***­*Efficacy of teacher education institutions – primary schools partnership in teacher preparation in Zimbabwe**

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to examine the efficacy of teacher education institutions (TEIs) and schools in Zimbabwe in regard to partnering for the delivery of teacher education. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion (FGD) involving 24 participants and comprising student teachers, college lecturers and mentors. The findings revealed that there was a framework for TEI-schools collaboration in teacher preparation. The efficacy of the partnership was, however, undermined by such factors as inadequate attention being accorded to various aspects that are considered to be central to effective partnerships, i.e. planning, mentoring, TEI visits to schools, communication, and a number of inconsistencies that seemed to characterise the relationship. The findings suggest that the efficacy of the partnership could be enhanced through the recognition of the interdependent nature of the relationship, diversification of areas of TEI-schools joint activity and increased conversations between the partners about issues pertinent to the arrangement. The knowledge derived from the study may provide insights into factors that contribute to undermining the effectiveness of partnerships and the implications of these for the professional development of prospective teachers.

**Keywords:** partnership,teacher education institutions, primary schools, student teachers, teacher preparation, field experiences, efficacy

**Introduction**

Teacher education institutions (TEIs) and schools have traditionally been the main sites for teacher learning. This relationship between the key players in teacher education, though central in defining the outcomes of initial teacher education (ITE) (Brisard, Menter and Smith 2005), has often been considered as lacking and superficial, especially in integrating the knowledge from the two educational settings (Smedley 2001). The search for teacher education models that enhance teacher effectiveness, and ultimately teacher quality, has resulted in the emergence of primarily practical approaches which accentuate the role of field experiences in the process of learning to teach. Such approaches have necessitated the increased involvement of schools in teacher preparation and the closer collaboration of TEIs and schools, thus making TEI-schools partnerships a common trend in ITE.

The notion of partnership between TEIs and schools in teacher preparation appears to be a practical option for Zimbabwe. Each year, thousands of student teachers who are studying for a Diploma in Education are deployed into primary schools for extended field experience. This requires TEIs and schools to work closely together in teacher preparation. Questions have been raised as to the effectiveness of this collaboration (Mudavanhu 2014; Ndlovu 1993) and the situation has not been helped by a dearth of research into the matter of how well the arrangement is working. Most studies on teacher education in the country have tended to focus on one aspect of the partnership – mentoring (Tirivanhu 2014; Maphosa, Shumba and Shumba 2007; Mtetwa and Thompson 2000; Chiromo 1999) – rather than on a holistic examination of the concept of partnership. Consequently, any reference to issues of partnership has usually emerged as part of the recommendations of other studies, the focus of which was not primarily on collaboration in teacher preparation (Magudu 2014; Ndlovu 1993). The focus of this article, therefore, is on the day-to-day workings of the TEI-schools partnership. This represents an attempt to examine the efficacy of the partnership in the delivery of teacher education in terms of the nature, scope and coherence of the partnership, and the challenges that emerge in the course of collaboration. The contribution of this study lies in documenting and seeking to understand the workings of the concept of TEI-school partnerships as it relates to Zimbabwe. This study also seeks to provoke stakeholders to reflect about the partnership and to provide a framework for future research since there is scant literature on the subject in the country.

**Background: TEI-schools partnership in Zimbabwe**

In Zimbabwe, the notion of TEI-schools partnership in teacher education has evolved over the years. For example, since the 1980s various models for training primary teachers have been adopted. These models include, firstly, a three-year ‘conventional’ programme, the 3-3-3 programme. (3-3-3 refers to the structure of the programme in terms of which the prospective teachers spend three terms at college doing the theoretical aspects of the course, three terms on the field experience and, finally, the last three terms back at college). The ‘conventional’ programme was offered by the majority of the primary teachers’ colleges. Under this system, the trainees spent two-thirds of the training period at college learning theory and the other third on teaching practice (TP) in schools. This programme was criticised in educational circles for producing highly theoretical practitioners whose opportunities to integrate theory with practice were confined to shorter periods.

The other model was the Zimbabwe Integrated Teacher Education Course (ZINTEC) which was introduced in four selected teachers’ colleges. Its adoption was driven by the need to address the problem of teacher shortages created by the rapid expansion of primary education which occurred after independence. The latter model entailed trainees spending extended periods of training (about 66% of the four year programme) on field experience, thus implying some form of school-centred (on-the-job) training. However, the student teachers, as in the case of the 3-3-3 programme, were required to assume full teaching responsibilities for their classes, without the support of a class teacher or mentor and with only the school heads playing a role in their assessment.

