools of placement and that resulted in other teachers and learners not respecting them. This significantly influenced student teachers' performance during teaching practice and negatively influenced their perception of the teaching profession in general.

Learner discipline was a serious restraint for the student teachers. The teaching environment did not allow student teachers to execute what they had learnt at university. There is a possibility that student teachers had not been fully prepared for the real environment in which they were supposed to teach.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings indicate that student teachers view teaching practice as an important component in their training because it exposes them to the actual teaching and learning environment in which they can contextualise their theoretical knowledge gained during training (Marais & Meier, 2004; Perry, 2004; Quick & Sieborger, 2005). It also affords student teachers an opportunity to determine whether the appropriate career choice has been made or not. Student teachers felt that Teaching Practice Program at AL-Mergeb University college of Education had prepared them for the teaching practice. However, despite the thorough preparation, students were faced with challenges which significantly affected their ability to accrue maximum benefits from the teaching practice. These experiences also negatively influenced the student teachers' perception of and attitude towards the teaching profession.

In the first instance, the timing of the teaching practice at the end of the year was inappropriate. Class teachers view this period as critical for their learners; consequently they are reluctant to relinquish their classes to inexperienced student teachers thus defeating the purpose of teaching practice. Moreover, student teachers had to play a dual role of being teachers in schools and students at university. This put tremendous pressure on the student teachers and rendered them ineffective both as teachers and as students. It is therefore recommended that the teaching programme timetable should be designed in such a way that it does not coincide with key school terms such as towards or during the months of June and October when teachers are preparing students for crucial examinations (Kiggundu, 2007).

While some respondents indicated that the mentors were supportive and always willing to share their valuable advice and skills, others felt exploited and unsupported by the mentors. The study therefore recommended that teacher-training institutions should work hand in hand with the schools and organise workshops to empower and support mentors. On a similar note, Maphosa et al. (2007:305) suggested that mentors should be constantly empowered through workshops, to work effectively in leading and guiding student teachers.

Furthermore, student teachers were not always made to feel welcome and were not generally respected by other staff members. Student teachers were often excluded from many school activities and were made to feel insignificant which greatly demoralised them. On this note Kiggundu (2007:34) suggested that before and during each teaching practice session there should be thorough public relations groundwork undertaken by the institution in order to maintain good relations between the student teachers and all relevant role players. To minimise the problem of student teachers going to schools where they are made to feel excluded and insignificant, the higher education institutions should have a profile of each school which should be made available to the student

teachers so that it could give the student teachers an idea about the school and assist them in selecting the appropriate schools for teaching practice. Schools with a high number of untrained or under-qualified teachers should be avoided at every opportunity as these may create untenable conditions for the training student teacher who could be perceived as a threat to the unqualified teachers in practice.

We have attempted to highlight some of the factors which impact on a final decision by student teachers to decide either to stay in the profession or opt out. Some of these influences may not manifest themselves immediately but may account for the continued shortage of teachers as a result of teachers leaving the profession. It is thus essential that teacher trainers be mindful of the aspects that affect student teachers' experiences during teaching practice so that they may be able to assist student teachers to achieve the desired outcomes from teaching practice.

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