In the mid-1990s, as it became apparent that the problem of teacher shortages had been addressed, there was a shift from a concern with teacher quantity to a concern with the enhancement of teacher quality (Bourdillon 2000). Hence, from 1995, all primary teachers’ training colleges in the country, including former ZINTEC institutions (the ZINTEC programme had been phased out), adopted the attachment teaching practice model which made it mandatory for all student teachers on TP to be assigned experienced teachers as mentors, and which precluded them from taking full charge of classes (Chiromo 1999).

Then, in 2002, a modified version of the ZINTEC programme, namely 2-5-2 or the Unified Primary Teacher Education model, was introduced. The introduction of this model was as a result of the recurrence of teacher shortages, a problem caused by a brain-drain having been triggered by an economic meltdown in the country. This in-out-in model (which is still operational) extended the teaching practice period to five terms. It was meant to balance quantity with quality, as well as to enhance the quality of field experience. In an effort to achieve these goals, student teachers are not required to take responsibility for a class but are attached to a mentor who is supposed to provide them with professional guidance during the process of learning to teach. The model gives teachers and schools increased responsibility in teacher preparation and thus demands the nurturing of a culture of collaboration between TEIs and schools.

This article mainly focuses on the collaboration between TEIs and schools, which are the institutions on the ground. However, it should be noted that the partnership in ITE in Zimbabwe is broader than the arrangement between TEIs and schools as there are other significant stakeholders in teacher education. These are the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education and the University of Zimbabwe (UZ). Teachers’ training colleges (which are also referred to as TEIs in this study), are under the jurisdiction of Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education. The student teachers practise in schools under the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, which pays their stipend for the five terms they are on practicum in schools. All the teachers’ training colleges are affiliates of the UZ through its Department of Teacher Education (DTE) and, by virtue of this, the UZ institution influences policy on teacher preparation. Since all the primary teachers’ colleges in the country offer a similar Diploma in Education programme under the auspices of the same awarding institution, in this study we consider the association between TEIs or teachers’ colleges and primary schools as a single entity hence and refer to a ‘partnership’ rather than to ‘partnerships’.

**Conceptual framework**

Partnerships in teacher education generally evolved in response to concerns about the quality of student teachers’ professional learning experiences on pre-service teacher education programmes which seemed to be provided out of context. These traditional programmes were characterised by a rigid separation between Higher Education Institution (HEI) programmes and in-school experiences into different and loosely linked schemes – in other words, HEI academic knowledge was viewed as the only authoritative source of knowledge about teaching (Zeichner 2010; Brisard, Menter and Smith 2005) – and an overemphasis on academic competence in the preparation of teachers (Sultana 2005), resulting in a disengagement (or lack of linkages) between subject matter and teaching processes (Bezzina and Van Velzen 2006; Sultana 2005).

The term ‘partnership’ is used to describe the different models of collaboration and mutual co-operation between Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) or between Teacher Education Institutions (TEIs) and schools in an endeavour to provide quality Initial Teacher Training (ITT) experiences for teacher-trainees (Lynch and Smith 2012; Dhillon 2009; Moyles and Stuart 2003). Partnerships, therefore, represent an innovation in teacher preparation and a departure from the traditional conceptualisation of ITE to what Zeichner (2010, 89) describes as “a new epistemology for teacher education where there is a non-hierarchical interplay between academic, practitioner and community expertise”. A consequence of such an approach would be the creation of hybrid spaces (Zeichner 2010), or a ‘third space’ in teacher education “which is separate from the culture of either institution and allows for more creative ways of working together” (Greany and Brown 2015, 14). According to Flessner (2014), this third space also recognises binaries and creates new spaces for reflection and renewal.

Literature identifies three main types of partnerships namely, collaborative, complementary and HEI-led partnerships (Cunningham 2012; Brooks 2006). These different forms of partnership generally have the common purpose of enabling the players in teacher education to work together and share the responsibilities and goals of teacher preparation and professional development (Ducharme and Ducharme 1993). Other key goals of partnerships cited in literature include:

* developing a shared understanding about the purposes, processes and intended outcomes of the student teaching experiences (Ducharme and Ducharme 1993, 18);
* facilitating the achievement of a more coherent and integrated approach to Teacher Education(European Commission Directorate-General of Education and Culture 2010) through synergising the various components of teacher education (i.e. the theory and subject matter provided by TEIs and practice in schools) (Husbands cited by Greany and Brown 2015 ; Bezzina and Van Velzen 2006; Sultana 2005); and
* providing for authentic and expanded professional learning experiences for pre-service teachers by enabling them to learn in and from practice (Feiman-Nemser 2001).

These goals underline Eraut’s (1994) contention that professional learning is a product of both propositional (theoretical aspects) and procedural (practical element) knowledge. Thus, this goal emphasises the significance of partnerships in teacher preparation as these elements of knowledge are acquired at two sites respectively, these being training colleges and schools.

Scholars concur that the idea of partnerships implies that some direct benefits should accrue to all those involved. The benefits for trainees are the development of professional competence and confidence (Moyles and Stuart 2003, 1); being equipped to perform complex teaching tasks (Zeichner 2010), and preparation for diverse school situations. On the other hand, the rewards of collaboration for TEIs and schools include bringing together different but complementary expertise and facilitating the sharing of perceptions, beliefs and practices (Smedley 2001; Bullock and Scott 1995); extending knowledge about teaching and learning through research (European Commission Directorate-General of Education and Culture 2010); and addressing recruitment and teacher shortages (Cunningham 2012).

Literature, however, indicates that the success of partnerships is dependent on several essential elements. These include shared goals, trust between partners, clear channels of communication and keeping those people involved in the partnership informed (Billet, Ovens, Clemans and Seddon 2007; Ducharme and Ducharme 1993). Other factors, which could affect the success of a partnership are the extent to which the collaboration is positive, empowering and reciprocal with all partners benefitting from the arrangement (Cunningham 2012); ensuring the equality of voices between school and TEI staff; accommodating practitioner priorities and knowledge as well as acknowledging the ‘mind gap’ or cultural differences between TEIs and schools and the manner in which issues of power and control are handled (Greany and Brown 2015). In a nutshell, partnerships in teacher education call for the re-examination and redefinition of traditional roles. However, as observed by Zeichner (1992) (in Ducharme and Ducharme 1993), working out the new dimensions of their roles is a difficult task for TEIs. The formation and implementation of effective working partnerships has been a challenging and elusive goal (Greany and Brown 2015; Billet, Ovens, Clemans and Seddon 2007; Brooks 2006).

**Research methodology**

This study adopted a generic qualitative research approach to examine the efficacy of the partnership between TEIs and schools in teacher preparation. According to Caelli, Ray and Mill (2003, 2), a generic qualitative study is not “guided by any specific or established set of philosophical assumptions in the form of one (or more established) qualitative methodologies” such as grounded theory, phenomenography or ethnography. Its main purpose is to locate and understand a phenomenon or a process – or the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved (Merriam cited by Caelli, Ray and Mill 2003, 2). Scholars concur about the practicality of the generic approach but caution that its credibility can be undermined by a lack of rigour in and understanding of qualitative research (Kahlke 2014; Cooper and Endacott 2007; Caelli *et al* 2003), hence the need to pay particular attention to these aspects.

Purposive sampling was employed to identify participants of the study as the focus was more on understanding than on generaliliability, and to work with participant who would cede rich and thick data (Creswell 2007). The sample consisted of twenty-four participants made up of six student teachers, nine mentors (four of whom were either school heads or deputies) and nine college lecturers (including a TP coordinator for each participating TEI). Three rural schools within the same cluster were targeted, and these hosted the student teachers. Rural schools were preferred since the majority of the country’s schools are located in rural areas and such schools are where most prospective teachers would be deployed.

The school heads of participating schools were asked to provide a list of the student teachers they hosted and the names of their parent TEIs. Using this list, the participating TEIs – along with two student teachers from each of them – were identified. The student teachers were in their final term of teaching practice and were therefore in a position to reflect on their experiences of practicum. Three lecturers were drawn from each of the participating TEIs, as well as three mentors from each school. The main demographic variable that was considered for lecturers and mentors was experience with issues concerning the TEI-schools relationship. The lecturers had an average of eight years of experience as teacher educators and were, therefore, conversant with issues of TEIs-schools collaboration. The mentors were seasoned teachers with teaching experience ranging from eight to fifteen years. In addition, they had previously participated in the mentoring of the teacher-trainees. The inclusion of school heads or deputies was crucial as they would be central to the forging of the partnership. These different categories of participants represented the key stakeholders in the partnership and their multiple perspectives provided rich and sufficient data central to understanding the complexities of the partnership and to account for all the aspects of the phenomenon (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson and Spiers 2002).

After identifying the potential research sites, permission was sought from the relevant authorities to conduct the research. Informed consent was also obtained from the participants prior to the onset of the data collection. To that effect the participants were provided with consent forms which highlighted such aspects as purposes, procedures, risks and benefit of the study.

Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews with lecturers and mentors, and a focus group discussion with the student teachers. The focus group session was conducted at a school that was within the cluster. A preliminary visit was made to participating schools to make arrangements for the interviews and focus group session. The focus group interview questions were open-ended and enabled us to appraise the quality, coherence and limitations of the partnership and to triangulate the data. The information from each interview was later summarised and made available to the participants for validation. Member-checking and triangulation were pertinent in ensuring the trustworthiness of the study.

A thematic approach was used to analyse the data. Thematic analysis was preferred for the flexibility in how it can be used (Braun and Clarke 2006). The process of analysis involved searching through the data to identify recurrent issues or patterns of meaning (Braun and Clarke 2006), followed by reorganising the data according to the identified themes.

**Findings and discussion**

The findings are arranged around the three main themes which form the basis for the examination of the efficacy of the partnership. These are: understanding the notion of the partnership, operationalisation of the partnership, and some paradoxes of the partnership.

**Understanding the notion of the partnership**

This theme examines the participants’ understanding of the concept of partnership and their views about the envisaged benefits of the arrangement. Both TEI lecturers and mentors displayed some appreciation of the concept of partnership. Schools broadly viewed the purpose of the partnership as being *to assist the student teachers in becoming wholesome teachers.* On the other hand, lecturers described the goals of collaboration as:

*to bring TEIs and schools together to* *work as partners in the development of professional teachers…in the making process* so that *the receiving end (schools) won’t play the blame game when the end product has some gaps.*

These views imply that the partners were aware of their shared responsibility in teacher preparation. In addition, the participants appreciated the benefits that could accrue to them from the collaboration in ITE. The benefits cited for the trainees were that they would get an opportunity to apply the theory learned at college *rather than having a lot of theory which at times is obsolete,* and that they *would have the real picture and feel of the profession*. Schools anticipated such benefits as:

*having the chance to participate in the making of the products that will finally serve us;* *revitalisation* *in terms of new educational ideas and knowledge;* and, *a reduction in workload in the classroom and in co-curricular activities.*

For TEIs, the collaboration with schools would enable them *to keep abreast with what is prevailing in the sister ministry* (the Ministry of Primary and secondary Education) *as well in schools, both of which will eventually absorb the new teachers.* All these potential benefits would result in what one lecturer termed *a win-win situation*. The shared purpose and stake were pertinent in providing a positive basis for the partnership.

**Operationalisation of the partnership**

This category encompasses the placement of the student teachers for TP, delineation of roles and responsibilities, and the specific responsibilities of the partners such as supervision and assessment, mentoring and TEI visits and communication between partners. These are some of the elements that Cunningham (2012) identifies as indicating the extent to which schools and TEI have developed an effective partnership ‘in practice’ relate. The other indicators identified by the same author relate to planning, documentation, content, contractual relationship and legitimation.

***Placement***

Lecturers indicated that their institutions deployed students to an average of two-hundred schools each (per college) and that the host schools were scattered over wide geographical areas, mainly within the provinces where the TEIs are located. The criteria used to identify schools for student teaching placements usually included *the* *availability of qualified and experienced teachers*, *accessibility of the schools and their capacity to provide accommodation for the trainees*. The above criteria, however, were not always adhered to as it would appear that, in practice, TEIs mostly settled for *any school that was willing to host student teachers, those that requested for students or trainees’ own local schools identified by students themselves.* Thissuggests that the identification of the host schools was unsystematic and determined by expedience. Such a situation, combined with the involvement of a large number of schools in student teacher placements might have made it difficult for TEIs to ensure the ability of the selected settings to model the desired teaching practices and to forge meaningful relationships with each host school (Darling-Hammond 2002).

***Delineation of roles and responsibilities***

The roles and responsibilities of schools were outlined in the information packages that TEIs provided on deployment of student teachers. The typical packages contained:

*guidelines on mentoring, supervision and assessment of the student teacher and teaching load; College policy documents and formats for planning for instruction; assessment instruments; DTE criteria for assessment*

The tasks for schools as specified in information packages were *to carry out school-based supervision and assessment of student teachers; produce reports, conduct book inspection, provide mentors, professional guidance and counselling of student teachers, as well as to induct students on school and community ethos.* Such specifications about the responsibilities of schools were meant to facilitate better planning and use of time to support student teachers (Moyles and Stuart 2003) and also in a way, reflected the contractual relationship between the partners (Furlong cited by Cunningham 2012).

***Mentoring***

The guidelines from TEIs specified that the student teachers should be assigned mentors. The responsibilities of the mentors from the perspective of lecturers were *to be role models, critical friends and to mould the student teachers on issues of pedagogy and classroom management*.Similarly mentors described their role as:

*To be the chief trainers of the students teachers since we know what is required by the school and by the ministry, to supervise student teachers’ work…to assess them using the instrument provided by the college*

The above excerpts suggest that TEIs and schools had a shared understanding about the responsibilities of mentors. Despite their awareness of the significance of mentoring in the TEI-schools partnership, the partners might not have accorded due attention to aspects that are central to effective mentoring, such as investment in mentor selection, preparation and support (Menter, Hulme, Elliot and Lewin 2010). The task of selecting mentors was left to schoolson the basis that *they know their teachers best.* TEIs, though, specified that teachers who were assigned the mentoring role should be qualified and experienced and, in addition, *discouraged school heads, deputy heads and TICs from mentoring students*. Nonetheless, indications were that, in some instances, schools *attached trainees to senior teachers who have extra responsibilities so that when they are busy with these other duties, the student teacher can take over responsibility for the class.* Lecturers viewed such an arrangement negatively since trainees would be required to take full teaching loads and described this as taking *the trainees as relief teachers*.

Other instances of problematic mentor allocation highlighted by the student teachers included *being assigned* (by design or default) *a mentor who was enrolled for part-time studies and who could take advantage of the presence of a trainee to concentrate on their studies and overload the trainee with responsibilities;* or being attached to *a mentor who was on leave implying that the trainee would again take full responsibility of a class.* Such arrangements, as described above, would have denied the student teachers access to models of good practice that learning in and from practice should facilitate (Burn and Mutton 2013; Feiman-Nemser 2001). One mentor, though, argued that it was not always possible to adhere to TEI specifications on mentoring and that, at times, schools would be compelled to advise colleges that *what you require may derail our programmes in the school.* This implies that schools had other mandates that needed attentionand indicates a dilemma as to how to accommodate the priorities of various players in a partnership (Greany and Brown 2015). It also raises questions about schools’ sense of responsibility for initial teacher education (ITE).

Literature identifies mentor training as an important factor in TEI-school collaborations (Zeichner 2010). However, indications are that this aspect might have been overlooked as explained by one mentor:

*There* *is no training as such but some of the teachers who are mentors have been mentored by other teachers and they know how they were mentored and can use that knowledge to assist the student teachers.*

Such an arrangement would imply leaving things to chance. However, lecturers made reference to TEIs communicating the responsibilities of mentors through *handouts given to students as they go on TP and guidelines by the college,* and claimed that TEIs occasionally conducted workshops and seminars with mentors where TP issues were discussed as part of preparation for their role. One mentor, though, disputed the holding of workshops and insisted that *colleges do not conduct workshops and instead schools and clusters sometimes run workshops on mentor-student teacher relationships and how to assess the student teachers.* The lack of preparation and support of school-based supervisors to equip with requisite knowledge and skills to manage mentoring relationships was a dichotomy, for without the requisite knowledge and skills they would have been unable to implement a more active and educative concept of mentoring.

As regards the actual mentoring, some student teachers indicated that they benefitted from the process and described their mentors as supportive. They alluded to mentors *demonstrating to teach, assisting with marking and sourcing of media,* indicating that they were receiving some support*.* However, most trainees reported reluctance by some mentors to allow them opportunities to participate in some key tasks in the classroom and that they generally considered the presence of student teachers in their classrooms as an inconvenience as explained in the following composite excerpt:

*It was like you are delaying them* (mentors) *by what you were doing…the mentor during TP was eager to do all the activities, giving work, marking, so the student teacher will just sit; I lack test setting because we were not setting tests during TP; the mentor only allowed me to mark written work in mathematics and not compositions, so I don’t know how to mark compositions.*

Other inconsistencies of mentoring that were alluded to were: after a student teacher had prepared for a specific lesson, a mentor could decide just before its delivery: *this is not what I want you to teach today,* and then assign the teacher-trainee a new task,or assigning student teachers to teach content subjects such as Social Studies and Religious and Moral Education, which mentors were not comfortable with and which are not part of the core curriculum. All these practices might have been a reflection of a limited understanding by mentors of the purposes, processes and intended outcomes of the student teaching experience (Ducharme and Ducharme 1993). Furthermore, the failure by schools (mentors) to deliver adequate opportunities to practice would have undermined the development of professional competencies and confidence in the prospective teachers (Moyles and Stuart 2003) and defeated the purpose of the extended field experiences and training in context.

Several explanations were provided by the mentors for the above practices, for example, the trainees’ limited teaching skills:

*A mentor might be forced to take over a lesson that a student teacher was supposed to teach after realising that the student teacher is struggling, is not capable of teaching and is ‘killing’ my class.*

Furthermore, some mentors were of the view that *some student teachers are lazy, they make excuses about having a lot work and this makes it difficult for a mentor to closely monitor them*. In situations as described above, mentors who emphasised that they were *the owners of the classes in which the trainees were practising* (and were ultimately accountable for their performance which would be reflected in the termly rankings of classes), would find it necessary to do most of the teaching. Some lecturers, however, attributed the seeming lack of commitment to their role with student teachers to the fact that mentors were not rewarded for the additional load and argued *that they (mentors) feel used if unpaid for their services, and would perform better if they are incentivised.* This introduced the dimension of how to motivate the mentors or to give them recognition to encourage them to commit to their role (Hobson 2002), an issue that does not seem to have been catered for in the partnership.

***Supervision and assessment***

The supervision and assessment of student teachers were included among the responsibilities of both TEI lecturers and school-based supervisors (mentors and administrators) who were supposed to observe the student teachers’ lessons and produce written reports. Schools were required *to supervise and assess student teachers using a supervision instrument provided by TEIs, at least three times a term.* Indications were that most TEIs incorporated at least two school-based assessment marks into the computation of the final TP grade for the trainees, thus reflecting the recognition of the input of schools in teacher preparation*.* However, some lecturers questioned the credibility of some of the high grades awarded to student teachers by mentors, especially where there were discrepancies between the marks they awarded and those awarded by school-based supervisors. They attributed the discrepancies to such factors as some *schools being generous with marks* or *failure by schools to apply the DTE assessment criteria* (implying differing understandings of the instrument).

Another possible source of the problem could have been a lack of training of those responsible for assessment in schools (Brooks 2006), which was noted earlier. Mentors viewed the scepticism expressed by lecturers about school-based marks as depreciating their contributions and expertise. This is apparent in remarks by mentors, that *some lecturers feel they are superior over mentors and this doesn’t go well with mentors who feel that they are partners in the making of a teacher* and that school-based teacher educators *expected their professional perspectives to be respected.* Such sentiments suggest some underlying tensions between the partners. The possible tensions are illustrated by the manner in which one administrator handled poor performance by trainees, as explained:

*When a student teacher gets repeated adverse reports from college lecturers, we tell the student teacher to follow their lecturers because in this school we expect our teachers to work hard.*

The above excerpt might also not be an indication of the extent to which schools took ownership of the ITE programme, and points to a need to get schools buy into the idea of being significant players in teacher education.

***TEI school visits***

TEI visits to schools were an important feature of the interactions between the partners. TEI lecturers visited schools to supervise and assess student teachers at least once per term, i.e. once in four months. The infrequent visits were attributed to the location of schools in remote areas as well as resource constraints. A mentor felt that the irregularity of visits left *the burden of ensuring that students are well prepared to teach to schools.* This was ironic as schools were not formally prepared for the task*.* Trainees, on the other hand, indicated that, at times, the visits were undertaken *during end term tests session when it would not be possible to observe* them teaching. Furthermore, the visits seemed to be rushed as reflected in the following description of a typical visit:

*The team meets the school administrator first, gives introductions and purpose of visit and lecturer is then led to the classroom. Lecturer supervises student’s teaching in the presence of the mentor. After the lesson the lecturer, mentor and student teacher deliberate on the lesson proceedings highlighting critical feedback on the general performance of the student. The team leader gives feedback on general performance of all students at that school and bids farewell to the school authorities.*

Of note in the above quotation are the several purposes served by the visits (Cunningham 2012; Moyle and Stuart 2003). The first of these is the provision of support and feedback to the trainees and the identifying of areas of weakness that needed attention (Cunningham 2012). Second is the opportunity for collaboration between the partners that manifested through the involvement of lecturers and mentors in joint lesson observations and post-observation conferences. Furthermore, schools viewed the visits as a forum for dialogue between the partners, and for trouble-shooting, as explained by one mentor who said that *we discuss and iron out issues which might be problematic at the station.* This again underlined the many purposes served by TEI visits to schools. It should be noted, however, that the visits might not have allowed for adequate time to get to know each school, its particular ethos and needs, to demonstrate commitment and build trust in the relationship, all of which are central to a functional partnership (Greany and Brown 2015).

***Communication between the partners***

Brisard *et al* (2005) cite effective communication as the most important single factor for the successful functioning of partnership at any level. Data show that, besides the information packages provided on the deployment of student teachers*,* additional information on TP issues was occasionally relayed to schools through*circulars and periodic letters* generated by the TP office and information disseminated by the lecturers during school visits*.* [The TP office was a common feature of all TEIs which handled the communication with schools and students and any other issues relating to teaching practice and was viewed by participants as an important communication structure]. The communication was characterised by a one way flow of information, with schools being the recipients of information from TEIs. Mentors stressed that the circulars and letters were usually *from colleges to schools and not from schools to colleges,* and that schools communicated with TEIs only: *when there is a problem with the student teacher, that’s when we may decide either to telephone or make a written communication to the* (college) *principal.* What stands out here is the emphasis on referring issues to TEIs for final arbitration rather than joint decision making by the partners, which should be a proxy of effective partnership (Billet *et al*. 2007). This imbalance in communication points to a lack of equality of voice between the partners and suggests that TEIs might not have been in touch with issues that affected schools in acquitting their roles.One mentor, though, felt that the one-sided nature of the communication was logical:

*I think it becomes a very complex situation whereby every school is given an opportunity to communicate with college. You can imagine each school from each district bringing its own suggestions…it becomes very difficult*

These views further highlight the complexities of incorporating too many schools into the partnership and suggest a need to revisit this issue.

Another mode of communication cited by both TEIs and schools were the trainees themselves as explained by a mentor:

*The students are required once a month at the college... They carry our reports to the college, and when they return, they also feed us back what they will have collected from college pertaining to the execution of our duties. We also ask the students, go and tell you TP office we want this, and the students bring it*

This was confirmed by a lecturer who indicated that TEIs, at times, informally learned about the expectations of schools from *students themselves.* While this mode of communication might have had its merits, the effectiveness of indirect communication is debateable.

TEIs and schools were aware of the shortcomings of the communication process. Schools suggested that communication between the partners could be enhanced through *continual dialogue and collaborative research, more workshops and seminars to appraise each other on challenges and success stories.* TEIs on the other hand called for the establishment of *open lines of communication in terms of information flow, clarifying each other’s roles in the process and periodic feedback reviews.* What is apparent in these suggestions are the various pertinent issues that were not being addressed as a result of limited dialogue between the partners.

**Some paradoxes of the partnership**

TEIs and schools generally rated their partnership as good and cordial. However, several inconsistencies and limitations that characterised the relationship emerged in the narratives of the participants. For example, mentors and student teachers reported a mismatch in expectations by TEIs and schools about the format of planning for instruction to be adopted by the trainees. They pointed out that the separate scheme and plan that TEIs required student teachers on TP to adhere to in planning for instruction was not consistent with the practices in schools where the document in use was a scheme-cum-plan (a composite document which schools justified on grounds of reducing the load for teachers). One mentor suggested that colleges should teach student teachers to come up with a scheme-cum-plan and not to scheme and plan as separate entities *because it doesn’t apply anywhere,* which implied thatthe document required by schools was not relevant to school contexts. What also emerges from the issue is the communication of the contradictory messages to trainees.

Other indicators of the limitations of collaboration between the partners could be gleaned from the concerns raised by the mentors about the quality of teacher preparation. For instance, they complained about the absence of the basic teaching skills in teacher-trainees on deployment for TP, as explained below:

*Students are not adequately prepared before deployment for TP, most students have problems with planning and even lesson in delivery they lack confidence and won’t teach in your presence. I think too much emphasis is being placed on the preparation of the TP files rather than the practical aspect which is pertinent.*

These narratives could have been an expression of a desire to contribute to the conversations about enhancing the ITE programme, something which Husbands, cited by Greany and Brown (2015), views as necessary where student teachers spend more time in schools during training. Lecturers were aware of these concerns but ascribed some of the student teachers’ perceived skills deficits to a different source:

*The school curriculum changes are not communicated to colleges. Therefore, some of the subjects taught at college will be out of the curriculum and students will go for TP lacking skills in those areas.*

The above quotation indicates an discrepancy which would have serious implications for the legitimacy of the teacher education programme. Furthermore, mentors questioned the quality of the Professional Studies course offered by colleges and noted that some of the student teachers as *just raw,* unfriendly and wanting in interpersonal skills and felt this was *because colleges do not give them orientation about how they should relate with fellow teachers in schools.* One lecturer dismissed these observations and those about the calibre of student teachers as blame shifting and urged *schools and colleges to avoid the blame game on the shortcomings of the programme.* However, these views suggest a trivialisation by TIEs of contributions from schools and limited capacity by the partners to collaborate in creating solutions to enhance the quality of field experiences.

Another inconsistency of the partnership was the seemingly dominant TEI requirements in their interactions with schools. This was demonstrated by their handling of the scheme-cum-plan issue that was cited earlier, as well as the TEIs’ requirements for student teachers majoring in Physical Education, as explained:

*Students who specialise in PE have to introduce sporting activities such as tennis and golf of which resource the schools may lack the resources. Yet students have to practise what they are being taught, it’s a big challenge.*

Schools felt that this requirement was not practical as it did not take into account the resource constraints that characterise the rural contexts, thus reflecting a failure by TEIs to closely adapt the teacher education curriculum to the reality within schools (European Commission Directorate-General of Education and Culture 2010). It also emerged that TEIs required *trainees to participate in college events, e.g. sports, whilst schools expect students to be fully part of the school staff during the whole TP period.* Such an arrangement was likely to create a dilemma for the student teachers about which instruction to take.The dominance of TEIs in the partnership was again evident in the guidelines on how schools were to handle disciplinary cases involving trainees whereby schools were expected to *refer the cases to them* (TEIs)for final adjudication, rather than making provision for joint decisions (which is a proxy of an effective partnership). This would have reinforced the impression of an unequal relationship. Mentors felt that such an approach influenced some trainees not to respect their role as teacher educators and that *students will listen more to lecturers more than school heads, there is always partner who is more forceful.* Hence, schools felt powerless to resolve issues at station level and would validate even decisions on minor issues as the dress code by making reference to *college requirements,* rather than authoritatively stamping their own authority onto the situation. These reports illustrated the hierarchical nature of the relationship, that is the unequal power relations that characterised the arrangement and the limitations that these placed on operationalisation of the partnership.

**Conclusion**

This study established that, although there is no formal policy on TEI-schools partnership, there is a framework for collaboration between the key players in teacher education as evidenced in the appreciation of the potential mutual benefits of the partnership and the delineation of responsibilities. However, the translation of the partnership into practice seemed to present some challenges. What emerges is a limited relationship in which inadequate attention was paid to the purposes of extended field experiences and the various aspects that Cunningham (2012) highlights as being central to the effective partnership. Recurrent issues in the study which seemed to have compromised the efficacy of the partnership were the following:

* Non-involvement of partner schools in the planning for the trainees’ field experiences, and the incorporation of too many schools in a partnership. There is clearly a need to revisit this aspect and maybe even to consider the idea of having specific practice schools in which to deploy student teachers.
* Inadequate emphasis on the interdependent nature of the relationship between TEIs and schools in teacher preparation (Bullock and Scott 1995) and domination of TEIs in the construction and dissemination of knowledge, and in determining the ‘terms’ and ‘conditions’ of the partnership. Consequently, schools were relegated to playing a subordinate role of providing a classroom and a mentor, thus, merely providing practice fields where student teachers were to try out practices recommended to them, or even demanded of them, by the colleges (Zeichner 2010; Moyles and Stuart 2003). This was further evidenced by the absence of such proxies of effective partnership as equality of voice between the partners and mechanisms for joint decision making as, at times, TEIs made arbitrary decisions on issues related to TP. All this discounted the idea of the partnership being a cooperation of equals (Wharfe and Burrows 1990), and demonstrated failure to create a third space in teacher education. It suggests a need to extend the training role of schools and to diversify activities which teachers and TEI lecturers engage in jointly in order to promote the development and strengthening of professional relationships. Such activities could include undertaking the design and review of the programme cooperatively with the partnership schools (Husbands, cited by Greany and Brown 2015).
* Mentoring was clearly the mainstay and face of the partnership. But the flawed implementation of the concept of mentoring of student teachers tended to reduce the whole process to a formality. The study points to a need for explicit mentor empowerment and for partners to come up with a model of mentoring which ensures that student teachers benefit from such extended field experiences. Furthermore, the UZ, as part of its quality control function, could oversee the training of mentors to equip them for their roles. Finally, the partners could consider appointing the mentor representatives (or lead teachers) from clusters who could then act as the link persons between TEIs and schools on issues of TP. The lead teachers could even participate in the teaching of methodology courses so as to be informed and influenced by practices in both schools and TEIs.
* The limited communication between the partners, and its one-sided nature, underscores a need for a variety of forums for face-to-face dialogue between partners, for example, regular workshops, where issues could be clarified, and views exchanged and debated on professional issues and how to enhance the teacher education programme.

Future studies could explore such areas as ways of broadening the partnership and how to exploit TEI visits to schools to enhance the partnership.

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